

Argentina and its relationship with the Russian Federation (2007-2023). The pursuit of international autonomy amidst a dynamic link

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ABSTRACT


Objective/context: This paper aims to explore the links that some recent Argentine presidencies (Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Mauricio Macri and Alberto Fernández) maintained with the Russian Federation.

Methodology: It will initially dwell into the longstanding tradition of pacifism which characterizes Argentine foreign policy, and then proceed to register the strategy of its most recent federal administrations regarding their international outlooks and its ties with Russia. Its strategy regarding the war in Ukraine will be inscribed within that broader diplomatic framework and tradition. It will then introduce the concept 'geopolitical vaccinationism' into this scenario, making connections between purely public health issues, originated after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and foreign policy postures and decisions that are not necessarily related to them. In this section, the strategies of some recent Argentine administrations regarding the purchase of COVID-19 vaccines to be administered to its population will also be covered. Finally, in the last section of the paper, the issue of the increased rate of pregnant Russian women coming to Argentina to give birth will also be tackled.

Conclusions/originality: This situation, prompted by the Russian-Ukraine Conflict, increased the strains between Presidents Alberto Fernández and Vladimir Putin, while also presenting risks in regard to the international standing of Argentina and the seriousness with which its passport is being regarded by foreign governments.

Keywords: Argentina, Russia, Diplomacy, Nationalism, Vaccines

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Argentina y su relación con la Federación Rusa (2007-2023). La búsqueda de la autonomía internacional en el marco de un vínculo dinámico

RESUMEN

Objetivo/contexto: Este trabajo tiene como objetivo explorar las relaciones que las algunas recientes administraciones presidenciales argentinas (Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Mauricio Macri y Alberto Fernández) mantuvieron con la Federación Rusa.

Metodología: Inicialmente, se reparará en la larga tradición de pacifismo que caracteriza la política exterior argentina, y luego se procederá a inscribir la estrategia de su administración federal con respecto a su inserción internacional y la vinculación con Rusia, haciendo hincapié el conflicto en el Este europeo dentro de ese marco y tradición diplomáticos. Luego se introducirá en este escenario el concepto de “vacunación geopolítica”, haciendo conexiones entre cuestiones puramente de salud pública, originadas tras el estallido de la pandemia de COVID-19, y posturas y decisiones de política exterior que no necesariamente están relacionadas con las mismas. En esta sección también se abordarán las estrategias del gobierno de Alberto Fernández en lo relativo a la compra de vacunas contra el virus COVID-19 para administrar a su población. Finalmente, en la última sección del artículo, también se abordará la cuestión de la creciente cantidad de mujeres rusas embarazadas que van a la Argentina a dar a luz.

Conclusiones/originalidad: Esta situación, propiciada por el conflicto, incrementa las tensiones bilaterales al mismo tiempo que presenta riesgos en cuanto a la proyección internacional de Argentina.

Palabras clave: Argentina, Rusia, diplomacia, nacionalismo, vacunas

1. INTRODUCTION

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine launched in February 2022, while having considerable consequences in the immediate region as well as with the allies and partners of the main contenders, did not have a direct or significant impact on Argentina. At the economic level, the reduced output of crops and commodities from direct competitors did not reflect immediate economic gains or trade surpluses. At the geopolitical level, the dispute also did not significantly alter the international alignments of the Argentine government. Then President Alberto Fernández, at the helm of a center-left Peronist coalition, tried to initially mediate between the conflicting parties without success. That attitude revealed, despite its lukewarm reception by the warring actors, an attempt towards independence in terms of geopolitical positions and alignments. Argentina, while condemning any resort to violent means, framed its intervention within its historical global role as mediator and peace promoter.

In fact, and to make a brief review of the peaceful record of the South American country in terms of good offices, mediation and diplomacy, Argentina even has a former Foreign Affairs Minister, Carlos Saavedra Lamas, who won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1936 due to his efforts to prevent a war between neighbors Paraguay and Bolivia. In addition, the country won the same prize in 1980. Adolfo Pérez Esquivel was awarded due to his efforts as a private citizen to bring to light Human Right abuses committed by the last military *junta* that ruled the country between 1976 and 1983. This places Argentina as the only state in Latin America with two awardees in that category (as well as the nation in the region with most Nobel prizes in the hard sciences as well, with a total of three). Argentina has also a longstanding tradition of being a diplomatic and international negotiations leader in Latin America, launching and coordinating regional efforts towards global peace and mutual understanding among its neighbors and peers.

