The Russians are coming — and that’s a good thing

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Atlanta continues to build its reputation as a truly international business hub and regional capital of economic development. And the Russians know it. On Oct. 22-24, Atlanta will host the annual meeting of the U.S.-Russia Business Council (USRBC), the leading U.S.-based organization dealing with Russian-American business and economic relations.

This is a real coup for Atlanta since the USRBC’s delegates will include senior representatives of some of the most powerful and influential American and Russian companies. The CEOs of Alcoa, International Paper and Rusnano (Russia’s leading nanotechnology company) will be featured speakers. In addition to such global powerhouse companies as Bank of America, Boeing, Caterpillar, Chevron, Ernst & Young, Exxon Mobile, Ford, Pfizer, PMI, Renova, Visa and many others, the conference will include Atlanta-based USRBC members: The Coca-Cola Co., AGCO, GE Energy, Global Payments, UPS and Georgia State University’s Robinson College of Business. Coca-Cola, which has long held an influential role in the USRBC, was instrumental in bringing this important conference to its hometown of Atlanta.

The conference program will include some of the leading government and business officials from the U.S. and Russia, a country that recently has become a member of the World Trade Organization. While Russia still only hovers around No. 25 in the list of U.S. trading partners, the country continues to rank high in importance because of its geopolitical significance, its vast natural resources, and large, highly educated population. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has gained a prominent position among global growth markets, being grouped with the most important emerging markets, the so-called BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China and, more recently, South Africa. The Coca-Cola Co., AGCO, Equifax, General Electric, Global Payments and UPS all have a major presence in Russia, which continues to develop its consumer goods, agricultural, energy, infrastructure, financial services, medical technology and logistics sectors.

While there have been ups and downs in the politics of U.S.-Russian relations over recent decades, they have not deterred continued engagement in commercial, academic and cultural exchanges between our countries — nor should they. As a country we should continue our efforts to strengthen the bilateral relationship through trade and investment when those things make good economic sense. Many scholars and business leaders believe that such engagement was one of the reasons that prompted the political changes inside the Soviet Union that in turn led to the creation of a new, more open and market-oriented Russia in the 1990s.
The economic opportunity to our country through continued exports to growing markets like Russia leads to increased employment and opportunity here at home. This is especially important in our own state, where unemployment remains around 9 percent.

On the final day of the USRBC conference, the World Affairs Council of Atlanta will co-sponsor a luncheon focused on an issue of specific importance to Atlanta: the examination of the latest strategic thinking on how cities and regions in both countries attract investment and trade.

The panel will feature moderator Clyde Tuggle of Coca-Cola and panelists, including former Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago and senior officials from several of Russia’s regional governments.

This conference vividly underscores Atlanta’s growing international reputation as a venue for serious discussion of global trade and investment. That is a really good thing.

*Lord is president of the World Affairs Council of Atlanta.*