



LIVE

RT

**VENEZUELAN PRESIDENT ON GRIPPING
CRISIS TO RT SPANISH - EXCLUSIVE**

Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro addresses RT's U.S. viewers in an English-dubbed interview posted to YouTube. (Source: YouTube)

Reading the RT Leaves: Foreign Policy Lessons from Russian International Media Coverage of Venezuela

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While the crisis in Venezuela has not provoked foreign military intervention, it remains a significant part of Russia's war of words with the West. This narrative is evident on RT, Russia's foreign broadcaster.¹ RT, the former Russia Today, is a key component of Russia's foreign media apparatus and a critical foreign policy instrument. It can be difficult to predict Russia's actions abroad, but analysis of RT's English-language coverage of Venezuela provides important insights into its foreign policy.

Turmoil in Venezuela

The late Hugo Chavez's revolution in Venezuela is in crisis. Declining oil prices compounded with economic mismanagement have created drastic food and medicine shortages and have sparked mass protests against Chavez successor Nicolas Maduro. Maduro won a second term as president in May 2018, but the opposition-led National Assembly declared his inauguration invalid over allegations of voter fraud and intimidation. The National Assembly appointed Juan

Guaidó as interim president and the U.S., among other nations, quickly recognized his appointment while levying increased economic sanctions on Maduro's officials and Venezuelan industries. Russia steadfastly supports Maduro's government.

The Russian Connection

Russia and Venezuela maintain a cooperative relationship.² Leaders in both countries are skeptical of the U.S.-led international order and have built camaraderie through the pursuit of a "just" order to counter American hegemony. Chavez and Maduro recognized this common ideology and have worked to enrich the Russian-Venezuelan relationship through numerous state visits and calculated diplomatic recognitions designed to win Moscow's favor.³ The Bolivarian leaders clearly understood their ability to generate significant domestic and international political capital for Moscow. Venezuela's geographic position outside Russia's traditional near-abroad and professed loyalty to Moscow boosts Russia's great-power status.

Yet political gains alone provide an incomplete picture. Rosneft, the largest Russian oil company and a well-documented instrument of Russian foreign policy, owns nearly 150 billion barrels of Venezuela's proven oil reserves.⁴ This makes Venezuela the largest recipient of Rosneft's foreign investments, but Venezuela has not delivered on many of its contracts. Russia has also provided consultation on sanction relief, food aid shipments, and arms. Estimates place Russia's total investment at \$20 billion, an especially significant signal of its commitment to Venezuela given the many hurdles Russia faces to recouping its funds in light of sanctions and instability.

These poor investments make sense when considering the political capital Russia receives in return. Demonstrating Russia's status as a great power is one of Moscow's key domestic and foreign policy objectives. By presenting Russia as an equal

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partner of other great nations, Moscow earns valuable prestige among Russians and potential allies, meaning that expending financial resources for relationships that project Russian greatness is likely money well spent. Great power identity also gives Moscow justification to defend friendly governments from regime-toppling uprisings. Many Russian elites believe that sinister foreign forces invent unrest to create color revolutions and oust Russian allies. Venezuela's leaders have historically agreed, and the current crisis has only cemented this view and bolstered ties with the Russians.

This combination of tangible and political investments makes it unlikely that Russia could accept Maduro's exit. A new government in Caracas could avoid commitments to repay Russian loans. Even more importantly, losing a key political ally to a perceived foreign intervention would be damaging to Russia's international image. These factors point towards continued Russian support for Maduro and opposition to U.S. intervention in Venezuela.

RT's Role

Modern constraints on military action elevate influence operations and information warfare to the core of national security policy. Putin's government articulates elaborate and consistent strategic narratives as part of a wider information offensive against the West. According to the editors of a book on modern political communication, strategic narratives are "tools that political actors employ to promote their interests, values, and aspirations for international order by managing expectations and altering the discursive environment."⁵ By establishing recurring stories about conflicts and consequences, states intend strategic narratives to shift audience expectations about certain actors and influence future audience perceptions. Russia's strategic narratives form the foundation for its influence operations. State-directed media outlets mold news coverage to fit strategic narratives that push audiences towards Moscow's policy on a given issue.

For Western-targeted narratives, Russia turns to RT. Broadcast from studios in the U.S., written in English, and heavily marketed to Americans, RT presents itself as an alternative to mainstream news sources such as CNN.⁶ To build an audience, a significant portion of RT's content comes from "clickbait" videos and sensational, apolitical stories.⁷ Attracting readers with relatable content brings them into RT's sphere and then exposes them to Russia's political messages. Measuring the reach of RT's political content is difficult, but Moscow's consistent narrative projection through the outlet demonstrates a degree of faith in its potential.

