

## Mexico — Russia: the Prospects of Relations

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### Abstract

The United Mexican States and the Russian Federation have a long history of inter-state cooperation. During 125 years of collaboration, the moments of both ups and downs took place. However, almost always, the governments sought not to forget about the existence of each other. The article highlights the status and prospects of relations between the two countries.

**Keywords:** Mexico, Russia, international relations, world politics.

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**T**he relations of the United Mexican States and Russia have a long history. The first contacts between the two states occurred in the eighteenth century, trade and economic ties emerged at the dawn of the nineteenth century and diplomatic relations were established more than 125 years ago.

Relations of Mexico and Russia take a special place in the history of the two countries. It is determined by many factors and, in particular, the coincidence in time of revolutions. The United Mexican States was the first country in the region which recognized and established diplomatic relations with the

USSR (1924). The Mexican government was the one which first officially condemned the fascist aggression against the Soviet Union. During the war, a powerful movement of solidarity with the Soviet Union started in Mexico and during the cold war its government unlike the authorities of other regional countries did not sever the diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Mexico was one of the first countries in Latin America (the first was Cuba) which adopted the practice of meetings and negotiations at the level of Foreign Ministers and then at the highest state level in relations with the Soviet Union. Since the postwar years (especially since the 1970s)

the understanding between the two countries on actual issues of international affairs was growing.

However, there are many factors due to which the interaction between Mexico and Russia, and between Russia and other countries in the Latin America, were not carried out so actively and rapidly as it could be. The main reason is the geographical distance: the Soviet Union was hardly interested in Latin American cooperation; nevertheless, it tried to maintain strong ties with many states in the region. During the Cold war Latin America and the Soviet Union had few opportunities for interaction and this fact was actively used by the United States of America using the situation for various interventions in the region. Thus, for example, the interference into the politics of Guatemala in 1954 was justified with fight against communism. Similar actions of the American government in Cuba led to guerilla warfare and subsequently to the Cuban revolution in 1956, when Fidel Castro came to power and the «Island of Freedom» was now under communist rule.

In 1960s, the relations between the Soviet Union and the United States of America had the character of a direct confrontation. This was connected with two factors: first, because of the «Caribbean Crisis» in 1962, which is now known due to the work of Sergo Anastasovich Mikoyan<sup>1</sup> and, secondly, because of the Soviet missiles and weapons in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

The American government justified destabilization of political system organization and overthrowing of the government of Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973 with struggle against communism. However, the Soviet Union supported strong economic and diplomatic ties with Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Peru, at least during the period of the military regime of Juan Velasco Alvarado in the early 70 s. It was connected with the fact that

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<sup>1</sup> Mikoyan S. Anatomija Karibskogo krizisa [The anatomy of the Carribean crisis]. ed. S. Savranskaya. — Moscow: Akademija [Academia]. 2006.

the Peruvian government was interested in purchasing Soviet weapons.

Despite the fact that most countries of Latin America gained independence until the 70–80s, for the Soviet Union this region still remained less important than the countries of Africa and Asia (mostly because many states implemented defensive policy).

Later in 1989, at the meeting with the US President George Bush in Malta, Mikhail Gorbachev admitted that Latin America was the «sphere of influence» of the United States and that the Soviet Union was not going to interfere into Latin American affairs<sup>2</sup>.

It is necessary to admit that until the beginning of the 21st century, foreign policy of Russia was not aimed at close cooperation with the countries of Latin America, for it could be interpreted as a provocation or aggression against the United States of America.

The visits of the President Vladimir Putin to Nicaragua, Argentina, Brazil, and most importantly to Cuba in 2014 influenced the development of bilateral dialogue between the Russian Federation and the countries of Latin America. Owing to good relations between Russia and Venezuela formed under Hugo Chavez, the recent visits of Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov to Latin America helped to resolve the tension between the two countries. The visit of Patriarch Kirill also served to strengthen diplomatic ties of Russia with Latin American continent. The only roughness between the states appeared after the Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation Sergei Shoigu mentioned the deployment of Russian military bases in Latin America, while, in fact, he was talking about «points of support and food provision»<sup>3</sup>.

In fact, in both the USA and Mexico the

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<sup>2</sup> RIA Novosti. The betrayal of Gorbachev in Malta. [Electronic resource]. URL: [http://ria.ru/zinoviev\\_club/20150101/1040924212.html](http://ria.ru/zinoviev_club/20150101/1040924212.html).

