

Jana Lenghardtová
Jana Paľková

PERCEPTIONS OF LATIN AMERICA IN SLOVAKIA AND THEIR REFLECTIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS IN BRATISLAVA

***Abstract:** In this paper an overview of scholarly literature on Latin America published by Slovak authors is briefly introduced within a broader cultural and societal context. The latter is given by the Slovak society's perceptions of this target region. The picture of the development of the Latin American Area Studies in Slovakia is presented according to different disciplines (mainly linguistics, literary studies, history, and archaeology) with a short reference to those institutions in which research and education in Latin American issues have been performed. At the end, the article brings a case study of the University of Economics in Bratislava (UEBA) which shows, among others, how teaching/learning the Spanish language for future economists and managers stimulated the development of Latin American studies from the perspective of economics, political science, international relations, and related fields. The UEBA's activities aimed at initiating and developing relations and cooperation with universities from Latin American countries are shortly introduced, as well.*

Structure of the paper:

- 1. Perceptions of Latin America in Slovakia. A historical perspective.*
- 2. Slovak scholarly literature on Latin America. Overview of developments, disciplinary approaches, and main topics*
- 3. In search of awakening interest in Latin American studies and in developing cooperation with Latin American universities. The experience of the University of Economics in Bratislava*

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1 Perceptions of Latin America in Slovakia. A Historical Perspective

In Slovakia¹, the first relatively large scale human contacts with Latin America started to take place from the second half of the 19th century within socially and economically motivated emigration. The largest wave of Slovak emigrants left the country in the period between 1860-1870 (to Argentina, Chile and Brazil), and later at the end of the thirties of the last century. At that time Slovakia – being part of the first Czechoslovak Republic – was a poor and underdeveloped country. The impact of the world economic crisis had been extremely negative. Many Slovaks were forced to abandon the country in search of a new life abroad. Many of them went to the “New World“, both to the Northern America, as well as to the Southern part of the continent, and found their new home mainly in Argentina, especially in the Chaco region, and partially in some other Latin American countries.

Later, after the end of the World War II, people involved in the circles of power of the first nominally independent Slovak State (1939 – 1945) left the country for political reasons. In this emigration wave other Slovak citizens also abandoned their homes because of worries about the possible future political development of the country.

In the next period Slovakia became once again a part of the reconstituted Czechoslovakia. In 1948 the communist regime was established and the country entered the sphere of interest of the Soviet Union. Actually, contacts with the region of Latin American and its individual countries were rather poor until the middle of the last century. In this respect the year 1959 was a milestone. The Cuban revolution against the dictatorial regime of Fulgencio Batista, with its consequent socio-political changes in the Caribbean country and its gradually closer adherence to the “Soviet bloc“, opened the doors to a real boom in all kinds of economic, commercial, educational, and cultural relations including for the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia. Many Slovak professionals, as did those from other socialist countries, went to work to Cuba as experts in different fields. Conversely, Slovakia was receiving students, workers, trainees, etc. for study periods or work internship in our country.

Leaving aside political and ideological implications and interpretations, it can be stated that this period had a decisive impact on the way in which Slovaks perceived Latin America. Suddenly, one Latin American country was seen differently: instead of a “very distant, remote and exotic country“, or “a country that has no importance to

¹ Up to the end of the World War I Slovakia was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1918 Slovaks and Czechs established a new common state of Czechoslovakia. In the years 1939-1945 Slovakia was a nominally independent state under the rule of Germany. After the World War II, Slovakia became a part of the reconstituted Czechoslovakia, which belonged to the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence. Short after the Velvet Revolution and the fall of communist regime in 1989 Czechoslovakia split into two parts. The independent Slovakia came into being in 1993. It joined the NATO and EU in 2004, the euro-zone in 2009, and the Schengen Area in 2007. The country is also member of the United Nations, OECD, WTO, among others. According to the Human Development Indicator, Slovakia belongs to the group of high-income advanced economies.

us”, Cuba became to be considered as a real partner for cooperation. Even more, the cooperation and contacts with Cuba also stimulated an increase in Slovaks’ interest in Latin America as a whole.

Later, other countries of the region and other socio-political events called the attention of Slovak society towards this part of the world. Among them, e.g. the Frente Popular period and the consecutive coup d’état in Chile in the sixties and seventies of the 20th century and – approximately a decade later – the socio-political evolution in Nicaragua are to be stressed. Nevertheless, the above-mentioned events did not have such a spectacular impact on Slovak perceptions of Latin America as the first encounters with Cuba. The crucial difference is this: in the case of Cuba the attitude was built on real human contacts, not only on news and information in the media.

At this point the impact of teaching/learning Spanish in Slovakia has also to be mentioned as one of the most efficient motivating factors for people’s interest in Latin America. The Spanish language was officially supported within educational system in Slovakia mainly in the sixties, precisely as a consequence of growing relations with Cuba. It is true that later this support grew weaker, but as a result of the “boom” of Spanish in Slovakia the number of people who came in touch with the language, and thus also with Hispanic culture, and became interested in the Hispanic world, registered an unprecedented increase. Later, in the eighties Portuguese also started to be taught as a major at the Faculty of Philology and Arts of Comenius University, though it is true that for a long time this language did not attain a level comparable to Spanish within the Slovak educational system.

