



# The Footprints of the Bear. Why does the Return of Russia to Latin America Matter?

RESEARCH ARTICLE

MÓNIKA SZENTE-VARGA 

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the motives behind the 'return' of Russia to Latin America and the means employed for that end: general commercial relations, arms sales, energy deals, niche technology related to nuclear science, naval and air power displays and high-level political meetings. The growth of Russian presence in Latin America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has not been even. There is a clustering in time around events via which Russian leadership tried to alter the status quo near its borders, in Georgia and Ukraine. It will be argued that the intensity of Russian top diplomatic activities and military displays in far-away Latin America do not only coincide with the date of these anti-status quo events, but in fact could have helped to foresee some of them.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo examina los motivos detrás del 'regreso' de Rusia a América Latina y los medios que el liderazgo ruso ha empleado para ese fin: relaciones comerciales; venta de armas; acuerdos de energía; tecnología de nicho relacionada con la ciencia nuclear; demostraciones de poder naval y aéreo, así como reuniones políticas de alto nivel. El crecimiento de la presencia rusa en América Latina en el siglo XXI no ha sido parejo. Hay un agrupamiento en el tiempo en torno a los eventos a través de los cuales los líderes rusos intentaron alterar el statu quo cerca de sus fronteras, en Georgia y Ucrania. Será demostrado que la intensidad de las principales actividades diplomáticas rusas y las demostraciones militares en la lejana América Latina no solo coinciden con la fecha de estos eventos anti-statu quo, sino que de hecho podrían haber ayudado a prever algunos de ellos.

## CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

**Mónika Szente-Varga**

Ludovika – University of Public Service, HU

Szente-Varga.Monika@uni-nke.hu

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## INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to examine the motives behind the 'return' of Russia to Latin America and the means employed for that end. The author assumes that due to its limited resources, Russia has been using diverse means to build an increased presence in the region, such as general commercial relations, arms sales, energy deals, niche technology related to nuclear science, naval and air power displays, and high-level political meetings. Although these interactions might have beneficial effects both on Russia and the targeted Latin American countries, the overall aim of the Kremlin is not (only) that of strengthening ties with Latin America, but to exert increasing influence on the Russian-United States (US) nexus.

Interestingly, 21<sup>st</sup> century Russian foreign policy displays a lot of similarities with Soviet thinking vis-a-vis Latin America when international politics was seen via the concepts of the School of Realism: a constant struggle for power and security in a zero-sum game. The gains of the Soviets meant automatic losses for the United States (Kanet 2006, 334; Mujan-Leon 1986, 101). Latin America was not a primary interest for the Soviet Union. It became important because it was geographically close to and constituted a vital national security interest of its greatest rival: the United States (Rodríguez Hernández 2019, 18). Therefore, building a Soviet presence in the region could make the Soviet Union more visible on the international stage, displease the United States and distract it from areas where direct Russian interests were at stake (Evanson 1986, 79; Desjeans & Clement 1987, 223; Astrada & Martín 2013).

Russian goals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century seem to be similar. Make the US see Russia as a global player, taking into account Russian interests before acting on the international scene (Blank & Kim 2015, 159, 163; Ellis 2015, 8). Russia is also keen on showing capacity to retaliate. For example, if the US sends ships to the Black Sea (a Russian sphere of interest) Russia would be able to send vessels to the Caribbean region.

Yet there are important differences between today's situation and the times of the Cold War. One, the lack of ideological motives. Nonetheless, there are substantial dissimilarities between the Russian and the US political systems which hinder mutual understanding. Two, Russia can try to use new tools to increase its support: encourage Latin American, South American, and Central American regional organizations and exploit, besides the historical distrust of the United States in the region, the intracontinental immigration issue (Shuya 2019, 34–35). Three, neither the US nor Russia are as dominating as in the Cold War. New powers have emerged, such as the People's Republic of China (from now on referred to as China). Four, whereas the ultimate Soviet goal was to win the Cold War and become the only superpower,

current Russian aims include being recognized as one of the great powers, thwarting attempts to isolate Russia internationally and demonstrate the failure of sanction policies, by having and showing off partners, for example in Latin America (Ellis 2022, 5). All in all, compared to Soviet times, Russia is weaker both in terms of geopolitics and economy, which paradoxically contributes to its aggressivity on the international scene.

After the Cold War the US did not have to consider Russian interests for at least a decade. The US was the only superpower, able to make and carry out unilateral decisions on the international arena (Brands 2016). This unipolar *moment*, despite its denomination, lasted at least from 1989–90 until the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Yet for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, much of the supremacy of the US has been eroded, and though it still might be the strongest state in the world, its position is increasingly challenged by countries such as China and India. Russia has been trying to come back to the international scene and be considered as a global player, yet it does not feature among the top ten economies. Its military steps (Russo-Georgian War, annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the invasion of Ukraine) brought it international visibility (and notoriety), as well as increasing isolation and a nadir in the relations with the West. The worse this nexus got, the more important Latin America became for Russia.

