

OPENING A SECOND WESTERN FRONT AGAINST PUTIN: RUSSIA'S LATIN AMERICAN PROXIES

BY PETER YOUNG



DEMOCRACY | FREEDOM | HUMAN RIGHTS

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Peter Young was formerly Head of Research at the Adam Smith Institute, where he directed the Institute's 'Omega Project', involving the production of 15 separate reports containing policy proposals for every area of government, many of which were subsequently implemented during the Thatcher years.

He went on to serve as Director of the British Privatization Export Council and Head of Strategy at Adam Smith International. He has advised governments in over 35 countries - including several in South and Central America - on such subjects as privatization, deregulation, civil service reform and economic growth. He now writes on policy matters for a variety of outlets.

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About The Henry Jackson Society

The Henry Jackson Society is a think-tank and policy-shaping force that fights for the principles and alliances which keep societies free, working across borders and party lines to combat extremism, advance democracy and real human rights, and make a stand in an increasingly uncertain world.



About the Russia & Eurasia Studies Centre

The **Russia and Eurasia Studies Centre** undertakes in-depth, analytically-focussed research into domestic and foreign policy issues in Russia and the other post-Soviet states. Established in 2010 as the Russia Studies Centre, the programme's geographical scope has widened since 2014, mirroring the high level of importance attached to the region.

Executive Summary

Putin's belligerence and aggression against the West has been increasing over the last two decades and has been deployed on a global basis – including in Africa, the Arctic, the Middle East and Latin America. It has now culminated in the brutal invasion of Ukraine. Unfortunately, the West has neither devised nor deployed a coherent and comprehensive strategy to push back against the Kremlin's hybrid warfare aggression. Such a global strategy is now urgently needed and a coherent approach to Russia's Latin American proxies – Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua – should be a key part of it.

In fact, countering Russian hybrid warfare aggression in Latin America should be understood as a vital second front in addition to the primary front of Western support for Ukraine. The more pressure that is put on Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua, the more Russian President Vladimir Putin will be forced to spend scarce Russian resources on propping them up or be forced to abandon them and suffer a serious strategic reverse.

The West should, thus, regard opening a second front as a priority and see it as a way to impose a significant geopolitical loss on Russia by removing its Latin American proxies. The linchpin of the former Soviet Union's and Russia's current sphere of influence in Latin America is Cuba, which is, at the same time, also its weakest link.

The Cuban economy is teetering on the brink of collapse. The Cuban regime is only being sustained through direct infusions of foreign currency from its large diaspora and foreign tourism, and by exploiting its citizens' slave labour abroad. Once these three sources of funds are cut, the regime will be unable to survive.

If the West does not adopt a more robust stance against Russia's proxies in Latin America, there is a danger that Putin will make good on his recent threats to station troops and missiles in Cuba, establish a strategic bomber base in Venezuela, or take other escalatory steps to damage Western interests in Latin America. It would not be beyond imagination to see Putin position nuclear weapons in Cuba, as the USSR attempted to accomplish in the early 1960s. Russian troops are already on their way to Nicaragua – in June 2022, President Ortega announced that they would be deployed for purposes of law enforcement, training and emergency response.¹

Russian proxy states in Latin America have already caused immense damage to both their own populations and the region. Venezuela, once Latin America's wealthiest country, has been totally impoverished, with a large part of its population fleeing to other countries in the region in the world's second largest refugee crisis. Cuban citizens also live in poverty, with severe shortages of food and medicine. Hundreds of thousands have left their country, despite the difficulty in doing so, with over 140,000 reaching the US in the last eight months alone.² Cuba³ and Venezuela⁴ have financed revolutionary and terrorist groups throughout Latin America, destabilising and disrupting peaceful democracies.

¹ "Nicaragua authorises deployment of Russian military forces", *Al Jazeera*, 10 June 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/10/nicaragua-authorises-deployment-of-russian-military-forces>.

² Dave Sherwood and Nelson Acosta, "Cubans frantic to migrate as economy falters, new hurdles arise", *Reuters*, 17 March 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/cubans-frantic-migrate-economy-falters-new-hurdles-arise-2022-03-17/>, and Nora Gamez Torres, "Bigger than Mariel: 140,000 Cubans have arrived at US borders since October", *Miami Herald*, 25 June, 2022, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article262771743.html>.

³ "US announces Cuba as state sponsor of terrorism", US Department of State, January 11, 2021, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-announces-designation-of-cuba-as-a-state-sponsor-of-terrorism/index.html>.

⁴ Joshua Curzon, "Chavista support for terrorism", Adam Smith Institute, June 2, 2019, <https://www.adamsmith.org/blog/chavista-support-for-terrorism>.

The Cuban regime is primarily responsible for propping up Venezuelan dictator Nicolas Maduro.⁵ The Cuban communist regime designed his security apparatus, which they now oversee, and without Cuban control of the Venezuelan security forces, Maduro's regime would not survive.⁶ As Luis Almagro, Secretary General of the 35-nation Organization of American States (OAS), said, "If we want to help Venezuelans, we must deal with the dictatorship in Cuba. The only military invasion of Venezuela that has occurred began slowly some 20 years ago and has been perpetrated by the armed forces and security, intelligence and counter-intelligence of Cuba."⁷

Cuban, Venezuelan and Nicaraguan citizens should be able to decide whether their countries are autocracies within Russia's sphere of influence or democratic members of the Western world.

⁵ Angus Berwick, "The Cuban connection", *Reuters*, August 22, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/venezuela-cuba-military/>.

⁶ Roger F. Noriega, "Roger Noriega: Cuba Is Real Villain in Venezuela", *Newsmax*, 1 May 2019, <https://www.newsmax.com/newsfront/roger-noriega-socialism-dictators-drug-trafficking/2019/05/01/id/914174/>.

⁷ Luis Almagro (@Almagro_OEA2015), *Twitter*, 2 May 2019, 11:08pm, https://twitter.com/Almagro_OEA2015/status/1124073240547209216.

Russia's Relationship with Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua

The history of their relationships

The Soviet Union bankrolled Fidel Castro's regime, which loyally gave its full support in gratitude. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and removal of Soviet subsidies, Cuba experienced considerable economic difficulties and its relationship with Russia declined. However, after Putin was first elected in 2000, he reinvigorated old ties with Cuba and the two countries once again worked in close sync, seeking to counter US influence and advance Russian interests in Latin America and Africa. Cuba and Russia have since signed many cooperation agreements, including a 2009 bilateral accord that established a military and security "strategic alliance".

Putin has twice visited Cuba. The first occasion in December 2000 took place not long after he assumed power in Russia.⁸ In this highly symbolic visit, he vowed to renew historical ties.⁹

His second visit was in 2014, when he wrote off 90% of the former Soviet debt that Russia was owed by Cuba, a whopping 25 billion euros, with the remaining 10% to be invested in Cuba.¹⁰ In an interview published in the Cuban Communist Party newspaper *Granma*, Putin promised closer relations with Cuba and said, "We are disposed to recover lost possibilities."¹¹ He signed a host of collaboration agreements and a range of new Russian financial assistance and credits followed the visit.

In 2016, 55 collaboration projects worth \$4 billion were authorised, including one "to modernize Cuba's defence industry".¹² Russia started building four power plants to be ready in 2025.¹³ In 2019, Russia provided Cuba with a €38 million credit to "buy military equipment"¹⁴ and pledged support of £1.5 billion to modernise Cuba's railway network.¹⁵ Military ties were also strengthened in other ways, with Cuba serving as a friendly port of call for the resupply of Russian military vessels. Since 2014, the spy ship *Viktor Leonov*, an intelligence-gathering vessel outfitted with high-tech electronics, has reportedly docked in Cuba annually.¹⁶ In 2019, the Russian navy's most advanced warship, the *Admiral Gorshkov*, docked in Havana.¹⁷

⁸ "President Vladimir Putin arrived in Cuba on an official visit by invitation of Fidel Castro", President of Russia, 14 December 2000, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/39938>.

⁹ Tom Gibb, "Putin flies into Cuba with a message of solidarity", *The Guardian*, 14 December 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/dec/14/russia.cuba>.

¹⁰ Patrick Oppmann, "Putin meets Cuba's Castro brothers to open Latin America tour", *CNN*, 12 July 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/07/12/world/americas/cuba-putin-castro/index.html>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Amaury Valdivia, "Cuba-Russia Military Cooperation Never Completely Ended", *Havana Times*, 15 February 2022, <https://havanatimes.org/features/cuba-russia-military-cooperation-never-completely-ended/>.

¹³ "Russia to install four power generators in Cuba", *New Energy*, 24 May 2016, <https://newenergyevents.com/russia-to-install-four-power-generators-in-cuba/>.

¹⁴ "Russia approves 38 million loan to Cuba's military", *Reuters*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-cuba-idUSKCNIPVINH>.

¹⁵ "RZD signs Cuban railway upgrading agreement", *Railway Gazette International*, 10 October 2019, <https://www.railwaygazette.com/infrastructure/rzd-signs-cuban-railway-upgrading-agreement/54793.article>.

¹⁶ Rosa Tania Valdés, "Russian spy ship makes surprise visit to Havana", *Reuters*, 27 February 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-russia-ship/russian-spy-ship-makes-surprise-visit-to-havana-idUSBREA1Q21120140227>; Dorian Archus, "Russian intelligence ship Viktor Leonov arrives in Havana", *Naval Post*, 5 March 2020, <https://navalpost.com/russian-intelligence-ship-viktor-leonov-arrives-in-havana/>; Luis Martinez, "Russian spy ship returns to East Coast of US", *ABC News*, 16 March 2017, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/russian-spy-ship-returns-east-coast-us/story?id=46172968>.

¹⁷ Michael Weissenstein, Andrea Rodriguez and Vladimir Isachenkov, "What's an advanced Russian warship doing in Havana harbor?", *Navy Times*, 24 June 2019, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2019/06/24/whats-an-advanced-russian-warship-doing-in-havana-harbor/>.

Russia's military alliance with Cuba's satellite regime in Venezuela is also strong. In 2005–2007, Venezuela signed 12 arms contracts with Russia to the tune of \$4.4 billion that was used to purchase 24 Sukhoi fighters, 50 combat helicopters and 100,000 Kalashnikov rifles.¹⁸ The value of weapons purchased from Russia up until the end of 2010 is estimated at between \$12 and \$15 billion. Loans and credit lines totalling \$17 billion were extended to Venezuela by both the Russian Government and *Rosneft*, Russia's largest energy company, which took a 49.9% stake collateral in Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA's US subsidiary Citgo Petroleum.¹⁹

Russia has long planned to set up a strategic bomber base in Venezuela. Indeed in 2009, Major General Anatoly Zhikharev, long-term Commander of Russia's Air Force, confirmed that then President Hugo Chávez had offered Venezuela's entire island of La Orchila to Russia to be used as a strategic bomber base. In 2018, Moscow sent two Tu-160 strategic bombers to Venezuela.²⁰

After popular protests rocked the Maduro regime in early 2019, approximately 400 Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group, a group ostensibly independent but, in fact, closely tied to the Kremlin, were sent to provide additional protection for Maduro and to prevent his overthrow. A second Russian mercenary group active in Venezuela is VEGA, a PMC (Private Military Company) with close ties to the Kremlin. On 27 December 2021, Major General Johan Hernández Lárez, commander of the Integral Defence Operational Zone for the Venezuelan state of Miranda, said that a rapid response unit of the Bolivarian National Guard was training with "international instructors of the special operations company V.E.G.A."²¹

In mid-2019, Putin sent troops to refurbish and deploy existing S-300 long-range missile defence systems. These were originally supplied in 2009, along with Sukhoi Su-30 fighter jets capable of delivering BrahMos cruise missiles, T-72 tanks, Komar torpedo boats and an assembly plant for AK-103 assault rifles.²² Additional groups of Russian soldiers were sent in 2019, including cybersecurity and special forces personnel.²³ On 17 May 2022, Maduro underscored his critical relationship with the Kremlin by appointing his ambassador to the Russian Federation as his foreign minister.²⁴

The US administration admitted that Russian as well as Cuban efforts to prop up Maduro were critical factors in enabling him to defeat the opposition led by Juan Guaidó.²⁵ US special representative for Venezuela Elliott Abrams said: "We underestimated the importance of the Cuban and Russian support for the regime, which has proved, I think, to be the two most important pillars of support for the regime and without which it wouldn't be there. It wouldn't be in power."²⁶

¹⁸ Maria Werlau, *Cuba's Intervention in Venezuela: A Strategic Occupation with Global Implications* (Independently published, 2019).

