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Russia and Nicaragua:

**A Peculiar Relationship Threatening Security
and Democracy in the Western Hemisphere**

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May 2023

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Russia and Nicaragua: A Peculiar Relationship Threatening Security and Democracy in the Western Hemisphere

Prologue

Dr. Armando Chaguaceda

Over the last two decades, global autocracies (China and Russia) have actively influenced the redesigning of the Latin American political landscape. From this perspective, the Kremlin has backed regimes in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela through diplomatic support, supplies, and training in the fields of defense and security, and, to a smaller extent, economic and financial partnerships, as well as cultural and communication ties. Such autocratic cooperation is sustained by the following rhetoric: respect for sovereignty, defense of multipolarity, and non-intervention of foreign powers, all of which disguise the authoritarian notion of the exercise of power while Moscow and its allies actively deploy an aggressive foreign policy toward Latin America and consolidate all levels of social control domestically.

The selective use of the political discourse of sovereignty also goes against the position of Washington, the European Union, and various Latin American governments that back the defense of democracy and human rights. Moscow and its partners in Latin America share the exclusively state-centric concept of sovereignty, allegedly counter-hegemonic, while they justify a territorial occupation. The manipulation of the principle of self-determination of peoples from authoritarian states and populist governments has allowed for political and diplomatic cooperation, which has proved a coordinated platform against the critiques and sanctions of the international community.

The high level of bilateral political ties with Moscow has led Managua to present the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a “special military operation,” distinguishing between this type of operation and the unrestricted defense of national sovereignty that the regime in Nicaragua proclaims in its defensive discourses. In turn, Russia has rejected the United Nations’ condemnations of the situation of repression in Nicaragua. In an interview with Sputnik Mundo in February 2022, the Russian Ambassador to Nicaragua Alexandr Khokholikov clearly pointed out the possibility and desirability of expanding economic, commercial, cultural, and military cooperation with Managua, independently of the international situation and the conflict with the West.

As V. Rouvinski highlights in this work, the cooperation between Moscow and Managua, relevant due to its three-fold condition of analytical sophistication, exhaustive understanding of current affairs, and value for political decision-making, could expand. Managua is always in keeping with the Kremlin’s desire to promote a new world order, with

a focus on the recruitment of new allies in Latin America, which, to date, has led to very limited results.

From this perspective, the potential reinforcement of intelligence and military capacities in Nicaragua threatens the security and democracy of the Western Hemisphere, which to date, has been governed by a mainly liberal democratic consensus, and democratic nations have prevailed during the 21st century. For all these reasons, the author emphasizes the need to raise awareness among decision-makers and influence public opinion about the nature of today's Russian-Nicaraguan cooperation, especially in the fields of security, defense, and information.

Autocratic cooperation between Russia and its Latin American partners thus strengthens a bilateral confluence of values and opposing positions of the defense of democracy. A (geo) political ecosystem where consolidated democracies predominate represents a threat, both real and symbolic, to the survival of autocratic regimes. Subverting this relationship and securing the support of similar political values has been an objective of the Kremlin's global reach, recently reinforced by the new concept of foreign policy approved last March amid the invasion of Ukraine.

The policy proposes a supposedly pragmatic and non-ideological focus on its approach to the so-called Global South, and within it, Latin America, aimed at the common defense of "multipolarity." However, as this document points out, the policy is merely a project for the defense of values and hierarchical institutions that are authoritarian and conservative and geopolitically oppose the West and, in a broader sense, the very idea of an open, multicultural, and politically pluralistic society embodied in the modern conception of progress. Cooperation between Moscow and Managua should be approached from an understanding of this perspective.

Dr. Armando Chaguaceda is a Cuban-Mexican political scientist and historian, whose research examines democratization and democratic decay, the forces of populism and authoritarianism, and the role of global powers such as Russia and China in Latin American politics.

Russia and Nicaragua: A Peculiar Relationship Threatening Security and Democracy in the Western Hemisphere

Executive Summary

The current relationship between Russia and Nicaragua stands out from Russia's relations with other Latin American countries by the confidence levels between Moscow and Managua and the constantly growing engagement on sensitive political and security issues. This multi-dimensional and continuous engagement threatens security and democracy in the Western hemisphere in the short, medium, and long terms because it aims to cement the erosion of democratic norms in Nicaragua by providing political, informational, and military support to the authoritarian regime in this Central American nation and to use Nicaragua as a gateway to expand Russia's influence in this part of Latin America.

There are two main reasons behind this peculiar relationship. On the one hand, Nicaragua's authoritarian government wants a powerful ally with a global reach, willing to provide political support and engage in domestic issues such as policing and influence operations. On the other hand, Moscow sees Nicaragua as strategically valuable due to Central America's geographical location. From this perspective, it is no coincidence that the ties between Putin's Russia and Ortega's Nicaragua have been growing and strengthening in parallel with the rise of Moscow and Managua's tensions with the US, other Western nations, and democratic governments in Latin America.

Despite the regular bravura statements by Nicaraguan and Russian government officials, there has been little economic cooperation between the two countries during the fifteen years of the reemerged political and military collaboration following Ortega's recognition of the pro-Russian breakaway territories of Georgia in 2008. For instance, in 2020, Nicaragua exported 300 times fewer goods and services to Russia than in the case of the US while importing 26 times less from Russia than from the US. However, both countries intended to present modest examples of economic cooperation as the pillars of the future breakthrough in Russia-Nicaragua relations. For instance, Russia donated urban buses that use obsolete technology and have little demand in Russia proper and signed cooperation agreements in pharmaceuticals and science, which have yet to show any actual outcome.

Authentic engagement occurs in military and security cooperation and information and influence operations. Firstly, an overwhelming part of the military equipment of the Nicaraguan army is produced in the former Soviet Union and contemporary Russia. Dozens of tanks supplied by Moscow to Managua are likely to be the most advanced equipment of this kind in the region. Besides these, Moscow owns and independently manages a training center in Nicaragua and a GLONASS station, which can guide high-precision weapons and facilitate the navigation of navy boats and military aircraft. Russian law enforcement agencies train the Nicaraguan police force in various aspects of intelligence and policing that helps the Ortega regime to repress the opposition. Regarding information and influence operations, the Nicaraguan and Russian government-controlled media cooperate in strategic information, spreading the Putin and Ortega regimes' narratives on critical international and regional issues. Among the latest developments is the participation of Russian observers in the disputed elections in Nicaragua, used by Moscow and Managua to legitimize election results that the opposition and international community have rejected.

Following the beginning of Russia's open warfare in Ukraine in February 2022, Moscow has sought to increase its geopolitical influence in the Western Hemisphere. Nicaragua, under the control of Daniel Ortega, provides Russia with an opportunity to collect firsthand knowledge of the situation in the region and promote Moscow's interests via the Russian embassy, in addition to collaboration between the armed forces and security agencies. There is also a Russia-Nicaragua alliance for strategic communication using government-controlled information networks and Moscow's independently managed installations on the ground, making it an ideal hub for Russian activities in the area.

Engaging Nicaragua is advantageous for Russia compared to investing in other allied nations in the region, such as Cuba or Venezuela. In this context, the modus operandi of the Russia-Nicaragua relationship perfectly serves the interests of both political regimes. Moreover, the cooperation between Moscow and Managua is likely to expand, considering Russia's desire to become a chief promoter of a new world order and the fact that, so far, the Kremlin has been failing to recruit new allies in Latin America despite continuous calls from Moscow on Latin American leaders to cut ties with the US. From this perspective, the potential for rapidly expanding Moscow's intelligence and military capacities in Nicaragua threatens the security and democracy of the Western Hemisphere, where the prevalence of democratic nations in the 21st century is crucial for maintaining the region's stability.

Considering the threats to security and democracy in the Americas associated with Russia's engagement with Nicaragua, it is necessary to raise the awareness of decision-makers and the public regarding the nature of Russia-Nicaragua cooperation in security and information operations. In this sense, monitoring the state of collaboration between Moscow and Managua independently using publicly available sources, making the results of this monitoring widely open to the Latin American public, and fostering discussion by think tanks and mass media in a region may be helpful steps.

All evidence used to compile this report is collected from open sources, publicly available on the Internet.

