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DIGITAL AUTOCRACY

**Maduro's control of the Venezuelan
information environment**

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The Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) is a start-up incubated at the Atlantic Council, which leads the study of information to promote transparency and accountability online and around the world. DFRLab is known for defining disinformation, documenting human rights abuses, and focusing on facts; it has forged a role as a global leader in bridging the collective responsibility for information among government, media, and the private sector. It leads a large body of work on technology and democracy policy.

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Introduction

Since he came to power in 2013, Nicolás Maduro has implemented a full-fledged autocratic takeover of the Venezuelan government and its institutions, including in its approach to the internet and traditional media. While his predecessor, Hugo Chávez, started the shift toward autocratic rule, starting with subverting the judiciary system, Maduro has accelerated that transition. He refused to accept the opposition's parliamentary victory in 2015, which drove him to bypass it until he regained control of the National Assembly, the final vestige of representative democracy, through an election largely boycotted by his opposition in late 2020 and which was considered by many in the international community as flawed.

The Maduro regime's manipulation of the Venezuelan information environment—its implementation of a “digital autocracy”—has deepened domestic control and enabled the regime's power projection beyond the country's borders, often finding common cause and useful allies in other autocracies.

While many studies have investigated the disinformation strategies of Russia, China, and Iran, few reports have researched the Maduro regime's strategies, as well as those of the opposition, in depth. The work presented in this report is a synthesis of the DFRLab's findings from its weekly #AlertaVenezuela monitoring between October 2019 and February 2021. The sixteen-month project occurred during a period of instability in the country in which two men, Maduro and then-National Assembly President Juan Guaidó, claimed to be the president of Venezuela. The political crisis arrived amid deteriorating economic and humanitarian crises that saw more than 5 million Venezuelans flee the country. Through this series of compounding crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, Maduro has managed to maintain control of the domestic information environment and proven resilient in his ability to project narratives abroad, including into the information environments of countries whose governments do not recognize his continued rule.

This report analyzes the information environment in Venezuela, exploring the Maduro regime's tactics when promoting information operations in the country. Though this report looks predominantly at the Maduro regime, it

includes influence efforts related to other domestic actors, such as those spreading anti-Maduro narratives, though what the DFRLab found was significantly smaller in volume and apparently had limited effect on Maduro's further clampdown in the country in 2020.

Finally, the DFRLab investigated how aligned foreign actors—Russia, Cuba, and Iran—cooperate with Venezuela, especially in the context of their shared adversarial relations with the United States. Venezuelan actors exerted influence in other Latin American countries and internationally. Alignment between Venezuela and other autocracies often manifests because of their interests, first, in self-preservation and maintaining absolute control and assisting each other in that effort and, second, in targeting common enemies. Especially on the former, shared economic interests play a significant role, bolstering the regime with finances and deepening aligned countries' desire to protect the relationship.

The Maduro regime maintains tight domestic information control and promotes its pro-regime and anti-US messaging abroad via authentic and inauthentic means. The regime's current goal appears to be survival, amid the ongoing political, economic, and humanitarian crises, but Maduro also uses information to promote the socialist, anti-neoliberal, and “anti-imperialist” goals he inherited from Chávez. The Maduro regime has implemented a full spectrum manipulation apparatus that ranges from repressive measures such as censorship, internet shutdowns, and silencing of critics, to “positive” propaganda that promotes the regime's policies and successes via state and pro-regime media, hashtag manipulation performed by paid citizens, and other inauthentic methods to push its own geopolitical goals.

The research featured throughout this report utilized open-source tools, data collected via social media listening tools, and databases built by partners. In particular, open-source methodologies are one of the main strengths of researching a contested information space, as they can be replicated independently. The work was conducted using a mixed method approach in which quantitative methods were used to analyze data and qualitative methods were adopted to dive into the information space.

1 | Iria Puyosa, “Venezuelan Government Strategies for Information War on Twitter,” Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at Brown University, September 9, 2018, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3459724> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3459724>; Erin Gallagher, “Automation in Venezuelan Twitter Networks,” Blog post, June 16, 2017, <https://erin-gallagher.medium.com/automation-in-venezuelan-twitter-networks-c823d9458dd>.

2 | “#AlertaVenezuela newsletter,” DFRLab, February 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/alertavenezuela/>.

Background

Three months into 2021, at the time of writing, Maduro's hold on power is strong. Maduro and his allies have consolidated political control, often through strong-arming and authoritarian tactics, despite a collapsed economy. Venezuela was, however, in the not too distant past a relatively thriving democracy and economic hub in the heart of Latin America.

Chávez, Chavismo, and the rise of Nicolás Maduro

During Hugo Chávez's time in power (1999-2013), Venezuela built and held significant influence in Latin America, where it claimed regional leadership and tried to promote leftist governments and policies. This can be linked to the principles of Bolivarianismo, which gets its name from independence hero Simón Bolívar and his dream of a united Latin America. Pan-Latin American movements that referred to themselves as "Bolivarian" have existed in Latin America since the 19th century; Chávez resurrected the concept and declared himself Bolivarian, using the concept to support the integration of Latin America under a socialist, anti-neoliberal, and sovereign (anti-imperialist) ideology, a movement that could be understood as a "neobolivarism."³

Over the last two decades, though, Venezuela descended from a relatively stable democracy to a dictatorial regime at the center of one of the world's largest humanitarian crises. Chávez, a lieutenant colonel in the Venezuelan military who led a failed coup years before his successful presidential bid,⁴ was elected democratically in 1998. In 2002, he himself was the target of a coup and was briefly ousted from power for two days.⁵ The polarization that led to the short-lived coup, however, has lingered.⁶

Chávez's fourteen years in power were marked by conflicts

with the media, the opposition, and the United States. Chávez was one of the first presidents elected in the period considered the "pink tide" in Latin America, as left-wing presidents would subsequently be elected in Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina, and other countries.⁷ His legacy gave rise to "Chavismo," a broad, catch-all regime ideology for which, according to Brigham Young University Professor Kirk Hawkins, the ideological tenets are not well defined beyond a vague left-wing populism but which is inextricably linked to the persona of Chávez himself.⁸ Chavez's charismatic leadership and popular support was fueled by historic peaks of government-controlled oil revenues. He leveraged the increasing control of his party over the institutions to develop a complex state-sponsored communication apparatus that resonated beyond Venezuela's borders and his successors operate today.⁹

After Chávez passed away in 2013, his hand-picked successor Nicolás Maduro took power. Under his rule, the already weakened Venezuelan economy collapsed: the nationalized oil industry suffered from mismanagement and a lack of investment in infrastructure, and the country faced hyperinflation, food and basic supplies shortages, and a steep escalation in crime rates.¹⁰

In December 2015, Maduro and his allies lost the elections for the country's parliamentary body, the National Assembly, for the first time. To avoid losing power in the country, Maduro created a counterpart legislative house, the National Constituent Assembly, which he convened in 2017 with the (unfulfilled) mandate of creating a new Constitution in its first two years, as well as acting as a replacement for the opposition-controlled National Assembly.¹¹ For many, 2017 marked the passage from a flawed democracy to a dictatorship.¹² Maduro was reelected in 2018, in an

3 | Evelyn Moreno and Giovanna Paiva, "La Política Exterior de Venezuela: noticias en dos tiempos, Chávez y Maduro. Cadernos do Tempo Presente, 2016, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332716278_La_Politica_Exterior_de_Venezuela_noticias_en_dos_tiempos_Chavez_y_Maduro.

4 | Harris Whitbeck, "Left-wing populist Chavez wins Venezuelan presidency," *CNN*, December 6, 1998, <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/americas/9812/06/venezuela.results/index.html>.

5 | Katelyn Fossett, "How the Venezuelan Government Made the Media into Its Most Powerful Ally," *Foreign Policy*, March 11, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/11/how-the-venezuelan-government-made-the-media-into-its-most-powerful-ally/>.

6 | Pablo Uchoa, *Venezuela: A Encruzilhada de Hugo Chávez*, (São Paulo: Globo Editora, 2003).

7 | For more on the "pink tide," see: Benedicte Bull, "Social Movements and the 'Pink Tide' Governments in Latin America: Transformation, Inclusion and Rejection" in: *Democratization in the Global South. International Political Economy*, eds Kristian Stokke and Olle Törnquist (London: Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2013), 75-99, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230370043_4.

8 | Kirk Hawkins, "Populism in Venezuela: the rise of Chavismo," *Third World Quarterly* 24 no. 6 (2003), 1137-1160, 2003, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3993447>.

9 | Eduardo Frajman, "Broadcasting Populist Leadership: Hugo Chávez and 'Aló Presidente,'" *Journal of Latin American Studies* 46, no. 3 (2014), 501-26, accessed April 1, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24544171>.

10 | "Venezuela crisis: How the political situation escalated," *BBC News*, December 3, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-36319877>.

11 | Luisa Quintero, "ANC cesará funciones luego de tres años sin discutir una letra de la nueva Constitución," *Tal Cual*, August 18, 2020, <https://talcualdigital.com/anc-lleva-tres-anos-sin-discutir-una-letra-de-la-nueva-constitucion/>.

12 | Alexander Brockwehl, "Venezuela Sheds Its Democratic Façade," *Freedom House*, February 6, 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/venezuela-sheds-its-democratic-facade>.

election boycotted by the opposition that other countries and international organizations declared to be flawed or illegitimate.¹³ The disputed nature of the election led to Juan Guaidó's subsequent ascension to public prominence after he declared himself interim president of the country, which many countries and supranational entities – including the United States and the European Union – attempted to empower through recognition and which is covered in more detail later.

On December 6, 2020, in an election boycotted by many in the regime's opposition, Maduro reclaimed control of the National Assembly, bringing the final check on his authority under his control. The United States and the European Union, among others, declined to recognize the results of the election, of which the latter's High Representative Josep Borrell said that it "failed to comply with the minimum international standards."¹⁴

Life under Maduro

Since his elevation to power, following Chávez's vocal support to be his successor, Maduro has overseen the collapse of the economy and health system and tightened restrictions on speech, targeting his political opposition in particular.

Between 2015 and 2021, more than 5 million Venezuelans fled the country looking for better living conditions.¹⁵ The current situation results from the Maduro regime's corruption, its mismanagement of public funds, and the increasing economic pressure caused by heavy US and EU sanctions against the regime.¹⁶

On the economic front, Maduro had promoted an implicit dollarization of the economy and the use of cryptocurrency following the collapse in oil prices and hyperinflation.¹⁷ As of January 2021, the minimum wage averaged between \$1 and \$3 per month. In some regions, Venezuelans had to cook over wood fires instead of natural gas, as was previously prevalent, and others lost their source of income

as businesses shuttered due to the scarcity of gas, electricity, and oil.¹⁸

While the country was already suffering from simultaneous economic and political crises, a long-lasting health crisis also arose: the arrival of the novel coronavirus served to exacerbate the problems of Venezuelans, as the Maduro regime used it as a pretext to intensify its censorship and further restrict access to public services, such as water and gas.

In response, Venezuelans reacted by holding 9,633 different protests—ranging from small, local demonstrations to nationally coordinated protests—during 2020, twenty six demonstrations on average per day,¹⁹ according to the Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social (OVCS), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that monitors human rights in Venezuela. The regime response against protesters left 415 arrested, 150 wounded, and six killed. OVCS said that witnesses and, in one case, judicial investigations pointed to the security forces as the perpetrators of all six killings.

In addition, Maduro's National Constituent Assembly approved a broadly written hate-speech law in 2017 that "mandate[d] fines and up to twenty years' imprisonment for anyone who amplified information deemed 'intolerant' via traditional or social media."²⁰

The NGO Espacio Público, which monitors freedom of speech, found that 399 cases of "restrictions" to freedom of expression have occurred in the country between January and December 2020.²¹ That year was the third highest in terms of number of cases since 2002, following 2017 and 2019, with 708 and 468 cases, respectively. Ipys Venezuela, another NGO that monitors freedom of expression in the country, reported 141 violations against freedom of expression between July and December 2020.²²

13 | "Venezuela's Maduro wins re-election," *BBC News*, May 21, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-latin-america-44194815>; "Colombia desconocerá resultado de elecciones en Venezuela, dice Santos," *La Patilla*, January 25, 2018, <https://www.lapatilla.com/2018/01/25/colombia-desconocera-resultado-de-elecciones-en-venezuela-dice-santos/>.

14 | Vivian Sequera and Deisy Buitrago, "US, EU say they do not recognize Venezuela parliamentary vote," *Reuters*, December 7, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-election-results-idUSKBN28H0L3>.

15 | "Venezuelan Refugee and Migrant Crisis," International Organization for Migration, March 2020, <https://www.iom.int/venezuela-refugee-and-migrant-crisis>.

16 | "Independent UN rights expert calls for unilateral sanctions to be

17 | Alex Vasquez, and Nicolle Yapur, "Venezuela moves closer to dollarization with new bank rules," *Bloomberg*, January 12, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-13/venezuela-plans-to-expand-use-of-foreign-currency-bank-accounts>.

18 | Nicole Kolster, "'Es como vivir en la Edad de Piedra:' el retorno a la cocina de leña por falta de gas en el interior del país," January 13, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-55248348>.

19 | "Conflictividad social, Venezuela 2020," Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, January 25, 2021, <https://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org/ve/oc/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/INFORMEOVCS-ANUAL2020.pdf>.

20 | "Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2020," Freedom House, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-world/2020>.

21 | "Situación general del derecho a la libertad de expresión en Venezuela enero-diciembre 2020," *Espacio Público*, January 30, 2021, <http://espaciopublico.org/situacion-general-del-derecho-a-la-libertad-de-expresion-en-venezuela-enero-diciembre-2020/>.

22 | "Seis meses de agresiones y abuso de poder," IPYS Venezuela, December 28, 2020, <https://ipysvenezuela.org/2020/12/28/reporte-especial-ipysve-seis-meses-de-agresiones-y-abuso-de-poder/>.

State of the opposition

The Venezuelan opposition to the Maduro regime is diverse, and many within the opposition take different approaches to the best way to resolve the ongoing political crisis in the country. In February 2021, International Crisis Group released a report highlighting how opposition members within the country tend to have a more pragmatic approach to the regime, often favoring dialogue over interventionist positions.²³ Those living in exile, however, tend to resort to more strident rhetoric online and support more interventionist positions.²⁴

While there is cross-over—domestic activists calling for intervention and exiles calling for dialogue—Maduro frequently uses the pretext of supposed outside interventions to support increasingly repressive actions. That said, in 2020, at least one operation was undertaken and exposed.²⁵ The details around the failed attempt to oust Maduro, nicknamed “Operation Gideon,” are rife with uncorroborated or unsupported allegations by both the Maduro regime and his inner circle. In particular, they both alleged that the operation involved people in the US Government and high-profile figures within the Venezuelan opposition. There was no proof US government involvement and the Trump Administration refuted the allegation, and there was limited and uncorroborated evidence of involvement by the Venezuelan opposition.²⁷ Given his history of such claims around Western intervention, Maduro inevitably used the attempt as yet another excuse to boost unverified claims of direct foreign intervention to consolidate power.

On January 23, 2019, Juan Guaidó, then-president of the National Assembly (the only institution not controlled by Maduro at the time), declared himself the interim president

with the support of the Assembly.²⁸ Guaidó was subsequently recognized as the legitimate president by more than fifty countries and international organizations, including the United States and the European Union (EU).²⁹ On April 30, 2019, Guaidó called for a military uprising, but the military—which, domestically, is primarily responsible for Maduro’s ability to maintain his grip on power—did not comply.³⁰

A year later, in January 2020, the Maduro regime interfered and prevented Guaidó from being reelected as the National Assembly president.³¹ On December 6, 2020, Maduro held new parliamentary elections for the National Assembly. Juan Guaidó and others boycotted the election, but some in the opposition rejected their call and participated. Amid pressure from the Maduro regime and claims of the situation rigging the vote, Maduro’s coalition representatives amassed a majority of the votes, based on a voter turnout of around 30 percent.³² Maduro’s candidates were sworn on January 5, 2021. After that, Guaidó lost support of important allies, including the European Union.³³ As of March 2, he is still recognized as interim president by the United States³⁴ and many Latin American countries.³⁵

Since then, Guaidó and Maduro have both maintained their claim on the presidency. Concurrently, however, some radical far-right groups that support neither Maduro nor Guaidó have repeatedly called for the United States to intervene militarily.

Venezuela in the world

Venezuela plays a relatively high-profile role in the global arena, as it has a reputation for being ideologically outspoken and has the largest proven oil reserves in the world.³⁶ In addition, following its Bolivarian Revolution, Venezuela has

23 | “The Exile Effect: Venezuela’s Overseas Opposition and Social Media,” International Crisis Group, February 24, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/venezuela/086-exile-effect-venezuelas-overseas-opposition-and-social-media>.

24 | Ibid.

25 | Kejal Vyas and Juan Forero, “Venezuelan Opposition Guru Led Planning to Topple Maduro,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/venezuelan-opposition-guru-led-planning-to-topple-maduro-11593163801>.

26 | Ibid.; also: Antonio Maria Delgado, Kevin G. Hall, Shirsho Dasgupta, and Ben Wider, “Venezuela coup plotters met at Trump Doral. Central figure says US officials knew of plan,” *Miami Herald*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/article246819562.html>.

27 | Anthony Faiola, Karen DeYoung, and Ana Vanessa Herrero, “From a Miami condo to the Venezuelan coast, how a plan to ‘capture’ Maduro went rogue,” *The Washington Post*, May 6, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/from-a-miami-condo-to-the-venezuelan-coast-how-a-plan-to-capture-maduro-went-rogue/2020/05/06/046222bc-8e4a-11ea-9322-a29e75effc93_story.html.

28 | “Juan Guaidó: The man who wants to oust Maduro,” *BBC News*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-46985389>.

29 | Ibid.

30 | Ibid.

31 | “Venezuela’s Guaidó forces his way into assembly after stand-off,” *BBC News*, January 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/51018928>.

32 | Fabiola Sanchez and Christine Armario, “Venezuela high court orders takeover of Guaidó’s party,” AP, July 7, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/69e0e1d9f1e987e6b26221e91991a26d>.

33 | Jordan Fabian, “Biden Still Backs Guaido in Venezuela, Despite EU Downgrade,” *Bloomberg*, February 26, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-02-26/biden-still-backs-guaido-in-venezuela-despite-eu-downgrade>.

34 | Antony Blinken (@SecBlinken), “Today Venezuelan Interim President @jguaido and I discussed our unwavering support for democracy in Venezuela and our efforts to improve the lives of the Venezuelan people,” Twitter post, March 2, 2021, accessed March 5, 2021, <https://twitter.com/SecBlinken/status/1366917587578331144>, archived at <https://archive.is/NGmZL>.

