

# **The impact of Venezuela's political and electoral situation on inter-parliamentary EU-LAC relations: Strengthening political convergence among Latin American regional parliaments?**

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## **Introduction**

Europe and Latin America have a long-standing tradition on parliamentary diplomacy and particularly regarding the development of regional parliaments, which are associated with regional integration projects. Since the 1970s, inter-parliamentary relations between the two regions have been institutionalised, first by the regular dialogue of the European Parliament with the Latin American Parliament (Parlatino) and more recently, in 2006, with the creation of the Euro-Latin American Assembly (Eurolat). Apart from representatives of Parlatino, Eurolat includes in the EU-LAC parliamentary relations members of other regional assemblies created in the past decades, such as the Andean Parliament (Parlandino), Central-American Parliament (Parlacen) and MERCOSUR Parliament (Parlasur).

Within the parliamentary axis of EU-Latin America relations, Eurolat occupies a relevant role, through the establishment of an environment of dialogue and political deliberation between parliamentarians and political parties from both regions. More institutionalised relations between the European Parliament and regional and national parliaments from Latin America, through Eurolat, have the potential to increase the coordination and convergence of the inter-parliamentary agenda with the traditional EU-LAC diplomatic agenda. Although one can observe a relevant degree of thematic synergy between the parliamentary and governmental dimensions of EU-Latin America relations, Eurolat is still a less relevant institution with regard to the governmental dialogue of both regions. Moreover, its institutionalisation is strongly marked by the EU parliamentary experience and inspiration and by the fragmentation of the Latin American component.

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On the other hand, last Eurolat meetings have made evident a polarisation of positions on regional politics between European and Latin American sides, especially regarding the political and human rights situation in Venezuela. Since the death of President Hugo Chávez, Venezuela has been facing strong polarisation of political positions between governmental and opposition forces. The tight election of his political successor, Nicolas Maduro, as well as the arrest of political oppositionists – including the mayor of Caracas – brought several uncertainties to the holding of parliamentary elections in the end of 2015. Added to this, the fall in the oil price – the country's main export product, shortage of food and supplies, and increasing inflation have intensified economic and social instability within the country, drawing attention of the international community.

In this sense, the present paper analyses the impact of EU-LAC relations on the political convergence of Latin American parliaments concerning regional political issues. The aim is to discuss how institutionalized relations with the EP, through Eurolat, increased coordination and convergence among Latin American parliamentarians and parliamentary institutions on regional political opinions. This argument is exemplified by the joint defensive position on Venezuelan political situation adopted by Latin American parliamentarians *vis-à-vis* the European Parliament's condemnatory posture.

This article begins by introducing parliamentary diplomacy in Europe and Latin America, and particularly the constitution of Eurolat as an EU-LAC mechanism of inter-parliamentary relations. It then proceeds assessing the potential and limits of parliamentary influence on the EU-CELAC governmental dialogue. We conclude discussing how current Eurolat's discussions on the political situation of Venezuela have shown a political division between European and Latin Americans regarding this issue. Instead of looking for a common position on international affairs, each regional component has opted to present a separate declaration, with divergent opinions regarding the Venezuelan case. This article argues that this recent example shows a clear attempt from Latin American parliamentarians to achieve a greater political convergence in regional positions.

## **1. The Spread of Parliamentary Diplomacy and Regional Parliaments in Europe and Latin America**

Parliamentarians and parliamentary institutions have played an increasingly important role in contemporary international relations. Although the centrality of traditional diplomacy – of governmental and State origin – has not been replaced, it now has to reckon with new political and social actors, be they domestic or international. The involvement of parliamentarians at the regional level has resulted in the enhancement of democratic and representative principles in projects and issues of regional integration. According to Stavridis and Ajenjo (2010), the parliamentary engagement in regional affairs sought to impact on the democratisation of these projects, through the addition of legitimacy mechanisms to these processes, the construction of a parliamentary and deliberative environment for the discussion of regional policies, and the creation of a sense of common belonging or regional identity among its participants.

Moreover, these regional parliamentary institutions can play a fundamental role in certain situations where the traditional means of diplomacy have failed (Malamud and Stavridis, 2011). Distinctly from traditional government-driven diplomacy, parliamentary diplomacy is characterized by a more plural and diverse degree of composition and organisation. It is conducted through both formal and informal means, and it can involve members of different nationalities, languages and identity, and can present several levels of detachment with regard to the governmental diplomacy (Stavridis, 2006). These instances have been characterised at the regional and international scale as ‘moral tribunes’, i.e. spaces which aim to openly promote and defend values such as democracy, human rights and freedom of opposition. For instance, when making political declarations and resolutions, these bodies have publicly denounced the violation of human rights. The very composition of these parliaments – mostly composed by members of both government and opposition parties – indicates the ideological plurality embedded in these instruments of parliamentary diplomacy. In particular, these parliaments have sought a more prominent role in the resolution of internal and international conflicts, as well as in cases of human rights violations. Through the establishment of missions of electoral observation and monitoring and through the creation of ‘friendship groups’, parliaments and parliamentarians can facilitate the dialogue between the litigant sides, regardless of whether they are states or domestic opposing political groups.

