

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Russian-Venezuelan relations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The perspective of Russia's superpower interests

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Abstract

The fight against the COVID-19 pandemic has been instrumentalised on several occasions by powers that have seen a new sphere for realising their interests. One such power is the Russian Federation. The article aims to explain the importance of close relations with Venezuela for Russia's strategic objectives in expanding its political power in the Latin American region in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve the research objective, the authors focused on answering the following research questions: How has the political crisis in Venezuela affected the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic? Why and how does Russia consistently support the regime of Nicolás Maduro in times of a pandemic crisis? The article's research hypothesis is that Russia used the new conditions of superpower policy, the COVID-19 pandemic, to strengthen its influence on Venezuela's domestic politics to secure the realisation of its superpower interests. The authors used content analysis of media broadcasts, statements by politicians, and literature on the subject (in English, Russian and Spanish). In addition, the re-analysis of quantitative data made it possible, for example, to characterise the economic level of the relations. The main part of the research was completed in November 2021. The article uses methods characteristic of international relations research, including the method of decision analysis. The results of the research confirm that Moscow's activity in Latin America should be interpreted as one of the manifestations of the reactivity of Russian geostrategy, i.e. a response to U.S. actions in the post-Soviet area. In this context, Caracas has a special position in Russia's policy as a key regional partner in energy cooperation and a market for the sale of military technologies. The research was conducted on 13 March 2020 and ended before 24 February 2022.

Keywords

Russia, Venezuela, COVID-19 pandemic, power politics, geopolitics, geostrategy, offensive realism

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Author roles: **Miarka A:** Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Validation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation; **Łapaj-Kucharska J:** Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Validation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: The author(s) declared that no grants were involved in supporting this work.

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How to cite this article:

For printed version: Miarka Agnieszka and Łapaj-Kucharska Justyna. "Russian-Venezuelan relations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The perspective of Russia's superpower interests". *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 59, (2023): 125–142. Printed 2023. <https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17623.3>.

For online version: Miarka A and Łapaj-Kucharska J. **Russian-Venezuelan relations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The perspective of Russia's superpower interests.** *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 2023, 3:2 <https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17623.3>

Introduction

The political crisis in Venezuela has generated opportunities for Russia to boost influence on the internal situation in that country. Furthermore, response to the global challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic marks another area where Moscow seeks closer cooperation with Caracas. This article aims to explain the importance of close relations with Venezuela for Russia's strategic objectives in expanding its political power in the Latin American region in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, it is necessary to indicate the effects of the crisis of power in Venezuela and the attempts to combat the pandemic, and then to indicate Russia's role in both areas. To achieve the research objective, the authors focused on answering the following research questions: How has the political crisis in Venezuela affected the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic? Why and how does Russia consistently support the regime of Nicolás Maduro in times of a pandemic crisis? The article's research hypothesis is that Russia used the new conditions of superpower policy, the COVID-19 pandemic, to strengthen its influence on Venezuela's domestic politics to secure the realisation of its superpower interests. Russian policy towards Venezuela conforms to the model of foreign policy created by the superpower according to the tenets of offensive realism. The reason for addressing this issue is the current relevance of the raised topic, to be considered crucial from the point of view of the intensifying superpower competition in the region of Latin America in the 21st century.

Increasing Russia's political power in Latin America is an area of interesting academic research. In the case of Russia's influence on Venezuelan politics, cooperation in the energy sector is highlighted by researchers as part of the use of Venezuelan resources to strengthen Moscow's role as a leading player in this sector.¹ Moreover, defense cooperation is another mechanism for building alliance connections.² Also, the Russian government's response to the political crisis in Venezuela was in academic research.³ The two countries' proximity is also evident at the systemic level, as there is a similar political regime in both countries. This case has been explored by researchers in comparative studies.⁴ Most often, researchers do not

¹ A. Cohen and R. Walser, "Energy for Geopolitical Advantage," 2008, <https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/the-russia-venezuela-axis-using-energy-geopolitical-advantage>; M.N. Katz, "The Putin-Chavez Partnership," *Problems of Post-Communism* 53, no. 4 (2006): 3–9, <https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216530401>; D. Rozental and L. Kheyfets, "Kredity na doverii: razmyshleniya o venesuel'skoy politike Moskv," *Vestnik SPbGU* Ser. 6, 2015.

² A. Sitenko, "Latin American vector in Russia's Foreign Policy: Identities and interests in the Russian-Venezuelan Partnership," *Politics in Central Europe* 12, no. 1 (2016): 37–57.

³ D. Rozental, "Venesuel'skiy uzel v latinoamerikanskoj politike Moskv," *Latinskaya Amerika* Vypusk №. 10, 2018; D. Rozental and L. Jeifets, "Russia and Venezuela. Russia's Gateway to Latin America," in *Rethinking Post-Cold War Russian–Latin American Relations*, eds. V. Rouvinski and V. Jeifets, 2022.

⁴ R. Frankengerger and P. Graf, "Elections, Democratic Regression and Transitions to Autocracy: Lessons from Russia and Venezuela," in *Regression of Democracy?*, eds. G. Erdmann and M. Kneuer (VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-93302-3_8.

explore bilateral relations in depth by framing themselves within Russia's overall strategy in the traditional US sphere of influence and the reactions of individual states to Moscow's instrumentality of pressure.⁵

Although researchers tried to explain some aspects of Russian-Venezuelan relations, the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic implied a dynamization of Moscow's political offensive towards Latin America, particularly Caracas, as a strategic ally. This article aims to fill the research gap in explaining the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Russia's strategy towards Venezuela (objectives, instruments, effectiveness). At the same time, empirical research contributes to developing the theory of offensive realism, which is the main optics of foreign policy of states with a authoritarian regime. The authors are aware that the Russian vaccine diplomacy policy can be seen as part of a general trend of creating Russia's strategy towards the region of Latin America as a whole in the context of the global health crisis. However, the selection of the research sample is intentional, as, in the gradation of Moscow's areas of expansion in the region, Venezuela has a particular position. In addition, their bilateral relations are available with features that distinguish them from Russia's ties with other countries in the region. The future form of Russia's strategy towards the development of relations with Venezuela should be considered in the context of more general political phenomena (e.g., the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, perspectives for the democratization of Russia, or the strengthening of the authoritarian regime). This article is supposed to be a voice in discussing further possibilities of superpower influence in the Latin American region.

