EU-Latin America relations: shared values and missed opportunities
While the EU and Latin America share common values and challenges, the region does not receive much attention from European policymakers.

As the EU navigates its way through multiple crises – from the war in Ukraine to mitigating the worst impacts of climate change – forging close partnerships with like-minded states has become of paramount importance for policymakers in the EU.

This special report takes a closer look at the opportunities for closer collaboration with Latin America.
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As the EU looks to forge closer ties with democracies across the globe amid the war in Ukraine, one region has been largely neglected so far, despite its vast potential for partnership: Latin America.

A new representative study by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, which surveyed 12,000 people in 10 Latin American countries, found that Latin Americans see the European Union as their preferred partner, and there is a significant overlap when it comes to values such as human rights or multilateralism. EURACTIV spoke with the president of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Martin Schulz, about the survey’s results and what they mean for the European Union.

"As a leader of the Socialist group in the European Parliament and as President of the European Parliament, I have pointed out time and again that there is no region on this planet that bears so many similarities to Europe on a cultural, economic and political level as Central and South America," Schulz said. [FES/Presidencia de la Nación Argentina]

Martin Schulz is the chairman of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Between 2012

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INTERVIEW

Martin Schulz: The EU has neglected Latin America for too long

By Oliver Noyan | EURACTIV.de

Languages: Deutsch
and 2017, he was president of the European Parliament before he was selected as the lead candidate for the Social Democrats in the German federal election of 2017.

Interview highlights

- Despite its vast potential as a close partner in times of crises and beyond, Latin America is still largely neglected in the EU and is often portrayed as a continuation of Spanish or Portuguese foreign policy.
- The Russian war of aggression led some Latin American states to move away from the EU when it comes to their approach toward Russia, as the sanctions would be too costly for them.
- Europe has to do more to economically assist the region in preventing social rifts from widening and has to intensify the economic cooperation with the region on an equal footing.
- The EU has an advantage over China in the region because the population recognises the EU as a preferred partner. But the EU has to act now to use this to its advantage.

Your representative study clearly shows excellent potential in EU-Latin America relations. Why has the EU neglected such an important region for so long?

This is something completely inexplicable that I have been fighting against for many years. As a leader of the Socialist group in the European Parliament and as President of the European Parliament, I have pointed out time and again that no region on this planet bears so many similarities to Europe on a cultural, economic and political level as Central and South America. It is not limited to the social democratic perspective but the entire basic orientation of these countries. And this should not be underestimated.

If we look at the developments of the last one and a half years, especially concerning the elections in Chile, Colombia and possibly also in Brazil, progressive governments in Europe, in particular, would be very well advised to make more significant efforts to reach out to Latin America.

There are two main reasons for neglecting relations with Latin America: One problem is that individual EU member states, such as the Federal Republic of Germany, pick and choose the economically most interesting countries and then focus primarily on the bilateral level.

At the same time, many see Latin American policy as a continuation of Spanish-Portuguese foreign relations – only with a European dimension. In my eyes, these are the main factors behind this neglect of the region.

Do you expect a stronger focus on Latin America in this context, especially because of the tense geopolitical situation we are currently facing?

I think the European Parliament is the part of the EU institutions most open-minded toward Latin America. There is a great awareness there about the importance of the region.

A danger is that some Latin American states are moving away from the European Union when it comes to their approach to Russia.

While Latin American politicians – especially those on the left – condemn this shameful war, many do not support the sanctions imposed on Russia. Many politicians confirmed this to me during my trip to São Paulo, Montevideo, and Buenos Aires.

There I was told: For you rich Europeans, the rising energy and food prices are bearable. For us, however, it means hunger for some sections of the population and the collapse of the middle class, which will lead to major political upheavals.

And yet the EU would need Latin America as a strong geopolitical partner at this very moment?

Of course, it would. Especially in this tense situation, in which democracies are under attack, we certainly need the region as a partner. For the most part, governments there favour multilateralism and stand firmly behind the United Nations. They are all governments that want to see individual fundamental rights enshrined as principles – especially the new governments in Colombia and Chile. In this context, the EU would be well advised to ensure that we do not lose these states as partners.

What could be done now to strengthen cooperation in these areas?

