



THE KREMLIN PLAYBOOK IN MEXICO

ASYMMETRIC
INFLUENCE



CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
DEMOCRACY

The Kremlin Playbook in Mexico

Asymmetric Influence



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DEMOCRACY

The Kremlin's pursuit of global influence has sought fertile ground in Mexico, where entrenched corruption, opaque governance, and economic dependencies open the door to its state capture model. By aligning with China, funneling corrosive capital, and exploiting elite networks, Moscow seeks to turn limited economic stakes into out-sized political leverage.

Mexico's strategic position as a US neighbor and partner makes it a prime target. Russia has entrenched itself in the hydrocarbons sector, expanded its media and cultural footprint, and covertly deployed influence networks that amplify anti-Western narratives. These tools allow Moscow to exploit social divisions, erode trust in democratic institutions, and punch far above its economic weight.

This report looks at Russia's developing strategy in Mexico. By mapping influence channels across the economy, politics, and society, it underscores how Moscow's playbook threatens not only Mexico's democratic resilience but also the broader security of North America.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BRICS+	Brazil Russia India China South Africa (+ refers to an expanded format of the original group)
CBP	U.S. Customs and Border Protection
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
LNG	Liquified Natural Gas
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
USMCA	United States Mexico Canada
PAN	National Action Party
PET	Polyethylene Terephthalate
PTA	Purified Terephthalic Acid
SIDE	Secretariat of Intelligence

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia's footprint in Mexico remains modest compared to Moscow's entrenched presence in Cuba, Venezuela, or Nicaragua. Yet, the Kremlin has consistently sought to expand its influence by exploiting Mexico's structural vulnerabilities, ambivalence towards Washington, and regional ties with Moscow's closest allies. While Mexico has not joined BRICS+ and remains deeply integrated within the North American economic system under the USMCA trade agreement, Mexico's trade with Russia reached 2.4 billion dollars in 2023, compared to only 1.3 billion in 2012, making Mexico the Kremlin's second largest partner in Latin America. The bilateral trade balance **reflects strategic dependencies**: Mexico exports vehicles, auto parts, medical instruments, and alcoholic beverages, while Russia supplies steel, aluminum, fertilizers, and wheat, with the latter two particularly critical for the Mexican agricultural sector.

Russian corporate presence has become significant in the energy sector, where the second largest Russian oil company, Lukoil, and Wintershall DEA, controlled by oligarch Mikhail Fridman's LetterOne, have **taken advantage of Mexico's energy market liberalization** to develop key crude exploration and production projects. Lukoil has invested more than 700 million dollars in Mexico projects, notably the Ichalkil and Pokoch fields, whose production could exceed 115,000 barrels per day. DEA's acquisition of Sierra Oil & Gas for around \$500 million gave it access to Zama, one of the country's largest offshore discoveries, cementing a strategic role for a firm linked to one of Russia's most influential oligarchs. Both companies became enmeshed in Mexico's **notoriously opaque political system**, as seen in the allegations that former Pemex director Emilio Lozoya facilitated Lukoil's entry, while simultaneously capitalizing on their positioning as contributors to local production and employment. Even after the imposition of Western sanctions, Lukoil expanded its commercial operations in Mexico, hiring former Pemex executives and exploring opportunities to supply Russian petroleum products into the Mexican market.

Moscow has also courted Mexico with offers to supply liquefied natural gas and petroleum technologies, presenting itself as an **alternative to the U.S. energy dominance** at a time when the Mexican government faces increasing pressure to secure reliable supplies and modernize its infrastructure.

The Kremlin's strategy is not confined to economics. Mexican political choices often dovetail with Russian regional interests. One example is former President López Obrador's decision to provide Cuba with record volumes of around 5.4 million barrels of oil in 2023, supporting one of Moscow's closest partners in the hemisphere. At the same time, Russian actors continue to navigate Mexico's political networks to maintain influence, taking advantage of elite corruption, personal ties, and the state's lack of solid investment screening and economic security in hydrocarbons.

Russia has also worked steadily to shape Mexican **public opinion** through its media arms. RT en Español and Sputnik Mundo are among the **most influential Spanish-language sources online in the country**, pushing Kremlin narratives on NATO, Ukraine, and U.S. policy while leveraging widespread anti-American sentiment. Their content circulates widely through Mexican outlets and digital platforms, giving Russia an **outsized voice in domestic debates**.

This media presence is reinforced by academic and cultural exchanges, featuring Russian media officials, and the incorporation of pro-Russian narratives in Mexican **foreign policy narratives**. These initiatives gradually **normalize Moscow's worldview** within both elite circles and wider society.

Less visible but no less significant are the **intelligence and migration dynamics** that accompany Russia's presence. The number of Russian citizens visiting in Mexico grew by 64 percent in 2024. While many arrivals are linked to the political exile of ordinary Russians or the search for safe haven, these flows have also created opportunities for intelligence operations. Mexico's relatively relaxed visa regime, combined with the fact that it is a transit corridor to the United States, makes it an attractive terrain for covert networks. This **intersection of migration, corruption, and espionage** risks mirrors patterns observed elsewhere in Latin America and deserves heightened scrutiny.

Even though the comprehensive economic integration between the U.S. and Mexico ultimately limits the scope of the Russian influence in the country, Moscow has nonetheless carved out entry points that intersect with energy dependence, corruption, leftist solidarity politics, and anti-U.S. narratives. Together, these elements amount to a persistent strategy of **asymmetric engagement**, with the Kremlin seeking leverage in areas where Mexico is vulnerable. Russia's activities in Mexico serve both to diversify its global partnerships under sanctions pressure and to **test influence tools** in Washington's immediate neighborhood. Monitoring these dynamics is essential, as Mexico's openness to Russian corporate, political, media, and intelligence channels creates risks not only for its own governance and economic security, but also for the broader regional stability.

THE CONTEXT: THE KREMLIN PLAYBOOK FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH

While Russia started a kinetic war in Europe,¹ it has been **on the offensive globally**, seeking to expand its influence across the globe through the full array of the *Kremlin Playbook toolbox* of hybrid warfare.² The Kremlin has clearly spelled out and implements a global strategy to undermine the international rules-based democratic order and has pushed other authoritarian regimes to fall behind it in support, dividing and polarizing the global community. China has underwritten Russia's ambition for global superpower status by focusing on and expanding the BRICS+ grouping. It aims to position BRICS+ as a global alternative to the West, engaging key economies from Latin America. Within the geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts following the Russian invasion in Ukraine, countries in Africa and Latin America are facing pressure to take a stand on the conflict.

Despite the overall condemnation of the Russian unprovoked aggression in global fora, most notably in the UN, many states have maintained and even deepened their political and economic ties with Russia on tactical, transactional grounds, seeking deals for immediate economic benefit. This has provided further openings for Russia to engage local state capture networks of political and economic groups. Such networks with local political representation have parroted some of the Russian disinformation narratives about the war, making them part of the internal political discourse, and have signaled they are supporting the Kremlin's position that Ukraine, and by extension, the West, are equally to blame for the conflict. At the same time, Russia has consistently tried to strengthen its diplomatic, political and economic ties with the 'Global South' in attempt to tilt the global public opinion on its side.³ Another objective has been to redirect Russian trade, investment, and more generally, capital flows outside Europe.

In this context, for Moscow, Latin America, and especially Mexico, has long been understood within a logic of reciprocity, where engagement in the region is seen as a counterweight to U.S. influence in Russia's own near abroad. Russian elites initially viewed actions in Latin America as responses to U.S. activities in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space. However, having now gained a foothold, they seek to utilize their presence to support and advance the Kremlin's broader global agenda.⁴

¹ Shentov, O., Stefanov, R., and Vladimirov, M. (eds.), *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020; Shentov, O., Stefanov, R., and Vladimirov, M. (eds.), *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, London: Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series, 2019.

² Vladimirov, M., Rueda, G., and Osipova, D., *Global Reach: The Kremlin Playbook in Latin America*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2024.

³ González, G., and Chaguaceda, A., *Russia's Sharp Power in Latin America*, GAPAC AC, 2022.

⁴ Rouvinski, V., "Russia in Latin America: A Framework of Analysis," – In: *Rethinking Post-Cold War Russian-Latin American Relations*, ed. Rouvinski, V., and Jeifets, V., New York/London: Routledge, 2022.

The interconnected political, economic, and symbolic ties have asymmetric effects, allowing Russia to exercise influence beyond its material capabilities. The Kremlin lacks the same commercial tools as China to expand its presence in the region. Instead, it tends to support authoritarian governments in Latin America, since such regimes allow Moscow to employ the instruments of asymmetric reciprocity, including security cooperation and disinformation. Russia uses its political influence in these countries as a springboard to weaken the rest of the democracies in the region, which are more closely aligned with the U.S. The ultimate goal is to undermine the U.S. dominance in the Western Hemisphere by making the region more volatile and less strategically aligned with Washington. At the same time, the compounded soft security risks of illegal drug trafficking and migration have demanded significant U.S. resources, which have constrained American action to counter the authoritarian rise in the region.

Against the above background, Latin America is becoming a key battleground in the global power competition launched by Russia and China, which have sought to lock-in countries in the region in long-term asymmetric dependencies that strive to change their foreign policy and democratic orientation.⁵ Relying on a feedback loop of state-friendly business and political interests, the Kremlin has successfully pursued a strategy of **state capture and sharp power** in Latin America. Russia has leveraged its informal oligarchic networks to gain a foothold in strategic regional markets including energy, infrastructure, natural resources extraction, and defense.⁶

Although Moscow has failed to implement many of the large-scale projects it has pursued in Latin America, its strategy in the region has exposed serious governance vulnerabilities and state-capture risks. Many countries in Latin America lack strong legal safeguards and public institutions that could ensure transparency and independent oversight, meaning civil society has an important role to play in shining a light on intergovernmental agreements with Russia and their detrimental effects on local democracy, particularly those related to large-scale infrastructure projects and strategic mergers and acquisitions. There is still very little understanding and discussion in the region about the mechanics of authoritarian influence from Russia and other states, and the links between state-capture vulnerabilities and sharp power.

The methods used by the Kremlin to expand its influence in Latin America were tried and tested first in Central and Eastern Europe, where it has gained a dominant position in strategic markets by forging corrupt relationships with local elites, locking governments into long-term, expensive infrastructure projects, and creating structural trade dependencies. Moscow has combined this economic power with Cold War-era security networks and renewed media offensives,⁷ all against the backdrop of increasing demonstrations of military power.

⁵ Belchi, A., "US Warns of Growing Influence of Russia and China in Latin America", *Diálogo Américas*, 29 March 2022.