¹⁹ "Venezuela's PDVSA uses 49.9 pct Citgo stake as loan collateral", *Reuters*, 23 December 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/venezuela-pdvsa-idUSL1NIE1FO>.

²⁰ "Russian nuclear-capable bomber aircraft fly to Venezuela, angering US", *Reuters*, 11 December 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-russia-airforce-idUSKBN10A23L>.

²¹ "Russians Boots in Venezuela", *Dialogo Americas*, 25 February 2022, <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/russians-boots-in-venezuela/#.Yj3Xj3rP02w>.

²² Martin Arostegui, "Russian Missiles in Venezuela Heighten US Tensions", *VOA News*, 29 April 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russian-missiles-in-venezuela-heighten-us-tensions/4896279.html>.

²³ "Russian military specialists arrive in Venezuela to service equipment: Interfax", *Reuters*, 25 September 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-venezuela-specialists-idUSKBN1WA2FJ>; "Russian deployment in Venezuela includes special forces and 'cybersecurity personnel', US official says", *South China Morning Post*, 27 March 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/united-states-canada/article/3003461/russian-deployment-venezuela-includes-special>.

²⁴ "Venezuela's Ambassador to Moscow returns home to assume post of foreign minister", *TASS*, 17 May 2022, <https://tass.com/world/1451771>.

²⁵ Dimitri Simes, "Putin is resurrecting Russia's Cold War pact with Cuba", *The Spectator*, 6 February 2020, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/putin-is-resurrecting-russia-s-cold-war-pact-with-cuba>.

²⁶ Conor Finnegan, "US sanctions Venezuelan lawmakers for backing Maduro effort to seize legislature", *ABC News*, 14 January 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-sanctions-venezuelan-lawmakers-backing-maduro-effort-seize/story?id=68251168>.

Nicaragua's relationship with Russia is built on decades of Soviet support for Daniel Ortega's Sandinista movement. A year after Ortega took power in 2007, he provided political support for Russia's 2008 illegal invasion of Georgia and recognition of the "independence" of the two Russian proxy entities, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia responded by providing major military and security support to Nicaragua. Nicaragua permitted Russian naval exercises to be carried out in its territorial waters²⁷ and Russian warships to dock in Nicaraguan ports. As noted above, in June 2022 the deployment of Russian troops in Nicaragua was authorised by Ortega.

Nicaragua's military has been developed by Russia, which has supplied 90% of Nicaraguan arms imports since 2000.²⁸ In particular, Russia has donated a considerable number of older tanks and other military equipment to Nicaragua.²⁹ It is, of course, unclear why Nicaragua needs so many tanks. A 2013 agreement between the two countries committed Russia to assist in the modernisation of Nicaraguan armed forces. In 2015, Nicaragua's parliament authorised the establishment of a Russian satellite ground station in Nicaragua.³⁰

Not surprisingly, Nicaragua is viewed as "Russia's entry point into Central America".³¹ The regional headquarters of Russia's International Cooperation Agency are in Managua and Russian installations based in Nicaragua are used to transmit sensitive security and intelligence information to Moscow.

Cuban, Venezuelan and Nicaraguan participation in the Russian propaganda war

Propaganda and disinformation are important elements of Putin's multi-pronged efforts to increase Russian influence in Central and Latin America. Putin has invested heavily in this effort and Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua have been enthusiastic supporters. All three countries are deeply involved in Russia's disinformation war and are supportive of the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine.

The Kremlin's RT Spanish television channel and website were launched in 2009 with dedicated news presenters and programming from bureaus in Buenos Aires, Argentina; Caracas, Venezuela; Havana, Cuba; Los Angeles and Miami, USA; Madrid, Spain; and Managua, Nicaragua. In 2014, Russia's Sputnik media outlet expanded its Spanish-language coverage with enhanced radio and web-based news and entertainment for its Latin American audiences. These Kremlin-run media channels promote disinformation. This is then disseminated by the state-controlled media of Russia's Latin American proxies.

In Cuba, for example, RT, Sputnik and RIA-Novosti are the main providers of international news content for the Cuban state media (independent or private media outlets are not allowed). In 2017, Sputnik signed a cooperation agreement on information provision and joint broadcasting with the official Cuban news agency *Prensa Latina* (PL).³² Among the objectives were the development of "joint projects" and "bilateral cooperation" to "increase their information presence" in both countries. In 2018, RT and the Government of Cuba signed an agreement

²⁷ Ivan Castro, "Russian warships visit cold war ally Nicaragua", *Reuters*, 14 December 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nicaragua-russia/russian-warships-visit-cold-war-ally-nicaragua-idUSTRE4BD00620081214>.

²⁸ "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database", SIPRI, 14 March 2022, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

²⁹ Roberto Cajina, "Armed to the teeth: Nicaragua's remilitarization", *Envio*, October 2016, <https://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/5266>.

³⁰ "Nicaragua approves Russian satellite base for 'alternative GPS'", *The Guardian*, 29 April 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/29/nicaragua-approves-russian-satellite-base-alternative-gps>.

³¹ "Ivan Kentros: Nicaragua is Russia's Entry Point into Central America", *Confidencial*, 9 August 2021, <https://www.confidencial.com.ni/english/ivan-kentros-nicaragua-is-russias-entry-point-into-central-america/>.

³² "The Kremlin's Expanding Media Conglomerate", Institute for the Study of War, 15 January 2020, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/kremlin%E2%80%99s-expanding-media-conglomerate>.

to provide the Kremlin's disinformation television channel gratis to Cuban viewers on the Multivisión and Canal Educativo channels and also in a broader format on the Telecable cable television channel.

Alvaro Alba, a Cuban Radio Marti TV journalist who has worked in Moscow, describes the format of how propaganda is disseminated: "The Kremlin's narrative is copied in Cuba from the headlines to the exact repetition of topics, terms, quotes, reproduction of videos and reports in the Russian official media."³³

A case in point is the Kremlin's disinformation surrounding alleged biological laboratories run by the Pentagon in Ukraine. Alba undertook a detailed investigation of how one particular segment of Russian disinformation on US biological warfare laboratories in Ukraine was disseminated.³⁴ The disinformation was first propagated on 6 March 2022 by *Granma*, the official organ of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. It was then picked up by Cuba's *Prensa Latina* news agency which published several articles a day later, citing RT News and a news-site dedicated to spreading RT conspiracies. *Granma* returned to the subject on 9 and 13 March when it stated, "the Russian Ministry of Defence verified, with documentation, that biological laboratories in the Ukraine established and financed by the US experimented with samples of coronavirus in bats."³⁵ Articles on similar themes, quoting Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, were published by *Granma* on 16 and 18 March 2022.³⁶

The Cuban TV channel Canal Caribe also published an article repeating Kremlin disinformation on the alleged laboratories.³⁷ Other official Cuban media outlets, including *Juventud Rebelde*, the organ of the Union of Young Communists, and the weekly newspaper *Trabajadores*, published³⁸ by the state-controlled trade union, also spread the Kremlin's disinformation campaign, as did provincial newspapers, such as *Periodico 26* and *La Demajuna*.³⁹

Cuba's media, which is completely controlled by the ruling Communist Party, enthusiastically spreads the most brazen Kremlin lies. When Brent Renaud, an award-winning photojournalist, was killed in Ukraine while working on assignment for TIME Studios, Cuban state media described him as a "CIA agent".⁴⁰ Fact checkers have comprehensively debunked this shameless invention. The US Government has denounced Cuban efforts to spread Russian disinformation, stating, "The Kremlin publishes disinformation to hide the atrocities of the war against Ukraine. The Cuban regime spreads disinformation in the official state media."⁴¹

Cuban opposition leaders have also condemned the Communist regime's support for Russia in the war in Ukraine. Manuel Cuesta Morúa, Vice President of the Platform Council for Democratic Transition in Cuba, said: "In fact, this hybrid war is already proving that the

³³ Alvaro Alba, "La Habana y Moscú mintiendo a coro sobre laboratorios en Ucrania" ("Havana and Moscow lying in chorus about laboratories in Ukraine"), *Radio Televisión Martí*, 27 March 2022, <https://www.radiotelevisionmarti.com/a/la-habana-mosc%C3%BA-mintiendo-a-coro-sobre-laboratorios-en-ucrania/316136.html>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Elson Concepción Pérez, "Bajo el disfraz de la colaboración biológica entre ucrania-y-EE-UU" ("Under the guise of biological collaboration between Ukraine and the US"), *Granma*, 13 March 2022, <https://www.granma.cu/opinion/2022-03-13/bajo-el-disfraz-de-la-colaboracion-biologica-entre-ucrania-y-ee-uu-13-03-2022-22-03-15>.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Graham Keeley, "Cuba Adopts Russian Narrative on Ukraine War", *VOA News*, 7 April 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/cuba-adopts-russian-narrative-on-ukraine-war-/6519782.html>.

⁴¹ "La verdad importa": EEUU reitera que Cuba apoya campaña de desinformación del Kremlin" ("The truth matters: the US reiterates that Cuba supports the Kremlin's disinformation campaign"), *Radio Televisión Martí*, 4 April 2022, <https://www.radiotelevisionmarti.com/a/la-verdad-importa-eeuu-reitera-que-cuba-apoya-campa%C3%B1a-de-desinformaci%C3%B3n-del-kremlin-sobre-guerra-en-ucrania/316782.html>.

