



The primate of the Russian Orthodox Church celebrates liturgy at the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul on 21 February 2016, the last day of his visit to Latin America, in São Paulo, Brazil. (Photo courtesy of the Russian Orthodox Church, Department for External Church Relations)

The Russians of Latin America

Moscow's Bid for Influence Over Russian-Speaking Communities in the Region

Brian Fonseca

Vladimir Rouvinski, PhD

Russia's rebound in the international system following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 has led it back to Latin America in search of economic and geopolitical opportunities. However, Russia's limited capacity to exercise influence in a Western-dominated international system using traditional instruments of power—such as diplomatic, economic, and military—has forced Moscow to search for alternative sources of influence. To that end, Russia is increasingly relying on informational and sociological approaches to achieve its foreign policy objectives—what some scholars describe as hybrid warfare.¹ For example, Russia is courting its diaspora around the world, including in Latin America, to leverage Russian-speaking communities as a source of Russian national power.

Since the early 1990s, mobilizing Russian diaspora has been a key feature of Russian foreign policy in its “near abroad”—that is, former Soviet Republics and Warsaw Pact countries in close geographic proximity to Russia.² However, in recent years, Moscow has also stepped up efforts to organize and engage its diaspora in its “far abroad”—that is, regions as far away as Latin America. Over the last decade, there has been a coordinated effort to consolidate diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean in an attempt to strengthen Moscow's connectivity to growing and increasingly more organized Russian-speaking communities. Diaspora-focused organizations range from compatriot movements to cultural centers, the Russkiy Mir Foundation, Russian media outlets, and of course, the Russian Orthodox Church—all of which help cultivate Russian-speaking communities as a source of Russian national power. This article will examine the evolution of Russian diaspora engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean, and assess its potential to support Russian domestic and foreign policy objectives.

Diaspora as an Emerging Source of Russian National Power

Moscow's inspiration to use diaspora as a component of foreign policy stems largely from structural changes that occurred immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The fourteen independent nations established along Russia's new border comprised territories that were up until then elements of Moscow's domestic affairs. These territories were vulnerable to Western influence and needed to be quickly incorporated into Russia's foreign policy strategy. One perceived advantage

by Moscow was that the populations in these territories maintained strong Russian roots, and large segments of their respective populations were native Russian speakers. To that end, Russia developed a near abroad strategy that included policies to cultivate influence among pro-Russia communities. In a speech to the United Nations in 1994, Russian President Boris Yeltsin asserted Russia's role in protecting ethnic Russians and ensuring peace in the newly independent nations that formerly comprised the Soviet Union, a concept later referred to as the Yeltsin Doctrine.³ Yeltsin's foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, drafted the first

Brian Fonseca is director of the Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy and an adjunct professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Florida International University's Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs. His technical expertise is in U.S. national security and foreign policy. His recent publications include *Culture and National Security in the Americas* with Eduardo A. Gamarra and *The New US Security Agenda: Trends and Emerging Threats* with Jonathan Rosen. His 2018 publications center on Russian engagement in Latin America, including information operations and Russian-Venezuelan relations.

Vladimir Rouvinski is director of the Laboratory of Politics and International Relations (PolInt), and an associate professor in the Department of Political Studies at Icesi University, Cali, Colombia. He graduated from Irkutsk State University, in Russia, majoring in history and international relations, and he holds an MA and a PhD in international development and cooperation from Hiroshima University in Japan. Before joining Icesi University in 2007, Rouvinski worked with the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), and with education and research institutions in Russia, Japan, and Colombia. He served as an associate with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR); as a George F. Kennan Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C., JSPS special invited researcher; and as an Otto Bannemann Fellow at Georg-Eckert-Institute in Germany. Rouvinski's area of expertise is Russian and Asian countries relations with Latin America.

Russian Foreign Policy Strategy in 1993 that sought to protect the rights of millions in Russian-speaking communities in former Soviet Republics.⁴

Starting in 1994, Moscow began establishing important policies—State Commission on Compatriots Issues, Federal Law of the Russian Federation toward Russian Compatriots, and State Program for the Support of Voluntary Migration of Compatriots to the Russian Federation—aimed at developing Moscow’s connectivity with Russians living abroad.⁵ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs established the Department of Compatriot Affairs in 2005 and the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Aboard, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (*Rossostrudnichestvo*). These organizations analyze diaspora communities, develop strategies to engage compatriots, and coordinate work with compatriot organizations encompassing an estimated thirty million Russians around the world.⁶

