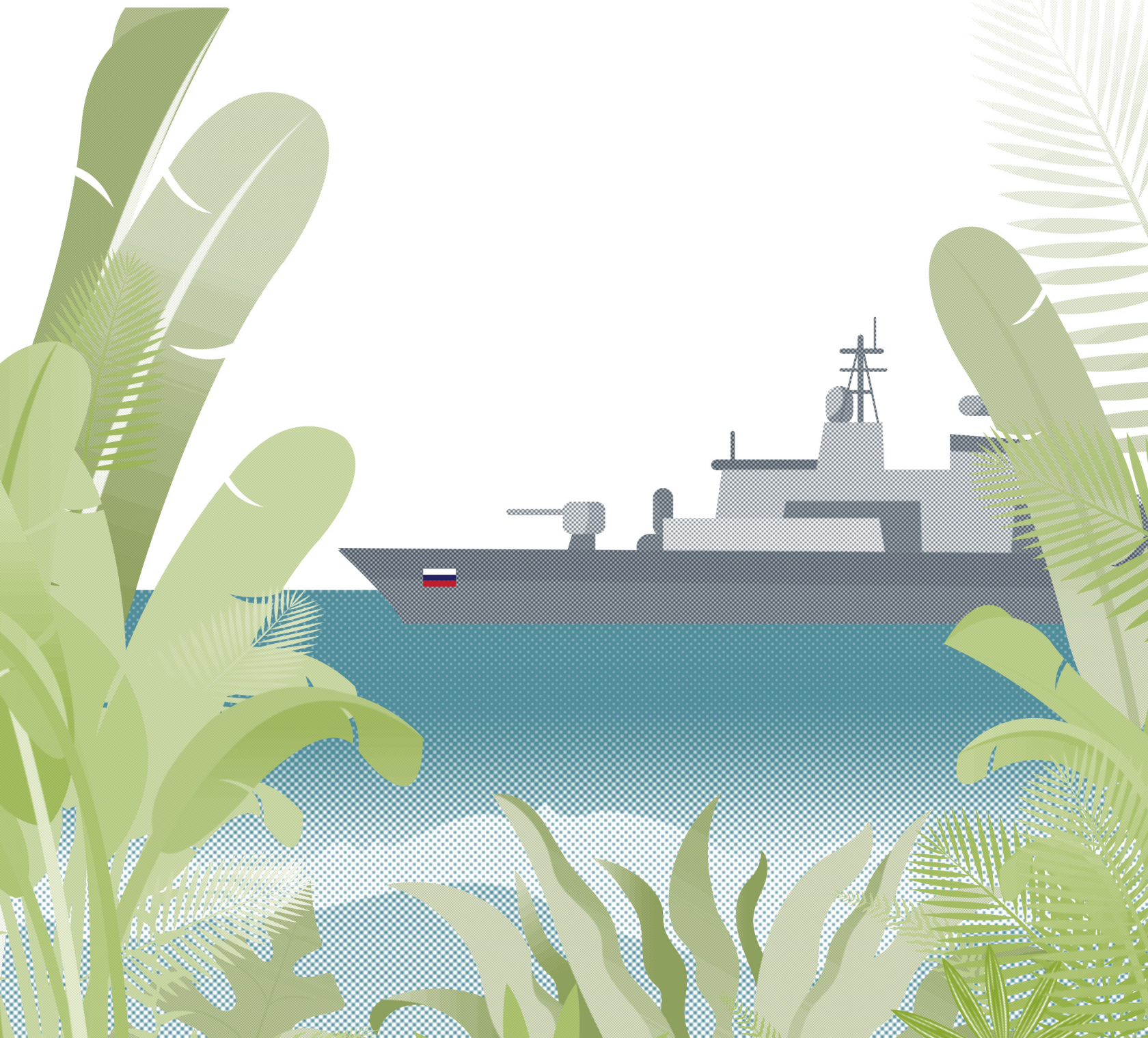


RUSSIA'S CENTRAL AMERICAN ENGAGEMENTS

Ivan Ulises Klyszcz



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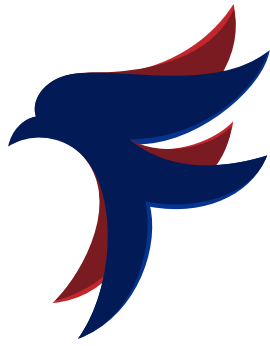
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RUSSIA'S CENTRAL AMERICAN ENGAGEMENTS

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Abstract

Central America has received little attention in the Russia Federation's 'return' to Latin America. The region's small population and underdeveloped markets make it relatively uninteresting for a far-off country like Russia. Yet, in recent years, Russia has intensified and diversified its engagement with Central America, expanding beyond Moscow's traditional partner, the Republic of Nicaragua. Central American leaders want more trade and investment with Russia as Moscow seeks to bolster its presence in the Caribbean. However, tense relations between Managua and its neighbors could make Moscow's defense cooperation with Nicaragua counterproductive. Seeking to become a significant player in the region, Moscow is set to expand its presence in Central America through bilateral and multilateral channels, a move that will likely affect the region's conflicts.

Key Findings:

- By increasing its influence in Central America, Moscow advances its geopolitical ambitions and diplomatic needs by demonstrating the Russian Federation's global reach, diminishing U.S. hegemony in Latin America, and diversifying diplomatic relations after the annexation of Crimea damaged Moscow's relationship with the West.
- Since the 2010s, most Central American states have courted Russia for investment and trade. This trend reinforced itself by the end of the decade as Moscow became interested in other Central American states beyond its traditional partner of the Republic of Nicaragua, which has been mired in domestic political crisis since 2018.
- Current tensions between Russia and the West have not led to a Cold War-like situation in Central America. Central American countries are not choosing between Moscow and Washington, instead seeking good relations with both.
- Russia has yet to become a strategic player in Central America. In countries other than Nicaragua, its security and defense cooperation are unsubstantial. Nevertheless, countries such as the Republic of El Salvador and the Republic of Guatemala have increased cooperation with Moscow on matters of counter-narcotics.

BEYOND NICARAGUA

A new period of contestation is brewing in the Caribbean. When Hugo Chávez led the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Caracas sought to challenge U.S. hegemony in the region by creating the Bolivarian Alliance for American Peoples (ALBA), a group of Latin American countries at odds with the U.S., and the PetroCaribe-subsidized energy program to gain favor among Caribbean countries. While these institutions may have had limited effect in the long term, they rallied some of the region's countries around an anti-American agenda.

Today, the Trump administration has shifted U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America, reshuffling relations with many of the region's countries. President Donald Trump has scaled back the Obama administration's thaw policy towards the Republic of Cuba and adopted a more overtly confrontational position towards Caracas.

The Trump administration has cut numerous aid programs for certain Central American countries. These measures have brought a chill in U.S.-Latin America relations and potentially opened opportunities for extra-hemispheric powers to expand their influence in the region. Among the countries that have already done so are the People's Republic of China, the Republic of India, and the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹ The Russian Federation is also engaging Latin America again. Moscow's closest allies in the region are all in the Caribbean: Cuba, Venezuela, and Republic of Nicaragua. These three countries were named by

former U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton as the "Troika of Tyranny,"² and they are all seen as supported by Russia.³

Nicaragua stands out as Russia's key partner in Central America. Since the Daniel Ortega administration began in 2007, Managua and Moscow have cooperated in security and military affairs. Nicaragua is the only major buyer of Russian arms in Central America. It is one of the few countries that aligned with Moscow in recognizing Georgia's breakaway territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as independent states. Moscow, for its part, has been a reliable partner of Ortega's administration, which has been embattled by international condemnation over its human rights violations since 2018.

But Russia's presence in Central America goes beyond Nicaragua. Unlike during the Cold War, no Central American countries have chosen to engage exclusively with Moscow or Washington. This attitude is further reinforced by the current chill in U.S.-Central American relations, which has created an opportunity for Moscow to increase engagement.