35 | Kristen Martinez-Gugerli, “Interactive Map: Degrees of Diplomatic Recognition of Guaidó and Maduro,” The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), October 15, 2020, <https://www.venezuelablog.org/interactive-map-degrees-of-diplomatic-recognition-of-guaido-and-maduro/>.

36 | Sheyla Urdaneta, Anatoly Kurmanaev, and Isayen Herrera, “Venezuela, Once an Oil Giant, Reaches the End of an Era,” *The New York Times*, November 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/07/world/americas/venezuela-oil-economy-maduro.html>.

inspired other countries in Latin America and Europe, such as the political party Podemos in Spain,³⁷ and served as a counterweight to US influence in the Americas. The Maduro regime, in particular, accomplishes influence in part by allying with US detractors (e.g., Russia, Cuba, Iran), acting as a stronghold for the anti-US sentiment in the Americas.

Abroad, the Maduro regime deploys messaging to promote the regime and aligned Latin American leaders and movements that question capitalism and US dominance in Latin America, an extension of Venezuela's Bolivarian foreign policy goals and a way of maintaining alliances. Reports suggest, however, that Venezuela also attempted influence operations during the Catalan independence referendum in 2017 and the US midterm elections in 2018, though their impact seemed to be insignificant.³⁸ More recently, on March 10, 2021, the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence released a report that directly implicated Venezuela for trying to influence the 2020 US presidential elections, saying:

“The Venezuelan regime of Nicolas Maduro had an adversarial relationship with the Trump administration and we assess that Maduro had the intent, though probably not the capability, to try to influence public opinion in the US against the former President. We have no information suggesting that the current or former Venezuelan regimes were involved in attempts to compromise US election infrastructure.”³⁹

Despite the dire situation at home, Maduro has been able to hold on to power with the support of traditional partners like Russia, which has turned into an important ally for the regime.⁴⁰ Other states also take an interest in Venezuela: Cuba has been a longstanding ally, providing intelligence and security services;⁴¹ and increasing pressure from the United States on both Iran and Venezuela has brought both countries closer.⁴²

While finding common cause with autocratic countries, Venezuela has also fallen under scrutiny of multilateral organizations. In September 2020, the United Nations (UN) Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela published its first report on abuses inside the country.⁴³ According to the UN, “the Government, State agents, and groups working with them had committed egregious violations” since 2014, including killings, torture, enforced disappearances, and arbitrary detentions. The investigators counted 223 instances of crimes against humanity and 2,891 additional cases of human rights violations. The UN in particular highlighted the Maduro regime’s targeted political repression as “a coordinated response” to what it claimed to be threats of destabilization. The report also identified “various common elements to violations,” such as physical attacks, criminal prosecutions, smear campaigns, and stigmatization. Conversely, on February 12, 2021, the UN released a preliminary report determining that the US sanctions, along with those of the European Union and the United Kingdom, to be “devastating” to Venezuela, “exacerbating” its humanitarian crises.⁴⁴



37 | David Román, “How Hugo Chavez Helped Inspire Spain’s Far-Left Podemos Movement,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 26, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-venezuelas-chavez-lives-on-in-spain-1425000737>.

38 | Javier Lesaca, “Why did Russian social media swarm the digital conversation about Catalan independence?,” *The Washington Post*, November 22, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/11/22/why-did-russian-social-media-swarm-the-digital-conversation-about-catalan-independence/>; “Retrospective Review Twitter, Inc. and the 2018 Midterm Elections in the United States,” Twitter blog, February 4, 2019, https://blog.twitter.com/content/dam/blog-twitter/official/en_us/company/2019/2018-retrospective-review.pdf.

39 | “Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence, March 10, 2021, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf>.

40 | Jessica Donati, Andrew Restuccia, and Ian Talley, “How Putin Outfoxed Trump in Venezuela,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 27, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-the-u-s-bid-for-regime-change-in-venezuela-faltered-11580138560>.

41 | Angus Berwick, “Imported repression: How Cuba taught Venezuela to quash military dissent,” *Reuters*, August 2, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/venezuela-cuba-military/>.

42 | Christopher Woody, “Venezuela and Iran’s ties grow as warnings are raised about Trump pulling an ‘October Surprise’ on Tehran,” *Business Insider*, October 4, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/venezuela-iran-ties-grow-as-us-pressures-iran-before-election-2020-10>.

43 | “Detailed findings of the independent international fact finding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela,” UN Human Rights Council, September 15, 2020, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFMV/A_HRC_45_CRP11.pdf.

44 | Steffano Pozzebon and Caitlin Hu, “US-led sanctions on Venezuela ‘devastating’ to human rights, says UN report,” *CNN*, February 12, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/12/world/us-venezuela-sanctions-alina-douhan-intl/index.html>.

Information environment— mainstream media and the internet

The Maduro regime has consolidated its oppression not just with punitive force on his own populace, but also with the Venezuelan media and online space. Maduro's predecessor, Chávez, had started taking control of the heavily anti-Chávez media,⁴⁵ in what can be best understood as a mix between authoritarian consolidation and a reaction to the media's support for the short-lived 2002 coup against him.⁴⁶ Maduro, as other autocrats, uses state-controlled media to limit public access to information that would undermine regime control. The current structure of the Venezuelan information environment indicates that the regime has mostly succeeded in that control.

When it comes to how Venezuelans get informed, a recent

study published by the European Union, Universidad de Navarra, and Transparency International Venezuela, revealed that 38.7 percent of Venezuelans used television to receive news, emphasizing how critical the Maduro regime's dominance of broadcast media is to information control. Social media platforms were next, with 25.3 percent of the population saying that they use them to stay informed.⁴⁷

When asked about which actors worried them the most as possible sources of disinformation, 35.5 percent of pro-Maduro respondents said they were mostly concerned with disinformation coming from journalists and the media. Meanwhile, 41.7 percent of regime opponents said their main concern was politicians and political party's actions.

Sources of news

	General	Regime supporters	Opposition	Not aligned
TV news	38.7%	51.4%	26.3%	39.4%
Social media	25.3%	14.7%	39%	22.3%
24 hours news channels	10%	13.8%	6.5%	10%
Online newspapers	7.8%	3.4%	12.7%	7.1%
Radio programs	7.2%	7%	7.9%	6.7%
Talking with family, friends and acquaintances	5.1%	4.9%	1.9%	7.5%
Print newspapers	2%	2.8%	0.8%	2.3%
Online magazines	1.3%	0.3%	0%	0.6%
Blogs	0.3%	0.3%	0%	0.6%
Other/none	2.1%	1.5%	2.7%	2.1%
Doesn't know/didn't reply	0.2%	0%	0.5%	0.2%

Source: Internet Consumption in Venezuela survey.
National survey of public opinion conducted by phone between January 20 and 29, 2020.
Number of interviews: 1200 Sampling errors: 2.81% Confidence level: 95.0%.









45 | Carmen Beatriz Fernández, Javier Serrano Puche, and Jordi Rodríguez-Virgili, "El fenómeno de la desinformación digital en el contexto venezolano," *Transparencia Venezuela*, August 2020, <https://espaja.com/El-fenomeno-de-la-desinformacion-digital-en-el-contexto-venezolano-agosto2020.pdf>.

46 | Uchoa, Venezuela: A Encruzilhada de Hugo Chávez.

47 | Fernández et al, "El fenómeno de la desinformación digital en el contexto venezolano."

Perceived sources of disinformation, by political alignment

	General	Regime supporters	Opposition	Not aligned
Journalists and news outlets	 30.6%	35.5%	27.6%	27.6%
Politicians and political parties	 29.4%	19.6%	41.7%	41.7%
Foreign agents and foreign interference	 21.4%	31.2%	12.5%	12.5%
Activists	 5.9%	4.6%	6%	6%
Citizens	 5.6%	4.3%	6%	6%
Doesn't know/didn't reply	 7.2%	4.9%	6.2%	6.2%

Source: Internet Consumption in Venezuela survey.

National survey of public opinion conducted by phone between January 20 and 29, 2020.

Number of interviews: 1200 Sampling errors: 2.81% Confidence level: 95.0%.



Venezuela currently has six state broadcasters, including Venezolana de Televisión (VTV); three radio broadcasters; 250 community radio stations; and three publicly funded newspapers.⁴⁸ Beyond state media, the regime is also supported by private media, including Globovision and Últimas Noticias, for which the regime facilitated the transfer to Maduro-friendly owners with economic and judicial pressure.⁴⁹ The regime also contributes financing to multi-state-funded television broadcaster *Telesur*, a channel across Latin America. Spanish-language news outlets funded by aligned countries such as Iran's HispanTV, and Russia's *RT en Español* and *Sputnik* also assist. Venezuelan NGOs monitoring censorship and freedom of expression in the country have counted that Maduro has pressured 115 media outlets—sixty-five radio stations, forty-one print media outlets, and eight television channels—to close since 2013, when he came to office.⁵⁰

In contrast, Guaidó was largely restricted to broadcasting via the internet, most often through YouTube or Periscope.⁵¹ The Maduro regime frequently deploys selective internet

shutdowns as a means of limiting information flow, especially during high-profile protests. In 2019, the British technology watchdog Netblocks reported that the Maduro regime was the most active in blocking the internet in the world. In 2019 alone, the organization recorded forty temporary blockages of streaming services and social networks. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Periscope were among the services blocked, in part to prevent the regime's opposition from spreading its message. Wikipedia was also blocked after the entry on Juan Guaidó was changed to refer to him as "Venezuela's president."⁵² Internet connectivity in the country has also been detrimentally affected by power outages and aging infrastructure.⁵³

In the 2018 edition of *Latinobarómetro*, an annual opinion survey that interviews some 20,000 people in eighteen countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, 74.2 percent of Venezuelans interviewed said they used social media. The most used platform was Facebook, followed by WhatsApp and YouTube.

48 | Ibid.

49 | Alfredo Meza, "La venta de un diario venezolano aviva el debate sobre la propiedad de los medios," *El País*, July 5, 2014, https://elpais.com/internacional/2014/07/05/actualidad/1404587135_949473.html.

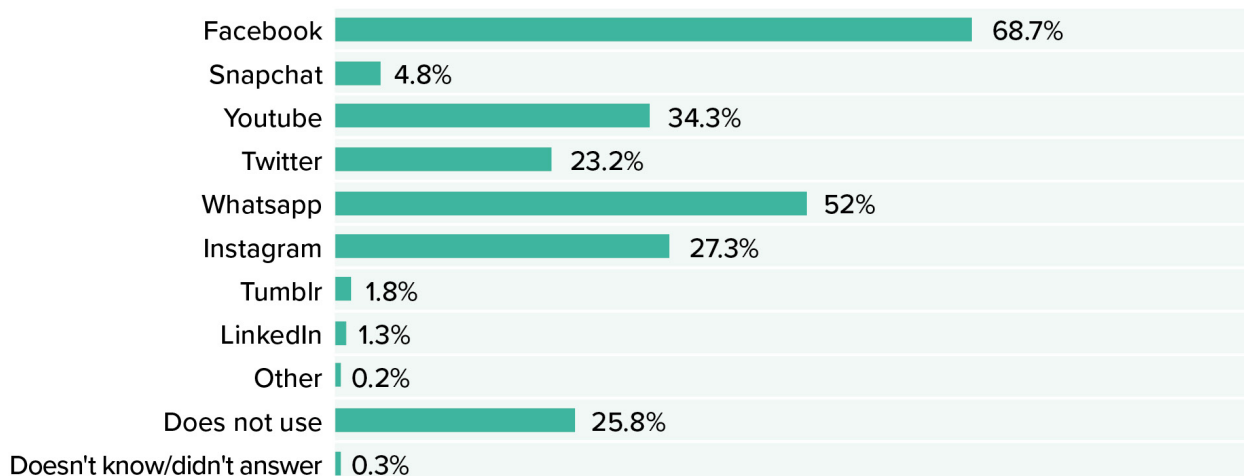
50 | Francisco Zambrano, "Medianálisis: El sistema mediático en Venezuela se ha empequeñecido y desaparecido en Buena medida," *Runrun.es*, July 28, 2020, <https://runrun.es/megafono/416695/los-que-no-se-rinden-medianalisis-el-sistema-mediatico-en-venezuela-se-ha-empequeñecido-y-desaparecido-en-buena-medida/>.

51 | Ibid.

52 | "From the blocking of Wikipedia to Social Media: Venezuela's Political Crisis," IPYS Venezuela, January 29, 2019, <https://ipysvenezuela.org/2019/01/29/from-the-blocking-of-wikipedia-to-social-media-venezuelas-political-crisis/>.

53 | "Venezuela internet operators fall offline for scheduled subsea cable maintenance," Netblocks, December 1, 2019, <https://netblocks.org/reports/venezuela-internet-cut-subsea-cable-maintenance-QyKp6R8D>.

Social media use in Venezuela*



Source: Latinobarometro, 2018.

Total number of interviews: 1,200. Year: 2018. *One person can use more than one social media platform.

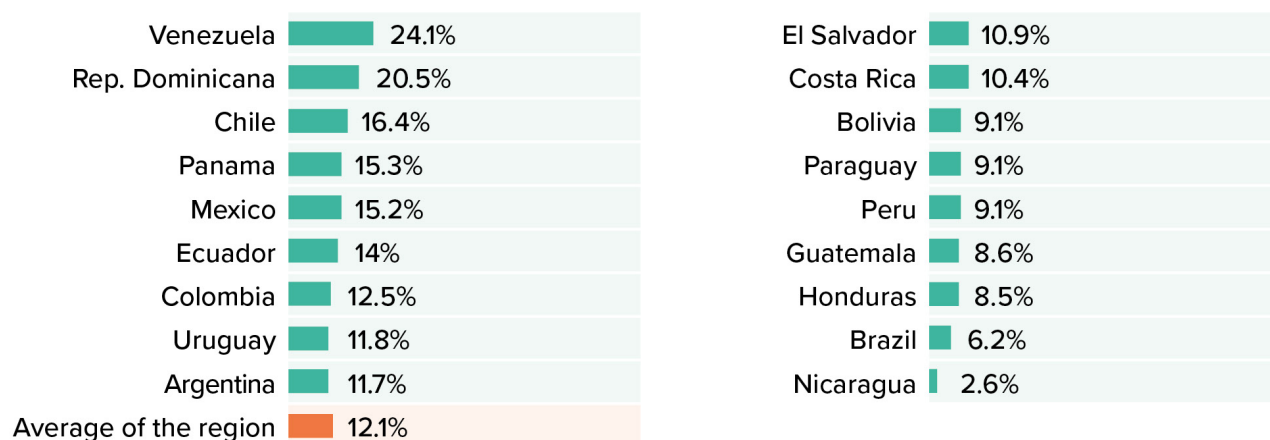


Despite Twitter being only the fifth preferred social platform in Venezuela, the platform is more popular in the country than in its neighbors. While in the region, on average, 12.2 percent of the population used Twitter, the uptake in Venezuela is much higher at 24.1 percent. The country appeared to have the most active users of Twitter in the region. This offers

insight about why the regime and the opposition focus its efforts on Twitter, rather than on other social media platforms.



Twitter use in Latin America



Source: Latinobarometro, 2018.



The regime's domestic information control

The Maduro regime controls information domestically with two strategies. The first is promotional, pushing hashtags, pro-Maduro narratives, and conspiracy theories (particularly around supposed attempts by foreign governments to oust him through force) in support of the regime. The second is repressive, using censorship, persecution of journalists, and internet shutdowns to deter or silence opponents. The DFRLab documented several cases of both strategies online; the case studies comprising this report, while perhaps not comprehensive of the regime's activities, are representative of the strategies and tactics the regime pursues in its attempt to control Venezuela's domestic information environment.

The regime and its manipulation of Twitter

As mentioned in the previous section, the regime focuses significant resources on Twitter to disseminate its messaging broadly and drown out narratives it considers as undermining its authority. This section outlines notable aspects of the Maduro regime's Twitter operations.

To achieve narrative dominance on the platform, the regime has used manipulative and inauthentic tactics on which Twitter has been compelled to act. In January 2019, Twitter announced that it had “removed 1,196 accounts located in Venezuela which appear to be engaged in a state-backed influence campaign targeting domestic audiences.”⁵⁴ The accounts relied heavily on automation and used an app developed to help users automate their retweets, which marked the first verifiable instance of a government using a Twitter app to amplify its domestic propaganda.⁵⁵ In addition, accounts associated with Chavistas and the Maduro regime were sanctioned by Twitter at the beginning of 2020, including the official accounts for Maduro's Ministry for Petroleum, the Minister of the Interior, the Central Bank of Venezuela, and the Bolivarian Army of Venezuela. Details about reasons for the removal of the accounts were not made public.⁵⁶

The regime also had other strategies to amplify its agenda. In September 2018, researcher Iria Puyosa, from Brown University's Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, identified that a coordinated strategy appeared to have

three main goals: to coordinate accounts to reach trending topics every day; to promote hashtags that distract attention away from other popular hashtags critical of the regime; and to hijack opposition hashtags and interfere in opposition conversations.⁵⁷

All of these strategies are intended to ensure that users in Venezuela are exposed to the Maduro regime's own messaging before all else. For less discerning users, the first strategy of manipulating the trending topics might also cause them to believe that the message being pushed is more popular than it actually is. To achieve this objective, the regime uses a relatively unique approach, deploying bot-like accounts and rewarding real people with money (as detailed below) for amplifying its messages, which evades Twitter's community policies and creates the appearance of authenticity to the operation.

