

EU-LAC Inter-regionalism during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Bruno Theodoro Luciano*

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has shown a variety of responses from countries of the two regions, ranging from denialism to regional health cooperation. This article aims to assess how these reactions have impacted European Union (EU) and Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) inter-regional relations, considering multiple and sometimes incompatible approaches taken by national and regional actors. The article contends that the existence of contrasting approaches – coupled with previous institutional and political challenges faced by the EU and LAC regional organisations – have undermined the convergence of national health policies into regional ones, and the promotion of multilateral responses and institutions in a post-pandemic world. First, focus is given to the main characteristics and institutional features of contemporary EU-LAC relations, usually conceived as a multidimensional and multi-tier relationship. Second, it introduces how EU and LAC countries and regional organisations have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating distinct ways that EU-LAC actors have engaged with the outbreak and the main challenges and successes for regional cooperation in this respect. Lastly, the main developments and challenges for EU-LAC overall relations in pandemic times are indicated, highlighting how EU-LAC actors have attempted to cooperate in order to develop a more positive and sustainable inter-regional partnership for the future.

Keywords: EU-LAC relations; inter-regionalism; COVID-19 pandemic; democracy; multilateralism; regional integration.

Introduction

This article explores the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the present and prospects for the bi-regional partnership between the European Union (EU) and Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries, aiming to answer to what extent the pandemic has affected EU-LAC inter-regionalism. The pandemic has prompted a variety of responses from countries of the two regions, varying from denialism to regional health cooperation. By qualitatively examining major national, regional and inter-regional responses to the pandemic, the article argues that these diverse reactions have impacted the prospects of

* São Paulo State University (UNESP), São Paulo, Brazil. brutheodoro@hotmail.com. ORCID iD 0000-0002-1276-6076

EU-LAC relations, as they highlight multiple and sometimes incompatible approaches, both for (inter)regional cooperation and multilateralism.

Previous literature has vastly explored the history and the key issues of EU-LAC relations (Gratius 2010; Sanahuja 2015; Dominguez 2015). Scholarly research has examined the evolution of EU-LAC relations as a traditional and multidimensional dialogue, referring to the approximation between the two regions, significantly upgraded with the admission of Spain and Portugal to the European Communities in the 1980s (Sanahuja 1999; Freres 2000). Additionally, the literature has highlighted the relevance of the several instruments signed by the EU with its Latin American counterparts, such as the political/cooperation agreements with Mercosur (1995) and the Andean Community (1996) aimed at fostering inter-regional cooperation and promoting regional integration in Latin America (Gratius 2013; Doctor 2015) in the context of the EU's growing position as an international actor (Manners 2002; Telò 2006). During the late 20th century and the first decade of the 2000s, literature has identified a shift in EU's foreign policy as the EU has prioritised individualised relations through three key dialogues: the EU-LAC (1999), EU-Brazil (2007) and EU-Mexico (2008) Strategic Partnerships (European Commission 2005; Blanco and Luciano, 2018). Recent studies have emphasised this movement of EU's approach towards Latin America, from a pure inter-regionalist stance to increasingly individualised relations with strategic countries/sub-regions, highlighting its effects on the cohesion of LAC countries and the support of Latin American regional integration (Gratius, 2018; Meissner, 2018; Luciano, 2020; Ayuso and Gratius, 2021). Additionally, major new EU policies such as the European Green Deal have also been shaping EU's contemporary external action, and consequently EU-LAC relations (Sanahuja, 2021). However, the rise of populism in Europe and Latin America, and the more recent COVID-19 outbreak have demanded more up-to-date accounts of the state of EU-LAC inter-regionalism in a challenging world.

In this sense, this article will discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected recent EU-LAC relations, by examining the simultaneous presence of two opposing responses to the health crisis in both continents, i.e. epidemiologic nationalism and epidemiologic cosmopolitanism (Sanahuja, 2020). The existence of these contrasting approaches, coupled with previous institutional and political challenges faced by regional cooperation by the EU and LAC regional organisations, have undermined the convergence of national health policies into regional ones, promoting multilateral responses and institutions in a post-pandemic world. The article is organised as follows: First, emphasis is given to the main characteristics and institutional features of contemporary EU-LAC relations, usually conceived as a multidimensional and multi-tier relationship. Second, it will introduce how EU and LAC countries and regional organisations have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating diverse ways in which EU-LAC actors have engaged with the outbreak and the main challenges and successes for regional cooperation in this respect. Lastly, the main current developments and challenges faced by EU-LAC inter-regionalism are indicated, highlighting how the pandemic has affected EU-LAC inter-regional relations.