Resumen ejecutivo

El vínculo contemporáneo entre Rusia y Nicaragua destaca si se le compara con las relaciones que Rusia mantiene con otros países latinoamericanos. Los niveles de confianza entre Moscú y Managua y la creciente participación de Nicaragua en sensibles asuntos políticos y de seguridad a solicitud de Rusia son significativos. Este continuo compromiso multidimensional amenaza la seguridad y la democracia en el Hemisferio Occidental a corto, mediano y largo plazo. Pretende, principalmente, consolidar la erosión de las normas democráticas en Nicaragua al proporcionar apoyo político, informativo y militar al régimen autoritario en esta nación centroamericana y usar a Nicaragua como puerta de entrada para la expansión de la influencia rusa en América Latina.

Hay dos razones principales detrás de esta peculiar relación. Por un lado, el gobierno autoritario de Nicaragua quiere un aliado poderoso con alcance global, dispuesto a brindar apoyo político y participar en asuntos internos, como operaciones policiales y de influencia. Por otro lado, Moscú ve a Nicaragua con valor estratégico debido a su ubicación geográfica en América Central. Rusia también reconoce que EEUU observa con preocupación a Centroamérica debido a la migración, el tráfico de drogas y otros factores. Desde esta perspectiva, no es casualidad que los lazos entre la Rusia de Putin y la Nicaragua de Ortega hayan crecido en paralelo al aumento de las tensiones de Moscú y Managua con Estados Unidos, otras naciones occidentales y los gobiernos democráticos de América Latina.

Con estos antecedentes, no sorprende que, a pesar de las frecuentes declaraciones de funcionarios gubernamentales de Rusia y Nicaragua, ha habido poca cooperación económica entre los dos regímenes tras quince años de colaboración política y militar resurgida con el reconocimiento de Ortega de territorios separatistas prorrusos de Georgia en 2008. Por ejemplo, en 2020, Nicaragua exportó 300 veces menos bienes y servicios a Rusia comparado a lo exportado a Estados Unidos. Además, importó 26 veces menos de Rusia que de Estados Unidos. Sin embargo, a pesar del bajo progreso en el comercio, ambos gobiernos intentaron presentar ejemplos modestos de cooperación económica, como la donación rusa de autobuses urbanos que utilizan tecnología obsoleta y tienen poca demanda en Rusia o la firma de acuerdos de cooperación en industria farmacéutica y ciencia que aún no han mostrado ningún resultado real.

La verdadera cooperación se manifiesta en términos militares y de seguridad. En primer lugar, la gran parte del equipo militar del ejército de Nicaragua es fabricada en la otrora Unión Soviética y la Rusia contemporánea. Docenas de tanques suministrados por Moscú a Managua probablemente sean el equipo más avanzado de este tipo en la región. Además, un centro de entrenamiento de propiedad y gestión independiente de Moscú en Nicaragua y una estación GLONASS pueden guiar armas de alta precisión y facilitar la navegación de barcos de la armada y aeronaves militares. Las

fuerzas del orden rusas capacitan a la fuerza policial nicaragüense en varios aspectos de inteligencia y vigilancia que ayudan al régimen de Ortega a oprimir a la oposición. En cuanto a las operaciones de información e influencia, los medios controlados por los gobiernos de Nicaragua y Rusia cooperan en el área de información estratégica, difundiendo narrativas de los regímenes de Putin y Ortega sobre temas internacionales y regionales clave. Entre las últimas novedades está la participación de observadores rusos en las controversiales elecciones en Nicaragua en 2021, utilizadas por Moscú y Managua para legitimar resultados electorales que la oposición y la comunidad internacional han rechazado.

Tras el comienzo de la guerra abierta de Rusia en Ucrania en febrero de 2022, Moscú busca aumentar su influencia geopolítica en el hemisferio occidental. Nicaragua, bajo el control de Daniel Ortega, brinda a Rusia la oportunidad de conocer de primera mano la situación regional y promover los intereses de Moscú a través de la embajada rusa. También existe una alianza ruso-nicaragüense para la comunicación estratégica que utiliza redes de información controladas por el gobierno y las instalaciones en el terreno administradas de forma independiente por Moscú, lo que lo convierte en un centro ideal para las actividades rusas en la región.

Involucrar a Nicaragua es rentable para Rusia en comparación con invertir en otras naciones aliadas en la región, como Cuba o Venezuela. En este contexto, el modus operandi de la relación ruso-nicaragüense sirve perfectamente a los intereses de ambos regímenes políticos. Además, es probable que la cooperación entre Moscú y Managua se amplíe, considerando el deseo de Rusia de convertirse en el principal promotor de un nuevo orden mundial y el hecho de que, hasta ahora, el Kremlin no ha logrado reclutar nuevos aliados en América Latina a pesar de sus continuos esfuerzos. Desde esta perspectiva, el potencial de expansión rápida de las capacidades militares y de inteligencia de Moscú en Nicaragua amenaza la seguridad y la democracia del Hemisferio Occidental, donde el predominio de las naciones democráticas en el siglo XXI se ha considerado crucial para mantener la estabilidad regional.

Considerando las amenazas a la seguridad y la democracia en las Américas asociadas con el compromiso de Rusia con Nicaragua, es necesario sensibilizar a los tomadores de decisiones y a la opinión pública sobre la naturaleza de la cooperación ruso-nicaragüense en operaciones de seguridad e información. Esto se puede lograr monitoreando el estado de la cooperación entre Moscú y Managua de forma independiente utilizando fuentes públicas disponibles y haciendo que los resultados de este monitoreo estén ampliamente difundidos en la opinión pública latinoamericana. También debe fomentarse la discusión entre centros de pensamiento y los medios de comunicación que puedan contribuir en diseñar y ajustar las políticas correspondientes de los países del Hemisferio Occidental.

Toda la evidencia utilizada para elaborar este informe se recopilan de fuentes abiertas, disponibles públicamente en Internet.

Russia and Nicaragua: A Peculiar Relationship Threatening Security and Democracy in the Western Hemisphere

Introduction

Within the scope of contemporary Russian relations with Latin America, Moscow's ties to Nicaragua stand apart in terms of the level of trust built between the political leaderships of both countries, which can be traced back to the Cold War, in addition to the extent of cooperation in delicate political and security issues that Daniel Ortega and Vladimir Putin have been consolidating continuously since Nicaragua separately recognized the Russian-backed republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the Five-Day War or Russo-Georgian War in 2008.

The main reason behind the peculiar Russia-Nicaragua relations is double-fold. On one hand, in parallel with the strengthening of authoritarian trends in Nicaragua and the growing isolation of Ortega's regime in the international arena, Managua needed a powerful ally capable of providing wide-ranging political support to the country in various multilateral settings and information spaces. Besides, Ortega wished to engage Putin's Russia in the domestic issues that needed to be reinforced quickly, such as policing and influence operations. On the other hand, Moscow views Nicaragua through the lens of strategic reciprocity, described later in this paper, where the pivotal value of this Central American nation to the Kremlin is its geographical proximity to the United States.

At the same time, following the war in Ukraine started by Putin in February 2022, Russia is bound to raise its stake in the geopolitical game in the Western Hemisphere, and, in this context, Ortega-controlled Nicaragua has all the characteristics that Russia would seek to create a hub for its activities in the region: first-hand and constantly updated knowledge through its embassy and other Russian government-controlled offices in the area, fully-collaborating local authorities, Moscow's independently managed installations on the ground, and its networks in the neighboring countries of Central America. In addition, engaging Nicaragua requires relatively low costs for Russia compared to the investments necessary to increase Russian presence in other allied nations of the region, such as Cuba or Venezuela .

In other words, the strength of contemporary Russia-Nicaragua ties perfectly serves the interests of both Moscow and Managua from short and medium-term perspectives. Moreover, taking into consideration the increased importance given by the government of Vladimir Putin to the ideological dimension of Russia's quest for constructing a new world order, an alternative to the existing liberal world order led by the United States and their Western allies, combined with the potential to expand the Russian intelligence and military capacities in Nicaragua swiftly, constitutes a threat to security and stability in the Western Hemisphere, where the prevalence of like-minded democracies is the key to maintain peace and collaboration in the region. Against the above background, this paper traces the evolution of relations between

Daniel Ortega and Vladimir Putin's government by paying particular attention to the influence of symbolic reciprocity and examining a multi-dimensional continuous engagement between the countries that threatens security and stability in the Western Hemisphere in the short and medium terms.



