

**COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A PROMISSORY OPPORTUNITY FOR A STRONGER EUROPEAN UNION-LATIN AMERICA PARTNERSHIP****PANDEMIA DE COVID-19: OPORTUNIDAD PROMISORIA PARA UNA ASOCIACIÓN MÁS FUERTE ENTRE LA UNIÓN EUROPEA Y AMÉRICA LATINA**

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**Abstract:** Latin America and Europe share important historical, economic, cultural and migratory ties; paradoxically, a bi-regional understanding has not been fully reached and now it is being tested by the advance of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the already weakened global multilateralism. In this sense, there are several internal and external challenges that the pandemic has posed for both regions. On one side, a confronted European Union in its internal divisions, a growing euroscepticism and the goal of leading an integral transformation towards a greener and digital economy for positioning itself as an influential geopolitical actor amid US-China tensions. On the other side, a disintegrated Latin America immersed in the greatest economic, social and health crisis in its history, which has been intensified with the continuous years of low economic growth and social discontent. In this context, this essay's objective is to identify how the pandemic has deepened existing and emerging weaknesses in these regions and then, to propose potential main axes –economic recovery, environment, democratic institutionalism, migration, gender and health- for a postCOVID-19 cooperation agenda.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, bi-regional cooperation agenda, European Union-Latin America partnership, multilateralism

**Resumen:** América Latina y Europa comparten importantes lazos históricos, económicos, culturales y migratorios; paradójicamente, un entendimiento birregional no se ha alcanzado plenamente y ahora está siendo aún más desafiado por el avance de la pandemia de COVID-19 y sus efectos sobre el multilateralismo global ya debilitado. En este sentido, son varios los retos internos y externos que la pandemia ha planteado para ambas regiones. Por un lado, una Unión Europea que enfrenta sus divisiones internas, un euroescepticismo creciente y el objetivo de liderar una transformación integral hacia una economía más verde y digital, para posicionarse como un actor geopolítico influyente en medio de las tensiones entre Estados Unidos y China. Por otro lado, una América Latina desintegrada e inmersa en la mayor crisis económica, social y sanitaria de su historia, que se ha intensificado tras los continuos años de bajo crecimiento económico y descontento social. En este contexto, el objetivo de este ensayo es identificar cómo la pandemia

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ha profundizado las debilidades existentes y emergentes en estas regiones y luego, proponer potenciales ejes –recuperación económica, ambiente, institucionalismo democrático, migración, género y salud- para una agenda de cooperación posCOVID-19.

Palabras clave: pandemia de COVID-19, agenda de cooperación birregional, asociación Unión Europea-América Latina, multilateralismo.

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### *I. Introduction*

The European Union and Latin America have established a friendly, but asymmetric, relationship mainly reflected in a dynamic commercial rapprochement and a growing international cooperation policy that the EU deploys in the region. However, the COVID-19 pandemic marks a before and after in bilateral relations since there are economic, social and political challenges that both blocks face, which at the same time represents an opportunity for the reconfiguration of their relations into a more ambitious, horizontal and multilateral cooperation agenda. Therefore, this essay proposes the establishment of a bi-regional cooperation agenda, based on a selective inter-regionalism approach that makes of this partnership a benchmark for the recovery of trust and credibility in multilateralism and the strengthening of EU strategic autonomy. Regarding methodology, this essay is expository because it provides a clear and focused explanation of the topic, using information from secondary sources such as institutional reports, official government documents, official statements and articles, which together support the proposed topic of this essay.

### *II. European Union on test again*

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted worldwide in many aspects and the EU has not been the exception. Until April 22nd 2021, there are 29 441 874 confirmed cases and 662 622 deaths in the European Union and the European Economic Area (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2021).

On 16 September 2020, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen (2020: 3-15), during the annual State of the Union (SOTEU), expressed to the European Parliament the main guidelines for the region, summarizing them: to protect citizens' health and to deepen efforts on a vaccine against COVID-19; to avoid unemployment by protecting jobs, workers and companies with measures like the temporary program "Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE)"; to strengthen the NextGenerationEU agreement (recovery plan proposed in May 2020); to focus on the European Green Deal and the revision of energy legislation; to develop more technology such as artificial intelligence and data management and infrastructure;

to support international institutions like United Nations, World Health Organization and World Trade Organization; to enhance the processes of migration and the conditions for refugees; to fight against racism; and to build solid partnerships with global partners. In words of President von der Leyen “we will need to build a resilient, green and digital Europe”.

