After neglecting Latin America for over a decade, Russia has recently displayed pronounced interest in expanding its presence in the region. This article aims to examine Russia’s contemporary foreign policy towards Latin America and to define whether Moscow’s new strategy is a continuation of the former Soviet presence in the region or whether Russia has introduced some new elements. After identifying the motives behind Moscow’s renewed interest, the authors analyse the issue with a focus on diplomatic, economic and military activities. The article concludes that despite the tangible progress, there are still many limitations, including conceptual ones. Moreover, Moscow faces keen political and economic competition in the region, from actors old – such as the United States – and new – such as China.

Latin America’s position in the system of international relations has changed significantly at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The region has become an important player in world politics. A new Cold War between the Russian Federation and the West has emerged because of serious disagreements over the Ukraine and the aggravation of political and economic situation in world affairs, which has had a negative effect on the Russian economy, making Moscow seek a new balance of trade and geopolitical allies. Strengthening its ties with Latin America could provide Russia with a lifeline through the diversification of trade flows and could replace European goods in the Russian market.

KEYWORDS
Russia
Latin America
relationship
trade
cooperation
arms sales

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However, leading Latin American states are also facing serious internal tensions and political changes that are likely to affect relations between Russia and its partners in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). The fall in the price of oil has an effect not only on Russia but also on its main Latin American political partner, Venezuela, where there is no end in sight to the political instability and economic meltdown. In Argentina, the former president, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who was friendly to Moscow, has been charged with defrauding the state, while the strategy of her successor, Mauricio Macri, clearly aims to chart a new course for Argentinian relations with both its neighbours and major world players. After the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, who was accused of breaking fiscal laws, Brazil has disappeared from the latest Russian Federation’s latest Foreign Policy Concept (2016).

The LAC is currently agitated and regional political heterogeneity is on the rise. Despite the re-election of Nicaraguan President, Daniel Ortega, in 2016 and the victory of the leftist candidate of Rafael Correa’s Alianza País, Lenin Moreno, in 2017, the left in Latin America, which are sympathetic to Russia, are losing ground in the region. Therefore, our aim is to analyse how Russian foreign policy towards the LAC is changing in the face of this volatile political and economic scenario.

Based on a literature review and a survey of documents and available statistical data, and the analysis of official statements, the aim of this article is to contribute towards a more profound and vivid understanding of Russia’s policy in Latin America.

There is no doubt that Latin America is a diverse region, and that the variety of political and economic orientations in the continent suggest fragmentation while modern geopolitical shifts are increasingly weakening inter-Latin American ties. However, following existing scientific and Russian foreign policy traditions, we believe it necessary to treat LAC as a single region, particularly since the creation of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), which seeks to promote its own regional identity, is turning LAC into one of the poles in the emerging multipolar world, which is heightening Moscow’s interest in the region.

The research methodology is based on various forms of analysis: retrospective, comparative and systemic, with elements of event data analysis, statistical analysis, content analysis and case study. The article focuses on the list of Latin American states that have declared themselves to be regional strategic partners of Russia: Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Peru and Venezuela.

We note that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the main component of Russian-Latin American ties has moved towards trade and economy; however, the political aspects largely determine the special nature and the relatively small scale of the economic relations between Russia and LAC.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Despite the long-standing relationship between Latin American countries and the Soviet Union, the nature of these ties remained largely formal. Although there were breakthroughs in some areas, the majority of contacts were politically determined. Under the bipolar system, the fact of its dependence on the United States prevented Latin America from establishing extensive connections with Soviet Russia.
The dualism of Soviet foreign policy diplomacy, together with the implementation of a revolutionary line, had spatial and regional limits. Moscow continued to maintain outstanding economic relations with Argentina, where the right-wing military government pursued a ‘dirty war’ policy against left-wing militants (while breaking off relations with Chile after the 1973 coup). The absence of a political partnership did not prevent Moscow from developing trade relations with Peru. After 1961 Cuba became a fortress for Soviet influence in Latin America.