EU-LAC inter-regionalism before the pandemic

Considering the several challenges brought by the pandemic to both Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean, this section situates current EU-LAC inter-regional relations. First, it highlights the institutional features and ongoing key issues of the bi-regional partnership, with special emphasis on the key topics on the inter-regional agenda as well as the key agreements under negotiation between EU and LAC countries. Second, it focuses on the global projection of the EU-LAC partnership, discussing how these inter-regional relations have supported principles shared by countries on both sides of the Atlantic, such as democracy, human rights, trade liberalisation, and the promotion of multilateral institutions. At the same time, it stresses the main political and institutional challenges of the bi-regional partnership, which stem not only from the domestic and intra-regional dynamics of the two continents, but also from the relevant political transformations identified in the international system and in the role of relevant external actors, such as China and the United States.

The main institutional feature of EU-LAC relations is its particular arrangement where multi-level and overlapping partnerships between the EU – for instance, simultaneous EU's Strategic Partnerships with Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and individual countries such as Brazil and Mexico, as well as negotiations agreements with sub-regional organisations such as Mercosur – and various regional projects on the Latin American side co-exist with individual external relations promoted by governments of both continents. On the one hand, this characteristic gives great flexibility to EU-LAC inter-regional cooperation, enabling the development of partnerships with variable geometries, depending on the topics and actors involved. On the other hand, it also leads to overlaps and divergences of agendas in several dialogues with different sets of members, which may sometimes undermine both intra and inter-regional coordination on certain issues.

The multiple levels of EU-LAC inter-regionalism may be disaggregated into four tiers: (i) the inter-regional relations, comprising the political dialogue between the EU and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States; (ii) the EU sub-regional relations with Central America, the Caribbean, the Andean Community and Mercosur; (iii) the bilateral relations among individual countries from the two regions; and (iv) the EU-LAC cooperation on global governance (Gratius 2015). Additionally, considering how the EU has structured its external agenda and how policy competences lies in different EU institutions and Member States, one may also categorise EU-LAC inter-regionalism according to three pillars: political dialogue, trade, and cooperation (Haider et al. 2020). In this respect, Table 1 merges the multi-tier dialogues within the overall EU-LAC relations, highlighting the most prominent pillar(s) when it comes to each level of EU-LAC dialogue.

Table 1. EU-LAC multilevel dialogues and pillars.

Levels of the EU-LAC dialogues	Pillars of the relationships
Bilateral (Individual relations between the EU and LAC countries)	Political dialogue, trade , and cooperation
Sub-regional (EU relations with sub-regional projects, i.e. SICA, CARICOM, CAN, MERCOSUR)	Political dialogue, trade, and cooperation
Inter-regional (EU-CELAC relations)	Political dialogue , trade, and cooperation
Global (EU-LAC global governance coordination)	Political dialogue , trade, and cooperation

Source: author's elaboration, based on Haider et al. (2020) and Gratius (2015).

As each level of EU-LAC dialogue has its own priorities, the pillars have different meanings for each level. Moreover, distinct topics of the agenda are more prominent depending on the level of the partnership. For instance, given the low level of institutionalisation of EU-CELAC relations and the fact that CELAC is rather a coordination forum than a decision-making organisation, the EU-LAC inter-regional agenda focuses on political dialogue on broader and more consensual topics for both regions, such as migration, climate change and gender equality. As pointed out by Haider et al. (2020: 9), 'The political pillar mainly consists of joint declarations on topics where the participating countries potentially have a common interest, reflecting not a common European approach but rather aligned interests of member states under a common umbrella'. Likewise, as EU-LAC global governance cooperation comprises a broader relationship among governmental and non-governmental organisations in the two regions, the agenda often concentrates in promoting dialogue on social affairs as well as on major global affairs such as the reform of multilateral institutions.

Reversely, a more specialised agenda is often observed in EU-LAC relations at the sub-regional and bilateral levels, where LAC individual countries and some regional organisations have stronger competences to act in certain issues. Therefore, it is at these levels that the materialisation of preferential, free trade or association agreements between the two regions can be seen more clearly. For instance, the agreement in principle of the EU-Mexico Modernisation Agreement (2018) and the EU-Mercosur Association (2019) are examples of concrete contemporary achievements at the bilateral and sub-regional levels, respectively.

These observed trends do not imply that the political dialogue pillar is restricted to the inter-regional and global levels, while the trade and cooperation pillars are exclusively found at the sub-regional and bilateral levels. In fact, discussions on cooperation are also identified at the EU-CELAC level and the EU-Brazil Strategic Partnership demonstrates that bilateral relations may also have strong components of political dialogue, making EU-LAC overall relations a complex and multidimensional bi-regional partnership.