It can be perceived that the EU has well defined priorities for this year. Nonetheless, there are some challenges to deal with internally and externally. On one hand, there are not only social and economic factors to take into account internally, but also the “union” of countries itself. According to Hans-Joachim Bürkner (2020), there is no clear origin for euroscepticism, but anti-EU movements could have emerged during the last decade due to some events such as: the different responses towards the refugee crisis (Germany showed hospitality, but Austria, Hungary closed borders), the EU political interventions in the Ukraine conflict, Brexit and the Eurozone crisis that includes the case of Greece and other South European countries, the division between those supporting (e.g., Spain, Portugal) and those objecting (e.g. Greece) austerity policies of the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Euroscepticism gained support lastly due to a reinforcement of nationalism by arguing that the EU does not contemplate local interests, which also led to a reappearance of right-wing political parties and new radical populism. Amid COVID-19 pandemic, a central controversy between northern and southern European countries was the proposal of issuing “corona-bonds” to reactive economy, whose guarantee and risk are shared among all the EU members, countries like Spain and Italy agree with the initiative, but others such as Germany and the Netherlands do not (Centre International de Formation Européenne, 2020).

Regarding this matter, in an interview with EURACTIV’s media partner EFE in April 2020, President von der Leyen explained that “populism and nationalism provide no answers”. She also emphasized that the common efforts of the EU against COVID-19 has turned into more than 3 trillion euros. “We’ve seen ventilators from Germany and medical supplies from Lithuania help to save lives in Spain. We have seen patients from Italy and France treated in hospitals in Luxembourg, Czechia and elsewhere.” (Martos, 2020).

On the other hand, it is also necessary to have an overview of the EU within the external scenario, principally with two actors: United States and China. It is known that before the pandemic these countries were already immersed in a trade war since Washington claimed that Beijing was having unfair trading practices, so both started to impose tariffs (Hass, R. and Denmark, A., 2020). However, the differences deepened during the pandemic since President Donald Trump referred to the coronavirus as “Chinese Virus” and he also accused China and the WHO of not being transparent about it (BBC News, 2020).

In the SOTEU, President von der Leyen (2020: 15-17) affirmed that the relation with China is “one of the most strategically important and one of the most challenging [...] China is a negotiating partner, an economic competitor and a systemic rival.” Besides, she recognized that the EU and China “promote very different systems of governance and society” and that there are still imbalances

on trade and investment. Concerning the US, she highlighted that even if the EU disagreed with the latest Trump Administration decisions and independently of the 2020 elections result, the EU “will always cherish the transatlantic alliance [...] we are ready to work *together* on reforming the international system we built *together* [...].”

The international arena turned even more uncertain with the pandemic, the US-China rivalry and the 2020 US elections. Hence, the role of the EU will be crucial. The expression “European strategic autonomy” is not new, but it has gained prominence lately. Generally, it has been related to security and defense issues (Fiott, 2018). According to Ulrike Franke and Tara Varma (2019), “European strategic autonomy is [...] one of many concepts that seek to a more capable, independent EU at a time of growing geopolitical competition”.

In April 2020, President of the European Council, Charles Michel, mentioned “it is of utmost importance to increase the strategic autonomy of the Union and produce essential goods in Europe” probably referring to the shortage of medical supplies during the worst of the pandemic, which affected many European countries such as Spain (European Council, 2020). Additionally, in September 2020, in his speech at the Brussels Economic Forum he talked about Europe’s Recovery Plan, the effective response to protect citizens and livelihoods; and there, he defined strategic autonomy as a “vital objective” and “goal number one for our generation” (European Council, 2020). President Michel explained that strategic autonomy does not mean protectionism, but the contrary, and that European autonomy has already been part of many phases: the formation of the single market, the Schengen area, the Treaty of Lisbon (European Council, 2020).

During the Cold War, Europe built its economic bloc and it was aligned with US containment. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Europe aimed to global economic interdependence and to shift post-communist economies from political adversaries to partners by integrating their economies. Now, “strategic autonomy is emerging as a guiding principle for Europe’s international leadership” (Hellendoorn, 2020). Consequently, strategic autonomy embraces military, political, technological and economic characteristics and one could consider that EU vision is not to be among two players in the international order, but to become one great player. Thus, the bloc is working on having a strong position politically and economically in the world.