Cuban Government is part of this conflict on the side of Russia, because it is supporting their communications' war and its propaganda through the systematic and constant reproduction of the false narratives that the Government of Russia has been spreading through the media under its control".⁴²

Cuban state outlets are not the only ones spreading the Kremlin's propaganda. In 2005, the Chavista regime in Venezuela launched the propaganda television channel Telesur, funded and supported by the Cuban, Nicaraguan and Bolivian communist and socialist governments.⁴³ Telesur is a 24-hour television channel mixing news, documentaries, round-table discussions, movies and cultural programmes, with news and information accounting for about 40% of all programming. A Reuters Institute in-depth study of the channel a year after it was launched concluded that it was "Chavista TV" and that it "is in effect paying homage to its financial and political master. Moreover, it broadcasts little or no criticism of two of its other sponsoring governments, Cuba and Bolivia, and does not hold them to account."⁴⁴

Telesur has substantial influence throughout Latin America, not only from its direct broadcasting but also because of the material carried on its social media channels. For example, Telesur's Twitter account has 3 million followers, just short of RT's Spanish Twitter account, which has 3.5 million followers.⁴⁵ Telesur's direct broadcasting reaches many. For example, in Argentina, President Alberto Fernandez has ensured that Telesur is included in the basic package of TV programmes available to all Argentinians and it is therefore available to 83% of the population.⁴⁶

Telesur also seeks influence outside Latin America. In 2015, it launched a 24-hour English language channel which has achieved significant reach – its Facebook page has some 700,000 followers.

Telesur disseminates blatant Russian propaganda, lies and disinformation on a daily basis. For example, as soon as the war crimes against civilians in the Ukrainian town of Bucha were discovered, Telesur activated a reporter in the Donbas who produced the shameful article "Alleged Russian army massacre in Bucha a fake news story".⁴⁷ This centred on an interview with Maxim Grigoriev, a Russian disinformation practitioner who played a central role in Russian attempts to discredit the White Helmets and other humanitarian activists reporting on Russian atrocities in Syria.⁴⁸ Telesur has stationed a dedicated correspondent, Alejandro Kirk, in the Donbas from where he has generated a stream of Russian propaganda articles, such as "Civilians of Donbas receive humanitarian aid from the Russian army" and "Luhansk militia seized military equipment in a joint operation with Russian army forces".⁴⁹ Telesur's

⁴² "Putin quiere más cooperación estratégica con Cuba" ("Putin wants more strategic cooperation with Cuba"), *Radio Television Martí*, 6 April 2022, <https://www.radiotelevisionmarti.com/a/putin-quiere-m%C3%A1s-cooperaci%C3%B3n-estrat%C3%A9gica-con-cuba/316911.html>. (Translation from Spanish).

⁴³ "Telesur", *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telesur>.

⁴⁴ James Painter, "The Boom in Counter-Hegemonic News Channels: A case study of Telesur", Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Winter 2006, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/research/files/The%2520Boom%2520in%2520Counter-Hegemonic%2520News%2520Channels%2520-%2520A%2520case%2520study%2520of%2520Telesur.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Emanuele Ottolenghi, "The Kremlin's Latin American Echo Chamber", *The Dispatch*, 4 April 2022, https://thedispatch.com/p/the-kremlins-latin-american-echo?s=r&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=05/04/2022.

⁴⁶ José Ospina-Valencia, "How Russia is waging a successful propaganda war in Latin America", *DW*, 13 April 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/how-russia-is-waging-a-successful-propaganda-war-in-latin-america/a-61467050>.

⁴⁷ Telesur English, "Alleged Russian army massacre in Bucha a fake news story", *YouTube* video, posted by Telesur English, 5 April 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z207WkNftgE>.

⁴⁸ "Briefing by Director of the Foundation for the Study of Democracy Mr. Maxim Grigoriev at side-event 'Humanitarian situation in Syria'", Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, 24 October 2019, https://russiaun.ru/en/news/sideevent_syria_hum.

⁴⁹ Telesur English (@telesurenglish), "#FromTheSouth News Bits | Civilians of Donbas receive humanitarian aid from the Russian army", *Twitter*, 7 April 2022, 5:33pm, <https://twitter.com/telesurenglish/status/1512106390529183746>; "Lugansk militia seized military equipment in joint operation with Russian army forces", *Dailymotion*, uploaded by Telesur English, 20 March 2022, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x89drly>.

social media accounts pump out shorter propaganda pieces, such as “Ukraine Stages A Video Of Dead Civilians”.⁵⁰

The Maduro regime is running digital propaganda campaigns in support of Russia's invasion at Putin's behest. The digital monitoring organisation Probox conducted a study of such activity immediately after Maduro promised Putin he would “increase Venezuela's alliance and strategic support to Russia” in a phone call on 1 March 2022.⁵¹ That same afternoon, regime elements promoted the hashtag ‘#EEUUirespeta’ referring to supposed “hypocrisy” regarding the US position on the Ukraine conflict. 38,000 messages were involved, with at least 52.56% of tweets being generated from fake accounts.⁵² On 2 March, the Venezuelan Ministry of Communication and Information (MIPPCI) promoted the hashtag ‘#VenezuelaApuestaALaPaz’, with some 240,000 tweets condemning the “disinformation campaign promoted by Western countries against Russia”.⁵³ Probox's analysis suggested that at least 68.43% of the tweets came from accounts exhibiting inauthentic behaviour.⁵⁴ On the same day, a number of pro-regime entities promoted an MPCCI-originated hashtag ‘#VenezuelaConRussia’.⁵⁵ Since this initial period, the regime's digital propaganda effort in support of Russia's invasion has intensified. The Kremlin's propaganda network run by Russia's proxies in Latin America has had a significant impact on the broader region as well as a more limited impact outside the continent.⁵⁶ These proxies assist the Kremlin in deepening, amplifying and more widely spreading its propaganda and disinformation through multiple sources, in effect laundering lies to make them sound like truths.

Cuban, Venezuelan and Nicaraguan support for Russia's policies towards Ukraine

In December 2021, Russia threatened a repeat of the Cuban missile crisis when it warned it would station nuclear weapons in Cuba unless the West signed its security guarantees that *de facto* made Ukraine part of the Russian sphere of influence. Referring to the 1961–1962 attempt to station nuclear missiles in Cuba, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said, “You know, it really could come to that. If things continue as they are, it is entirely possible by the logic of events to suddenly wake up and see yourself in something similar.”⁵⁷

On 13 January 2022, Ryabkov, who led Russia's delegation in talks with the US over the security guarantees and Ukraine, repeated the threat, telling Russian television he could neither confirm nor exclude expanding military bases in Cuba and Venezuela if the talks failed. Ryabkov said: “It all depends on actions by our US counterparts”.⁵⁸ On 24 January 2022, the Cuban and Russian presidents had “a friendly and productive phone call” during which they reviewed the “excellent relationship between both countries and examined future developments in bilateral cooperative efforts”.⁵⁹

⁵⁰ Telesur English, “Ukraine Stages A Video Of Dead Civilians”, *Facebook*, 5 April 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/479681268841947/videos/2843083832663266>.

⁵¹ “Maduro extends support to Russia's Twitter propaganda in Venezuela”, *Probox*, <https://proboxve.org/en-US/publicacion/maduro-extiende-su-apoyo-a-la-propaganda-de-rusia-en-twitter-en-venezuela>.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ “Measuring the impact of misinformation, disinformation and propaganda in Latin America”, *Global Americans*, 28 October 2021, <https://theglobalamericans.org/monitoring-foreign-disinformation-in-latin-america/>.

⁵⁷ “Russia says Ukraine could turn into re-run of Cuban missile crisis”, *Reuters*, 9 December 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/rates-bonds/russia-says-ukraine-could-turn-into-re-run-cuban-missile-crisis-2021-12-09/>.

⁵⁸ Trevor Filseth, “Russia Threatens To Deploy ‘Military Infrastructure’ to Cuba and Venezuela”, *The National Interest*, 18 January 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/russia-threatens-deploy-military-infrastructure-cuba-and-venezuela-199560>.

⁵⁹ Valdivia, “Cuba-Russia Military Cooperation”.

On 26 January 2002, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov described to the Russian parliament the agreements President Putin had reached for greater cooperation with Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua, particularly in the military field.⁶⁰ Lavrov said that: “President Putin held recent telephone conversations with his colleagues from these three governments, with whom we are very close and friendly, and they agreed to look at further ways to deepen our strategic partnership in all areas, with no exceptions.” He pointed out that Russia already has close relations with these countries in a number of areas, “including military and military-technical”.⁶¹

A few days prior to the invasion of Ukraine, Cuba fully aligned with Russia's goals towards Ukraine. Following a visit from Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov, the Cuban Foreign Ministry said: “The effort of the United States to impose the progressive expansion of NATO towards the borders of the Russian Federation constitutes a threat to the national security of this country and to regional and international peace.”⁶²

Cuba's official position continues Havana's long-standing support for the Kremlin's demands for the Russian Federation to be recognised as a great power counter-weight to the US; for a multipolar world rather than a US-led unipolar world; and for Russia to be recognised as enjoying an exclusive Eurasian sphere of influence within which Ukraine is transformed into a satellite, like Belarus. In 2008, Cuba steadfastly supported Russia's position when it invaded Georgia. In 2014, when Russia invaded and annexed Crimea, then Cuban President Raul Castro Ruz stated: “The intervention of Western powers must cease ... It should not be ignored that these events can have very serious consequences for international peace and security.”⁶³ Cuba is one of a handful of countries that recognised Crimea as part of Russia. In 2018, at the United Nations, newly elected Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez warned that: “the continued expansion of NATO towards the borders with Russia causes serious dangers, aggravated by the imposition of arbitrary sanctions that we reject.”⁶⁴ NATO has never offered a MAP (Membership Action Plan), let alone membership, to Ukraine.

On 22 February 2022, just two days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin announced it had agreed to postpone repayment until 2027 of \$2.3 billion of debt payments owed by Cuba.⁶⁵ The following day, Chairman of the State Duma Viacheslav Volodin undertook an official visit to Cuba during which he thanked the country for supporting Russia's decision to recognise the “independence” of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), and justified Russia's invasion using the false flag of an alleged Ukrainian plan to militarily attack its two proxy entities. “The decision to recognise these republics is the only way to stop a bloodbath and aggression,” he said.⁶⁶ Esteban Lazo Hernández, President of the Cuban National Assembly of People's Power, replied that: “Russia has the right to defend itself, and NATO must pay attention to the demands of the Russian

⁶⁰ “Russia unveils military plans in Cuba & Latin America”, *World News Times*, 12 February 2022, <https://worldnewstimes.com/russia-unveils-military-plans-in-cuba-latin-america/>, and TASS <https://tass.com/politics/1393375>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Dave Sherwood, “Cuba to deepen ties with Russia as Ukraine tensions mount”, *Reuters*, 19 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/cuba-deepen-ties-with-russia-ukraine-tensions-mount-2022-02-19/>; *Deutsche Welle*, “Gobierno Cubano apoya a Rusia y pide a países occidentales que no intervengan en Ucrania” (“Cuban Government supports Russia and asks Western countries not to intervene in Ukraine”), *America Economía*, 23 February 2022, <https://www.americaeconomia.com/politica-sociedad/politica/gobierno-cubano-apoya-rusia-y-pide-paises-occidentales-que-no-intervengan>.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Polina Devitt and Dave Sherwood, “Russia postpones Cuba debt payments amid warming relations”, *Reuters*, 23 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/russia-postpones-cuba-debt-payments-amid-warming-relations-2022-02-23/>.

⁶⁶ “Chairman of State Duma met with President of the National Assembly of Peoples Power and the Council of State of Cuba”, *The State Duma*, February 23, 2022, <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/53528/>.

Federation for security guarantees.”⁶⁷ On 28 February, Cuba voted alongside Russia, China and Venezuela against a resolution to discuss the invasion in an emergency meeting of the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC).