Initially, policies were largely targeting diaspora living in Russia’s near abroad. However, there has been greater intentionality in developing a globally connected Russian diaspora over the last decade, thanks in large part to Russian President Vladimir Putin. In 2006, Putin asserted, “cooperation with the diaspora, legal advocacy and support for them is one of our national priorities.”⁷ In fact, Putin often includes Russian diaspora into definitions of the Russian nation-state and views engagement with Russian-speaking communities around the world as an increasingly important component of its public diplomacy strategy. Putin publicly refers to this as the Russian world, also known as *Ruskiy Mir*, a concept that builds on Russian identity all over the world and bonds Russian-speaking communities together under a nationalistic moniker.⁸ According to Russia’s 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, foreign policy objectives include “consolidating the Russian diaspora around the world” to advance Russian foreign policy interests.⁹ Moscow wants Russians around the world to preserve cultural and historical ties and the Russian language as well as to promote a positive image of Russia in host countries to aid Russian commercial and diplomatic efforts.¹⁰ Evidence of successes in using Russian diaspora to support Moscow’s foreign policy include Georgia, the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, and interference in the Estonian and Latvian elections, among others.

History of Russian Diaspora in Latin America

Russian migrants first appeared in Latin America and the Caribbean in the early nineteenth century. The first waves consisted largely of labor migrants from the European part of the Russian Empire and, to a lesser extent, political opposition from the Baltic provinces in Poland and western Ukraine. After October 1917, only a relatively small number of Russians escaping communist rule had chosen the region as their place of refuge, mostly because they were unable to establish their new homes either in Europe or Asia. The second wave of Russian migration to Latin America occurred following the end of the Second World War and consisted largely of Soviet citizens residing in the occupied territory liberated by the Western allies who did not want to return to the Soviet Union. These Russians expanded the diaspora footprint in Latin America to Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Early Russian migrants laid the foundation for important cultural exchanges between Russia and countries in the Americas. In fact, some ethnic Russians of the early waves went on to become famous political figures in Latin American history. For example, Juan Belaieff, born Ivan Timofeyevich Belyaev in Saint Petersburg, Russia, migrated to Argentina in 1923 and then Paraguay in 1924. Belaieff was a cartographer and soldier in Paraguay and is revered for his role in mapping the Chaco region ahead of Paraguay’s victory over Bolivia during the Chaco War (1932–1935).¹¹

The contemporary Russian diaspora in Latin America consists mostly of Russian-speaking populations who migrated to the region following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, largely for economic reasons. More recently, starting in about 2012, there has been a surge in Russian outbound migration. Some analysts suggest that Russian emigrants today consist largely of middle and upper-middle classes who had successful careers in Russia but saw limited opportunities for growth at home.¹² Since there are no restrictions to leaving Russia to live abroad, and given that most Latin American countries are visa free for Russian passport holders, many Russians have chosen to migrate to Latin America in search of work or to simply experience living abroad before making a final decision to relocate permanently out of Russia.



Russian oil workers at the Astra deposit, circa 1936, in Chubut, Patagonia, Argentina. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

According to ethnographic studies, the Russian diaspora maintains a strong sense of Russian identity and an overall ethnic group consciousness unified largely through common language.¹³ Culture, food, art, and literature also serve as unique Russian identifiers within its diaspora. The diaspora tends to include Russian-speaking populations from former Soviet republics like Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus. Members of the contemporary Russian diaspora tend to assimilate quickly, and most successfully integrate within host societies.¹⁴ Russians living in Latin America tend to have a strong collective memory about their homeland that reflects a perception of Russian greatness, a trait that Moscow exploits in its engagement. Russian diaspora tend to remain patriotic and well connected to Russia through interpersonal relationships and commercial and religious ties. Russian media outlets—television, radio, and web-based programming—and Russian government-funded programming are critical to unifying diaspora and defining and promoting Russianness to and through the Russian diaspora in the region.

Only recently has the Russian government started to request that Russians living abroad report their citizenship or permanent resident status to the authorities in Russia, so it is difficult to provide the

exact number of Russians living in Latin America and the Caribbean. However, the Russian embassies and independent researchers estimate that between one hundred thousand and three hundred thousand reside permanently in Argentina; from one hundred thousand to two hundred thousand live in Brazil, between fifty thousand and one hundred thousand reside in Mexico; and a much smaller number (between one thousand and five thousand) live in other Latin American countries and the Caribbean.¹⁵ It is important to mention that Russian-speaking communities are present and identifiable in most, if not all, Latin American nations, and that the Russian government considers Russians residing in Latin America and the Caribbean as an important resource in its engagement with the region.

