

118TH CONGRESS
2D SESSION

S. RES. 833

Countering disinformation, propaganda, and misinformation in Latin America and the Caribbean, and calling for multi-stakeholder efforts to address the significant detrimental effects that the rise in disinformation, propaganda, and misinformation in regional information environments has on democratic governance, human rights, and United States national interests.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

SEPTEMBER 19, 2024

Mr. LUJÁN (for himself, Mr. CARDIN, Mr. KAINE, Mr. BENNET, Mr. KELLY, Mr. WARNER, and Mr. MURPHY) submitted the following resolution; which was referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations

RESOLUTION

Countering disinformation, propaganda, and misinformation in Latin America and the Caribbean, and calling for multi-stakeholder efforts to address the significant detrimental effects that the rise in disinformation, propaganda, and misinformation in regional information environments has on democratic governance, human rights, and United States national interests.

Whereas the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of the press are core pillars of democratic governance throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, as recognized in the Inter-American Democratic Charter, done at Lima September 11, 2001;

Whereas the vulnerability of existing information environments in Latin America and the Caribbean and the growing spread of inaccurate or false news through disinformation and misinformation activities pose serious threats to democratic governance and human rights in the Americas, which are likely to be further exacerbated by the rise of disinformation generated and enhanced by artificial intelligence;

Whereas disinformation and misinformation activities in Latin American and the Caribbean have—

(1) promoted harmful, false narratives spread by the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation, according to research by Global Americans and the Equis Institute, including with respect to the COVID–19 pandemic and the unjustified invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation;

(2) posed risks to the integrity of electoral processes throughout the region, including in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, according to a report entitled “Disinformation in Democracies: Strengthening Digital Resilience in Latin America” issued in March 2019 by the Atlantic Council;

(3) contributed to protests in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador, oftentimes amplified by operations linked to the Russian Federation, according to reporting by the New York Times;

(4) contributed to the exploitation of migrants by human smuggling networks that drive irregular migration, according to multiple investigations by the Tech Transparency Project; and

(5) contributed to a rise in xenophobic violence against migrants and refugees, according to multiple sources, including the Digital Forensic Research Lab;

Whereas information environments are closely interconnected between the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean, such that disinformation and misinformation flows between Latino populations in the United States and populations in Latin America and the Caribbean, according to a report entitled “Latinos and a Growing Crisis of Trust” issued in June 2022 by the Equis Institute;

Whereas, according to the report entitled “Measuring the Impact of Misinformation, Disinformation, and Propaganda in Latin America” issued in October 2021 by Global Americans (referred to in this preamble as the “Global Americans Report”), intra- and extra-regional actors operate independently and in tandem to create and spread disinformation in Latin America and the Caribbean on both traditional and digital media platforms, including YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Telegram, where such activities are amplified through coordinated inauthentic behavior, such as the use of bots, trolls, and cyber troops;

Whereas political actors throughout Latin America and the Caribbean have manipulated domestic information environments by targeting citizens through disinformation activities, including in—

(1) Brazil, where former President Jair Bolsonaro had a direct role in spreading electoral disinformation, according to the Superior Electoral Court of Brazil and the Federal Police of Brazil;

(2) El Salvador, where President Nayib Bukele uses coordinated inauthentic networks to attack political opponents and bolster the perception of support for his policies, according to reporting by Reuters;

(3) Guatemala, where malicious actors with links to the then ruling party of former President Alejandro Giammattei carried out information operations to artificially amplify narratives eroding trust in the country's 2023 electoral process and targeting now President Bernardo Arevalo and his political party Semilla, according to research by the Digital Forensic Research Lab;

(4) Honduras, where actors linked to former President Juan Orlando Hernandez developed coordinated inauthentic networks to spread falsehoods about, and undermine support for, opposition party candidates, according to reporting by Time;

(5) Mexico, where President Andrés Manuel López Obrador spreads false and misleading narratives against the media and other independent institutions, according to research by the Digital Forensic Research Lab; and

(6) Venezuela, where actors linked to the regime of Nicolás Maduro have engaged in a sustained and synchronized campaign of disinformation to undermine the country's 2023–2024 electoral process, invalidate the results of such elections, and attack Maria Corina Machado and other opposition leaders, according to multiple sources, including the Digital Forensic Research Lab;

