



# The EU-Latin America Summit: Shared Democratic Challenges

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The July 2023 meeting between European and Latin American leaders – formally an EU-CELAC summit – promises a wide-ranging agenda. In preparation for the summit, in early June 2023 the EU issued a new communication proposing a renewed political and economic partnership with Latin America around a long list of policy issues. The new communication identifies democracy and human rights cooperation as one priority for cooperation between the EU and Latin America but without spelling out in detail what form this should take in the future.[1]

While the renewed EU-Latin America partnership embraces many areas of cooperation, this article focuses on just one of these priorities, namely cooperation on democracy and human rights. It results from a joint project led by the Club de Madrid and Spanish ministry of foreign affairs aimed at generating ideas for this ‘shared values’ dossier at and beyond the summit. Giving substance to the democracy agenda looks extremely difficult given recent developments in both Europe and Latin America and in light of the geopolitical fallout from the invasion of Ukraine. Taking on board these challenges, the article forwards ten concrete ideas for upgrading EU-Latin America support for democracy and human rights.

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In the run up to such summits and dialogue forums, it is ritually asserted that citizens and most governments in the EU and Latin America (LA) share a conviction in democratic values. However, increasingly, this agenda of 'shared values' is also about shared challenges. Most reports and recommendations talk of EU-LA shared values as if these were self-evident; they tend not to dwell on the way these values are increasingly challenged from within both regions.

It will be extremely difficult to ensure democracy and human rights a tangible place on the EU-LA summit agenda. Democracy is under assault, in different ways in different places across the world. Not all trends in democracy are negative, but many are. Annual democracy indices report that democracy scores have been worsening in both regions. In the Economist Intelligence Unit index for 2021, Latin American democracy scores worsened more than those of any other region and registered their biggest fall since 2006, with hybrid regimes now outnumbering democracies. While EU democracy remains in better health and more robust, the same index defines only seven EU states as 'full democracies'. And the [Varieties of Democracies](#) 2021 report suggests half a dozen EU states are 'autocratizing'. A record 33 countries autocratized in 2021 and this group included many in Europe and Latin America. The top ten autocratizers include states in the two regions: Brazil, Poland, Hungary, El Salvador.

Authoritarian governance persists or has put down new roots in both regions. In many democracies in both Europe and Latin America, the quality of political pluralism and accountability is worsening. Many citizens in both these regions have been drawn to illiberal leaders and political parties. Levels of citizen frustration and dissatisfaction with democracy are rising in both regions, even in countries where democratic process appears strong and resilient. The outcome of last year's elections in Brazil offers a positive fillip for the defence of democratic norms, but the challenges still run deep.

This situation makes pro-democracy support more necessary and, in many ways, more difficult to design. These trends mean a focus on defending democracy will be especially important for and within both regions. They also deepen the difficulties of pursuing such democracy efforts.

Contrary to some rhetoric, the discourse on 'shared democratic values' is not something that is unique to EU-LA relations, as the EU also stresses 'shared values' in its summits with Asian and African countries – and indeed polls suggest support for democratic values has held up rather better in these other regions – while also struggling to form concrete democracy policies there.

These democracy problems go well beyond the two or three states in each region that are most widely cited as examples of clearly authoritarian drift. Limited or electoral democracy is now a common regime type in both regions. The most heavily declining democracy indicators over the decade have been restrictions on civil society and media censorship. More human rights defenders are killed each year in Latin America than in any other region. The hard-right has more presence and involvement in government in Europe than in any other region. The European Commission's annual rule of law report notes that a majority of member states now suffer deficiencies with regards judicial independence. In both regions, there is increasing contestation over how democracy is defined and conceived, as a divergence has opened between, on the one hand, its liberal-constitutional elements and, on the other hand its radical-popular or illiberal-populist dimensions.

