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EUROPE AGAINST THE TIDE? The Invisibility of Cities in EU-CELAC Relations

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Agustí Fernández de Losada, senior research fellow and director of the Global Cities Programme, CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs).

Marta Galceran-Vercher, research fellow, Global Cities Programme, CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs).

Alexandra Vidal D'oleo, researcher and project manager, Global Cities Programme, CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs).

This document is a compilation of the main conclusions of the CIDOB Global Cities Dialogues "European Foreign Policy and Synchronous Diplomacy: The Contribution of Cities", held on 4 July 2023 at CIDOB and organised by its Global Cities Programme with support from the Barcelona City Council. The report offers a critical analysis of the role played by cities in relations between Latin America and the European Union in recent decades, examining both EU strategies and instruments for external action, as well as other initiatives that have arisen within the municipalist ecosystem. As a result of the analysis, recommendations are offered for strengthening the role of cities in the EU-CELAC political dialogue in the coming years.

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1. A strengthened strategic partnership

It would seem that 2023 is the year that the European Union has once again placed Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) among its foreign policy priorities and is seeking to strengthen its strategic relationship with the region. This is an important association since LAC has traditionally been the "natural and privileged partner" of the EU, which it sees as essential for advancing towards a rules-based international order and upholding democracy, human rights, peace, and security. In this sense, the commitment to revitalise the strategic partnership is especially relevant in a context of strategic competition among hegemonic powers, and acute geopolitical tensions.

Accordingly, one of the goals of the **Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union** (EU) in the second half of 2023 is, precisely, to bolster the Bi-regional Strategic Partnership (BSP) with LAC. It is within this framework that one should situate the June 2023 tour of Latin America by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, with stops in Brazil, Argentina, Chile,

and Mexico; the Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council in which the European Commission has presented a **New Agenda for Relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean**; and the EU-CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) Summit, held in Brussels, in July 2023.

In this situation, local governments should be called upon to play a key role. As well as the longstanding links uniting cities of Europe and Latin America, mayors and mayoresses are essential players in the political dialogue. They are in a privileged position for mobilising local agents and resources, and for fostering economic, cultural, scientific, and technological relations. This has been understood by other global superpowers, for example the United States and China, whose support for urban and subnational diplomacy is increasingly significant. However, it would seem that Europe, after decades of giving priority to support for cooperation among cities, decentralisation, and reinforcement of local government as important elements of its international cooperation policy, is not including local governments as part of its strategic thinking today.

This CIDOB Briefing aims to present an analysis of the role played by cities in relations between Latin America and Europe over the last thirty years. The first part examines the participation of cities in the European Union's external action, in both formal strategies promoted by EU institutions (and in particular the Global Gateway), and in international cooperation policy. In the second part, the focus is on the instruments that have guided relations between the European Union and Latin America, once again analysing not only the formal strategies pursued by EU institutions, but also the diplomatic initiatives arising from within the domain of international municipalism. The article closes with some final reflections on how to shape EU-CELAC dialogue "from below" in the coming years.

2. Cities in European Union external action

2.1. Cities in EU strategies of external action: an analysis of Global Gateway

More than thirty years have gone by since the Maastricht Treaty (1992) established the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as one of the European Union mainstays. This foreign policy has been deployed through

clean, and secure connections within the digital, energy, and transportation sectors, while simultaneously strengthening health, education, and research systems." To this end, it plans to mobilise up to 300,000 million euros for investment through the so-called Team Europe, which consists of EU institutions, its member states, the European Investment Bank (EIB), and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD).

In this context, even though the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy alludes to the need for more thoroughgoing partnerships with civil society and the private sector as key players in a networked world, there is no mention at any point of cities and their governments. Something similar occurs with Global Gateway, which only vaguely refers to "local communities" and, more clearly, to the importance of working with civil society and businesses in the partner countries.

It is paradoxical that the EU's foreign investment strategy should overlook local governments when a significant part of the priorities it defines—transport, climate and energy, the digital sector, and education—and the investments it proposes to make are situated in spheres that fall

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various initiatives and strategic frameworks whereby the EU has been constructing its global identity and establishing the political priorities and guiding principles that must underpin its external action. The most recent of these is *A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* (2016), in which, *inter alia*, the EU affirms its desire to project itself as a unitary global actor, to defend multilateralism and working in partnership as one of its hallmarks.

