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The Crisis of Regional Leadership in Latin America: Between Internal Fragmentation and External Pressure

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Abstract

Introduction. This research provides a comprehensive analysis of the structural transformation of the regional leadership system in Latin America, in the context of increased global geopolitical instability. The purpose of the study is to identify the causes and manifestations of the crisis of regional leadership in Latin America, which was caused by the transformation of the role of key regional players such as Brazil and Argentina. The study examines internal factors such as fragmentation and disunity, external challenges, and possible ways to overcome the current situation.

Materials and methods. The methodological framework includes a systematic and institutional approach, which allows us to assess the resource potential of candidate states for regional leadership and identify the reasons for their ability or inability to consolidate the region. The empirical basis of the study includes legal acts that regulate the activities of states within the framework of regional integration associations and organizations.

Results. The study identifies how internal political crises and economic stagnation in the "middle powers" have led to the erosion of regional integration mechanisms such as UNASUR and MERCOSUR, creating a "power vacuum" in the region and paving the way for a transition from potential monocentrism to an unstable polycentric model. It is argued that the absence of a dominant regional power contributes to the fragmentation of Latin America, turning it into a field for intense competition among non-regional actors. The authors pay special attention to the "double dependency" dilemma faced by Latin American countries, which must balance between the ongoing military and political pressure from the United States and the rapid growth of China's economic presence.

Discussion. The study theorizes the transition of the regional system from potential monocentrism to an unstable polycentric model. The authors predict that, in the short term, the struggle for leadership will shift away from ideological confrontation and towards a pragmatic pursuit of external investment, which will eventually lead to the consolidation of the regional security architecture and the reduction of Latin America's overall international influence. The future of regional leadership in Latin America depends in large part on the political will of the current generation of leaders to overcome their differences for the common good, and on the ability of institutions to translate that will into concrete action. In the context of the emerging new world order,

this is a necessary condition for the region to take its rightful place in the new global architecture, rather than remaining an arena for foreign competition.

Conclusion. The publication is of interest to experts and young scientists, as well as to anyone interested in contemporary global and regional studies. The study's findings provide recommendations for improving the effectiveness of existing integration models for regional and transregional cooperation between states, in which Russia actively participates.


Keywords: region; regional leadership; Latin America; Brazil; Argentina; CELAC; MERCOSUR; foreign policy; integration

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Кризис регионального лидерства в Латинской Америке: между внутренней фрагментацией и внешним давлением

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Аннотация

Введение. В исследовании представлен всесторонний анализ структурной трансформации системы регионального лидерства в Латинской Америке в контексте возросшей глобальной геополитической нестабильности. Цель – определить причины и проявления кризиса регионального лидерства в Латинской Америке, который был вызван трансформацией роли ключевых региональных игроков, таких как Бразилия и Аргентина. Рассматриваются внутренние факторы, такие как фрагментация и разобщенность, внешние вызовы, а также возможные пути выхода из сложившейся ситуации.

Материалы и методы. Методологическая основа включает системный и институциональный подходы, позволяющие оценить ресурсный потенциал государств-кандидатов на региональное лидерство, выявив причины их способности или неспособности консолидировать позиции региональных акторов. Эмпирическую базу исследования составили правовые акты, регулирующие деятельность государств в рамках региональных интеграционных объединений и организаций.

Результаты. Проведенное исследование позволило определить, как внутривнутриполитические кризисы и экономическая стагнация в «средних державах» привели к размыванию региональных интеграционных механизмов, создав «вакуум власти» в регионе, и создавая условия для перехода региональной системы от потенциального моноцентризма к нестабильной полицентричной модели. Сделан вывод, что отсутствие доминирующей региональной державы-лидера способствует фрагментации Латинской Америки, превращая ее в поле для острой конкуренции между внерегиональными акторами. Авторы уделяют особое внимание дилемме «двойной зависимости», с которой сталкиваются латиноамериканские страны, когда они должны балансировать между сохраняющимся военным и политическим давлением Соединенных Штатов и быстрым ростом торгово-экономического присутствия Китая.

Обсуждение. В исследовании рассмотрены перспективы перехода региональной системы от потенциального моноцентризма к нестабильной полицентрической модели. Авторы прогнозируют, что в краткосрочной перспективе борьба за лидерство в регионе перейдет от идеологической конфронтации к прагматичному привлечению внешних инвестиций, что в конечном итоге приведет к укреплению архитектуры региональной безопасности, но и снижению общего международного влияния Латинской Америки. Будущее регионального лидерства в Латинской Америке во многом зависит от политической воли нынешнего поколения лидеров преодолеть свои разногласия ради общего блага и от способности институтов воплотить эту волю в конкретные действия. В контексте формирующегося нового мирового порядка это необходимое условие для того, чтобы регион занял свое законное место в новой глобальной архитектуре, а не оставался ареной для иностранной конкуренции.