The growth of Russian presence in Latin America is beyond doubt. Yet its evolution has not been even, in great part due to lack of a consolidated long-term policy towards the region, selective approach vis-a-vis Latin American countries and changes in the international scenario. First of all, there are important differences among countries. Russia does not want (and is not able) to intensify contacts with all the states in the region, instead, only some countries are targeted, considering geopolitics, trade, history of bilateral relations and current political context.

Cuba and Nicaragua used to be outstanding contacts in the Cold War and are allies again. Their importance for Russia stems from their proximity to the United States and from their symbolic value, as they might serve as a confirmation of Russia being a great-power, able to take the place of the Soviet Union. The re-mending of ties at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century could be helped, on the Latin American side, by the endurance of the Castro system in Cuba and the return of Daniel Ortega to power in Nicaragua in 2007 (used to be president between 1985 and 1990), yet, instead of ideological considerations, Moscow would rather be guided by pragmatism. Nonetheless, it could capitalize on the nostalgia of certain Latin American groups (especially of political left) towards the Soviet Union<sup>1</sup> and the Cold War (Serbin 2019, 171).

Venezuela is a new friend, attractive for its vast resources<sup>2</sup> and its geographical location in the middle of the Americas, a "gateway to South America" and a "temporary alliance partner in the balance of power

against the United States” (Sitenko 2016, 52). Cooperation and closer contacts started with the coming to power of Hugo Chávez (in office: 1999–2013) and have been strongly ideologized from the Venezuelan side. Despite the economic collapse and political crisis of Venezuela following the death of Chávez in 2013, Russia kept up support for the Maduro government, which might be an attempt to ensure that Russian loans are repaid but could also be interpreted as a confirmation that Russia wants to stay relevant in the region (Rozental & Jelifets 2022, 201).

Besides Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, which are the closest allies, ties have been strengthened between Russia and the “big three”, that is, Brazil, Mexico and Argentina (based on commercial considerations and their relatively high international visibility and leverage), and countries led by governments with an anti-US stance, such as Bolivia (presidency of Evo Morales: 2006–2019 and Luis Arce: 2020–) and Ecuador (presidency of Rafael Correa: 2007–2017). Nonetheless the latter also implies the volatility of these contacts as governments and presidents change. “The vital role of personal politics” (Sitenko 2022, 133) makes prospects of these relations questionable.

Besides being geographically selective and non-comprehensive, Russian presence in Latin America also displays differing intensities in time. It became more intensive in times of aggressive Russian foreign policy steps elsewhere. Especially when considering (naval and air) power displays and high-level visits in Latin America, it is noticeable a clustering in time around events via which Russian leadership tried to alter the status quo near its borders, in Georgia and Ukraine. This implies that the intensity of Russian top diplomatic and military activities does not only show the date of these anti-status quo events, but in fact could have helped to foresee them. To prove this hypothesis – after having introduced the methodology and sources used – three key areas in Russian-Latin American bilateral relations will be examined in depth: nuclear technology, naval and air power displays, and high-level visits.

## DATA AND METHODS

Due to the geostrategic reasons explained in the introduction, Russian government websites display a meticulous account of the country’s international relations with Latin America. This paper is based mostly on qualitative analysis of information published on the official website of the President of Russia and that of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation which make it possible to reconstruct the high-level visits between Russia and Latin American countries. The data obtained was organized in a database using *date* (year and month), *venue* (type of visit), *place* (country)

and *activity* as categories to be able to identify patterns and tendencies in top diplomatic activities between Russia and Latin America. The above information was complemented by contemporary press (mostly US and Latin American) and academic publications.

The growth of Russian presence and activities was opaqued by the advances the People’s Republic of China made to the region. “Between 2000 and 2020, China-LAC trade grew 26-fold from \$12 billion to \$315 billion” (Zhang & Prazeres 2021). Attention both on political level and in the academic field grew towards Chinese activities in Latin America, whereas little interest characterized Russian actions. Studies on Russian presence in Latin America mostly began after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War (Alvarez Herrera & Barco 2009; Blank 2009; Pavlova 2011, Smith 2009) and became more frequent after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (for example Blank & Kim 2015; Ellis 2015, Jelifets 2015; Gaetano Ciccarillo 2016; Sitenko 2016; Rouvinski 2017; Gurganus 2018; Dall’Agnol et al. 2019; Rácz 2019; Rodríguez Hernández 2019; Shuya 2019; Ellis 2022; Rouvinski & Jelifets 2022) but would not match at all the quantity of studies devoted to China’s Latin American presence.

## CONTEXT OF GROWING RUSSIAN PRESENCE IN LATIN AMERICA

Russia’s return to Latin America from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (a starting date could be Vladimir Putin’s visit to Cuba in 2000) at first did not raise worries due to a combination of factors: Russians were not completely new to the subcontinent, there used to be a Soviet presence in the region in the Cold War; Chinese activities and influence grew much more spectacularly in the 2000s than Russian ones; Russia was relatively inactive on the international sphere until 2008 (Gaetano Ciccarillo 2016, 34) and US-Russian relations were quite good at the turn of the millennium. After 9/11 Russia shut down its radar station in Cuba, followed by the closing of a surveillance centre on the island in 2003 (Blank & Kim 2015, 168).

