



**DEMOCRACY, HUMAN
RIGHTS AND CIVIC SPACE**

RELEVANCE

The upcoming EU–CELAC Summit is taking place in a context of a global crisis of liberal democracy, marked by institutional weakening, rising human rights violations, and the erosion of the rule of law amid growing exhaustion of the international order.¹

In several countries around the world, the lack of effective responses to key social issues such as unemployment, inflation, insecurity, and access to education and health services by governments perceived as inefficient and serving minority interests has led to widespread public frustration with democracy.² In Europe and in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), the search for quick solutions to these problems, as well as for a more prosperous future, has triggered the rise of authoritarian and far-right populist alternatives that undermine democratic institutions, increase inequalities, restrict civic space, and promote anti-rights agendas.³ These types of alternatives challenge international norms, the relevance of the SDG agenda, and publicly discredit multilateral and regional bodies and forums, thereby hindering the construction of consensus and joint solutions to shared and interconnected challenges.

Assessment of the Situation in Europe and LAC

The crisis of democracy takes on specific characteristics in each region. In LAC, this crisis unfolds in a context of extreme inequality, discrimination, unmet basic needs, the climate crisis, escalating violence, and high levels of corruption.⁴ In both regions, the expansion of illegal economies and intense political polarization are evident as well.

¹ More broadly, we are witnessing a crisis of the global order based on liberal democracy and the free market, as well as on a set of international rules and institutions that have served as the reference framework for relations between regions and countries around the world. This context reflects the limits of globalization, which are becoming evident alongside the multiplication of armed conflicts and the escalating rivalry between the United States and China.

² According to the Latinobarómetro 2024, satisfaction with democracy is below 50% in every country in the region except Uruguay, El Salvador, and Mexico. In Honduras, Ecuador, and Colombia, only 18%, 19% and 20% of the population, respectively, express satisfaction with democracy. Peru and Bolivia reported only 10% satisfaction. Source: <https://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp> According to the Democracy Perception Index, 57% of people in the European Union consider their country to be democratic. In Hungary, only 31% of citizens believe their country is a democracy; only 43% of Greeks and just 46% of French respondents feel the same. Source: <https://es.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/05/08/el-descontento-con-la-democracia-crece-en-algunas-partes-de-europa-segun-un-estudio-intern>

³ In recent decades, in both Latin America and Europe, political movements have gained ground in advancing issues such as marriage equality, civil unions, and abortion. This, in turn, has enabled the organization of a national, regional, and global counter-movement, which has become a key component of the polarization currently defining politics worldwide.

⁴ The Americas score 42 out of a possible 100 points in Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), which measures the perceived level of corruption in the public sector. Source: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024>. According to this index, perceptions of corruption in Western Europe and the European Union have increased. Source: <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/cpi-2024-western-europe-eu-leaders-hollow-efforts-cause-worsening-corruption-levels>

Concentration of Power, Authoritarianism, and Inequalities

In most LAC countries, the erosion of democratic institutions is reflected in the growing concentration of power in the executive branch to the detriment of the other branches of government, facilitating authoritarianism in some countries, such as El Salvador and Ecuador, and the consolidation of dictatorships in Venezuela and Nicaragua.⁵ In the region, the lack of transparency and the weakening of the system of checks and balances foster corruption and promote the undue influence of economic and political elites in the formulation of public policies and the administration of justice. As a result, in many countries in the region, public policies respond to the interests of the few, to the detriment of the common good, disproportionately affecting the rights of the most disadvantaged groups, such as women, girls, gender-diverse persons, youth, indigenous peoples, older adults, migrants, people of African descent, and persons with disabilities. As they face multiple forms of discrimination, their demands are often dismissed, which further restricts their rights. This is compounded by the advance of conservative movements seeking to dismantle achievements in gender equality and inclusion, threatening to reverse decades of progress in human rights and equity.⁶ Furthermore, in the context of the new migrant expulsion policies pursued by the Trump administration and the rise of the far right in many European countries, there has been growing stigmatization and criminalization of migrants, who are associated with the expansion of illegal economies and crime.

