

**Corvinus University of Budapest**

**Doctoral School of International Relations and Political Science**

**The role of summits in the development of interregional cooperation  
programs between the European Union and Latin America:  
The cases of Eurosocial and Euroclima**

**Doctoral Dissertation Booklet**

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## **Abstract**

In 1999, a strategic partnership between the European Union (EU) and Latin America was established with the aim of strengthening political dialogue, cooperation initiatives and economic ties between the two regions. A set of biennial summits convening the Heads of State and Government was held to foster mutual understanding and address shared challenges. However, these summits were interrupted from 2015 to 2023 due to several internal and external circumstances that hindered the continuity of high-level political dialogue. Against this background, it is crucial to inquire about the significance of these meetings, the implications of their interruption, and the evolution of interregional cooperation during the non-summits period. In particular, this research aims to identify the role of summits between the Heads of State and Government of the EU and Latin America in the development of interregional cooperation programs and to what extent the lack of summits affected the functioning of these programs. To this end, a comprehensive study was conducted through the analysis of two case studies: Eurosocial and Euroclima. These cooperation programs were created by a mandate of

the summits to address the issues of social inclusion and sustainable development, respectively. To conduct this study, a time framework of ten years was selected, encompassing two specific periods: from 2010 to 2015, referred to as the summits period, and from 2016 to 2020, identified as the non-summits period. A multi-method qualitative methodology was implemented by conducting a three-phase process of data collection and analysis, which involved the examination of interviews and primary documents. The results of this research revealed that summits play the role of providing guidelines that shape the operating mechanisms and implementation processes of cooperation programs. The main consequence of the lack of summits was the lack of new summit-driven guidelines. However, the continuity of the cooperation programs was not affected by the absence of summits due to their adherence to old summit-driven guidelines, which became structural characteristics of these programs, and the incorporation of new guidelines from external sources, such as regional forums in the case of Euroclima and international practices in the case of Eurosocal. Furthermore, the building of relational capital and the uninterrupted EU

budget allocation also ensured the continuity of these cooperation programs during the non-summits period. These findings contribute to enriching the debate on the usefulness and relevance of summits and shed light on the factors that strengthen interregional cooperation programs during non-summits periods by providing empirical evidence from the case studies of Eurosocial and Euroclima.

## **I. Research background and justification of the topic**

Summits have progressively become one of the major rituals of international politics (Jönsson and Hall, 2005). High-level meetings between representatives of different countries have often paved the way for reaching agreements even amidst turbulent circumstances. While the practice of leaders convening to discuss matters of governance and statecraft can be traced back to antiquity, what is notable in recent times is the frequency of these meetings and the extent to which they have replaced traditional methods of diplomatic communication (Dunn, 1996). In this sense, some scholars argue that summitry is a controversial but irreversible development in modern diplomatic practice (Melissen, 2003).

While being a common practice in the realm of international relations, summits have faced disruptions affecting their continuity. A recent example was the Covid-19 pandemic, a global phenomenon that not only halted in-person events but also disrupted the overall dynamics of international exchanges. However, there are also interruptions in summitry arising from internal crises rather than external

constraints. This was the case of the summits between the Heads of State and Government of the European Union (EU) and Latin America, interrupted from 2015 to 2023.

These two regions have been considered “natural allies” given their solid cultural, historical and economic ties (Roy, 2012). In this sense, most scholars agree on assessing the EU-Latin America relationship as a deep-rooted partnership between like-minded regions in terms of values and principles. As Domínguez (2015) points out, “despite nuances and differences, the gaps between the European and Latin American worldviews are considerably smaller in comparison to the diplomatic clashes between the European Union and other regions or countries” (p. 2).

In 1999, a strategic partnership between the EU and Latin America was established with the aim of strengthening political dialogue, cooperation initiatives, and economic ties between the two regions. This partnership was considered a critical component of a “new institutional architecture”, marking significant progress in the relationship (Grisanti, 2004). A set of biennial summits convening the Heads of State and Government was held to foster mutual understanding and work together in order to address shared

challenges. Several cooperation programs were created as a result of this periodic dialogue.

However, the biregional relationship has faced significant challenges, mostly stemming from intraregional crises. On one hand, the EU grappled with the emergence of multiple problems such as the Euro crisis in 2008, the migration crisis in 2015 and the Brexit process in 2016, which had a negative impact on its interregional relations. On the other hand, Latin America experienced a profound regional fragmentation due to ideological disagreements over the Venezuelan crisis, political instability in some countries, and the prevalence of national interests over regional unity, hindering the international projection of the region and weakening its interregional links. This complex scenario led to the interruption of summits between the Heads of State and Government of the EU and Latin America from 2015 to 2023. This was an unprecedented fact in the history of the biregional relationship.

While summitry has been a pivotal aspect of the EU-Latin American relationship, some scholars have questioned its usefulness based on a perceived lack of concrete results. In this sense, Ayuso (2015) argued that biregional summits

became a diplomatic formality instead of being an opportunity to solve issues and give impetus to policies. Meanwhile, some authors identified a growing sense of stagnation and fatigue, highlighting the lack of dynamism in summit discussions (Maihold, 2007; Gardini & Malamud, 2016; Quevedo Flores, 2019). Other scholars emphasized the need to rethink the institutional structure of the biregional relationship given the limitations of the summits (Altmann Borbon, Rojas Aravena & Beirute Brealey, 2011). The complex scenario of the EU-Latin American relationship provided an opportunity to assess the significance of summits, the implications of their interruption and the evolution of interregional cooperation during the non-summits period.



