

# The War in Ukraine: Global Perspectives-Latin America

**Juan Carlos Sainz-Borgo**

*The Baker Institute International Symposium: The War in Ukraine, October 21, 2022*

Juan Carlos Sainz-Borgo is the Dean of the United Nations-mandated University for Peace and is Professor of International Law and International Relations.

The main purpose of these reflections is to give an overview of the Latin American perception of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As such, we are going to start by defining “America” and of course this is a challenging task to complete. Because if you ask any resident of the Continent from Argentina to Canada or Central America, they will include a different list of countries. To talk about Latin America in the region is more or less the same.

What is Latin America? It is super difficult to define. Let’s start with another concept: “South America.” It is a little bit easier because it starts south of Mexico, but there is even a huge discussion on whether Mexico is part of South America or not. For “Latin America,” some will include the Caribbean Islands while others will not. There is no doubt that Brazil is in South America, but for some authors it is not part of Latin America as such. Therefore, when I discuss Latin America it is extremely convoluted. In this article, I will refer to Latin America in the strict sense of the concept, basically the main countries in South America, not including the English-speaking Caribbean.

In Latin America, we consider ourselves a great region, especially from the cultural, historical, and culinary point of view. However, it is necessary to have a global perspective for a more objective analysis. For example, from the economic point of view, on the list of the world’s richest regions, Latin America, as a region with nineteen countries, is only just ahead of Australia.

As a way of comparison, let’s take Russia. A country similar to Russia in economic terms is Italy. Even though Russia has the same economic power as that Mediterranean state, Russia is one of the members of the selective nuclear weapons club, and that gives them a prominent position in world politics, including a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. However, physical size is also very important, because Latin America is about 19,197,000 km<sup>2</sup> and Russia is only about 17,098,246 km<sup>2</sup>. The whole continent of Latin America therefore is almost the same size as Russia. This is a reality difficult to appreciate mainly because the Mercator projection is usually used to draw global maps.

In a more political term, until the 1990s Latin America was immersed in a discussion of dictatorship versus democracy. The confrontation was backed by their own interpretation of the Cold

War, with the support of the United States's foreign policy on one side and the Soviet Union's armed insurgency on the other side. As a result, during the Cold War we had some dictatorships in Latin America that had American support because basically we were trying to stop the expansion in the region of the Soviet Union's communism and their guerrillas.

Once the Cold War ended, the debates in the region had more space to evolve into a more sophisticated political discussion, leaving aside bipolar approaches. Today we have a fully democratic region, where the discussion is not democracy versus dictatorship; it is a more complex discussion between left and right. This left and right discussion is so important for this paper because for many people, and for some leaders in Latin America, the situation between Russia and Ukraine is about a confrontation between left and right, as reminiscent of the Cold War. For some sections of the Latin American population, Putin's regime recalls the old left and communist movement. As we all know today, Putin is more of a far-right leader than a resurrection of the *ancien régime*.

In this moment, the democracy in the region ranges from the extreme right to the extreme left. There is everything that you could imagine. If we go to the extreme right we have, for example, Brazil with a government led by a former military officer, Jair Bolsonaro, who has a Trump-style of leadership. At the same political end, Nayib Bukele, the President of El Salvador, introduced Bitcoin as a national currency as a way to facilitate financial transactions, especially in remittances from the United States. Let's move to the other end of the political spectrum, where there is such an interesting collection of people. For example, the new president of Chile, Gabriel Boric, thirty-six years old, represents a grassroots left political organization. He backed the street protests some years ago but also believes in a more participatory democracy. In Colombia, the new president, Gustavo Petro, was a former commander of the guerrilla movement M-19, one of the most important Colombian guerrilla organizations in the last century.