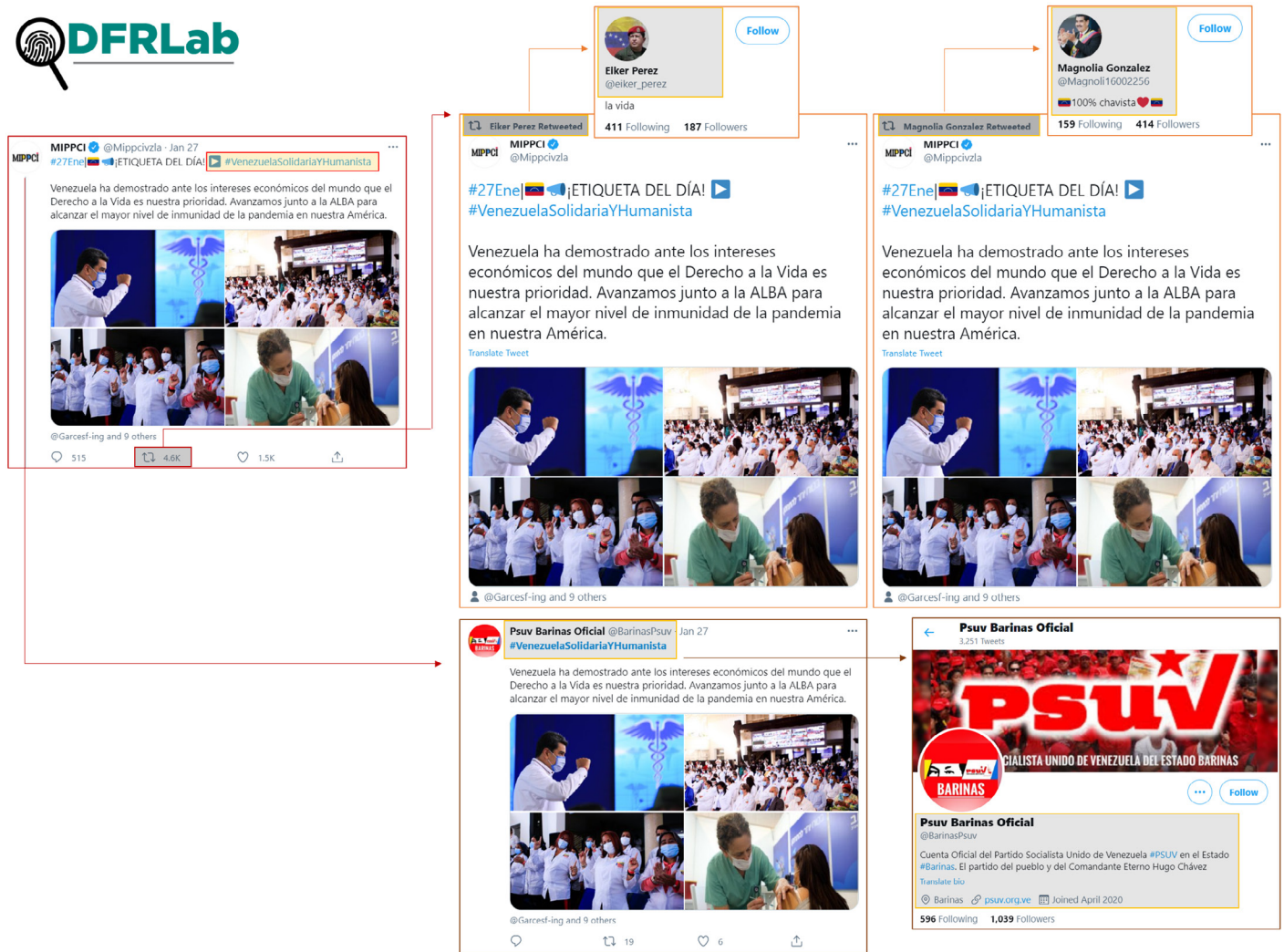
Starting in 2019, the DFRLab elaborated on how its strategy of forcing hashtags into the trending topics worked. The strategy starts with the Twitter account for the regime's communications ministry, the Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Comunicación e Información (also known in Spanish by its acronym MIPPCI). On an almost daily basis, the account announces the “etiqueta del día” (hashtag of the day) in a tweet. Sometimes, it promotes more than one in the same day. These hashtags usually supported the “Bolivarian revolution,” commemorated important dates from the past, projected geopolitical goals, or promoted government policies, all serving as a domestic propaganda effort.

After that, hundreds of accounts—many anonymous, using images of Venezuela's late president Hugo Chávez, Nicolás Maduro, or Venezuelan flags as their profile pictures—start posting the hashtag repeatedly, either in original tweets or retweets. At least part of this engagement arises from a coordinated effort tied to the regime and to Maduro's Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV, or United Socialist Party of Venezuela).

55 | Kanishk Karan, Jose Luis Peñarredonda, and Luiza Bandeira, “#TrollTracker: Venezuelan Government-linked Influence Campaign on Twitter,” DFRLab, March 13, 2019, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/trolltracker-venezuelan-government-linked-influence-campaign-on-twitter-63a8fe7a62e0>.

56 | “What we know about the pro-Maduro accounts suspended on Twitter,” DFRLab, January 14, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/alertavenezuela/alertavenezuela-january-14-2020/>.

57 | Puyosa, “Venezuelan Government Strategies for Information War on Twitter.”



The flow of a single “etiqueta del día,” with the MIPPCI account introducing it (left), two accounts—both of which exhibit suspicious behavior, such as anonymity, extremely high posting rates, and ratio of retweets to original tweets—retweeting it (top middle and right), and a PSUV-affiliated account reusing it (bottom).⁵⁸

The DFRLab showed that the regime rewarded accounts that tweeted their hashtags the most with cash bonuses. The payment was done via an app connected to the regime’s Carnet de la Patria (Motherland Card) program, which provides an ID card that identifies social aid recipients.⁵⁹ In order to receive money for tweeting, people must register

their Twitter accounts in the app and tweet using the daily hashtags.⁶⁰ The apps used by the regime to reward users remain available on the Google Play store.

The regime’s manipulation strategies have not gone unnoticed by Twitter, as some accounts involved in this scheme were

58 | MIPPCI (@Mippcivla), “#27Ene|ETIQUETA DEL DÍA! #VenezuelaSolidariaYHumanista Venezuela ha demostrado ante los intereses económicos del mundo que el Derecho a la Vida es nuestra prioridad. Avanzamos...” Twitter post, January 27, 2021, archived at <https://archive.fo/ZWf9g>; @eiker_perez, retweet of @Mippcivla “#27E,” January 27, 2021, https://twitter.com/eiker_perez/status/1354391302515912706, archived at <https://archive.fo/GyTN4>; Magnolia Gonzalez (@Magnoli16002256), retweet of @Mippcivla “#27E,” January 27, 2021, <https://twitter.com/Magnoli16002256/status/1354391251005669376>, archived at <https://archive.fo/ZDw4U>; @BarinasPsuv, “#VenezuelaSolidariaYHumanista Venezuela ha demostrado ante los intereses económicos del mundo que el Derecho a la Vida es nuestra prioridad. Avanzamos junto a la ALBA para alcanzar el mayor nivel de inmunidad de la pandemia en nuestra América,” Twitter post, archived at <https://archive.fo/nMZBA>; @BarinasPsuv, Twitter profile, archived at <https://archive.fo/U99XM>.

59 | Jose Luis Peñarredonda and Kanishk Karan, “#InfluenceForSale: Venezuela’s Twitter Propaganda Mill,” DFRLab, February 3, 2019, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/influenceforsale-venezuelas-twitter-propaganda-mill-cd20ee4b33d8>.

60 | @Patriva_ve, “Para el logro veQR destacado usted debe ayudar a escanear a las personas. Para las redes sociales registrar en el sitio su twitter y su facebook, mejor si registra ambos,” Twitter post, May 1, 2018, 4:45 p.m., archived at <https://archive.vn/SYJph>.

removed from the platform in 2019. Still, in January 2021, the DFRLab found evidence that the scheme was still under way. On January 29, 2021, accounts that had previously used the “hashtag of the day” posted screenshots of the regime’s app that rewarded them for posts. Additionally, on Telegram, various groups discussed the scheme and shared advice on how to maximize their profits. In these groups, users said that, in order to be rewarded, it was necessary to use the “hashtag of the day” at least 400 times per day from Monday to Sunday. A post suggested that maximum payment was 384,000 bolívares (approximately \$0.22 USD) per week. On January 28, 2021, the minimum wage was 1,200,000 bolívares, or \$0.68 USD.⁶¹

Users seemed to adopt a “call-to-action” scheme in which some mentioned the hashtag and tagged other accounts, which in turn retweeted the post in which they were tagged, thus amplifying the hashtags exponentially, as can be seen in the image on page 16.

According to a social network analysis, the accounts using the analyzed hashtag fell into three groups: a set of accounts linked to the Maduro regime, some of which represented official institutions including Maduro’s Ministry of Communications, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Science and Technology; a set of accounts that support the regime’s daily hashtags and that generate mostly original tweets, including calls for action to coordinate Twitter activity; and a set of accounts that exhibit amplification features, mostly retweeting other posts by accounts belonging to the previous mentioned sets.

The composite image consists of four parts:

- Top Left:** A screenshot of Telegram search results for the keyword "tuiteros". It lists several groups and users, including "Tuiteros Patriotas", "Tuiteros Activos", and "#TuiterosActivos #BatalladoresDigitales".
- Top Right:** A screenshot of a Telegram message titled "#TuiterosActivos #BatalladoresDigitales" with 38 members. It contains a "mini-guide" for making money with tweets, detailing steps like synchronizing the Twitter account, daily searching for the "hashtag of the day", and retweeting 400 times.
- Bottom Left:** A table titled "Tabla de Logros Semanal" (Weekly Achievement Table) showing earnings for different ranks.
- Bottom Right:** A screenshot of a Monedero Patria credit confirmation message, stating a credit of Bs.S 334.080,00 for the second prize of the Social Networks contest.

Rango	Pago (Bs)
1er Lugar	384.000,00 Bs
2do Lugar	334.080,00 Bs
3er Lugar	268.800,00 Bs
Mención Especial	192.000,00 Bs

MONEDERO PATRIA: CREDITO
 por Bs.S 334.080,00 por concepto Segundo Premio Redes Sociales (11 al 17/ENE/2021) el 19/01/2021 10:40

At top left, the tuiteros groups on Telegram app; on the top right, “mini-guide” on how to make money with tweets. On the bottom left, a summary of how much tweeters were paid; on the bottom right, a screenshot from a message sent by app Monedero Patria, connected to Carnet de la Patria, shared on Telegram, confirming the values.⁶²

61 | “Para renovar el pasaporte en Venezuela se necesitan 281 salarios mínimos,” *Efecto Cocuyo*, January 28, 2021, <https://efectococuyo.com/la-humanidad/pasaporte-venezuela-281-salarios-minimos/>.

62 | Images retrieved from Telegram groups by the DFRLab; user names are anonymized to protect their identities.

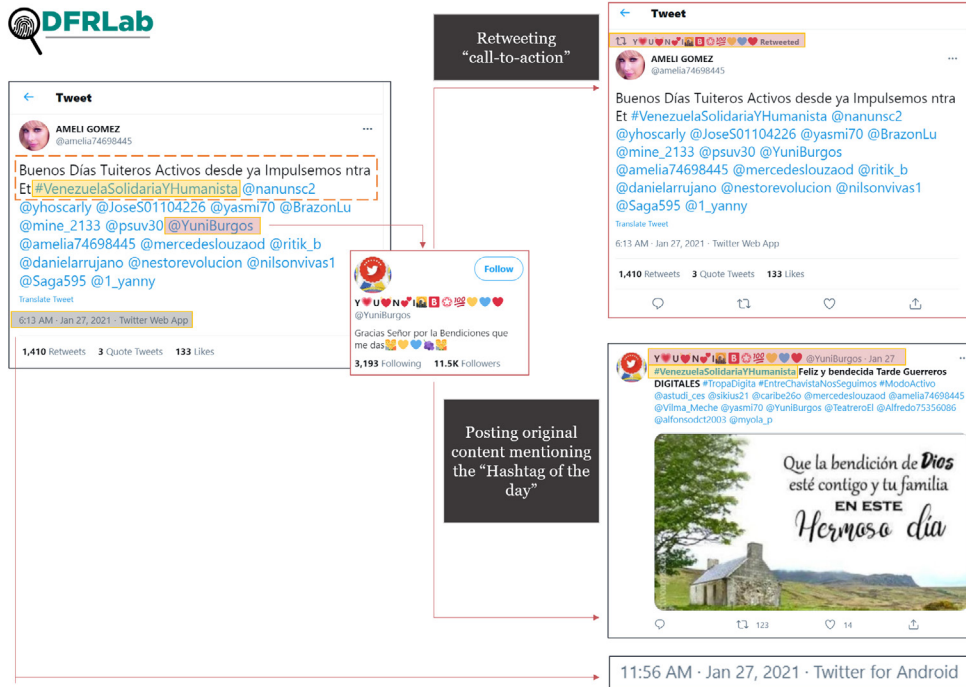
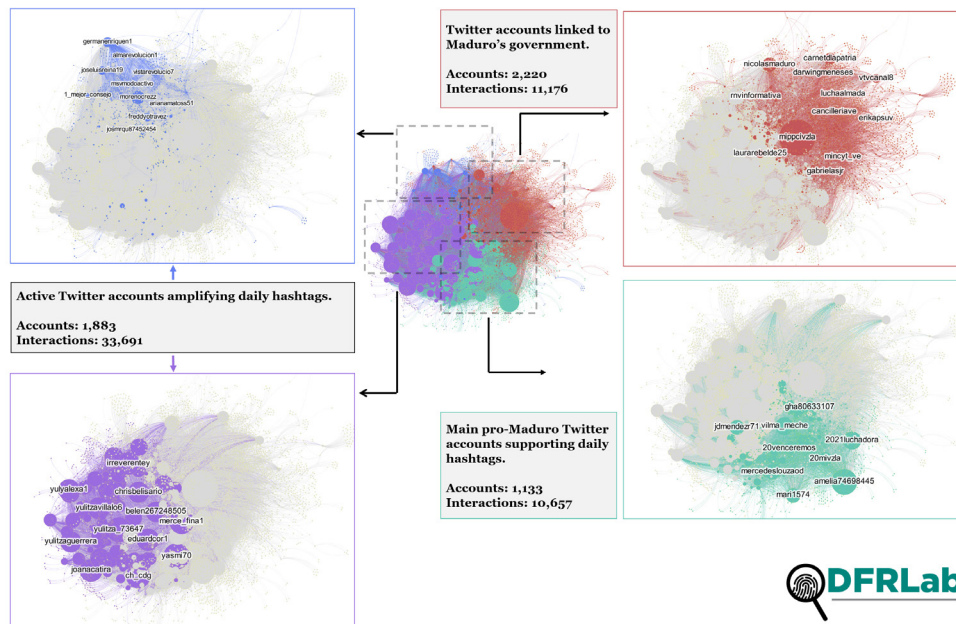


Image showing an example of a “call-to-action” post from the Twitter account @amelia74698445. In this example, the account tagged other user accounts, which in turn retweeted the post in which they were tagged. The example also shows an original post from one of the tagged accounts using #VenezuelaSolidariaYHumanista, a “Hashtag of the day” that trended on Twitter on January 27, 2021.⁶³

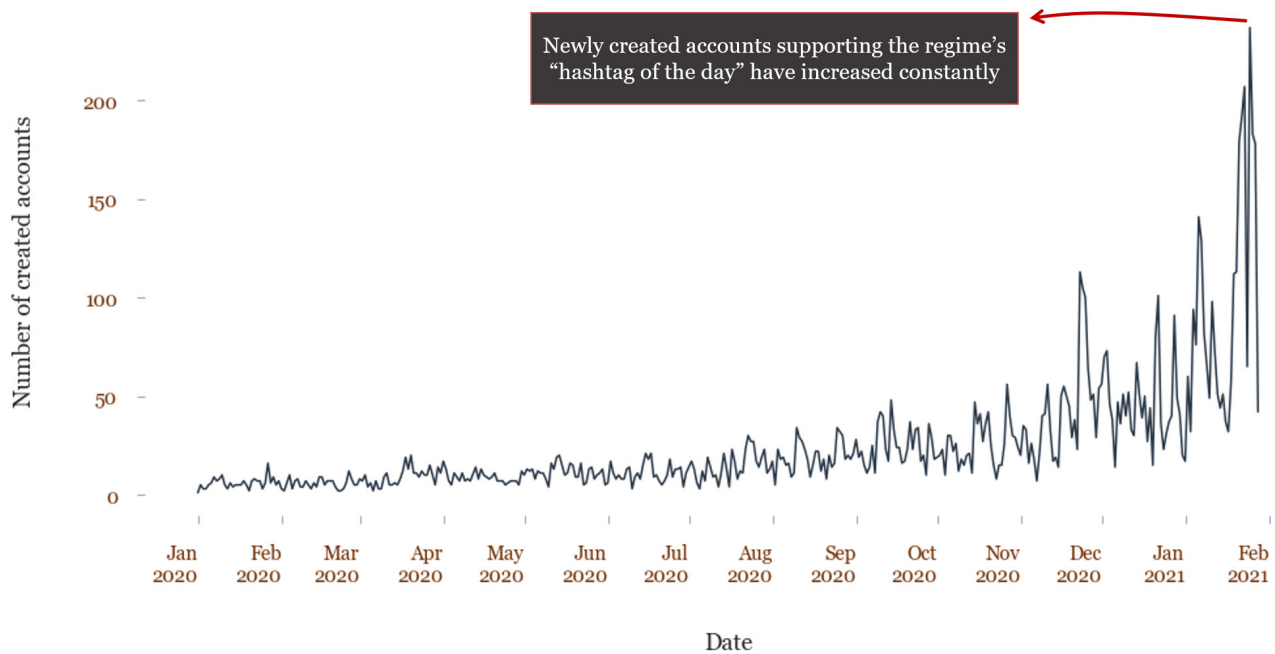


Graph showing the identified communities using the “hashtag of the day” #VenezuelaSolidariaYHumanista (Solidary and Humanist Venezuela) in the network, which trended on January 27, 2021. In red, a set of accounts linked to Maduro's government. In green, a set of accounts that support the regime's daily hashtags. These accounts generated original tweets, including calls for action to coordinate Twitter activity. Both the purple and blue sets are user accounts that amplified the hashtag mostly through high-volume retweeting of other accounts' posts.⁶⁴



63 | DFRLab-generated composite graphic, sourced from: @amelia74698445, “Buenos Días Tuiteros Activos desde ya Impulsemos ntra Et #VenezuelaSolidariaYHumanista,” Twitter post, January 27, 2021, 6:13 a.m., archived at <https://archive.fo/SYvho>; @YuniBurgos, “#VenezuelaSolidariaYHumanista Feliz y bendecida Tarde Guerreros DIGITALES,” Twitter post, January 27, 2021, 11:56 a.m., archived at <https://archive.fo/XFq4l>.

64 | DFRLab-generated graphic, using Gephi.



Graph showing user account creation dates involved in the analyzed hashtag (#VenezuelaSolidariayHumanista). The chart indicates that high volume of newly created accounts engaged in the “hashtag of the day.”⁶⁵

Most of the posts to use #VenezuelaSolidariayHumanista came from newly created accounts. This is likely because a large proportion of accounts supporting the regime have been suspended or disabled by Twitter. The example below shows that more than 50 percent of all accounts involved in the analysis that amplified #VenezuelaSolidariayHumanista, which trended on January 27, 2021, were created in January 2021. This subset of accounts generated nearly 80 percent of all content, of which 98 percent was retweets.

Still, many of the most active accounts amplifying “hashtags of the day” detected by the DFRLab were still online at the time of writing. Of the twenty-six accounts that appeared to be the most active in spamming regime hashtags between January and October 2020, twenty were still online as of February 2021 and six were offline (due to suspension or removal).

