

# Russia Cannot Remain a Permanent Observer at the Organization of American States

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Russia's war on Ukraine reminds the West that leveraging strategic diplomatic and economic tools against threats from rogue actors cannot fall on the U.S. alone.

The U.S. has an opportunity to consolidate a regional coalition to defend the West and regional security interests at a critical moment.

To articulate an effective defense of the West, the U.S. must reengage Latin America and the Caribbean on Russia's presence at the OAS.

The Organization of American States (OAS) will soon vote to suspend Russia's Permanent Observer (PO) status in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine. The vote comes as Russian President Vladimir Putin escalates his unprovoked war through new offensives in the Donbas. Putin has repeatedly tied Russian engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean to immediate imperial endeavors in Eastern Europe—going back to Russia's reengagement with the region amid the 2008 invasion of Georgia. The outcome of the upcoming vote—and with it, more broadly, a hemispheric defense of a West that is whole, free, prosperous, and at peace—remains uncertain.

It is in the national interest of the United States and its neighboring countries to discourage Russian meddling in the region, which includes emboldening dictatorships, selectively enabling transnational

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crime, and increasingly attempting to destabilize democratic processes through disinformation tactics and interference in elections. Russia's assault on a sovereign and democratic neighbor has reminded the West that the burden of leveraging strategic diplomatic and economic tools to counter the threats of rogue actors or pariah states cannot fall on the U.S. alone.

Ahead of June's Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles, the United States has both an opportunity and the responsibility to consolidate a broad pro-West coalition in the region. To counter Russia's immediate aggression, the U.S. must lead efforts to secure a majority in Thursday's vote through deliberate bilateral engagement, explain the implications of a continued Russian presence in the OAS, and urgently devise a strategy to offset Putin's short-term and long-term efforts in the region.

## The OAS and Russia's Permanent Observer Status

The Organization of American States is the world's oldest regional organization and the Western Hemisphere's most important forum for regional diplomacy and the promotion of freedom, human rights, and sovereignty. The OAS holds the distinction of including Latin American and Caribbean countries as well as the United States and Canada in its 35-member Permanent Council with full access to voting and permanent missions. In 1972, the body added the status of Permanent Observer, allowing countries outside of the region to participate in and contribute to OAS activities and projects without voting or permanent mission privileges.

The Russian Federation was granted PO status in 1992 following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Today, it is one of 72 Permanent Observer nations. In this capacity, Russia has access both to permanent missions and to the regional staff, expertise, and legal frameworks made available by the OAS. According to OAS records, Russia has not made monetary contributions to the organization since at least 2016.<sup>1</sup> On April 19, the nations of Guatemala and Antigua and Barbuda sent a formal request for a Special Meeting of the Permanent Council to vote on Russia's suspension.

## Precedent for Diplomatic Isolation

The overwhelming evidence of the systematic commission of war crimes by Russian forces in Ukraine has warranted a coordinated, albeit slow, institutional response from the West. Recent efforts at the OAS follow Russia's suspension from the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), propelled most directly by reports of crimes committed against civilians

by the Russian military and the Russian-linked Wagner Group in Bucha.<sup>2</sup> The criminal Wagner Group is also notable for providing direct security to Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro and a mercenary presence elsewhere in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East.<sup>3</sup>

But the UNHRC vote was not the only sign of clear-eyed diplomatic action against Russian aggression. Russia's February invasion of Ukraine and its previous incursions in Ukraine and Georgia since 2008 have led to its suspension or outright removal from the Council of Europe, the International Labor Organization, the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN), and the Group of 7 (previously the Group of 8).<sup>4</sup> The World Trade Organization has also excluded Russia from ongoing talks, and the regional Inter-American Development Bank announced plans to divest Russian holdings and remove its observer rights.

## **Russia's Wartime Activity in Latin America and the Caribbean**

Putin's calculus in Ukraine goes by way of the Western Hemisphere. In its incursions in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014, Russia sought to publicly engage friendly governments in the region in efforts to counter U.S. support of sovereign nations in Eastern Europe. This time is no different. Ahead of the February 24 invasion, Moscow hosted visits from Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and Argentinian President Alberto Fernandez. That same month, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov paid visits to the dictatorships in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela and signed at least 20 security cooperation agreements with Caracas. Venezuela signed an additional space exploration agreement with Russia in April. All of this occurred as Moscow toyed with threats to deploy troops to Cuba and Venezuela, failing to mention its existing presence in these countries through Russian military officials or contractors like the Wagner Group.