Заключение. Публикация представляет интерес для экспертов и молодых учёных, а также всех, кто интересуется проблематикой современных глобальных и региональных исследований. Результаты исследования позволяют выработать рекомендации по повышению эффективности существующих интеграционных моделей регионального и трансрегионального взаимодействия между государствами, в которых активно принимает участие и Россия.

Ключевые слова: регион; региональное лидерство; Латинская Америка; Бразилия; Аргентина; СЕЛАК; МЕРКОСУР; внешняя политика; интеграция

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Introduction

Latin America is experiencing an acute leadership crisis at the regional level. Experts note that the modern world order is becoming increasingly fragmented.¹ In this situation, the countries of the region faced a difficult choice. They need to determine their place in the context of internal contradictions and external influence. In other words, Latin America is confronted with the necessity of regional consolidation or the identification of a predominant leader to deal with internal problems and work out a common path of development.

The urgency of the problem is due to several factors [1]. Firstly, there is an erosion of democratic norms and an increase in political polarization within the countries of the region. The political landscape of Latin America is characterized by a series of power shifts and ideological narratives, which impedes the continuity of foreign policy initiatives. Secondly, global geopolitical shifts have increased external pressure on the countries of the region. The rivalry of world powers for influence in Latin America has escalated, presenting states with a complex strategic dilemma between different foreign policy courses. Thirdly, the traditional mechanisms of regional integration are weakened. All this together creates a situation that can be described as a "crisis of regional leadership".

¹ The Great Fragmentation: driving conflict as world peace plummets // Vision of Humanity: [website]. URL: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/the-great-fragmentation-driving-conflict-world-peace-plummets/> (last accessed: 05.02.2026).

The purpose of this research is to analyze the causes and manifestations of the crisis of regional leadership in Latin America, to explore the role of internal factors such as fragmentation and disunity, and external challenges, as well as to identify possible ways out of the current situation. The research uses the following comprehensive scientific methods: literature review, source analysis, comparative analysis. The novelty of the work consists in a comprehensive review of the latest trends in Latin American regional politics based on current facts and events.

Materials and Methods

The methodological framework includes a systematic and institutional approach, which allows us to assess the resource potential of candidate states for regional leadership and identify the reasons for their ability or inability to consolidate the region. The empirical basis of the study includes legal acts that regulate the activities of states within the framework of CELAC (“The Caracas Declaration”²), MERCOSUR (“Treaty Establishing a Common Market”³) and final documents of the summits with regional and external actors (including “The new EU-MERCOSUR Partnership Agreement”⁴).

The following research methods were used:

- descriptive review of literature;
- source analysis, which involves a comprehensive study of some theoretical and historical approaches to the analysis of regional integration processes in Latin America;
- comparative analysis, which involves the characteristics of common aspects and differences in the implementation of regional leadership strategies by the leading countries in the region.

Results

The origins and evolution of the problem of regional leadership

The idea of Latin American unity and an independent path of development has a long history, from the Pan-American thinkers of the 19th century to the waves of regionalism of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. However, the practical implementation of regional leadership has always faced many obstacles. Traditionally, Brazil and Argentina were viewed as the primary candidates for the role of leaders of the region. Their potential (economic, demographic, and diplomatic) made this particular combination key to building integration mechanisms and a common regional agenda [2]. The starting point of the modern rapprochement was the political decision to turn from historical competition to cooperation, enshrined in the Iguazu Declaration on November 30, 1985⁵.

² Declaración de Caracas // full text: [website]. URL: <https://parlatino.org/pdf/comunidad-estados/declaracion-caracas.pdf> (In Spanish, last accessed: 03.02.2026).

³ Treaty Establishing a Common Market between the Argentine Republic, the Federal Republic of Brazil, the Republic of Paraguay and the Eastern Republic of Uruguay (Treaty of Asunción) // SICE (OAS): [website]. URL: https://sice.oas.org/trade/MRCOSUR/TreatyAsun_e.asp (last accessed: 03.02.2026).

⁴ The new EU-Mercosur Partnership Agreement // European Commission: [website]. URL: https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/mercosur/eu-mercosur-agreement/text-agreement_en (last accessed: 03.02.2026).

⁵ Declaración de Iguazú, 1985 (Full text of the document signed on November 30, 1985 by the presidents of the Argentine Republic and the Federative Republic of Brazil) // Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Worship of Argentina: [website]. URL: <https://www.cancilleria.gob.ar/es/actualidad/noticias/declaracion-de-iguazu-1985> (In Spanish, last accessed: 03.02.2026).

