

## European Union-Mexico Think Tanks Dialogue Initiative

### First dialogue: “Modern Challenges to Democracy within Latin America and the European Union”

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#### CHRONICLE

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#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Democracies in Europe and Latin America are facing criticism in their organisation, institutions, and procedures. Several factors have made this criticism more acute and the wider use of media and social media have intensified public debate. Political parties seem to be closer to the State than to society, which has strengthened protest voting. There is a general criticism to liberal order and a global search for ways to respond to critical citizens through political inclusion and improving the quality of democratic life.

#### I. DEMOCRACIES: THE STATE OF PLAY IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

##### Pressures on representative democracy in the European Union

A poll by the Pew Research Centre (2017) revealed that 37% of citizens have a strong commitment to representative democracy in the EU while 42% of people were only moderately committed to democracy, and 10% supported non-democratic forms of government. This decreasing commitment can be explained by four general challenges that democracies are facing in the European Union: external shocks, external actors, internal actors and users of democracies. Regarding external shocks, income inequalities have risen since the economic crisis of 2008, with increased fear of losing economic status due to stagnating economies and higher migration flows, which have come along with a perceived threat to individual identities. As far as external actors, China and Russia are currently offering an alternative model of government for economic success around the

globe, placing Western democracies in question. Internal actors include far-right parties in different parts of Europe that are challenging EU institutions and rules, which shows how actors can undermine democracy by playing within the rules that underpin it. Lastly, recent studies of internal users have concluded that citizens under the age of 30 years old increasingly do not consider that it is indispensable to live under representative democratic regimes, which could represent a threat to fully guaranteeing democracy in the future. In the EU, democracy's legitimacy is based on its results, and citizens do not know who to hold accountable for the various shocks that impact them, such as economic crises. This is a matter of sovereignty and of economic, social and political interdependence, which shows that new mechanisms will have to be created in order to regain the legitimacy of democratic decision-making among citizens.

##### Democracy in Latin America: an overview of the state of play

Democracies in Latin America are mainly executed through electoral processes and with low State capacity. Street demonstrations are a main element of political life in the region and there is a long history of politics based on the cult of personality. The Latino-barometer (2018) revealed that the level of support for democracy has diminished for seven consecutive years and is down to a rate of 48%, which is the lowest since 1995; neither has there been an increase in the preference for authoritarian governments, which remains at 15%, and indifference to a specific type of government has risen 10 percentage points. Citizens are unsatisfied, with high

disaffection rates among millennials and centennials. On the other hand, social demands in very unequal societies put enormous pressures on Latin-American democracies and their redistributive capacity. The region is experiencing the closure of various “exhaust valves” caused by the global economic stagnation since 2013, as well as by nationalist and protectionist measures fostered mainly by the US. Dissatisfaction with democracy in Latin America must be understood in terms of political and social injustice. Satisfaction with the economy is at its lowest level in the region with 16% approving of this, and only 17% who consider that government rule for everyone, which shows that politicians are perceived as elite and not as popular representatives. Furthermore, interpersonal trust in Latin America is the lowest in the whole world at 12%, which affects the flourishing of democratic institutions. Finally, the cleavages in Latin American democracies have changed from democracy/free trade versus authoritarianism/protectionism, to more polarising cleavages based on minorities’ rights and issues of gender, egalitarian marriage, and abortion.

### Shortcomings of EU integration to the democratic process

The experience of the Balkans is an example of how representative democracies do not necessarily provide citizens with self-corrective possibilities in terms of policies and governments. Citizen frustration rises as policies are dictated by supranational institutions or organisms. The crisis of democracy has to do with a conceptual fallacy—because democracy was presented as a panacea—and that representative institutions have served the purpose of sustaining a failed status quo rather than supporting change in line with citizens’ dissatisfaction. This situation affects the general support for democracy as a form of government and opens the door for alternative models. The capacity of political parties in the Balkans to offer meaningful policy alternatives has been severely curtailed by the EU accession process, discrediting representative institutions to citizens. Furthermore, the lack of democratic *acquis communautaire* in the European Union has allowed impunity and led to fragile democratic regimes in the Balkans that have focused more on regional stability than deep transformations. It is crucial to look more closely at the function and interaction of political parties and find ways to better support political party development and focus on the gap between citizens and their political representatives.

### Representative democracy and security: insights from Latin America

There is global dissatisfaction with democracy, and Latin America is one of the regions where this phenomenon is most prevalent. Latin America is experiencing a growing polarization of society, between populism and neoliberalism, but also between a form of representative liberal democracy and popular direct democracy (“*pueblo en la calle*”). This polarization is due to both external and internal factors. One of the main external factors is the geopolitical reconfiguration of the United States, with significant changes in its immigration and trade policies that has put extra pressure on Latin American governments including Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Internal factors are common challenges for all countries in the region: unequal income distribution, weak legislative and judiciary powers, high levels of corruption, lack of rule of law, dispersed civil society, freedom of expression at risk, and a lack of institutional transparency and accountability. In a weakened democratic system, populism emerges as an alternative to traditional parties, and as the perceived solution to key challenges facing Latin American societies. However, a weakened democratic system also allows for organised crime units to take virtual control of areas of the State and the possible involvement of military units to combat this problem. There is a need to find new solutions to tackle the perceived inefficacy of the democratic model.