During the 1990s, as Russia faced serious economic problems and dramatically redirected its foreign policy towards the United States and Europe, Moscow lost all interest in Latin America and cut its ties with Cuba. Moscow abandoned about 500 major unfinished projects, stopped supplying energy and considerably cut purchases of raw materials from the island. Russian Foreign Minister, Andrei Kozyrev (1990–96), postponed his trip to the region three times before finally cancelling it. During that period commercial transactions with the LAC became increasingly rare and irregular; these facts led to a deterioration in Moscow’s image, creating the impression of Russia as a disloyal partner (even in countries opposed to Castro’s regime). Moscow’s abrupt decision to close the Lourdes Electronic Radar Station in Havana in 2001 strengthened these perceptions of Russia as a minor and uncritically minded partner of the West.

At the end of 1990s there were a number of sporadic attempts to ‘return’ to the region. The visit of Evgeni Primakov – head of Russia’s Foreign Ministry – to Latin America in 1996–97 resulted in agreements with Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil (in this case a ‘strategic partnership for the 21st century’ was mentioned for the first time) and Colombia. After his tour, Primakov declared that relations with the LAC were part of a new independent Russian foreign policy direction that had considerable potential (Bain 2008: 129–30).

There were two reasons for Moscow’s more active engagement with Latin America under Primakov’s ministry. First, it was intended to provide political support for Russian energy and military-industrial companies (Rouvinski 2015: 21). In fact, it was the result of a request from the Russian political establishment and business community for the state to take a more active global to promote Russia’s interests, especially commercial interests. Second, one should take Primakov’s personality into account. He formulated the concept of a multipolar world and strongly supported a multi-vector approach, with Russia’s foreign policy towards Latin America being one of such vectors (while his predecessor, Kozyrev, had insisted on Russia becoming part of the coalition of ‘civilized Western nations’ [Tsygankov 2010: 6376–77]).

The selection of partners on a non-ideological basis was definitely a step forward. Yet, this new policy towards Latin America was not fully implemented. While the frequency of reciprocal official visits between Russia and the region did increase substantially, many of the agreements have remained unimplemented.

**RUSSIA: TOWARDS A NEW POLICY IN THE REGION**

After years of dualistic Soviet policy towards the region, it took time for the new Russian political elite to understand the Soviet legacy and move to a new pattern of relations for the 21st century.
Moscow could not overlook the fact that since the 1990s ever more LAC countries had expressed a desire to play a more active and independent part in world politics. In 1999, the Rio Group denounced NATO’s bombing of Yugoslavia, which it claimed was a flagrant violation of the United Nations (UN) Charter (Davydov 2009: 203). In 2003, Chile and Mexico – the non-permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) – contributed towards the rejection of the British-American resolution authorizing military action in Iraq.

A change in Russian views about relations with the LAC was a result of geopolitical concerns: from Moscow’s perspective, Latin America is a key geopolitical region in a multipolar world. Brazil, the largest country in the region, plays a particularly important role with its claim for a permanent seat on the UNSC, and its membership of BRICS – a group of emerging economies that strongly advocate the multipolar world order. Argentina, Brazil and México are also members of the G20.

In 2008, Nicaragua became one the first countries to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia during the war in the Southern Caucasus. In December 2008, 33 LAC heads of state and of government urged the United States to lift its embargo against Cuba. In June 2009, as a result of an initiative of several Latin American countries, the Organization of American States (OAS) adopted a resolution lifting the suspension of Cuba’s membership. In 2011, the ALBA countries agreed on a special declaration of ALBA-TCP Foreign Ministers on the situation in Libya and Syria.

Russian reaction to Latin America’s renewed activity in global affairs represented a turning point in Kremlin policy towards the region. In November 2008, President Dmitry Medvedev visited Peru, Brazil, Venezuela and Cuba, and called Latin American countries ‘friends, with whom Russia maintains special relations’ (RG 2008). In addition to the presidential visit to Latin America, Russia’s Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, and the Secretary of Russia’s Security Council, Nikolay Patrushev, made official visits to several countries in 2008 to upgrade ties with the continent.

In November 2008, a squadron of Russian naval ships was sent to the westem hemisphere. These vessels took part in joint exercises with Venezuela. At the same time, two Russian Tu-160 (‘Blackjack’) strategic bombers crossed the Atlantic and landed in Venezuela. These activities were significant for at least three reasons: for the first time since the end of the Cold War, Russian bombers had landed in the western hemisphere, it was the first time the Russian navy had taken part in surface operations in the region (Weitz 2010: 33) and it was the first time since the Second World War that a Russian warship had sailed through the Panama Canal. Similar activities took place in April 2013 during a ‘friendly visit’ to Nicaragua. Since 2008, Russian ships have regularly called in to Havana. However, these activities are of no military significance, with the purpose seeming to be to offer an effective demonstration of Russia’s readiness to ‘return to Latin America’.

