

2-7-2018

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## Recommended Citation

Navarro, Carlos. "Russia Accused of Interfering in Mexican Electoral Process." (2018). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/6409>

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## Russia Accused of Interfering in Mexican Electoral Process

by *Carlos Navarro*

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2018-02-07

Reports from US President Donald Trump's administration and the US Senate suggest that the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin is planning to interfere in the upcoming presidential and congressional race in Mexico, scheduled for July 1. According to the reports, the Russian government has begun to spread misinformation on social media to confuse would-be voters, a maneuver intended to boost the candidacy of center-left candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who is leading the vote preference in most polls.

The denunciation of potential Russian interference has come from seemingly credible US sources: National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and three members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: Democrats Robert Menéndez and Tim Kaine and Republican Marco Rubio. The irony is that the same US administration that is accusing the Putin government of seeking to influence the Mexican elections is also rumored to have benefited from Russian involvement in the election that brought Trump to power in November 2016.

"We've seen that this is really a sophisticated effort to polarize democratic societies and pit communities within those societies against each other," McMaster said in a speech to the Washington-based Jamestown Foundation in mid-December. McMaster's comments were contained in a video that a reporter from the Mexican daily newspaper Reforma posted in early January.

"You've seen, actually, initial signs of it in the Mexican presidential campaign already," said McMaster, who did not elaborate on how Russia was seeking to influence the election.

Menéndez, Rubio, and Kaine expressed their concerns in a letter to Tillerson before the secretary of state began his trip to Mexico and other Latin American countries in early February.

"We are deeply troubled by recent news articles [saying] that Russia is reportedly using sophisticated technology to meddle in Mexico's upcoming election," wrote the senators, who are members of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues.

Tillerson raised the concerns from the US senators during a meeting with Mexican Interior Secretary Alfonso Navarrete during a stop in Mexico City on Feb. 3. "We hear this from our European counterparts," he said about signs of Russian meddling in elections. "My advice would be ... pay attention to what's happening."

While the US officials made their concerns very public, no actual evidence was presented—at least in a public forum. The biggest question is why Russia would want to interfere in the Mexican election, and why they would support López Obrador specifically. López Obrador has consistently led the public opinion polls over the last year, in part because many would-be voters see him as the best option in Mexico to challenge the Trump administration's protectionist and anti-immigration policies ([SourceMex, Feb. 22, 2017](#)).

## *Mexican officials generally quiet*

Much of the noise about potential Russian interference in the election is coming from the US, with Mexican officials initially avoiding any comments on the issue and later making vague references to the matter.

"The rumor about the interest that the people of Vladimir Putin could have in the coming Mexican elections has originated in a US newspaper," columnist Pablo Gómez wrote in the online news site Proceso.com, in reference to coverage in The Washington Post about the issue, including the comments from McMaster and a piece from Mexican columnist León Krauze.

"The Mexican government officially cannot speak about this matter without presenting a documented protest via diplomatic channels to Russia," added Gómez. "Therefore, there is no proof available to the public."

Krauze did publish a longer opinion piece in the Mexico City daily El Universal, making some of the same arguments that he put forth in his piece in The Washington Post. In both instances, he cited a report from the US Senate's Foreign Relations Committee.

"The report from the US Senate anticipates that Vladimir Putin will continue to consolidate a sophisticated propaganda machinery that would allow him to subvert democracy in vulnerable countries," Krauze wrote. "To accomplish this, he makes use of a devious set of resources that employ a common method: polarizing the electorate and eroding public discussion via disinformation."

According to Krauze, Mexico already faces a myriad challenges and threats in its democratic process, and therefore "must take every measure possible to avoid being the next guinea pig in Putin's experiment in destabilization." Krauze and other critics suggest that one tool that Russia is using in Mexico is the Spanish-language version of the newspaper RT (Russia Today), whose coverage has been highly favorable toward López Obrador.