⁶ Stefanov, R., and Vladimirov, M., *Deals in the dark: Russian Corrosive Capital in Latin America*, Sharp Power and Democratic Resilience Series, NED, November 2020.

⁷ Rouvinski, V., *Russia's Strategic Communication in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Research Publications 42, The Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy, October 2021.

The pattern in Latin America has been very similar despite the Kremlin's much more modest reach. With the exception of Venezuela and Brazil, and to a lesser degree, Cuba, Moscow has not been able to penetrate strategic economic sectors, has implemented few large-scale projects, and is dwarfed by China in terms of trade and investment in the region. However, leveraging China's economic weight and "no limit" partnership and its historic Soviet political and economic links, the Kremlin has still been able to take advantage of state-capture vulnerabilities, political corruption, and the strong fusion between political and economic power to advance its standing and narrative as an alternative. In some countries, including in Bolivia and Venezuela, large scale projects have been used to achieve an outsized political influence.

Russia has also sought to expand its partners in crime alliance. For example, the Kremlin has reached out to Iran to bolster their joint security presence and expand their influence in Latin America. Venezuela serves as a staging ground for Iranian military support, with advisors and potentially even drone technology deployed in the country. Bolivia recently signed a security pact with Iran, raising concerns about the potential transfer of weapons and technology that could destabilize the region, particularly near Argentina and Chile, which have already bolstered their border security measures.⁸ This collaboration between Russia and Iran presents a challenge to regional security and raises the specter of the Kremlin enlarging its geopolitical presence into Latin America.

In this context, Mexico, with its vast energy resources and strategic geoeconomic position vis-à-vis the U.S., has emerged as a key new target of the Kremlin Playbook. In fact, as early as 1997, Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov observed that Russia's presence in Mexico could help it "deal with the West in Russia's neighboring territories".⁹ Under Vladimir Putin, this reciprocal logic has been reinforced and combined with Russia's global partnership with China, extending Moscow's reach.¹⁰

Today, after Brazil, Mexico has become Russia's second biggest economic partner in Latin America. Nonetheless, when contrasted with the scale and complexity of Mexico's trade with China, the U.S. and Canada, **Russia has not become a strategic economic partner for the country.** Russia's economic footprint is peripheral but is concentrated in strategic sectors such as oil and gas, commodities and finance. More importantly, Russia has been able to leverage its limited economic ties to achieve an **outsized political influence**, exemplified by the improvement of bilateral ties, the spread of Russian narratives in the Mexican public space and the expansion of Russia-linked criminal and intelligence networks.

⁸ Delgado, J., "Iran and Bolivia's Strengthening Ties, a Risk for Latin America", *Diálogo Américas*, 22 March 2024.

⁹ Jamestown Foundation, "Moscow Seeks Influence in Latin America", Monitor Volume: 3 Issue: 230, 1997.

¹⁰ Levaggi, A. G., "Latin America and the Russo-Ukrainian war: Too much to lose, too little to gain", *Trends Research*, 16 October 2025.

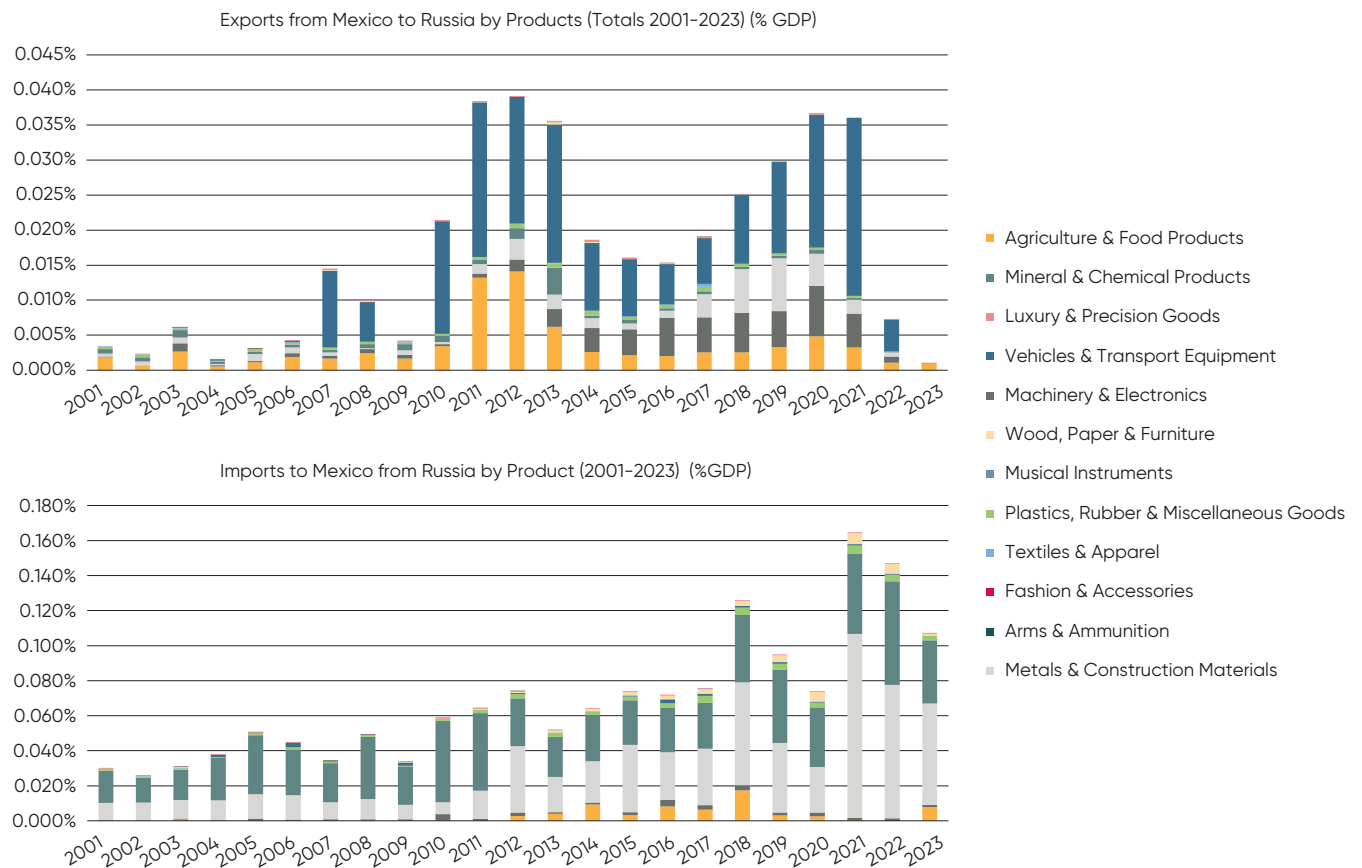
FOLLOW THE MONEY: RUSSIAN ECONOMIC FOOTPRINT IN MEXICO

The structural asymmetry of the trade relationship is evident: for Russia, Mexico is a useful market and potential sanctions-evasion node; for Mexico, Russia is a marginal trading partner but one that supplies critical inputs for food and industrial security. This asymmetry mirrors the Kremlin’s broader pattern in Latin America: taking advantage of niche dependencies and exploiting weak enforcement mechanisms to magnify influence far beyond the actual scale of economic engagement.

Trade Patterns

Mexico’s trade relations with Russia are relatively modest in volume compared to those with its North American partners, but they remain strategically relevant in specific sectors. Bilateral trade peaked in 2021 at around \$2.4 billion, before falling sharply after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the introduction of sanctions against Russia. By 2023, total trade had declined to roughly \$1.4 billion, illustrating both the sensitivity of these flows to geopolitical shocks and the relatively low level of resilience in the bilateral trade structure.

Figure 1. Bilateral Trade by Product Type as % of Mexican GDP (2001-2023)



Source: CSD based on Comtrade (trade related) and World Bank (current GDP) data.

Trade flows are heavily concentrated in a handful of commodities: fertilizers, steel, and certain machinery on the Russian side; and agricultural products, vehicles, and electronics on the Mexican side¹¹.

Box 1. The Dragon in the Room

While Russia's direct trade with Mexico remains modest, China's dominant position in Mexico's economy provides Moscow with an indirect channel of influence. China is now Mexico's second-largest trading partner after the United States, with bilateral trade close to \$140 billion in 2024, nearly hundred times greater than Mexico–Russia trade. Chinese exports to Mexico, close to 20% of all Mexican imports, cover a vast spectrum, from telecommunications equipment and electronics to automotive parts and consumer goods, deeply embedding Chinese firms into Mexican supply chains.

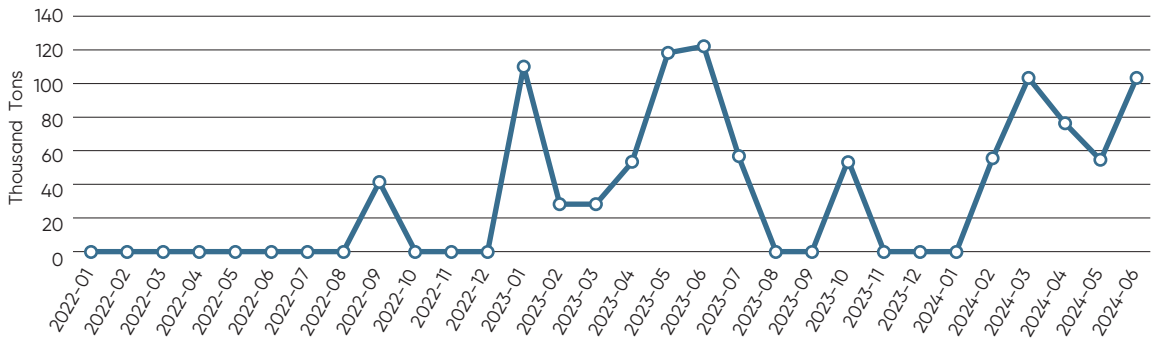
For the Kremlin, China's entrenched economic presence creates opportunities in at least three ways. First, it allows Russian goods to “hide in plain sight,” entering Mexico through Chinese intermediaries or mixed cargo shipments, which complicates customs monitoring and sanctions enforcement. Second, China's diplomatic and economic weight in Mexico provides cover for Russia's narrative of a “multipolar order” in Latin America, reinforcing the idea that U.S. dominance over the Mexican economy is being diluted. Third, trilateral ventures, for instance, in infrastructure or energy, may allow Russian companies to attach themselves to larger Chinese-led projects, using Beijing's financial and political clout to shield their activities.

This triangulation reflects a broader trend across Latin America: Russia does not need to match China's economic footprint to remain relevant. Instead, it leverages China's market dominance and political legitimacy to entrench itself within Mexico's economic ecosystem, while avoiding the visibility that would come from a more substantial direct presence. In this way, Beijing functions as both a partner and an enabler of Moscow's strategic interests in Mexico.