The next step was already institutional in nature. The Asuncion Treaty of March 26, 1991 laid the foundations of MERCOSUR as a common market for Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay⁶. Thus, a model of "two-center leadership" was established in the region, where the sustainability of integration depended on the consistency of the strategies of the two largest participants. However, it is precisely this bipolar structure that contains an internal contradiction. When foreign policy and economic priorities coincide, it becomes an engine of integration, but when courses diverge, it turns into a factor of stagnation. This was reflected in the fate of broader projects, including UNASUR, established in 2008 as the South American integration structure⁷. However, the political succession of regimes and ideological fractures led to the fact that regional institutions lost their stability [3].

At the beginning of the 21st century, against the background of the so-called "pink wave" of leftist governments, vigorous efforts were made to form new regional associations alternative to the Organization of American States (OAS) and the influence of the United States [4]. The Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) was established in 2008 and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in 2010, followed a few years earlier by the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) under the auspices of Venezuela. These initiatives facilitated the prospects for an autonomous agenda and collective leadership of the region. Thus, in the early years, UNASUR demonstrated its potential. Under its auspices, presidents of different ideological positions jointly condemned the coup in Honduras in 2009 and helped resolve the border crisis between Colombia and Ecuador in 2008⁸. Nevertheless, these associations could not avoid internal contradictions. UNASUR initially had a pronounced center-left character, largely supported by the resources of Venezuela under Hugo Chavez. When conservative governments came to power in a number of countries in the mid-2010s, a leadership crisis in UNASUR broke out. In 2017, disagreements arose over the candidacy of the Secretary-General, and already in 2018, half of the participants, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru and Paraguay, suspended membership or withdrew from the organization.⁹ As a result, UNASUR virtually ceased to function. Analysts directly attribute this failure to the ideological fragmentation of the region and the lack of supranational leadership. The lack of unity put UNASUR among the numerous unsuccessful attempts at regional cooperation [5].

A similar fate befell CELAC. Originally conceived as an inclusive forum without the participation of the United States and Canada, CELAC was intended to promote integration and serve as a platform for a unified voice of Latin America. However, here, too, ideological differences have made themselves felt. After 2014, CELAC's activity decreased, and summits were not held for several years due to disagreements between the members. In 2020, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro completely froze the country's participation in

⁶ Treaty Establishing a Common Market between the Argentine Republic, the Federal Republic of Brazil, the Republic of Paraguay and the Eastern Republic of Uruguay (Treaty of Asunción) // SICE (OAS): [website]. URL: https://sice.oas.org/trade/MRCSR/TreatyAsun_e.asp (last accessed: 03.02.2026).

⁷ UNASUR // Encyclopaedia Britannica: [website]. URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/UNASUR> (last accessed: 03.02.2026).

⁸ Lula and the revival of UNASUR and CELAC // Global Americans: [website]. URL: <https://globalamericans.org/lula-and-the-revival-of-unasur-and-celac/> (last accessed: 05.02.2026).

⁹ UNASUR under pressure: six nations, including Brazil and Argentina, suspend their memberships // MercoPress: [website]. URL: <https://en.mercopress.com/2018/04/21/unasur-under-pressure-six-nations-including-brazil-and-argentina-suspend-their-memberships> (last accessed: 05.02.2026).

CELAC, stating that the organization supports "dictatorships" in Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela [6]. In 2023 when Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva came to power in Brazil, there was a chance to restart CELAC when the country resumed membership.¹⁰ Nevertheless, for the success of such associations, experts point to the need for deideologization and a pragmatic approach. As political scientist Greg Weeks points out, for the long-term success of CELAC and UNASUR, Lula will have to rid them of their narrow ideological heritage and ensure the participation of all countries, regardless of political regimes. The history of these organizations demonstrates that one of the key causes of the regional leadership crisis was the traditional fragmentation and lack of priority in integration initiatives [7]. Each new wave of governments often rejected the achievements of their predecessors, returning regional politics to a state of drift.