One should agree with Vladimir Rouvinski that the term ‘return’ is inaccurate since the Russian objectives only partially match those pursued by the Soviet Union (Rouvinski 2015). The region diversified its economic and political ties rapidly because of the crisis in the European economy and the uncertain economic situation in the United States. Russia cannot remain on the sidelines if it does not want to be a marginal player in the western hemisphere.

Apart from journalistic metaphors, Russia’s activities in the region objectively established the limits of cooperation. Expanding relations with Latin
RUSSIA AND LATIN AMERICA: PARTNERS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

In 2008, the Russian Federation foreign policy concept stressed the importance of a strategic partnership with Brazil and the broadening of political and economic cooperation with Argentina, Mexico, Cuba and Venezuela, and, in the latest version of the document, Nicaragua. Russia repeatedly states that it considers Latin America to be a growing centre of influence in international affairs and continuously acknowledges the similarities between the Russian and Latin American approaches.

As the Russia’s foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, notes, Russia and Latin America are natural allies on issues such as the need to ensure the supremacy of international law, the strengthening of multilateral mechanisms for solving international problems, the reinforcement of the central role of the United Nations and in seeking collective answers to modern challenges. One can trace the similarity of views on reforming the world financial architecture, the importance of respecting the cultural and civilizational diversity of the world and preventing splits along the civilizational basis (Lavrov 2009).

Russia’s 2013 Foreign Policy concept placed the LAC after North Korea, Mongolia and Afghanistan. Despite the fact that only African countries followed Latin America, the document referred to the strategic nature of relationships with certain Latin American countries. The latest edition of Russia’s Foreign Policy concept (2016) pays less attention to the LAC.

The major problem, therefore, is conceptual: Latin America remains beyond Russian foreign policy priorities. In fact, shifts in the regional political balance have resulted in a degree of politically driven rollback.

Nevertheless, Russia has set its sights on much deeper cooperation that seeks to ensure a persistent positive growth in trade and a mutually profitable inter-regional partnership. Russia and the LAC do not compete directly in economic terms: at least for now their economies are complementary.

Moscow tends to develop relations on a bilateral basis, which can be considered a traditional element of Russian foreign policy strategy, while cooperation with regional trade and political blocks such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is conducted through Russia–CELAC political mechanisms.

The other means of ensuring friendly bilateral relations is Russia’s respect for the sovereignty of LAC countries. For instance, when Brazil’s President Dilma Rousseff was being impeached the Russian Foreign Ministry called it an ‘internal matter’ (MFA of Russia 2016), emphasizing the country’s compliance with the country’s legal framework and refusing to interfere. Similar statements were made on the impeachment of Paraguay’s president in 2012. During the Honduran coup d’état of 28 June 2009, Russia claimed that the solution should have been found within the framework of constitutional legitimacy. Russia is also particularly concerned with instability in Venezuela.

However, the core idea promoted by Russia’s Foreign Ministry is its unwillingness to accept foreign interventions and its unconditional respect for the
2. Particularly insofar as the concept is not new: The first Soviet ambassador to Mexico, Stanislav Pestkovsky, took an active part in the development of the American Anti-Imperialist League and interpreted its development as a way to ensure the spread of communist influence and revolutionary progress.

3. Venezuela was elected to serve as a non-permanent member on UNSC in 2015 and 2016.

4. Uruguay was elected to serve as a non-permanent member on UNSC in 2016 and 2017.

country’s constitution. All these examples are evidence of the consistency of the Kremlin’s position on matters related to the region’s political development. Tensions between a number of LAC countries and the United States, and the explicit or latent desire to use anti-imperialist rhetoric to strengthen Moscow’s position in the geopolitical confrontation with Washington may be tempting. However, Russia’s relationships with the LAC countries do not tend to be based on ideology. For example, Moscow abandoned its plans to seek associate member status of ALBA because it viewed that organization as being too left-wing.

