

INSS



INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL  
STRATEGIC STUDIES

STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES 41

## Dangerous Alliances: Russia's Strategic Inroads in Latin America

by Douglas Farah and Marianne Richardson



Center for Strategic Research  
Institute for National Strategic Studies  
National Defense University

## **Institute for National Strategic Studies**

National Defense University

The Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) is National Defense University's (NDU's) dedicated research arm. INSS includes the Center for Strategic Research, Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, and Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction. The military and civilian analysts and staff who comprise INSS and its subcomponents execute their mission by conducting research and analysis, publishing, and participating in conferences, policy support, and outreach.

The mission of INSS is to conduct strategic studies for the Secretary of Defense, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the unified combatant commands in support of the academic programs at NDU and to perform outreach to other U.S. Government agencies and the broader national security community.

**Cover:** Russian President Vladimir Putin talks with Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega at Augusto C. Sandino Airport in Managua, July 11, 2014  
(President of Nicaragua)

# **Dangerous Alliances**



# **Dangerous Alliances: Russia's Strategic Inroads in Latin America**

By Douglas Farah and Marianne Richardson

*Institute for National Strategic Studies  
Strategic Perspectives, No. 41*

Series Editor: Denise Natali



National Defense University Press  
Washington, D.C.  
December 2022

Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the contributors and do not necessarily represent the views of the State Department, Defense Department, or any other agency of the Federal Government. Cleared for public release; distribution unlimited.

Portions of this work may be quoted or reprinted without permission, provided that a standard source credit line is included. NDU Press would appreciate a courtesy copy of reprints or reviews.

First printing, December 2022

For current publications of the Institute for National Strategic Studies, please visit <https://inss.ndu.edu>.

# Contents

Executive Summary .....	1
Introduction and General Framework .....	3
The NK SESLA Network.....	9
Russian Media Strategies in Latin America .....	15
Country Profiles .....	18
Conclusions and Recommendations .....	32
Notes .....	35
About the Authors.....	43





### Executive Summary

Russia's strategic interests in Latin America center on establishing a multisector, persistent presence in the Western Hemisphere as a counterweight to U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) presence in the former Soviet Union and bordering states. The engagement focuses on aggressive implementation of what the West calls the doctrine of "hybrid warfare." This approach fuses hard and soft power across multiple domains, recognizing the existence of a permanent state of confrontation with the West. This strategy undergirds the rationalization and operationalization of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Russia's primary areas of visible engagement include escalating mis- and disinformation through its own state media in coordination with the state media of authoritarian, anti-U.S. allies in the region. These tactics create echo chambers of false narratives. Russia also provides weapons sales and support to authoritarian populist regimes, which give Moscow a toehold in the hemisphere and a veneer of international legitimacy.

Less visible but vital lines of effort include the operation of networks of groups and people with deep ties to Russian intelligence and the former Soviet KGB (Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti) specializing in cryptology and cyber activity and active across Latin America. This hub makes available multiple advanced Russian state surveillance systems, which are now used by authoritarian regimes in Nicaragua and Venezuela, offered in Paraguay and Bolivia, and likely acquired by nonstate armed groups across the continent. This Russian technology is responsible for increasing the repressive capacity of the most authoritarian, most anti-U.S., and least transparent regimes.

In addition to the sale of equipment, the network provides selected partners with access to high-level Russian officials, support to regional multilateral organizations formed to exclude the United States and Canada, and technical assistance for developing cryptocurrencies in the region. An overlapping, deeply rooted, and low-profile network of veteran state and quasi-state actors across the region, often involved in illicit activities, complements the technology network.

A key hub of Russian activity is in Nicaragua, under the protection of the Daniel Ortega/Rosario Murillo regime. In addition to allowing a permanent presence of some 250 Russian military personnel on the ground, Nicaragua is the Russian base for its GLONASS (Global'naya Navigatsionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema) navigation system. Nicaragua also houses a multimillion-dollar vaccination plant that produces no vaccines, a police academy that does little of what it advertises, a cyber warfare and training center in the state telecommunications building, and a Russian Ministry of Interior building that enjoys the diplomatic status of an embassy.

Russia's economic interests in Latin America, particularly compared with those of the United States and the People's Republic of China, are small. However, in specific countries such as Argentina and Paraguay, Russian economic interests are significant and give Moscow leverage to pursue other strategic objectives.

Russia's growing strategic presence in the U.S. near abroad empowers anti-U.S. populist authoritarian regimes while gaining potentially important access points for Russia in the Western Hemisphere. Understanding and developing a comprehensive response to this asymmetric threat should be a hemispheric priority as the United States faces numerous strategic challenges with waning influence in the region. The response should include ongoing proactive engagement in the media and on social platforms to create a fact-based counternarrative to Russian propaganda as well as coordination with regional allies to expose and counter Russian activities and the threats they pose.

## Introduction and General Framework

*Russia continues to destabilize the [Western Hemisphere] and undermine democracy by flooding the region with disinformation, to include hundreds of articles distorting U.S. security actions. . . . These disinformation campaigns are just one part of Russia's broader efforts to influence national elections across the region this year. Russia's relationship with its key regional partners—Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua—allows Moscow to expand its air and sea access to project power throughout the region. Agreements with Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Brazil now allow Russian warships to make port calls on short notice. . . . Russia seeks inroads in the hemisphere by providing security training through \$2.3 billion in weapons and military equipment sales in the past 10 years, to include direct sales to Venezuela.*

—U.S. Southern Command Posture Statement 2022<sup>1</sup>

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Moscow's strategic interests in Latin America have become the subject of concern in the hemispheric policy community. In this paper, we provide an overview of some key issues often not included in the discussion. Our analysis reflects current fieldwork and research in Chile, Argentina, Colombia, Paraguay, and Ecuador, within the framework of National Defense University's Western Hemisphere Illicit Networks Review project.

Given the U.S. policy community's familiarity with Russian influence in Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, we do not tread much over this familiar territory. Russia's strategic interests extend beyond those three nations, and the purpose of this analysis is to examine other facets of the scope and breadth of Russia's influence in Latin America.

Our field research shows that Russian military, crypto, economic, and strategic interests in Nicaragua are often not given the weight that they deserve in this discussion. Of particular concern is Russia's alliance with Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, which affords Moscow access to a network of global fixers and super fixers who help Moscow evade global sanctions.

### **Russia's Application of the Primakov Doctrine in Latin America**

There is wide consensus that Russia seeks to both expand and deepen its regional ties in what its strategic thinkers term the near abroad of the United States, which is Latin America. The term *near abroad* was coined after the collapse of the Soviet Union to describe the former Soviet states, which are entitled only to limited sovereignty. It is in this space that Russia's leaders see Russia's maintaining primacy as both a duty and a strategic necessity.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1. Historic Areas of Russian Operations (*left*) and Actual Theater of Russian Operations (*right*)**



Although there are important differences between Russia’s relationship with former Soviet states and the United States’s relationship with Latin American nations, Russia likely applies this concept to Latin America because of U.S. historic interventions in the region, as well as U.S. economic and strategic preeminence in its relationships with these countries. Russia’s use of this concept in Latin America carries telling implications about the way it understands the sovereignty of Latin American nations relative to the United States.

Within this framework, the multiple spaces that Russia occupies in Latin America come into clearer focus. Underlying the Primakov Doctrine, named for former Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov and articulated in 1996, is the bedrock belief that the West is meddling and exerting influence in Russia’s near abroad and therefore Russia’s defense must include access to the closest approximation of the enemy’s near abroad to level the playing field. As described by Eugene Rumer, the doctrine posits that a unipolar world dominated by the United States is unacceptable to Russia, that Russia must oppose NATO expansion, and that Moscow must insist on primacy in the former Soviet space and integrate states that once were part of the USSR.<sup>3</sup>

This Primakov Doctrine and its subsequent implementation strategy, articulated by Valery Gerasimov, posit that it is this doctrinal imperative that makes Russia’s activities in Latin America—the near abroad of the United States—of strategic importance. This is particularly true

when the United States is directly involved in defending a country, Ukraine, that Russia views as inherently within its near-abroad sphere of influence.

Russia has an important advantage over other extraregional actors such as China and Iran because Moscow has been actively engaged in Latin America since the 1940s. Main points of entry include the Cuban revolution, the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, and multiple armed insurgencies in the hemisphere.

Driven by the vision of establishing Marxist beachheads and enhancing its strategic position, the USSR developed several important centers for Latin American studies—the most important being the Latin American Studies Institute of the Academy of Sciences (ILA RAN)—to provide both a reservoir of knowledge and an opportunity to engage with the thousands of allies from across the hemisphere who study there.<sup>4</sup>

In June 2022, Russian state media explicitly linked a potential Russian military deployment in Nicaragua to the Ukraine invasion, connecting the two tenets of the near-abroad equation. State media announced that the Ortega regime in Nicaragua had extended an invitation to the Russian military to enter Nicaragua in the second part of 2022. “What did you want?” stated the television host. “If American missile systems can nearly reach Moscow from Ukrainian territory, it is time for Russia to roll out something powerful closer to the American city upon a hill.”<sup>5</sup>

Although this announcement was widely interpreted in the media as an escalation, it was more likely an effort by Russian President Vladimir Putin to justify the regular presence of Russian military troops in such proximity to strategic U.S. geographic space. Since signing multiple bilateral military and technical treaties in 2014–2015,<sup>6</sup> Russia has maintained a constant rotation of about 260 troops on the ground, many working with Nicaraguan special operations command near Lake Xiloá.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu made a similar link when he visited Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela in February 2015, with Pravda—the Communist Party of the Russian Federation’s official news service—noting the importance of the trip for giving Russia access to the Atlantic coast of the United States.

“If such Russian vessels are deployed somewhere near the territory of Cuba, they will be able to attack the United States. This is our response to the deployment of U.S. military objects near the Russian border,” stated one official in justifying the trip. “The United States is quite vulnerable. One may eventually have to create missile defense from the side of Florida, rather than Alaska. All these issues arise and require huge financial resources. I think it will convince the United States of the short-sightedness of this kind of policy.”<sup>7</sup>

The works of Russian military thinkers such as Generals Makhmut Gareev, Vladimir Slipchenko, Sergei Bogdanov, and Valery Gerasimov provide a useful framework for understanding the Russian strategy of expanding confrontation beyond conventional warfare into a broad spectrum of strategic activities, ranging from disinformation to cyber warfare to economic sabotage.<sup>8</sup>

Gerasimov, as Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, is perhaps best known for his 2013 comprehensive look at how Russia must face the West through the aggressive implementation of a multifaceted fusing of hard and soft power across many domains in a state of permanent war, by multiple means.<sup>9</sup>

This hybrid strategy contemplates an enduring, multidimensional effort aimed at challenging U.S. dominance while extending the Kremlin’s influence. The goal is a stronger Russian position in Latin America within the loose anti-U.S., authoritarian coalition that today includes China, Iran, and the Bolivarian Joint Criminal Enterprise (BJCE), among other partners.

Gerasimov’s implementation strategy calls for whole-of-government warfare and the fusion of elements of hard and soft power as the permanent conflict with the West transcends the boundaries of peace and war.<sup>10</sup> Russia’s seizure of Crimea in 2014, the undeclared war in eastern Ukraine before the February 2022 invasion, and other actions are cited by Rumer as the successful implementation of what U.S. analysts call hybrid warfare in service of the Primakov Doctrine.

As Gerasimov wrote:

*In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have seen a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed*

**Figure 2. Visual Rendition of Russian's “Hybrid Operations” Strategic Flow**



*according to an unfamiliar template. . . . The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. . . . Asymmetrical actions have come into widespread use, enabling the nullification of an enemy's advantages in armed conflict. Among such actions are the use of special-operations forces and internal opposition to create a permanently operating front through the entire territory of the enemy state, as well as informational actions, devices, and means that are constantly being perfected.<sup>11</sup>*

Using this lens, we look at the Russian offensive efforts in the middle ground between soft and hard power, as described above: cyber capabilities, information dominance, economic power, and private-sector capabilities. The defensive efforts focus, again, on the middle of the spectrum: media, research and science, government affairs, and financial markets.

### **The Mutual Protection Society and Shared Authoritarian Interests**

Russia's three primary Latin American allies—Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua—are radical populist authoritarian governments that used nearly identical templates to criminalize political opposition, concentrate power in the executive branch, abolish judicial independence, curtail freedom of expression, and rig elections. Russia's influence helped fracture once broadly shared hemispheric values in often fragile democratic systems. These values are being replaced by a toxic mix of antidemocratic values, accepted state corruption, and a populism that draws on totalitarian models.

Russia's expanded outreach to the BJCE carries reciprocal benefits for Russia and Latin American nations.<sup>12</sup> The outreach furthers mutual goals to attenuate U.S. regional and global influence while providing Russia with access to the U.S. near abroad.

These diplomatic relationships help ensure that Russia's Latin American allies have a powerful friend on the United Nations Security Council that can veto efforts to hold them accountable for human rights violations or electoral fraud.<sup>13</sup> In return, these Latin American allies shield Russia from international isolation by providing diplomatic support and a regional media network.<sup>14</sup> This dynamic yielded vocal support for Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The Ortega regime, as a favor to Moscow, became one of the few countries to recognize the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, parts of Georgia now under Russian domination.