Moreover, the performance of different pillars is not only shaped by different levels of institutionalisation on the Latin American side. On the European side, the distribution of EU institutions and Member States among the pillars also affects the autonomy and capabilities of the EU to further engage with its Latin American counterparts in this multi-tier approach. On the political dialogue and cooperation pillars, the EU usually shares competences with Member States, meaning that EU's engagement in these areas is the result of joint decisions by Brussels and the national capitals. Besides, Member States may adopt parallel political and cooperation ties with Latin American actors, which may either reinforce multi-tier cooperation or create overlaps and inconsistencies among EU and Member States' interests and principles when relating to LAC countries. Nonetheless, when it comes to the trade pillar, as the EU has exclusive competence in this matter, EU institutions – in particular the European Commission – can proceed with a more autonomous performance when negotiating trade agreements with LAC nations (Haider et al. 2020).

Regarding the global projection of the bi-regional partnership, EU-LAC relations have been guided by principles and norms traditionally shared by the two regions and promoted by them in international forums such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation. In this respect, the two regions have frequently expressed their identification with key liberal values such as peace, democracy, human rights, trade liberalisation, gender equality, respect for international law, and the promotion of multilateralism at the global level (Ayuso, Gratius and Serbin 2018). Nonetheless, the current turbulent times have challenged not only the global promotion of these values, but also the protection of these standards within EU and LAC countries.

Since the first EU-LAC Summit held in 1999, democracy and human rights have been issues of significant importance in the bi-regional dialogue (Haider et al. 2020). The mutual concern with these values was in tune with the development of the EU as an international actor and a normative power since the Treaty of Maastricht of 1992 and with the process of re-democratisation seen in Latin America since the 1980s. However, recent attacks on democratic institutions in countries such as Hungary and Poland in the EU and in Brazil and Venezuela in Latin America pose some challenges to the global promotion of human rights and the rule of law in the two regions. These trends have shown that democratic values are not uncontested on the two continents, which in fact may undermine their democratic standards and their willingness to further cooperate on these matters within the framework of EU-LAC inter-regionalism. For instance, the political and humanitarian crises in Venezuela in recent years have generated fragmentation within CELAC, a key institutional forum for relations with the EU. In practice, these events have paralysed CELAC activities. Consequently, no EU-CELAC High Level Summit has been organised since 2015; only one Ministerial Meeting was held by both parties in Brussels in 2018 (Ayuso, Gratius and Serbin 2018).

On the trade liberalisation agenda, EU-LAC relations have been marked by the promotion and implementation of several preferential trade agreements among the two regions as well as by strong shared support for the multilateral trade system. In this sense, over the past years the EU has negotiated distinct levels of preferential trade arrangements

with virtually all LAC countries (Grieger 2019). Nonetheless, despite the rise of global protectionism observed since the beginning of the Trump administration in the United States, the EU and LAC continue to favour practices of economic openness. Therefore, 'In the context of restrictions and commercial sanctions on the part of the USA, the EU and LAC have an opportunity to devise a pragmatic partnership and to stand up as the main defenders of international economic integration' (Tayar 2020: 50). However, despite the overall traditional affinity for trade liberalisation, as a result of the global economic shift towards Asian markets, the EU has seen its position of main commercial partner with LAC countries be replaced by China in recent years (Nolte 2018). This may have a direct impact on EU-LAC trade relations, as it has the potential to affect the EU's trade and investment policies towards LAC in the near future. In this sense, EU High Representative Josep Borrell called attention to the risks of EU's neglecting Latin America despite the ongoing presence of other extra-regional actors in the region:

[W]e have not had a Summit since 2015 and few high-level visits. This has not gone unnoticed: our diplomatic missions are sending reports of a growing sense of neglect. During the same time, other international players are moving forward. The US has kept a steady engagement. And Chinese investment has increased tenfold between 2008 and 2018. In fact, China recently overtook us as the Latin America's second most important trading partner (Borrell 2020b: 1).

Lastly, the promotion of multilateral institutions is an aspect historically associated with both regions. In this sense, the 2015 EU-CELAC Declaration highlights this shared concern when signatories 'underscore the need to strengthen the multilateral system and to promote more effective and inclusive global governance, respectful of international law' (EU-CELAC 2015: 2). This is also seen in the 2018 EU-CELAC Ministerial declaration, when the foreign ministers of both regions once again stressed that: 'Together we are ready to jointly address current international developments and new global challenges, and to continue strengthening multilateralism' (EU-CELAC 2018: 1). Nonetheless, emerging political leaders in the world have contested the assumption that multilateralism is always the best approach to address global issues, resorting to sovereign/nationalist responses to address some topics. In fact, the COVID-19 outbreak has also negatively impacted the legitimacy of multilateral institutions, as some countries have criticised or ignored the World Health Organisation's (WHO) recommendations in responding to the pandemic, contributing to putting multilateralism at stake.

