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THE COMEBACK KID

Russia in Latin America

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INTRODUCTION

The Soviet Union's withdrawal from Latin America in the early 1990s was as sudden as its meteoric rise in the region three decades before. Its clients states were among the first affected. In Nicaragua, the left-wing Sandinista government was refused more cash ahead of the 1990 elections. After the Sandinistas lost, the Kremlin swiftly recognised the results of the elections and called for a peaceful transition. In the same vein, Moscow drastically cut its economic assistance to Havana and in 1991 announced the withdrawal of its military brigade from Cuba. Similarly, a wide network of sister communist parties across Latin America was left to its own devices. Soviet power and influence in the region was rapidly shrinking.

However, international relations are rarely a linear affair. It is not unusual for world powers to temporarily reduce their footprint in a region only to make a comeback later. Russia, the legal successor of the Soviet Union, is no exception. After the Soviets' precipitous withdrawal from Latin America in the early 1990s, Russia slowly worked its way back to the region. In 1997, Russia's chief diplomat made a first regional tour. At the dawn of a new century, re-engagement with Latin America picked up pace and Russia gradually began to repair ties with former client states and invest in new partnerships. This

Summary

- Over the last decade, Russia has scaled up its presence in Latin America. Engagement with this distant region seeks to put pressure on the US, foster multipolarity, offset the negative effects of Russia's assertive policy in the post-Soviet neighbourhood, and expand economic benefits.
- A number of indigenous and exogenous factors have facilitated Russia's resurgence in Latin America: regional expertise and institutional memory, more capable Russian armed forces, a network of former Soviet clients in the region, long-term dependencies created via arms exports, anti-Americanism and the 'left turn' in Latin American politics that took place in the 2000s.
- Although, Russia's efforts to revive its relations with Latin America shows mixed results, its comeback to the region is real and has political, diplomatic and normative ramifications for the EU's interests in the region. It intensifies competition for votes in international multilateral bodies, hampers democratic developments in the region and impacts negatively on Europe's information space.

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culminated in the 2010s with more high-level visits, increased trade, military exercises, scholarships for students, augmented presence in the information space, arms supplies and diplomatic protection of regional clients.

This 'comeback' calls for a thorough reassessment of Russia's posture in Latin America: the nuts and bolts behind its regional policy and its wider implications for Europe. To do this, this Brief proposes to address several questions. First, what motivates Russia to look across the Atlantic and engage with Latin American states? Second, Moscow is not re-engaging in the region with a clean slate nor is it operating in a vacuum; which factors are supporting and which are hindering Russia's policy in the region? Third, what is the provisional balance sheet of Russia's renewed engagement with Latin America? Finally, what are the consequences for the EU of Moscow's resurgence in the region?

THE LAND OF POSSIBILITIES

The role of Latin America in overall Soviet foreign policy design was once described as 'never a priority…, [but] a possibility' [1]. This captures not only the philosophy behind Soviet policy in the region but Russia's current attitude too. Unlike the post-Soviet neighbourhood, which Russia feels entitled to control and in which it at times feels compelled to intervene, engagement with distant Latin America remains an issue of choice and possibility. Seen in this perspective, Latin America represents an arena in which the Kremlin seeks to advance a host of larger foreign and domestic policy objectives.

The first possibility relates to the US, a military power which from the Russian perspective challenges its interests in its immediate proximity. The Kremlin regards its renewed engagement in Latin America as a way to balance Russia's asymmetric relationship with the US, if not in terms of capabilities, then at least in terms of the risks and threats each side has to face in their own neighbourhoods. The policy is designed to make the US feel more vulnerable in its immediate neighbourhood and raises the costs of its attempts to shape regional states' behaviour [2]. By doing so, Moscow considers that it is simply retaliating for the United States' disruptive behaviour in post-Soviet Eurasia, seen by Russia as its own backyard [3]. For example, the Kremlin sent its navy on a tour of Latin America in the aftermath of the Russian-Georgian war, when US ships made their way to the Black Sea and made a port call to Batumi, Georgia [4]. This inter-regional linkage is very frequent in Russian and Soviet foreign policy. For example, in the early 1990s, the Kremlin's withdrawal from Latin America was part of a much larger foreign policy enterprise to mend relations with Washington. Accordingly, Moscow threw its allies under the bus in Latin America but also in Africa, to signal that it would refrain from causing trouble, in particular in what it saw as the United States' backyard. Two decades later, the Kremlin's foreign policy has come full circle. Disruptive behaviour in the vicinity of the US is meant to force Washington to heed Russia's concerns.