However, with the worsening of relations between the United States and Russia, Latin America started to gain importance for Russian geopolitics (Rouvinski 2017, 8). Russian advance remained much unnoticed due to its limited nature, different spheres of presence (economic, political, cultural, etc.) and to the reduced attention of the United States towards Latin America in the so-called post-hegemonic period, which followed the Cold War and put an end to the politico-ideological considerations that used to define US foreign policy towards the region (Crandall 2011; Riggirozzi & Tussie 2012; Briceño-Ruiz & Morales 2017).

US leaders used to employ huge resources during the bipolar confrontation to keep Latin America on the anti-

communist side of the struggle (Gaetano Ciccarillo 2016, 25). After the dissolution of the Socialist Camp and the Soviet Union, US attention turned to other parts of the globe, contributing to a weakened political and economic influence over Latin America (Kostyuk 2014, 5). This tendency was reinforced after the 9/11 attacks, resulting in a “regional vacuum” (Boersner & Haluani 2011, 24).

Latin America, “neglected by the US” (Sitenko 2016, 47), was left ‘alone’, being able to experiment with alternatives it could not try out in the Cold War, which coupled with huge social inequalities, widespread poverty and discontent associated with the neoliberal economic policies contributed to the coming to power of the political Left/New Left. This ‘pink tide’ turned into a dominant trend in South America at the beginning of the 2000s and spread to the north, reaching Mexico in 2018, when for the first time in Mexican history, a progressive party candidate won (Ellner 2019). The victory of Andrés Manuel López Obrador – in office since 2018 – came at a time when conservative forces had already taken back the lead in various countries, characterized by Larrabure (2021) as a post-pink tide period. Yet the economic recession of the second half of the 2010s, combined with the multiple crises caused by the Covid pandemic led to political turns, resulting in a growing number of countries governed again by progressive political forces. The pink tide and its return could contribute to the strengthening of links between Russia and Latin American countries. In fact, the electoral successes of the Latin American political left did not affect Russian policy much. Russian leadership would have tried to open towards Latin America anyway to achieve its overall geostrategic goals. Where this political change mattered more, were the policies of Latin American countries. Progressive governments tended to be more nationalistic, more bent on regional cooperation, and they would try to reduce their dependence on the United States, by diversifying their trade and foreign policy partners, and therefore being more receptive towards Russia.

Thus, although the region is kind of a chess piece in an international strategy game played by Russia, Latin American countries could and did profit. Russia’s return to the region has been an opportunity for Latin American countries to get something they need, let it be investment; aid; arms; military advisers; niche technology related to the nuclear field, and specific trade products. Russian relations were more important for the less developed countries like Bolivia and those under sanctions such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Due to its limited capacities, it was not possible for Russia to concentrate on all Latin American countries, but only a selection of them. According to the classification established by Giles and Ellis (2017, 133), countries can be grouped into three categories: 1) traditional allies, that is countries with which the Soviet Union used to have close ties, such as Cuba and Nicaragua; 2) countries which are willing to risk a confrontational stance with the United States and

are looking for alternative partners (Venezuela, Bolivia), and 3) countries with neither bad relations with the US, nor pro-Russian sentiments, but which are considered important for a certain motive, for example trade (Brazil). Cooperation could include a combination of commercial, economic, military, and political ties. After an overview of the state-of-the-art of these links, the focus will be cast on activities meant to attract international visibility and attention: planned nuclear technology transfer; naval and air power displays and high-level visits.

## RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND LATIN AMERICA

Russia cannot compete with the United States or China with respect to overall economic output (US GDP: 20,953.0 billion; China GDP: 14,722.7 billion; Russia GDP: 1,483.5 billion USD, in 2020, *Worlddata* 2020) and share in global trade. It did experience a favourable economic trend at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, reaching its highest annual GDP growth (10%) in 2000. Average annual growth was around 7% in the period 2000–2008. This could boost confidence and provide the financial basis for more Russian activities and visibility in international matters. However, Russian economy and exports are heavily dependent on the oil market which can lead to imbalance and vulnerability (Pavlova et al. 2017, 226). The end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century brought about an abrupt recession and in the following ten years, the 2010s, the country produced only a 2.1% growth on average (*The World Bank* 2022a). It ranked 11<sup>th</sup> among the biggest economies of the world in 2020, closely followed by Brazil, situated on the 12<sup>th</sup> place. The US economic output was 14 times, and that of China 10 times higher than Russian results.

Latin America and Russia are not major trade partners. The proportion of exports and imports does not tend to surpass 1% even between Russia and the two Latin American countries it currently has most trade with (Mexico and Brazil) (see Tables 1 and 2).