Internal factors of regional fragmentation

Modern Latin America is extremely heterogeneous ideologically [8]. Left-wing populist governments, right-wing conservative regimes, and centrist coalitions simultaneously coexist in the region. This ideological pluralism, on the one hand, reflects the region's democracy, and on the other, creates difficulties for interaction between countries. State leaders often engage in public polemics, which undermines trust relations. An illustrative example is the relationship between the presidents of major countries, namely the center-left leader of Brazil, Lula da Silva, and the far-right President of Argentina, Javier Milei. After Milei's election at the end of 2023, their personal and political differences only intensified. Bilateral relations were strained by ideological rhetoric and personal critiques issued by President Milei. He called his Brazilian counterpart "corrupt" and a "communist,"¹¹ as well as a "leftist with an inflated ego,"¹² and refused to apologize despite diplomatic pressure. Lula, in turn, criticized Milei's radical libertarian plans as dangerous for democracy and demanded a public renunciation of such statements in order to establish a personal dialogue.¹³ Similar ideological clashes are observed in other countries. For example, Colombian President Gustavo Petro accused the Peruvian authorities of undemocratic methods of suppressing protests, to which the interim Government of Peru responded with a sharp protest and the recall of the ambassador. Chilean President Gabriel Boric also sharply condemned Nicolas Maduro, expressing serious doubts about the legitimacy of the elections in Venezuela, calling the situation unreal.¹⁴ All these examples

¹⁰ Бразилия вернулась в состав Сообщества стран Латинской Америки и Карибского бассейна // Газета.Ру: [сайт]. URL: <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2023/01/06/19425181.shtml> (дата обращения: 10.02.2026).

¹¹ Milei sobre Lula: "Qual o problema em chamá-lo de corrupto? Ele não foi preso" // CNN Brasil: [website]. URL: <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/internacional/milei-sobre-lula-qual-o-problema-em-chama-lo-de-corrupto-ele-nao-foi-presos/> (last accessed: 05.02.2026).

¹² Milei won't make amends with Lula, says he has inflated ego // The Peninsula Qatar: [website]. URL: <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/28/06/2024/milei-wont-make-amends-with-lula-says-he-has-inflated-ego> (last accessed: 05.02.2026).

¹³ Argentina's Milei hosts Mercosur summit amid multilateral crisis // Courthouse News Service: [website]. URL: <https://www.courthousenews.com/argentinas-milei-hosts-mercosur-summit-amid-multilateral-crisis/> (last accessed: 05.02.2026).

¹⁴ Lula's fraught South America summit // Americas Quarterly: [website]. URL: <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/lulas-fraught-south-america-summit/> (last accessed: 05.02.2026).

illustrate interstate tensions caused by ideological differences and personal ambitions, which hinder the development of coordinated regional positions.

In addition, the internal problems of most Latin American countries also contribute to the crisis of regional leadership. Almost all Governments in the region are forced to focus on solving acute economic and social issues, from inflation and debt crises to rising crime and mass protests. It is noteworthy that the majority of South American heads of the state confront profound challenges to their political longevity.¹⁵ For example, in 2023-2024, a number of leaders found themselves in a vulnerable position. Ecuador's President Guillermo Lasso dissolved Parliament and did not seek re-election amid impeachment.¹⁶ In turn, Chilean President Gabriel Boric lost the support of a significant part of the population after the failure of constitutional reform. The level of disapproval of Borich's support policy was about 59%.¹⁷ Some leaders with high political ratings had significantly weakened by the middle of their terms. In August 2024, the approval rating of Uruguayan President Luis Lacalle Pou was about 45%, and the level of negative attitude was about 40%¹⁸. The approval rating of Colombian President Gustavo Petro dropped to about 26% by the middle of his mandate, and the disapproval rate reached 61-65%¹⁹, one of the lowest levels since the beginning of his term in office. The internal political turbulence leads to the fact that the national leaders lack the necessary institutional resources and trust to act as moderators of the regional agenda. Moreover, the aggravation of internal crises often leads to an outburst of nationalist rhetoric or the search for "external culprits" of problems, which further complicates cooperation.

An important manifestation of internal fragmentation is the weakening of the effectiveness of regional organizations and treaties [9]. Mechanisms designed to serve as platforms for dialogue and joint action, such as the Organization of American States, CELAC, MERCOSUR, the Andean Community, and the Pacific Alliance, are experiencing serious difficulties. The OAS has long been split along ideological lines. A number of left-leaning governments (Venezuela, Nicaragua, formerly Bolivia) accused the organization of a pro-American position, while other countries supported the OAS line of defending democracy. CELAC, as mentioned, was virtually inactive until recently. MERCOSUR although it continues to function, has also faced a test of strength. An example was the MERCOSUR summit in Buenos Aires in July 2025, when Javier Milei, who assumed the presidency of the bloc, openly declared his intention to "end the destructive inertia" of

¹⁵ Boric says Maduro's victory in Venezuela's presidential election is hard to believe // MercoPress: [website]. URL: <https://en.mercopress.com/2024/07/29/boric-says-maduro-s-victory-in-venezuela-s-presidential-election-is-hard-to-believe> (last accessed: 08.02.2026).