In 1968, attempts to revitalise and improve the socialist regime took place in Czechoslovakia. After the suppression of this process, known as the “Prague Spring“, with its ideal of “socialism with a human face”, Slovakia experienced the third strong emigration wave from its territory. After the occupation of the country by Soviet and other Warsaw Pact’s troops a considerable part of Slovak citizens left the country, and joined the already established Slovak communities in Latin America.

After approximately 20 years, on the eve of the “Velvet Revolution” which brought along the fall of communist regime in 1989, the situation regarding Slovak relations with and perceptions of Latin America can be summarised as follows:

Spanish, being one of the most influential “channels of perceptions” of the whole Hispanic world, was taught as a foreign language in six non-philological faculties (some of them focused on Economics and Business, Engineering, Agriculture, and others) and also at some secondary schools.

The number of persons for whom Iberian and Latin American countries ceased to be “terra incognita” was gradually growing. These were mainly graduates of Spanish Philology and Linguistics – and later – from the eighties – those of Portuguese – as well as other professionals, students, and teachers, who spent some period in Cuba, Slovak diplomats in Latin American countries, journalists, translators of Hispanic and Lusitanian literatures, and also those graduates of different non-philological schools who learned Spanish as a foreign language during their university studies, etc. A lot

of these persons became interested in the Spanish - and Portuguese - speaking world and, moreover, some of them became enthusiastic about the development of relations with Latin America [20], [23].

At that time Czechoslovakia had twelve embassies in Latin America (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela). Despite the existence of the “monopoly of foreign trade” and a rather low volume of trade, Czechoslovak commercial offices and also some enterprises were active in the region.

Finally, the fall of the “iron curtain” in 1989, and the ensuing opening of Slovakia to Europe and to the world in general, have created considerably more favourable conditions for Slovak people to learn more about Iberian and Latin American countries.

In this respect, it should be stressed that contacts with Spain and Portugal had a strong impact on perceptions of Latin America in Slovakia. The socio-political democratic changes, which occurred in Iberian countries in the seventies of the 20th century, their transition processes towards democracy and their European and transatlantic integration were followed with great interest in Slovakia. Particularly in the period after the Velvet revolution, the need of the country’s democratic transformation inspired Slovak politicians’, intellectuals’, and other people’s interest in learning from the experience of both Iberian countries. Their transition process was considered in many aspects as an example to be followed in Slovakia. Of course, the Iberian Peninsula became attractive for many other reasons also: its rich history, culture, art, attractive tourist destinations, etc. Suddenly, all this could be discovered by direct personal experience. This period gave rise to a second “boom” of interest in languages and cultures of both Iberian countries. This way, indirectly – but logically and intensively – the positive image and attraction of Spain and Portugal also gave a new impetus to interest of Slovak people in the whole Spanish and Portuguese speaking world.

In 1993, after its formation as an independent country, the Slovak Republic as a successor state to the former Czechoslovakia continued in the tradition of good relations with Latin America and it re-established previous diplomatic relations with all Latin America and the Caribbean with the exception of three Caribbean countries. At present, Slovakia has diplomatic relations with all countries of the region.

However, the priorities of the newly established country were focused mainly towards the European and transatlantic integration processes. The result was that after 1993 the Slovak presence in Latin America has been gradually decreasing. A good example of this is the fact that at present there are only four Slovak embassies in the region: in Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico. All the others have been closed for economic reasons.

On the other hand, almost all Latin American embassies with accreditation to Slovakia have their offices outside Slovakia. The majority are in the neighbouring Vienna, and two in Berlin. The only two Latin American embassies actually located in Slovakia are those of Cuba and Brazil.

The weak presence of Slovak embassies in Latin America is partially counterbalanced by the growing number of Slovak honorary consulates there. The number of Latin American honorary consulates has been increasing in the recent period as well. At the moment there are ten of them.²

In the field of economic and commercial relations Slovakia has succeeded to all the bilateral agreements with Latin American countries, and/or established new ones with its most important commercial partners. Later, after its accession to the European Union, the Slovak Republic adjusted its contractual relations with the countries of that region to the rules and obligations related to EU membership. As for the current state of economic cooperation, no major development has been achieved up to now. Participation of Latin America in Slovak foreign trade can hardly be considered satisfactory [24].

However, Slovak perceptions of Iberian languages, cultures, and the Latin American region in the fields of education and culture show a more optimistic and promising picture:

Spanish and Portuguese, the languages that are real communication bridges between the two continents, have achieved a better position within the education system in the country. Spanish specially has been growing rapidly. At several non-philological faculties, in which Spanish is taught as a foreign language, it contributed to awaken interest of their students in Latin American issues. In most of them courses of this language were introduced in the sixties of the last century.

At present, e.g., there are seven bilingual Slovak-Spanish secondary schools³. The young generation's interest in learning Iberian languages is generally growing.

Latin American literature is rather well-known in Slovakia. Since the post-second world war period, more than 250 books of Latin American authors writing in Spanish and Portuguese have been translated into Slovak. Thus, readers in Slovakia acquired the chance to read works of the best Latin American authors such as Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, Paulo Coelho, Mario Vargas Llosa, Julio Cortázar, Jorge Luis Borges, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Juan Rulfo, Ernesto Sábato, Alejo Carpentier, Horacio Quiroga, and others. The most translated authors are Gabriel García Márquez from Spanish and Paulo Coelho from the Portuguese language. Most of the translations were made from the fifties to 1989, experiencing a decrease in the following years until the present [34].