Similar to these examples of pressures on the concept of democracy, there are also some elements that go beyond the extreme left, as in the cases of Venezuela and Nicaragua. Venezuela represents a complicated situation with the regime of Nicolas Maduro, who is not recognized by the international community because of non-legally recognized general elections. In Nicaragua, the general elections were held without the opposition's participation because they were incarcerated by the government or were not approved to run by the state administration. In both cases governments were formally elected but were not recognized by the international community. Understanding the political diversity of the region is necessary for understanding the variety of responses to the Russian war. Even though there are different perspectives in each of these countries, no government in the region has changed the nature of their diplomatic or trade relations with Russia as a result of the war.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, from a Latin American perspective, presents some general elements. First, there is no clear historical or political context to the relationship between the former neighbors and members of the USSR. Second, territorial confrontations in the region ceased in the nineteenth century; for more than 100 years there have been no wars for the acquisition of territory. The process of territorial determination followed, in general, a peaceful diplomatic process, which for almost 100 years has been settled through diplomatic channels. And finally, it is far removed from the geographical, political, and historical context of the region.

However, to have a clearer view of the consequences that this war in Europe has brought to the region, we will analyze the way these states have voted on the different United Nations resolutions condemning the situation. The votes divided Latin America into four main groups of countries: (1) those that have clearly condemned the Russian invasion to Ukraine; (2) those that have tried to project a certain neutrality towards the conflict and voted against the invasion; (3) those that have projected a discourse of neutrality and legitimized Russia's positions; and (4) those that have supported Russia's positions as a close partner to the region.

The first group has the following countries: Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Paraguay Panama, and Perú. They are the clearest defenders of international legality in relation to the Russian invasion to Ukraine. No double talk or diplomatic ambiguities. These governments clearly condemned the invasion and the intended territorial annexation. The second group includes Brazil and Mexico, the two regional powers, that projects an image of neutrality but supports the international legality. In other words, they condemned the invasion but at the same time called for negotiation and peace as a way of projecting some form of global independence.

Groups three and four support Russia or at least do not openly condemn it. The third group, led by El Salvador, stands for neutrality. However, in practical terms its neutrality supports the Russian perspectives on the conflict. Finally, the fourth group—Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela—supports the Russian position and in general criticizes the Western position. These four countries have been calling for peace without condemning Russia, while at the same time promoting a discourse of criticism of the positions of the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

This division of the countries into four groups shows the great lack of consensus that exists in the region. But why is there such a variety of positions? First, it is important to remember the expansion of Russian foreign policy in the region. For example, the Russians' Covid vaccine arrived first in most of these countries, before any of the Western ones. As a result, many countries feel a certain gratitude to the Russian regime. Also, for Argentina and Brazil, more than 60% of the fertilizers used in their huge agricultural industry comes from Russia. Lastly, the financial support that Russia provides these countries is not to be underestimated. These elements—vaccines, fertilizers, economic aid, as well as arms

support—represent a development of Russian foreign policy that is now bearing fruit. Many of these elements are repeated in various examples of foreign policy, as in the case of China or even the European Union. However, this expansion of Russian foreign policy has developed within a shift in the region’s foreign policy priorities, including American foreign policy.

To conclude, we can see that there is a lack of consensus in the region around the war. For immense groups of the population, the conflict is perceived as a European war. However, the conflict will not affect what will happen in Latin America because it is a European problem. It also connects through the regional agenda that supersedes the global agenda on the issue, where the left vs. right influences the perception of the global agenda. Therefore, the actions of Russia or Ukraine will be perceived as actions that have the support of the left or the right depending on which governments are defending them. For Latin America, it is very important that our own discussion of democracy and freedom takes precedence. Everyone will have their own opinion based on their political leanings.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Malamud, Carlos and Rogelio Nuñez. “América Latina y la invasión de Ucrania: su incidencia en la economía, la geopolítica y la política interna.” *Royal Institute Elcano* 26 (2022). [América Latina y la invasión de Ucrania: su incidencia en la economía, la geopolítica y la política interna \(realinstitutoelcano.org\)](https://realinstitutoelcano.org)
- Sanahuja, José Antonio, Pablo Stefanoni, and Francisco J. Verdes-Montenegro. “América Latina frente al 24-F ucraniano: entre la tradición diplomática y las tensiones políticas,” *Documentos de Trabajo* 62 (2022): 1-23. DOI:[10.33960/issn-e.1885-9119.DT62](https://doi.org/10.33960/issn-e.1885-9119.DT62)
- Williams, Jennifer. “The Invasion That Changed Everything.” *Foreign Policy*. December 19, 2022. [How Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Changed Everything \(foreignpolicy.com\)](https://foreignpolicy.com)