Moscow likely believes that it can thread a needle between destabilizing tactics against openly pro-U.S. governments like Colombia and a carrot-and-stick approach to nations with a more ambiguous posture like Brazil or smaller Caribbean nations. In March, local media in Colombia reported evidence that Russians were injecting funds into local savings accounts to finance destabilizing actors ahead of May presidential elections.<sup>5</sup> Moscow also actively assists the Maduro regime in armed conflict along the Colombia-Venezuela border. Short-term trade opportunities for countries like Mexico and Brazil as Russia looks for alternative energy and fertilizer markets further complicate any diplomatic calculus.<sup>6</sup>

## Needed: U.S. Leadership

A position by the United States alone will not suffice either to suspend Russia's PO status in the upcoming vote or to further isolate Russia from the hemisphere. Russia's suspension requires a two-thirds majority of the Permanent Council's 35 members, which means that 24 of those 35 members must approve the resolution presented by Guatemala and Antigua and Barbuda. The resolution also includes explicit support from Canada, Colombia, Grenada, the United States, and Uruguay.

Ahead of the UNHRC vote in early April, Russia threatened consequences with respect to its bilateral relations with developing countries that voted in favor, abstained, or absented themselves.<sup>7</sup> When Russia was suspended from the UNHRC, 11 Latin American and Caribbean countries abstained, and three voted against suspension. While the negative votes by the region's hard left (Nicaragua, Cuba, and Bolivia) were hardly surprising, the number of abstentions was much higher than the number in the OAS's March resolution condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine. This likely indicates that Russia's threats are not lost on countries in the region with an independent voting streak or with direct interests linked to Moscow. These countries may vote with the United States and the West, but it is not a given that they will do so without leadership and bilateral outreach to permanent missions.

## What the U.S. Should Do

Rather than allowing Moscow to shape the course of a regional organization and bully the region's democracies to avoid taking a clear stance, the U.S. has an opportunity to consolidate a regional coalition to defend the West and regional security interests at a critical moment. Accordingly, the U.S. should:

- **Lead efforts to secure a majority against Russia's Permanent Observer status at the OAS.** Putin's Russia is not the Russia that was granted PO status three decades ago, and the U.S. must take a position of leadership to secure its suspension. The Biden Administration and Congress should signal the importance of the vote to countries whose positions remain ambiguous. They should also ensure that the U.S. mission at the OAS is pursuing bilateral talks, beginning with those that abstained on the UNHRC vote. The U.S. should define a clear standard for a future lifting of Russia's suspension and consider efforts to revoke its status permanently. The U.S. should make clear to its

partners that isolation is not merely symbolic, but part of a strategy to show Russians that Putin's actions are broadly rejected, isolate Moscow in its effort to evade sanctions, and deter similar aggression by Russia and other actors in the future.

- **Consider congressional measures if the OAS Permanent Council fails to suspend Russia.** If the vote at the Permanent Council fails, the U.S. Congress should immediately consider measures to elevate the issue of Russia's PO status at the OAS and signal how future funding may be affected if Russia's status is maintained. Congress should ask the State Department to determine whether any OAS funds are spent in accommodations for Permanent Observers or whether any funds have gone to Russia in accommodations since its entry as a PO. While this may be unlikely, the U.S. should ensure that no taxpayer dollars sent to the OAS at any point are spent on Russian diplomats.
- **Develop a hemispheric strategy to counter Russian activity and strengthen the West's response on Ukraine.** The U.S. has an opportunity to evaluate where the countries of the region stand in relation to Russia following Thursday's vote. This should encourage efforts to develop a strategy to counter Russian economic, security, intelligence, and diplomatic efforts in the region. Putin's determination to distract the U.S. from its efforts elsewhere by challenging its influence in the Western Hemisphere is clear. But uncertainty ahead of an OAS vote shows a need for a course correction on U.S. regional engagement. Congress should ask the State Department and the Pentagon to develop a strategy to counter Russian influence in the hemisphere. The Administration also has an opportunity to engage regional partners on articulating sanctions policy to strengthen sanctions on Russia from the U.S. and Western Europe.
- **Ensure that Ukraine and Russian activity in the region are discussed at the Summit of the Americas.** The Summit of the Americas in June is an opportunity to reengage the region to counter geostrategic adversaries and common threats. The U.S. should ensure that the West's priorities to counter Putin's aggression in Ukraine are discussed among partners during the Summit. Russia's activity in the region and the threats it poses to democracy and security should be elevated in bilateral engagements at the Summit and in public multi-lateral dialogue.

## Conclusion

While China remains America's main adversary on the global stage and in the Western Hemisphere, rogue actors like Russia continue to threaten both U.S. national security and regional security. To articulate an effective defense of the West, the U.S. must reengage Latin America and the Caribbean on Russia's presence at the OAS and its long-term presence in the hemisphere.

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## Endnotes

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