Lack of Judicial Independence

On both sides of the Atlantic, interference by other branches of government in the judiciary is evident, hindering the effective and impartial enforcement of laws. According to the 2022 Rule of Law Report, perceptions of judicial independence are very low in Spain, Italy, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Poland, and Croatia, while in Hungary, there is growing political interference in the judiciary.⁷

In LAC countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Bolivia, and Honduras, the removal and appointment of judges and prosecutors by other branches of government through opaque and, in some cases, illegal processes have undermined the independence of the judiciary, fostering impunity for the powerful. In many countries in the region, the justice system has been instrumentalized and placed at the service of the government. For example, in recent elections in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Venezuela, the

⁵ In other countries, such as Peru, the concentration of power following the same authoritarian logic is exercised by the Congress, which subordinates the Executive and declares itself the primary branch of the State.

⁶ These sectors challenge the policies and legislation that recognize the rights of women and gender-diverse groups, and that penalize gender-based violence—a severe issue in the region. Source: <https://elpais.com/argentina/2025-01-24/milei-pedira-al-congreso-el-fin-de-la-figura-de-feminicidio-y-las-leyes-de-paridad-de-genero.html>? https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-considers-hungarys-judicial-reform-addressed-deficiencies-judicial-independence-maintains-2023-12-13_en

⁷ https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-considers-hungarys-judicial-reform-addressed-deficiencies-judicial-independence-maintains-2023-12-13_en

executive branches have used the judiciary and electoral bodies to manipulate elections in favor of new or remaining governments, thereby endangering the basic rules of democracy and violating the will of the people.⁸

This set of factors, together with corruption scandals involving high-level officials and powerful actors—in the case of Latin America—has undermined the trust of both European and Latin American citizens in the capacity of democratic institutions to safeguard the common good and deliver quality public services.⁹ At the same time, social media accelerates social demands at a pace that States on both continents are unable to process, increasing public frustration and deepening the conditions for populism and autocracy.

Shrinking Civic Space

The shrinking of civic space is another prominent manifestation of the democratic crisis, as it prevents individuals from exercising the fundamental rights that every healthy democracy requires.¹⁰ In several countries around the world, the indiscriminate use of force against social demonstrations, the criminalization of protest, political persecution, and restrictions on the freedoms of expression, press, and association are becoming increasingly common. In LAC, there is a growing trend of criminalization and direct violent attacks against civil society organizations (CSOs), journalists, and activists, aimed at discrediting their work and silencing critical voices. These groups are also subjected to digital violence, such as defamation based on disinformation, intimidation, harassment, and surveillance. Likewise, in both Europe and LAC, some governments are seeking to restrict and criminalize CSOs through “anti-NGO” initiatives or legislation. This is the case in Venezuela, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Peru, Hungary, Serbia, and Turkey.

Finally, it is essential to note that the recent freezing of United States cooperation aid and funding cuts for CSOs in Europe are further shrinking civic space by jeopardizing the financial sustainability and very existence of civil society organizations and independent journalism, especially in Latin American and Caribbean countries.¹¹

⁸ In Peru, the breakdown of the balance of powers has led to a high concentration of power in an authoritarian and conservative coalition within Congress, which has placed the Government at its service and taken significant steps toward controlling all institutions. At present, this coalition is advancing a plan to take over the electoral system.

⁹ In Europe, only 43% of French citizens and 31% of Hungarians consider their country to be fully democratic. Source: <https://es.euro-news.com/my-europe/2024/05/08/el-descontento-con-la-democracia-crece-en-algunas-partes-de-europa-segun-un-estudio-intern>

¹⁰ According to the 2024 Civicus Monitor, women—including groups advocating for their rights and women human rights defenders—are among the groups most vulnerable to attacks. Furthermore, according to Global Witness, Latin America is the most dangerous region in the world for environmental defenders. In 2023, 85% of the killings of environmental defenders occurred in the region, with Colombia being the most dangerous country for this group.