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The second possibility refers to Russia's overarching idea of fostering multipolarity in international relations. Russia treats Latin America as another geographic theatre where it can advance its vision of a multipolar world and keep in check what it perceives as US global hegemonic instincts. By reactivating its presence in a region far from its shores, Russia is demonstrating that it is one of the power poles with global, even if thin, military outreach. The Russian concept of multipolarity also envisions regional structures built around great powers [5]. In this sense, Moscow looks at Latin America as an auxiliary source of international legitimacy for its regional projects (e.g., the Eurasian Economic Union memorandums signed with Chile, Peru and Mercosur). But Russia's presence in Latin America is not only about solidifying its status in a multipolar world; it is also about stimulating strategic emancipation of regional powers or groups of states from the US shadow. In this regard, cooperation with fellow BRICS country Brazil has been partially motivated by Russia's aspiration to see this state as a more autonomous player in a polycentric world. The symbolic political support (through participation in summits, observer status, declarations of support) that Russia provides for regional organisations which do not include the US in any form, follows the same logic [6].

The third possibility that Latin America provides is linked to Russia's top foreign policy priority region: its immediate vicinity. In this sense, partnerships in Latin America are regarded as useful tools to offset the negative effects of the Kremlin's assertive policy in post-Soviet Eurasia. For example, in the wake of sectoral sanctions introduced by the EU in response to the destabilisation of Ukraine in 2014, the Kremlin enforced a partial food embargo on agricultural products originating from the EU. This move was not cost-free for Moscow: the ban fuelled food price inflation at home, hurting the most vulnerable social groups. To neutralise the negative effects, the Kremlin looked to Latin America as an alternative source of agri-food imports. Moscow also

sought Latin American and Caribbean votes in the UN to gather as many states as possible against resolutions condemning Russia's policy towards Ukraine. Geographically, Latin America provided most of the votes 'against' (4 out of 11), while a sizeable group of states from the region (15 out of 33) opted to abstain or to be absent [7]. Last but not least, in times of tensions with the West, the Russian leadership occasionally used red carpet receptions in Havana, Buenos Aires or Brasilia (in particular after the annexation of Crimea) to dispel the impression that Russia had been isolated on the diplomatic stage.

Although re-engagement with Latin America is mostly about pursuing foreign policy ambitions, it also opens up an array of domestic possibilities for the Kremlin. Throughout Putin's presidency, foreign policy has served as a source of internal legitimacy, especially in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea. Advertised on state TV, Russia's 'return' to Latin America aims to bring back the memories of the days when Moscow was and acted across the globe as a superpower. Thus, it is supposed to connect the Soviet's prestigious past with the foreign policy of today's Russia and fortify the president's image as a respected world leader [8]. Besides the issue of political legitimacy, Latin America also serves more down to earth objectives. For example, the Panama Papers examined by a consortium of independent journalists revealed that Putin's close circle used offshore jurisdictions in Latin America and the Caribbean to conduct shadow transactions and manage secret funds. The analysis of the documents indicates a possibility that some operations involved the transfer of assets and funds by third parties on behalf of the Russian president [9]. In addition to serving the personal interests of Russian governing elites, Latin America is viewed by Russian state companies as an attractive possibility to earn money from participating in infrastructure projects, investing in the oil and gas sector as well as accessing new markets for the export of machines, airplanes, nuclear technologies, pharmaceutical products, raw materials and arms. Often, Russia's business activities are associated with corruption schemes that weaken the rule of law and enrich elites tightly connected to Russian state companies. Business relations between Caracas and Moscow in extractive industries speak volumes [10].

For Russia, Latin America is not *terra incognita*.

FACTORS PLAYING IN RUSSIA'S FAVOUR

Possibilities do not turn into realities by default. Success requires not only the political will to act, but also favourable circumstances. There are quite a few indigenous and exogenous factors at play in Russia's game of influence in Latin America.

