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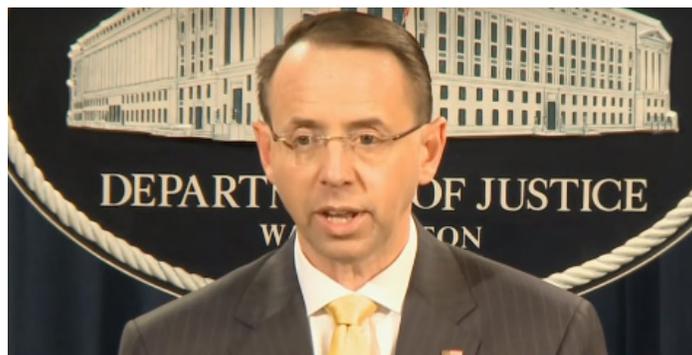
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FEATURED Q&A

How Safe Are Latin America's Elections From Interference?



Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein recently announced indictments against several Russians on charges of meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Experts below discuss how secure Latin America is from such interference. // Photo: U.S. Justice Department.

Q The U.S. Justice Department on Feb. 16 announced indictments against 13 Russian nationals on charges they meddled in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The defendants sought to wage "information warfare against the United States, with the stated goal of spreading distrust towards the candidates and the political system in general," said Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein. Russia's government has denied meddling in the election. The charges came ahead of presidential elections scheduled for this year in Latin American countries including Mexico, Brazil and Colombia. To what extent are Latin American countries susceptible to election meddling, via social media and other means, from outside actors? How prone are they to the spread of misinformation about candidates from domestic entities, and what should be done about it? Whose job is it to prevent misinformation from swaying elections?

A Jason Marczak, director of the Atlantic Council's Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center: "Upcoming presidential elections in Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil provide fertile ground for disinformation to affect the electoral process. As in the United States, a coherent policy has yet to be developed to mitigate the effects of fake news originating both domestically and abroad. Disinformation is not a new phenomenon that has emerged with just this current electoral cycle. In Brazil, for example, at the height of the Car Wash corruption scandal, top misinformation stories were more widely shared on Facebook—a total of nearly four million shares—than real news stories.

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TODAY'S NEWS

ECONOMIC

Venezuelan Economy Shrank 13.2% Last Year: Opposition

Last year was the fourth year of contraction for the South American country. "The economy is being destroyed," said opposition lawmaker and economist José Guerra.

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BUSINESS

Trump's Name Stripped From Panama Hotel

A local court ruled against the Trump Organization in a dispute with the hotel's majority owner.

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POLITICAL

Lawmakers Planning New Push to Oust Peru's Kuczynski

Peruvian President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, who survived an attempt to remove him from office in December, is facing a new impeachment effort over his alleged ties to Brazilian construction company Odebrecht.

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Kuczynski // File Photo: Peruvian Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Peruvian Lawmakers Planning New Push to Oust Kuczynski

Peruvian lawmakers are planning a new attempt to oust President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski over his alleged ties with scandal-plagued Brazilian construction company Odebrecht, Peru's state-run Andina news agency reported Monday. Opposition lawmakers are preparing to file a new impeachment motion against Kuczynski within days. Kuczynski narrowly survived a similar attempt to remove him from office in December. Soon after surviving that attempt, Kuczynski controversially pardoned imprisoned former President Alberto Fujimori, a move Kuczynski's critics saw as payback

after Fujimori's son, lawmaker Kenji Fujimori, helped Kuczynski remain in office. On Monday, Kuczynski said in a posting on Twitter that the new move to oust him would create "tremendous chaos" in Peru. He urged Congress to work with his administration in the country's interests. The president is facing accusations that he lied to Congress over his ties to Odebrecht, Bloomberg News reported. Daniel Salaverry, a lawmaker and member of the Popular Force party, told television network Canal N that the party will decide today on whether to back the impeachment motion, which could then be presented to Congress on Wednesday. Support in Popular Force, the largest opposition party in Congress, for ousting Kuczynski has declined since December, as 12 of the party's lawmakers, led by Kenji Fujimori, have broken from the party. [Editor's note: See [Q&A](#) on whether Kuczynski will be able to complete his term in the Jan. 9 issue of the Advisor.]

NEWS BRIEFS

Guatemala to Move Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem

Guatemala's government said Monday it will transfer its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem the second week of May, the Associated Press reported. The move follows a similar but much-criticized decision by the United States to relocate its own diplomatic mission to Jerusalem, announced in December. Critics say the move could spark unrest between Palestinians and Israelis. Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales met on Sunday in Washington with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who favors the move.