¹⁶ Ecuador president dissolves legislature, bringing elections forward // VOA News: [website]. URL: <https://www.voanews.com/a/ecuador-president-dissolves-legislature-bringing-elections-forward/7097059.html> (last accessed: 08.02.2026).

¹⁷ Chilean president has 59% disapproval; polls show 42% do not support new constitution // MercoPress: [website]. URL: <https://en.mercopress.com/2023/11/13/chilean-president-has-59-disapproval-polls-show-42-do-not-support-new-constitution> (last accessed: 08.02.2026).

¹⁸ Lacalle Pou has 45% approval, study shows // MercoPress: [website]. URL: <https://en.mercopress.com/2024/09/20/lacalle-pou-has-45-approval-study-show> (last accessed: 08.02.2026).

¹⁹ Colombia's Petro is under pressure to deliver halfway through his term // Americas Quarterly: [website]. URL: <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/colombias-petro-is-under-pressure-to-deliver-halfway-through-his-term/> (last accessed: 08.02.2026).

integration and move towards freer trade with a minimum of supranational norms.²⁰ Milei criticized the MERCOSUR structure as "bloated and clumsy" and proclaimed a course towards radical economic liberalization across the entire bloc. Although his speeches at the summit sounded relatively restrained compared to more radical statements in other situations, it is clear that the political line of the new leadership of Argentina differs from the methods used, for example, by Brazil, which, in turn, traditionally combines economic integration with elements of coordination of economic strategy. As a result, MERCOSUR found itself between two opposing approaches: Brazil, under Lula's leadership, advocates maintaining and deepening integration, while Argentina, under Milei, questions previous agreements and even withdrew from the plan to join BRICS after previously submitting an application to participate in the group [10].

The disparity of foreign policy in the region also has a negative impact. Electoral cycles often lead to abrupt shifts in foreign policy orientation. For example, the coming to power of a new president in Argentina, Brazil or Mexico often means a departure from the initiatives of his predecessors. The already mentioned decision of the Milei government to reject Argentina's accession to the BRICS group, to which it has been invited since 2024, was a clear indication of how quickly the country's key foreign policy guidelines can be revised. As a result, neighbors are constantly having to adapt to new realities, making long-term regional strategies difficult. Researchers note that Latin America's regional positions depend too much on the impulses of individual governments or short-term diplomatic conjunctures, instead of being based on a solid institutional foundation.²¹ In the absence of stable cooperation platforms and with intergovernmental disunity, even a promising initiative to develop the Responsibility to Protect norm called "Responsibility while Protecting", proposed by Brazil in 2011-2012 as a way to clarify criteria for the use of force through the UN, was then lost in practice. After initial interest, the project actually left the international agenda and did not develop as a sustainable tool, especially after the departure of key initiators from the active diplomatic movement [11].

Thus, the internal fragmentation of Latin America manifests itself at several levels at once: ideological, political, economic and institutional. Taken together, these factors have led to the fact that Latin America as a region often cannot present a united front either in solving common problems or in dialogue with the outside world.

External factors and external pressure

In addition to internal disagreements, the crisis of regional leadership in Latin America is significantly influenced by external factors. The geopolitical position of the region has traditionally been determined by interaction with external centers of power, primarily the United States of America, and in the 21st century the influence of China, as well as interaction with the European Union and international financial organizations, is becoming more noticeable. External pressure manifests itself both through direct political and

²⁰ Milei urges Mercosur to pursue greater trade openness at summit // Buenos Aires Times: [website]. URL: <https://www.batimes.com.ar/news/economy/milei-urges-mercocur-to-pursue-greater-trade-openness-at-summit.phtml> (last accessed: 08.02.2026).

²¹ Agendas de paz y seguridad sin blindaje: desafios y oportuni-dades desde América Latina // Universidad de Navarra: [website]. URL: <https://en.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/agendas-de-paz-y-seguridad-sin-blindaje-desafios-y-oportunidades-desde-america-latina> (last accessed: 08.02.2026).

economic steps on the part of the great Powers, and indirectly through global processes to which the countries of the region have to adapt.