Methods

Data collection

In the research, the authors identified an independent variable in the form of a change in the conditions for creating political strategy by a power with a authoritarian regime, wanting to see how this would affect its relations with allies. Firstly, the authors developed a theoretical framework for the issue of offensive realism based on a critical analysis of the literature on the subject. It has made it possible to confirm that Russia qualifies as an example of a superpower that creates foreign policy according to the logic of offensive realism and that relations with Venezuela correspond to the type of relations established by this superpower. The authors interpreted Russian-Venezuelan relations as asymmetrical in favor of Moscow but at the same time crucial for the emanation of the political power of this superpower in the Latin American region. Identifying the most important areas of relations, the authors have explored the impact of the political crisis in Venezuela on bilateral relations, which is inextricably connected to the formula of cooperation

⁵ S. Blank and Y. Kim, "Russia and Latin America: The New Frontier for Geopolitics, Arms Sales and Energy," *Problems of Post-Communism* 62, no. 3 (2015): 159–173, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1019817>.

during the pandemic. Given the research objective of the article, the authors used qualitative methods in the research process. The authors collected, selected, and analyzed records, a characteristic data source in qualitative research regarding explaining political phenomena (the official website of the President of the Russian Federation, ReliefWeb, Wilson Center, CSIS, Levada Center). In the case of permanent records, the authors made limited use of them (the economic plane of bilateral relations). The analysis of the literature on realism in international relations and Russia's geopolitics made it possible to create a theoretical framework for the study and to characterize the relationship between Russia and Venezuela before the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the analysis of reports and information provided by OCHA and Human Rights Watch on official websites made it possible to present the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic and the humanitarian situation in Venezuela. In turn, analysis of media content (19 news items posted in Russian, Spanish, and English) and official statements by politicians helped clarify the assumptions of the instrumentalization of the pandemic in Russia's policy toward Venezuela. The selection of the sample of sources was intentional, as the types of sources mentioned allowed for adequate verification of the research hypothesis.

Data analysis

The article contains the results of qualitative research in a case study formula. The authors conducted their research in light of the neoclassical realism paradigm. On the one hand, it assigns importance to explain the dynamics between the main actors, primarily the powers, to the international system. On the other hand, it argues that several variables condition how a state interprets and responds to revisions in the international system and consequently affect its policies. While the approach focuses on issues of grand strategy, it also allows for an analysis of the impact of domestic politics on state behavior involving problems of power and security, such as interventions by powers. According to the authors, this approach is helpful for an in-depth analysis of Russia-Venezuela relations during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the authors used content analysis of media broadcasts, statements by politicians, and literature on the subject (in English, Russian and Spanish). In addition, the re-analysis of quantitative data made it possible, for example, to characterise the economic level of the relations. The main part of the research was completed until February 24, 2022. The analysis does not include events since the beginning of Russia's aggression against Ukraine because the authors were interested in the period of Russia's particular focus on vaccine diplomacy towards Latin American countries. The aggression against Ukraine caused Russia to focus primarily on the eastern axis of its foreign policy.

Offensive realism

The starting point for realism is the assumption that international relations are anarchic. Anarchy means the lack of supreme power over peers. It is not synonymous with chaos and the war of "all against all." Individuals in a given system create

order even in the absence of hierarchical power. The distinguishing feature is maintaining in its competence the decision on the possible use of force, which makes international relations a sphere of social relations vulnerable to violence and thus the fundamental “disorder” at the very core. In realistic terms, the main consequence of anarchy is the emphasis on the role of power in the international activities of states, which is responsible for the domination of power politics in international relations. The structure of the power distribution between individual actors and the desire to change it is a source of conflict, rivalry and wars between states. John J. Mearsheimer, a leading representative of offensive realism, argued that states, especially superpowers, “interested in surviving in the dangerous world of international politics cannot shirk from the struggle for power. Even those who would only like to live in peace are doomed to this ruthless competition. The main reason for the struggle for power is the lack of a superior authority to which states could invoke in the event of a threat”.⁶

The interpretation of foreign policy based on the recognition of the national interest as the central motive (goal) of states’ actions in international relations is one of the most characteristic features of the realistic approach and its subsequent variations to explaining international reality. Hans Morgenthau, the main representative of classical realism, emphasized that the concept of national interest remains the last resort in foreign policy as long as nations are the basis of the world’s organizational structure.⁷

Kenneth N. Waltz, a leading representative of structural realism, wrote that finding that the state acts in accordance with its interests national means that it “has analyzed the security requirements and tries them to cope with. The concept of national interests is based on the assumption that diplomatic and military actions must be planned, otherwise the survival of the state”.⁸

Foreign policy of the Russian Federation

The concept of Russian foreign policy strongly corresponds to the offensive realism concept of international relations, which indicates the priority of national interest for each state. In turn, the task of policymakers is to employ all kinds of instrumentation to defend the state against the threats generated by the international system. The utility of *hard power* resources has been particularly stressed. The main axis of antagonism between states is the struggle for political power as interpreted by the psychological relationship between those who exercise power and those who are subject to it.⁹ Geopolitics is extremely important in the process of

⁶ J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Norton & Company, 2018).