### Corruption and lack of transparency, fundamental challenges within democracies

If Mexico is taken as an example, lack of freedom of expression on the local level, and the different forms corruption permeates citizens’ daily life, particularly in the delivery of basic needs and services, place the fundamental aspects of democracy in question. These factors undermine trust in institutions and reveal the urgent need to strengthen and develop more impartial, autonomous, and independent democratic institutions. Moreover, there is a need for better institutional cooperation that results in the sharing of information on local, national and supranational levels as a wider strategy in addressing the current challenges to democracy. However, these efforts can only be guaranteed with a strong political will that is currently lacking in the Latin American context. The real attractiveness of the democratic model is its capacity for creating opportunities and spaces for citizens to express their level of satisfaction regarding their leaders and policies. In this sense, it is important to develop

monitoring systems, like Mexico did with the National Anti-Corruption System, as these can help to prevent corruption and build more transparent procedures that will respond to citizens' demands, thereby regaining their trust in the democratic model in both Latin America and Europe.

## II. REGAINING LEGITIMACY AND CITIZENS' TRUST: THE PATH AHEAD FOR DEMOCRACIES

### Solidarity and European identity as principles for a citizens' Union

Representative democracy is beset by a crisis of legitimacy around the world, but in the European Union this crisis is compounded by the inadequacy of both national governments and EU institutions to address citizens' frustrations and achieve transnational unity on common issues. The crisis that has plagued the EU for years is largely over, but the cacophony of voices calling for fundamental change to the integration project remains. The relationship between citizens, the state, and EU institutions have resulted in a multi-layered Union. The role of new digital technologies and social media platforms, which can help to promote constructive criticism and higher citizens' engagement, has been highlighted. However, digital technologies bring new challenges to traditional institutions and models, as they create the impression that bureaucratic processes can be simplified, when they are in fact quite complex, and nowadays citizens absorb information faster than the government apparatus. Crises and external pressures can challenge the core principles of the EU, such as solidarity and the construction of an EU identity. However, these principles can be rescued by implementing a bottom-up strategy that contributes to strengthening citizen participation in representative democratic mechanisms and allowing them to construct 'their' version of the EU (S. Blockmans and S. Russack, 2019).

### The role of international law and institutions in safeguarding and promoting democratic values

Public International Law can reinforce national democratic processes to respond to and represent citizens better, as it provides additional mechanisms and checks and balances for increased accountability, political participation, and the inclusion of minorities. Concrete examples in the Inter-American system and the Mexican case show how international law instruments and institutions can promote democracy and its values on national, regional and global levels. In the Mexican case, these instruments and

institutions helped in coining several human rights values and standards on a constitutional level. Furthermore, the Inter-American Democratic Charter has promoted the inclusion and establishment of human rights agendas related to gender and indigenous peoples on a national level. For example, in the electoral realm, a concrete case before the Interamerican Court allowed for independent candidacies, showing the impact of international organisms on national democracies. Finally, the EU and Mexico have a common commitment to promoting democracy and democratic values. The soon to be signed modernised EU-Mexico Global Agreement and its democratic clause helps to ensure constitutional order in Mexico and the EU. In case of a violation of this clause, either party could totally or partially suspend the Global Agreement.

### Accountability and transparency at the core of democracies

Corruption and the lack of effective counterbalances to government institutions are the main challenges to the democratic model in Latin America. In Mexico, corruption is identified as a core legal offense, a strategy that increases the risk of reducing political opposition to the current government and the benefits of the democratic model. In this scenario, accountability and transparency are the two main principles that need to be strengthened to make democracies legitimate before citizens. Anti-corruption policies and civil society participation are an example of how citizens need instruments beyond elections to make governments accountable. In this sense, think tanks play an active role in stimulating and strengthening the democratization process by analysing and explaining the corrosive impact of corruption cases on the democratic order and designing, implementing and evaluating innovative solutions to increase institutional transparency.

### Digital technologies for more efficient and legitimate democracies

Technologies could allow for increased collaboration between citizens and public administration in the co-creation of public services that could result in a higher level of citizen satisfaction towards the government. Government efficiency and trust in democratic institutions could be improved through equal access to new technologies, considering challenges such as cognitive biases and information overload. However, this strategy can be more effective in European Union countries, where citizens have greater

access to digital technologies compared to Latin America, where governments need to invest more in the public infrastructure necessary for this. The digital revolution in decision-making and citizen participation, as well as in the implementation of transparency and accountability principles is an important strategy for addressing challenges such as the rise of populist movements.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

- There is clear strategic value in the partnership between European Union and Mexico, and common ground for fostering more efficient and representative democracies in Latin America and Europe.
- Think tanks from the EU and Mexico agreed that there are interesting opportunities for them to continue to work together on identifying ways in which democracy in Latin America and the European Union could be strengthened.
- A comparative analysis that emerged from the Dialogue, particularly regarding institutional consolidation, state-building and social and economic pressures, revealed similarities, but also important differences that should be the object of more in-depth investigation to help underpin EU-Mexico relations.
- Future joint research projects involving the collaboration of think tanks from the EU and Mexico need to ensure that there is a shared understanding regarding the definition of democracy in order to conduct a deeper analysis of institutions, procedures, practices, and values.
- Future think tank dialogues or cooperation related to democracy issues should focus on important contemporary transversal issues for both the EU and Latin America, such as migration, sovereignty and the role of the media.
- Populism as a phenomenon needs to be analysed with arguments based on principles of representative democracy. Engagement with populist movements and addressing the arguments they put forward are key in working towards solutions of inclusion, accountability, and better matching governmental policies with public preferences, which could lead to renovated and stronger democracies.

EU-Mexico cooperation. Engaging with the expert community, enhancing mutual understanding, and exchanging opportunities are key elements for consolidating EU-Mexico relations within the framework of the future modernised EU-Mexico Global Agreement. The five dialogues foreseen under this initiative will bring together European and Mexican Think Tanks to debate around priority topics for the EU-Mexico bilateral agenda.

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## ABOUT THE EU-MEXICO THINK TANK DIALOGUE INITIATIVE

The initiative is part of the public diplomacy and outreach strategy in support of the EU's foreign policy. Its aim is to promote strategic discussions and practical steps to deepen