U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) leadership correctly identified Russia's disinformation and diplomatic campaigns in Latin America as strategic priorities for the Kremlin. However, Russia is engaged in a much broader set of strategic objectives in the hemisphere, across a much broader swath of the region, than is generally discussed. Its projects include:

- A network of front companies with interlocking directorships, based in Santiago, Chile. The network is led by senior former Soviet intelligence officials, who provide specialized cryptology and surveillance capabilities across the region.
- A series of media alliances that include outlets controlled by the BJCE, Iran, and other global allies. Thousands of social media outlets create a series of “super spreader” echo chambers for alternative narratives designed to damage U.S. interests and its image.<sup>15</sup>
- Nicaragua's backing of Moscow's interests in Latin America, which include a significant, permanent presence of troops in Nicaragua; robust cyber, intelligence, and cryptographic capabilities; access to financial institutions; and rotation of accredited diplomats under protection of the Ortega regime at the highest levels. These interventions touch multiple strategic interest points for Russia, and, as discussed below, through the GLONASS project and other activities, may be part of the implementation of the establishment of Russia's own “sovereign Internet” project, signed into law by Putin in November 2019.<sup>16</sup>
- A series of economic investments, from hydroelectric energy in several countries to crypto currency interests in Uruguay and Venezuela to strategic oil sales to Argentina, that are reshaping Latin America's role in Russia's survival under economic sanctions.
- A deeply rooted, low-profile network of veteran state and quasi-state actors in Latin America whose experience in the hemisphere often spans several decades. This network of people—who trained in the former Soviet Union and speak Russian—gives Moscow access to both formal diplomatic channels and less formal allied networks in many countries.
- Russia's participation in Latin America's multilateral organizations that do not include the United States and Canada, as a way of frustrating U.S.-led efforts to fight corruption, build democratic institutions, and work to implement the rule of law. These include the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the Bolivarian Alliance



for the Peoples of Our America, and the Union of South American Nations, all set up by leaders of the BJCE as a counterweight to the Organization of American States.

We first examine two strategic hemispheric lines of efforts by Russia through the lens of Moscow's hybrid warfare doctrine: unofficial state groups that provide surveillance and intelligence capacities to state and nonstate actors, and media dis-/misinformation efforts. We then analyze specific countries to show how Russia's varied goals, efforts, and resources work together in different political contexts to amplify its strategic advances and achieve specific goals.

### **The NK SESLA Network**

One of Russia's most active networks in Latin America is an unofficial association of intelligence and surveillance providers. This consortium of companies operates under the umbrella of the Russian National Committee for the Promotion of Economic Trade with Countries of Latin America (NK SESLA in English, CN CEPLA in Spanish), based in Santiago, Chile.

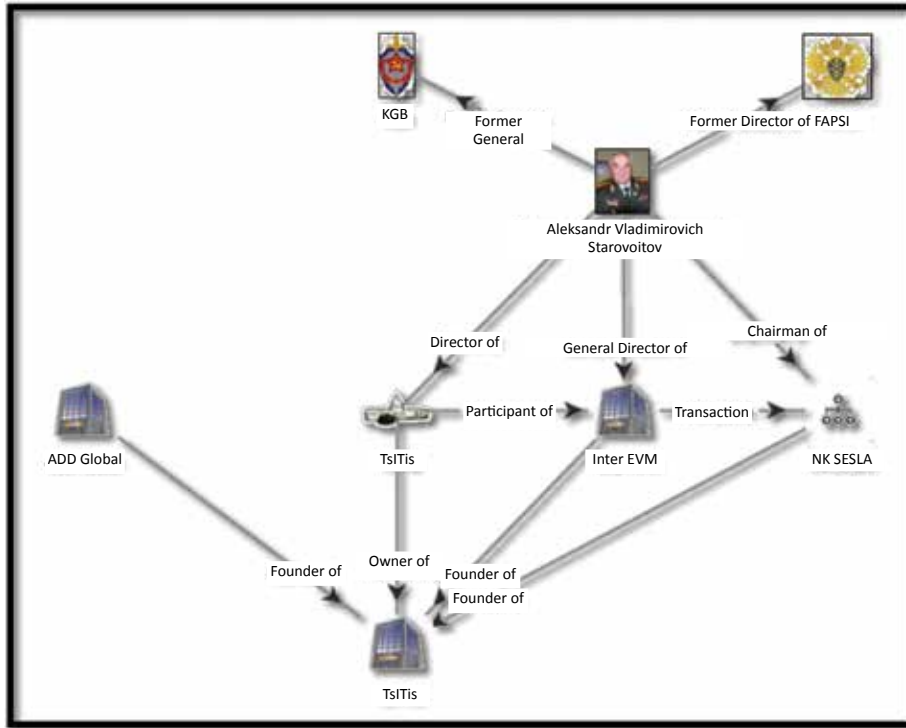
NK SESLA's leadership team members also serve as the directors of multiple other Russian state cyber warfare entities. Given the leaders' seniority, as well as documents authorizing the entity to act on behalf of Russian intelligence services and the Russian military, it is highly probable that this network's primary purpose is connected to its roots in electronic intelligence, cryptology, and surveillance rather than regional trade.

The details of the leadership of NK SESLA and its affiliates, which continue to operate in Latin America, were mapped through fieldwork and open-source data mining of its Web sites in Russian, English, and Spanish over the past 7 years. Whereas the English-language Web site has been scrubbed since the invasion of Ukraine, the Spanish-language Web site remains active, with occasional updates. Much of the source material is no longer available on the Web sites.

Among the formal members of the NK SESLA network is the Central Institute for Information and Communications (TsITiS). In 2016, President Putin charged this institute with a core strategic mission of highest importance to the Russian state: building a multibillion-dollar integrated, secure communications network for the Russian military. The TsITiS network is now tasked with helping detect and deter cyber attacks.<sup>17</sup>

TsITiS was formed as a subsidiary of the post-Soviet Federal Agency of Government Communications and Information (FAPSI). FAPSI, a legacy agency of the Soviet KGB, was formed in 1991 to handle all state electronic intelligence. FAPSI was dissolved in 2003 and absorbed into the Federal Security Services (FSB), Russia's primary civilian intelligence service.

Figure 3. Initial Analysis of NK Sesla Network and Its Links



Source: C4 ADS.

### The Role of the KGB General

The first director of FAPSI, appointed in 1991, was Aleksandr Vladimirovich Starovoitov, who had been a major general in the KGB as well as an officer in the Soviet army. During his 8 years as FAPSI director, Starovoitov was responsible for his nation’s core cyber and electronic security, including signals intelligence, cryptography, cryptology, and secret government communications.<sup>18</sup>

On leaving FAPSI in 1998, Starovoitov established NK SESLA in Chile, where he served simultaneously as director of TsITis and president of the Russia-Chile Business Council.<sup>19</sup> He also occupied the position of director general of the International Center for Informatics and Electronics (Inter EVM), a para-state science and technology and information consortium to “jointly solve the problems of the creation and development of advanced information technology, computer hardware, and microelectronics.”<sup>20</sup> The group lists itself as a member of NK SESLA on its Web site. All three groups list the same home addresses in Moscow and in Santiago.

Starovoitov served in these positions until his death in 2021—more than two decades operating largely under the radar as Russia’s man in Latin America. His death was announced prominently in Russian media, where he was distinguished as a Hero of Russia.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Successor of NK SESLA**

Tatiana Mashkova, Starovoitov’s longtime deputy, took over as NK SESLA’s director general when the general died in 2021. She also is listed as executive director of the Chile Business Council and vice president of the Russia-Cuba Business Council. She has been affiliated with NK SESLA since at least 2009, when she worked as an advisor for the group. NK SESLA’s Web site highlights her work experience across many federal ministries and departments, and notes that she led a Spanish government company in Russia.

Mashkova has been active in the media and in organizing events across the region following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, appearing regularly at official and unofficial events and giving media interviews. She maintains economic relationships with Latin America that blunt the impact of sanctions. She also met with both President Alberto Fernández of Argentina and President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil when they visited Putin in February 2022. She gave an interview in late April 2022 to *Sputnik News* discussing recent efforts to maintain engagement with the region.<sup>22</sup>

Her efforts included a recent event with Sergey Katyrin, president of the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and Alexander Shchetinin, director of the Latin America Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry and liaison for the Chamber of Commerce. Representatives from more than 20 countries were reportedly present. In the same interview, Mashkova announced Russian sales to Uruguay of software, a new export and a new development in relations between the countries.

Mashkova also said Russia is exploring new direct maritime routes to Latin America to evade limits on commercial transportation due to global sanctions. Mashkova specifically commented on Ecuador as Russia’s main ally in establishing these routes, noting that 97 percent of Ecuador’s bananas are sold to Russia and that Ecuador’s economy is being adversely affected by sanctions.

A second strategic theme Mashkova discussed involved a joint effort by the Russian and Cuban governments to build an alternative banking verification system that would allow Russian organizations to circumvent the bans on use of the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) system. Our field research shows that Nicaragua, Venezuela, and

Iran joined Cuba and Russia in the endeavor. This new system would help sanctioned countries evade U.S. and European Union enforcement by bypassing the dollarized banking system.

Mashkova was awarded a medal from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2013 for her “contribution to the development of international cooperation.”<sup>23</sup> In addition, she was the advisor to CELAC until at least April 2012.<sup>24</sup> She speaks Spanish, Portuguese, and English and is reportedly a specialist on Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Chile.

### **The PROTEI/SORM-3 Connection**

One of NK SESLA’s important roles in the hemisphere has been to facilitate the expansion of Russia’s premier cyber security firm, PROTEI ST Cybersecurity and Surveillance Company. The firm is a subsidiary of NTC PROTEI, a cyber security firm that has contracted with Russian military and intelligence agencies to provide them with cyber security and surveillance Web sites, offering delivery and payment options.

PROTEI is the largest provider of technology compliant with the Russian government-mandated System for Operative Investigative Activities (SORM, in Russian) that allows the Russian government access to all communications. SORM was established in 1996 and is licensed by the FSB.<sup>25</sup> SORM is a phone and Internet surveillance platform, allowing operators to monitor credit card services. PROTEI’s technology is fully compliant with this platform. NK SESLA continues to offer dozens of PROTEI surveillance products on its Spanish-language transactions, e-mails, phone calls, text messages, social networks, Wi-Fi networks, and forum posts. As one recent study found:


*By 2015 an updated version—SORM-3—would encompass all communications. Under Russian law . . . [Internet service providers] and telecom providers are required to install SORM equipment, providing the Russian Federal Security Services (FSB) with access to all data shared online without the companies’ knowledge or control of which data are being shared and with whom. SORM works by basically copying all data flows on internet and telcom networks—sending one copy to the government and the other to the intended destination. SORM is the FSB’s “backdoor” to Russia’s internet.<sup>26</sup>*

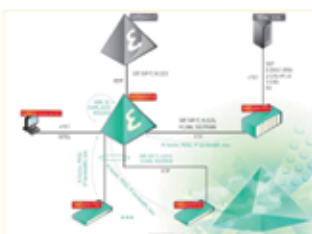
Our field research found that the SORM-3 technology, provided through the NK SESLA network, is reportedly behind the growing sophistication of the surveillance and monitoring capabilities of the Ortega regime in Nicaragua, the Nicolás Maduro regime in Venezuela, and


**Figure 4. PROTEI Technology for Sale by NK SESLA**

Examples of the dozens of types of PROTEI technology for sale on the NK Sesla Web site. Though often opaque in their descriptions, most products have clear surveillance or monitoring capacities.

- PROTEI DPI:** Advertised as technology that “controls service policy through data flows,” allowing data to be analyzed “through distinct or static platforms.”


- PROTEI SE imSwitch5:** Advertised as an “affordable solution” scalable for use in offices to city-wide networks. It offers access to “Triple Play” services, and specifically lists “legal [electronic] interception” among its services.


- PROTEI imSwitch Complex for Zonal Communications:** Advertised as a “potent system for collecting and analysis” with “use of certificates of interception” and “active monitoring of equipment, detailed collection of data about calls, and “detailed tracing of calls.”



heightened Cuban repression. In addition, criminal groups and political parties may have access to increasingly sophisticated electronic monitoring equipment, as well as advanced training in cloning sites, attacking adversaries and political enemies, trolling, and malicious software use.

In recent years, through NK SESLA meetings, PROTEI representatives have connected with the Cuban government<sup>27</sup> and expanded their regional involvement to include meetings with the Paraguayan ambassador during a trip to Moscow,<sup>28</sup> a partnership with a Venezuelan telecom provider,<sup>29</sup> construction of a mobile virtual network operator in Mexico in 2016, and a

**Figure 5. Certificates Authorizing the Russian Ministry of Defense (left) to Carry Out Inter EVM Activities on Behalf of the Federal Security Services**



Source: C4 ADS.

number of meetings with Mexican leaders.<sup>30</sup> PROTEI representatives were also part of a delegation that met with Iranian government and information technology representatives in Tehran on December 5, 2016.<sup>31</sup>

The NK SESLA network’s direct ties to the Russian state were demonstrated by archived Russian state documents authorizing Inter EVM, a key component of the network, to operate on behalf of the FSB and the Russian military.

There are thus multiple concurrent cyber developments that seem to have the shared goal of granting Russian intelligence services expanded access to Latin American data. Russian representatives are also encouraging countries in the region to allow the installation of tracking systems for GLONASS, which it is trying to market worldwide as an alternative to U.S. global positioning systems.