While there has been some renewed interest in Russia's activities in Latin America,⁴ its engagement with Central America (Belize, Republic of Costa Rica, Republic of El Salvador, Republic of Guatemala, Republic of Honduras, and Republic of Panama)⁵ is seldom studied. This report tackles the following questions: What is the state of bilateral and multilateral relations between Russia and Central America? Is the new confrontation between Russia and the West tangible in Central

1 Vladimir Sudarev, "New Players on the Latin American Pitch," Russian International Affairs Council, 14 March 2012, https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/new-players-on-the-latin-american-pitch/?sphrase_id=23687706.

2 "Bolton praises Bolsonaro while declaring 'troika of tyranny' in Latin America," The Guardian, 1 November 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/nov/01/trump-admin-bolsonaro-praise-john-bolton-troika-tyranny-latin-america>.

3 "Estados Unidos solicitará a Rusia que relaje su apoyo a Nicaragua, Venezuela y Cuba [The United States will ask Russia to relax its support to Nicaragua, Venezuela and Cuba]," La Prensa, 22 October 2018, <https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2018/10/22/politica/2487569-estados-unidos-solicitar-a-rusia-que-relaje-su-apoyo-a-nicaragua-venezuela-y-cuba>.

4 R. Evan Ellis, "The New Russian Engagement with Latin America: Strategic Position, Commerce and Dreams of the Past," US War College Press and Strategic Studies Institute, June 2015; Julia Gurganus, "Russia: Playing a Geopolitical Game in Latin America," Carnegie Endowment International, 3 May 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/03/russia-playing-geopolitical-game-in-latin-america-pub-76228> and Douglas Farah, Liana Eustacia Reyes, "Russia in Latin America. A Strategic Analysis," PRISM vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 101-117.

5 It is worth noting that Belize is typically excluded from analyses of Central America due to its dispute with Guatemala and due to its own self-perception as a Caribbean country and not a Central American one. Nevertheless, it is included in this report. Similarly, Mexico is sometimes categorised as a Central American state; due to its size and strategic location, Russia engages Mexico in a different way and with a greater intensity than its southern neighbours. Consequently, Mexico is omitted.



“Sanctions have compelled Moscow to seek new markets to replace European products. Central American countries are simultaneously looking for new markets to sell their products since their relations with the U.S. have cooled.”

America? Are there any visible trends in Russia's Central America engagement?

In principle, there are no strong reasons for Russia to engage with Central America. Distance, a lack of historical and cultural ties, and the overwhelming regional influence of the U.S. diminish Central America's strategic significance for Russia. Nevertheless, three factors have pushed Russia to involve itself in the region.

The first is geopolitics. Russia's Latin American engagements assist Moscow's strategy of post-sanctions diplomatic diversification. Strategically, Moscow seeks a presence in the Caribbean that mirrors Washington's presence in Eastern Europe,⁶ thus reinforcing Moscow's claim that it is a great power⁷ with a global reach.⁸ Moscow also seeks to engage with Latin America due to its belief that a multipolar world order is emerging. Latin America has been central to Moscow's vision of multipolarity since former Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov visited the region in 1997.⁹ Primakov's views on multipolarity and Russia's place in the world still influence Russian foreign policy today.

Second, security issues motivate Russia's engagement in the region. Central American states seek international cooperation in combatting organized crime and resolving the region's territorial conflicts.¹⁰ On both accounts, Russia is a relatively small player. The one exception is Russia's defense and security cooperation with Nicaragua, which illustrates Moscow's potential to expand its security presence in Central America. On the other hand, security issues constitute a push factor, as the Russian mafia actively engages

in organized crime throughout the region.¹¹

A third factor driving Russian engagement with Central America is trade. Sanctions have compelled Moscow to seek new markets to replace European products. Central American countries are simultaneously looking for new markets to sell their products since their relations with the U.S. have cooled.

One variable affecting Russia's presence in the region are the crises and shifts within Central American states themselves. A change in government may alter a state's foreign policy orientation, reducing or expanding its engagement with Russia. Central American states, furthermore, lack a singular perspective on foreign affairs. They are therefore open to engaging with countries beyond their immediate neighborhood, even with states that may cause consternation among their neighbors, as Costa Rica and Nicaragua have done with Russia.¹²

This report examines Russia's presence in Central America in the realms of commerce, diaspora affairs, education, diplomacy, and multilateral cooperation. The picture that emerges is one of uneven engagement—some countries cooperate more closely with Russia than others. However, there is a visible growing trend in the Russian-Central American relationship. Mutual interest in developing the relationship is set to continue, but it has not yet turned Russia into a key player in the region. However, by increasing its engagement with Central America, Moscow risks being drawn into regional conflicts, which may harm its broader Latin American diplomacy.

⁶ Argument made in Douglas Farah, Liana Eustacia Reyes, "Russia in Latin America."

⁷ Although critical of the geopolitical importance of Venezuela to Russia, Hess does see a role for geopolitics, albeit in second place to debt concerns. See, Maximilian Hess, "Russia in Venezuela: Geopolitical Boon or Economic Misadventure," January 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/hessrpe1.pdf>.

⁸ Stephen Blank & Younkyoo Kim, "Russia and Latin America: The New Frontier for Geopolitics, Arms Sales and Energy," *Problems of Post-Communism*, 2015, vol. 62, no. 3, pp. 159-173.

⁹ "La Visita del Canciller Ruso Evgueni Primakov. Ofensiva diplomática de Rusia en América Latina [The visit of the Russian Chancellor Yevgeni Primakov, Russia's diplomatic offensive in Latin America]," *Clarín*, 20 November 1997, https://www.clarin.com/ediciones-anteriores/ofensiva-diplomatica-rusia-america-latina_0_rJbZW11-0Kg.html.

¹⁰ Here, the case of Nicaragua's dispute with Colombia over the sovereignty of a large swath of Caribbean waters is an illustrative case (discussed below).

¹¹ Bruce Michael Bagley, "Globalization and Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean," Luis Guillermo Solís, Francisco Rojas Aravena (eds.), *Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Flacso, 2009.

¹² This geopolitical plurality has been most visible in the contest between Beijing and Taipei for recognition among Central American states.

RUSSIA AND CENTRAL AMERICA: CONTOURS OF THE RELATIONSHIP

This section presents an overview of Russia's interactions with the seven Central American states across several areas: trade, diaspora engagement, education cooperation, and bilateral and multilateral diplomacy. Some trends emerge across countries.

Trade and Arms Sales

Trade and investment between Russia and Central America is small. Total trade with Central American states does not even account for 1% of Russia's overall trade.¹³ The Central American business community is similarly uninterested in Russian markets, so it does not seek partnerships with Russian enterprises.¹⁴ Worsening trade and investment prospects, the collapse in international energy prices, and the imposition of sanctions on Russia in 2014 diminished Russia's ability to deepen economic engagement abroad. Domestic downturn caused investment flows to look inwards as sanctions reduced Russian institutions' ability to invest abroad and deterred foreigners from investing in Russia. Despite these fluctuations, Russian-Central American trade relations have settled in an established pattern: Russia imports agricultural goods and exports chemical products, such as synthetic fertilizers (see, Table 1). Throughout the relationship, the trade balance has always favored Russia.¹⁵

Arms trade between Russia and Central America is lackluster compared to the rest of Latin American countries, many of which are major arms buyers from Russia. Between 2001-2013,

Russia provided 40% of Latin America's weapons. In particular, Russia is one of the sole providers for Latin America's helicopter fleets.¹⁶ Yet, according to SIPRI data on global weapon transfers,¹⁷ Russian arms have not featured in international arms transfers to Central American states. Nicaragua is the sole exception, as most of its arms imports are from Russia.

Russian Diaspora

The presence of the Russian diaspora in Central America is overall small, but it plays a role in Russia's public diplomacy in some countries of the region. It is slightly larger when considering the scores of "compatriots" present, a vague category assigned by Moscow to people of Soviet origin regardless of their citizenship, often referring to ethnic Russians but not exclusively. At a minimum, that Russian citizens and compatriots live in Central America compels Moscow to maintain a presence there in the form of consular protection. At most, the diaspora can play a potentially pivotal role in any Russian cultural diplomacy initiative. Table 2 shows the numbers of Russian citizens and compatriots according to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁸ In Central America, the Russian diaspora is largest in Costa Rica and Panama, bolstering Russian public diplomacy there. As discussed below, these diaspora groups have organized joint events with the local Russian embassy to promote Russian culture, ultimately contributing to Russia's soft power in the region.