The Cuban regime launched a campaign in schools to educate (i.e., indoctrinate) children with Russian propaganda in support of its invasion of Ukraine⁶⁸ and has launched repressive measures against Cubans sympathetic to Ukraine. For example, Cuban civil society activist Pablo Enrique Delgado Hernández was arrested and interrogated after leaving roses at the Ukrainian Embassy in Havana in a show of solidarity.⁶⁹

Venezuela, a Cuban satellite and Russian proxy, has also aligned itself with the Kremlin in support of its invasion of Ukraine. Maduro said on 16 February 2022 that “Russia is fully supported by Venezuela in the face of the threats from NATO and the Western world.”⁷⁰ He announced that the two countries had “endorsed an area for strong military cooperation between Russia and Venezuela to defend peace, sovereignty and territorial integrity.”⁷¹

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega similarly backed Russia's invasion of Ukraine, saying President Putin was right to recognise the DPR and LPR as “independent”.⁷² “Russia is simply defending itself,” he claimed.

⁶⁷ “Chairman of State Duma met with President of the National Assembly of Peoples Power and the Council of State of Cuba”, The State Duma, February 23, 2022, <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/53528/>.

⁶⁸ Antonio Rodriguez Paz, “Cuban regime's support for Putin: another case of ideological manipulation in the schools”, *Diario De Cuba*, 17 March 2022, https://diariodecuba.com/cuba/1647546065_38174.html.

⁶⁹ “Interrogated and Threatened for Delivering Flowers to the Ukrainian Embassy in Cuba”, *Translating Cuba*, 27 February 2022, <https://translatingcuba.com/interrogated-and-threatened-for-delivering-flowers-to-the-ukrainian-embassy-in-cuba/>.

⁷⁰ Tom O'Connor, “Russia Boosts Military Ties in Venezuela, Visits to Cuba, Nicaragua Next”, *Newsweek*, 16 February 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-boosts-military-ties-venezuela-visits-cuba-nicaragua-next-1680077>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ismael Lopez, “Nicaragua's Ortega defends Russia's stance over Ukraine”, *Reuters*, 22 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/nicaraguas-ortega-defends-russias-stance-over-ukraine-2022-02-22/>.

The Vulnerabilities of Putin's Latin American Proxies

Cuban vulnerabilities

The Cuban economy is weak and is perennially threatened by bankruptcy. With few reforms, Cuba's communist economic system is unable to produce sufficient goods and services; it resembles the era of stagnation in the USSR prior to Mikhail Gorbachev becoming Soviet leader in 1985. Prior to the communist takeover of Cuba in 1959, the largest and second largest Cuban exports to the US were sugar and coffee. Both sectors have experienced decreasing levels of productivity since they were nationalised and starved of investment.

In 2021, the Azcuba Cuban state sugar monopoly announced that the 2020–2021 harvest was “one of the worst in the history of Cuba” and, at 816,000 tonnes, the lowest since 1908.⁷³ In 1959, the sugar harvest had been six times larger at 5.6 million tonnes. Of the 156 sugar mills operating before 1959, only 56 exist today and only 38 of these continue to operate.⁷⁴ Domestic sugar consumption amounts to between 600,000 and 700,000 tonnes per annum while Cuba has an agreement with China to sell it 400,000 tonnes per year.⁷⁵ Cuba has either to deny sugar to its people or reduce its few remaining exports.

The harvest in 2022 was even worse, bringing in just 472,000 tons, just more than half of the previous year's record low total.⁷⁶ “It's not a secret, the sector is in crisis”, said Dionis Perez, Azcuba's director of communication.⁷⁷ The poor state of Cuba's coffee sector tells a similar story. Once a major Cuban export, with annual exports of over 20,000 metric tons in the 1950s, the sector stagnated following its nationalisation and the introduction of price controls. Cuba now rations coffee to its citizens to only two ounces every 15 days; it even has to import a small amount of coffee.⁷⁸

Across Cuba, state-owned food-processing factories are degenerating due to lack of investment and fuel shortages for agricultural vehicles, leading to harvests being left to rot in the fields.⁷⁹ The Cuban state needs to import food products like wheat, which are not grown domestically, although it can no longer afford to do so in sufficient quantities.

The stagnation of Cuba's economy has forced it to resort to selling services to other governments and foreign enterprises to keep itself afloat. It also obtains subsidies from Venezuela, whose leaders are beholden because Cuba provides security support to the regime. Without free Venezuelan oil, Cuba's economy would have ground to a halt. Since 2019, around 32,000

⁷³ “Cuba closes one of the worst sugar harvests in its history”, *Market Research Telecast*, 4 July 2021, <https://marketresearchtelecast.com/cuba-closes-one-of-the-worst-sugar-harvests-in-its-history/92694/>, and Marc Frank, “Coronavirus slashes Cuba sugar harvest, piles on economic woes”, *Reuters*, 11 May 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/cuba-economy-sugar-idUSL1N2MX2PH>.

⁷⁴ “Cuba: crisis of an industry that doesn't take off”, *On Cuba News*, 7 May 2021, <https://oncubanews.com/en/cuba/economy/cuban-economy/cuba-crisis-of-an-industry-that-doesnt-take-off/>.

⁷⁵ Marc Frank, “Coronavirus slashes Cuba sugar harvest, piles on economic woes”, *Reuters*, 11 May 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/cuba-economy-sugar-idUSL1N2MX2PH>.

⁷⁶ “Cuba's sugar harvest worst in over century”, *Reuters*, 25 May 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/cubas-sugar-harvest-worst-over-century-another-hit-ailing-economy-2022-05-25/>.

⁷⁷ “Cuba sugar harvest only half of what expected”, *AP*, 15 June 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/caribbean-cuba-46d63ccca2aaff7a96e9ac6d27c72dcc>.

⁷⁸ “Origins: Cuba”, *Coffee Dive*, <https://dive.coffee/en/2021/03/19/cuba/>.

⁷⁹ “Cuba: Tomatoes and Squash Rot in the Fields Because There is No Fuel”, *Translating Cuba*, 8 April 2021, <https://translatingcuba.com/cuba-tomatoes-and-squash-rot-in-the-fields-because-there-is-no-fuel/>; “Cuba: Another Harvest Lost: ‘Take Pictures of the Rotten Mangoes to Show the Evidence’ to the Government Company”, *Translating Cuba*, 15 June 2021, <https://translatingcuba.com/cuba-another-harvest-lost-take-pictures-of-the-rotten-mangoes-to-show-the-evidence-to-the-government-company/>.

barrels of crude oil per day have been exported by Venezuela to Cuba. Volumes have declined in 2021 and 2022;⁸⁰ in the first quarter of 2022, Cuba imported a total of only 70,000 barrels per day, well under the 100,000 it needs, leading to severe fuel and power shortages.

Ironically, it is mainly capitalist countries that allow Cuba to avoid collapse. Foreign tourism is a key source of Cuba's income, an area of the economy isolated from the bulk of the population and the communist economic system. Tourism revenues were already declining before they were ravaged by the coronavirus pandemic and they are now being badly affected again, this time by Western sanctions against Russia.⁸¹ Russians were projected to have constituted a fifth of foreign tourists in 2022, but their numbers have now shrunk to nearly zero as Russian airline carriers have been sanctioned and are unable to operate. Holidaying in Cuba is a risky choice. Cuba does not adequately report its infectious diseases, or any diseases that affect the tourism industry in particular, in order to avoid tourists being dissuaded from visiting. Health facilities in Cuba are in poor condition, lacking qualified staff, equipment and medicines. While some clinics for foreigners are better equipped, many hotels are located too far away for these to be used by tourists. Moreover, there is misuse of medical insurance, which has been compulsory for tourists visiting Cuba for some years. During the Covid-19 pandemic, there were cases where tourists were wrongly diagnosed as having coronavirus and forced to isolate in low-quality facilities for which insurance companies were charged large amounts of money.⁸²

Cuba's export of its workers is the main way in which the Cuban Communist Party keeps its bankrupt state running.

As of September 2021, Cuba had 327 state enterprises exporting services, mostly of temporary workers sent on "internationalist missions" abroad: doctors, nurses, medical technicians, teachers, sports trainers, musicians, sailors, architects, geologists, tobacco rollers, construction workers, and others from myriad fields. They are exported as commodities for two to three years in highly unusual and secret agreements with governments or corporations. 55-75% of the export services are in health care...⁸³

In 2020, Cuba's social and health service exports earned the country \$3.99 billion, almost four times the revenue generated by tourism of \$1.2 billion. Cuba's slave labour arrangement pays a pittance to the workers after the Cuban state has expropriated almost all of their earnings.⁸⁴

As Human Rights Watch has recently documented, the doctors are basically treated as captives when sent overseas and they face criminal penalties if they "abandon" their jobs.⁸⁵ They can be disciplined for being "friends" with people who hold "hostile or contrary views to the Cuban revolution" and are routinely pressured to cooperate with the intelligence services. They are not allowed to bring their families, who are effectively held hostage in Cuba.⁸⁶ Their freedom of movement and expression is controlled. In November 2019, the UN special

⁸⁰ Marianna Parraga, "Cuba struggles to buy fuel as imports from Venezuela dwindle - data", *Reuters*, 5 April 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/cuba-struggles-buy-fuel-imports-venezuela-dwindle-data-2022-04-05/>.

⁸¹ "Cuba feels economic blow from departing Russian tourists", *Skiff*, March 12, 2022, <https://skift.com/2022/03/12/cuba-feels-economic-blow-from-departing-russian-tourists/>.

⁸² "Russian Ambassador in Havana on false positive PCR of tourists: It cannot be repeated", *Cibercuba*, July 7, 2021, <https://www.cibercuba.com/noticias/2021-07-07-u1-e208049-s27061-embajador-ruso-habana-falso-pcr-positivo-turistas-puede>.

⁸³ "Fact Sheet: Overview of Cuba's Medical Brigades", *Cuba Archive*, 23 May 2022, <https://cubaarchive.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/FACT-SHEET-Cubas-Medical-Diplomacy.pdf>.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ "Cuba: Repressive Rules for Doctors Working Abroad", *Human Rights Watch*, 23 July 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/23/cuba-repressive-rules-doctors-working-abroad>.

