



all Latin American leaders when they travel to Moscow. Visiting leaders recognize the important symbolic role the Orthodox Church plays in constructing and strengthening the new Russian identity. Here the interests of the Russian state and the Church coincide, and this explains in part the increased influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Latin America.

This time for Russia, it is not about backing a few regional communist leaders or movements, as was the case in the Soviet era. Now Russia promotes, in conjunction with the Orthodox Church, its strong support for “universal traditional values” on a global scale, a message that resonates well in many conservative sectors of Latin American societies. From this perspective, the meeting in Havana served as yet more evidence that Russia is returning to the region with an agenda that is not limited to sporadic arms sales and contacts with anti-American governments. Today, Russia seeks to establish a longer-term, multifaceted presence in the Western Hemisphere.

The Return of the Russians

During the Cold War, the Cuban Revolution allowed Moscow to establish its first true base in the Western Hemisphere. For many years, Havana was a major recipient of Soviet direct aid. The USSR supported other leftist regimes in the region throughout the Cold War. However, by the end of the 1980s, with the decline of Soviet economic power, Moscow’s efforts and influence in Latin America dropped sharply, allowing experts to conclude that the “Russians aren’t coming.”²

The newly independent Russian state inherited a legacy of relationships with Latin America from

the Soviet Union that were previously based on shared ideology. Russia soon found that restoring those links to their Soviet heyday would require patronage support that Kremlin could no longer afford and no longer wished to provide. Thus, for the most of the 1990s, Russia was largely absent from Latin America. Considering Russia’s economic problems and its initial desire to cooperate with Western powers, the Boris Yeltsin government did not prioritize this distant region.

That began to change in the late 1990s, with increased visits of Russian government officials, including then-Minister for Foreign Affairs Yevgeny Primakov, to several Latin American countries. Russia wanted to forge new friendships, and rekindle old ones—especially with those political figures who had troubled relations with the United

long-term financial commitment to Latin America is not the Kremlin's goal. The voyages of warships and strategic bombers to Central and South America are in reality episodes of the political spectacle called "Making Russia Great Again," with the Russian general public as the main audience. This spectacle is also the foremost reason for Russia's current interest towards Latin America.

Why Latin America Matters to Russia

For Russia, the key value of Latin America and the Caribbean is its geographical proximity to the United States. In the eyes of the Kremlin, it is Washington's "near abroad." Moscow believes that its own "near abroad," the territory of the former Soviet Union, must be a region where Russia's interests must be taken into consideration by all other states. The Russian government further believes that the United States consistently ignores Russian interests, and for this reason Russia must amplify its presence in Latin America in response. As early as 1997, the then-Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov, while visiting Latin America, reportedly said that if Russia maintains a presence in the region, it might help Russia deal with the West in Russia's neighboring territories.⁶ This vision was only reinforced in the following years: in 2013, Moscow declared its

World War (a high-level delegation from Moscow took part in the festivities in Cuba), joint opening of memorials to local iconic leaders (such as the Chavez Memorial Museum in Venezuela), or Vladimir Putin and Kristina Fernandez launching Russia Today's Spanish-language broadcasting as a national public channel in Argentina. When they visit Russia, Latin American heads of state are taken to the Great Patriotic War memorials or are shown paying respect to Russian national traditions (for example, Hugo Chavez was awarded the title of Honorary Cossack).

As a result of the efforts by the Russian media, today the Russian general public is much more



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