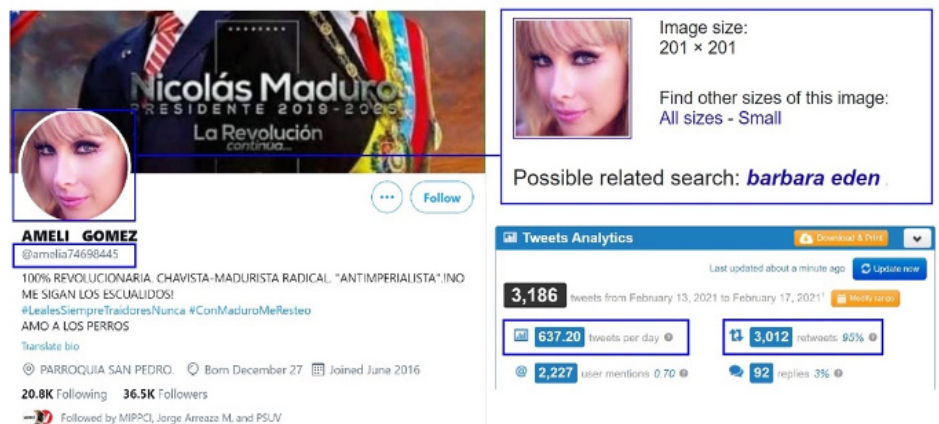


Image showing profile of one of the accounts that tweeted hashtags promoted by the Communications ministry most frequently. Blue boxes highlight possible signs of inauthenticity such as having an alphanumerical handle, using a stolen photo (in this case, a picture of US actress Barbara Eden), tweeting more than 600 times per day, and having a high rate of retweets.⁶⁶

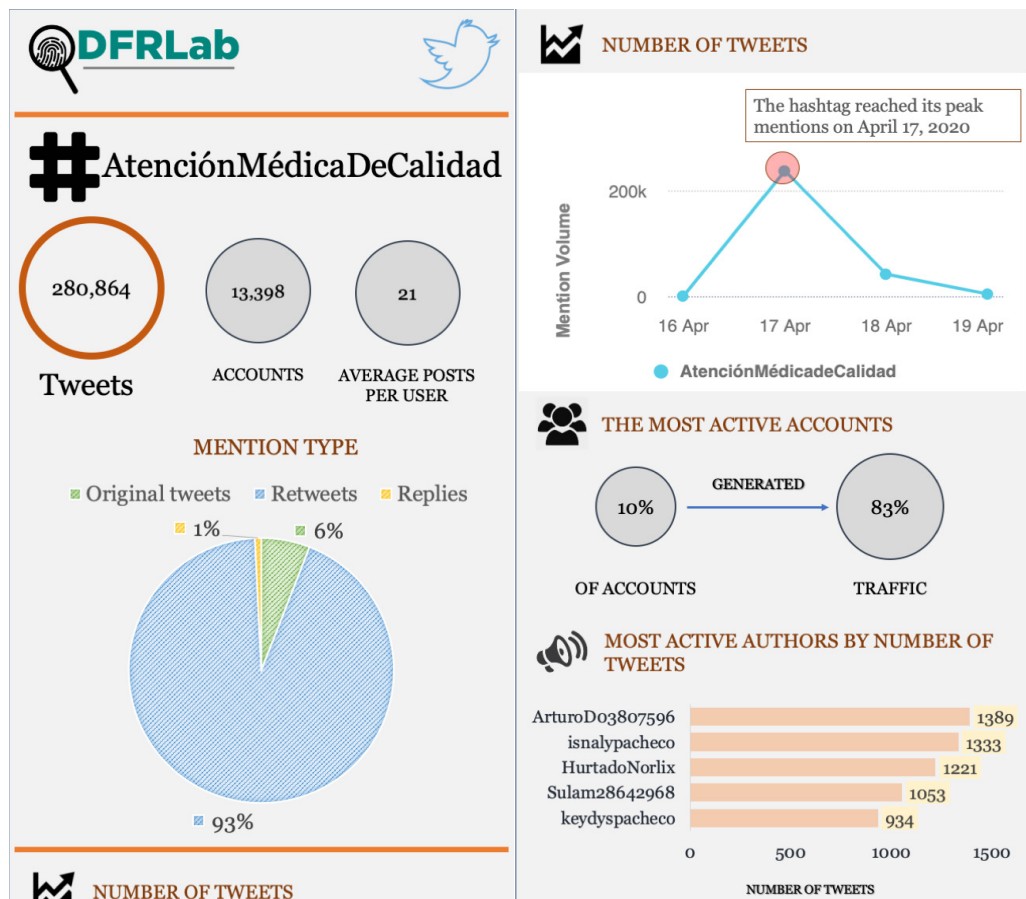
65 | DFRLab-generated graph using Twitter data.

66 | DFRLab-generated graphic, sourced from @amelia74698445, Twitter account, January 30, 2021, @amelia74698445, Twitter profile, captured February 17, 2021, <https://twitter.com/Amelia74698445>, archived at <https://archive.vn/vojPW>; and queries using Google Images and Twitonomy.

The DFRLab also discovered that much of the traffic for these hashtags was generated by a small group of users, rather than being used by a large groups of users, which suggests that small groups tried to position the hashtags among the trending topics and make them seem more popular than they were. On April 17, 2020, for instance, the hashtag of the day was #AtencionMedicadeCalidad (“Quality Medical Care”) in an attempt to boost a narrative Venezuela’s healthcare system was prepared to assist Venezuelans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ten percent of the most active accounts using the hashtag, however, generated 83 percent of the total mentions to the hashtag, indicating that it was their extreme level of activity, rather than broad engagement by a larger group of accounts, that allowed the hashtag to reach the trending topics.

Hashtags also served to capture conversations. On January 15, 2020, for instance, the regime promoted the hashtag #PuebloHeroicoyVencedor (“Heroic and Victorious Nation”) and positioned it as a trending topic. The mass use of the hashtag #PuebloHeroicoyVencedor by regime-aligned accounts diluted the critical discussion about violence that was taking place on that same day, when the regime and its supporters blocked, harassed, and otherwise physically intimidated National Assembly members, preventing them from convening in the assembly building.⁶⁷

These strategies gave the regime an omnipresent profile on Twitter. Research conducted by ProBox, DFRLab’s partner organization in the #AlertaVenezuela monitoring project, tracked all hashtags that made it to the Venezuelan trending topics in 2020 and discovered that the overwhelming majority came from the regime, pushed by Maduro’s Ministry of Communications and other pro-Maduro accounts.⁶⁸



Infographic with an analytical breakdown of the activity around the hashtag #AtenciónMédicaDeCalidad.

Between January and September 2020, more than 7 million monthly tweets on average were coming from accounts supporting the regime. Other hashtags that often reached the trending topics the most were those protesting the lack of social services in Venezuela, coming from NGOs and other civil society organizations. However, they amounted to thirty times fewer posts than pro-regime posts.

In March 2021, @BonosSocial, the Maduro regime’s Twitter account that manages the communications for the Carnet de la Patria program, posted that the payments for those participating on this scheme were suspended until further notice.⁶⁹ Pro-Maduro accounts that replied to the posts said that the payments had been suspended since February 2021.⁷⁰ It was unclear, at the time of writing, whether this marked the end of this strategy or simply a forced hiatus. Although pro-regime hashtags trend every day in Venezuela,

67 | “Venezuela opposition convoy attacked outside parliament,” *BBC News*, January 15, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-51120832>.

68 | Daniel Suárez Pérez and Esteban Ponce de León, “How Venezuelans use Twitter to protest the ongoing humanitarian crisis,” December 16, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-venezuelans-use-twitter-to-protest-the-ongoing-humanitarian-crisis-db46611b5ee8>.

69 | @BonosSocial, “Se le informa que la asignación de los logros de los #TuiterosActivos a través del @CarnetDLaPatria estan suspendido hasta nuevo aviso,” Twitter post, March 1, 2021, 11:01 a.m., <https://twitter.com/BonosSocial/status/1366418321512534018>.

70 | @keiny_medina, “Diooss miiiooo,y ya han pasado un mes suspendido y no han arreglado eso??. Pienso que es una burla,tantas personas que se mete a twitero por ncesidad,porque no les llegan los bonos y quieren que les lleguen los bono,a part los logros también es una ayuda, Todos estamos sin plata,” Twitter post, March 1, 2021, 2:19 p.m., https://twitter.com/keiny_medina/status/1366468123579322372.

it is hard to know how effective the strategy of pushing them is. On the one hand, hashtags that reach the trending topics are usually seen by many and sometimes also get amplified by the media, which further extends their reach. On the other hand, research from fact-checking organization Cazadores de Fake News showed that the conversation about these topics is restricted to a small group of very active accounts, which puts into question the effectiveness of the strategy.⁷¹

Regime support on Facebook and Instagram

While there is robust evidence to link Twitter operations to the regime, its activities on other social media platforms are less understood. That said, in this section, the DFRLab identified some cases in which disinformation benefitted Maduro or attacked his opposition on Facebook and Instagram.

In December 2020, for instance, an anti-Guaidó campaign appeared first on Instagram and then spread to Twitter. After the regime's controversial victory in the 2020 parliamentary elections, Guaidó promoted a popular "consultation" asking Venezuelans if they supported ousting Maduro. Guaidó claimed 6.5 million people participated⁷² but, in a move that experts considered questionable, did not publish the results.⁷³ Meanwhile, a hashtag campaign—apparently aiming at discrediting Guaidó's "consultation"—falsely claimed that hackers had leaked the identification of those who voted in the process. The campaign caught the media's attention when it appeared on Twitter, but it originated with ten Instagram accounts that had previously published anti-opposition disinformation. Although Cazadores de Fake News debunked the claim that hackers had leaked voter's data,⁷⁴ Pro-Maduro blog Lechuginos amplified the false claims by posting two articles, on December 10 and December 11, that showed a false list with alleged voter's identification.⁷⁵

On Facebook, Maduro does not appear to dominate the

conversation as on Twitter. Still, on July 8, 2020, Facebook announced the removal of a network originating in Canada and Ecuador that targeted elections in many Latin American countries, including Venezuela's 2018 presidential election. The platform attributed the network to Estraterra, a Canada-based public relations firm, and Ecuadorian employees aligned with the country's former president Rafael Correa, a Maduro ally.⁷⁶ The DFRLab found that pages and personal profiles supported Maduro in the run-up to the 2018 election.⁷⁷ Later, in 2019, other assets started attacking Guaidó, mostly by comparing him to Donald Trump.⁷⁸ There was no indication as to whether the regime hired Estraterra for the work.⁷⁹

Traditional media

Beyond its social media activities, the regime has a strong grip on traditional media. The regime's tighter control of Venezuela's television ecosystem reflects the fact, as highlighted above, that the medium is still the predominant source of news in the country. This section provides a deeper look into the country's traditional media and how the Maduro regime uses it to further its objectives.

State media is mostly used to broadcast official statements, publish pro-regime news, and to counter negative coverage published by independent media. More than creating its own narratives, state media usually follows and amplifies regime propaganda, which includes conspiracy theories pushed by Maduro himself. In March 2020, for instance, Maduro was indicted by the United States for drug trafficking. State broadcaster VTV, Maduro's preferred channel to address the population, reacted to the indictment by broadcasting that the regime had discovered a plan by the United States and Colombia to kill Maduro. No evidence of this plan has yet been presented.

71 | "Elecciones legislativas 2020: la carrera por el trending topic," Cazadores de Fake News and Observatorio Probox, November 26, 2020, <https://cazadoresdefakenews.info/elecciones-legislativas-la-carrera-por-el-trending-topic/>.

72 | "Primer boletín: Más de seis millones 400 mil venezolanos dijeron sí en la Consulta Popular contra el fraude y por elecciones libres justas y verificables," Asamblea Nacional, December 12, 2020, <https://www.asambleanacionalvenezuela.org/noticias/primer-boletin-mas-de-seis-millones-400-mil-venezolanos-dijeron-si-en-la-consulta-popular-contra-el-fraude-y-por-elecciones-libres-justas-y-verificables>.

73 | Gustavo Ocando Alex, "Oposición reporta que 6,4 millones de electores participaron en consulta de Venezuela," *Voz de América (VOA)*, December 13, 2020, <https://www.voanoticias.com/venezuela/venezuela-consulta-popular-participacion-segun-reportes>.

74 | @cazamosfakenews, "Falso: ¿se filtra la lista de venezolanos que participan en la Consulta Popular? Una #FALSA lista filtrada de participantes en la Consulta Popular, fue publicada el 10 de diciembre por una red de cuentas en Instagram que han desinformado en múltiples ocasiones. HILO/1," Twitter post, December 11, 2020, 6:22 a.m., <https://twitter.com/cazamosfakenews/status/1337356982223843330>.

75 | "¡NO OCULTAREMOS NADA! Vea la data confidencial de quienes han participado en la «consulta popular» (+HACKEADO TELEGRAM)," Lechuginos, December 10, 2020, <https://www.lechuginos.com/vea-data-confidencial-consulta-popular-hack/>; "¡LOS DEJARON EN LA CALLE! Vea la segunda parte de la data de la «consulta popular» filtrada por hackers," Lechuginos, December 11, 2020, <https://www.lechuginos.com/segunda-parte-consulta-popular-hackeada/>.

76 | "Removing political coordinated inauthentic behavior," Facebook, July 8, 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/07/removing-political-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior/>.

77 | Esteban Ponce de León and Daniel Suárez Pérez, "Facebook takes down inauthentic assets targeting multiple Latin American elections," DFRLab, July 8, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/facebook-takes-down-inauthentic-assets-targeting-multiple-latin-american-elections-1fa93c85501e>.

78 | Ibid.

79 | Ibid.



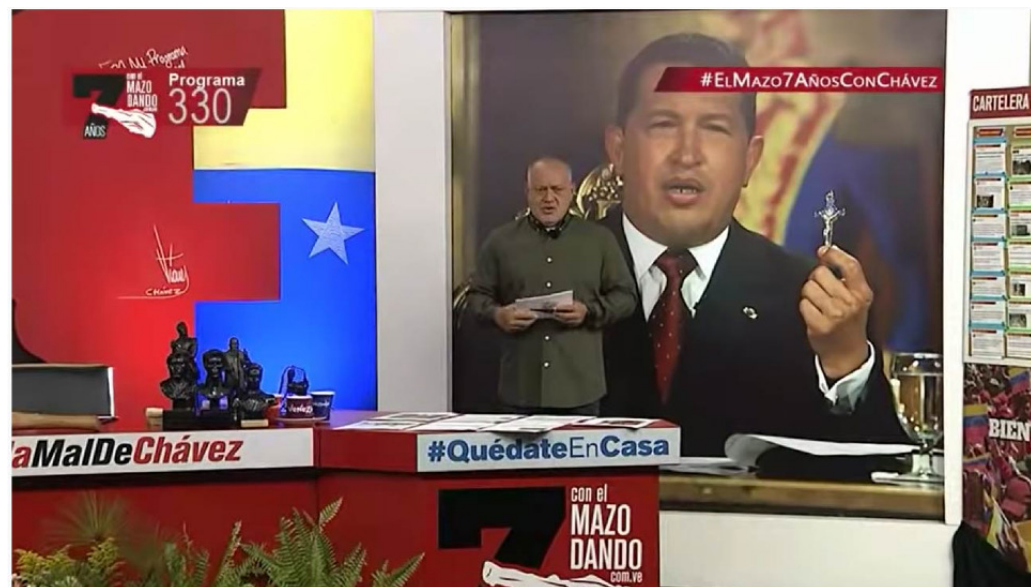
Screenshots of Instagram and Facebook posts from assets that the platforms removed for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior and that targeted Guaidó or supported Maduro.⁸⁰

One of most popular shows on VTV is “Con el Mazo Dando” (“Going at It with a Club”), a three-hour talk show aired weekly and starring Diosdado Cabello, Venezuela’s second-in-command. On the show, Cabello discusses anniversaries of historic dates, offers the regime’s take on stories published by independent media, makes fun of the opposition, and listens (with the audience) to old speeches by Chávez. The

show is also another tactic used by the regime to promote the amplification of hashtags on Twitter: at the beginning of each episode, Cabello announces a hashtag that should be promoted by Twitter users.

Over the #AlertaVenezuela monitoring period, YouTube took action against VTV. In August 2020, YouTube and Google suspended three VTV channels as well as associated Gmail

accounts. YouTube did not publicly explain the reason for the action, and VTV referred to it as “an attack on freedom of expression.”⁸² VTV recreated two of the channels, but the volume of engagement and reach is far below that of the earlier, removed channels.



Screenshot of video from “Con el Mazo Dando” that aired on February 10, 2021.⁸¹

Beyond state media, the regime also relies on private media for support, some of which are traditional outlets bought by entrepreneurs aligned with the regime. Others are hyper-partisan websites and blogs, such as Lechuguinos, Misión Verdad, La Iguana, and La Tabla,

80 | DFRLab-captured screenshots taken from Facebook, prior to their removal by the platform. @elsemanarioreg, “Por su parte, el líder opositor venezolano instó a sus seguidores a salir a las calles de Caracas el próximo 23 de julio para ‘avanzar a otra etapa de su lucha,’” Instagram post, July 18, 2019; Latam Post, “Venezuela escribe una carta al pueblo de EE.UU. para pedir ‘el cese de las sanciones.’ El mandatario venezolano hizo un llamado al pueblo de los Estados Unidos para que ponga freno a esta locura, para que responsabilice a sus gobernantes y los obligue a enfocar su atención en la atención urgente de la pandemia,” Facebook post, April 6, 2020; La Crema, “Está loco o ya no sabe qué decir: Su ineficiencia para tumbar al ‘chavismo’ en Venezuela ha sido más grande que el Orinoco. Pero el ‘Autoproclamado’ quiere convencerse de lo que no existe,” Facebook, October 7, 2019.

81 | Transmisión en vivo, “Con El Mazo Dando—Programa 330,” YouTube video, February 10, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SiuNCTp6Kk>.

82 | “YouTube suspende cuentas de VTV en su Plataforma,” Tal Cual, August 21, 2020, <https://talcualdigital.com/youtube-suspende-cuentas-de-vtv-en-su-plataforma/>.

that purport to be independent but serve as propaganda outlets for Maduro and his allies.

Effect of VTV's suspension on YouTube

	Subscribers before suspension*	Subscribers after suspension**
VTV Programas Completos	87,900	5,280
Multimedios VTV	314,000	3,470

Sources: YouTube, Social Blade.
*August 20, 2020. **February 16, 2021.