Thus, apart from the Falklands/Malvinas war, launched in 1982 without national consensus by an unpopular *de facto* leader, Argentina still sustains, during the current Russia-Ukraine conflict, the position of neutrality and good offices that characterized its behavior as an independent country throughout most of the XX century (Míguez, Hernández Nilson & López Burian, 2022, p. 93). This was also prevalent in the two most severe conflicts of that period, the World Wars. In the first one, Argentina's then president, Hipólito Yrigoyen, resisted pressure from the West to declare war on the Alliance. In the second, Argentina sustained neutrality for most of it, while its leaders harbored secret sympathies for the Axis, finally declaring war against the latter in the final stages of the contest.

Hence, the initial reflexes of the Fernández administration before and in the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in early 2022 were in alignment with the peaceful and neutral foreign affairs policy record and traditions of the country. Moreover, those traditions have also been defended by other countries and leaders from Latin America, relying on the legal and republican mores of the latter (Mijares, 2022, p. 4).

In parallel with these developments, it is useful to analyze recent developments on the relationship between Argentina and Russia, in order to better understand the general scenario in which the bilateral relationship is evolving. For that purpose, this paper will also be covering, in its last sections, two connected situations: on the one hand, the relationship between the Argentine and the Russian governments regarding the supply of the Russian-manufactured COVID vaccine Sputnik, as well as the international positions and reactions created by this connection, and on the other hand some travels embarked upon by either pregnant Russian women or by Russian couples in late stages of pregnancy to Argentina, in order to give birth to their children on Argentine soil.

2. A BRIEF REVIEW OF RECENT RUSSIAN-ARGENTINE RELATIONS 2008-2022

During the last twenty years, the bonds between Argentina and Russia dramatically grew and developed (Rojas, 2022, pp. 439-440). In 2008, a Strategic Association agreement among both nations was signed, revealing that they considered themselves as valuable partners with a strong potential for further cooperation. Argentina was then led by Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, representing a center-left political coalition, while Russia had Dimitry Medvedev as president and Vladimir Putin, then former President, as Prime Minister. Fernández de Kirchner visited Moscow in December 2008, while Medvedev reciprocated by landing in Buenos Aires in 2010. This was a major landmark in bilateral ties, as it was the first visit of the highest-ranked Russian political authority to the South American country in over 125 years (Rojas, 2022, p. 441). Furthermore, within this period, both nations signed 21 bilateral cooperation agreements, thus placing Russia on the top of the non-Latin American countries with most strategic frameworks established with Argentina (Rojas, 2022, p. 441).

This association was dramatically consolidated in 2015. With Fernández de Kirchner in the last year of her administration, Argentina and Russia redefined their relationship within the terms of an Integral Strategic Association (González Levaggi & Martínez Otero, 2022, p. 256). Both states were keen to cooperate on vital areas such as energy, mining, pharmacy, technology, software, and IT. Rojas (2022, pp. 441-442) states that, as these countries were facing difficulties and backlash abroad, due to the dispute with the vulture funds in the Argentine case and due to the sanctions adopted against the Eurasian nation after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, they were looking for further opportunities for cooperation and development wherever they could find them. In this regard, this ratifies what was expressed by Mijares (2022, p. 3), who stressed that the most important side of the bilateral link for Russia, both with Argentina as well as with other Latin American states, is political.

Argentina was subsequently governed by a center-right alliance between 2015 and 2019. Then President Mauricio Macri was nevertheless intent on sustaining commercial, economic, and strategic links of cooperation with Russia, which, since 2012, has again been directly ruled by Vladimir Putin. Macri visited Moscow in 2018 to show the interest on his side to sustain and improve diplomatic and trade relations with his hosts. During his four-year presidential period, 12 bilateral agreements were signed among Russia and Argentina (Rojas, 2022, p. 442). In parallel with the renewed, intensified ties with the Popular Republic of China, these Argentine foreign policy initiatives were a strange case of bipartisan consensus, which some analysts even label “state policy” (Dieguez, 2023, p. 351), while others comment

that the links mostly rely on political exchanges and support, on top of economic, scientific, and cultural rapport (Mijares, 2022, p. 3).