Besides the organisation of international or parliamentary institutions, the dialogue at parliamentary level has also been strengthened by the creation of interregional parliamentary assemblies, composed by parliamentarians of regional parliaments and/or national congresses

from different regions. Among the examples of inter-regional parliamentary assemblies are the ACP-EU (Asia, Caribbean and Pacific-European Union) Joint Parliamentary Assembly, the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (Euromed) and the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly (Eurolat). There are three main characteristics and aims of these inter-regional assemblies: *parliamentary socialisation* (they facilitate the exchange of experience, information and understandings among parliamentarians from different regions or countries within the meetings organised by these assemblies); *intercultural dialogue* (they have the potential to establish a dialogue among the involved political elites on issues and principles such as human rights, democracy and climate changes); and *monitoring of inter-regional partnerships* (they become parliamentary branches of the partnerships between the regions, responsible to monitor and supervise the policies and decisions derived from inter-regional negotiations) (Cofelice, 2012).

In this context, both Europe and Latin America have been seen as regions where regional parliaments and mechanisms of parliamentary diplomacy have been established over the past decades (Malamud and Sousa, 2007). In the European case, besides the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which was the first institution of this nature organised on the European continent, the prominence of the European Parliament (EP) cannot be ignored. The EP, which represents the parliamentary dimension of the European Union (EU), has held an increasing role within the European political system (Hix et al, 2006; Kreppel, 2002). On the other hand, Latin America has been characterised by the multiplication and overlapping of regional parliaments, which have received little attention by the media or social and political actors on the continent (Malamud and Sousa, 2007). Such regional parliamentary institutions are the Latin American Parliament (Parlatino), first institutions of this nature in the region, with current head office in Panamá City; the Andean Parliament (Parlandino), parliamentary dimension of the Andean Community (AC), settled in Bogotá, Colombia; the Central-American Parliament (Parlacen), part of the Central-American Integration System (SICA), installed in Guatemala City; and the most recent Parliament of MERCOSUR (Parlasur), parliamentary body of MERCOSUR, which is regularly gathered in Montevideo, Uruguay. With the creation of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), there is the expectation of creating a South American Parliament, with most likely headquarters in Cochabamba, Bolivia.

It is important to note, that European integration has served as a model to be pursued by other regional projects of the world (Manners, 2002; Borzel and Risse, 2009; Whitman,

2013; Farrell, 2009). When it comes to Latin America, the EU has sought to position itself as a historical project which could offer lessons and experiences concerning democracy, democratisation and regional integration, presenting itself as an external counterweight to US foreign policy to the region (Stavridis and Ajenjo, 2010). In this sense, the political dialogue between Europe and Latin America refers constantly to the importance of supporting democracy, the strengthening of political parties, the effective protection of human rights, and the promotion and consolidation of the existing regional projects in Latin America.

The parliamentary dialogue between Europe and Latin America started in the 1970s, reaching a stage of further formalisation and institutionalisation only in the first decade of the twentieth-first century. From 1974 onwards, one could observe the first meetings and inter-parliamentary conferences among Members of the European Parliament and the Parlantino. Albeit unregularly and minimally institutionalised, this inter-parliamentary relationship was promoted and maintained during the three following decades. In total, 17 biannual conferences were held between the European and Latin American parliamentary delegation until 2006 (Stavridis and Ajenjo, 2010). It is worth highlighting that this parliamentary dialogue predates the establishment of the bi-regional governmental relations, which only began in 1984 with the San Jose dialogue between the European Communities and the Central-American countries (Sanahuja, 1999).

It is interesting to note that the strengthening of EU-LAC relations in the governmental sphere also led to the deepening of the inter-parliamentary dialogue. During the 1990s and 2000s, the EU – which since the Treaty of Maastricht has consolidated itself as a more relevant international actor - signed a Bi-regional Strategic Association agreement with Latin America and the Caribbean (1999), besides individual and sub-regional associations with MERCOSUR (1999), Chile (2002), Central America (2006), and the Andean Community (2007). In the current context of establishment of strategic partnerships with traditional and emergent global powers, Brazil (2007) and Mexico (2010) were formalised as priority partners of the EU in the region (Lazarou and Luciano, 2015). The increase of EU-LAC regional political coordination at governmental level in the 2000s, for instance, led also to a greater structuration of EU-LAC relations in its parliamentary dimension.

