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The EU, Regional Conflicts and the Promotion of
Regional Cooperation: A Successful Strategy for a
Global Challenge?

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1. Introduction

Latin America is often considered to be one of the most peaceful continents on earth. According to Herz (2008: 9) '[t]here were very few violent conflicts between states in the Americas after the end of the nineteenth century'. In fact, depending on the definitions used, the Americas have been the second-most peaceful region in the world after Europe since the end of the Cold War, according to the Upsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP, 2008).

This stability coincides with a period of (relative) economic prosperity in the region. Latin America has been, in the words of O'Neil (2013), a 'secret success story', with the region growing both in economic and political importance. Some commentators, such as Crandall (2011), argue that the economic success in particular has had significant political consequences, with Latin America becoming increasingly more autonomous.

Yet, this success story has not been unqualified. As the literature has made clear, economic prosperity in Latin America is not a universal phenomenon and extreme inequality remains, as Keen & Haynes (2008) show. Politically, several countries are passing through periods of tensions, especially Argentina and Venezuela, as Muõz (2013) has shown. In terms of security, 'territorial disputes [have been] abundant' (Herz 2008: 9), some of them continuing until today. Looking at Colombia and Honduras in particular, Boot (2013) argued that there were currently 'two faces of Latin America'.

In many respects, the tensions between Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador and the political tensions that have characterized Honduras since the military coup of 2009 are, therefore, quite representative of a region which seems to walk a fine line between security and instability, economic growth and social tensions, international influence and relative irrelevance.

The civil war in Colombia is one of the longest running conflicts in the world, having started in the 1960s as the result of a complex set of factors. Amongst those, the political culture of violence - the roots of which go back to the 19th century -, the

weakness of the Colombian state, limited political participation and unequal access to land and resources have been identified as crucial (European Commission 2007a: 10).

The origins of the main guerilla group in Colombia, the Revolutionary Forces (FARC), can be traced back to the 1930s when peasants and indigenous groups began to organize protests against the harsh working conditions in the countryside and the issue of land tenure. As one specialist on the subject pointed out, such protests were fuelled by a long-standing feeling of the countryside having been abandoned by those at the center of power (Interview Ramirez, 2013). The often brutal response of the authorities to these protests led to the formation of self-defense groups, out of which emerged the revolutionary forces during the 1950s and early 60s. In 1964, the FARC declared its intention of moving beyond 'self-defense', the stated aim now being the control of the entire country, i.e. the seizing of power in order to facilitate profound social and economic reforms, often inspired by Communist ideas.¹

The ensuing civil war – which escalated during the 1990s - has lasted for over 40 years and has, undoubtedly, had regional implications, causing 'the spread of violence across Colombia's borders [which] severely tested diplomatic relations with neighboring Ecuador and especially Venezuela' (Ramirez 2011: 59).

On the most basic level, the ongoing conflict has led to an almost constant migratory flux in the region, with Colombian refugees pouring in large numbers, in particular, over the Ecuadorian border, with significant practical implications for the neighboring countries: 'In simple terms, we need to spend an enormous amount of money protecting our border and [looking after] refugees, money that we could be spending on other things' (Interview, Ecuadorian government, 2013).

However, the issue of border protection has also periodically led to severe political tensions between the two countries, with Colombia regularly accusing the Ecuadorian government of not doing enough to prevent senior FARC leaders from escaping to Ecuadorian territory. In fact, it was the incursion of Colombian troops into Ecuadorian territory to kill several senior FARC leaders in 2008 which sparked the most recent

¹ See, for instance, Vargas (1999).

political crisis between the two countries and led to a temporary suspension of diplomatic relations, as Brockner (2009) has shown.

Critically, these political tensions have been further sustained over time by the two country's very different approach vis-à-vis the United States, according to all those interviewed the big power-broker in the region. Whilst the Colombian government has often enthusiastically embraced any help given to it by the US, most prominently under the mantle of the War on Drugs and the so-called 'Plan Colombia', Ecuador has taken a much more independent line in recent times, especially since the rise to power of left-leaning president Rafael Correa, as Walser (2008) has demonstrated.

Yet, according to senior diplomats from both Colombia and Ecuador, the differences touched upon above do not impede cooperation on many issues, especially with regards to commercial questions: 'At the end of the day, we are a small nation and we have to trade and Colombia is an important market for us' (Interview Ecuadorian Government, 2013).