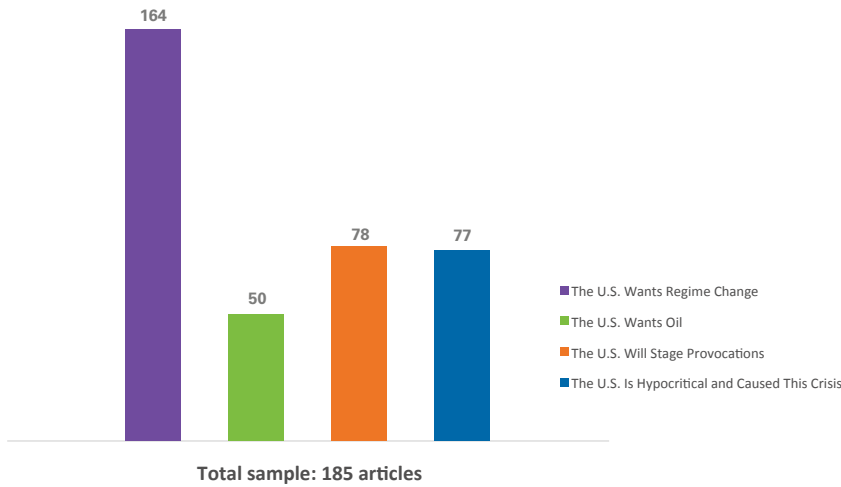
Regardless of RT's reach, its political articles present

a compelling way to assess Russia's intentions. RT's coverage of the Venezuelan political crisis confirms the outlet's operational purpose. Though its stories discuss the same news as other sites, they represent Russia's consistent message to Americans: Do not intervene in Venezuela. Analysis of select official Russian government statements and all RT articles labeled "US-backed coup in Venezuela news" (published between January 11 and March 4, 2019) uncovered four salient story lines (see Figure 1) aimed at eroding American support for action in Venezuela:⁸

- "The U.S. wants regime change." Russia's core message here is that the U.S. frequently deposes governments it does not like and Venezuela is the next target.
- "The U.S. wants Venezuela's oil." This is Russia's explanation for the U.S.'s interest in Venezuela, framed as natural resource theft.
- "The U.S. will create provocations." This story line suggests that the U.S. will covertly and malevolently instigate violence to unjustly remove Maduro.
- "The U.S. is hypocritical and caused the crisis." This embraces Russia's complaints about U.S. sanctions and "unnecessary" humanitarian aid.

Though these story lines often appeared together, they are distinctly identifiable and they all contributed to Russia's message about motivations for and consequences of U.S. action in Venezuela.

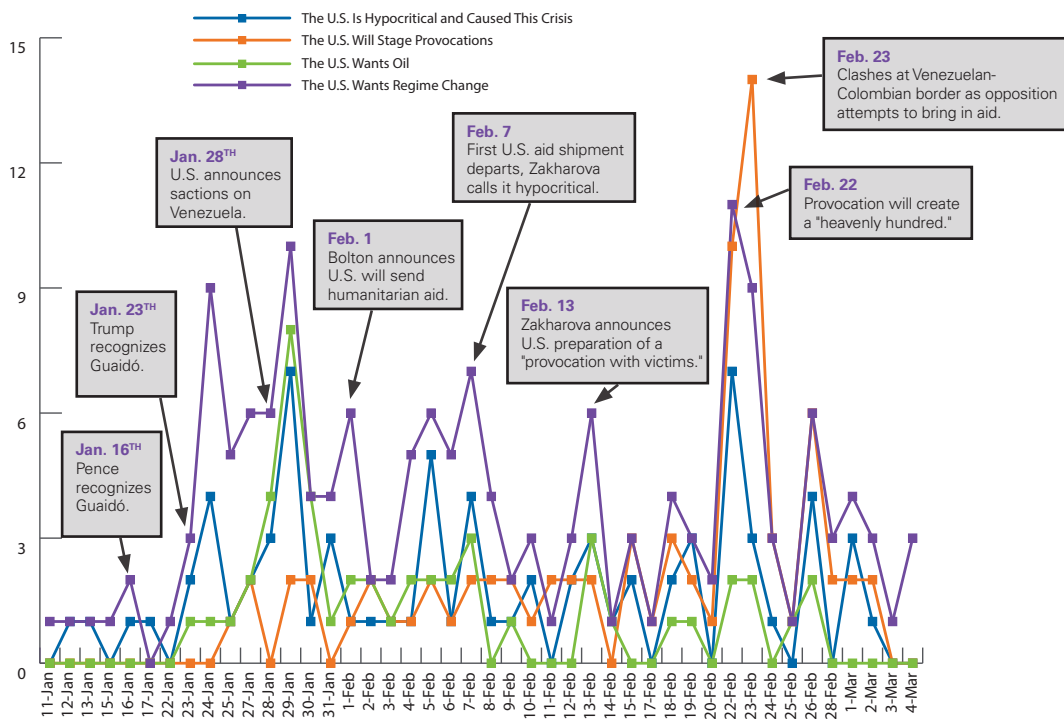
[Figure 1] Number of articles referencing each story line at least once



