

*¿EU and CELAC strategic partners or asymmetrical
interaction*

Towards a bi-regional relation

Bianca-Monica Mina⁸⁹

Bi-regional co-operation has become an important feature of the contemporary international system, its main benefits being defined in the terms of improving mutual understanding, promoting trade and investments, diversifying co-operation between regions. Building bridges between Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and the European Union (EU) is no exception.

Starting with the 90's, the Rio Group (Permanent Mechanism of Political Consultation and Agreement), as the representative and inclusive co-operation mechanism of the Latin American and Caribbean region at that time⁹⁰, saw the advantages of developing the dialogue with the EU. This process initially took the form of annual meetings at ministerial level, with relevant co-operation documents in various fields being adopted⁹¹. The first bi-regional high-level meeting was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1999, and a strategic partnership was established on that occasion.

The Rio Summit was followed by other five summits, in: Madrid (2002), Guadalajara (2004), Vienna (2006), Lima (2008) and again Madrid (2010).

The Rio Group was the predecessor of CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States), which was launched in 2010 as the new regional mechanism for political dialogue and co-operation, the most complete Latin-American organization in terms of number of members, gathering all the 33 states

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⁸⁹ **PhD student, National School for Political Studies and Public Administration; diplomatic counsellor, Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

⁹⁰ Created in 1986 by Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela (the members of the Contadora Group and the Contadora Support Group). Later on, other 16 states joined the organization.

⁹¹ Human Rights, poverty reduction, peace and security, drugs, renewables etc.

under its umbrella. Therefore, CELAC has become EU's counterpart for the bi-regional partnership process.

The first EU-CELAC Summit was held in Santiago de Chile, on 26-27 January 2013, the next one being scheduled to take place in Brussels, in 2015.

The political objectives of the European Union towards LAC, as mentioned in various statements of the European Commission⁹² are:

- to consolidate the political dialogue at regional and sub-regional level (Central America, Andean Community, MERCOSUR) and bilaterally;
- to promote regional integration through concluding association agreements with sub-regions;
- to promote social cohesion and tackle poverty and social exclusion through development aid.

Reflecting upon EU's interest in the LAC dynamics, HRVP Catherine Ashton emphasized the "need to find even more ambitious ways of working together".

Defining "ambitious" could be a challenge in the current circumstances, in which the traditional balance between the regions seems to have changed. The growing economic difficulties in the EU downgraded Latin America as a priority (Delisante & Bonilla, 2013, p.39), while LAC countries were less affected by the financial crisis, being preoccupied mainly to enhance the international profile of the region, and less to develop co-operation with the EU.

In his final remarks at the Santiago Summit, the President of Chile reaffirmed the commitment to create a new strategic alliance which will allow a "more symmetrical relationship" between the two regions at a moment when LAC does not stop growing and Europe is enduring one of the worst crises in its history (Delisante & Bonilla, 2013, p.6)

⁹² "Stronger Partnership between the European Union and Latin America (2005) and "EU-Latin America: global players in Partnership" (2009).

Although officials' rhetoric sounds very promising on both sides of the Atlantic, the future of the EU-CELAC bi-regional relation is still bearing many question marks.

The EU is still LAC's largest partner and a source for foreign investment, but it could soon lose its position to China by the middle of the current decade. According to a report prepared by ECLAC and AECID in 2012⁹³, economic growth in Latin America will continue to outpace growth in the European Union over the next few years. Economic prospect for 2012 to 2015 suggest that Latin America and the Caribbean may grow almost twice as fast as the European Union.

There have been voices pledging for an improvement of EU's engagement in the region, in terms of coherence and continuity of the foreign and development policies (Mendizabal & Edwards, 2008, p.2).

On the Latin American side, integration is still affected by nationalism and presidential pressure, despite the economic progress. Traditional integration systems with a certain degree of supra-nationalism co-exist with other experiments in cooperation (Roy, 2013, p.1). The fact that Latin American and Caribbean states did not manage to create a "community of states" as an interlocutor for the EU until 2013, was proof that they were lacking confidence in their capacity to integrate (Bărbulescu & Ghigiu, 2013, p. 29). In our opinion, it shows also a lack of political will to deepen integration, as CELAC continues to work as a permanent mechanism of regional consultation and not as a tool for integration.

As Joachin Roy put it, for the project to survive, it requires the existence of effective institutions, ruled by a juridical structure that is accepted by all.⁹⁴

⁹³ Latin America and the Caribbean and the European Union: striving for a renewed partnership, report prepared under component 4 "Integration, Trade and Investments" of the 2010-2012 Technical Cooperation Programme between the Economic Commission for Latin America and The Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID).