⁷ H.J. Morgenthau, “Politics Among Nations,” in *The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1968).

⁸ K. Waltz, “Struktura teorii stosunków międzynarodowych,” Warsaw, 2010.

⁹ Morgenthau, “Politics Among Nations.”

setting priorities in Russian politics. The Russian approach to foreign policy has been influenced by many ideological concepts such as neo-Occidentalism, then isolationism¹⁰ and Eurasianism.¹¹ In case of Eurasianism, of note is its priority influence on the contemporary shape of Russia's great-power policy. The concept of Eurasianism was created by Petr N. Savitsky, who emphasized that Russia is a civilizational entity, occupying a central position in Eurasia, being at the same time an isolated and holistic world, a historical and spiritual geopolitical realm. Indeed, Savitsky interpreted the Russia-Eurasia formula as a particular geopolitical category. Moreover, Russia is a historically predisposed entity that is a natural counterweight to the West.¹² One of the most prominent representatives of modern Eurasianism thought, Aleksandr Dugin, supports this perception. According to Dugin, Russia should be reborn as Eurasia, an empire, balancing the global dominance of Atlanticism. At the same time, he criticizes the erosion of national characteristics of Russians in the 1990s, including their characteristic expansionism. The Russian state is a Eurasian empire bound by alliance ties with Confucian and Islamic states. Moscow is to constitute the center of evolution of the modern international order as an alternative to modern liberalism (*Chetvortaya politicheskaya teoriya*). Russian policymakers, using cultural codes, create an image of Russia's unique role in international relations; in parallel, the expansion of values is an instrument for building the Russian empire in the 21st century.

Imperialism occupies a fundamental position in Russian foreign policy; its manifestation is the desire to maintain a great power position in the post-Soviet area, perceived as Moscow's traditional sphere of influence. The perception of Russia's mission and building of its central position in international relations makes this superpower an extremely active player in the global competition for power, e.g. Russia's acts aim at diminishing the influence of its main adversary, the U.S., on the geopolitical configuration. All activities of the Euro-Atlantic states in the area of Russia's "near abroad" are interpreted as a direct threat to the interests of the superpower. In order to achieve strategic alignment, Moscow boldly challenges the U.S. administration by developing multisectoral ties with Latin American states, widely considered to be Washington's traditional sphere of influence. Since the beginning of this century, the counter-hegemonic attitude of Russia toward the West, and in particular toward the U.S., has resulted in the search for opportunities to strengthen its influence among non-Western partners. The tightening of contacts with Latin American countries in correlation with anti-Washington tendencies of several Latin American states seeking their sovereignty from the U.S. lies in a special dimension. It should also not be forgotten that Russia's relations with Venezuela can be

¹⁰ V. Tsymburskiy, "Ostrov Rossiya," 1993.

¹¹ A. Dugin, "The Fourth Political Theory," Arktos Media, 2012.

¹² M.S. Sokolov, "Geopoliticheskiy aspekt yevraziyskoy kontseptsii," *Yevraziystvo i mir*, 2014.

interpreted in the context of Russia's concept of a multipolar world, the main idea of which is to diminish the role of the US in the international arena by strengthening smaller powers. The Latin American countries have traditionally been regarded as the U.S.'s sphere of influence since the 18th century, when George Washington formulated the 1796 concept of the two hemispheres. This resulted in the formation of the idea of pan-Americanism under the leadership of the U.S. This first led to the formation of the Pan-American Union in 1910, transformed in 1948 into the Organization of American States (OAS), and the establishment of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823. It stated that any attempt of European powers to interfere in the American continent would constitute a threat to peace and security of the U.S. This doctrine laid the foundation of American politics.

Anti-Washington rhetoric made the Kremlin's interests converge with such Latin American leaders as Evo Morales in Bolivia, Nestor and Kristina Kirchner in Argentina, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, and Fidel and Raul Castro in Cuba.¹³ Chavist Venezuela, openly conflicted with the U.S., joined the group of particularly important partners of the Russian Federation. Russia's relations with Venezuela have expanded dynamically since the beginning of the Chávez government. Between 2006 and 2014, Chávez paid eight visits to Russia, and his country became the second, after Brazil, importer of products from Russia, mainly armaments and agri-food goods. As part of strengthening relations with the Russian Federation, Chávez transferred Venezuelan gold reserves from Western financial institutions to other banks, largely seated in Russia. In turn, a manifestation of anti-Washington policy was Chávez's recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Caracas also fully supported Putin's position rejecting Kosovo's independence in 2008 as a "dangerous precedent".¹⁴ Chávez's policy was continued by Nicolás Maduro, all the more so because in the face of the growing economic crisis since 2014, which led to a humanitarian crisis and political chaos, and the complete erosion of democratic structures in the country, Venezuela needed a strong ally in the international arena even more than ever. For Russia, in turn, Venezuela serves on the one hand as an energy resource and an important partner in economic cooperation and arms contracts, while on the other hand, it is an expression of the political and ideological triumph of the effectiveness of Russian hard power in a region of the world perceived as a U.S. influence zone. Notably, as a consequence of the political crisis, economic collapse and humanitarian catastrophe in Venezuela, the country's internal affairs have begun to reach far beyond its borders, and are now having a considerable impact on the internal situation in other countries in the region, destabilizing

¹³ D.M. Rozental, "El "giro a la izquierda" en América Latina: regularidades comunes y singularidades nacionales," *Iberoamérica* 1 (2022): 134–159.