Although Mexico is itself a major oil producer, specialized Russian petroleum derivatives have entered Mexican supply chains after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russia has exported around 2 million tons of diesel to Mexico since August, 2022 (around 1,100 barrels per day). The volumes are relatively small in absolute terms but strategically significant, as they create entry points for Russian firms in downstream industries.

¹¹ Mexico Government, “Russia Profile”.

Figure 2. Russian Petroleum Products Exports to Mexico

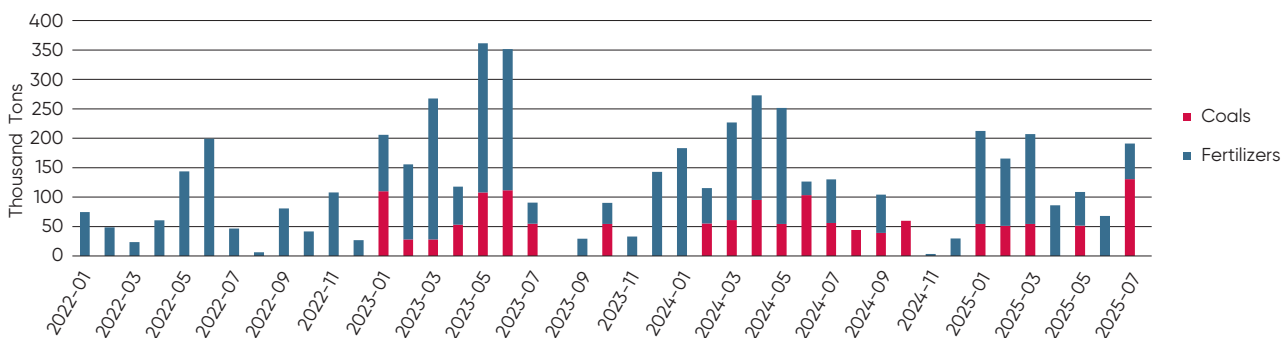


Source: CSD and CREA based on Kpler data. They were no Russian fuels shipments to Mexico until August, 2022.

The Russian state and state-linked corporations have also attempted to expand liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports to Mexico. The country’s heavy dependence on U.S. natural gas (over 70% of its imports come from Texas) has drawn Russian interest in offering alternatives. At the 2025 St. Petersburg Economic Forum, Russian Energy Minister Sergey Tsiviliov proposed delivering **liquefied natural gas (LNG)** to Mexico while sharing extraction and electricity distribution technologies. Moscow’s offer also included potential cooperation on oil infrastructure and upstream exploration, targeting Mexico’s ageing Pemex fields and fragile refining network. Although no formal agreements have been signed, the initiative illustrates Russia’s intent to exploit U.S.–Mexico frictions in energy policy to secure a foothold in North America’s second-largest market.

Beyond oil and gas, Russia has expanded its exports of strategic commodities such as coal, steel and fertilizers. The price of Russian coal has slumped on global markets after the EU embargo introduced in mid-2022. Russian companies have tried to diversify their sales away from the EU by dumping large volumes in countries that have not aligned with Western sanctions. Although the biggest recipients have become India and Turkey, Russia has gradually penetrated the Latin American market. Mexico increased its imports of Russian coal from zero to around 50 thousand tons per month (around \$120 million in imports since January 2023).

Figure 3. Russian Exports of Coal and Fertilizers



Source: CSD and CREA based on Kpler data.

The most critical channel of Russian influence on Mexico through trade lies in the fertilizer market. Russia and Belarus together account for a substantial share of Mexico's imports of nitrogen-based fertilizers and potash, commodities essential for Mexico's large agricultural sector. In 2021, Russia supplied nearly 27% of Mexico's imported fertilizers. Although imports fell after 2022 due to sanctions and global supply disruptions, Russian fertilizer exporters maintained privileged access to Mexican buyers, exploiting gaps in enforcement and re-routing cargo through intermediaries.

This dependency exposes Mexico to potential price shocks and supply disruptions that Moscow could leverage as a geopolitical instrument. In the wake of sanctions, Russia has repeatedly used fertilizers as a bargaining tool with Latin American partners, presenting itself as a reliable alternative to "politicized" Western suppliers. For Mexico, whose domestic food security depends on affordable fertilizer access, this rhetoric resonates strongly among agribusiness lobbies and policymakers.

Strategic Investment Cooperation

Despite its limited scale compared to Mexico's North American and European partners, Russian investment in Mexico occupies strategically sensitive niches including energy, fertilizers, logistics, and finance. The flagship example of Russian capital in Mexico is Lukoil's offshore presence. Since 2015, Lukoil has participated in exploration and production contracts in the Gulf of Mexico, often in consortium with European majors such as Eni. The company's stake in blocks 12 and 28 reflects Moscow's broader effort to maintain a foothold in the Western Hemisphere's hydrocarbon sector, even as sanctions restrict its access elsewhere. While Lukoil has insisted that operations are run through its European subsidiaries to avoid reputational damage, the overlap between Russia's state-linked energy firms and its geopolitical ambitions creates long-term risk for Mexico's energy security. In addition to upstream operations, Russian firms have explored midstream and downstream ventures, including interest in Mexico's refining and petrochemical capacity. These projects, however, remain underdeveloped due to both regulatory uncertainty and international scrutiny after the invasion of Ukraine.

Russia is among the world's leading fertilizer producers, and its footprint in Mexico has grown in line with the country's dependence on nitrogen and phosphate imports. Companies such as Uralchem and Uralkali have historically been key suppliers, often using intermediary traders to reach Mexican markets.

Russia has leveraged investment ties to secure a niche presence in transport infrastructure. This includes joint ventures for the assembly of Russian vehicles – from UAZ utility trucks to KAMAZ heavy lorries – which, while small in number, represent strategic nodes of influence in logistics and state procurement. Some of these ventures have been structured through local partners tied to state governments

Similarly, Russian aviation companies, notably Sukhoi, have attempted to penetrate Mexico's civil aviation market with the Superjet 100.

Box 2. Mexico's Sukhoi Superjet Gamble and Its Hard Landing

In 2011, the Mexican airline Interjet signed a contract worth about 650 million U.S. dollars with Superjet International, a joint venture between Russia's Sukhoi and Italy's Finmeccanica, to purchase 15 Sukhoi Superjet 100 aircraft with an option for five more. The decision was explained by Interjet's executives as based on the aircraft's ability to perform efficiently under Mexico's high-altitude and hot-weather conditions. The first planes were delivered in 2013 at the Paris Air Show, marking Superjet's debut in North America. The financing of the deal was supported by Russia's Vnesheconombank (VEB) together with France's Natixis, which arranged a syndicated loan to facilitate the acquisition.

Despite high expectations, the project soon faced difficulties. While Interjet initially integrated the aircraft into its fleet, the Superjet 100 suffered from technical and maintenance challenges. The lack of readily available spare parts and support infrastructure in the Americas significantly increased operating costs. By early 2019, of the 22 Superjets acquired by Interjet, only about five were still operational, while the rest had been grounded due to technical and logistical problems.

Eventually, Interjet concluded that maintaining the Russian aircraft was no longer economically viable. The airline decided to withdraw the Superjet from service and sought to sell off its remaining units. What had begun as a landmark for Russian civil aviation industries in the Americas, and a sign of closer commercial ties between Mexico and Russia, ultimately turned into an example of the difficulties Moscow faces in sustaining its technological exports in competitive and demanding international markets. At the same time, the failed deal damaged Interjet's finances and reputation, underscoring the risks for countries engaging in high-profile purchases with Moscow that later proved unsustainable, leaving both sides with significant political and economic costs.

At the same time, perhaps the most under-examined element of Russian investment in Mexico lies in the financial and banking sector. While no Russian banks operate openly in Mexico, financial cooperation is channeled through offshore intermediaries, often linked to Cyprus, Panama, or Caribbean jurisdictions. These conduits serve three purposes:

- Facilitating trade finance for Russian-linked firms operating in Mexico.
- Channeling remittances and investments from Russian expatriates and business networks.
- Providing potential platforms for money laundering in coordination with Mexican organized crime.

The overlap between Russian financial flows and local illicit economies is particularly concerning. Both U.S. and EU law enforcement have pointed to Mexico as a growing hub for laundering funds linked to sanctioned

Russian oligarchs. Transactions often exploit the same weak points in the Mexican financial system: real estate, shell companies, and cryptocurrency exchanges, which are all used by drug cartels. This convergence of interests between Russian actors and Mexican organized crime increases the risk of state capture dynamics, where political and regulatory institutions are bent to serve external and illicit agendas.

Box 3. Expansion in the Fintech Industry

Mexico has emerged as a landing zone for ex-Russia tech and finance talent. In 2023, former executives of the Russian bank, Tinkoff, owned by the sanctioned oligarch Oleg Tinkov,¹² set up *Plata*, a Mexico-based fintech that has grown rapidly on the back of app-delivered credit cards and streamlined onboarding. A funding round in 2025 raised \$160 million and valued the startup at \$1.5 billion, making it the first new Mexican unicorn since 2022.¹³ Founders say Mexico's large underbanked population and a permissive sandbox for financial inclusion created a "unique window" for scale.

While Plata's founders publicly deny equity participation by Oleg Tinkov, he has been described as an informal advisor and suggests his and Michael Calvey's families were early supporters alongside U.S. and European funds (Kora, Moore Strategic Ventures). Calvey is the head and founder of the Barings Vostok Capital Management, which has been investing billions in the Russian market including in the Yandex search engine.

Plata reports one million active card users roughly 18 months after launch and says it obtained a banking license in December; the company also claims to issue "about one in every ten" new credit cards in Mexico.

Company statements indicate an organization of roughly 2,000 employees, with several hundred former Russia-based engineers and product managers now operating from Mexico and European hubs (Cyprus, Serbia, Barcelona). Founders say most personnel have regularized local status. The relocation trend mirrors other Russia-originated tech players (e.g., the Yakutia-based inDrive taxi hailing service chose Mexico as its first international market before exiting Russia in 2022).

