

# A PAPER ON THE COURSE “EUROPEAN UNION-LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN RELATIONS: A RENEWED AGENDA AND A PROGRAMME FOR RECOVERY UNDER THE SDGs”

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Perhaps you have received information about a course in your email today that may be useful as far as your field of knowledge or interests are concerned via a notice from a friend or any other means. Once the information is received, it is worth spending a few minutes checking the topics that will be addressed and doing a bit of research on the speakers of the course. Once this is done, one's interest or perspective may change and one may thus reject the proposal or confirm one's assistance. The latter happened to be my case regarding the course “European Union-Latin America and the Caribbean Relations: A Renewed Agenda and a Programme for Recovery under the SDGs”. A course that was magnificently organised in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe by the European and Ibero-American Academy of the Yuste Foundation and the EU-LAC Foundation.

Just by taking a look at the organisers, one already presupposes success and good work, but the group of speakers confirmed and increased my interest in the course. They were first-rate professionals coming from both sides of the Atlantic who know the current state of relations first-hand, the problems that exist and the expectations that are sought to be completed in the future.

Anyone in our country who is interested in the international arena is also interested in the relations of Spain with our brothers and sisters from Latin America and the Caribbean. Historical and cultural relations in which Spain, which is currently integrated into the European Union, must play a primary role in exporting the values and principles that govern our Union such as human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including minorities. And all this within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals achieved at global

level, which means that by 2030 we will have achieved the eradication of poverty, we will have protected the planet and ensured prosperity in all corners of our world. A utopia that has suffered a major setback with the impact of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 for Latin America and the Caribbean as well as for the European Union and other actors in the international sphere. The question of how to channel all these issues encouraged me to enrol in the course, learn from it and enjoy it.

Once the course has concluded, the organisers and the cast of speakers should first of all be commended for such masterful lessons in which they transmitted all their experience and visions about current relations and their vicissitudes. The shadows that may appear on the horizon must be dispersed with the light of work for a mutual commitment of cooperation and desire to move forward together. Now more than ever, solutions that require political will and ambition in achieving a strong relationship governed by respect for the above-mentioned values and principles in pursuit of sustainable development on both sides of the Atlantic must be sought.

A first call to that end was the request of the now former Ibero-American Secretary General, Rebeca Grynspan, who, after invoking the debt crisis of the 80's, urged all those present to work to avoid "a new lost decade". The main effects that the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 has left are: a dramatic and irreparable death toll worldwide and a major setback in all economies. In this regard, the economic erosion of Latin America and the Caribbean has been particularly noteworthy. It has been dragging important structural problems along, such as the inadequacy of financing, as recalled by Marcela Meléndez, UNDP chief economist for Latin America and the Caribbean. The arrival of vaccines marked a turning point in overcoming the pandemic. However, they did not reach Latin America and the Caribbean as they reached the European Union<sup>1</sup>. This was not because the European Union remained by the sidelines, as it has been the main contributor to the Global Access Fund for Covid-

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<sup>1</sup> An unequal distribution that at the time of the course covered the spectrum from 58.8% of Chile's population which was fully immunized to 0.7% immunised in Honduras and Venezuela. This data was provided by Óscar Darío Pérez Pineda, co-chair of the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly.

19 Vaccines (COVAX) which many countries in the region have benefited from in order to have equitable access to vaccines. The problem has been the limited negotiating capacity of the countries of the region and their diminished economic capacity in favour of the world’s great powers and more robust economies.

It should be noted that the pandemic spread in a society that was disenchanted with the political class and involved in major social protests that were chained since the economic and financial crisis of 2008. This has led to the emergence of political movements of ideological radicalism in Europe. This has happened in Latin America and the Caribbean in the same manner, where there were important protests throughout the months of September, October and November 2019 that could well be described as the “Latin American Spring”<sup>2</sup>, as Professor Érika Ruiz masterfully explained. These mobilisations ended in timid advances at legislative, judicial and political levels, except in the case of Chile, which is immersed in a constituent process that will well serve to mark the future of its neighbouring countries and which democratic societies follow with interest.