According to reporting from Nicaragua, Brazil, and Chile, the GLONASS installations have a higher level of sophistication than is required for similar geolocation systems, raising the possibility they will be used for other purposes.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, a new Russian technology from Dialog LLC is being offered across Latin America, through means including sales at high-profile technology expositions. Dialog is authorized by the FSB and is the developer of the Dialog secure messaging app. The company was founded in 2016 and has belonged to the Sberbank Group since 2018.<sup>33</sup> The secure, encrypted app allows organizations to manage internal communications, as well as integrate or mirror communications from other apps. Dialog also provides its clients with the capacity to create bots capable of carrying out routine operations or chats with customers.<sup>34</sup>

### **Individuals of Interest**

Russia strategically places diplomats, interpreters, business representatives, and military leaders throughout Latin America. Many of these individuals have overlapping geographic or organizational relationships that facilitate coordination between regions or sectors. Several individuals, in addition to Mashkova, work within the NK SESLA orbit. They stand out within Russia's regional strategic maneuvers. The profiles found in the sidebar summarize each person's portfolio, leadership roles, and country ties.

### **Russian Media Strategies in Latin America**

The focus of U.S. policy on Russia's mis- and disinformation campaigns is important, and we seek to place them in the regional context that demonstrates that the sum of the actions is far greater than the individual parts would suggest.

Rather than allying with traditional media and conventional constructs to build alliances (as the People's Republic of China often does in Latin America), the Russian state media tried to move into the region's media market by providing new, dynamic content with a more marked anti-U.S. perspective and favorable coverage of the Bolivarian Revolution led by Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua.

To supplement this strategy and amplify its message, Russian media network RT and Sputnik News formed strategic alliances with other ideologically aligned networks. These networks are TeleSUR, the widely viewed Venezuela-based regional channel founded by Hugo Chávez, and HispanTV, the Iranian 24/7 Spanish-language satellite network, which has only a modest following in the Western Hemisphere.

### Individuals of Interest: Profiles

- Vyacheslav Petrovich Vasyagin, a representative of Inter EVM, operates under the protection of the FSB and Ministry of Defense. Vasyagin appears often in Central America. A primary contact is Luis Molina Cuadra, Ortega's former ambassador to Russia, whom he presented with a "Desyatina" cross. This award is given by the "Orthodox Russia" society, tied to the Russian Orthodox Church and close to Putin.<sup>\*</sup> Vasyagin worked in "divisions of external economic links of the Committee of People's Control" of the USSR.<sup>†</sup> From 2000 to 2003, he was the vice director of the Russian tax police, during a time when the tax police were part of Russia's intelligence structure.<sup>‡</sup> Additionally, Vasyagin is an "active state advisor of the first class" to the Russian Federation,<sup>§</sup> the highest rank a person can obtain in the Russian civil service and bestowed by the president of Russia.<sup>\*\*</sup>
- Vitaly Logvin, a former fencing champion, often escorts Russian diplomatic and commercial delegations across the region along with Vasyagin, usually as an interpreter. As a member of the governing bodies of multiple regional sports organizations (fencing, martial arts, Zumba) he has been able to travel across the region extensively without attracting attention. Reportedly because of his willingness to engage in illicit activities with former Salvadoran Minister of Defense David Munguía Payés (also a fencer), Logvin was granted Salvadoran nationality and a passport, so he no longer needs to travel on a Russian passport, which might draw more scrutiny.
- Alexander Furasiev, a former (and possibly current) Russian diplomat, was assigned as the business attaché to Ecuador until at least 2008.<sup>††</sup> During his Ecuador posting he lived mostly in Panama and Nicaragua, where, according to intelligence officials and investigators in different countries, he was one of the chief purchasers and shippers of weapons to the Marxist Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC. The most recent public information on Furasiev dates to 2016, but he has been seen in recent years in Central America, acting as an interpreter to Russian delegations. In 2016, he was referenced on the Russia-friendly blog of Pablo Jofré as a representative of "Russia's defense industries" while still accredited as a diplomat in the Russian embassy in Argentina. Government transparency reports in Chile list several meetings with Chilean defense officials to discuss selling helicopters, submarine-detection technology, and antitank missiles.

---

<sup>\*</sup> Much of the information accessed on Vasyagin in the initial research in 2017 has been removed from original Web sites and is no longer available. For an overview of the ties of the Russian Orthodox Church, Orthodox Russia, and Vladimir Putin, see Geraldine Fagan, "How the Russian Orthodox Church Is Helping Drive Putin's War in Ukraine," *Time*, April 15, 2022, available at <<https://time.com/6167332/putin-russian-orthodox-church-war-ukraine>>.

<sup>†</sup> For a brief official biography of Vasyagin, containing some information on his service in the USSR and Russian governments, and first found in other sources, see "Vasyagin, Vyacheslav Petrovich," *Bolshaya Biograficheskaya Enciklopediya* [Bolshaya Biographical Encyclopedia], available at <<http://my-dict.ru/dic/bolshaya-biograficheskaya-enciklopediya/1453992-vasyagin-vyacheslav-petrovich>>.

<sup>‡</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>§</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>\*\*</sup> "Table of Class Officers of the Federal State Civil Service, Military and Special Ranks, Class Officials of Justice, Class Officers of Prosecution Workers," Application to the Decree of the Russian Federation, February 1, 2005, no. 113, available at <[https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_51534/338ab21583732c497d5158fae3e6b83105b776f0/](https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_51534/338ab21583732c497d5158fae3e6b83105b776f0/)>.

<sup>††</sup> After 2008, Furasiev was no longer listed in the diplomatic registry of Ecuador. However, someone of the same name who holds a similar position to the one he held in Ecuador is now listed as the deputy commercial attaché and corporate representative of Rosetechnologii Russian State Corporation in Argentina.



These networks coordinate across social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Telegram. Together they coordinate messaging, narratives, and priorities that can rise from small platforms to mainstream media content in a relatively short period of time. At the same time, well-funded think tanks such as the Samuel Robinson Institute in Caracas curate the same messaging across the intellectual communities of universities, authors, and other think tanks, creating the illusion of multiple centers of independent thought converging in agreement.<sup>35</sup>

All these outlets are responsible for curating overlapping narratives that the United States is a counter-revolutionary “enemy of humanity” with vast imperialist designs and must be defeated. The unifying factor in this network is a strong anti-U.S. ideology, providing a constant narrative of U.S. oppression and reckless exploitation of natural resources, coupled with the narrative that the Iranian Revolution and the Bolivarian Revolution share a common set of goals with Russia, their steadfast ally and protector.

The core group of RT/Sputnik, TeleSUR, and HispanTV use a small collection of correspondents who report the same information—often verbatim—on all three platforms. These “super-spreaders” create echo chambers across the media landscape and serve as cultural interpreters across multiple platforms. We have identified several individuals who drive these echo chambers, repeating each other’s reporting on an ongoing basis. Such reporting generally includes a robust defense of Russia, anti-U.S. and anti-Israel attacks, defenses of Iran, and praise for the Maduro regime and its allies.<sup>36</sup>

Two recent studies found that the Spanish-language content of RT and Sputnik remain broadly influential in Latin America, with a combined following of 30.4 million accounts in the region. This is far larger than the 26.4 million followers of these outlets in English and less than their combined 39.8 million Arabic-language followers.<sup>37</sup> Another recent report found Russian Spanish-language media outlets were having a significant impact in Latin America, noting (without quantifying) that such Kremlin-controlled outlets were spreading widely in the region and becoming some of the top Spanish-language sources for information about the war in Ukraine. Russian outlet RT en Español is now the third-most-shared site on Twitter for Spanish-language information about Russia’s invasion.<sup>38</sup>

One concerted effort since February 2022 by Russian media has been to propagate allegations that Ukrainian forces are firing on their own civilians<sup>39</sup> and that Latin American “mercenaries” (among mercenaries from other countries) hired by Ukraine have not been paid and are angry at the lack of compensation, as well as disillusioned with the reasons they originally

agreed to join the fighting.<sup>40</sup> Additional coverage attempts to continue the theme that Russian forces are “de-Nazifying” Ukraine.<sup>41</sup>

Another notable theme since the Russian invasion of Ukraine is that there is a global shift away from using the U.S. dollar as the global currency. A popular RT show recently covered a “rebellion against the dollar,” specifically noting that China is considering participation in this scheme to challenge the dollar’s (and euro’s) dominance within the international financial system.<sup>42</sup>

The show’s Russian host argued, “It is not normal that all of the countries that don’t use dollars or euros in their economies continue to use them [for international transactions].” This is consistent with Chinese messaging on the need for global economic reform to displace the dollar and the multibillion-dollar debt swaps it has undertaken in the hemisphere.

Of particular interest are the attempts to paint both Russia and China as enemies of the United States and the arguments that U.S. efforts are aimed at getting the Chinese to withdraw support for the Russians. This narrative is that the United States is desperately trying to stop China from supporting Russia because the sanctions on Russia are an “act of war” requiring China’s complicity.<sup>43</sup>

The Russian media outlets also at times quote the Chinese media to reinforce their line of attack on U.S. policy. For example, RT recently wrote of the U.S. desire to “turn Ukraine into a quagmire so that Russia continues to bleed” and that the United States had forced Ukrainians to “elect a pro-American regime,” according to an article in the Chinese *Global Times*.<sup>44</sup>

## Country Profiles

While there are broad themes that tie together Russia’s overall strategy in Latin America, it is also useful to look at Russia’s activities in specific countries as case studies of different types of engagement. We will examine the strategic importance of Nicaragua, the economic engagement with Argentina, the financial ties of oligarchs and banks in Uruguay, and the engagement of a Russian state company in Ecuador, Colombia, and El Salvador.

### Nicaragua

Russia’s main activities in Nicaragua—its permanent military presence, cyber activities, and increasing training programs for both the army and the police—take place mostly in the shadows. Nicaragua is now cut off from cheap Venezuelan oil. The country faces a multitude of economic and political challenges, and Ortega’s inner circle and some economic holdings have been sanctioned by the United States. Yet the Nicaraguan gold trade, financial structures, and

Figure 6. Imports from Russia, 2020–2022



role in the BJCE supply chain are far less sanctioned and under far less pressure than those in Venezuela.

The Ortega regime relies on its historic ties to Russian leaders from the days of Soviet support in the 1980s. While Ortega remains Nicaragua’s leader, those ties make the Ortega regime both a more stable and more reliable ally to Russia than the Maduro regime. Even before the legislative approval of the 2017 bilateral Treaty of Collaboration to Guarantee the Security of International Information, Moscow had taken an active role in Nicaraguan cyber intelligence.<sup>45</sup> The monitoring of social media inside Nicaragua is viewed as imperative to suppressing internal dissent and allowing Ortega to stay in power. Russia also trains an estimated 100 Nicaraguan military officers in Russia every year, as well as several hundred others in Venezuela and Cuba.

Ortega relies on a network of international “super fixers” to move illicit gold to market, purchase necessary goods, and protect his financial fortune. This network is largely made up of Libyan nationals who worked for the Muammar al-Qadhafi regime until it collapsed but who also had deep roots with the Sandinista regime. This network has historically strong ties to the

Soviet/Russian state and years of experience in avoiding sanctions for Libya under Qadhafi, Iran, and Venezuela, making them potentially very useful as Putin seeks to avoid Western sanctions.

One ongoing area of collaboration is the Russian Ministry of Interior “training center” in Managua, which is under the command of Russian Police Lieutenant Colonel Oleg Surov. The center was officially opened first in 2014 as a regional counternarcotics training center, though it held no classes. It was inaugurated again on October 16, 2017, as a training facility for law enforcement officials.<sup>46</sup> The center’s first course was held in November 2017, and several other courses have been held since.<sup>47</sup>

As of June 2019, at least 270 security officers had reportedly been trained in the center, suggesting there were more courses than were publicly acknowledged.<sup>48</sup> Most recently, in February 2020, the center held two courses, on drug trafficking and money laundering, for 40 Nicaraguan federal police officers and one unnamed Brazilian individual.<sup>49</sup>

What is striking about the center is that the building is formally property of the Russian Ministry of the Interior. Facility access is controlled by Russian officers, and the center is listed as an extension of the Russian embassy.<sup>50</sup> Our sources in Managua said Surov operates outside the normal Russian embassy chain of command, reporting directly to Moscow rather than to the ambassador or chief military attaché in Managua.