"The coverage that RT has given the López Obrador campaign has generated heated debates in the media and in social networks," columnist Héctor De Mauleón wrote in El Universal. However, de Mauleón also quoted Moscow's ambassador to Mexico, Eduard Malayan, who noted that the Russian government has worked well with the PAN governments of Vicente Fox (2000-2006) and Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), and the PRI administration of Enrique Peña Nieto.

According to Malayan, the extensive coverage of López Obrador was a function of his early declaration as a candidate for president. "He started before all the others, at a time when there were no other official candidates or electoral platforms," noted the Russian ambassador. "RT was not the only medium that focused its attention on him. All the others did the same."

Malayan also noted that Russia has not received any protests from Mexico's federal electoral institute (Instituto Nacional Electoral, INE) or from the Peña Nieto government. "No Mexican agency or public official has put forth a single complaint," he said. "They haven't done so, because they lack any concrete examples to prove this point."

López Obrador, for his part, made light of the accusation that he was benefiting from alleged Russian meddling. He wore a jacket with the inscription "Andrés Manuelovich" during a campaign stop in Tijuana. At a campaign rally at the waterfront in Veracruz, he again referred to himself with

the Russianized name and joked about the presence of a Russian submarine in the bay loaded with gold for his campaign.

Still, Krauze suggested López Obrador, rather than make light of the situation, needed to eliminate all appearance of conflict of interest. He pointed out that Irma Sandoval, an academic who is a member of López Obrador's inner circle, is the wife of John Ackerman, a regular contributor in Mexico to RT.

"López Obrador needs to get serious and sort out a potential conflict of interest within his team before shrugging off any suspicion of Russian influence in his campaign and, crucially, his now likely future government," he wrote.

In a letter to The Washington Post, Ackerman objected to any suggestion that his contributions to RT had anything to do with the López Obrador campaign, which he said he supports but for which he does not work.

Official spokespersons for the Putin government denied that Russia was involved in any way with the Mexican election. In an interview with Reuters, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, who has repeatedly denied accusations by US intelligence officials and others that Moscow interferes in any foreign elections, said charges from McMaster and other officials are not accurate. "This is incorrect, and importantly, unfounded," he said.

The Peña Nieto government had kept quiet until Tillerson's visit to Mexico City, when Navarrete, the interior secretary, suggested there were "signs of foreign interference" in this year's presidential election.

"We must be very careful in this regard and discern the truth," he told reporters. "That's the process we're in."

López Obrador's rivals also chimed in. "We have to be very careful with any attempt at disinformation, regardless of its source," said José Antonio Meade, who is representing the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in the July 1 election. "Disinformation is not helpful, creates confusion and worries."

Ricardo Anaya, who is representing a coalition formed by the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), urged the Peña Nieto government to conduct an investigation. "It is unacceptable for a foreign government to interfere in our electoral process," Anaya told reporters.

### *López Obrador still leads polls*

The latest public opinion polls suggest López Obrador is still the candidate to beat, but the numbers indicate that many would-be voters are still undecided. One recent poll, commissioned by the daily newspaper El Heraldo de México and conducted by the polling organization Suasor Consultores on Jan. 25-28, indicated a high level of uncertainty about the election. Roughly 28% of the respondents said they were undecided. Of those who had identified a candidate to support, 25% expressed preference for López Obrador, 22% for Meade, and 20% for Anaya.

Another recent poll conducted on Jan. 19-25 by Buendía & Laredo on behalf of El Universal also showed López Obrador in the lead, but pointed to growing support for Anaya at the expense of Meade. In the poll, 32% of respondents indicated they backed López Obrador, 26% said they were

for Anaya, and 16% for Meade. Support for independent candidates Margarita Zavala and Jaime Rodríguez were in the single digits.

“The numbers confirm a national election dominated by a strong sentiment against the PRI,” said the online news site *Publímetro*. “On top of that, Meade has had the worst campaign of any PRI candidate in recent years, even those conducted by Francisco Labastida in 2000 and Roberto Madrazo in 2006 ... The reason is simple. The PRI candidate makes many mistakes and does not connect with the voters.”

-- End --