¹⁴ El País, "Chávez rejects the independence of Kosovo, which he describes as a 'dangerous precedent'," 2008, https://elpais.com/internacional/2008/02/21/actualidad/1203548418_850215.html.

security in whole Latin America. The mass exodus of Venezuelans to other Latin American countries, which is responsible for triggering the largest migration crisis in the modern history of the region, and the involvement of global players such as the U.S., China, Russia, and the EU in Venezuela, translate into more attention paid to the internal situation of this country, and lend it an international dimension.

Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro

Beginning in 1998, during the 14 years of Hugo Chávez's government, despite the extensive investments made by his government in infrastructure development, the agricultural sector, education, and health care, which were combined with dynamic economic growth in his country, he failed to diversify the Venezuelan economy. The reforms and policy of extensive social programmes financed from oil revenues, as well as the attempt to create a new type of state and society based on Bolivarian principles and models¹⁵ in the spirit of 21st century socialism (Heinz Dieterich Steffan; Serbin),¹⁶ led by Hugo Chávez, lacked the nature of systemic change and could ensure improvement of the poorest part of Venezuelan society only in the short term. Therefore, although the current economic crisis in Venezuela is associated with the actions of the government of Nicolas Maduro, the origins of this phenomenon should be sought precisely in the times of the administration of Hugo Chávez.¹⁷

The country began to lack basic daily necessities such as food, cleaning supplies and medicine. Simultaneously, Maduro, not having the same opportunities as his predecessor to consolidate his power in the face of economic difficulties, practically from the beginning of his presidency, after Chávez's death in 2013, commenced an action plan to radicalize the Venezuelan political scene, with resulting repression of opposition activists, mass arrests, the illegal takeover of control of the Supreme Court and establishment of an alternative parliament, and subjugation of the state security apparatus and military.

On January 23, 2019, during another protest against the rule of Nicolás Maduro, Juan Guaidó, a Venezuelan politician (since 2019, the president of the democratically elected parliament, the National Assembly) declared himself interim president of Venezuela, under the provisions allowing him to take over the duties of the head of state in the event of annulment of the elections. On the same day, support for his decision was expressed by, among others, The United States, Canada, Brazil and

¹⁵ P. Vidal-Molina, M. Ansaldo-Roloff and C.J. Cea-Madrid, "Hugo Chávez and the principles of Socialism of the 21st Century: a discursive inquiry (2005–2013)," 2018.

¹⁶ A. Serbin, "Chavez, Venezuela y la reconfiguración política de América Latina y el Caribe," (2011 Editorial Siglo XXI y Plataforma Democrática, Buenos Aires, 2011).

¹⁷ A. Pyatakova, "Venezuela: Prueba por la crisis Venezuela: The Crisis Test," *Iberoamérica* no. 2 (2019): 57–83.

Argentina, together, his presidential mandate has been recognized by 50 countries.¹⁸ In this situation the Maduro's government prioritized a strategic objective: safeguard the fundamental proposals of the Revolution Bolivarian.¹⁹ Guaido however never managed to capitalize the popular support and solidarity from abroad to oust Maduro's government. That is why he is not considered now as the strongest leadership within Venezuelan opposition. Definitely, Maduro and his supporters would lose everything in case of abrupt change of political regime. However this scenario is not very probable at the moment.

Venezuela remains in a serious political, economic and humanitarian crisis. Every day the country and its inhabitants have to deal with hyperinflation, high unemployment rates, electricity shortages and blackouts, shortages of food, medicines, basic hygiene products (such as bandages or dressings, which are also in short supply in hospitals) and drinking water. The health system was in crisis even before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁰ There is a shortage of both vital life-saving supplies and qualified medical personnel. According to the NGO Médicos Unidos Venezuela, somewhere between 25,000 and 35,000 doctors, nurses, and other health personnel fled the country in last few years.²¹

The economy is in deep decline. According to data presented by the Central Bank of Venezuela, since Nicolás Maduro took power, GDP shrank by almost 48 percent between 2013 and 2018. According to the United Nations, 94 percent of Venezuela's population lives in poverty,²² and a quarter of Venezuelans are in need of humanitarian assistance.²³ More than 5.6 million people have already fled the crisis-ridden country since 2014,²⁴ especially to neighboring countries such as Colombia, Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Brazil, and Argentina. This exodus has become the greatest migratory challenge in the region's recent history.

On March 13 in 2020, Vice President Delcy Rodríguez confirmed the first two cases of COVID-19 virus infection in Venezuela. The country's authoritarian

¹⁸ Z.W. Iwanowski, "Venezuela: crisis sistémica y relaciones cívico-militares," *Iberoamérica* 3 (2021): 147–168.

¹⁹ D.M. Rozental, "Partido socialista unido de Venezuela: prueba por la crisis," *Iberoamérica* 1 (2021): 96–111.

²⁰ "Venezuela's Humanitarian Emergency," 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/04/04/venezuelas-humanitarian-emergency/large-scale-un-response-needed-address-health>.

²¹ G.M. Rojo, "In Venezuela, a pandemic meets years shortages and a broken health system," *The Humanitarian*, 2020, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/03/25/venezuela-coronavirus-shortages-broken-health-system>.

²² "Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida," 2018, <https://elucabista.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/RESULTADOS-PRELIMINARES-ENCOVI-2018-30-nov.pdf>.

²³ OCHA, "Venezuela, Situation Report," 2020, <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/venezuela-bolivarian-republic-of>.

²⁴ "Plataforma de Coordinación Interagencial para Refugiados y Migrantes de Venezuela," <https://www.r4v.info/>.

leader, Nicolás Maduro, declared a mandatory quarantine in seven states and the capital district, which was quickly extended to the rest of the country. His administration was the first to take such drastic measures in Latin America and was one of the most brutal in enforcing them. The government deployed the police and the military²⁵ to enforce the prohibitions imposed on citizens and to enforce the quarantine.

