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## **CHARACTERISTICS OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA IN LATIN AMERICA WITH REGARD TO RUSSIAN AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE: CASE OF BRAZIL**

### **Abstract**

*Russian aggression against Ukraine has become one of the most serious challenges for the international security system. One of the regions where Russian propaganda has been spread widely is Latin America. And one of the countries especially influenced by the Russian disinformation in the region is Brazil. The goal of this article is to define characteristics of the Russian propaganda in Latin America regarding Russian aggression against Ukraine, particularly, look at the case of Brazil, trace features of the Kremlin propaganda in this country at the current stage and outline possible ways of countering this propaganda.*

*It can be concluded that Russian propaganda in Latin American and in Brazil, particularly, has several specific characteristics-it is widespread, long-standing and generally supported. Key current narratives concerning the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine include the nuclear threat, calls for peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia and accusing the West of russofobia. Other false narratives include accusing Ukraine of war crimes and provocations, as well as dangers of further “escalation” of the war. Among reasons for common misconceptions about the Russia-Ukraine war in Brazil one can name a simple lack of information and familiarity with the local politics. This gap is partially the result of Ukraine’s insufficient communication with the Latin American and Brazilian audiences and the countries’ lack of interest in each other for many years.*

*In order to counter Russian propaganda in Latin American and Brazil, in particular, Ukraine should enhance its communication and diplomatic efforts, cooperate with the Ukrainian diaspora in the region and consistently deconstruct Russian disinformation narratives. In the long-term perspective, it is worthwhile increasing opportunities to study the Spanish and Portuguese languages and have respective Regional Studies courses at Ukrainian educational institutions.*

**Keywords:** Brazil, Latin America, Ukraine, Russia-Ukraine war, disinformation, international security.

Russian aggression against Ukraine has become one of the most serious challenges for the current international security system. Despite the ongoing military campaigns, it has been widely held that Ukraine is winning on the information front of the war. Particularly, a week after Russia's invasion, observers were already declaring that "Ukraine is winning the information war."<sup>1</sup> Yet, while the Kremlin continues to lose the information war—at least in the Global North—it has not lost the ability to use information operations in the pursuit of its strategic objectives.<sup>2</sup>

One of the regions of the world where Russian propaganda has been flourishing is Latin America. What the United Nations (UN) votes and lack of support for Western-led sanctions in the Global South has laid bare is how Russian efforts seem to have increasingly taken hold with audiences like Spanish speakers in Latin America (Green). Russian propaganda in Spanish is spreading very actively, for instance, the Spanish-language account of Russia Today (RT) has even more subscribers than the page of the RT "media."<sup>3</sup> Russian government-controlled media outlets operate Spanish language variants of both Sputnik and RT—with more than 200 Spanish-speaking employees at its Moscow headquarters, *RT en Español*, also known as *Actualidad RT*, has developed a successful network of offices across Latin America (Green). The Reuters Institute at the University of Oxford recently found that *RT en Español* is more successful than any of the other services of RT, including English, Arabic, German, and French (Green). Latin America is important for Moscow in view of using the region as a springboard to promote the idea of multipolarity (the Primakov doctrine), creating an illusion around Russia as an international actor that is not in diplomatic isolation, as well as a part of a deterrence strategy against potential attempts by the US to encroach on Russia's perceived "legitimate zone influence" in Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup>

One of the Latin American countries in which Russian propaganda has been spread widely is Brazil. Recent years have signaled an intense concentration of the Kremlin's efforts on the bilateral track, in particular with Brazil, as well as Argentina, Bolivia, and Mexico—countries with traditionally strong leftist parties.<sup>5</sup> Russian policy in the region cannot boast of using its traditional methods such as energy blackmail or full-fledged co-optation of elites up to the state capture, yet Russia can weaponize a specific Latin American resistance to globalization and weakness of state institutions in their own interests.<sup>6</sup>

Russia has a relatively modest trade balance with the Latin American countries. The Russian share is only 0.3 % of the total import-export balance of the region, however, it is a supplier of agricultural fertilizers to Brazil, which is crucial for the Brazilian economy.<sup>7</sup> Since 2010, Brazil has maintained the status of Russia's main trade partner in Latin America, accounting for 33 % of Russian trade in the region; besides, since 2009, both countries have been members of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) grouping.<sup>8</sup> Russian media *Sputnik Mundo*, *RT en Español*, *RT en vivo*, *RT Latinoamerica*, *RT Play en Español*, *RT Futuro* remain accessible in the Latin American region, specifically, in Brazil.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the goal of this article is to define characteristics of Russian propaganda in Latin America regarding Russian aggression against Ukraine, particularly, look at the case of Brazil, trace features of the Kremlin propaganda in this country at the current stage and outline possible ways of countering this propaganda.