Some of them are related to the Soviet legacy. For Russia, Latin America is not *terra incognita*. Although it weakened significantly over time, the Russian state machine was able to preserve expertise, a diplomatic network on the ground and institutional memory of engagement with the region. Thus, Moscow did not have to start from scratch when it decided to reboot relations with Latin America. Another legacy aspect is a network of officials or business people who closely cooperated with Moscow in the past or were educated in the Soviet Union [11]. Former leftist guerrillas Daniel Ortega, José Luis Merino and Sanchez Ceren held top government positions at various periods and served as bridgeheads between Russian, Nicaraguan and El Salvadoran politics [12]. One additional feature of the Soviet legacy is the arsenal of military equipment exported to the region until the late 1980s, maintenance and modernisation of which stimulated the demand for military-technical cooperation with post-Soviet Russia. This is the case of Peru, which owns 90 Soviet/Russian-made helicopters - the biggest fleet in the region [13]. This led to the opening in the country of a maintenance and repair centre for Russian-manufactured helicopters with wide regional coverage [14].

But not all advantages are legacy factors. Re-entry to the region has been favoured by domestic transformations in Russia too. The oil boom of the 2000s flooded the Kremlin with the resources it needed to conduct a bolder foreign policy. This made Russia attractive in Latin America as a potential business partner and source of capital. Even if Russia did not turn into a generous regional investor in the end, these expectations facilitated its renewed engagement with Latin America. Local favours supporting the Russian agenda (such as welcoming the Russian navy or a vote at the UN) were usually rewarded with Russian credits or loans [15]. This would not have been possible if Moscow had not substantially restored its public finances. More financial resources also provided the Russian military with the funds to slowly modernise its power projection capabilities and ensure logistical backup. During the wars in Chechnya in the 1990s, the Russian army experienced chronic shortages of fuel [16], but in the late 2000s Russian armed forces were amply supplied with fuel, making it possible to undertake more frequent navy and airforce flag showing operations in Latin America and the Caribbean.

As part of its charm offensive' the Kremlin also exploited a set of exogenous advantages. Just like the Soviet Union, Russia found more common ground

Three vectors of Russian power in Latin America

2010-2021

Economic operations

- **1.1. Banks and loans** — Public loans and credits
- **1.2. Infrastructure projects** — Projects including mines, hydroelectric plants or technological parks
- **1.3. Rosatom** — Memorandums of cooperation in the field of peaceful uses of atomic energy and attempts to secure contracts to build nuclear plants
- **1.4. Rosneft/Gazprom** — Projects with local state-owned and private companies in the energy field