There are more activities, which bring Latin America's culture closer to the Slovak public. For instance, in the years 1996 – 1998, Slovak radio broadcast courses and programmes of the Spanish language, and in the years 1998 – 1999 a programme entitled “On the Hispanic Wave” addressing Slovak listeners interested in the Iberian and Latin American world. Several non-governmental associations which

² The following Latin American countries have their honorary consulates in the Slovak Republic: Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, and El Salvador.

³ Bilingual Slovak-Spanish secondary schools are in Bratislava, Nitra, Nové Mesto nad Váhom, Banská Bystrica, Žilina, Trstená, and Košice.

are focussed on cooperation with Iberia and Latin America were established, e.g.: Slovak Association of Spanish Teachers (1993), SEILA-Slovak Association for the Relations with Iberian Peninsula and Latin American Countries (1999), Portuguese Institute (2001), Mosaic association (2003), and Friends of Mexico (2010). Iberian and Latin American embassies, and also the mentioned non-governmental associations, organize e.g. film festivals, art exhibitions, and other cultural activities for the general public. Aula Cervantes, the Bratislava based branch of the Cervantes Institute, has offices at the University of Economics in Bratislava, and is also active in organizing events for spreading the Spanish language and culture of Spanish speaking countries.

Latin American “pop” music”, “soap-operas“ on television, and other similar pop-cultural phenomena entered also Slovakia and enjoyed popularity among some segments of the Slovak public.

On the other hand, in higher education, contacts and academic exchanges with universities and other institutions from Latin America are somewhat sporadic.

2 Slovak Scholarly Literature on Latin America. Overview of Developments, Disciplinary Approaches, and Main Topics

A view on the evolution of the Slovak scholarly literature on Latin America to be outlined in this paragraph shows, that its results are rather modest in quantitative terms, and that their greatest part is focused of linguistic and literary studies. To offer a relatively comprehensive and realistic picture on main topics treated in the Slovak literature on Latin American historical, political, economic or societal issues, we have included into this short overview not only strictly scientific outputs (monographs, papers, and articles in scientific journals), but also other publications, based on serious knowledge of the issue in question, and aimed at introducing Latin America to a larger public.

Another important common denominator of Latin American studies in Slovakia is that, with exception of linguistic, literary and marginally also historical research related to degree programmes in Hispanic and Lusitanian Philology, they depend almost exclusively only on a pure personal academic interest of individual scholars and authors, and are not motivated by the institutional or societal demand.

However, as stated before, it is true that there have been two already mentioned periods, when the socio-political situation called attention of the Slovak society also towards Latin American issues, and thus – directly or indirectly – gave impetus to the development of Latin American studies:

Firstly, in the sixties, due to the development of relations with Cuba, including relations with institutions of higher education was officially supported. As a result, both general and scholarly interest in Cuba and the whole Latin America grew considerably. At that time in the former Czechoslovakia a “Commission for Research of History and Culture of Peoples of Latin America” was established within the Institute of History of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in Prague. It is unique

in the history of Latin American studies in Slovakia – at that time as part of the former Czechoslovakia – that research on that region was officially supported for political reasons.

Secondly, the political and economic transformation processes started in 1989 brought a never-before-seen openness to the world, to free travel, tourism, access to varied information, to formal and informal meetings with people from around the world, etc. In comparison with the previously mentioned period, also Latin America as a whole and its individual countries suddenly became relatively more frequent travel destinations and more frequent topics in the media and society, in general, than ever before.

These two “turning points” in the history of Slovak perceptions of Latin America also mark milestones in the development of Slovak scholarly literature on Latin America in Slovakia. They divide them roughly into three periods: the first lasting from the beginnings of the 20th century to the sixties, the second from the sixties to the Velvet Revolution in 1989, and the third from the Velvet revolution in 1989 up to now.

■ *First period*

The first Slovak publication related in some way to Latin American issues, that can be detected at present in accessible bibliography sources, dates from the beginnings of the 20th century and refers to the construction and development of the Panama Canal [1].

Later, in the 1920s, it was Martin Kukučín, one of the most prominent Slovak writers of those times, who for the first time opened to the Slovak society “imaginary windows” to that region by his literary works. He used the experience from two periods of his life spent in South America for writing a book of travel with the title “Walks in Patagonia” (1923), and the novel “The Mother Calls” (1926 – 1927).⁴

In the first half of the 20th century, books introducing Brazil [40] and the Latin American region as a whole [17] were published as well. The latter was probably the first attempt to transmit to Slovak readers a brief but comprehensive review of topics such as geography, history and economy of the region.

However, the real origins of Latin American studies in Slovakia coincide with the birth of Hispanic linguistics and philology at the Faculty of Philology and Arts of the Comenius University in Bratislava. This Faculty can be considered by rights as the cradle of future Latin American studies in Slovakia. In this respect, the crucial date is the year 1955 when Hispanic linguistic and literary Studies at that Faculty were established. The current Department for Romance studies, in its present shape, has existed at the Faculty since 1991. However, this Department has its roots in the first years following the foundation of Comenius University. The Seminar for

⁴ Martin Kukučín spent a part of his life (1907 – 1922; 1924 – 1926) in South America, first in Argentina and then in Chile. The major part of that period he worked as physician in the Chilean Punta Arenas town. He was highly appreciated by the local people. A plaque, situated at the place he lived in Punta Arenas, and a clinic bearing his name, commemorate the writer’s work and person.