Our sources with direct knowledge of events said that when protests against the Ortega regime broke out in 2018, Surov was tasked with providing special training to a select group of Nicaraguan police, in classes titled “Modern Means and Methods to Combat Extremism and Terrorism.” The course provided digital and electronic surveillance techniques that enhanced the Ortega regime’s capacity to repress and control civil society. In 2021 a follow-up course for 20 officers taught by the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, titled “The Fight Against Computer Information Crime”, focused on electronic surveillance techniques and training.<sup>51</sup>

Since then, Ortega’s primary enforcer and national security adviser, Néstor Moncada Lau, who was sanctioned by the U.S. Government for violently suppressing the protests in 2018, established a new permanent structure within the Nicaraguan National Police to carry out intelligence and surveillance activities with Russian advisers.<sup>52</sup>

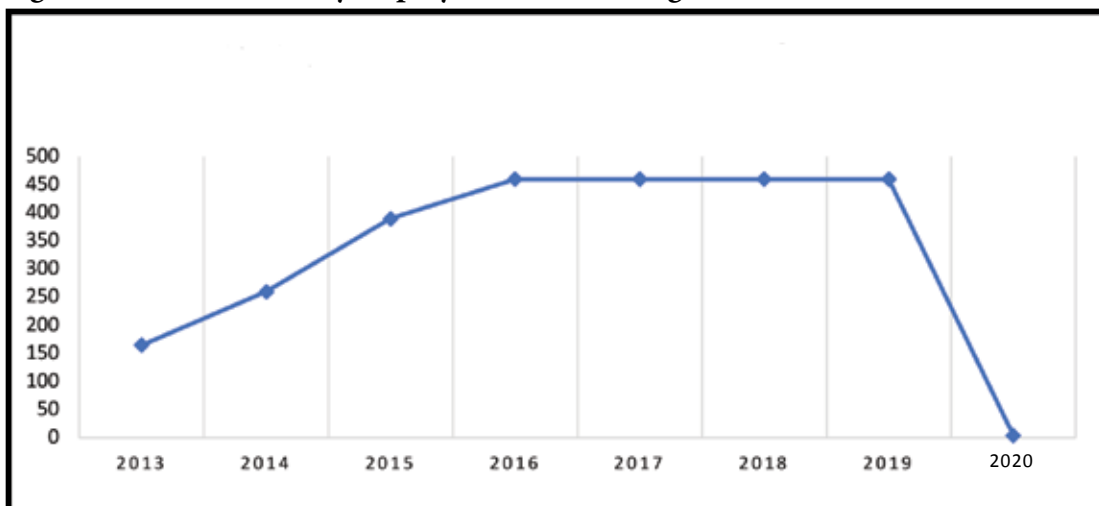
The headquarters of the new surveillance center is reportedly the second floor of the Telecomunicaciones y Correos de Nicaragua (Telecommunications and Postal Service of Nicaragua) building in Managua. The Russian training and technology were instrumental in allowing the Ortega regime to identify, imprison, or execute the student leaders through cell phone tracking on WhatsApp and other encrypted applications in the largely decentralized protest movement in 2018.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to directing the center, one of Surov’s main tasks is to select the growing number of Nicaraguan officers, both police and military, now being sent on a regular basis to be trained in Russia. Some 150 Nicaraguan police officers, mostly young and single men, have been sent to Russia over the past year to receive advanced training in electronic surveillance and intelligence. The purpose is, according to Nicaraguan sources within the police structure, to create a cadre of intelligence operatives familiar with and loyal to Russia, who could operate not only in Nicaragua but across the region.

In addition to the police training, Russia has had a constant presence of some 230 troops on Nicaraguan soil since at least 2017. Although the Russian personnel rotate, so that no one stays longer than 60 days, the overall number remains relatively steady from month to month. In contrast, since 2019 the United States has had no military deployments to Nicaragua. Most of the Russian military training activity in Nicaragua centers on the navy and the elite General Pedro Altamirano special forces unit.

Another point of interest in the Nicaragua-Russia relationship is the jointly built Instituto Latinamericano de Biotecnologia Mechnikov, located outside Managua. The USD 20 million vaccine factory was inaugurated in 2017 but failed to produce any vaccinations.<sup>54</sup> Yet according to published reports, since March 2020 the laboratory has been working to produce interferon alpha-2B, a drug as yet unproven for its value in combating COVID-19.<sup>55</sup> According to the Russian state TASS news agency, Russia assisted Cuba in sending more than 8,000 doses of interferon alpha-2B to Nicaragua.<sup>56</sup>

**Figure 7. Russian Military Deployments in Nicaragua, 2013–2020**



Following that shipment, Mechnikov also reportedly sent 600,000 flu vaccines to Cuba, though it is not clear why such a shipment would be needed.<sup>57</sup> Finally, according to the Mechnikov lab's director, Stanislav Uiba, in 2020 the lab was working on a vaccine for the coronavirus and anticipated having at least three vaccine candidates by August of that year.<sup>58</sup> It is unclear what, if anything, the laboratory has produced.

From January 2020 to September 2021, Nicaragua registered USD 17.2 million in exports to Russia and USD 126 million in imports from Russia. Many bulk imports and exports have no identifying description (they are labeled as “N/A” or “other”), but they still provide an important perspective regarding the countries' economic relationship and the opaqueness of that relationship. Imports included vaccines, steel, fertilizer components such as urea and ammonium nitrate, and oil. Exports included nuts and copper.

During the period of analysis, Nicaragua's imports from Russia spiked repeatedly, in apparent multimillion-dollar imports, with a relatively lower baseline of day-to-day imports. Exports decreased during 2020 before increasing dramatically in January 2021. Net exports remained high for the first four months of 2021 before slowly decreasing again.

When the data are filtered for just imports over USD 1 million, interesting information emerges. The spikes in imports seem to be represented by single transactions ranging from USD 3.9 million to almost USD 10 million in value, all marked “other” or “N/A.”

Since the data points marked “other” represent a single product, not an aggregate sum of many products, the data suggest that Nicaragua is regularly importing a high-value product or series of products from Russia that it does not wish to disclose even within its own port registries.

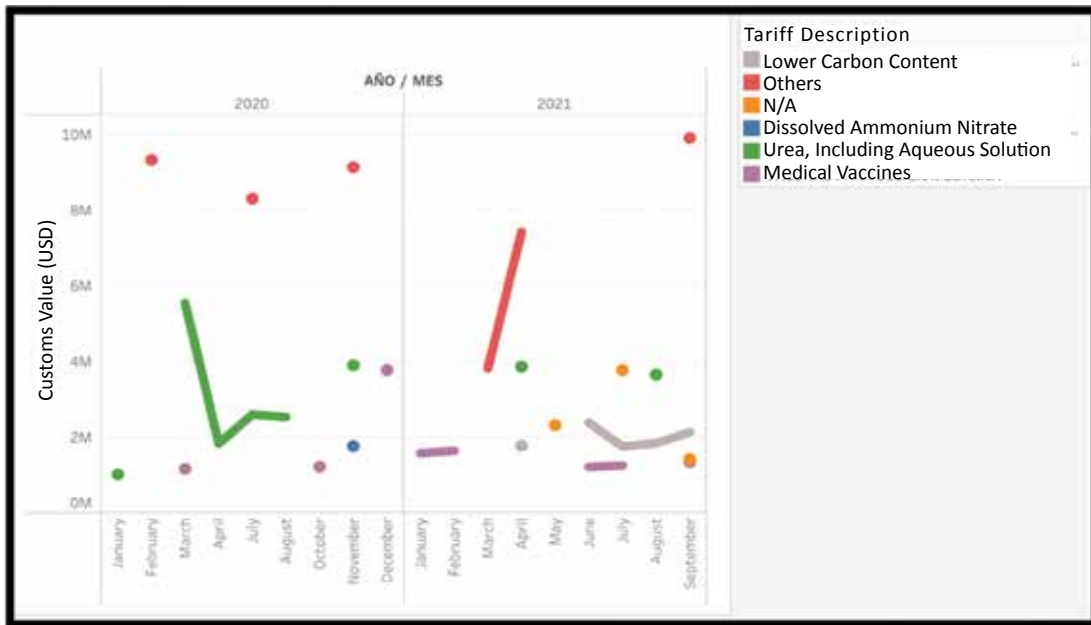
### **Ecuador, Colombia, and El Salvador**

Russia's engagement with Ecuador provides an important perspective on the ways representatives work within a country that, unlike Nicaragua, is not a historic regional ally.

Under the presidency of Rafael Correa (2007–2017), Ecuador operated as an integral part of the BJCE, and it was during this time that its major agreements with Russia were signed. When Lenín Moreno was elected president, in 2017, he distanced his administration and Ecuador's political economy from Correa's ideology in both domestic and foreign policy. When Guillermo Lasso was elected, in 2021, he promised to continue the transition away from Correa's decade of influence and the traditional left-right conversation and political alliances.<sup>59</sup> With that distancing came a less cordial relationship with Russia.

For more than a decade, beginning in Correa's presidency, Ecuador has been involved in an ambitious and costly plan to build 26 different hydroelectric projects. Supporters have

Figure 8. Nicaragua's Imports from Russia Over \$1 Million, 2020–2021



praised the initiative to provide clean, renewable energy to much of Ecuador’s power grid. Many of the projects have been beset with corruption scandals. In at least one case, two different Russian companies were employed to finish construction on a power plant. Taken together, Ecuador’s expanding hydroelectric projects provide a relevant case study regarding Russian strategic expansion methodology under increasingly less favorable political administrations.

**Companies Involved in Toachi Pilaton Hydroelectric Plant Construction.** A closer look at the hydroelectric plants’ construction histories reveals ample opportunities for suspicious investments and relationships with Russian companies. Construction of the Toachi Pilaton plant began in 2008, during Correa’s presidency, with an initial contract to the Brazilian company Odebrecht. The Ecuadoran government terminated this contract because of Odebrecht’s failure to execute work.<sup>60</sup>

Since then, three other companies have been involved in the plant’s construction: the Chinese company China International Water & Electric Corporation (CWE), the Russian company Inter Rao, and the Russian company Tyazhmash, which is also building a hydroelectric plant in El Salvador and conducting business in Colombia.<sup>61</sup>

Both CWE and Inter Rao faced their own corruption scandals and contract failures. Under the original contract, in 2010 the Empresa Publica Estrategica Corporacion Electrica del Ecuador (CELEC EP), Ecuador’s state hydroelectric agency, signed CWE to fulfill the construction

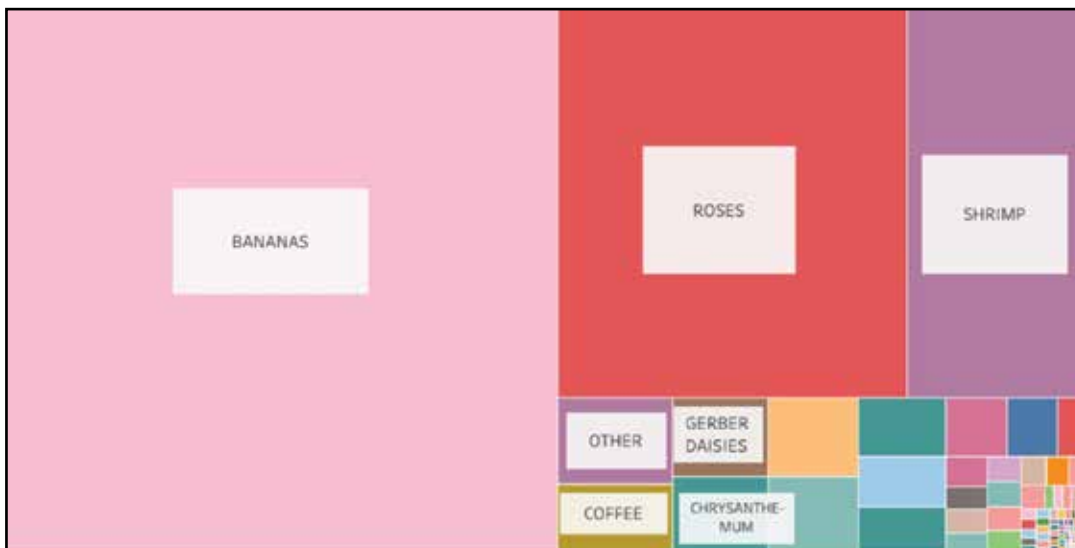
obligations and Inter Rao to build and install the necessary hydroelectric equipment.<sup>62</sup> In 2016 the Correa administration announced that Inter Rao was in violation of contract for failing to complete work. The contract between CELEC EP and Inter Rao entered forced arbitration in 2018.

CELEC EP hired Tyazhmash in May 2016 to take Inter Rao's role, to complete construction and provide hydroelectric equipment for the plant. Tyazhmash is currently responsible for equipment design and installation at Toachi Pilaton.<sup>63</sup> According to CELEC EP, the plant's construction is 98 percent complete, and it has 65 percent of the mechanical and hydroelectric equipment it needs.<sup>64</sup>

**Trade Relationship with Russia.** Whereas the above analysis presents a case study of a semi-public, semi-covert economic relationship between Russia and Ecuador, figures 9a and 9b provide an interesting perspective on the two countries' public economic relationship. Although Ecuador is strategically relevant to Russia because of its geographic position in Latin America, its political administrations are not now pro-Russia in the way many neighboring administrations have been. Thus, figures 10a and 10b offer an important look at how Russia navigates influence in a country that is neither ideologically aligned nor economically enmeshed, but still useful in other ways.