Political technology and sharp power

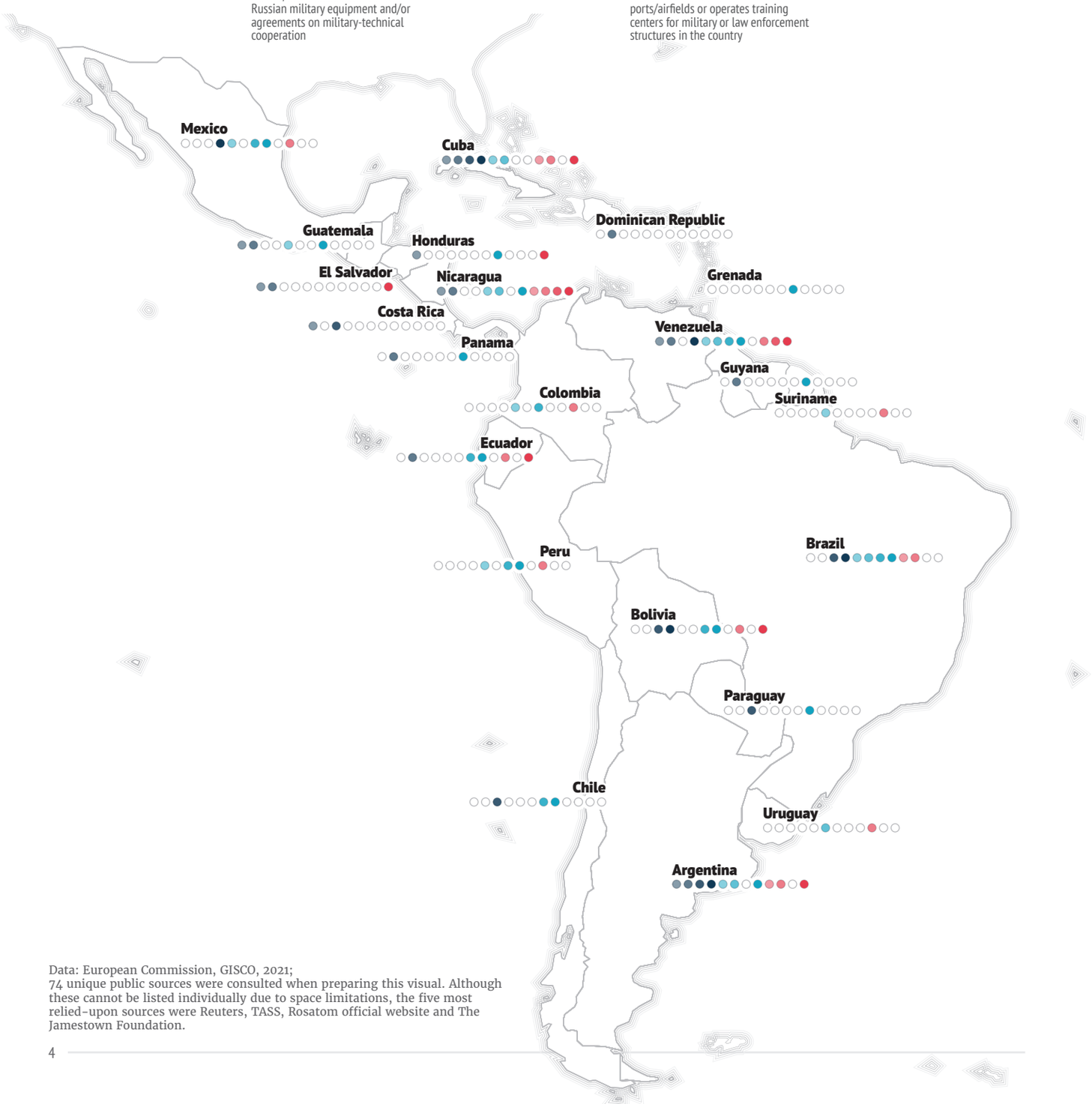
- **2.1. High-level visits** — In-country visits of Russian president, prime minister, defence and foreign ministers
- **2.2. Traditional media** — Offices of Russia Today and Sputnik Mundo
- **2.3. Social media** — Election meddling and disinformation via Russian social media accounts
- **2.4. Sputnik V** — Export of Sputnik V vaccine or production of Sputnik V in the country

Security and military

- **3.1. GLONASS** — GLONASS station on the territory
- **3.2. Arms export and service centers** — Russia exports arms or has service/maintenance centres for Russian military equipment and/or agreements on military-technical cooperation
- **3.3. Russian mercenaries "Wagner"** — Wagner mercenaries operate in the country
- **3.4. Access to military infrastructure and military training centers** — Russia has access to the ports/airfields or operates training centers for military or law enforcement structures in the country

Total vectors per area

8	10	7	6
10	6	8	15
4	12	2	8



Data: European Commission, GISCO, 2021;
74 unique public sources were consulted when preparing this visual. Although these cannot be listed individually due to space limitations, the five most relied-upon sources were Reuters, TASS, Rosatom official website and The Jamestown Foundation.

with left-leaning governments in Latin America. The public image of Russia as a sort of resurrected Soviet Union and thus close to socialist ideals also helped [17]. As a result, the turn to the left witnessed in Latin America in the 2000s opened the doors for Moscow to the circles of power in former client states or Cold War partners [18]. This was the case for instance in Nicaragua where Daniel Ortega reclaimed power, Bolivia under Evo Morales and Argentina under the presidencies of the Kirchner family. The turn to the left also helped Russia to expand and deepen its relations with states who were not among Russia's traditional or preferred partners in the region before the 1990s, like Chile, Venezuela or Brazil.