Fernández to Face Trial in Alleged Cover-up in 1994 Jewish Center Bombing

Former Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner will face trial on charges she covered up the role of Iranians in a deadly 1994 terrorist bombing at a Jewish center in Buenos Aires, the Associated Press reported. Judicial authorities announced Monday that 11 other former officials and people close to Fernández's government will also be tried on charges of cover-up and abuse of power. A trial date has not been set. As a sitting senator, immunity protects Fernández from being arrested, but she can still be tried, according to the report.

Clarke Wins Special Parliamentary Election in Jamaica

Jamaican businessman Nigel Clarke on Monday won a special parliamentary election that kept the St. Andrew North West constituency under control of the governing Jamaica Labor Party, or JLP, the Jamaica Gleaner reported. The first-time candidate for parliament defeated the People's National Party's Keisha Hayle with 61 percent of the vote, compared to 39 percent for Hayle.

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In Colombia, fake news spread like wildfire around the October 2016 FARC peace agreement plebiscite. And notably, U.S. National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster late last year announced evidence that Russia is conducting a sophisticated campaign to influence Mexico's elections. Recent reports indicate that Russian outlets such as RT (its 24-hour news channel) and Sputnik are significantly ramping up their Spanish-language media presence ahead of elections. Pro-Russia media outlets receive around 76 million annual website visits, according to the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab. Initial steps have been taken to combat disinformation. President Santos announced in mid-January the creation of a unit to combat cyber-attacks and the spread of misinformation throughout the electoral process. In Mexico, the National Electoral Institute signed an agreement with Facebook to collaborate in identifying and eliminating fake news. Brazil's federal police also established a fake news prevention task force that is looking to collaborate with social media companies. Some measures have raised

concerns about their impact on freedom of expression. Going forward, governments will have to seek the support of tech companies, civil society with expertise in the information space, and media to fact-check viral news and monitor sources of disinformation."

A Joel Korn, president of WKI Brasil and senior international partner at UPITE Consulting Services:

"Political disinformation campaigns have been always somewhat present in electoral processes. The challenge that we now face is that rapidly evolving sophisticated Internet technology legitimately targeted for commercial purposes has been leveraged to potentially disrupt the integrity of election results across all democratic nations. Latin America is evidently not immune to this phenomenon, and its effects in the upcoming presidential races in Colombia, Mexico and Brazil should not be underestimated. Unlike in the last U.S. election, in Latin America, customized communication actions aimed at highly targeted segmented groups are expected to be largely

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ECONOMIC NEWS

Venezuela's Economy Shrank 13.2% Last Year: Opposition

Venezuela's economy contracted 13.2 percent last year, the country's opposition-controlled National Assembly said Monday, Reuters reported. The opposition has been calculating gross domestic product and inflation in the absence of official data from the administration of President Nicolás Maduro. The GDP report examines oil industry activity, vehicle assembly, tax collection and bank loans.

BUSINESS NEWS

Trump's Name Stripped From Panama Hotel

Executives with The Trump Organization, a holding company for all of the business ventures of U.S. President Donald Trump, were evicted from a property in Panama City on Monday, after a local court ruled in favor of the majority owner of the Trump Ocean Club International Hotel and Tower, CNBC reported. Workers were photographed removing the Trump name from a sign outside the hotel complex, after more than a dozen police officers were on site to escort the executives off the property, ABC News reported. The decision marked an apparent victory for the hotel's majority owner, Orestes Fintiklis with Miami-based Ithaca Capital Partners, who has been fighting a legal battle to oust the Trump Organization's hotel management team. "Today, Panama has made us proud," he told reporters. Ithaca had charged the Trump Organization with "abysmal management" of the property and "mob-style tactics" related to its contract, which extends through 2031. However, in a statement, The Trump Organization said that the spat will ultimately be settled by an arbitration panel under the International Chamber of Commerce.

HEALTH NEWS

Region Making 'Insufficient Progress' in Reducing Teen Pregnancies: PAHO

Latin American and Caribbean countries have made "insufficient progress" in reducing high teenage pregnancy rates, the Pan-American Health Organization said in a report released last week. The global adolescent pregnancy rate is estimated at 46 births per 1,000 girls, while adolescent pregnancy rates in Latin America and the Caribbean continue to be the second highest in the world, estimated at 66.5 births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 years, behind only to Sub-Saharan Africa, according to the report. And things could be getting worse. Latin America is the only region in the world where a rising trend has been observed in pregnancies among adolescents younger than 15, according to the report. The report highlights recommendations to reduce teen pregnancy, which range from supporting prevention programs geared toward those in the most vulnerable situations, to increasing access to contraception and sex education.

