

Panel Report: Venezuela's Russian Influence

Ben Dunn

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The Atlantic Council's held a panel June 20 to discuss the nature of the Russian Federation's influence in Venezuela during the ongoing crisis with President Nicolas Maduro and his opponent Juan Guaido, as well as Russia's broader economic and political arrangements there.

Before the panel began, U.S. Senator and former Florida governor Rick Scott gave an opening address where articulated the nature of Florida's diverse Latin American constituency and the success the state had in receiving and integrating refugees under his governorship. He then spoke on Venezuela's current humanitarian and refugee crisis due to economic instability and political upheaval. He accused the Maduro regime of creating a humanitarian crisis and called the Venezuelan leader genocidal for allowing starvation and utilizing oppressive tactics over the nation's populace. Scott also pointed to the Venezuelan government's allies Russia, Iran, Cuba, and China and blamed them for fostering an environment that allowed for what he called, genocide to happen by supporting the regime. He called on Russia to end its support of the regime and said that the U.S. must confront it on this matter. Scott closed his remarks by advocating for a U.S. military intervention to "deliver humanitarian aid and liberate the people Venezuela from a criminal regime."

After the senator's remarks, the panel participants highlighted Russia's continued investments in Venezuela which culminated to \$17.5 billion, including investments by Russia's state-owned oil firm Rosneft and a loan of upwards of \$6 billion given by the Kremlin to the Maduro regime. However, the most discussed point was Russia's military presence in Venezuela, particularly, both the naval and air presence, Russian military advisers, and the alleged Russian mercenaries guarding Maduro.

Panel members, former Ambassador Paula J. Dobriansky of the Belfer Center at Harvard and Dr. Evelyn N. Farkas of the General Marshall Fund, called for a more aggressive approach by the Trump administration to push back against Russian influence in the Western Hemisphere and putting diplomatic pressure on the Kremlin as well as using force and military intervention to dispose Maduro. They were highly critical of Russia's current role and motivations, and expressed concerns that Russian broader geo-political influence served the purpose of undermining the United States. They also called on continuing support for Ukraine against Russia as well as supporting Syrian rebels to topple the Assad regime, a Russian ally. They each seemed to view Venezuela as another geopolitical arena where the U.S. should combat Russian influence.

Both speakers along with several other members of the panel called out Cuba for its backing of Maduro and its military presence in the country. Farkas stated that Cuba had 25,000 troops in Venezuela. However, according to a Washington Post article¹, Cuba said it has only humanitarian workers and no troops in the country. The Post said that Cuba has a military size of less than 40,000, making it highly unlikely that they could have 25,000 soldiers in Venezuela.

Whistleblowers from the Venezuelan military, however, have claimed that they have taken orders and advice from Cuban military officials dressed as civilians and humanitarian workers.

Other panelists Mark D. Simakovsky, Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center, Konstantin von Eggert a dissident Russian journalist, Dr. Francisco Monaldi of the Mexico Center, and John Herbst former Ambassador to Ukraine and Uzbekistan all noted that though Russian influence was present in Venezuela, it had declined in recent years in terms of overall economic involvement. These experts also all alluded to the fact that Russian presence in Venezuela was not sustainable, especially in the manner it currently exists. Von Eggert, in particular, said that Russia's current domestic challenges including education and infrastructure would sway public opinion away from involvement in foreign affairs, especially in faraway countries like Venezuela. He also said that Russia's current regime has grown stagnant and become somewhat of a gerontocracy made up of aging leaders. This, he said, would shift the nation's focus more inward in the upcoming years rather than outward towards matters of expanding its foreign influence. It was also noted that Russia was not solely committed to Maduro's presidency and that they had offered to host negotiations between Maduro and the opposition, but that the opposition had refused.

Simakovsky warned of Russia's presence in the region, saying that it was clearly an attempt by the Kremlin to expand its influence. However, he also noted that the Kremlin or its state-run oil companies made no new investments in Venezuela in the past months. Dr. Monaldi said Russia's influence in the region was favored by Venezuela over others such as China. Simakovsky concluded that it is the people of Venezuela who should ultimately decide how to deal with Venezuela's contemporary political situation.

Ambassador Herbst advocated for taking a more aggressive diplomatic approach and believed it was unlikely that the Russians would delve into any kind of military action to counter it. He used the example of the U.S.'s aggressive diplomatic stance against Russia's presence in Syria and its effectiveness. He concluded that the Kremlin was taking advantage of the lack of U.S. confrontation on Venezuela.

In the questions and answers session, the most controversial question came from a young British journalist and received no proper answer from the panelists. The question stated that Russia's support of Maduro is no worse than America's support of the Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen. He then asked what could be done to build cohesion and bridge the gap between Russia and the U.S. Several of the panelists berated him for being a moral relativist and responded to his question by saying they could not comprehend what he was asking.

Sources:

¹ How many Cuban troops are there in Venezuela? The U.S. says over 20,000. Cuba says zero.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/05/02/how-many-cuban-troops-are-there-venezuela-us-says-over-cuba-says-zero/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b8fcda7b5f55