The United States has historically been considered an external guarantor of order in the Western Hemisphere. In the twentieth century, American influence manifested itself both in the economic sphere and through the OAS, military and intelligence operations, and support for various regimes [12]. In recent years, the nature of the US presence in the region has changed. Direct intervention has given way to diplomatic and sanctions pressure. Washington continues to promote a pro-American agenda, support for democracy and human rights (according to the US version), open markets, and countering "hostile regimes." Specifically, the Joe Biden administration, on the one hand, went to a partial softening of positions, which is confirmed by the resumption of dialogue with Venezuela on the issue of elections, the lifting of some sanctions in the fall of 2023²². However, 2026 marked a resurgence of direct interventionism in the internal affairs of sovereign nations. Consequently, a targeted military operation was executed in Caracas to apprehend Nicolas Maduro and facilitate his transfer to the USA for legal proceedings.²³ At the same time, it is noteworthy that the UN Human Rights Office has characterized the actions of the United States as a violation of international law, and some countries in the region as a unilateral and destabilizing step.²⁴ Latin America's reaction, in turn, demonstrated the depth of the ideological and political rift. A number of governments welcomed the operation, while leftist and progressive-oriented cabinets publicly emphasized the principle of sovereignty and the inadmissibility of the unilateral use of force; the joint statement by Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Uruguay and Spain is indicative, which emphasizes the rejection of the actions of the United States and calls for "peaceful ways" of settlement while demanding regional unity "over and above political differences"²⁵.

Over the past two decades, China has become a key external player in Latin America [13]. Its role is primarily economic in nature, but it is gradually acquiring a geopolitical dimension. Chinese trade with the region is growing rapidly. The trade turnover between China and Latin America is already expected to exceed \$700 billion by 2035, and China may surpass the United States by becoming the region's largest trading partner.²⁶ China is already the main export buyer for Brazil, Chile, Peru and several other countries. About two thirds of Latin American countries have officially joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and are attracting Chinese infrastructure funding.²⁷ For example, in Peru and Ecuador, large-scale

²² США смягчили санкции против нефтегазового сектора Венесуэлы // РБК: [сайт]. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/19/10/2023/653067ae9a7947bcc981541d> (дата обращения: 10.02.2026).

²³ «Крупномасштабная операция». Трамп объявил о похищении президента Венесуэлы // Газета.Ru: [сайт]. URL: <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2026/01/03/22287001.shtml> (дата обращения: 10.02.2026).

²⁴ UN chief Guterres raises concerns about instability in Venezuela, legality of US operation // Reuters: [website]. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/un-chief-guterres-raises-concerns-about-instability-venezuela-legality-us-2026-01-05/> (last accessed: 10.02.2026).

²⁵ Reactions to the U.S. operation in Venezuela, from Latin America and beyond // Americas Society. Council of the Americas (AS/COA): [website]. URL: <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/reactions-us-operation-venezuela-latin-america-and-beyond> (last accessed: 10.02.2026).

²⁶ How China is seeking dominance in Latin America // Americas Quarterly: [website]. URL: <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/how-china-is-seeking-dominance-in-latin-america/> (last accessed: 10.02.2026).

²⁷ China courts Latin America with Belt and Road deals outpacing US in regional trade // Malay

Chinese projects are being implemented in ports, energy, and extractive industries. For example, the port of Chancay was built in Peru with the participation of Chinese COSCO Shipping Ports with financing from China; it is a deep-water port worth more than \$3 billion, which is intended to become a key hub for trade between China and Latin America.²⁸

In 2025, Ecuador awarded a 20-year contract for the development of the Sacha oil field to a consortium in which China's Sinopec holds a leading stake. The project involves significant investments to increase oil production.²⁹ On the one hand, Chinese investments and loans provide the necessary resources for development, on the other, they cause concern in Washington and other capitals. Latin American countries have to balance. Profitable economic cooperation with China sometimes contradicts the expectations of the United States. In some cases, this leads to external pressure. For example, the United States has warned partners about the risks of using Chinese 5G telecommunications technologies, and China, in turn, expects political loyalty³⁰.

The competition between the United States and China for influence in the region is becoming an increasingly tangible reality, and Latin American leaders are forced to maneuver, trying not to choose sides openly. Brazil, under the leadership of Lula da Silva, declares a multi-vector policy. This is evidenced by the fact that in 2023 Lula visited Beijing³¹, concluded a number of agreements and at the same time maintains a dialogue with the United States and the EU. Mexico, being closely linked to the US economy, is also looking for benefits in cooperation with China and Asia as a whole, developing nearshoring as the transfer of production chains closer to the American market with the participation of Asian capital.³² However, such a balance is not easy to maintain with the growing opposition of the great powers.