Engaging the Russian Diaspora in Latin America

Since about 2007, the Russian government has been consolidating and engaging Russian-speaking

communities in Latin America through a variety of organizations. These organizations include coordinating councils, Russian cultural centers, the Russkiy Mir Foundation, the Russian Orthodox Church, and Russian media—in many cases, with direct support from Russian embassies. These organizations are still in rather young and varying stages of development in Latin America and the Caribbean. Furthermore, there are limited signs of regional cooperation among these organizations, which limits the scope and reach of diaspora across the region.

The Russian Foreign Ministry's Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Aboard, and International Humanitarian Cooperation was established by presidential decree in 2008 and has representative offices in Russian embassies and Russian science and cultural centers in eighty countries around the world, including eight in Latin American and Caribbean.¹⁶ Rossotrudnichestvo representatives are located in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, and Venezuela. They openly foster relations with diaspora and conduct joint activities to promote Russian language and culture, along with Moscow's political views. They enlist the diaspora to aid in "developing friendly relations between countries."¹⁷ Putin is responsible for nominating the head of Rossotrudnichestvo. Some of Rossotrudnichestvo's key partners in Latin America include Coordinating Councils of Russian Compatriots, the Russkiy Mir Foundation, the Russian Cultural Foundation, and media outlets like RT, Sputnik, and TASS.

Russian embassies. Russian embassies are important sources of support for diaspora organizations to promote and engage members. Russian embassies often use cultural centers as venues to hold meetings with Russian nationals residing in the region. Formally, meetings are organized by compatriot organizations and not by the embassies directly. However, embassy representatives chair the meetings and take minutes to record the proceedings. This is because these meetings are considered of ultimate importance: they are where the staff of the Russian embassies and representatives of compatriot organizations can communicate direct messages of the government in Moscow to Russians living abroad and explain what is expected from the members of the Russian diaspora in one or another country. In particular, Moscow expects members of the Russian diaspora to maintain highly positive images of Russians living abroad—to promote "a country to be proud of" among

Latin American colleagues and friends and to spread Moscow's view on important events in which Russia is involved.¹⁸ In return, the staffs of the Russian embassies receive detailed information about the involvement of local Russians in economic, political, and cultural activities, and they update their dossier files on Russians in their respective countries. This kind of information would be difficult and time-consuming to obtain by other means. In addition, representatives of the Russian embassies show keen interest in learning from local Russians what their Latin American colleagues and friends think about Moscow's domestic and foreign policies.

Coordinating councils. Moscow also relies on the International Council of Russian Compatriots and the Coordinating Councils of Russian Compatriots to help consolidate and coordinate Russian-speaking communities in more than ninety-eight countries around the world.¹⁹ There are Coordinating Councils of Russian Compatriots in fifteen countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.²⁰ Coordinating councils are often established, guided, and funded by their affiliated Russian embassies.²¹ For example, in Argentina, the Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriot Organizations (KSORS), established in 2007, and the Coordinating Council for Russian Youth, established in 2012, are prominently promoted on the Russian embassy website in Argentina.²² In 2015, when newly elected Argentine President Mauricio Macri proposed cutting commercial rights to Russian government-funded RT, KSORS launched a letter-writing campaign, likely supported by the Russian embassy, demanding Macri keep RT in Argentina.²³ In addition to the country-specific coordinating councils, there is also a regional Coordinating Council for Latin America that meets once a year and brings together representatives from around the region to develop strategies and programming to support Russian-speaking communities. The 2017 meeting was held in Costa Rica and the 2018 meeting took place in Havana.²⁴

Russian cultural centers. The reemergence of Russian cultural centers in the region is further evidence of Moscow's growing interest in connecting with people in the region. Many of these cultural centers were almost completely abandoned following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. Examples of these centers include Russian Centers for Science and Culture in Buenos Aires, Santiago de Chile, and Lima; Leo Tolstoy



Institute in Bogota; Maxim Gorky in Montevideo; and others. Nowadays, many of the above-mentioned centers have been renovated and offer many services ranging from Russian language classes to free Russian movies showing highlights of Russian theater and dance performances.