In this respect, relations between Colombia and Venezuela are much more difficult, as Ramirez & Cadenas (2006) demonstrate in detail. Already with a complex history – having emerged out of a single territory as two independent nations - the presidencies of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Uribe in Colombia led to sharp ideological, political and economic differences. To these differences one can add a profound personal dislike between the two leaders which led to a severe deterioration in diplomatic relations between the two countries, Colombia accusing Venezuela of actively supporting the FARC, with Venezuela arguing that Colombia is 'causing a regional imbalance due to its strengthened military capabilities [...] and [the] influence exercised by the United States in South America [...]' (Buelvas 2011: 56). To these strategic problems, one can add the same practical problems mentioned in relation to Ecuador, namely refugees and cross-border crime, especially, according to one journalist who has covered the issues extensively the trade in counter-fit goods and petrol (Interview, Ricardo Avila, 2014).

There is, then, mutual mistrust between the two countries, something that has not changed even after new political leadership assumed government in both. As one senior

Colombian diplomat put it, ‘the two presidents get on better, but the underlying problems remain’ (Interview, Colombian government, 2013).

As Ramirez (2011) has shown, Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador have significant differences in their interpretation of the Colombian conflict, its roots and its possible solutions. Yet, all those interviewed on the matter so far agree that the conflict is essentially an internal affair and not a *regional* matter, a fact also recognized by the international community:

The resolution of the Colombian conflict had been (and still is) considered a domestic issue. For instance, the presence of the United Nations (UN) had not been considered necessary by both the government or any guerrilla group. In fact, the Colombian conflict is not an “international conflict” since: 1) it is not a direct threat to international peace and security, 2) it is not a “national liberation war” based on the principle of self-determination of people, 3) it is not a war against a recognised “belligerent” force (Castaneda, 2012: 15-16).

As will be shown below, this has significant implications both for the actions taken by the three countries in dealing with the conflict and its consequences, as well as for the EU in its actions in South America.

A similar observation can be made in relation to Honduras.

The spark for the current crisis in Honduras was the military coup against the government of Manuel Zelaya in 2009 in response to a planned referendum about political reforms which consulted, amongst other things, on the possibility of presidential re-election. One day before the planned consultation, Zelaya was ousted from the government by the military, with considerable support from parts of the political and judicial system, as well as the Catholic Church and business associations.² The coup was followed by several months of severe political instability and reports of widespread human rights abuses against supporters of the deposed president and those who opposed the coup, as Frank (2012) has shown.

At the international level, whilst there was widespread condemnation of the coup on the part of the international community, this was by no means universal and there were

² For details, see Meyer (2010); Meza (2012)

significant disagreements over whether to recognize the ‘de facto’ government which assumed after the coup, led by the former president of the national assembly, Micheleti. Even with the restoration of democratic government at the end of 2009 after an election won by the candidate of the National Party, Porfirio Lobo, there have been continued stories about human rights violations, as, again, Frank (2013) has demonstrated.

Yet, the origins of the political instability in the country – and indeed Central America as a whole – go far deeper and, in the Honduran case specifically, can be traced back to at least the early 1950s and the Cold War. During this time, the United States provided significant material support to the Honduran military as a way of keeping the country firmly in the Western Block. With its professionalization the military became increasingly involved in politics and, as Ruhl (1996) has shown, the period until the 1980s was marked by almost constant political instability, both in terms of the internal political situation – with coups or attempted coups frequent – and in terms of regional stability, especially the continuous conflict between Honduras and El Salvador, which was not resolved until the beginning of the 1990s. As such, and as shown in detail by Meza (2012), Honduran democracy is both recent and fragile. Indeed, Frank (Interview, 2013) argued that there really is no democracy to speak of in Honduras. The lack of internal legitimacy of the political class because of its inability to deal with the most urgent issues facing the country – such as violence - and rampant corruption, as shown by Ruhl (2010), only adds to this problematic panorama.

The fragility of the democratic system is also a reflection of the fragility of the state as a whole and it is here that one can make the link between Colombia/Venezuela/Ecuador and the Honduran case. As Stevenson (2011) has shown, vast quantities of drugs produced in Colombia for the European and –especially– the North American market pass through Honduras, making it one of the principal drug-routes in the world. This has had a series of consequences and reinforced several long-standing significant problems.