By late 2019, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was back in power, this time as Vice-president. The new administration, led by Alberto Fernández, was a coalition of center-left political forces. And while both elected representatives of the executive power were broadly aligned regarding foreign affairs, after February 24th, 2022, the President of Argentina started to walk a fine line between the East and the West in a way his coalition partner did not agree completely with¹.

In early February 2022, despite the heightened levels of tension and alertness that were being registered in Eastern Europe, Fernández visited Moscow, *en route* to attend the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympic Games in Beijing. After reaffirming the great bond that united the two nations as well thanking Putin for the support provided during the COVID-19 pandemic, he stated that Argentina should become Russia's gateway to Latin America (Míguez, Hernández Nilson & López Burian, 2022, p. 98). This visit was regarded as ill-timed by the West. Another South American leader, Bolsonaro, would also travel to Moscow shortly before the conflict began. However, the Brazilian president was not in good terms with either the United States or the European Union. Fernández, on the contrary, seeing that his interview with Putin was a *faux pas*, would try to readdress the perception of being too close to Russia by returning to the Argentinian traditional stance of neutrality, nonviolence, and good diplomatic offices regarding international disputes (Míguez, Hernández Nilson & López Burian, 2022, pp. 94, 99).

3. THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

3.1. The diplomatic position of Argentina

With the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine by February 24th, 2022, the initial Argentine reaction was relatively subdued. At the United Nations it supported the two resolutions adopted by the General Assembly in March, asking for the withdrawal of Russian forces and the respect of the sovereignty of Ukraine. In April, Argentina backed the suspension of Russia from the Human Rights Council, which was also presiding (González Levaggi & Martínez Otero 2022, pp. 257-258). But,

¹ As mentioned by Dieguez (2023, p. 344), the wing of the ruling coalition of Argentina led by its Vice-president, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, was more adversarial of the United States and, conversely, more inclined to support its rivals, such as Russia or Venezuela. This is also ratified by Pereyra Doval and Colalongo (2022, p. 43), who state that Cristina Kirchner was very confrontational towards the US, thus wanting to approach Russia and China to counterbalance its predominance. This road was also pursued through non-alignment, and by strengthening ties with Latin American nations.

while supporting positions promoted by the West at the UN, at the Organization of American States it adopted a different stance. In February, Argentina abstained on a resolution adopted by the body which also asked a withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory (González Levaggi & Martínez Otero, 2022, p. 257). This decision was mostly based on the fact that, to the then Argentine government, the best treatment of the international dispute was not the one that could be had at the Interamerican regional body but, above all other multilateral organizations, at the United Nations, as they are the global fora *par excellence* (Míguez, Hernández Nilson & López Burian, 2022, pp. 100, 103).

Furthermore, Argentina took more distance from the West by not supporting international sanctions against the Russian regime. The then Argentine foreign affairs minister proclaimed that the country did not deem sanctions a good mechanism to promote peace. Moreover, the administration refused to ban official Russian media outlets, such as RT (Rojas, 2022, pp. 449, 453). Lastly, by April, Argentina formally rejected the American proposal of expelling Russia from the group of the 20 most developed world economies, known as G-20, on the grounds that it is an economic, not political, forum. Also, it was mentioned by some Argentine officials that, to have a working multilateral system, it is important to have all actors involved in negotiations and diplomatic spaces (Rojas, 2022, pp. 450-451). These three actions reflect the fine line president Fernández decided to walk, laying between a formal condemnation of hostilities and an outright, general blockade of the Russian economy.

By May, Argentina sought to create inter-Atlantic consensus and alignments. As leader of the Community of States from Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAC), Fernández initiated a tour of Spain, Germany, and France, with the clear intention of opening spaces for dialogue and mutual understanding, while at the same time trying to appear neutral and not too closely coordinated with any of the belligerent parties (González Levaggi & Martínez Otero, 2022, p. 258).

Argentina kept that posture at the G7 summit and at the BRICS virtual dialogue, both held in June. At the latter, Fernández insisted on the fact that any war creates poverty and hunger in the Global South (Rojas, 2022, p. 451), thus insisting on Argentina's role as representative of Latin American countries.