Above all, the EU must introduce an economic policy that enables the Latin American states to conduct a fair partnership on an equal footing. To this end, financial support using trade policy is
needed. But this also means that the EU's trade policy should not focus primarily on opening up markets.

This could be realised, for example, in the Mercosur agreement. For this to work, however, the Latin American states would have to agree on the Mercosur strategy. This is very difficult in a country like Brazil because Brazil has so much economic and political influence in the region.

But the European Union should be sending out the message: Our market is open to you, and we are ready to support you financially to close the social rifts currently being exacerbated by the food crisis.

The European Commission claims that it is already negotiating with Latin America on an equal footing.

Naturally, the Latin American partners see things differently. They continue to say that the negotiations are not being conducted on eye level. It is precisely the particular interests of some member states that make it difficult for the Mercosur agreement to materialise.

However, as I have already said, it is also necessary that the Latin Americans finally agree on the agreement.

Let me turn to the social divisions you mentioned: How could the EU support the Latin American countries in this regard?

First and foremost, financially. Latin American countries need money. Some of them don't have it and are therefore dependent on the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund. Argentina is a good example: at the end of September, Argentina's next instalment from the International Monetary Fund is due. And this is even though Argentina is currently in a deep crisis. Not only is Argentina struggling with soaring inflation, they actually urgently need to use their money to stockpile food supplies in the country to avoid shortages in autumn.

The President of the Republic, Alberto Fernández, also addresses the problem quite clearly by saying that the IMF money is needed to prevent the crisis from getting worse in the current situation. Tackling the debt crisis affecting some Latin American countries is a pressing issue. Europe and also the United States of America must lend a hand here. European companies also play a crucial role and could help to close the investment gaps.

Equally important in this context is the skills and education policy, both at the school and university levels. Investing in the training of young people is an essential prerequisite for financial investments. The European Union must become even more active in this field.

Your representative study illustrates the opinion of the Latin American population. In many areas – especially as far as value-related questions are concerned – there is a great deal of overlap. At the level of political leadership, however, there are still significant discrepancies. Why is this the case?

If we could build our partnership on the will of the population alone, we would reach our goal relatively quickly. But the problem is often the governments, for example, in Brazil, where the democratically elected president Jair Bolsonaro has displayed a very populist stance. He is, so to speak, an Amazon Trump.

But that also applies to Venezuela and, to some extent, to the Central American governments.

But overall, the EU currently has a whole range of dialogue partners in Latin America – especially since the shift to the left in the last elections – with whom it has one thing in common: The realisation that strengthening multilateral cooperation is a prerequisite for defending democracy.

That is why I believe that in the political leadership of most Latin American countries, there is a great deal of agreement with the results of our survey. They want to cooperate with Europe because they think the European way toward democracy is right.

Many analysts are currently warning that a new era of bloc politics could result from the war in Ukraine and the ever-closer ties between Russia and China. Is there a danger that China could establish itself as a preferred partner in the region if the EU does not move now?

I think that is less the case in Latin America. China will face bigger hurdles there than it does in Asia or Africa. The Chinese strategy is clear. For them, development cooperation is not based on any conditionality. They say: “Here you have money, give us your raw materials. We are not interested in what else you do.” Of course, this is particularly attractive for dictatorships and authoritarian regimes. More attractive, at any rate, than the European Union, which imposes specific requirements upon entering into cooperation – such as the rule of law, transparency and respect for fundamental rights.

That is why I believe that we have an advantage over China, especially
in Latin America, because the population recognises the EU as a preferred partner. But that also means that we have to act now.

**Where would we have to take concrete action?**

Above all, in financial and trade policy. And that is the big problem of the EU, and incidentally also the problem of the Brussels-based institutions. They are so fixated on the internal issues of the EU that they sometimes lack a geopolitical view of the EU’s role. The New Green Deal, for example, is too internally focused instead of being an offer to other regions of the world. The European Union must do much better in this respect.

**With its infrastructure initiative – the Global Gateway – the EU has also set itself the goal of playing a greater role again on the international stage. What would have to happen here?**

You would have to answer this question in great detail. It is also a country-specific question. When we talk about implementing strategies like Global Gateway, we have to abandon the idea that Latin America is one homogeneous entity.