¹ In the case of Cuba, the economic situation requires urgent measures to avoid collapse. However, this cooperation involves high costs, which Russia, unlike the Soviet Union, is unprepared to incur, especially considering the expenses associated with Moscow's war in Ukraine. In the case of Venezuela, Russia had already invested billions of US dollars into the oil sector but may risk losing even these assets in the context of sanctions. This is not the case in Nicaragua.

The Peculiarity of the Contemporary Russia-Nicaragua Relationship

To understand better why the rapprochement of Ortega's Nicaragua to Putin's Russia resulted in constructing sustainable and mutually beneficial cooperation between both regimes, the Soviet legacy should not be overlooked. Along with Fidel's Cuba, Nicaragua was one of the most important Soviet allies in the Western Hemisphere during the Cold War, not least of which because of its geographical proximity to the United States. Therefore, the Soviet Union rushed to establish diplomatic relations with the Sandinista government of Nicaragua in 1980, soon after Ortega led the Sandinistas to become the paramount political power in the country. Guided by the reciprocity logic of the Cold War, Moscow ensured that Nicaragua would receive wide-ranging Soviet Union economic and military aid. Likely, young Daniel Ortega learned back then that it was worth having Soviets as friends because of the benefits that such a "friendship" could bring him beyond the ideological rhetoric. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union collapsed, and Nicaragua disappeared from the radar of Moscow in the 1990s.

Hence, it must come as no surprise that the revival of Russia's interest in Nicaragua started only with the early attempts by Putin to acquire a more decisive role for Moscow in global affairs and the return, in 2007, of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) and Ortega to power. In this context, the recognition in 2008 by Nicaragua of two breakaway territories of Georgia, namely, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as independent nations, must be considered as a message to Moscow that Ortega had returned to the geopolitical game and expected to receive tangible benefits like he was accustomed to receiving during the era of the Soviet Union (Reuters, 2008). Of course, the Nicaraguan president knew that post-Soviet Russia was no match to the former Soviet Union regarding economic might and, even more importantly, the scope of the aid it would offer Nicaragua. However, as it is clear now, his vision of the further paybacks he would receive for collaborating with the new Russia and its strategy turned out to be correct. Moscow needed an ally in Central America who would be prepared to support its policy and with whom it would be easier to deal than countries already aligned with Russia, like Cuba and Venezuela. In the case of Cuba, the issue of the Soviet era's multi-billion-dollar debt remained unresolved. In the case of Venezuela, Caracas expected sizeable investments in its oil sector. Hence, as one of the Russian experts ironically noticed, "Ortega felt Russian gratitude in 2008, during a visit to Moscow, from which he took away a \$1 billion loan and an agreement to build several small and medium-sized hydroelectric power plants and geothermal power plants in Nicaragua (...) Russia would significantly increase the import of agricultural products from Nicaragua, which would not be difficult to do" (Gabuev, 2009).

The comparative advantage of Nicaragua as a new Russian ally was the absence of uncomfortable items in their bilateral agenda, as was the case of Cuba with outstanding Soviet debt or Venezuela with the need to invest considerable resources in the oil sector (Kommersant, 2012). Another advantage of the Russia-Nicaragua partnership was the restored mutual trust from the Soviet legacy linked to Daniel Ortega. For Putin and his elites, "Russia and Nicaragua are connected by time-proven, amicable,

fraternal, and strategic partner relations” and “share the vision of fair world order, solidarity, and mutual support in international affairs” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014). In practical terms, the above observation meant that in 2008, Russia started to view Nicaragua as available for collaboration. Moreover, Russia began to consider its links with Ortega’s government as strategically crucial since “a serious groundwork had been laid out to activate the Russian-Nicaraguan interactions with new content and their subsequent upgrading to the level of a strategic partnership.” (Ria Novosti, 2010).

Additionally, it is necessary to examine the scope of commercial relations between Nicaragua and Russia (excluding arms trade) since both sides often talk about the “promising character” and “future potential” of their mutual business (TASS.ru, 2022). In this context, besides the military equipment, it is likely that for the people of Nicaragua, the most visible sign of Russia’s presence in the country is urban buses on the streets of Managua. Between 2009 and 2012, the Kurgansky Avtobusniy Zavod (KAvZ) plant supplied 549 buses to Nicaragua. In late 2021, Russia was expected to ship another 250 buses, and Moscow fully assumed the order for costs estimated at 16 million USD (Izvestiya, 2021).

The case of Russian buses in Nicaragua is quite illustrative of the approach chosen by the government of Vladimir Putin to deal with its Central American ally. In the past, the KAvZ bus manufacturing plant was the biggest in the Soviet Union. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the plant rapidly began to lose competitiveness due to the growing demand for more sophisticated buses that would meet new environmental and efficiency standards. Today, the plant is an outsider of the Russian domestic bus markets, where KAvZ’s share is just 1.8% (Trokhachev, 2022). In 2021, KAvZ only managed to sell 268 buses out of 15,664 in Russia that year.

Moreover, the KAvZ buses are not included in the list of city bus models participating in various state-sponsored programs for updating public transport in Russia. The city government of Kurgan, where buses for Nicaragua are produced, is considering buying Chinese buses instead of locally produced ones because the buses made in China are “more comfortable and [of] better quality” (Grozniy, 2023). In other words, Russia’s offer of buses to Nicaragua sought to kill two birds with one stone.

On the one hand, for the Russian government, it was easy to assume the costs of buying this equipment because of the low costs of KAvZ buses compared to the production of other plants. On the other hand, placing an order for manufacturing the buses in Kurgan helped to avoid cutting workplaces at KAvZ due to the low demand for this type of equipment in the domestic market. At the same time, Nicaragua remains the only export destination of KAvZ.

As the story with Russian buses in Nicaragua shows, many of Russia’s civilian industrial and consumer products may not be competitive globally or even in Russia’s domestic markets. Most Russian enterprises invest their funds in purchasing imported innovations instead of fomenting their own Research, Development, and Engineering (R&DE) (Torvinen & Väättänen, 2013; Repinskiy et al. 2021). Therefore, in the case of Nicaragua, despite the bravura statements by both sides and the highly publicized supply of Russia-made urban buses, which have a limited market even inside Russia proper, the trade between these two nations is inferior to the trade that Nicaragua (and Russia) has with other countries. As of 2020, in order of importance, Russia was the 16th origin country for Nicaragua’s imports, with approximately US\$ 63.53 million (0.97% of the total imported). At the

same time, Russia was the 26th destination (country) for Nicaraguan exports, with US\$10.41 million (0.02% of the total exported). It is important to emphasize that although there have been many talks on collaboration between Russia and Nicaragua in the sectors that require the use of R&DE, such as the use of nuclear technologies (Rosatom, 2023), little progress can be expected in practical terms, at least to the extent that Nicaragua's economic collaboration with Russia, besides the military and security sectors, would allow Moscow to move significantly up in the list of Nicaragua's major trading partners because of the low competitiveness of many goods originated in Russia. Exceptions like fertilizers, pharmaceutical products, or nuclear medicine would not suffice for a breakthrough in trade due to the dominance of other items in the Nicaraguan trade basket.