⁸⁶ "Cuba's overseas medical brigade a repressive sham, ex-staffers say", *France 24*, 10 June 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190610-cubas-overseas-medical-brigade-repressive-sham-ex-staffers-say>.

rapporteurs on contemporary forms of slavery used the words “forced labour” to describe the corrupt scheme.⁸⁷

Cuba's export of health services is officially represented as medical “missions” or “brigades” of a “humanitarian” and “altruistic” nature, while those delivering the services are referred to as “internationalists”. Such descriptions are disinformation because they are, in fact, a crucial part of Cuba's profit-making enterprise to fund its security apparatus and advance its economic and political objectives in Central and Latin America.⁸⁸

Cuba's export of medical personnel violates a number of international laws pertaining to human trafficking and modern slavery. Two important violations include:

1. Supplement to the United Nations' Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (Trafficking in Persons Protocol, one of the three Palermo Protocols), ratified by Cuba on 9 February 2007, as well as by many of its partner nations in labour agreements;
2. Several International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, including Convention No. 29 concerning forced or compulsory labour (1930) which was ratified by Cuba in 1953; ILO Convention No. 95 on the Protection of Wages (1949) that was ratified by Cuba in 1952; and the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Cuba's health workers are not “willing” or “volunteer” participants of trafficking. The 2000 Trafficking in Persons Protocol (“Palermo Protocol”) clearly states that abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability for the purpose of exploitation constitutes human trafficking. Article 3 of the Palermo Protocol defines trafficking as:

... the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.⁸⁹

The definition of trafficking contained in the Palermo Protocols was adopted by the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (“Convention on Action against Trafficking”). In addition, the Modern Slavery Act was adopted in 2015 by the UK which defines “human trafficking” in the following manner:

1. A person commits an offence if the person arranges or facilitates the travel of another person (“V”) with a view to V being exploited;
2. It is irrelevant whether V consents to the travel (whether V is an adult or a child);
3. A person may in particular arrange or facilitate V's travel by recruiting V, transporting or transferring V, harbouring or receiving V, or transferring or exchanging control over V;

⁸⁷ Urmila Bhoola, “Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences; and the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children”, United Nations Special Rapporteur, 6 November 2019, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=24868>.

⁸⁸ “The systematic violation of the Convention Against Torture of Cuba's ‘internationalist’ medical missions”, *Cuba Archive*, March 2022, <https://cubaarchive.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2012-2022-CAT-Report-on-medical-missions-FINAL.pdf>.

⁸⁹ “Definition of Trafficking: The Palermo Protocol”, Kirklees Safeguarding Children, <https://www.kirkleessafeguardingchildren.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2016-01-27-The-Palermo-Protocol-Definition-of-Trafficking.pdf>.

4. A person arranges or facilitates V's travel with a view to V being exploited only if:
 - a) The person intends to exploit V (in any part of the world) during or after the travel, or;
 - b) The person knows or ought to know that another person is likely to exploit V (in any part of the world) during or after the travel.⁹⁰

Cuba's export of medical personnel imposes the following conditions on health workers:

1. *Suppression of labour rights:* They may not peacefully protest, form independent unions, strike, engage in collective bargaining or enter into direct employment;
2. *Restriction of movement:* They cannot leave their country of assignment without Cuban Government permission;
3. *Denial of credentials:* Health workers have their educational and professional credentials withheld, so they may not work overseas other than through the Cuban Government scheme;
4. *Coercive, deceptive, and leveraged recruitment practices:* They are often not informed of the terms of their work contract until it is presented to them to be signed at the last minute, often just before they board the plane taking them to their country of assignment;
5. *Forced family separation:* They must leave their families in Cuba for the term of their contract, usually two to three years;
6. *Surveillance, control, and punishment:* Once abroad, they are subjected to constant surveillance and threats by supervisors and "minders" who are Cuban secret service agents;
7. *Unsafe living conditions and hardships;*
8. *Arbitrary restrictions and disciplinary action:* They are forbidden from accepting gifts, driving a car, marrying a local, staying overnight other than in their residence, leaving home after a certain time, speaking to journalists, or associating with any person in the host country who does not support the Cuban communist regime;
9. *Coercion to violate local laws and professional ethics:* Health workers are instructed to systematically inflate data and statistics to meet quotas;
10. *Forced political duties:* While serving overseas, health workers are required to inform on co-workers who offend the "honour of the motherland and its symbols" or engage in any suspicious behaviour that might indicate they are planning to desert. They are required to attend pro-Castro rallies and take part in other political activities;
11. *Wage confiscation:* Between 75 and 95% of their remuneration is confiscated by the Cuban state.⁹¹

As of March 2020, the Cuban Government reported it had dispatched 28,268 health workers in medical brigades to 61 countries.⁹² It is surprising that some European countries, including Italy and Andorra, as well as several British Overseas Territories, such as Anguilla, British Virgin

⁹⁰ Modern Slavery Act 2015, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/30/contents/enacted>.

⁹¹ "Fact Sheet: Overview of Cuba's Medical Brigades", *Cuba Archive*, 23 May 2022, <https://cubaarchive.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/FACT-SHEET-Cubas-Medical-Diplomacy.pdf>.

⁹² "Cuba's Medical Brigades: totals", *Cuba Archive*, <https://cubaarchive.org/cuba-salud/cubas-medical-brigades/>.

Islands, Montserrat and Turks & Caicos, have invited Cubans from the regime's slave labour programme. Barbados is the latest Commonwealth country to have done so.

Some Cuban health workers are exported through triangular cooperation agreements in which governments and international organisations fund Cuba's health services to developing countries. The beneficiaries of these agreements include, or have included, Angola, Haiti, Honduras, Bolivia, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Honduras, Nicaragua, Niger, Rwanda, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Even some Western nations, including France, Australia, Norway, Germany, Luxembourg and Japan, as well as Brazil, Mexico, Saudi Arabia and South Africa, have supported and financed these exploitative arrangements.⁹³

These money-making and exploitative operations are often run by Cuban military oligarchs. Cuba's centralised oligarchic system, controlled by the Castro family, is different from the decentralised variant found in Russia. The Castro family clan commands hundreds of enterprises, large hard currency holdings, and many property assets inside and outside Cuba that are excluded from official statistics. From 1997 until his death, *Forbes* magazine featured Fidel Castro as one of the wealthiest leaders in the world in its annual edition of *Fortunes of Kings, Queens and Dictators*.⁹⁴

The main enterprises Cuban oligarchs control include:

1. *GAESA (Grupo de Administración Empresarial s.a.)*: Cuba's largest company, a gigantic military-controlled umbrella enterprise until his death in June 2022 under the direction of General Luis Alberto Rodríguez López Calleja (Raul Castro's former son-in-law), who has controlled practically every hard-currency money-making operation in Cuba, including the GAVIOTA and CIMEX enterprises. GAESA does not publicly disclose its financial records. Only, Álvaro López Miera, Raúl Castro and a few other members of the inner-sanctum of the ruling elite have access to GAESA's multi-billion-dollar financial records.
2. *GAVIOTA*: Operates most of the tourist hotel chains, with over 35,000 rooms throughout the island, in partnership with a number of international corporations.⁹⁵ A subsidiary of GAESA.
3. *CIMEX*: Manages over 2,800 retail outlets selling in hard currency, including the Panamericana Stores, fast food restaurants and gas stations, and jewellery, clothing and appliance stores, as well as commercial enterprises, construction and real estate companies, and tourism operators.⁹⁶ A subsidiary of GAESA.

GAESA controls Cuba's legal and unofficial hard-currency economy and employs thousands of retired military personnel. In 2020, it took control of all the hotels, stores and eateries in colonial old Havana that had previously been operated by Habaguanex, an entity until then administered by the city's historical office.

Much of the remittances, international medical revenues, and illegal drug-related financial operations are believed to be tightly controlled by GAESA. Taken together, they constitute

⁹³ "Fact Sheet: Overview of Cuba's Medical Brigades", *Cuba Archive*, 23 May 2022, <https://cubaarchive.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/FACT-SHEET-Cubas-Medical-Diplomacy.pdf>.

⁹⁴ Luisa Kroll, "Fortunes of Kings, Queens and Dictators", *Forbes*, 5 May 2006, https://www.forbes.com/2006/05/04/rich-kings-dictators_cz_lk_0504royals.html?sh=41c7ce1010f9.

⁹⁵ "The inner circle of power", Cuban Institute of Strategic Studies, 2022, <https://cubastrategicstudies.com/the-inner-circle-of-power-2021-2022/>.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Cuba's largest hard-currency money-making operation.⁹⁷ These revenues are partially used as the plaything⁹⁸ of military leaders and also utilised to finance the Communist Party elite and the security apparatus.⁹⁹

Communist dictatorship and human rights

Cuba has a one-party system in which the constitution¹⁰⁰ recognises the Communist Party (CP) as the only legal party and the highest political entity of the state.¹⁰¹ Elections do not include a choice of candidates; citizens instead are required to confirm individuals previously selected by the regime. For example, on 11 March 2018, citizens voted to ratify a preselected list of 605 candidates to the National Assembly of People's Power. These candidates, pre-screened by a CP candidate commission, were chosen by Government-linked organisations based on criteria such as their "merit, patriotism, ethical values and revolutionary history".¹⁰²

The judiciary is directly subordinate to the National Assembly of People's Power and the CP, which can remove or appoint judges whenever it chooses. Judicial decisions are dominated by political considerations and there is no separation of powers between the judicial system, the CP and the Council of State, the highest constitutional government entity, elected by the National Assembly of People's Power every five years.

Cuban law provides for a maximum four-year preventive detention of individuals who are not charged with an actual crime. During this period, a subjective determination is undertaken of their "pre-criminal dangerousness" defined as the "special proclivity of the person to commit crimes, demonstrated by conduct in manifest contradiction of socialist norms."¹⁰³ The regime uses this detention to silence non-violent political opponents. Cuban human rights groups have published lists of persons they consider to be political prisoners imprisoned under this "pre-criminal dangerousness" provision of the law. On 15 May 2022, a new Penal Code was approved, effective within 90 days of being published in the Official Gazette of the Republic, which eliminated the pre-criminal clauses but strengthened the overall repression of dissent.¹⁰⁴

Other human rights abuses are pervasive and include unlawful and arbitrary killing by the police; torture of political dissidents, detainees and prisoners by the security services; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; and arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy. Amnesty International details human rights abuses in Cuba as follows: "Arbitrary detentions, discriminatory dismissals from state jobs, and harassment in self-employment continued to be used to silence criticism. Advances in education were undermined by ongoing online and offline censorship. Cuba remained mostly closed to independent human rights monitors."¹⁰⁵

⁹⁷ "Cuba's military tentacles reach deep into economy", *Reuters*, 15 June 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-cuba-military-idUSKBN1962VK>.

⁹⁸ Emilio Morales, "Gaesa: It's business is money-laundering, not managing remittances", *Diario de Cuba*, 22 September 2021, https://diariodecuba.com/economia/1632326685_34279.html.

⁹⁹ "Treasury identifies Cuban state-owned businesses for sanctions evasion," US Department of the Treasury, 21 December 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1217>.

¹⁰⁰ Cuban Constitution, 2019, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Cuba_2019.pdf?lang=en.

¹⁰¹ "2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Cuba", US Department of State, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/cuba/>. (Cuba's Constitution (Art. 5) stipulates that the Communist Party is "the superior and commanding force of the society and of the state" which "organizes and guides all efforts towards the construction of socialism and the progress towards the Communist society." (Translation to English).

¹⁰² Emily Shugerman, "Cuba election: When is it, who is voted in, and what does it mean for Raul Castro and the presidency?", *Independent*, 9 March 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/cuba-election-latest-castro-president-national-assembly-a8248831.html>.

¹⁰³ US Department of State, "2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Cuba", <https://www.ecoi.net/de/dokument/2071136.html>.

¹⁰⁴ "Cuban parliament approves penal code which activists warn curbs dissent", *The Guardian*, 17 May 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/16/cuba-parliament-penal-code-updated>.

¹⁰⁵ Amnesty International Annual Report 2017/18, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/6700/2018/en/>.