On top of these domestic-level challenges, the risks facing democracy have become more severe at the international or inter-state level. The overarching rationale for a stronger focus on defending democratic values flows from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Many European leaders and analysts have framed the invasion's wider ramifications in terms of a battle between authoritarianism and democracy as systemic alternatives. They insist that upgraded and more effective international

coordination is urgently needed between democratic states due to the geopolitical fallout from the Ukraine invasion. In contrast, LA leaders have declined to frame the Ukraine conflict in these terms. EU states have stressed the strategic risks of deepening authoritarian coordination, LA governments much less so. From an LA perspective internal issues like inequality are the most severe and immediate threat to democracy rather than the fraught geopolitical context. A crucial question is whether, against this backdrop, the new EU-LA agenda has any scope to play its part in advancing democracy-protecting coordination

### From trade to geopolitics

Of course, issues other than democracy and human rights are likely to be of higher priority at the summit and in the renewed EU-LA agenda that results from it. Much has been said and written about the two regions' neglect of each other in recent years, and democracy related issues have been especially low-key in the relationship in recent years. Most recent and current effort to redress the neglect has been in the area of trade policy. In this area of policy, the stated aim to revive EU-LA relations does not start from a blank slate. For the EU, the trade agenda has been mainly prompted by concern over China and its growing presence in Latin America. In recent years, the EU has already begun to deepen and extend its commercial focus on Latin America and some Latin American states have begun to rediscover an interest in partnership with the EU. As is well known, a priority focus at the summit will be on whether currently stalled trade agreements can be either completed or moved towards full implementation.

The trade agenda is often presented as if it were an integral part of a values-based partnership. But there are tensions between commercial and values-based aims. The EU has promised in many of its policy documents to ensure that its trade and investment relations do not empower non-democratic actors; but it is clear that they are doing just this in several LA autocracies – some European energy companies have developed creative processes to get access to energy supplies from authoritarian

states, for instance. European trade and investment have continued to flow to non-democratic countries in LA, in contrast to more critical policy responses towards autocracy in some other regions. If trade is to be the priority for an EU-LA reset, then governments may be tempted to sacrifice any focus on democracy and human rights.

In recent years, while the trade agenda has progressed, democracy and human rights have lost presence in EU-LA relations. Environmental issues have become a much more prominent point of attempted leverage than have political rights. In the EU-Mercosur stand-off the focus has been on environmental issues, not democracy or human rights; the EU has shown itself increasingly willing to use climate-related conditionality but much less so democracy-related conditionality. The EU has for many years pursued a policy of engagement and cooperation with non-democratic regimes in LA without success in opening these up to political reform.

Levels of European funding are not insignificant in the region but have not centred on democracy as a priority. The EU has allocated 3 billion euros for the social effect of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Global Europe budget line allocates 3.4 billion euros to Latin America for 2021-7. The EU has been running development programmes on social equality and inclusion for many years. Democracy and human rights are certainly included in EU national indicative development programmes with LA states and the EU funds many important projects on human rights defenders, women's empowerment and the like. But the levels of such funding have not been as high as in most other regions. The two regions have done little to coordinate on major global-level threats to democracy; indeed, divisions between them have grown on such political issues (as divisions have widened within each region too).

In 2022 and 2023, the EU's focus has moved from trade to geopolitics. It has begun to reach out to Latin America in order to build support for what is happening with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the broader surge of authoritarian power internationally. To some extent, this

geopolitical focus opens the door to a stronger focus on democratic values, as outlined above. However, the relationship between democracy and geopolitical interests is less than clearcut. Much has been written about Latin American democracies' apparent reluctance to sacrifice relations with Russia and even less so with China. At the same time, the EU's own declared aim to become a more 'geopolitical power' seems to entail a great deal of realpolitik that sits uneasily with support for democratic values.

These trends suggest that there is heightened need for EU and Latin American states to upgrade the focus on democracy and human rights in their inter-regional coordination, but also that this agenda faces severe obstacles. Relations between the two regions are traditionally infused with rather ritualistic references to 'shared values.' Yet, democracy issues are increasingly a point of contention within both regions and in relations between them.

It will be relatively easy to fill the summit with rhetorical references to shared democratic values without any tangible coordination on authoritarianism in Cuba, Nicaragua or Venezuela (beyond a planned, fairly ritualistic human rights dialogue with Cuba). While it is understandable that the EU seeks Latin American support to defend democratic values internationally in the aftermath of the Ukraine invasion, its instrumental approach has largely backfired. As LA states stress their desire for a 'partnership of equals' any democracy agenda will need to emerge from LA as much as from EU states.

### Ten ideas

With this unsettled and taxing reality in mind, ten concrete policy ideas are suggested here for EU-LA cooperation on democracy and human rights at the summit and in the work programme that follows it.