While it is safe to assume that the 2008 Georgian crisis and the consequent tensions between Russia and the United States gave Moscow cause to re-evaluate its Latin American policy, the 2014 Ukraine crisis that led to the United States and European Union imposing sanctions on Russia gave Moscow even more reason to expand its presence in Latin America.

On 27 March 2014 Cuba, Bolivia, Venezuela and Nicaragua were among the eleven countries that voted against draft resolution A/68/L.39 (condemning Russia’s actions in the Crimea) at the UN General Assembly (UNGA), while thirteen Latin American countries supported the resolution with the remainder abstaining. Almost half of the states that supported Russia were from Latin America. Soon after the vote, the heads of state of Argentina and Ecuador, countries that had abstained in the UNGA, expressed their support for Russia over the Ukrainian crisis (Sudarev 2014).

Of course, Russia’s strategic interests in Latin America differ from state to state. The most important matter for Moscow was the opinion of Brazil, Argentina and Mexico, the largest economies in the region (number one, three and two, respectively). Two abstained at the UNGA, while no Latin American government supported the imposition of sanctions against Russia, with Bolivia’s President Evo Morales calling sanctions ‘economic terrorism’ (RT International 2014).

In the spring of 2014 Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Cuba, Chile, Peru and Nicaragua. Two of these countries supported Russia in the UNGA vote, while the other two did not. Moscow was clearly trying to show that the vote should not be correlated with political or economic cooperation. In the case of Chile, the fact that the country had been elected to the Security Council for the period 2014–15 was taken into account, demonstrating that pragmatism and a multi-vector approach are becoming the main drivers for Russia’s new regional strategy. This is in line with the aspiration of moderate regional governments to differentiate political and economic cooperation.

Beyond supporting Russia’s stance in Georgia and the Ukraine, LAC countries often support Russia’s international initiatives within the framework of different international organizations, including the UN. The most obvious examples of this were resolutions countering the glorification of Nazism on the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the strengthening of confidence-building measures in space, the development of and cooperation in international information security, road safety and human rights, to name a few. Russia, Venezuela, Uruguay, China and some other countries created a strong group of associates on human rights issues that has been working within the Security Council to depoliticize these issues and to ensure an equal and respectful dialogue on all aspects of human rights.

In turn, Moscow has also offered its support to Latin American countries on issues that they are concerned about. For instance, Russia fully supports...
Brazil’s claims for a permanent seat on the Security Council and Argentina’s claim against the United Kingdom over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).

Latin American positions on the crisis in the Ukraine remain unchanged.

Subsequent UNGA votes on the Crimea show that left-wing governments (Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia) actively support Russia, while right-wing governments (Costa Rica, Guatemala and Panama) oppose Moscow.

The position of the region’s leading countries is moderate. In our opinion, the reason for this is quite clear: on the one hand, protection of human rights and international law is a significant element of Latin American international posture but on the other, the majority of governments in Latin America are neutral towards documents with a pro-American stance because supporting them can affect relations with Moscow.

It is clear that cooperation based primarily on ideology is limited. Therefore, Russia maintains diplomatic relations with each Latin American country, develops high-level diplomacy and uses the concept of ‘strategic partnership’ to establish different contacts with the region. In fact, Russian foreign policy in Latin America centres on three groups of states: (1) ALBA countries, (2) leading regional economies and countries actively participating in global affairs and (3) close US partners. Pragmatism forms the basis of the relationship with all of them; however, the scale of interactions differs drastically.

**TRADE AND COOPERATION**

We need to differentiate various aspects of Russian cooperation with LAC countries. Trade, security, increased cooperation in hi-tech areas, including energy and technology, and humanitarian ties are chief among Moscow’s interests. Setting aside Russian–Latin American humanitarian ties, we will look at Russia’s other priorities in the region.

All the Russian activities mentioned, including joint military exercises, warships and strategic bombers in the western Hemisphere, were intended to help open new markets for Russian arms sales and to promote military technical cooperation (MTC), rather than just demonstrating Russia’s military potential per se. There has been some success in this score, with Venezuela purchasing more than three-quarters of the $14.5 billion worth of Russian arms sold in the region between 2001 and 2013 (Berman 2014). Military equipment has been sold to Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, while Mexico has purchased a number of helicopters for its police forces.