¹³ Data retrieved from the Observatory of Economic Complexity website, <https://atlas.media.mit.edu>.

¹⁴ Evan Ellis, "Russian Engagement in Latin America: An Update," Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 19 January 2018, <http://www.coha.org/russian-engagement-in-latin-america-an-update>.

¹⁵ There are some exceptions. First, Belizean exports to Russia followed no pattern in the 2000-2017 period. Second, Nicaraguan and Panamanian trade with Russia is diverse (although also skewed to primary sector exports to Russia). And third, unlike any other Central American state, Panama imports oil from Russia. But, to put Panamanian oil imports into perspective, Russian oil imports make roughly one percent of the total.

¹⁶ Ellis, "The New Russian Engagement," 14.

¹⁷ SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, www.mid.ru.

TABLE 1. DATA ON RUSSIAN-CENTRAL AMERICAN TRADE, 2000-2017.

Country	Largest export to Russia (share of total, total exports in million USD)	Largest import from Russia (share of total, total imports in million USD)
Belize	Machines (55%, \$22.1)	Chemical products (37.2%, \$306)
Costa Rica	Vegetable products (54%, \$954)	Chemical products (47%, \$614)
El Salvador	Foodstuffs (95%, \$272)	Metals (68%, \$635)
Guatemala	Foodstuffs (80%, \$370)	Chemical products (57%, \$1100)
Honduras	Vegetable products (61%, \$183)	Chemical products (37%, \$748)
Nicaragua	Foodstuffs (51%, \$273)	Vegetable products (37%, \$748)
Panama*	Vegetable products (31%, \$147)	Mineral products (62%, \$1740)

Source: MIT Observatory of Economic Complexity website, <https://atlas.media.mit.edu>.

*Panamanian machine exports to Russia have been omitted as “blank audio media” exports to Russia in 2013 amounted to nearly \$1 billion. This is a major outlier. In all other years, Panamanian machine exports to Russia have played a marginal role.

TABLE 2. RUSSIAN CITIZENS AND ‘COMPATRIOTS’ IN CENTRAL AMERICA.

Country	Russian Citizens	Compatriots
Belize	No Data	-
Costa Rica	300	700
El Salvador	0	2
Guatemala	50	-
Honduras	No Data	-
Nicaragua	No Data*	-
Panama	1,000-3,000	-

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation

*The Russian Foreign Ministry of Foreign Affairs recognizes two compatriot organizations based in Managua.

Education Cooperation

Cooperation in higher education has been a central component of Russia's public diplomacy in Central America. This cooperation is most evident in higher education scholarships. Local Russian embassies may offer up to 20 fully-funded positions to study in Russia for each Central American country, although this number has decreased in recent years. In 2016, over 6,000 students from Latin America sought to study in Russia, of which 2,000 applied for a Russian government scholarship.¹⁹

Central American graduates from Russian institutions are unevenly distributed across the region. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports that up to 5,000 people in Nicaragua have completed higher education in Russia since the 1980s. In Panama 2,500 students have studied in Russia since the two countries established diplomatic relations in the 1990s. In Costa Rica, 800 have done so since 1960.²⁰ Compared to the hundreds of thousands of higher education students in Central America, the quantitative impact of the scholarship program is small. Nevertheless, Russian diplomats tout this initiative as evidence of the robust potential of Russian-Latin American cooperation,²¹ and graduate associations also seek to keep connections to Russia, sometimes through the local Russian embassy.²²

Diplomatic Engagement

Since the mid 2010s, Russia has shown an interest in increasing bilateral and multilateral engagement with Central America. This trend is exemplified by Russia's pursuit of visa-free regimes (see,

Table 3) and its high-level political visits. Russia currently has embassies in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Panama. Moscow is represented in El Salvador and Honduras through Russia's Managua embassy and in Belize through Russia's Mexico embassy. All Central American countries, aside from Belize, have an embassy in Moscow.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Guatemala in 2010 and 2011 and Nicaragua in 2010 and 2014. President Vladimir Putin visited Guatemala in 2007 and Nicaragua in an unscheduled visit in 2014. Central American heads of state have also visited Russia: Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega visited Moscow in 2008, followed by former Guatemalan President Álvaro Colom in 2010 and former Panamanian President Juan Carlos Varela in 2018.

While not necessarily due to their relationship with Russia, some Central American states share Moscow's pro-Maduro, anti-interventionist positions on Venezuela.²³ This differs notably from the South American response to the Venezuelan crisis. When Washington recognized opposition figure Juan Guaidó as the legitimate Venezuelan president in early 2019, most of South America, with the noted exception of ALBA member states and Uruguay, followed suit. Costa Rica has also taken a confrontational stance towards Maduro's regime, participating in a suit against Maduro at the International Court of Justice for crimes against humanity.²⁴ In the rest of Central America, however, the picture is different. Belize, El Salvador, and Nicaragua did not support the January 2019 resolution of the Organization of American States (OAS) condemning Maduro's regime (Belize and El Salvador abstained, Nicaragua

19 "Unos Dos Mil Estudiantes De Latinoamérica Solicitaron Beca Para Estudiar En Rusia [About two thousand Latin American students requested scholarships to study in Russia]," Universitam, 13 January 2017, <https://universitam.com/noticiero-2/destacado/unos-dos-mil-estudiantes-de-latinoamerica-solicitaron-beca-para-estudiar-en-rusia>.

20 Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/ni/?currentpage=main-country> and <http://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/cr/?currentpage=main-country>; and Embassy of Panama to the Russian Federation, <http://www.embapanamarusia.ru/index.php/es/noticias/97-presidente-varela-incrementara-intercambios-con-rusia-en-los-ambitos-de-educacion-superior-y-seguridad>.

21 "Guatemala y Rusia comienzan a analizar aplicación de extradición [Guatemala and Russia begin to analyze extradition application]," Prensa Libre, 26 March 2019, <https://www.prensalibre.com/guatemala/politica/guatemala-y-rusia-comienzan-a-analizar-aplicacion-de-extradicion>.

22 "Asamblea General de los Egresados de la Unión Soviética y Rusia [Soviet and Russian graduates general assembly]," □ Gazeta Rusa, 10 May 2018, <http://gazetarusa.cr/es/отчётно-выборное-собрание-выпускник>.

23 It is possible to assert that some effort is made on the Russian side to promote their vision of the Venezuelan crisis. Russian embassies in Latin America regularly share news about Venezuela and official statements of the Russian government on Venezuela through their social media accounts.

24 "Costa Rica choca con Venezuela tras lío diplomático con Nicaragua [Costa Rica clashes with Venezuela after diplomatic spat with Nicaragua]," El Universal, 18 October 2018, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/mundo/costa-rica-choca-con-venezuela-tras-lío-diplomatico-con-nicaragua>.

TABLE 3. VISA REQUIREMENTS FOR RUSSIAN CITIZENS.

Country	Visa required for entry of Russian citizens (year visa free regime came into effect)
Belize	Yes
Costa Rica	No (2019)
El Salvador	No (2016)
Guatemala	No (2012)
Honduras	No (2015)
Nicaragua	No (2010)
Panama	No (2015)

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.

voted against.).²⁵ Panama has also opposed unilateral regime change from abroad and instead favors international mediation. For instance, in June 2018, then-Panamanian President Varela said that Russia could assist in intra-Venezuelan discussions.²⁶ In July 2019, Valera's successor, Laurentino Cortizo, openly rejected a military intervention in Venezuela and offered to host Venezuelan negotiations in Panama.²⁷ There is no evidence that these positions are the product of Russia's influence. Nevertheless, overlap on the Venezuela issue, where it exists, may encourage Moscow to foster further diplomatic coordination.

In spite of these high-level visits and occasional agreements on the diplomatic agenda, the Russo-Central American relation has only recently begun to build an institutional basis for multilateral cooperation (see below). Nevertheless, some Russian international aid organizations have

been present in Central America. The Russkiy Mir Foundation, a government organization aimed at prompting Russian language and culture globally, has an office in both Costa Rica and Nicaragua, and Rossotrudnichestvo, Russia's international aid agency, has an office in Nicaragua and operates across Central America. Their activities have bolstered Moscow's attempts at creating a positive image of Russia, attracting international students and businesses.