The first of these is the hollowing out of the state through rampant corruption. It is worth noting, for instance, that Frank (Interview, 2013) raised concerns about the suggested interviewees for this project, arguing that several agents of the state listed were ‘severely compromised’, with some being implicated in several murders of political activists and journalists critical of the government and other agents of the state.

Indeed, one of the last acts of outgoing president Lobo has been to sack the commander of the police force, himself suspected of being involved in several murders (Cowley, 2013b). Senior Honduran diplomats interviewed for this project agreed that corruption in the police force and the judiciary system represents perhaps the most daunting challenge for any government (Interview Senior Honduran Diplomat, 2013). According to the same diplomat this corruption is fuelled by drug money. In fact, one specialist interviewed argued that some of Honduras' biggest drug traffickers sit in the upper echelons of the Honduran state (Interview Frank, 2013).

With the state weak and often compromised, violence is rampant in Honduras, the country being considered the most violent in world outside warzones (Cowley, 2013a). Street gangs that are often connected to groups of drug traffickers in a complex web of relationships control significant parts of urban areas with other, more rural parts often being ideal staging posts for the transportation of drugs coming from Colombia. Their influence can be such that some commentators have wondered whether these gangs are 'overwhelming Central America' (Boraz & Bruneau, 2006).

This being the case one senior Honduran diplomat agreed with one of his Colombian counterparts that the main focus in the fight to bring stability to the region should be on the drugs trade. According to him, 70% of all homicides in the country are linked to the drugs trade (Interview Senior Honduran Diplomat, 2013). However, significantly, whilst this diplomat acknowledged the link between Colombian drug cartels, the Colombian conflict and violent crime in Honduras, when talking about 'the region' being affected, his focus was Central America, even though he did say that there was some cooperation between Honduras and some South American countries on how to combat drug trafficking and the influence of drug traffickers, especially cooperation with Colombia on police training. At the same time, this did not mean that this particular diplomat considered what was happening in Honduras a regional problem, less so a regional conflict. The problems were very much seen as internal, a sentiment which diplomats from all case study countries shared.

It is also worth noting that some analysts vehemently contest the notion that the problems in Honduras are exclusively the result of drug-trafficking. Rather, as Frank (2013b) has argued, the coup 'opened the door [...] for worsening violence and

anarchy' including an increase in drug trafficking. In an interview with the author she argued that the narrative of the war on drugs is convenient in order to secure the continued political and financial support of the United States. Therefore, drug-trafficking is *part* of a much broader problem of state criminality (Interview Frank, 2013).

2. Regional integration in Latin America

The above is significant when it comes to analyzing regionalism in the Americas and its purpose.

The Americas are, after Europe, the region which has most experimented with regionalism in the world. A bewildering 'alphabet soup' of regional organizations spans the continent, dealing with a variety of issues, with the main focus being trade and security, as Dabène (2009) has shown.³ The vast majority of Latin American countries belongs to more than one such organization and, as Malamud (2010) has pointed out, promoting regionalism has been common amongst political leaders for some time.

Yet, despite this, two important qualifications need to be made when talking about Latin American regionalism: First, regionalism is really *sub*-regional and, second, this sub-regionalism rarely extends beyond *cooperation* on specific issues, rather than integration. In fact, some commentators, such as Malamud & Gardini (2012), have gone further and argued that even cooperation is very limited in many cases and that, at this moment in time, even this limited form of regionalism is facing a crisis. A brief look at the history of Latin American regionalism will tell us some of the reasons why.

Regionalism in Latin America has a long history. Starting with the idea of a Pan American Congress promoted by the hero of Latin American liberation, Simon Bolivar, there has been a long-standing idea that some kind of regional cooperation can serve specific political and economic goals, as Pastor (2005) has shown. Yet, rarely, if ever, has there been a consensus about what role and what objectives these should be.

³ The description comes from Glickhouse (2012)

The lack of common objectives and a common strategy have persisted ever since. In fact, from the point of view of the project, they can be clearly identified when looking at UNASUL which, according to an EU ambassador in the region, is one organization which exists specifically ‘to promote peace [amongst its members]’ (EEAS, 2013a). Yet, as Lehmann (2013) has shown, there are widely differing views between its member states about what its specific role should be or what regionalism as a whole in Latin America is *for*. Looking at it from a European perspective and historical experience, the mushrooming in terms of the number of (sub-)regional organizations in Latin America, then, is more a sign of fragmentation and lack of a coherent vision. According to Malamud (2010), regionalism in South America is characterized by a process of ‘spill-around’, whilst Gardini (2013) has described the ongoing process as one of ‘modular regionalism’. As will be shown below, from a Latin American point of view, such description is often not contested but is seen in a very different (and much more positive) light.