European and Latin American and Caribbean initial responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to mixed reactions from governments and regional organisations in Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean. In both regions responses ranged from denial to isolated national responses, from ineffective

regional coordination to proactive regional cooperation. This variety of responses were due, in large part, to the multiple perceptions of national governments regarding the scientific recommendations issued by the WHO as well as their preference to respond to the health crisis individually or within multilateral/regional environments. While some actors around the globe have promoted an *epidemiologic cosmopolitanism*, which is grounded in the necessity of international cooperation to address borderless policy issues or ‘public evils’, such as the current health crisis, others have been guided by an *epidemiologic nationalism*, i.e. a nationalist, individualist, anti-multilateralist, and in some cases negationist approach towards the pandemic (Sanahuja 2020).

Some countries in both Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean have opted to disregard the concerns about the pandemic and the recommendations of the medical community concerning the virus. For instance, the Brazilian federal government has frequently contested WHO recommendations, rallied anti-lockdown protests, and avoided establishing any kind of national lockdown in the country, leaving the responsibility for implementing measures to contain the spread of the virus to state governors, who have much more limited resources to deal with the pandemic without the guidance of any clear national plan (BBC 2020a). Initially in Mexico, the spread of the virus in the country was overlooked by the national government, symbolised by the systemic refusal of the President to wear masks in public events (The Guardian 2020; Riggiozzi, 2020). Meanwhile in Europe, the government in Hungary has instrumentalised the pandemic context to acquire more executive powers by indefinite time (BBC 2020b). These reactions are aligned with what Sanahuja (2020) called ‘epidemiologic nationalism’ when referring to the approach mainly adopted by recent populist and nationalist leaders, who in the pandemic context have been questioning science and undermining collective action and global health cooperation.

In fact, the most common response observed in the two regions has been the development of isolated national plans to address the COVID-19 pandemic. However, countries have set out different strategies to deal with the outbreak. For instance, in Europe, while Italy – the first European country highly affected by the COVID-19 outbreak – promptly implemented regional and national lockdowns, Sweden opted for a different approach, avoiding strict lockdown measures (Washington Post 2020). In Latin America, Argentina also adopted early restrictive measures: ‘When the pandemic first hit, Argentine officials took rapid and decisive measures aligned with recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) and its regional office, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), which initially flattened the curve and saved lives’ (WHO 2020: 1). On the other hand, the Brazilian federal government did not implement a national quarantine and only recommended social distancing (Benítez et al. 2020), which generated strong criticism from state governors (Bloomberg 2020).

Although most countries chose to focus on national responses to the pandemic, there was some room in the two regions for the development of regional coordination to address an issue that does not respect borders (Schmidt, 2020; Legler, 2021; Ruano and Saltamacchia, 2021). As pointed out by Bonilla (2020: 2),

When we talk about multilateralism and cooperation, we have to stress that the pandemic has shown that common international problems cannot be solved in isolation or in an autarchic manner. Cooperation, coordination, collective production of policies are necessary at times like these.

Nonetheless, despite the initiatives of some countries, not all of their actions have been effective to set up relevant shared policies at the regional level, demonstrating the various challenges for regional cooperation in an emerging context of nationalism, populism, and distrust in international institutions (Legler, 2021). For instance, regional coordination in South America led by countries such as Chile has failed in establishing a collective response in the region. Among other reasons, the paralysis and withdrawn of several countries from the Union of South American Nations (Unasur), and consequently of the South American Institute of Government in Health (ISAGS), resulted in the lack of regional mechanisms to coordinate a regional response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Riggiozzi, 2020; Agostinis and Parthenay, 2021). Similarly, despite having organised a virtual high-level meeting in March, the newly created Forum for the Progress of South America (Prosur) has so far only issued a generic joint declaration calling for coordinated responses to the health crisis in the region (OECD 2020). Overall, health cooperation in South America has been minimal, illustrated by the fact that members of the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) spent US\$16m to acquire medical equipment and tests to address the COVID-19 outbreak (Mercosur 2020). Further, the political heterogeneity and the erosion of relevant regional arenas over the past years have in practice undermined a stronger Latin American collective response to the pandemic (Milet and Bonilla, 2020).

On the other side, some regional organisations have succeeded in providing some relevant responses to the pandemic in the two continents. In Latin America, Central American and Caribbean initiatives have been considered the most positive examples of regional health cooperation within the pandemic (Legler, 2021; Ruano and Saltalamacchia, 2021). Central American and Caribbean countries have provided a more comprehensive response to the pandemic than their South American counterparts:

The countries of the Central American Integration System (SICA) also met virtually on 11 March and subsequently approved a regional contingency plan to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, along with a dedicated website entitled 'Central America united against the Coronavirus' (OECD 2020: 1).