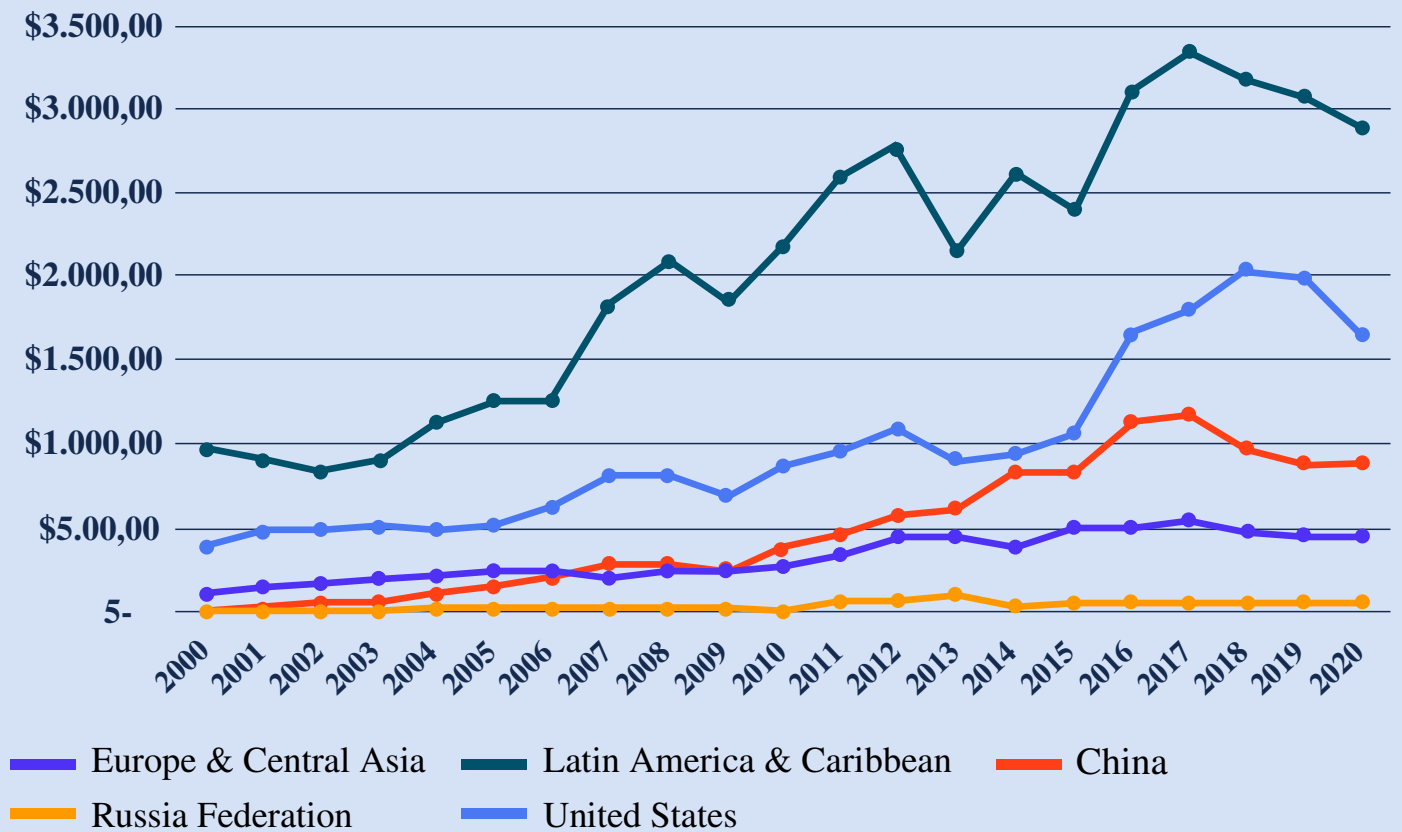
Below are three graphs that contrast the destination of Nicaraguan exports, the origin of its imports, and the trade balance (the difference between exports and imports) that the country has with some of its most important trading partners, including Russia.



² The model supplied to Nicaragua KAvZ-4238-61 is a modified version of the model designed in 1998 (original name: PAZ-3209 or "Avrora").

Graph 1.

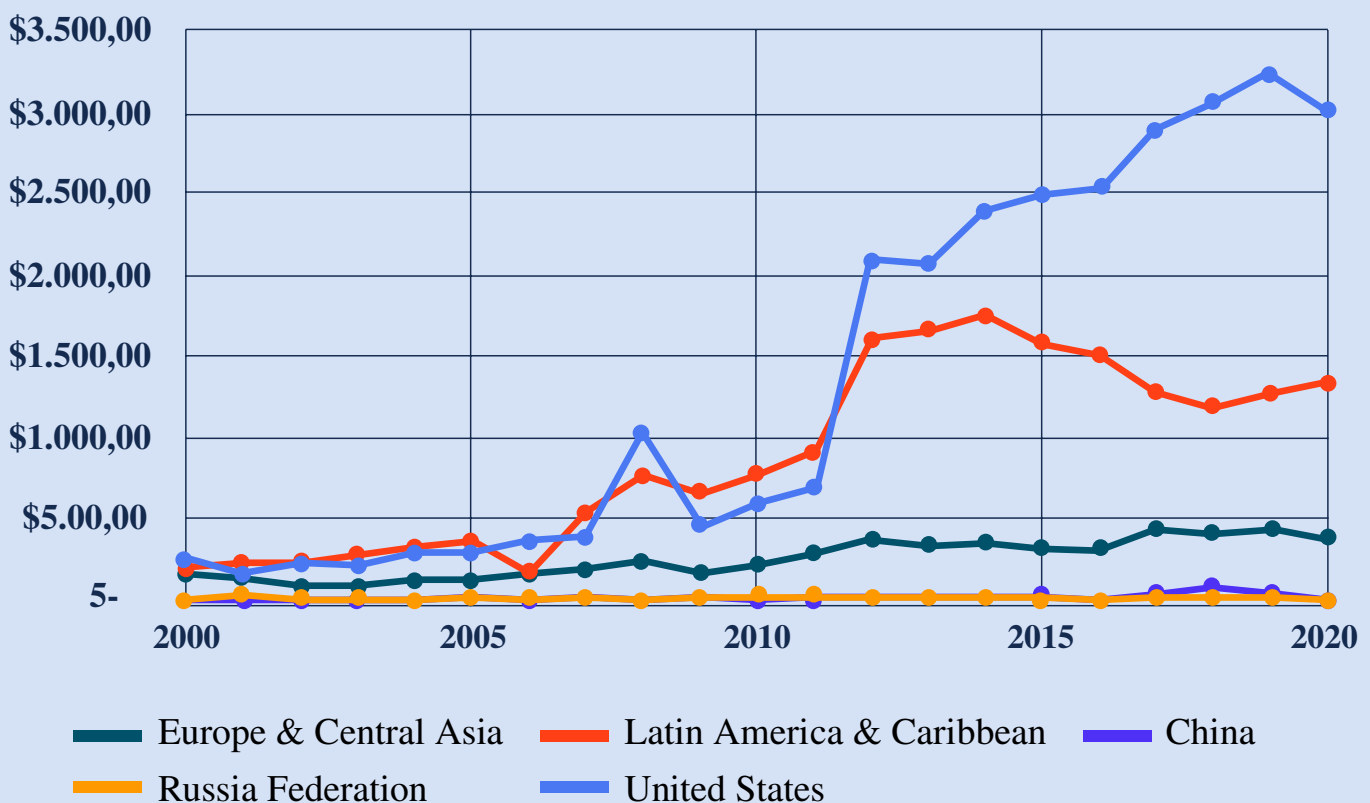
Nicaraguan Imports in Thousands of US, Dollar



Source: Created by the author using WITS World Bank data

Graph 2.