#### EU-LA Defending Democracy Fund.

Governments could set up a new Defending Democracy Fund. If 40-plus governments attend the summit, then small contributions will be enough to reach a significant level of funds. The fund should be managed by

independent non-state actors and projects would not need any approval or authorisation from governments. This would focus attention on the creation of EU-LA civil society networks and empower these to have more leverage over the poor state of democracy in both regions. This work could build on recent initiatives led by EU delegations in Mexico and Colombia to offer more proactive support for human rights activists.

#### EU-LA initiative on populism and democracy.

The two regions are distinctive in the prominence of populist parties and leaders; Europe and Latin America are the two regions where populism has been most widespread and of most significance politically. Most populism in Europe is rightist, while most in Latin America is leftist, although this division is not absolute and there are examples of each type in both regions. Most of the populists that have gained a role in government insist they are democratic, although their governance styles and positions on some rights often leave doubts over this claim. LA's latest wave of leftism appears to be more rooted in notions of local democracy and more pluralist than previous waves.

As this issue is shared between the two regions, more than any other region in the world, it would be an important topic to include in a future democracy agenda – framed perhaps as an indirect issue of general democratic quality. A statement of principles could be drawn up of what political parties would need to abide by to ensure a fully democratic style of populism. The presence of populist leaders and parties at the summit would of course make this a hotly contested issue. Yet if these two regions could at least begin a process of dialogue with and about populism's relationship to democracy, this may help in the longer term reconcile at least some softer versions of populism with democratic principles. A group of LA experts might be supported to provide advice on how Europe should deal with its non-democratic populism.

Inclusive management of external funding. Non-democratic governments in both regions continue to receive large amounts of external funding – with humanitarian aid sharply rising in LA in recent years in

authoritarian contexts. The rights and wrongs of this might be debated, but it is a reality that is unlikely to change. Some opposition groups in the most authoritarian contexts in the EU and LA have recognised a need to accept this external support and argue that a condition should be that non-state actors get a role in allocating such funds. As a minimum, a new effort should be made for the independent and inclusive monitoring and control over such funding. A civil society initiative to this end could be considered.

EU-LA initiative on climate and democracy.

The two regions are suffering the consequences of ecological crisis in increasingly tangible and evident forms. In both regions, this ecological crisis is having an increasingly serious impact on governance patterns. In both regions, many fear that climate change could soon become the most serious risk to democracy and prompt trends towards what is often labelled eco-authoritarianism – the idea that only governments unencumbered by democratic accountability can effectively deal with the ecological crisis. A new initiative could work up a set of guidelines for democratic climate action, together with concrete commitments from governments to support a positive increase in climate-related citizen engagement.

Pre-empting attacks on democratic space.

There would be great benefit to be gained from joint EU-LA early warning coordination on government attacks against civil society and democratic activists. The two regions share unfortunate records in being amongst the worst places in the world for the so-called closing civic space. Even the most democratic governments in each region are guilty of having restricted civil society organisations and narrowed the space for democratic activism. A joint early warning mechanism would help pre-empt such democratic erosion. Governments could support the creation of an independently managed early warning structure. This would bring together actors already working on publicising such government abuses in the two regions and give additional momentum and weight to their respective efforts in the two regions. If governments refuse to do so,

an initiative led by civil society organisations from the two regions could be considered.

EU-LA joint ideas for future of Summit for Democracy process.

The two regions could jointly promise to take over a co-shaping role in the Summit for Democracy process that the Biden administration launched in 2021. South Korea is currently preparing a third democracy summit. One European and one Latin American state could undertake to host the next two summits after this. The two regions could work together to fashion an enduring process as follow-up to the way in which the US has led and largely controlled the summit process so far. They could suggest and co-manage new ‘cohorts’ that currently group together certain thematic issues under the summit process.

Regional mechanisms.

The EU and LA share a notable feature: they have more developed and formalised regional mechanisms for defending democracy than those that exist in other regions. If anything, LA mechanisms have proven themselves somewhat more effective than EU democracy clauses. Yet, these regional mechanisms have failed in both regions to hold at bay a general decline in democratic quality. An extremely important contribution would be for the two regions to oversee an initiative on improving regional democracy-defence mechanisms. The two regions should be learning a lot more from each other on this issue. Of course, those states likely to be the subject of such mechanisms are hardly likely to be supportive of more effective regional monitoring and responses. This could be another issue on which civil society could take the lead together with a small subset of EU and LA states.

Democratic innovations: a joint programme of mutual learning.

Democracy needs rethinking and qualitatively different types of democratic practice encouraged in both regions. The two regions have been at the forefront of experiments in new types of democratic participation and citizen engagement.