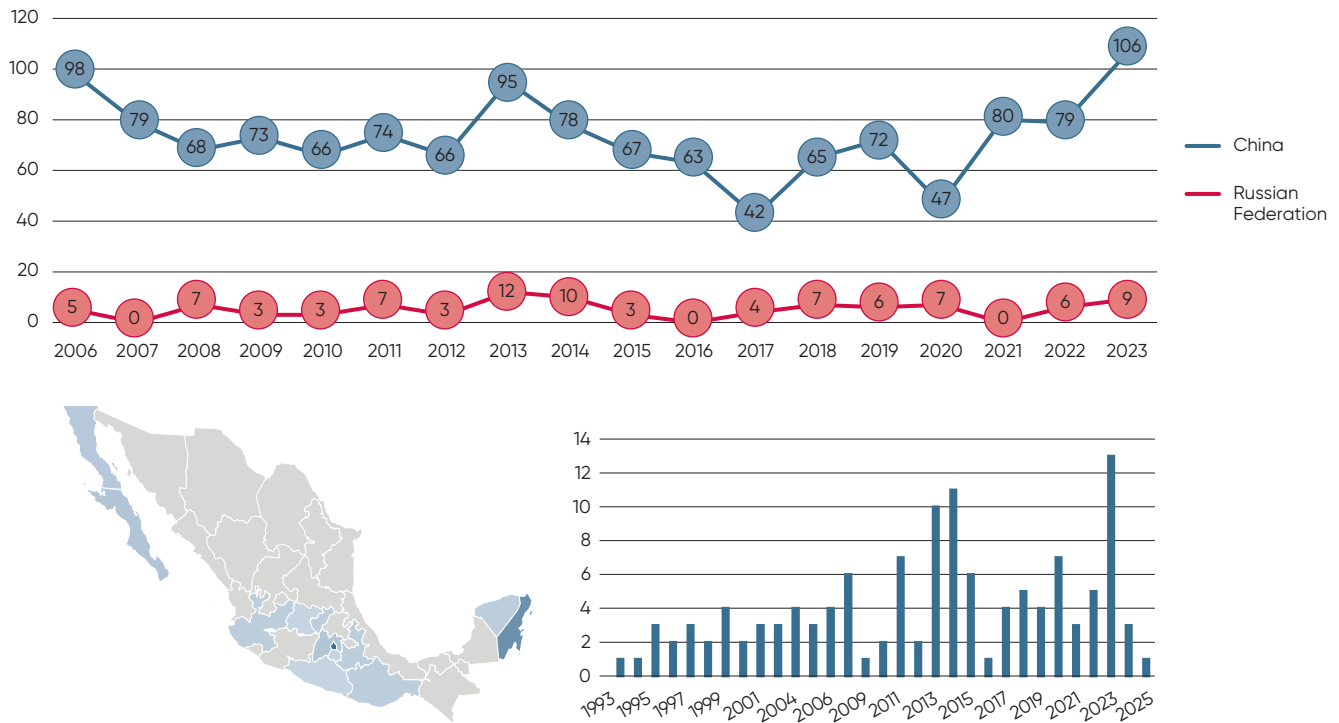
¹² Tinkov was also sanctioned by the UK in March 2022 but his designation was lifted in June, 2023 after an appeal by the U.K. businessman Richard Branson and by the anti-Kremlin ex-oil tycoon, Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Tinkov has been highly critical of the Kremlin for its war effort in Ukraine, and he renounced his Russian citizenship at the end of 2022. Tinkov also sold his shares in the company, controlling the bank alleging full separation from his business activities in Russia. US-sanctioned Russian oligarch, Vladimir Potanin, bought Tinkov's and his family's position in TCS Group. Oleg sold other businesses to companies whose ownership included another Forbes-billionaire Roman Abramovich. Before the war, Tinkov was indicted by a US grand jury in September 2019 for willfully filing false tax returns and attempting to evade over \$240 million in taxes.

¹³ Aris, B. "Russia's Tinkov and Calvey bet on Mexican fintech as Plata targets \$10bn IPO", BNE Intellignews, 27 June 2025.

Mapping the Russian Corporate Footprint

Russian corporate presence in Mexico is relatively limited when measured against the scale of U.S., Canadian, and European companies. Yet, where it exists, it tends to cluster in strategic or dual-use sectors – energy, arms and security, IT/cyber, and illicit networks – that create asymmetrical vulnerabilities. Moscow’s approach mirrors its global playbook: embed Russian firms in sensitive supply chains, leverage diaspora networks, and operate through opaque offshore intermediaries. Although ultimate Russian ownership of companies registered in Mexico appears very limited, according to Mexico’s Ministry of Economy, from 1993 to 2025 a total of 126 Mexican companies were registered with Russian foreign investment in their capital stock.¹⁴ Nearly half (49%) of these Russian-linked firms are based in Mexico City.

Figure 4. Number of Chinese and Russian Companies in Mexico (Graph 1) and Number and Location of Mexican Companies with Russian Foreign Investment (Graph 2)



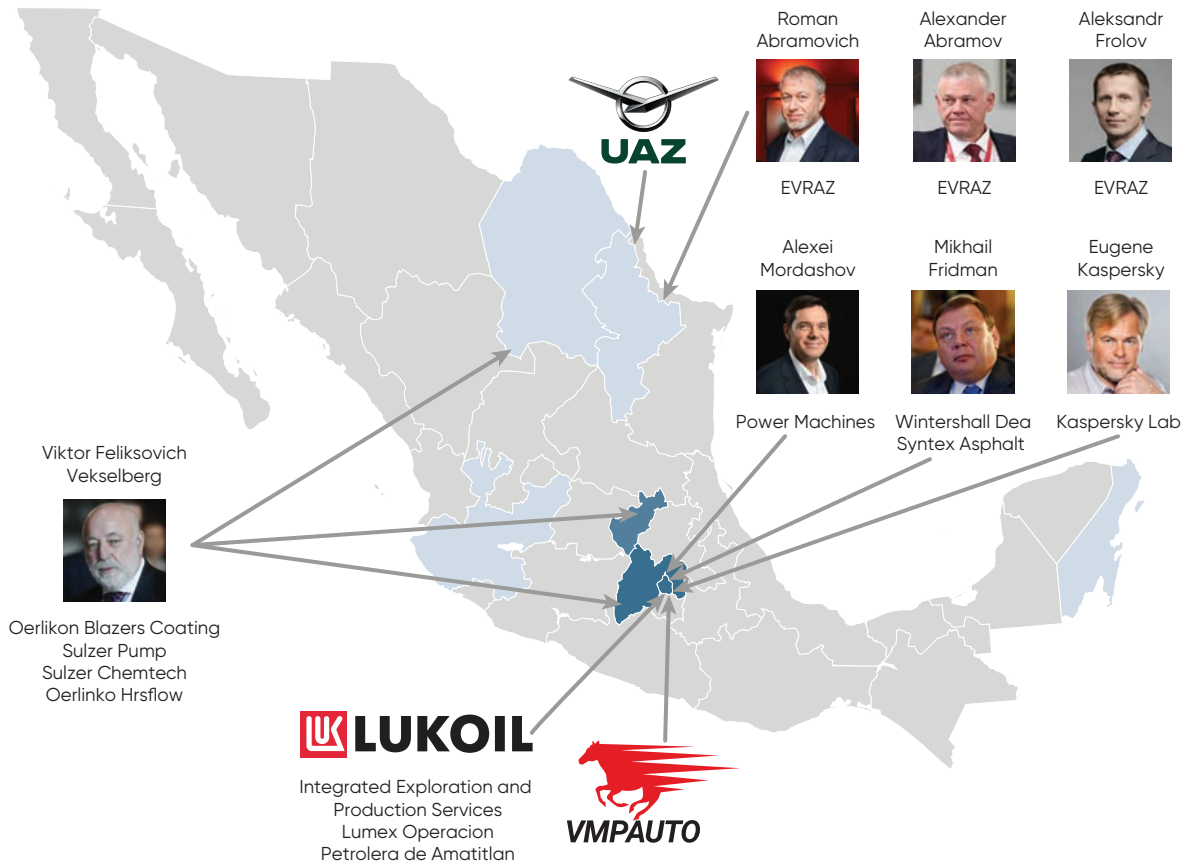
Source: CSD based on Ministry of Economy of Mexico "Mexican Companies with Foreign Investment in Their Share Capital Registered in the National Foreign Investment Registry".

The **manufacturing and industrial equipment** sector hosts several notable Russian-linked companies. Among them are Oerlikon Blazers Coating, Sulzer Pump, Sulzer Chemtech, and Oerlinko Hrsflow, all ultimately tied to Viktor Vekselberg. These firms specialize in providing advanced manufacturing equipment and industrial technologies in Mexico. Vekselberg, a Russian national sanctioned by the United States for his proximity to President Vladimir Putin and alleged involvement in Russian interference in the 2016

¹⁴ Far fewer than the 1,510 companies registered with Chinese investment during the same period.

U.S. presidential election, has formally reduced his stakes in these and other companies to shield them from potential restrictions.¹⁵

Figure 5. Russian-Owned Companies per Federal State



Source: CSD.

Evraz, a major Russian steel and mining company, is also active in Mexico. Founded and expanded in the 1990s and 2000s by Roman Abramovich, Alexander Abramov, and Aleksandr Frolov, Evraz produces steel, coal, and iron ore for Mexico’s industrial and construction sectors. All three principals have faced Western sanctions since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, but Evraz continues to operate under Russian-linked ownership.¹⁶

In the automotive products segment, the Russian firm VMPAUTO, established in Saint Petersburg in 1996 and operating its export arm SMAZKA.RU LLC since 2003,¹⁷ develops and manufactures lubricants, oil additives, greases, and automotive service products. Although its exact ownership structure is not publicly disclosed, it remains an example of a Russian scientific-production company with a footprint in Mexico.

¹⁵ RadioFreeEurope, “U.S. Charges Associate Of Russian Oligarch With Sanctions Evasion, Money Laundering”, 8 February 2023.
¹⁶ Vantuono, W. C., “Evraz Wants Out of North America”, *Raleway Age*, 12 August 2022.
¹⁷ Smazka.ru.com, “SMAZKA.RU LLC”.

In the **energy and natural resources** sectors, Russian presence is represented by several large players. Power Machines (Silovye Mashiny), one of Russia's largest manufacturers of power-generation equipment, is significantly owned by Alexei Mordashov. Mordashov, a sanctioned oligarch and recipient of the Order of Friendship from Vladimir Putin for his company Severstal's role in supplying steel to Russia's military-industrial complex, also controls Severgroup. Severgroup has held shares in the Bank of Russia, which was linked to the annexation of Crimea, and in the National Media Group, known for promoting Kremlin-aligned narratives on Ukraine. Under Severgroup's ownership, Power Machines has even supplied wind generators to Crimea.¹⁸

The U.S. sanctioned Russian oligarch Mikhail Fridman, through his investment vehicle LetterOne,¹⁹ entered Mexico's oil sector by acquiring DEA Deutsche Erdoel AG in 2015. DEA quickly positioned itself as a major player in the Peña Nieto government's energy reform auctions, winning acreage alongside Pemex in Tampico-Misantla field and in onshore farmouts (Ogarrio, Cárdenas-Mora). DEA's unusually high bids fueled speculation that its strategy prioritized strategic positioning over commercial returns.