This, however, does not mean that *all* regional organizations in Latin America are irrelevant or that regionalism in general has not had an impact. In fact, one EU ambassador to the region argued that regionalism has ‘certainly’ been a major factor in stabilizing the region politically over the last couple of decades and making it one of the most peaceful on earth (Interview EEAS, 2013a). One senior Brazilian diplomat agrees, arguing, for instance, that the ‘democracy clause’ which is part of most regional organizations founding charters has been crucial in consolidating the democratic regimes over the last few years and pointing out that even the more ideologically strident and, if one likes, radical leaders – ‘whether we agree with them and their policies or not’, in the words of that diplomat – have all been elected and re-elected to their posts in democratic elections (Interview Brazilian Government, 2013).

Having said all that, it is noticeable that the *justification* for many of the current regional organizations is often less political and much more based on perceived economic necessities. In the words of the same Brazilian diplomat ‘regional cooperation is something pragmatic’ in South America (*ibid.*).

One example which clearly illustrates this point is the attitude of Venezuela towards regional cooperation. On the one hand, Venezuela is the leader of ALBA, an alliance of

politically left-leaning countries whose declarations are often notable for their strong anti-Western and ‘anti-imperialist’ rhetoric, displayed most recently again during a meeting of ALBA leaders in Caracas.⁴ Yet, at the same time, some of ALBA’s key members – such as Venezuela and Ecuador – are, in the case of Venezuela, now full members of MERCOSUL, which has the explicit goal of creating a common market in South America, or, in the case of Ecuador, are seeking closer ties with the same organization: ‘We would like to become a full member [at some stage]’ (Interview Ecuadorian Government, 2013). There is, hence, a significant gap between rhetoric and action on the part of many South American countries: ‘Talk is cheap, Venezuela can talk all it likes about the imperial United States, but [the U.S. is one of the biggest] export markets for its oil’ (Interview Gardini, 2013). One high-ranking representative of the Federation of Industry in São Paulo (FIESP) responsible for regional cooperation agrees: ‘They talk a lot, but they are actually very good in incorporating MERCOSUL’s rules [nationally]’ (Interview, FIESP, 2013).’

Yet, even within this pragmatic framework, regional cooperation only extends so far and, on the whole, it does *not* include direct involvement in conflict management or resolution.

As mentioned above, it has been noticeable that not one of the people interviewed considered the Colombian conflict or what has happened in Honduras over the last few years as a regional conflict. As a consequence, the ‘fall-out’ from the conflict in Colombia is treated in a bi-lateral fashion. This is particularly true for relations between Colombia and Ecuador, which are intense and include regular talks – and even joint cabinet meetings – about all aspects of the economic and political relations between the countries, including the problem of refugees in the Colombian-Ecuadorian border, as one Colombian specialist interviewed confirmed. Such intense bi-lateral dialogue also suggests that the diplomatic tensions which surged after the bombing of a FARC camp located in Ecuadorian territory by Colombian armed forces have been overcome, a fact confirmed by all those interviewed. In discussing the reasons for this development, the pragmatic nature of the relationship was once again given prominence. As one diplomat

⁴ See <http://economia.terra.com.br/alba-e-petrocaribe-iniciam-zona-comum-e-buscam-integracao-com-mercosul.826a0d475f303410VgnVCM3000009af154d0RCRD.html>, accessed on 21st December 2013.

put it: ‘What interests [the country] at the moment is to have more trade, so that is what [is done]’ (Interview Ecuadorian Government, 2013).

The reason for the reluctance of regional organizations to get involved directly in this conflict was summed up succinctly by a Brazilian diplomat responsible for South American integration: ‘We are all relatively young nations, so sovereignty has [a different meaning] for us [than for Europeans]’ (Interview, Brazilian Government, 2013). Bearing in mind that the conflicts analyzed are seen principally as internal matters for the states concerned, as shown above, it should come as no surprise that *regional* negotiations are not seen as particularly important or desirable. One Colombian diplomat was emphatic in this respect: In terms of the conflict, ‘regionalism is not important’ (Interview Colombian Government, 2013).