Romance studies was established in 1923. The Spanish language started to be taught in 1936. Nevertheless, Spanish as a study field was constituted only in the academic year 1954/1955. At that time this language was studied in combination with other languages within degree programmes aimed at preparing teachers of languages for secondary schools. In this period Jozef Škultéty⁵, the first Slovak scholar in the field of Romance and specifically Hispanic linguistics in Slovakia, wrote the *Introduction to Romance Linguistics with Special Attention to Iberian Languages* as one of the basic textbooks in the field [44]. Regarding literary studies, it was Vladimír Oleríny⁶, a prominent translator from the Spanish language, who created the basis of studies in Hispanic literature in Slovakia. In that period only he translated more than 25 literary works from Spanish and started to publish studies on literature written in Spanish, including that of Latin America [38].

In that period, solid foundations of linguistic and literary Hispanic studies were laid in Slovakia, and the first generation of Spanish teachers, translators from the Spanish language, and researchers in Hispanic linguistics, literature, and culture graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts of Comenius University in Bratislava.

■ *Second period*

The second period, lasting from the sixties to the Velvet revolution in 1989, represents a modest step forward in comparison with the previous one. The number of outputs related to Latin American issues grew a little, and a slight diversification of topics can be observed as well.

In the sixties a new generation of teachers in Hispanic linguistics and literature entered the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts. In that period teachers from Chile (Y. Moretic, and V. Moretic Vidal) made an important contribution to the development of Hispanic studies at the Faculty.

From the seventies, Portuguese started to be taught at the Faculty. Lusitanian studies were introduced in the academic year 1981/82 within the degree programmes aimed at preparing translators and interpreters. This study field created conditions and motivated further activities in education and research on culture, society, and other realities of Brazil. Many of them brought visible results only much later, in the beginnings of the 21st century.

⁵ Jozef Škultéty (1930-1992) was the founder of the Romance studies in Slovakia. Professor of Romance Linguistics and president of the Circle of Modern Philology focused his investigation mainly on the lexicology of Romance languages and Spanish and French phraseology. Author of several textbooks, dictionaries, papers and articles published in Slovakia and abroad.

⁶ Vladimír Oleríny (1921) is one of the founders of the Hispanic studies in Slovakia, literary historian and critic, researcher of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and translator of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American literature. He translated more than one hundred books of poetry, prose and drama and is author of many papers, essays and other publications on Spanish and Latin American literature. For his work in the area of Hispanic studies he received several awards and recognitions (e.g. Silver Medal for Merit in Fine Arts awarded by the Spanish Ministry of Culture or Grand Cross of the Civil Order of Alfonso X, the Wise).

In the field of linguistics and literature an increasing number of papers or scientific articles was published by researchers in linguistics and in literary studies in specialist journals, e.g. in *Revue svetovej literatúry*, *Cizí jazyky ve škole*. As far as specific Latin American studies in linguistics are concerned, works in that field focused on peculiarities of variants of the Spanish language in that region (e.g. Cuban Spanish) (e.g. [45], [47]). Research on literature brought many valuable analytical studies of Latin American poetry and prose of different authors from several Latin American countries and that of different ethnic groups of the region (e.g. [9], [10], [26], [28], [29], [30]).

Besides linguistics or literature, Latin American history, society, and its political issues became subjects of interest. In this period it was mainly the Cuban case that attracted attention to the socio-political issues of the whole Latin American sub-continent. Books of travel, and non-fiction for a large public, introducing Cuba as “the first socialist country on Western hemisphere”, as well as the effervescent socio-political panorama of Latin America, were published.

This period also marks a significant point with regards to Slovak literature on Latin America’s history. A prominent Slovak historian, František Višváder, can be considered as the first author and founder of Latin American studies in that field. His book on important events in the history of Latin American countries described with a background of other disciplines (mainly geography), represents the first attempt to introduce this region to the Slovak public in a comprehensive way and with a serious research base [48].

Later, in the eighties, other books brought, for instance, such topics as the phenomenon of dictatorial regimes in the region, and reports on travel to Latin America, stressing political and economic development of some countries of the region (e.g. [4], [5]). While the major part of these publications aimed at gaining general public’s attention, a small amount of them was written on political demand, published only for internal institutional use and partially influenced by the current ideology. The description of the Slovak mountaineering expedition to Aconcagua also drew Slovak readers’ attention to Latin American region [12].

■ *Third period*

The third period, i.e., the one from the Velvet revolution in 1989 up to now, represents a real leap in the history of Latin American studies in Slovakia mainly, but not only, in quantitative terms. The total number of books, papers, and articles in scientific journals and proceedings from conferences increased considerably. More disciplinary diversification can be observed as well. Literature on Latin America for a general public continued to play an important role by spreading knowledge on the continent. New books, mainly those of travel, brought Latin America closer to Slovak readers.

Linguistic and literary studies maintained active development and contributed to the knowledge of Latin America with textbooks and monographs (e.g. [11], [16], [39]).

