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The View from the South: Latin American Perspectives on Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine

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Abstract

The positioning of some Latin American presidents on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has raised serious questions about their foreign policy orientation. This article aims to show that the sources of this attitude can mostly be found in Latin American countries' domestic situations.

Concerns about the foreign policy orientation of Latin American countries have intensified in the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Some of the region's heads of state have expressed themselves in bizarre ways that have seemed designed to provoke controversy and discord with Western countries. This was generally expected from the region's authoritarian countries, such as Nicaragua or Venezuela—some of which have voted with Russia at the UN General Assembly. What has come as a surprise to many observers, however, has been the vehemence with which democratic politicians such as Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Colombian President Gustavo Petro appear to have adopted some aspects of Russian rhetoric. Something similar has been true of Mexican head of state Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

While their official representatives in the UN General Assembly, like the overwhelming majority of its members, have typically condemned the invasion in the essential resolutions on the matter, some of these presidents' statements have suggested that they side—at least rhetorically—with Russia. Lula's comments about Western countries' alleged lack of interest in a peaceful solution and his cynical call for Ukraine to seek a negotiated end to the war received applause from the Russian Foreign Minister and harsh criticism from the United States. Even more ignorant—or at least bizarre—were the comments of Lula's advisor Celso Amorim, who described the West's efforts to weaken Russia as reminiscent of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles that followed the First World War, which he went on to blame for Nazi Germany's aggression in the Second World War.

Attempted Explanations

Academic experts on Latin American politics have made numerous attempts to explain these developments, most of which have not been particularly helpful. Counter to what is often claimed (cf. Fuentes 2022), most Latin American countries do not have a long tradition of neutrality—on the contrary, the military security of the

majority of the region's states is guaranteed by the United States under the Rio Pact—nor are their economic ties with Russia of extraordinary importance. The frequently mentioned importance of Russian fertilizer exports to the agricultural states of the Southern Cone (Sugarman 2023) is only a superficially plausible reason—after all, given its dire economic situation, Russia could hardly afford to simply stop these exports. They would also not be affected by current sanctions, as these expressly exclude the food sector. Other economic motives are not apparent, especially since it is not clear how scandalous statements by Latin American politicians could contribute to bringing an end to the sanctions. Indeed, the increased raw material prices caused by the war may actually prove economically beneficial for at least some countries in the region.

The argument that Latin American leaders understood Russia's sensitivity to violations of its supposedly legitimate "sphere of influence" in Ukraine appears brutally paradoxical (Mijares 2022). Ultimately, Latin American dislike of, and at least rhetorical resistance to, the United States' past claims to hegemony and geopolitical control in the Monroe Doctrine's Roosevelt Corollary—as well as to similar claims by other historical great powers—is, to a certain extent, the normative basis of the autonomist intellectual traditions with which Latin American foreign policy decision-makers, especially those with a progressive orientation, continue to identify.

However, it should be noted that right-wing and right-wing extremist presidents, such as Lula's predecessor Jair Bolsonaro and Salvadoran strongman Nayib Bukele, have also openly sympathized with the Russian position. An ideological motivation arising from the left-right spectrum—perhaps stemming from Cold War-era sympathies—can therefore be ruled out, especially since one of the few Latin American heads of state to take a clear stand in favor of Ukraine was the Chilean socialist Gabriel Boric. This is in contrast to Latin American positions regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, which are clearly structured by the left-right distinction.

Russian Disinformation and Public Opinion

In contrast, Russian information warfare cannot be ruled out as an influencing factor. In contrast to its European counterparts, the Latin American version of the television channel RT, for example, is not identifiable from the outset as a crude product of right-wing extremist conspiracy theorists. Rather, it mostly offers plausible information on the problems of democratic practice in the region, which politically or commercially influenced national or regional broadcasters in Latin America are often sorely lacking. It is staffed by seasoned journalists and features frequent appearances by prominent media personalities (Rouvinski 2022). This regionalized content could of course create an opening for strategic propaganda messages about the Russian wars in Ukraine and elsewhere. In terms of reach, RT and Sputnik clearly outperform their Spanish-language competitors from CNN or Voice of America, at least on platforms such as YouTube or Facebook.

However, the fact that public opinion in Latin American countries—contrary to many clichés—is by no means particularly critical of the United States, nor particularly friendly to Russia, speaks against such a causal role of Russian information warfare. In fact, various opinion polls in recent months show a fairly clear trend in this regard: Russia is one of the most unpopular countries in Latin America, and it has become far less popular as a result of its war against Ukraine. In fact, according to a Gallup poll from April 2023, Russia's post-invasion loss of prestige in Latin America was the most significant of all world regions—Russia had previously enjoyed slightly more positive than negative assessments, in line with perceptions elsewhere in the Global South (Ritter and Crabtree 2023). According to a survey by Latinobarómetro (Infobae 2022), Russia was less popular than the three other options—China, Germany, and the US—in all ten regional countries surveyed. In Brazil, only four percent of respondents sympathized with Russia.

When another survey asked about opinions regarding concrete support for Ukraine (GlobeScan 2023), the figures were lower in Latin America than in the other polls—but with the exception of Mexico, they were still characterized by majority support for Ukraine. Both fears about economic consequences and the lack of actual opportunities for effective military support by Latin American countries may have played a role here: Among Latin American countries, only the armed forces of Brazil, Chile and, to a lesser extent, Colombia possess equipment that could be usefully employed by Ukraine. In Brazil, however, the proportion of those in favor of supporting Ukraine was 67 percent. Thus, Lula and other leaders' pro-Russia positioning surprisingly occurred against the background of a public opinion

clearly skeptical of Russia, making these leaders' intentions even more mysterious.