Yet, there is an important feature of Russian exports to Latin America. These tend to specialize in a certain group of products for each country: steel and iron products (Mexico) and fertilizers (Brazil) (OEC 2022). Therefore, in case of interruptions or breakdown in trade relations, the lack of these goods could cause substantial challenge to the receiving countries. For example, Russia supplied 21.1% of nitrogenous fertilizers and 21.2% of potassic fertilizers imported by Brazil in 2020, whereas its share in mixed mineral and chemical fertilizers, in which Brazil is the world’s biggest importer, reached 15.5% (OEC 2022).

Russia is the second biggest arms exporter in the world. The US covered 32.2% of the world market and Russia 24.1% between 2012 and 2016 whereas for the period 2017–2021, the global share of the US reached 38.6%

% OF THE TOTAL EXPORT OF	MEXICO	BRAZIL	ARGENTINA	RUSSIA	CHINA	US
Mexico to		0.86	0.21	<b>0.21</b>	2.07	76.4
Brazil to	1.85		4.0	<b>0.73</b>	31.7	10.2
Argentina to	0.53	14		<b>1.25</b>	9.9	6.35
Russia to	<b>0.37</b>	<b>0.67</b>	<b>0.04</b>		14.9	3.59
China to	2.26	1.37	0.31	1.91		16.5
US to	14.6	2.18	0.37	0.42	9.1	

**Table 1** Proportion of exports in 2020 (Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Russia, China and the US).

Source: OEC 2022.

% OF THE TOTAL IMPORT OF	MEXICO	BRAZIL	ARGENTINA	RUSSIA	CHINA	US
Mexico from		1.08	0.08	<b>0.33</b>	16.2	53.2
Brazil from	2.28		4.78	<b>1.38</b>	22.7	18.3
Argentina from	2.17	20.4		<b>0.29</b>	19.8	11.9
Russia from	<b>0.41</b>	<b>0.71</b>	<b>0.31</b>		23	2.58
China from	0.57	4.39	0.35	3.19		7.91
US from	14.5	0.97	0.15	0.53	19.5	

**Table 2** Proportion of imports in 2020 (Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Russia, China and the US).

Source: OEC 2022.

and that of Russia 18.6% (Statista 2022). Yet again, Latin America does not feature among the major buyers of Russian military products, those are mostly sold in Asia. “From 2001 to 2013 Russia sold Latin America almost \$15 billion in arms which amounts to 40 percent of the arms purchased by the region from external actors” (House Hearing 2015). By far the most important client was Hugo Chávez’s Venezuela which alone spent around 11 billion USD (Blank & Kim 2015, 165; Rácz 2019, 5), that is, approximately three quarters of all Russian arms sales directed to the LAC region, went to this country. However, Venezuela could no longer afford such costs. The values of yearly arms exports of major conventional weapons from Russia to Venezuela in fact show zero value in the SIPRI Arms Transfer Database since 2015. Yet the South American state did make some purchases from other countries, principally China, the Netherlands and Spain (SIPRI 2022).

The whole region experienced economic stagnation in the 2010s – the average GDP growth for Latin America and the Caribbean was less than 1% for 2015–2019 (The World Bank 2022b). Whereas military purchases of Latin American countries made up 10% of global arms transfers in the period 2010–2014, when the region had an average annual 3.5% GDP growth, this share dropped to 5.7% in the years 2015–2019. During this time (2015–2019), the proportion of Latin America in Russian arms exports reached merely 0.8% (Cavanagh, 2020).

Russian arms sales have mostly been directed to Latin American allies (Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, but

all are undergoing economic crises), as well as to other interested parties, most importantly Peru and Brazil. Purchases of outstanding values were not to be expected from Latin American countries even in economically favourable periods, due to relatively low volume of military spending in general, and traditionally strong ties with US and European armament industry (Dall’Agnol et al. 2019, 131; Conolly & Sendstad 2017, 19; Jeifets & Khadorich 2022, 147). Despite the latter, there were various years during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when Russian arms sales to the region surpassed in volume US ones (Cavanagh 2020). Naturally, the US was keen to regain its position and has been the major arms supplier to the region since 2014. Yet Russian successes in the previous decade had shown that nothing can be taken for granted, and Russia would not shy away from selling arms to Latin American countries.

## NUCLEAR TECHNOLOGY

Being able to export nuclear power plants is an ability attributed to great powers with cutting-edge and frontier technologies, bringing about high international visibility. Upon signing a strategic document in 2018 on partnership on the peaceful use of nuclear energy, President Putin announced that he discussed with his counterpart, Mauricio Macri, “building a nuclear power plant in Argentina using Russian technology” (Kremlin 2018). Now, at the beginning of the 2020s, there are only three Latin American countries which have energy-generating nuclear reactors: Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. “Rosatom

has positioned itself to build nuclear power reactors in Brazil and Argentina and less realistically, in Ecuador, Peru and Paraguay” (Giles & Ellis 2017). For the countries that already use nuclear energy, adding Russian-built power plants would lessen their dependence on Western technology. For the others, it could be their entry to the so-called nuclear family of states, as well as an opportunity to fulfil aspirations of socioeconomic development and improved regional status.

