

PEACE AND SECURITY

THE EUROPEAN UNION AS PEACE ACTOR

Proposals for conflict resolution in Colombia and Venezuela

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February 2021



The EU and Germany view the conflicts in Venezuela and Colombia as two separate issues. However, both countries' histories, economies and politics have always been closely linked. This impacts on the region's stability and security.



The EU should step up its role as a peace actor and contribute to reducing the tensions between the two countries contributing to greater stability in the region. After the US elections, the international political context for multi-lateral conflict mitigation is favourable.



In order to react to the precarious security situation, the EU shall expand the humanitarian aid and medical care and conceptualise them on a long-term basis. Besides, the EU's potential for diplomatic mediation has not been fully used yet. It would be conceivable to have a EU special representative for Venezuela and Colombia.

BACKGROUND

THE CONFLICTS IN VENEZUELA AND COLOMBIA

In **Venezuela**, – despite international economic sanctions – the authoritarian president Nicolás Maduro remains firmly in power. According to official figures, the ruling party won a majority in last December's parliamentary elections; however, the voter turnout was only 31 per cent. The EU, several Latin American countries, and the USA do not recognize these elections. According to the polls, the Venezuelans largely disapprove of the current government but also of Maduro's opponent, Juan Guaidó. Simultaneously, the highly precarious humanitarian situation is continuing to deteriorate. The end of the fossil fuel economic model, hyperinflation and international sanctions had already by 2019 led to food shortages affecting 80 per cent of the Venezuelan population. The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated this situation. The Venezuelan government intentionally uses violence and violations of human rights as potent means to assert its power. In addition, Maduro benefits from the weakness of the opposition, which is heavily divided.

In **Colombia**, a peace deal in 2016 between the government and Latin America's oldest guerrilla group, the FARC-EP (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo), ended an armed conflict that had lasted for more than 50 years. Since then, according to the government 13,194 guerrilla fighters have been successfully demobilised and reincorporated into society. The FARC-EP founded the party Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común (FARC), which participates in the political process. However, the government under the right wing conservative President Iván Duque (Partido Centro Democrático) elected in 2018 is currently blocking major aspects of the implementation of the peace agreement. According to national NGOs, 1,084 civil society and community leaders plus 250 former combatants engaged in the peace process have been murdered since the agreement was signed. A number of FARC members have withdrawn their support for the peace process or have never actively supported it, amongst them prominent signatories of the agreement. Other guerrilla groups such as the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) and organised crime groups are gaining power, due to the state lacking a democratic institutionalised presence in the regions. Extreme acts of violence abound particularly in regions that lack state structures or whose structures are riddled with corruption.

CLOSE LINKS BETWEEN COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA

The poor security¹ situation in the region is well known in Germany and Europe. Less known, however, is the close

interrelation of the various conflicts in both countries, particularly along their huge shared border region: Colombia and Venezuela share a long colonial history. They only separated in 1829, after having become independent from Spain. However, socially and culturally they remained closely connected to this day. Migration between the two countries is not a new phenomenon: already the Colombian armed conflict and the Venezuelan oil boom stretching from the 1970s to the 1990s had caused many millions of Colombians immigrate to Venezuela. Today between 2–2.5 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees dwell in Colombia, some of whom possess dual nationality. They form part of the world's second largest migrant crisis. With the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, many Venezuelans tried to return to their home country, having lost jobs and housing in their host countries. Neither in Venezuela nor in Colombia are the migrants sufficiently covered by a formal system of social security and are therefore, with ever-growing urgency, dependent on humanitarian aid.

While under President Hugo Chávez, Venezuela had contributed significantly to the achievement of the peace deal, the ideological differences between the two countries today seem irreconcilable. An international armed conflict looms often rhetorically on the agenda. The Maduro government supports the remaining Colombian guerrilla group ELN and the ex-FARC dissidents, who are using the border region and Venezuela as a retreat area or are directly cooperating with the Maduro regime. In pursuance of guerrillas, Colombia has repeatedly infringed upon Venezuela's national sovereignty. The ideological dispute between »Bolivarian socialism« and the right wing conservative Colombian government will continue to play a role in the Colombia presidential election campaign in 2022. A climate of insecurity and violence is dominating many areas of life in both countries and is contributing to the region's polarisation and destabilisation.

The hardened antagonism between both countries has geopolitical implications also beyond the continent. While Colombia seeks support from the Lima Group, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the USA, Maduro receives backing from Cuba, Russia, China and Iran.

THE BORDER SITUATION

What holds true for the relationship between the two countries as a whole becomes even more acute at the 2,219 kilometre long common border. Far from the respective capitals it arbitrarily divides an economic area and the living space of indigenous peoples. Weakness and absence of the state on both sides of the border facilitate the proliferation of illegal and criminal structures.

The reclosing of the border in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 has not only lead to many migrants now being stuck in the border area but has also enhanced criminal activities, drug and human trafficking, smuggling and underground economy and has led to

¹ The FES uses the term security in an encompassing way, including political, social and economic dimensions of security.

massive social disruption. Local national and binational initiatives are trying to counteract these tensions and conflicts. However, civil society organisations lack sufficient financial means for this work. Beyond the humanitarian emergency care for the refugees, it is also necessary to provide them with long-term social and economic perspectives.