## **2. EUROLAT and the institutionalisation of EU-LAC inter-parliamentary relations**

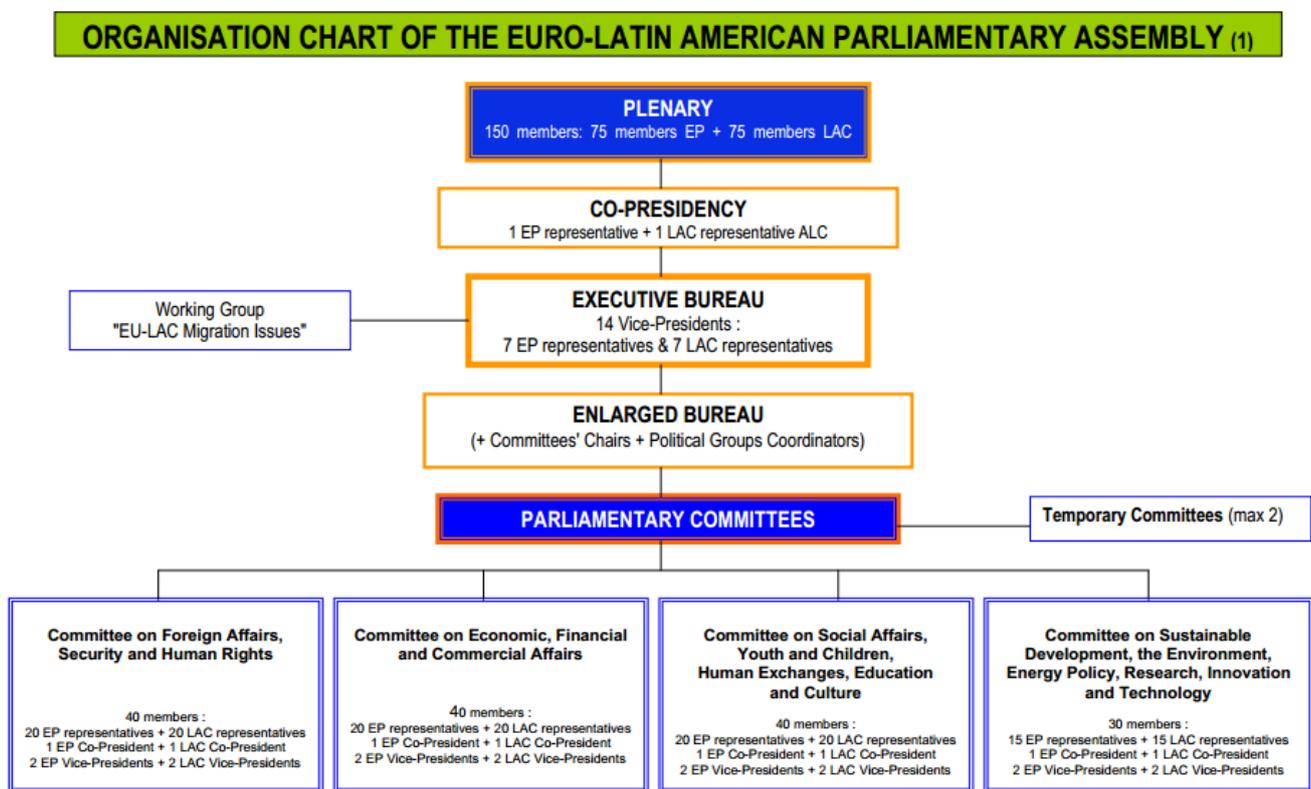
Within the context of broadening bi-regional relations, the parliamentary dialogue that the Europeans have already established individually with the regional parliaments in Latin America (Parlandino, Parlacen, and Parlasur), as well as with selected national congresses of the region (Chile, Mexico, Brazil, among others) has gained a shared and institutionalised place. In 2006 the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly (Eurolat) was created in Brussels. This privileged instrument to promote inter-parliamentary relations between Europe and Latin America has not only facilitated the meetings of European parliamentarians with their Latin American counterparts, but also, as it is further argued in this article, tends to strengthen the convergence and coordination of positions within the Latin American group, which is composed of representatives of regional parliamentary organisations. Thus, Eurolat would be formally structured as the parliamentary dimension of EU-LAC relations, which was founded in 1999 through the Bi-regional Association. The main objective of this new instrument of parliamentary diplomacy at the inter-regional level is the development of a forum of parliamentary discussion, consultation, supervision, and monitoring regarding the issues associated to the EU-LAC Bi-regional Strategic Partnership.

The variety of topics included in the EU-LAC bi-regional agenda and the multiplicity of interests of the parliamentarians involved meant that a wide array of themes were included into Eurolat's parliamentary agenda. Among the subjects covered by Eurolat are topics such as: Migration, peace, security, defence, trade, the fight against poverty, and sustainable development. In contrast to the relationships which the EP has established with other regions of the world, Eurolat is a joint initiative and it is a compromise with regard to principles as human rights, democracy, good governance, multilateralism, and social cohesion; priorities that are shared by both regions (Stavridis and Ajenjo, 2010).

Since its creation, Eurolat has been composed by 150 members: 75 Europeans and 75 Latin Americans. This parity between the European and Latin American components represents the idea of the symmetry proposed to this bilateral/bi-regional relationship. This symmetrical composition is also reflected within the Presidency (simultaneously headed by one European and one Latin American co-President), Secretariat and Commissions. However, while all members from the European delegation are also Members of the European Parliament – a single continent-wide organisation – the Latin American representatives not only come from Parlatino, but also from other regional parliaments such as Parlacen, Parlandino, and Parlasur, as well as from the national congresses of Chile and Mexico – which are not represented in the three previous parliaments. As it will be discussed

subsequently, this fragmented parliamentary composition of the Latin American component hinders its organisational development, especially when compared to the European Parliament. As shown in Figure 1, aside from Eurolat’s plenary and secretariat sessions, this institution is divided into four thematic commissions, with the possibility of creating additional temporary commissions, according to the demand of parliamentarians. The activities of those commissions are, in accordance with Eurolat’s symmetric principles, also chaired by two co-Presidents, from both European and Latin American components.

**Figure 1. Eurolat’s Organisational Chart**



**Source:** Eurolat (2016), available at: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/intcoop/eurolat/documents/org\\_chart\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/intcoop/eurolat/documents/org_chart_en.pdf), access: 08/02/2016.