### *III. Latin America facing the greatest crisis in its history*

The COVID-19 pandemic positions Latin America as one of the most affected regions with 28 146 902 registered cases and 896 072 deaths until April 26, 2021. Before the health crisis, the region was already going through some economic problems. Germán Ríos (2020: 2) states that, according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the region’s economic growth was of 0.1% in 2019%. This situation can be explained by a combination of structural factors: the decrease of exports intensified by the US-China trade war, the reduction in raw materials prices and the tightening of global financial conditions (Hernández, 2020: 12). Precisely, those conditions have marked the period 2014-2019 as the one with the lowest economic growth in the

region since the decade of 1950 (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020).

ECLAC estimates that the pandemic will be the most severe crisis in Latin America's history and its effects threaten to destroy the social and economic advances achieved in decades (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020). In fact, the IMF estimates that Latin America's income levels before the pandemic will recover in 2023 and per capita income levels in 2025 (International Monetary Fund, 2021). In the report "Regional Economic Outlook for Western Hemisphere" of October 2020, the IMF predicts that the Latin American economy would experience a contraction of -8.1%, which is much greater than the one registered during the 2008 global financial crisis. Likewise, it estimates that the most affected countries will be Venezuela, with a decrease of -25%; Peru -13.9%; Mexico -9%; Argentina -11.8%; Brazil -5.8%; Colombia -8.2%; Chile -6% and Ecuador -11%. Among the countries with the best expected economic performance are Paraguay (-4%) and Uruguay (-4.5%) (International Monetary Fund, 2020).

Despite the diverse crises in Latin America's history, the difference today is that the effects of the pandemic appear on several fronts and at the same time. The decline in global demand due to the imposition of worldwide lockdowns led to a disruption of global supply chains and a significant drop in Latin American exports, whose value has decreased by 15% in 2020. Besides, the region has experienced a significant capital flight (especially to the US) that the IMF estimates at 30 billion dollars only during the first trimester of 2020. This has resulted in the devaluation of Latin American currencies and the governments' inability in financing the response to the crisis in the short term. Tourism is also strongly affected with severe implications for Central America and the Caribbean. Moreover, the economic crisis in Europe and US has caused the decline in migrant remittances on which many Latin American economies depend (Ríos, 2020: 3-5).

Thus, social prospects are hopeless in a region where nearly 50% of the population works in the informal sector and 38% of workers have no access to any form of social protection (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020). In fact, ECLAC projects that in 2020 29 million people will fall into poverty and 16 million into extreme poverty; passing from 186 million poor people in 2019 to 215 million in 2020 and from 67 million people to 83 million in extreme poverty (Hernández, 2020: 15). In terms of employment, the International Labor Organization (2020) estimates that 34 million people have lost their jobs in Latin America due to the pandemic. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development also emphasizes that the pandemic affects in a disproportionately way to women because in most Latin American countries they are the most likely group to have an informal job (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020).

### *1. The absence of a coordinated regional response*

Globalization has implied the creation of consensus spaces or global agendas to face various common issues. Latin America has not been able to consolidate itself as a region with a single capable voice of playing as a significant

geopolitical actor on the international stage. Although the region has developed a variety of integration attempts, it has resulted in an oversupply of integration processes that, far from articulating a regional vision, has ended up dividing it even more (Rojas, 2008).

Some causes of Latin American regional disengagement are: the weakness of democracy and governance; the nonexistence of effective regional mechanisms for conflict resolution and of non-ideologized regional leaderships; the poverty that makes Latin America the world's most unequal region; a deficient cohesion despite the common history and traditions; the heterogeneity of development models; and, the lack of a common commercial policy (Forero, 2010). In this way, the pandemic took Latin America devoid of regional spaces for cooperation. This is evident by the type of governmental responses, characterized by their absence of coordination and the plurality of reactions that range from strict quarantines to the denial of the seriousness of the disease (Ríos Sierra, 2020).

From the Andean Community (CAN) and the Pacific Alliance, there have been no coordination initiatives that go beyond the commercial sphere. In Mercosur, despite the call of Argentinian President to establish a regional convergence space, the strong ideological differences with his Brazilian counterpart lead to a scenario of unilateralism. ALBA and UNASUR are going through terminal institutional crises. The economic situation in Venezuela is resulting in the end of the first one. Regarding UNASUR, 8 of its 12 members have temporarily or permanently suspended their membership after accusing it of being "ideologized". The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), which operates despite Brazil's unilateral suspension, is seen more as a forum that has issued very general and timid pronouncements on the pandemic (Ríos Sierra, 2020).