²⁵ US Mission to the Organisation of American States, <https://usoas.usmission.gov/permanent-council-approves-resolution-to-not-recognize-the-legitimacy-of-the-maduro-regime>.

²⁶ "Presidente de Panamá debatirá con Putin el relanzamiento de las relaciones bilaterales [Panamanian President will debate with Putin the relaunch of bilateral relations]," Sputnik News, 14 June 2019, <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/politica/201806141079558056-que-debatiran-putin-y-varela>.

²⁷ "Cortizo: Panamá podría ser sede del diálogo de Venezuela [Cortizo: Panama may host Venezuelan dialogue]," El Nacional, 9 July 2019, http://www.el-nacional.com/noticias/mundo/cortizo-panama-podria-ser-sede-del-dialogo-venezuela_287888.

MULTILATERAL ENGAGEMENT: RUSSIA AND THE SYSTEM OF CENTRAL AMERICAN INTEGRATION

Russia's engagement with multilateral fora in Central America has also increased in recent years, particularly with the System of Central American Integration (SICA). Founded in 1991, SICA includes all seven Central American states and the Dominican Republic, aiming to advance regional integration, consolidate democratization, and manage inter-state conflict.

The basis for Russia's relationship with SICA was laid during Primakov's aforementioned trip to Central America in 1997, but substantial cooperation did not begin until years later.²⁸ In 2013, Russia and SICA discussed expanding cooperation into areas such as trade and the fight against organized crime. After the West imposed sanctions on Russia in 2014, the Russian ambassador to Honduras sought to build agricultural business ties with SICA aimed at replacing European products with imports from Central America.²⁹ Then, in 2018, following a Russian request, Russia received observer status to SICA.

Since 2018, there has been mutual interest in expanding multilateral cooperation through SICA and its bodies. Most recently, there have been meetings between SICA representatives and Russian diplomats on the possibility of a free trade area between SICA countries and

Russia, or even between SICA and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). In May 2019, representatives of the EAEU and of SICA's economic secretariat (SIECA) identified areas of joint cooperation and affirmed the need for a framework document for further cooperation.³⁰ As of July 2019, the Central American Parliament (a branch of SICA involving all Central American states except Belize and Costa Rica) is also considering a framework agreement with the EAEU to explore and expand inter-regional cooperation.³¹

Multilateral cooperation in cybersecurity also has the potential for growth. In 2019, the Central American Parliament hosted a major pan-regional conference on cybersecurity with extensive Russian participation, including personnel from the Russian security services (the FSB and General Prosecutor's Office), the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense, as well as several private companies (Sberbank and others). According to a press release, the primary topic covered was the prevention of cybercrime.³² This conference could mark the beginning of multilateral or even bilateral cooperation in cyber security, an unexploited area of Russian-Central American cooperation.

Since Primakov's visit to Costa Rica in 1997, Russian diplomats have portrayed their cooperation with Central American multilateral

28 Between then and later years, Russia chose to shift its attention to engage Latin America as a whole through pan-Latin America fora. See, Carlos Humberto Cascante Segura, "Rusia en América Latina, el caso Costa Rica [Russia in Latin America, Costa Rica's case]," *Observatorio de la Política Internacional*, 60, July/August 2017, <https://opi.ucr.ac.cr/node/1021>.

29 "SICA Promueve Colaboración Económica con Rusia [SICA promotes economic collaboration with Russia]," *Sistema Económico Latinoamericano y del Caribe* website, 15 February 2016, <http://www.sela.org/es/prensa/servicio-informativo/2016/02/20160215/sica-promueve-colaboracion-economica-con-rusia>.

30 "О работе Посольства России в Гватемале по развитию многосторонних отношений Центральной Америки с Евразийским экономическим союзом [On the work of the Russian embassy in Guatemala for the development of the multilateral relationship between Central America and the Eurasian Economic Union]," Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 21 May 2019, http://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/gt/-/asset_publisher/0n4XEAQLbbjN/content/id/3654399.

31 "El Parlamen propondrá un convenio de cooperación a la Unión Euroasiática [The Central American Parliament is set to propose a cooperation agreement with the Eurasian Union]," *Sputnik News*, 4 July 2019, <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/economia/201907041087891786-el-parlacen-propondra-un-convenio-de-cooperacion-a-la-union-euroasiatica>.

32 "Об итогах Центральноамериканского форума по киберпреступности и международной информационной безопасности с участием России [On the results of the Central American forum on cybercrime and international information security with the participation of Russia]," Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 30 May 2019, http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/guatemala/-/asset_publisher/zf1huzgTo0I9/content/id/3663841.



institutions as evidence of an increasingly multipolar world. However, during the Trump administration, Central America's perspective now is partly informed by its souring relations with the U.S. This chill in relations makes cooperation with Russia more attractive. In June 2019, for instance, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) advised SICA countries to diversify trade beyond the U.S. because of the protectionist measures taken by the Trump administration. Losing confidence in the U.S. as a business partner, CEPAL recommended China, India, Russia, and Mexico as potential new trade partners.³³

³³ "CEPAL propone al istmo abrir sus mercados [CEPAL proposes to the Central American isthmus to open their markets]," *El Periódico*, 5 June 2019, <https://elperiodico.com.gt/nacion/2019/06/05/cepal-propone-al-istmo-abrir-sus-mercados>.

COUNTRY ANALYSIS

This section addresses bilateral relations between Russia and the seven Central American states. It focuses on the evolution of diplomatic relations, security and defense cooperation, and trade and investment.

Belize

Relations between Russia and Belize have developed recently. During the Cold War, Belize was a British colony, so contacts between Belize and the Soviet Union were non-existent. Since Belize gained independence in 1981, its diplomacy has been mostly focused on Guatemala, with which it has an extensive territorial dispute, and on Central America more broadly. Consequently, relations with states outside of the Americas took time to develop. Belize has 12 embassies abroad, of which only six are outside of the continent, but it doesn't have one in Russia. Nevertheless, Belize-Russia relations have been growing since the late 2010s.

Moscow and Belmopan recognized each other officially in 1991, but there were no diplomatic exchanges until the 2010s. In 2012, they signed their first agreement, a document on joint efforts against money laundering. In 2017, at the sidelines of the UN, Belize and Russia signed protocols for diplomatic exchange. One year later, they signed a framework document for diplomatic relations and discussed the possibility of Russian-Belizean cooperation at the UN.³⁴ There have been no new major treaties in the bilateral relationship and no significant increase in trade or cooperation since then. This inactivity could change. As mentioned above, Belize is among the Central American countries that is not overtly opposed to Maduro's regime, which Russia may consider a promising

sign of mutual understanding.

The Northern Triangle: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras

The three Northern Triangle countries, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, have undergone a similar trend of engagement with Russia. They established relations with Russia in the aftermath of the Cold War. The mid 2000s saw a renewed interest in bilateral ties, followed by more intense engagement since 2014 and a substantial increase since 2018. El Salvador established relations with Moscow in 1992, and since the mid 2010s, they have entered a period of greater cooperation. This began, partly, when the Salvadoran government approached Moscow in 2015 with a trade and investment agenda.³⁵ In 2018, the parties signed a major agreement outlining cooperation in defense, counter-narcotics, education, and trade.³⁶ Russia's participation in the El Salvadoran Chaparral dam, discussed further below, is symbolic of this new era of cooperation.

The Russian-Guatemalan relationship is technically older, as mutual diplomatic recognition occurred in 1945. However, in part due to covert Soviet support for Salvadoran guerrillas in Guatemala, Russian-Guatemalan ties remained unsubstantial until the 2000s. When the Guatemalan civil war ended, the country opened an embassy in Moscow in 1997. Moscow opened its Guatemalan embassy in 2007, establishing the only Russian embassy in the Northern Triangle. Cooperation has continued without any major breaks. In 2018, the Guatemalan vice-minister of foreign relations visited Moscow to discuss the potential for deeper bilateral cooperation.³⁷

34 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, http://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/bz/-/asset_publisher/kK9sucLfYSm2/content/id/3352357.