In December 2018, DEA struck a landmark \$500 million deal to acquire Sierra Oil & Gas, one of the most visible "success stories" of Mexico's energy opening. The acquisition gave DEA a portfolio of ten exploration licenses and, crucially, a 40% stake in the Zama discovery, Mexico's largest offshore find in two decades (400–800 million barrels of oil equivalent). This purchase instantly made DEA one of Mexico's top foreign operators and positioned Fridman's group at the heart of the country's most strategic upstream project. DEA announced it would invest \$2 billion over five years in the Sierra portfolio.

DEA's Mexican operations were guided by Lord John Browne, former BP CEO and close associate of Fridman since the TNK-BP joint venture in Russia. Browne's arrival as DEA chairman was seen as giving the company elite credibility in Western energy circles, even as it remained under Russian strategic control. However, DEA's advance into Mexico coincided with growing U.S. concerns about Russian influence in the region. Former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson reportedly warned Mexican officials about DEA's links to the Kremlin, noting that Fridman's business empire had long maintained close ties to Putin's inner circle.

In addition to DEA, since 2015, **Lukoil** has quietly become one of the most significant Russian investors in Mexico's upstream oil sector. The company entered through the Amatitlán block and gradually expanded to Blocks 10,

¹⁸ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Additional Individuals and Entities in Connection with the Conflict in Ukraine and Russia's Occupation of Crimea", 26 January 2028.

¹⁹ Since the invasion of Ukraine, Fridman and his business partner Petr Aven have resigned from LetterOne's board and sold their stakes in Alfa-Bank to non-sanctioned partners in an effort to comply with Western measures, though both remain on the EU sanctions list. Fridman also has indirect links to **Syntex Asphalt**, an industrial firm located in Mexico; Chronicles, "Collectors of sanctions exports. How St. Petersburg companies transported banned bitumen to Europe", 23 January 2025.

12, 14, 28 in the Sureste Basin.²⁰ Its most ambitious step came with the \$435 million acquisition of a 50% operating stake in Area 4, covering the Ichalkil and Pokoch fields (estimated 564 million barrels of oil equivalent reserves). The deal, closed in February 2022 with PetroBal as local partner, made Lukoil operator of one of the most promising shallow-water developments in the Gulf of Mexico. Production has already reached 25,000 barrels per day, with peak output projected at 115,000 barrels per day.

This positions Lukoil as not just a participant but an operator in Mexico's oil sector: a rare role for a Russian major company under sanctions. The firm has pledged to invest an additional \$250 million in the development phase, underscoring its long-term commitment despite geopolitical headwinds. Lukoil's arrival has been tainted by links to the Pemex corruption scandal involving former CEO Emilio Lozoya. The latter was instrumental in introducing Lukoil during the Presidency of Peña Nieto, whose administration began a major overhaul of the energy market that involved the opening of multiple tenders for oil and gas exploration and production concessions in the Gulf of Mexico.

Beyond upstream, Lukoil is eyeing Mexico's downstream and fuel markets. Company executives have openly discussed plans to establish a network of service stations. In parallel, Bloomberg reported in 2023 that Lukoil hired veteran Mexican trader Yuri Carreño (formerly Pemex's PMI) to launch a fuel trading arm in Mexico. This could allow Russia to redirect sanctions-constrained refined products into Latin America's largest fuel-importing market. If successful, Moscow could erode U.S. dominance in Mexico's refined products trade, where currently 90% of gasoline and diesel imports come from the U.S.

Russia is also active in Mexico's **cybersecurity** sector through the KL Anti-Virus Solutions firm, owned by Eugene Kaspersky, a former Soviet military cryptologist and co-founder of Kaspersky Lab,²¹ a cybersecurity company recognized for its antivirus software and digital threat protection. Kaspersky Lab has faced bans in several countries, including most members of the "Five Eyes" intelligence alliance, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, over concerns of foreign interference, espionage, and sabotage.²²

In the **agricultural** sector, active is the Russian company Avgust México S.A. de C.V., a subsidiary of JSC Firma Avgust, which is one of Russia's largest producer of crop protection chemicals. Avgust operates in more than thirty countries and entered the Latin American market in 2018 through a merger with the Peruvian firm Fitocorp. From its headquarters in Mexico City, Avgust

²⁰ Lukoil's operations are conducted through multiple entities: Petrolera de Amatitlán SAPI de C.V., responsible for exploration and production; Lumex Operación S. de R.L. de C.V., managing operational activities; and Integrated Exploration and Production Services S. de R.L. de C.V., which provides technical and operational support.

²¹ In 2022, Eugene Kaspersky was added to an Expert Council under the Russian government, suggesting he gained a formal advisory role after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (The Russian Government, "Mikhail Mishustin's meeting with Government Expert Council", 13 December 2022).

²² Da Silva, J., "Russia antivirus firm Kaspersky quits US after ban", BBC, 16 July 2024; TechCrunch, "Australia bans government use of Kaspersky software due to 'unacceptable security risk'", 24 February 2025.

México distributes agrochemical products to local agricultural markets while maintaining a direct link to Russian ownership.

Figure 6. Number and Type of Projects of Russian-Owned Companies per Federal State



Source: CSD.

Box 4. Diversifying Russian Energy Investment Initiatives

Power Machines has maintained a long-standing presence in Mexico, with involvement in several major hydroelectric projects. Between 1991 and 1997, the company took part in the **construction of the Huites and Aguamilpa plants**. From 2003 to 2009, it joined a consortium with Constructora ICA and La Nacional to develop the **El Cajón hydroelectric project**, valued at \$750 million, from which Power Machines earned around \$140 million. Later, between 2007 and 2012, it acted as a subcontractor to CPH and Peninsular in the construction of the **La Yesca hydroelectric plant**, a project worth \$800 million, generating over \$200 million in revenue for the Russian firm. These activities have been concentrated mainly on Mexico’s west coast, particularly in the states of Sinaloa and Nayarit.

Another notable Russian-linked venture in Mexico is tied to the Sakhalin-2 liquefied natural gas (LNG) project in Russia. In 2008, **Sakhalin Energy**, then owned by Gazprom (50% plus one share), Royal Dutch Shell (27.5% minus one share), Mitsui (12.5%), and Mitsubishi (10%),²³ signed a 20-year agreement to supply a total of 37 million tons of LNG to Shell's Energía Costa Azul plant in Baja California, with 1.6 million tons to be shipped annually to a regasification terminal built by Semptra Energy and leased by Shell, for distribution in both Mexico and the United States.²⁴ Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Shell withdrew from Sakhalin-2, recording a \$1.6 billion loss and citing risks of asset nationalization; in June 2022, the Russian government converted the project's operator into a domestic entity, later selling Shell's 27.5% stake, valued at about \$1 billion, to Gazprom via a state-backed company called Sakhalin Project.²⁵ In March 2025, Russia's Prosecutor General demanded \$1.614 billion from Shell in favor of Gazprom for alleged illegal withdrawal from the project and unpaid gas deliveries in 2022, with the possibility of offsetting part of the claim against \$1.12 billion Shell has reserved as compensation for its former shareholding.²⁶ The current status of LNG deliveries to Mexico under the 2008 contract remains unclear in light of these ownership changes, sanctions, and ongoing legal disputes.

In September 2013, the Mexican petrochemical company Alpek, through its subsidiary Grupo Petromex, reached a co-investment agreement with **Russia's United Petrochemical Company**, part of the Sistema JSFC group, to build a large plant in Ufa, Bashkortostan, Russia, for producing purified terephthalic acid (PTA) and polyethylene terephthalate (PET).²⁷ Each company agreed to invest \$10 million to study the project's feasibility, with full construction depending on final approval from their boards. The plant would use Alpek's IntegRex® **PTA-PET technology and was designed to produce 600,000 tonnes of PTA and 600,000 tonnes of PET per year**, mainly for the Russian market. The main raw material, paraxylene, was expected to be supplied locally, with sourcing talks underway with JSOC Bashneft, another Sistema subsidiary.

²³ KeyFactsEnergy.com, "Sakhalin Energy".

²⁴ La Prensa, "Shell venderá gas a México" [Shell to sell gas to Mexico], 15 October 2004.

²⁵ Latin Energy Group, "Gazprom compra la parte de Shell en Sakhalin Energy" [Gazprom buys Shell's stake in Sakhalin Energy], 27 March 2024.

²⁶ Swissinfo.ch, "Rusia reclama a Shell indemnización de 1.614 millones de dólares por impagos para Gazprom" [Russia claims \$1.614 billion in compensation from Shell for unpaid bills to Gazprom], 25 March 2025.

²⁷ Integrex Tech, "Alpek y UPC firman acuerdo de coinversión en Rusia" [Alpek and UPC sign joint venture agreement in Russia], 26 September 2023.

In 2013, the Russian company **Permskaia Kompania Neftianogo Mashinostroenia (PKNM)** delivered a batch of sucker rod pumps for use in oil fields in the state of Tamaulipas, Mexico. In early 2014, testing of the equipment was completed successfully and on schedule, allowing the Russian supplier to obtain local certification and deliver a fully compliant batch to the Mexican client. Due to strong demand from Mexico's oil and gas sector, PKNM announced plans to open a specialized maintenance center in the country, with an estimated investment of US \$15 million.

Beyond hydrocarbons, Russia has highlighted opportunities in lithium extraction technologies, pharmaceutical cooperation, and biotechnology. Mexico's strategic ambitions to develop its lithium reserves have made Russian expertise in processing and extraction technologies attractive. Moscow has also positioned itself in nuclear energy cooperation, dating back to the 2013 bilateral agreement on peaceful use of nuclear power, and more recently in discussions on "green energy transitions". While these initiatives remain largely aspirational, they form part of a broader Kremlin strategy to embed itself in Mexico's high-value industries of the future.

The Russian **corporate footprint** in Mexico is not defined by volume but by **strategic positioning**. Companies such as Lukoil, Rosoboronexport, and Kaspersky operate in sectors where even limited presence generates disproportionate influence: hydrocarbons, defence maintenance, cybersecurity. Around them, a web of smaller firms, shell companies, and expatriate businesses provides Moscow with additional channels for illicit finance and political leverage.

For Mexico, the risks lie in state capture dynamics. Corporate actors tied to Russia often bypass good procurement practice, operate through intermediaries in corruption-prone sectors, and embed dependencies (maintenance contracts, IT ecosystems, energy supply chains) that can be exploited for geopolitical purposes. This combination of commercial, technological, and illicit networks transforms a relatively modest footprint into a potential strategic vulnerability.

