

Putin, Petro, and Maduro

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Russia is quietly but steadily expanding its geopolitical footprint in Latin America, with two regional authoritarians at the center of Putin's strategy: Venezuela's Maduro and Colombia's Petro. Neither has condemned Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and Petro has gone further, suggesting that Western hostility provoked Moscow—an unmistakable signal of political and ideological alignment.

Maduro: Moscow's Dependable Strongman
For Putin, Maduro is more than an ally; he is a strategic asset. Economic collapse, isolation, and authoritarianism have driven Venezuela into near-total dependence on Russia, which provides military aid, financial relief, security advisers, and diplomatic cover.

In return, Moscow secures a foothold in the Western Hemisphere. By propping up a beleaguered autocrat, Russia preserves regional influence while projecting power beyond its borders and challenges longstanding U.S. dominance there directly.

Petro: A Calculated Gamble for Moscow

Petro represents a different kind of opportunity-less certain, but potentially transformative for Russian influence in South America. Analysts and intelligence reports over several years have pointed to Russian engagement with Colombian opposition movements, social-media operations, and protest networks during Colombia's political crises in 2019.

Now in power, Petro has echoed elements of Russian geopolitical narratives and adopted diplomatic positions that diverge from traditional Western partners. His political vulnerabilities—including allegations related to campaign financing and relationships with armed groups—create openings that foreign powers could exploit. For the Kremlin, Petro

is not yet an ally like Maduro, but a strategic possibility: whose ideological orientation could gradually shift Bogotá closer to Moscow. In this equation, Putin's support has sustained Maduro's regime under sanctions and amplified Petro's rise as a viable challenger to Colombia's political establishment.

Democracy Under Siege

Both Petro and Maduro claim to defend democracy, yet their systems rely on alliances with illegal armed groups, criminal networks, and compliant foreign partners that corrode democratic institutions. They govern through repression, electoral manipulation, and systematic human-rights abuses.

Petro's approach has strengthened illegal armed groups and criminal organizations, trapping civilians in violence while the state stands by.

These dynamics are reinforced by external actors—including Iran (Hezbollah, Hamas), Sweden (Saad AB), Türkiye, Portugal (Passport deal), and Spain—whose engagement provides legitimacy and channels of support driven by geoeconomic calculation rather than democratic principle.

The Just War

The doctrine of *Just War* outlines ethical criteria for armed conflict: legitimate authority, just cause, right intention, last resort, proportionality, and adherence to moral conduct. While embedded in European and international legal traditions, it struggles to account for modern hybrid warfare, foreign interference, and criminal-state fusion.

U.S. foreign policy swings between principle and pragmatism. Some interventions, like the 2003 Iraq war, were politically charged; others pursued genuine strategic aims. Military action in Venezuela could be either a blatant invasion or a historic liberation. Aid to

Ukraine is crucial for European security—but mishandled, it risks igniting wider conflict.

Against this backdrop, Maduro and Petro are executing a sophisticated influence campaign. They have poured resources into lobbying the U.S. and Europe, aggressively framing themselves—and their illicit allies, including illegal armed groups and criminal networks—as victims. This political maneuvering is amplified by vast bot armies tied to both the Venezuelan regime and Moscow.

The controversy surrounding the protests against María Corina Machado during her 2025 Nobel Peace Prize visit to Norway vividly illustrates this broader pattern of political warfare. Alarmingly, these influence activities may be financed, in part, by international aid flows due to minimal oversight within certain European parliaments.

The Strategic Triangle: Putin, Petro, and Maduro

The networks surrounding Putin, Petro, and Maduro form a mutually reinforcing triangle of power, ideology, and opportunism. Their alliances connect state actors, political movements, and criminal networks across borders.

Putin is admired by these Latin American leaders who view centralized authority and anti-Western positioning as pathways to regime security.

In turn, these leaders adopt narratives, policies, and propaganda frameworks that strengthen their hold on power—and expand Russia's influence in the region.

For Venezuelans, Colombians, and Ukrainians, the consequences are immediate: lives defined by insecurity, massacres, democratic erosion, and geopolitical manipulation. Europe—and much of the international community—continues to underestimate the depth of these crises, repeating the same pattern of delayed awareness witnessed during the Balkan tragedies under Slobodan Milošević.

Countries like Sweden and Portugal support Petro's policies, and Spain regards both the Maduro and Petro regimes as democratic models. These European states are accomplices to the severe human rights and humanitarian crises facing the Venezuelan and Colombian people.

Conclusion

Latin America is entering a period of acute geopolitical vulnerability. Authoritarian governance, foreign interference, and the fusion of state power with organized crime now threaten sovereignty and democratic resilience—particularly in Venezuela and Colombia.

This trajectory is intentional. Putin's approach is calculated: Maduro serves as the entrenched pillar, while Petro represents the strategic gamble. Together, they pose a coordinated challenge to democratic institutions and to the integrity of legislative and presidential elections across South America.

The reliance of these leaders on criminal networks to maintain control has eroded the boundary between the state and illicit power, accelerating democratic decay.