¹¹ In Europe, conservative governments and members of the European Parliament are advocating for reducing development aid and financial support to civil society organizations. Source: <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-conservative-target-ngo-financing-rules-eu-taxpayer-money/>, <https://www.dutchnews.nl/2024/11/dutch-aid-minister-to-cut-e1-billion-from-budget-for-ngos/> <https://www.politico.eu/article/fears-over-health-ngos-future-as-massive-eu-funding-cut-looms/>

Transnational Organized Crime, Corruption, and Illicit Economies

The rise of transnational organized crime is a serious problem in both regions. In LAC, the boom in drug trafficking, illegal logging, deliberate forest fires, illegal mining, wildlife trafficking, and human trafficking has severe humanitarian consequences for communities, in addition to the devastating effects on the environment and the ancestral territories of indigenous populations.¹² These illicit economies negatively impact countries' GDP and State revenue collection, reducing governments' capacity to guarantee their populations' economic and social rights. They also fuel violence and forced migration, posing serious threats to peace and security with impacts in Europe and other parts of the world.¹² On both sides of the Atlantic, organized crime activities are sustained through the direct participation or collaboration of public officials in all levels.¹³ According to Europol, 60% of criminal activities in Europe are driven by corruption.¹⁴ It is also important to highlight that organized crime groups launder their illicit gains by exploiting global financial systems and cooperating with "facilitators," such as banks, lawyers, accountants, real estate agents, and luxury goods brokers, most of whom are located in the Global North, including European countries.

Strategic Recommendations

The crisis of democracy in Latin America and Europe is a complex phenomenon that must be addressed comprehensively and from multiple dimensions. Based on shared values of respect for democracy and human rights, we call on the European Union and CELAC to seek joint solutions to ensure peace and advance the construction of more democratic, resilient, and inclusive societies.

We advocate for the recovery and renewal of the meaning of representative and participatory democracy, whose social practice is grounded on three fundamental pillars:

- (a)** the full exercise of citizenship in its basic dimensions—belonging, rights, and participation;
- (b)** the restoration of its social function, oriented toward promoting distributive equity by prioritizing the common good over particular interests;
- (c)** the open management of the public sphere through the highest possible level of citizen participation, combining both direct and representative forms of involvement, that is, the creation of public spaces—both State and non-State—for effective citizen engagement and oversight.

¹² <https://insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/El-itinerario-de-la-cocai%CC%81na-hacia-Europa-InSight-Crime-Global-Initiative.pdf>, Bergman, Marcelo (2023): El negocio del crimen. El crecimiento del delito, los mercados ilegales y la violencia en América Latina, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Buenos Aires. See also: Carrión, Fernando (2024): La producción social de las violencias en Ecuador y América Latina. Histórica, estructural, plural y relacional, FLACSO Ecuador-FES-ILDIS, Quito

¹³ <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/cpi-2022-americas-corruption-criminal-networks-human-rights-abuses>

¹⁴ <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/serious-and-organised-crime-in-eu-corrupting-influence>

1) To defend and strengthen civic space and citizen participation mechanisms that uphold democratic transparency and institutions

It is crucial to coherently place democracy and human rights at the center of relations between the European Union and Latin America

To attain this, it is necessary to:

- Effectively enforce the binding clauses on human rights and democracy of all trade and association agreements with the region, as well as to guarantee real monitoring and participation spaces for civil society.
- To ensure that all European investments in LAC—including Global Gateway investments and strategic agreements on critical raw materials—are equipped with robust, transparent, and sufficient mechanisms for impact assessment and due diligence on human rights and the environment, to guarantee that these projects do not contribute to the shrinking of civic space in the territories or benefit corrupt actors or organized crime.

