The European Union and the promotion of regional integration as a way to resolve regional conflicts in Latin America – still a viable option?

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Abstract

Latin America, at once, one of the most peaceful regions on earth, yet, marked by often severe instability and long-standing conflicts, as the military coup in Honduras in 2009 or the ongoing civil conflict in Colombia illustrate.

With long-standing historical ties and its importance as one of the region`s most important trading partners, the European Union has often actively promoted regional integration as a way resolving regional conflicts. However, the ongoing economic crisis as well as the stagnation of integration initiatives in Latin America, have put a question mark over the role the EU can play in the resolution of conflicts in this region.

Taking the Colombian civil conflict and the EU's role in Central America as case studies, the paper will ask whether the 'European model' of multilateral integration has a future in the context of a region which is becoming more assertive globally whilst being internally more fragmented.

The paper investigates whether and how the EU will need to adapt its approach in relation to regional conflicts in order to stay relevant. The paper will conclude by making policy-relevant suggestions on how the suggested changes can be achieved.

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1. Introduction

Latin America is a curious region: On the one hand considered to be one of the most peaceful regions in earth since the end of the Cold War, as Herz (2008) has pointed out, it is, at the same time, home to one of the most long-standing civil conflicts in the world (Colombia). The continent, although democratic, is also characterized by often severe political instability, as is the case of Venezuela currently or Honduras after the military coup of 2009. Equally, whilst Latin America is-alongside Europe-the region that has most experimented with regionalism as political tool for problem resolution, the region is marked by an 'alphabet soup' of regional organizations (Glickhouse, 2012) and several authors, such as Malamud and Gardini (2012) have attested that Latin American regionalism is in crisis and retreat.

This combination of seemingly contradictory facts make Latin America a fascinating case study for evaluating the role of the European Union in the promotion of regionalism as a tool for conflict resolution. The EU has a long-standing interest in Latin America and, for some time during the 1990s in particular, Latin America was a clear example of the EU's attempts to export its 'model' of regionalism throughout the world.

However, recent developments in both Latin America and Europe have meant that such attempts at 'exporting' the European model have hit the buffers, as Lehmann (2013) and Lehmann, Neto and Haddad (2014) have already outlined. This being the case, this paper aims to assess what role the European Union *can* realistically play in trying to positively influence areas of instability and conflict in Latin America. Furthermore, it will be asked what the European Union has to do in order to act more effectively in Latin America, bearing in mind the particular local circumstances that it encounters.

The paper will start by giving a brief outline of EU-Latin American relations. Following that, the paper will specifically investigate two cases of EU actions to influence conflicts and/or instability, namely its reaction to the military coup in Honduras in 2009 and the civil war in Colombia. Taking these two case studies, it will be asked whether any general conclusions for the EU's role in Latin America can be drawn and what

actions the EU should take to make itself a more effective actor in the region. Finally, areas for further research will be outlined.

2. Europe-Latin American relations in a historical context[4]

The EU has had a long-standing relationship with Latin America which is based on trade, significant historical links and common interests. These express themselves perhaps most clearly in the economic sphere where, as Ferreira (2013) has pointed out, over the last 10 years or so, trade between the two regions has 'doubled to around $280 billion'. The historical links can most obviously be seen through the ties that bind Latin America to the former colonial powers – Spain and Portugal – whose entry into the European Union in 1986 played an important role in strengthening the ties between the regions. As Hoste (1999: 3) put it:

> '[I]t is not pure hazard if this interest in Latin America suddenly increased after the entrance of Spain and Portugal within the Community. When those two countries joined the EC, it was legitimate for them to ask for the same kind of aid for their former colonies that France and Great Britain were giving to theirs through the EC.'

Finally, politically, the two regions have been notable for the – at least rhetorical – commitment respective governments have shown towards the idea of 'regionalism' as a political and economic tool, as Dabène (2009) has shown in relation to Latin America and Hill and Smith (2011) have made clear in relation to the European Union, amongst others.

Yet, these similarities have always masked significant differences in relation to the *context* within which regionalism occurred and the strategic and practical *justification* which have underpinned it. This becomes quite clear when one looks at the history of Latin American regionalism.

Ever since Latin America achieved its independence from – mostly – Spain during the 19th century, some of the heroes of this independence dreamt about Latin American unity. Foremost amongst those pushing such ideas was Simon Bolivar who actually

[4] This section is a shortened, and slightly different, version of a paper presented by Lehmann, Neto and Haddad (2014) at the Annual Conference of the *British International Studies Association* in Dublin.

instigated a Pan-American Congress during the 19th century as a way of consolidating Latin American independence against further possible interference by either the Europeans or the United States, as Pastor (2005) has demonstrated.

This is a critical point in the sense that, historically, regionalism has been used in Latin America to define the region *against* an outside force. In other words, regionalism has generally been defined negatively and has had very little to do with achieving internal, regional objectives, in stark contrast to the European experience which was, as is well known, above all an exercise to bring France and Germany together within a broader project of reconciliation, peace and economic reconstruction, combining both practical and normative elements, as Manners (2008) has illustrated.

Critically, in Latin America, even within this very limited framework, there were significant dividing lines between regional governments, as the so-called first wave of Regionalism after the Second World War makes plain, when the key consideration dividing the regional governments where the position towards the Cold War in general and the United States in particular. At the same time, there were significant differences in terms of the definition of the 'region' and, therefore, who should and could or should not and could not participate in regional schemes, as Lehmann (2013) has demonstrated. As a result, Latin American regionalism was marked by sub-regional organizations whose objectives were often very broadly defined.

