

Latin American vector in Russia's Foreign Policy: Identities and interests in the Russian-Venezuelan Partnership¹

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Abstract: *The crisis in Ukraine, that broke out in 2013 and escalated in 2014, has led to sanction policy and the emergence of significant political divergences between Russian Federation and the West. This has resulted in an intensification of Russia's foreign and economic policy alliances with its neighboring countries as well as with the rest of the BRICS members. In his interview with Cuba's Prensa Latina, Vladimir Putin further classified cooperation with Latin American states as one of the key and very promising lines of Russia's foreign policy.*

In light of the above mentioned developments, this paper addresses the Latin American vector of Russian foreign policy using the example of Russian-Venezuelan partnership, which has been intensified after 2004. It explores the underlying key elements of this partnership based on realist and constructivist assumptions and is aimed at outlining foreign policy identities, perceptions and interests constitutive for the cooperation between the two countries. The author concludes, that the cooperation is based both on realist and constructivist elements, whereas Russian interests are mainly realist and Venezuelan constructivist, and that fact could hinder long-lasting and both-way beneficial bilateral collaboration.

Keywords: *Foreign Policy, Security Policy, Identities, Russia, Venezuela*

Introduction

The outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine has brought significant divergences into Russian-European relations. This led to strengthening of foreign and economic policy alliances between Russia and its neighbors within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as well as in Latin America and other BRICS countries.

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In April 2014, the founding of the Eurasian Union between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus was announced. A month later, the signing of major energy deals with China came about. In August 2014, when Russia imposed a ban on imports of agricultural products from the EU countries, the US and Canada, several South American countries, including Brazil, Argentina and Chile agreed to supply their products to Russia. In October 2014, Latin America and the BRICS were proclaimed by Vladimir Putin as Russia's new foreign policy priorities (Voice of Russia 2014).

Thus, with the growth of the tensions between Russia and the European Union in the context of the conflict in Eastern Europe, Russian foreign policy interests in Latin America are experiencing a new boost comparable in its intensity to the close cooperation which used to mark Soviet-Latin American relations. Though at present, also Latin American actors that stayed irrelevant during the Soviet period are making a mark as Russia's new strategic partners in the Western hemisphere. Venezuela is one of them.

This paper is based on the thesis that *the transatlantic link Venezuela-Russia represents a realpolitik-alliance but is simultaneously being guided by similar foreign policy perceptions and identities*. It enquires the underlying key elements of the Russian-Venezuelan partnership since the arrival in power of Vladimir Putin and Hugo Chávez in 2000 and how they influence the intensification of the bilateral cooperation. It is based on realist and constructivist assumptions and is aimed at outlining foreign policy identities and interests constitutive for the cooperation between the two countries, focusing on security, regional and energy policy areas, whereby energy and economic sector is being foregrounded. Before starting the analysis, a brief theoretical outline is to be presented.

Realism and Constructivism in International Relations

Realism and Constructivism traditionally represent two different schools of thought within the discipline of International Relations. The Realist theory is based on the assumption that the national interests of a state determine the shape of its foreign policy. This, in turn, causes that the international politics are transformed into a "battlefield" of states, dominated by selfishness, rivalry, and lust for power, where state actors are determined to enforce their respective interests (Korab-Karpowicz 2010). According to the founder of the classical or biological Realism, Hans Morgethau, the international climate of rivalry attributes to the fact that "politics are governed by objective laws, which have their roots in human nature" (Morgenthau 1973: 4). The human egoism thus becomes visible in the international politics. Further, the acquisition of power is regarded as the main foreign policy goal and is at the same time an instrument for the enforcement of national interests (ibid: 8). If certain countries become too strong or develop too big political ambitions, that could jeopardize

the international status quo, there is the instrument of the so-called Balance of Power that should insulate these power aspirations. The typical strategy for achieving it is alliance formation (ibid: 167). The 'Politics of the Status Quo', based on Balance of Power is not the only policy form pursued by the states. In addition to this form and the 'Policy of Imperialism', Morgenthau uses the term 'Policy of Prestige', whose main objective is to impress other states with the power that one state possesses or believes to possess. This objective is being achieved by the states through diplomatic ceremonial and display of military power (ibid: 74–75).

The theoretical models of Morgenthau formed basis for the development of different strands of the theory of Political Realism, which drew the attention of science to new elements and priorities of the relationships within the international community. In this paper we mention only Neorealism.