Russian–Venezuelan relations were established during the ‘Bolivarian project’ of President Hugo Chávez (1999–2013). At the start of the decade, key areas of bilateral economic cooperation were determined, and included oil and gas, chemicals and petrochemicals, the joint development of natural resources and MTC.

However, one must be aware that Russia’s relations with Venezuela and Nicaragua really began to take shape later, and were triggered to a large extent because of their position on the Russia-Georgian conflict and diplomatic recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In 2008, Chávez repeatedly referred to the ‘revival of Russia’ (Anon. 2008). It was therefore unsurprising that Russia responded to the flattery by promising to continue military cooperation with Venezuela. High-level diplomacy was activated as a means of demonstrating Russia’s gratitude for its support of Moscow’s foreign policy.

It is worth noticing that not all radical left-wing regimes in Latin America were ready to adopt such measures. Despite the statement of the Cuban revolutionary leader Fidel Castro over the ‘illegal actions’ of Georgian ‘militants,

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5. Russian presidents paid eight visits to Latin America (2000–17), visiting nine countries, including Brazil (four times), Argentina (twice) and Cuba (twice). This activity contrasts markedly with Soviet times – Soviet leaders Leonid Brezhnev and Mikhail Gorbachev visited the region (Cuba) only twice. Also, official contacts between different branches of power have developed effectively.

6. In 2008 Brazil agreed to purchase twelve Mi-35M helicopters, according to unofficial data published in the Brazilian media, for a total cost of $3 million.
armed to the teeth by the United States’ in relation to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the declaration of the legitimacy of Russia’s intervention (Castro 2008), Cuba did not consider offering the new states any diplomatic recognition.

Activation of MTC with Nicaragua was also an attempt to renew the extent of Soviet cooperation (up to 90 per cent of Nicaraguan military machinery was made in the Soviet Union). Russia has supplied Nicaragua with a wide array of military equipment, including T-72 tanks. Moscow has also established a centre in which to train police from all over Central America to combat the drugs industry. Some experts see this as an attempt by Russia to displace US counter-narcotics efforts in the western hemisphere (Farah and Reyes 2015: 113). In 2014 a new integrated training centre for Mi-17V-5 helicopter operators was launched. Russia also helped build an ammunition disposal plant and provided equipment for a topographic centre in Nicaragua. In 2017, a Russian Global Navigation Satellite System (GLONASS) station was opened on the outskirts of Managua and another is expected to be established in Cuba.

Moscow maintains close political and military cooperation with Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela, which explains the proximity of attitudes of these partners on issues of global and regional security.

During a visit to Cuba in 2014, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin confirmed the write-off of 90 per cent of Cuba’s $35.2 billion debt to the Soviet Union and spoke about Moscow’s commercial interest in helping establish a major transport hub on the island (Putin 2014). This trip to Cuba became an apparent attempt to restore Russia’s presence on the island: an important task in the face of growing commercial competition with the EU and China. The two countries reached an agreement on the construction of two thermal power plants worth $1 billion. Nevertheless, a breakthrough in the MTC is unlikely as Cuba remains committed to the non-aligned movement and has no military plans. However, in 2015 Havana did purchase two Russian Mi-17 helicopters. Now the two countries are discussing the possibility of manufacturing ANSAT helicopters in Cuba, as a way of promoting this model across Latin America.

There are about 500 and counting military and commercial Russian-made helicopters in Latin America. Russian helicopters can be found in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua and Peru. A regional centre for the maintenance and repair of helicopters in Peru is expected to be finished in 2018.

Peru is one of the traditional Russian arms buyers since the Soviet era and it continues to buy Russian-made military equipment. According to the deputy director general of Rostec, Dmitry Yarygin, Russian–Peruvian cooperation could be enhanced through military and civil technology transfers (Anon. 2015).

Colombia purchased Russian military helicopters for the first time during the 1990s, a clear intrusion into the US sphere of influence. In 2013 the Colombian government agreed to the purchase of ten more helicopters, and a new deal has been under discussion since 2017. If the two countries are able to achieve a new level of relationship, then this would be a good way for Russia to demonstrate its political, geopolitical and economic interests. If the relationship does blossom, then a kind of Venezuela-Colombia axis would be created. These countries are two sides of the same coin, being large and economically important partners with different political systems. Bogotá, in turn, clearly intends to use Russia as a lobbyist within APEC as a way of lifting the moratorium on the organization’s expansion and allow Colombia to become a member.