It could be said that the Central American Integration System (SICA) has conducted the most solid supra-state response after the declaration "Central America United against the Coronavirus"; compromising a USD 1.9 billion fund to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. Moreover, the work of the Pan American Health Organization stands out for its weekly reports, indicators and regional diagnostic and prognostic instruments that are useful for the national health strategies of member States. Hence, the pandemic has stressed the weak response capacity of Latin America in face of global threats (Ríos Sierra, 2020). The most immediate challenge lies in making the current crisis the definitive reason for configuring a solid regional integration far from antagonistic ideological components.

## *2. Democratic setbacks in times of pandemic*

Before the pandemic, Latin America had witnessed a growing climate of social discontent in countries such as Venezuela, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador, Chile and Bolivia. The common governmental response was the use of the Armed Forces as element of social control, resulting in the erosion of Latin American democracies. Then, the entry into force of exceptional measures to control the transmission of COVID-19 has accentuated the

involvement of the Armed Forces in the public life of Latin American societies (Lührmann, Edgell and Maerz, 2020).

Peru stands out with its Police Protection Law (No. 31102) signed in March 2020 that sought to repeal the principle of proportionality and establish a presumption in favor of the Armed Forces and the Police when they use lethal force. There are also multiple videos during the first months of the pandemic in Ecuador, Dominican Republic and Mexico showing the arrest and use of force against people who did not wear a mask or violated the curfew. In Honduras, the NGO ACI registered the disproportionate repression against 106 peaceful demonstrations demanding food, water and medicine from the government (Verdes-Montenegro, 2020). A similar situation occurred in Ecuador after the police repression against doctors demanding better working conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Colombia experienced massive protests after the murder of Javier Ordóñez by members of the National Police, for violating the curfew in Bogotá (BBC News, 2020).

In El Salvador and Brazil, there is an increasing rhetoric from President Nayib Bukele and President Jair Bolsonaro respectively in discrediting the decisions and powers of the Judicial and Legislative branches, as well as a constant appeal to the Armed Forces (Verdes-Montenegro, 2020). Furthermore, the pandemic has also coincided with the elections in Bolivia. The political polarization, that has undermined the trust in electoral institutions after the October 2019 crisis, worsened with the pandemic because it forced the postponement of the elections twice. After many violent protests, October 18, 2020 was defined as the final and definitive date (International Crisis Group, 2020). In the case of Peru, the confrontation between the Executive and Legislative powers provoked an important political crisis, which led to the change of 3 presidents in one week, in November 2020 (Cortés, 2020: 6).

Although it cannot be said that Armed Forces in Latin America are conspiring to break the democratic systems by taking advantage of the pandemic, it is very likely that their influence will continue to grow in a region with fragile institutions and a coming unprecedented social crisis.

#### *IV. A renewed cooperation agenda for a reinvigorated EU-LAC partnership*

The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the need to strengthen joint responses to global impact phenomena. Considering the background presented, the following part of this essay proposes the development of concrete agendas between Latin America and the EU, recognizing the challenges of both blocs, the potential of this bi-regional relation, and the fact that the EU is the main cooperator for Latin America (it has mobilised €3.6 billion in grants for bilateral and regional programmes between 2014-2020) (EU-LAC Foundation, 2020).

##### *1. Cooperation for an economic recovery*

The economic responses of the EU and Latin America to combat the effects of the pandemic reveal their asymmetries. While Europe makes use of its monetary capacity through the issue of “corona bonds” despite the division this

proposal caused initially (the value amounts to €750 billion), Latin America lacks a regional economic recovery strategy. In this way, new cooperation dynamics can be opened with Latin America as a priority region for European foreign action. Although the majority of Latin American countries are considered middle or high income nations, the pandemic has represented a substantial setback in the region's social progress. Many experts think that the EU could increase the aid budget to Latin America, which is firstly fixed on €918 million out of a total of €15.6 billion (Banchón, 2020).