Neorealist school, created by the political scientist Kenneth Waltz, criticizes the assumption of classical Realists about the bad human nature. Instead of dealing with human beings, Neorealists suggest to deal with the structure of the international system. For Kenneth Waltz, the cause of all international conflicts lies in the anarchic nature of the international system, which is lacking a referee to solve conflict among states. Egotistic states are those who alone coordinate the international scene. Anarchy is therefore the context in which relationships between different international actors take place, and conflicts between states are thus pre-programmed (Waltz 2001: 160). From the anarchism of the international system, according to Waltz, results the pursuit of Balance of Power, which should be traced back not to the human nature or the national interests of the states, but only and alone to the anarchic state of the international system that forces the states to survive (Kissane 2011: 84).

In Realism, states are regarded as rational actors, who deliberately pursue their interests and fight for the extension of their influence on the international stage. In Classical Realism, human nature is responsible for such state of affairs, and Neorealists see the causes for it in the anarchic nature of international system. However Realism doesn't broach the issue of where national interests and foreign policy priorities exactly come from or how are they being constructed. Their existence is simply accepted as given and is not questioned.

Constructivists analyze actions of political actors based on their identities and worldviews. Both, structure and environment as well as actors in this structure, such as states, constitute and change it through interaction. Through social interaction ideologies, interests, and priorities of international actors undergo various transformations, and are therefore by no means perpetual, nor always based only on power gain as suggested in Realism.

One of the most influential Constructivists – Alexander Wendt – does not deny the importance of national interests and the anarchic nature of the international system, however advocates, like all Constructivists, that the system

has arisen in the course of social processes and national interests are therefore product of an international interaction and exchange of ideas. The only substantive part of it is human nature (Wendt 1999: 135).

The author uses the rational choice theory for his argumentation, which states that “desires” and “beliefs” create “choices”. Rationality is thereby defined as “having consistent desires and beliefs” and “choice” means “the enactment of these desires and beliefs” (Wendt 1999: 124–125). Using the example of the status quo states Wendt shows, that the decision-formation of a state has nothing to do with its material interests, but for a small part with the desire of all men for security, and mainly with the identity of the state as “law-abiding” or “member of a society of states”, whose rules it respects (ibid: 124). This notion of its own nature causes, that certain state opts for a certain foreign policy behavior. Hence the identity and therefore foreign policy objectives of a state can undergo various transformations and phases and are not predetermined.

There is also an overlap between the two theoretical approaches. Some Constructivists, among them Daniel Green and Martha Finnemore, admit the existence of realistic factors in the behavior of political actors (Green 2002, Finnemore 1996). According to Vaughn Shannon, ideal components change nothing about the fact that “at the bottom, all political actors are (...) sensitive, goal driven (...) materially constrained rational actors” (Shannon-Kowert 2012: 6). In this regard, one cannot refrain from involving a realistic perspective in the analysis of interests of foreign policy actors. But at the same time we should consider, that national interests “are not just out there waiting to be discovered” (Finnemore 1996: 5), but they are constituted with and through the international relations. This construction incorporates geographical and historical factors of a state, its status related aspirations, the expectations of its partners and the existing international standards and regulations. However, the concept of the international standards is problematic. International norms have been designed by the community of nation states and are controlled by these, meaning that the existing international normative acts could not have come about without their adaptation to the national interests of more than one hundred individual states. In this paper, the normative aspect, which is very controversial and complex, will not play any role.

To this paper applies, that foreign policy is guided by national interests, according to which alliances and covenants are made. National interests are connected with ideas and worldviews. Further, the international status is important for most of international players, and they strive to find international recognition (Welch Larson 2012). Accordingly, behind every international action all or at least some of the following factors are to be assumed: selfish national interests, identity-related preferences, and the desire for recognition. In the following analysis of the relations between Venezuela and Russia, an

investigation of the major foreign policy interests in consideration of the above mentioned factors will come to the fore.

A new chapter in Russian-Venezuelan relations

In the past, soviet Russia has maintained good relations with countries such as Mexico, Argentina, Brazil and Cuba. Venezuela has never been as present on the foreign policy agenda of Russia as today.

The origins of Russian-Venezuelan relations date back to the end of 19th century and the establishment of direct relations between the two countries with the opening of the Venezuelan Consulate in St. Petersburg (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores 1996: 9). However, the formal establishment of relations did not provide any concrete initiatives until the 20th century.

The relations with the Soviet Union, established in 1945, have been marked by highs and lows. In the 50's, they were dominated by alienation rather than cooperation. Only a chargé d'affaires represented Soviet delegation in Caracas. The reason for this was the ideological incompatibility of the programs of the Social Democratic Party Democratic Action (AD), which provided the governments in Venezuela since 1945, and the Soviet communism (Romero 1992).

The Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, which by that time has reached its most tense phase, was an additional obstacle on the way of political and economic rapprochement of Venezuela and Russia. For the USSR, Mexico, Uruguay and Argentina were more important due to their loyalty and independence of the foreign policy course during the Cold War (cf. Romero 1992, Davidov 2009, Khachaturov 1999). After 1959, the socialist Cuba became the closest ally of the USSR in Latin America.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and as the first phase of the crisis in the early 90 s has been overcome, the relations between Venezuela and Russia experienced an upswing, as illustrated by the Memorandum of Cooperation in the field of Fuel and Energy (1993). Nevertheless, Venezuela was still by far not as important for Russian foreign policy agenda as were Cuba or Mexico.

After the change of power in Moscow and Caracas in early 2000 s, the mutual cooperation has experienced a new impetus. Under the presidency of Hugo Chávez and Vladimir Putin, the Caribbean country has risen to become one of Russia's most important partners in Latin America, and Russia has become one of the main international partners of Venezuela. Especially close cooperation has been taking place in military and energy sector (Kroth 2012, Romero/Corrales 2010). In 2005, Russia and Venezuela began to produce oil in Venezuela's Orinoco basin. Meanwhile, the funding for the bilateral projects is being allocated through the joint Russian-Venezuelan bank, founded in 2009 (ibid.).

It is worth mentioning, that prior to 2004 the bilateral Russian-Venezuelan relations were less dynamic. Only after Chávez's third visit to Moscow in No-

vember 2004 we can speak about a “qualitative improvement” (Katz: 15) of the Russian-Venezuelan relations and concrete joint projects, which this paper is centered on.

Political regimes in Russia and Venezuela

In 1998, Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Rafael Chávez Frias won the Venezuelan presidential election. His victory led to radical changes in Venezuelan society. With the new Constitution of 1999, the country was renamed in the República Bolivariana de Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela). The name already contains the central political concept of the new government – el Bolivarianismo or Revolución Bolivariana (The Bolivarian Revolution). This concept is for the most part influenced by the thinking of a revolutionary and the founding father of independent Latin America – Simon Bolivar, based on more social justice and the idea of creation of united Latin America. The new social order should make traditionally marginalized sectors of the population to the central political actors in order to then build the Socialismo del Siglo XXI (‘21st century socialism’), that sees a departure from the economic liberalization and the rule of political elite towards the rise of ‘people’ in Venezuela (Schoen/Rowan 2009, Isidoro Losada 2011, Herrmann 2012, Perez Salazar 2013). The Venezuelan society had hereby to be reoriented towards socialist values like equality, solidarity and the common good and be dissociated from capitalism. After the death of Hugo Chávez on March 5, 2013, its policy has been continued by Nicolas Maduro, who also comes from the ranks of Chavismo.

Russia, on the contrary, has left the socialist path with the collapse of the Soviet Union and has been transferred into a capitalist-oriented market economy. The term ‘ownership’ has been defining the social order and social status, which is being determined on the basis of income and assets (Schroeder 2007). These principles apply in today’s Russia under Vladimir Putin. Thus, the radical ideas of the redistribution of power and disempowerment of elites, that determine the ideological concept in Bolivarian Venezuela, are obsolete in Russia.

The fact that the governments of two distant countries that represent two very different concepts of society maintain close bilateral relationship suggests behind this connection purely pragmatic interests, dictated by political Realism (Morgenthau 1973, Waltz 1979). But closer inspection shows important similarities between Venezuelan and Russian models.

Venezuela of Hugo Chávez and Russia of Vladimir Putin are characterized by a strong centralization of political power, which is centered on the figure of the president. In Russia, all the state power is concentrated in the presidential administration (Malek 2009). In Venezuela, the president can apply the instrument of the so-called ‘Ley Habilitante’ (‘Enabling act’) and with it have the ability to bypass Parliament’s consent and to adopt laws by decree. In the 13 years of his

presidency, Hugo Chávez has governed a total of five years by 'Ley Habilitante' (El Universal 2012). Under Chávez and Putin, the staffing policy in public sector in Venezuela and Russia has been subjected to the will of decision-makers, whereby public offices have been awarded mainly to pro-government candidates. The energy industry has been nationalized, the independence of the judiciary has been limited and the coverage in the mass media increasingly subjected to state control (Malek 2009, Orttung/Walker 2013). An important element of both governments is the politicization of the military. In Venezuela, active and retired military personnel occupies numerous political and administrative offices (Isidoro Losada 2011), while in Russia much of the political elite, including President Putin, used to have ties to Soviet or post-Soviet secret services and military (Mommensen 2004, Malek 2009).

Despite substantial differences, the political models of Venezuela and Russia since 2000 have many common elements which bring their governments ideologically closer together and suggest beside *realpolitik*-based also constructivist components in their bilateral cooperation.