35 "Rusia dará tecnología para seguir construcción de presa El Chaparral [Russia to transfer technology to continue the construction of the Chaparral dam]," El Salvador.com, 15 June 2015, <https://historico.elsalvador.com/152538/rusia-dara-tecnologia-para-seguir-construccion-de-presa-el-chaparral.html>.

36 "El Salvador y Rusia estudian importantes convenios bilaterales [El Salvador and Russia study important bilateral agreements]," Sputnik News, 21 September 2019, <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/rusia/201809211082166054-relaciones-bilaterales-entre-rusia-y-salvador>.

37 "Grandes ambiciones de un país pequeño: vicedecanciller guatemalteco viaja a Rusia [The great ambitions of a small country: the vice chancellor



The Chaparral Dam project in El Salvador. Source: ejatlas.org

The Russian-Honduran relationship is equally lively today, yet it has had a less straightforward path. In 2005, a major treaty was signed between the two countries that would have opened new areas of bilateral cooperation. However, a coup in 2009 derailed cooperation prospects.³⁸ Moreover, Russia's deep ties with the Nicaraguan defense sector and legacy of engagement with communist guerrillas in El Salvador has raised concerns in Tegucigalpa of "encirclement" by pro-Russian states.³⁹ Nevertheless, Russian-Honduran relations experienced a reset around 2013, boosted by Russia's renewed engagement with Latin America. In 2018, Tegucigalpa and Moscow signed a new foundational agreement in cooperation, covering areas such as energy, mining, and transportation.⁴⁰

Russia's trade and investment in the Northern Triangle is not unsubstantial. Guatemala, in particular, stands out relative to other Central American countries in scale. Before 2010, Russian investments in Guatemala were negligible, but they have been steady since. Russia's hallmark investment came in 2013 when the Swiss mining group Solway purchased a major nickel mine in north Guatemala with the participation of Russian capital.⁴¹ This project made Russia the second largest foreign investor in Guatemala, behind only the U.S. However, due to its recent economic slowdown, Russia today plays a marginal role in Guatemala's foreign direct investment (FDI).⁴² Nevertheless, since 2018, there has been renewed interest in bilateral trade, as Russia's Guatemalan

of Guatemala travels to Russia],” Sputnik News, 18 December 2018, https://mundo.sputniknews.com/radio_que_pasa/201812181084222781-guatemala-rusia-relaciones-bilaterales.


38 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, http://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/hn/-/asset_publisher/Q98A8VqvoQKk/content/id/287720.

39 Ellis, “The New Russian Engagement,” p. 80.

40 “О подписании Договора об основах отношений между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Гондурас [On the signing of the foundational agreement for relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Honduras],” Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/hn/-/asset_publisher/Q98A8VqvoQKk/content/id/2667005?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_Q98A8VqvoQKk&_101_INSTANCE_Q98A8VqvoQKk_languageId=ru_RU.

41 “Empresa de níquel con capital ruso recibe licencia para trabajar en Guatemala [Nickel company with Russian participation receives license to operate in Guatemala],” Sputnik News, 9 April 2013, <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/economia/20130409156811303>.

42 Data retrieved from Banco de Guatemala, http://www.banguat.gob.gt/inc/ver.asp?id=/Publica/v_man_bpagos/flujo_IED_2007_2018.htm&e=139708.



“Russian trade and investment in El Salvador and Honduras have primarily served to facilitate diplomatic relations . . . trade with and investment from Russia has grown steadily, with the active promotion of Central American partners.”

embassy has promoted business relations between the two countries and between Guatemalan and EAEU companies.⁴³

Russian trade and investment in El Salvador and Honduras have primarily served to facilitate diplomatic relations. Russia, for instance, does not have an embassy in El Salvador, but it does have a trade promotion office.⁴⁴ The first-ever visits by a Honduran and Salvadoran chancellor to Moscow were made in 2015⁴⁵ and 2013,⁴⁶ respectively, to discuss economic issues. Trade with and investment from Russia has grown steadily, with the active promotion of Central American partners.⁴⁷ The most significant project receiving Russian participation is the construction of the strategic Salvadoran Chaparral dam. The Russian company Tyazhmash is not only helping to construct the dam, but also contributing technology transfer and financing. Diplomats tout the project as a cornerstone of Russian-Salvadoran engagement.⁴⁸ Once completed in 2020, the dam will contribute greatly to Salvadoran energy production, as the country is currently a net energy importer. The Salvadoran government has further signaled that it wishes to keep Russian companies interested in participating in domestic infrastructure projects.⁴⁹

Economic cooperation also helped Honduran diplomats break the Russian-Honduran chill in the aftermath of the 2009 coup. The Honduran chancellor's 2013 visit to Moscow was hailed

as a "new page" in the relationship.⁵⁰ This rapprochement was confirmed by the opening of the Honduran embassy in Moscow later that year. Exports from Honduras to Russia have since increased, from \$9 million in 2013 to \$22 million in 2017.⁵¹ Beyond trade data, it is difficult to assess whether investment between Russia and Honduras has risen since the 2013 visit or the 2018 ratification of the foundational cooperation agreement.

While Russia's presence in the Northern Triangle is mostly focused on economics, Russia is not absent from the region's security sector. Counter-narcotics leads the security agenda, although cooperation in cyber-security is growing (The aforementioned forum on cybersecurity took place in Guatemala City).⁵² Guatemala and Russia have concluded a cooperation agreement on combatting organized crime, but relative to El Salvador and Honduras, cooperation on this topic is minimal. El Salvador and Honduras have two agreements each with Russia in matters relating to organized crime (2013 and 2019) and counter-narcotics (2012 and 2014). The Russian-Honduran treaties allow Moscow to provide financial aid, share counter-narcotics tactics, train Honduran personnel, and share intelligence on the drug trade.⁵³ Between Russia and El Salvador, two agreements stand out: the 2013 agreement on drug trafficking and the 2019 agreement on organized crime. The first agreement established inter-ministry cooperation

43 "La Embajada de Rusia apuesta por la diplomacia económica en Guatemala [The Russian embassy bets on economic diplomacy in Guatemala]," Sputnik News, 17 May 2019, <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/america-latina/201905171087288693-rusia-apuesta-insta-diplomacia-economica-guatemala>.

44 "Russia Trade Office in El Salvador Announced," Central America Data.com, 8 October 2014, https://www.centralamericadata.com/en/article/home/Russian_Trade_Office_in_El_Salvador_Announced.

45 "Rusia dará tecnología," El Salvador.com.

46 "Lavrov, Honduras FM to discuss prospects for political dialogue," TASS, 13 October 2013, <https://tass.com/russia/702202>.

47 For instance, see, the participation of the Salvadoran trade promotion body PROESA (in Spanish) at the 2017 St. Petersburg economic forum. "El Salvador y Rusia estrechan relaciones de cooperación [El Salvador and Russia develop joint cooperation]," PROESA website, 31 May 2019, <http://www.proesa.gob.sv/novedades/noticias/item/3546-el-salvador-y-rusia-estrechan-relaciones-de-cooperación>.

48 "El Salvador y Rusia estudian importantes," Sputnik News.

49 "Rusia entre los socios que interesan a El Salvador para construir el metro en su capital [Russia, among the partners that El Salvador is interested in to build the capital's subway]," Sputnik News, 1 June 2019, <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/america-latina/201906011087474848-rusia-podria-construir-metro-en-el-salvador>.

50 "Russia, Honduras open new page in relations," TASS, 14 October 2013, <https://tass.com/russia/702218>.

51 Data retrieved from the Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://atlas.media.mit.edu>.

52 "Об итогах Центральноамериканского форума по киберпреступности и международной информационной безопасности с участием России [On the results of the Central American forum on cybercrime and international information security with Russian participation]," Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 30 May 2019, http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/guatemala/-/asset_publisher/zf1huzgTo019/content/id/3663841.

