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Webinar EU-LAC Foundation and International Idea

‘State of Democracy in Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe: Analysis and Perspectives in Times of Pandemic and Post-Pandemic’

The webinar 'State of Democracy in Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe: Analysis and Perspectives in Times of Pandemic and Post-Pandemic' was organised by the EU-LAC Foundation and International Idea within the framework of the signing of a cooperation agreement between both entities, carried out on December 11, 2020. The [recording](#) is available on the website of the [EU-LAC Foundation](#).

The objective of this webinar was to provide a space for a group of experts to share reflections on the challenges of democracy in Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe, to address the complexities posed by the pandemic and the opportunities that open up for the continuous strengthening of the democratic value in both regions. The format of the event consisted of 8-minute presentations from each speaker, followed by a series of questions from the audience.

The panel was made up of Dr Adrián Bonilla (Executive Director of the EU-LAC Foundation), Dr Sergio Bitar (Former Minister of State of Chile and Vice President of the Board of International Idea), Dr Maria Hermínia Tavares de Almeida (Senior Lecturer at the University of São Paulo and Senior Researcher at the Brazilian Centre for Analysis and Planning - CEBRAP), Dr Claudia Zilla (Principal Researcher of the Americas Research Department at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs) and Dr Felipe Burbano de Lara (Director of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences-FLACSO Ecuador). The seminar was moderated by Dr Daniel Zovatto, Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean at International Idea.

Opening remarks

Dr Adrián Bonilla opened this webinar commenting that the European Union (EU) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) share the democratic value given that both organisations have always raised the idea of defending democracy, both in international documents and in their political statements. In Latin America, particularly, CELAC has defined democracy with a relatively procedural logic. It is defined as a political process that: a) respects the essential values of this type of regime; b) states that access to power and its exercise are subject to law; c) raises respect for the constitutional capacities of different State powers; d) proposes holding free, transparent and informed elections under universal suffrage as an expression of sovereignty; and e) raises the respect of all public freedoms including human rights as a basis for this principle. Around this conception of the desirable political reality, both regions have developed partnership strategies.



Dr Daniel Zovatto indicated that 4 out of 10 democracies in the world show setbacks due to health measures taken in face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The degrees of deterioration have increased, new and complex threats have appeared, and there is a greater degree of dissatisfaction with democracy; in some cases, it has been eroding, in others its hybrid features have deepened, and in others the authoritarian characteristics of these regimes have deepened.

Presentations

Dr Sergio Bitar, Vice-President of the Board of International Idea

Dr Sergio Bitar began his presentation by stating 5 great opportunities that the crisis presents for Latin American States:

- 1) *Necessity for change of the political system: Reduce polarisation and seek basic consensus to maintain democracy, paying attention to electoral systems as well as strengthening the autonomy of the judiciary, and reducing the decoupling between the elite and the citizenry through a reinforcement of dialogue and deliberation.*
- 2) *Creation of a new social pact: The central issue is the reform of the health system such as the proposal to create a global body for the prevention and coordination of pandemics, within the framework of the World Health Organization (WHO).*
- 3) *Change in the productive structure: This implies advances in terms of digitisation, forms of education, training and reduction of informal employment.*
- 4) *Governance: The leadership of many female leaders has been decisive, and the participation of young people has been innovative.*
- 5) *Rearrangement of the global order: The global institutional framework must support democracy.*

According to Sergio Bitar, Europe has a more affirmative position of its own strategy regarding democracy, since it is about the so-called “European Strategic Autonomy”. Although Europe is showing a more pronounced interest in Asia, it is possible to distinguish 5 topics that could lead to rethinking and generating dynamics between Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean:

- 1) *Values, social democracy and human rights*
- 2) *Strategic autonomy*
- 3) *Social pact*
- 4) *Climate change*
- 5) *Digitalisation*

Referring to a question from the audience about how social movements can contribute to an innovative bottom-up social pact, Dr Bitar added that a social pact is a gradual process that has to be characterised by an ascending political line, through actions that promote discussion and state-induced dialogue with citizens. He pointed out that the resources for this purpose should be



in proportion to the reduction of inequality and the creation of a basis for democracy and that a social pact means, above all, reviewing the poverty reduction policy.