Russian nuclear export has its antecedents in the Cold War when the Soviet Union exported nuclear power plants, mainly within the COMECON (Duffy 1978). There is Russian experience in this commodity, nonetheless, there might be some worries on behalf of Latin American countries with respect to using Russian technology. One is the dismay of the United States. Another is reliability. The image of safety of these reactors was seriously shaken by the 1986 Chernobyl accident. Yet it is important to note that the Chernobyl reactor is of RBMK type (graphite-moderated, using light water as a coolant), which the Soviet Union never exported as it is also capable of producing plutonium besides generating electricity (Marx 1996, 151). The Soviet/Russian export of nuclear power plants has consisted of VVER pressurized water reactors. Three, neither the Soviet Union nor Russia ever completed a nuclear power plant in Latin America. There were plans to build various nuclear plants in Cuba and the constructions started in the 1980s (Castro Díaz-Balart 1990, 49), but were abandoned due to the falling apart of the Socialist Bloc and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The transfer of nuclear technology can encompass various fields other than energy generation, such as scientific research via (near) zero-potential research reactors. In July 2021 the construction of a research reactor started in Bolivia, which would transform one of the poorest states in South America into a nuclear country by 2024 (TeleSur Tv 2021; Barrientos 2021). For the Bolivian government it is prestige, political capital and a promise of socio-economic development linked to prospective advances in healthcare, agriculture, and science. For Russia, it would be the first exported research reactor onto the American mainland. What is more, the reactor is to be placed at an altitude of 4000 metres above sea level. Therefore, the construction is likely to face various challenges, but in case it was successful, it could give a boost to Russian nuclear export to the region.

### NAVAL AND AIR POWER DISPLAYS

Russian warships and strategic bombers appeared from time to time in the Caribbean in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their presence was connected to specific international events in a worldwide power game in which Russia considered the US as its most dangerous opponent.

It was only a few months following the Russo-Georgian War, in November 2008, that for the first time after the Caribbean missile crisis of 1962, Russian warships had

manoeuvres in the region (COHA, 2012). The four-ship fleet consisted of the battlecruiser Peter the Great, the destroyer Admiral Chabanenko, a minesweeper, and a supply ship (Giles & Ellis 2017, 139). They arrived in La Guaira at the same time when the visit of Dmitri Medvedev took place, the first one a Russian president ever made to Venezuela. It was a demonstration that Russia was not isolated after the Russo-Georgian War, what is more, it was able to project strength by sending ships to the Americas. The Russian ships participated in a joint exercise with the Venezuelan navy (VENRUS-200). Afterwards the vessel Peter the Great headed for India to take part in another exercise, whereas the Admiral Chabanenko visited Panama, Nicaragua (Bluefields) and Cuba (Havana) (Polmar 2012).

The destroyer Admiral Chabanenko, together with the cruiser Moskva,<sup>3</sup> the destroyer Kulakov and a tanker, returned to Latin America in August 2013. A couple of years later, in the summer of 2019, another selection of Russian ships arrived in the Caribbean. It included the multifunctional logistics vessel Elbrus; the medium sea tanker Kama; the rescue tug Nikolai Chiker and most importantly, the guided-missile frigate, Admiral Gorshkov (Weissenstein et al. 2019). Unlike the vessels Moskva and Peter the Great, whose constructions began in the 1980s, the Admiral Gorshkov is one of the most advanced and recent ships of the Russian fleet, which entered service in 2018.

Besides the 3- or 4-ship fleets, which visited the Caribbean in 2008, 2013 and 2019, there was another Russian ship which frequented the region even more often: the Viktor Leonov intelligence-gathering vessel. It appeared in Havana in September 2012; February and March 2014; January 2015, March 2018, and March 2020 (Blank & Kim 2015, 168; Turner 2015; ABC11 News 2018; Archus 2020). The appearance of the “spy ship” caused uneasiness on the US side and could distract it from matters important for Russia. The timing of these visits is attention-grabbing.

The February 2014 trip closely followed the deployment of two US ships to the Black Sea, connected to US security concerns in relation with the Sochi Winter Olympics (Valdés 2014). The arrival of the Viktor Leonov also coincided with the declaration of Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu that his country was planning to open military bases in countries such as Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, The Seychelles, Vietnam, etc. He added that negotiations were under way not only with respect to the above-mentioned bases but also related to port visits and refuelling sites for Russian strategic bombers (Akipress 2014; Winter 2014).

The return of the Viktor Leonov to Havana in March 2014 could put further emphasis on Russian intentions. Both this (March 2014) and the previous visit (February 2014) took place during the Russian annexation of Crimea, at the height of tensions between the US and Russia.

The next arrival of the ship in Havana (January 2015) occurred only one day before the beginning of talks between the United States and Cuba on improving relations (AFP 2015). Russian presence could be interpreted both as a support for the island and as a reminder that it should not be left out of such negotiations.

The next visit in March 2018 happened immediately after the announcement of US sanctions on Russia, related to cyberattacks, for trying to interfere in the 2016 US elections (Baker 2018; Radio Televisión Martí 2018). It should not be surprising the Viktor Leonov was sent back to Cuba in 2020, during US electoral year.