However, Russian-Latin American cooperation cannot be reduced to high-level visits and arm sales alone. Moscow is particularly interested in the
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<td>LAC</td>
<td>Import</td>
<td>1 201</td>
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<td>8 044</td>
<td>10 059</td>
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<td>Export</td>
<td>978</td>
<td>6 266</td>
<td>10 615</td>
<td>6 028</td>
<td>4 800</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total trade</td>
<td>2 180</td>
<td>15 297</td>
<td>18 659</td>
<td>16 087</td>
<td>12 487</td>
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<tr>
<td>World</td>
<td>Import</td>
<td>33 880</td>
<td>267 051</td>
<td>314 945</td>
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<td>103 092</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total trade</td>
<td>136 972</td>
<td>735 045</td>
<td>842 211</td>
<td>784 482</td>
<td>526 689</td>
<td>467 748</td>
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Table 1: Russian products export and import in millions of US dollars.
However, close political ties and long-term interests (cumulative Russian investments in Venezuela amounted to $4.4bn) determine Russia’s policy: bilateral projects in different spheres continue, while political support for Venezuela remains secure, moderate and pragmatic.

possibilities of selling its own innovative technology products in Latin American markets. Russia exports a number of special transport facilities (construction equipment) to the region, including metals and radar equipment, etc. At the same time, many agricultural and food products from the LAC (bananas, soybeans, beef, cane sugar, cut flowers, raw tobacco, poultry, pork etc.) are sold to the Russian market. However, one of the most important goals of bilateral trade is to diversify this product range.

Moscow’s turnover with LAC countries increased from $2.2 billion in 2000 to $18.6bn in 2013. However, there has been a fall in recent years, caused mainly by the economic situation in both Russia and across Latin America (see Table 1).

While Russia has attempted to establish closer economic ties with a number of partners in the region, economic relations at present are dominated by Moscow’s engagement with Brazil and Mexico, which combined represent almost half of Russia’s trade with the region. In 2016 trade between Russia and Latin America was around $12.1 billion, with the top three trading partners being Brazil ($4.3bn), Mexico ($1.7bn) and Ecuador ($1.4bn). The others include Argentina ($0.84bn), Chile ($0.6bn), Peru ($0.3bn) and Venezuela ($0.33bn). Following the slowdown of the Russian economy Russian–Latin American trade has decreased in real terms, although Russia’s trade balance with the LAC increased from 2 per cent in 2014 to 2.5 per cent in 2016. The decline in trade with Venezuela should not be seen as a trend. Despite the grave political and economic crisis, one should note that the majority of bilateral trade was the result of arms sales, while nowadays the composition of trade between Russia and each of its LAC partners varies from partner to partner.

According to the United Nations International Trade Statistics Database, in 2016 more than 70% of Russian export to Brazil were chemicals, more than 20% were fuels, while 76% of its exports to Mexico were metals, and 40% of its exports to Venezuela was machinery and electronics. Most of Latin American exports to Russia were animal, vegetable and food products, while 43% of its imports from Mexico were machinery and electronics, with 18% transportation. The importance of some Latin American countries for Russia on selected commodities is great: Brazil is the largest Russian export market for fertilizers, the largest import market for meat and tobacco and the second largest for sugars and sugar confectionary. Ecuador is Russia’s biggest supplier of fruits, while Paraguay, a country that has recently established trade and economic relations with Moscow, has become one of Russia’s main beef suppliers.

The new context of trade between Russia and the West has encouraged trade between Russia and those LAC countries that produce the necessary commodities to replace western produce for the Russian food market. This caused serious concern within the EU business community (Oliver 2014), while Latin American food industry representatives expressed their willingness to substantially increase exports to Russia.

Unfortunately, Russia’s trade with the LAC does not include many long-term projects. Also, the structure of Russian exports to Latin America has not undergone any essential changes and still includes too small a percentage of technology.

The high level of political representation of Russia in the region still does not correspond to a modest volume of trade cooperation. Russia is still limited in its resources (particularly investment). It is clear that the cooperation with the second largest economy in the region – Mexico – is insufficient.
CHINA IN LATIN AMERICA: LESSONS FOR RUSSIA

China maintains close relationships with a number of states in the region, including Russia’s strategic partners. Over the last decade LAC has turned into a strategically important region for China, while Beijing has become a key Latin American partner.