On July 1st, Fernández became the first sitting president of South America to make an official phone call to the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, after hostilities began on February 24th. (Rojas, 2022, pp. 451-452). Although several months between the two aforementioned facts had elapsed, this became another significant gesture reflecting both the Argentine desire of being a diplomatic leader of Latin America as well as its strategy of not appearing biased in the conflict.

In August, Fernández told his audience at a CELAC forum that the conflict in Ukraine was also being promoted by passive actors who take economic advantage of the war (González Levaggi & Martínez Otero, 2022, p. 258). This position, presented half a year after hostilities had already begun, again reflects Fernández's desire to keep his country above the parties in conflict, avoiding direct blame assignment to any actor but rather diffusing responsibilities, implicitly even to some Western actors. However, this should also be interpreted as his broader intention to appear removed from geopolitical disputes and oppositions between East and West.

All these actions were well received by Russian officials. Foreign minister Lavrov congratulated Argentina for not joining the international embargoes established after February 24th. Russia also supported the Argentine sovereign claim on the Malvinas/Falkland Islands and was an active promoter of the accession of Argentina to the BRICS group (Dieguez, 2023, pp. 351, 356), which was formally presented at the June 2022 forum previously alluded to (Rojas, 2022, p. 451). With these decisions, Moscow hoped to gain further Argentine support towards its actions.

This also reflects the perspective of the former Argentine president about the road his country needed to follow in international affairs. According to Dieguez (2023, p. 342), Fernández believed that it was impossible not to become part of globalization. He stated that isolationism, a trend Argentina closely followed throughout the XX century, particularly considering the Cold War and East-West disputes, was no longer feasible. This integrationist option did not preclude, nevertheless, the search for a singular spot under the global sun, but rather a space in the midst of regional alliances. Thus, Argentina had to gain access to foreign markets and establish its position on global affairs in accordance with the interests of South and, if possible, Latin America (Busso, Oliva & Zelicovich, 2022).

This was evident on the positions Argentina adopted at the UN General Assembly debates, and on the vote regarding the suspension of Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. At the UNGA, the Group of Latin America and the Caribbean (GRULAC) has 33 members. Argentina was one of 20 of its members which voted in favor. Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua voted against, Venezuela could not vote due to delays in payments to the institutions, and the two most powerful nations of the region, Brazil and Mexico, abstained (Mijares, 2022, p. 2).

Hence, it is possible to see here, on the one hand, a willful alignment of the Argentine foreign affairs policy with that of the wider region and, more particularly, of the West. On the contrary, it is also evident that Fernández lacked the margin of independence and autonomy that the other two great countries of Latin America had when deciding which option to pursue. In this regard, Argentina, despite being led

by a center-left coalition that prided itself on its global approach and its quest of independence from unduly external influences, could not acquire and sustain the levels of autonomy held by its Brazilian and Mexican counterparts. What is more, President López Obrador could still enjoy warm close relationships with the US, while President Fernández felt he was still being criticized for his visit to Putin in early February 2022 during many months, despite voting in favor of the US resolutions sponsored at the UN.

This opportunistic, sometimes ambivalent approach in foreign policy is singled out by Dieguez (2023, p. 352) as an example of the pragmatic idealism that characterized, in his opinion, the Argentine leader. In addition, this author also identifies the fact that Argentina, being a heavily indebted country that does not present the best environment to receive foreign direct investment, needs to be in good terms with any potential lender available. Hence, while this scenario propelled the political realignment of Fernández, causing his opinions to become harsher against Russia and closer to the West (Míguez, Hernández Nilson & López Burian, 2022, p. 104), this is conversely another capital factor motivating the broad, autonomy-seeking, international insertion strategy of the former Argentine president (Dieguez, 2023, p. 358).

That being said, the two aforementioned tendencies are mostly mutually exclusive, rather than symbiotic, sometimes creating the impression of having an erratic, dysfunctional, and contradictory foreign policy (Míguez, Hernández Nilson & López Burian, 2022, p. 110), even when speaking about one single president.