More importantly, Russia's growing strategic alignment with China could offer indirect channels of influence within Mexico's evolving supply chain landscape. As Chinese investment continues to expand, it may open new entry points for Russian involvement through joint ventures, resource supply agreements, or informal collaboration in logistics and infrastructure.

POLITICAL AMPLIFIERS

Russia's aims to strengthen political and diplomatic relations with Mexico on the basis of an anti-Western ideological worldview, buttressed by an aggressive media disinformation campaign. By doing so, Moscow seeks to exploit internal divisions, weaken Western influence, and normalize its authoritarian worldview.

Formal and Informal Strategic Cooperation

Russia's political influence in Mexico is based on a combination of formal diplomatic channels and informal state capture networks, reflecting Moscow's broader geopolitical aims in Latin America. While official state-to-state ties between Moscow and Mexico City remain relatively shallow compared to Nicaragua or Cuba, the Kremlin has cultivated **strategic niches of cooperation** that advance its geopolitical interests while avoiding the visibility of a full-fledged partnership.

In addition, Mexico's alignment with Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua has created indirect synergies with Russia's regional agenda. The López Obrador administration and now Claudia Sheinbaum have pursued solidarity policies with Havana, including record oil shipments that by 2023 reached 5.4 million barrels valued at nearly \$400 million.²⁸ This made Mexico Cuba's second-largest oil supplier, surpassing Russia itself. While officially framed as humanitarian aid, such policies indirectly strengthen Moscow's most important allies in the hemisphere, enabling the survival of authoritarian regimes that provide Russia with critical political footholds.

Bilateral relations are structured around occasional high-level visits and inter-parliamentary cooperation. The most visible episodes include Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's tour of Latin America in 2020, where he met with then-Mexican Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard, and a series of exchanges in multilateral fora such as the G20, APEC, and the UN. Moscow frames these encounters as evidence of shared commitment to "multipolarity" and sovereignty, themes that resonate with Mexico's historical emphasis on non-intervention (the Estrada Doctrine).²⁹

Mexico and Russia also signed a security and law enforcement cooperation agreement in 2009, intended to cover organized crime, terrorism, and arms trafficking. While implementation has been limited and uneven, the agreement remains a framework that Moscow highlights in diplomatic forums as proof of "strategic partnership." Occasional exchanges of officials and training

²⁸ McFields, A., "Mexico shamefully joins Russia, Venezuela in backing Cuba's dictatorship", *The Hill*, 11 January 2024.

²⁹ The Estrada Doctrine (1930) is Mexico's foreign policy principle of non-intervention, which dictates that Mexico design and direct its international relations based only on its own interests. This doctrine was invoked in September 2023, when a Russian military contingent marched in Mexico's Independence Day parade in Mexico City, alongside other foreign units. The gesture, defended by President López Obrador as part of Mexico's tradition of inviting countries with which it has diplomatic ties, sparked criticism from Ukraine's ambassador, who condemned the symbolism amid the ongoing war.

opportunities have kept the channel alive, even amid broader geopolitical frictions. For Russia, the agreement's symbolic value outweighs its operational impact, allowing the Kremlin to portray itself as a trusted partner in Mexico's struggle against transnational crime while reinforcing a shared anti-Western narrative of sovereignty in security affairs.

Beyond cooperation on civil security matters, Russia has also periodically attempted to penetrate Mexico's military-industrial sector. In the early 2000s, Rosoboronexport promoted helicopter sales and maintenance contracts, particularly for Mi-17 models used by Mexican security forces. These efforts generated technical exchanges and visits by Russian defense officials, though large-scale deals never materialized due to U.S. pressure and interoperability concerns. Still, Russia has leveraged these limited transactions to cultivate defense-sector contacts and to present itself as a potential alternative supplier should Mexico seek to diversify its sources. More recently, Russian firms have continued offering spare parts and servicing for legacy equipment, maintaining a foothold and signaling Moscow's long-term interest in Mexico's security infrastructure.

Yet it is in the informal sphere that Russian influence has been more persistent and strategically significant. Russian diplomacy in Mexico relies heavily on cultivating networks of sympathetic elites (parliamentarians, party operatives, business actors, and intellectuals), who provide platforms for Moscow's narratives. The Mexico–Russia Friendship Group in the Chamber of Deputies has been particularly active since 2022, despite controversy following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Composed of deputies from across the political spectrum but disproportionately represented by the ruling Morena party, the group has hosted Russian diplomats and defended Moscow's foreign policy positions in parliamentary debates.

Box 5. The Russia–Mexico Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Group

Created in 2008, the Grupo de Amistad México–Rusia in the Mexican Chamber of Deputies has become one of the most active bilateral legislative groups. During the 2018–2024 legislature, it was chaired by deputies from Morena, reflecting political sympathy toward Moscow's narratives of multipolarity and sovereignty. The group regularly hosts delegations from the Russian Duma, coordinates symbolic events such as Victory Day commemorations, and issues joint declarations critical of Western sanctions. Although framed as parliamentary diplomacy, the group functions as a soft-entry point for Russia to cultivate elite networks in Mexico's legislature, amplify anti-U.S. messaging, and legitimize Moscow's role as a strategic partner.

Beyond the legislature, Moscow leverages **Mexico's role as a key player in the Global South**. Through coordination in the BRICS+ framework and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), Russia amplifies narratives of resistance to U.S. hegemony and sanctions regimes.

Mexican officials have occasionally echoed these positions in multilateral negotiations, aligning with Moscow on issues such as food security, vaccine distribution, and the reform of global governance institutions.

Informal cooperation is further facilitated by Russia's extensive use of cultural and media and by the presence of Russian-linked organizations and individuals in Mexico's economic and academic spheres. This blending of formal diplomacy with informal networking ensures that, while Mexico is not a frontline ally of Russia, it remains a strategic amplifier of Kremlin discourse in the hemisphere.

Winning the Hearts and Minds

Unlike in Cuba or Nicaragua, where Moscow benefits from long-standing ideological alliances, Russia's soft power strategy in Mexico has had to adapt to a more pluralistic and competitive political and media environment. Still, the Kremlin has carved out strategic entry points, targeting universities, cultural institutions, and media platforms as vehicles to embed influence. These activities are less about winning mass public opinion, which remains skeptical of Russia, and more about cultivating niche constituencies of academics, students, journalists, and political elites who can act as multipliers of Moscow's narratives.

Russia has invested heavily in promoting **educational and cultural ties** with Mexico. The Russian Centre for Science and Culture in Mexico City (Rossotrudnichestvo, often branded as the "Russian House") serves as the hub of this outreach, offering language courses, scholarships, and cultural programming. Russian language teaching, supported by the Russkiy Mir Foundation, has expanded through partnerships with Mexican universities, most notably UNAM and the National Polytechnic Institute. These initiatives provide Moscow with platforms to identify and cultivate young leaders sympathetic to Russian perspectives.

A striking example has been a widely used Mexican textbook on foreign policy, authored by a graduate of Russia's Friendship University, which reproduces Kremlin propaganda lines about Ukraine without counterbalancing perspectives. At UNAM's Program for Studies on Democracy, Justice, and Society, Kremlin-affiliated media representatives were given platforms to discuss "fake news," echoing Moscow's narratives on censorship and multipolarity.³⁰ These interventions highlight Moscow's success in embedding its discourse into mainstream academic and media spaces, blurring the line between genuine debate and deliberate disinformation.³¹

In parallel, Russia has extended scholarships for Mexican students in science, engineering, and international relations, explicitly targeting fields with strategic value. Alumni networks of former scholarship holders play an understated but critical role in disseminating favorable narratives about Russia, especially in debates over multipolarity, sanctions, and sovereignty.

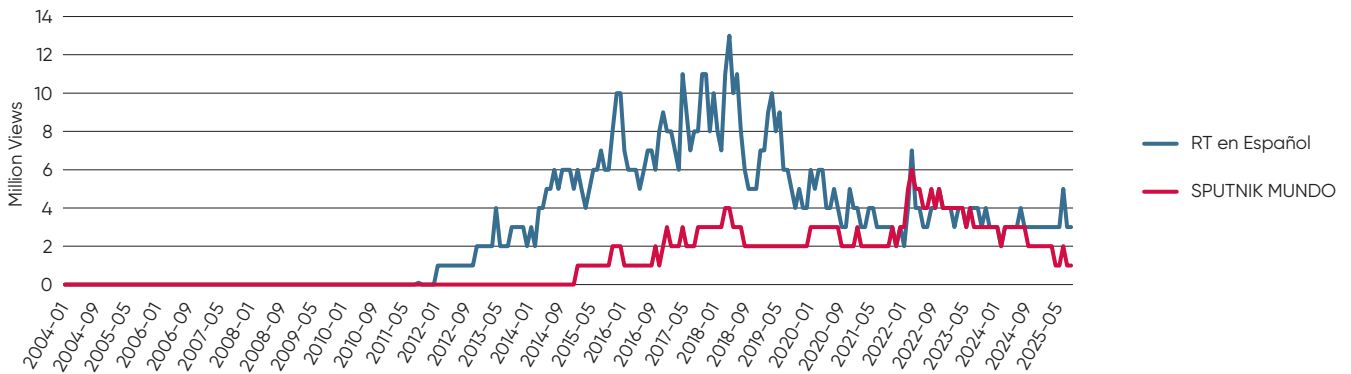
³⁰ Chaguaceda, A., and Rouvinski, V., *Russia's Capture of Intellectual Elites in Latin America*, Wilson Center, 10 September 2024.

³¹ Ibid.

Russian state-backed outlets, particularly *RT en Español* and *Sputnik Mundo*, enjoy a significant presence in Mexico’s digital space. RT’s Spanish-language YouTube channel has among its largest audiences in Mexico, where anti-U.S. sentiment and polarized political discourse provide fertile ground for Kremlin narratives. Mexican mainstream media often reproduce RT or Sputnik content, sometimes without attribution, which allows Russian messaging to circulate under the guise of local reporting.

RT en Español began registering activity in Mexico in 2011, while Sputnik Mundo followed in 2014. Interest surged in 2021 and 2022, coinciding with the escalation of the war in Ukraine and its global repercussions (Fig.7). Both outlets have since expanded their operations in Mexico and Latin America.³² Compared to major Western outlets, their audiences are smaller but highly engaged: RT en Español has over 3.5 million followers on X (formerly Twitter) versus CNN en Español’s 22.5 million and BBC Mundo’s 5 million. On Telegram, Russian outlets outperform many Western competitors, with RT en Español and Sputnik Mundo attracting 212,043 and 68,079 subscribers respectively, compared to BBC Mundo’s 13,400 and El País’s 17,200. Posting frequency is also higher: RT en Español has nearly twice as many total tweets as CNN, BBC Mundo, or El Mundo Es, while Sputnik Mundo has published around 434,000 tweets despite having only 187,800 followers. In contrast, Western outlets achieve far larger followings with less frequent posting, CNN en Español, for example, has under 500,000 tweets but 22.5 million followers.