The European Union has traditionally been less involved in Latin American politics than the United States, but economic ties are significant and diplomatic activity is growing. The long-suffering free trade agreement between the EU and MERCOSUR, agreed back in 2019, has not yet been ratified. In 2023, the European Commission proposed additional environmental conditions, which met resistance in Brazil and Argentina. President Lula called these demands a violation of sovereignty, although at the end of 2023, under pressure from economic realities, Brazil softened its position and negotiations resumed. In December 2025, the presidents of the MERCOSUR countries agreed to intensify dialogue with the EU,

Mail. 12.05.2025: [website]. URL: <https://www.malaymail.com/news/money/2025/05/12/china-courts-latin-america-with-belt-and-road-deals-outpacing-us-in-regional-trade/176482> (last accessed: 10.02.2026).

²⁸ China and Peru jointly building a better future // Information office of Shanghai municipality: [website]. URL: <https://en.shio.gov.cn/TrueCMS/shxwbgs/voices/content/20241117121209092.htm> (last accessed: 10.02.2026).

²⁹ Ecuador awards 20-year production sharing contract to new Stratus Energy, Sinopec // Reuters: [website]. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/ecuador-awards-20-year-production-sharing-contract-new-stratus-energy-sinopec-2025-03-03/> (last accessed: 10.02.2026).

³⁰ США предостерегли ЕС от закупок оборудования Huawei для внедрения 5G // РБК: [сайт]. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5c5a13139a7947136a576c7b> (дата обращения: 10.02.2026).

³¹ Президент Бразилии Лула да Силва встретился с Си Цзиньпином в Пикине // Ведомости: [сайт]. URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2023/04/14/971041-lula-vstretilsya-si> (дата обращения: 10.02.2026).

³² Latin America's new frontiers in 2025 // Gateway House: [website]. URL: <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/latin-americas-new-frontiers-in-2025/> (last accessed: 10.02.2026).

hoping to sign the agreement in the near future.³³ Eventually, 17 January 2026 the EU–MERCOSUR agreement was formally signed in Paraguay, which marked an important step in strengthening interregional economic cooperation. However, the deal continues to provoke debates within the region regarding environmental standards, market access and the balance between economic benefits and national sovereignty³⁴. This is an example of how external economic imperatives can push countries to cooperate, overcoming ideological differences, but also an example of how external conditions can be perceived as pressure, causing internal disputes.

The combination of external factors creates a difficult situation for Latin America: the region is under pressure from several directions at once, which tests the strength of interstate solidarity. Competition from external players sometimes splits the region, and global crises reveal a lack of coordinated responses. Regional mechanisms such as the OAS or CELAC have not yet been able to develop a unified line of behavior in the face of external influence – this is hampered by both internal contradictions and limited resources. As a result, Latin America often remains an "object" of geopolitics rather than a subject. This state of affairs acutely raises the question of the need for consolidation.

Discussion

Prospects for overcoming the crisis and ways to strengthen leadership

Despite these difficulties, Latin America is taking steps to overcome regional disunity and restore collective leadership. The imperative for regional cohesion is re-emerging as a priority of many Governments.

The resumption of regular summits and meetings at the highest level is an important step in this direction. An example is the informal summit of the heads of State of South America, initiated by Lula da Silva in May 2023 in Brazil.³⁵ Although the leaders' meeting did not lead to the signing of high-profile agreements, the resumption of high-level multilateral dialogue after several years of rift was regarded as a positive signal. Similarly, the holding of the MERCOSUR summit at the end of 2025 in Buenos Aires, despite the sharp disagreements between its participants, it demonstrated a willingness to maintain dialogue within the bloc.

Given the negative experience of the past years, there is now much talk that regional associations should be pragmatic and inclusive. The new generation of integration initiatives is trying to avoid the labels of the "left" or "right" club. The goal is for the platform to become a place of dialogue, not ideological confrontation. Similarly, within the framework of MERCOSUR in 2025. There were statements that "the diversity of views did not become an obstacle, but, on the contrary, served as an incentive for the work of the bloc"³⁶, as stated

³³ EU-Mercosur trade deal signing postponed to January, sources say // Politico: [website]. URL: <https://en.bb.lv/article/world-news/2025/12/19/the-signing-of-the-eu-mercosur-deal-has-been-postponed-until-next-year-81496> (last accessed: 10.02.2026).

³⁴ EU and Mercosur sign trade deal after 25 years of negotiations // Reuters: [website]. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/eu-mercosur-sign-trade-deal-after-25-years-negotiations-2026-01-17/> (last accessed: 10.02.2026).

³⁵ Итоги саммита стран Южной Америки // Институт психолого-экономических исследований (ИПЭИ): [сайт]. URL: <https://ipei.ru/index.php/events/publications/379-itog-sammita-stran-yuzhnoj-ameriki> (дата обращения: 10.02.2026).