International Order and the BRICS

There are also interpretations that see Russia-friendly rhetoric as the expression of a shift toward a “multipolar” world, which is supposedly in the process of emerging and is often imagined as being based on the BRICS grouping. First, it should be noted that this use of the word comes from Russian and Chinese government communication; in no way does it correspond to “multipolarity” as a concept in International Relations theory. Second, those interpretations can be relegated to the realm of fantasy just as easily as can Latin American publics' supposed friendliness toward Russia.

In fact, apart from the development bank associated with the group, run by Brazilian ex-president Dilma Rousseff, the BRICS have no independent institutionality—and the aforementioned bank actually implements the financial sanctions imposed on Russia. So far, it does not seem to be indicative of a structural shift in power. Insofar as a shift in weight can be observed in Latin America, it is a shift in trade flows (though not in investment capital or in military power) that is taking place in favor of China, and to the detriment of Russia (Kleinschmidt 2022). It therefore does not represent a plausible cause of pro-Russian rhetoric. At the same time, if there was a real power shift perceived to be underway, why would this not be accommodated by also shifting the votes in the UN General Assembly?

Considerations that point to status disputes that would be exacerbated by Russia's war might be more convincing. In fact, it is conceivable that the immense suffering of the Ukrainian population could cause other catastrophes—such as the mass exodus from autocratic Venezuela, the numerous deaths from gang wars caused by international drug prohibition (Kleinschmidt and Palma 2020), or the expected serious effects of climate change on the countries of Latin America—to move down the hierarchy of global political problems. Making matters worse, in Latin American expert discourse as well as in political and media debates, Russia's genocidal war of aggression (Etkind 2022) is often equated with conflicts in Latin America, such as the border wars between Ecuador and Peru. In some cases, recognized experts have suggested applying the intergovernmental consultation mechanisms established in Latin America to the war between Russia and Ukraine (Tokatlián 2023). This would be a drastically inadequate strategy considering that the drivers of the war are concentrated in domestic Russian politics—but against such an informational background, Lula's statements appear to be at least partially explicable.

Elites' Discourse and Soft Balancing

The fact that such deeply problematic equations do not cause major disagreements demonstrates an instinctive tendency among Latin American elites to distance themselves from the dominant position in Western countries. In the literature, this is sometimes interpreted as a mechanism for overcoming domestic legitimacy deficits (Baker and Cupery 2013). It could at least account for some of the divergence between public opinion and political rhetoric. Accordingly, marginal opinions that are widely criticized in the Western expert community, such as John J. Mearsheimer's statements on the war (Mearsheimer 2014), often find a grateful audience in Latin America. This effect might of course be reinforced by Russian media such as RT. The attractiveness of such rhetorical dissidence might therefore be traceable to Ukraine's originally subaltern international position, which was actually not too dissimilar to that of many Latin American countries.

Ukraine's subsequent performance—its successful military resistance against a country generally viewed as a great power, but also its rapid formation of political agreements with the United States, NATO, and the EU, including the acquisition of candidate status in the latter, as well as achieving centrality in media reporting and intellectual debates—is overwhelming in comparison (Korablyova 2022). In the context of Latin America, it can be seen as an indictment of the inability of Latin American elites to achieve similar political weight and discursive centrality for their own countries—as already mentioned, autonomy is a central concept in Latin America's foreign policy discourse—or at least to demand it with similar resonance, and thus break out of their subaltern status. As with so many foreign policy maneuvers by Latin American countries, “soft balancing”—that is, the attempt to achieve one's own policy goals by rhetorically delegitimizing the strategies of other, more powerful actors—is likely to play a role here (Flemes and Castro 2016). In this case, the elites of Latin America, regardless of the ideology to which

they may adhere, seem to be particularly concerned with their own legitimacy.

Outlook

How should Western countries (and Ukraine itself!) deal with these rhetorical attacks by Latin American presidents? Overreactions are certainly undesirable—when it comes to the question of UN votes on the war, for example, almost all Latin American countries have proven to be responsible, and structural factors such as the end of rapid growth in China will in any case prevent a truly militant anti-Western foreign policy.

On the other hand, the rhetoric should definitely be countered, due not least to the imperative of maintaining a coherent narrative regarding the need to support Ukraine. In particular, such voices should come from Ukraine itself. In addition, greater efforts should be made to communicate the importance of the Ukrainian defensive struggle through new channels. This could be done in various ways: Kateryna Vakarchuk (2022), for example, describes a possible role for the Ukrainian diaspora in Latin America (primarily in the Brazilian state of Paraná, but also in Argentina and Paraguay) in creating the conditions for understanding the situation in Ukraine.

Ultimately, the deficits observed in Latin America are simply a variant of the problematic ignorance of numerous Western publics about the history of Ukraine and its difficult emancipation from colonization by Russia (Kurylo 2023), exacerbated by local conditions in Latin America. Providing the necessary resources and infrastructure for this could be an important task for Western think tanks and political foundations. In Ukraine itself, there are currently hardly any resources for engagement with Latin America, and there is often a lack of necessary experience. Considering the need to (re)build Eastern Europe expertise in Western countries and move it away from its traditional focus on Russia, such support would ultimately be beneficial in several respects.

About the Author

Jochen Kleinschmidt is Research Associate at the Chair for International Politics at Dresden University of Technology. His work focuses on armed conflict, International Relations theory, and political geography.

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