To conclude his speech, Dr Bitar made reference to the Chilean case to exemplify how the political agreement to create a plebiscite to open a new constitution is an institutional opening to channel social protests, issues of inequality, and discrimination.

Dr Maria Hermínia Tavares de Almeida, Senior Researcher at the Brazilian Centre for Analysis and Planning (CEBRAP)

Dr Maria Hermínia Tavares de Almeida began her speech by explaining that with the ‘third wave of democratisation’ there have been diverse regional responses in the world. While democracy has taken hold in southern Europe and is disappearing in Russia, Latin American and Caribbean democracies face the challenge of strengthening their democratic institutions in societies in which there are numerous inequalities alongside poverty.

Dr Tavares de Almeida considers that guaranteeing the integrity of electoral processes is essential to strengthen democratic institutions. Latin American democracies are advancing as elections are allowing the system to sustain itself. In addition, special emphasis should be placed on governmental capacity to allow democracy to take hold on the continent. The major challenge is the ability of the region's political systems to institutionally channel protest and unrest, which are permanently present in the respective societies. From her perspective, Chile is an example of how a political system can be opened and reformed based on the demands of society. This ability of democratic systems to open and respond to pressure will be crucial for democracy to remain the prevalent system in the region.

Faced with a question from the audience about how to compare current populism with that of the past, Dr Tavares de Almeida commented that populism is a somewhat imprecise term since it has been used to describe very different processes. In the past, leaders that enabled important sectors of the population to be included in political life have been called populists. What exists now are political processes and phenomena that are no longer on the subject of real inclusion, but sectors excluded from political life, which use uncertainty in the face of differences, and in a way encourage polarisation. If populism already had a difficult approval of democracy in the past, now it is basically a factor of tension and deepening polarisation.

In her final reflection, the researcher highlighted that one of the points that has advanced the most in the democratic period is the idea of rights. Movements have been built and have advanced because the democratic system advanced the idea of equality, women's movements and movements of Afro-descendant and indigenous communities.



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Dr Claudia Zilla, Principal Researcher of the Americas Research Department at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin

Dr Claudia Zilla argued that there is a "vicious triangle in the democracies of Latin America and the Caribbean". In other words, three disruptive points for the functioning of democracy in the region: 1) poverty and inequality; 2) violence and corruption; 3) institutional transgression.

Dr Zilla relied on data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to explain the first disruptive point, stating that with 8.2% of the world's population at the end of September 2020, Latin America and the Caribbean concentrated 28% of cases of infection and 34% of deaths related to COVID-19, this being a consequence of the poverty and inequality of the subcontinent. More than a third of the region's population lives under the poverty line, and within this third, a third survives in conditions of extreme poverty. In turn, Latin America and the Caribbean is the most unequal region in the world. According to data from the World Bank, 8 of the 10 most unequal countries in the world are in the region; in it 20% of the population concentrates 83% of the wealth. These levels of poverty and inequality restrict the exercise of rights and freedoms, make the political sphere permeable to economic logic, and undermine social cohesion to the extent that society becomes compartmentalised into parallel worlds according to social strata.

Regarding the second point of the vicious triangle, Dr Zilla mentioned that although Latin America and the Caribbean form a zone free of nuclear weapons and without interstate conflicts, it is the most violent region in the world. This is due not only to the presence of criminal gangs and paramilitary groups, but also the involvement of state security agents in what makes up a large part of the computed homicides. Violence is combined with poverty and inequality, affecting the most vulnerable social groups: women, indigenous people, Afro-descendants, homosexuals, queers and trans. In addition to this problem of violence, there is corruption, which promotes the discrediting of politics. In her words, corruption is such a structural problem that it is not only a political issue but also a cultural one that touches all individuals in society.