According to information provided by the Venezuelan government (the country's authorities have not published official epidemiological data since 2017, when the Minister of Health published data showing an increase in maternal mortality of 65 percent in 2016 and infant mortality of 30 percent). A few days later, the Minister was fired,²⁶ as of May 27, 2020, only 1,211 people were affected by the coronavirus, of whom 302 recovered and 10 died.²⁷ According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), the country had done fewer than 6,000 smear tests by the end of April 2020.²⁸ Authorities say they had done more than 330,000 rapid blood tests based on tests received from China, checking for the presence of antibodies that emerge a week or more after a person is infected. However, the number of confirmed cases of coronavirus infection did not increase significantly after the tests were performed. Many people infected with coronavirus likely went undetected because they did not yet have high antibody levels at the time of testing.²⁹

According to WHO, by April 19, 2021, Venezuela, with ca. 30 million inhabitants, reported 181,903 infections and 1,888 deaths. Dr. Carlos Walter, a member of the Venezuelan Health Alliance, points out that "if we just deal with the most serious cases, it is clear that the total number of cases in Venezuela would be up to eight times higher than the official figures recognize, because the government does not even say how many tests they do every day".³⁰ As of June 23, 2021, Venezuelan authorities reported 263,372 positive cases and 2,989 deaths.³¹

Pointing to the harmful policies of the Maduro government and lack of effective responses to deal with the crisis in the country does not change the actions of

²⁵ O. Van Praag and C. Arnson, "A Crisis Within a Crisis: Venezuela and COVID-19," 2020.

²⁶ World Report 2021, "Rights Trends in Venezuela," 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/Venezuela>.

²⁷ OCHA Services, "Venezuela - Situación COVID-19," 2020, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/venezuela/covid-19%20t%20_blank.

²⁸ OCHA, "Venezuela – COVID-19," 2020, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/20200423_ven_covid-19_flash_update_no3.pdf.

²⁹ Van Praag and Arnson, "A Crisis Within a Crisis: Venezuela."

³⁰ "La pandemia en Venezuela, manipulación de la información, cementerios llenos y aún sin plan de vacunación," 2021, <https://www.dw.com/es/la-pandemia-en-venezuela-manipulaci%C3%B3n-de-la-informaci%C3%B3n-cementerios-llenos-y-a%C3%BAn-sin-plan-de-vacunaci%C3%B3n/a-57258234>.

³¹ Human Rights Watch, "Putting Venezuela's Crisis on the International Agenda," 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/08/putting-venezuelas-crisis-international-agenda>.

those in power. On the contrary, according to human rights organizations in Venezuela, journalists, health workers, and union leaders are intimidated and arrested for any reports that hospitals are unprepared to receive patients with the coronavirus.³² The government used the COVID-19 state of emergency as a pretext to repress dissent, arbitrarily detaining and prosecuting dozens of political opponents, including legislators, journalists, healthcare workers who criticize the government's handling of the pandemic, and lawyers who provide legal support to demonstrators protesting lack of access to water, gasoline, or medicines.³³

The Maduro government is applying the same tactics against the COVID-19 pandemic that they adopted against the entire crisis in Venezuela. For years, they have refused to admit that their country is in a humanitarian crisis. They have also obstructed the efforts of international organizations to help the Venezuelan people. Now, facing the ongoing pandemic, a series of internal crises and external sanctions mainly from the U.S., the government is increasingly seeking humanitarian aid, especially from its main political allies and trading partners such as Russia, China and Cuba.

In February 2021, Venezuela began the vaccination programme including the Russian Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine and a vaccine produced by the Chinese company Sinopharm. Its goal was to vaccinate 70 percent of the population by the end of 2021. An academic survey found that by September 1, 2021, 10% of the Venezuelan population had been fully vaccinated.³⁴

Venezuela's place in Russia's multinational policy

Russia's involvement in Venezuela's internal affairs has been evident since the beginning of the socioeconomic and institutional and political crisis as we have described, while the coronavirus pandemic fostered favorable conditions for intensifying Russian influence. Maintaining and strengthening strategic relations on the Moscow-Caracas line is important from the point of view of the strategy and implementation of the Russian government's multinational interests. Chavez's anti-Americanism became the basis for establishing relations with Russia, while the country's energy resources made it possible to purchase Russian weapons and attract Russian investment.³⁵ Nicolas Maduro is continuing the policies of his predecessor.

³² "Reporte Sobre La Represión En Venezuela," 2020, <https://foropenal.com/reporte-sobre-la-represion-en-venezuela-marzo-2020/>.

³³ World Report 2021, "Rights Trends," <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/Venezuela>.

³⁴ "Venezuela has fully vaccinated around 10% of its population, doctors group says," *Reuters*, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/venezuela-has-fully-vaccinated-around-10-its-population-doctors-group-says-2021-09-02/>.

³⁵ Katz, "The Putin-Chavez," 3–9, <https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216530401>.