Whereas, in addition to spreading and amplifying disinformation against their own populations, authoritarian regimes in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela have also engaged in such activities against other countries in the region for purposes of undermining democratic values and spreading narratives contrary to the interests of the United States and its allies, including through coordinated efforts with extra-regional actors, such as publishing and amplifying false narratives by Russian state-controlled media outlets;

Whereas, according to the Global Americans Report, the Governments of the People’s Republic of China, the Russian Federation, and the Islamic Republic of Iran have engaged in disinformation and propaganda operations aimed at undermining the influence and interests of the United States in Latin America and the Caribbean, particularly through the use of state-affiliated media networks targeting Spanish-speaking audiences, such as CGTN TV and Xinhua News, RT and Sputnik, and HispanTV;

Whereas, according to a public statement by the Department of State on November 7, 2023, the Russian Federation is “currently financing an on-going, well-funded disinformation campaign across Latin America”, including in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay;

Whereas, according to the Digital Forensic Research Lab and EUvsDisinfo, the Russian Federation considers social media outreach to Spanish-speaking and Portuguese-speaking audiences an important component of its state-sponsored media strategy, and the Spanish-language social media accounts of Kremlin-controlled media RT and Sputnik have more followers and engagement than their English- and Russian-language counterparts and comparable programming from the United States Agency for Global Media;

Whereas information environments in Latin America and the Caribbean are further distorted by the rise in the practice of disinformation for hire, by which political actors outsource information operations to regional and extra-regional public relations firms that impersonate local

news outlets, civic organizations, and other entities through fake social media accounts and engage in other deceptive practices to create and amplify disinformation for profit;

Whereas the threats and effects of disinformation and misinformation in Latin America and the Caribbean are exacerbated by—

(1) the widespread use of social media and closed messaging platforms, where disinformation and misinformation is spread faster and farther, as primary communication and news sources, as indicated by the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022;

(2) high barriers of access to other forms of independent media and low media and digital literacy rates that lead to the unintentional spread of disinformation and misinformation;

(3) growing levels of distrust in public institutions, as indicated by recent AmericasBarometer surveys by the Latin American Public Opinion Project; and

(4) low levels of transnational coordination among relevant stakeholders within the region;

Whereas, on March 3, 2017, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Representative on Freedom of the Media, the Organization of American States (OAS) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information issued a declaration entitled "Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Fake News, Disinformation and Propaganda", which cautioned

against the criminalization and regulation of disinformation and misinformation activities and called instead for joint efforts by relevant stakeholders;

Whereas some current efforts by governments in Latin American and the Caribbean to counter disinformation raise serious freedom of expression concerns that run counter to the recommendations made in the “Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Fake News, Disinformation and Propaganda”;

Whereas government and political actors in some Latin American and Caribbean countries have undertaken notable efforts to address the threat of disinformation in ways consistent with the protection of freedoms of expression and the press, including—

(1) political parties in Uruguay, which signed an ethics pact in April 2019 pledging to not generate or promote disinformation against political adversaries; and

(2) the national electoral institution of Panama, which engaged in joint workshops with the electoral institutions of Argentina in June 2019 and Costa Rica in September 2021 to share best practices on monitoring and countering information operations on social media;

Whereas, despite discernible progress in taking down accounts used by prominent, often foreign-backed, disinformation networks to engage in coordinated inauthentic activity and partnering with regional stakeholders, efforts by social media companies, including Facebook and Twitter, to address disinformation and misinformation in Latin America and the Caribbean continue to be hampered by—

(1) insufficient resources and attention devoted to countering such activities in low- and middle-income

countries, as documented by multiple sources, including the Facebook Papers;

(2) significant gaps in the detection and enforcement of Spanish-language disinformation and misinformation relative to such English-language activities;

(3) enduring barriers to transparency and access for social media datasets and algorithms that are critical to independent disinformation and misinformation research; and

(4) limited cooperation among social media companies on plans and best practices to mitigate disinformation networks operating across platforms;

Whereas independent media, civil society, and academic groups have launched several initiatives to address disinformation and misinformation on social media and closed messaging platforms in Latin America and the Caribbean through fact-checking, media and digital literacy, and information sharing services, including Chequeado, Comprova, Verificado, and Cazadores de Fake News; and

Whereas the United States has pursued efforts to support the strengthening of information environments, promote independent media, and counter disinformation activities in Latin America and the Caribbean, including through initiatives led by the Global Engagement Center, the United States Agency for International Development, the United States Agency for Global Media, and United States embassies in the region: Now, therefore, be it