Main features of Venezuelan and Russian foreign policy under Hugo Chávez and Vladimir Putin

Like in domestic policy, there are also a number of similarities in the foreign policy structure of Russia and Venezuela. First, it should be noted that in both cases the president plays the decisive role in formulating foreign policy tasks and priorities. The Russian Constitution says explicitly that "in compliance with the Constitution of the Russian Federation and the federal laws, the President of the Russian Federation determines the guidelines of domestic and foreign policy of the State" (Constitution of the Russian Federation: Article 80). Article 236 of the Venezuelan Constitution entrusts the president with the foreign policy activities and with the preparation of the national development plan Proyecto Simon Bolivar, in which the foreign policy guidelines are formulated (Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela: Art 236.). Furthermore, there is a similar temporal classification in the formulation of foreign policies of the two countries.

Venezuelan foreign policy under the socialist government is traditionally divided into two stages: 1) the stage of consolidation of the Bolivarian Revolution from 1999 to 2004 and 2) its radicalization after the victory of Hugo Chávez in the recall referendum of August 2004 until his death in spring of 2013 (González Urrutia 2006, Werz 2011). A similar periodization can be applied also to the Russian policy under Putin. Russia that Putin took over after the two terms in office of Boris Yeltsin in 1999 was in a deep financial crisis, that erupted in 1998 and made the country insolvent (Grinkewitsch 2010). The social situation in Russia was equally disastrous. Internationally its reputation has also suffered

great damage. Among Putin's priorities during his first term of office until 2004 were therefore a set up of the Russian economy and the fulfillment of international financial obligations of his country in connection with the crisis (Herr 2002). Only after his re-election in 2004, the foreign policy claims of Russia came clearly to light and became visible both on the regional as well as on the security and energy policy level.

It was thus not accidentally that only after 2004, as both countries have overcome a phase of domestic political insecurity and had defined their foreign policy goals and priorities, their bilateral relations experienced a decisive push, in order to be transformed into a strategic transatlantic cooperation, that is being continued at present.

Security policy assumptions in Russian-Venezuelan relations

The national interests of Venezuela, which are articulated by its foreign policy, relate primarily to the promotion of a multipolar world with Venezuela as a sovereign state (Líneas Generales 2001–2007). Since the coup d'état of 2002, however, the main interest lies in the creation of an international anti-US-American alliance together with other developing countries (Proyecto Nacional Simón Bolívar 2007–2013). The direction of the new political course of the Venezuelan government has been set at 12 and 13 November 2004 at a high level a meeting. Hugo Chávez drafted a "new strategic map of Bolivarian Revolution" with the aim of deepening the Bolivarian Revolution and the construction of a direct democracy and a socialist society (González Urrutia 2006: 160). The foreign policy tasks that had to serve the above mentioned purposes found their detailed articulation in the Project Simon Bolivar 2007–2013, the first socialist plan, which, among other things, concerned new international geopolitics. As a foreign policy priority it defined the creation of a multipolar world "with new centers of power that represent a break with North American imperialism" (Proyecto Nacional Simón Bolívar 2007–2013: 40). Hereby, Venezuela is supposed to play a leadership role. The perception of danger emanating from the United States defines since 2004 the Venezuelan national and international security policy.

It must be noted that Russia, like Venezuela asserts the need for a multipolar world order as well. The term 'multi-polar world' is mentioned in many bilateral documents (Malek 2009: 51) and has a prominent place in the Concept of National Security of the Russian Federation (Concept of national security 2000). The affirmation of a multi-polar world, however, implies that Russia should be one of the poles, first and foremost due to its historical and cultural relevance. According to Vladimir Putin, the objectives of Russian foreign policy have strategic character and "reflect the unique place of Russia on the world political map and its role in world history and in the development of civilization" (Putin

2012). Russia therefore deserves a special place on the international arena due to its undoubted historical and political significance. Nevertheless, there were visible “efforts of a number of states to weaken Russia’s position in the political, economic, military and other fields” (Concept of National Security, Section I). This trend was the result of attempts “to create a structure of international relations, which is based on the dominance of developed Western countries led by the United States in the international community and is aimed at one-sided, military-violent solution of the key problems of world politics (...)” (ibid.). The interests of Russia are to restore its former international weight and to be at least one of the political world centers as well as curb the influence of the United States and to prevent NATO enlargement. Characteristic of the Russian foreign policy perception is a *realpolitik*-view of the modern world order, a dislike of the western dominance in international politics and the affirmation of the necessity for Russia to take a proper place on the international scene.

According to the foreign policy goals, the partnership between Russia and Venezuela is thus based on three key common security policy principles: 1) the principle of *multipolarity in international politics*, which is most evident in the Russian and Venezuelan search for alternative political alliances; 2) the affirmation of the *need of existence of a superior international organization* to conduct the conflict regulation in the international community, in order to put paid to Western dominance; 3) *militarization and demonstration of military power*, in order to be able to compete on the international political scene.