As such, it is perhaps no surprise that the European Union did not have a coherent relationship with Latin America as a whole especially bearing in mind that, within the context of the Cold War, the EU's room for maneuver was extremely limited, playing, almost inevitably, second fiddle to the United States, as Hoste (1999) has pointed out. As such, for much of this period, the EU's main focus in relation to Latin America was trade. This included cooperation with, for instance, existing regional bodies in Latin America, like the Andean Community, in sectors like Agriculture and the energy sector (European Commission, 2007), as will be further explored below.

Yet, from the 1980s onwards, the EU itself diverged in its activities in the Americas. Whilst, in South America, the organization's focus remained principally on trade, in Central America, the 1980s saw the EU engage as a significant and serious *peace actor*

in the various civil and inter-state conflicts and tensions that marked the region during that period, as Dykmann (2004) has shown. In other words, the role of the EU differed between the sub-regions due to particular circumstances. This divergence has significant consequences until today in many spheres, ranging from the openness of the sub-regions to regionalism, its justification, the standing of the EU and its ability to promote and implement its ideas in Latin America, as will be further explored below.

Ironically, during the 1990s these differences seemed to become less important as, for the first time perhaps, there seemed to exist the possibility of the European Union engaging with the region as a whole on the basis of a clear and coherent *regional* model which was converging with that of the European Union, based on the opening up of markets, insertion into the international economy and liberal democracy. Several key factors can explain this convergence.

The first was the re-orientation towards regionalism by the newly democratic governments in Latin America from the late 1980s onwards. Freed from the political considerations which the Cold War had placed upon them, these governments had a certain amount of freedom to re-orientate their respective foreign and economic policy. In several cases and, crucially, in the case of Brazil and Argentina, this also led to an opening of the economy and a conscious attempt to integrate more actively with the world economy. As a result, there was the beginning of what Fawcett (2005: 30) has called a process of 'competitive region-building', trying to emulate, above all, the economic success of the European project, the single market fitting in nicely with the more liberal economic policies and rhetoric. Overall, then, there was an attempt and an opportunity to engage politically and economically on an international scale.[5]

This re-orientation played into the hands of the European Union which, during the 1990s, was actively promoting the export of its 'model' of regionalism, based on just the principles outlined above. With regards to Latin America, the European Commission stated clearly that promoting regional integration remains a 'strategic policy priority' in respect of all the major political and economic objectives pursued by the organization, seeing integration as an 'effective tool to foster sustainability and

[5] See, for instance, Miyazaki & Santos (2013)

growth' (European Commission 2009: 7), especially through the continued support for 'sustainable infrastructure development […], promoting interconnectivity [which] implies devising joint initiatives and projects involving the public sector, the private sector, and financial institutions' (*ibid*.). This is particularly urgent since crime and political instability in some parts of the region have been identified as increasing problems whose solutions are key political priorities' (*ibid*.). Reading the founding treaties of organizations such as MERCOSUL, UNASUL, the Central American Integration System (CICA) or, more recently, CELAC one can see clear similarities between the principles stipulated there and those promoted by the EU, with emphasis on free trade, respect for Human Rights, a commitment to democracy and reducing social inequality.[6]

Yet, despite the undoubted approximation between the regions from the 1990s onwards in both political and economic terms, the current literature identifies clearly that both Latin American and European regionalism are in crisis, that there has been a cooling in the relationship between the two regions, as Malamud (2012) has outlined in some detail. Lehmann, Neto and Haddad (2014) have outlined some of the general factors that can explain this current state. Amongst the key contemporary factors are the crisis of the European Union which has made 'model Europe' far less attractive to outsiders, declining interest in regionalism and a return to 'sovereignty' by Latin American governments which, in turn, can also be explained by increasingly deep divisions between those same governments over the economic and political model to be pursued. Finally, as Shifter (2012) has shown, there are also attempts by several Latin American countries, such as Brazil, Mexico or Venezuela, to become more assertive on the world stage individually.

Within this broad context, the aim of this current paper is to look more specifically at the *sub-regions*, that is, at Central and South America individually, in order to see what the EU realistically *can* do in Latin America and what it has to change in order become more effective.

[6] See, for instance, MERCOSUL (2014)

3. The EU in Central America: From peace actor to what?

As mentioned above, the Cold War was, for much of its duration, a serious impediment to the EU having a significant political role in Central America, a region which was severely impacted upon by the dispute for territory and influence between the two superpowers, a dispute which caused significant internal and regional conflicts, with civil wars in Guatemala and Nicaragua, as well as interstate wars, such as the one between Honduras and El Salvador, being but the clearest examples.[7] This constant instability also had a negative impact on the importance of Central America as a trade partner, so that, as a general rule, contacts between Central America and the EU were quite limited (Hoste, 1999).

It was only in the early 1980s that the European Union began to seriously engage with Central America during a time when, according to the European Commission (2007: 3)

> 'Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua were racked by a series of internal disputes, largely as a result of economic and social inequalities and repressive political regimes and fuelled by the policies pursued in the region by foreign powers. These conflicts also affected Costa Rica and Honduras due to the presence of armed groups operating outside the countries concerned and large numbers of displaced persons.'

In order to overcome these problems and create durable stability in the region, a series of diplomatic initiatives were launched out of these emerged the so-called San José Dialogue of 1984 - with Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama - which forms the cornerstone of EU-Central American relations. The aim of this – as well as the various complementary diplomatic initiatives launched at that time – was explicitly to 'to extend peace, democracy, security and economic and social development throughout the Central American region' (European Commission, 2003a: Foreword).