First, the allies share a strong economic relationship. Between 2006 and 2019, Moscow provided Venezuela with loans totaling USD 17 billion.³⁶ In addition, key economic players, most notably the Russian state-owned conglomerate Rosneft, are involved in financing and investment. For Russian decision-makers, co-operation in the energy sector is particularly important, including investments in Venezuela's extractive (oil) infrastructure. Caracas has the largest oil reserves in the world, but Venezuela's share in global oil production is negligible. One example of this is the agreement signed by Rosneft with its Venezuelan partner in 2013, the main purpose of which was to develop the Karabobo-2 field. The Russian side paid USD 1.2 billion for the right to participate in the project. In addition, the corporation initiated co-operation with the Venezuelan state-owned company PDVSA in the area of oil and petroleum product supplies. The prepayment for one of them amounted to USD 2 billion. Investment in extractive infrastructure and training of the Venezuelan business community yielded positive results. In 2015, Venezuela became the leader in raw material extraction in Latin America. Close cooperation between Rosneft and PDVSA resulted in five joint projects: "Petromonagas", "Petroperchia", "Bukeron", "Petromiranda", and "Petroviktoria". Russian-Venezuelan actions were also taken in the natural gas production sector. In mid-2016, Rosneft and PDVSA reached an agreement on the execution of a project to build and exploit the Patao, Mihillones and Rio Caribe blocks in the Venezuelan shelf.³⁷ From the Russian perspective, relations in the energy sphere allow Moscow to control the amount of Venezuelan raw material production, as well as the directions of exports. Moreover, Russia obtains raw material from its ally as part of the repayment of part of Venezuela's debt at a favorable price. Russia, whose economy is largely based on the extraction and sale of energy resources, is particularly exposed to the negative implications of price fluctuations on the global oil market. Cooperation with Venezuela is also part of a strategy to build economic ties with entities outside the European Union, which is now particularly important given the severe economic sanctions introduced by the Western states in connection with the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine (2014).

Secondly, Venezuela appears to be an important market for Russian military equipment. Already during the presidency of Hugo Chávez, the parties began to cooperate intensively in this sector. In 2005, the total volume of purchases of Russian equipment by Caracas was estimated at USD 11 billion. As influence of close cooperation regarding military technology, the Venezuelan armed forces (with the exception of air transport and the navy) are now almost fully equipped with Russian equipment and weapons. Between 2012 and 2016, Russia ranked first in arms exports to Venezuela with a share of 74%. In addition to supplying armaments

³⁶ "Factbox: Oil, loans, military - Russia's exposure to Venezuela," *Reuters*, 2019, October 21, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics-russia-factbox-idUSKCN1PI1T4>.

³⁷ Rozental, "Venesuel'skiy uzел v latinoamerikanskoy," 2018.

to the Venezuelan market, relations in this sector also include purchases of licenses and Russian technologies and production – a service center for helicopter repair and an AK-103 production facility.³⁸ Then, in 2015, the Caracas authorities allocated USD 480 million for the purchase of 12 Russian Su-30 fighters to strengthen defense capabilities (Venesuela kupit). Among the equipment that Caracas has purchased from its Russian partner are 38 Mi-17V5 and Mi-26T2 helicopters, 10 Su-35M2 combat aircraft, 92 T-72B1V tanks, 300 BMP-3 and BTR-80 armored vehicles, “Smerch” and “Grad” missile systems.³⁹

One of the most striking actions taken on Venezuelan foreign policy relates to the agreements with the Russian State-run arms company Rosoboronexport.⁴⁰ The contract contributed to re-animate a largely neglected area of studies in South America: the military balance and strategic studies. Faced with Washington’s refusal to authorise the sale of highly sensitive materials to re-equip Venezuela – specially the sale of the Fighting Falcon F-16A air bombers – Caracas decided to replace its obsolete equipment with Russian aid. Therefore, for a period of five years, both countries signed 51 cooperation agreements, a credit line of US\$4 billion, contemplating the sale of 51 helicopters of the Mi series and 24 Sukhoi SU-30MK2 fourth generation fighter bombers, besides Kalashnikov rifles and the production of ammunition in the Venezuelan arms company CAVIM.⁴¹ Venezuela and ALBA contributed to the Russian comeback as a military actor in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁴²

Russia’s multi-level alliance with Venezuela is an example of Moscow’s policy of reactivity; Russia’s actions in Latin America should be interpreted as a reaction of the Russian government to the U.S.’s increasingly bold engagement in the post-Soviet area, which is Russia’s traditional sphere of influence. At the same time, an attractive concept in Russia’s geopolitics for the states of the region is the consistent promotion of multipolarity as an element balancing the global influence of the U.S. Nicolás Maduro’s condemnation of the activity of European states in the context of the Ukrainian crisis as an expression of disrespect for state sovereignty and expression of solidarity with Moscow was a symbol of sharing Russian standpoint in the creation of international order.⁴³ Another example of the desire to

³⁸ I.T. Malashenko, “Voyenno-tekhnicheskoye sotrudnichestvo Rossii v Latinskoy Amerike: Venesuela,” *Ekonomicheskkiye i sotsial’no-gumanitarnyye issledovaniya* 3, no. 23 (2019).

³⁹ Rozental, “Venesuel’skiy uzul.”

⁴⁰ A. Boersner and M. Haluani, “Convergencias y divergencias en la asociación estratégica ruso-venezolana y sus implicaciones hemisféricas,” *CUADERNOS DEL CENDES AÑO 30. N° 82 TERCERA ÉPOCA ENERO-ABRIL 2013*, 2013; 67–107.

⁴¹ Boersner and Haluani, “Convergencias y divergencias en,” 67–107; V.M. Mijares, “Consejo de Defensa Suramericano: obstáculos para una alianza operativa,” *Politeia* 34, no. 46 (2011): 1–46.

⁴² C.A. Romero and V.M. Mijares, “From Chávez to Maduro: Continuity and Change in Venezuelan Foreign Policy,” *Contexto Internacional, Rio de Janeiro* 38, no. 1 (2016): 165–201.