However, it is worth pointing out that this is not to say that regional organizations have *no* role or that none of them include a security dimension. For instance, Central American countries – including Honduras – are party to a regional security strategy which aims to ‘integrate the different regional efforts on security matters, to harmonize them and [so] to achieve better results’ (SG-SICA 2011: 4). Equally, Dabène (2009) has shown, regional integration has, at various points, served as *one* instrument to resolve regional crises. Herz (2008) has shown that the Organization of American States (OAS) has had an important role in managing – or indeed resolving – regional tensions and conflicts during its history, with the so-called ‘soccer war’ between Honduras and El Salvador being one particular example. Equally, whilst many of the most important regional organizations in Latin America – such as MERCOSUL or the Andean Community - were initially formed for commercial and economic reasons, it has already been shown that others, such as UNASUL, do exist to preserve peace and security. What is in dispute in relation to these organizations is their *effectiveness* in achieving those objectives, as *The Economist* (2009) has argued.

All of the above has significant implications for what the EU can and does do in the region in general and in relation to the conflicts in particular.

3. EU activities in the region

The European Union has a significant presence in Latin America which goes back several decades. Politically, the EU has a particular interest in the region, with two of its member states having been the principal colonizing powers. Economically, as the European Commission (2009) has stated, the region is one of the EU's principal partners and markets. It is also clear that, at least economically, the European Union remains hugely important to regional governments, with the single European market being seen both as a model to be followed, all be it with some qualifications, and one to which Latin American countries would like to have access to. All diplomats interviewed so far for this research have expressed both admiration for what the European Union has achieved and a wish to have closer ties with it, at least commercially. As one ambassador put it, 'the EU remains very important to us, it is essential' (Interview Brazilian Government, 2013b).

How, then, does this translate into concrete action on the ground, especially in relation to the conflicts being investigated in this study?

In basic terms, the EU does very little in relation to conflict management because it does not see them as regional conflicts and is very conscious of its limited scope in terms of getting involved in any problems that exist. For one EU ambassador, the simple fact is that 'there are no major conflicts in the region' (Interview EEAS, 2013a). Another senior EU official agreed with that assessment but also made the crucial point that 'our influence outside Brussels is very limited' (Interview EEAS, 2013b) In other words, for the EU to have significant influence over the policies of one or several Latin American states, those states would have to come to the EU rather than the other way around. This being the case, much of the EU's influence is exerted in the commercial sphere, where countries like Ecuador, for instance, are actively seeking out the EU: 'We would love to have a commercial agreement with the EU', in the words of one senior Ecuadorian trade representative (Interview, Ecuadorian Government, 2013).

In fact, it has been trade that has been the main focus of EU activities in the region over the last few years, as a look at Central- and then South America will make clear.

Central America

The European Union signed an Association Agreement with Central America in 2012. Within this agreement, trade plays a central role. According to the EU's own figures, trade flows between the two regions increased by an average of 15% between 2008 and 2012, reaching 14.9Bn Euros.⁵ In this respect, it is also noteworthy that, in trade terms, Central America is a very integrated region and well on the way to becoming a fully-fledged Common Market, as the World Bank (2013) has noted. In this sense, the Central American Integration System is much more advanced than, for instance, MERCOSUL and the relationship between it and the EU stands on a much firmer footing, though it is also worth noting that the common market is spurred on by the fact that Central America still represents the 2nd biggest market for its member states (*ibid*).

Yet, EU involvement in Central America goes beyond merely trade issues and significantly pre-dates the Association Agreement. Initially formalized in the 'San José Accords' of 1984, the political relations between the EU and Central America were heavily influenced by the Cold War and led to some significant results, amongst them the so-called Esquipulas Accords I and II of 1986-1987, which played an important role in stabilizing relations between Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Costa Rica, as Lopez & Garza (2009) have demonstrated and in whose negotiations the EU played an important role, as shown by Paris (2004). At that time, the EU's involvement was very welcome because the organization 'was seen as a neutral actor' compared, for instance, to the United States, a point made by, amongst others, Kosny (2009), McCormick (2007) and Carranza (2004).

With the end of the Cold War and the processes of re-democratization which occurred in large parts of the region, the focus of EU activities shifted towards economic integration - as shown above -, the stabilization of democracy, Human Rights, the rule of law, good governance, civil society engagement, security, responsible use of natural resources and political consultation on international matters of common interests (European Commission, 2012d). One of the key instrument to address these challenges has been the General System of Preferences (GSP) that the EU signed with Central American countries during the 1990s, which, according to Lopez & Garza (2009: 6)

⁵ <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/central-america/>

included measures in support of the fight against the production and trafficking of drugs, according to all those interviewed a key issue in order to address the generalized weakness of governance in the region.