Meanwhile, Caribbean Community (CARICOM) leaders have swiftly elaborated an emergency regional protocol, strengthening the regional coordination of Caribbean health authorities (Legler, 2021). As summarised by Ruano and Saltalamacchia (2021: 94):

While Central American and Caribbean regional integration mechanisms – Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana (SICA) and Caribbean Community (CARICOM) – have been successful at coordinating a number of collective responses, Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR) showed a limited capacity to act. Meanwhile,

Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (CELAC), a political concertation mechanism of which little was expected, managed to coordinate several initiatives.

In Europe, although the initial reaction to the outbreak relied on the performance of national governments (Renda and Castro, 2020; Salvati, 2020), since then the EU has established stronger policies and emergency packages to address the health crisis on the continent (Schmidt, 2020; Wolff and Ladi, 2020). Although competences on health policies come mostly from Member States, the EU was able to coordinate national responses across the continent, sharing information and supporting the acquisition of medical equipment, as well as promoting Public-Private Partnerships to the development of a COVID-19 vaccine. In March 2020, the European Central Bank set out the pandemic emergency purchase programme (PEPP), aiming to monetarily support the Eurozone countries in the context of the outbreak (European Central Bank 2020). Afterwards, in the context of the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework negotiations, the EU was able to approve a €1.82t recovery package that will financially support the Member States that were most affected by the COVID-19 outbreak, an initiative considered by many as a strong demonstration of European solidarity (Politico 2020).

Lastly, at the inter-regional level, the EU has also shown some initial support to LAC countries in the context of the pandemic. In this sense, High Representative Borrell informed members of the European Parliament that: 'On 8 April 2020, the Commission allocated EUR 927 million and the European Investment Bank EUR 325 million to help the most vulnerable countries and population groups across Latin America and the Caribbean' (Borrell 2020a: 1).

In sum, one can observe a variety of approaches from governments in Latin America and the Caribbean and Europe towards the COVID-19 outbreak. This is due to not only the resources and health systems that these countries have available, but also because national governments have developed different perceptions regarding the relevance of engaging in international/regional cooperation in health as well as of following the guidelines of the scientific community. In fact, in both regions one can identify nationalist and cosmopolitan versions of epidemic control in relation to the current COVID-19 pandemic (Sanahuja 2020). This multitude of approaches is not a direct outcome of the health crisis, but a product of contemporary national and global politics. In fact, the COVID-19 outbreak has only exacerbated certain political behaviours already in place in several countries. For instance, the simultaneous promotion and condemnation of collective responses of international organisations such as the WHO and regional organisations such as the EU, SICA or Mercosur showcased how multilateralism has been increasingly challenged by some political groups across the globe. This contestation of multilateral institutions not only undermines the legitimacy of their mandates, but also compromises their effectiveness when developing joint health policies. This current turbulent context has brought additional challenges to both regional cooperation within Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean, and to the current and future inter-regional relations between the two regions.

EU-LAC bi-regional partnership in and beyond the pandemic

This section addresses the implications of the COVID-19 outbreak for the projection of the EU-LAC inter-regional relations, highlighting three main challenges involving EU-LAC inter-regionalism in current times and pointing out how actors have attempted to overcome these issues in order to foster a positive and stronger bi-regional partnership beyond the pandemic context. In this respect, it is important to note that this article assumes that the COVID-19 outbreak did not create these tensions, but only accelerated trends which were already in place in the international system, and particularly within EU-LAC countries.

First, as discussed in the previous section, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to different types of responses from EU and LAC countries. While some countries/sub-regions invested in individual national responses (epidemiologic nationalism), other actors favoured the promotion of regional/multilateral governance (epidemiologic cosmopolitanism) as a more adequate approach to address this new 'global public evil' (Sanahuja 2020). Nonetheless, the adoption of different strategies to handle the pandemic by countries in the two regions was not only taken due to sovereigntist/cosmopolitan beliefs of political leaderships, but it was also driven by (in)capacities of regional organisations to contribute promptly to the development and implementation of collective health policies.

For instance, the EU initially lagged behind Member States and did not act decisively in the early stages of the pandemic, due to the lack of stronger competences in health policies and difficulties in developing effective coordination among Member States. However, later on the EU was able to develop substantial and comprehensive policies, such as approving a €1.82t EU coronavirus recovery fund in the context of the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework, aiming to economically support Member States most affected by the pandemic (Politico 2020). Meanwhile, internal regional fragmentation has marked Latin American integration in the past years, for instance, leading to the division within CELAC and the paralysis of Unasur (Ayuso, Gratius and Serbin 2018). In this turbulent regional scenario, regional organisations have shown very limited capabilities and political willingness. Except for coordinated policies in Central America and the Caribbean, most LAC countries cannot rely on regional organisations to support them during the pandemic.