Supersonic strategic bombers, capable of carrying nuclear arms were also deployed to friendly Latin American countries. Tu-160 bombers landed in Venezuela, and then returned home in 2008 (Rodríguez 2008; Strange 2008). This exercise closely followed the Russo-Georgian War, in which, according to Russian leadership, the West should not have meddled. Russia not only wanted to distract the US from the Black Sea by sending bombers to Venezuela in September and a fleet in November 2008, but there were also plans to forge an alliance between Venezuela and Ecuador, cooperating with the FARC rebels, to weaken the Colombian government, the most important US ally in South America. The Tu-160 bombers returned in October 2013 and completed the itinerary of Venezuela-Nicaragua-Venezuela (Felgenhauer 2013); a visit which preceded by only a few months the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, beginning in February 2014. Before the Ukrainian presidential elections (spring 2019) but following the escalation of tensions between Russia and Ukraine (Kerch Strait incident, 2018), two Tu-160 planes reappeared in Venezuela in December 2018; a week after Vladimir Putin had participated in the first ever G20 Summit organized in South America. That was a third-time visit by the Russian supersonic bombers in approximately a decade (Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces 2018). All in all, it is evident that naval and air power display in Latin America was closely linked to Russian foreign policy goals and imperial ambitions, whose focus fell outside the region.

### HIGH-LEVEL VISITS

Russian presidential trips to Latin America (see Table 3) took place in 2000 (Cuba), 2004 (Chile and Brazil), 2008 (Peru, Brazil, Venezuela, and Cuba), 2010 (Argentina, Brazil) 2012 (Mexico), 2014 (Cuba, Nicaragua, Argentina, Brazil), 2016 (Peru), 2018 (Argentina) and 2019 (Brazil).<sup>4</sup>

Visits – let it be state, official, or working visits – were often connected to high-level meetings held in the framework of international organizations in which Russia is a member, such as the APEC Summit (2004, 2008, 2016), BRICS Summit (2010, 2014, 2019) and the G20 Summit (2012, 2018), which provided opportunity for multilateral and bilateral negotiations. The latter

were generally conducted with non-Latin American leaders, but almost always included the head of state/government of the Latin American host country.<sup>5</sup>

Visits by the Russian president became more frequent in the 2010s. There were three trips between 2000 and 2009 and six between 2010 and 2019. Out of the total of nine trips, five were directed into one country only, while the rest included two or more states of destination. The two most complex visits, involving the highest number of countries, took place after conflicts in which Russia had participated. Following the Russo-Georgian War, President Medvedev paid a visit to Latin America in November 2008, covering four countries: two potential partners, Peru and Brazil, and two allies, Venezuela and Cuba. Six years later, it was in July 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, that President Putin embarked on a four-country trip. It had a similar pattern, including two allies, Cuba and Nicaragua and two countries Russia views as potential partners, Argentina and Brazil.

The Latin American trip of Medvedev was special not only because of the timing but also because of its scope. It started in Peru (APEC Leaders' Meeting), then continued in Brazil, in Venezuela (ALBA Summit) and finished in Cuba. Besides holding consultations with Lula (Brazil), Hugo Chávez (Venezuela) and Raúl Castro (Cuba), Medvedev also met top political leaders of ALBA member states, including the presidents of Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, and Nicaragua (Gurganus 2018, 5).

The importance of Latin America grew for Russia with the deterioration of its links to the US. Therefore, Russia openly manifested its strengthening Latin American connections not only by trips its leaders made to the region, but also via inviting Latin American top politicians to Moscow. Only in 2009 (year following the Russo-Georgian War) Russia hosted six Latin American presidents (Table 5). High-level visits did not only contribute to improving mutual relations – principally used as a tool on the international scene vis-à-vis the US – but also had impacts on Russian internal affairs, bolstering national pride (Giles & Ellis, 2017, 132) as well as support for a government that made Russia a centre for diplomatic activities and restored 'its natural position' as a principal global player (Sánchez 2010, 365; Pavlova 2011, 63; Jeifets 2015, 104; Ellis 2015, 8).

Visits by Russian ministers of foreign affairs to Latin America have been recurrent,<sup>6</sup> and grew in frequency and geographical scope from the first to the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (see Table 4).<sup>7</sup> Countries not visited by a Russian foreign minister – Bolivia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Panama, and Paraguay – count more like exceptions. Trips covered various countries, both allies and potential partners, showing a concentration towards Cuba. Not only the number of visits is the highest in case of the island, but there are more trips by the Russian side compared to travels in the opposite direction. This stands in contrast with the general