Our period of analysis covers critical moments at the beginning of the current Venezuelan crisis. Mapping these moments onto a graph (see Figure 2) of the daily number of articles containing each story line shows how RT writers respond

to dynamic events. The spikes on these graphs frequently corresponded to identified critical moments, supporting the theory that RT writers work to quickly frame new events into the context of Russia's preferred narrative.

[Figure 2] Number of articles referencing each story line over time



Regime Change Policy

When Guaidó asserted his claim to the presidency in early January 2019, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) quickly deployed the “U.S. wants regime change” story line, saying that “the U.S. is clearly trying to apply a tried and tested regime change scenario in Venezuela.”⁹ RT followed, labeling the events a “coup” and basing the majority of its coverage on how the American recognition of Guaidó would soon lead to military intervention to topple Maduro.¹⁰ RT and the MFA referenced the American regime change policy in 89 percent of the articles coded during this period, establishing it as the foundation for all of RT’s messaging on Venezuela. RT emphasized Maduro’s status as Venezuela’s “democratically-elected president” and warned of “Washington’s unprecedented obsession” with regime change and disregard for “the norms and principles of international law.”¹¹ These descriptions frame the U.S. as a threat to other “legitimate” states by suggesting that the U.S. is ready and willing to violate international law.

RT met each escalation in the crisis with additional warnings about U.S. regime change. This story line is likely the most common because RT could easily remind readers of past U.S. interventions. Writers pointed to Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, and Syria to suggest that U.S. intervention always creates more harm than good. MFA spokeswoman Maria Zakharova sarcastically noted that “democracy was restored in Iraq. In Libya, too,” and when Senator Marco Rubio appeared to threaten Maduro in a tweet showing Muammar Gaddafi moments before death, RT reminded readers that “gangs of armed democrats” still fight for control of Libya.¹²

To explain the U.S.’s motivations for removing Maduro and dissuade readers from supporting its policy, RT reported that “oil [is] the sole and real purpose behind [the] US coup.”¹³ Stories that claimed the U.S. will steal all of “Venezuela’s riches—gold, gas, diamonds, iron, [and] water” worked to discredit Western democratic justifications for supporting Guaidó by questioning the virtue of U.S. intentions.¹⁴ RT writers accompanied warnings about regime change with phrases such as “war of oil plunder” and “a ‘take the oil’ policy” to paint the U.S. as greedy and unconcerned with the people it claims to be saving.¹⁵ With these, RT hoped to reignite long-running American skepticism of and protests against wars in oil-rich countries.

While RT referenced the U.S.’s oil greed in 27 percent of the articles coded, it mostly ignored Russia’s own massive oil interests in Venezuela and only two RT articles from this period mention Rosneft. This is likely a necessary omission in RT’s eyes. RT loses the moral credibility to discourage U.S. intervention by labeling it a “war of oil plunder” when its audience is aware of Russia’s massive (and unfulfilled) oil contracts.

Humanitarian Aid

As Guaidó and the U.S. coordinated to deliver humanitarian aid to Venezuela in February 2019, the Russians quickly tried to frame the effort as a military maneuver.¹⁶ In suggesting that the U.S. would create provocations, RT writers warned about covert U.S. intervention to justify regime change. On February 7, RT covered Zakharova’s claims

that humanitarian aid could become a conduit for U.S. military intervention in Venezuela. RT wrote that “the government in Caracas has reason to be skeptical of U.S. humanitarian aid....The U.S. has previously used the label ‘humanitarian aid’ to deliver weapons and equipment to anti-government guerrillas in Latin America.”¹⁷ As aid convoys drew closer to the Venezuelan border, Zakharova warned that “a provocation with victims [was] being prepared under the cover of a humanitarian convoy,” suggesting that the U.S. intended to provoke violence to provide justification for outside military intervention.¹⁸ RT articles reported Zakharova’s message as she set a date for the provocation and claimed it would become “a Venezuelan Maidan, a ‘heavenly hundred,’ which would justify military intervention from outside the country.”¹⁹