In this respect, the few EU-LAC dialogues held in the context of the pandemic emphasised the need to strengthen inter-regional/international cooperation to address this global health crisis. For instance, a joint declaration signed by Foreign Ministries of 25 LAC countries and Germany a month before Germany assumed the Presidency of the Council of the EU (July-December 2020) stated that the signatories 'agreed that we must now stand together in a spirit of solidarity, engage in a close exchange and work together on internationally coordinated solutions' (Federal Foreign Office 2020: 1), as fighting the pandemic is a fundamental part of the multilateral agenda. In the same vein, the Declaration of the co-Presidents of the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly (Eurolat) voiced a similar conviction regarding strengthening EU-LAC cooperation in times of pandemic:

[T]he current challenges posed by this pandemic call for a highly coordinated international approach, to which Europeans and Latin Americans must make a decisive contribution, an approach that must be grounded in science and experience, consistent with our democratic values and leave no room for ideological manoeuvres and political and partisan confrontation (Eurolat 2020: 1).

Second, the pandemic has also highlighted the crisis of global multilateralism as several countries, including some in the EU and LAC, have rejected the recommendations of international institutions, such as the WHO, and multilateral solutions to collectively address the COVID-19 outbreak. According to the Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard: ‘Some countries have decided not to participate in the global coordination exercise needed to address the pandemic. Others have chosen to hinder or even sabotage it’ (Ebrard 2020: 3). This trend is particularly visible in WHO’s current financial constraints on dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and in the announcement that the United States will withdraw from the organisation (Hirst and Malacalza 2020).

Indeed, the defence of multilateral institutions is one of the topics of the global governance agenda to which EU-LAC inter-regionalism can contribute the most in terms of inter-regional political dialogue, especially when considering the historical contribution of both regions to the development of multilateral institutions over the past decades. In this sense, EU-LAC actors gathered in the context of the pandemic have emphasised their support for multilateral institutions. For instance, Eurolat Co-Presidents called for ‘national authorities to rigorously apply and comply with international standards, and express our support to the World Organisation [sic] (WHO), in its efforts to combat the pandemic’ (Eurolat 2020: 1), while EU-LAC and German Foreign Ministers declared that ‘The corona crisis shows how important strong, multilateral institutions are for health, prosperity and security in the world’ (Federal Foreign Office 2020: 1).

While much can still be done in terms of high-level EU-LAC initiatives to support multilateralism, these political statements indicate that both regions continue to jointly defend international institutions from recent attacks, which is especially important in a context where global cooperation and solidarity is most needed. Given the absence of the global leadership of US in this pandemic context, Europe – alongside like-minded regions such as Latin America and the Caribbean – will need to assume a key role in the UN system if multilateralism is to be protected (Wouters 2020).

Third, the pandemic has also affected one of the most relevant topics of EU-LAC agenda, namely trade and investment. This is particularly relevant as countries in the two regions are also suffering the economic consequences of the global COVID-19 outbreak. Global trade liberalisation was already under threat by protectionist policies emanating from Washington, providing a window of opportunity to deepening trade relations between the EU and LAC region (Tayar 2020). However, the pandemic has brought additional challenges to global free trade, due to the disruption of global supply chains and the businesses’ fear that new protectionist barriers will be imposed by countries, particularly the US (Financial Times 2020).

In this context, the EU-LAC dialogues have voiced the shared concern of both regions about the effects of the pandemic on trade liberalisation. While Eurolat Co-Presidents stressed their 'commitment to the stability of the world economy, as well as global trade and investment' (Eurolat 2020: 3), LAC and German Foreign Ministers stated that:

We are determined to strengthen rules-based free trade and to boost the openness, sustainability, resilience and diversification of supply chains as the basis for promoting economic recovery, overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic and improving our national and collective preparedness for other similar health emergencies. Regional integration as well as the conclusion of comprehensive, modern agreements between the EU and Latin American countries will make key contributions towards this (Federal Foreign Ministry 2020: 2).

Despite individual divergences seen in some LAC countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Cuba and Venezuela, EU-LAC countries have expressed in the declaration a commitment to trade liberalisation, which is overall considered a shared value by the regions. Moreover, the conclusion and modernisation of trade agreements between the regions – even though agreements such as the EU-Mercosur deal are still pending legal revision and have been facing domestic resistance in both the EU and South America – have been majorly seen as a key step against trade protectionism within and beyond the pandemic context.