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Bodnar, Bret Schafer, and Etienne Soula, "A Year of Disinformation: Russia and China's Influence Campaigns During the War in Ukraine," Alliance for Securing Democracy, February 24, 2023, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/a-year-of-disinformation-russia-and-chinas-influence-campaigns-during-the-war-in-ukraine/>

<sup>2</sup> Bodnar, Schafer, and Soula, "A Year of Disinformation."

<sup>3</sup> Olha Satsuk, "Russian Propaganda in the Spanish-Language Information Field," OPORA, February 18, 2023, [https://www.oporaua.org/en/polit\\_ad/24553-rosiiska-propaganda-v-ispanskomovnomu-infopoli-24553](https://www.oporaua.org/en/polit_ad/24553-rosiiska-propaganda-v-ispanskomovnomu-infopoli-24553).

<sup>4</sup> Olha Bykova et al. *Yak Latynska Ameryka reahuie na rosiisku ahresiiu: mizh rishuchym zasudzhenniam ta bezzaperechnoiu pidtrymkoiu* [How Latin America reacts to Russian aggression: between strong condemnation and unquestioning support], Policy Paper, ed. Yaroslav Suprun (ADASTRA, 2022), 3, <https://adastra.org.ua/special-edition> [in Ukrainian].

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>9</sup> Satsuk, "Russian Propaganda in the Spanish-Language Information Field."

Russian propaganda in Brazil has been spreading extensively. In the countries of Latin America, Russian propaganda fills the information space where there has been no tangible Ukrainian voice available.<sup>10</sup> Overall, Brazil demonstrates a position that can be called conditionally neutral-since 2014, the dynamics of Russian-Brazilian relations have not been affected by Russian aggression against Ukraine.<sup>11</sup> From the first days of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Brazil has had an inconsistent position, which revealed a lack of synchronization and coordination between various government agencies and bodies in the field of foreign policy.<sup>12</sup>

This statement is, specifically, evidenced by voting at the UN. Within the UN, Brazil voted for a General Assembly (GA) resolution of March 2, 2022, condemning the Russian invasion, calling for an end to hostilities in Ukraine and refraining from any kind of similar threat against any other UN state by Russia.<sup>13</sup> However, already during the vote on the expulsion of Russia from the UN Human Rights Council on April 7, 2022, the state abstained, and Brazil refused to sign the joint statement of the Organization of American States condemning Russian actions in Ukraine as of February 25, 2022.<sup>14</sup>

Geopolitics is an important factor in bilateral Brazil-Russia relations. Brazil is the main economic and geopolitical partner of Russia in the region, and this trend was laid during the presidency of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, was maintained under Dilma Rousseff and later blossomed under the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro.<sup>15</sup> The re-elected incumbent Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva argued in April 2023 that Ukraine should consider ceding the Crimea and that the United States had prolonged the war, echoing the Russian government's narratives.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, later on Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva recognized that Ukraine was the war's "great victim," and Brazil was the only member of the BRICS grouping to support a February 23 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution calling on Russia to pull its troops out of Ukraine.<sup>17</sup>

Russian propaganda in Latin America has been studied widely, yet, it is still necessary to determine particular characteristics of this propaganda in the case of Brazil with regards to the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine. In accordance with the results of the 2022 study of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security of the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, among the main Russian narratives in the media landscape of Brazil, as well as Mexico and Argentina, were those related to the nuclear threat, russofobia, calls for peace negotiations, and support for China in the Russian war against Ukraine.<sup>18</sup> During the media landscape monitoring in 2023, a number of Russian narratives were also noted in the online media of Brazil and Argentina, e.g. messages about Russia's nuclear weapons blackmail, assuring foreign audiences that "the Russian military in Ukraine protects the interests of the Russian nation, the future, and its children," as well as discrediting the Ukrainian army.<sup>19</sup>

Another important topic was the Western military support to Ukraine. Threats of "escalation of the conflict" in the event of continued military assistance to Ukraine from the West remained a separate leading topic, as well as the impact of sanctions on Russia and the West.<sup>20</sup> The idea of returning the Crimea to Ukraine has consistently been rejected by Russia.

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<sup>10</sup> Satsuk, "Russian Propaganda in the Spanish-Language Information Field."