EU ACTIVITIES

Over the past decades, German and European policy has been committed to conflict resolution in the two Andean countries: through active support of the peace process in Colombia and mediation in the political conflict in Venezuela via the EU International Contact Group, as well as through provision of humanitarian aid in the border region. However, up until now sufficient attention has not been paid to the intricate intertwinement of both conflicts as described above. Political solutions are also necessary, to alleviate the situation at the border.

The following paragraphs will make concrete recommendations as to how the EU can improve the current situation, promote stability, security and a future perspective for the population in both countries. The EU – and explicitly Germany – should deploy their high standing in Latin America as neutral mediators to forge a workable solution independent of the USA's geopolitical interests on the one hand, and China, Russia, Iran and Turkey's on the other.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EU ACTION

1. At the present time, the main objective of European politics towards Venezuela should not be a change of government but the promotion of a dialogue between the government and the opposition with the aim to negotiate political reforms which will in the medium term facilitate a return to democracy. For this, the government should receive positive incentives (see recommendation no. 7).
2. In the current situation, in its negotiations with Venezuela, Europe should focus on ending the violations of political, economic and social human rights as well as on providing humanitarian aid for the population throughout the country.
3. The support of the Colombian peace process and the integral implementation of the agreement is a medium to long-term objective for the EU and Germany. The 2016 peace process has been firmly enshrined in the Colombian constitution since 2017, and is thus a state objective. Its implementation is bindingly stipulated in the constitution for at least three legislative periods and will take many years to be realised. This means that the international community with its very own interests in the success of the process must engage in a
- immense task. Yet international interest particularly during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic has shrunk significantly.
4. European and German foreign policy with respect to Colombia should concentrate on a sustainable and inclusive peace policy, supporting a stable, permanent and complete peace in the country and promoting the country's further democratisation. This implies that it should be more outspoken in condemning the violence against peace activists and demobilised guerrillas and should ostentatively question authoritarian tendencies, such as the return to militarisation or the use of repressive policies in the region (for instance in the fight against drug trafficking).
5. Regarding the humanitarian emergency in the conflict region, the EU should preferably support local actors providing humanitarian aid. This particularly applies to the border region between Venezuela and Colombia. Here, there are now numerous civil society initiatives on both sides of the border active, including from the church, academia and business (such as the Colombian-Venezuelan Chamber of Commerce, e.g.), but also initiatives run by local authorities. These initiatives work to normalise the situation despite the border closure (closed from the Venezuelan side since 2015 and closed from the Colombian side since the 2020 pandemic), striving to end the closure whilst offering concrete assistance to those people who depend on the crossing of the border. Local state structures in the border area should therefore be strengthened, especially with the additional aim of jointly overcoming the pandemic. In the medium term, it is important to convert humanitarian aid into sustainable development projects for social security and reinforced social safety nets in both countries.
6. The EU should advocate a renewal of the consular and later on diplomatic relations between the two countries and work towards the reopening of the border as swiftly as possible. Only then can they effectively fight illegal structures in the border region and enable the formal economy to resume its traditionally strong cross border connections. Legal alternatives must be strengthened to oppose the illegal activities. This could increase mutual trust on both sides and reduce the enmity towards Venezuelan migrants and refugees.
7. The opportunities arising from the change of administration in the USA, should be utilized to resolve the conflicts in both countries. The Venezuelan government should be offered the prospect of a gradual lifting of the existing general economic sanctions and access to Venezuelan assets abroad in return for improvements of the humanitarian and human rights situation as well as for genuine political reforms.
8. With the prospective improvement of the relations between the USA and Cuba – under the new president

Joe Biden – Cuba’s strong influence on Venezuela’s government and military should be used, both for a mediation between the government and the opposition at home and to improve the relationship with Colombia.

9. It can currently be observed that the regional peace and security architecture in Latin America is weak and that countries join together for specific purposes in loose but highly politicised and ideologically influenced alliances (e.g. the Lima Group). The EU should therefore work to strengthen or rebuild formalised regional security structures across Latin America, so that they can take on local responsibility for the security situation in the Andean region.
10. In order to underline an even stronger commitment of the EU to the conflict region and to demonstrate awareness of the interrelation of the conflicts in both countries, the creation of a joint EU special representative for Venezuela and Colombia would be a significant step which could be achieved in the short term. This special representative’s task would be to develop concrete proposals for cross-border solutions to these intertwined conflicts together with other Latin American partners.

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The EU and Germany largely view the conflicts in Venezuela and Colombia as two separate issues. However, both countries' histories, economies and politics have always been closely linked. At the same time, their current political leaders are at opposite ends ideologically. This impacts on the entire region's stability and security. The EU should step up its role as a peace actor and contribute to reducing the tensions between the two countries contributing to greater stability in the region.



The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have additionally aggravated the political, economic and humanitarian problems within both countries and particularly in their joint border region. It has become more necessary than ever to act purposefully and it is a favourable moment to do so. Because of the outcome of the US elections, the international political situation has changed in favour of multilateral conflict mitigation and the EU should take advantage of this situation.



The EU currently has concrete options for reacting to the precarious security situation in the two countries: The humanitarian aid and medical care for those in need must immediately be expanded but also be conceptualised on a long-term basis. As for its humanitarian aid, the EU should actively involve and strengthen local authorities and local civil society. In addition to that, an immediate opening of the borders between the two countries would render possible a swift resumption of the economic cooperation in the border region. Furthermore, the EU's full potential for diplomatic mediation has not yet been fully utilised, it would be conceivable, for instance, to have a joint EU special representative for Venezuela and Colombia.