³⁶ Courthouse News Service. Argentina's Milei hosts Mercosur summit amid multilateral crisis //

in Buenos Aires by the Argentine Foreign Minister, trying to emphasize pluralism within the association. It is hoped that economic interdependence will encourage countries to cooperate even with political differences. A striking example is the initiative to conclude the long-delayed MERCOSUR–EU free trade agreement. Strengthening pragmatism and reducing the rhetoric of mutual reproaches is one of the ways to strengthen regional leadership on a consensual basis, where the role of coordinator can be performed, for example, by a neutral technical group or a Secretariat.

Paradoxically, it is precisely the increase in external pressure that can push Latin American countries to coordinate more closely with each other in order to jointly withstand negative impacts and take advantage of new opportunities. In the context of a more multipolar world, Latin America has a chance to increase its weight by participating in expanded coalitions of the Global South. Participation in the BRICS is an important example as a sign of the desire to integrate regional interests into global formats³⁷. Brazil in 2025 chairs the BRICS³⁸, promoting the theme of cooperation in the Global South. Mexico has been stepping up its foreign policy since Claudia Sheinbaum came to power. At the G20 summit in 2024, she proposed that all countries devote 1% of military spending to global greening.³⁹ Such steps form the image of Latin American leaders as responsible global actors who go beyond purely regional issues. Although these efforts are still fragmented, they show that if there is political will, the region is able to increase its collective presence in solving global problems.

Summing up the prospects, it is worth noting that although the crisis of regional leadership in Latin America is a fact, it should not be considered as inevitable and permanent. History shows cycles. Periods of disunity were followed by ups of integration when favorable conditions appeared. Now, at the turn of 2025-2026, there is an awareness that fragmentation weakens everyone, making countries more vulnerable to external challenges and limiting their development opportunities. There is a demand for a new model of regional leadership – flexible, collective, based on common interests, and not on the hegemony of one power. The question is whether the current leaders will be able to overcome mutual contradictions for the sake of long-term benefits.

Conclusion

The crisis of regional leadership in Latin America is manifested in the inability of the countries of the region to present a united front and consistently defend their interests on the world stage. The causes of this crisis lie both in internal problems (ideological polarization, political instability, weakening of integration institutions) and in external factors (geopolitical pressure from world powers, the influence of global economic processes). Internal fragmentation is combined with external pressure, which puts states in front of

Courthouse News Service: [website]. URL: <https://www.courthousenews.com/argentinas-milei-hosts-mercosur-summit-amid-multilateral-crisis/> (last accessed: 05.01.2026).

³⁷ Brazil takes over BRICS presidency, focusing on Global South cooperation // Xinhua: [website]. URL: <https://english.news.cn/20250102/c3f3f35962de41f4ab9c02cc4e5de1e2/c.html>. (last accessed: 10.02.2026).

³⁸ Рябков оценил председательство Бразилии в БРИКС // РИА новости: [сайт]. URL: <https://ria.ru/20250618/ryabkov-2023620741.html> (дата обращения: 10.02.2026).

³⁹ Mexico proposes global reforestation fund ahead of G20 summit // Mexico Business News: [website]. URL: <https://mexicobusiness.news/policyandeconomy/news/mexico-proposes-global-reforestation-fund-g20-summit> (last accessed: 10.02.2026).

difficult choices. As a result, Latin America has largely lost its former subjectivity in recent years. Against the background of the rapid changes in the world order, the region's diplomatic influence diminished, and its global role became increasingly marginalized.

At the same time, the conducted research shows that the region is not devoid of potential to overcome this situation. An analysis of current trends allows us to draw a number of conclusions. First of all, the crisis is not structural, but opportunistic. It is caused by the temporary overlap of several unfavorable factors, such as internal crises in key countries and the peak of external competition for influence. As the situation stabilizes, potential opportunities for revitalized cooperation may arise. Moreover, even in the current circumstances, there are attempts by countries to act collectively in the face of common challenges. Summits, multilateral initiatives, and participation in global forums demonstrate an understanding of the need for unification. Brazil and Argentina, the two largest economies in the region, whose cooperation can set the tone for others, may play a special role in the near future.

Summarizing, we can conclude that the current agenda for Latin America is to re-store the lost unity in the face of common challenges. According to analysts, over-coming the "Latin American paradox", a strong normative commitment to shared values with little practical coordination, requires a common vision, permanent structures and consistency of external actions with internal development.⁴⁰ The future of regional leadership in Latin America largely depends on the political will of the current generation of leaders to overcome differences for the common good and on the ability of institutions to back up this will with concrete actions. In the context of a fragmented world order, this is a necessary condition for the region to take its rightful place in the new global architecture, instead of remaining an arena for foreign rivalry.

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