Lastly, considering these three fundamental global tensions and how EU-LAC countries have reacted to them, relevant strategies have been proposed aiming at overcoming some of the main challenges often faced by EU-LAC inter-regionalism, such as investing in dialogues of variable geometries (inter-regionalism *à la carte*); promoting a clearer division of labour among each tier of EU-LAC relations; reducing the predominance of the trade pillar in EU-LAC relations; and supporting a strong dialogue among non-executive actors such as the parliamentary, civil society, businesses, and academic actors.

The consensual and comprehensive nature of EU-CELAC relations is one of the most significant impediments to the progress of concrete inter-regional initiatives/policies. On the one hand, this feature provides substantial levels of legitimacy for political declarations and commitments from two entire regions of the globe. On the other hand, in practice it has also led to the development of generic declarations. This feature is well summarised in the recent words of EU High Representative Borrell: 'Our partnership with Latin America contains a paradox: despite having much in common, our interactions remain well below their potential' (Borrell 2020b: 1). Along these lines, Ayuso, Gratius and Serbin (2018: 7) pointed out that 'rhetorical declarations have predominated in the political dialogue with the EU through CELAC, as a collective space representing the region, and it has not proved possible to develop a convincing institutional framework'. More recently, not even these rhetorical statements have been issued; since 2015 no EU-CELAC High Level Summit has been gathered, majorly due to the lack of a consensual approach regarding the political crisis in Venezuela. Thus, one of the alternatives for overcoming the paralysis of

inter-regional relations is promoting a selective or *à la carte* inter-regionalism, conceived by Serbin and Serbin Pont (2018: 72) as ‘an intermediate scenario in which inter-regional relations do make progress, but only partially, in certain specific sectors, and with alliances of variable geometry’. In other words, specific issues that not all EU-LAC countries are interested in addressing would not necessarily be discarded, as certain ‘coalitions of the willing’ could be established in order to make progress in these particular areas.

At the same time – recalling Table 1 – another approach to promote a more effective EU-LAC inter-regional partnership is recognising the multi-tier nature of EU-LAC relations and strongly promoting a division of labour according to each tier, separating certain topics/pillars at different levels of EU-LAC relations (national, sub-regional, inter-regional, global). ‘Instead of treating the same topics at all levels it might be more useful to establish a division of labour and assign issues by partner’ (Gratius 2015: 6). This pragmatic move could also contribute to reducing the overlapping agendas often observed among various levels of EU-LAC relations, producing a more effective and synergistic inter-regional multi-tier partnership. When it comes to the three pillars which have often structured these relations, the same logic could be applied as certain pillars (such as trade) in practice can only be materialised in the national and sub-regional tiers. Meanwhile, political dialogue benefits greatly from inter-regional and global arrangements.

Another structural feature of EU-LAC overall relations is the predominance of the trade pillar with regard to the most tangible aspects of this relationship. Undoubtedly, the fact that the European Commission has greater margins of autonomy to negotiate preferential trade agreements and that several LAC countries have been strongly favourable of trade liberalisation – namely the countries of the Pacific Alliance (Chile, Colombia, Peru and Mexico) – have contributed to the proliferation and modernisation of free trade agreements between the two regions. However, EU-LAC trade has traditionally been seen as an asymmetric/North-South trade relationship, marked by LAC exports of commodities to the EU.

In this regard, as the several values shared between EU-LAC countries attest, much more could be done in terms of advancing in inter-regional cooperation beyond trade. In order to do so, Serbin and Serbin Pont (2018: 1) suggested that:

This requires renewing, updating and deepening existing relationships – which up to now have mainly been perceived as concentrated in trade exchanges and North-South cooperation – bringing to light and developing other areas of cooperation that open up strategic alliances of various kinds and boosting a new agenda of mutual opportunities, visibility and impact, bearing in mind, however, the heterogeneity within both blocks.

Among the topics on the agenda beyond trade, one must note the possibilities of convergences in areas such as the Sustainable Development Goals, cyber-crime, migration, climate change, infrastructure, the digital revolution, cooperation in higher education and research (Ayuso, Gratius and Serbin 2018; Serbin and Serbin Pont 2018). Although those

areas are often included in EU-CELAC generic declarations, they have not generally become concrete inter-regional public policies.

Lastly, another often mentioned aspect is the need to develop a stronger EU-LAC dialogue that involves parliamentarians, civil society and business actors to transcend the intergovernmental dimension of EU-LAC inter-regionalism. In this respect, the parliamentary dialogue, which takes place mainly at Eurolat, but also between the European Parliament and certain national/regional LAC parliaments, is the most striking example of how EU-LAC relations has moved beyond the executive domains. Most interestingly, while EU-CELAC Summits have been interrupted since the crisis in Venezuela, Eurolat meetings have remained frequent, demonstrating the autonomy of parliamentary actors to promote their own approach to inter-regional relations. As already mentioned, one of the few EU-LAC overall responses to COVID-19 pandemic came from the co-Presidents of Eurolat, who, among other suggestions, urged governments to return the High-Level Summits in order to provide collective responses to the pandemic (Eurolat 2020).