<sup>11</sup> Bykova et al., *Yak Latynska Ameryka reahuie na rosiisku ahresiiu*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Oliver Stuenkel, "How to Understand Brazil's Ukraine Policy," Foreign Policy (blog), 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/18/russia-ukraine-war-brazil-lula-nonalignment-global-south/>

<sup>17</sup> Stuenkel, "How to Understand Brazil's Ukraine Policy."

<sup>18</sup> Oleksandr Slyvchuk, "Latin America under Influence of Russian Propaganda: Kremlin Messages in Online Media of Argentina and Brazil," SPRAVDI, March 28, 2023, <https://spravdi.gov.ua/en/latin-america-under-influence-of-russian-propaganda-kremlin-messages-in-online-media-of-argentina-and-brazil/>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Besides, Brazil, as one of the strong regional leaders, has traditionally had complicated relations with the global West and the U.S., in particular. It is important to be aware of Brazil's struggle for regional leadership, its affiliation to the G-20 (Group of 20) and the desire to strengthen its positions at the global level.<sup>21</sup> No wonder that the active involvement of the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries in the Russia-Ukraine war and Kyiv's rapprochement with the West is perceived critically in Brazil.<sup>22</sup>

Russian propaganda in Brazil is also aimed at accusing Ukraine of committing war crimes. Russia's "accusation" of Ukraine in the alleged "use of chemical weapons near Artemivsk and Vuhledar" was spread, but no evidence of this fact was provided, besides, transliteration of toponyms in Russian indicates that the regional news repeats Russian sources that deliberately disseminate false information about the Ukrainian troops.<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that the town of "Artemivsk" had its historical Ukrainian name of Bakhmut returned in 2016.

Current political stance of Brazil is oriented toward "peace-making." According to the analysis of the media landscape, Brazil has the position of a "country of peace," for instance, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva explains the refusal to provide weapons to Ukraine by saying that "Brazil is not interested in transferring ammunition so that it can be used in the war between Ukraine and Russia and does not want to participate in this war, even indirectly."<sup>24</sup> Such a stance is especially alarming, because Brazil has the status of a regional leader in Latin America.

Thereby, it should also be noted that, at the domestic level, Brazil is going through a range of political challenges. Brazil is among countries in danger of severe polarization.<sup>25</sup> There are sufficient indications to confirm that the Russian propaganda model is taking account of the Brazilian informational system as a fake news distribution channel.<sup>26</sup> The proportion of falsehoods increases even more when the misinformation is consistent with narratives or prejudices maintained by the public and directed at the specific audience, more prone to accept the ideas that are pretended to be introduced.<sup>27</sup> Despite the initiatives to disclose fake news in Brazil, disinformation messages (for instance, in WhatsApp groups) spread so quickly that it is exceedingly difficult to combat the phenomenon adequately.<sup>28</sup> In this context, one should also consider the findings of the digital iceberg study, according to which 42 % of Brazilians question what they read on the web only from time to time or do not question it at all—these data represent fragility of the population aiming to make informed decisions.<sup>29</sup> As Byung suggests, the world is rushing to digital psycho-politics, one in which the big data as an instrument allows for a comprehensive knowledge of the communication society in order to dominate it, to intervene in the minds of people and condition them at a pre-reflective level.<sup>30</sup> Since "emotions, as inclinations, represent the energetic, even sensitive foundation of action," people are manipulated through the emergence of quick situational emotions that fuel a desired action, what Byung calls the "dictatorship of emotion" and which is a foundation for disinformation.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Nataliia Shevchenko, *Yakymy maiut buty priorityety Ukrainy v rehioni Latynskoi Ameryky ta Karybskoho baseinu?* [What should be Ukraine's priorities in the region of Latin America and the Caribbean?], Policy Paper (Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism", 2020), <https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/LA1.pdf> [in Ukrainian].

<sup>22</sup> Slyvchuk, "Latin America under Influence of Russian Propaganda."

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer, Global Report, 16, accessed December 10, 2023, [https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2023-01/2023%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Global%20Report\\_Jan19.pdf](https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2023-01/2023%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Global%20Report_Jan19.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Vânia Siciliano Aieta, "O Impacto Eleitoral Resultante da Manipulação das Fake News no Universo das Redes Sociais: a Construção da Desinformação," *Revista Interdisciplinar do Direito – Faculdade de Direito de Valença* 18, no. 1 (2020): 228, <https://revistas.faa.edu.br/FDV/article/view/848>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>28</sup> Sandra Bonnie Flórez Hernández and Maria Susana Marlés Herrera, "Fake News and Democracy in Latin America," *Politeja* 19, no. 6(81) (2022): 94, <https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.19.2022.81.04>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Another reason for common misconceptions about the Russia-Ukraine war in Brazil is a simple lack of information and familiarity with the local politics. The reason for such coverage in Brazil is that many journalists and experts have a vague understanding of the situation, not to mention detailed knowledge of the causes of this war, events prior to 2022 and Russia's real motives.<sup>32</sup> Such a lack of understanding is partly the result of Ukraine's insufficient communication and the countries' lack of interest in each other for many years.<sup>33</sup>