In countries like Mexico, Argentina and Brazil, the larger Latin American countries, I think we need to focus European support on the following: What are investments that help the local population and at the same time help the country to meet the sustainable development goals outlined in the 2030 Agenda, that is, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

In Brazil, for example, this would take the form of not investing in any highways if we want to counteract the deforestation of the rainforest, but in creating economic opportunities in those regions where people live from logging. We would have to invest in concrete projects that support companies’ establishment or training and education.
EU has huge potential for closer partnership with Latin America, study says

While Latin Americans perceive the EU as the preferred partner to tackle many evolving global challenges, the EU has so far largely neglected the region, according to a new representative study by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

The study, presented on Thursday (30 June), surveyed 12,000 people in ten Latin American countries between September and October 2021 on their perceptions of the EU. Almost half of Latin Americans perceive Europe as their preferred region for partnership, and over two-thirds stated that they have a “good” or even “very good” vision of their country’s relationship with the EU. “When it gets to the issue of international politics, leadership, and the international order, we almost always choose to work with the EU,” Monica Hirst, who co-authored the study, said while presenting the study.

There is also significant overlap between the perceived global threats and Europe’s global leadership.

Pressing issues

The three most pressing issues for Latin Americans are extreme poverty, climate change, and human
rights violation – the areas Europe is also perceived as having a global leadership role, the study conducted ahead of the Ukraine war found.

However, when it comes to hard power issues, Europe is perceived as a comparably weak actor, with only 7% stating that the EU is a world leader in military affairs and 11% saying that the EU is leading in the area of economic power.

“It is annoying to observe that Europe is a source of soft power, but not of hard power for Latin America,” Hirst stated.

While the EU is looking to intensify its collaboration with non-Western democracies across the globe, due to the war in Ukraine, the bloc has so far done little to forge closer ties with Latin America.

While the bloc, for instance, held an EU-Africa summit in early 2022, the last EU-Latin America summit was held over seven years ago in 2015. Plans to hold another summit in 2017 have been postponed indefinitely.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell renewed this pledge in 2021, claiming he would do “everything possible” to hold a summit between the EU and Latin America. However, since then, only an online “mini-summit” has been organised – that fell short of including any EU heads of state.

The same holds for the EU’s flagship global infrastructure initiative – the Global Gateway – which aims at mobilising investments worth €300 billion until 2027 to rival China’s belt and road initiative.

European Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jutta Urpilainen, stressed during her visit to Latin America in mid-June that the Global Gateway Initiative will “reinforce our already strong cooperation” in the region.

However, it is unclear how much the region will actually profit from the initiative, as half of the funds have already been pledged to Africa.

**Chinese and Russian influence**

While it is still not known what role the EU’s Global Gateway initiative could play in Latin America, China is already perceived as a dominant force regarding infrastructure investments.

According to the survey, 36% see China as the best partner in infrastructure investments, compared to only 20% for Europe.

The same holds true for commerce and investment, where 46% of respondents named China as the preferred partner for Latin America.

The survey results reveal that Latin America sees China as the best partner for commerce and investment. Outside of Mexico, China has overtaken the US and EU as the top trading partner in the region, according to a report by the World Economic Forum.

According to the Socialist MEP Iban García del Blanco, Europe’s weight in the region has suffered in recent years vis-à-vis China’s influence in Latin America.

“But the fault does not lie with China, but rather with those who have been abandoning their role,” said MEP Iban García del Blanco after the survey presentation.

Russia has also been eying the region with increased interest in recent years. However, its charm offensive in the region has proven less successful, especially regarding the Kremlin’s COVID-19 diplomacy.

Russia’s Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine was the first to arrive in many Latin countries with the promise of relief for countries low on the waiting list for shots developed and approved in the West.

However, Russia failed to deliver the amount promised in many regions, and as individuals would require two different doses that were not designed to be swapped or mixed with other vaccines, people were left waiting for a second dose.

While Russia aimed to become a dominant supplier of COVID-19 vaccines in the region, Latin Americans still see the US as the best vaccine partner.
Right now, all eyes are on Europe: the ongoing war in Ukraine and the resulting global political and economic difficulties dominate the geopolitical realm. Unsurprisingly, the European Union’s (EU) current focus lies on the war next door. While the resulting economic crisis has led to a renewed emphasis on resilience, in which new solutions are being sought to match the present global situation.

