



The Hungarian rediscovery of Latin America and the Caribbean

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Historical connections between Hungary and the LAC region

Hungary has had (relative to its size and geographical distance) strong ties with Latin American countries since the 19th century. During the colonial period, the most influential activities were that of the (in majority Jesuit) missionaries. After the independence of the Latin American countries, the biggest and most influential impacts were made by those Hungarians who arrived there, firstly, after the failed Hungarian revolution of 1848-49, secondly, after the world wars, and thirdly, after the 1956 Hungarian revolution against the Soviets.

The most important Hungarian personalities in Latin America (in my consideration) have been: János Czetz (Juan Fernando Czetz, 1822-1904), the founder of the Military College of Argentina; Ferenc József Debály (Francisco José Debali, 1791-1859), composer, orchestra conductor, and composer of the national anthem of Uruguay and that of Paraguay; László Bíró (Ladislao Bíró, 1899-1985) inventor and painter who settled in Argentina, and the inventor of the nowadays most widely used (ball point) pen, among others. And finally we should also mention the Benedictine monks (among others: Arnold Szelec, Anzelm Horváth and János Markos) from Hungary, who founded the Colégio Santo Américo in São Paulo in 1951.

After the Second World War, during the communist area, Hungary was giving scholarships for several hundreds of Latin American students (mostly from countries of the Non-Aligned Movement, namely Cuba, Ecuador, Venezuela) and was offering home for left-wing thinking refugees (mostly from Chile).

Consequences of the democratic change in Hungary

Following the regime change in Hungary (1989/1990), the priorities of the Hungarian foreign and security policy changed considerably. The newly elected, democratic Hungarian government announced the new “triangle of foreign politics”: Euro-Atlantic integration, friendly and stable relationship with the neighbouring countries, and finally, monitoring the situation of Hungarian (historical) minorities (in the neighbouring countries). These priorities were essential to all Hungarian governments until the country reached the long wished for “reintegration to Western Europe” through joining the OECD (1996), the NATO (1999) and the EU (2004). The first years in the EU were quite turbulent due to inner political and economic crisis, which led to the shutting down of most of the Hungarian diplomatic missions in Latin America. In 2009, merely four embassies were functioning (Mexico City, Havana, Buenos Aires and Brasília) in the region.



Rediscovery of the LAC region

After the years of crisis, Hungary was rethinking its political and economic position in the world, being already deeply embedded into the European economic structure. The government realised that the EU's 80% share in Hungarian trade makes Hungary vulnerable and uniquely dependent on the European markets, so the decision was made to (re)open relationships to old partners in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Looking at the trade data of the Netherlands, the government realised that a Western European country (with roughly the same size that Hungary) could have much higher (trade) connections to non-EU regions while not questioning its place in the European integration. This led to the announcement of the "Opening to the South" (focusing on Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa) and "Opening to the East" (focusing on Southeast Asia) policies. It was clear to everyone that the final objective (deeper trade and economic relations) could be achieved only through a diverse set of policies: cultural diplomacy, stronger diplomatic presence, and facilitation of market entry of Hungarian SMEs with competitive products into the target countries.

As concrete steps, Hungary reopened old and opened new diplomatic missions (mostly with commercial attachés) in Panama City, Bogotá, Quito, Lima, Santiago de Chile, Montevideo and São Paulo. The Hungarian government enhanced the existing scholarship programme of Stipendium Hungaricum and included many Latin American and Caribbean countries (such as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay and Uruguay, while Chile is on the way). Several hundreds of students of these countries are applying every year to BA and MA programmes (in English language) in several different fields of studies with all costs covered (including tuition fee, accommodation and living costs). In 2018, more than 200 received the scholarship and started their studies.

Conclusion and future prospects

We all know that behind all diplomatic relations there are economic and political interests of the countries. To build stable and mutually beneficial relations there has to be a certain level of awareness and familiarity between the populations of the countries. This is the rationale beyond the importance of the student (and professor) exchange programmes: they bring the young generation together, facilitate the exchange of new ideas, help the participants to get to know each other's culture, language and customs and to build long-standing contacts, which in the future could be the base of fruitful economic and business activities. Educational programmes are the best long-term investments into the future with better understanding of people and prosperity.

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