Ukraine should continue fighting Russian propaganda in the Latin American region and Brazil, in particular. Ukraine should pay attention to audiences outside of the European Union, the United States and Canada, and promote information policy in Brazil, Mexico, Peru, and other countries.<sup>34</sup> Ukraine should enhance its bilateral cooperation with Brazil, building on the existing solid foundation. Brazil recognized Ukraine as a sovereign, independent state on December 26, 1991.<sup>35</sup> In February 1992, the Agreement on the establishment of diplomatic relations was signed, and in December 2009, the Joint Declaration of the President of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko and the President of the Federative Republic of Brazil Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was signed, which declared a strategic partnership between the two countries.<sup>36</sup>

Cooperation between Brazil and Ukraine keeps developing. Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Andrii Melnyk has recently held an online conference with the leaders of the Ukrainian communities in Latin American countries-to show that Ukraine's leadership pays special attention to supporting numerous Ukrainian communities abroad despite the ongoing full-scale Russian aggression.<sup>37</sup> Also, Ukrainian diplomacy can count on the local diaspora in its efforts to form an international coalition of solidarity with Ukraine-about 600,000 citizens of Ukrainian origin live in Brazil today, and the Ukrainian Society of Brazil (Subras) published a statement stating that "as Brazilians, we expect a clear position from our representatives".<sup>38</sup> In conversation with leaders of the Ukrainian communities in Latin America and the World Congress of Ukrainians, in particular with the head of the Ukrainian-Brazilian Central Representation Vitório Sorotyuk, Andrii Melnyk emphasized the important role of Ukrainians abroad in promoting the national interests of Ukraine in the world, primarily among the countries of the Global South.<sup>39</sup> During the online meeting, joint activities were coordinated with the aim of providing governments and societies in South American countries with truthful information about events in Ukraine and countering Russian disinformation and anti-Ukrainian propaganda.<sup>40</sup>

Ukraine should take a wise approach in developing its communication with Brazil. One needs to look for common interests of Ukraine and Brazil as subjects of international relations, considering the interests of the parties.<sup>41</sup> One can hardly expect a fundamental change in the political stance of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as one of the architects of Brazilian-Russian friendship-yet, as the sanctions pressure expands, Brazil may fall under the secondary sanctions as an importer of Russian products, which will be problematic for the stagnating economy.<sup>42</sup> Besides, at the political level, sometimes it seems that the audiences of Brazil still have not accepted the failure of the Russian military machine, and the elites would like to prove the invincibility of their political ally in Moscow-however, this phenomenon is

<sup>32</sup> Slyvchuk, "Latin America under Influence of Russian Propaganda."

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Satsuk, "Russian Propaganda in the Spanish-Language Information Field."

<sup>35</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Embassy of Ukraine in the Federative Republic of Brazil, "Dvostoronni politychni vidnosyny" ["Bilateral political relations"], May 13, 2020, <https://brazil.mfa.gov.ua/spivrobotnictvo/ukrayina-braziliya/dvostoronni-politichni-vidnosini>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, "Andrii Melnyk proviv onlain-konferentsiiu z lideramy ukrainskoi hromady krain Latynskoi Ameryky" ["Andrii Melnyk held an online conference with leaders of the Ukrainian community in Latin American countries"], July 5, 2023, <https://mfa.gov.ua/news/andrij-melnik-proviv-onlajn-konferenciyu-z-liderami-ukrayinskoyi-gromadi-krayin-latinskoyi-ameriki> [in Ukrainian].

<sup>38</sup> Bykova et al., *Yak Latynska Ameryka reahuie na rosiisku ahresiiu*, 15.

<sup>39</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, "Andrii Melnyk proviv onlain-konferentsiiu z lideramy ukrainskoi hromady krain Latynskoi Ameryky."

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Bykova et al., *Yak Latynska Ameryka reahuie na rosiisku ahresiiu*, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

temporary.<sup>43</sup> As to the nuclear threats, Kyiv should promote the narrative that these threats are Russian blackmail and an unlikely scenario due to the gradual loss of legitimacy of the Russian authorities and the disadvantage of a nuclear war for Russia itself.<sup>44</sup> Besides, in the long-term perspective, in order to enhance cooperation and mutual understanding with the Latin American countries and Brazil, in particular, it is recommended to provide more opportunities to study the Spanish and Portuguese languages and have respective Regional Studies courses at Ukrainian educational establishments.