Zakharova’s reference to the Euromaidan revolution’s “heavenly hundred” echoes an entrenched Russian narrative about Western-backed color revolutions and fear of the alleged “provocations” that initiate them. In Venezuela, Moscow used this story line to discredit evidence of “popular” support for the opposition. Instead, RT blamed the sinister foreign forces that the Russian and Venezuelan governments fear, hoping to convince its audience of the U.S.’s deceitful nature. Implicating the West in regime-toppling popular revolutions draws attention away from domestic factors that bring people to the streets. Russia also uses this story line domestically where it allows Moscow to explain internal dissent as a foreign attack and hence maintain order.²⁰

On February 23, opposition aid convoys attempted to enter Venezuela from Colombia but failed after trucks carrying the aid caught fire. RT’s references

to the provocation story line peaked during these clashes, which demonstrates a crucial connection between information and kinetic operations. Even when covering apparently unrelated humanitarian aid, RT writers framed the situation as a covert assault in 42 percent of articles coded.

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RT writers and MFA officials also suggested that U.S. sanctions were the true reason for Venezuela’s desperate economic situation. These claims spiked following announcements of additional U.S. sanctions on Venezuela and appeared in 42 percent of the articles coded. RT compared the sanctions with “medieval sieges of towns” and labeled them “economic war” designed to remove Maduro.²¹ As the U.S. sent humanitarian aid to Venezuela, Zakharova claimed that using sanctions to cripple the economy and offering aid at the same time reveals the U.S.’s true hypocritical character.²² This ignored the significant economic and social problems that Maduro faces absent any U.S. government policies.

Moscow also devoted significant attention to arguing that U.S. humanitarian aid was both unnecessary and of poor quality, connecting these stories with suspicions that the aid was designed to elicit more support for the coup in Venezuela.

RT quoted Venezuelan officials denigrating the U.S. aid as “crumbs,” and “spoiled food and expired medicine.” RT even dispatched a reporter to a Caracas grocery store to find the “toothpaste which CNN says does not exist in Venezuela.”²³ By claiming that U.S. sanctions are the true cause of Venezuelan strife, Russia presents selective evidence to suggest that the U.S. instigated the crisis in Venezuela and to convince Americans that they are being tricked into further action. Russia also uses this to support its running complaint against Western sanctions on their own industries and leaders.

Implications

In 1946, George F. Kennan argued that, concerning Russia, we must “apprehend, and recognize for what it is, the nature of the movement with which we are dealing.”²⁴ For national security analysts facing Russian tactics that increasingly rely on deception, this charge is daunting but still critical. Though not a replacement for traditional analytical sources, RT and Russia’s modern foreign-targeted

media provide specific and useful insights into Russian foreign policy ambitions and actions, helping us to recognize the “nature” of the Russia we face today. Decoding policy from RT’s messages requires a robust understanding of Russian narratives and contexts, but viewed through the appropriate lens, coverage and commentary in RT can signal Russia’s desired outcomes. It may be tempting to dismiss RT, which is not a force in the U.S. media sphere, as a marginal venue for false information of little value. Further, Russia’s messages often defy traditional understanding of soft power because they distract and confuse rather than attract readers towards an ideal. However, recognizing RT as a foreign policy instrument that broadcasts Russian global intentions is useful for gaining a more detailed and timely understanding of the Kremlin’s ambitions and actions on the world stage.

The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the authors.



Endnotes

1. RT is one of Russia's state-run foreign media outlets. It was called "Russia Today" until 2009.
2. Vladimir Rouvinski, *Russian-Venezuelan Relations at a Crossroads* (Washington, DC: The Woodrow Wilson Center, 2019), https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/russia-venezuela_report_rouvinski_final.pdf. We drew on Rouvinski's comprehensive account of the dynamics between Russia and Venezuela as background for our media analysis and to make connections with wider aspects of Russian foreign policy.
3. Rouvinski notes on page 11 of *Russian-Venezuelan Relations* that Chavez visited Russia "more than any other Latin American leader," traveling to Moscow nine times. Rouvinski also discusses Venezuela's alignment with Russian policy by supporting Abkhazia and South Ossetia's separatism and opposing Kosovo's independence on page 4.
4. Rouvinski discusses the specific cooperative measures between Russia and Venezuela in more detail on pages 6–12.
5. Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, eds., *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), i.
6. For discussion on the character of RT, see Yablokov, Ilya. "Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today (RT). *Politics* 35(3-4), 2015: 301-315 and Orttung, Robert. A. and Elizabeth Nelson. "Russia Today's strategy and effectiveness on YouTube." *Post Soviet Affairs* 35(2): 77-92, 2019.
7. Bret Schafer, *A View from the Digital Trenches: Lessons from Year One of Hamilton 68* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Securing Democracy, November 9, 2018). Schafer's report for the German Marshall Fund's Alliance for Securing Democracy on Russia's influence campaigns discusses audience creation through apolitical content extensively, specifically on pages 5–6.
8. Coding notes: this analysis includes all articles tagged "U.S.-backed coup in Venezuela news" and published on the RT English-language news website between January 11 and March 4, 2019 (see <https://www.rt.com/trends/us-coup-venezuela-news/>). It also includes publications from the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia (www.mid.ru/en) on the "Briefings," "Foreign Minister Speeches," and "Official Statements" pages published between January 11 and March 4, 2019 that reference Venezuela at least once. Vladimir Putin's press office published only one document relating to Venezuela during this period on its official website (<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>).