On Venezuelan side, the shared principles with Russia also include the so-called “common anti-imperialist interests” (Proyecto Simón Bolívar: 40). Obviously, Venezuela sees in Russia a potential partner in its anti-imperialist struggle. Russia is thus attributed to an anti-imperialist identity without that it has ever assigned to this ideological category.

The sense of a certain ideological proximity to Russia as a former Soviet country, although it has now no relation to socialism anymore, has made that Russia has been proclaimed by Venezuela as a strategic partner. Still, the national interests of Venezuela shouldn’t be underestimated. Russia is supposed to play an important role in the realization of the key foreign policy interest of Venezuela, namely in the construction of a multi-polar world and a new world order. At a conference in Caracas in 2012², the former Venezuelan Deputy Foreign Minister Temir Porras Poncelón underlined: “The imperial hegemony can only be combated with an alternative political power” (Porras Poncelón 2012). He also added that this resulted in “the necessity to construct a strategic relationship with one of the emergent or re-emergent powers of the world” (ibid.). According to Poncelón, Russia represents such power (ibid.). The Deputy Foreign Minister also stressed the Latin American and the Caribbean pursuit

2 The author was present at this meeting and can attest to the discussion.

to be one of the new centers of power in the world, which was why it had been important to build relations with another center of power – the Russian Federation. At this point we can state that the Venezuelan-Russian cooperation is based on constructivist identity-related elements as well as on *realpolitik*-calculations.

Though for Russia what counts are not the ideological aspects but rather the practical benefit it gains from the strategic partnership with Venezuela, related primarily to military cooperation. The peculiarity of the Russian-Venezuelan arms deals, however, is that Venezuela pays the arms supplies with Russian money. In 2009, Caracas received the first loan of 2.2 billion US dollars and bought Russian tanks. Another loan of 4 billion US dollars was granted in 2011 (Nezavisimaya Gazeta 2011). Economically, Russia hardly profits from the arms deals with Venezuela. The benefit that Moscow has is geopolitical, as it allows Russia to secure its presence in South America. In addition to Venezuela and Argentina, also Peru, Brazil and Colombia are now buyers of Russian arms (RIA Novosti 2007). Thus, Russia is coming closer to its goal of global influence expansion. While NATO is approaching the eastern borders of Russia, Russia is operating a geopolitical offensive in Latin America. The joint military exercise in Venezuelan waters in 2008 was the first large-scale maneuver close to the US since the end of the Cold War (Moeller-Holtkamp 2008).

Through joint military exercises with a *global player* Russia, Venezuela is gaining international attention for its political project, for the commercial deals and military exercises with Russia have received broad media coverage. Ultimately, Venezuela gains political weight by exercising what Realist Hans Morgenthau calls *Policy of Prestige*, a policy that aims at increasing one's international recognition (Morgenthau 1973: 74–75).

In security terms, Russia and Venezuela combine negative attitude towards the power-political claims of the United States as well as the idea of creating a multi-polar world order, with Latin America and Russia as two of these poles.

Russian rivalry with the West is particularly evident when looking at the aspects of the regional policy. In case of Venezuela, the targeted isolation of the United States is an important element of its regional strategy. This aspect plays an important role in connecting Venezuela with Russia.

The role of regional policy for the Russian-Venezuelan connection

It seems unlikely at first sight that regional policy of two geographically distant countries has something to do with their bilateral relations. The reason is political in nature and can be ascribed to the Venezuela-led ideologization of Latin America. The strong anti-US-American propaganda of Hugo Chávez and his followers as well as the expulsion of US institutions, like *Drug Enforcement Administration* (DEA), from Venezuela (Romero/Corrales 2010: 222) opened up new political and economic cooperation opportunities for Russia. Russia's activities in Latin

America can be regarded as political and economic occupation of the former US sphere of influence. But apart from the competition with the United States, world power ambitions of Russia are relevant. Although geopolitically the CIS countries are priority for Russia (Concept of the Foreign Policy: 14), it has to look for alternatives elsewhere given integration challenges in the region (Bordachev/Skriba 2014). In the European Union, Moscow is now regarded as aggressor in the Ukraine conflict and as destabilizing power in Europe. In Moscow, the EU is seen as a geopolitical competitor who wants to export its democratic values to the CIS. In Asia, China currently has the supremacy, which makes it difficult for Russia to expand its political interests into the Asian region cold-shouldering China. The current Russian-Chinese alliance is based rather upon pragmatic considerations than on fair-minded friendly intentions. Besides of it, originally, the idea of a close alliance with China proposed to Putin in 2000 by former Prime Minister Primakov in 2000 was received with little enthusiasm (Mangott 2005: 95). The Latin American region, instantaneously neglected by the US and the EU, proves to be the best alternative with Venezuela as an entry point. From Venezuela Russia can establish links with other South American and Caribbean countries. For the Caribbean country and its South American neighbors Russia constitutes an alternative to the historical US-American and European dominance.