Yellow Fever Encircling Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo

Brazil's yellow fever outbreak continues to threaten populations and is now circling the major metropolitan areas of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, The New York Times reported Monday. Although there have been only 237 deaths since the hot season began, this year's outbreak could be the worst since 1942, according to the report. Health officials aim to vaccinate 23 million people, a large number that nurses are covering primarily through door-to-door visits. In January, the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention raised its alert level over the disease, advising Americans headed for Rio, São Paulo and several other areas to first be vaccinated. Critics say Brazil's government should have acted faster. "Brazil's public health response was very delayed," said Dr. Karin A. Nielsen, an infectious disease expert at the University of California, Los Angeles, who does research in Brazil. "Monkeys were dying in the wild two to three years ago." Public health officials have defended their efforts, however, noting that since January 2017, Brazil's Health Ministry has distributed more than 45 million doses of yellow fever vaccine to areas where cases have been reported in 2016 and 2017. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Jan. 25 edition of the Advisor.]

Jamaica Eyes More Regulation of School Lunches

Jamaica's minister of health, Christopher Tufton, on Saturday called for more state regulation of school lunches in order to prevent noncommunicable diseases such as diabetes, the Jamaica Gleaner reported. "We are going to guide the foods that are provided on these school premises. We are not going to be motivated by the power of marketing and marketing companies, which have a right to market," Tufton said. "It's a free market, but in the space of a school compound, students must know what they eat, know the consequences of what they eat, and indeed in some instances, we must regulate what is available, or some of what is available, in terms of what they have access to," he added. Tufton also called for more effectiveness in reducing substance abuse in schools. Jamaica has set a goal to reduce noncommunicable diseases, including heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes and chronic lung disease by 25 percent by 2025.

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driven by local digital marketing companies, as opposed to cross-border influences. Regardless of the source, the process follows the underlying rationale of tracking online users' behavioral activity as an effective tool to misinform and persuade large target audiences. There are no simple solutions. Rather, a series of initiatives should be pursued to hinder the usage of technology for harming the public interest. The large Internet platforms and social media networks have a crucial role to play through ongoing and increasingly tight self-regulated actions oriented to inhibit faked or suspicious accounts and embedded cookies in websites and emails. This is far from a trivial task, given the available sophisticated technology, boosted further by artificial intelligence. Governments are equally challenged by the need to come up with legislation that strengthens transparency in the Internet ecosystem through enforceable cybersecurity measures to prevent acts of electoral crime, while preserving freedom of expression, juridical security and technology innovation. The outlook for the upcoming elections in Colombia, Mexico and Brazil reveals a fragmented and competitive process. Against this scenario of uncertainties, measures aimed at avoiding manipulation of voters along with the required integrity of public opinion polls are key contributing factors for free and transparent elections."

A **Arturo Sarukhan, board member of the Inter-American Dialogue and former Mexican ambassador to the United States:** "In the last two decades, Latin America devoted significant institutional bandwidth to hardening institutions first against democratic rollback, then against the footprints of organized crime and now corruption. But today, it does not seem prepared for the political, ideological and geostrategic disruption that technology and digital platforms have recently spawned. It is the weaponization of narratives and storytelling, fueled by disinformation, astroturfing

and bot-farms on social media that have become one of the most salient forces in the political and international landscape of the 21st century. Nor do many of the region's political and opinion elites grasp how global power rivalries are being exacerbated by the use of these tools and how and why certain

These threats aren't going away.

— Arturo Sarukhan

hemispheric nations might become unwitting pawns in this game. These threats aren't going away. Therefore, a core question going into the polls in 2018 will be whether Latin American nations can preserve the tenets of open societies, the values of freedom of speech or the free flow of information while protecting themselves from domestic or foreign actors waging cyberattacks and weaponizing data for political-electoral or geopolitical gain. If the dynamics unleashed in the United States in 2016 caused severe democratic damage there, the replication of some of these patterns and tactics in other nations in the Americas might spell trouble. This is a region, after all, where the rule of law, accountability and democratic governance require strengthening, where distrust of institutions, politicians and political parties remains high and where media and watchdog organizations still face important constraints. Sooner or later, Latin America will be forced to dedicate greater bandwidth to cybersecurity, to understanding how global power relationships are being reshaped by these forces and implementing measures—whether in partnership with corporations, NGOs, traditional and digital news sites, or other nations—to confront these tectonic shifts and challenges."

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