According to Abrahamson (2008: 3), from the very beginning of this process, these objectives were tied to particular policies based on the EU's historical experience which included, amongst other things, 'promoting regional integration across all sectors.' In

[7] The 'soccer war' between Honduras and El Salvador of 1969 being perhaps the most talked-about example. See Kapuscinski (1992)

other words, in a situation where a region was experiencing serious strife, death and destruction, the EU tried to promote its particular historical model as one to follow.

Critically, in Central America, local governments were very receptive to such ideas. As Mahoney (2001) has pointed out, attempts to integrate Central American countries – indeed to unify them as one independent state – have been made ever since Spain gave up possession of the region which, historically, it had colonized as a single unit, the Kingdom of Guatemala. Whilst these attempts were never successful in the long-term, it is crucial to note that regional integration is *not* a new idea either in the political or economic sphere, later conflicts between the separate 'units' notwithstanding. There has, hence, always been a 'meeting of minds' between the EU and its attempts to project its 'model' on the global stage and Central America and its historic attachment to being a unified actor and its consciousness of common problems and challenges.

During the 1980s, these factors combined with the context of the Cold War actually *helped* the European Union in its actions in Central America. Firstly, the long-standing nature of some of Central America's conflicts – such as the Civil War in Guatemala which lasted from 1960 to 1996, or persistent conflict between Honduras and El Salvador – seemed to show clearly that superpower involvement in the region may well contribute to *prolonging* conflicts rather than resolving them, bearing in mind the entrenched ideological positions of the superpowers, and the inflexible policies that flowed from those positions, as well as the unresponsive and authoritarian governments they helped bring to or keep in power.[8] Added to this were the problems those same superpowers had experienced, especially the United States in Vietnam during the 1970s but also the Soviet Union in Afghanistan at the time the dialogue with the EU was being established. Combined, these factors allowed for the emergence of the EU as a *neutral* peace actor, a fact that has been emphasized by virtually all political and diplomatic actors in Central America interviewed for this research. As Hoste (1999) has shown, the EU, then, effectively acted as a mediator between the conflict parties and which enabled the signing of the so-called 'Esquipulas Agreements I and II' in 1986 and 1987, which contributed significantly to the stabilization of the region.

[8] See, for instance, Schlesinger *er al.* (2006)

With this success behind it, the EU in fact expanded its involvement in Central America, focusing on the 'other' parts of its model. In 1996 and 2002, the San José dialogue was both renewed and extended to include themes like the environment, humanitarian aid, security and bi-regional relations, whilst making a clear link between those issue areas and the strengthening of Central American regionalism (Guillemette & Villa, 2007). At the same time, with regards to trade, the EU instigated a so-called 'Special regime' of trade preferences. The privileges that this regime entailed were linked, at least on paper, to 'the fight against the production and the trafficking of drugs' (Lopez & Garza 2009: 9), as well as to good governance and sustainability. In other words, the EU made a clear attempt to 'move on' from 'traditional' conflicts towards seeing security challenges in a much broader context, linking issues such as drug-trafficking to, for instance, governance.

This focus has been a recurring theme in the EU's dealing with Central America ever since. In 2003, during the renewal of the San José Process, focus was given to the promotion of Human Rights and democracy, reduction of poverty, protection of the environment, food security, rural development and debt relief, (Guillemette & Villa, 2007). In 2004, this focus was widened again to include persistent social inequality, transparency of the judicial process and system, as well as the consolidation of the democratic political and electoral process (Cumbre AL y C-UE, 2004). This development culminated in the signing, in 2012, of a full Association Agreement between the European Union and the Central American Integration System (SICA), which includes an economic, social/cultural and political part.[9]

From the point of view of the European Union, the agreement is a very important step in the consolidation of the integration process in Central America. According to the EU, in the economic area 'this means the creation of a customs union and economic integration in Central America […]. [The] closer economic integration between the countries of the Central American region [and Europe] is important for attracting investment to the region and helping local businesses develop the strength in their regional market to compete internationally' (European Commission, 2012a). In the political and cooperation areas, the European Union searches for reinforcing democratic values,

[9]See European Commission (2012a).

respect for human rights and principles of the rule of law, individual freedom, State reform and public administration (*ibid*.).

Moving on to the case of Honduras specifically, one can clearly identify very similar priorities. In the 2001 Memorandum of Understanding, which established the country as a strategic EU partner, aid was designated for sustainable management of natural resources, local development and decentralization and education. Between 2007 and 2013, priority was given to social cohesion, management of forestry resources, improving the legal system and public safety (European Commission, 2010a).

Interestingly, at least on paper, these priorities did not change much in response to the military coup of 2009, which deposed the democratically elected president Manuel Zelaya. Whilst the EU cut diplomatic with the country immediately after the coup, such relations were quickly re-established after the elections of 2009 which brought Porfirio Lobo to power, elections which the EU considered a 'significant step forward in solving the crisis in Honduras' (Council of the European Union, 2009) and it is here that one can see one of the key problems the EU facing in its dealings in Central America in particular but also Latin America in general.