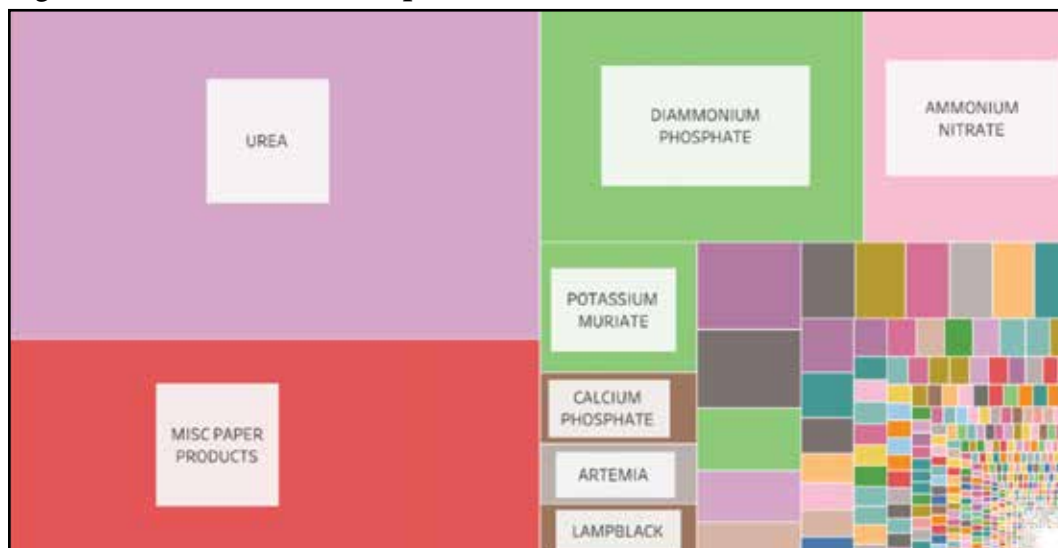
Ecuador exports significantly more to Russia than it imports. From January 2020 to March 2022, Ecuador exported just over USD 3 billion to Russia while importing just USD

**Figure 9a. Ecuador's Exports to Russia, 2020–2022**





**Figure 9b. Ecuador’s Main Imports from Russia, 2020–2022**



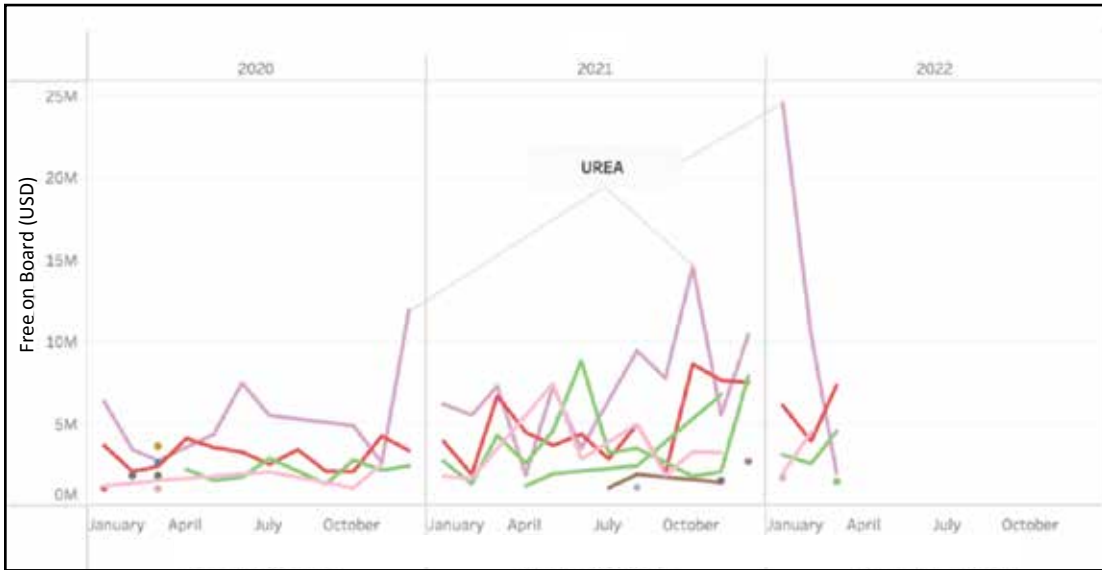
562 million. Ecuador’s highest-value export to Russia was bananas, followed by roses, shrimp, and coffee.

Ecuador’s imports from Russia fluctuated between USD 10 million and USD 30 million during any given month during 2020 and 2021. Gross monthly imports increased during 2021, until their peak in January 2022 at USD 43.8 million. Imports fell sharply after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Exports to Russia hovered around USD 100 million per month for most of 2020 and 2021, spiking in December 2021 at USD 214 million before dropping down to USD 64.5 million in March 2022.

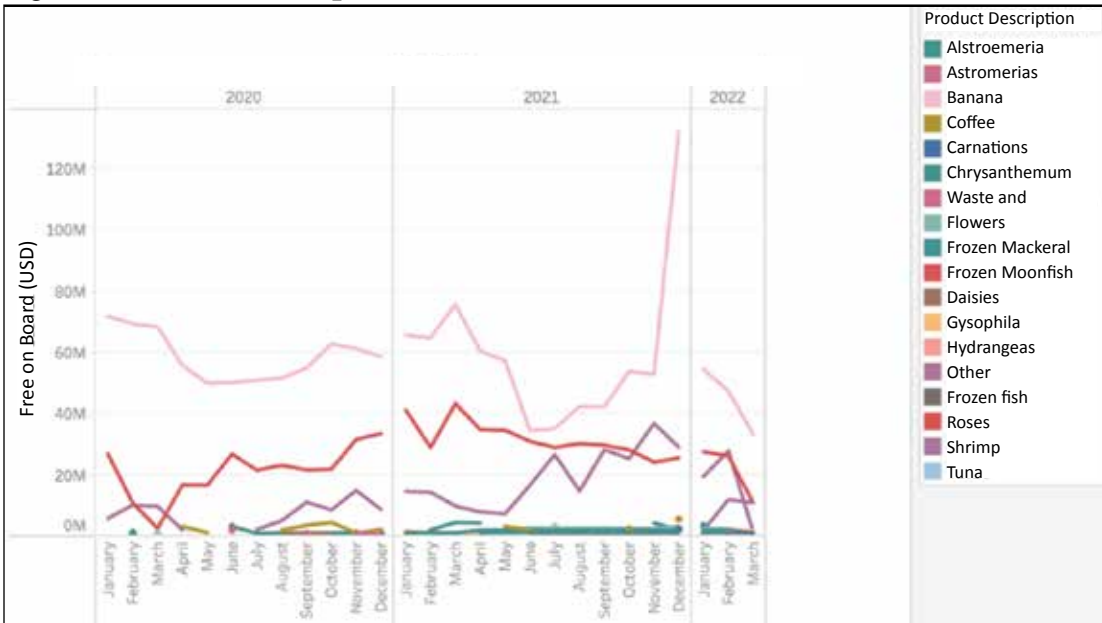
An analysis of disaggregated data shows that the variation in Ecuador’s imports is largely due to high-value shipments of urea, which drove three spikes in the data, with the largest in January 2022. The highest-value exports were shipped on relatively consistent schedules, with one shipment of bananas valued at more than USD 120 million responsible for the spike in December.

These figures suggest that while Russia may not be Ecuador’s most important trading partner, certain sectors—such as bananas—rely on trade with Russia for a significant portion of their revenue, meaning there is some level of reciprocal incentive to find ways around international sanctions. Nonetheless, available data indicate that Ecuador’s trade with Russia decreased following the invasion of Ukraine, indicating some level of compliance with international sanctions.

**Figure 10a. Ecuador’s Imports from Russia Over \$1 Million, 2020–2022**



**Figure 10b. Ecuador’s Exports to Russia Over \$1 Million, 2020–2022**



**Argentina**

Whereas Ecuador provides a case study of Russia’s national strategy in a nation with a less favorable administration, Argentina provides an example of the Russian strategy in a nation with a more favorable and ideologically aligned administration with much higher volumes of bilateral trade.

***Political Engagement: President Fernández and Cristina Kirchner.*** On the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Argentine President Albert Fernández held a joint press conference with Putin in Moscow, announcing that Argentina would serve as the "gateway" to Russian expansion in the Western Hemisphere. He added that Argentina needed to "stop being so dependent on the [International Monetary Fund (IMF)] and the United States and has to open up to other places and that is where it seems to me that Russia has an important place." He finished by saying Russia and Argentina should work together to release Argentina from the "grip" of Washington and move away from the U.S. dollar and the United States.<sup>65</sup>

The meeting highlighted the mercurial nature of the Argentine relationships with Russia and the United States. The Moscow visit came after the United States had exerted its influence to get the IMF to approve a USD 44.5 billion standby loan for Argentina that staved off a devastating debt default, and the Argentine Foreign Ministry had assured U.S. officials that Fernández would not publicly support Putin.<sup>66</sup>

Following the invasion of Ukraine, Fernández condemned the attack but also condemned international sanctions on Russia and called for a negotiated end to the conflict. The willingness to vote against Russia in international forums was seen as politically necessary in Argentina's current political context.<sup>67</sup>

Since the 2019 election that brought Fernández and Cristina Kirchner to power, their administration has made overt and public attempts to extend opportunities to Russia in the Western Hemisphere. Kirchner personally manages the diplomatic relationship with Russia, just as she did when she was president herself.<sup>68</sup>

Russia reciprocates, centering Argentina within its efforts to develop ideological allies. Argentina's political context, in particular Fernández and Kirchner's Peronist party's history of blending far-right politics with radical populism, facilitates this development. Russia focuses on specific strategic interests that directly affect Argentina's political, economic, and information environments.

These efforts are not always successful. In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Fernández administration embraced Russia's Sputnik-V vaccine and tried to broker deliveries of Russian vaccines to Bolivia and Mexico. The promised second doses, purchased under contract, were delayed for months. This embarrassment forced the Fernández administration to seek other options, which ultimately included U.S. vaccines. The national crisis fueled animosity against the governing party and is reportedly part of the reason the governing party lost its senate majority in the 2021 midterm elections.<sup>69</sup> However, these losses did not deter the Fernández administration's drive to become a bulwark of support for Russia in the hemisphere.

Argentina’s strong bias toward decoupling from U.S. interests builds on efforts initiated by Kirchner during her two terms as president (2007–2015), when she welcomed President Putin, allowed Russian network RT to begin broadcasts in Argentina, and increased exports to Russia.

**Trade Profile.** Russia’s engagement with different Latin American nations varies according to ideology, economic interests, strategic priorities, and opportunities. Argentina stands out because of the size of its economic commitments with Russia and the enthusiasm with which Fernández and Kirchner engage Putin. Since January 2020, Argentina has imported over USD 6 billion in goods from Russia and exported over USD 3 billion. No other country analyzed imported more than USD 1 billion during that period.

Figures 11a and 11b represent customs data for goods passing through Argentina’s ports. They do not include services exports from either country (for example, telecom or data exports using servers or offshore labor). However, the information provides an important perspective on the scale and range of Russia’s economic involvement in Argentina, Argentina’s favorable posture toward trade with Russia, and changes in trade after Russia invaded Ukraine and faced international sanctions.

Argentina trades across many companies, industries, and contracts. Main imports include plastic goods, automobile parts, phosphates, and rubber. The highest-value category, iron and steel manufacture, represents USD 701 million in imports from January 2020 to March 2022.

**Figure 11a. Argentina’s Main Imports from Russia from 2020–2022 (By Value USD)**



Argentina’s exports to Russia are similarly diverse, representing USD 3 billion from January 2020 to March 2022. Exports range across agricultural categories such as beef, grains, beans, frozen fish, dairy products, and some industrial products. The largest category, beef, represents USD 394 million in trade.

Argentina’s gross imports from Russia decreased at the beginning of the pandemic before increasing sharply in September 2020. Imports dipped in January 2021 before increasing from February to May, then decreasing again. Gross imports from Russia were relatively low and constant as of January 2022 and have remained at the same level through March 2022.

Argentina’s gross exports to Russia generally remained between USD 40 million and USD 80 million, but with significant fluctuations. There was a large increase in September 2021, after which exports remained high until February 2022, when they sharply decreased. Exports to Russia are currently at a historic low, just over USD 5 million in March 2022.

**Disaggregated Import and Export Trends.** A closer analysis of disaggregated imports over USD 1 million reveals that the greatest increase in imports throughout 2021 was driven by bulk imports of COVID-19 vaccines. Other products with consistent high-value shipments include petroleum, nitrogen, and phosphates.