3.2. Economic consequences of the dispute

Despite what could have been initially supposed, as two of its most immediate competitors regarding agricultural commodities would see their production severely diminished or affected due to the hostilities, Argentina did not substantially obtain economic benefits after the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

While there was an initial rise in the price of corn and wheat, which are two of the main exportation products of the country, by mid-2022 their values had already diminished. Furthermore, while their sales partially increased, the same occurred with the costs associated with their production. This was due to the fact that fertilizers were also mostly acquired from Russia, and that oil, another Russian export, also got more expensive (Mijares, 2022, p. 7), thus increasing costs of transport and freight services. Additionally, the scarcity or even sheer lack of energy and food supplies promoted inflation worldwide, something that negatively impacted the Argentine economy, as noted in some of the speeches of then President Fernández previously referred.

In general, the trade exchange between the two nations, which had been severely affected by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and which was starting to rebound by 2021, reversed its gains after the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine on late February 2022 (Rojas, 2022, p. 453). Despite not joining widespread sanctions against the regime led by Vladimir Putin, Argentina had nevertheless to start looking for new markets, as Russian ports had also been embargoed, hence making problematic, if not completely impossible, to export to the country, and also due to the fact that Russia had been excluded from the SWIFT system, thus rendering very difficult to conduct international payments (Rojas, 2022, p. 453).

Hence, Argentine exports to Russia were the ones most affected by the conflict, dropping from almost 670 million USD in 2021 to just over 164 million USD in 2022. The same tendency was also evidenced in the imports from the Eurasian country, which decreased from over 650 million USD in 2021 to just over 173 million USD the following year².

4. THE SPUTNIK VACCINE SUPPLY-CHAIN CRISIS, AND THE EMERGENCE OF 'GEOPOLITICAL VACCINATIONISM'

Argentine political alignments also responded, at least during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic during the years 2020-2021, to a pro-West, pro-East (Russia, China, and the Global South) orientation. In fact, the alliance in government tried to obtain most of its vaccines, at least initially, from Russia and China³, mainly due to ideological affinities, as well as a reluctance to rely solely on Western-made products. The only exception to this rule was the AstraZeneca brand, manufactured either in the UK or in India with UK license. Eventually, due to the need to satisfy the demand to vaccinate most of its population, Argentina also accepted to receive vaccines manufactured by the US, such as Pfizer and Moderna.

The main opposition parties to the government of Fernández, a grouping of center-right political forces, demanded this openness to American-manufactured vaccines from the start. So, the debates and polemics around how the former President handled the COVID-19 crisis also revolved around international alignments and realignments either with the West or with the East, as well as with the rest of the developing world. Fernández and his inner circle resisted initial offerings from the US regarding the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines and sought beneficial arrangements

² The figures for 2022 are updated until the month of August (Rojas, 2022, p. 454).

³ By February 2021, Argentina received its first batch of Sinopharm vaccines, as well as other medical supplies, from China (Dieguez, 2023, p. 350).

with Russia concerning the supply of Sputnik. This in turn promoted opposition parties to blame the President for being one-sided and biased in terms of geopolitical posturing during a time of extreme public health risk because of the global pandemic.

The administration, in turn, started to make a comparison with its most immediate, powerful neighbor to the north: Brazil. The Brazilian government, then led by populist rightwing President Jair Bolsonaro, refused for many months to do a massive, concerted effort to inoculate or protect its population from the virus, instead repeating the catchword that the pandemic was a 'little flu' (*gripezinha*) (Phillips, 2020). In this regard, the Argentine administration sought to distance itself both from Bolsonaro as well as from the US leader back then, Donald Trump, who also had similar attitudes regarding the disease.

Thus were the alignments through which what was until then mostly a public health matter became a contested ideological, political question. Political polarization could also be labeled as a pandemic of our times, and in the Argentine scenario it even has a name of its own: the 'fracture' (*grieta*) (Graham Yooll, 2017; Lisinska, 2023). As with many other nations, the response from the federal government then tended to be either appreciated or criticized *in toto* by its allies or rivals, without much concern about its efficiency when addressing the public health emergency that was evolving in 2020 and 2021.

Hence, the international geopolitical fault lines of nowadays also made themselves noticeable during the COVID-19 crisis. The Argentine government wanted to take distance from the American policies promoted by Donald Trump and by its South American ally, Jair Bolsonaro. This led to its prompt acquisition of the Sputnik vaccine. The purchase of the Russian-made preparation was the first one done by the presidency, choosing it over other countries and offers.