For one former foreign minister of Honduras, just as for one current senior Honduran diplomat, the coup was actually necessary in order to *re-establish* democratic rule.[10] For them, the EU had an important role in assisting in this process and both pointed out that the EU election observer mission of 2013, in particular, considered the elections to be fair and left no doubt about the legitimacy of the eventual winner, current President Juan Orlando Hernandez (European Union, 2013). Senior EU diplomats involved in this mission interviewed for this research agreed that the elections were generally fair and that 'significant progress' had been made in re-establishing democracy and the rule of law in Honduras. In fact, one EU ambassador based in the region argued that the EU and its promotion of regionalism over the years have had a significant and positive impact in *containing* and managing the impact of the coup: 'Without regionalism, there [may have been] civil war'.[11]

[10] Interviewed respectively in January 2014 and November 2013.
[11] Interview with EU diplomat, January 2014

Interestingly, this same diplomat emphasized again and again that the key aim of the European Union was *stability*, something confirmed by representatives of other regional organizations working in Honduras, such as the Organization of American States (OAS).[12] As such, the quick re-establishment of diplomatic relations between the EU and Honduras after the post-coup elections of 2009 have to be seen within the context of this particular priority, the aim being 'not leaving Honduras isolated', in the words of one senior EU diplomat involved in the policy process at that time.[13]

This focus on stability has a critical impact on the policy aims of the European Union as well as on *where* it acts. For the EU, the key impediment to stability is the fragility of the state and its branches, not just in Honduras but in Central America as a whole. This fragility has been linked strongly to the international drugs trade which has, in Central America, one of its principle hubs. According to one Honduran Ambassador, 70% of homicides committed in Honduras are linked, in one form or another, to the drugs trade.[14] As such, the key focus of EU activities in recent times has been the reform and strengthening of state institutions, including the Judicial and security system. Key amongst such programs have been the 'Programa de Apoyo al Sector Seguridad' (PASS, Program in Support of the Security Sector) or the 'Proyecto de Apoyo a la Reconciliación para Fortalecer el Sistema Democratico en Honduras' (Project in Support of Reconciliation to Strengthen the Democratic System in Honduras). Out of these programs emerged, for instance, the first integrated National Policy for the Security and Justice Sector (PASS, 2013). This ties in with attempts at institution building at regional level and support for regional security programs within the context of the Central American Integration System, as Abrahamson (2008) has shown. In fact, one of the most important initiatives to come out of the Central American Integration System in recent times has been the 'Central American Security Strategy', which focusses precisely on cooperation in the fight against the drugs trade, strengthening of borders and other such measures (SG-SICA, 2011).

There is, then, a clear evolution of the EU's aims and policy in Central America from *peacemaking* to *state building, consolidation* and *stability* which also extends to the

[12] Interview with senior OAS representative in Honduras, January 2014
[13] Interview in January 2014.
[14] Interview, December 2013.

regional level in the form of institution building in support of the Central American Integration System where *capacity building* is a key challenge. From the EU's point of view, this evolution is a clear sign of *success* of its previous policy – something referred to by all those interviewed who either currently or previously worked for the EU on these matters- which, then, calls for a continuation of the basic planks of this policy: institution building, regionalism etc.

However, for all the acknowledgement of the historically positive role of the EU, there has been severe criticism of the EUs current actions from a variety of actors, including one group which, according to the EU's own strategy papers is a key constituency for its actions and policies: civil society.

The first basic criticism is actually not restricted to civil society and concerns something just touched upon above: capacity building. The Central American Integration System has an extensive list of agreements covering a great number of policy sectors, including, as mentioned, an Association Agreement with the European Union, which covers economic, political, social and cultural issues.[15] Yet, according to a senior El Salvadorian diplomat, there are significant problems with implementation which have to do both with the administrative capacity of the respective countries as well as political will: 'We talk about integration until the border and then [back in our] own countries, we forget about it. We can't really blame the EU for that'.[16]

Civil Society actors would agree that there is a problem of capacity and political will but would argue that the *reasons* for these problems are rooted in the patterns that sustain the very system that the EU is trying to reform. In its bluntest form, this argument was brought forward by Dana Frank who has written extensively on Honduras post-coup.[17] In a telephone interview, she argued that trying to reform Honduras' state institutions was of no use since 'some of the [country's] biggest drug traffickers sit in government'. Equally, according to her, reforming the judicial system to make it more transparent and accountable is all but impossible as successive governments since 2009 had made the judiciary essentially another arm of the executive branch with no pretense

[15] The full text of which can be found here: http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=689. See European Commission (2012)
[16] Interview, January 2014
[17] See, for instance, Frank (2012)

to being in any way independent.[18] This being the case, there was no way one could talk about a stable democracy existing in Honduras. Human rights violations continued on a large scale, with political opponents of the government being routinely detained, tortured or even murdered (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2014). Furthermore, corruption in the state in general and the police in particular was so widespread that any resources spent on reforming those institutions were essentially wasted[19], a view shared also by one of the largest Civil Rights organizations in Honduras, the Committee of the Disappeared (COFADEH).[20] Frank, in fact, went further, arguing not only that the EU was naïve and ineffective in its dealings with the Honduran state, but that it was actually counterproductive in that its dealings with this state – through programs such as the ones mentioned above – legitimized an illegitimate government and state which had absolutely no intention of reforming since many of those that staff it and run it benefited from the situation as it stood.[21]

Other civil society organizations were somewhat more nuanced in their criticism of the EU but did go in the same broad direction. The country chief of one organization which had previously received funding from the EU for educational projects in some of Honduras' poorest and most violent neighborhoods pointed out that funding for this particular project from the EU had been cut, suggesting that it was to be re-directed to the state level in order to pursue the reforms mentioned above. Yet, it was pointed out that any reform of the state was quite meaningless in areas where there was no effective state presence and where, for many, the state was not seen as a legitimate actor. In other words, the problem was not only that the state had structural deficiencies that needed to be addressed to make it more effective, but that – to all intents and purposes - the state did not exist and had no legitimacy amongst the local population.[22]

This points to some very interesting, but potentially troubling, conclusions for the work the EU does in Central America in general and Honduras in particular. What one has is a significant disconnect between the EU and many other actors that work within the same 'system', both in terms of problem definition and, hence, possible solutions.