Individual researchers, mainly from universities or from the Slovak Academy of Sciences enriched the Slovak Latin American studies on literature also with articles, projects and other research activities (e.g. [6], [27], [31]), in the fields of linguistics, translation (e.g. [32], [33], [46]), culture, and philosophy (e.g. [36], [43]).

Several literary works of prominent Latin American authors were translated into Slovak language. Most of these publications included studies on respective writers like Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, Alejo Carpentier, Octavio Paz, Juan Rulfo, Julio Cortázar, José Martí and others [34].

Young researchers paid attention to characteristics of varieties of the Spanish language spoken in Latin America (e.g. in Mexico, Chile, Argentina) mainly from the point of view of lexicology and phraseology, and to problems of cultural identity, traditions and thinking, and published their outputs in numerous proceedings from seminars/conferences on departmental or Faculty level.

In the field of history, after 1989 researchers chose for their monographs a wide variety of thematic areas: Slovak emigration to Latin America, especially to Argentina and the Chaco region (e. g. [7], [42]); Mexican history from the beginnings of the 20th century, with stress on the Mexican revolution [2], [3]; pre-Columbian law in the Inca Empire based on an interesting and new interdisciplinary approach, combining law and history studies [35]. Also the dictatorship phenomenon in Latin America, in particular the case of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, was treated by František Višváder in a masterly way [49], [50]. For the first time pre-Columbian cultures, mainly Olmec, Maya, Aztec, and Lacandonian, were introduced to Slovak readers by Slovak authors, not only on the basis of research in history and religion studies, but also on the results of their own archaeological research (e.g. [14], [15]). The latter is a brand-new modality in Latin American studies in Slovakia. Since 2009 a team from the Slovak Archaeological and Historical Institute, led by Milan Kováč, has been doing archaeological research in ruins of the Maya town of Uaxactún, Guatemala.

Books introducing countries of the region to a wide general public appeared on the book market (e.g. [8], [13]).

Summarizing the main findings on the historical developments of Latin American studies in Slovakia, it can be stated that for a long period they have been carried out predominantly as integral parts of Hispanic and Lusitanian philological studies within corresponding study fields at different Slovak Faculties of Philosophy and Arts or those of Pedagogy. Literary studies were developed also at Institutes of the Slovak Academy of Science. Interest in Latin American issues from the point of view of other disciplines, especially that of history, appeared in the 60s and showed further diversification in approaches and areas of interest in the late eighties, and mainly at the beginning of the new century.

With the exception of research in linguistics and literature, Latin American studies are not firmly embedded in higher education institutions or research institutes. The lack of institutional interest in supporting Latin American studies is caused mainly by two reasons: with the exception of the “Cuban phenomenon”, Slovakia has never

had intensive economic and political relations with Latin America. It being a small country with limited resources of all kinds, investments into the development and institutionalization of Latin American studies have not been considered as necessary or feasible. Thus, Latin American studies were developed and are still developing, to a great extent, as a result of the individual interest of university teachers and researches. Up to present, there has been neither specific public nor private funding for supporting Latin American studies centres or similar institutions.

At present, Latin American studies are being developed mainly at universities, i.e. at those departments which provide bachelor's and master's degree programmes aimed at preparing Spanish or Portuguese teachers, and/or translators and interpreters in those languages. Research activities focus mainly on linguistics and literature, and partially on culture, history, and civilisation of Hispanic and Lusitanian world.

Nowadays, the following Faculties provide studies in Spanish and/or Portuguese language and culture:

Faculty of Philology and Arts of the Comenius University, Bratislava
Department of Romance Studies (Department of Romance Languages)

Faculty of Education of the Comenius University, Bratislava
Institute of Philological Studies: Department of Romance Languages and Literatures

Faculty of Arts of the University of Prešov
Institute of Romance and Classical Philology

Faculty of Philosophy and Arts, Constantine the Philosopher University, Nitra
Department of Romance Studies

Faculty of Arts Matej Bel University, Banská Bystrica
Department of Romance Studies

Faculty of Applied Languages of the University of Economics in Bratislava
Department of Romance Languages

In some periods Latin American studies have been developed by individual researchers at the Slovak Academy of Science, mainly at the Institute of World Literature and the Institute of Ethnology.

In the field of archaeology, religion, history and philosophy a special attention to Latin American Studies is paid at the Department of Comparative Religious Studies of Comenius University and the Slovak Archaeological and Historical Institute. This is a civic association, which aims to support and implement the various scientific, researches, and cultural projects primarily related to the mentioned disciplines.

The first research outputs on Latin America from the point of view of economics, international economic relations, and other related fields, appeared in the last decades of the 20th century at the University of Economics in Bratislava.