⁹⁴ Joachin Roy, "European Union-Latin American Relations in a Turbulent Era", The Jean Monnet/Robert Schuman Paper Series, Vol. 12, Special December 2012, p.15.

The second CELAC Summit, held in Havana in January 2014, under Cuban presidency, brought high expectations in terms of advancing on the integration path. But analysts consider that CELAC's consolidation requires more substantial accomplishments (Serbin, 2014, p.2). CELAC still lacks legal status, organizational structure and institutional authority.

In these circumstances, it is important to find answers to questions such as:

- Is the EU-CELAC bi-regional co-operation working at its best parameters?
- Are the EU and the CELAC currently showing the same level of commitment towards implementing the partnership in a pragmatic and mutually beneficial manner?
- How to make the partnership more effective on a long-term perspective?

The EU-CELAC 2013 Summit had as main theme "Alliance for a sustainable development: Investment for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental sustainability" ("Alianza para un Desarrollo Sustentable: Promoviendo Inversiones de Calidad Societal y Ambiental").

The leaders adopted a political Declaration and an Action Plan for 2013-2015, which is an update of the Action Plan agreed upon in Madrid in 2010.

The political **Declaration** is a 48 articles document, which is structured on four main chapters:

1. New CELAC-EU Dialogue;
2. Shared values and positions in the international and multilateral arena;
3. Progress in the bi-regional Strategic Partnership process;
4. Alliance for Sustainable Development: Promoting Investments of Social and Environmental Quality (European Parliament, 2013, p. 1-14).

Critical voices close to the negotiations⁹⁵ said that due to the extent of the Declaration, reaching an agreement on the text took ages, thus participants ran out of time and didn't manage to discuss the Action Plan in detail, as they should have;

⁹⁵ who wanted to remain anonymous.

according to analysts who also criticize the lack of cohesion of the document, the Declaration was drafted following the diplomatic practice of “reiterating the reiterated” (Tremolada, 2013, 199).

The objective of the **EU-CELAC Action Plan 2013-2015** (the second important document of the Santiago Summit), based on the Madrid Action Plan, is to “identify instruments and activities which, if properly implemented should lead to concrete results guaranteeing ownership and capacity building in the following key areas:

- science, research, innovation and technology;
- sustainable development, environment, climate change, biodiversity, energy;
- regional integration and interconnectivity to promote social inclusion and cohesion;
- migration;
- education and employment to promote social inclusion and cohesion;
- the world drug problem;
- gender;
- investments and entrepreneurship for sustainable development (European Union External Action, 2013, p.1).

The Action Plan is a very ambitious document, which identifies many instruments and actions in the fields that were agreed upon. The wide range of topics reflects the variety of expectations. What it really lacks is deadlines and clear responsibilities, and this is why it is difficult to put it into practice and to have a follow up. The conclusion is that the level and quality of political discussion at the Summit remains insufficient for turning the Action Plan into a really effective tool, and should be doubled by concrete measures agreed at expert level in between the Summits, the EU Council’s Working Group on Latin America and the Caribbean (COLAC) and the EU-CELAC Senior Officials Meeting (SOM Reunions).

Another initiative of the Madrid Summit was the creation of European Union-Latin America and Caribbean Foundation (EU-LAC Foundation), which took up its

activities in November 2011. The EU-LAC Foundation has 62 members: the 33 states of Latin America and the Caribbean, the 28 members of the European Union, and the European Union institutions.

According to the official website of the Foundation, it aims at „transforming the strategic partnership between the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean, which was adopted in 1999, into a strengthened and visible reality in which the respective societies participate actively” (EU-LAC Foundation, 2013). It is also a new instrument to promote contacts at civil society level (Leffler, 2013, p. 6)

In fact, even if it became functional under German jurisdiction, the EU-LAC Foundation still lacks legal status as an international organization. Negotiations for the international agreement on the Foundation functioning are under way, but so far, the LAC partners do not seem so enthusiastic about the idea. There are concerns regarding representativity and participation in the decision making process. If the two sides manage to reach agreement by the 2015 Summit, it could be an important achievement of the bi-regional co-operation.