<sup>3</sup> Before the collapse of the USSR the Institute of Friendship and Cultural interchange «Mexico-USSR» was functioning between the two countries.

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ruling elite noticed the expanding influence of Russia in Latin America over the last decade.

## II

Despite the growing influence of the Russian Federation in Latin America, intergovernmental relations of Mexico and Russia are still very weak. The main reason of the fact is that Russia continues looking for a «supporting point» in Argentina: sound contacts were ascertained when the presidency held Cristina Fernandez (from December 10, 2007 to December 10, 2015), during this period a 24-hour broadcast of the program «Russia Today» began. Moreover, Argentina is the only country of this region, having the tradition of Slavic immigration (partially, Paraguay too). The situation was different with Mexico, for the majority of immigrants arrived in the country to move further to the United States of America and Canada.

Cultural ties between the United Mexican States and the Russian Federation weakened after the collapse of the Soviet Union<sup>1</sup> and the formation of NAFTA<sup>2</sup>. However, the activity of Russian emigrants has recently increased in Mexico<sup>3</sup>, major importance gained two restaurants in Mexico city, though the owners initially wanted to emigrate to Canada, (in Soviet times there were more restaurants); there are Orthodox churches, a medical-diagnostic centre and there is also the Center of studying foreign languages on the territory of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, where the Russian

<sup>1</sup> North American Treaty on the Free Trade between Canada, USA and Mexico. NAFTA was signed on December 17, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> «The Russians in Mexico» a documentary in Youtube, shot at the TV Department of the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

<sup>3</sup> REGNUM. Informational Agency. Naval base of Russia will be in Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Argentina. [Electronic resource]. — URL: <http://regnum.ru>.

language is taught, there are also schools where the Russian language and culture are promoted. Currently, the Mexicans know less about Russia than they knew about the Soviet Union: in bookstores there was a lot of scientific literature published by «Mir», classical literature from publishing house «Raduga» and political literature by publishing house «Progress», as well as the Embassy of the Soviet Union published its own journal.

However, the cultural void is gradually being filled: artists of the Bolshoi and the Mariinsky theatres began visiting Mexico more often, the evenings of Russian culture are held, and student exchanges are being established. Interstate dialogue between the two countries is also adjusted through the tourism. The Foreign Minister of Mexico Claudia Ruiz Massieu holds talks with the Russian side on the establishment of direct flights from Saint Petersburg to Cancun (a Mexican beach resort on the Caribbean coast).

## III

On December 11, 2015, Mexico and Russia celebrated the 125th anniversary since the establishment of diplomatic relations. This symbolic event reflected the growth in the vol. of trade between the countries (it is also connected with the intercommodity substitution of European products in the Russian market).

Diplomatic relations between Mexico and Russia were formally established in 1890 and considerably strengthened after the Russian-Japanese war in 1905 when Russia, as well as Mexico, was in fear of Japan, spreading its influence in the Pacific Ocean (the Mexican government feared the Japanese occupation of the Peninsula of Baja California). Also, in 1909, Tsar Nicholay II awarded the Mexican President Porfirio Diaz with the Order of Alexander Nevsky (this order had not been given to any Latin American ruler before).

Mexico and Russia have many similarities, for example, in the 1910–1917 years, there

was the first «social revolution of the 20th century» in Mexico, which resulted with the Constitution of 1917, and in the same year the «Great October revolution» — the first mighty socialist revolution, happened in Russia. American journalist John Reed, who supported the policy of Pancho Villa, witnessed the Mexican revolutionary events in his book «Insurgent Mexico», which was published in 1914. Three years later, John Reed witnessed the «Great October Socialist Revolution». After that he wrote the book «Ten days that shook the world». Thus, the American journalist combined both of these revolutions of the early twentieth century, and forty years later, Russian filmmaker Sergei Bondarchuk witnessed both of these historical events in his film «The red bells». Referring to the Ambassador of Mexico Héctor Cárdenas, it may be said that «the history of the establishment of the fraternal relations between Mexico and Russia is connected with such names as Heraclio Sepeda<sup>1</sup> and Mikhail Borodin»<sup>2</sup>.