Perhaps the most emblematic element of EU foreign policy, and the one that makes it stand out from that of other global actors, is its particular model of international cooperation for development. This has been changing in recent years, giving greater consideration to geopolitics in a scheme where development aims have become fused with those of foreign policy (Olivie and Santillán O'Shea, 2023). It is in this context that the *Global Gateway*, the EU's main foreign investment strategy is formulated. Adopted in 2021, it is *defined* as a strategy for promoting around the world, "intelligent,

within the remit of cities in most countries of the world. Disregarding city governments could be problematic. Not recognising them as necessary partners could limit the real potential for impact of the planned investments and their appropriateness for local realities. Overlooking the fact that, without them, it would not be possible to foster solutions like electrification of public transport, decarbonisation of buildings, and narrowing the digital divide, to give some specific examples, means foregoing knowledge, skills, and resources that are essential if these investments are to respond to the real needs of citizens and the sociodemographic structures of the partner countries.

Then again, it is symptomatic that Global Gateway, which identifies democratic values and good governance as the basic principles for channelling its investments, should overlook local governments and, as a result, local democracy. Doing so entails neglecting important structuring principles for the European Union itself, among them subsidiarity, which recognises proximity to

citizens as a key factor in the exercise of power. It also means disregarding decentralisation as a mechanism of democratic government.

In spite of all this, the Commission seems to be becoming aware of the dysfunctionality that can arise from not providing a space for dialogue with local governments when investments are being discussed. In this regard, and in the framework of provisions pertaining to governance of the strategy, a platform for dialogue with civil society and local authorities is being launched. It will operate from October 2023 as a working group within the framework of the Policy Forum on Development. It remains to be seen how far this dialogue will advance in a mechanism in which civil society has much more influence than local governments.

2.2. The territorial dimension of European international cooperation for development policy

The absence of local governments in the strategic frameworks regulating European external action and its development policy contrasts with the notable recognition they have achieved in recent decades for the impetus of

sustainable development. This commitment is sustained in the **New European Consensus on Development** (2017) which recognises the relevance of local authorities for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the importance of strengthening local government in order to be more effective in the area of development.

In the years between these two consensuses, there has been growing recognition among the European institutions of the role played by local governments and also of the need to define financial instruments to support them. Notable in this regard is the well-known **Schapiro Report on local authorities and development cooperation** (2007), which inspired the **Communication from the Commission to the Council, Local Authorities: Actors for Development** (2008) and the subsequent **Empowering Local Authorities in partner countries for enhanced governance and more effective development outcomes** (2013).

In 2009 and in this context, the European Commission opened a space for structured dialogue with local authorities and civil society. This space was consolidated in 2013 in the framework of the Policy Forum on Development which,

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their international cooperation for development policies. This recognition has resulted in ongoing support for decentralisation policies and local democracy in partner countries, as well as for decentralised cooperation. Nevertheless, as this article argues, everything seems to suggest that the alliance that the EU was able to forge with cities is in danger of being weakened.

Since the **Fourth ACP-EEC Convention**, signed at Lomé in December 1989, introduced the concept of decentralised cooperation (which still refers to all emerging actors and those are not national governments or international organisms) the European Union has been reinforcing its partnerships with local governments by recognising their condition as stakeholders, opening channels for dialogue, and presenting specific financial instruments.

Moreover, the **European Consensus on Development**, a document which, for the first time, sets out the common principles guiding the cooperation for development policies of the EU and its member states, indicates a clear commitment to processes of decentralisation and expresses recognition of the role played by local authorities in democratic governance and in practices of

still in force, enables local authorities, represented by their networks, to influence the design and implementation of the policies and strategies proposed by Brussels, whether at the global, regional, or national level. Since their launch, the dialogues have allowed the European Commission to adjust its financial instruments in accordance with the needs, interests, and aspirations of European local governments and in partner countries. However, given the lack of funding for decentralised cooperation in the present European financial framework (2021-2027), it would seem the chances of influence of these dialogues have been limited or have diminished significantly in the last few years.

Indeed, despite all the above, the resources the European Union has allocated to support local governments under the auspices of its cooperation for development policy have very substantially dwindled. In 2013, the third phase of the URB-AL programme, the last regional initiative to support urban and regional development in Latin America, was finalised, this bringing to an end more than eighteen years' activity and three innovative, high-impact phases. URB-AL had been launched in 1995, together with other programmes supporting decentralised cooperation, among them MedURBS and AsiaURBS which were of less duration.