⁴³ I.D. Gulamova, “Khronika otnosheniy Rossiyskoy Federatsii i Venesuely v XXI v, Vestnik KRSU,” 2016.

consolidate the multipolar order as proposed by Russia was the recognition of the statehood of Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008. Cooperation with Maduro's authoritarian regime is also useful for President Vladimir Putin in reinforcing Moscow's image as a defender of state sovereignty and of the right of peoples to self-determination against the aggressive policy of forcing regime change in other states ("managed democratization") implemented by Washington. Currently, Venezuela is an area of Russia-U.S. proxy conflict, and the coronavirus pandemic is being used by Moscow as an instrumentum to increase Russia's influence on Caracas in the context of keeping Maduro in power, as he is a guarantor of the alliance's duration.

Russia's activity in the context of the political and pandemic crises in Venezuela

The Kremlin's position on the political crisis in Venezuela is unchanged and is expressed in its consistent manifestation of support for Maduro as the country's legitimate president. In September 2019, Nicolás Maduro went on a working visit to Moscow, where he met with President Vladimir Putin. The Russian side was also represented by First Deputy Prime Minister, Finance Minister Yuri Borisov, Presidential Advisor Yuri Ushakov, and Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin, among others. The Russian president defined the most important areas of Russian-Venezuelan cooperation, stressing the difficult position of the ally, which is struggling with external pressure. He announced the delivery of 1.5 million doses of flu vaccine to Venezuelans. In addition to the area of medical cooperation and the supply of Russian medicines, the president highlighted bilateral cooperation in the field of energy, estimating the volume of Russian investments at USD 4 billion. In conclusion, Putin stressed that Russia supports the legitimate government of Venezuela and supports the dialogue that Maduro has initiated with opposition activists.⁴⁴ A month later, the Venezuelan president met with Borisov to extend Russian-Venezuelan cooperation in military technology. Citing the aforementioned agreement, the Russian side sent Russian forces in 2019 and 2020 with, i.a., cyber-security specialists, which sparked controversy over the potential tasks of the Russian technical contingent with regard to helping the regime in surveillance of political opposition representatives (Russian "specialists"). There even was speculation regarding the potential use of the runway on La Orchila Island as an air base.⁴⁵ Noteworthy, this is the first allocation of Russian military personnel in the Northern Hemisphere since the dismantling of infrastructure in Cuba in the 1990s. Russia has instrumentally used the crisis in Venezuela to gain another geopolitical foothold relevant to the struggle for a sphere of influence with the American adversary.

⁴⁴ "Peregovory s Prezidentom Venesuely Nikolasom Maduro," 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61640>.

⁴⁵ E. Ellis, *Venezuela: Pandemic and Foreign Intervention in a Collapsing Narcostate* (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2020).

It is also a clear message to Washington; Moscow is determined to keep Caracas in its orbit of influence at all costs. Russia's diplomatic offensive, as its manifestation was the veto of U.S. draft resolutions on the results of the presidential election (2018) and the presidential crisis (2019) in Venezuela, was its demonstration as well. Moreover, thanks to Rosneft's mining activity in Venezuelan territory, Caracas circumvents the severe sanctions covering, i.a., the energy sector, imposed by the U.S. in August 2019. Some Russian financial institutions have stepped up their efforts to facilitate financial flows to/from Venezuela. The Russian state TV channel *Russia Today*, which is essentially a propaganda vehicle of Moscow, has initiated an intensive media campaign to present the Venezuelan political crisis in line with the Russian political thought.⁴⁶

In the context of the political crisis, Russia's unquestionably controversial policy in Venezuela should be regarded as a serious interference in the U.S.'s traditional sphere of influence calculated to defeat the American rival. The fall of the Maduro regime and the seizure of full power by Guaidó would mean a prestigious defeat for Russia and damage to Russia's image as a defender of the pluralism of political regimes in the world. The Russian government is aware of Maduro's destructive fiscal policy, and is constantly calling for reforms that would have a positive impact on Venezuela's ailing economy, but it seems that the left-leaning government has no intention of taking the appropriate steps. Nonetheless, they consistently support the capricious ally, as a rotation of power in Caracas would at the very least constitute an element of uncertainty for the continued survival of the strategic alliance of the two states.

It would be an oversimplification to view Russia's position on the internal situation in Venezuela solely from a geopolitical perspective. Russian oligarchic circles, including Putin's close associate Igor Sechin, take a particular interest in the matter. As already mentioned, Rosneft has close ties with Venezuela's energy sector. The corporation is still waiting for repayment of a USD 3 billion loan that the Maduro regime has yet to settle. Although the Venezuelan debt was restructured in 2017, the Venezuelan authorities have not dynamized the repayment process. It seems that in the current situation it is even unfeasible to collect the debt, but it is much more important for Rosneft to secure assets in the form of two offshore oil fields and shares containing more than 20 million tonnes of oil. Thus, alongside the state's strategic interests, the corporate interests of people close to the president are also evident. Furthermore, for many years, the Kremlin has been building a narrative of relations with Caracas as benefiting Russian companies, which has been used as justification for large-scale investments in the economic sector of this ally. In the absence of control over the situation in Venezuela, the loss of substantial monetary support for the economy will generate further momentum for the Russian

⁴⁶ V. Rouvinski, *Russia's Continuing Engagement with Venezuela in 2019 and Beyond. An Update* (Latin American Program, Kennan Institute, 2020).

political opposition to raise criticism of United Russia's political line, exacerbating public discontent, which is currently at a high level. Russian public dissatisfaction is illustrated by the fluctuating support for Putin and the intense demonstrations organized in relation to the arrest of the leader of the non-system opposition, Alexei Navalny, and the likelihood of falsification of the results of the 2021 State Duma elections.⁴⁷ The failures on the international arena are fostering the right conditions for social mobilization by Putin's opponents.