Although these activities are open to any interested person, with an obvious exception of language classes, most of the attendants are local Russians. For the Russian authorities, this is one of the ways to engage members of the diaspora and to show them that the Russian government cares about them. From time to time, there are also meetings with famous Russian journalists, writers, and public figures who give lectures on historical or current developments. In addition to the previously existing cultural center, the Russkiy Mir Foundation sponsors a number of new programs similar to China's Confucius Institutes. These Russian cultural centers are usually alliances between the foundation and a university or high school. They receive direct funding from Moscow to promote the learning of the Russian language and culture. According to the Russkiy Mir Foundation website, there are twelve

As a way of honoring cultural pluralism, the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, celebrates Russian culture 3 June 2018 with traditional Russian dress, food, dance, and music in the streets. (Photo courtesy of the Government of the City of Buenos Aires)

Russkiy Mir Foundation-sponsored Russian centers in Latin America—two in Argentina and one each in Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Cuba, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Peru.²⁵

The Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox Church is another important source of influence among Russians in the region, and Moscow relies heavily on it to help create a sense of Russianness among the diaspora. Many Russians are believers, but there are only few Russian Orthodox churches in Latin America. However, the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations has divided all Latin America into church districts, and a representative of the Russian Patriarch has been assigned to each of the districts. Yet, these offices lack the logistical capacity to reach out to the majority of local Russian orthodoxies, so information about religious activities arrives to Russians via the Russian



embassies through the members of the recognized diaspora organizations. Many religious ceremonies are held in the above-mentioned Russian cultural centers.

Russian media. Russian government-sponsored media outlets like RT, Sputnik, TASS, and Voice of Russia are actively engaging Russians in Latin America to communicate Russian government views to and through diaspora. Amplifying Russian strategic communication efforts are its use of growing platforms to deliver information—television broadcasting, social media, and the internet.²⁶ Russian authorities monitor the presence of Russians residing in Latin America on social networks like Facebook or VK (a Russian version of Facebook). In recent years, there has been an extraordinary growth of Facebook managed by Russians living in Latin America and the Caribbean. There are more than fifty Facebook groups in the region focused on bringing together Russian diaspora. Some examples include Russians in Latin America with 4,200 members, Russian Forum in Argentina with 1,300, and Russians in Colombia with 1,400 members.²⁷ For the Russian government, monitoring of Facebook pages is a source to gather information about the social, political, economic, and cultural activities of local Russians. It is also a means to disseminate

Head of The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo), Lyubov Glebova (*left*), and Russian Federation Council member Konstantin Kosachev, former head of Rossotrudnichestvo, attend the first meeting of the 2017 World Festival of Youth and Students organizing committee 8 February 2017 at the VDNKh Exhibition Centre in Moscow. (Photo by Vladimir Gerdo, TASS via Alamy)

fake news and information from the Russian perspective. This information can be easily shared with a diaspora's broader social media following.

One may wonder why many Russians residing in Latin America decide to answer the call and attend the meetings organized by the embassies. There are several reasons. In many cases, Russians living in Latin America enjoy a positive attitude toward the meetings simply because they serve to raise the Russians' self-esteem through a shared pride in and satisfaction with the Russian community. The Russian authorities are aware of this and offer some incentives like awarding diplomas in recognition of important contributions made by individuals in "the strengthening of a positive image of Russia abroad."²⁸ These diplomas are signed by

the ambassador and, sometimes, even by the minister of foreign affairs or Putin himself. Another reason is of a different nature. Many Russians residing abroad fear difficulties in getting documents like passports, certificates, and paperwork for receiving pensions from Russia or dealing with real estate left in the home country. Being recognized by the embassy as a member of a Russian diaspora is considered useful to facilitate formal procedures and, in fact, Russian authorities demonstrate readiness to help people they know well.

Conclusion

The diaspora as an instrument of Russian national power in Latin America and the Caribbean is still in a relatively young stage and has not yet yielded any serious benefits outside of aiding in cultural awareness. Still, it is important to note that Latin America and the Caribbean have been used to test Russian foreign policy in the past—consider the violent proxy wars that took place with Russian backing during the 1970s and 1980s. Although the region is of relatively little value to Russia economically or politically, it still sits close enough to the United States to have an upside if emerging methods prove useful in achieving foreign policy objectives. To that end, Russia will likely continue strengthening a community of pro-Russian

organization using diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean. In the near-term, Russian-speaking communities will remain available but limited in their ability to advance Moscow's interests, given that diaspora have not gained significant widespread commercial or political influence. Still, diaspora will be used to communicate Russian views to Latin American audiences in the hopes of bolstering the Russian brand in the region.

In the long term, diaspora could increase their commercial and political value by moving into influential spaces in Latin American societies, giving Moscow greater access to the region. Because of the important Soviet legacy and the presence of the Russian diplomatic posts in the region, and the mostly positive attitude toward common Russians combined with the easiness in carrying out the activities described in this essay, for Moscow, the Russian diaspora in Latin America enjoy a privileged position in comparison with other parts of the world. This is just one of the reasons why Russia values current and future engagement with its Russian compatriots in Latin America. Diaspora living in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil offer Moscow the greatest potential return on investment given that these countries remain primary destinations for Russians moving into the region. ■

Notes

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