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Russia Sends Lavrov to Venezuela to 'Counteract' U.S. Sanctions

By Reuters

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Lavrov's trip follows a tour by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo of four former Soviet states. **Foreign Ministry**

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov will visit Venezuela on Friday in a show of support for President Nicolas Maduro, a socialist who Washington wants out of power.

Russia has helped Maduro weather a political crisis as the United States has targeted Caracas with sanctions and, like dozens of other countries, recognizes opposition politician Juan Guaido as Venezuela's legitimate interim leader.

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Moscow has denounced the U.S. sanctions as illegal and damaging, while Venezuela's opposition has urged Washington to step up pressure on Russia for its economic, diplomatic

and military support of Maduro.

Lavrov, foreign minister since 2004, flies to Latin America on Wednesday, stopping in Cuba before heading to Mexico on Thursday and Venezuela the next day.

His trip follows a tour by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo of four former Soviet states - Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan - in a region that Moscow sees as its backyard.

In Venezuela, Lavrov will meet Maduro as well as Executive Vice President Delcy Rodriguez and Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza for talks that will broach deeper cooperation on energy, mining, transport, agriculture and defense, Russia's Foreign Ministry said.

"The agenda includes a discussion of steps ... to counteract illegal unilateral sanctions that worsen the socioeconomic situation in Venezuela," ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

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The United States last year ratcheted up diplomatic pressure on Venezuela and imposed sanctions on the OPEC member's state oil company, PDVSA.

Venezuela's opposition disputed the legitimacy of Maduro's re-election to a second term in 2018, and opposition leader Guaido proclaimed himself interim president in January last year, winning the backing of Washington and other countries.

Maduro has remained in power though, backed by the military as well as Russia, China and Cuba.

In Mexico, Lavrov will meet Foreign Secretary Luis Ebrard Casaubon to discuss economic and trade ties as well as cooperation with the Community of Latin America and Caribbean States (CELAC). In Cuba, Lavrov will meet his counterpart, Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla, Zakharova said.

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