Human Rights Watch paints a similar picture: “The government controls virtually all media outlets in Cuba and restricts access to outside information. A small number of independent journalists and bloggers manage to write articles for websites or blogs, or publish tweets. The government routinely blocks access within Cuba to these websites, and only a fraction of Cubans can read independent websites and blogs because of the high cost of, and limited access to, the internet.”¹⁰⁶

In July 2021, shouting “freedom”, “down with communism” and “down with the dictatorship”, thousands of Cubans across the Island, for the first time in many years, took to the streets to denounce the regime’s political repression and its failure to provide basic necessities of life, such as food and medicines. The protests were brutally and violently suppressed and over 1,000 people were arrested. To date over 120 have been given long prison sentences of between six and thirty years’ incarceration;¹⁰⁷ over 20 of them are minors under eighteen years of age. According to the US State Department, the Cuban regime has condemned over 550 protestors to more than 4,000 combined years of prison or other punitive measures since the historic July 21 protests. A further 700 protestors remain in detention with the regime targeting in particular those from the impoverished neighbourhoods of La Guinera and 10 de Octubre, which have significant Afro-Cuban populations.¹⁰⁸ The willingness of large parts of the population to demonstrate in spite of regime repression suggests that when the economic situation worsens further a much more widespread revolt is indeed a possibility. In the interim the regime’s brutal suppression of human rights provides a clear justification for the imposition of a wide range of sanctions.

Venezuelan vulnerabilities

Venezuela is a bankrupt mafia state, dependent on a combination of targeted corruption and Cuban intelligence and military support to ensure the loyalty of its security forces. Once the wealthiest country in Latin America, its economy has been destroyed through nationalisation, cronyism and abandonment of the rule of law.

94.5% of Venezuelans live in poverty with 76.6% in extreme poverty, living on less than \$1.90 per day.¹⁰⁹ Over 6 million Venezuelans have fled the country.¹¹⁰ A tiny Chavista elite who have made fortunes from rampant corruption dominate the rest of the population through the use of brute force.

Venezuela has the largest proven oil reserves in the world and oil is the country’s biggest export and largest foreign currency earner. However, two decades of corruption and incompetence have largely destroyed its oil industry. By June 2019, Venezuela’s oil production had shrunk to just 741,000 barrels per day (bpd), sharply down from the 1.9 million bpd produced in 2017. This represented a stunning collapse given that Venezuela produced 3.6 million bpd when Chavez came to power in 1998. May 2022’s production of 735,000 bpd is just 20% of that level and far below what was achieved in the 1940s.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ “Cuba: Events of 2018”, *Human Rights Watch*, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/cuba>.

¹⁰⁷ “Cuba anti-government protestors jailed for up to 30 years”, *BBC News*, 17 March 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-60764403>.

¹⁰⁸ “The Harsh Sentencing of Human Rights Defenders in Cuba”, US State Department, 30 June 2022, <https://www.state.gov/the-harsh-sentencing-of-human-rights-defenders-in-cuba/>.

¹⁰⁹ “Extreme poverty in Venezuela rises to 76.6% – study”, *Reuters*, 29 September 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/extreme-poverty-venezuela-rises-766-study-2021-09-29/>.

¹¹⁰ “Venezuela situation”, UNCHR, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/venezuela-emergency.html#:~:text=With%20over%206%20million%20Venezuelan,displacement%20crisis%20in%20the%20world>.

¹¹¹ “Venezuela further below oil output target”, *MercoPress*, 14 June 2022, <https://en.mercopress.com/2022/06/14/venezuela-further-below-oil-output-target>; and “Venezuela oil exports sink to 1940s level under tighter US sanctions – data”, *Reuters*, 4 January 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-venezuela-oil-exports-idUKKBN2990HR>.

Around 60% of the country's crude output comes from onshore reserves of extra-heavy oil in the Orinoco belt. This is only saleable after having been blended with lighter crudes and condensates or going through an upgrading process, which does not work well in Venezuela due to maintenance issues. While the Russian invasion of Ukraine has benefitted Venezuela due to higher oil prices, it seems unlikely that it will help to increase Venezuela's oil revenues to any significant degree. Production is still deeply constrained by lack of both investment and maintenance. Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA is unable to access its own foreign currency bank accounts because it transferred them to Russian banks, which are now frozen. Its oil exports, sold through opaque channels, largely to China, now have to compete with cheaper Russian oil in the same opaque markets and are likely to lose market share.¹¹² Russian investment in Venezuelan oil production, accounting for about 15% of production, is hampered by Western sanctions against Russia.¹¹³

There remain international oil companies operating in Venezuela, notably Chevron under a special license from the US Government, as well as Spain's Repsol and Italy's ENI. Their operations in the huge La Perla gas-producing field produce gas for electricity generation within Venezuela.

The cash-strapped state operator PDVSA, unable to maintain its crumbling infrastructure, has caused appalling environmental damage¹¹⁴ and, decided to cover up the problem by ceasing since 2016 to publish statistics on oil spills. In 2010–2016, PDVSA reported 46,080 oil spills, an average of 18 a day; since then, the situation has considerably worsened.¹¹⁵

According to a report produced by Venezuela's Academy of Sciences in February 2022: "Along the coast, hydrocarbon spills and the discharge of waste by the oil industry happen with greater frequency every day."¹¹⁶ The report detailed nine serious oil spills in 2020 and 2021, each causing major environmental damage. One of the worst was the July 2021 spill in Falcon state, which dumped 26,730 barrels into the ocean and polluted the Morrocoy national park, destroying a number of mangrove swamps. There is extensive leakage on Lake Maracaibo from some 10,000 kilometres of unmaintained underwater pipes.¹¹⁷ The Maduro regime, however, shows no interest in identifying, containing and cleaning up oil spills, which makes the situation significantly worse.¹¹⁸

The regime's desperate attempts to earn hard currency are also causing major environmental degradation elsewhere. With oil earnings in decline since 2016, Maduro designated approximately 112,000 square kilometres of pristine tropical rainforest as a mining belt.¹¹⁹ A Dutch environmental specialist investigated and concluded that official government policy was meant to "put a legal jacket to illegal mining called Arco Minero... run by illegal armed

¹¹² "Venezuela oil sanctions not an easy fix", Columbia Centre on Global Energy Policy, 23 March 2022, <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/research/commentary/venezuela-oil-sanctions-not-easy-fix>.

¹¹³ Alexandra Ulmer and Marianna Parraga, "Russian oil firm shuffles Venezuela assets as sanctions bite", *Reuters*, 29 March 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/exclusive-russian-oil-firm-shuffles-venezuela-assets-sanctions-bite-2022-03-29/>.

¹¹⁴ Matthew Smith, "An Environmental Disaster Is Unfolding In Venezuela", *Oil Price*, 23 February 2022, <https://oilprice.com/The-Environment/Global-Warming/An-Environmental-Disaster-Is-Unfolding-In-Venezuela.html>.

¹¹⁵ Gideon Long, "Venezuela's environmental crisis: 'the beginning of a wave of destruction'", *Financial Times*, 16 January 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/92583389-fcf7-43d1-b1f9-6516b4370bc2>.

¹¹⁶ Deisy Buitrago, "Venezuela oil spills caused grave environmental damage over two years - report", *Reuters*, 16 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/venezuela-oil-spills-caused-grave-environmental-damage-over-two-years-report-2022-02-16/>.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Isaac Nahon-Serfaty, "Why Global Environmentalists Are Silent on Venezuela's Mining Crisis", *Eco Watch*, 27 June 2018, <https://www.ecowatch.com/venezuelas-mining-crisis-2581795160.html>.

troops and state forces.”¹²⁰ The International Crisis Group reported that top military officers in the state of Amazonas received US\$800,000 each in bribes every month to facilitate the illegal mining.¹²¹ Senior officers have taken stakes in both illegal mining projects and gold processing facilities and also assist in trafficking gold across borders.¹²² The decree creating the Orinoco Mining Arc establishes a “military economic zone” in which the military exercises even greater control.¹²³

The subsoil and rivers have been heavily polluted by the mercury used in the mills to extract gold from soil. The effect on aquatic life and the indigenous population has been catastrophic. The gold is smuggled out of Venezuela, often into Brazil, Colombia and Guyana where its origin is obscured before it is sold on. Some of it may have been mixed with the Venezuelan gold reserves which have been taken by Russian charter planes to Uganda, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and other unknown locations, where it is laundered into hard currency.¹²⁴ The gold has also been used to pay Iran for repair work on the oil refineries.¹²⁵

Venezuelan governments have done little to stop gold smuggling, while neighbouring countries are failing to prevent Venezuelan gold being laundered and made to look like their own produce. In July 2020, the European Parliament called for a ban on the trade and circulation of Venezuelan gold, but the EU did not follow up with concrete policies.¹²⁶ The only firm steps taken are those by the US, which sanctioned Venezuela's gold sector in 2019.

Maduro, his inner circle, senior ruling members of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) and pro-government military commanders are actively involved in drug trafficking.¹²⁷ They provide logistics for international criminal organisations, including Mexican and Colombian cartels through ports, airports and road infrastructure.

Maduro and his ruling PSUV elites also have close links with National Liberation Army (ELN) and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissidents and partner with them on drug trafficking and illegal mining in border areas where they are allowed to exercise social and territorial control.¹²⁸ Maduro and senior PSUV leaders are also involved in corruption and money laundering activities on a large scale, including in cahoots with the Lebanese-based Hezbollah terrorist organisation and other Middle Eastern and Turkish businesses groups.¹²⁹

¹²⁰ Jewel Fraser, “Illegal mining in Venezuela threatens to contaminate fish stocks in South America, Caribbean”, *Seafood Source*, 10 August 2018, <https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/environment-sustainability/illegal-mining-in-venezuela-threatens-to-contaminate-fish-stocks-in-south-america-caribbean>.

¹²¹ “Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South”, International Crisis Group, 28 February 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/venezuela/073-gold-and-grief-venezuelas-violent-south>.

¹²² Bram Ebus, “Exploiting Venezuela's Uncertain Future: Resource Conflicts and the Environment”, Wilson Center, March 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/exploiting-venezuelas-uncertain-future-resource-conflicts-and-environment>.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Gabriele Steinhauser and Nicholas Bariyo, “How 7.4 Tons of Venezuela's Gold Landed in Africa – and Vanished”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 June 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-7-4-tons-of-venezuelas-gold-landed-in-africa-and-vanished-11560867792>; Corina Pons and Mayela Armas, “Exclusive: Venezuela plans to fly central bank gold reserves to UAE – source”, *Reuters*, 31 January 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics-gold-exclusive/exclusive-venezuela-plans-to-fly-central-bank-gold-reserves-to-uae-source-idUSKCN1PP2QR>; Anna Golubova, “Venezuela Gold Saga Continues: 20 Tonnes Of Gold To Be Shipped To Unknown Location – Reports”, *Kitco News*, 30 January 2019, <https://www.kitco.com/news/2019-01-30/Venezuela-Gold-Saga-Continues-20-Tonnes-Of-Gold-To-Be-Shipped-To-Unknown-Location-Reports.html>.

¹²⁵ Tsvetana Paraskova, “US: Maduro Pays Iran In Gold For Oil Services”, *Oilprice.com*, 1 May 2020, <https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/US-Maduro-Pays-Iran-In-Gold-For-Oil-Services.html>.

¹²⁶ “European Parliament resolution of 10 July 2020 on the humanitarian situation in Venezuela and the migration and refugee crisis”, European Parliament, 10 July 2020, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0193_EN.html.

