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Provocations by the U.S. State Department Can Chill Press Freedom in Latin America

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[Article Body:]

The headline is provocative: “The Kremlin’s Efforts to Covertly Spread Disinformation in Latin America.” This was a [statement](#) on the U.S. State Department website, posted on November 7, 2023. The United States government accused two companies—Social Design Agency and Structura National Technologies—of being the main agents of what it alleged is Russian-backed disinformation. The statement named the heads of both of the firms, Ilya Gambashidze of Social Design Agency and Nikolay Tupkin of Structura. On July 28, 2023, the European Union [sanctioned](#) several Russian individuals and firms, including SDA and Structura. The European Union accuses these two IT firms of being “involved in the Russian-led digital disinformation campaign” against the government of

Ukraine. The statement by the U.S. State Department now alleges that these IT companies are involved in a disinformation project in Latin America.

Neither the European Union nor the U.S. State Department offer any evidence in their various public statements. The U.S. document does, however, refer to the 2023 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, which [says](#) the following: “Russia’s influence actors have adapted their efforts to increasingly hide their hand, laundering their preferred messaging through a vast ecosystem of Russian proxy websites, individuals, and organizations that appear to be independent news sources.” Here, we get mainly the methodology—laundering information through proxy websites—rather than any hard evidence.

On May 3, 2023, the U.S. Foreign Relations Committee held a [hearing](#) on “The Global Information Wars: Is the U.S. Winning or Losing?” The main speaker at the hearing was Amanda Bennett, the Chief Executive Officer of the [U.S. Agency for Global Media](#) (USAGM), an umbrella group that runs several U.S. government media projects from Europe (Radio Liberty) to the Americas (Office of Cuba Broadcasting) with an \$810 million annual budget. Bennett, the former director of the U.S. government’s [Voice of America](#), [told](#) the senators that if the U.S. government fails to “target investments to counter inroads Russia, the [People’s Republic of China], and Iran are making, we run the risk of losing the global information war.” These three countries, she argued, have “outspent” the United States in Latin America, an advantage that she said needed to be overcome by increased U.S. interference in Latin American media.

The Role of RT

In Latin America, Jessica Brandt of the Brookings Institute [told](#) the Senators, Russian media has secured a decisive advantage. The facts she laid out are worthwhile to consider: “Through the first quarter of 2023, three of the five most retweeted Russian state media accounts on Twitter messaged in Spanish, and five of the ten fastest growing ones targeted Spanish-language audiences. On YouTube, RT en Español has also proven capable of building large audiences, despite the platform’s global ban on Russian state-funded media channels. On TikTok, RT en Español is among the most popular Spanish-language media outlets. Its 29.6 million likes make it more popular than Telemundo, Univision, BBC Mundo, and El País. Likewise, on Facebook, RT en Español currently has more followers than any other Spanish-language international broadcaster.” In other words, RT by itself has become one of the most influential media outlets in Latin America. Brandt’s facts are widely accepted, including by a [report](#) published in March by the Reuters Institute for the

Study of Journalism called “Despite Western bans, Putin’s propaganda flourishes in Spanish on TV and social media” and by a [study](#) from the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab from 2022.

[RT](#) (formerly Russia Today) is owned by [TV-Novosti](#), a non-profit organization founded by the state-owned [Ria Novosti](#) in 2005. RT is banned or blocked in Canada, the European Union, Germany, the United States, and several other Western countries. In fact, at the Senate hearing, there was little discussion about the entire web of RT projects. The focus was on the “laundering” of “disinformation.”

‘Most Likely’

What is striking about the U.S. State Department statement is that it names two news projects that operate in Latin America as these “proxies” without any evidence but with hesitant language. For instance, the U.S. State Department says that part of the Russian campaign is to cultivate a group of journalists “most likely in Chile,” but not definitely. This hesitation is important to underline because a few paragraphs later, the doubt vanishes: “While the network’s operations are primarily done in concert with Spanish-language outlets [Pressenza](#) and [El Ciudadano](#), a broader network of media resources is available to the group to further amplify information.”

Pressenza, founded in 2009 in Milan, Italy, emerged out of the debates and discussions provoked by the International Commission for the Study of Communications Problems (formed by UNESCO) and its report, *Many Voices, One World* or the [MacBride Report](#) (1980). The MacBride report itself built on discussions about media democracy that had resulted in the formation, in 1964, of [Inter-Press Services](#), and then later in Pressenza. El Ciudadano was founded in 2005 as part of the process of democratization in Chile in the aftermath of the fall of the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in 1990.

Both outlets denied (in [English](#) and [Spanish](#)) that they are either funded by the Russian government or that they launder information for the Russian government. In their joint statement, signed by David Andersson (editor of Pressenza) and Bruno Sommer Catalán (editor of El Ciudadano), they say, “We believe that this kind of attack is malicious, and we insist that the US State Department withdraw this accusation as well as publicly apologize to us for maligning our reputations.” In a separate statement, Italian journalist Antonio Mazzeo (who won the [Giorgio Bassani prize](#) in 2010) [said](#): “This affair worries me because it could prepare for the next step, the creation of a proscription list... to put all those who do not accept to think only of war and therefore become dangerous and must be silenced.”