[18] Telephone interview, January 2014
[19] *Ibid*
[20] Interview by e-mail in April 2014.
[21] Telephone interview, January 2014
[22] Interview in Tegucigalpa, March 2014

For the EU, the problems encountered are essentially ones of capacity building and reform at state and regional level. This capacity building is necessary to preserve and guarantee stability in both the country and the region. It might be argued that such a focus follows naturally from both the historical experience of the EU in its own integration process (its *model*) and from its particular experience of working in Central America from the 1980s onwards. State- and institution building is, in many ways, the next *phase* of a long-term process of *region* building based on the Central American Integration System. The state, therefore, is a central part of the solution to the problems encountered.

However, many civil society actors see the state as a significant part of the *problem* rather than the solution. Critically, from this point of view, key actors within the state significantly *benefit* from its weakness and have very little to no interest in changing the current situation. Looked at from their level, civil society leaders see the major problem as one of a total lack of legitimacy of the state in many parts of the country and the region, leading to – and incentivizing – the formation of alternative power structures which, once again, reinforce the illegitimacy of the state. Bearing this in mind, it seems unlikely that the EU would have any significant influence 'on the ground', seeing that it is inevitably associated with the very same state which has no control over a lot of territory and no legitimacy. The EU can be seen as being *part of* that state.

This disconnect in terms of problem definition between the EU and civil society actors, then, has serious consequences in terms of what the EU can do. The organization's focus on dealing, essentially, on a state-to-state level (the EU in this case representing the European 'state') makes it far more difficult for the organization to engage with the 'mesa level' of actors, such as civil society actors, who, crucially, have contacts both upwards towards the governments and downwards, to those most directly impacted upon by the lack of effective justice, the presence of parallel power structures, the lack of educational and work opportunities, as well as those who represent those parallel power structures.

As will be discussed below, just like in South America, then, the EU does what it knows how to do but, as will be argued, it does not do enough engage across time and space to

both understand and change the *patterns* that underpin the current situation or, where it does, it does so with a very narrow focus. This critically undermines its ability to act as well as its political legitimacy, as will be shown now also in relation to South America.

4. South America: The EU as trade partner and little more?

The EU's relationship with South America has always been marked by difficulties in developing a coherent approach to the entire region. As a general rule, the EU has always had varying relationships with different countries and different organizations across time and space. For the particular case study this project is looking at (the Colombian conflict and the tensions this has caused with Ecuador and Venezuela), it is therefore interesting to look at the EU's relationship with the Andean Community, of which Colombia and Ecuador are members and Venezuela used to be a member.

The EU began to interact officially with the Community from the 1970s onwards. Initially, the cooperation between the two blocs focused mainly on promoting regional institution building in support of the Andean integration process, as well as support for specific sectors of the Andean economy, especially energy, fisheries and questions relating to environmental protection and sustainability (European Commission 2007: 11). In other words, one can clearly see the intent to promote 'model Europe' from the very start.

On paper this cooperation grew more intense and more political over the years, culminating with the signing, in 2003, of a 'Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement'. This agreement envisaged cooperation on further issues of common interest, such as migration, conflict prevention, good governance and counter-terrorism (European Commission, 2003b).

Yet, this agreement, as well as subsequent developments, has also shown the fragility of this cooperation and the general difficulties the EU has had in engaging even with what appeared to be reasonably coherent sub-regions.

First and foremost, the agreement remains un-ratified ten years after its conclusion[23] and has, in many ways, been superseded by subsequent events. Amongst those, one can highlight the increasingly selective engagement of the European Union with specific countries of the region and the exit of Venezuela from the Andean Community which, in turn, highlights an increasingly fragmented region both in political and economic terms.

In terms of the EU's actions, there has undoubtedly been a more selective engagement with the region over the last 25 years or so. For instance, in relation to Colombia, the EU became significantly interested in the specific Colombian conflict from the early 1990s onwards, spurred on by its 'success' in the Cold War and the successful engagement in Central America during the 1980s. As Ramirez (2011) has shown, this conflict has undoubtedly had a significant impact on the region as a whole and the political and economic relationships between Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela. Yet, it is noteworthy that the EU has *not* treated this conflict as 'regional' but, rather, has engaged with the respective states on a bi-lateral basis.

In the case of Colombia, this engagement has been quite extensive. One of the key initiatives launched by the EU were the so-called 'Peace Labs' of 2002. According to the European Commission (2002),

> 'these laboratories explore ways to defuse the conflict and to bring about sustainable development. In this context EC co-operation aims to build up zones of peaceful co-existence for the inhabitants by reinforcing local institutions, supporting civilian actors engaged in promoting peace and fostering economic and social development. Among the activities sponsored by the Commission are the strengthening of civil society organisations working towards the respect of Human Rights; the identification of productive alternatives that permit the gradual abandonment of the illicit crops; and the improvement of social and productive infrastructure.'

Yet, it has been impossible to find anyone during the research for this project who has argued that this initiative has had a significant impact on the conflict in Colombia. One senior Colombian diplomat interviewed on this issue simply stated that the EU 'is not important' when it comes to conflict, a view endorsed by a locally-based Colombian

[23] See European External Action Service (2012): http://ec.europa.eu/world/agreements/prepareCreateTreatiesWorkspace/treatiesGeneralData.do?step=0&redirect=true&treatyId=2341, accessed 29th May 2014.

specialist.[24] For Castaneda (2012: 14), the laboratories were primarily a political response to the American-sponsored 'War on Drugs' and an attempt by the EU 'to become an international actor'.