Within this context, Honduras was – and continues to be – one of the chief beneficiaries of EU funds in support of programs in areas as diverse as food security, decentralization initiatives, education, public administration, judicial reform and environmental protection, amongst others. Whilst the EU has claimed some successes within these broad themes, it has also acknowledged significant problems in the implementation of a variety of programs, as the European Commission (2012a) makes clear, citing corruption and a lack of political will as key barriers to progress. These problems, however, did not stop the organization from engaging more deeply with the region, as proved by the fact that the two sides began negotiating a full-scale Association Agreement in 2007, negotiations which, as shown, have now been completed. As such, it is noteworthy that the Honduran coup occurred during a time of deepening political and economic relations between the two blocs.

The European Union condemned the coup against the elected president Manuel Zelaya and suspended diplomatic relations with the country as a result, relations that would only be re-established in March 2010, therefore after the election of Porfirio Lobo as the first democratic president post-coup. Aid to the country was also suspended as a consequence, as Vogel (2009) has shown. Still, the fragility of the democratic system is a major concern for the EU and its involvement as an observer during the 2013 presidential election was welcomed by the Honduran government as a way of giving credibility and legitimacy to the democratic process and the newly-elected president: ‘It was important to us to know that the electoral process was [fair]’ (Interview Senior Honduran Diplomat, 2013). It is worth noting, though, that the claims of fairness are hotly disputed with some observer denouncing widespread fraud, intimidation and violence, and even death, as highlighted by the Honduras Solidarity Network (2013). In addition, Human Rights continue to be violated frequently in Honduras, as shown by Irias (2013).

As such, significant challenges remain, the main one of which perhaps being the construction and maintenance of an effective system of public security. According to

the literature, as well as those interviewed, corruption in the judicial system and the police are key problems which affect all other areas of public policy and economic development, as Meza (2012) has shown. In the review of its activities in the country, the European Commission (2012a) has stated that corruption and, at times, a lack of cooperation on the part of the central government have been major obstacles to the effective implementation of its programs.

However, these problems have not led to a scaling down of EU activity. In fact, for such a small country, the number of EU programs from which Honduras benefits continues to be extensive and include the Regional Program for Food and Nutritional Security Information Systems (PRESISAN), the Regional Program for the Reduction of Vulnerability and Environmental Degradation (PREVDA), as well as the EUROsocial and URB-AL projects, which have promoted social cohesion at national and at local level. Other initiatives focus on the impact of climate change and drug-trafficking, on which more will be said below.⁶

It is important to note that the European Union clearly sees all these issues as *regional*, though the organization varies in its definition of the region. In relation to Central America this has meant a significant effort on the part of the EU to strengthen processes of regional integration and regional institutions such as the Central America Integration System (SICA), Central American Economic Integration Secretariat (SIECA), Central America Parliament (PARLACEN) and Central American Court of Justice (CCJ). To this end, the European Union and the SICA have established a Program for the Support for Central American Integration (PAIRCA, in its Spanish initials), which is currently in its second version. In it, the EU, for instance, actively encourages the exchange of information between member states governments of the Central American Integration System and supports the establishment and maintenance of the system and its institutions System (European Union, 2008).

Interestingly, one of the most advanced areas of cooperation within this context is the control of borders through the ‘Programa Regional de Seguridad Fronteiriza en América Central (SEFRO)’. This program aims at facilitating cooperation between Central

⁶ For a detailed breakdown, see, for instance, European Commission (2007b, 2012a)

American countries in the fight against drug trafficking and organized crime through the harmonizing of regional security policies, the sharing of information and inter-agency cooperation (EEAS, 2012). In other words, the EU has sold its ‘know-how’ on integration to a region which, according to those interviewed so far, has been receptive to this kind of assistance.

In doing so, the EU is certainly not alone. Other actors also play an important role in the country, especially the United States which, according to Irias (2013), see Honduras as the key battleground for combating narcotrafficking. In addition, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the World Bank, the Organization of American States (OAS) and many other Non-Governmental Organizations have a significant presence in the country and the region as a whole. According to one senior representative of the OAS, more than 20 donors work in Honduras alone which include some individual European countries, such as Spain, Germany and Denmark (Interview, OAS, 2014).