Similarly, the Team Europe initiative called “COVID-19 Round tables” is a multisectoral program and has a direct impact on 10 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda; the pilot exercise will be carried out in Argentina, Ecuador and Costa Rica (FIIAP Cooperación Española, 2020). This initiative has a budget of USD50 million in non-reimbursable funds and USD30 million in loans. The first round table was held in Ecuador in October, 2020. The objective was to provide a European-Ecuadorian response by identifying the most immediate needs during the crisis and post-recovery phase in Ecuador. The government presented health, food security and the preserving of dollarization as its priorities (Delegation of the EU to Ecuador, 2020). It is expected that this initiative would be replicated in more Latin American countries, in coordination with other EU-funded projects such as EUROSOCIAL+, EUROCLIMA+, etc., and the bilateral cooperation agencies of the EU member states in each country (FIIAP Cooperación Española, 2020).

Also, some experts remark that the best help that Europe can give to Latin America is the external debt relief. On one side, through international financing, Latin American governments can obtain funds to fight the pandemic in the short term; and in the medium and long term they can establish counter-cyclical economic measures to protect jobs, to strengthen social policies and to lead Latin American economies to more sustainable and egalitarian development models (Fundación Carolina, 2020: 8). Proposals like the establishment of an emergency basic income, which is applied in European countries such as Spain, are gaining support to be replicated in Latin America to prevent the aggressive increase of poverty. On the other side, Latin America and Europe can find mechanisms to renegotiate Latin American debt and to facilitate the access to emergency credits within international organizations such as the IMF or the World Bank (Cecchini, 2020: 9). Forums such as the G20, integrated by important Latin American and European countries, could be the space to promote a global governance agenda focused on strengthening multilateral credit institutions for the future economic and health recovery.

Spain has led the High Level Conference called "United in providing a response for Latin America and the Caribbean to COVID-19" in which Latin America was recognized as a key area for Europe and that its economic failure "poses a tremendous threat at a global level". With the support of nine Latin American presidents and the presence of senior representatives from the IMF, World Bank, ECLAC, Inter-American Development Bank and others, Spain wants to promote a new approach for international financing (Government of Spain, 2021).



## *2. Environment: a must for the EU, a challenge for Latin America*

The commitment of the EU on climate change is undeniable even before the pandemic. Guided by the “Leave No One Behind” principle and the 2030 Agenda, the EU announced the European Green Deal in December 2019, which mission is to make of Europe climate-neutral by 2050. That involves decarbonising the energy sector, achieving healthier and cheaper ways of transport, innovating clean technologies and becoming global leaders in the green economy (European Commission, 2019). President Ursula von der Leyen, during the SOTEU 2020, referred to the proposal of the European Commission to increase the 2030 target for emission reduction from 40 to 55%. She also informed that 37% of NextGenerationEU will be invested in the European Green Deal purposes and remarked that it is not only about cutting emissions, but modernizing industry and society. She also stated that the commitment of the EU goes beyond its borders since there is the willing to form coalitions and to use EU power to fight against deforestation, etc. In the context of the pandemic, the European Council concluded on October 2, 2020 that the cornerstone of the EU economic recovery is “the green transition and the digital transformation”, reinforcing an open economy, the Single Market and strategic autonomy (European Council, 2020: 2-4).

Concerning international cooperation with Latin America in climate change issues, the EUROCLIMA program originated in the agreements of the V Summit EU-LAC in 2008. It had two phases (2010-2013 and 2014-2017), but it was broadened with the introduction of EUROCLIMA+ (2020-2022) because the environmental challenges in Latin America still continue. EUROCLIMA+ promotes combined efforts with 18 Latin American countries to improve “the knowledge of decision makers and the scientific community [...] about the problems and consequences of climate change”. EUROCLIMA+ is financed by the EU and aligned to the Paris Agreement. This program includes topics such as energy efficiency, water and risk management, and urban mobility (Euroclima, N.D.). This is a great example on how international cooperation on climate change is indispensable and the need of adjusting initiatives to the pandemic.

On this subject, there also exists the Latin America Investment Facility (LAIF), funded by the EU for helping “Latin American countries finance projects in key sectors [...] such as energy, environment, water, transport, social services, and support to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)”. LAIF promotes partnerships of regional financial institutions, governments and the private sector and its financing modalities can be applied to reimbursable or non-reimbursable cooperation (LAIF Latin American Investment Facility, N.D.).