This went hand in hand with a decline in the standing of the United States in Latin America. For example, between 2000 and 2008, favourable views towards the US in Brazil, Argentina and Mexico declined from 56 %, 50 % and 68 % to 47 %, 22 % and 47 % respectively [19]. Speculating on anti-American sentiment, these less favourable attitudes towards the US made Moscow's reemergence easier. However, this is not something that the Kremlin can bank on permanently. Over the last two decades, attitudes towards the US have fluctuated in the region; becoming more positive under the Obama administration and turning negative again under President Trump [20]. The bottom line is that the region is host to a sizeable constituency receptive to anti-West messages.

Finally, among the factors which worked partially in Russia's favour were national or regional crises as well as overlapping agendas with minor extra-regional powers active in Latin America, such as Iran and Turkey. For example, the 2019 political crisis in Venezuela substantially undermined the legitimacy of Maduro's leadership and increased the regime's dependence on external backers, including Moscow and its political and security support. The Covid-19 pandemic allowed Russia to attempt boosting its soft power by promising its Sputnik V vaccine while highlighting the 'selfish' behaviour of wealthy Western states [21]. Russia's outreach to the region has been helped by occasional interaction with Teheran and Ankara. For example in 2018, Russian planes transported gold as a part of a transaction between Venezuela and Turkey which provided Caracas with much needed financial resources [22]. In addition, Russia and Iran reportedly worked in parallel to help Caracas to circumvent US sanctions and resell oil from Venezuela [23].

FACTORS CONSTRAINING RUSSIA'S DESIGNS

Not everything was or is smooth for Moscow though. Russia's efforts to re-establish a foothold in the region are constrained by its past, lack of resources and by the actions of other actors. To start with, the Soviet legacy is not only a plus; the way the Kremlin withdrew in the 1990s left a bitter taste among Latin American allies. Moreover, not everyone in the region welcomes Russia's increased presence in Latin America. Some regional states with close security ties to the US view Moscow's support of Maduro's regime and reported involvement in elections with deep suspicion. For instance, Colombia has been wary of growing Russian activism and did not hesitate to take steps to limit this, expelling two Russian diplomats over spying accusations in 2020 [24].

Another downside is that despite the economic recovery of the 2000s, Russia's military and financial means remain limited compared to more resourceful powers operating in Latin America, such as the US, the EU or China. The economic slowdown in Russia in the 2010s did not help to catch up with regional competitors. In spite of efforts to modernise the armed forces, Russia's blue-water navy capabilities have not improved significantly; thus Moscow's capacity to rapidly deploy and sustain a sizeable military presence across the Atlantic remains limited.

There are several externally induced constraints too. Political cycles in Latin America are a double-edged sword. They can bring to power potential allies but also less accommodating leaders and can weaken existing clients. In the 2010s, right-wing leaders succeeded left-wing governments in Argentina, Bolivia and Brazil, which slowed down or temporarily undermined Moscow's cooperation with these countries.

Multipolarity in Latin America does not always play in Russian's favour. Targeted cooperation with emerging extra-regional powers such as Turkey and Iran did help the Kremlin's agenda. At the same time, Russia's efforts to restore its position in the region are constrained directly or indirectly by powers with long-standing presence (the US and the EU) or those who solidified their influence in the 1990s and early 2000s (China). China's deep pockets and greater political clout often place it ahead of Russia in bids for infrastructure or energy projects in Latin America. Despite Russia's push to secure a contract to build a nuclear power station in Argentina, Buenos Aires went for the Chinese offer [25]. Similarly, Moscow's efforts to expand into the Brazilian weapons market – one of the largest in Latin America – have been checked by European arms producers (France, Germany and Sweden) who were able to secure new arms

deals [26]. Unlike China or the EU, the US undertook direct measures to counter Russia. For instance, US sanctions or threats of sanctions forced Russian state companies (e.g. Rosneft) to cease business activities in Venezuela whereas traditional clients (e.g. Peru, Mexico) declined to buy more helicopters from Russia [27].

UPSIDES...

Political will coupled with a combination of favourable factors have made Russia more visible and present in Latin America. But presence is not automatically an asset. In the dying days of the Soviet Union, the leadership regarded its posture in the region as a liability and swiftly moved to cut the political and economic costs. How about Russia's current policy: is it winning or losing?