Embedded in the situation of political disaffection, there was the crisis of multilateralism in international relations. The protectionism that has characterised the international arena in recent years (except in the European Union and there are yet occasional turbulences) has had a very negative impact on the progress of joint achievements. Fear and mistrust have been fed and society has been blinded, a society which is doomed to failure if it does not work together. History has written its most wonderful passages in achievements made among those who are different and who are determined to joining forces. It is therefore necessary, as was made clear by each and every one of the speakers, to activate and enhance all the flows of multilateral cooperation. And in particular, of course, especially between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean. A relationship that, as acknowledged by the Head of Americas Regional Division of the European External Action Service (EEAS), Claudia

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<sup>2</sup> In parallel to the Arab Spring; a series of popular revolts in countries in North Africa and West Asia that advocated democracy and the achievement of social rights.

Gintersdorfer, “remains below its potential”. And this is so despite the fact that all Member States are represented in the 33 countries of the region, there are trade and political partnership agreements with 27 of the 33 countries, the European Union is the region’s main partner in development and humanitarian aid and the European Investment Bank carries out an important mission in the countries of that area. In short, it may assuredly be said that caring for and improving multilateralism among the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean and the European Union is an urgent and necessary matter.

To that end, it would be very positive for the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean to join under the same umbrella. That they should be provided with a single structure in which common synergies could be used to address the challenges jointly. A process of integration such as the one that brings together the Member States in the European Union. It is not something that must be done quickly, because any process of change or adaptation requires a lapse of time (let’s recall Monnet-Schumann’s *méthode des petits pas*). However, this process is necessary to boost the region’s growth and presence in the international arena. Ramón Jauregui, president of Euroamérica Foundation and member of the Academy of Yuste, was very clear in his speech stating that “integration is a *sine qua non* condition for geopolitical presence and as a commercial and economic attraction”. Integration in Latin America and the Caribbean is not easy in the light of the testimonies provided by the speakers, since it is a question of bringing together different sensitivities and different speeds as regards the achievement of democracy and respect for human rights in the countries.

However, in its own experience, the European Union can and must act as a guide. We have not created our Union in one day, it is still under construction. With the necessary political will and learning from our mistakes, we strengthen our common path. In this regard, I think it is very important to point out the reflections made by

Professor Antonio Romero, who indicated the policy areas in which the European Union must cooperate more vigorously in Latin America and the Caribbean: productive transformation, social inclusion, sustainability and international insertion. Could these be the germ of an integrating path between the countries of that region to create a common structure? This leads to deep reflection that is impossible to be analysed in these lines.

Another component is added to this historic moment of recovery from the cruellest events of a pandemic, in which society lives in disenchantment with its political representatives and where multilateralism has been relegated to the background. It is that all the States of the world are immersed in what was described in the course as a “digital and ecological disruption”. The ever-changing world is embarking on a profound transformation fuelled by new technologies and the social awareness that human development cannot and should not undermine the planet’s environmental integrity. A disruption that presents risks and opportunities, and in which the latter must be maximised to reduce the former. And in it, again, cooperation at all levels is essential.

We should, therefore, conclude by bringing up the last message left by the director of Yuste Foundation, Juan Carlos Moreno Piñero, who pointed out that: “Latin America and the Caribbean need Europe, as Europe needs Latin America and the Caribbean. We are two regions that go hand in hand; no one is so rich that needs to receive nought, nor is no one so poor that has nought to give”.

In short, the course was a wonderful and realistic journey through the current state of relations on both sides of the Atlantic between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean. The impact of COVID-19 has been truly terrible in all societies at a time when the disconnection between the rulers and their constituents and the rethinking of our models of government were being questioned.

Be that as it may, the pandemic has made one thing clear: cooperation and coordination are needed to meet any challenge. As the speakers stated and I have repeated on several occasions along these lines, everything that unites us must be enhanced to the maximum, strengthening ties. Let the ocean be the only thing that separates us. Yes, there are many challenges that must be faced, perhaps one with special relevance is the realisation of an integration process in the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, but one must be ambitious and go for it. It should not be viewed with reluctance as a new-generation colonialism by Europe or other actors. It should be seen as a path of opportunity in which the citizens of those countries decide their future. Remember, the motto of our Union is “United in Diversity”, the European Union can and must always guide us from respect and equal treatment, where we are conductors who compose our score. The European Union must accompany us along the way and be there to cooperate and collaborate in all that is necessary. Together, we can achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and all the challenges ahead. Together we are stronger.

Do you want to enjoy the full sessions? You still can! All sessions of the course are uploaded to the European and Ibero-American Academy of Yuste Foundation’s YouTube channel.



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Translated by **Verónica Guillén Melo**