The *Chavistas*³ in Venezuela consider the USA to be the epitome of imperialism. Consequently, Venezuela's rapprochement to Russia can be regarded as a result of its anti-imperialist identity. It ignores though that historically Russia has also played a hegemonic role in Central Asia and Caucasus. This fact contradicts the anti-imperialist attitude proclaimed by *Chavistas*, but is not subjected to discussion due to ignorance or pragmatic considerations. Meanwhile, the cooperation benefits both partners. Their collaboration is brought forward not only by similar *realpolitik*-considerations, but also by the same view-points on issues of regional integration and the need to stop the US-American influence on both continents. The methods that the governments of the two countries employ to preserve the loyalty from their neighbors are the same. Both Russia and Venezuela rely on their energy monopoly power and oil revenues to influence or control political events in neighboring countries. It is what constructivist Alexander Wendt defines as "socially shared knowledge or culture" (Wendt 1999: 139). Russian and Venezuelan political culture, treated with rejection in many countries, brings them together.

In addition to regional security and political aspects, Venezuela and Russia are also connected by their resource wealth, which is their most important geopolitical instrument and enables an expansionist foreign policy. Energy sector is one of the key areas, where Venezuela and Russia have developed a variety of joint projects and therefore deserves a closer look.

3 Supporters and political followers of Hugo Chávez (author's note)

Economic and energy policy issues of Russia and Venezuela

In Venezuelan case, there is virtually no difference between the concepts “economic policy” and “energy policy”. Because the oil is now the only asset Venezuela can offer its foreign economic partners. Venezuela’s economy is based on its oil wealth. Since the change of power in 1998, the Venezuelan oil dependency has been steadily increasing. While the oil and its derivatives amounted to 69% of total exports with \$11.06 billion in 1995, in 2008 their share was already 94.4% with \$94.52 billion. The proportion of other goods in export volume of Venezuela has declined in the same period from 31% to 5.6 % (Schaeffler: 502). It is unlikely that these circumstances can change in the near future, for the National Plan Simon Bolivar allows in the years 2007–2013 for the realization of a “national development strategy that combines the sovereign use of natural resources with regional and global energy integration (...)” as well as for the transformation of Venezuela “in the medium term in an energy super power with global influence” (Proyecto Simon Bolivar: 35). The Chavistas see Venezuela not only as a global leader of the new socialist movement and as a Latin American influence power, but also as a leading power in the energy field at the international level.

The coming to power of Hugo Chávez has also changed the logic of Venezuelan economic policy. Just like the already analyzed areas of security and regional policy, the economic relations of Venezuela had to serve ideological and geopolitical objectives of Chávez. The confrontation with the USA that broke out during the presidency of Hugo Chávez and affected the security and regional policy issues has found its continuation also in the economic area. Chávez has taken every appropriate opportunity to threaten his nemesis and most important oil customers – the US – with petroleum delivery suspension (CNN México 2010). All threats turned out to be pure provocations and have never been implemented, mainly because the United States is by far the most important purchaser of Venezuela’s oil (Werz 2011: 381). The government in Caracas is aware of it and seeks, driven by the ideological and pragmatic economic necessity, for alternative alliances in the economic sphere. The group of alternative partners is being led by China, Iran and Russia (Matz 2010, Romero/Corrales 2010, Romero 2010).

Russia is another big energy nation. However, the most important role is being attributed not to the oil, but to the natural gas, as the country is the largest gas exporter. In addition, Russia is the largest oil producer outside of the OPEC. The abundance of natural resources thus represents Russia’s key source of income. It also represents the geopolitical instrument of the Russian government. As stated in the Energy Strategy, the energy policy factor is the “basic element of Russian diplomacy” due to the “global nature of the energy-related problems and their politicization” (Energy-Economic Strategy of Russia up to 2020: item 7).

Its positive economic development since 2003 has helped Russia to consolidate its position among the major international energy policy players. By the end of the 1990 s, it was still an “energy appendage of the West” (Malek: 80), and during Putin’s second presidential term it has risen to an international energy power. The Russian economy has made an impressive development between the first and second term of Vladimir Putin. The gross domestic product (GDP) has increased by 35 %, between 2000 and 2005, the foreign debt has fallen from 60 % of GDP to 15 % and the gold and currency reserves have increased from 12 billion US dollars to 200 billion US dollars (Dynkin 2007).