It is important to stress that the organisational model which structures Eurolat, as well as its working agenda, draws on the EP’s experience and parliamentary organisation rather than the Latin American ones. The numeric parity between the members of Europe and Latin America has not prevented the prevalence of the structure and agenda from one of the sides of the Atlantic in this parliamentary dimension (Stavridis and Ajenjo, 2010). The fact that the European Parliament was taken as a template during the development of regional parliaments

in Latin America indicates this mismatch concerning the behaviour of the regional parliaments which compose Eurolat (Erthal, 2006). In this sense, the undeniable organisational asymmetry between the EP and the Latin American parliaments has impacted upon Eurolat's agenda setting and structure. For instance, the EP's Secretariat is not only responsible for formatting and promoting the agenda of Eurolat but also for the maintenance of the website of this organisation, which is currently hosted at the virtual domain of the European Parliament (europarl.europa.eu). The lack of coordination within the Latin American component and the disorganisation of dialogue among the bureaucracies of these parliaments hindered a deeper involvement of Latin American officials in Eurolat's organisation. Therefore, European officials – due to their previous involvement in other inter-regional mechanisms – have occupied more responsibilities in organising the parliamentary sessions of Eurolat.

The analysis of the recent agenda of Eurolat reinforces the prevalence of the European *modus operandi* in EU-LAC parliamentary dialogue. Within the preparatory meetings of the plenary and commission sessions, it is noted the realisation of formal meetings among the European and Latin American 'political families', i.e. transnational political groups which gather political parties with shared ideologies. For instance, one day before Eurolat's plenary session of June 2015, some political meetings of EP's Christian-Democrats (centre-right), Socialist (centre-left) and United Left (far-left) political groups with their Latin American counterparts were scheduled (Eurolat, 2015). Nevertheless, this model of political-partisan organisation is strongly associated with the EP and not with Latin American politics. Although one can identify attempts to create transnational political groupings in Latin America, such as the Progressive Group within Parlasur – such as the association of left and centre-left parties of MERCOSUR – this tendency is still very weak, especially when compared to the the Europarties and political groups in the European Parliament (Luciano, 2015). The lack of political-partisan compatibility and organisation on the Latin American side has prevented a deeper ideological-partisan relation on the bi-regional scale.

Moreover, is also relevant to note that the interest in parliamentary relations with Latin America differs significantly according to the European parliamentarians involved. Traditionally, it prevails the participation of Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and French parliamentarians as members of the European component of Eurolat, which points out that historical, cultural and linguistic bonds have predominated in the willingness of European parliamentarians to dialogue with their Latin Americans partners (Stavridis and Ajenjo,

2010). Although Eurolat's agenda sought to follow and complement EU-LAC relations, the documents approved by this inter-parliamentary organisation are only consultative deliberations, exempt of real decision-making power and dependent on the interests of states and regional organisations from both sides of the Atlantic. Parliamentarians, through Eurolat, gained a space to discuss regional topics among themselves. However, their political opinion are not necessarily welcomed or considered by the governmental dimension of EU-LAC dialogue. In addition, the fragility sub-regional projects in Latin American – and consequently Latin American parliaments – have hindered the attention to issues of more regional orientation, overvaluing national political priorities and discourses (Stavridis and Ajenjo, 2010).

### **3. The Parliamentary Dimension of EU-CELAC New Strategic Agenda**

The convergence of European and Latin American governments on regional and global values (pacific resolutions to conflicts, multilateralism, democracy, human rights, asymmetries' reduction, among others) led to the formalisation and deepening of the dialogue between the two regions in the last decades (Saraiva, 2015). For the European side, a structured and permanent dialogue with Latin America could be important, as it could reinforce the role of the EU as a more relevant international actor (Stavridis and Ajenjo, 2010). One of the most significant elements of the EU's global performance is its assistance in the development of further integration projects around the world. Bi-regional relations with Latin America, in this context, would have the aim to guarantee the European support to the regional projects found in Latin America, through: the establishment of a political dialogue with the region; the signature of trade agreements; and the development of cooperation projects with Latin America and the Caribbean. In the domain of bi-regional political relations, Eurolat has a fundamental role in deepening the political, partisan and parliamentary dialogue between Europe and Latin America (Morazán et al, 2011).

Eurolat's agenda is not entirely different from the EU-LAC governmental dialogue. As previously seen, one of the main functions of Eurolat is to monitor and to supervise the activities and discussions derived from the EU-LAC relations. In 2011, it was launched the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), which aims to institutionalise an environment of exclusive political dialogue and coordination among the countries of the

region, as well as to established an organised forum to the relationship of the region with extra-regional actors (Sanahuja, 2014). Since CELAC's creation, the EU-LAC traditional dialogue is formalised within the EU-CELAC meetings.

A comparison of the agenda from the last plenary meetings of Eurolat with the last two EU-CELAC Summits (2013 and 2015) allows us to identify the degree of thematic convergence between the parliamentary and governmental dimensions of EU-Latin America relations. It is important to note, thus, that during the events of 2013 and 2015, Eurolat have also included in its agenda deliberations on women and gender issues, meetings with the civil society, as well as political discussions within a thematic workshop on migration. These diverse channels of dialogue with civil society and social issues inserted in the parliamentary agenda have enhanced the multifaceted axis of Eurolat, and, ultimately, of EU-LAC inter-parliamentary relations.

