

Putin Heads to Latin America to Boost Ties

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President Vladimir Putin is to embark on a five-day visit to Cuba, Argentina and Brazil on Friday in an effort to strengthen Russia's ties with its Latin American partners amid political spats with the West.

Putin will first meet with Cuban President Raul Castro to discuss the extension of economic ties between the countries, before heading to Argentina and Brazil for bilateral talks and to attend the BRICS summit and the World Cup final.

Although Russia has fostered warm ties with Latin America since the Soviet era, Putin's visit has taken on more significance given Russia's fallout with the West over the annexation of Crimea and conflict in Ukraine.

"Putin's visit to Latin America in the current international context is a demonstration that Russia is seeing the world more broadly," said Boris Martynov, deputy head of research at the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Latin America. "This visit shows the desire to create

a multi-civilization world order."

In an address to Russia's ambassadors to foreign countries earlier this month, Putin said that "the unipolar world order had not come into being" and that nontraditional centers of power had been gaining influence on the international stage.

"Peoples and countries are raising their voices in favor of self-determination and civilizational and cultural identity, which conflicts with the attempts by certain countries to maintain their domination in the military sphere, in politics, finance, the economy and in ideology," he said in an apparent reference to Western countries.

Putin's visit follows Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's tour of Cuba, Nicaragua, Peru and Chile in May, at the height of clashes between Ukrainian troops and pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. Lavrov's visit was interpreted as an effort to court a region that has traditionally been viewed as the U.S.'s backyard amid a seemingly intractable dispute with the West.

Harking back to the strong ties between the region and the Soviet Union, two days ahead of Putin's arrival in Cuba, Russia's Federation Council ratified an agreement canceling 90 percent of Cuba's \$35.2 billion debt to the Soviet Union, a deal Martynov said paved the way for "a world of possibilities" in the countries' bilateral relations. Putin will also visit with Fidel Castro, the 87-year-old legendary leader of the Cuban revolution who played a key role in forging his country's ties with the Soviet Union and with modern Russia.

On the sidelines of his visit to Havana, Putin is also expected to meet with Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega to discuss Russia's involvement in the construction of a canal — presented as an alternative to the Panama Canal — that would connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The 278-kilometer canal's construction is scheduled to begin in December.

In Argentina on Saturday, Putin will discuss other ambitious undertakings with his counterpart there, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, including a variety of joint projects in the fields of atomic energy, military technical cooperation and machine-building. The Kremlin said earlier this month that a series of bilateral agreements were expected to be inked at the meeting.

Presidential aide Yuri Ushakov said Thursday that Putin's bilateral talks with his Brazilian counterpart Dilma Rousseff would address questions related to the countries' cooperation in multilateral forums such as the BRICS — the grouping of developing economies that comprises Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — as well as in the United Nations, Group of 20 and WTO, and would lead to the signing of intergovernmental and commercial bilateral agreements.

✘The BRICS summit on July 15 and 16 will also serve as an opportunity for Russia to propose the creation of a BRICS energy association "aimed at ensuring the energy security of the participating countries," Ushakov was cited by Interfax as saying. The aide added that the joint project, which he said had already been discussed at the government level, would entail the establishment of a reserve fuel bank and a BRICS energy institute. He did not provide a timeline or further detail on the initiative.

The Kremlin said that a number of economic agreements are expected to be signed at the BRICS summit, including on establishing the BRICS Development Bank and Currency Reserve Pool. Putin will also be meeting with the leaders of China, South Africa and India on the sidelines of the summit, but an agenda for their meetings has not been released.

Putin's trip will not be all work and no play. The president will watch Germany and Argentina battle it out on the football pitch for the World Cup title on Sunday in Rio de Janeiro, and take part in the closing ceremony where Russia will be introduced as the host of the next tournament in 2018.

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