Accordingly, the strategic priorities in that policy area have changed. The energetic expansion of Russia is currently to be guaranteed through the presence of its national energy companies abroad, which are getting diplomatic support from the Russian state (Energy Sector Strategy of Russia to 2020: item 7). The cooperation is aimed primarily at strengthening ties with the CIS countries, East Asia, the Shanghai Organization, the EU and with “other international organizations and countries” (ibid.). In addition, creation of a common economic energy space between Europe and Asia is planned (ibid.). Though regarding the creation of a Russian-Asian-European energy space, there is currently no clear perspective. Russia aims to gain a monopoly on gas supplies to Europe. The Europeans in turn, led by Germany, want to be relatively independent from the Russian gas. This goes back to interruptions in gas supply in Western Europe due to wage disputes between Russia and Ukraine. The major gas cut-off happened in 2009, as a majority of Central, Eastern and South European countries experienced a large gas supply disruption (Kroeger 2009). That is why the same year in Ankara several EU countries agreed on the construction of the Nabucco pipeline that had to transport gas from the Caspian Sea via Turkey and southern Europe to Austria (Spiegel Online 2009). Another project, called Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), envisaged gas supplies from Azerbaijan via Italy to Central Europe and has been declared ready by 2019 (Reuters 2013). The possible prospect of Europe’s energy supply without Russia’s participation clearly defies the strategic energy interests of Moscow. That is why Vladimir Putin gave the state-owned gas giant Gazprom in 2012 the order to start building the South Stream gas pipeline (Graetz 2012). The pipeline should extend from Russia through the Black Sea and through Bulgaria and the Balkans to Italy. The project was cancelled in 2014 in light of the political differences between Russia and Europe. However, Russia is planning to substitute it through the Turkish Stream pipeline, which is supposed to bring Russian gas to South Europe through Turkey, avoiding Ukraine (Buckley 2015).

In the energy policy sector, there is a conflict between the Russian effort to gain control over the gas supplies for Europe and the European intention of avoiding dependence on Russian supplies in view of the supplies disruptions in the past.

Economy and energy as principal boundary points between Russia and Venezuela

The economic policies of the Bolivarian Venezuela and Putin's Russia have a number of characteristics in common. This concerns, first, *the prominent place of the raw materials* in the economic policies concepts. In both countries, petroleum and natural gas constitute the main export goods and both Venezuela and Russia are hoping to win a prominent place in the international economic system. Venezuela's National Plan Simon Bolivar allowed in the years 2007–2013 for the realization of a “national development strategy that combines the sovereign use of natural resources with regional and global energy integration (...)” as well as for the transformation of Venezuela “in the medium term in an energy super power with global influence” (Proyecto Simon Bolivar 2007–2013: 35). Energy policy is the essential part of Moscow's foreign policy strategy in the 21st century and a tool for expanding the international influence of Russia. The renewed version of the *Energy Strategy of Russia* up to 2030, envisions not only strengthening of Russia's position on the energy market, but even Russia's “full integration” in it (Energy Strategy of Russia up to 2030: Point V.9). Petroleum and natural gas are also used by Venezuela and Russia *as a geopolitical instrument*. Further, the energy business in Venezuela as well as in Russia is being conducted through *state owned enterprises* and is thus completely controlled by the government. In Venezuela, it is the state oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA), whose transactions are decided on by the President alone (Graetz 2013: 208–209). The largest Russian company *Gazprom*, which originally was involved only in gas production, but became an oil producer in 2005, has undergone a strong state control after restructuring in 2001. Its management has since been largely occupied with the confidants of Vladimir Putin (ibid: 107–108). The next common element is the *diversification of economic relations*. Venezuela is looking for alternatives to its longtime one-sided focus on the US, while Russia is trying to reduce its dependence from the European energy market. At the same time, Venezuelan and Russian governments are aware of their dependence from the United States and Europe and are trying to hold on to the old connections either by threats of oil supply cut-offs – in case of the *Chavistas* – or the construction of new pipelines – in case of Putin. Finally, there is one more element that Caracas and Moscow have in common. It is the critique *of the international economic behavior of the United States*. Some years ago, Vladimir Putin and Hugo Chávez came to the conclusion that the US is an “economic parasite” that benefits largely from the dollar monopoly (Agência Latina Press 2011). These similarities, which are based on economic policy ambitions but also on similar foreign economic strategies and approaches, provide a sound basis for bilateral cooperation.