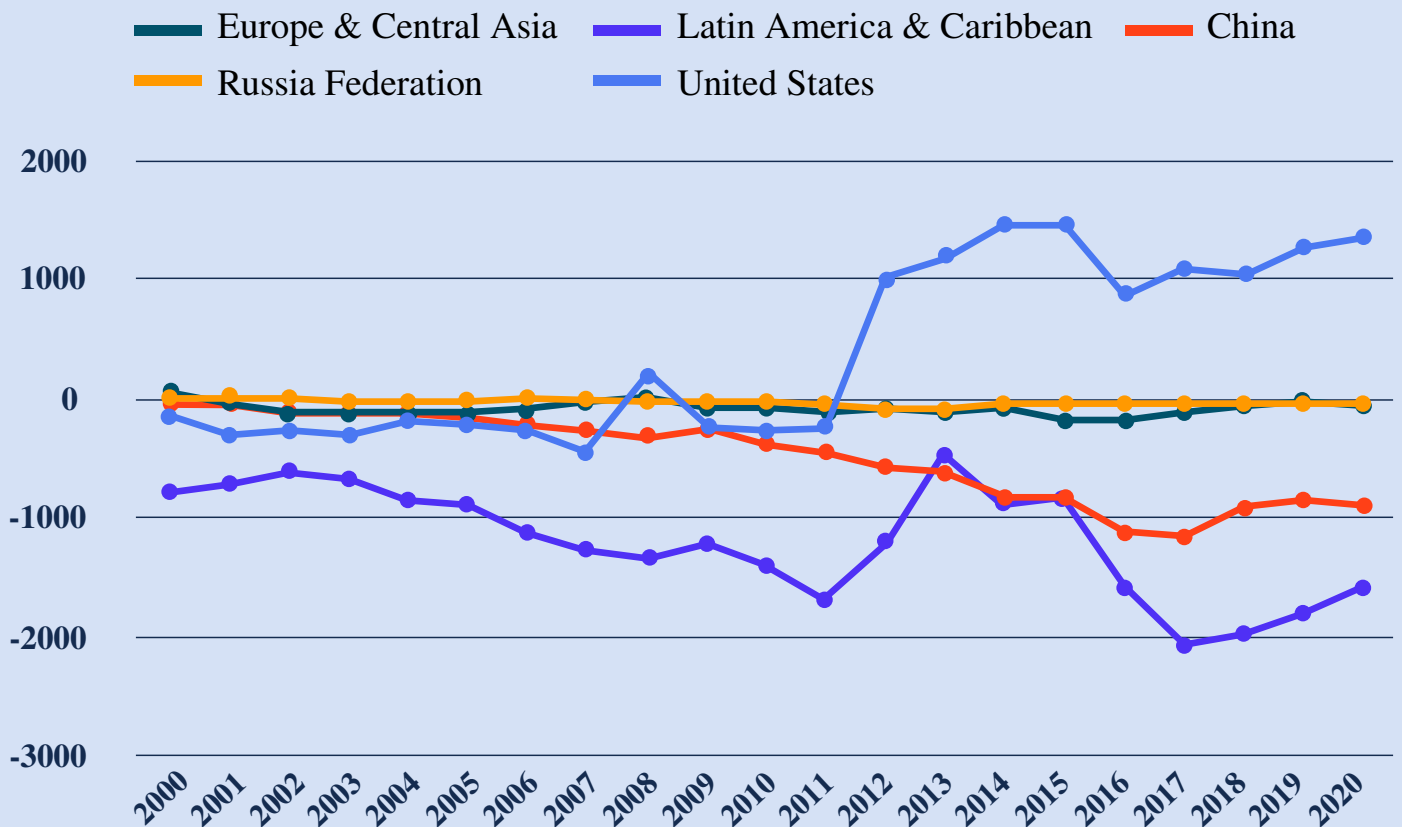
Nicaraguan Exports in Thousands of US, Dollar



Source: Created by the author using WITS World Bank data

Graph 3.

Nicaragua's Trade Balance in Thousands of US, Dollar



Source: Created by the author using WITS World Bank data

If trade relations between Russia and Nicaragua are so insignificant compared to those of other nations, why does Ortega's Nicaragua matter to Russia so much in the contemporary global and regional context and vice-versa? To answer this question, one must refer to two of the core national interests of Putin's regime:

- To maintain and recover Russia's influence in the territories of the former Soviet Union; and
- to project the vision of Russia internationally as a great power.

In parallel, the contemporary Daniel Ortega's regime views Putin's regime as a political reference regarding the political modus operandi and government practices in both countries .

It is essential to consider that the Kremlin defines the area of the former Soviet Union (like Ukraine) as its "near abroad" and the area of Moscow's primary strategic military and contemporary concerns. At the same time, modern Russian elites are convinced that Latin America and the Caribbean remain the areas of Washington's political, economic, and social interests, just as they were during the Cold War. They view Latin America through the prism of the US' "near-abroad," approaching the concept

from a Russian perspective. There is an ever-growing consensus in Moscow that the presence of Russia in countries such as Nicaragua is a factor that could facilitate, to the Kremlin, the task of negotiating with Washington the incidence of the United States in the neighboring territories of Russia and other regions of Russian primary interests (Rouvinski, 2020). In other words, Russia is using the logic of reciprocity. It intends to reciprocate US support to Ukraine and other territories of the former Soviet Union by offering Moscow's multidimensional support to the authoritarian regimes in the Western Hemisphere.

From the above perspective, and according to the new (2023) foreign policy doctrine, Moscow is providing its "support for interested Latin American states that are under pressure from the [US] and its allies in ensuring sovereignty and independence, including through the establishment and expansion of cooperation in the areas of security, military, and military-technical cooperation." This is the main reason Moscow designs its policy towards Nicaragua as part of a broader Latin American policy, which the Kremlin considers "strategically important." In other words, for Vladimir Putin's Russia, while the main value of Latin America and the Caribbean is their unique geographical position in the Western Hemisphere and importance to the United States in military, political, and economic terms, Nicaragua particularly matters to Russia because of the presence of critical elements of strategic partnership in the context of "the support to the state under pressure from the United States" guided by the logic of reciprocity (see Table 1).



³ Even though, today Russia and Nicaragua do not share ideology as they did back during the Cold War, Putin and Ortega's regimes do share preferences for the authoritarian way of governance, and they both reject values associated with human rights (Noriega & Rouvinski, 2023).

⁴ "Regarding Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, we have very close relations with them, relations of strategic partnership in all areas without exception: in the economy, in culture, in the educational sphere, in the military and military-technical sphere, including," declared the Minister [of Foreign Affairs] Lavrov (Interfax, 2022). rights (Noriega & Rouvinski, 2023).

Table 1.

RUSSIA-NICARAGUA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Elements of strategic partnership	Indicator(s)	Evidence
Official recognition of the strategic character of relations by the states	A declaration or agreement exists to establish a strategic partnership.	Moscow and Managua have declared their relations of strategic importance.
High level of mutual trust	There is frequent personal contact between heads of State, regular meetings at a high level, and coordination of foreign policy positions in international organizations.	There have been frequent personal contacts between Putin and Ortega and other high-level officials of Russia and Nicaragua. The political positioning in multilateral organizations such as the United Nations have been fully cooperative .
Long-term character	Action plans of a strategic partnership, which effects last and go beyond the period of their enactment, have a high degree of institutionalization.	Numerous formal agreements between Russia and Nicaragua are in place concerning sensitive areas of security cooperation, in addition to a bilateral commission.
Comprehensive character	Economic and other areas of cooperation, such as culture and science, complement political–diplomatic ties.	Several agreements exist dealing with the issues of “cultural exchange,” such as Moscow and Managua signing in December 2022 a memorandum of cooperation for the priority areas of interaction between the two capitals: the economy and culture, and cultural” (MOS, 2022).
Compatible foreign policy objectives and interests	Strategic partnership goals correspond to each party's foreign policy goals, interests, and principles.	The goals of Ortega’s Nicaragua and Putin’s Russia are similar regarding domestic and foreign policies. There are no “uncomfortable” issues on the bilateral agenda.

According to Russian official documents, “Russia’s interests [...] are directly related to [...] global trends, including... the developments [...] in [...] Latin America.” (Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 2023). Additionally, the Kremlin expects that “Russia will continue to strengthen relations in all respects with the states of Latin America and the Caribbean, considering the growing role of this region in world affairs” (Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 2023). From this perspective, and because of the rapidly deteriorating Russian relations with the West due to the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Russian leadership believes that Latin America could compensate for its losses in other regions and help project Russia’s vision internationally as a great power. The voting by Latin American nations at the United Nations (UN) on the issue of the war in Ukraine has been far from univocally rejecting the invasion, and the voting by Nicaragua is showing its full support of the Russian stance in the war (see Table 2).

Table 2.

Nicaragua’s support (the results of voting) to Russia at the United Nations:

Resolutions on the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

<p>General Assembly April 7, 2022. Russia’s suspension from the Human Rights Council (UN, 2022a).</p>	<p>General Assembly October 12, 2022. Member states are asked not to recognize the illegal Russian annexation of the Ukrainian territories of Donetsk, Kherson, Lugansk, and Zaporizhzhia. (UN, 2022b).</p>	<p>General Assembly November 14, 2022. Furtherance of remedy and reparation for aggression against Ukraine (UN, 2022c).</p>	<p>General Assembly December 5, 2022. The Russian Federation is required to comply with the UN recommendations on human rights and act by international law in the occupied territories of Crimea and Sevastopol (Ukraine). (UN, 2022c).</p>	<p>General Assembly February 16, 2023 Principles of the Charter of the United Nations underlying a Comprehensive, just, and lasting peace in Ukraine (UN, 2023).</p>
Against	Against	Against	Against	Against

Source: Developed by the author using WITS World Bank data based on the UN reports.