So, whilst the Honduran coup of 2009 was seen essentially as an internal affair, it served to underscore the regional nature of many of the problems confronted in Central America and the need to be further engaged in tackling these problems.

Amongst these problems the one which establishes the link with *South* America – and therefore turning it a pan-Latin American problem is drug-trafficking, already touched upon above.

South America

As mentioned above, the Colombian conflict is one of the longest-running civil conflicts in the world, yet not one of the people interviewed about it until now considered it to be a regional conflict. Rather, there has been broad agreement between interviewees that the regional dimension of it comes from what sustains it which, according to many, is the drugs trade: ‘Without drugs trafficking, the FARC could not sustain itself’, according to one Colombian diplomat (Interview, Colombian Government, 2013), a sentiment echoed by a Colombian specialist on the country’s civil conflict (Interview,

Colombia Specialist, 2013). At the same time, one Honduran diplomat argued that it is drugs money which fuels and sustains corruption in the country, thereby weakening state structures. Most of that money is made from drugs that pass through Honduras from Colombia (Interview, Senior Honduran Diplomat, 2013).

The EU has recognized the importance of the drugs trade, not just in relation to sustaining the Colombian conflict, but in relation to the stability of the entire region. One of the main projects on the part of the European Union to combat drug trafficking has been the so-called COPOLAD program, which fosters cooperation between the EU and Latin American countries about anti-drugs policies.⁷

The main focus of the activities of the EU ‘on the ground’ has been the facilitation of dialogue between the various actors in the conflict, as Kurtenbach (2005: 10) has shown. Within this context, the launch in 2002 of the so-called ‘Peace Laboratories’ has perhaps been the key practical achievement. According to the European Commission (2002),

‘these laboratories explore ways to defuse the conflict and to bring about sustainable development. In this context EC co-operation aims to build up zones of peaceful co-existence for the inhabitants by reinforcing local institutions, supporting civilian actors engaged in promoting peace and fostering economic and social development. Among the activities sponsored by the Commission are the strengthening of civil society organisations working towards the respect of Human Rights; the identification of productive alternatives that permit the gradual abandonment of the illicit crops; and the improvement of social and productive infrastructure.’

However, some doubts have been expressed about both the utility of - and the reasoning behind - these laboratories in the wider context of the conflict. For Castaneda (2012: 14), the laboratories were primarily a political response to the American-sponsored ‘War on Drugs’ and an attempt by the EU ‘to become an international actor’. She continued: ‘Indeed, the EU’s decision-makers judged it possible to get involved considering the European experience in Central America as well as the expectations from international and local actors in Colombia as to the role the EU could play.’

⁷ See the homepage of the program http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/latin-america/regional-cooperation/copolad/index_pt.htm, European Commission (2012b)

One Colombian diplomat interviewed argued that, whilst many within Colombia – and indeed within Colombian diplomatic circles – welcomed what they considered the more measured approach of the EU to the conflict in comparison to that taken by the United States, he still considered the EU’s approach to be ‘wrong’ because ‘they talk about more police and more technology, more visas etc., so they think about how to attack drug-trafficking, but they do not think about how to stop [consumption in their markets]’ (Interview Colombian Government, 2013). This problem of consumption was readily acknowledged by a regional EU ambassador who shrugged shoulders when trying to think of strategies about how to tackle the demand for drugs in Europe: ‘How can we do it? I [have] no idea’ (Interview EEAS, 2013a).

This impotence in the light of continued high demand for Colombian drugs in Europe partially explains the very limited political role the EU plays in terms of conflict resolution and it is noticeable that the EU is not involved in the current peace negotiations taking place in Havana.

Instead, the EU has focused on more practical issues. One of them is the facilitation of trade with Colombia, the argument being that increased economic prosperity will undercut the reasons for sustaining the conflict, a point also strongly made by one Colombian diplomat. To that end, the EU signed a free-trade agreement with Colombia (and Peru) which entered into force on 1st August 2013.⁸ Importantly, the agreement also includes clauses on labor- and indigenous rights, groups that have often been victims during the Colombian conflict, as Pop (2013) has stated.

The second issue has been the management of the refugee problem, particularly in the border region between Colombia and Ecuador. According to one senior diplomat from Ecuador, in practical terms, the management of refugee flows is the most urgent issue:

‘Our country is spending much money protecting our territory from a military conflict that is not ours. Our president always says that, after the Colombian people, the Ecuadorian people are the most interested in resolving this conflict...so there are a lot of discussions with Colombia on these issues but they do not include Venezuela.’ (Interview Ecuadorian government, 2013).