Figure 7. Interest Over Time in Russian Outlets (2004-2025)³³



Source: CSD based on Google Trends.

Russia’s **information manipulation campaigns** have focused on three recurring themes: delegitimizing Western narratives about the war in Ukraine, amplifying skepticism toward U.S. security cooperation with Mexico, and promoting Russia as a defender of sovereignty and multipolarity. Disinformation has also exploited domestic issues, such as migration, crime, and corruption, to frame Mexico as a victim of U.S. interference while positioning Russia as an alternative partner.

³² RT operates from Moscow with regional offices in Havana, Buenos Aires, and Caracas and about 200 Spanish-speaking staff, while Sputnik is based in Moscow with offices in Montevideo and Rio de Janeiro.

³³ RT Español exists only from December 2009. Sputnik Mundo since November 2014.

One example is a disinformation campaign between 2022–2024 when Russian outlets circulated fabricated stories suggesting U.S. agencies were weaponizing migration flows from Central America and Haiti to destabilize the region. These narratives, echoed by fringe Mexican outlets and amplified on Twitter/X, framed Russia as sympathetic to migrants while portraying Washington as manipulative and exploitative. At one point, RT was circulating claims suggesting U.S. weapons sent to Ukraine were sold to Mexican cartels³⁴, an assertion echoed also by Russian diplomats.³⁵

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Russian Embassy in Mexico has become among the most prolific in terms of publications and reach globally.³⁶ The Russian Embassy has further amplified its narratives through op-eds in national newspapers like *El Universal*,³⁷ *La Jornada*,³⁸ and *El Heraldo de México*,³⁹ Ambassador Nikolay Sofinskiy's articles routinely defended Russia's position in Ukraine and blamed the West for global crises, including inflation and food insecurity, framing Russia as a peaceful actor and the West as aggressive and hypocritical.

Russia also uses individual actors to reinforce its messaging including prominent media and academic figures. John Ackerman, a U.S.-born academic, UNAM law professor and host of the *Convención Nacional Morenista*⁴⁰ since 2015, on the *La Batalla por México* program on RT en Español, portrays the U.S. as a threat to Mexican sovereignty and endorses **López Obrador as a counter-imperialist leader**. **López Obrador** has been presented as a larger global movement against imperialism, alongside Syriza and Podemos parties in Greece and Spain, respectively. Ackerman's content functioned as a pro-Russian, anti-American political narrative embedded within Mexican electoral discourse. Ackerman had sought RT's support as early as 2015.⁴¹

Celeste Sáenz de Miera, Secretary General of the Club de Periodistas de México, has become a recurrent **amplifier of Russian narratives**, transforming the platform into a platform for official communications between the Russian Embassy and segments of Mexican civil society. Under her leadership, the

³⁴ RT, "Tucker Carlson: Ucrania revende armas estadounidenses a cárteles de la droga mexicanos" [Tucker Carlson: Ukraine resells U.S. weapons to Mexican drug cartels], 10 February 2025.

³⁵ *El Financiero*, "Ucrania envía armas a cárteles mexicanos en Tamaulipas, advierte embajada de Rusia" [Ukraine sends weapons to Mexican cartels in Tamaulipas, warns Russian embassy], 2 June 2023.

³⁶ The Watch, "Mexico targeted by Russian information operations after Ukraine invasion", 12 August 2024.

³⁷ Sofinskiy, N., "Verdaderas causas de la crisis alimentaria mundial" [True Causes of the World Food Crisis], *El Universal*, 26 July 2023.

³⁸ Sofinskiy, N., "¿Hacia dónde se dirige el mundo: multipolaridad o caos?" [Where is the world headed: multipolarity or chaos?], *La Jornada*, 19 February 2025.

³⁹ Sofinskiy, N., "Un mundo multipolar: camino hacia la justicia y la igualdad para todos" [A multipolar world: the road to justice and equality for all], *El Heraldo de México*, 10 February 2025.

⁴⁰ A grassroots group within Morena with radical left-wing positions. See, for example, the group's national project for 2024 presidential elections in Mexico.

⁴¹ Salvo, D., and De León, S., "Russian Influence in Mexican and Colombian Elections", German Marshall Fund, 2018.

Club has repeatedly honored outlets like RT,⁴² Sputnik,⁴³ and sanctioned individuals like Konstantin Malofeev (head of Tsargrad), Daniel Estulin, who claims to be a former KGB agent and supporter, and Alex Jones, a far-right American broadcaster, legitimizing Kremlin narratives within Mexico's journalistic circles.⁴⁴

Box 6. RT en Español's Digital Reach in Mexico

RT en Español has become one of the most influential foreign media outlets in Mexico. With over 6 million YouTube subscribers, its content consistently trends among Mexican audiences, often outpacing local news providers in engagement. Mexico ranks among the top three countries globally consuming RT en Español online.

Simultaneously, RT en Español expanded its physical presence. In October 2023, RT began broadcasting news segments in Mexico City's Metrobus stations, including videowalls with real-time news updates and QR codes directing viewers to RT content online. According to Margarita Simonyan,⁴⁵ editor-in-chief of RT and for many Kremlin's top propagandist and ideologue, the project aimed to increase the reach among urban commuters and promote alternative narratives to mainstream Western coverage.⁴⁶ The campaign, endorsed by Martí Batres's local government, closely aligned with President Claudia Sheinbaum and the Morena party,⁴⁷ served as a vehicle for Kremlin messaging in one of Mexico's busiest public spaces, which serve over one billion trips per year.

The outlet's programming blends news with talk shows that present Russia's foreign policy positions as legitimate counter-narratives to "Western hegemony". Coverage of the Ukraine war, for instance, frames Moscow's actions as defensive while accusing NATO and the U.S. of destabilizing the international order. Clips and headlines are widely shared on Mexican social media, frequently stripped of their RT branding, which facilitates information laundering into mainstream debates.

⁴² Teleobzor, "Телеканал RT на испанском завоевал три премии клуба журналистов Мексики" [RT en Español won three awards from the Mexican Journalists' Club], 6 December 2024.

⁴³ Russia Today, "Sputnik получил премию Клуба журналистов Мексики" [Sputnik received an award from the Mexican Journalists' Club], 6 December 2024.

⁴⁴ Estéves, D., "Cooptación rusa" [Russian co-optation], 1 April 2024.

⁴⁵ Khinkulova, K., "Who is Margarita Simonyan, Putin's propagandist-in-chief sanctioned by US?", BBC, 5 September 2024.

⁴⁶ VK, "RT en español transmite en vivo en las estaciones de Metrobús en la Ciudad de México" [RT in Spanish arrives at the Metrobús stations in Mexico City], 27 October 2023.

⁴⁷ Estéves, D., "Mexicanos, víctimas de la posverdad putiniana" [Mexicans, victims of the Putinian post-truth], 5 May 2024.

Beyond media and education, Russia has used symbolic events to strengthen emotional and historical identification. The Russian Embassy and affiliated organizations frequently host commemorations of Soviet victories in World War II, Pushkin Day celebrations, and Russian film festivals in Mexico City and Guadalajara. Such events may appear innocuous but serve to normalize Russia's presence and to associate its global role with cultural prestige and historic legitimacy.

A key target of this strategy has been left-wing and nationalist political circles, where anti-U.S. rhetoric resonates. Russia's positioning as a "sovereign alternative" aligns with strands of Mexican discourse that emphasize independence from Washington. By embedding itself in these debates, Moscow gains indirect access to influential sectors of Mexico's political spectrum without needing formal alliances.

The Russian Centre for Science and Culture in Mexico City, managed by Rossotrudnichestvo, functions as the main institutional anchor of Russian cultural diplomacy. The center organizes language courses, photo exhibitions, Russian film festivals, and historical commemorations. Partnerships with UNAM and other major universities provide legitimacy and visibility, while language programs supported by the Russkiy Mir Foundation target younger audiences.

Although attendance at these events is modest, their impact lies in **cultivating small but loyal pro-Russian networks** in academia and the cultural sector. Such spaces also allow Russian diplomats to interact informally with Mexican intellectuals, artists, and journalists, reinforcing Moscow's image as a cultural and intellectual alternative to the U.S.

The Shadow Presence: Russian Espionage and Intersection with Organized Crime in Mexico

Russia's influence in Mexico does not rely solely on cultural diplomacy or media penetration. An opaquer, but equally significant, dimension is the operation of Russian intelligence networks embedded within diplomatic missions, business circles, and expatriate communities. Russian intelligence activity in Mexico is not new. During the Cold War, Mexico was a significant base for the KGB. The Kremlin's interest in the region dates back decades, for example, to the assassination of Leon Trotsky in Mexico, one of the most infamous Soviet intelligence operations abroad in 1940, or decades later the use of Mexico City⁴⁸ and neighborhoods like La Condesa were "hotbeds" of Soviet spy activity.⁴⁹

Since the start of the war between Russia and Ukraine in 2022, Mexico has become a strategic **hub for Russian intelligence operations** in the Americas. The country's geographic proximity to the U.S., its bilateral relations with Washington, weak counterintelligence capabilities, and Mexico's non-interventionist foreign policy have made it an ideal base for Russian operations, run by the GRU (Russian military intelligence) and the SVR (foreign intelligence service).

⁴⁸ Luce, D., and Hayes, O., "Back to the Cold War: Russia uses Mexico as a hub for spying on the U.S.," *NBC News*, 21 September 2024.

⁴⁹ El Universal, "La Condesa, centro de operaciones del espionaje ruso desde la Guerra Fría" [La Condesa, center of Russian espionage operations since the Cold War], 25 March 2022.