3 In Search of Awakening Interest in Latin American Studies and in Developing Cooperation with Latin American Universities. The Experience of the University of Economics in Bratislava

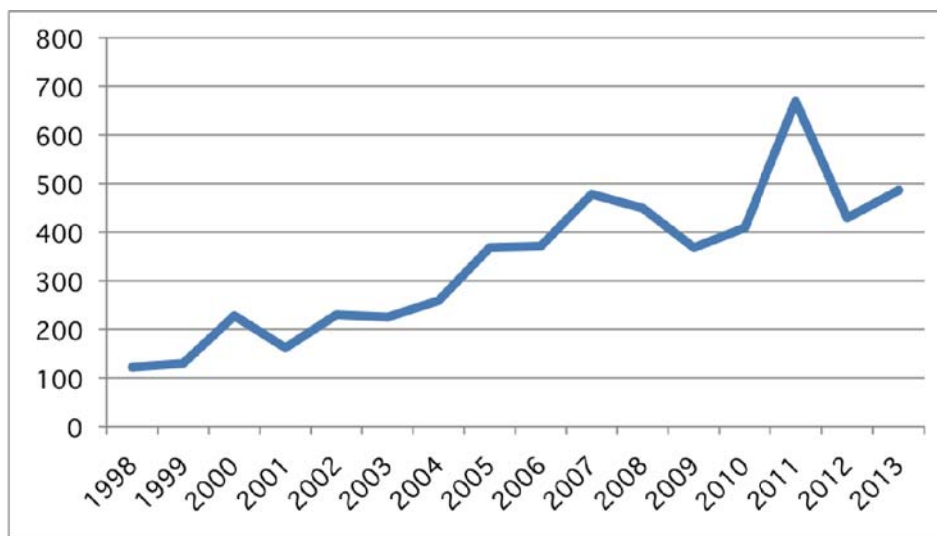
The University of Economics in Bratislava (UEBA), established in 1940, provides higher education in Economics, Business, and Management at all three levels of University studies.

The experience of this university can illustrate, among others, how teaching/learning Spanish contributed – in conjunction with other factors – to awaken students' interest in Latin America and helped to increase the number of degree theses and other publications focusing on this region.

Spanish had already been introduced into study plans in 1940, in the same year as the Slovak School of Commerce – predecessor of the UEBA – was established. In spite of this, for many years students did not evince enough interest in applying for courses of this language. By the end of the sixties of the past century, the number of students interested in learning Spanish was less than 10 each term (semester). However, this situation was gradually changing and their interest in learning the language was constantly growing. On the eve of the Velvet Revolution (1989) the number of students attending Spanish courses was oscillating between 150-200 students/term. The following chart shows the evolution of the number of students enrolled in courses of Spanish since the year 1998.

Chart 1

Numbers of students of the University of Economics in Bratislava enrolled in courses of the Spanish language. Development in the period 1998-2013



Source: Institute of Languages/Faculty of Applied Languages annual reports from the years 1998-2013.

Since the seventies of the past century, Spanish teachers started to introduce into language courses for advanced learners also topics related to culture, civilisation, history, society, and economy of Latin America. From the beginning of nineties, these issues have become an integral part of the system of teaching Spanish.

Thus, students who decided to learn Spanish, as one of the two compulsory languages, usually became more interested in the reality of the whole Spanish-speaking world, and, moreover, acquired the indispensable communication tool for studying original information sources needed for their research projects. These facts, together with society's slowly growing attention to the Hispanic and Lusitanian world, brought as a consequence that students started to choose different Latin American issues as topics for their degree projects.

The first theses (bachelor's, master's, and PhD) on Latin America started to appear in the seventies. According to accessible sources, their total number by the end of 2013 is more than 100 (from that number 45 bachelor's projects, 49 master's and 10 doctoral theses). Most of them were prepared by students of the Faculty of International Relations, Faculty of Commerce, and the Faculty of National Economy.

Topics of the degree theses addressed, for instance, the economic development of the region or of its individual countries in a historical perspective or in particular periods; economic reforms and crisis in the twenties or beginnings of 21st centuries; Latin American integration processes (Mercosur, Caricom); regional energy resources; international relations of Latin American countries in general, and specifically, relations with the European Union, and those with the United States; research cooperation between the EU and Latin America; impact of globalisation on Latin American economy; theories of development and development in Latin America; to name just some of them. The following particular countries were chosen as topics for students' degree theses written in that period: Venezuela, Argentina, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Brazil, Colombia, Nicaragua, Chile, Cuba, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, and Haiti.

At present, at the UEBA and at its individual Faculties there are already several doctoral students, young teachers and researchers working in the fields of Economics, Finance, Banking, Business Management, Foreign Trade, International Economics Relations, and others who are fluent in Spanish and are interested in Iberian and Latin American studies. Another promising group of potential scholars in Latin American studies at the UEBA is that constituted by a new generation of teachers focusing mainly on intercultural communication, culture, civilization and history of Iberian and Latin America region in the newly established Faculty of Applied Languages⁷. It is to be supposed, that future graduates of the Faculty will enrich the field by their research and publications, and/or to contribute to develop relations with universities and research institutes Latin American countries.

In the last years also books and papers on Latin America written by the UEBA academic staff have been published, e.g. such as the civilisation issues [36], position

⁷ At the latter Faculty a study programme for preparing Slovak-Spanish translators and interpreters specializing in the language for specific purposes (economics, management, business and related fields) was opened in the academic year 2012/2013.

of the region in the world economy [41], or bilateral international relations within Latin American region [37].

In the year 1998, *Centre for Iberian and Latin American Studies (CEILA)* was established at the UEBA. It was officially inaugurated in April 1999 by a panel discussion entitled “The Iberian and Latin American world – Horizons of a Dialogue for Slovakia” with participation of eight ambassadors of the Iberian and Latin American countries [19].