⁵ Nicaragua shares third place with Brazil by the number of Russia’s high-level visits to Latin America behind only Cuba and Venezuela (BÁEZ & MILES, 2018)

The overarching interest and goals of Putin's and Ortega's regimes coincide as both seek to diminish the US influence in the region and protect their monopoly on power in Russia and Nicaragua. Speaking on August 15, 2022, at the 2022 Military-Technical "Army" Forum, Putin emphasized "historically strong, friendly, truly trusting ties" with Latin America (Tass.ru, 2022). While the next day, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, at the opening of the Moscow Conference on International Security, argued that "US policy is aimed at curbing the interaction of the region's countries with any other pole of power not controlled by Washington. The goal of this policy is to draw the region into a confrontation with Russia [...], destroy traditional ties, and block new forms of cooperation." (RIA Novosti, 2022). Moreover, according to Russian observers, "ideological confrontation in Latin America has been talked about for a long time, but since the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine, much more often than before" (RIA Novosti, 2022).

The Russian interest in diminishing US influence in Latin America is two-fold. On the one hand, the success of its strategy in the Western Hemisphere could be seen as the success of Moscow's reciprocity policy in response to US support of Ukraine. This goal seems to have become even more critical in the context of the war in Ukraine because the open military confrontation revealed vulnerabilities of Russian military power, which previously benefited from an overall confident reputation in Latin America (BBC, 2022). At the same time, in Central America, Russia benefits from the changing political patterns in the region where the other powerful autocratic actor, China, is advancing rapidly. This advance is evidenced, among other developments, by the fact that more Central American nations are cutting ties with Taiwan and establishing diplomatic relations with Beijing.

On the other hand, unlike China, which relies heavily on its economic might to strengthen its relations with this part of the world, Moscow chooses to use additional affordable and readily available tools. This Russian infrastructure for influence campaigns in Central America includes embassies, Russian government-controlled Spanish-language media outlets, diaspora organizations, and a network of Russia-linked influencers.

In this context, the strategic partnership between Moscow and Managua, the level of personal trust between decision makers, the Russian-controlled military training facilities on the ground, and the existing legal framework suggest that Russia is prepared to use Nicaragua as a platform for increasing its military presence should the need to do so arise. Furthermore, discussing such a possibility is part of the strategy of Moscow and Managua to foster regional instability and uncertainty (Gromova, 2022).

In 2023, the Kremlin's quest to become the leader in constructing a new world order, an alternative to that which the US and its Western allies have established, has been openly announced as the primary goal of Russia in the international arena, according to Russia's new foreign policy doctrine. Russia accused the United States of "starting a hybrid war" against the country because "the US considers the strengthening of Russia, as one of the leading centers of development of the modern world, as a threat to Western hegemony." In response, "the Russian Federation has decided to focus on the geographical vectors of its foreign policy, which have obvious prospects in expanding mutually beneficial international cooperation." The move to focus on "promising" "geographical vectors"

requires actively recruiting partners worldwide from Moscow. In this context, the government of Putin considers that, because of the type of political regime in contemporary Nicaragua, Russia could not only count on Ortega's support for its policy in Latin America but also expand its influence in Central America and beyond from its hub in Managua. Managua intends to pave the way for Russia to become an observer in the Central American Integration System (Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana in Spanish), a bid reportedly supported by several other Central American nations (Swissinfo, 2023). For example, in April 2023, Putin characterized Honduras as "an important partner of Russia in Central America," adding that Russia will continue to "develop a political dialogue with this country and expand commercial and economic ties and cultural and humanitarian exchanges." (Romero, 2023).

The strengthening of Russia's ties to Managua threatens security in the region. That is because the Kremlin is well aware that the sharing of democratic values among all the countries of the Western Hemisphere, promoted by the United States, and many Latin American countries in the recent past and present, is a crucial pillar of stability in the region. In Latin America, in the aftermath of the Cold War, the prevalence of like-minded democracies made the political geography of the Western Hemisphere unique. That is why, at the core of Russia's approach to Latin America and the Caribbean, which is manifested, among other things, by the backing of Latin American authoritarian regimes like the one in Nicaragua today, is the intent to undermine the idea of democracy, still strongly associated with the United States.



Russia's Military Cooperation with Nicaragua

The Soviet Union was engaged in the arms trade with Nicaragua during the Cold War, resulting in a scenario where almost 90 percent of Nicaraguan military equipment was acquired by Nicaragua from the former Soviet Union in the 1980s. Following its collapse in the 1990s, Nicaragua's contacts with the Russian military diminished. However, in 2001, just a year after Vladimir Putin came to power in Russia, Moscow, and Managua signed an agreement on what Russia calls "military-technical cooperation." (Cajina, 2016). Yet, the sales of arms truly gained a new sense of momentum after the return of Ortega to the presidential office in 2007 and following the recognition by Nicaragua in 2008 of Georgia's breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Back then, Russia's ambassador to Managua, Igor Kondrashev came forward to offer Russia's support to modernize the Nicaraguan army's military equipment (Taipei Times, 2008). Later in 2008, three Russian warships docked in Nicaragua's port of Bluefields (Castro, 2008). Besides the symbolic value of the visit, from the perspective of symbolic reciprocity, the visit also signified the return of comprehensive contact between Russian and Nicaragua militaries.

Four years later, in 2012, the Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Colonel-General Alexander Postnikov, visited Managua (Cajina, 2016). The visit was important because the parties announced the start of training programs for the Nicaraguan military in Russian educational institutions. A year later, in 2013, another high-level Russian military official visited Nicaragua. This time, it was the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Gerasimov (Tass.com, 2013). Gerasimov's name is associated with the "Gerasimov doctrine." (McKew, 2017).

Following the "Gerasimov doctrine" (Rumer, 2019), there is little doubt that Russian decision-makers have long viewed the current state of international affairs as a stage where "hybrid wars" have proliferated. In 2013, when Gerasimov visited Nicaragua for the first time, he wrote a review of "whole-of-government warfare" involving "a fusion of various elements of soft and hard power across various domains." (Rumer, 2019). The Gerasimov doctrine is, thus, the vision of international relations as a permanent conflict: "In the 21st century, there is a tendency to blur the distinction between the state of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared and, once started, do not go according to the pattern to which we are used to." In this context and taking into consideration the subsequent development of events in this part of the world, the amplification of Russia's presence in Nicaragua has meant that Russia considers Nicaragua as a testing ground for Russia's imposing of a scenario that it built following the logic of the "Gerasimov doctrine" and "hybrid warfare."

During the 2013 visit, Gerasimov participated in the opening ceremony of the ground troops' training center, "Marshal Zhukov." The center is in Mateare, 25 km from Managua (Infodefensa, 2013). For the first time after the end of the Cold War, Russian military instructors were again present in the Western Hemisphere. According to open sources, the Russian military actively provided Nicaragua's militaries with advanced training technology, including computer software training and recognition technologies (Chaguaceda, 2019). Since Russian militaries are directly engaged in training operations, they also have direct access to any security-sensitive information obtained the Nicaraguan military

forces and new information acquired as part of the “training” process. This type of cooperation is facilitated by a “memorandum of international security cooperation” between Nicaragua and Russia signed in 2013 during the visit to Nicaragua of Russia’s Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, who recognized Nicaragua as “an important partner and friend of Russia in Latin America,” pointing out the “coincidence of views of the two countries’ authorities on many issues of concern” (Interfax, 2013). Nicaragua, in turn, recognized Moscow as one of its main strategic partners.

Russia’s efforts were met with full collaboration by the Nicaraguan Army, who assured the Russian side that the Zhukov Center would become a starting point of military cooperation between the two countries and an example that would be used to set up similar training centers in other formations and units of the army of Nicaragua. Besides the training center, General Gerasimov opened a plant to dispose of ammunition with expired shelf life, which he built with the assistance of the Russian military. Russian specialists were charged with the task of training the plant workers. Moreover, in 2014, Russia implemented a new integrated training facility in Nicaragua to train personnel operating Mi-17V-5 helicopters 5 (Russian Aviation, 2014).