Nonetheless, incorporating civil society, businesses and academic actors is still embryonic (Ayuso, Gratius and Serbin 2018). Although some dialogues among these actors have happened in parallel to the EU-CELAC Summits in the past as preparatory events (European Council, 2015), the fact that high-level meetings were suspended has also led to the paralysis of meetings among non-state actors, highlighting their dependency on the willingness and resources of the executives. An important exception is the civil society dialogue, which organised a meeting in San Salvador in 2017 despite the EU-CELAC deadlock. Thus, promoting a more autonomous agenda for non-executive actors at the EU-LAC level will surely contribute to the multidimensionality of the bi-regional partnership, enabling the inclusion of new actors and new topics on the inter-regional agenda.

Conclusions

This article examined the present and the prospects for EU-LAC inter-regional relations considering the new challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. First, this paper discussed the key features of EU-LAC relations, pointing out their multi-tier characteristics as well as its institutional challenges to provide a common or convergent approach to the inter-regional dialogue, given the many regional, sub-regional and national actors at stake. The fact that EU-LAC relations take place at global, inter-regional, sub-regional and national levels and are often explored according to three pillars (political dialogue, trade and cooperation) make these particular inter-regional relations quite complex, allowing overlaps and divergences among the parties.

Second, the diverse national, regional and inter-regional responses to the COVID-19 outbreak were identified. It was demonstrated that while some countries have opted for more individualistic responses, certain countries and regional organisations have provided collective solutions to this global challenge, highlighting the simultaneous existence of nationalist and cosmopolitan approaches to address the pandemic.

Finally, the main developments and challenges of EU-LAC inter-regionalism in times of pandemic were highlighted, accompanied by some indications of how EU-LAC actors have attempted to address these issues in order to overcome the current deadlocks and divergences, aiming at promoting a more sustainable partnership for the future. In this sense, the three challenges stressed concern the existence of sovereignist/nationalist views of handling not only the pandemic, but other topics on the global agenda; the rising contestation of multilateral institutions; and the prevalence of trade liberalisation as the main pillar of inter-regional relations. Besides, one could add the need of strengthening non-executive EU-LAC dimensions such as inter-parliamentary relations via Eurolat and dialogue among civil society, business and academic actors. Overcoming these issues together is crucial for EU and LAC countries if both regions intend to further deepen their inter-regional ties in a post-pandemic world.

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About the author

Bruno Theodoro Luciano is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the San Tiago Dantas Graduate Program in International Relations (São Paulo State University – UNESP / University of Campinas – UNICAMP / Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo – PUC-SP). He has research experience in the area of regional integration, comparative regionalism and inter-regionalism in Europe, South America and Africa, with focus on the development of regional parliaments in Europe, Africa and Latin America, as well as the performance of these institutions internationally. He is a member of the Research Network on Foreign Policy and Regionalism (REPRI), the Observatory of Regionalism (ODR) and the subcoordinator of the Grupo de Reflexión sobre Integración y Desarrollo de América Latina e Europa (GRIDALE).

Inter-regionalismo UE-ALC durante a pandemia de COVID-19

Resumo: A pandemia de COVID-19 tem mostrado uma variedade de respostas dos países das duas regiões, que vão desde o negacionismo até a cooperação regional em saúde. Este artigo tem como objetivo avaliar como essas reações impactaram as relações inter-regionais UE-ALC, considerando as múltiplas e às vezes incompatíveis abordagens adotadas por atores nacionais e regionais. O artigo afirma que a existência de abordagens contrastantes – juntamente com os desafios institucionais e políticos anteriores enfrentados pelas organizações regionais da UE e da ALC – prejudicaram a convergência das políticas nacionais de saúde em ações regionais, e a promoção de respostas e instituições multilaterais em um mundo pós-pandemia. Em primeiro lugar, é dado foco às principais características institucionais das relações UE-ALC contemporâneas, usualmente concebidas como uma relação multidimensional e multicamadas. Em segundo lugar, apresenta como os países e organizações regionais da UE e da ALC responderam à pandemia de COVID-19, indicando formas distintas de envolvimento dos atores UE-ALC com o surto e os principais desafios e sucessos da cooperação regional nesse respeito. Por último, são indicados os principais desenvolvimentos e desafios para as relações globais UE-ALC em tempos de pandemia, destacando como os atores UE-ALC tentaram cooperar para desenvolver uma parceria inter-regional mais positiva e sustentável para o futuro.

Palavras-chave: relações UE-ALC; inter-regionalismo; Pandemia do COVID-19; democracia; multilateralismo; Integração regional.

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