Most of the times, these outlets reinforced the regime's narratives by publishing their statements without questioning their veracity. Sometimes they also undertook

disinformation campaigns. For instance, Globovisión and Misión Verdad falsely claimed that Guaidó had misused funds the National Assembly received from the US Agency for International Development in 2020; in April 2020, Lechuginos claimed, without evidence, that the Colombian government had stolen international funds money destined to support Venezuelan migrants in the country.⁸³

Other forms of suppression: internet access limitations and blockages, violent crackdowns

Maduro's regime also used repressive actions, such as blocking or throttling internet access, to control the information domestically. Venezuelan NGO Ve Sin Filtro, which monitors internet availability in the country, registered internet shutdowns during the election for the presidency of the National Assembly on January 5, 2020. It also registered selective temporary blockages of websites. For instance, on February 1, 2020, Ve Sin Filtro reported that the news website "Punto de Corte" had been blocked, two days after publishing an article about infrastructural problems faced by CANTV, Venezuela's state internet provider.⁸⁴ On March 18, the NGO reported that a website made by Guaidó and the National Assembly to provide information about the COVID-19 pandemic had also been blocked.⁸⁵

blockages.⁸⁶ Additionally, in March 2020, Ve Sin Filtro noticed a phishing attack—powered by CANTV—that targeted a platform created by the interim presidency to give extra payments to healthcare professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸⁷ The regime also made it harder for users to access circumvention tools such as VPNs and blocked servers linked to an app that was one of the three ways Venezuelans could participate in Guaidó's consultation; the other ways to participate were through a Telegram channel or a dedicated website.⁸⁸

The regime also pursues censorship and persecution of journalists. Ipys Venezuela, as identified above, reported 141 violations against freedom of expression between July and December 2020.⁸⁹ Ipys Venezuela highlighted that the most "serious" cases related to suppression were the killings of two journalists, José Carmelo Bislick and Andrés Eloy Nieves Zacarías. While the motives behind the attack on Carmelo are unknown, Ipys Venezuela said that Maduro's security forces committed Nieves execution. Both Espacio Público and Ipys Venezuela said that Maduro's security forces and workers have been identified as the main attackers, and most of the victims are citizens and journalists participating or working amidst demonstrations for improved access to public services.

Websites from independent news outlets such as *Efecto Cocuyo* and *La Patilla* have also suffered temporary

83 | "Without evidence, pro-Maduro media claim Colombia stole migration funds," DFRLab, April 21, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/alertavenezuela/alertavenezuela-april-21-2020/>.

84 | "Bloquean Punto de Corte luego de publicar reportaje 'CANTV en las ruinas,'" VESINFILTRO, February 1, 2020, <https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/alerta-2020-01-31/>.

85 | "Bloquean sitio sobre coronavirus COVID-19 organizado por la AN y Juan Guaidó," VESINFILTRO, March 18, 2020, https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/bloqueado_portal_coronavirus_AN.

86 | "30 nuevos eventos de bloqueo: CANTV reactiva bloqueos HTTP," VESINFILTRO, October 12, 2020, https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/2020-10-12-30_nuevos_bloqueos_cantv/.

87 | "Preliminar report: State sponsored phishing against healthcare workers amid COVID-19 pandemic in Venezuela," VESINFILTRO, April 27, 2020, https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/2020-04-26-phishing_healthcare_heroes.

88 | "Maduro-controlled ISP sabotages participation in Venezuelan opposition's Consulta Popular," VESINFILTRO, December 12, 2020, https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/2020-12-07-consulta_popular_en/.

89 | Ibid.

Opposition information efforts

The Maduro regime's opposition—both the interim government headed by Guaidó and the radical groups calling for military intervention by the United States—use social media and websites to push their messages, though their efforts often have to circumvent the regime's strict control of the Venezuelan information environment. The opposition has also adopted information operations, especially the radical opposition, a sign of how deteriorated the information space is in Venezuela. Opposition groups have run structured and coordinated inauthentic operations, such as the one that used automation software to amplify Twitter posts from the anti-Chavista account DolarToday.⁹⁰

In contrast to the regime, the DFRLab did not find any information operation that could be directly connected to Juan Guaidó or his allies. Some operations, however, were meant to benefit Guaidó or the broader opposition to Maduro's regime.

On August 31, 2020, Facebook removed a network that engaged in “coordinated inauthentic behavior” targeting the Maduro regime. This network was attributed to the US-based strategic communications firm CLS Strategies. A report published by Stanford's Internet Observatory showed that, in the beginning, the inauthentic network supported opposition leaders, including former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles, Vente Venezuela opposition party coordinator María Corina Machado, and Guaidó. In 2020, however, they changed tone to target Guaidó and his allies, reflecting internal divisions in the opposition.⁹¹ There was no public information as to who hired CLS Strategies to run this campaign in Venezuela.

Other smaller campaigns also promoted Guaidó. On Instagram, an account named VenezuelaLucha, which has



The suspended Facebook assets supported Guaidó in 2019 (top) but, in 2020, changed their position toward Guaidó and his allies, such as Leopoldo López (bottom), Guaidó's political mentor.⁹²

1.4 million followers, amplified pro-Guaidó content and posted manipulated images to amplify anti-Maduro content.⁹³ The DFRLab also discovered pages that impersonated media outlets on Facebook in order to publish anti-Maduro and pro-Guaidó content. This operation, nonetheless, appeared to be motivated by profit, rather than by ideological reasons. Following the DFRLab's investigation, Facebook removed at least eighteen assets from the platform.⁹⁴

90 | Gallagher, “Automation in Venezuelan Twitter Networks.”

91 | Elena Cryst, Esteban Ponce de León, Daniel Suárez Pérez, Shelby Perkins, and David Thiel, “Bolivarian Factions: Facebook Takes Down Inauthentic Assets,” Stanford Internet Observatory, September 4, 2020, <https://stanford.app.box.com/v/20200903-cib-bo-vz>.

92 | Ibid.

93 | @venezuelalucha, “Aquí todos los pasos para la Consulta Popular. ¡No te quedes sin expresar tu opinión!,” Instagram post, November 4, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHK9aCypuDY/>; @venezuelalucha, “Upss.,” Instagram post, October 27, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CG3javYpbNQ/>; Alexis Correia, “¿Se identificó a Delcy Rodríguez de manera ofensiva en la pantalla de VTV?,” *Es Paja*, October 28, 2020, <https://espaja.com/verificaciones/delcy-rodriguez-fue-identificada-en-la-pantalla-de-vtv-con-un-cargo-equivocado>.

94 | Daniel Suárez Pérez, Luiza Bandeira, and Jean Le Roux, “Venezuelan fringe websites impersonate media outlets on Facebook,” DFRLab, March 24, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/venezuelan-fringe-websites-impersonate-media-outlets-on-facebook-a8ec4fe097c8>.

Another source of disinformation in the country were radical groups who support neither Guaidó nor Maduro, instead advocating for US military intervention. ProBox considers these groups to be the “radical opposition,” a group that includes the “Vente Venezuela” party headed by Machado and online communities such as “Muro de Occidente” (“West’s Wall”) or “Guerreros del Teclado” (“Keyboard Warriors”). The DFRLab also investigated the actions of other groups supporting a military intervention, such as “Rumbo Libertad” and “Derecha Ciudadana.”⁹⁵

These groups manipulated hashtags promoting US military interventions such as #TrumpAyudaMilitarYA (“Trump, [send] military support now”), which trended on January 23 and 24, 2020. This hashtag was mostly promoted by “EquipoTAC,” a radical opposition group, which tweeted the hashtag 500 times in two days, a spammy behavior that violates Twitter rules.

The accounts also pushed disinformation around possible US military interventions. For example, while Guaidó was in the United States in early 2020, they pushed a false narrative that he had given permission for the United States to lead an intervention into Venezuela. They also took one of Guaidó’s statements out of context to imply that he was no different from regime members, attempting to diminish his credibility and push the message that a military intervention was the only way forward to Venezuela.

Disinformation campaigns built around supposed plans of foreign military interventions, however, were not exclusive to radical opposition groups. The Maduro regime has also pointed similar claims at the United States, Colombia, and Guaidó and his supporters to divert attention away from Venezuela’s internal situation. Many of these operations never materialized or ended in supposedly failed attempts after the intervention of the Maduro regime’s security forces.

For instance, Maduro claimed⁹⁶ on the last day of International Week of Anti-imperialist Struggle⁹⁷ on October 10, 2020, that Colombia’s Duque had prepared for and would oversee an incursion into Venezuela. Maduro said that Duque was “at this moment” (i.e., on October 10, 2020) training over 1,000 “mercenaries and terrorists” to sabotage the Maduro-controlled parliamentary elections scheduled for December 6. On Facebook, pro-Maduro pages appeared among the most engaged-with assets to share the allegation between October 10 and October 13, 2020.⁹⁸ Pro-Maduro media outlet VTV published the most-shared Facebook post.⁹⁹

The Colombian Chancellor’s Office denied Maduro’s claims and described them as “false” on October 10.¹⁰⁰ On December 6, the Maduro regime did not report on an incursion during the elections, however, Tareck El Aissami, Maduro’s minister of oil, reported on December 11,¹⁰¹ five days after the elections, that “Bolivarian special forces” seized 47 kilograms of explosives. El Aissami said that three suspects, instead of the alleged thousands, had planned to attack El Palito oil refinery in Venezuela’s Carabobo state and that the attack was planned before the parliamentary elections.

An unsuccessful attempt to overthrow Nicolás Maduro on May 3, 2020, called “Operation Gedeon,”¹⁰² was one of the rare actual manifestations of an attempted military intervention by foreign non-state actors, but analysis by open-source forensic outlet *Bellingcat* and *Associated Press* journalist Joshua Goodman showed that the Maduro regime used manipulated content in presenting its evidence that its security forces operatives had thwarted the armed incursion.¹⁰³

The Maduro regime claimed that Colombia, the United States, and Guaidó were behind the failed attempt to oust him from power.¹⁰⁴

95 | “Venezuelan right-wing movements link Guaidó to Maduro,” DFRLab, February 18, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/alertavenezuela/alertavenezuela-february-18-2020/>.

96 | Multimedios vtv, “Pdte. Maduro participa en Festival Internacionalista de los Pueblos en Resistencia 2020,” October 10, 2020, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/B5eAOXRPgW?t=178>.

97 | “About,” International Week of Anti-Imperialist Struggle, October 13, 2020, <https://antiimperialistweek.org/en/about/>.

98 | “Pro-Maduro Facebook pages published the most-shared posts covering a dubious claim from Maduro about Colombia,” DFRLab, October 14, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/alertavenezuela/alertavenezuela-october-14-2020/>.

99 | VTVCanal8, “En Colombia se preparan más de mil mercenarios, bajo el entrenamiento del Ejército Nacional de Colombia y el amparo de Iván Duque, que pretenden infiltrarse en Venezuela para sabotear el clima político y electoral, denuncia el Presidente Nicolás Maduro,” Facebook video, October 10, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/VTVtuCanal/posts/3565881456795572>.

100 | Cancillería Colombia (@CancilleriaCol), “El Gobierno de Colombia rechaza las declaraciones del dictador Nicolás Maduro por falsas y absolutamente carentes de verdad,” Twitter, October 10, 2020, 4:21 p.m., <https://twitter.com/CancilleriaCol/status/1315039713246445569>.

101 | “Venezuela denuncia plan de acto terrorista contra instalaciones petroleras en su territorio,” *Telesur*, December 11, 2020, <https://www.telesur.net/news/venezuela-denuncia-plan-terrorista-contra-instalaciones-petroleras-20201211-0025.html>.

102 | Joshua Goodman, “Ex-Green Beret behind Venezuela raid suspected of plagiarism,” *AP*, May 7, 2020, <https://apnews.com/3b199c2dcbf6a3f8e39c4dc298da5f34>.

103 | Giancarlo Fiorella, “The Invasion of Venezuela, Brought To You By Silvercorp USA,” *Bellingcat*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/05/05/the-invasion-of-venezuela-brought-to-you-by-silvercorp-usa/>; Joshua Goodman (@APjoshgoodman), “At 8:00 mark, Denman makes exaggerated, unnatural eye movement when he mentions Trump as ultimate boss of the raid on Venezuela. His special forces’ buddies say it’s interrogation training techniques kicking in to communicate his answer isn’t truthful,” Twitter post, May 6, 2020, 11:29 p.m., <https://twitter.com/APjoshgoodman/status/1258252640020029443>.

104 | Carlos Eduardo Sánchez, “Maduro: Operación Gedeón sucedió por la desesperación de Donald Trump,” *Últimas Noticias*, January 31, 2021, <https://ultimasnoticias.com.ve/noticias/politica/maduro-operacion-gedeon-sucedio-por-la-desesperacion-de-donald-trump/>.

However, the Colombian and US governments denied Maduro's accusation.¹⁰⁵ Guaidó similarly denied involvement, but members of his interim government admitted that they knew of and initially supported plans for the incursion but stopped doing so well before it was underway in May 2020.¹⁰⁶ Guaidó also claimed that the Maduro regime infiltrated the incursion before it took place. Jorge Rodríguez, Maduro's former Minister of Communications and current president of the Maduro-controlled National Assembly, addressed the issue in press conferences before and after Operation Gedeon, during which he revealed that the regime knew about an operation against Maduro.¹⁰⁷



105 I "Versiones sobre supuesta conspiración para derrocar a Nicolás Maduro tocan a Colombia," *El Espectador*, May 3, 2020, <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/el-mundo/versiones-sobre-supuesta-conspiracion-para-derrocar-nicolas-maduro-tocan-colombia-articulo-917727/>.

106 I "J.J. Rendón renuncia al equipo de Juan Guaidó por su participación en la 'Operación Gedeón,'" *El Espectador*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/el-mundo/jj-rendon-renuncia-al-equipo-de-juan-guaido-por-su-participacion-en-la-operacion-gedeon-articulo-918940/>.

107 I *TeleSUR*, "Venezuela denuncia nuevos planes de desestabilización y magnicidios," March 25, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkJQRNfYpcQ>; Luigino Bracci Roa - Situación en Venezuela, "Jorge Rodríguez, nuevos testimonios sobre Operación Gedeón: Hermán Alemán y Clíver Alcalá," YouTube video, May 18, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJTrg41OG7c>.

Foreign attempts to influence Venezuela's information space

While Venezuela is witnessing a calcification of the Maduro regime's control of the domestic information environment, the international space still features a lively contest to shape the narrative about what is happening in the country. Many international actors support or denounce the regime in an attempt to impact Maduro's prospects, both at home and abroad. Shaping the information space in and around Venezuela remains important for many reasons, such as Venezuela's economic influence, especially through its oil reserves, and its geopolitical role as a center of anti-capitalist ideology in Latin America.

The country possesses the world's largest crude oil reserves,¹⁰⁸ which drives economic interest from countries such as Russia and Iran, and has loose supervision over the extraction of its other resources such as gold and coltan;¹⁰⁹ in 2020, the UN concluded that the mining industry has been poorly managed, allowing criminal enterprise to flourish.¹¹⁰ Venezuela is similarly attractive to other authoritarian regimes for its "anti-imperialist" stance, which makes it an important counterweight to—and ally for adversaries of—the United States, challenging it in its own "backyard."¹¹¹

While the country's economic and health infrastructures are collapsing, the Maduro regime seeks and receives support from like-minded autocracies (Russia, Iran, Cuba), whose messaging bolsters the regime and attacks the United States, in particular, as a common foe.

Russia: *RT in Spanish*, the Russian amplifier

Latin America has emerged as a strategic target for Russian President Vladimir Putin. According to experts, Putin is seeking to diversify Russia's political partnerships in Latin America, in part as a response to US engagement with countries on

Russia's own borders but also to counter the US presence and influence in the region.¹¹² Russia's strategic goals in Latin America raise the question of whether the Kremlin's activities in the region could lead to increased efforts to interfere in Venezuela's domestic affairs, in part through manipulation of public opinion.¹¹³

As of 2013-2014, the Kremlin has increasingly used information operations as a tool in its perceived war against the West. Russia has repeatedly targeted the United States with information operations designed to cause societal disruption, knowing that internal chaos might diminish its international reputation and cause the government to expend resources domestically that it would otherwise devote to its external hard and soft power projection. In this approach, the Kremlin aims to use its full spectrum of influence, including state media, a state-adjacent network of oligarchs, state-backed NGOs, and top government officials, intelligence services, and embassies, to support regimes that it perceives as adversarial against the West and liberal democratic order.

The Kremlin-owned news outlet *RT in Spanish* has been a major ally in the Maduro regime's efforts to shape the online conversation in the country and the region. For example, the outlet has led campaigns that favorably bolstered the Russian and Venezuelan responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, complimented the Maduro regime's decisions regarding Venezuelan migrants,¹¹⁴ and downplayed the ongoing economic, political, and humanitarian crises.

An analysis of more than 43,000 news articles published by *RT en Español* between January 2019 and July 2020 showed that the outlet has primarily used social media to share links to its own stories focused on US-related topics. Meanwhile, Venezuela-related topics have seemingly received more

108 | "Venezuela Oil," Worldometer, February 13, 2021, <https://www.worldometers.info/oil/venezuela-oil/#:~:text=Oil%20Reserves%20in%20Venezuela&text=Venezuela%20holds%20299%2C953%2C000%2C000%20barrels%20of,1%2C374.2%20times%20its%20annual%20consumption.>

109 | "Venezuela: UN report highlights criminal control of mining area, and wider justice concerns," *UN News*, July 15, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1068391>; Fabiola Zerpa, "Venezuela fuels an amazon gold rush with petrodollars drying up," *Bloomberg*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-31/venezuela-fuels-amazonian-gold-rush-with-petrodollars-drying-up>.

110 | "Venezuela: UN report highlights," *UN News*.

111 | Anatoly Kurmanaev, "Why Is Russia Helping Venezuela?," *The New York Times*, March 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/08/world/americas/russia-venezuela-maduro-putin.html>.

112 | Mar Pichel, "La era Putin en América Latina: cuáles son los objetivos estratégicos de Rusia en la región," *BBC News*, July 2, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-53219910>.

113 | Pichel, "La era Putin en América Latina."

114 | Daniel Suarez, "Maduro regime exploits return of Venezuelan migrants during pandemic," *DFRLab*, May 8, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/maduro-regime-exploits-return-of-venezuelan-migrants-during-pandemic-96ef92ca7138>.