When one compares the 1<sup>st</sup> EU-CELAC Summit agenda (2013) with Eurolat's plenary session held previous the governmental meeting, it is possible to unveil similarities and differences from the topics of deliberation between the diplomatic and parliamentary axis of the EU-LAC bi-regional relations. As shown in Table 1, it is observed a high convergence degree on the topics found in the key-documents of the parliamentary and governmental meetings, especially on issues such as migration, sustainable development, climate changes and drugs, which are seen in the political debates of the EU-CELAC Summit, but also had a particular relevance in the parliamentary deliberations of Eurolat. However, Eurolat's message goes beyond the essentially bi-regionals topics, inasmuch as it has mentioned the situation and political contexts from some countries of Latin America in the referred period (Colombia, Haiti, and the question of Malvinas/Falklands). The official documents of the 1<sup>st</sup> EU-CELAC meeting have deliberately focused on global and multilateral issues, avoiding references to any particular political situation of countries from both regions.

**Table 1. Topics of the governmental and parliamentary meetings in the context of the 1st EU-CELAC Summit (Santiago, 2013)**

<i>Summit/Action Plan</i>	<i>Eurolat's message</i>
Global challenges Science, research, innovation, and technology	Principles and institutions of the bi-regional partnership Sustainable development, investment,

Sustainable development, climate changes, biodiversity, energy	innovation
Regional integration and interconnectivity	Fights against drugs and organised crime
Migration	Migration
Education and employment	Globalisation and financial crisis
World drugs problem	Climate changes
Gender	Renewable energies
Investment and entrepreneurship	<b>Positions on Colombia, Haiti and Malvinas/Falklands</b>

Sources: elaborated by the author, based on EU-CELAC Action Plan 2013-2015 (2013); Santiago Declaration (2013) and Eurolat's Message to the 1<sup>st</sup> EU-CELAC Summit (2013).

In 2015, within the context of the 2nd EU-CELAC Summit, it is observed the maintenance of previous topics of the agenda, but at the same time the addition of new issues, especially by the governmental meeting, which gave more attention to subjects such as superior education, citizens' security, and the post-2015 Development Agenda. It is interesting to note that in this second meeting, representatives from both sides of the Atlantic have referred to Cuba, Colombia and Venezuela in the final communiqué of the Summit, thereby mentioning some political events such as. Table 2 (below) illustrates the thematic diversity identified in both the governmental summit and Eurolat's meeting.

**Table 2. Topics of the governmental and parliamentary meetings in the context of the 2st EU-CELAC Summit (Brussels, 2015)**

<i>Summit/Action Plan</i>	<i>Message of Eurolat's co-presidencies</i>
Global challenges	Principles and institutions of the bi-regional partnership
Science, research, innovation, and technology	Sustainable development, investment, innovation
Sustainable development, climate changes, biodiversity, energy	Fights against drugs and organised crime
Regional integration and interconnectivity	Migration
Migration	Globalisation and financial crisis
Education and employment	Climate changes and renewable energies
World drugs problem	Post-2015 Development Agenda
Gender	<b>Situation on Cuba, Colombia, Venezuela, Malvinas/Falklands, Ukraine and the Mediterranean</b>
Investment and entrepreneurship	

<b>Superior education</b>	
<b>Citizens' security</b>	
<b>Situation on Cuba, Colombia, and Venezuela</b>	

Sources: elaborated by the author, based on EU-CELAC Action Plan (2015); Brussels Declaration (2015); Message from the European component of Eurolat to the 2<sup>nd</sup> EU-CELAC Summit (2015); and Message from the Latin American component of Eurolat to the 2<sup>nd</sup> EU-CELAC Summit (2015).

In contrast to 2013, Eurolat has not emitted a single joint message to the EU-CELAC governmental meeting of 2015. Due to some divergences of opinion about the electoral and political situation in Venezuela, the European and Latin American components have not reached a common political position on the subject and preferred to emit two different messages, through their co-presidencies, to the EU-CELAC meeting – which is the particular topic of the next section of this article. In this sense, both parliamentary messages were evaluated, identifying the issues raised in both documents to the governmental summit. While the European side has positioned itself on specific situations in Europe (Ukraine and the Mediterranean) and Latin America (Cuba, Venezuela and Colombia), the Latin American component only mentioned issues from Latin America, with particular opinions regarding Venezuela and Malvinas/Falklands.

As observed in previous tables, both diplomatic and parliamentary dimensions of EU-CELAC relations introduced a significant thematic range in their agenda. Although the diversity of topics is maintained in the meetings of 2015, more issues are included in the agenda, especially from the governmental side. In both meetings, there is a relevant thematic convergence between the executive and parliamentary bi-regional dialogues. A complementarity between the parliamentary and traditional diplomatic talks is evident when attention is given to the messages sent by Eurolat to the governments of both regions. However, the fact that these two axes of Europe-Latin America relations are publishing positions on common issues does not necessarily mean that the parliamentary opinions are significantly influencing the diplomatic agenda. Although a substantive rhetorical acknowledgement was made by governmental instances of the role of Eurolat in the parliamentary dialogue between the regions, this organisation occupies a fragile and limited space within the setting of inter-governmental positions of EU-CELAC Summits. In contrast to Eurolat, which is a body that aims to represent the plurality of political views and opinions on global and regional issues, EU-CELAC as a forum is an environment based on consensus-

building among the states and regions involved. Albeit Eurolat presents itself as a relevant instrument of parliamentary diplomacy at the bi-regional level, this channel still presents significant limits when it tries to impact the political positions from the traditional diplomatic means.