It is important to note that continuing Nicaragua’s military cooperation with Russia is changing the balance of power regarding the security of other countries in the region. According to Enrique Castillo, Costa Rica’s former minister of foreign affairs,

Nicaragua is becoming armed and entering into a military dependence on Russia, who have declared [its] desire to have bases in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, with the euphemistic name of “refueling bases.” But...it goes beyond that. Russia is facilitating the arming of Nicaragua with all kinds of weapons and other military equipment... Problems are expected (Mercopress, 2014).

Russia’s expanded military cooperation with Nicaragua also hurts the security of other nations, such as Colombia. For example, in October 2013, Colombia handed a note of protest to the Russian Ambassador in Bogota in connection with the Russian strategic bomber Tupolev Tu-160, which flew over the Caribbean Sea from Caracas to Managua. While Moscow stated that the flights took place over the neutral waters of the Caribbean Sea in “strict accordance with international rules of airspace use” (Qatar News Agency, 2013). However, the fact that Russia was able to conduct such a complex operation is evidence that, with the implementation of a flyover by an aircraft that is capable of carrying nuclear weapons, Moscow has reached a new milestone in being able to bring a nuclear threat closer to the US borders, should Putin’s government decision to raise the stakes in global competition with the US using Russia’s allies in the Western Hemisphere.

Later, during the Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu’s visit to Managua in 2015, Russia and Nicaragua signed an intergovernmental agreement, renewed in 2022, aimed at “simplifying the procedure for Russian warships to enter Nicaraguan ports.” (Stepano, 2015). Despite Nicaraguan officials’ assurance that this type of permit includes other nations as well, in the case of Russia, the arrangements made with Nicaragua are very similar to agreements reached with the Venezuelan and Cuban governments. In addition, Nicaraguan and Russian officials also approved a joint training program for Russian and Nicaraguan military officers (Stepano, 2015). Although officials of both countries insist that the security cooperation between Russia and Nicaragua is limited to supplying equipment to local anti-narcotics forces, it has a much more extensive reach. In particular, a topographic

center in Managua designed by Russian experts and equipped with specialized Russian-made software and hardware uses satellite navigation aids from Russian military satellites. It is effectively part of Moscow's ecosystem designed to gather sensitive military information that countries are implementing globally (Infobae, 2022).

In 2015, the Nicaraguan armed forces had already been operating Soviet T-55 tanks. Still, they announced that Managua was interested in purchasing Russian T-72 tanks, and some experts said that this request was likely in response to the long-term interests of Russia rather than those of Nicaragua (Dolan, 2016). Soon, the reports came about the contract to supply modernized T-72B1 tanks (The Military Review, 2016). In 2016, Nicaragua received 20 of the 50 agreed-upon tanks. However, the tanks provided by Russia to Nicaragua were not newly produced but were taken from the Russian army's existing stock, repaired, and upgraded at an armor repair plant in Strelna (located in St. Petersburg, Russia). According to open sources, a public procurement website published a purchase order involving the plant in Strelna that agreed upon 50 sets of control equipment with automatic target tracking manufactured by CJSC NPK BIS (Taganrog) and planned for delivery to a foreign customer "558" (Nicaragua) as part of the upgraded T-72B1 products (Karpenko, 2016). Still, according to public sources, tanks supplied to Nicaragua at that time were the most advanced T-72s, serially upgraded in Russia. They are equipped with a PN-72 function, which allows for around-the-clock sight for the gunner (also known as "Sosna-U" manufactured by the Belarusian company "Peleng"), a PKP-72 or "Falcon Eye" option (also manufactured by the same Belorussian company using a third-generation thermal imaging camera), which allows an army commander to have an around-the-clock panoramic vision, and an automatic target tracking and control system in addition to the modern navigation system, new gun stabilizer, and remote-controlled anti-aircraft mount for machine guns. These tanks are the most sophisticated battle machines currently in Central America. As of 2023, with Russia entering a full-scale military offensive in Ukraine in 2022, the priorities of Moscow are now the supply of military equipment to the frontline in Donbas and Lugansk. The future of the contract with Nicaragua and payments are unclear due to the unavailability of reliable data from open sources.

The review of Russia-Nicaragua security cooperation would not be complete without mentioning the support and training provided by Russia to Ortega's regime in terms of controlling opposition and training police forces in tasks of surveillance and disinformation. In this context, it is worth examining the activities of a training center registered as a branch of Russia's Siberian Law Institute of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia in Managua.

In charge of the training center is an associate professor at the Siberian Law Institute and a colonel of the Russian police force, Oleg Surov. The apparently strange decision to affiliate the training center in Nicaragua to an institution located 12.5 thousand kilometers away from Managua, in the heart of Siberia, can be explained by the fact that such arrangements are giving Surov a free hand to operate outside the standard chain of command of the Russian embassy, reporting directly to Moscow and not to the Russian ambassador or chief military officials and, thus, creating yet another channel of penetration into Nicaragua's domestic political realm. Moreover, through this new avenue, Moscow can deal directly with Ortega's intelligence services and law enforcement, enabling the center in Managua to "create a cadre of intelligence officers familiar with and loyal to Russia who could operate not only in Nicaragua but also in the Central American region." (Pelcastre, 2023). Surov is also

charged with selecting who among the Nicaraguan officers will be sent to Russia for training. A review of publicly available sources indicates that the training at the Russian center in Managua covers the whole range of sensitive areas of policing, including digital surveillance, “operative-searching countermeasures,” and “reinforcing the skills of using physical force in conditions of resistance,” i.e., the methods actively used in Russia proper against the opposition to Putin.

The contemporary trends of Russian military cooperation with Nicaragua place the latter at the top of Moscow’s agenda as one of the few countries in Latin America entirely dependent on Russia at the highest level. Although Nicaragua does not represent any large-scale purchases of Russian weapons and military equipment with a high-tag price tag attached, it is unrestrictedly cooperative with Moscow on all the critical sensitive items of the agenda due to the level of involvement of the Russian military in defining the agenda of cooperation in such a way that it responds to the long-term strategic interests of Russia and directly benefits Ortega’s regime.



⁶ This information is based on public blog data “Sdlano u nas,” Upgraded T-72B1 tanks in Nicaragua, <https://sdelanounas.ru/blogs/82061/>

Russian Electoral Observers in Nicaragua

The integrity of electoral processes is a crucial aspect of elections held worldwide. However, as authoritarianism continues to expand globally, non-democratic regimes are learning to use electoral missions to support the legitimacy of allied parties and strengthen their power. This trend is particularly visible in Latin America and the Caribbean, where Putin’s Russia has sent observer missions to countries that are not free, including during contested elections in Nicaragua in 2016 and 2021 (Freedom House, 2023).

There are several reasons why both Ortega and Putin are interested in having Russian observer missions during elections in Nicaragua. Firstly, the presence of electoral observers during contested elections reflects an attempt to ascribe to the existing international norms and claim legitimacy before the international community. Therefore, in parallel with the growing concerns about the lack of integrity of elections inside Russia, Moscow has been seeking to expand the presence of international electoral missions in its territory and send observer missions to other countries since the 1990s. From this perspective, unlike cases such as the United States and the European Union, where many observers are not linked to the official structures of their states but form independent missions, the Russian observers in elections abroad almost exclusively work under the auspices of the Central Election Commission (CEC) of the Russian Federation, the electoral authority of this country.

Although the CEC is formally an independent authority, investigations have shown that it works closely with other authorities of the Russian State, especially with the President’s Administration, and, in the case of its observer missions abroad, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The existence of links between the CEC and other branches of power is significant because it allows for the correlation between the mandate of an observer mission and the goals of Russian foreign policy. In the case of Nicaragua, sending electoral observers can be considered a response to the presence of Western observers and Washington’s approval or rejection of the electoral results in countries such as Ukraine or Belarus.

The second motivation behind this Russian interest is to use observer missions as a powerful tool to “penetrate and influence the political and information environments of target countries.” (Walker, Shanthi & Ludwig, 2020). This notion of power allows for a more precise assessment of the impact of Russian missions on electoral processes in countries like Nicaragua. Russia’s electoral missions serve as a vehicle of power for Moscow that allows the government of Putin to legitimize the actions of Ortega’s authoritarian government in the context of disputed elections and amplify existing divisions within Nicaraguan society.

“Challenges only come together”: Russia and Nicaragua ratify the “special character” of their relations.