China focused on trade and investments. Pursuing a ‘multi-dimensional strategy of extreme pragmatism’ (Serbin 2016b) based on the primacy of economic considerations, Beijing imports raw materials from the region and offers finished commodities, arms and technology in return. A surface analysis demonstrates that Russia falls behind China in several positions.

First, trade between Russia and LAC tripled between 2001 and its peak in 2013, while trade between China and LAC grew by a factor of more than seventeen over the same period (Serbin 2016a). China became the largest export market for Brazil and Chile, and the second largest for Peru, Cuba and Costa Rica (Xinhua 2018).

Beijing has free trade area agreements with Chile, Peru and Costa Rica, which contribute to bilateral trade and economic cooperation. Russia, in turn, promotes the cooperation through the EEU. Following the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) in 2012, Moscow entered into dialogue with almost all Latin American countries, offering the idea of memorandums on behalf of the Commission with the governments of these states. In 2015 such documents were signed with Chile and Peru, and then with Ecuador in 2017. A similar document is expected to be signed with Mexico. A memorandum of cooperation on trade and economic matters between the EEC and MERCOSUR is currently being discussed: however, internal MERCOSUR controversies due to the Venezuelan crisis are preventing progress.

Second, China has become a key LAC financial partner with Chinese companies having invested more than $110bn in the region since 2003 (Avenando et al. 2017).

Third, on the solid grounds of trade and economic relations with the region, the Asian giant competes actively for influence. By 2024, the volume of trade between China and LAC is expected to grow to $500bn, with Chinese investments growing to $250bn. To promote Chinese-Latin American cooperation, the China-CELAC Cooperation Fund was created with an investment of $5bn. Beijing attempts to create new platforms that are easily influenced by Chinese to encourage the establishment of a new and favourable international environment that will limit US pressure over the long term (Serbin 2016a). This will inevitably lead to the emergence of alternative megaprojects in which Russian participation might be considered. As the United States tries to respond to Beijing’s expansionist strategy it will have to improve its relations with Latin America.

This was one of the reasons behind the re-establishment of bilateral relations with Cuba: an attempt to bring it over to the US political orbit and to weaken the Cuban-Venezuelan axis, which is an essential part of the anti-American front in Latin America. Russia has many opportunities to adopt such circumstances to increase its own commercial and geopolitical status in the region.

Fourth, one of the characteristics of Beijing’s policy towards LAC is its attempt to strengthen all possible ties, including working closely with the huge Chinese diaspora in the region and to promote ties between different political parties. China maintains contacts with 90 political parties and organizations, and cross-party groups (Sudarev 2015: 204). Moscow, by contrast, is doing practically no work with the Russian diaspora in Latin America. The widely
9. Blank 2009 it seems impossible to agree with Blank’s evaluation of Russian policy determination on ‘instrumentalization of the region’ to convert it into a political block to support Russia’s stand against the US international predominance as it is an obvious simplification and schematization made in the frames of the Cold War paradigms known ‘ideologization’ of relations with Venezuela, and to a lesser extent with Cuba and Bolivia, limits Moscow’s attempts to build contacts with opposition forces in these countries and creates serious risks for Russian businesses in the event of inevitable political change. Moreover, Russian businesses in Latin America are still not well known enough as they have insufficient support from their mother country. However, the Russian approach as far as the primary element of Moscow’s diplomacy in the region, pointed out by the director of the Foreign Ministry’s Latin America Department, consists in engagement with all political parties (Shchetinin 2015).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It seems wrong to reduce Russian-Latin American relations to an exclusively geopolitical response to US expansion. Expanding its presence in the world is the natural course for any country. Russia is a major producer of military equipment and, like the United States, United Kingdom and France, inevitably seeks new markets.

Russia is unable to oust the United States from the geographically distant Latin American market. But distance does not prevent China from competing even with the United States for Latin American markets, including Venezuela and Brazil – countries that are strategic partners of Russia (Ellis 2013).