The coronavirus pandemic enabled Russia to increase its influence on Latin American countries through dynamically implemented "vaccine diplomacy". As already pointed out in the article, Venezuela, due to the catastrophic state of its health services, was unable to implement effective mechanisms to counteract the effects of the pandemic. Big pharmaceutical companies such as Pfizer, for example, focused their efforts on ensuring a smooth supply of vaccines primarily to European countries, while Latin American countries were seen as secondary recipients. This niche in the health policy of the region's countries was skillfully exploited by Russia. Symptomatically, Venezuela was the first country in the Northern Hemisphere to register the Russian vaccine *Sputnik V* and to join its clinical trials. Subsequently, the Russian party initiated the systematic distribution of this vaccine, followed by the second vaccine *EpiVacCorona*. During the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, Geropharm signed a contract for the supply of 10 million doses of *EpiVacCorona* to Venezuela. During an official visit of Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreas to Moscow (June 21–23, 2021), the politician met with his Russian counterpart. One of the topics of conversation was the continuation of cooperation in supplying Venezuela with the Russian vaccines.⁴⁸ Sergei Lavrov reaffirmed the strategic relations linking the countries and assured of continued support for the protection of Venezuela's sovereignty and right to choose the path of growth. At the same time, the particular intensification of diplomatic relations on the line Russia-Venezuela since the outbreak of the pandemic and the development of subsequent joint ventures are notable. In May 2021, direct air connections between the countries were initiated. Before the pandemic, such direct flights had not existed, and now the Venezuelan airline Conviasa operates flights to Russia every 2 weeks. At the same time, the Venezuelan party shows the need to increase the frequency of flights to 1–2 per week (Ibid).

Conclusion

Given the permanent political crisis in Venezuela, the authorities' response to the COVID-19 pandemic was ineffective, and the emergency confirmed significant

⁴⁷ "Doveriye Politikam, odobreniye institutov I polozheniye del v strane," Levada-Tsentr, October 24, 2021, https://www.levada.ru/2021/07/30/doverie-politikam-odobrenie-institutov-i-polozhenie-del-v-strane-4/?fbclid=IwAR2RlcYyir3ksLtraKGz8flbDLrYB6bs8bl_T-F3MIRO5rSY44E5HJGfojw.

⁴⁸ "Lavrov obsudit s glavoy MID Venesuely sotrudnichestvo v vaksinatсии i situatsiyu v respublike, Tass.ru.," 2021, <https://tass.ru/politika/11711445>.

deficiencies in the country's health infrastructure. Moreover, Maduro used the instrumentality of the pandemic policy to combat political opposition. The Kremlin's strategy in the face of the aggravation of the political crisis in Venezuela and the growing U.S. sanctions against the country was based on unquestioning support for the legitimate authority, which in the perception of the Russian Federation is represented by President Nicolás Maduro. Antagonizing the U.S. policy towards Venezuela, in which, under Donald Trump, "all options were on the table," the Russian side emphasized the necessity of resolving the crisis by peaceful methods ruling out the possibility of external intervention.

The fall of the Maduro government is not in Moscow's interest because good contacts with Venezuela are an element of maintaining the image of the Russian Federation as a country with allies around the world, as well as a superpower capable of effectively balancing the US's influence in the world and an anti-imperialist guardian in the American sphere of influence. Although the Venezuelan issue itself means little in Russian politics,⁴⁹ the actions of the Russian Federation will be aimed at extending the duration of the current regime. The fall of Maduro would affect Russia's relations with other allies who would not consider Moscow a reliable and strong partner in this matter. In addition, Maduro's support to combat the effects of the pandemic is a mechanism to make Venezuela dependent on Russia's foreign policy vectors. Moscow aspires to engage in and cultivate political and economic-commercial cooperation with select Latin American countries in order to strengthen and perpetuate its presence in Latin America as an integral part of its global geopolitical resurgence.⁵⁰

The Russian government has been taking steps to strengthen the Maduro regime by increasing the effectiveness of its reaction to the pandemic (e.g. supplying vaccines) or investing in Venezuela's energy infrastructure. Russia's support for Venezuela's fight against the COVID-19 pandemic is intended to strengthen Maduro's position as an effective president in the face of a global challenge. In parallel, Moscow is building an image of a trusted ally that, unlike the U.S., is providing assistance rather than imposing sanctions that are severe for the Venezuelan economy, making it difficult for Caracas to effectively fight the spread of the coronavirus, including the purchase of necessary medical equipment and drugs. This is a deliberate ploy by the Kremlin to influence a reorientation of society and a gradual shift away from Washington-approved support for Guaidó. The strengthening of anti-American sentiment in the region and the undermining of the U.S.'s credibility as the main

⁴⁹ M. Haluani, "Rusia en América Latina: variables, implicaciones y perspectivas de su presencia en el hemisferio occidental," Instituto de Estudios Políticos, UCV, *Revista Politeia* 36, no. 51 (2013): 83–124; Starting in 1999 and with the arrival of Hugo Chávez to the presidential power in Venezuela, Venezuelan-Russian relations took a turn towards establishing a strategic association between those two countries, although Russia has never expressed an explicit interest in creating such a close status with Venezuela, despite the 9 visits of Chávez made to Moscow and the 63 cooperation agreements signed during his presidency.

⁵⁰ Haluani, "Rusia en América Latina: variables, implicaciones," 83–124.

partner of the Latin American republics will call into question Washington's continued hegemony in the Americas. In the Russian view, Latin America could be a key market for Russian products, and the effectiveness of Russia's "vaccine diplomacy" and its priority treatment of the region's states in this aspect is to be a guarantee of the marginalization of the U.S. in its traditional sphere of influence. In the context of the empirical proof supporting our hypothesis, we consider it to be true. The actions described above are correlated with the continued implementation of the concept of a multipolar world, in which Venezuela may be an important player supporting Russia in the global power game.

Data availability

All data underlying the results are available as part of the article and no additional source data are required.