CEILA is a kind of “hub” the mission of which is to initiate and coordinate activities aimed at calling attention of the UEBA’s students, teachers, and researchers to the Iberian and Latin American areas. In the first period of its existence the CEILA’s crucial task consisted in developing and implementing interdisciplinary area studies courses, and in motivating and supporting research in the field of Iberian and Latin American studies. In line with this, within the international Erasmus project⁸ “*Intercultural Communication in International Economic Relations. Application: Iberian and Latin American Studies*” CEILA developed a short interdisciplinary area studies programme including modules on the history, culture and civilisation, economy, and international relations of the region. Later, the project’s results served as one of the models for developing the study programme on intercultural communication for the newly established Faculty of Applied Languages [18], [22].

CEILA has been cooperating with other similar European centres within the academic association CEISAL – *Consejo Europeo de Investigaciones Sociales de América Latina* (European Council for Social Research of Latin America). Between 1998 and 2005 CEILA was represented in the steering committee of this association.⁹

⁸ **Intercultural Communication in International Economic Relations: Iberian and Latin American Studies**

Programme: Socrates – Erasmus-1-CD – Multilateral projects – Curriculum development; Project Number: 63827-IC-1-2002-1-SK-ERASMUS-PROGUC-1; Duration: 2003-2006; Coordinator: University of Economics in Bratislava – International Programmes Institute/Centre for Iberian and Latin American Studies; Partner institutions: University of Granada (ES), University of Economics in Prague (CZ), Austrian Institute for Latin America, Vienna (AT).

The project objective was to develop and implement a pilot interdisciplinary Modular Programme of Iberian and Latin American Studies (in the Spanish language). Within this project the study plan of the programme and syllabus of individual courses were developed, and this two-year pilot programme was implemented. Students who successfully completed the programme were awarded certificates signed by the statutory representatives of all three universities participating in the project. Manuals and other teaching aids in the field of Iberian and Latin-American studies, as well as proceedings from the closing workshop, were published. The project results were used for the development of the study programmes at the newly established Faculty of Applied Languages of the UEBA.

⁹ CEILA entered the CEISAL network mainly thanks to the support of Prof. Andrzej Dembiczy (1939-2009), a prominent Polish scholar in Latin American studies and at that time President of CEISAL. It was mainly thanks to the CEILA’s membership in this network that several articles and papers stressing the role of teaching/learning Spanish as motivating factor regarding cooperation with Latin America, calling attention to the need of strengthening cooperation with universities from Latin America, and similar topics, could be published in journals and proceedings from conferences and seminars organized by this association or its particular member institutions [20], [23].

From among other academic events and activities¹⁰ implemented by CEILA is to be mentioned that the centre was organiser of the *IV European CEISAL Congress of Latin American Studies* held at the premises of the UEBA in June 2004. More than 600 scholars from different fields, e.g. Economics, Geography, Sociology, Political Science, History, Cultural Studies, and others, from Europe and other countries of the world participated in that event [21].

Starting from 2007, the UEBA internationalization strategy stresses, among others, not only further development of effective relations with universities from the European Union, but also cooperation with universities from third countries, while paying a special attention to the relations with higher education institutions from Latin America. In the last years, agreements with universities from Peru, Argentina and Brazil were signed in addition to those existing from the nineties of the past century (Mexico, Chile). Student exchanges started to be implemented modestly with the universities from mentioned countries¹¹. However, the most intensive cooperation is that with ITESM – Institute of Technology and Higher Studies of Monterrey, a prestigious Mexican higher education institution. Numbers of exchange students are growing and summer schools prepared by the UEBA enjoy a greater popularity with Mexican students. In 2011 the UEBA signed the agreement on strategic alliance called Group 10+1, which associates ITESM with ten universities from Central and Eastern Europe.

The rationale of the strategy aimed at intensifying relations with universities and other stakeholders from Latin America has been explained in the book published as one of the outputs of the international project “Knowledge Triangle and Co-operation European Union – Latin America & the Caribbean” (2008-2011)¹² co-ordinated by the

¹⁰ CEILA organizes a wide range of cultural and academic activities, such as exhibitions of photographs, lectures, discussions, roundtables, presentations, etc., aimed at promoting countries of the Iberian Peninsula and Latin America. For instance, every year a cultural event “Days of Mexico” is organized in cooperation with the Embassy of Mexico.

¹¹ Agreements on cooperation of the University of Economics in Bratislava with Latin American universities (in alphabetical order of countries):

Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina (2012)

Pontificia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, Brazil (2012)

Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil (2012)

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil (2012)

La Universidad de La Serena, Chile (2004)

Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de Las Villas, Cuba (2014)

Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mexico (2011)

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Perú, Peru (2009)

¹² **Knowledge Triangle and Cooperation European Union – Latin America and the Caribbean Programme:** Erasmus – Multilateral projects – Cooperation between universities and enterprises; **Project number:** 142711-LLP-1-SK-ERASMUS-ECUE; **Duration:** 2008-2011; **Coordinator:** University of Economics in Bratislava – International Programmes Institute; **Partner institutions:** University of Granada (ES); University of Economics in Prague, (CZ); Austrian Latin American Institute, Vienna (AT), Slovak Academic Association for International Cooperation (SK), Granada Chamber of Industry and Commerce (ES), Granada Savings Bank (ES), Developcom, s.r.o. (SK).