As for the LAC, Russian and Chinese presence in the region, ‘while reduced’ lately, introduces an opportunity for CELAC countries to establish business relations beyond the United States and Europe (Haluni 2016). Unfortunately, there are incidental goals to be achieved by the Russian political elites. All Russian activities in Latin America are not only related to foreign policy considerations but imply a kind of internal political show. The Russians feel nostalgic for the former Soviet Union and want Russia to regain allies who are ready to support the country in the international arena. In this respect, Venezuela could not but meet the standards. At the same time, Russia’s domestic economic discourse is based primarily on a liberal rhetoric, while foreign policy seems to be based on a hard rhetoric that can be compared with that of the Cold War (Pavlova 2011). Russia’s ‘partners’ – including Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, Ecuador and Bolivia – are not countries that promote a liberal economic agenda; therefore, there are limits to cooperation, and in those cases, the ideology divides rather than unites.

In addition, the political image of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin – one of the world’s most recognizable politicians and who is known for his opposition to unipolarity – has a positive role in Russian foreign policy in general, and the LAC in particular, where historically the figure of the politically strong and charismatic leader has been of special importance. Thanks largely to the political will of the leader, Russia managed to escape outside political pressure and position itself as an important and independent world player. Putin’s self-sufficiency and foreign activity, and his ability to react promptly, contribute towards the effectiveness of Moscow’s diplomacy. However, the personification of foreign policy generates stereotypes about political realities in Russia, making some people believe that presidential political will is the only consideration in foreign policy-making, obscuring the real facts and real national interests. Putin’s strong political leadership gives rise to accusations of aggressiveness and over-ambitious claims, while his constant call for dialogue is intentionally left ignored.

To sum up, there is no doubt that Russia’s foreign policy behaviour towards the region is changing – it tends to pragmatism. Moscow’s more
balanced approach differs from the previous, Soviet one: ideology that was laid in the core of the foreign policy has been replaced with political considerations, however, from time to time Russian Authorities neglect economic advisability, despite the fact that modern Russia does not possess enough resources to match the Soviet capabilities. Nevertheless, these changes have not yet resulted in a conceptual evolution of the place and role of LAC in Russia’s foreign strategy. Moreover, political, trade and economic cooperation has not yet been accompanied by awareness-building efforts among citizens. Thus, the old problems remain a major obstacle to establishing a new dynamism.

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**SUGGESTED CITATION**


**CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS**

Victor Jeifets is a professor at the Department of Theory and History of International Relations, School of International Relations, Saint-Petersburg State University, Russia. He has a Doctor of Sciences (Post-Doctoral degree) and a Ph.D. in history. He was elected as professor of the Russian Academy of Sciences since 2015. He is the author of more than 150 academic publications including six monographs. His academic interests focus on the history of Latin America and international relations, the history of the ‘left movement’, the history of Latin American guerrillas, political processes and systems of the countries of the western hemisphere, diplomatic relation between the USSR (Russia) and Latin American states and others.

Contact: School of International Relations, St.-Petersburg State University, Smolniy str. 1/3, entr.8, Saint-Petersburg, 191160, Russia.

E-mail: Jeifets@gmail.com

Web address: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7197-7105


Contact: School of International Relations, St.-Petersburg State University, Smolnii str. 1/3, entr.8, Saint-Petersburg, 191160, Russia.
E-mail: lkhadorich@gmail.com
Web address: http://spbu.academia.edu/
https://orcid.org/

Yana Leksyutina is an associate professor and deputy head of the American Studies department at the School of International Relations, Saint-Petersburg State University, Russia. She has a Doctor of Sciences (post-doctoral degree) and a Ph.D. in political science with a specialization in international relations and world politics. She has written more than 80 academic publications including three monographs. Her academic research focuses on China’s foreign policy, Sino-US relations, China’s Latin American policy, US policy in the Asia-Pacific region and Sino-Russian relations. Recent publications include ‘An overview of Latin America: Republic of Korea economic engagement, 1948–2015’, *Latin America*, 4 (2016), ‘¿Ocaso de la dominación de los EE.UU. EN América Latina?’ (‘Sunset of US domination in Latin America’), *Iberoamérica*, 1:76: 5–20 (2015), ‘China in the Caribbean islands: From intentions to actions’, *Latin America*, 6: 42–53 (2015).

Contact: School of International Relations, St.-Petersburg State University, Smolnii str. 1/3, entr.8, Saint-Petersburg, 191160, Russia.
E-mail: lexyana@ya.ru
Web address: http://sir.spbu.ru/profs/?id=141
https://orcid.org/

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