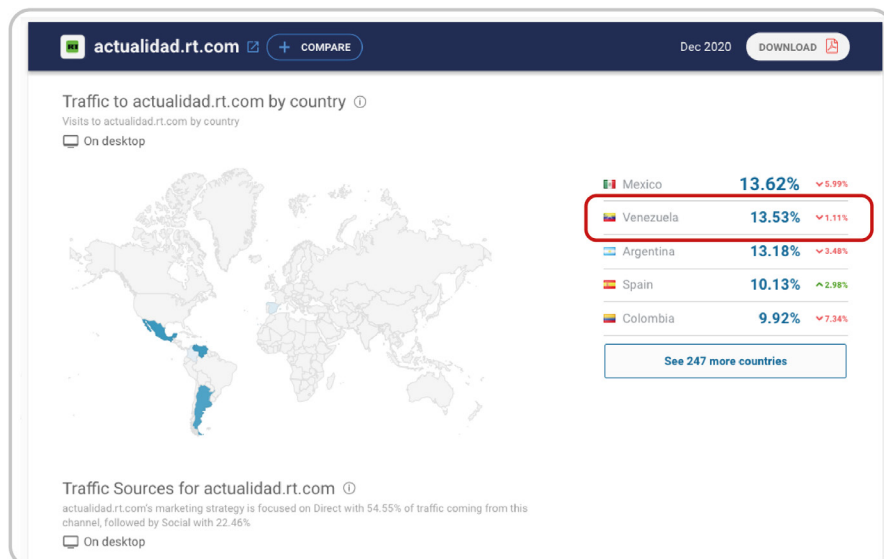
engagement on average.¹¹⁵ *RT in Spanish*'s website received 27.16 million visitors in December 2020, of which 13.5 percent (the second most active location of its audience with almost 3.67 million visitors) were located in Venezuela.¹¹⁶

According to a search using analytics tool Alexa,¹¹⁷ *RT in Spanish* appeared among the top fifty websites with more visitors and pageviews in Venezuela in January 2021. Although *RT in Spanish* appeared in fortieth place, it was the second media outlet on the list after anti-Maduro Venezuelan news outlet La Patilla. Pro-Maduro website La Iguana was the third media outlet in Alexa's rank.

Kremlin-funded media in Latin America, whose primary exponents are *RT in Español*, *Sputnik Mundo*, and *Sputnik Brasil*, have also been promoted by high-ranking Kremlin officials on their social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. On Twitter, Maduro's communication apparatus stands out for successfully promoting this alliance, demonstrating the capacity to amplify Russia's interests in Latin America, including for Russian projects and campaigns that benefit other Latin American countries besides Venezuela.¹¹⁹

RT in Spanish has also used associated social media accounts, such as a YouTube channel called Ahí les Va! to support the Maduro regime. For instance, a query for YouTube videos published between December 6 and December 16, 2020, showed that two videos for Ahí Les Va! were among the most engaged-with on Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Pinterest combined. The two videos supported the December 6 Maduro regime-controlled parliamentary elections¹²⁰ and criticized the results of "people's consultation" promoted by Guaidó.¹²¹

This channel, created in September 2019, had 688,000 subscribers as of March 2021 and did not explicitly mention its connection to RT; its videos did not carry RT's logo and the



Rank	Site	Daily pageviews per visitor
32	Seniat.gob.ve	9.20
33	Hzhongxing.cn	7.90
34	Binance.com	7.73
35	Xvideos.com	9.97
36	Iqbroker.com	1.10
37	Cinencialdad.is	4.95
38	Microsoft.com	3.30
39	Disneyplus.com	4.25
40	Rt.com	2.57
41	Wordpress.com	2.57
42	Laiguana.tv	4.10

*Screen caps shows SimilarWeb's (top) and Alexa's (bottom) queries on traffic to RT in Spanish's website in December 2020 and January 2021, respectively.*¹¹⁸

channel's description did not mention RT.

Inna Afinogenova and screenwriter Mirko Casale, the presenter and the scriptwriter of Ahí les Va!, respectively, described some of RT's strategies for Latin America during an interview with Salvadoran YouTube channel Bálsamo Radio-TV, on November 12, 2019. Both Afinogenova and Casale said they are based in Moscow, and they are working with an "alternative focus," that is different than the traditional

¹¹⁵ | Esteban Ponce de León, "A glimpse into RT's Latin American audience," DFRLab, August 7, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/a-glimpse-into-rt-latin-american-audience-487d52bed507>.

¹¹⁶ | Results of DFRLab query using SimilarWeb, February 4, 2021, <https://www.similarweb.com/website/actualidad.rt.com/>.

¹¹⁷ | Results of DFRLab query using Alexa, February 2, 2021, <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/VE>.

¹¹⁸ | Results of DFRLab-generated queries on SimilarWeb and Alexa, taken on February 4, 2021, and February 2, 2021, respectively.

¹¹⁹ | "Venezuelan Twitter accounts pushed Kremlin messaging on vaccine trials in Latin America," Atlantic Council's DFRLab, September 15, 2020 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/alertavenezuela/alertavenezuela-september-15-2020/>.

¹²⁰ | Ahí les Va!, "Elecciones en Venezuela: qué pasa ahora con Guaidó, sus apoyos, el Gobierno de Maduro...", December 8, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=859IcapwLZU>.

¹²¹ | Ahí les Va!, "La consulta de Guaidó fue tan inclusiva que votaron personas sin saberlo (y algunas sin pulso)," December 15, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Be3lBumi6E>.

mass media in Latin America. They said they believed the reach of their channel in the region was due to “focusing on social media,” and because they choose the coverage of specific countries according to their perceived geopolitical importance in the region.¹²²

Iran: An ideological alliance, built on pro-Maduro propaganda

As two of the founders of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Iran and Venezuela have had a longstanding relationship. While the dominance of oil in their economies makes them natural competitors when the commodity’s price is low, the latter’s plummeting oil output and recent changes in international relationships between Russia, China, and the United States have highlighted that a partnership is in their interest.

Iran, like Russia, concentrates its influence on the digital conversation in Venezuela through its state-funded Spanish-language news outlet, *HispanTV*. The broadcast execution, however, is far from effective. In 2020, Twitter¹²³ and YouTube¹²⁴ suspended its accounts. However, Venezuela-based accounts on Twitter and media outlets linked to *Chavismo* have been key allies for *HispanTV* in amplifying its Spanish-language content targeting Venezuela.

During the period analyzed, *HispanTV* campaigns targeting Venezuela coincided with events and commercial exchanges between both regimes, such as the Maduro-controlled parliamentary elections on December 6¹²⁵ and shipments of fuel sent from Iran that started in March 2020, at the outset of the pandemic.¹²⁶ The first two shipments arrived in Venezuela on May 25, 2020, amid heightened tensions with the United States due to sanctions it had imposed on both Iran and Venezuela.

After *Reuters* revealed the locations of the tankers using vessel tracking data tools and testimonies from opposition

politicians,¹²⁷ pro-Maduro accounts started using the hashtag #IranYVenezuelaUnionAntiimperialista (“Iran and Venezuela, Anti-imperialist Coalition”) on Twitter. The hashtag garnered 22,025 mentions between May 16 and May 19, 2020, reaching its peak (10,297) on May 18, the same day that *HispanTV* published an article boosting the hashtag and falsely claiming it had reached the trending topics in Venezuelan Twitter.¹²⁸ A search of Twitter activity between May 16 and May 18 using Trendinalia¹²⁹ and GetDayTrends¹³⁰ showed that the hashtags did not trend in Venezuela.

The DFRLab analyzed 10,413 mentions of #IranYVenezuelaUnionAntiimperialista by accounts that had defined their location,¹³¹ of which 87 percent (9,027 mentions) had a set location of Venezuela. Pro-Maduro Twitter account @adelso_Car, one of the accounts set to Venezuela, was the most active using the hashtag and amplifying *HispanTV*’s article. *HispanTV* also included a screenshot in its article of a post from the user account @adelso_Car praising Venezuela’s and Iran’s “anti-imperialist coalition.”

In reaction to US federal authorities seizing four vessels carrying fuel from Iran to Venezuela, *HispanTV* quoted La Tabla and amplified Iranian President Hassan Rouhani’s claim that the US authorities had “lied,” describing that the tankers did not belong to Iran. However, Iranian Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zanganeh argued semantically that “the fuel was Iranian.”¹³²

The DFRLab found that La Tabla used contradictory arguments to partially debunk a US Department of Justice (DOJ) press release describing the operation on August 14, 2020.¹³³ The DFRLab observed that, for instance, La Tabla suggested that the four vessels sailed from “enemy country” Israel and incorrectly claimed that the DOJ confirmed that the ships—instead of the “fuel shipments”—hailed from Iran. In the body of the article, however, La Tabla showed the results of queries using Marine Traffic, which showed the

122 | Bálamo Radio-Tv, “Entrevista con Inna Afinogenova y Mirko Casale, de *Russia Today* (RT),” November 12, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L51UD45h3cc>.

123 | “Twitter suspende de nuevo la cuenta de HispanTV,” *HispanTV*, October 6, 2020, <https://www.hispantv.com/noticias/politica/478676/twitter-bloqueo-cuenta-hispantv-eeuu>.

124 | “Censura: Google vuelve a bloquear acceso de HispanTV a YouTube,” *HispanTV*, February 12, 2020, <https://www.hispantv.com/noticias/social/449059/google-bloquea-youtube-hispantv>.

125 | HispanTV, “La alianza chavista gana las elecciones parlamentarias en Venezuela con el 67,6 % de 5,2 millones de votos,” Facebook video, December 7, 2020, 5:03 a.m., <https://www.facebook.com/HispanTV/posts/3800552990007480>.

126 | “Llegada de barcos iraníes a Venezuela, una gran derrota para EEUU,” *HispanTV*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.hispantv.com/noticias/venezuela/467060/barcos-iranies-derrota-imperialista-eeuu>.

127 | Marianna Parraga, and Luc Cohen, “Fuel cargo loaded at Iran sets sail to Venezuela: data,” *Reuters*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-fuel-iran/fuel-cargo-loaded-at-iran-sets-sail-to-venezuela-data-idUSKBN22P32I>.

128 | “Internautas alaban unión antimperialista de Irán y Venezuela,” *HispanTV*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.hispantv.com/noticias/venezuela/466340/iran-combustible-petrolero-eeuu>.

129 | Results of DFRLab query using Trendinalia, May 18, 2020, <https://www.trendinalia.com/twitter-trending-topics/venezuela/venezuela-200518.html>.

130 | Results of DFRLab query using GetDayTrends, May 18, 2020, <https://getdaytrends.com/venezuela/2020-05-18/20/>.

131 | Twitter allows account operators to define their location, as opposed to sourcing location automatically, such as from an IP address.

132 | Arsalan Shahla and Verity Ratcliffe, “Tehran Says Ships Targeted by US Were Holding Iranian Fuel,” *Bloomberg*, August 17, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-17/venezuela-bound-ships-seized-by-u-s-had-loaded-gasoline-in-iran>.

133 | “Pro-Maduro media amplified Iran’s false claims about US ‘lies,’” DFRLab, August 19, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/alertavenezuela/alertavenezuela-august-19-2020/>.

departure ports for the ships as the United Arab Emirates. A search on Marine Traffic by the DFRLab, however, showed that two of the vessels (the Luna¹³⁴ and the Pandi¹³⁵) were in Omani waters, near Iran, between May and July. Although the information from Marine Traffic is limited and not conclusive, the locations shown in the DFRLab's search coincided with an August 17 statement to *Bloomberg* from Vice Admiral James Malloy, commander of the US Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain.¹³⁶

HispanTV presented La Tabla's article as "research" that proved the DOJ statement, as well as related press articles on the seizure, were "false."

Cuba: The Cuban saviors

Cuba stands out for having the closest ideological influence with the Maduro regime as, from its outset, the Chávez administration (and that of his successor) sought to create ideological linkages with Cuba's late president Fidel Castro. Exchanges between both countries have ranged from oil, medicine, and medical personnel to military and government advisors.¹³⁷ For instance, an agreement between the two countries signed in 2000 sought to trade 53,000 oil barrels per day from Venezuela in exchange for more than 13,000 Cuban medical personnel and medicines.¹³⁸ More recently, Maduro, following agreements initially established by Chávez, has adopted repressive tactics similar to those of the Cuban regime.¹³⁹

In this vein, Cuban and Venezuelan entities have taken to Twitter in joint efforts to push coordinated narratives. Between February 1 and February 4, 2020, for example, Twitter accounts notionally¹⁴⁰ located in Cuba and Venezuela jointly promoted the hashtag #OEATraidoraDeSuramerica ("OAS Traitor to South America"), using it in a total of 42,443 posts. The accounts targeted the Organization of American States (OAS) for its work in Latin America. In Venezuela, the hashtag trended on February 2 and February 3 and coincided with tweets from both Guaidó and the Maduro regime regarding an OAS delegation that the regime had blocked from entering the country.

Among the most active Cuban accounts using #OEATraidoraDeSuramerica was @DeZurdaTeam. According

to Twitter, as cited by the Stanford Internet Observatory,¹⁴¹ @DeZurdaTeam belonged to a network linked to the Cuban state, that Twitter revealed on September 24, 2020. The network pushed "patriotic, pro-Cuba, and anti-US content," as well as increased the number of tweets during the COVID-19 pandemic focusing on Cuba's medical diplomacy.

Cuba-linked accounts pushed hashtags denouncing US sanctions on both Venezuela and Cuba and promoting Cuban medical missions to Venezuela between April 2 and May 1, 2020, a few weeks after both countries confirmed their first cases of COVID-19.¹⁴² The investigation analyzed six hashtags initially posted by Cuban accounts about discussions either critical of the US sanctions on both Cuba and Venezuela or supporting the Cuban medical missions to confront the COVID-19 outbreak. The hashtags analyzed were #BloqueoNoSolidaridadSí ("Blockade No, Solidarity Yes"), #ElBloqueoMata ("The Blockade Kills"), #CubaCoopera ("Cuba Cooperates"), #CubaSalvaElAmor ("Cuba Saves Love"), #TheBlockadeKills, and #ViviremosYVenceremos ("We Will Live and Overcome"). Among the most active accounts using the six hashtags were Cuban accounts for Cuban embassies around the world, Cuban organizations located in Cuba, and Cuban healthcare organizations or personnel connected to the Cuban medical missions in Venezuela. Accounts with their location set to Cuba posted 25 percent of all mentions of the six hashtags (nearly 22,500 posts), while Venezuela-based accounts gathered around 10 percent of all mentions, some 9,000 posts.

134 | Results of DFRLab query using MarineTraffic, August 18, 2020, <https://www.marinetraffic.com/en/ais/details/ships/shipid:123415/mmsi:636019604/imo:9208100/vessel:LUNA>.

135 | Results of DFRLab query using MarineTraffic, August 18, 2020, <https://www.marinetraffic.com/en/ais/details/ships/shipid:752807/mmsi:636010513/imo:9105073/vessel:PANDI>.

136 | Berwick, "Imported Repression."

137 | Ibid.

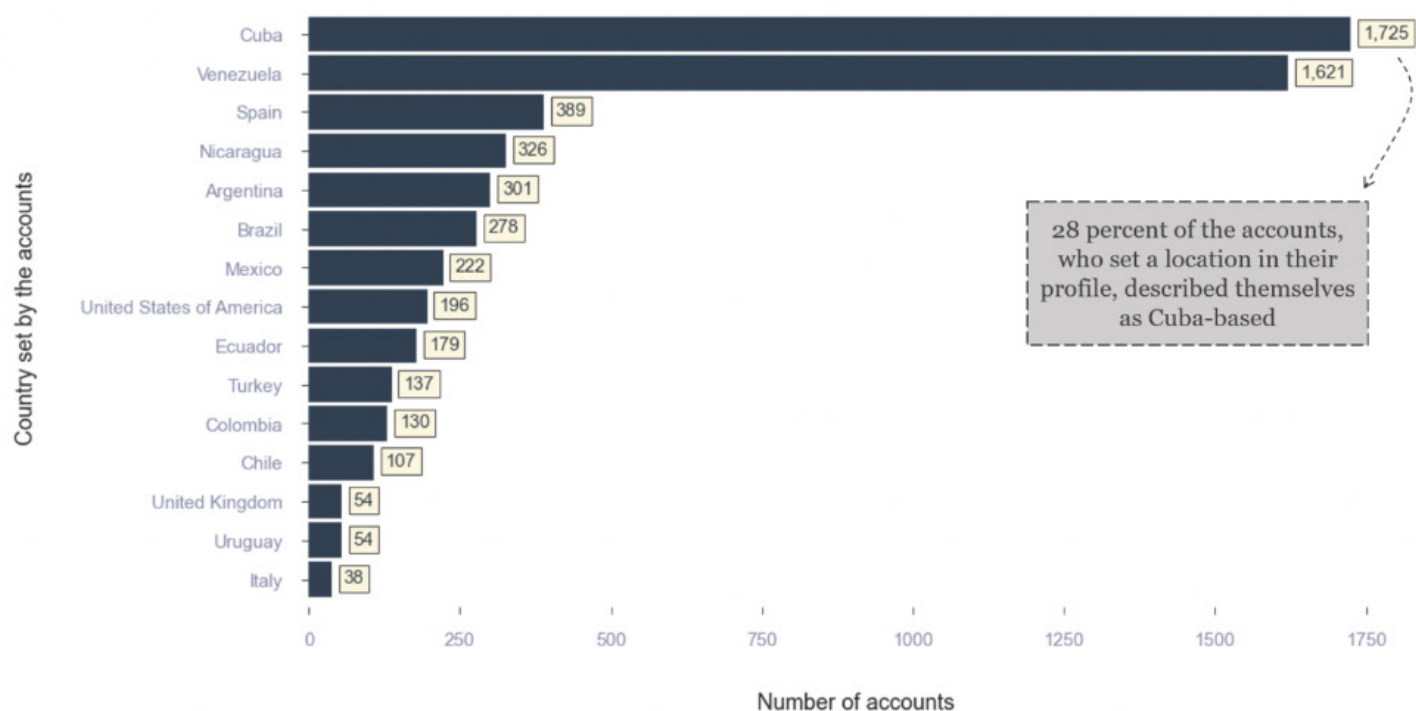
138 | "Cuba y Venezuela: 20 años de un matrimonio conveniente y dispar," Alianza Rebelde Investiga (ARI), October 20, 2020, <https://alianza.shorthandstories.com/cuba-y-venezuela---20-a-os--de-un-matrimonio-conveniente--y-dispar---/index.html>.

139 | Ibid.

140 | As noted in a previous footnote, the account operators can set their location to wherever they want, if they choose to set a location at all.

141 | Elena Cryst and Shelby Perkins, "DeZurdaTeam: A Twitter network promotes pro-Cuba hashtags," Stanford Internet Observatory, October 7, 2020, <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/twitter-takedown-october-2020>.

142 | Esteban Ponce de León, and Daniel Suárez Pérez, "Cuba-linked Twitter activity trends in Venezuela," DFRLab, June 30, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/cuba-linked-twitter-activity-trends-in-venezuela-268cad28261b>.



