

EU-CELAC: A bi-regional partnership to strengthen the development of our nations

*by Ricardo Patiño**

The II EU-CELAC Summit will mark a milestone in the history of our strategic partnership: it will be the beginning of a deep reflection on the future of bi-regional relations in accordance to present realities and priorities of both regions. This reflective exercise ought to be led by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and the Heads of State and Government so as to develop new ideas, initiatives and guidelines for the construction of new bi-regional relations.

Institutionalized relations between Latin America and the Caribbean with the then European Community began in 1990. In the Fourth Ministerial Reunion with the Rio Group, held in São Paulo in 1994, the participation of the Central American countries was extended and both regions agreed on a scheme for the strengthening and deepening of their relations on the basis of the negotiation of Association Agreements with the various regional integration processes, Mexico and Chile.

In 1999, the first European Union, Latin American and the Caribbean Heads of State and Government Summit was held in Rio de Janeiro, wherein the aim of establishing a “Bi-regional Strategic Association” was highlighted, based on shared principles and values, amongst which are the upholding of international law and the principles and purposes of the Charter of Human Rights: respect to sovereignty and territorial integrity, sovereign equality between States, non intervention in home affair; mutual respect and the promotion of human rights in the broadest sense; refraining from making threats or the use of force, strengthening of the multilateral system and international cooperation and promotion of commerce and investment. In practice, the Strategic Bi-regional Partnership is reflected on the workings of Association or Commerce Agreements between parties.

In 2013, Santiago de Chile hosted the First EU-CELAC Summit, which inherited the process of institutionalized relations developed since 1990.

Undoubtedly, since 1990 the European Union is for Latin America a privileged political actor, the first or second commercial partner of all Latin American and Caribbean countries and has the most complete network of integral commercial agreements, and stands as the first bi-lateral and regional cooperation donor, as well as the first investor in a wide number of Latin American and Caribbean countries.

Nevertheless, Latin America, the Caribbean and the European Union have experienced deep changes in their political, economical and social reality since the launching of the Strategic Bi-regional Partnership in 1999. Furthermore, the dynamics of the European integration process with its 28 Member States and the international reality itself have very different shades of color from those prevailing 16 years ago. At the same time, the CELAC is working on the consensually defined action plan guidelines until the year 2020, which demands coherence between the goals of this process and the relations between the EU and other extra-regional partners.

For these reasons Ecuador, holding the CELAC's Pro Tempore Presidency, expressed in several occasions to the EU the need to evaluate the current progress of bi-regional relations and the results of the Action Plan in order to lay out the future of our relationships.

This initiative was very well received by the European Union, so much that not only did it agree to the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of both regions meet during the period between Summits to evaluate the processes, but also presented the draft declaration for "A Partnership for the Next Generation" that will be approved on the Brussels' Summit in June 2015.

This Summit will set a historical milestone: the beginning of a deep reflection on the future of bi-regional relations in accordance to the present realities and priorities of both regions. This exercise will be led by Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Heads of State for the emergence of new ideas and guidelines for the construction of new bi-regional relations on the basis of the strengthening and deepening of the current bonds through concrete actions in diverse areas. The sovereign transference of Science and Technology from European countries to Latin American and Caribbean countries, for example, would highly contribute to the implementation of wealth redistribution policies through the change of the productive and energetic matrix of the region.

The bases on which our relationship is grounded – political dialogue, commerce and cooperation – will be the cornerstones that will make this reflection possible. The historical moment demands not only to look to the past but also into the future. Our aim is to achieve the welfare of our citizens with social justice and to build more inclusive societies. This Summit, therefore, will provide the opportunity to renew our shared values and visualise a better future for our nations.

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