## **II. Methodology**

This dissertation inquired about the role of summits in the development of interregional cooperation programs between the EU and Latin America, the impact of the lack of summits on their functioning, and their strategies to address the non-summits period. A comprehensive research was conducted by analyzing two case studies, namely Eurosocial and Euroclima, in a timeframe of ten years, from 2010 to 2020. Two consecutive five-year periods were examined: from 2010 to 2015, denominated as the summits period, and from 2016 to 2020, referred to as the non-summits period. A multi-method qualitative study was implemented following a three-phase research process, including data collection and analysis from interviews, summit declarations, action plans, and institutional reports of the cooperation programs.

The first phase of this process entailed the conduction of interviews with staff of Eurosocial and Euroclima. Interviews were chosen as a data collection tool because they provide first-hand information not obtainable through other means, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the functioning and evolution of these cooperation programs over the years. The second phase of the methodological

process entailed the collection of the declarations and action plans that resulted from the summits held during the study period. The document analysis in this phase focused on identifying and characterizing the specific guidelines furnished by summits to these cooperation programs. Finally, the third phase was the collection and analysis of the institutional reports from Eurosocial and Euroclima. The aim of this phase was to identify whether the guidelines provided by the summits declarations and action plans were reflected in the institutional reports of Eurosocial and Euroclima, looking for possible common patterns in the documents published during both the summits and non-summits periods. The data collected from interviews and documents in each phase was processed by thematic analysis.

### **III. Findings of the dissertation**

- This research revealed that summits set biregional priorities based on the consensus reached by the leaders, which are subsequently delineated as guidelines that provide a framework for the functioning of cooperation programs. Thus, summits played the role of “guideline providers” for these programs. Substantial evidence from the analysis of interviews and institutional reports demonstrated that summits-driven guidelines shape the operating mechanisms and implementation processes in the cases of Eurosocial and Euroclima. The influence of these guidelines extended beyond the summits periods, permeating the operations of the cooperation programs in the non-summits period as well. This fact reflects the relevance of the summits-driven guidelines in steering the course of the cooperation programs over time.
- However, the documentary analysis of declarations and action plans unveiled that while summits provide general guidelines for the development of cooperation programs, they fall short of proposing specific pathways for implementation. The summits

declarations and action plans provide only general principles and objectives without delineating a precise roadmap to achieve them. Consequently, Eurosocial and Euroclima had to give concrete form to many of the concepts and proposals appearing in these documents. In this sense, the cooperation programs had a broad margin of maneuver to adapt the summits-driven guidelines according to their specific needs.

- This research demonstrated that the lack of summits did not imply stagnation in the development of Eurosocial and Euroclima. In other words, the absence of summits did not cause any noticeable disruptions or hinder the continuity of these cooperation programs. As the analysis revealed, the lack of summits affected their functioning only to a limited extent. The main negative consequence of the interruption of summits was the void created by the lack of new summits-driven guidelines. However, both programs, regardless of their structural differences, were able to continue their operations during the non-summits period due to several reasons.

- First, the void created by the lack of new summits-driven guidelines was mitigated in several ways. For instance, the cooperation programs continued to follow most of the summit-driven guidelines during the non-summits period. Some of these guidelines evolved into structural characteristics of the cooperation programs and became part of their institutional protocols. Moreover, regional forums and international practices became guideline providers in the absence of interregional summits. In this regard, it is important to remark on the role of the Forum of Ministers of Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean in the case of Euroclima, and the importance of international orientations such as the Sustainable Development Goals in the case of Eurosocio, which provided new guidelines that facilitated the continuation of these programs. This fact also reflected the inherent flexibility of Eurosocio and Euroclima to adapt to evolving circumstances and be resilient in challenging contexts.
- Second, the functioning of the cooperation programs was bolstered by the building of networks and

communities of practice that remained in place regardless of the lack of high-level dialogue. These networks constitute what the staff of Eurosocial identified as relational capital. Relational capital enhanced trust and knowledge sharing between people and institutions in both regions. This particularity brings to light the interconnectedness forged at the technical/execution level of the relationship. According to the evidence collected, this level has created a separate dynamic that does not depend on the continuity of summits to function. In this sense, it is important to highlight the institutional commitment emerging from technical assistance actions conducted within the framework of Eurosocial and Euroclima. Collaboration between institutions created strong networks whose relationship went beyond the absence of political dialogue, facilitating the continuity of cooperation activities. Thus, the resilience of cooperation programs such as Eurosocial is driven by a “bottom-up pressure” exerted by the institutions and actors involved in these programs.

- Third, the financial support from the EU channeled through the European Commission was crucial for the continuity of cooperation programs, and especially important for the remarkable growth of Euroclima. The development of programs such as Eurosocal and Euroclima during the non-summits period was possible because the European Commission consistently allocated funds to these programs despite the lack of biregional summits. This evidence aligns with the argument of Maihold (2010), who pointed out that only the European Commission has functioned as an implementation body of the summits-driven commitments, reflecting the unilateral character of this process. While these cooperation programs have sought to engage the Latin American counterparts as much as possible, the continuity of the programs depends mostly on the EU budget. This fact reflects the asymmetry of the EU-Latin America relationship, which is widely documented by the literature.
- In sum, the adaptation of old and new guidelines, the building of relational capital and the EU budget allocation guaranteed the continuity of Eurosocal and

Euroclima during the non-summits period. These conditions ensured the independence of these cooperation programs from the summitry process. In this context, they developed a certain degree of *actorness* as the commitment of the partner institutions to the programs promoted “bottom-up” policy coordination and harmonization independent of the high-level dialogue. This evidence aligns with the argument of Ayuso and Foglia (2010), who claim that a network of interrelations between several actors from Latin America and the EU has filled the relationship with “real content” beyond political dialogue.



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## **V. List of the author's publications on the topic**

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