Svenja Blanke is the Editor of the Journal Nueva Sociedad, Monica Hirst is the Visiting Professor at the Institute of Social and Political Studies of the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), and Ronja Schiffer is the Project Assistant at Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Argentina.

In this context, a historical, democratic and traditional relationship with a key continent is often overlooked: the EU’s ties with Latin America. Not only the obvious parallels between countries with similar democratic systems, but also the prolonged and difficult negotiations over the MERCOSUR Agreement, the goal of which is to ease trade between the countries of the southern cone and the EU, have laid bare the EU’s neglect of the continent and the resulting missed opportunities.

But against all odds, Latin America’s desire to reconnect with the EU and focus on opportunities for cooperation is being given renewed emphasis. Primarily in order to remedy urgent food and energy shortages – a direct consequence of the ongoing war.

Latin America’s population has
a strong desire to strengthen its cooperation with Europe, especially in regard to ‘soft power’ issues such as human rights, climate change, and the fight against poverty. A representative survey in Latin America measuring the population's global outlook and opinion of the European Union, carried out by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Latinbarómetro and the Latin American journal Nueva Sociedad (More information about the survey appears at the end of the article) reflects this desire quite clearly.

In this current period characterised by an institutional vacuum, when Latin America lost much of its relevance on the global geopolitical chessboard, it is necessary to search for reasons and explanations that go beyond the realm of conventional politics. It is not sufficient to only examine traditional actors and the national and regional spaces that shape the interests and behaviour of governments and other players, organizations, and trends.

It is necessary to listen to the societies themselves and understand how they view and interpret the issues on the international agenda. The pandemic offered a unique opportunity to evaluate exactly this: the region’s capacity to react, the Latin American perception of the turbulent international situation, the type of action, leadership and example being set by the central actors of the global system and in particular the EU.

The present EU-Latin America interregional relationship is influenced by how global and EU leadership is interpreted in Latin America, which areas of cooperation are valued and desired and how they are connected to global and regional uncertainties and problems.

### The Question of Global Leadership

In Latin America, the European Union is associated with leadership in specific soft power areas – environmental protection, the defence of human rights, the promotion of world peace and the fight against poverty and inequality.

In fact, there is a clear desire for further cooperation in these areas. Interestingly, however, when it comes to security, technological development, and economic power, the EU is not perceived as a leading actor; the US and China have clear superiority in this segment. These contrasting perceptions regarding leadership are reflected by sectoral partnerships.

In Latin America, relations with the United States and China are seen as very significant in terms of trade and investment, while the EU is not seen as a leader or even as a strong partner in this regard.

Despite the limiting soft power perception of the EU, it is precisely this soft power sphere and the issues associated with it which are most pressing on the international stage. Problems such as extreme poverty, human rights violations, and climate change, are – in addition to concerns about the pandemic – the main worries for the region.

The Covid 19-pandemic and its aftermath starkly exposed deficits in global governance and led to high levels of uncertainty in the face of severe humanitarian, economic, environmental, and political crises that disrupted every sphere of life. In the case of Latin America, internal and external vulnerabilities were found to be severe, and were exacerbated by failures to respond collectively.

### The search for new responses

This article was written in response to a survey entitled “European Union – Latin America: Perspectives, Agendas and Expectations”. The study was processed by Latinobarómetro in the second half of 2021 and polled a representative sample from ten Latin American countries: Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

The survey design sought to fill in the gaps in information about local attitudes to global issues. The questions posed focused on issues relevant to the region as a whole and to its decision-makers, as well on international issues, particularly the role of the European Union. To find out more, visit the website data.nuso.org which contains more content and illuminating presentations and analysis.

The survey was overseen by an academic advisory board that examined and analysed the results. Its members are also the authors of this article. It is part of a long-term research programme run by the Dialogo y Paz team at Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's journal Nueva Sociedad: a space for international and geopolitical analysis and debate committed to finding peaceful, constructive, and collective solutions to the critical challenges faced by Latin America.
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the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area

Contact us

Oliver Noyan
Senior Editor, Berlin
oliver.noyan@euractiv.com
+49 15781778572

Marco VENOSTA
EU Affairs Executive
marco.venosta@euractiv.com
tel. +32 (0) 2 226 58 19

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