Sean Steiner collected documents using the MAXQDA Web collector extension for Google Chrome and employed the "lexical search" feature to automatically code segments from each document based on the presence of key words that corresponded to the target story lines. For example "coup" and "regime change" represented the "U.S. wants regime change" story line. The author manually verified all auto-coded segments to ensure they represented the intended story lines. This involved removing instances of erroneously coded in-text advertisements of other RT articles and removing segments that carried the wrong meaning. For example, the "sanctions" keyword must imply that sanctions caused the Venezuelan crisis to represent the "U.S. is hypocritical" story line. To refine the analysis, the author recorded each story line as present if any of the corresponding tags appeared at least once in the document. The final sample to analyze was 185 stories.

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10. RT International, "'It's None of Our Business!' Ron Paul Denounces American 'Hypocrisy' in Backing Venezuelan Coup," <https://www.rt.com/news/449755-ron-paul-venezuela-hypocrisy/>.





11. "'Inhuman' Humanitarianism: Caracas Slams Us as It Vows to Send Aid to Venezuela While Backing Coup," <https://www.rt.com/news/450438-us-venezuela-aid-regime-change/>; and "Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, February 14, 2019," news release, February 14, 2019, http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/briefings/-/asset_publisher/D2wHaWMCU6Od/content/id/3517450/pop_up?_101_INSTANCE_D2w%E2%80%A6.
12. RT International, "Trump-Bashing Iraq War Architect Elliott Abrams to Lead US Regime Change in Venezuela," January 26, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/usa/449756-abrams-pompeo-venezuela-iran-contra/>; and "'Sick & Twisted': US Senator Rubio Tweets Picture of Gaddafi's Murder as a Threat to Maduro," February 25, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/news/452329-rubio-gaddafi-venezuela-tweet/>.
13. "'Oil' the 'Sole and Real' Purpose Behind US 'Coup' Attempt, Says Venezuela's Foreign Minister," January 29, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/news/450083-venezuela-fm-us-oil-coup/>.
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16. "Venezuela Opposition Leader to 'Test' Regime with Shipment of Aid from Neighbouring Countries," *The Telegraph*, February 1, 2019; and Bolton, John. Twitter Post. February, 1 2019, 4:44 PM. <https://twitter.com/AmbJohnBolton/status/1091497490925404160>
17. RT International, "Time for Talks 'Long Passed': US Weaponizes Aid Amid Push for Regime Change in Venezuela," February 8, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/news/450937-us-aid-venezuela-abrams/>.
18. "Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova." February 14, 2019.
19. The "Heavenly Hundred" refers to civilian victims of the 2014 Euromaidan revolution in Kyiv. Zakharova's reference suggests the Russian conspiracy theory that Western governments instigated the revolution and civilian deaths to give the revolution credibility and oust President Viktor Yanukovich. See "Statement by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova," news release, February 18, 2019, http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/official_statement/-/asset_publisher/t2GCdmD8RNlr/content/id/3524476/pop_up?_101_INSTANCE_t2%E2%80%A6.
20. Sarah Oates research.
21. RT International, "'Oil' the 'Sole and Real' Purpose Behind US 'Coup' Attempt"; and "'Direct Nexus between US Sanctions & Death'—UN Rapporteur Slams 'Economic War' on Venezuela," January 30, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/news/450146-de-zayas-venezuela-sanctions-war/>.
22. "Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova," news release, February 7, 2019, http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/briefings/-/asset_publisher/D2wHaWMCU6Od/content/id/3503377/pop_up?_101_INSTANCE_D2w%E2%80%A6.
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