This is not to say that the EU has not had a significant impact on Colombia. In fact, within this geographical sub-region, Colombia is perhaps the key partner for the EU, accorded a political and economic significance which few other South American countries enjoy. This is primarily reflected by the fact that Colombia entered into a free-trade agreement with Colombia (as well as Peru) on 1st August 2013. Interestingly, this agreement at least *tries* to make some connections between trade and political issues and between the agreement itself and what the EU considers some of the root causes of the conflict: For instance, the agreement makes reference to the importance of enhancing and respecting labor and indigenous rights, as well as rights of the rural population, things that have been identified by many, including Pop (2013), as key issues behind the continuing conflict. To this end, the EU was also prepared to provide 40m euros in support of programs for rural development in Colombia (Council of the European Union, 2013). Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, the EU was also, rhetorically at least, very supportive of the present peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC rebels, as Cirlig (2013) has shown. According to one senior official from the Council of the European Union, the progress of these talks have led to 'significant preparations' being made on the part of the EU to assist in a possible post-conflict scenario to actually implement any peace-deal, even though the EU itself is not involved in the actual peace negotiations.[25]

All of the above points give a fairly clear idea of what the EU does and does not do in relation to Colombia. Essentially, the EU's activities in this country reflect what the EU has traditionally done and what it thinks it is good at doing. Therefore, one can clearly see a focus on trade and a linkage between trade and other issues, such as human- and minority rights, the involvement of civil society in the political process and, through its focus on workers' rights, on the 'regulation' of the market. Clearly, then, there is an

[24] The diplomat was interviewed in person in October 2013, whilst the specialist was interviewed via Skype, in December 2013.
[25] Conversation with senior Council Official, January 2014

attempt at exporting the EU model and, in a more indirect way, at changing the context within which the conflict is being played out.

However, the Colombia situation also shows us clearly that the EU is often a very *pragmatic* actor, i.e. one that does what it sees as *possible* rather than what is necessarily desirable.

One can clearly see this in how the EU defines the – and acts in relation with – the Colombian conflict. Critically, and in contrast to Central America, for instance, there has been virtually no attempt to define or resolve the Colombian conflict as a regional matter. Rather, as will be shown below, the conflict has been treated as an internal matter with some consequences for neighboring countries. In so doing, the EU has essentially accepted the idea put forward by South American decision-makers that the Colombian conflict is a matter for Colombians, something stressed time and again by interviewees for this research and agreed by senior EU officials based in the region.[26]

Apart from facing the resistance of regional actors from South America against 'outside interference', this stance on the part of the EU also has to do with the circumstances it confronts when trying to deal with the countries most directly affected by the Colombia conflict, namely Ecuador and Venezuela. In simple terms, the relationship between those three countries is often quite delicate for a number of reasons which make any EU action very difficult and, potentially, politically risky.

Starting with Ecuador, the EU has significant involvement with Ecuador in relation to the spillover of the Colombian conflict, namely managing a continuous flow of refugees across its border. In order to help these refugees the EU has initiated itself or supported a variety of projects. For instance, in 2013, the EU invested 400,000 euros in order to enable the education of children of refugees from Colombia in Ecuador.[27] Within the same context, in 2013, the EU co-financed humanitarian assistance to Colombian refugees in the northern border region of Ecuador, assisting, for instance, Projects run by the World Food Program to the tune of more than 600,000 euros (WFP, 2014).

[26] This was argued by two EU ambassadors and other senior EU officials in the region, interviewed between November 2013 and February 2014.
[27] See European Commission (2013)

Yet, this financial aid, whilst welcome, has also been criticized for the way it is administered and distributed, criticism which is quite enlightening in terms of what it tells us about how the EU works and how it defines the issues that it faces.

Essentially, the European Union treats the refugee flows on the Ecuadorian – Colombian border as a purely humanitarian issue/crisis which, therefore, requires a strictly 'humanitarian' solution. In practical terms this means that the EU ring-fences its aid for those who are classified as 'refugees'. According to one senior representative of the WFP who works on the Ecuadorian-Colombian border, limiting aid to this group causes significant problems since there are many people in that region who are in desperate need but who do *not* classify themselves as refugees and who, de facto, live *across* borders, having connections in both countries. Having seen the application form for financial support from the EU, the authors can confirm the quite restrictive terms of the support. Furthermore, according to this representative, such an approach has bred resentment and divisions between those receiving help as a 'refugee' and those who do not but whose needs are equally as important: 'I get the feeling the EU has to tick boxes in Brussels and that is what they do'.[28] Interestingly, there were signs of further inter-agency tensions when representatives from the WFP claimed to have no knowledge of the preparations the EU was making for any possible peace-deal in Colombia already referred to above: 'If you find out what they want to do, please let me know', was how one representative put it.[29]

Relations between the EU and the Ecuadorian *government* have grown over recent years and have the issue of refugees as one of its central pillars. For the financial perspective between 2007 and 2013, the EU allocated 137 million euros to Ecuador, with the main focus of its activities being social spending, education and promoting sustainable economic opportunities (European Commission, 2010b: 1). Within these priorities, the Commission identified the refugee problem as an urgent priority, pointing out that 135,000 Colombians on Ecuadorian territory who had not asked for political asylum needed 'international protection' which could not be guaranteed through the efforts of the Ecuadorian government alone. In fact, according to the EU, requests for

[28] Interview with senior representative from the World Food Program in Quito, February 2014.
[29] *Ibid.*

international help by the Ecuadorian government are 'constant' (*ibid*: 3), something confirmed by a senior Ecuadorian diplomat: 'We are the country most affected by the Colombian conflict after (Colombia) and need to spend [a lot of resources] on securing our border […]'.[30] Yet, for the diplomat the key aid that the EU could give to Ecuador would be the facilitation of trade. Referring to the deal the EU singed with Colombia and Peru, the diplomat stated Ecuador's intention to sign a similar deal: 'We are a small country and we need to trade […]. We'd like a [trade deal] with the EU'.[31]