Currently there are several Russian energy companies operating in Venezuela. The leading role belongs to the LUKoil. The escalation of hostilities between Russia and the United States in the Georgia War in 2008 accelerated the political, economic and energy-technical cooperation with Venezuela that led to the establishment of a petroleum consortium with the participation of *LUKoil*, *Rosneft*, *Gazprom*, *Surgutneftegaz* and the Venezuelan PDVSA (Gabuyew 2008). On May 24, 2013, the Russian *Rosneft* and the Venezuelan PDVSA signed an agreement establishing a joint venture for oil production in the Orinoco block Carabobo-2 (Rosneft 2013). On top of that, Russian companies are digging for gold in Venezuela's gold mines, building apartments in Caracas, and the company Ruso-Orquídea Venezolana SA is engaged in the export of Venezuelan orchids to Russia (Kroth 2012).

A mutually beneficial cooperation?

At first glance, Russia and Venezuela have a mutually beneficial cooperation, based upon economic considerations, practical reasons and similar economic preconditions. However, Venezuela is getting numerous loans for the purchase of Russian weapons without a clear perspective to get them paid back. The logic behind it is to make Venezuela dependent on future Russian arms and its spare parts. Still, the geopolitical factors play major role in this connection. Venezuela has a partner in its alliance against the US and can ensure its military-technical security with Russian weapons. Russia wins solid presence in Venezuela and South America – the traditional sphere of influence of the West – while its state energy companies secure its income through the promotion of the largest proven oil reserves. Nevertheless it is doubtful that such cooperation can work permanently without penalizing one of the partners, for the existing alliance is not among two equal partners. The oppositional Venezuelan newspaper *El Universal* occasionally publishes articles that analyze Venezuelan-Russian relations. In one such article the author states:

“The concern arises when we realize that Chávez believes he has woven an alliance between equals. It is a big mistake. What he is [doing] is turning Venezuela into a world chess pawn of Russia and that, far from being desirable, is harmful, because all that will happen is that we will substitute the dependence on the “natural” geographic, economic and cultural centers by others are only temporary will swiftly discard us when it seems appropriate for them” (Salguero 2008).

In accordance with this opinion, Venezuela is important for Russia as long as the Eurasian country is consolidating its presence in Latin America. In the long term Russia is not interested in a close bond with Venezuela. Fernando Ochoa Antich puts it in a nutshell saying: “In big games small players always lose (...) It is sure, that Venezuela will come at least singled out of this game” (Ochoa Antich 2008). Thus, there is growing consensus in oppositional circles,

that Venezuela is merely a means to an end for Russia that serves as temporary alliance partner in the balance of power against the United States and as the gateway to South America. Ultimately, according to Ochoa Antich, Venezuela would expect the fate of Cuba that has been excluded from the Russian sphere of interest with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union (ibid.). However, the biased attitude of the Venezuelan opposition towards the policy of the *Chavistas* has to be taken into account. The suggested dramatic scenarios as a result of the foreign policy of the government can also be part of political tactic.

Conclusion

This paper revealed that the Russian interest in Venezuela is largely guided by considerations of geopolitics and realist power politics, while to Venezuela constructivist ideology-based components are critical. Venezuela is not envisioning global leadership – except in the energy area – as such ambitions would simply go beyond the capacities of a small Caribbean country. It pursues the ideological goal of expelling the US from Latin America and establishing of a multi-polar world, whereby Latin America should serve as one of the poles. A “friendship” with Russia provides legitimacy to Venezuelan government and draws international attention to it. This factor stays relevant for the *Chavistas* also after the death of Hugo Chávez. Yet in his charge as interim president, the current Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro assured that the friendship with Russia would continue to exist (RIA Novosti 2013). During Maduro’s this year’s visit to Russia, Vladimir Putin stated: “Before discussing energy and international matters, I would like to underscore that Venezuela is not only a fellow country; we are also very close partners, it is one of Russia’s most important partners” (El Universal 2015). But while Venezuelan security notions are strongly influenced by ideological elements anchoring in socialist anti-imperialism and are not dictated purely by political interests, Russia is mainly concerned with regaining its former political weight and disarming geopolitical competitors, whereby Venezuela is supposed to function as a gateway to South America and the Caribbean. That is the main difference between the policies of Venezuela and Russia, and it is questionable, whether they can join forces in a durable manner. Without innovative ideas, Venezuela would remain relevant for Russia primarily as weapons market, a gateway to South America, and also possibly due to its OPEC membership.

However, given the current escalation of tensions between Russia and the West over Ukraine and the dominance of an anti-Western course in Kremlin, Russia is interested in Latin America and would most likely try to keep Venezuela in the foreign policy focus at least in the medium term. In view of the rise of the US crude oil and gas production (Holeywell 2015), it is also important for

Russia to contribute to the maintenance of Venezuelan energy production, in order to deter the Latin American region from a renewed political shift towards North America, which doesn't seem unlikely in light of the historic meeting between Barack Obama and Raul Castro at the 7th Summit of the Americas 2015 in Panama.

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