Despite actively developing diplomatic ties, intergovernmental relations between the countries declined, and eventually Mexican Communism continued its own development, different from the Soviet one. However, it is interesting to note that the Soviet political figure Lev Trotsky got a shelter in Mexico by President Lázaro Cardenas, he lived in the family home of the artists Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera in the South of Mexico City, headed the creation of the fourth international 6 7 8 and was murdered by the NKVD agent Ramon Mercader. Today

<sup>1</sup> The Mexican writer of the XX century, the follower of Pancho Villa policy. In 1958–1959 years he was the member of Workers and Peasants Party, a member of the Communist Party of Mexico, a reporter of «The voice of Mexico»; had been in Moscow.

<sup>2</sup> In 1919, he was the first Soviet Council in Mexico, the founder of one of the parallel Communist parties and attributed much to the foundation of the Latin American Bureau of the III International.

Trotsky is known from archival documents of Mexico: primarily due to his statements in front of the Commission of John Dewey, and from the works of Grover Ferrat, which have recently been translated into Russian language.

It is necessary to mention that, despite the estrangement between the two states, in 1930 and 1932, the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, who directed a number of films, visited Mexico. His most famous film «Viva Mexico!» tells the story of the country throughout its history.

It can be mentioned that Valentina Ivanova (her parents were Russian artists, living in Mexico) was the wife of a famous Mexican comedian Mario Moreno «Cantinflas», promoted in the 30s by the Russian Director Jacques Helman, who was born in St. Petersburg.

«Despite the resumption of diplomatic relations in 1942, the contacts between Mexico and Russia were not as close and productive, as between Russia and Argentina»<sup>3</sup>. Since the Second World War, the Mexican government was maintaining the political course of the United States of America; however, there were two exceptions in the 70s: the presidency of Luis Echeverría (1970–1976) and José López Portillo (1976–1982).

The relationships aggravated because of the incident with the Soviet diplomats: they were accused of controlling the internal affairs of Mexico; although it must be mentioned that the Mexican Communist Party was illegal in the late 1920s and from 1940 to 1977, although such famous artists such as David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera were the party members. The Communist military leaders were educated at Patrice Lumumba Peoples Friendship University (now the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia) in Moscow, on subjects as mathematics, physics and other exact sci-

<sup>3</sup> Cárdenas Héctor. «La historia de las relaciones entre México y Rusia», la Secretaría de Relaciones Extranjeras (Relaciones Exteriores) / fondos Económica de la Cultura de 1993.

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ences, because, according to Hector Cardenas: «In Mexico the level of education was not so good»<sup>1</sup>. Mexican intellectuals also forged ties with the Lomonosov Moscow State University.

Did the Soviet Union intervene in Mexican Affairs? The answer is «Maybe, it was!», but not at the official level, it was from below, reinforcing «revolutionary acceleration», the same inspired the faith in Cuba into possible changes and led to the revolution in 1959.

The relations between Mexico and the Soviet Union began to improve after the visits of the Mexican President Luis Echeverria to the Soviet Union in 1973, and the Ambassador Victor Flores Olea, the former Dean of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of the National Autonomous University of Mexico. These visits contributed to the intensification of cultural relations: in Mexico such exhibitions as «Treasures of the Kremlin», «the Hermitage Masterpieces», «Painting from the Russian Museum» and «Icons of the 12th to the 18th century» were held<sup>2</sup>. Shortly thereafter, Soviet filmmaker Nikita Mikhalkov, who speaks Spanish, visited Mexico. These examples are a good proof of establishing cultural dialogue between the countries.

However, the tension remains in the relationship and, first of all because of the fact that many Mexican journalists support the anti-Russian line.

#### IV

**D**espite the long history of the establishing of the interstate relations between Mexico and Russia, which lasted throughout the 20th century, now the

economic relationship between the countries are very weak: the direct investments are almost absent (Juan Pablo Gongora Perez has a lot of reasoning regarding the issue 1).

Russia and Mexico share a commitment to the practical implementation of democratic principles in dealing with urgent international problems, strict compliance with international law, primarily the UN Charter, strengthening of the central role of the United Nations and the UN Security Council as a universal tool for peacekeeping and conflict situations regulating, in particular around Iraq, the Middle East, Afghanistan and the Balkans. The position of the countries on major human rights issues, many aspects of the disarmament process are similar.

Both countries agree that a serious threat to global security appeared with such phenomena as international terrorism, separatism and religious extremism. Moscow and Mexico City are interested in establishing effective cooperation in countering to new threats and modern challenges, including drug trafficking, arms smuggling, transnational organized crime.

After analyzing the interview of the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin and the Ambassador of the United Mexican States in Russia Alfredo Perez Bravo, the main prospects of cooperation between the two countries can be highlighted.