Moreover, the EU-LAC or EU-CELAC dialogue still encounters some fundamental difficulties in becoming an increasing structured and institutionalised diplomatic mechanism. While Europe, through the EU, has succeed in producing more coordinated and unified postures in bi-regional relations – by the growing participation of Brussels institutions and specifically the European External Action Service – Latin America, on the other hand, due its internal differences, has not yet constituted itself as an coordinated international actor able to dialogue with the EU and other international powers, or even to conform joint positions on international issues (Saraiva, 2015). Although the establishment of CELAC is a clear intent to establish a Latin America forum to regional coordination and extra-regional dialogue, the plurality of regional and sub-regional projects as well as the multiplicity of agenda of these institutions on the Latin American continent diluted the deepening capacity of this newly-created regional organisation. Its low level of institutionalisation and the dependency of its activities and agenda from the *Pro Tempore* Presidencies contribute to the incipient degree of coordination within the Latin American side, especially when contrasted to the high bureaucratisation found from the European partners (Sanahuja, 2015).

Last but not least, the economic and political transformations of the international system observed in the last decades present new challenges to the EU-CELAC bi-regional agenda. The emergence of new international actors, particularly in Asia-Pacific region, has relativized the priority given to the EU by Latin America. While Central America and the Caribbean still have a significant interdependence degree with the United States, South American countries started to have China as their main trade partner (Gratius, 2013). The Asian ascension will likely decrease the centrality of the North Atlantic in international relations. Therefore, the dialogue with Asian partners – exemplified by the recent establishment of the CELAC-China forum (2015) – is becoming even more attractive to the Latin American countries, which would ultimately reduce the attention paid to the Europeans, and particularly to EU-CELAC bi-regional dialogue. On the other hand, the poor economic performance of Latin American in the last years (CEPAL, 2015) has changed the previous optimistic scenario of the region, which tends to reduce the potential opportunities to European investments in the Latin American countries.

#### **4. A Political Division between Europeans and Latin Americans: The Venezuelan case**

As mentioned before, Eurolat's session of 2015 presents particular elements which might indicate some important transformations within the political and ideological coordination among the European and Latin American sides. Distinctly from previous meetings, when a final consensual document was adopted by both European and Latin American components, the plenary of 2015 have not reached a common political position on what should be sent as a parliamentary message to the EU-CELAC Summit, which was held just a couple of days after Eurolat's meeting. A single topic has fundamentally provoked this polarisation between representatives of both continents: The position on Venezuela's electoral and political situation. While the majority of the European parliamentarians, represented by socialist MEP Ramón Jáuregui Atondo (Spain), co-President of the European component, have defended a stronger and condemnatory position on the human rights track record in Venezuela, the Latin American component, led by its co-President, left-wing Central-American parliamentarian Leonel Vásquez Búcaro (El Salvador), has taken a more defensive position on the Venezuelan case, considering that a very critical position on Venezuelan government would violate the principle of the non-intervention on domestic affairs. As both components have not reached a consensual opinion on the final document, each one has produced a specific message delivered at the 2015 EU-CELAC Summit.

A strong commitment to principles such as democracy, human rights, and freedom of expression has been one of the characteristics of not just Eurolat, but of all mechanisms of parliamentary diplomacy found in Europe and Latin America. However, when it comes to reacting to any breach of these values, these parliamentary organisations tend to assume a less assertive view, prioritising the construction of a common and more comprehensive position among the parties. Observing the previous meetings of Eurolat, Stavridis and Ajenjo (2010) emphasised that *“on specific conflictual situations, both internal and international, the EUROLAT Parliamentary Assembly has been rather cautious and limited in its statements and declarations”*. Interestingly, Eurolat's plenary sessions of 2015 have, for the first time, escaped this logic and assumed a more polarised and emphatic position, specifically on Venezuela's political and electoral situation. The main political forces of the European Parliament have presented a strong willing to position themselves assertively on the issue, regardless any further resistance of the Latin American component.

As a more assertive declaration would not be consensually reached with the Latin Americans, the European component decided to split the parliamentary message to the intergovernmental Summit into two communications, which would be made by each co-President. The message delivered by the European co-President to the EU-CELAC Summit and the subsequent letter sent by European co-President Jáuregui Atondo to the European Council shed some light on the content of the position taken by the majority of the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) regarding the Venezuelan case. Therefore, not only have the Europeans expressed a deep concern with the electoral situation currently found in Venezuela, they have also urged that political prisoners should be released by the Venezuelan government, guaranteeing the freedom of expression and of opposition in this country. Thus, MEPs emphasised “*that the free democratic process is incompatible with the existence of political prisoners and requires unrestricted enjoyment of all freedoms under the rule of law by all political and civic representatives of Venezuelan society*” (EUROLAT, 2015a, p.12).

Moreover, the decision that the European parliamentarians preferred to emit a stronger and separated document on Venezuela – contrasting to Latin American reluctant position – can be verified in the letter sent by the European co-President to the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk. After expressing the disappointment of the majority of MEPs with the EU-CELAC intergovernmental final declaration, which have not condemned the violations of political rights and freedom of press in Venezuela, the Spanish MEP stated that this was the reason why the Europeans decided to not signing a joint document with the Latin American component, delivering a more emphatic declaration on this issue (Jáuregui Atondo, 2015).

On the other hand, the Latin American component has not been silent regarding the European position on Venezuela. In fact, as expressed in the message presented by the Latin American co-Presidency to the governmental meeting, Latin American parliamentarians – even from distinct parliaments and ideological positions – have unanimously supported a rather defensive opinion on the matter. This is evident in the emphasis given to the principle of non-interference in internal/domestic affairs by Latin American parliamentary message at EU-CELAC meeting. Latin Americans have defended the contemporary electoral tradition of Venezuelan democracy, supporting the government’s respect to the Constitution and to the democratic institutions, as well as referring to the significant popular participation on last elections. Moreover, they strongly denounced the European parliamentary posture on the

issue, which was clearly seen as interventionist initiative by the Latin American counterpart (EUROLAT, 2015b).