Yet, politically, the conflict does not seem to play a big role in Ecuador-EU relations. Rather, its spillover is largely dealt with on a bi-lateral basis between Colombia and Ecuador, whose relationship have all but normalized after being suspended following a Colombian raid into Ecuadorian territory to kill senior FARC leaders in 2008: 'It's over, it's resolved', according to another Ecuadorian diplomat. In fact, cooperation between the two governments is extremely close today with joint cabinet meetings being held on a regular basis to discuss a wide range of issues, from trade to refugees.[32]

The lack of *regional* action with regards to Colombia and the difficulty of the EU in fostering such action, has a lot to do with one of Colombia's other key neighbors, Venezuela. One senior EU diplomat in South America with experience in Venezuela summed it up thus: 'They are different…they are difficult'.[33] It is here that one can find some of the broader difficulties that the EU is facing in South America at this present time.

First and foremost, Venezuela, today, is following a very different economic and political model to most of South America, its 'Bolivarian revolution' being almost the polar opposite to the EU single market model and certainly representing a departure from the economic consensus of the 1990s which, as shown above, seemed to allow the EU to export its 'model' to the region.[34]

[30] Interview with senior Ecuadorian diplomat, October 2013.
[31] *Ibid*.
[32] Interview in October 2013. The close cooperation and joint cabinet meetings between the two governments was outlined by a senior Ecuadorian representative during a seminar held in São Paulo in April 2014.
[33] Interview, February 2014
[34] For a review of Chavez' presidency that instigated this 'revolution', see *The Economist* (2013)

Yet, it is not just the different model which makes Venezuela a difficult case, it is also its ideological firmness or stubbornness (depending on your point of view) and internal political polarization which sets it apart from much of the region and, especially its immediate neighbors, such as Colombia. This polarization, combined with a worsening economic situation – marked by hyperinflation and the shortage of many basic goods – have led to social and political unrest at a time when the chosen successor of the late President Hugo Chavez, Nicholas Maduro, is still trying to establish his authority and political credentials.[35] This, in turn, has led to a situation where the Venezuelan government has essentially isolated itself from external actors. Said one Colombian journalist with extensive experience of Venezuela: 'We do not understand their system and we have no influence over it'.[36] A senior EU representative in Venezuela agrees: 'We can talk to them, but we cannot criticize…they will simply shut the door [on us]'.[37]

Confronting such a panorama, and such profound differences between the different countries, it seems virtually impossible for the EU to develop a coherent and inclusive policy in respect of this particular case, especially bearing in mind that even Venezuela's immediate neighbors – such as Brazil or Colombia - do not seem to have a coherent policy. Said, again, the Colombian journalist: 'The policy of the Colombian government [in relation to Venezuela] is to sit, wait and hope for the best'.[38] In such a situation, all the EU can do is to 'encourage' regional cooperation of common problems, but very little else.[39]

Interestingly, the volatile internal situation in Venezuela, for all the problems it has created, has *not* had a detrimental impact in relation to the country's role in the Colombian conflict. Here, as Ramirez and Cadenas (2006) have pointed out, tensions have always been high, stemming, amongst other things, from very different interpretations of the root causes and possible solutions to this conflict. A significant improvement in personal relations between the respective leaders (Santos and Maduro) in comparison with the intense dislike between Uribe and Chavez, as well as Venezuela's preoccupation with internal matters, have led to improved cooperation

[35] See, for instance, Tayler (2014)
[36] Interivew in Bogotá, February 2014.
[37] Interivew, February 2014.
[38] Interview in Bogotá, February 2014.
[39] Interview, February 2014.

between the two countries in terms of, for instance, border security and the extradition of Colombian rebel fighters from Venezuela: 'They bring them over regularly', according to one specialist with knowledge of the issue.[40]

In relation to this particular case, then, the EU is facing some key difficulties that make its room for maneuver very limited. First, the EU itself has defined the conflict as essentially internal with some regional consequences. However, as shown, the EU is dealing with some of the consequences in essentially a humanitarian manner, rather than a political or security matter. Secondly, there seems to be in progress a process of fragmentation both between the three countries in question, as well as within one of them in particular, Venezuela. This makes a *regional* approach to the case virtually impossible at the present time. As such, the individual nature of the EU's approach to the three countries – extensive cooperation with Colombia, almost nothing formal with Venezuela – would seem to be a logical consequence of this fragmentation. However, it does raise some important questions for the EU in relation to its dealings with the region as a whole which will be considered now.

5. General implications for EU action in Latin America: picking and choosing across time and space?

Taken together, then, what broader conclusions can one take from the case studies presented here?

First, one can clearly detect an evolution of the EU role, especially in Central America, where it has gone from peace actor to promoter of regionalism but with a heavier focus on economic and trade issues, as well as what one might broadly term 'state building'. In this sense, there is an approximation between what the EU does in Central America and what it does in South America, a region where its role as a peace-maker never really got off the ground, sidelined, as it is, in the negotiations currently ongoing to find a peace deal for Colombia. As briefly mentioned, during the research, there have been some vague indications that the EU is preparing for a possible post-conflict scenario in

[40] Interivew, February 2014

Colombia, but very little on the precise role is known and, in any case, until and unless a peace deal is signed, this is hypothetical.

Within this broader context one can also detect clear similarities between the priorities that the EU has established for its work in Central America and in South America, with, at least on paper, heavy emphasis on civil society involvement, human rights, synergy between economic and environmental sustainability and the strengthening and improvement of governance and state structures, something that has a prominent place in, for instance, the agreement between the EU and the Central American Integration System, as well as the agreement between the EU and Colombia/Peru (European Commission, 2012b).