YEAR	MONTH	VISIT TO	VENUE	TOP-LEVEL BILERAL MEETING WITH	
2000	Dec	Cuba	State visit	Cuban leader, Fidel Castro	
2004	Nov	Chile	APEC Summit		
			Official visit	President Ricardo Lagos	
2008	Nov	Peru	Official visit	President Luis Inacio Lula da Silva	
			APEC Summit		
			Official visit	President Luis Inacio Lula da Silva	
			Official visit	President Hugo Chávez	
			ALBA Summit	President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, President Evo Morales of Bolivia, President Manuel Zelaya of Honduras, President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua, President Rafael Correa of Ecuador, Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Dominica Roosevelt Skerrit, and Vice President of the Council of Ministers of Cuba Ricardo Cabrisas	
		Cuba	Visit	President of the Council of State and Council of Ministers, Raúl Castro	
2010	Apr	Argentina	Official visit	President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner	
			Brazil	BRICS Summit	President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva
2012	June	Mexico	G20 Summit (inc. BRICS meeting)		
			bilateral meeting	President Dilma Rousseff of Brazil	
2014	July	Cuba	Official visit	Cuban leader, Raúl Castro	
			Nicaragua	Visit	President Daniel Ortega
			Argentina	Official visit	President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner
				Official lunch	President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, President José Mujica of Uruguay
			Brazil	BRICS Summit	
				BRICS leaders' meeting with South American heads of State	South American heads of State, inc. President Ollanta Humala of Peru, President Michelle Bachelet of Chile and President Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia
				bilateral meeting	President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela
				bilateral meeting	President Evo Morales of Bolivia
			bilateral meeting	President José Mujica of Uruguay	
			Official visit	President Dilma Rousseff	
2016	Nov	Peru	APEC Summit		
			Working visit	President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski	
2018	Nov-Dec	Argentina	G20 Summit (inc. BRICS meeting)		
			Visit	President Mauricio Macri	
2019	Nov	Brazil	BRICS Summit		
			Visit	President Jair Bolsonaro	

**Table 3** Trips of Russian presidents to Latin America (2000–2020).

Source: Author's own compilation based on President of Russia's Website. Trips. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/trips>.

tendency: more trips by Latin American foreign ministers to Russia than vice versa. Besides Cuba, there is only one country where the number of Russian visits has been higher than visits in the opposite direction: Peru – which is a clear manifestation of Russian interest. Three visits by Sergey Lavrov to this Andean country – opposed to one in return –, plus a presidential visit, make it obvious

that Russia would like to intensify ties. But Russia is not the only one. Peru is a key country for China as a state rich in copper reserves and a gateway to South America: a transit to China's most important trade partner in the region, Brazil.

In the last twenty years it has become increasingly common for Latin American foreign ministers to make



	VISIT TO RUSSIA BY FOREIGN MINISTER – NO.	VISIT TO RUSSIA BY FOREIGN MINISTER – YEARS	VISITED BY RUSSIAN FOREIGN MINISTER – NO.	VISITED BY RUSSIAN FOREIGN MINISTER – YEARS	MEETINGS OF FOREIGN MINISTERS ON THE SIDELINES OF THE UNGA HIGH-LEVEL WEEK, IN NEW YORK – NO.
Argentina	4	2011, 2014, 2016, 2017	3	2003, 2006, 2013	4
Bolivia	4	2011, 2016, 2017, 2021	0	no	4
Brazil	7	2005, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013 Sept, 2013 Nov, 2022	3	2003, 2013, 2019	6
Colombia	2	2010, 2019	1	2015	6
Costa Rica	0	no	0	no	2
Cuba	3	2008, 2013, 2019	6	2004, 2010, 2014, 2015, 2019, 2020	11
Chile	2	2009, 2015	1	2014	1
Ecuador	3	2009, 2016, 2018	1	2008	4
El Salvador	3	2010, 2015, 2017	1	2011	1
Guatemala	3	2013, 2016, 2021	2	2010, 2015	2
Honduras	2	2013, 2021	0	no	2
Mexico	4	2008, 2011, 2017, 2021	3	2005, 2010, 2020	5
Nicaragua	3	2007, 2019, 2021	3	2010, 2014, 2015	5
Panama	0	no	0	no	1
Paraguay	2	2010, 2016	0	no	no
Peru	1	2012	3	2007, 2011, 2014	3
Uruguay	3	2006, 2010, 2020	1	2007	2
Venezuela	8	2008, 2014 May, 2014 Oct, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2021 June, 2021 Nov	2	2011, 2020	4

**Table 4** Meetings and visits of foreign ministers (2000–2021) between Russia and Latin American countries.

Source: Author's own calculation based on The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. News. [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/).

PRESIDENT	COUNTRY	MONTH/YEAR
Cristina Fernández de Kirchner	Argentina	12/2008
Daniel Ortega	Nicaragua	12/2008
Raúl Castro	Cuba	01-02/2009
Evo Morales	Bolivia	02/2009
Michelle Bachelet	Chile	04/2009
Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva	Brazil	06/2009
Hugo Chávez	Venezuela	09/2009
Rafael Correa	Ecuador	10/2009

**Table 5** Visits of Latin American presidents to Russia (2008 Dec–2009 Dec).

Source: author's own compilation based on <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/by-date/>.

visits to Russia. The number of visits more than doubled comparing the time periods 2000–2010 and 2011–2020. Venezuelan and Brazilian ministers travelled the most.