⁷ The estimated (unofficial) cost of the contract signed by Rosoboronexport (Russian government entity responsible for export of Russia-made equipment) for the supply of 50 modernized T-72M1 tanks to Nicaragua was not officially disclosed but some sources estimated the value of purchase by \$80 million.

Table 3.

Russian Observers in Nicaragua:

Motivations and Actions in Support of Daniel Ortega’s Regime

Motivation	Russia’s actions
Symbolic reciprocity	Dispatching of observer missions to the elections in Nicaragua in response to the participation of Western observers in the elections in Russia’s “near abroad” countries.
Legitimizing Ortega’s regime	Certifying of contested elections in Nicaragua as a country allied to Russia.
Incisive power	Using observer missions as a power tool.
Source for media coverage	Media coverage of the work of Russian observers in the Russian media and the Latin American media.

Source: Developed by the author in collaboration with Juan Pablo Milanese.

The presence of Russian observers in Nicaraguan elections offers opportunities for media coverage that favors the interests of Moscow and Managua in both the media controlled by the Russian government (RT Actualidad and Sputnik Mundo) and local media outlets, which use the reports of Russian observers to support local authorities, especially in scenarios in which the results are put into question by the opposition, the United States, the European Union, the Organization of American States, and independent observers from other Western countries. Table 3 summarizes these motivations for implementing electoral observations between both countries.

The agreements signed between the CEC and the Latin American and Caribbean electoral authorities are among the formal bases facilitating the planning and implementation of Russian observer missions in the region. In this context, it is interesting that no formal agreement between Nicaragua and Russia existed before December 2022. However, it does exist now, indicating that both regimes are committed to using electoral observations as one of the political tools (CEC, 2022).

As for its primary objectives, the recent agreement expresses the intention of “promoting the development and deepening the cooperation in the field of improvement of the legislation on elections and referendums, the improvement of the political culture of the participants in electoral and referendum processes, and [the] development and use of modern electoral technologies.” (CEC, 2022). In addition, it is expected to have “results of joint investigations focused on preparing and holding elections and electoral law projects, carry out the exchange of electoral observers, hold seminars on topics of mutual interest, and send representatives to form observation missions, among others.” (CEC, 2022).

The agreement also mentions technological tools such as “automation of the count; voter identification process; automated voting; verification and scrutiny; and management, storage, and transmission of databases.” This point is particularly significant since, according to various reports, Russian observers have shown continued interest in issues related to electoral technology during their missions in the region, highlighting the vital importance of knowing electoral data for the success of electoral campaigns, as demonstrated by the case of Russian interference in the Bolivian electoral campaign reported by independent researchers (Project Media, 2019).

Another important aspect concerns the planning and coordinating of all public activities related to Russian observer missions in Nicaragua. Each task carried out in Nicaragua benefited from extensive media coverage, both in Nicaragua and in the region. In this type of coverage, emphasis is placed on objectivity and neutrality of their observations and rejection, in the case of missions to non-competitive elections, of the positions of democratic countries on the matter. In this context, it is striking that the Russian observer missions use as evidence the technical aspects of the organization of the vote more than any other dimension of the electoral process and ignores the accusations made by the opposition forces concerning political freedoms and fair processes leading up to the vote. The other relevant aspect is the composition of the missions. In those cases where the international community has questioned the transparency of the electoral process before the election date, Russia chooses to send senior officials of the Russian government or parliament, and even ambassadors, to the observer missions. One of the reasons behind placing high-level foreign officials in an observer’s seat is to contribute, from their top political positions to strengthening Ortega’s official narrative once the elections are held.

Since Nicaragua is currently one of Russia’s most faithful allies in the region, one of the most emblematic examples of the importance that Russia attaches to its observer missions is the general elections in Nicaragua held on November 7, 2021. According to the Organization of American States, the electoral process “did not comply with any of the essential elements of democracy, described in the Inter-American Democratic Charter” (OEA, 2021). Additionally, most American countries rejected the results of the elections during the OAS General Assembly on November 12, 2021, while the European Union declared the elections “illegitimate”. (European Parliament, 2021). However, in his message acknowledging the election results, Russia’s Foreign Minister Lavrov referred to the testimonies of the Russian observer mission to justify Russia’s position contrary to those of the OAS and the European Union: “we sent observers (...) and, according to their testimony, the elections were held in an organized manner and in compliance with Nicaraguan legislation, the epidemic rules imposed by covid-19, and significant citizen participation” (Infobae, 2021). Minister Lavrov also took the opportunity to denounce the role of the US, which “promoted an unacceptable campaign not to recognize the results.” (Infobae, 2021).

The Russian delegation was headed by the Deputy Chairman of the Committee for International Affairs of the Russian Parliament, Dmitriy Novikov (Tass News Agency, 2021). Another member of the mission, also a member of the Russian parliament, Vladimir Poletaev, in a press conference, characterized the role of international observers as “important to guarantee the transparency and legitimacy of the elections and compliance with the electoral process, and local legislation” (Federation Soviet of the Russian Federation, 2021).

The analysis of the activities of the observers allows us to affirm that their presence in the country responded both to the interests of Russian foreign policy (in terms of symbolic reciprocity and power) and served as support for the position of the government of Daniel Ortega, who insisted on the “democratic and transparent nature” of the process, despite abundant evidence to the contrary. The Russian authorities used the observations to reject the OAS and European Union’s complaints about violations of democratic norms in Nicaragua. They offered alternative coverage of the election results in media outlets inside and outside the region.

From the above perspective, the experience gained by sending electoral observers to Nicaragua can be used by Moscow to support the other regional political regimes that distance themselves from democratic norms. Even though many of the elections that Russian observers evaluate as impeccable are not free and competitive, their presence allows authoritarian governments to offer an alternative narrative to those proposed by other missions promoted by organizations constituted by states indeed democratic. Since Russia has electoral observation agreements with authoritarian countries and countries where the electoral processes comply, to a large extent, with the standards of transparency and impartiality, Russian participation in the elections in Nicaragua as observers contributes to the erosion of the democratic norm; it addresses the risk of devaluing the work of observer missions from other countries in Nicaragua and elsewhere in the region.

Added to the erosion of democracy is the penetration of Nicaragua and Central American information spaces combined with the use of state media in Spanish controlled by the Russian government and other sources of information on public opinion. On December 5, 2022, Ortega’s government signed an agreement with Russia’s RT government-sponsored media outlet to “strengthen collaboration in the ongoing struggle for the truth.” (Swissinfo, 2022). The agreement sought to “establish strategic cooperation between RT and the Council of Communication and Citizenship of Nicaragua in the field of development and improvement of the television media, the increase in the quality of the services produced and provided, and the expansion of the horizons of cooperation” (Swissinfo, 2022). This move can be seen as strengthening Ortega’s regime’s capacity to spread disinformation in the environment of continuous assault on freedom of information in the country, in addition to expanding Moscow’s outreach to the Central American region using its ties to the media networks in Nicaragua.

⁸ According to the official webpage of the CEC, there are bilateral agreements with nine Latin American countries, in addition to the agreement with the Organization of American States.

Conclusion

As the evidence presented in this report suggests, engaging Nicaragua is cost-effective for Russia compared to investing in other allied nations in the region, such as Cuba or Venezuela. In this context, the modus operandi of the Russian-Nicaraguan relationship serves the interests of both political regimes. Moreover, the cooperation between Moscow and Managua is likely to expand, considering Russia's desire to become a chief promoter of a new world order and the fact that, so far, the Kremlin has been failing to recruit new allies in Latin America despite continuous calls from Moscow on Latin American leaders to cut ties with the US. From this perspective, the potential for rapidly expanding Moscow's intelligence and military capacities in Nicaragua threatens the security and democracy of the Western Hemisphere, where the prevalence of democratic nations in the 21st century has been considered crucial for maintaining the region's stability.

Considering the threats to security and democracy in the Americas associated with Russia's engagement with Nicaragua, it is necessary to raise the awareness of decision-makers and the public regarding the nature of Russian-Nicaraguan cooperation in security and information operations. This can be achieved by monitoring the state of collaboration between Moscow and Managua independently using publicly available sources, making the results of this monitoring widely available to Latin American public opinion, and fostering discussion by think tanks and mass media in the region that can contribute in designing and adjusting related policies of the countries of the Western Hemisphere.



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