This movement was also aligned with the lines repeated by Putin and the broader Russian administration and officials, which branded Sputnik as the first effective vaccine against COVID-19 to be launched for massive, general inoculation, something done with much fanfare in August 2020⁴ (Rojas, 2022, p. 444). In this regard, the Fernández administration could then openly state that they were not making an ideologically based purchase but, on the contrary, embarking upon the most speedily process available to protect its citizens from the virus.

⁴ As stated, some paragraphs later, this launch would be labelled premature by most of the West, which insisted that the vaccine manufactured in Russia was not, at the time, impartially verified and certified by international observers, following existing World Health Organization standards and procedures. By the time of completion of this paper, the certification and verification process had not yet been accomplished.

This was what actually occurred. By December 2020, Argentina became the first Latin American country that purchased and authorized the use of Sputnik V with its citizens (González Levaggi & Martínez Otero, 2022, p. 257). With an initial investment of 95 million USD, Argentina acquired 30 million doses of Sputnik V (Rojas, 2022, p. 444).

However, by July 2021 a crisis emerged, as Russia did not honor a scheduled delivery of vaccines already purchased by Argentina. This prompted the Argentine government to send a letter to the Russian Direct Investment Fund, complaining about the delay and the political quagmire in which the South American administration was being enmeshed by this violation of the terms of the contract (Del Río, 2021; Rojas, 2022, p. 445). After some delays and much public outcry about how the crisis was managed by both nations, deliveries resumed. Nevertheless, the relationship had been put under stress and duress. Argentina had, reluctantly, to purchase more doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine, as well as start importing the American-manufactured Moderna (Rojas, 2022, p. 445).

However, from this stressful episode, the bond between Moscow and Buenos Aires proved resilient. Argentina, taking advantage of its advanced developed pharmaceutical and medical sector, started producing the vaccine on its own soil (Menegazzi, 2022). After signing an agreement of 70 million USD, the Argentine-based Richmond laboratory was able to import the antigen from Russia, and then continue with the remaining steps of the manufacturing process, to guarantee its final delivery to different health centers across the nation. The Gamaleya Laboratory transmitted the know-how and the required technology, while the National Agency for Medicines of Argentina authorized the manufacturing of the Sputnik V.I.D.A (L.I.F.E.) (Rojas, 2022, p. 445).

While this kind of attitude contributed to make the country more self-sufficient in terms of eventual supply-chain bottlenecks, it nevertheless did not suffice to prevent further crises, this time of a geopolitical nature, from affecting its Sputnik-vaccinated citizens.

Indeed, by late 2021 the American government, now led by the Democrat Joe Biden, informed that it would allow entrances to the US by international visitors vaccinated with any WHO-approved vaccine (Shepardson, 2021). This automatically excluded people vaccinated with Sputnik, as its WHO approval process was never streamlined or finished. This measure, also adopted by the European Union and other developed and developing states created, in turn, a rush to being inoculated with a WHO-approved vaccine, without regard to the doses of the Russian-made vaccine received so far. In the end, this promoted an actual devaluation of the latter

immunization product for all practical purposes. As international travel was slowly being resumed both for business and tourism, Argentine citizens inoculated with Sputnik who wanted to go abroad started to look for supplementary doses of the approved vaccines to be eligible for travel.

These series of developments could be named 'geopolitical vaccinationism'. The latter term originally meant hoarding stocks of vaccines instead of exporting them to countries that lacked them (United Nations, 2021), to have them ready for the eventual need to make further inoculations on domestic audiences. However, in the case recently described the application of certain vaccines instead of others also started to be a point of geopolitical contention. Some governments, being attentive first and foremost to the health of their nationals, became very restrictive when opening their borders to international visitors, wanting to make sure the former did not become exposed to new variant of the virus carried by the latter. And while this part of the equation mostly responds to public health criteria, it must be said that this situation also represented, at least for some leaders, an occasion for geopolitical rivalries and disputes to emerge or re-emerge, thus the new significance of the term 'geopolitical vaccinationism'. The word also acquired a new meaning, now related to the usage of health-related criteria, in this case due to the COVID-19 pandemic, to also put pressure and cause stress on international rivals. In this scenario, gaining immunity from and preventing an unduly spread of different variants of the virus went hand in hand with the opportunity to make a score in foreign policy. As commented by Malacalza & Fagaburu (2022, p. 8), the global great powers used the production of COVID vaccines to gain access and political influence in different countries worldwide, for themselves and their companies, something that Rojas (2022, p. 446), in turn, names 'vaccine diplomacy'. The Latin American markets were also part of these worldwide quarrels.