However, not all the outlook is positive. The Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, also known as the Escazú Agreement, was approved in Costa Rica on March 2018. The preliminary meetings began at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in 2012 with the adoption of the Declaration on the application of Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean. The negotiation phase of the Agreement started in 2014 through the Santiago Decision (ECLAC Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, N.D.). The

elaboration was led by Costa Rica and Chile and the ECLAC was the Technical Secretariat. It is related to the Agenda 2030 and the Consultative Opinion 23-17 of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights on environment and human rights (Peña Chacón, N.D).

The Agreement exemplifies a landmark on multilateralism, South-South Cooperation and environmental democracy. It is the first legally binding treaty on environmental human rights in Latin America and the first in the world that contains a provision on environmental human rights defenders. During the process, the participation of civil society was relevant. Thirty-three countries had the opportunity to sign it since September 2018. To take effect, it needed the ratification of 11 States until September 27, 2020 (Victoria, 2019). Chile was one of the most participative delegations during the process, but before the deadline for the ratification it announced its objection to sign and ratify it. The Chilean government argued that many aspects of it are already part of the national environmental legislation and that it could increase the disputes with Bolivia on the access to the Pacific Ocean (Fundación Terram, 2020). Until September 2020, 9 countries ratified it. Even if other countries have not signed or ratified the agreement, the Chilean decision was criticized since it was not coherent with its previous actions.

On the other hand, the negotiations of Mercosur-EU trade agreement, after 20 years, concluded in June 2019, which represented the integration of approximately the 25% of the global GDP (Mercosur, 2019). Nevertheless, on October 6 2020 it was not ratified by the EU since the rejection of many European leaders, mainly based on their worries regarding the environmental crisis in Brazilian Amazon ignored by the government and Jair Bolsonaro's denial of climate change (Sanahuja, 2020). Besides, France, Belgium and Ireland added not only environmental objections, but also commercial ones.

According to Nicolás Albertoni and Andrés Malamud, this Agreement showed the geopolitical vision of the EU, presenting itself as an important economic partner for Latin America; but, this also “implies a political defeat for the EU” since it demonstrates a “low level of internal consensus”. Furthermore, the possibilities of influencing Brazil to implement environmental policies are less without the agreement (Albertoni and Malamud, 2020). In the opinion of José Antonio Sanahuja, Mercosur-EU alliance is more than a free trade agreement; it could be an opportunity for legitimating integration amid US-China tensions and generating a common space for policy dialogue, which addresses to the EU strategic autonomy.

#### *V. Reinforcing democratic institutionalism*

The EU traditional support to the democratic processes of Latin America should continue, especially considering the pandemic and socio-political crises of recent years. 2021 will be a key year for the region since there will be presidential or parliamentary elections in countries such as Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and two of the most worrying cases: Honduras and Nicaragua, whose authoritarian governments seek to perpetuate in power (Cota, 2020).

The elections in Ecuador and Bolivia, countries that experienced major social crises in 2019, represent an ideal space for the EU to continue accompanying the consolidation of Latin American democratic systems. Although the advance of the pandemic has forced the suspension or cancellation of some of its Electoral Observation Missions in the world, the EU confirmed the deployment of electoral missions in both countries (Delegation of the EU to Ecuador, 2020). In the case of Bolivia, the EU allocated more than €2million to the Supreme Electoral Court and €600000 to civil society organizations to guarantee the celebration of free and democratic elections (Delegation of the EU to Uruguay, 2020). On the other hand, the EU deployed an electoral mission in Ecuador for the presidential and legislative elections that were held in February 2021 (Delegation of the EU to Ecuador, 2020). Furthermore, the European bloc also expressed its intention of accompanying the democratic strengthening of Peru in its presidential elections in April 2021 (Borrell, 2020).

In the same priority line, Venezuela still represents the greatest challenge for democratic restoration in the region. The efforts to channel pacifically the political conflict between the government and the opposition acquire more importance because the regime of Nicolás Maduro, accused of perpetrating crimes against humanity, held legislative elections in December 2020 that were not recognized by the EU. Besides, bi-regional initiatives such as the International Contact Group did not send electoral missions because it argued that those elections would not have any real certainty of transparency (EU External Action, 2020).

Although Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has undertaken since October 2020 a diplomatic initiative aimed at facilitating a peaceful and democratic solution for Venezuela and the relief of international sanctions that affect Venezuelan society, the EU ambassador to Venezuela was expelled in February 2021 because the EU imposed sanctions to 19 high level officials of the government (Melean, 2021).