Yet, here one can also find some of the significant difficulties that the EU is facing in pushing these priorities. In the case of Central America, the EU is dealing heavily with regional governments, as well as the regional integration body, CICA. Yet, as pointed out in the discussion above, there are serious doubts about the *will* and *capacity* of both the individual states as well as the regional body to effectively work towards the objectives established in the agreements, such as the fight corruption, environmental sustainability, state- and judicial reform or cooperation in the fight against drug trafficking. As we have seen, there are serious disagreements about who to deal with on these issues and how.

In South America, whilst the capacity issues may not be quite as serious, there is the lack of a *regional* approach to very similar issues, such as drug-trafficking, a serious problem for the three countries investigated here. In the absence of such a regional approach, the EU is dealing with countries on a bi-lateral basis, in many ways re-enforcing the fragmentation of the region already outlined above. From the EU's point of view, this may be seen as a necessity, bearing in mind the inconsistencies apparent in South American regionalism: For instance, from a European point of view, it is quite difficult to understand Venezuela's membership of both the ALBA group of left-leaning regional governments, of which it is a leader, and which distinguishes itself often through its stridently anti-capitalist and 'anti-imperialist' rhetoric and its simultaneous

membership of MERCOSUL, which is, at least on paper, committed to the creation of a common market along European lines between its member states.[41]

However, from a South American point of view, such an approach is merely seen as *pragmatic*, something that makes sense at a particular time in a particular circumstance. In fact, as has been shown in this paper, the EU itself often acts pragmatically to respond to the particular circumstances it encounters, especially in relation to the second case discussed here. Therefore, the main criticism that has been voiced by some actors in Latin America is that there is a discrepancy between how the EU *talks* – often emphasizing the need for regionalism and region-to-region cooperation - and how it *acts*, in this case bi-laterally according to circumstances. In fact, the authors themselves have encountered this gap: One EU ambassador in the region summed up the current political situation in South America as 'stable' and characterized by 'democracy, democracy, democracy', whilst many of the EU's strategy papers still talk about the need for the strengthening of democratic institutions, more involvement of civil society, human rights etc., most recently in relation to the Free Trade Agreement with Colombia and Peru. This is seen by many actors in South America as both – in the words of one ambassador – 'neo-colonial' as well as – in the words of another - hypocritical, bearing in mind the significant progress that has been made in the region over the last 20 odd years as well as the EU's own current economic and political problems.[42]

Out of this, a second criticism has been developed – already touched upon above – which is that the EU, whilst talking about the importance of civil society, itself only insufficiently engages with civil society. Rather, it acts on an EU-to-government basis, such as is the case in Central America, or does not take account – or even seek – of the opinions and insights that civil society actors could give when trying to implement EU-financed projects on the ground, when trying to make a difference to the people most impacted upon by the consequences of a particular conflict, for instance. In other words, there are glaring inconsistencies in how the EU acts, trapped, as it seems to be, between its self-image and historic priorities and 'way of doing things' on the one hand, and

[41] On recent developments of ALBA, see http://economia.terra.com.br/alba-e-petrocaribe-iniciam-zona-comum-e-buscam-integracao-com-mercosul,826a0d475f303410VgnVCM3000009af154d0RCRD.html, accessed 21st December 2013. The founding treaty of MERCOSUL can be found here: http://www.mercosul.gov.br/normativa/tratados-e-protocolos/tratado-de-assuncao-1/, accessed on 30th May 2014

[42] Interviews conducted in December 2013 and January 2014 respectively.

what it encounters on the ground in societies and regions that do not match the EU's circumstances and expectations. This is true both in Central America, where the EU has had a significant role as a peace actor historically, and in South America, where its role was always more focused on trade and 'spillovers' from conflicts and instability. In a sense, both sub-regions discussed here have 'moved on' and the EU seems to have problems following this adaptation.

6. Conclusions

What all this amounts to, then, is an urgent need for the EU to re-think its role in Latin America as a whole, and the sub-regions specifically. If the EU is no longer a peace-actor in Central America, what is it and what *can* it be? If there are serious problems that state-actors and regional structures are unable or unwilling to confront and resolve, what can the EU realistically achieve and with whom can and should the organization interact in order to affect positive and sustainable change? What should that change look like and *how* should it be affected?

In South America, many of these questions seem to be more urgent still since the *desire* for EU involvement seems to be less, the sense of passing through a moment of relative stability and prosperity seems to be more keenly felt whilst, at the same time, political and economic differences seem to be more pronounced. Therefore, serious thought needs to be given on the part of the EU to not only what should be done, but what *can* be done by it faced by those circumstances.

In short, whilst the particular circumstances of each case – and each sub-region – vary, the trends are broadly similar and point to a difficult environment for the EU in the sense of promoting regionalism, be it for conflict resolution or otherwise. In fact, the EU is contributing to this difficult environment not only because it is currently extremely hard for it to sell its 'model' to the world – bearing in mind its internal difficulties – but also because of the serious disconnect that exists between Brussels and the EU's actions on the ground in Latin America.

In other words, the EU's key priority ought to be closing that disconnect by re-establishing a synergy between all its organizational levels around the questions of what

it wants to do in Latin America, whether, how and for what it wants to promote regionalism in Latin America and what its strategic aims are in Latin America. Without such a strategic debate, the EU's influence in the region will continue to decline despite its historic success and function as a role model.

Finally, academically, it has to be asked whether it is useful and wise to continue to talk about Latin America as *one* region or whether it would be better to look at the sub-regions as connected but, in many ways, spate entities which, whilst they have a lot of features in common, are really marked by their differences and particularities, which will make regionalism a very different phenomena between the two (**ref**).

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