University of Economics in Bratislava and supported by the European Commission within the Erasmus programme. The project aim consisted mainly in developing a model of international university cooperation based on “knowledge triangle” and at the promotion of ideas which motivate the dialogue and cooperation between universities from the European Union and Latin America & the Caribbean [24].

The objective of the Erasmus-Mundus project REALITY – Research Cooperation of European and Latin American Universities in Innovation Technology (2012-2014)¹³ is to test in practice the suggested cooperation model and to establish sustainable relations, based on knowledge triangle, between the project’s consortium constituted by six universities from four EU countries, and one university from one Latin American country (Mexico) [51].

Since the year 1995 up to present, altogether five international projects – including the three already mentioned – co-funded in the framework of different programmes of the European Commission were submitted and coordinated by the University of Economics in Bratislava. They helped considerably to promote cooperation with Latin American universities and/or to improve teaching/learning Spanish for specific purposes.¹⁴

The project was aimed at contributing to the promotion of ideas which motivate the dialogue and cooperation between universities from the European Union and Latin America & the Caribbean, based on the knowledge triangle, and to search for sustainable ways (strategies, policies, methods) which could facilitate the university-business cooperation in the context of EU-LAC dialogue. The Project’s activities comprised mainly four international seminars (held in Granada, Bratislava, Prague, Vienna) on the main project topic; an opinion survey among selected target groups (university teachers, university students, managers and employees of enterprises and other institutions) regarding the prospects of relations between the European Union and Latin America. As a result of the project’s activities, a book on cooperation between universities and enterprises /other institutions within the EU-LAC dialogue was published, and an information system to support cooperation between universities and enterprises /other institutions was developed.

¹³ **REALITY – Research Cooperation of European and Latin American Universities in Innovation Technology**

Programme: Erasmus Mundus; Project number: 2012-3974/001-EMA3-PP; Duration: 2012-2014; General objective: To create sustainable relations between partner universities from four EU countries and one LA country (Mexico) based on a closer interrelation between education, research, and cooperation with practice within the framework of so called “knowledge triangle” (education – research – innovations); Specific objectives: 1. To enhance awareness on the European higher education at the partner university in Mexico 2. To explore synergies between higher education and research, and between higher education and businesses. 3. To secure students, teachers, and researchers from partner universities access to educational and research processes in partner universities.

Main activities: Preparing presentation and promotion kit; Presentation of the project objectives at the partner University in Mexico; Research period of Mexican students in Central Europe aimed at testing the model of international student mobility; preparing portal for sustainable cooperation within the consortium of project partner university. Coordinator: University of Economics in Bratislava; Partner institutions: Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava; University of Economics, Prague; Vienna University of Economics and Business; University of Granada; Monterrey Institute of Technology.

¹⁴ **Español para Fines específicos: Economía y Empresa**

Programme: Tempus Phare; Project number: S-JEP 09297/95; Duration: 1995-1998; Coordinating

The UEBA was represented in several transnational activities supporting EU strategies and policies aimed at strengthening EU-LAC/CELAC dialogue and cooperation¹⁵ [25].

As demonstrated by this short historical overview, the previous efforts and activities developed at the University of Economics in Bratislava since its foundation, created favourable prerequisites for further development of Latin American studies, as well as for strengthening cooperation and relations with universities from the region.

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institution: University of Economics in Bratislava – Institute of Languages; Project partners: University of Matej Bel in Banská Bystrica (SK); Energoinfo, s.a. (SK); University of Granada (ES); Granada Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ES); Leeds Metropolitan University (UK); Objective: Restructuring of courses of Spanish for Specific Purposes (modules C, D) at the University of Economics in Bratislava); Results: Intensive courses for Slovak teachers of Spanish for specific purposes, seminars on methodology of teach Spanish for Specific Purposes; lectures of teachers from Spain at the UEBA; teaching materials published;

En el Mundo de los Negocios

Programme: Leonardo da Vinci; Project number: SK/98/1/84016/PI/III.1.A/CONT.; Duration: 1998-2001; Coordinating institution: University of Economics in Bratislava – Institute of Languages; Partner institutions: Comenius University; Faculty of Pedagogy (SK); Solucionaria, a.s. (SK); Slovak Chamber of Commerce (SK); University of Alcalá (ES); University of Granada (ES); Granada Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ES); University of Bologna (IT). Objective: To develop a multimedia textbook of Spanish for Specific Purposes (intermediate level). Result: Textbook “En el Mundo de los Negocios”; booklets with translations to 5 languages; CD-Rom with interactive exercises, video and audio recordings.

¹⁵ The UEBA has been represented at following activities:

- Seminar on EU-LAC cooperation in Higher Education organised within the project VertebrALCUE Alfa 3; Granada, April 2012
- Seminar EULAC 2013 +. Next steps in EU-LAC cooperation in the fields of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation; Brussels, October 2012
- I. Academic Summit CELAC-UE; Panel V Strengthening an effective association between the Academic World and the World of Public Policies; Santiago de Chile, January 2013
- EU-Brazil Summit: Forum on internationalisation of Higher Education; Brussels, February 2014
- Preparatory Seminar of the II. Academic Summit CELAC-UE; Bucharest, May 2014.

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