Accounts that set their location to Cuba and Venezuela were the most active using the hashtags #BloqueoNoSolidaridadSí (“Blockade No, Solidarity Yes”), #ElBloqueoMata (“The Blockade Kills”), #CubaCoopera (“Cuba Cooperates”), #CubaSalvaElAmor (“Cuba Saves Love”), #TheBlockadeKills, and #ViviremosYVenceremos (“We Will Live and Overcome”). Cuban accounts initially posted the six hashtags between April 2 and May 1, 2020, criticizing the US sanctions on both Cuba and Venezuela and supporting the Cuban medical missions to confront the COVID-19 outbreak.¹⁴³

The DFRLab identified that a small group of accounts generated more than half the volume of mentions per hashtag in a likely attempt at platform manipulation. This joint campaign exploited the narrative that the US policies are to blame for each country’s economic crisis and their limited response to the coronavirus emergency.

Regime rivals abroad: disinformation from social media users in the United States, Colombia, and Brazil

Social media users in countries governed by Maduro opponents—such as Brazil, the United States, and Colombia—also undertook disinformation campaigns about Venezuela in pursuit of their own agenda, most often as a means of attempting to undermine Maduro.

Several of these campaigns happened on YouTube, where channels originating in Colombia, Panama, Peru, and the

United States have tried to discredit the Maduro regime by using false information. Although Maduro used claims about foreign military interventions orchestrated by the United States and Colombia to divert the attention from Venezuela’s domestic problems, the most engaged-with and viewed claims within this overarching narrative were on YouTube channels of users from those four countries. These YouTube channels also falsely claimed Maduro had been overthrown or that his security forces had deserted en masse; as with the claims around foreign military interventions, however, these claims too never materialized.¹⁴⁴ The videos appeared to garner more views in the Spanish-speaking world than international media outlets or pro-Maduro channels during the different periods analyzed.

The channels’ videos mostly quoted news articles and videos to misleadingly support their claims around Venezuela’s political and humanitarian situation, and DFRLab analysis showed that profit seemed to be the primary motivation for the propagation of false claims and sensationalism, while

143 | DFRLab-generated graph, created using Python.

144 | “Anti-Maduro YouTube channel claimed, without evidence, that Nicolás Maduro had been ousted from power,” DFRLab, January 26, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/alertavenezuela/alertavenezuela-january-26-2021/>.

Sort by: Views 1,459 Results EXPORT

Select All	Actions	Video Title	Video Length	Likes	Dislikes	Comments	Social Engagement	Views
<input type="checkbox"/>		<p>¡URGENTE! HACE UNAS HORAS! NOTICIAS DE VENEZUELA, GOLPE AL REGIMEN DE MADURO, NOTICIAS DE HOY! Noticias de Ultima Hora Venezuela - Mar 1, 2021</p> <p>Entertainment View full insights</p>	11:36	7.6K	836	587	111	400.2K
<input type="checkbox"/>		<p>Esto está PASANDO en VENEZUELA y NO, NO SON BUENAS NOTICIAS Mar 7, 2021</p> <p>People & Blogs View full insights</p>	3:01	18.5K	428	3.9K	87	172.8K
<input type="checkbox"/>		<p>¡URGENTE! ULTIMO MINUTO! NOTICIAS DE VENEZUELA, LO ENTREGAN A ESTADOS UNIDOS, NOTICIAS DE HOY! Noticias de Ultima Hora Venezuela - Mar 4, 2021</p> <p>Entertainment View full insights</p>	12:10	3.4K	230	269	46	172.8K
<input type="checkbox"/>		<p>Así están los MC DONALDS - BURGER KING y ARTURO'S EN VENEZUELA - Oscar Alejandro Oscar Alejandro - Mar 3, 2021</p> <p>People & Blogs View full insights</p>	17:45	9.4K	286	1.1K	53	172.4K
<input type="checkbox"/>		<p>JEFFERSON visitando AL GORDITO VENEZOLANO DE CHABUCA GRANDA! Ponce Producciones - Mar 7, 2021</p> <p>Comedy View full insights</p>	21:11	8.8K	113	582	28	172.2K

Screncap of a query using BuzzSumo on 1,459 videos posted about Venezuela between March 1 and March 8, 2021. The YouTube channel Noticias de Ultima Hora Venezuela posted the first and the third most viewed videos (orange boxes). The videos posted on March 1¹⁴⁵ and March 4¹⁴⁶ used thumbnails that misleadingly suggest that the United States bombed Venezuela and that Maduro had been captured.¹⁴⁷

political interests appeared secondary. The channels' videos frequently used thumbnails showing memes, manipulated images from media, and headlines suggesting that Maduro was in prison or that the supposed foreign military interventions in Venezuela were imminent.¹⁴⁸ The channels used the thumbnails as a means of generating clickthrough revenue as the videos had ads turned on and significant viewership.¹⁴⁹ Alternatively, the DFRLab also identified channels such as Súper Viralísimo and Magister Comunica that asked for donations and memberships in the description of the videos.

Panamanian channel Parecen Noticias Extra was one of the most active YouTube channels targeting Venezuela in 2020. On February 1, 2020, the channel posted a video in which the presenter falsely claimed that Guaidó had signed an agreement with US President Donald Trump clearing the way for a US military intervention in the country. The video additionally claimed that the final decision would be Trump's and that Maduro was "on alert" because of the deal. The video amassed almost 102,000 views and appeared during Guaidó's international tour seeking political support in Europe and the United States.¹⁵⁰ After Guaidó returned to Venezuela on February 11, he announced free and democratic elections as the new plan to remove the Maduro regime from power and did not mention any possible foreign military intervention.¹⁵¹

An analysis of YouTube videos covering Venezuela published between April 8 and April 15, 2020, showed that two Colombian channels amassed over 1.6 million views and used unreliable evidence to attack the Maduro regime. In the video, posted by the channel Social News on April 13,¹⁵² the narrator claimed that the Maduro regime had killed migrants returning to Venezuela because they were infected with COVID-19. The second video,¹⁵³ posted by the channel Noticias de Ultima Hora on April 11, argued that Trump had ordered an invasion of Venezuela to remove Maduro from power. Although Maduro's security forces announced Operation Gedeon as a failed attempt to oust Maduro from power on May 3, 2020, the video referred

145 | Noticias de Ultima Hora Venezuela, "¡URGENTE! HACE UNAS HORAS! NOTICIAS DE VENEZUELA, GOLPE AL REGIMEN DE MADURO, NOTICIAS DE HOY!", YouTube video, March 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBbG7OJEu6c>.

146 | Noticias de Ultima Hora Venezuela, "URGENTE! ULTIMO MINUTO! NOTICIAS DE VENEZUELA, LO ENTREGAN A ESTADOS UNIDOS, NOTICIAS DE HOY!", YouTube video, March 4, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKwbDk4i8YU>.

147 | Results of DFRLab query using BuzzSumo, March 8, 2021.

148 | Ibid.

149 | "Suspicious Facebook assets amplified YouTube channel spreading misleading claims against the Maduro regime," DFRLab, October 20, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/alertavenezuela/alertavenezuela-october-20-2020/>.

150 | "Rumors about military intervention gain momentum," DFRLab, February 11, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/alertavenezuela/alertavenezuela-february-11-2020/>.

151 | Juan Guaidó (@jguaido), "Trabajamos con el #GrupoDeLima en una agenda de acciones concretas que acompañan nuestro objetivo de rescatar la Democracia y lograr la Libertad de Venezuela. Estamos unidos en causa y acción con nuestros aliados. #UnidosConElMundo," Twitter post, February 21, 2020, 6:55 a.m., <https://twitter.com/jguaido/status/1230823477608898563>.

152 | SOCIAL NEWS, "NOTICIAS DE VENEZUELA HOY 14 ABRIL 2020 insólito en frontera desaparecen a los conta giados," YouTube video, April 13, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xnXlrOZ2Q>.

153 | NOTICIAS DE ULTIMA HORA, "homenaje los caidos de venezuela hoy," YouTube video, April 12, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3V_oyFyzlc.



Channel	Date created	Country	Videos uploaded	Subscribers	Channel views	Average views per video
 PARECEN NOTICIAS EXTRA	11/12/2013	Panama	2,592	1,560,000	472,423,808	182,262
 SOCIAL NEWS	27/05/2019	Colombia	1,603	586,000	141,381,900	88,198
 NOTICIAS MUNDIALES AL DÍA	28/01/2019	Colombia	1,084	434,000	79,625,680	73,455
 Super Viralisimo	7/02/2016	United States	2,323	301,000	77,408,933	33,323
 Noticias de Ultima Hora Venezuela	19/05/2017	Colombia	1,587	327,000	59,123,139	37,255
 Videos Virales Noticias	2/01/2019	Peru	111	287,000	43,201,207	389,200
 Noticias Al Dia 024	28/06/2017	United States	570	424,000	34,816,527	61,082
 Magister Comunica	31/01/2019	United States	438	219,000	26,616,037	60,767
 NOTIMORTH	26/10/2017	Colombia	374	135,000	22,275,879	59,561
 NOTICIAS DE ULTIMA HORA	17/07/2012	Colombia	98	278,000	16,581,455	169,199
 ULTIMAS NOTICIAS	27/06/2014	Colombia	255	N/A	16,018,771	62,819
 Noticias Del Momento	1/06/2015	Colombia	619	242,000	15,706,842	25,375
 NOTICIAS DIARIAS	11/12/2016	United States	886	97,500	15,651,686	17,666
 ULTIMA HORA VENEZUELA	4/06/2019	United States	358	70,800	8,511,340	23,775
 EL FARO INFORMATIVO	4/02/2008	Colombia	735	126,000	7,087,741	9,643
 Noticias VRDS	20/02/2016	United States	918	92,200	5,699,534	6,209
 Noticias Mundiales TV	7/11/2013	Colombia	203	149,000	5,920,255	29,164
 Noticias de Venezuela Hoy	4/09/2018	Colombia	48	242,000	1,931,570	40,241
 NOTICIAS AL DIA	29/05/2017	Colombia	225	11,000	1,600,147	7,112

Table consisting of nineteen YouTube channels that DFRLab monitored during the #AlertaVenezuela monitoring period that spread false or misleading claims about Venezuela.¹⁵⁴

154 | DFRLab-generated graph using channels' data from Social Blade and YouTube.

to the US-led counter-narcotic operation that Trump announced on April 1.

Between December 28, 2020, and January 4, 2021, the DFRLab found that the Colombian YouTube channel Noticias Mundiales Al Día posted five of the 20 most watched videos discussing Venezuela.¹⁵⁵ The channel, which outperformed other channels including those belonging to news outlets covering Venezuela, propagated unsubstantiated claims about the extradition process for Maduro's diplomat Alex Saab,¹⁵⁶ an upcoming but unspecified foreign military intervention against Maduro, and that Maduro would be ousted from power. The channel also amplified Trump's claims of supposed voting fraud during the US presidential elections. The DFRLab previously identified, on October 20, 2020, that the channel's videos were shared by Facebook assets demonstrating signs of inauthentic behavior, promoting content targeting the Maduro regime and amplifying Guaidó's call for public protests.¹⁵⁷

The only anti-Maduro influence campaign built around disinformation that could be linked to a state-actor came from Brazil. On July 8, 2020, Facebook announced the removal of an inauthentic network that was attributed to employees of the Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, his sons, and other politicians that supported him. Some of the assets used memes and false information to portray Venezuela as a failed state country, promote anti-socialist content, and call for a foreign military intervention. The operation, however, appeared to be targeting a domestic Brazilian audience rather than Venezuela, which only arose in the context of generating fear among Brazilians that their country would become the "next Venezuela."¹⁵⁸ The narrative has been observed repeatedly over the past two years, often being used to target left-wing leaning candidates in different countries around Latin America.¹⁵⁹



155 | "Colombian YouTube channel was the most viewed amplifying false claims against the Maduro regime and the US elections," DFRLab, January 5, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/alertavenezuela/alertavenezuela-january-5-2021/>.

156 | For more on Alex Saab, see: Juliet Pineda Sleinan, "Cape Verde Court Approves Extradition of Maduro's Ally to the US," Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, January 5, 2021, <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/13580-cape-verde-court-approves-extradition-of-maduro-s-ally-to-the-us>.

157 | "Suspicious Facebook assets amplified YouTube channel," DFRLab.

158 | Luiza Bandeira, Esteban Ponce de León, and Zariné Kharazian, "Facebook removes inauthentic network linked to Bolsonaro allies," DFRLab, July 8, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/facebook-removes-inauthentic-network-linked-to-bolsonaro-allies-5927b0ae750d>.

159 | Luiza Bandeira, "#ElectionWatch: What Was Up with WhatsApp in Brazil?," DFRLab, January 14, 2019, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/electionwatch-what-was-up-with-whatsapp-in-brazil-f8476814730f>.

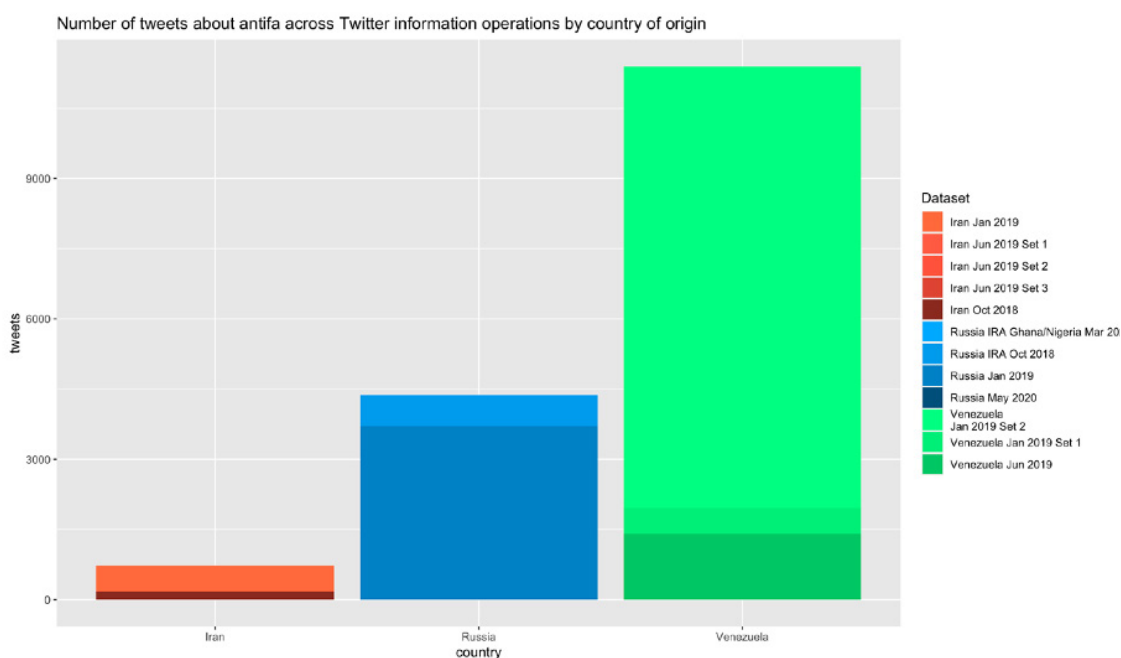
Venezuela's outward attempts at influence

Venezuela is not only a stage on which foreign countries compete for their interests. The Maduro regime, its supporters, and actors unaffiliated with the regime also tried to exert outward influence on other countries, especially in the Spanish-speaking world. Either by using state media or manipulating conversations on Twitter, the regime has tried to manipulate other countries' information environments, especially when supporting aligned governments and parties. This section looks at the Maduro regime's known attempts to influence other countries, though ultimately the impact of these efforts was likely low.

In 2017, Spanish researcher Javier Lesaca found, for instance, that, between September 29 and October 5, 2017, Twitter accounts self-described as located in Venezuela or as "Chavista" amplified RT and Sputnik articles "to propagate a negative image of Spain in the days running up to and after the October 1 referendum on independence in Catalonia."¹⁶⁰ Maduro and, before him, Chávez, both support the independence of Catalonia.

On January 31, 2019, Twitter announced the suspension of accounts originated in Iran, Russia, and Venezuela that tried to intervene in the United States 2018 midterm elections.¹⁶¹ The DFRLab analyzed these accounts in 2019 and then again in 2020, after protests erupted across the United States following the May 25 killing of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police. The DFRLab investigated how a US domestic far-right disinformation campaign sowed fear over "antifa

terrorism" and had been exploited by foreign actors in the past.¹⁶² It found that Venezuela-based accounts in Twitter's archive sent out over twice as many tweets (69.1 percent) as Russian and Iranian accounts mentioning "antifa." Despite the high number of mentions, tweets originating in Venezuela had lower engagement, which might have resulted from the Venezuelan operation seemingly making heavier use, when compared to Russian and Iranian operations, of automation and spamming tactics;¹⁶³ the high volume of posts resulting from such tactics would dilute the content infiltrating the US domestic information environment and drive down overall engagement.¹⁶⁴



Volume of tweets targeting the United States, divided by country of origin and dataset.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁰ I Ibid; also: David Alandete, "Russian network used Venezuelan accounts to deepen Catalan crisis" El País, November 11, 2017, https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2017/11/11/inenglish/1510395422_468026.html.

¹⁶¹ Tony Romm, "Twitter removed some accounts originating in Iran, Russia and Venezuela that targeted US midterm election," *The Washington Post*, January 31, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/01/31/twitter-removed-some-accounts-originating-iran-russia-venezuela-that-targeted-us-midterms/>.

¹⁶² I Twitter attributes posts in its Information Operations Archive to countries, enabling researchers to parse between different countries.

¹⁶³ Zarine Kharazian, Working Paper: The enduring domestic disinformation campaign about "antifa" and its interactions with foreign influence operations—examining Russian, Iranian, and Venezuelan actors on Twitter, DFRLab.

¹⁶⁴ I Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ I DFRLab-generated graph using data from Twitter's archive.

In its first statement, in January, Twitter said was not able to tie the accounts to a foreign government but did note that “the behavior we uncovered is similar to that utilized by potential Russian IRA accounts.”¹⁶⁶ In a later blog post, published in June 2019, Twitter clarified that “[w]hile there were initial indications that these accounts were associated with the Russian Internet Research Agency, our further analysis suggests that they were operated by a commercial entity originating in Venezuela.”¹⁶⁷ The attribution indicated that, at least in this case, accounts based in Venezuela used techniques similar to Russian tactics—not only amplifying its own narratives but sowing confusion and exploiting domestic fragilities within the United States.