Thus, and to sum the developments narrated in the present section of the paper, the bond between Argentina and Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic, while initially strong, experienced a downwards trend in the end, due to errors and mismanagement by the suppliers, as well as by the increasing international pressure against non-approved WHO vaccines. As all these events happened in the immediate months preceding the outbreak of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine in February 2022, to a certain degree they set the reluctant and distant tone with which Argentine efforts towards mediation were received by Russia back then. The two nations, while originally close in 2020 and during part of 2021, had grown more apart, and the efforts of the then Argentine leader, alongside the numerous other factors that influenced Vladimir Putin decisions in early 2022, did not suffice to persuade his Russian counterpart to heed to his message.

5. THE CONTROVERSY AROUND THE RUSSIAN PREGNANT 'TOURISTS'

After the Russian invasion to Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, a wide array of retaliatory measures against the former were adopted by the West and part of the developing world. Among them, travel restrictions or visa requirements were imposed or heightened. One of the countries that continued to sustain visa-free travel for Russian nationals was Argentina. This created a window of opportunity for Russians that were able to afford the costs and to make the long international travel to Argentina, give birth there, have children with dual nationality, and then eventually gain Argentine citizenship too, without having to live in Argentine soil, learn Spanish, or pay local taxes.

As there was a small Russian diaspora already living in Argentina, more particularly in its capital city Buenos Aires, bilateral connections were quickly established or re-established. Travel agencies helped young couples or women to make the arrangements for the trip, while also helping them to look for suitable clinics in order to give birth to their children. They would also assist them with the local paperwork and be in touch with them when they return to Russia to finalize the process regarding acquiring Argentinian nationality themselves as well, in addition to their newborns (Squires, 2023).

As the number of Russians coming to the country exclusively for this purpose dramatically raised by late 2022, the Argentine government tried to impose stricter border and migratory controls by February 2023 (Goñi, 2023). However, they were erratic, scattered, and not organically implemented, thus being rendered inefficient in the medium term. Argentina, as well as other countries experiencing similar phenomena, might adopt stricter travel restrictions towards Russian nationals, as a failure to do so would imply a global devaluation of the standing of its passports and its international reputation as an autonomous nation, in general.

This also became a point of contention in domestic politics. Argentina had a presidential election scheduled in October 2023. One of the main issues of debate between the incumbent center-left administration, which was up for reelection, and its main challenger, a center-right coalition, revolved around both domestic and international security. The latter political force had the issue of Russian selective, short-term migration and speedy naturalization as one of the easy points with which to criticize Fernández. Its main political figures had forged an image of toughness regarding crime and lawlessness and thus could take advantage of this migratory loophole and the messy scenario created by the increased irregular influx of Russian citizens who want to hold dual Argentine nationality to scold the federal government (Dataclave, 2023).

In 2022, more than ten thousand Russian pregnant women came to Argentina to give birth. Furthermore, suspicions were also raised regarding the possibility that some of the women and families could be Russian spies working undercover, trying to take advantage of the Argentine passport to travel freely to countries that have severed or severely limited their ties with Russia after February 24th, 2022 (Rey & Politi, 2023).

In fact, this is one of the most serious consequences of the Russia-Ukraine conflict for Argentina so far. At the beginning of this very particular migratory movement, the incoming Russians benefited both from a generally welcoming population, as well as broad lack of knowledge and interest about the conflict itself. Apart from the community of descendants from Russia and Ukraine, as well as some expats living in the South American nation before 2022, the conflict was not extensively covered in the media after its initial months and stopped being broadly debated or discussed through social media.

Argentina is among the top-five nations with the highest inflation rate worldwide, and its currency consistently loses value. It currently has a poverty rate of around 50% of its total population (Buenos Aires Times, 2023) and emigration as well as crime rates are increasing. This being the dire diagnostic of the domestic scenario, alongside the fact that Argentina is very far from the battleground (approximately 14.000 km away) in geographical as well as in socio-cultural and geopolitical terms, makes the rationale for welcoming the Russian short-time *émigrés* as well as their funds.