Although it has been said that Latin America is an instrument for Russia, this does not make Latin American countries mere passive recipients of Russian influence, as they would try to make the best of this old/new external actor in the region and achieve some of their national goals based on Russian ambitions. Their enthusiasm for ties with Russia manifests that they also profit from these relations, let it be in the field of trade, investment, internal and or international politics.

## CONCLUSIONS

The 'race for Latin America' was mostly a result of growing antagonism between the US and the Soviet Union in the Cold War, and now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is closely connected to the chilly US-Russian relations. Whereas the background is similar, the purpose of Russian presence in the region is different. In the Cold War Latin America was yet another terrain for the Soviet Union to fight its arch-rival, the United States with the eventual goal of winning

the bipolar struggle. Now, thirty years after the demise of the Soviet Union, Latin America is a means for Russia to avoid international isolation after activities that Russian leadership considers crucial to ‘restore security’, seen as aggressive and anti-status quo by the West: the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The intensity of Russian-Latin American ties might be used as a kind of thermometer for the quality of relations between Russia and the US, or Russia and the West in general. The Russo-Georgian War in August 2008 was the first occasion when Russian leadership resorted to military means to achieve political goals, including the frustration of the NATO membership of Georgia, by destabilizing it and establishing Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It was crucial for Russia to make sure that it would not be ostracised from the international system and to distract the US from the Caucasus. Consequently, activities were stepped up with Latin America *after* the Russo-Georgian War. Moscow visits by Latin American foreign ministers (Venezuela, Mexico, Cuba) were scheduled for autumn 2008. In September Tu-160 supersonic bombers flew from Russia to Latin America and back. Later in November, a four-ship Russian fleet arrived in Venezuela to do joint training, at the same time as President Medvedev got there on his four-country trip. His visit was followed by trips of eight Latin American presidents to Russia within the course of one year (Table 5).

In case of the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, more opposition could be expected from the US, and the West in general. Therefore the ‘Latin America tool’ was resorted to both *before* and *after* the annexation.

Russian activities were stepped up in Latin America from spring 2013 and included the visit of Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov to Cuba and Nicaragua (April) and the official visits of Foreign Secretary Sergey Lavrov to Argentina and Brazil (June). A fleet of Russian warships visited the region in August, followed by Tu-160 bombers in October. The same month Defence Minister Shoigu visited Brazil and Peru to promote arms sales (Moscow Times 2013), followed by the announcement in February 2014 that Russia was planning to open military bases in various Latin American countries (Keck 2014). In a parallel way, the Viktor Leonov intelligence-gathering vessel re-appeared in Havana in February and in March 2014.

After the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, Russian leadership was keen to reinforce its relations with Latin America. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov embarked on a four-country visit in April, followed by President Vladimir Putin in July. He met ten Latin American leaders, making it the most comprehensive series of meetings a Russian president has ever had in the region. In 2015 the Russian Defence Minister returned to Latin America for a three-country visit (Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba) (Litovkin 2015), and the Foreign Minister carried out a four-country trip.

The intensity of Russo-Latin American relations started to grow significantly from summer 2021. A key showcase project, the construction of a nuclear research reactor started in Bolivia in July 2021. Visits by various Latin American foreign ministers to Russia were scheduled to 2021: Mexico (April), Honduras (April), Guatemala (June), Venezuela (June), Nicaragua (July) Bolivia (October) and Venezuela (in November, for the second time in the same year). At the beginning of 2022, visits by Latin American presidents followed: Alberto Fernández (Argentina) and Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), taking place on 3 February and on 15–17 February respectively. In a parallel way, Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, Jury Borisov visited key allies on 16–18 February 2022: Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba (Lozano 2022). This kind of ‘hyperactivity’ in Russian-Latin American nexus in the second half of 2021 and beginning of 2022, driven by Moscow, should have been a warning sign with respect to Ukraine. Looking back, it was clearly a preparation for the invasion.

## NOTES

- 1 On the other hand, there exists certain mistrust towards Russia for not keeping commitments from Soviet times and abruptly withdrawing from Latin America in the 1990s, that impacted the countries in the region in a negative way, in particular Cuba (Jeifets & Andreev 2022, 210; Jeifets & López Arevalo 2022, 223).
- 2 Venezuela has the biggest crude oil estimated reserves in the world and it figures among the top ten with respect to gas reserves. It is rich in minerals (gold, diamond, coltan, bauxite and uranium ore).
- 3 The Moskva was sunk in April 2022 in the Russo-Ukrainian War.
- 4 Presidents of the Russian Federation: Vladimir Putin (2000–2008), Dmitri Medvedev (2008–2012), Vladimir Putin (2012–).
- 5 The primary source of travel data in these paragraphs is the website of the President of the Russian Federation, unless indicated otherwise.
- 6 Position held by Igor Ivanov (1998–2004) and Sergey Lavrov (2004–).
- 7 The primary source of data on visits which figure in these paragraphs is the webpage Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATION

**Mónika Szente-Varga**  [orcid.org/0000-0001-7403-6960](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7403-6960)  
Ludovika – University of Public Service, HU

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