¹²⁷ “US indicts Nicholas Maduro and other top Venezuelan leaders for drug trafficking”, *The Guardian*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/26/nicolas-maduro-us-indictment-venezuela-drug-trafficking-leaders>.

¹²⁸ “Maduro seeks to regulate the cocaine trade”, *Insight Crime*, 2 May 2022, <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/maduro-seeks-to-regulate-the-cocaine-trade/>.

¹²⁹ “The Maduro-Hezbollah Nexus: How Iran-backed Networks Prop up the Venezuelan Regime”, *Atlantic Council*, 7 October 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/the-maduro-hezbollah-nexus-how-iran-backed-networks-prop-up-the-venezuelan-regime/>.

Repression of the population and persecution of its opponents is, of course, one of the primary means by which the Venezuelan regime is able to remain in power. However, its excessive brutality also represents a weakness. In November 2021, the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Karim Khan, announced that the court would open a formal investigation into crimes against humanity in Venezuela. One focus of the investigation is violations of human rights that took place during mass anti-regime demonstrations between April and July 2017. Then, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), 124 protestors were killed and more than 5,000 were detained.¹³⁰ Maduro's regime treats dissidents as enemy combatants and, therefore, arbitrary detentions and systematic torture are widespread. Venezuela has around 240 political prisoners, of whom 130 are military personnel.¹³¹

Branches of the Venezuelan security forces that have committed these crimes have already been identified by the ICC's Office of the Special Prosecutor, including the Bolivarian National Police, the Bolivarian National Guard, the Special Action Forces, the Directorate General of Military Counterintelligence, and units of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces.¹³² Although Maduro's regime will undoubtedly continue its attempts to delay the investigation, it remains quite probable that the ICC will order the arrest of a number of regime officials and senior officers in the security services.

Military support is absolutely essential for the survival of the Chavista regime.¹³³ The lower ranks of the military are treated badly, with salaries amongst the lowest in the world at less than US\$10 a month. Soldiers moonlight as taxi drivers.¹³⁴ Senior officers can only be bought off by the regime when there are resources with which to do it and, therefore, diminishing regime support to the military should be a high priority Western policy.

Maduro is in a weak position politically; he remains very unpopular, with the support of only 18% of the population at most.¹³⁵ His position within the Chavista movement is challenged by the second most powerful person in the regime, Diosdado Cabello, who controls the Party structure. Ideological elements in the Party are also dissatisfied with the pro-market reforms that Maduro was forced to introduce under the pressure from sanctions, in order to prevent the country's economic collapse. Sanctions (primarily imposed by the US) have prevented the Maduro regime from easy access to resources to finance its internal support pillars and have been the primary trigger to force the regime to adopt pro-market economic and fiscal policies. Dissident elements within the regime are perturbed that they have been displaced by close collaborators of Maduro and, as the scraps to distribute become fewer, infighting among the ruling elites will intensify.

The Venezuelan regime is dependent on five countries to circumvent sanctions. Turkey, Iran, Cuba, China and Russia assist Maduro in selling oil and gold and in mobilizing other revenue streams. If the West increased the costs of collaborating with the Maduro regime, this would

¹³⁰ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Human rights violations and abuses in the context of protests in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela from 1 April to 31 July 2017", United Nations, August 2017, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/VE/HCReportVenezuela_1April-31July2017_EN.pdf.

¹³¹ Foro Penal report, 20 June 2022, <https://twitter.com/ForoPenalENG/status/1539712326747783168>.

¹³² The Office of the Prosecutor, "Report on Preliminary Examination Activities 2020", International Criminal Court, 14 December 2020, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/itemsDocuments/2020-PE/2020-pe-report-eng.pdf>.

¹³³ "Venezuela's Military Enigma", International Crisis Group, 16 September 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/venezuela/039-venezuelas-military-enigma>.

¹³⁴ "Venezuela's new taxi drivers: moonlighting soldiers", *France 24*, 8 January 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210108-venezuela-s-new-taxi-drivers-moonlighting-soldiers>.

¹³⁵ Gustavo Ocando Alex, "Maduro Avanza 'Solo' en la carrera electoral mientras la oposición espera elegir a su rival" ("Maduro advances 'alone' in the electoral race while the opposition hopes to choose his rival"), *Voz de America*, 11 April 2022, <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/maduro-avanza-solo-carrera-electoral-venezuela/6523942.html>.

discourage some from providing financial and technical assistance. While some US sanctions do impose a cost, it could be increased if the sanctions package could be broadened and implemented by other countries too.

Nicaraguan vulnerabilities

Nicaragua is a highly personalised dictatorship run by President Ortega and his spouse, Vice President Rosario Murillo. It became more brutal after civil society protests in 2018. Since then, their regime's army and paramilitary police have ruthlessly persecuted the political opposition and protestors, resulting in more than 300 deaths, 2,000 injuries and the imprisonment of hundreds of political opponents. Since 2018, more than 150,000 Nicaraguans have fled the country.¹³⁶

The 2021 Nicaraguan "elections" were a travesty and very far from being in any way free. Over 40 critics of the regime were detained during the electoral process, including seven presidential candidates, student and peasant leaders, civil society activists, journalists and defence lawyers. Many remain imprisoned. The US, UK and the EU condemned the election as illegitimate,¹³⁷ as did Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador¹³⁸ and Peru.¹³⁹ Russia, Cuba, Venezuela and Bolivia sent congratulations.¹⁴⁰

The political crisis in Nicaragua has led to an economic crisis. Foreign investment has all but dried up. Nicaragua's GDP shrank by 9% between 2017 and 2020 as a result of both the political crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁴¹ Economic growth resumed in 2021, assisted by remittances, increased exports and assistance from multilateral institutions. In August 2021, the IMF contributed US\$350 million; support has also come from the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI). IMF assistance followed an earlier injection of US\$185.3 million in November 2020.

Nicaragua's main exports are gold (US\$828 million in 2020), knitted T-shirts (\$527 million), coffee (\$448 million), insulated wire (\$399 million) and frozen bovine meat (\$289 million).¹⁴² Nicaragua's exports are assisted by a number of trade arrangements with Western countries, including the Central America Free Trade Agreement with the US, the EU Central America Association Agreement, which eliminates the most important tariffs, and the UK-Central America Association Agreement.¹⁴³ Both the EU and UK agreements state that respect for democratic principles, fundamental human rights and the rule of law constitute an essential element of the agreement.

¹³⁶ "Sharp rise in Nicaraguans fleeing to Costa Rica strains asylum system", *UN News*, March 25, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1114792#:~:text=Doubling%20in%20number%20over%20the,seeking%20refuge%20in%20Costa%20Rica>.

¹³⁷ Caitlin Hu, Natalie Gallón and Mia Alberti, "Ortega wins again in Nicaraguan elections panned as 'parody' by international observers", *CNN*, 8 November 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/11/07/americas/nicaragua-election-nov-7-intl-latam/index.html>.

¹³⁸ "Elecciones en Nicaragua: qué países reconocen la reelección de Daniel Ortega (y cuáles la rechazan)" ("Elections in Nicaragua - which countries recognise the re-election of Daniel Ortega (and which reject it)", *BBC News World*, 9 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-59223557>.

¹³⁹ "Pedro Castillo considera que elecciones en Nicaragua 'no fueron libres ni transparentes'" ("Pedro Castillo considers that elections in Nicaragua 'were not free or transparent'"), *Infobae*, 8 November 2021, <https://www.infobae.com/america/peru/2021/11/08/cancilleria-del-peru-considera-que-elecciones-en-nicaragua-no-fueron-libres-ni-transparentes/>.

¹⁴⁰ "Nicaragua's Ortega decries foes who question his re-election", *AP*, 9 November 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/elections-boycotts-united-states-election-2020-central-america-f6814f4bce601643c6c0bf31496cb695>.

¹⁴¹ "The World Bank in Nicaragua - Overview", 7 April 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/nicaragua/overview>.

¹⁴² "Nicaragua", OEC Country Profile, [https://oec.world/en/profile/country/nic#:~:text=Overview%20In%202020%20Nicaragua%20was,Economic%20Complexity%20Index%20\(ECI\)](https://oec.world/en/profile/country/nic#:~:text=Overview%20In%202020%20Nicaragua%20was,Economic%20Complexity%20Index%20(ECI)).

¹⁴³ Department for International Trade, "UK Central America Association Agreement", GOV.UK, 6 August 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/uk-central-america-association-agreement>.

Gold mining is controversial in Nicaragua; as in Venezuela, it is used to support the regime's ruling elites. A *de facto* alliance between Ortega's government and mining companies is to the disadvantage of indigenous people and small-scale farmers who are illegally deprived of their land and forcibly displaced.¹⁴⁴ While the mining sector provides less than 1% of formal employment, it accounts for some 5% of GDP and is used to drive profits to regime allies, such as those in the state mining company ENIMAS. Two of ENIMAS's senior managers have been sanctioned by the US Treasury.

Ortega will find it difficult to continue to maintain political control unless there is economic growth. Nicaragua is the second-poorest country in the Americas and his brutality and contempt for the rule of law is deterring much needed foreign investment. With the US by far the largest market, accounting for 58% of exports, Washington is in a position to apply significant economic pressure on Nicaragua. In summary Nicaragua is highly dependent on trade with Western countries and financial support from international institutions and its economy is therefore vulnerable to Western pressure.

¹⁴⁴ Josh Mayer and Anuradha Mittal, "Amid the Political Crisis in Nicaragua, Foreign Gold Mining Companies Amplify the Repression", Oakland Institute, 13 July 2021, <https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/blog/nicaragua-foreign-gold-mining-companies-amplify-repression>.

A Record of Failed Western Policies Towards Russia's Latin American Proxies

UK and European policies of engagement, appeasement and accommodation to achieve internal change have abysmally failed in Russia's proxy states in the Americas. These policies have been noticeably different from those pursued by the US.

US White House Chief of Staff John Kelly testified before the US Senate in March 2015 in his capacity as then head of the US Southern Command that: "Periodically since 2008, Russia has pursued an increased presence in Latin America through propaganda, military arms and equipment sales, counterdrug agreements, and trade." He went on to warn that during Putin's rule of Russia there had been "a clear return to Cold War tactics" with Russia seeking "to erode US leadership and challenge US influence in the Western Hemisphere".¹⁴⁵

The UK and EU have not changed their policies towards Russia's Latin American proxies in response to the growing Russian threat to Western interests since the 2014 crisis. The UK and the EU view Central and Latin America as an area best left to the US, viewing the large region as, in effect, the US's backyard. But they are often unwilling to assist the US in the region. At the same time, when a Russian threat to European security emerges in Europe's backyard, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, they expect full US solidarity and support.

The appeasement and accommodation approach undertaken by the UK and EU have failed to encourage positive change in any of Russia's proxies in the Americas. In the case of all three countries, political repression, denial of human rights and corruption have clearly worsened, and there has been a lack of substantial economic reform. The 2022 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index shows Cuba dropping from 169 to 173 out of 180 countries.¹⁴⁶ Venezuela dropped from 148 in 2019 to 159 in 2022 and Nicaragua even more sharply from 114 in 2019 to 160 in 2022.