53 Evan Ellis, "Honduras: a Pariah State or Innovative Solutions to Organized Crime Deserving U.S. Support?," US War College Press and Strategic Studies Institute, June 2016, p. 39.

and special equipment transfer from Russia to El Salvador.⁵⁴ The second contemplates intelligence exchange and other assistance in the fight against organized crime.⁵⁵ Russian attempts to increase Russian-Guatemalan defense cooperation through arms sales have failed, and Moscow has made no similar attempts with El Salvador or Honduras.⁵⁶

The Northern Triangle states do not suffer from the kind of political and economic isolation that Nicaragua currently does, which makes it an attractive region for increased Russian engagement. Already, in 2015, Russian diplomats hailed Guatemala as Russia's gateway to Central America.⁵⁷ However, cooperation with these countries has not been uncontroversial. Two cases, both in Guatemala, illustrate the growing entanglements of Russia in the Northern Triangle. The first is the 2008 "Bitkov" case when a Russian family sought refuge in Guatemala due to alleged persecution by a Russian company.⁵⁸ The second is the aforementioned nickel mine, which was mired by controversy due to its environmental impact and prompted major protests in 2019.⁵⁹ Both issues have not impeded Russian cooperation with Guatemala nor have they affected the appetite for more cooperation. They do illustrate, however, Russia's growing entanglements in the region.

Costa Rica and Panama

Russia's relations with Costa Rica and Panama

have been diverse and constant, focusing mostly on trade. Costa Rica was one of the countries that escaped the worst consequences of the Latin American Cold War by striking a balance between anti-communism and developmental policies.⁶⁰ Costa Rica was thus able to engage the Soviet Union without arousing suspicions of inviting Soviet intervention, and it emerged from the Cold War with good relations with both Washington and Moscow. Today, however, relations between San Jose and Moscow have cooled due to Costa Rica's concerns over Nicaragua's Russian-assisted military modernization.⁶¹ As Costa Rica and Nicaragua have several territorial disputes, the delivery of Russian arms to Managua has been seen in San Jose as potentially destabilizing. Nevertheless, in 2019, Putin expressed his interest in improving relations between the two countries.⁶² Moreover, in the same year, the visa-free agreement between Costa Rica and Russia entered into force.

Russian-Panamanian relations have been unencumbered by the type of conflicts that complicate Russian-Costa Rican relations. Moscow and Panama City began relations in 1991 though contact between the Soviet Union and local political parties began earlier. Today, Moscow and Panama City maintain several diplomatic agreements and cooperate at both the ministerial and parliamentary levels. The Russian-Panamanian bilateral relationship has been stable in part because Panama pursues a neutral foreign

54 "El Salvador y Rusia suscriben un acuerdo de cooperación para luchar contra el narcotráfico [El Salvador and Russia subscribe a cooperation agreement to fight drug trafficking]," Infodefensa.com, 28 January 2013, <https://www.infodefensa.com/latam/2013/01/28/noticia-el-salvador-y-rusia-suscriben-un-acuerdo-de-cooperacion-para-luchar-contra-el-narcotrafico.html>.

55 "Rusia y El Salvador firman acuerdo sobre cooperación en la lucha contra el crimen [Russia and El Salvador sign a cooperation agreement to cooperate against crime]," Sputnik News, 24 May 2019, <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/seguridad/201905241087375573-rusia-el-salvador-acuerdo-cooperacion-lucha-contra-crimen>.

56 "Rusia ofrece a Guatemala la venta de armamento militar [Russia offers arm sales to Guatemala]," Infodefensa.com, 1 March 2009, <https://www.infodefensa.com/latam/2009/03/01/noticia-rusia-ofrece-a-guatemala-la-venta-de-armamento-militar.html>.

57 "Guatemala y Rusia," Prensa Libre.

58 "El polémico caso de los Bitkov, la familia rusa presa en Guatemala que asegura ser víctima de una persecución del Kremlin [The polemic case of the Bitkovs, the Russian family jailed in Guatemala that claims to be victims of persecution by the Kremlin]," BBC News, 10 May 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-44013092>.

59 Marion Guégan & Cécile Schilis-Gallego, "En Guatemala, una foto compromete una mina ruso-suiza [In Guatemala, a photograph compromises a Russo-Swiss mine]," Proceso, 19 June 2019, <https://www.proceso.com.mx/588937/en-guatemala-una-foto-compromete-una-mina-ruso-suiza>.

60 See, Vanni Pettinà, *Historia Mínima de la Guerra Fría en América Latina* [Minimum history of the Cold War in Latin America], (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2018).

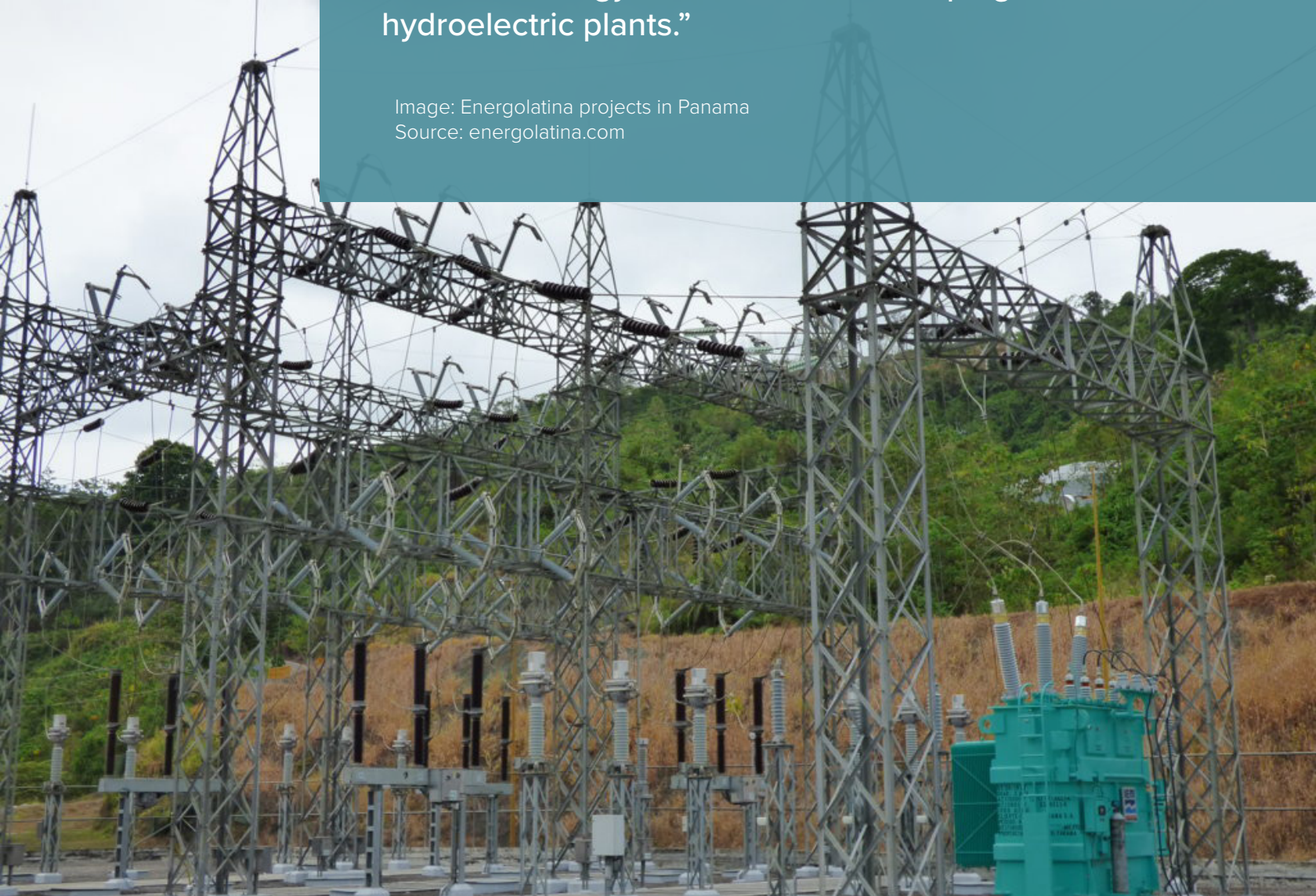
61 "Costa Rica muestra a EEUU su preocupación por el fortalecimiento militar de Nicaragua [Costa Rica expresses to the U.S. its concern over the strengthening of Nicaragua's military]," Infodefensa.com, 30 August 2016, <https://www.infodefensa.com/latam/2016/08/30/noticia-presidente-costa-expresa-preocupacion-remilitarizacion-nicaragua.html>.