**Figure 11b. Argentina’s Main Exports to Russia from 2020–2022 (By Value USD)**

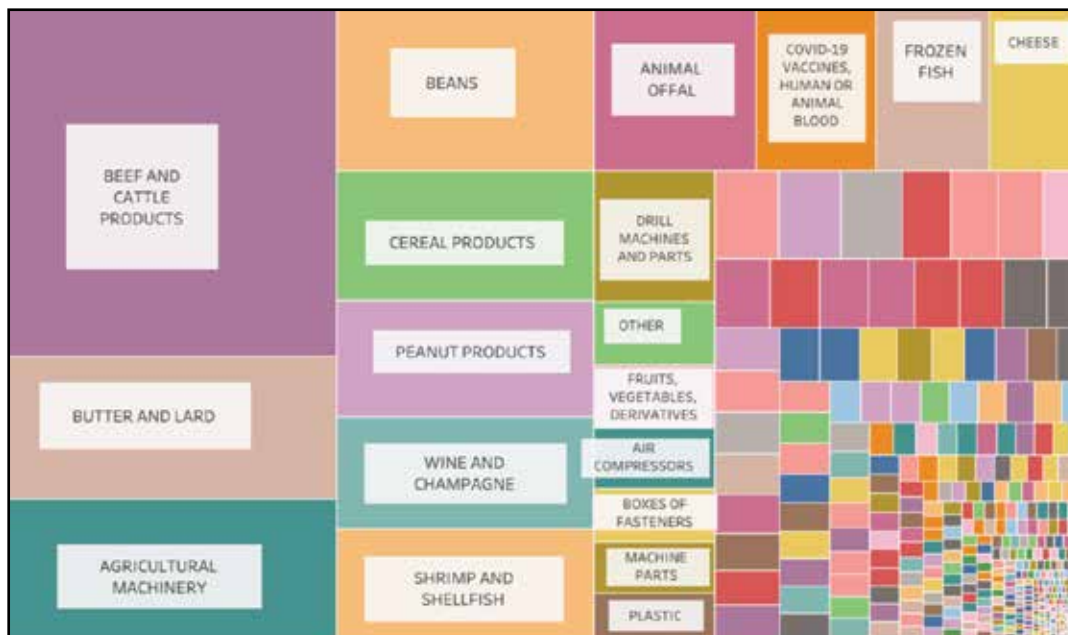


Figure 12a. Argentina's Imports from Russia Over \$1 Million, 2020–2022

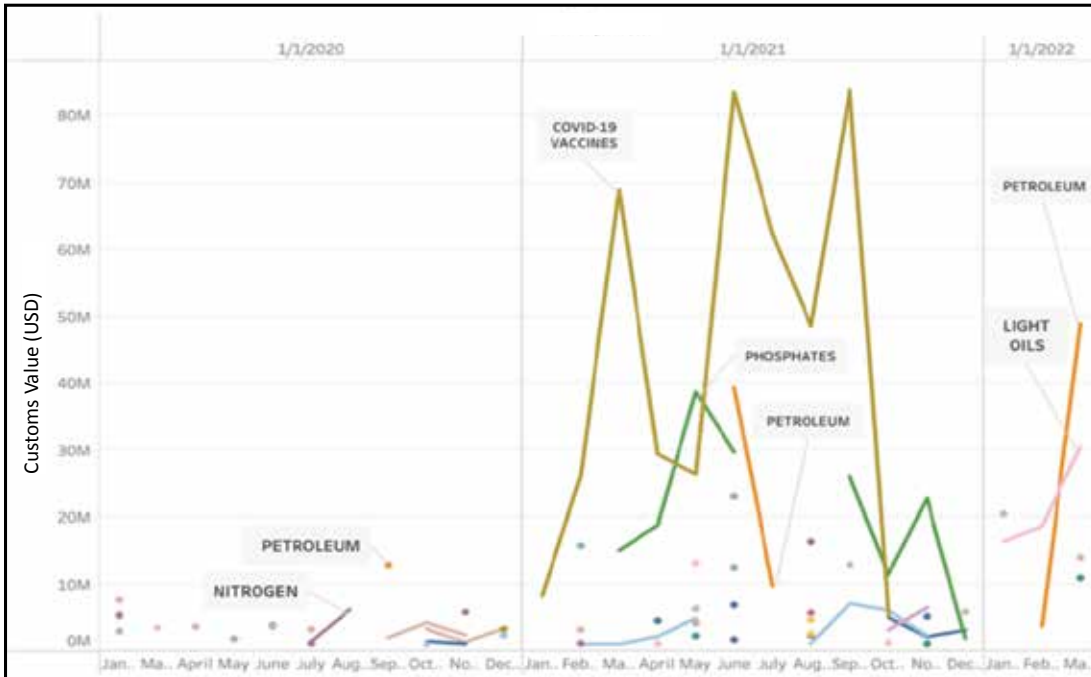
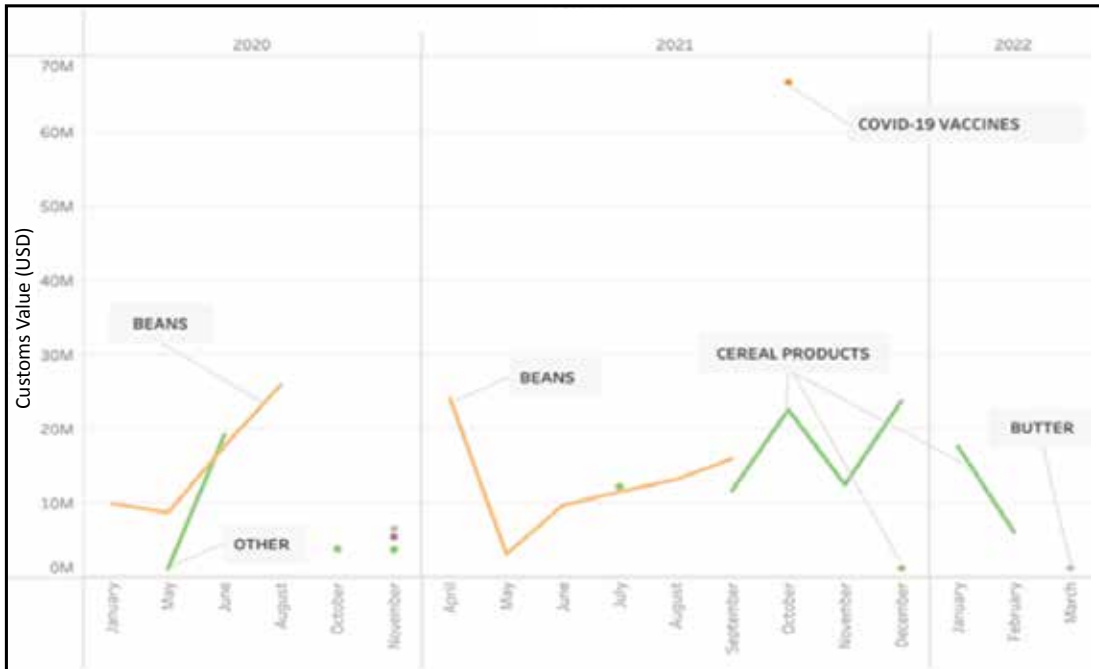


Figure 12b. Argentina's Exports to Russia Over \$1 Million, 2020–2022



After Russia invaded Ukraine, while the net value of Argentina's imports from Russia did not significantly change, the makeup of those imports did. High-value imports of a range of products almost disappeared, but imports of petroleum and light oils spiked.

Bulk exports to Russia are largely beans and other cereal products, with one outlying USD 66 million shipment of COVID-19 vaccines in October 2021. Other than this exception, most high-value exports to Russia are less than USD 26 million. The products with consistent high-value exports are beans and cereal products, though there is one category, labeled "other," that covers exports ranging from USD 1 million to USD 19 million.

### Uruguay

Trade data for Uruguay were not available for this analysis. However, there is significant information about Russia's participation in and use of Uruguay's business and banking system as a means to attain deeper involvement in Latin America.

Several individuals who are active in the Uruguayan business community and political institutions have close ties to Russia, and specifically to the Russian oligarch Dmitry Rybolovlev. Most notably, Rybolovlev is related through marriage to Juan Sartori, a Uruguayan senator, 2019 presidential candidate, and businessman who lived most of his adult life in Switzerland and France.

Sartori married Rybolovlev's daughter, Ekaterina Rybolovleva, in 2015 on a private Greek island. Ekaterina Rybolovleva has been used by her father in the past to shield assets from legal investigation and seizure, most prominently during his divorce from her mother in 2015. Several properties, businesses, and other assets, including Rybolovlev's soccer team, AS Monaco, are owned by trusts in her name.

Sartori's opaque background, multiple failed business endeavors, and ties to a Russian oligarch raise many questions about the origin of his wealth and how he continues to have cash with no visible means of income.

Some of Sartori's business developments raise suspicions, given the speed of growth and the scale of investment. Most notably, he is executive chairman of Union Group, an investment company that owns shares in at least three hydropower projects in Peru. Union Group also owns a majority share in Uruguay's largest marijuana business, ICC Labs (formerly ICC International Cannabis Corporation).

Interestingly, during Sartori's failed presidential campaign, he was linked closely to the leader of his main opposition candidate's party, former Uruguayan President Pepe Mujica, as well as Mujica's top advisor Diego Cánepa of the leftist party Frente Amplio, the principal

ideological and political rivals of Sartori's own National Front Party.<sup>70</sup> Cánepa was previously linked to Sartori during the Mujica administration, when Sartori won a number of contracts in Uruguay's government-controlled fledgling cannabis business. Cánepa was known to be a key advisor to Sartori.

Sartori maintains a minority share in the UK football club Sunderland AFC but is no longer actively involved in the football club. Instead, in late 2021 he joined the board of Rybolovlev's AS Monaco club, where his father-in-law remains a fixture. Although Dmitry Rybolovlev has not been sanctioned, he is, according to European media reports, under investigation for inclusion on the sanctions list.

Lately, Sartori has used his platform to advocate for legitimizing cryptocurrency transactions within Uruguay's banking system. On August 3, 2021, Sartori introduced a bill to the senate that would legalize and regulate some cryptocurrency transactions in Uruguay.<sup>71</sup> On October 1, Sartori sponsored another bill that would give Uruguay's Banco Central the power to regulate cryptocurrency payments.<sup>72</sup>

Sartori's interest in cryptocurrency transactions is notable given his ties to Russia and Russia's own history with cryptocurrency in Latin America. It was a Russian cryptocurrency architect, Fyodor Bogorodsky, who designed Venezuela's debt-bond-based cryptocurrency, the Petro. The Petro is drawn against Venezuela's oil reserves and designed to be hidden from the United States and avoid sanctions. Prior to designing the Petro, Bogorodsky founded numerous other companies in Uruguay, many of which were not legally registered or registered no business activity.

Russia is clearly aware of Uruguay's emerging cryptocurrency mechanisms and seems to be seeking a way to leverage them. In February 2022, *Sputnik News* referenced these developments, saying that Uruguay was "on the way to being a regional cryptocurrency hub."<sup>73</sup> Uruguayan media outlets are also devoting significant airtime to reporting on the possibility that Russia could use cryptocurrencies to evade sanctions, particularly after initiating the war in Ukraine.<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusions and Recommendations

U.S. policy regarding Russia in Latin America largely focuses on Russia's historic strategic coordination with Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua and the effective disinformation strategies now employed. That focus sometimes overlooks other important developments. Without a comprehensive contextual understanding of Russia's evolving strategy, U.S. policymakers miss opportunities to design effective countermeasures, help countries and communities reinforce tools of democratic governance, and counter malignant anti-democratic influence.



The most underappreciated strategically significant development is the existence of cryptography and intelligence networks, such as NK SESLA, that operate extensively but are largely unmonitored. These networks offer sophisticated surveillance and intelligence technology, direct access to Russian leadership, and recruitment services to Russia's allies. Other significant findings involve strategic alliances in Nicaragua, sanctions-busting tactics employed by Argentina, the likely presence of Russian oligarchy funds flowing through Uruguay, and the leadership of Russians in creating different types of cryptocurrencies in Latin America.

Our fieldwork in Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, and Colombia found that Russia's involvement varies by country, sometimes manifesting as a political, ideological, and economic alliance, as in Argentina's case, and sometimes as a more utilitarian choice, as in Ecuador's case. The intelligence and law enforcement leadership in Chile, Ecuador, and Colombia, historic U.S. allies, are dangerously uninformed and unaware of Russian strategic activities and operations in their countries.

Key to building a common agenda is finding common ground and common language on the malign actions that reflect the shared democratic and strategic priorities of blunting them. Those actions include undeclared intelligence operations that reach to the highest levels of government and business, unchecked sale of surveillance technology, and ongoing disinformation campaigns that lead to the erosion of trust in independent media and democratic institutions.

Successful engagement would include expediting the appointments of U.S. ambassadors to key countries such as Chile and Colombia, so that policies can be implemented in a more robust manner. The United States should also engage actively at the highest level with the Gabriel Boric administration in Chile to build a common agenda, understanding that the new administration will face significant challenges from the left but has, so far, remained publicly committed to democratic norms, the rule of law, and transparency. The same challenges will be in place in Colombia with the incoming Gustavo Petro administration.

The United States must also work quickly to address the knowledge deficit inside the U.S. policy community regarding Russia's multiple types of activities that fall beyond the scope of normal soft power engagement. A fact-based understanding of Russia's strategic interests and actions in Latin America, incorporating the Primakov Doctrine and other relevant concepts into the framework of Great Power competition, would give valuable context for revitalized analysis. A prioritization of intelligence tasking to focus on Russian front groups and technology transfers would be a useful shift in a time of limited resources.

With this knowledge and understanding, U.S. policymakers should develop a coordinated, fact-based outreach strategy to the media—focusing on the corrosive impact of the Russian

disinformation campaigns, corruption, espionage, environmental damage, and other dangers. This would be particularly useful in providing tools and training for identifying and calling out Russian dis- and misinformation and involvement in fomenting civil violence in Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador in recent years. A good template is the way USSOUTHCOM coordinated with numerous reputable media outlets in exposing the costs of overfishing off the coast of Ecuador.

Another step should be to reinvigorate educational, technology, and media training exchange programs with traditional and new media outlets in the hemisphere, on both the regional and national levels. The training should include means to detect and counteract foreign propaganda efforts, as well as methods for carrying out open-source data mining and research to trace the origin and source of foreign funding for the purchases of strategic companies, such as those in the electrical sector.

Understanding that Russia is now deeply enmeshed in multiple sectors in the hemisphere but has comparatively few economic resources to offer, the United States should engage in robust new public-private initiatives to further isolate Russia in the hemisphere. This would have both a real impact and the value of demonstrating U.S. reengagement.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Statement of General Laura J. Richardson, Commander, United States Southern Command, Before the House Armed Services Committee, 117<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., March 8, 2022, available at <[https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/Posture%20Statements/SOUTHCOM%20Posture%20Final%202022.pdf?ver=tkjkieaC2RQMhk5L9cM\\_3Q%3d%3d](https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/Posture%20Statements/SOUTHCOM%20Posture%20Final%202022.pdf?ver=tkjkieaC2RQMhk5L9cM_3Q%3d%3d)>.

<sup>2</sup> “Russia: History: Ethnic Relations and Russia’s Near Abroad,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, available at <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Russia/Ethnic-relations-and-Russias-near-abroad>>.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Rumer, *The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 5, 2019), available at <<https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/06/05/primakov-not-gerasimov-doctrine-in-action-pub-79254>>.

<sup>4</sup> R. Evan Ellis, *The New Russian Engagement with Latin America: Strategic Position, Commerce, and Dreams of the Past* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, June 1, 2015), available at <<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/451/>>.

<sup>5</sup> “Nicaragua autoriza tropas rusas para misiones ‘humanitarias’ [Nicaragua Authorizes Russian Troops for ‘Humanitarian’ Missions], Associated Press, June 9, 2022, available at <<https://apnews.com/article/noticias-7c9d34541a59f181cc25a2258f0763f4>>; Tim McNulty, “Russia Offered Chance to ‘Roll Out Something Powerful’—Putin’s Army to Move Closer to U.S.,” *Express*, June 9, 2022, available at <<https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1623217/Russia-Ukraine-war-Russian-TV-latest-Vladimir-Putin-army-US-Nicaragua-Daniel-Ortega-vn>>.