Analysts draw attention on LAC’s preference for the diplomacy of summits, or maliciously called ‘fever of summitry’, speaking about a ‘formidable resistance to the consolidation of independent institutions’ (Roy, 2013, p. 17). The diplomacy of summits has become a sort of public relations exercise, where leaders make enthusiastic public statements on regional integration ambitious objectives avoiding an evaluation of the tangible results. The dynamics of ‘summit diplomacy’, such as excessive rhetoric and failure to follow up on agreements that have been reached, damage the quality of the dialogue (Sanahuja, 2006, p. 5).

Similar problems have been identified also with regard to high-level meetings other than the EU-CELAC, such as the Ibero-American Summit. The 23rd one, held in Panama in October 2013, was attended only by half of the Head of States invited. It was an important signal that in order for this Summit to remain relevant, participants must redefine its objectives and functioning. Significant measures were endorsed, such as:

- holding the Summit biennially in order to alternate with the EU-CELAC summits;
- prioritizing and focusing on the major areas of common interest such as culture, social cohesion, economy and innovation;
- replacing the classic long Declaration by a more concise final document which will include concrete measures and will enable follow up;
- restructuring the activity of the Ibero-American General Secretariat (SEGIB);
- establishing an working group which will make suggestions to take the integration process further.
- last, but not least, establish regular contacts with the CELAC and develop relations with the EU.

Mutatis mutandis, some of these measures could be applied also to the EU-CELAC Summits, in order to make them more effective.

Speaking about effectiveness of the EU-CELAC political dialogue, analysts observe that this is limited by the broadness and lack of precision of the agenda, along with the lack of intermediary mechanisms and specialized dialogues to enable high-level meetings to be prepared in a more systematic way, in particular due to the weakness of the political harmonization processes in Latin America (Sanahuja, 2006, p. 6).

For instance, reducing the extent of the final political Declaration and prioritizing the topics on the agenda in order to have more time left for discussions of aspects that are really important, could be instrumental in making high-level meetings more effective.

Opinions regarding the well functioning of the EU-CELAC co-operation are shared. There are optimistic voices considering that the bi-regional relation in this new format, EU-CELAC, is still at the beginning, the CELAC itself being a young organization but a very heterogeneous one, which needs time to accommodate the various interests of its stakeholders, in order to be able to speak with the EU on one voice. The EU-CELAC Summits are seen as a good articulator of the dialogue

between both regions, and the European presence, through aid for development programmes, as a valuable asset (Delisante & Bonilla, 2013, p.5), which keeps the interest of LAC states alive. There are fields where co-operation is functioning swiftly, such as high-level education. It is also considered that old asymmetries between regions have been put aside, and the partnership is functioning on an equal basis (Leffler, 2013, p.1).

Critics are skeptical about the capacity of the decision makers from both regions to see reforming the partnership as a priority. This would mean making it more forward-looking and of mutual benefit. For instance, economic benefits within the regions are evaluated as insufficient, some countries receiving more than others (Grabendorff, 2012, p.31) The fact that more recently, due to internal difficulties to build consensus within different sub-regional LAC organizations, the tendency is to negotiate and sign separate agreements with the EU (such as the Multiparties Agreement with Peru and Colombia), could be considered symptomatic. Such is the case within MERCOSUR, where due to difficulties in reaching consensus, a similar approach could be favored by some states, such as Brazil and Uruguay. In any case, Venezuela is not taking part in the negotiations and after the accession of Bolivia and Ecuador, the two countries will probably follow the same path. Thus, the possibility of separate agreements concluded by the EU with those who are really interested and can advance a consistent offer, cannot not be excluded.

It became very clear that it is not easy work bi-regionally when it is hard to achieve consensus due to the lack of the necessary institutional mechanisms. Addressing asymmetries between the two regions is still a challenge and efforts in this respect should continue.

The preparatory process for the EU-CELAC Summit to be held in Bruxelles in 2015 has already started. The first phase is carried out for the EU by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and for the CELAC side by the Costa Rican rotating presidency, which will hand over to Ecuador in 2015. A first Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) is scheduled to take place in Brussels in June 2014, and on that

occasion the EEAS will suggest a theme for the summit, which will be negotiated with the counterpart. Giving the fact that the summit will take place in a period of changes such as institutional transition for the EU and changing presidency for the CELAC, it is likely that the topic chosen for the summit will be a generous one, focusing on aspects that will apparently not create difficulties in reaching consensus. Even if this will be the case, launching a debate on how to reform the partnership in order to make it more balanced and efficient is necessary and this should lead to both qualitative and quantitative revision. Otherwise, there is a risk for the Summit to become just another EU-CELAC high-level gathering, discussing more or less the same old agenda, but with no particular relevance for the future of the bi-regional relation.

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