62 "Putin: Brasil es uno de los socios clave de Rusia en el ámbito internacional [Putin: Brazil is one of Russia's key partners at the international scene]," Sputnik News, 3 July 2019, <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/politica/201907031087869903-rusia-brasil-socios-relaciones>.



“Energy is the main Russian export to Panama, and the Russian company, Energolatina, has been present in Panama’s energy sector since 2008, helping to construction hydroelectric plants.”

Image: Energolatina projects in Panama
Source: energolatina.com



policy, partnering with the U.S., China, India, Russia, and other Latin American countries. This multi-vector approach to international affairs is lauded by Russian officials, who consider it similar to Russia's own view of international relations and multipolarity.⁶³

Unlike in other Central American states, energy deliveries from Russia comprise a significant share of bilateral trade between Panama and Russia. While Russia does not export energy to Costa Rica, Russian businesses are reportedly interested in entering Costa Rica's energy sector and breaking the American monopoly on energy imports.⁶⁴ Energy is the main Russian export to Panama, and the Russian company, Energolatina, has been present in Panama's energy sector since 2008, helping to construction hydroelectric plants.⁶⁵ As was the case in El Salvador and Honduras, Panamanian authorities spearheaded greater cooperation and trade with Russia. These efforts culminated with the first-ever meeting of the Russian and Panamanian presidents in Moscow on the sidelines of the 2018 FIFA World Cup to discuss cooperation opportunities.⁶⁶ The Panamanian president also met with the Russian business community, inviting them to base their Latin American operations in Panama.⁶⁷

Russian-Panamanian cooperation in counter-narcotics is relatively old. The first agreement on the topic was signed in 1997.⁶⁸ Cooperation has increased recently; in 2012, the Panamanian

chancellor hosted the head of the Russian anti-trafficking body to discuss an expansion of bilateral cooperation.⁶⁹ In 2018, an agreement was signed between the Russian and Panamanian Ministries of the Interior to facilitate cooperation in counter-narcotics and the fight against organized crime.⁷⁰ Panamanian Ministry of Interior officers have received training in Russia and at a Russian-run facility in Nicaragua. Russian-Costa Rican cooperation in counter-narcotics is developing as joint operations have taken place,⁷¹ but the type of landmark agreements that frame Russian-Panamanian cooperation have not yet occurred.

Unlike the other Central American states, Costa Rica and Panama are the only countries with a visible Russian diaspora. These diasporas regularly cooperate with the Russian embassies to carry out public celebrations for Russian events such as Maslenitsa, Victory Day, and others.⁷² There is also a Russian-language newspaper in San Jose and a Russian-Costa Rican Chamber of Commerce. In Panama, civil society organizations have sought to create a permanent Russian culture center.⁷³ That said, coordination between the Russian diaspora in Costa Rica and Panama and the Russian government does not appear to go beyond the occasional organization of cultural events.

Nicaragua

Before Sandinista President Daniel Ortega took

63 "Lavrov notes similar views of Russia and Panama on world order," TASS, 31 March 2016, <https://tass.com/politics/866364>.

64 "Russia Ready to Diversify Costa Rican Energy Market Monopolised by US – Diplomat," Sputnik News, 14 May 2019, <https://sputniknews.com/latam/201905141075008302-russia-costa-rica-petroleum>.

65 Energolatina, <http://energolatina.com>.

66 "Meeting with President of Panama Juan Carlos Varela," Presidency of the Russian Federation website, 14 June 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57781>.

67 "Putin debate relaciones bilaterales con su homólogo panameño Varela [Putin discusses bilateral relations with his Panamanian counterpart Varela]," Sputnik News, 14 June 2019, <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/america-latina/201806141079566032-presidente-de-panama-visita-rusia>.

68 "Ficha País [Country profile]," Panamanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <https://www.mire.gob.pa/images/embajadas/europa/rusia/ficha-rusia.pdf>.

69 Panamanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, https://www.mire.gob.pa/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5338:&catid=75&Itemid=204&lang=es.

70 "Panamá firmará con Rusia un acuerdo de cooperación a nivel de Ministerios de Interior [Panama to sign an agreement with Russia on cooperation among both countries' Ministries of Interior]," RT, 15 June 2018, <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/275833-panama-rusia-acuerdo-cooperacion-ministerios-interior>.

71 Yuri Paniev, "Rusia y los países latinoamericanos colaboran en la lucha contra el narcotráfico [Russia and the Latin American countries collaborate in the fight against drug trafficking]," Russia Beyond the Headlines, 11 August 2014, https://es.rbth.com/internacional/2014/08/11/rusia_y_los_paises_latinoamericanos_colaboran_en_lucha_contra_e_42613.

72 "Asamblea anual de compatriotas [Annual compatriot assembly]," Gazeta Rusa, 11 June 2018, <http://gazetarusa.cr/es/отчётно-выборная-конференция-соотеч>.

73 "Embajada de Rusia celebra festival cultural [Russian embassy celebrates cultural festival]," La Estrella, 12 March 2019, <http://laestrella.com.pa/estilo/cultura/embajada-rusia-celebra-festival-cultural/24052806>.

office in 2007, there was little contact between Nicaragua and Russia. Ortega is a member of the socialist Sandinista party, which overthrew Nicaragua's Washington-aligned government with Soviet support during the Nicaraguan revolution (1979-1990). Shortly after he came to office, Russia invaded Georgia in 2008. The Georgian breakaway territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, supported by Moscow, then declared independence from Tbilisi. In 2008, Russia recognized them as independent. Just a few other countries followed suit. Nicaragua is one; in fact, Managua's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was unsolicited and unexpected by the Kremlin. It offered a strong signal that the Ortega administration sought deeper engagement with Moscow.⁷⁴

In return, Russia has been a dependable partner for Nicaragua. Nicaragua experienced a political crisis in 2018 when the government violently suppressed small-scale protests against pension reform. The authorities' outsized response prompted outrage among society, causing clashes to escalate. While the international community has widely condemned Managua's use of violence, Moscow has not. Russia is also among the few countries that have not cancelled humanitarian aid to Nicaragua in response to the human rights violations.

As in El Salvador and Honduras, Nicaragua's rapprochement with Russia centered heavily on an investment agenda, in this case set out in 2012.⁷⁵ Yet, to this day, Russia is not among the largest investors in the country, as American and Mexican investments continue to dominate FDI inflows

into Nicaragua.⁷⁶ It is also unclear how many joint Russian-Nicaraguan investment projects have actually been completed. The Nicaraguan trans-oceanic canal offers a prime example. First proposed in 2013, the Nicaraguan canal was envisioned as a competitor to the Panama Canal, and thereby attracted Russian and even Iranian interest.⁷⁷ However, the Nicaraguan canal is widely considered unviable today although it has not yet been officially cancelled.⁷⁸ This is not to suggest that Russian investments in Nicaragua are incapable of reaching completion. In 2019, the first vaccine factory in Central America was opened in Nicaragua with Russian investment and technology transfer.⁷⁹

Russian-Nicaraguan cooperation is closest in counter-narcotics and security, especially since the start of Ortega's second term in 2012. The hallmark of Russian-Nicaraguan security cooperation is the Russian-run training facility in Managua. Opened in 2017, the center aims to teach police officers in the region effective ways to fight drug trafficking. The center intends to promote an alternative to the U.S.-led counter-narcotics approach prevalent in the region.⁸⁰ Aside from the center, Russian forces have participated in joint raids and operations against drug trafficking, capturing as many as 41 presumed traffickers in one particular operation.⁸¹

Russia's defense cooperation with Nicaragua is much deeper than with other Central American states. As previously mentioned, Nicaragua is the only Central American state that procures armaments from Russia. Of special importance is Russia's transfer of battle tanks and fighter jets to Nicaragua. In addition to arms sales, there is also

⁷⁴ Ellis, "The New Russian Engagement," p. 10.