As the third and last vertex of the vicious triangle, Dr Zilla referred to institutional transgression, giving as examples the presidential re-electionism, the judicialisation of politics and the politicisation of justice. The researcher explained that the corruption scandals and their judicial prosecution have ambivalent effects since they generate a distortion of political competition, where the expectation of criminal prosecution increases the incentive to perpetuate themselves in public office and political mandates, guaranteeing a certain immunity from possible lawsuits.

Dr Felipe Burbano de Lara, Director of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences Ecuador

Dr Felipe Burbano de Lara began his speech by referring to the widespread discontent with democracy and the revolts against political parties and elites in Latin America and the Caribbean. Consequently, he pointed out that it is a crisis of the forms of social representation associated with the institutions of democracy in its liberal or polyarchic form.



The historical uniqueness of the region is due to two instances. On the one hand, the progressive dissolution of the democratic notion linked to the transitions of the 80s concentrated on building a democratic regime (set of parties, institutions, freedoms, rules that substituted previous forms of authoritarianism). The transitions that generated enormous expectations and even a re-founding moment for democracies were an imaginary concept that slowly diluted and already in the mid-1990s the sociological and political literature showed the difficulties of transitions to the consolidation of democracies (absence of citizenships and guarantee of citizen rights, amongst others). This first diagnosis has shown the difficulty of the coexistence of the transition regimes with neoliberal policies.

On the other hand, the left turn in Latin America since the late 1990s was the other event that marked history. This turning point is a process that opens the search for alternative forms to liberal democracy (participatory, civic, radical, re-founding) that altogether focussed on the criticism of representative liberal democracies. There was then a left turn not only in democratic terms but also in post-neoliberal economic models tied to ideals of the 21st century socialism.

According to Dr Burbano de Lara, the Latin American and Caribbean region faces five challenges in restoring the quality of democracy and enable it to build political horizons:

- 1) *Re-establish the link between political elites and society.*
- 2) *Re-establish the link between political elites and voters in order to avoid the volatility of political processes and the de-legitimisation of the governments of the elected presidents. Ensuring the quality of political processes is a minimum condition for democracies to renew and re-legitimise themselves.*
- 3) *Overcome the fracture between the political elites themselves: overcoming ideological polarisations is relevant to re-granting governmental capacity to democratic regimes.*
- 4) *Overcome the breakdown of political elites associated with existing democratic institutions and social and popular movements that cause radical popular effervescence in many Latin American countries and propose different forms of democratic change and renewal.*
- 5) *Re-think the economic model so that the model can retake growth, ensure redistribution and face the new challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.*

In agreement with the other speakers, Dr Burbano de Lara mentioned that the problem of democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean today is linked to the democratic capacity to incorporate the emancipatory demands of the various social actors and popular movements. The challenge is how to restore a libertarian sense to democracy, give political form to the demands, and connect democracy with the emancipatory ideal.



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Closing remarks

Dr Sergio Bitar, Vice-President of the Board of Idea International

To finalise, Dr Sergio Bitar explained the importance of thinking about what actions Latin America and the Caribbean can carry out together with Europe, region that supports and has solved extremely complex problems and is a beacon of democracy and values. It is the social participation, the social pact and a State administration of quality that allows for a better government, he concluded.

Dr Adrián Bonilla, Executive Director at the EU-LAC Foundation

By way of closing, Dr Adrián Bonilla referred to democracy as a global problem and, when referring to Latin America, highlighted the importance of taking into account that it is an extremely diverse region in which several political systems coexist that call themselves democratic and where part of the political debate revolves around how to name those practices and institutions. For Dr Bonilla, the most important thing is how to build a political regime that accounts for systems of representation of the societies' interests and how to build channels for the participation of all its actors in decision-making and resource allocation systems.

The EU-LAC Foundation and International Idea thank everyone who participated in the event as well as those interested in this report.

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