Several years later, in 2021, the EU not uncontroversially decided to discontinue the Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities thematic programme in the format it had previously had, thus terminating an instrument which, as a financial approach and then as a thematic programme, had for more than twenty years—since 1998—provided a privileged mechanism for supporting decentralised cooperation initiatives of subnational European governments and partner countries. By its final phase, this mechanism had financed more than 300 highly innovative projects undertaken by European cities with their counterparts in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

The new Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 has not brought good news for decentralised cooperation. Although the regulation governing the new **Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument** (NDICI), now renamed Global Europe, recognises local authorities as key stakeholders

countries. Without their commitment and willingness to support transformative initiatives, it is difficult to go ahead with them.

However, it is not all bad news. The EU continues to have some relevant instruments available for supporting local governments. With a significant track record, these include the TALD facility, the framework agreements signed with some of the leading international municipalist associations, the International Urban and Regional Cooperation (IURC) programme, and the Global Covenant of Mayors. This background also includes the work that is now beginning as part of the **Team Europe Initiatives** (TEI), the mechanism that coordinates actions of the member states and leading European agents in the domain of development.

In this regard, although the TEI focus does not initially include local governments as specific partners, there can

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for development and includes strengthening them among the areas of application of the thematic and geographic programmes, the fact is that, so far, the financial support given for their implementation has been very limited.

On the one hand, the new thematic programme is limited to civil society. On the other hand, the new regional programmes do not seem to focus on local governments, and although the NDICI suggests an allocation of 500 million euros, this is a mere indication. It is an indication addressed to EU delegations in partner countries asking them to support local governments, highlighting the territorial approach to development and decentralisation processes, always through a programme agreed upon with the national governments. It is an indication which, however, does not look as if it will be easy to put into practice.

Although EU delegations can call on the TALD (Territorial Approach to Local Development) which supports them in optimising their links with subnational governments, they do not have specialist focal points (which they do have for dialogue with civil society), and their staff has usually had little experience with territorial policies. Likewise, the possibility of opening up channels of communication with local governments or opening the doors (or funds) to decentralised cooperation tends to come up against resistance from the national authorities of the partner

be no doubt that their development could benefit greatly from contributions from and consultations with local governments in the partner countries. A very positive step in this direction would be the inclusion of local governments in the Team Europe Democracy (TED) initiative. In particular, three municipalist organisations (PLATFORMA, VNG International, and NALAS) have been invited to participate in the Team Europe Democracy Network, a mechanism created with the aim of improving the EU efforts to promote democracy.

3. UE-LATAM: a bi-regional dialogue without cities?

The EU tends to refer to the Latin American and Caribbean region (LAC) as its natural and preferential partner, with which it has deep historical, cultural, social, and economic ties. In the political sphere, the two regions have traditionally acted as strategic allies in strengthening the rules-based international order and defending democracy, human rights, and multilateralism. In economic terms, the EU is the region's leading investor, its third biggest trading partner, and chief development aid donor.

In the last few decades, given these shared values and interests, a solid relationship has been forged, backed by a wide-ranging network of bilateral and regional agreements

of association, both commercial and political, thus making LAC the region with the densest set of formal ties with the EU. In addition to the bi-regional agreements, the present political framework for the relationship between the two regions has been established by the recently approved [Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: A New Agenda for Relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean](#) (2023), which replaces the previous strategic framework stipulated in the Communication [European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean: joining forces for a common future](#) (2019).

It should be emphasised that, unlike its predecessor, the New Agenda totally excludes the role that might be played by cities in the bi-regional EU-LAC dialogue. The closest it comes to acknowledging the importance of local governments is an ambiguous reference to the potential of the European Committee of Regions and its LAC counterparts for mobilising “regional and local authorities

Along with the publication of the new Agenda and the announcement of the Global Gateway, the third big initiative of 2023 has been the holding of the Third EU-CELAC Summit (on 17 and 18 July, in Brussels). After almost a decade lost in terms of relations between the two regions,¹ in which most of the association and trade agreements were stalled, this Summit was announced as an “essential diplomatic step” (Borrell, 2023) for relaunching the strategic association between the EU and the LAC countries and thereby giving renewed political form to the sense of community that has historically united the two regions. Nevertheless, such attempts to revitalise the EU-LAC relationship run the risk of being ineffective if they do not include comprehensive dialogue that would take into account the various social actors, civil society, the private sector and, naturally, local governments as well. The bad news is that, for the moment, it does not seem that any progress is being made in the right direction since in the Summit’s preparations and in the resulting