<sup>6</sup> “Acuerdo entre Rusia y Nicaragua para el atraque de buques de Guerra rusos en el país centroamericano” [Agreement Between Russia and Nicaragua to Dock War Ships in the Central American Country], *Defensa.com*, February 13, 2015, available at <<https://www.defensa.com/centro-america/acuerdo-entre-rusia-nicaragua-para-atraque-buques-guerra-rusos>>.

<sup>7</sup> Dmitry Sudakov, “Russian Armed Forces Returning to Latin America,” *Pravda.ru*, February 17, 2015, available at <[http://english.pravda.ru/russia/politics/17-02-2015/129844-russia\\_returning\\_latin\\_america-0/](http://english.pravda.ru/russia/politics/17-02-2015/129844-russia_returning_latin_america-0/)>.

<sup>8</sup> For further analysis of Russia’s use of hybrid or multivariant warfare, see Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines Between War and Peace* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019); Timothy L. Thomas, *Russian Military Thought: Concepts and Elements* (McLean, VA: MITRE Corporation, 2019); and Ofer Fridman, *Russian “Hybrid Warfare”: Resurgence and Politicisation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Rumer, *The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action*; Gerasimov’s paper, titled “The Value of Science in Prediction,” was published in the relatively obscure *Military and Industrial Courier* journal, but it drew considerable attention because Gerasimov’s position gives him operational control of Russian military intelligence. This has been called “Gerasimov Doctrine,” although there is a robust debate over whether the document was intended to be a statement of Russian doctrine.

<sup>10</sup> Rumer, *The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action*.

<sup>11</sup> A full English translation of Gerasimov’s article can be found in Mark Galeotti, “The ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ and Russian Non-Linear War,” *In Moscow’s Shadows* blog, July 6, 2014, available at <<https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>>.

<sup>12</sup> For a full discussion of the Bolivarian Joint Criminal Enterprise as an alliance of radical populist criminalized states that embrace transnational organized crime as an instrument of national policy and have a common anti-U.S. agenda, see Douglas Farah, *The Maduro Regime's Illicit Activities: A Threat to Democracy in Venezuela and Security in Latin America* (Washington, DC: The Atlantic Council, 2020), available at <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/The-Maduro-Regime-Illicit-Activities-A-Threat-to-Democracy-in-Venezuela-and-Security-in-Latin-America-Final.pdf>>.

<sup>13</sup> For a comprehensive look at Russia's engagement on a state-by-state basis in Latin America, see Ellis, *The New Russian Engagement with Latin America*.

<sup>14</sup> Vladimir Rouvinski, *Kennan Cable No. 20: Understanding Russian Priorities in Latin America* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, February 3, 2017), available at <<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no20-understanding-russian-priorities-latin-america>>.

<sup>15</sup> For a look at these alliances, see Douglas Farah and Alexa Tavarez, *Iran in Latin America: Malign Alliances, "Super Spreaders," and Alternative Narratives*, Strategic Perspectives No. 34 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, June 2021), available at <<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-34.pdf>>.

<sup>16</sup> Alina Polyakova and Chris Meserole, *Exporting Digital Authoritarianism: The Russian and Chinese Models* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, August 2019), available at <[https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/FP\\_20190827\\_digital\\_authoritarianism\\_polyakova\\_meserole.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/FP_20190827_digital_authoritarianism_polyakova_meserole.pdf)>.

<sup>17</sup> "Russian FSB Mulls Unified Secure Communications Net," Flash Critic Cyber Threat News, August 21, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Much of the information on Aleksandr Vladimirovich Starovoitov was taken from his biography on the NK SESLA Spanish-language Web site. For his time as director of FAPSI, see Mojmír Babacek, "The Threat of Information, Electromagnetic and Psychronic [*sic*] Warfare," *Global Research*, September 29, 2005, available at <<http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-threat-of-information-electromagnetic-and-psychronic-warfare/1016?print=1>>. Additional information was found at "All Rubbish in One Hut," *Kompromat.ru*, available at <[http://www.kompromat.ru/page\\_11454.htm](http://www.kompromat.ru/page_11454.htm)>.

<sup>19</sup> NK SESLA's Spanish-language Web site is available at <<http://cncepla.ru/es/>>.

<sup>20</sup> This information was taken from Inter EVM's Web site, available at <<http://www.inevm.ru/>>.

<sup>21</sup> "Fallece in Moscú una importante figura de las relaciones Rusia-Latinoamérica" [An Important Figure in Russian-Latin American Relations Dies in Moscow], NK SESLA, available at <[http://cncepla.ru/es/press-center/news/79346/?sphrase\\_id=19925](http://cncepla.ru/es/press-center/news/79346/?sphrase_id=19925)>.

<sup>22</sup> Víctor Ternovsky, "Rusia y Latinoamérica con 'buena voluntad' y 'optimismo' para superar las trabas de su comercio" [Russia and Latin America to Overcome Obstacles to Trade with "Goodwill" and "Optimism"], *Sputnik Mundo*, April 28, 2022, available at <<https://mundo.sputniknews.com/20220428/rusia-y-latinoamerica-con-buena-voluntad-y-optimismo-para-superar-las-trabas-a-su-comercio-1124942897.html>>.

<sup>23</sup> Наш коллектив: Машкова Татьяна Николаевна [Our Team: Tatiana Nikolaevna Mashkova], NK SESLA, available at <<http://cncepla.ru/about/staff.php>>.

<sup>24</sup> Tatiana Rusakova, “Sexta comisión intergubernamental Rusia-Chile para asuntos económicos” [Sixth Russia-Chile Intergovernmental Commission for Economic Affairs], *Russia Beyond*, April 5, 2012, available at <[http://es.rbth.com/articles/2012/04/05/la\\_comision\\_intergubernamental\\_rusia-chile\\_crea\\_grupos\\_de\\_trabajo\\_16743](http://es.rbth.com/articles/2012/04/05/la_comision_intergubernamental_rusia-chile_crea_grupos_de_trabajo_16743)>.

<sup>25</sup> Pierluigi Paganini, “How Russia Controls the Internet,” Infosec, July 1, 2014, available at <<http://resources.infosecinstitute.com/russia-controls-internet/>>.

<sup>26</sup> Polyakova and Meserole, *Exporting Digital Authoritarianism*.

<sup>27</sup> “Компания «Модуль» принимает участие в FIHAV-2016” [Modul Takes Part in Havana International Trade Fair 2016], Modul, October 18, 2016, available at <<http://www.modul.spb.ru/news/2016/10/18/01/>>; see also “27-я Международная Гаванская ярмарка FIHAV [27<sup>th</sup> International Trade Fair–Havana], NK SESLA, November 2, 2009, available at <[http://cncepla.ru/press-center/events/1649/?PAGEN\\_3=44](http://cncepla.ru/press-center/events/1649/?PAGEN_3=44)>.

<sup>28</sup> “Деловая встреча «Россия-Парагвай»” [Russia-Paraguay Business Meeting], NK SESLA, available at <<http://cncepla.ru/press-center/news/4253/>>.

<sup>29</sup> “PROTEI Participates in Redknee Project for DIGITEL BSS Network Transformation,” PROTEI (official English-language Web site), June 19, 2016, available at <<https://protei.com/news/protei-participates-redknee-project-digitel-bss-network-transformation>>.

<sup>30</sup> “Protei Private LTE/5G Solutions at Informatica 2022,” PROTEI, March 24, 2022, noting that PROTEI “solutions and equipment operates successfully in Cuba, Mexico, and Colombia” since 2015, available at <<https://protei.com/news/protei-private-lte-solutions-informatica-2022>>.

<sup>31</sup> See “НТЦ ПРОТЕЙ представил свои решения в Тегеране” [STC PROTEY Presented Its Solutions in Tehran] PROTEI, December 7, 2016, available at <<https://protei.ru/news/ntc-protey-predstavil-svoi-resheniya-v-tegerane>>.

<sup>32</sup> For further information, see Joshua Partlow, “The Soviet Union Fought the Cold War in Nicaragua. Now Putin’s Russia Is Back,” *Washington Post*, April 8, 2017, available at <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/the-soviet-union-fought-the-cold-war-in-nicaragua-now-putins-russia-is-back/2017/04/08/b43039b0-0d8b-11e7-aa57-2ca1b05c41b8\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/the-soviet-union-fought-the-cold-war-in-nicaragua-now-putins-russia-is-back/2017/04/08/b43039b0-0d8b-11e7-aa57-2ca1b05c41b8_story.html)>.

<sup>33</sup> “About Company,” Dialog, available at <<https://dlg.im/en/government/>>.

<sup>34</sup> “Dialog Bot SDK,” Dialog, available at <<https://dlg.im/en/integrations/>>.

<sup>35</sup> For a full look at these echo chambers and ties see Farah and Tavarez, *Iran in Latin America*.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Sana Sekkarie, “A Global Tour Through Russian Propaganda: Where Russian Narratives on Ukraine Are Winning, Where They’re Losing, and Where They’re Not Even Competing,” *Miburo*, March 6, 2022, available at <[https://miburo.substack.com/p/a-global-tour-through-russian-propaganda?r=1dxl2&s=r&utm\\_campaign=post&utm\\_medium=web](https://miburo.substack.com/p/a-global-tour-through-russian-propaganda?r=1dxl2&s=r&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web)>.

<sup>38</sup> “Russian Disinformation on Ukraine Spreads on Spanish-Speaking Social Media,” Associated Press, April 4, 2022, available at <<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/russia-disinformation-ukraine-spreading-spanish-speaking-media-rcna22843>>.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, “‘Tanques ucranianos disparaban a los civiles’: Emergen testimonios de los sótanos de Mariúpol a medida que se retiran las tropas de Kiev” [“Ukrainian Tanks Were Shooting at Civilians”: Testimony Emerges from Mariupol Cellars as Troops Withdraw from Kyiv], RT en Español,

March 28, 2022, available at <<https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/425313-testimonios-emergentes-mariupol-liberar-ciudad-ucrania>>. Other coverage suggests that Russian soldiers in Mariupol are finding tortured bodies and other evidence that Ukraine committed human rights violations. See, for example, “Defensa rusa: encuentran cuerpos con huellas de tortura y esvásticas en Mariúpol” [Russian Defense: Bodies Are Found with Signs of Torture and Swastikas in Mariupol], *Sputnik Mundo*, March 28, 2022, available at <<https://mundo.sputniknews.com/20220328/defensa-rusa-encuentran-cuerpos-con-huellas-de-tortura-y-esvasticas-en-mariupol-1123684569.html>>.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, “Mercenarios, muchos de Latinoamérica, denuncian que Ucrania incumple sus promesas” [Mercenaries, Many from Latin America, Decry Ukraine’s Failure to Keep Its Promises], RT en Español, March 28, 2022, available at <<https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/425288-mercenarios-latinoamerica-denunciar-incumplimiento-promesas-ucrania>>.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, “Operación militar especial de rusia en ucrania” [Russian Special Military Operation in Ukraine], *Sputnik Mundo*, available at <[https://mundo.sputniknews.com/category\\_operacion-militar-especial-de-rusia-en-ucrania/](https://mundo.sputniknews.com/category_operacion-militar-especial-de-rusia-en-ucrania/)>.

<sup>42</sup> “¿Rebelión contra el dólar? ¿Qué se sabe del plan de Rusia y China de una moneda euroasiática (y otras rebeliones)?” [Rebellion Against the Dollar? What Do We Know about the Russian and Chinese Plan for a Eurasian Currency (and other Rebellions)?], *Ahí les Va*, March 25, 2022, Odysee video, 6:46, available at <[https://odysee.com/@ahilesva:e/2022.03.25\\_Mirko-China-Eurasia-Odysee:1](https://odysee.com/@ahilesva:e/2022.03.25_Mirko-China-Eurasia-Odysee:1)>. The news video notes that the main proponents of the change are five former Soviet Bloc countries, nicknamed the “istans.”

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, “China es el principal competidor estratégico: el Pentágono entrega al Congreso de EE.UU. una versión clasificada de su estrategia de defensa nacional” [China Is the Main Strategic Competitor: The Pentagon Submits a Classified Version of Its National Defense Strategy to the U.S. Congress], RT en Español, March 28, 2022, available at <<https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/425339-pentagono-estrategia-defensa-nacional>>.

<sup>44</sup> “Acusan a Biden de querer ‘convertir Ucrania en un lodazal para que Rusia siga sangrando’” [Biden Is Accused of Wanting ‘to Convert Ukraine into a Quagmire so That Russia Continues to Bleed’], RT en Español, March 28, 2022, available at <<https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/425299-biden-convertir-ucrania-lodazal-rusia>>. For the original opinion piece, see Yang Sheeng and Wan Hengyi, “Biden Makes U.S. Tensions with Russia ‘Personal’; Calling for ‘Regime Change’ in a Nuclear Power Dangerous: Expert,” *Global Times*, March 27, 2022, available at <<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1256924.shtml>>.

<sup>45</sup> According to IBI Consultants field research, the agreement was signed in 2017 and publicly announced and expanded in 2021. See Octavio Enríquez, “Ortega, the ‘Anti-Imperialist,’ Surrenders to Russian Interests,” *Confidencial* (Managua), March 1, 2022, available at <<https://www.confidencial.digital/english/ortega-the-anti-imperialist-surrenders-to-russian-interests/>>.