Venezuela was also accused of meddling in other political processes, but the DFRLab did not find evidence of that. In the end of 2019, after protests broke out in Chile and Ecuador, the Organization of the American States (OAS), among others, claimed that Venezuela and Cuba were behind attempts to destabilize the two countries. In Chile, the DFRLab did not find evidence that the Maduro regime orchestrated a state-backed operation in the online space to influence the country’s domestic affairs. The DFRLab analyzed 1.1 million tweets about the Chilean protests posted between October 16 and October 25, 2019, and found that 20,443 (1.86 percent) came from accounts that self-identified as Chavistas. Although accounts for *RT en Español* and *Telesur* appeared as the most retweeted when posting content related to the death of protesters, there was no indication that the Maduro regime or the Kremlin were behind the accounts retweeting the outlets’ articles.¹⁶⁸

There was also no indication that Venezuela used inauthentic methods to influence the conversation in Bolivia in November 2019, after Evo Morales left the Presidency of Bolivia following pressure from the country’s military. The DFRLab investigated hashtags on Twitter originating in Venezuela or from self-identified Venezuelan accounts. It found that two of the most used hashtags pushing the idea that Morales’ resignation was the result of a coup—a thesis

that was shared by other independent scholars¹⁶⁹—came from Venezuela and were promoted by the regime.¹⁷⁰ Still, there was no indication of massive use of inauthentic accounts in the campaign.

Morales resigned and left Bolivia on November 11, 2019, amid mass protests over mostly unsubstantiated allegations of vote rigging in the presidential election, in which he was seeking a controversial new term after almost fourteen years of leading the country. Following Morales’s resignation, Jeanine Áñez, vice president of the Senate and leader of the opposition, took office as interim president. On October 18, 2020, new elections held in Bolivia elected Luis Arce, a candidate from Morales’s Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) party. Although Arce has distanced himself from Morales,¹⁷¹ the exiled president returned to Bolivia on November 9, 2020.¹⁷²

In addition to cases in which the regime or its supporters appeared to be involved in influence efforts, Venezuela-linked accounts not aligned with Maduro also attempted to manipulate the conversation on social media, sometimes using inauthentic behavior or amplifying false claims. On November 4, 2020, after the US presidential election on November 3, accounts with locations set to Venezuela were among the most active amplifying in the Spanish language Trump’s false narratives that voting fraud had occurred. The Venezuela-linked accounts appeared among the most engaged-with posts sharing false claims while translating them from English into Spanish.¹⁷³

After January 6, when thousands of Trump supporters attacked the US Capitol in Washington, DC, the Maduro regime and Maduro himself made a disingenuous offer to be a peacemaker “to stop the polarization.”¹⁷⁴ Websites for the Maduro regime’s ministries were the most engaged-with on social media amplifying the Maduro regime’s proposal,¹⁷⁵ and *RT in Spanish*, in particular, was the most engaged-with media outlet supporting the Maduro regime suggestions.¹⁷⁶

166 | Kharazian, “Working Paper: The enduring domestic disinformation.”

167 | Ibid.

168 | Esteban Ponce de León and Luiza Bandeira, “Venezuelan ‘chavista’ accounts take an interest in Chilean protests,” DFRLab, November 7, 2019, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/venezuelan-chavista-accounts-take-an-interest-in-chilean-protests-b81bfb82014e>

169 | Gabriel Hetland, “Many wanted Morales out. But what happened in Bolivia was a military coup,” *The Guardian*, November 13, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/nov/13/morales-bolivia-military-coup>.

170 | “Maduro claims there was a coup in Bolivia, while Guaidó supports Morales’s resignation,” DFRLab, November 12, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/alertavenezuela/alertavenezuela-november-12-2019/>.

171 | “Luis Arce, ganador de las elecciones en Bolivia, a la BBC: ‘Si Evo Morales quiere ayudarnos será muy bienvenido pero eso no quiere decir que él estará en el gobierno,’” *BBC News Mundo*, October 20, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-54610692>.

172 | Ayelén Oliva, “Evo Morales: la historia de su regreso a Bolivia (y nuevos detalles de su partida hace un año),” *BBC News Mundo*, November 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-55025234>.

173 | “Venezuela-linked Twitter accounts supported US President Donald Trump’s narratives on electoral fraud,” DFRLab, November 11, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/alertavenezuela/alertavenezuela-november-11-2020/>.

174 | Multimedios vtv, “Reunión con Autoridades del Consejo de Defensa de la Nación y el Consejo de Estado,” YouTube video, January 7, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xK_O-sqpoJl.

175 | Karla Cotoret, “Presidente Maduro: Venezuela ofrece su concurso para el diálogo y la paz de EEUU,” Ministry of Communications, January 14, 2021, <http://www.minci.gob.ve/presidente-maduro-venezuela-ofrece-su-concurso-para-el-dialogo-y-la-paz-de-eeuu/>.

176 | “Maduro, sobre la toma del Capitolio de EE.UU.: ‘¿Quién lo iba a decir del país del que surgen los golpes de Estado?’,” *RT*, January 8, 2021, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/379505-maduro-comparar-toma-capitolio-golpes-estado>

Case study: the Maduro regime's full spectrum propaganda apparatus around COVID-19

The regime's reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic—a topic that arose frequently during the DFRLab's monitoring period—was a demonstration of its full spectrum propaganda and repression apparatus, as well as spreading lies and conspiracy theories, and boosting or blaming other countries, depending on their geopolitical stances. This section looks at the breadth of the Maduro regime's application of digital autocracy around the COVID-19 outbreak.

Before the arrival of the virus to Venezuela but after it had arisen in China and the global conversation around it was already robust, Maduro was promoting the narrative that the Venezuelan healthcare system was prepared for the effects of the pandemic, despite evidence that the system was already deteriorating. He also attacked adversary states, such as the United States and Colombia, for not having free and universal public healthcare systems.

Repressive tactics were applied throughout the pandemic. The regime did not publish reliable numbers of cases and deaths caused by the virus, and those who have questioned or presented information on healthcare failures have been the targets of persecution, ranging from defamatory social media campaigns to trials and detainment. Through its internet providers, the regime also blocked access to apps and websites related to COVID-19 recovery actions facilitated by Guaidó.

When Venezuelans who had migrated abroad started to return to the country amid lockdown measures in their host countries, especially Colombia, the regime and its

propaganda apparatus exaggerated the number of migrants coming back in an attempt to push the narrative that the situation in Venezuela was better than that of other countries. In pushing the narrative, the regime emphasized that the countries from which the migrants were returning had worse healthcare and rampant xenophobia.

Maduro also pushed a number of conspiracy theories, such as claiming the virus was a bioweapon created by the United States¹⁷⁷ or saying neighboring countries such as Colombia and Brazil were infecting Venezuelan migrants with a more lethal strain before they return home.¹⁷⁸ He also promoted a series of supposed cures that have not been proven effective by science, such as herbs¹⁷⁹ and miracle drops.¹⁸⁰ The regime has also become a promoter of drugs and vaccines that his allies, such as Cuba and Russia, have commercialized and tested in the region to treat the novel coronavirus.¹⁸¹

Maduro and his supporters have claimed since the beginning of the pandemic in Venezuela that Russian President Vladimir Putin had successfully dealt with the novel coronavirus in Russia, and not only emerged victorious in his country but was also able to assist governments that have attacked Putin. These claims, however, were made under dubious circumstances: Russia has been inconsistent in its public reporting of COVID-19-related fatalities and rushed its drugs and vaccines to market before phase 3 clinical trials were complete.¹⁸² Despite this, the Maduro regime promoted Avifavir and Sputnik V, both Russian drugs released to market before robust scientific evidence could prove their effectivity.

177 | “De que vuelan, vuelan! Maduro pide investigar si el coronavirus es un arma de guerra del imperialismo,” Con El Mazo Dando, February 27, 2020, <https://mazo4f.com/de-que-vuelan-vuelan-maduro-pide-investigar-si-el-coronavirus-es-un-arma-de-guerra-del-imperialismo>.

178 | “Nicolás Maduro pushes anti-migrant narrative to explain why COVID-19 cases are increasing in Venezuela,” DFRLab, July 8, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/alertavenezuela/alertavenezuela-july-8-2020/>.

179 | “Fake cures for COVID-19 in Venezuela: from the online sphere to the streets of Caracas,” DFRLab, April 28, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/alertavenezuela/alertavenezuela-april-28-2020/>.

180 | Multimedios vtv, “Venezuela avanza en la lucha contra la COVID-19 con método 7+7, tratamientos y espera por vacunas,” YouTube video, January 24, 2021, <https://youtu.be/rphtjq6X6qI?t=1680>.

181 | Luiza Bandeira, “How a false story about a Cuban COVID-19 vaccine spread in Latin America,” DFRLab, April 30, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-a-false-story-about-a-cuban-covid-19-vaccine-spread-in-latin-america-93cb21dac4a2>.

182 | “Russian COVID Deaths in 2020 Two Times Higher Than Earlier Estimate,” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, February 8, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-covid-deaths--2020-two-times-higher-earlier-estimate/31092610.html>; Linda Givertash and Matthew Bodner, “Putin claims first coronavirus vaccine without providing evidence,” NBC News, August 11, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/putin-claims-first-coronavirus-vaccine-without-providing-evidence-n1236354>.

On July 10, the Japanese government announced that Avigan—a tentative COVID-19 medicine developed using the same base drug (Favipiravir) as Avifavir—“yielded inconclusive results.”¹⁸³ While the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) announced on November 6, 2020, that the drug had been sent to market in fifteen countries after indicating “efficacy in three independent clinical trials in Russia,”¹⁸⁴ the Japanese studies revealed on December 22 that the side effects of the drug are “severe.”¹⁸⁵ Despite this, *Telesur*, *RT in Spanish*, *Sputnik Mundo*, and Twitter accounts with set locations in Venezuela engaged in an effort between May and July 2020 to promote Avifavir and the Kremlin’s plans to commercialize it in Latin America.

In addition to promoting Avifavir, Kremlin and Maduro regime social media accounts and news outlets backed the Russian vaccine Sputnik V. Maduro’s public support for the drugs arrived early, when they were in the early phases of trials and well before *The Lancet* report on February 2, 2021, that provided scientific backing for Sputnik V’s viability, which it found to be 91.6 percent effective.

After Russia approved the Sputnik V vaccine for widespread use after less than two months of human testing on August 11, 2020,¹⁸⁶ campaigns spread across Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. For instance, on August 16, Maduro claimed that he would be “an example” and would be the first Venezuelan to get vaccinated against the novel coronavirus using Sputnik V, when the vaccine arrived in the country—a claim on which he later backtracked.¹⁸⁷ *RT en Español* and *Sputnik Mundo* were among the most engaged-with in the Spanish-speaking



RT en Español (orange boxes) and *Sputnik Mundo* (blue box) were the most engaged-with articles on Facebook amplifying Maduro’s claim that he would be the first Venezuelan to get vaccinated against the novel coronavirus using Sputnik V.¹⁸⁸

world on Facebook and Instagram amplifying Maduro’s claim. Maduro promoted the vaccine anew on October 4, after the first 2,000 doses for clinical trials arrived in Venezuela and the country became the first to receive the vaccine in Latin America.¹⁸⁹ It was in this announcement that Maduro publicly stated a different intention around receiving the vaccine

183 | “Fujifilm’s Avigan inconclusive in COVID-19 patients in Japan trial,” *Reuters*, July 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-avigan-trial/fujifilms-avigan-inconclusive-in-covid-19-patients-in-japan-trial-idUSKBN24B0M4>.

184 | “Avifavir will be made available to outpatients free of charge for the treatment of COVID-19,” Russian Direct Investment Fund, November 6, 2020, https://rdif.ru/Eng_fullNews/5976/.

185 | “Fact check: Effective (and ineffective) COVID-19 treatments,” *Deutsche Welle*, January 20, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-effective-and-ineffective-covid-19-treatments/a-56277961>.

186 | Joshua Yaffa, “The Sputnik V Vaccine and Russia’s Race to Immunity,” *The New Yorker*, February 1, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/02/08/the-sputnik-v-vaccine-and-russias-race-to-immunity>.

187 | “Maduro anuncia que será el primer venezolano en ponerse la vacuna rusa Sputnik V contra el coronavirus ‘para dar ejemplo,’” *RT en Español*, August 17, 2020.

188 | Results of DFRLab query using CrowdTangle, August 20, 2020.

189 | “Maduro anuncia que su hijo y su hermana se ofrecen como voluntarios para probar la vacuna rusa Sputnik V,” *RT en Español*, October 4, 2020, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/368816-maduro-hijo-hermana-vacuna-sputnik>.

himself, saying that he would get the vaccine once mass vaccination began and ignoring his earlier proclamation that he would be the first in the country. On February 13, 2021, the first batch of 100,000 Sputnik V doses for the mass vaccination campaign arrived in the country.¹⁹⁰ On March 6, *Telesur* reported that Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, had received the first of two injections of Sputnik V at the start of a dedicated vaccination campaign,¹⁹¹ well after the first doses had been given in the country.

Conversely, Russian media outlets and social media accounts have also supported COVID-19 medicines developed by the Maduro regime, such as DR-10 and Carvativir, which the regime proclaimed to be “100 percent” effective without providing any scientific evidence to support the claims.

Separate from the many claims around the various Russian and Venezuelan drugs, the regime—and Russia—also used the outbreak as a means to attack its common enemy, the United States. On Twitter and on *RT in Spanish’s* website, Venezuelans and Russians also amplified claims that US sanctions were a “genocidal weapon” while Venezuela was fighting against the coronavirus outbreak, arguing that they added an economic burden at a time when the country needed every resource available to combat the disease’s spread.¹⁹²

The regime also promoted narratives that inflated the country’s outward benevolence toward other countries, either through inaccurately portraying the context of a claim or by actually providing resources to other countries despite the depleted resources at home. On the former (inaccurate portrayal of events), pro-Maduro Twitter accounts pushed the narrative, originally promoted in Venezuela by *RT en Español*,¹⁹³ that Russia, China, Cuba, and Venezuela had all supported Italy with personnel, medical supplies, and equipment as it fought a significant outbreak within its borders. Giulio Gallera, an official in Italy’s region of Lombardy, disputed the claims, publishing a press release explaining that the Venezuelan healthcare personnel he considered hiring were already residents in Italy and did not have any relationship with the Maduro regime.¹⁹⁴

On the narratives of direct assistance abroad while poor conditions remained at home, the regime actually provided limited assistance beyond its borders. Most recently, in January 2021, the Maduro regime sent oxygen to Brazil after

hospitals in the north of the country ran out of oxygen. The move was met with positive headlines and social media reactions in Brazil—a country whose ruling party, led by Jair Bolsonaro, is a fierce opponent of the Maduro regime.



190 | Nicolás Maduro, “LLEGARON LAS VACUNAS ¡Tremenda Noticia Venezuela! Tenemos las primeras 100 mil dosis de la vacuna Sputnik V en nuestro país. Esto es sin duda, una gran alegría para todos y todas, en medio de esta intensa batalla que estamos dando contra el Coronavirus. Pronto iniciaremos la vacunación masiva,” Facebook video, February 13, 2021, 4:35 p.m. <https://www.facebook.com/1402437823320030/posts/305825877737918>.

191 | “Presidente Nicolás Maduro se vacuna contra el coronavirus,” *Telesur*, March 6, 2021, <https://www.telesurtv.net/news/venezuela-presidente-maduro-vacunacion-coronavirus-20210306-0006.html>.

192 | “Moscú: Las sanciones durante la pandemia se convierten en un arma de genocidio,” *RT en Español*, March 28, 2020, <https://actualidad.rt.com/video/347896-moscu-sanciones-pandemia-arma-genocidio>.

193 | “Macron lamenta que en Italia se hable más de la ayuda de Rusia y China que la de los países de la UE para afrontar el coronavirus,” *RT en Español*, March 28, 2020, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/347911-macron-francia-esta-ayudar-italia-tener-cuidado-ayuda-rusia>.

194 | Valentina Gil, “¿Médicos venezolanos, cubanos y chinos recibieron aplausos en Italia?” *Es Paja*, March 16, 2020, <https://espaja.com/fact-checking/en-italia-no-recibieron-con-aplausos-a-mdicos-venezolanos-cubanos-y-chinos>.

Conclusion

The Maduro regime in Venezuela has undertaken a widespread effort to control the country's information environment, whether through inauthentic efforts to manipulate the conversation online or direct repressive measures to fully eliminate dissenting voices. The scale of the regime's efforts and its control of the internet stringently limits access to opposition narratives—regardless of whether they are artificially promoted or disinformative—such that the Venezuelan public has easiest and broadest access to only those narratives the regime wishes them to see.

This work, as a conclusion of the #AlertaVenezuela project, studied the information space in Venezuela, documenting domestic information operations and attempts at foreign influence. For that, the DFRLab monitored the landscape in the country weekly, for sixteen months, investigating not only actions taken by the regime, but also the digital capabilities of both Guaidó's interim government and the radical opposition.

The study has shown the Maduro regime uses a full spectrum propaganda apparatus that strictly controls information domestically, while running limited information operations abroad, including positive propaganda aimed at projecting an image of a stable and thriving Venezuela combined with repressive measures that seeks to hide failures in the country. The regime also positions itself as a country that goes to the rescue of its neighbors when help is needed and promotes pro-regime narratives on the multi-state-funded international broadcaster *Telesur*.

On the internet, the paid-for promotion of designated hashtags on Twitter represents one of the regime's more sophisticated operations. To game the platform and have pro-regime hashtags on the trending topics every day, Maduro and his allies use traditional manipulation techniques, such as bot and influencer accounts, as well as a strategy that rewards regular citizens with public funds for tweeting. These hashtags not only promote the regime and its ideology but also serve as a distraction by overwhelming other hashtags critical of the regime with a larger swell of regime-friendly hashtag use.

Anti-Maduro information operations have also been detected in the country. Some of them have benefited the Guaidó's opposition coalition, and others have been advantageous to other members of the opposition to the regime. The scale and scope of these operations, however, appeared to be smaller than the pro-regime ones, and only using open-source methods it was not possible to directly link these operations to any particular actors in Venezuela. Operations that oppose both Guaidó and Maduro have also been detected, being

linked to radical opposition groups that articulate online and support a military intervention in the country.

It is hard to accurately prognosticate the long-term effects of pro and anti-regime information operations in the perception of the situation of the country, both domestically and abroad. What is known, however, is that disinformation and inauthentic behavior have clouded the country's present information environment, which plays to Maduro's advantage in retaining power.

Similarly, the current information environment in Venezuela exacerbates polarization in the country, with disinformation being used to both exploit and amplify existing political tensions. The tactics used to propagate disinformation allow individual narratives to dominate the conversation; with its control of the internet and traditional media, the Maduro regime in particular can undertake this type of manipulation to drown out legitimate criticism. Ultimately, however, Venezuelans are left uncertain of who to trust, fully aware that much of the information they consume was generated in this manipulated environment.

In a democracy, robust political debate is considered healthy and expected, but democracies also need a minimum consensus about objective facts to function. Under the leadership of Hugo Chávez and now Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela has left democracy and objective fact behind. If it wants to find its way back to the former, it will have to start with creating a minimum consensus about the latter. Instead, the regime appears intent to maintain its hold on the government and its near total control of the country's information environment.





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