

## Vladimir Putin meets Fidel Castro in Cuba

Vladimir Putin, Russian president, meets Fidel Castro, the retired Communist leader, in Cuba



Cuba's Fidel Castro, center, meets with Russia's President Vladimir Putin, right, in Havana, Cuba Photo: AP

By Philip Sherwell, New York

9:40AM BST 12 Jul 2014

Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, has met Cuba's ruling Castro brothers at the start of a Latin American tour courting stronger trade and diplomatic ties as Moscow's relations with the West fester over Ukraine.

Mr Putin laid a wreath at Revolution Square in Havana with Raúl Castro, the communist island's president, and later met for an hour behind closed doors with his older brother Fidel, the long-time former dictator.

The visit was far from ceremonial as Russia agreed to write off 90 per cent of the impoverished island's \$35 billion (£20 billion) debts to Moscow and announced a series of oil and trade initiatives with its ally,

a staunch supporter of Mr Putin during the Ukraine crisis.



*Russia's President Vladimir Putin (R) takes part in a wreath-laying ceremony at Havana's Memorial to the Soviet Internationalist Soldier*

In a clear swipe at American dominance of its regional “backyard”, Mr Putin said that Russia was “interested in a strong, economically stable and politically independent, united Latin America that is becoming an important part of the emerging polycentric world order”.

The Russian president was kicking off a five-day Latin American trip that will culminate with a summit of the leaders of the emergent economic powers of the so-called BRICS states – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

The formation of a new international development bank that will be portrayed as an alternative to Western-dominated institutions is expected to be unveiled at the summit in the Brazilian city of Fortaleza.

His wooing of Latin America has come as Russia has been excluded from recent gatherings of the G8 group of leading industrial powers.

But Mr Putin has long sought to undermine what he believes is American and Western European domination of international agencies, even before his policies in Ukraine resulted in the imposition of US sanctions on prominent Russians.

Russia is also seeking new military cooperation agreements in Latin America, where some left-leaning leaders have distanced their countries from traditional US influence and anger over American

eavesdropping programmes is strong.

The Russian leader will also visit Argentina, whose president, Cristina Kirchner, recently drew parallels between Crimea and the Falkland Islands, and he will attend the closing ceremony in Rio de Janeiro of the World Cup as leader of the host nation for the 2018 tournament.

Mr Putin will meet with Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, while he is in Rio. Germany has close trade ties with Russia and the two leaders speak frequently.

Mrs Merkel has been far less critical of Mr Putin over Russian interference in Ukraine than the US and she also has her own conflicts with Washington over its espionage operations in Germany.

Russia's wooing of improved commercial links in Latin America comes as new figures indicate the economic impact of its belligerence in Ukraine.

Capital flight from the country reached \$75 billion in the first half of this year, the country's central bank reported, and the economy is stagnant.

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2014