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2014: Point of departure for the new Ibero-American direction

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Veracruz, Mexico's largest port city hosted the 24th Ibero-American Summit on December 8th and 9th 2014. Mexico was also the venue for the first summit in 1991 in Guadalajara, and this time the aim was to initiate a change of cycle to adapt the Ibero-American conferences to the new global and inter-regional context. It is a transformation that is seen as both opportune and necessary. Opportune because the debut of Rebecca Grynspan as head of the General Secretariat (SEGIB), replacing Enrique Iglesias, brought renewal after 11 years of intense leadership. Necessary because at the 22nd summit, in Cadiz in 2012, it was decided that a process of change should begin that would include the revision of SEGIB's mandate, objectives and of the conference itself.

The main goal of this process of revision, begun by the departing secretary and taken up by the new leader, is to adapt both the conferences and Ibero-American cooperation to a regional setting that has greatly changed since the time of its creation. The emergence of multiple Latin American regional forums and bodies, particularly the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), and the consequent multiplication of regional, sub-regional and inter-regional summits that currently fill presidential agendas, contrasts with how these conferences began, when the Ibero-American space provided a privileged meeting place. Latin America has also changed, and after a decade of growth and stability enjoys greater autonomy and global presence. Further, there has been a transformation in the position of the Ibero-American countries as seen from the European side which, the effects of the crisis apart, have a relationship of growing interdependence with the region.

The motto chosen for the summit, "Education, culture and innovation" was meant to highlight some of the factors of cohesion and mutual interest that have been defined as pillars of Ibero-American cooperation. In this way, the aim was to incentivise Ibero-American unity, focussing on an essential element for improving its development. However, of the twenty-two countries that make up the Ibero-American space, the highest-ranking state officials from six—Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela—did not make the trip to Veracruz. It may be that the current setup of the leaders' summit has run its course given that, in spite of the diplomatic efforts of Mexico, Spain and the General Secretariat itself

to ensure that the most emblematic leaders of the left attended, they did not. Their absence was perceived as a failure, although it was not as bad as the Panama Summit in 2013, which only half of the leaders attended.

This is the last annual summit. From now on it will be held biannually, with the next to be organised by Colombia in 2016. But spacing out the summits will not prevent them from languishing if incentives are not created to guarantee attendance at the highest level. Such incentives depend on the conviction that the summits have some use and on the support for a motor for Ibero-American thinking to feed them. An approach to the summits concentrating on the most operational parts of the conference of ministers for education, culture, science and technology, work, youth and so on, taking place without the spectacle of all the leaders being present, would show the meeting's effectiveness, which is genuine, and which the absence of certain leaders overshadows.

The high-level absences contrast with the support for the civil society forums, such as the business meeting, the civic meeting, the youth meeting, the communication forum and the forum of local governments. This shows both the interest in the programmes and the necessity for SEGIB to continue to develop them. Despite a degree of disenchantment due to the lack of political support from certain leaders to improve the strategic value of shared programme objectives that are not ideological, such as education, culture, innovation and the movement of students and researchers in the Ibero-American space, there is no doubt that the societies themselves are committed to growing inter-relation in a shared space of knowledge and cohesion, led by SEGIB. The future addition to the parallel forums of a think tank forum similar to the G20's "Think 20", will further spur the thinking on Ibero-America necessary for the germination of new ideas and initiatives that contribute to its sustainability.

The decision taken in the Monterrey resolution to produce a document that brings together sector-specific Ibero-American organisations such as the OEI, OISS, OIJ and OIMJIB in order to strengthen joint action and common planning is one of the successful outcomes of the meeting, along with the approval of the document that establishes the areas of priority for Ibero-American cooperation, altering the institutional structure to make it more functional and updating the rules concerning the Ibero-American programmes, initiatives and their financing. Other tangible goals are the boosting of the so-called "Ibero-American Erasmus" which aims to mobilise 200,000 young students by 2020, the conversion of the Cervantes Institute into an Ibero-American organisation and the setting up of the Register of Ibero-American Networks with which to contribute to strengthening common cultural and knowledge spaces.

One important issue, which will require the unanimous support of the countries, is the financing of SEGIB itself. The summits are just one part of Ibero-American Cooperation, which brings together the multiple work programmes and has its own area of public diplomacy, which must be supported by the whole community in a balanced way. The economic and financial crisis in Spain and Portugal revealed the problems of maintaining past levels of financial support. Thus, the traditional provision of seventy per cent of the funding by Europe and thirty by Latin America will change to a provisional 65-35 split, to be subsequently revised to 60-40% at the next summit. It is an agreement that remains far from proportional when the economic capacities of the countries are considered.

If SEGIB cannot be funded in a way that accords with its objectives and the sharing of its burdens in a way that is balanced between the members of the Ibero-American community, it is difficult to see it surviving. The establishment of clear objectives of common social interest may stimulate greater involvement by the governments at the citizens' request. The Ibero-American community is represen-

ted by its leaders, but it is the citizens who build it and it falls to them to rethink what their role shall be in the new direction that it takes, with a new route map and a new leader at the helm.