⁷⁵ "Nicaragua ofrecerá a Rusia cartera de proyectos por 600 millones de dólares [Nicaragua to offer Russia investment portfolio worth 600 million USD]," *El Nuevo Diario*, 21 January 2012, <https://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/nacionales/239300-nicaragua-ofrecera-rusia-cartera-proyectos-600-mil>.

⁷⁶ "IED que recibe Nicaragua proviene de 68 países [Nicaraguan FDI inflows come from 68 different countries]," *El Nuevo Diario*, 9 January 2018, <https://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/economia/452115-ied-que-recibe-nicaragua-proviene-68-paises>.

⁷⁷ "Pourquoi l'Iran lorgne sur le canal du Nicaragua [Why Iran eyes the Nicaragua canal]," *Sputnik News*, 8 September 2016, <https://fr.sputniknews.com/international/201609081027667043-iran-canal-nicaragua>.

⁷⁸ "Incertidumbres financieras desvanecen sueño de canal en Nicaragua [Financial uncertainty vanish Nicaragua canal dream]," *El Financiero*, 21 February 2018, <https://www.elfinanciero.cr.com/economia-y-politica/incertidumbres-financieras-desvanecen-sueno-de/7HFF44CY3RBVVE7BR3YRKJ3XZY/story>.

⁷⁹ "Fábrica de vacunas en Nicaragua abastecerá Centroamérica [Vaccines factory in Nicaragua to supply all of Central America]," *El Nuevo Diario*, 22 October 2016, <https://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/nacionales/408039-fabrica-vacunas-nicaragua-abastecera-centroamerica>.

⁸⁰ "Guerra contra las drogas: Moscú se hace presente en América Central [War on drugs: Moscow becomes present in Central America]," *Sputnik News*, 16 November 2017, <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/defensa/201711161074003881-drogas-guerra-politica-rusia>.

⁸¹ Ellis, "The New Russian Engagement," p. 29.

a stable Russian military presence in the country. Russian ships have docking rights in Nicaragua, and, since 2013, the Nicaraguan government has authorized 130 Russian military officers to enter the country annually. This number is likely higher in reality as it does not include Russian patrols on Nicaraguan territorial waters, namely the swathes conceded to Nicaragua from Colombia by a 2012 International Criminal Court ruling (the U.S. navy is also allowed by Nicaragua to patrol there).⁸² There is also a Russian satellite installed in Nicaragua called GLONASS, Russia's version of GPS. While it is unclear whether GLONASS is being used for Russian intelligence, the possibility has not been ruled out.⁸³

Nicaragua's cooperation with Russia in the defense and security spheres has understandably prompted concerns in the region. On April 12, 2019, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo referred to the Russian-run counter-narcotics center in Nicaragua as evidence of Russia's intent to "spread disorder" and "erod[e] good governance" in the region.⁸⁴ Russian military cooperation with Nicaragua has also alarmed Nicaragua's neighbors. Nicaragua's conflict with Colombia reached a critical point in 2013, for instance, when Russian military flights over disputed waters aroused suspicions that Russia would support Nicaragua if fighting broke out.⁸⁵ Nicaragua also has territorial conflicts with Costa Rica over the San Juan river and with El Salvador and Honduras over the Gulf of Fonseca. Consequently, there have been concerns that Managua's arms procurement from Russia is aimed at gaining an upper hand in these conflicts.⁸⁶ At the 2015 SICA forum, Russia's Minister of

Foreign Affairs addressed these concerns, saying that Russia does not seek to destabilize the region militarily nor establish any bases in it.⁸⁷ Furthermore, Russia has not accepted the role of Managua's security provider. In 2013, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Russia would not come to Nicaragua's aid in case of a war with Colombia over control of a disputed section of the Caribbean Sea.⁸⁸

82 "Rusia solidifica su presencia militar en Centroamérica a través de Nicaragua [Russia solidifies its military presence in Central America through Nicaragua]," *El Nuevo Herald*, 29 April 2015, <https://www.elnuevoherald.com/noticias/mundo/america-latina/article19909086.html>.

83 John R. Haines, "Everything Old is New Again: Russia Returns to Nicaragua," Foreign Policy Research Institute, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/07/everything-old-new-russia-returns-nicaragua>.

84 "China, Russia 'Spread Disorder' in Latin America, Pompeo Says," *Bloomberg*, 12 April 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-12/china-russia-spread-disorder-in-latin-america-pompeo-says>.

85 Ellis, "The New Russian Engagement," p. 28.

86 Michael Lohmuller, "Es difícil creer que Nicaragua enfrentará narcotraficantes con aviones de combate [It is difficult to believe that Nicaragua will fight drug trafficking with fighter planes]," *Insight Crime*, 27 April 2015, <https://es.insightcrime.org/noticias/analisis/dificil-creer-nicaragua-enfrentara-narcotraficantes-aviones-combate>.

87 "Rusia niega intentar desestabilizar militarmente Centroamérica [Russia denies trying to militarily destabilize Central America]," *Infodefensa.com*, 2 April 2015, <https://www.infodefensa.com/latam/2015/04/02/noticia-rusia-niega-estar-trabajando-desestabilizar-militarmente-centroamerica.html>.

88 "Rusia negó apoyo a Nicaragua en hipotético conflicto con Colombia [Russia denied support for Nicaragua in the case of a conflict with Colombia]," *El Herald*, 15 November 2013, <https://www.elheraldo.co/nacional/rusia-nego-apoyo-nicaragua-en-hipotetico-conflicto-con-colombia-132369>.


NO LONGER A ZEO-SUM GAME?

One of the primary features of Russian-Central American relations has been inconsistency, as Russia's involvement in the region has oscillated between disengagement and intense activity. Today, bilateral relations are varied, spanning trade, investment in strategic sectors, and cooperation in counter-narcotics. Russia's economic stagnation following the 2014 energy prices collapse has affected the trajectory of this cooperation, shifting the focus from trade and investment into the security sphere—although trade has regained importance in recent years. The crisis of the Ortega regime and the chill in U.S.-Central American relations has furthermore driven Moscow to expand its relations with every Central American state, most notably with those of the Northern Triangle.

An analysis of Russia's recent engagement with Central America reveals that it is highly dependent on the leaders of the Central American states. Nearly every country in Central America played the role of courting Russian interest in developing bilateral relations. Even Nicaragua, Russia's strategic partner in Central America, started the relationship nearly from scratch after Ortega rose to power. Previous analyses of Russia's Latin America engagement have mostly overlooked this factor, which has been critical. On the other hand, deeper ties may carry risks, as the mining operation in Guatemala illustrates, or the diplomatic pitfalls surrounding the Costa Rican-Nicaraguan relationship. As Russia's engagement with Central America grows, it will have to avoid falling into self-defeating entanglements.

In recent years, Russia has developed a distinct approach to Central America, led by multilateral engagement and restraint in its pro-Maduro agenda. In South America, Russia's public support for Maduro has alienated many. In Central America, however, Moscow has found that most states share either its pro-Maduro or its anti-interventionist

position. If Moscow were to engage in a diplomatic campaign to break Venezuela from its current isolation in Latin America,⁸⁹ then Central America could be receptive to these efforts. However, this diplomatic convergence has limits. If conflict in Venezuela were to escalate and draw Russia in, then Moscow would find little support in Central America, with the exception of Ortega's Nicaragua and, to a lesser extent, El Salvador.

The geopolitical drivers of Russia's presence in Central America conjure memories of the Cold War. The Latin American Cold War reached its bloodiest point in the 1980s, when bottom-up pressures for democratization and land distribution were aggravated by the bipolar logic of East-West confrontation. The conflict between the U.S. and the Soviet Union eventually devastated the region. Today's confrontation between the West and Russia does not follow the same path; no country in the region is pursuing a zero-sum game. The U.S. remains key to Central American states' foreign policy, and while Russia's presence in the region is not unsubstantial, it has hardly challenged the established intra-American order. The U.S. can thus resolve its security concerns without pressuring Central American states to choose between Washington and Moscow, as Cold War dynamics demanded. 

⁸⁹ In an effort akin to its attempts to bring back Syria from isolation in the Middle East.

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