It is important to stress that the Latin American message to the Summit was approved unanimously, meaning that no regional/national parliament or political party of the region decided to oppose it. This might not be surprising. After all, it could be assumed that this message would be defended by the left-wing parties of the region, closer to the Bolivarian ideology of Venezuela's government. Also, a resilient opposition from Latin American conservative parties to this declaration was also expected, inasmuch as they have been outspoken critics of the Venezuelan situation domestically. However, no formal political (conservative) opposition was found in the Latin American message to the EU-CELAC Summit. In this sense, recent Latin American reactions to the Venezuelan case at Eurolat showed that, the lack of previous institutional coordination within the Latin American component – fragmented into a couple of sub-regional and national parliaments – was surpassed when parliamentarians from the region built a consensual defensive position as a reaction to the European strong condemnation of the electoral context in Venezuela. Parliamentary disorganisation, low degree of bureaucratisation, and ideological diversity were overcome by the Latin American component and a strong political convergence was possible to be established against the European position on Venezuela.

While the Latin Americans have reached a common position on the matter, the European delegation was not entirely supportive of the declaration of its co-Presidency, showing the strength of the ideological cleavages within the European Parliament. Representatives of the European United Left at Eurolat, a far-left European political group, have supported the Latin American and not the European declaration during Eurolat's discussions. This trend indicates that although traditional European political groups such as the Socialists and Christian-democrats have not been able to build deeper ideological ties with contemporary Latin American centre-left and right parties, the European United Left has successfully established a transnational dialogue with the Bolivarian forces in Latin America, which ultimately led to their support to the Latin American defensive position on Venezuela, going against the majority of the European component.

In this sense, the observation of the political discussions and document from the Eurolat's plenary session of 2015 – with especial focus on how the Venezuela's case was handled by both European and Latin American parliamentarians – brings important lessons about the development of political convergence of the Latin American parliaments as a

reaction to the strong European position on the issue. Firstly, the majority of the European component has preferred to have a much stronger position on the electoral situation in Venezuela, instead of having a consensual but softer declaration with its Latin American counterpart. Distinctly from the past, the Europeans have decided to give more importance to voice assertively against the violations of human rights and democratic principles in Venezuela. However, as stated in the previous section, they not only have position themselves on political events on Latin America but also have stressed some contemporary European challenges (Ukraine and the Mediterranean) in their message to the intergovernmental meeting. This trend is extremely important as it means that political issues from both sides of the Atlantic should be addressed by the parliamentary dimension of EU-LAC relations, emphasising the symmetric principles of this organisation. Eurolat and ultimately the EU-CELAC forum should be able to equally mention the contemporary political challenges from Latin America and Europe.

Secondly, despite the fragmentation of the Latin American component into regional and national parliaments and the high autonomy degree of these parliamentarians at Eurolat – not organised in formal political groups as the Europeans (Pires, 2009; Stavridis and Ajenjo, 2010), the Latin American component has reached an important degree of convergence concerning the Venezuelan case. They built a unified and defensive position on the electoral and political context of this country, achieving even the consent of conservative representatives of the region, which preferred to stick with the Latin American component against the European ‘interventionist’ position. While it prevails a unanimous position in the Latin American side, the European message was not unified inasmuch as far-left MEPs chose to support LAC position due to their transnational ideological connexions with left-wing parties from Latin America. While in the Latin American side a ‘regional’ cleavage has prevailed in the approval of the component’s message, hindering any ideological dissent, the strength of formal European political groups has prevented a European consensual declaration, which led to a more ideologically pluralistic view on the final document of this component.

The parliamentary position adopted by the Latin Americans at Eurolat is not isolated from other parliamentary forums of the region. It must be seen in relation to other inter-parliamentary relations of existing parliamentary organisations within Latin America, such as the regional parliaments (Parlatino, Parlandino, Parlacen and Parlasur) as well as the national congresses of the region. These overlapping instances tend to strengthen the international

connections among parliaments and parliamentarians, intensifying their diplomatic influence vis-à-vis the intergovernmental negotiations (Jancic, 2014). For instance, Parlasur has previously discussed the political situation of Venezuela at their regular sessions. However, differing from Latin American defensive position at Eurolat on the matter, this body has put a strong emphasis on their concerns about the political conjuncture of Venezuela, calling for the establishment of a political dialogue between the governmental and opposition forces<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, within Eurolat parliamentarians from Latin America, some also representatives of Parlasur and Parlandino, preferred to adopt a more supportive position on Venezuelan politics rather than to follow a more critical position, which was assumed by the European component.

Although a significant dynamism of parliamentarians from both side of the Atlantic was seen in the deliberations on Venezuela's case, some important aspects have limited the real influence of Eurolat in the inter-governmental decision-making process within EU-LAC relations. First, it formally presents limited deliberative functions and almost non-existing mechanisms to directly impact the intergovernmental negotiations – the only formal moment in which Eurolat's voice is heard by the governments of both regions is through the brief message that this body regularly sends to EU-CELAC biannual meetings.