These may not have been fully successful so far, but there is a wealth of lessons to be learned from these innovations. Latin America started earlier than Europe on these experiments and has moved through several iterations of direct citizen engagement. Interest is growing in Europe of how to draw best-practice lessons on new forms of participative democracy. As these are the two regions with the most extensive experience in this dynamic new agenda, a common programme of lesson learning in democratic innovations could be prepared, drawing from both regions equally. Governments could undertake to support a concrete implementation of these lessons.

#### Post-Ukraine stresses on democracy.

An initiative is needed to better understand each region's major concerns about how Russia's invasion of Ukraine places additional strains on democratic structures. The idea here would be to avoid the framing of European governments insisting that Latin American governments sign up to a more supportive position on Ukraine. Rather, the aim would be to gain European help for Latin American concerns, as well as the reverse. It might be possible to work through some kind of acknowledgement that, while differences exist over how to deal with Russia, the two regions share concerns over attacks on democratic norms – and that they commit to not letting differences over tactics towards Russia prevent wider coordination on upholding democracy globally.

#### Trade, investment and the EU Global Gateway

Trade is likely to dominate the summit. And whether for good or bad, the EU is unlikely to attach much democratic conditionality to trade and investment relations. This means that more indirect ways need to be found to ensure that the economic dimension of EU-LA relations works in a more democratic fashion rather than undercutting democracy. Pressure and leverage could be used to insist on independent civil society scrutiny of new trade agreements' impact on basic rights. Funding could be linked to trade agreements to upgrade support to civil society working on rights issues.

The EU-LA summit could propose a more specific and political sub-strand of the EU Global Gateway programme. The EU claims it will mobilise 10 billion euros in investments for Latin America through the programme and will that this will form a major pillar of the renewed EU-LA partnership at and beyond the summit. The EU presents the Global Gateway as a democratic alternative to Chinese funds and trade, although it remains unclear precisely how EU funding for infrastructure is supposed to further democracy, as promised. The summit could help develop an initiative that offers more specific counter approaches to the anti-democratic effects of Chinese investment – in both regions. In parallel, EU and LA governments could use their pending trade agreements to get small entrepreneurs involved along with emergent green businesses that tend to support values agendas. Support for economic exchanges to provide digital access for marginalised communities could also have a democracy-enhancing function.

Both regions are going through a reassessment of economic policy in the aftermath of Covid-19. In both the EU and LA there is now more focus on building up state capacities and public investment; analysts talk about the post-neoliberal era. These changes could be harnessed to underpin democracy support. This is not a simple matter and the relationship between economic policy and democracy is complex. More effort is needed to connect the economic paradigm shift to direct forms of democratic engagement. A large number of policy documents and meetings have stressed the importance of the EU focusing on reducing social inequalities in the LA region; this is indeed important and is nearly always stated to be a priority in EU-LA summits, but it does not in itself amount to a democracy strategy (and indeed, the same could be said for debt relief, which may be justified but does not always work to democracy's advantage and in some cases can empower illiberal or non-democratic regimes). New and creative ways need to be found to ensure enhanced state economic powers go hand in hand with deeper forms of accountability and citizen participation in the management of these new policies.

## Conclusion

These ten ideas are offered with a clear cautionary note that focusing on political values at this moment will be extremely difficult. Expectations will need to be measured over what can be achieved. Highlighting an agenda of presumed 'shared democratic values' might invite criticism at a moment when commitment to such norms is in doubt across both Europe and Latin America. Framing this agenda as one of 'protecting democratic values' or 'addressing shared challenges to democracy' might be more apt.

Of course, some governments on both sides are likely to resist any meaningful or tangible focus on democracy. Governments might conclude that many of the kinds of ideas proposed here are not feasible. There will be relatively non-democratic or illiberal governments at the summit from both regions. The challenge will be to carve out modest areas of work on human rights and democracy in a relatively unfavourable context like this.

The ten ideas are proposed in a spirit of the EU needing to look for relatively indirect or creative ways of addressing democracy and human rights issues. There is scope to do so, especially through non-state actors, if expectations are not pitched too high. The need for a focus on human rights and democracy is certainly greater than previously, due both to domestic trends within both regions and because of the wider international situation. While governments may be tempted to limit their focus at an EU-LA summit largely to trade issues, it will increasingly be difficult to hold commercial and political issues separate from each other in the future.



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