As long as the war in Eastern Europe continues and the international sanctions and restrictions against Russian nationals stand, this very particular modality of international travel between Russia and Argentina will only increase, unless the latter changes its current rules and regulations towards the former. In this regard, it is a curiosity not much known abroad that one of the unexpected casualties of the Russia-Ukraine conflict has been the partial decrease of Argentina's international standing.

6. CONCLUSION

To sum up some of the recent developments experienced in the relationship between Russia and Argentina after the former invaded Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, this paper initially dwelt on the diplomatic tradition of the latter. This is generally based, albeit some occasional exceptions, on the prosecution of an independent pathway in its foreign affairs, trying to avoid being unduly attached to any block or global super-

power. The South American state also tries to become a leader of the region on global fora. Specially at the United Nations, it consistently tends to either align or directly promote resolutions and collective declarations of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean states (GRULAC).

Subsequently, this paper explored how the bilateral relations between Russia and Argentina dramatically grew in the past two decades. Due to international political realignments, these two nations found that they had powerful reasons to expand their global network of allies and partners. This led to a pair of significant documents being adopted among them. In 2008, a Strategic Association agreement was signed, which led to a spike in the rate of bilateral accords being concluded. Furthermore, by 2015 this association was consolidated with the signature of an Integral Strategic Association agreement between presidents Fernández de Kirchner and Putin. This reflected a solid trend for mutual association and collaboration, which was sustained during the following Argentine administration, between 2015 and 2019, despite being led by a block that held a political ideology drastically different from that one of its immediate predecessor. By 2019, Fernández de Kirchner was back in power, this time as Vice-president, and alongside president Fernández the closer ties with Russia were resumed, even at the ideological level.

These close ties became even closer after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as Argentina opted out to rely mostly on Russia to vaccinate most of its population. Nevertheless, supply chain problems as well as the emergence of what was here denominated 'global vaccinationism' meant that the relationship became strained. These issues only got magnified after the current Russian-Ukrainian war began on February 24th, 2022.

Argentina, while trying to sustain a position of impartiality and neutrality, coherent with its historical foreign policy record, could not remain totally aloof from the dispute. It endorsed the expulsion of Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council, as well as UN General Assembly resolutions that condemned it, calling it to respect international treaties and the sovereignty of all UN member states. Nevertheless, Argentina remained opposed to the expulsion of Russia from the Organization of American States (OAS), where it participated as an observer, as well as to the imposition of sanctions and other economic penalties on Russia. Argentina also advocated for peace as a leader *pro tempore* of CELAC and sought to enhance its international prestige by accessing BRICS.

Nonetheless, as the international economic scenario deteriorated and inflation and costs rapidly increased, Argentina had to realign itself more closely with the West, in order to avoid being unduly penalized or excluded from the global economy. This

meant that Russia saw its status as strategic partner of the South American nation considerably downgraded, at least non-officially. From being labeled even 'state policy' by some analysts before the war began in 2022, not only it stopped being a priority but revealed itself to be a nuisance (Rojas, 2022, p. 455). As Argentina is in dire need to attract international funds and investors, it cannot feasibly remain too aligned to a heavily sanctioned country such as Russia.

So, and while some actors in the then government coalition such as Cristina Fernández de Kirchner insisted on being closer to Russia and the East rather than being an ally of the West, the then President of Argentina saw its margin of maneuver severely constrained. Alberto Fernández could not sustain the potential retaliation of his main lenders and creditors. This forced him to gradually adjust its foreign policy, from a more neutral to a more adversarial tone regarding the Putin administration.

These decisions reflect why, when combined with some problems experienced with the delivery of the Sputnik V vaccine to Argentina by mid-2021 as well as the strain caused by the increasing flux of Russians that come to give birth to Argentina, the increasing approach between the countries attained in the previous decades was reversed.

As the problems experienced with the delivery of the vaccines fade away in time, it is to be expected that, when the Russian-Ukrainian war is finally over, the disturbances experienced in the bond between Argentina and Russia will also follow a similar pattern. In the meantime, that link will remain under duress. The former will probably keep its pursuit of an independent, autonomous, regionally minded foreign policy strategy, when feasible, and revert to a close adoption of Western lines when needed. For as long as the conflict endures, this ambiguous but pragmatic diplomacy will likely continue to characterize Argentine international policies regarding Russia.

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