The number of Russian diplomats in Mexico increased by about 60% to 86 accredited officials.⁵⁰ This expansion coincided with the mass expulsion of Russian diplomats from Europe, many of whom were redeployed to Latin America, with Mexico as a key destination. The increase goes far beyond the needs of diplomatic functions, and many of these individuals are believed to be GRU operatives and disinformation agents.⁵¹

According to General Glen VanHerck, former Commander of U.S. Northern Command⁵² “the largest concentration of Russian intelligence personnel in the world is in Mexico”, tasked with collecting intelligence on the United States.⁵³

Russia may have used the tourism hotspot of Cancún as a key hub for Russian migration, and possibly infiltration, into the region. Between January 2022 and April 2024, over 166,000 Russian citizens entered Mexico (90% of the post-2022 Russian arrivals in Mexico)⁵⁴, with at least 73,000 then **crossing illegally into the U.S.**⁵⁵ Some investigations revealed that at least 13 identified GRU agents infiltrated these migration flows,⁵⁶ often traveling via the Moscow–Istanbul–Cancún route.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has documented a sharp rise in Russian nationals attempting to cross the U.S.–Mexico border, with many relying on **smuggling operations coordinated through Telegram.**⁵⁷ These channels distribute detailed instructions on illegal crossings and connect migrants with facilitators, creating a well-organized underground pipeline. Some of these migrant flows may also serve as cover for intelligence operatives or as a means to recruit local intermediaries for espionage and sabotage.

These concerns have gained some credibility in January 2025, when Timur Praliev, a self-proclaimed former member of the Wagner Group, was apprehended near Roma, Texas, after crossing the Rio Grande from Mexico.⁵⁸ Brought before a federal judge in McAllen, Texas, his capture raised further questions about the possibility that Russian paramilitary elements may be using Mexican territory as a transit zone or staging area for intelligence-related operations targeting the United States.

⁵⁰ Mexico Government, “Personal acreditado de la Embajada de la Federación Rusa en México” [Accredited personnel of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Mexico], 26 March 2024.

⁵¹ Luce, D., and Hayes, O., “Back to the Cold War: Russia uses Mexico as a hub for spying on the U.S.,” *NBC News*, 21 September 2024.

⁵² Commandeer of the US Northern Command between 2022 and 2024.

⁵³ Marginedas, M., “México se convierte en la plataforma del espionaje ruso en el continente Americano” [Mexico becomes the platform for Russian espionage in the Americas], *El Periodico*, 7 August 2024.

⁵⁴ Estévez, D., “Rusos sin alas para volar a Cancún” [Russians without wings to fly to Cancún], *Eje Central*, 19 June 2024.

⁵⁵ Marginedas, “México se convierte en la plataforma del espionaje ruso en el continente Americano”, *El Periodico*, 7 August 2024.

⁵⁶ Mironova, V., “Russian FSB is trying to illegally enter US from Mexico”, *Conflict Field Notes*, 9 March 2023.

⁵⁷ Felbab-Brown, V., and García, D. P., “Russia, Ukraine, and organized crime and illicit economies in 2024”, Brookings Institution, 6 February 2024.

⁵⁸ Schreck, C. et al., “A Wagner Mercenary Who Crossed U.S.-Mexican Border Was Honored In Russia Weeks Before Arrest”, RFE/RL, 11 January 2025.

Former President López Obrador downplayed U.S. warnings about Russian espionage, stating that “Mexico does not spy on anyone, nor does it allow spying”.⁵⁹ Concurrently, the Foreign Ministry authorized an expansion of Russia’s diplomatic presence, while the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration has reported bureaucratic delays in accrediting its agents in Mexico.⁶⁰ Further concern arose when the newly-elected President Claudia Sheinbaum invited Vladimir Putin to her inauguration, reinforcing the perceptions of a foreign policy more tolerant of Moscow.

Box 7. Russian Cyberwarfare Tactics

Russia-linked cyberattacks have increasingly targeted Mexican institutions and digital infrastructure, highlighting the country’s vulnerability to foreign cyber operations. In 2024, the RomCom cyber-espionage group, affiliated with the Kremlin, exploited two critical zero-day vulnerabilities—CVE-2024-9680, affecting Mexican users of the browsers Firefox, Thunderbird, and Tor, and CVE-2024-49039, targeting Windows systems. These attacks used zero-click exploits, meaning they required no user interaction to install backdoors for remote access. Telemetry data identified 250 potential targets of Russian cyberattacks within Mexican networks.⁶¹

Earlier, in 2021, Mexico’s national lottery fell victim to a ransomware attack carried out by Avaddon, a hacking group with Russian origins. The attackers accessed the institution’s administrative systems and exfiltrated sensitive documents related to finances, legal matters, and internal personnel. They demanded a ransom of approximately \$40,000 USD, threatening to publish the stolen data if payment wasn’t made.⁶² The breach only came to public attention after evidence, including emails and contracts, was leaked on the deep web, and it was only then that the institution officially acknowledged the incident.

Going further back to 2018, during Mexico’s presidential election season, the website of the opposition National Action Party (PAN) was brought down by a Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack during a nationally televised debate. While direct attribution proved inconclusive, Russia and China were both suspected of involvement. The timing and nature of the attack raised concerns about foreign interference in Mexico’s democratic processes, exposing serious weaknesses in the cybersecurity of electoral infrastructure.

⁵⁹ Guillén, B., “López Obrador afirma que México “no es colonia de Rusia, ni de China, ni de EE UU”” [López Obrador affirms that Mexico “is not a colony of Russia, China, or the U.S.], *El País*, 25 March 2022.

⁶⁰ Marginedas, “México se convierte en la plataforma del espionaje ruso en el continente Americano”, *El Periodico*, 7 August 2024.

⁶¹ Schaeffer, D., and Dumont, R., “RomCom exploits Firefox and Windows zero days in the wild”, *WeLiveSecurity.com*, 26 November 2024.

⁶² Guillén, G., “Un grupo de hackers de origen ruso secuestra información confidencial de la Lotería Nacional” [A group of Russian hackers steals confidential information from the National Lottery], *El País*, 2 July 2021.

Mexico is not alone in facing the growing threat of Russian espionage and cyber activities in the region. Deeply embedded Russian intelligence and influence networks are also present in other Latin American countries, particularly Brazil, Argentina and Nicaragua. In Brazil, Russian intelligence has been exploiting its systems for years, transforming the country into a “spy factory,” where agents assumed Brazilian identities, including forged birth certificates, and fabricated life histories, to infiltrate globally, particularly United States, Europe or the Middle East.⁶³ High-profile cases involved a GRU officer, Sergey Cherkasov (alias Victor Muller Ferreira), arrested and sentenced in Brazil for identity fraud and espionage,⁶⁴ and Artem Shmyrev (alias Gerhard Daniel Campos), another Russian military intelligence officer who use a forged Brazilian identity. Counterintelligence services have uncovered at least nine Russian officers operating under Brazilian cover identities. Six have not been publicly identified until now.⁶⁵

Similarly, Argentine intelligence (SIDE) uncovered a Russian-linked spy ring known as “*The Company*,” accused of orchestrating disinformation campaigns and capturing NGOs to instill pro-Russian narratives in the public discourse. The network was led by Artem Viktorovich Dultsev (alias Ludwig Gisch) and his wife, Anna Valerevna Dultseva (alias María Rosa Mayer Muños), who had been living what appeared to be the lives of ordinary citizens of Argentina.⁶⁶

These operations are linked to the Lakhta Project, a well-documented influence campaign allegedly directed by the late Russian oligarch and Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin. Before its official dissolution in October 2024, his media network was notorious for operating “troll farms” that conducted disinformation efforts, most notably during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.⁶⁷

⁶³ Schwartz, M., and Bradley, J., “The Spy Factory”, *The New York Times*, 21 May 2025.

⁶⁴ Prazeres, L., “De empresário a modelo: como funcionava a rede de espões russos que operava a partir do Brasil” [From businessman to model: how the Russian spy network operating from Brazil worked], *BBC News Brasil*, 27 May 2025.

⁶⁵ Schwartz, and Bradley, “The Spy Factory”, *The New York Times*, 21 May 2025.

⁶⁶ La Derecha, “Russian spies conducting intelligence operations in Argentina have been detained”, 18 June 2025.

⁶⁷ Hanlon, B., “Target USA: Key Takeaways from the Kremlin’s “Project Lakhta””, GMF (n.d.).

FORTIFYING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND RESILIENCE

To fortify its democratic governance, Mexico should address the risks of state capture in strategic sectors. The hydrocarbons industry, where oligarch-linked firms have already secured long-term concessions, illustrates how opaque investment can translate into enduring political leverage. A systematic state capture diagnostic,⁶⁸ carried out at regular intervals and in cooperation with civil society and international partners, would allow Mexico to identify where **market power concentration and governance deficits pose national security risks**. Such diagnostics must be tied to enforcement mechanisms that strengthen institutional checks on both domestic elites and foreign actors.

A central pillar of resilience is the strengthening of the transparency in ownership and finance. Mexico needs to establish robust beneficial ownership disclosure requirements across all sectors, ensuring that foreign direct investment flows are traceable and insulated from the corrosive influence of offshore vehicles linked to authoritarian states. Boosting the capacity of anti-trust authorities, financial regulators, and tax inspectorates to probe opaque investments will help prevent Russian-linked companies from using shell structures to conceal their true control of strategic assets.

Equally important is the creation of stronger, independent institutions for financial intelligence and tax collection that can operate without political interference. This would bolster Mexico's ability to counter money laundering, close gaps in cross-border currency flows, and mitigate the use of offshore destinations for illicit proceeds or sanctions evasion.

International coordination is equally critical. Mexico's proximity to the United States makes it an attractive hub for Russia's sanctions circumvention networks, particularly in energy, finance and dual-use goods. Strengthened cooperation with U.S., Canadian, and European authorities on sanctions enforcement and cross-border financial intelligence would make it harder for Kremlin-linked actors to use Mexican intermediaries as gateways to the global financial system. At the same time, Mexico should **embed sanctions compliance in its own regulatory frameworks**, not only to avoid reputational risks but to reinforce its credibility as a democratic partner.

Addressing vulnerabilities in the information and cultural spaces is also vital. Russian propaganda outlets, amplified by social media, have targeted Mexican audiences by framing anti-U.S. narratives and positioning Moscow as an alternative partner. Building resilience here requires a combination of independent fact-checking, early-warning systems for disinformation, and stronger public-private cooperation between media, civil society, and regulators to prevent the manipulation of elections or social unrest through foreign-backed campaigns. Universities, cultural institutes, and media

⁶⁸ Stoyanov, A, Gerganov, A, and Yalamov, T., *State Capture Assessment Diagnostics*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2019.

companies should adopt transparent rules for foreign partnerships to ensure they do not become vehicles for covert influence.

Fortifying democratic resilience in Mexico will require a comprehensive strategy that brings together transparency reforms, financial integrity measures, institutional independence, and regional cooperation.

Only by closing the governance deficits can Mexico prevent not only Russia but also China from converting their economic presence into entrenched influence. The challenge is not only about shielding the country from Moscow's opportunistic strategies, but about strengthening democratic governance itself, ensuring that Mexico's economic future remains driven by open competition and the rule of law.