It can be concluded that the Russian propaganda in Latin American and in Brazil, particularly, has several peculiar characteristics-it is widespread, long-standing and generally supported. Key current narratives regarding the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine include the nuclear threats, calls for peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia and accusing the West of russiafobia. Other false narratives include accusing Ukraine of war crimes and provocations, as well as dangers of further “escalation” of the war. Among reasons for common misconceptions about the Russia-Ukraine war in Brazil one can name a simple lack of information and familiarity with the local context. This gap in understanding is partially the result of Ukraine’s insufficient communication with the Latin American and, specifically, Brazilian audience, and the countries’ lack of interest in each other for many years.

Current political stance of Brazil regarding the Russia-Ukraine war is focused on “peace-making.” Thereby, it should also be noted that, at the domestic level, Brazil is going through a range of political challenges. Brazil is among countries in danger of severe polarization.

Brazilian-Russian bilateral cooperation is well developed and particularly supported by the current Brazilian leadership. Yet, Brazil was the only member of the BRICS grouping to support a UNGA resolution calling on Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukraine. It is also important to consider Brazil’s position as a regional leader and its aspirations for global leadership.

In order to counter Russian disinformation in Latin America, particularly, in Brazil, Ukraine should enhance its communication and diplomatic efforts, work with the Ukrainian diaspora in Brazil, and consistently deconstruct false narratives of Russian propaganda. In the long-term perspective, it is worthwhile providing more possibilities to study the Spanish and Portuguese languages and have respective Regional Studies courses at Ukrainian educational institutions. As to prospects of further research, it is worthwhile focusing on peculiar characteristics of the Russian disinformation and propaganda in other Latin American countries, particularly, Argentina and Mexico.

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<sup>43</sup> Slyvchuk, “Latin America under Influence of Russian Propaganda.”

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Embassy of Ukraine in the Federative Republic of Brazil. "Dvostoronni politychni vidnosyny" ["Bilateral political relations"]. May 13, 2020. <https://brazil.mfa.gov.ua/spivrobotnictvo/ukrayina-braziliya/dvostoronni-politychni-vidnosini> [in Ukrainian].
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# ОСОБЛИВОСТІ РОСІЙСЬКОЇ ПРОПАГАНДИ В ЛАТИНСЬКІЙ АМЕРИЦІ ЩОДО РОСІЙСЬКОЇ АГРЕСІЇ ПРОТИ УКРАЇНИ: КЕЙС БРАЗИЛІЇ

Російська агресія проти України стала одним із найсерйозніших викликів системі міжнародної безпеки. Одним із регіонів світу, де російська пропаганда дуже поширена, є Латинська Америка. А однією з країн, які виявилися особливо вразливими до російської дезінформації в регіоні, є Бразилія. Мета цієї статті – визначити особливості російської пропаганди в Латинській Америці щодо російської агресії проти України, зокрема, розглянути кейс Бразилії, виявити особливості кремлівської пропаганди в цій країні на сучасному етапі та окреслити можливі шляхи протидії цій пропаганді.

Можна зробити висновок, що російська пропаганда в Латинській Америці, зокрема в Бразилії, має кілька специфічних характеристик: вона дуже поширена, тривала і загалом має підтримку аудиторії. Основні наративи щодо триваючої російської агресії проти України – це ядерна загроза, заклики до мирних перемовин між Україною та Росією, а також звинувачення Заходу в русофобії. Серед інших наративів російської пропаганди – звинувачення України у воєнних злочинах і провокаціях, а також небезпека подальшої «ескалації» війни. З-поміж причин поширених хибних уявлень про російсько-українську війну в Бразилії можна назвати брак інформації та обізнаності з місцевою політикою. Ця ситуація частково є наслідком недостатньої комунікації України з латиноамериканською та бразильською аудиторією, а також того, що протягом багатьох років країни не мають спільного інтересу.

Щоб протистояти російській пропаганді в Латинській Америці, зокрема Бразилії, Україна має посилити свої комунікаційні й дипломатичні зусилля, співпрацювати з українською діаспорою в регіоні та послідовно деконструювати російські дезінформаційні наративи. У довгостроковій перспективі варто розширити можливості вивчення іспанської та португальської мов і запровадити відповідні регіональні студії в українських навчальних закладах.

**Ключові слова:** Бразилія, Латинська Америка, Україна, російсько-українська війна, дезінформація, міжнародна безпека.

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