It is mandatory to build a safer, more transparent, and democratic digital ecosystem

To attain this, it is crucial to:

- Advocate for regulations requiring social media and technology platforms to be transparent about their algorithms and data use to protect users from disinformation and digital attacks, by establishing precise mechanisms for detecting and removing false and malicious content.
- To promote digital literacy from an early age, empowering citizens with the tools needed to discern between truthful and false information and to foster critical thinking in the digital environment.

It is necessary to provide robust support to human rights defenders in both regions

To attain this, it is of the utmost importance to:

- Promote preventive protection mechanisms for human rights defenders through training programs for public officials, as well as support for investigations into threats.
- Promote effective legislation and policies for the protection of defenders and ensure adequate funding.

- Establish regular spaces for dialogue and participation that are physically, linguistically, and technically accessible, and that have sufficient financial resources to guarantee their functioning.
- Strengthen existing support programs to ensure mechanisms reach rural and hard-to-access areas, maintaining regular meetings with defenders and conducting systematic visits to communities where defenders are at high risk.
- Promote and facilitate safe spaces for interaction among defenders, and between defenders and other relevant stakeholders.
- Accompany protection programs with political commitment, including public support when necessary, particularly in cases of criminalization and imprisonment.
- Ensure the protection of feminist leaders, who face high levels of violence and criminalization in the region.

2. It is vital to promote the rights and participation of young women, ethnic peoples, and other historically excluded groups in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of policies aimed at reducing economic and social inequality

To attain this, it is necessary to:

- Ensure non-regression in women's rights legislation, alongside strong monitoring and accountability mechanisms.
- Demand clear commitments from governments to strengthen efforts against femicide and gender-based violence through prevention, sanction, and reparation policies.
- Reject initiatives aimed at restricting sexual and reproductive rights in the region, and promote equitable access to reproductive health services, including comprehensive sexuality education, contraception, and safe access to abortion, in line with international human rights standards.
- Guarantee the inclusion of women in the green and digital economy to promote their participation in future-oriented jobs and in a just ecological transition.
- Ensure that climate policies include specific measures to mitigate the impacts of the climate crisis on women and vulnerable communities.

3. It is necessary to strengthen the balance of powers, judicial independence, and electoral bodies as core pillars of democracy

To attain this, it is necessary to work in the following areas:

○ Judiciary

Appointments and dismissals of judges and prosecutors must be transparent and based on expertise and performance to prevent interference from other branches of government. It is essential to make judges' and public officials' asset declarations public to avoid conflicts of interest. Honest judges and prosecutors must be guaranteed the conditions to carry out their work without interference, pressure, or threats, so they can advance investigations and impose sanctions.

○ Electoral Bodies

It is indispensable to strengthen the autonomy, transparency, and accountability of electoral bodies to protect the integrity of electoral processes and ensure the impartiality of institutions and national electoral oversight mechanisms, as well as to establish adequately resourced consultation mechanisms with civil society.

4. It is vital to fight against Corruption and Organized Crime

To attain this, it is mandatory to:

- Develop policies to combat organized crime that incorporate the fight against corruption and are centered on human rights.
- Promote transparent political financing and accountability to prevent undue influence and the capture of public institutions by interest groups and organized crime.
- Provide specialized training and technical support to police officers, investigators, and prosecutors working on complex cases of organized crime and corruption, and implement comprehensive whistleblower protection mechanisms that guarantee anonymity and protection from retaliation.
- Promote cross-border investigations and intelligence sharing.
- Strengthen transparency regarding ownership (the actual owners of companies) to advance investigations and reduce impunity.

- Promote compliance with international anti-money laundering obligations and strengthen the regulation of accountants, financial institutions, and lawyers who facilitate illicit financial flows derived from corruption and organized crime.
- Strengthen national tax systems and ensure taxation of large digital corporations in the countries where they conduct business.





**Grupo de trabajo
de Sociedad Civil
CELAC-UE**