It is difficult to assess precisely to what extent unfavourable attitudes towards the US in Latin America can be ascribed to the US's own misguided policies or are the result of Russian hostile messaging. What is certain is that a sizeable part of the population in Latin America is sceptical towards the US and its policies; and this was already the case before Russia became active in the regional information space. Thus, most likely, Russia acted as an amplifier of mistrust in the US via *RT en Espanol* (previously *Russia Today*) and *Sputnik Mundo,* rather than being at its origin. By doing so Russia was at least partially successful in weakening Washington's soft power in the region.

Over the last decade, Russian TV has played a key role in driving the narrative about the country's return to Latin America. If before 2006, Russian citizens did not identify any Latin American countries as Russia's 'friends', as from 2007, Cuba and Venezuela are constantly mentioned as countries who are among the closest to Russia. From 2016, Brazil joined the list too [28]. Obviously, as the opinion polls demonstrate, Russians are more aware of their government's actions in the region than a decade ago. In this sense, the state TV information coverage has been a success.

Russia has made headway in the economic field too. Its trade turnover with Latin America jumped from $5.6 billion in 2000 to $14.1 billion in 2019 [29]. Russian banks provided loans while Russian companies invested in the oil and mining sectors and won tenders for infrastructure projects. Other business successes include progress made by the Roskosmos corporation in spreading its global positioning system in the region. The Sukhoi corporation also obtained an order from Interjet – Mexico's third biggest airline – for 30 Superjet-100 planes [30].

Moscow's popular appeal across the region remains low.

In the security field, Moscow achieved a certain amount of success. Traditionally, Latin America is not among Russia's biggest arms clients; between 2000 and 2016 its share was only 4.6 % [31]. Nevertheless, Russian arms sales to the region peaked in 2005–2009 and 2010–2014, generating extra revenues for the defence industry. Arms deliveries helped to boost the military capabilities of Russia's clients, making a military solution against them more expensive for any regional or great power. This partially worked in Venezuela as the military component became essential in maintaining Maduro's regime. More importantly, through military exercises and counter-drug trafficking initiatives (e.g. Nicaragua) the Kremlin managed to reach out and expand its contacts with the security establishment, which often plays a prominent role in national politics. For the Russian navy, closer engagement with a few clients in Latin America meant gaining or regaining greater regional port access rights (Nicaragua, Cuba, Venezuela). Moscow has not hesitated to use this opening to temporarily deploy reconnaissance and battleships close to US shores.

AND DOWNSIDES

While Russia has indeed made some gains in Latin America, they are less impressive than often depicted by Moscow officials.

Russia may have been successful in contributing to the decline of US soft power in the region. However, a less popular US in Latin America does not necessarily mean a more appealing Russia. On the contrary, more Russia in the region has raised suspicion and fueled negative perceptions of Moscow's intentions, not only among the elites (e.g. Colombia) but also in public opinion. For example, a poll conducted in 2017 revealed that Russian influence was regarded negatively by 50 % of respondents in Brazil, 42 % in Mexico and 44 % in Peru – an increase of 7 %, 13 % and 14 % respectively compared to 2014 [32]. Russia is more noticeable in Latin America, but as this survey shows, it has not become more popular or trusted, except probably among governing elites in client states. Despite efforts to boost its soft power profile, occasionally appealing to the Soviet past, Moscow's popular appeal across the region remains low.

In terms of domestic impact, Russia's hyperactive and combative foreign policy, including in Latin America, has done little to reverse the decline in the leadership's

approval ratings. President's Putin's approval ratings dropped from 89 % in 2015 to 61 % in 2021[33]. Citizens might know more about their country's engagements in Latin America, but this does not translate into political support. Although the presidential foreign policy still commands widespread public support, it seems that its potential to contribute to his popularity and legitimacy is weakening as citizens increasingly pay more attention to internal problems.