Latin America must accompany any peaceful effort led by the EU to avoid the possibility of a military conflict in the region and that implies deploying bi-regional diplomacy to persuade the Venezuelan regime to hold elections again with a transparent and accountable process, to release the rest of political prisoners (100 have already been released) and the formation of an independent electoral power (EU External Action, 2020).

### *1. Migration: commitment and solidarity*

The EU and the CELAC had their first bi-regional Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1999. Then, it was established a strategic partnership and it was also identified that “migration and mobility is a key element of this bi-regional partnership”. In 2009, it was launched the Structured and Comprehensive bi-regional Dialogue on Migration as a follow up to the 5th EU-LAC Summit of 2008 (IOM International Organization for Migration, 2020).

The EU and Latin America have both faced the migration phenomenon in recent years. In the case of Latin America, there has been a massive migration wave

from Venezuela. In the last five years, approximately five million people have left Venezuela and the 80% of them are displaced in countries of the region. “It is one of largest and most serious external displacement crises in the world.” During 2014-2020, a budget of €716 million has been given by the EU to global programmes on migration and forced displacement (European Commission, 2020).

The situation has been aggravated by the pandemic. Consequently, “The International Donors' Conference in solidarity with Venezuelan refugees and migrants and countries of the region” was held on May 26 2020, organized by the EU and the Spanish Government with the participation of 50 stakeholders and the UNHCR and IOM. The promise of international donors was a total of €2.544 billion. “The European Commission pledged €144.2 million for immediate humanitarian assistance, medium- and longer-term development assistance and conflict prevention interventions” (European Commission, 2020).

The EU Commission financed the Global Public Goods and Challenges (GPGC) migration programs in 2020 with €47.5 million. The GPGC program promotes a better management of migratory flows and the protection of migrants' human rights. One of its main objectives in 2020 is to help hosting communities, Colombia, Peru and Ecuador, in order to achieve local integration for Venezuelan refugees with a budget of €27.5 million. In the context of the pandemic, the core aspects to contemplate are: socio-economic inclusion, access to health and education services, and to reinforce legal migratory conditions of Venezuelans so they can be inserted in local labor markets. This is part of the “Lives in Dignity” EU Global Facility, which reaffirms “the EU’s commitment to international responsibility sharing and engagements at the first Global Refugee Forum in 2019.” Besides, it encourages participation of multilateral institutions, public and private sector, and civil society (European Commission, 2020). This demonstrates that refugee crisis and migration are and will be a priority of EU-LAC cooperation.

Lastly, on October 19, 2020, Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Latin America initiative “Proceso de Quito” (12 countries), representatives of the “Grupo de Países Amigos” (Group of Friends) integrated by the EU, US, Canada, among others, and international organizations had a meeting to call on solidarity, technical assistance and financial cooperation for Venezuelan migrants and refugees in the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ecuador, 2020). However, in 2021, this situation has worsened. On January 26, Peruvian armed forces were deployed on the border with Ecuador to control irregular crossing points. The Ecuadorian government implemented the same measure. Therefore, many Venezuelans (approximately 400 people daily) have remained stranded at the border, in Huaquillas (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2021). In this context, the EU could operate as a coordinator of humanitarian actions since the bloc is able to gain greater support of the US and Canada in this matter.

## *2. Gender on the top: dealing with the double pandemic of COVID-19 and violence towards women.*

Placing in lockdown has been one of the most common measures implemented globally due to the pandemic. This situation worsens another one:

violence against women and girls. It is known that before the pandemic domestic violence was already a huge problem; however, there has been an increase in the number of calls looking for help due to domestic violence (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020). Until April 2020, “243 million women and girls aged 15-49 have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence by an intimate partner (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020). In Argentina since the establishment of the lockdown on March 20, the rise of emergency calls to report domestic violence situations has been of 25% (Plan International, 2020).

In this point, it must be mentioned the Spotlight Initiative, which is a global campaign endorsed by the EU and the UN to eliminate all forms of violence towards women (United Nations, 2020). The regional program of Latin America is being carried out in Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico. The EU gave an initial investment of €50 million in 2018 aimed to raise awareness and to end femicide (Spotlight Initiative, 2020), which causes daily the death of 12 women in Latin America (European Commission, 2018). It is clear that the efforts to eliminate violence, to generate financial independence for women and more access to education for girls need to continue. Hence, gender should be on the top of the bi-regional cooperation agenda during and after the pandemic. The Spotlight Initiative can be updated to the current context and reinforced with the EU’s leadership since it has been its main donor. This can represent the possibility of increasing budget, projects and more countries to participate.