So, in his interview for Mexican publisher Mario Vazquez Rana, Vladimir Putin said the following: «Economic ties between our two countries are still the «bottleneck» of our cooperation. But, it is worth noting that in recent years there is a growing mutual interest in business circles of both countries in establishing direct ties and activating of a business dialogue. New partnership mechanisms are created which help to join state, business and academic circles. For example, there is the Russian-Mexican intergovernmental Commission on trade, economic, scientific and technological cooperation and maritime shipping, Business and Academic Forum, the Business Council.

<sup>1</sup> Cárdenas Héctor. «La historia de las relaciones entre México y Rusia», la Secretaría de Relaciones Extranjeras (Relaciones Exteriores) / fondos Económica de la Cultura de 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Cárdenas Héctor. «La historia de las relaciones entre México y Rusia», la Secretaría de Relaciones Extranjeras (Relaciones Exteriores) / fondos Económica de la Cultura de 1993.

It is necessary to enrich our cooperation with specific business projects. From the Russian side such companies and banks as «Gazprom», «Energomashexport», «Techsnabexport», «Rosoboronexport», «Vnesheconombank» are interested in widening the relations with Mexico. I must note that they have a successful experience in implementing large-scale projects with multimillion budgets in various countries of the world. Good prospects for cooperation are opening in the field of energy, engineering and aviation.

The Ambassador of the United Mexican States in Russia Alfredo Perez Bravo sticks to the same position. He says: «I would like Mexican companies to invest their money in Russia. And on this account I have good news — this year we are renewing our investment projects in Russia. One large Mexican company, which produces spare parts for trucks, will open its branch in Kaluga. This is the first step in the investment cooperation between our countries. We in our turn welcome Russian business to Mexico. We have very favorable conditions»<sup>1</sup>.

Another promising direction, which A. P. Bravo distinguishes, is a tourist business. «A huge number of Russians annually visit Mexico, the number of Russian tourists has increased from 22 to 77 thousand, primarily due to the attractiveness of the Riviera Maya<sup>2</sup>. Russian companies could buy or build hotels, restaurants, entertainment centers for tourists in Mexico. Mexico is open for the construction of airports, roads, ports, railways. I would like to see Russian railways, power plants, chemical plants in my country. Mexico needs the presence of Russian capital, in addition to the development of trade»<sup>3</sup>.

Speaking about the economic prospects for both countries, cooperation in the

sphere of education should be mentioned. Every year the Russian government allocates 15 educational scholarships for Mexican students. A great contribution to the development of the cooperation in this field was made by the Mexican Ambassador, who «visited more than 20 Russian universities, including all the largest universities in Moscow and St. Petersburg. He became the first Ambassador of Mexico in history who visited the universities of Omsk and Vladivostok, met with the rectors, vice-rectors, deans and participated in conferences and debates. He discussed the inter-university cooperation and the opportunity for Russian students to study in Mexico and Mexican students to study in Russia. He found understanding of the Russian partners in the field of scientific and technical cooperation». He believes that «humanitarian contacts today are as much important for the understanding of people as public diplomacy, regular communication between heads of states or international politics in general»<sup>4</sup>.

### Conclusion

The United Mexican States and the Russian Federation have a long history of interstate cooperation. During the 125 years of cooperation the moments of both ups and downs took place. However, almost always, governments have sought not to forget about each other.

Currently, the governments of both countries face the challenge of strengthening the position of interstate interaction, the establishment of trade and intercultural dialogue. This tendency can be beneficial for both parties.

Diplomatic progress of Russian-Mexican cooperation will undoubtedly contribute to strengthening the international prestige and influence of the Russian Federation, in partic-

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<sup>1</sup> International affairs. The Ambassador of Mexico in Russia Alfredo Perez Bravo: «Our economic ties should be increased a hundred times...» [Electronic resource]. — URL: <http://interaFFairs.ru/print.RNR?item=629>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>4</sup> International affairs. The Ambassador of Mexico in Russia Alfredo Perez Bravo: «Our economic ties should be increased a hundred times...» [Electronic resource]. — URL: <http://interaFFairs.ru/print.RNR?item=629>.

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ular in Latin America. The objective similarity of positions and the absence of insurmountable contradictions show the prospect of consistent performance of the two states in the solution of major international issues will give an additional positive factor to the im-

provement of the international climate and the establishment of more balanced world order beneficial to both countries and the majority of the world community.

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