In the economic realm, Russia's gains remain modest and some are probably not sustainable. Even though its trade volume with Latin America has increased, Russia only represents a share of 0.7 % of the region's commercial exchanges, making it an insignificant trade partner for Latin America[34]. Trade with Russia in some sectors (oil, agri-food products, arms) may be vital for its few regional allies, but not for the region as a whole. Thus, Russia's economic clout in Latin America pales in comparison to that of the US, Europe and China. Moreover, although Russia had a positive trade balance with Latin America in the early 2000s, with an intensification of economic exchanges, the balance has turned negative since 2006. In addition, the geography of Russia's trade partners reveals an overconcentration of trade: Brazil and Mexico account for half of Russia's trade with the region[35]. An important part of Russia's economic exchanges with the region is thus extremely vulnerable to the economic situation in these two countries.

The picture is also mixed for Russia's added value exports. Even though the Rosatom nuclear energy corporation has signed dozens of memorandums in the region, it has yet to secure its first real deal to build a nuclear power station. The delivery of Superjet-100 did not go smoothly either. Mounting technical problems led the Mexican company to cancel new orders for Russian planes and look for ways to return the aircrafts to the manufacturer[36]. Last but not least, Sputnik V was supposed to demonstrate Russia's cutting edge in the pharmaceutical sector, but its limited industrial base and thus incapacity to deliver as many vaccines as promised has strained relations with some regional partners (Argentina, Bolivia, Guatemala and Mexico).

Russia has experienced setbacks in the security domain too. Its arms supplies to the region relied mainly on the orders from a single country: Venezuela, who accounted for 80 % of imports[37]. The moment Caracas descended into political and economic turmoil, Russia's arms sales declined. In the coming years, Russia will not have a sufficiently large consumer base to significantly boost its arms sales in the region. More than that, various sanctions regimes might estrange some old or scare some prospective clients from cooperating with Russia in the technical-defence field. Aside from the arms business, Russian top military officers have been announcing Moscow's intentions to reopen military bases in Latin America since 2014[38]. The declarations made splashes in the international press but have failed to materialise so far. The last aspect concerns the security aid that Moscow provided to its close partners to resist external or internal pressures. Russia may have won more time for clients in Havana, Caracas or Managua; but they are still standing on very thin ice as fundamental internal problems remain unaddressed and keep accumulating.

At times of domestic crisis in Europe, Russia is using disinformation to inflame the political debate.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPE

Russia's return to Latin America is still very much a work in progress, but it is real and has a number of current or potential consequences for the EU.

First, more trouble in the vicinity of the US caused or sustained by Russia has the potential to divert the resources and attention of Europe's top security ally. The Kremlin applied the same strategy in the Western Balkans, using more destabilising tactics over the last decade to divert Europe's attention from the eastern neighbourhood, and force it to allocate more time and resources to maintain order at its borders. The US's resources are not infinite: if Latin America requires more assets and diplomatic attention, cuts will have to be implemented somewhere else.

Secondly, Russia serves as a catalyst for an increased competition for Latin America's votes in multilateral organisations; institutions which the EU regards as important pillars of a functioning international architecture. For example, Russian diplomacy won Latin America's votes in the UN not only on the Crimean file, but also on the issue of chemical attacks in Syria. One can expect that the EU's efforts at coalition building inside international organisations will be more demanding when it will come to securing votes from Latin America. Though it will not be exclusively because of Russia; China's diplomacy has to be factored too.

Third, in times of tensions with Europe, Russia will continue to fall back on clients around the world, including Latin America, to avoid diplomatic isolation and to some degree, offset the impact of a prolonged economic warfare. In some cases, it is not important if clients can actually scale up their exports of products to Russia. What matters is to create the illusion that Moscow has alternatives and thus that European companies are set to lose the Russian market for years to come. It ultimately aims

to wear down the EU's political will to maintain or escalate sanctions.

Fourth, Russia's disinformation campaign in Latin America not only targets the US but also Europe, as the Spanish language versions of *RT* and *Sputnik* also reach out to audiences inside Europe. At times of domestic crisis in Europe, Russia is using disinformation to inflame the political debate. The coverage by *RT* of separatist movements in Catalonia is an example of that.

Last but not least, Russia is not in a position to seriously challenge the EU's economic interests in Latin America, where China is a more serious competitor. At the same time, Russia's growing presence and protection of client regimes undercut the EU's long standing efforts to promote democracy in the region. Thus, Russia represents rather a normative challenge for the EU in the region than an economic one.

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