The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index,¹⁴⁷ based on 60 indicators across five categories measuring pluralism, civil liberties and political culture, paints a similar picture. They have all become more authoritarian, with Cuba falling from 3.31 in 2017 to 2.59 in 2021, Venezuela from 3.87 to 2.11 and Nicaragua from 4.66 to 2.69 over the same period.

On the economic front, their indicators continue to worsen with poverty increasing in each country. Cuba even managed to gain the accolade of being the most miserable country in the world in 2021, according to the Annual Misery Index.¹⁴⁸ Venezuela came second.

Nevertheless, neither the UK nor the EU have imposed any sanctions on Cuba, instead providing it with assistance,¹⁴⁹ without linked conditions. This support continued even after the brutal suppression of the July 2021 protests when thousands of Cubans were arrested, beaten up, mistreated and sentenced to long periods of incarceration, and despite Cuba introducing an infinitely more politically repressive new criminal code. A blind eye is also turned to Cuba's

¹⁴⁵ John F. Kelly, "Posture Statement of General John F. Kelly, United States Marine Corps Commander, United States Southern Command Before the 114th Congress", Senate Armed Services Committee, 12 March 2015, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Kelly_03-12-15.pdf.

¹⁴⁶ "World Press Freedom Index", *Reporters Without Borders*, 2022, <https://rsf.org/en/index>.

¹⁴⁷ "Democracy Index 2021", Economist Intelligence Unit, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2021/>.

¹⁴⁸ "Cuba is the most 'miserable' country in the world, an economic study finds", *ADN America*, 22 March 2022, <https://adnamerica.com/en/cuba/cuba-most-miserable-country-world-economic-study-finds>.

¹⁴⁹ British Embassy Havana, "Official Development Assistance funds of the British Government for projects in Cuba", GOV.UK, 25 August 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/official-development-assistance-funds-of-the-british-government-for-cuban-projects>.

export of medical slave labour. The UK, bizarrely, sent Prince Charles to Havana where he posed for photos in front of a large mural of Communist revolutionary Che Guevara.¹⁵⁰

The UK has imposed some sanctions on Venezuela, but on just 36 individuals,¹⁵¹ compared with 166 individuals sanctioned by the US;¹⁵² it has also prevented the Maduro regime from gaining access to gold held by the Bank of England.¹⁵³ The EU has sanctioned 55 individuals, and has also prevented exports to Venezuela of selected military, telecommunications and police equipment that could be used for internal political repression.¹⁵⁴

Regarding Nicaragua, the EU has sanctioned 21 individuals in addition to the National Police, the Electoral Council and the telecommunications and postal services.¹⁵⁵ The UK has sanctioned 14 individuals.¹⁵⁶ But neither the UK nor the EU have adopted any of the tough economic sanctions applied by the US to Venezuela and Nicaragua.

¹⁵⁰ Rebecca English, "The Royals and the Revolutionaries", *Daily Mail*, 26 March 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6845393/Charles-Camilla-arrived-Cuba-historic-royal-visit.html>; and Edward Malnick, "Royals face pressure to call off Cuba visit", *Daily Telegraph*, 24 February, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2019/02/24/royals-face-pressure-call-cuba-visit-concerns-regime-helping/>.

¹⁵¹ HM Treasury, "Consolidated List of Financial Sanctions Targets in the UK, Venezuela", UK Government, 25 February 2022, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1057511/Venezuela.pdf.

¹⁵² "Venezuela: Overview of US Sanctions", Congressional Research Service, 23 May 2022, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF10715.pdf>.

¹⁵³ "Venezuela: Maduro suffers setback in claim to gold at BoE", *BBC News*, 21 December 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-59733321>.

¹⁵⁴ EU Sanctions map: Venezuela, EU, 12.4.2022, <https://www.sanctionsmap.eu/#/main/details/44/?search=%7B%22value%22:%22%22,%22searchType%22:%7B%7D%7D>.

¹⁵⁵ "EU imposes new sanctions on Nicaragua", *AA*, 10 January 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/eu-imposes-new-sanctions-on-nicaragua/2470396>.

¹⁵⁶ HM Treasury, "Consolidated List of Financial Sanctions Targets in the UK, Nicaragua", UK Government, 25 February 2022, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1057498/Nicaragua.pdf.

Conclusion

The more pressure that is exerted on Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua, the more Putin will be forced to either prop them up with scarce Russian resources or, in the aftermath of tough Western sanctions, to abandon them. Having to divert huge financial resources from Russia's much weakened, sanctioned economy to stagnant proxies in the Americas may prove to be too difficult at a time when the Kremlin is spending an estimated US\$500 million each day on its war in Ukraine.¹⁵⁷

Putin seeks to follow in the footsteps of the Soviet Union he so dearly has nostalgia for; losing the Kremlin's foothold in the Americas would be an additional affront to the image of Russia as a great power on top of the visibly poor performance of the Russian military in Ukraine. Applying tougher and concerted Western (US, British, European) pressure against Russia's proxies in the Americas would open up a second front against the Kremlin in addition to the primary front the West is pursuing against Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The West's second front should form part of a coherent and comprehensive global strategy to push back against Putin's worldwide campaign of belligerence and aggression against Western democracies and liberal values. Although in Europe the Kremlin's information war is performing poorly in relation to the conflict in Ukraine, in the global south it may even be winning it, especially in the Americas, where Cuban and Venezuelan propaganda assets work in close coordination with Russia's. Sanctions against Russia are not supported by most countries in the South, such as India and, of course, China. In east Asia, Taiwan, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand are outliers in backing sanctions. In Latin America, no countries support sanctions against Russia.

¹⁵⁷ Aleksey Maltsev, "What's the cost of war for Russia, and what could be done with this money?", *Geneva Solutions*, 4 May 2022, <https://genevasolutions.news/ukraine-stories/what-s-the-cost-of-war-for-russia-and-what-could-be-done-with-this-money>.

Policy Recommendations

Overall, Western nations should focus on two major policies. Firstly, the West should adopt clear and consistent policies to achieve the overarching goal of returning Russia's three proxy states in the Americas – Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua – to democratic governance. Towards this end, support for pro-democracy groups and independent journalism should be considerably increased in all three. Secondly, a more vigorous Western stance towards Russia's three proxy states in the Americas should be understood as the opening of a second front against the Kremlin, the first being the West's support for Ukraine's fight against Russia's illegal invasion.

1. Cuba

a) Cut off slave labour revenues

- Vigorously apply national and international laws that forbid modern slavery and human trafficking practices.
- Pressure countries that participate in Cuban labour trafficking to cease doing so in two ways. Firstly, by publicising Cuba's activities. Secondly, by applying specific measures, including linking development assistance to compliance with international law.
- Sanction agents of the Cuban Government and its partners who are directly responsible for human trafficking programmes and deny visas to all those who are involved.
- Demand that international organisations stop supporting or funding arrangements that involve Cuba's labour trafficking.
- Britain and European countries should offer asylum to Cuban personnel trafficked by the regime who no longer wish to be subject to the oppressive arrangements imposed on them by Cuba. Their spouses and children should be permitted to join them once they have succeeded in leaving Cuba.
- Insofar as organisations and states wish to hire Cuban health workers, they should do so directly under the same terms and conditions as other foreign workers, and categorically not through Cuban state organisations.

b) Close off aid to official Cuban institutions

- Democratic governments should discontinue providing loans or assistance to the Cuban Government and any of its entities. Instead, they should channel humanitarian assistance and support human rights initiatives through churches and verifiable independent groups.
- Western democracies such as Norway, France, Switzerland and Japan should no longer fund Cuba to the tune of tens of millions of dollars each year without conditions linked to the upholding of human rights and democratic freedoms. By not including linked conditions, these governments are indirectly supporting the Cuban communist regime.

c) Reduce the number of Western tourists visiting Cuba

- Hard currency tourism revenues, in many cases channelled into hotels and other enterprises controlled by the military, are one of the most important sources of funds that keep the regime afloat. A multi-pronged approach should be undertaken to cut off these financial flows.

- Western political leaders should undertake information campaigns against taking vacations in Cuba. It is particularly inappropriate to provide support to a Kremlin military proxy – Cuba – when Russia is undertaking a brutal war and committing war crimes in Ukraine.
- Western governments should issue advice to their citizens to not travel to Cuba, not least on safety and health grounds.
- Certain enterprises in the tourism sector, particularly those owned by the military, should be sanctioned.

d) Sanction Cuba's oligarchs, human rights abusers and their enterprises

- Targeted political, financial and diplomatic sanctions should be imposed on all Cuban oligarchs and the enterprises they control.
- The licenses of Cuban banks authorised to operate in the UK should be annulled. Havin Bank, one of those Cuban banks allowed to operate in the UK despite being sanctioned by the US Treasury,¹⁵⁸ is a prime candidate for such licence cancellation.
- The UK and EU should conduct an in-depth investigation into the funds acquired by the Castro family and high-ranking officials and military officers in the Cuban regime.

2. Venezuela

- A key policy aim should be to reduce the revenue that the regime is able to distribute to ruling elites and its supporters. One way would be for the Venezuelan oil sector to be placed under a comprehensive set of sanctions with a view to reducing its output and ability to finance the regime. This would most likely lead to the withdrawal of most international oil companies from Venezuela, a ban on equipment supplied to the oil industry, and an embargo on shipping, insurance and other areas used by the oil industry.
- As requested by the European Parliament, a complete ban should be introduced on the trade and circulation of Venezuelan gold, with sanctions applied to all individuals and firms who do not comply with this prohibition.
- The governments of Brazil, Guyana and Colombia, as well as other transit countries, should be placed under pressure to reduce opportunities for Venezuelan gold to be trafficked through their countries and assisted in improving border security where possible
- The UK and other democracies should lend their full support to the ICC investigation into crimes against humanity committed by the regime and its agents and press for the investigation to be pursued with the utmost vigour.
- A complete prohibition on the supply of military equipment to the Venezuelan military and security forces should be introduced.
- Individual sanctions, asset freezes and travel bans should be introduced against Venezuelan military and security officers involved in illegal gold extraction, other activities that cause environmental degradation, narcotics smuggling and suppression of human rights.

¹⁵⁸ US Department of the Treasury, "Cuba Designation Update", 30 July 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/recent-actions/20200730>.

- The UK and EU members should provide additional naval and other resources to assist the US in closing down narcotics routes from Venezuela.
- Any relaxation of sanctions should only occur when irreversible steps have been taken to restore democracy and the rule of law in Venezuela.

3. Nicaragua

- The UK and EU should expand their sanctions against Nicaragua to include those enacted by the US.
- The UK and EU should also conduct an in-depth investigation into the funds acquired by the Ortega-Murillo family and high-ranking officers in the Nicaraguan armed forces.
- The UK, EU, US and their allies should influence multilateral institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank, to ensure that no further resources, either loans or grants, are provided to the Nicaraguan regime.
- The gold mining sector in Nicaragua should be thoroughly sanctioned, with international companies required to end their operations, international supplies to the sector banned, and a prohibition placed on the trading of Nicaraguan gold.
- The UK should work with its US and EU allies to devise a comprehensive package of economic sanctions. It should include the suspension of Nicaragua's participation in the EU-Central America Agreement and the UK-Central America Association Agreement, not least because of Nicaragua's breaches of the human rights provisions of both agreements.

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