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as well as economic and social partners to enhance people-to-people contacts.” This contrasts with the earlier Communication of 2019 which explicitly recognises the urban dimension of many of the joint challenges faced by the two regions and calls on the EU to step up its engagement with its LAC partners in promoting smart, sustainable cities through fruitful cooperation among them. This Communication even goes so far as to highlight a specific municipalist initiative, namely the Global Covenant of Mayors. Furthermore, it identifies capacity building for local authorities as a priority area of action.

As noted at the start of this article, 2023 will be remembered as the year of the commitment to revitalise EU-LAC political dialogue. Hence, some weeks after the presentation of the New Agenda for EU-LAC Relations, the president of the European Commission announced an investment in Latin America of 10,000 million euros via Global Gateway, to be implemented through the Team Europe Initiatives. However, the LAC component of Global Gateway is also handicapped by the omission of cities as essential allies for attaining set goals, especially when taking into account the fact that, as noted in the [Declaration of the Latin American & Caribbean – Europe Forum of Local and Regional Governments](#) (July 2023), “cities and territories are at the heart of catalysing the transition towards a low carbon, energy efficient, inclusive, sustainable and resilient development model”.

documents, local governments were not given space for dialogue or the political recognition they deserve.

Instead of including the LAC-EU Forum of Regional and Local Governments² as an official component of the EU-CELAC Summit, which European and Latin American municipalist organisations had long been requesting,³ the participation of cities was relegated to a mere side event as part of the [EU-LAC Forum: Partners in Change](#) (Brussels, 13-14 July). This is, of course, a relevant and necessary space but it is designed for civil society and not for government actors. Neither is there a single mention in the [Declaration of the EU-CELAC Summit](#) (2023) of local governments and, among the thirty initiatives envisaged in the EU-CELAC Roadmap 2023-2025, they are only allotted one EU-LAC Local Authorities and Civil Society Dialogue Day (in clear contrast with the two business and bi-regional summits that have been planned).

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1. This was the third Summit to be held since CELAC’s creation in 2020. The other two took place in 2013 (Santiago de Chile) and 2015 (Brussels).
 2. This was not the first time the Forum was held, but it was the first time that it aimed at directly influencing the CELAC Summit. The other two times the Forum was held were in 2007 (before CELAC was created) and 2011 (two years before the first Summit).
 3. PLATFORMA, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) and the Latin American Federation of Cities, Municipalities, and Associations of Local Governments (FLACMA), the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF), and Mercociudades.

This flagrant omission is even more disturbing if considered from the historical perspective because this is not a matter of local governments not yet achieving the status required for them to engage in the EU-CELAC political dialogue but, rather, a reversal to the levels of recognition they had ten years ago. This can be seen in the [EU-CELAC Brussels declaration](#) that came out of the 2015 Summit, in which “the importance of bi-regional dialogue on urban development and the strengthening of local governments” is highlighted (Article 65, p. 14) and in the [EU-CELAC action plan](#) of the same year, which contains many references to the need to work with municipalities and “local communities” in the broad sense. Looking even further back, one can easily confirm how, even in the [Santiago Declaration of the EU-CELAC Summit in 2013](#) and prior initiatives, local governments were accorded a greater degree of recognition than what they receive at present.

As a result of all this, decentralised cooperation between Europe and Latin America has no foothold whatsoever in the EU budget. Along with the disappearance of the section on local authorities from the thematic programme, it is clear that the existing regional programmes,

American cooperation. One of the oldest of these is the [Union of Ibero-American Capital Cities \(UCCI\)](#), which was founded in 1982 and is, by almost ten years, the precursor of the Ibero-American summits that began in 1991. Other examples are the [Ibero-American Centre for Strategic Urban Development \(CIDEU\)](#), which began its activities in 1993, the [Decentralised Cooperation Observatory](#), and the AI-LAs Project, an alliance established in 2013 with the aim of promoting the internationalisation of local governments as a means of improving public policy. In its early years of activity, this group was funded by the Thematic Programme “Non-State Actors and Local Authorities in Development”.