<sup>46</sup> Carlos Fernando Álvarez, “Inaugurado el Centro de Capacitación Anti Narcóticos Rusia-Nicaragua” [Inauguration of the Russia-Nicaragua Anti-Narcotics Training Center], *El 19*, October 16, 2017, available at <<https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:62553-inaugurado-el-centro-de-capacitacion-anti-narcoticos-rusianicaragua->>>.

<sup>47</sup> Lesbia Umaña, “Entregan diplomas a oficiales de la Policía que recibieron primer curso antinarcótico” [Diplomas Awarded to Police Officers Who Completed the First Anti-Narcotics Course], *El 19*, November 10, 2017, available at <<https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:63445-entregan-diplomas-a-oficiales-de-la-policia-que-recibieron-primer-curso-antinarcotico>>.

<sup>48</sup> Mabel Calero, “Esta es la propiedad que Daniel Ortega le ‘donó’ a Rusia en Managua” [This Is the Property That Daniel Ortega “Donated” to Russia in Managua], *La Prensa*, June 30, 2019, available at <<https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2019/06/30/nacionales/2565282-esta-es-la-propiedad-que-daniel-ortega-le-dono-rusia-en-managua>>.

<sup>49</sup> Tatiana Rodríguez Vargas, “Centro de capacitación ruso inicia su año lectivo 2019” [Training Center Begins Its 2019 Academic Year], *Policía Nacional*, January 28, 2019, available at <<https://www.policia.gob.ni/?p=28542>>.

<sup>50</sup> In addition to a brass plaque on the wall stating it, the Russian embassy’s official Web site also makes this relationship unambiguous. See “Centro de capacitación del Ministerio del Interior de Rusia” [Training Center of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs], Embajada de Rusia en Nicaragua Web site, available at <[https://nicaragua.mid.ru/web/nicaragua\\_es/centro-de-capacitacion-del-ministerio-del-interior-de-rusia](https://nicaragua.mid.ru/web/nicaragua_es/centro-de-capacitacion-del-ministerio-del-interior-de-rusia)>.

<sup>51</sup> See “Noticias de la Embajada: Clausura de los cursos ordinarios en el Centro de Capacitación del Ministerio del Interior de Rusia” [Embassy News: Closure of Ordinary Courses at the Training Center of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs], Embajada de Rusia en Nicaragua Web site, available at <[https://nicaragua.mid.ru/web/nicaragua\\_es/noticias-de-la-embajada/-/asset\\_publisher/xwLVnXkKpZSL/content/clusura-de-los-cursos-ordinarios-en-el-centro-de-capacitacion-del-ministerio-del-interior-de-rusia?p\\_p\\_auth=VXpPr5vg&inheritRedirect=false](https://nicaragua.mid.ru/web/nicaragua_es/noticias-de-la-embajada/-/asset_publisher/xwLVnXkKpZSL/content/clusura-de-los-cursos-ordinarios-en-el-centro-de-capacitacion-del-ministerio-del-interior-de-rusia?p_p_auth=VXpPr5vg&inheritRedirect=false)>.

<sup>52</sup> “Treasury Targets Nicaraguan Vice President and Key Advisor over Violent Response to Protests,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, November 27, 2018, available at <<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm554>>.

<sup>53</sup> Our field interviews with knowledgeable sources in Nicaragua in 2021 and 2022 found multiple reports of the use of SORM technology by the Ortega regime.

<sup>54</sup> Douglas Farah and Kathryn Babineau, *A Strategic Overview of Latin America: Identifying New Convergence Centers, Forgotten Territories, and Vital Hubs for Transnational Organized Crime*, Strategic Perspectives No. 28 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, January 2019), available at <<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-28.pdf>>.

<sup>55</sup> Nohemy Sandino, “Planta de vacunas en Nicaragua podría producir Interferon Alfa 2B” [Vaccine Plant in Nicaragua Could Produce Interferon Alpha-2B], *El 19*, March 19, 2020, available at <<https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:101449-planta-de-vacunas-en-nicaragua-podria-producir-interferon-alfa-2b>>.

<sup>56</sup> “Russia Assists in Delivery of Coronavirus Drug to Nicaragua from Cuba,” TASS, April 10, 2020, available at <<https://tass.com/world/1142939>>.

<sup>57</sup> Keyling T. Romero and Ivette Munguía, “Régimen ha recibido más de US\$15 millones de ayuda por covid-19” [Regime Has Received More Than US\$15 Million in Aid for COVID-19], *Confidencial*, May 10, 2020, available at <<https://confidencial.com.ni/nicaragua-ha-recibido-mas-de-15-millones-de-dolares-de-ayuda-por-COVID-19/>>.

<sup>58</sup> Victor Ternovsky, “La biotecnología rusa se ofrece para combatir el coronavirus en América Latina” [Russian Biotechnology to Combat Coronavirus in Latin America], *Sputnik Mundo*, May 7, 2020, available at <[https://mundo.sputniknews.com/radio\\_que\\_pasa/202005071091351100-rusa-se-america-latina-COVID-19-vacuna/](https://mundo.sputniknews.com/radio_que_pasa/202005071091351100-rusa-se-america-latina-COVID-19-vacuna/)>.

<sup>59</sup> José María León Cabrera and Anatoly Kurmanaev, “Conservative Ex-Banker Headed to Victory in Presidential Election in Ecuador,” *New York Times*, April 11, 2021, available at <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/11/world/americas/ecuador-election-indigenous.html>>.

<sup>60</sup> “Ecuador contrata empresa rusa para terminar hidroeléctrica” [Ecuador Contracts Russian Company to Finish Hydroelectric Plant], Associated Press, May 23, 2019, available at <<https://apnews.com/article/352b7af24aef4dc3918416aef40d49f8>>. Odebrecht was separately implicated in a massive Brazilian corruption probe called Operação Lava Jato, or Operation Car Wash. See Humberto de Faria Santos and Anderson Bronzato, “¿Operação Lava-Jato e Odebrecht: Um caso que va acabar?” [Operation Car Wash and Odebrecht: A Case That Will End?], *Revista Científica Multidisciplinar Núcleo do Conhecimento* 10, no. 2 (February 2021), 61–75, available at <<https://www.nucleodoconhecimento.com.br/etica/operacao-lava-jato>>.

<sup>61</sup> “49 megavattios de Sarapullo entrarán en operación hasta marzo de 2022” [49-M Megawatt Sarapullo Hydroelectric Plant Will Come into Operation in March 2022], *Primicias*, February 21, 2022, available at <<https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/economia/megavattios-sarapullo-operacion-toachi-pilaton/>>.

<sup>62</sup> “Inter RAO to Open Offices in Ecuador,” Interfax, October 5, 2010, available at <<https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/62803/>>.

<sup>63</sup> “Ecuador contrata empresa rusa para terminar hidroeléctrica” [Ecuador Contracts Russian Company to Complete Hydroelectric Plant].

<sup>64</sup> “La empresa Tyazhmash entregó las garantías y firmó el contrato para concluir el proyecto Toachi Pilatón” [Tyazhmash Delivered the Guarantees and Signed the Contract to Complete the Toachi Pilatón Project], CELEC EP, June 21, 2019, available at <<https://www.celec.gob.ec/hidrotoapi/index.php/79-noticias/505-la-empresa-tyazhmash-entrego-las-garantias-y-firmo-el-contrato-para-concluir-el-proyecto-toachi-pilaton>>.

<sup>65</sup> Eliana Raszewski, “Argentina’s Fernandez, in Russia, Says Must End Economic ‘Dependence’ on U.S., IMF,” Reuters, February 3, 2022, available at <<https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/argentinas-fernandez-russia-says-must-end-economic-dependence-us-imf-2022-02-03/>>.

<sup>66</sup> This information is based on interviews with two Argentine foreign policy sources in the Fernández government and partially substantiated by open-source reporting. See Evan Ellis, “Alberto Fernández’s Magical Odyssey to Russia and China,” *Global Americans*, February 15, 2022, available at <<https://theglobalamericans.org/2022/02/alberto-fernandezs-magical-odyssey-to-russia-and-china/>>.

<sup>67</sup> “Argentina Joins UN in Condemnation of ‘Russian aggression’ in Ukraine,” *Buenos Aires Times*, March 4, 2022, available at <<https://www.batimes.com.ar/news/latin-america/argentina-joins-un-condemnation-of-russian-aggression-in-ukraine.phtml>>.

<sup>68</sup> Fernando Gonzalez, “Fernández-Kirchner Looks like Medvedev-Putin,” *Clarín* (Buenos Aires), August 31, 2020, available at <<https://worldcrunch.com/opinion-analysis/argentina-fernaacutendez-kirchner-looks-like-medvedev-putin>>.



<sup>69</sup> Lucila Sigal and Polina Nikolskaya, “Argentina Handles Sputnik V Delay by Giving Second Jabs of Other Vaccines,” Reuters, August 5, 2021, available at <<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/argentina-handles-sputnik-v-delay-by-giving-second-jabs-other-vaccines-2021-08-05/>>.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, “Uruguay: Sergio Botana dijo que Juan Sartori ‘es más amigo de Cánepa y Mujica que de nosotros’” [Uruguay: Sergio Botana Said That Juan Sartori “Is More a Friend of Cánepa’s and Mujica’s Than of Ours”], *ICNDiario*, April 19, 2019, available at <<https://www.icndiario.com/2019/04/uruguay-sergio-botana-dijo-que-juan-sartori-es-mas-amigo-de-canepa-y-mujica-que-de-nosotros/>>.

<sup>71</sup> “El Proyecto de Sartori para regular las criptomonedas y la vision de un expert” [The Sartori Project to Regulate Cryptocurrencies and the Vision of an Expert], *El Observador*, August 4, 2021, available at <<https://www.elobservador.com.uy/nota/el-proyecto-de-sartori-para-regular-las-criptomonedas-y-la-vision-de-un-experto-202184173316>>.

<sup>72</sup> Ficha Asunto 152583, “Virtual Assets: Regulation,” Cámara Senadores del Uruguay, October 1, 2021, available at <<https://parlamento.gub.uy/documentosyleyes/ficha-asunto/152583>>.

<sup>73</sup> “¿Uruguay: En camino a ser el hub regional de criptomonedas?” [Uruguay: On the Way to Becoming the Regional Cryptocurrency Hub?], *Sputnik Mundo*, February 12, 2022, available at <<https://mundo.sputniknews.com/20220212/uruguay-en-camino-a-ser-el-hub-regional-de-criptomonedas--1121580530.html>>.

<sup>74</sup> Juan Diana and Pedro Copelmayer, “El fantasma de Kiev: apuntes sobre la Guerra, las sanciones economicas, el dinero y las criptomonedas” [The Ghost of Kyiv: Notes on the War, Economic Sanctions, Money, and Cryptocurrencies], *La Diaria Economía*, March 7, 2022, available at <<https://ladiaria.com.uy/economia/articulo/2022/3/el-fantasma-de-kiev-apuntes-sobre-la-guerra-las-sanciones-economicas-el-dinero-y-las-criptomonedas/>>.



## About the Authors

*Douglas Farah* is a Visiting Senior Fellow in the Center for Strategic Research (CSR), Institute for National Strategic Studies, at the National Defense University. He is also the president of IBI Consultants, a national security consulting firm. Prior to these positions, Mr. Farah worked as a foreign correspondent and investigative reporter to the *Washington Post* for more than 20 years, covering security in Latin America and West Africa. He is an expert on national security, transnational crime, terrorism, terror finance, and nonstate armed actors. Mr. Farah has given testimony before House and Senate committees, has sat in as an expert witness in security conferences across the Western Hemisphere, and has published two books on these topics. He holds Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degrees from the University of Kansas.

*Marianne Richardson* is a Research Coordinator for IBI Consultants and National Defense University. Her work focuses on migration, transnational systems, and finance. Prior to these positions, Ms. Richardson worked with the city of Austin's COVID-19 disaster response team to develop real-time financial tracking tools for testing sites and mass vaccination centers. She also developed research on migration drivers at the Central America and Mexico Policy Initiative at the Strauss Center for International Security and Law. Ms. Richardson is a returned Peace Corps volunteer (Mozambique 2015–2017). She holds a Master of Arts in public affairs from the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin and a Bachelor of Arts in international studies and Spanish from Butler University in Indianapolis.

IBI Consultants, LLC ([www.ibiconsultants.net](http://www.ibiconsultants.net)), is a national security consulting firm. Researchers in the firm offer a broad range of expertise and access across Latin America on issues of national security, transnational crime, terrorism, terror finance, and nonstate armed actors. IBI Consultants works with a wide range of clients, from U.S. Government entities to private foundations, and provides analysis, information, scenario development, and access to a broad range of on-the-ground experts.



## Center for Strategic Research Senior Fellows

DR. LISA A. ARONSSON

*Research Fellow*

DR. R. KIM CRAGIN

*Senior Research Fellow*

DR. T.X. HAMMES

*Distinguished Research Fellow*

DR. FRANK G. HOFFMAN

*Distinguished Research Fellow*

DR. JACLYN A. "JACKIE" KERR

*Senior Research Fellow*

DR. BRYCE S. LOIDOLT

*Research Fellow*

COLONEL RAPHAEL "RALPH"

LOPEZ, PH.D., U.S. ARMY

*Senior Military Fellow*

DR. THOMAS F. LYNCH III

*Distinguished Research Fellow*

DR. JEFFREY MANKOFF

*Distinguished Research Fellow*

DR. DENISE NATALI

*Director*

DR. MAHSA ROUHI

*Research Fellow*

MR. BRETT SWANEY

*Assistant Research Fellow*

For a complete list of INSS researchers and staff, please visit <https://inss.ndu.edu>.