### *3. Health and multilateralism*

The urgent need to vaccinate population against the COVID-19 should join Latin America and the EU to consider several fronts for cooperation in health terms. In general, both regions can foster greater support to the WHO’s work by giving it more financial, technical and administrative autonomy (Fundación Carolina, 2020: 7). Specifically, bi-regional cooperation must be reflected in political wills that consider the vaccines as a public good with global access.

Despite the weak capacity response of integration forums such as CELAC, the pro-tempore presidency of Mexico could represent an opportunity to reinforce bi-regional understanding due to the ambitious agreement reached between Mexico and Argentina with Carlos Slim Foundation to produce in both countries and distribute in the continent the COVID-19 vaccine, developed by AstraZeneca and the University of Oxford (DW, 2020). This proposal was presented in CELAC and gained great interest and hope in various Latin American governments. Certainly, the EU can consider the CELAC opening as a space for dialogue to agree on coordinated policies to facilitate the future access to vaccines and medical equipment necessary to eradicate the pandemic. Besides, it should be considered that the EU is the most prominent donor of the COVAX Facility, whose objective is to guarantee access to the COVID-19 vaccine in low and middle-income countries, many of them in Latin America and the Caribbean. In fact, the EU has allocated more than €850 million to this initiative, which will allow the production of one billion doses of vaccines (European Commission, 2021).

## *VI. Conclusions*

The scope of the pandemic has shown that even the most developed countries have structural weaknesses, reflecting that the North-South vision is outdated. The impact has been harsh in almost all countries, but with special incidence in those that lack strong social policies that can withstand the economic, social and health impact of the pandemic. In this sense, to collectively respond to a global problem, international cooperation must overcome the “graduate and non-graduate countries” approach towards a more horizontal one.

In addition, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of betting even more on multilateralism, especially if one reminds that Latin America and the Caribbean is, for the EU, the region with the closest ties. Summits held in Chile in 2013 and Dominican Republic in 2016, in which both blocs agreed on common points of cooperation, need to adapt the bilateral understanding and cooperation to the current situation. Throughout this essay it has been emphasized that despite the internal challenges of each region, the rapprochement between Latin America and Europe is imperative and must be framed in specific agendas. Topics such as migration, the International Contact Group for Venezuela, gender, and international electoral observation are examples of this.

Likewise, it is more demonstrated than ever that a pandemic knows no borders and therefore regaining trust in multilateral organizations such as the UN, the WHO and the G20 is essential. But for this, it is required to overcome the great Latin American problem of ideological division and disintegration that has been accentuated in recent years, impacting on the poor regional response to the pandemic. Although the division persists and Brazil does not participate in CELAC, the forum is still the largest platform for regional agreement regardless of governments’ ideology. It was precisely through CELAC that Latin American governments knew about the alliance between Mexico and Argentina to produce the AztraZeneca and Oxford vaccine. This constitutes an opportunity to relaunch regional understanding for an issue that has affected everyone.

A new integration approach between the EU and Latin America should focus on advocating for a reformed multilateralism addressed mainly on three fronts: health, economic and environment. In health terms, WHO’s work, autonomy and funding should be reinforced avoiding to fall into geopolitical disputes. In environmental terms, the European Green Deal is becoming the world benchmark for the future green and digital economy. Precisely, the Climate Diplomacy, that seeks to consolidate the EU as global leader in green economy issues, must work to attract regions such as Latin America to comply with the Paris Agreement and to work together on important environmental challenges such as the preservation of the Amazon rainforest, large-scale mining and the increasing urbanization of cities. In economic terms, Latin America needs more than ever the European support for the restructuring of the Bretton Woods financial institutions regarding debt renegotiation and granting emergency loans for economic recovery. There are even those who propose debating some type of mechanism for allowing Latin American governments to have access to European aid funds.

Finally, a stronger Euro-Latin American alliance acquires more relevance because: on the one hand, Europe strengthens its strategic autonomy vis-à-vis China and the US; on the other hand, a more integrated Latin America with itself and with Europe reduces the region's vulnerability and dependence on Beijing and Washington. Subsequently, the bi-regional association should be understood as a clear and powerful message that both blocs will avoid being trapped in the Sino-American dichotomy in which the world is being conducted.

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