4. Conclusion

Recognition of local governments as stakeholders in the international cooperation for development system is, to a large extent, due to the European Union’s decades-long commitment to prioritise decentralisation and local democracy, and to make way for decentralised cooperation. After the 1980s, Europe mobilised funds, opened up channels for political dialogue with local

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which used to be concerned with local and territorial governance, no longer situate subnational governments as eligible actors. Programmes like [EUROsociAL+](#) and [EUROCLIMA](#), which address problems with a clearly territorial dimension, seem to focus on cooperation between national governments and to situate subnational governments as indirect beneficiaries of its projects. Likewise, regional associations in Latin America and the Caribbean do not benefit from the framework agreements that the European Commission has signed with other international municipalist organisations. A similar anomaly appears in the IURC programme in which the Latin American section seems to have less prominence in the new 2021-2027 programming. Country programming remains, but it seems that, so far, there are few projects aimed at strengthening local governments.

However, EU-LATAM urban diplomacy has developed beyond the initiatives of the European institutions. To begin with, there exists within international municipalism extensive experience of encouraging cooperation initiatives between European and Latin American cities which, in some cases, has become institutionalised in specific networks of European-Latin American, or Ibero-

governments, and incorporated them into the global network of actors with which it works. Now, however, there are signs that this support could be waning, which means that the EU is going against the tide of what other global powers like the United States and China are doing in their pursuit of subnational diplomacy which, although incipient, seems determined and laden with geostrategic intentionality.

Although the NDICI continues to provide regulatory coverage to the alliance with local governments, the new global investment strategy, Global Gateway, and recent financial instruments designed within the framework of the European budget for the period 2021-2027 confirm that the EU no longer gives priority to cities and territory in the implementation of its external action and international cooperation policies. Programmes that were operative for more than twenty years have ceased to function and budget availability is limited to an indication that is difficult for EU delegations in partner countries to make operative.

In this regard, Latin America is no exception. Even when bearing in mind the long-standing and consolidated relationship between European and Latin American

local governments, and the importance that European cooperation has had for the region's cities and territories, the agenda now governing bi-regional political dialogue and the budget underpinning European investment seems to have set other priorities. In the present situation, European-Latin American decentralised cooperation no longer has clear objectives in the European budget and the EU delegations are facing major obstacles when they try to organise initiatives to support local governments and the decentralisation agenda.

All this gives rise to a certain paradox given that, as mentioned above, a significant part of the investments that the EU proposes through the Global Gateway is linked with areas that are related with the jurisdiction of local governments in most parts of the world, including Latin America. Ensuring that these investments respond to the real needs of citizens and making them fit with local realities depends to a large extent on the ability to engage in dialogue with cities and territories. Hence, being able to count on democratic local governments, empowered and endowed with the resources they need, is essential for fostering the transformations that Europe wishes to bring about in its relationship with the world.

Decentralised cooperation between Europe and Latin America has no foothold whatsoever in the EU budget. This is not a matter of local governments not yet achieving the status required for them to engage in the EU-CELAC political dialogue but, rather, a reversal to the levels of recognition they had ten years ago.

Revitalising the bi-regional alliance with CELAC and ensuring that the planned investments have the desired impact requires a renewed commitment to local governments and recognition of them as essential partners. To this end, it would be necessary to equip spaces for political dialogue, for example, by institutionalising the Forum of Local and Regional Governments as a mechanism for monitoring the agreements adopted in the framework of bi-regional dialogue. Another relevant measure would be to assess the possibility of recovering financial instruments or creating new ones so as to resume support for local government, decentralisation, and decentralised cooperation. The mid-term review of current thematic programmes and the launching of new regional projects like EUROsociAL+ could represent an opportunity in this regard. Finally, the EU should consider strengthening the capacities of its delegations in the regions and providing them with the necessary wherewithal to work with local governments. Establishing specialised focal points would be highly advisable if the aim is effective implementation of available funds.

Advancing in this direction would, to a large extent and equally, depend on the standpoints of the European institutions, the EU member states and their counterparts in CELAC, and the municipalist organisations. It is up to the latter groups to present evidence-based arguments and exert the pressure that would be necessary to convince Europe to situate, once again, its decentralisation and local democracy agenda amongst its investment and political action priorities in Latin America and its other partner countries. Europe should not opt to go against the tide in an area whose leadership is still undisputed today.

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