1 *Resolved*, That the Senate—

2 (1) recognizes the serious threats the distortion
3 of information environments through the creation

1 and amplification of disinformation and misinforma-
2 tion on traditional and digital media platforms poses
3 to democratic governance and human rights in Latin
4 America and the Caribbean;

5 (2) denounces independent and coordinated ef-
6 forts by malicious actors to create and amplify
7 disinformation in the Western Hemisphere, including
8 foreign information operations led by the Govern-
9 ments of the People’s Republic of China, the Rus-
10 sian Federation, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Cuba,
11 and Nicaragua and the Maduro regime in Venezuela;

12 (3) urges social media companies to take addi-
13 tional steps to address how social media platforms
14 are used to facilitate malicious activities, including
15 disinformation, in Latin America and the Caribbean,
16 including by—

17 (A) devoting significantly more resources
18 to monitoring how such platforms are being ex-
19 ploited to spread false news, incite violence, and
20 interfere with democratic electoral processes in
21 the region;

22 (B) strengthening detection and removal
23 enforcement capabilities against sources of
24 Spanish-language and other non-English
25 disinformation content;

1 (C) improving transparency over regional
2 content moderation efforts to counter
3 disinformation, the training and auditing of so-
4 cial media algorithms for Spanish-language and
5 other non-English content, and datasets critical
6 for disinformation and misinformation research;

7 (D) expanding and strengthening partner-
8 ships with local actors, including initiatives with
9 third-party fact checkers and independent,
10 democratic electoral institutions;

11 (E) investing in media and digital literacy
12 education in the region; and

13 (F) strengthening coordination with one
14 another on plans and best practices to help
15 limit the spread of disinformation content on-
16 line;

17 (4) calls on governments in Latin America and
18 the Caribbean to counter disinformation activities
19 and strengthen information environments by—

20 (A) bolstering regional mechanisms to co-
21 ordinate responses and share best practices on
22 countering disinformation;

23 (B) advancing efforts by political parties
24 and other actors to publicly commit to refrain
25 from generating or amplifying disinformation

1 content through coordinated inauthentic behav-
2 ior or outsourcing such activities to public rela-
3 tions firms; and

4 (C) safeguarding and strengthening free
5 and independent media, promoting fact-check-
6 ing, increasing use of digital forensics, and
7 boosting media literacy efforts by civil society,
8 journalists, and academia; and

9 (5) calls on the President and the heads of all
10 relevant Federal agencies and departments to
11 strengthen the role of the United States in coun-
12 tering the creation and amplification of
13 disinformation in Latin America and the Caribbean
14 and bolstering regional information environments,
15 including by—

16 (A) increasing support for the activities de-
17 scribed in paragraph (4);

18 (B) ensuring strong support for and co-
19 ordination of concurrent efforts between all rel-
20 evant bureaus and offices of the Department of
21 State and the United States Agency for Inter-
22 national Development;

23 (C) ensuring strong support for relevant
24 efforts within the United States Agency for
25 Global Media;

1 (D) convening regional fora, with partici-
2 pation from all relevant stakeholders, to discuss
3 and develop methods to promote a strong, inde-
4 pendent media and counter the spread and am-
5 plification of disinformation, including through
6 a high-level summit and a Global Engagement
7 Center Tech Challenge;

8 (E) pursuing measures—such as public
9 identification, targeted sanctions, and informa-
10 tion sharing and coordination with social media
11 companies in identifying accounts spreading
12 disinformation—to deter and hold accountable
13 government officials in Latin America and the
14 Caribbean who undermine democratic govern-
15 ance by targeting independent media or engag-
16 ing in activities to create and amplify
17 disinformation; and

18 (F) strengthening the capacity of the
19 United States Government to mitigate the im-
20 pact and influence of local state-affiliated media
21 outlets of malicious extra-regional actors by of-
22 fering objective, reliable, and accurate informa-
23 tion, including through—

24 (i) increased investment in public di-
25 plomacy programming by the United

1 States in Latin America and the Carib-
2 bean, particularly programming aimed at
3 engaging with local audiences through so-
4 cial media and messaging platforms; and

5 (ii) increased resources and program-
6 ming from the United States Agency for
7 Global Media tailored to audiences in
8 Latin America and the Caribbean.

○