Second, parliamentary diplomacy faces some key problems when trying to perform a more effective and influent position internationally. Those issues are usually related to the limited availability of time, expertise and funding of this forums; the discontinuities of their members, hindering the deepening of the parliamentary dialogue as well as losing the institutional memory of the organisations; and the distinction of (semi)parliamentary regimes in Europe vis-à-vis presidential systems found Latin America, which bring differences of relevance and expectations from the parliamentary representatives of these continents (Malamud and Stavridis, 2011). Third, while the EP has gained increasing powers within the European political system, regional parliaments in Latin America are characterised by their consultative and marginal role within integration, which has distanced themselves from the formulation and monitoring of regional policies (Malamud and Sousa, 2007). Therefore, these factors altogether have limited substantially the role of the inter-parliamentary dialogue within the EU-CELAC bi-regional relations.

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<sup>2</sup> Parlasur's Motion on the political situation of Venezuela, available at: <http://www.parlamentodelmercosur.org/innovaportal/v/8155/1/parlasur/parlamento-del-mercosur-llama-al-dialogo-y-la-paz-en-venezuela.html> , accessed in 21/04/2016.

Although they might face substantive limitations to successfully meet citizen's expectations of holding governmental relations into account (IPU and UNDP, 2012), EU-LAC parliamentary diplomacy, institutionalised by Eurolat, has helped to strengthen political communication at the bi-regional level, aiming to promote a shared identity among the Latin American and European parties, mostly grounded in the referred principles, such as democracy, human rights, multilateralism and regional integration. Finally, as observed through the plural parliamentary reactions to the political situation of Venezuela, parliamentary actors and institutions can play a major role in publicising inter-regional political debates and contested decisions within EU-LAC relations.

## **Conclusion**

The parliamentary dimension of EU-LAC relations is marked by a tradition of regular meetings between European and Latin American parliamentarians. Since the 1970s, parliamentarians and political parties from both regions have exchanged experiences and political opinions on bi-regional topics, especially with regard to defence of democracy and human rights in both regional contexts. This parliamentary connection even precedes than any bi-regional relations at the intergovernmental level. The constitution of Eurolat in 2006 made this historical relation more institutionalised, providing to this inter-parliamentary dialogue a formal and structured mechanism of parliamentary diplomacy, aiming to make this dimension more influential on the governmental side of EU-LAC relations.

A comparative analysis of the official documents emitted by Eurolat and by the EU-CELAC governmental sessions in 2013 and 2015 confirms a high degree of thematic convergence between the meetings from both bi-regional dimensions as well as a more emphatic position from the parliamentary axis on several political situations or national crises observed in Latin America, with particular focus on the political events of Colombia, Cuba, and Venezuela. Albeit the diplomatic actors acknowledge the important role of Eurolat, as well as other social, academic and business forums between Europe and Latin America, these dimensions have a limited degree of influence on the decisions taken by the Heads of State and Government from both regions. The fact that the Eurolat's plenary sessions are annual while the EU-CELAC Summits are held biannually reinforces this mismatch between the governmental and parliamentary dimension of this relationship.

On the other hand, the multiplicity of dimensions and issues found in EU-LAC dialogue has guaranteed a bi-regional relation of significant plurality and diversity. The presence of shared principles and values – such as democracy, human rights, multilateralism and regional integration – has favoured the usefulness of this relationship, especially when compared to other regions of the globe. The creation of CELAC and the change from EU-LAC to EU-CELAC meetings have brought new expectations from the deepening of this relation, in the face of a scenario full of global and regional challenges and transformation which will certainly impact both regions on distinct ways.

Although the symmetry of European and Latin American parliamentary representations is one of the principles of this political body, the greater bureaucratisation and experience from the European side have led to a more significant weight of this component in the organisation and agenda-setting of Eurolat during its first years of activities. Not only have the foundation of Eurolat being constituted as a more simplified strategy for the European parliamentarians to dialogue with representatives from the whole Latin America as it has built an innovative environment to the connecting and convergence of regional parliaments and parliamentarians from Latin America, inexistent since then. In this sense, the fragmentation of the Latin American component had been seen as one of the great obstacles faced by Eurolat, along with its low capacity of influence on the bi-regional governmental negotiations.

However, Eurolat's meetings of 2015 have presented an increasing coordination of the Latin American component, countering the previous behaviour found among the Latin American representatives at this inter-parliamentary organisation. As a reaction to the stronger position adopted by the majority of the European parliamentarians to condemn the current political situation in Venezuela, the Latin American side assumed a unanimously defensive posture on the issue, defending the Venezuelan democratic traditions and considering the European declaration as a rather 'interventionist' one. Given that a common position was not reached between the two components, two separated messages were delivered to the 2<sup>nd</sup> EU-CELAC governmental Summit, voiced by the European and the Latin American co-Presidents. While the European message was accepted by only the majority of the MEPs, the Latin America declaration was approved by all representatives from this continent, also having a particular support from the European far-left.

Although Eurolat has a marginalised role in the EU-LAC governmental relations, it represents a clear instrument of parliamentary diplomacy and an intent to bring the plurality

of political positions to the bi-regional level, inserting parliamentarians and political parties from both regions within this strategic and traditional dialogue. The Venezuelan case seems an interesting episode in which representatives from the European and Latin American parliaments have not found a common political opinion, preferring to emit diverse and stronger positions on the issue. While the governmental dimension assumed a consensual and loose message on Venezuela, members of EuroLat decided to agree to disagree.

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