⁸ For the whole agreement, see <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=691>, European Commission (2012c).

In this respect, the EU works closely with the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Program in order to help manage the refugee flows along the border and integrate refugees into the local community.⁹

Yet, the last sentence from the above quote is critical to understanding the EU's role on the ground. Whilst it is clearly involved in managing the refugee crisis on the border, there is no *regional* approach to the issues raised by the conflict and its consequences. On the one hand, relations between Colombia and Ecuador are very close- with regular joint cabinet meetings discussing a host of issues of common interest, including refugees and the conflict - there are severe and continuing difficulties between Colombia and Venezuela, despite the recent upturn in relations between the respective presidents, Santos and Maduro. Ramirez (Interview, 2013) described relations as still 'severely strained'. At the same time, relations between Ecuador and Venezuela are quite good. Therefore, what one has is a series of bi-lateral relationships but little by way of an integrated regional approach. As such, the influence of the EU on the parties involved in the conflict is variable and focused heavily on practical issues, such as refugees and trade. Even within these limited fields, there are big differences: Whilst Colombia, as shown, *has* a trade agreement with the EU and Ecuador would like one, Venezuela is, according to one EU ambassador in the region, actively resisting: 'They are difficult', according to one senior EU official interviewed in Venezuela (Interview, EEAS, 2014).

These difficulties are also reflected in the EU's relations with the organizations that exist in the region. For instance, whilst the EU has relatively close contacts with the Andean Community – and whilst the issue of drug trafficking is regularly discussed between the two organizations – Venezuela is no longer part of the Community, removing one key player in the region's politics from that particular tale. As such, the regular dialogue that exists between the two organizations is, in many ways, incomplete.¹⁰

⁹ For details on one of the latest initiatives, see <http://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/eu-reaffirms-its-support-refugees-northern-border-ecuador> or <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e492b66>.

¹⁰ For details on this dialogue, see European Commission (2003).

Taking all these issues together, how can one, then, summarize and evaluate the impact of the EU within Latin America in relation to the conflicts being investigated? As will be argued now, the picture is very complex and the results mixed.

4. Evaluation and assessment

If one were to make a summary of EU activities in the region as a whole – and the conflict in particular – the thing that stands out the most is the patchwork nature of the interaction, a fact freely acknowledged by one EU ambassador: ‘It is difficult to develop an integrated approach to Latin America’ (Interview, EEAS, 2013a). As an example one may point to the fact the EU has a close – but difficult – formal relationship with MERCOSUL, as well as ELAC, but almost nothing formal with UNASUL.

Bearing this general panorama in mind, it should come as no surprise that the interaction of the EU with the conflict parties in the two case studies is also patchy, both in terms of its intensity and in terms of the questions being discussed at regional level.

Starting with the Honduran/Central American case, it is important to measure the impact of the EU outside a ‘conflict’ framework. As mentioned, the EU does not see what is happening in Honduras as a ‘conflict’, and certainly not as a regional conflict. However, it clearly sees what is happening in the country as both having the potential of destabilizing the region as a whole, as well as a reflection of the problems the region as a whole is confronting: the weakness of the state, corruption, the corrosive influence of parallel power-structures, violent crime and the impact all of these factors have on other important issues, such as the environment, education and, by extension, the economy (European Commission, 2010).

Within *that* context, the overall perception of the EU and what it is doing in the region seems, on the whole, to have been positive. The willingness to engage with the EU on the issue of regionalism *seems* to rest on both a perception of common interests and similar problems, a pragmatic belief that regional cooperation is necessary in order to prosper economically and resolve the common problems identified and a general willingness to learn from what is seen as a successful model of integration. That was

certainly the view of one ambassador from Honduras interviewed for this research, as well as the view of one EU ambassador.

Yet, this does *not* mean that the EU has had a significant impact on the key problems identified. That is to say, there is little to no evidence that the EU has been successful in significantly strengthening the various states' capacities to confront – less so dismantle– the parallel power-structures identified or that the EU has had a significant impact in terms of corruption in Honduras. In fact, the newly-elected president, Juan Orlando Hernandez, has promised to deploy 'soldiers on every corner' (as opposed to policemen) in order to bring the security situation under control, a proposal which even a senior official at a regional Honduran embassy described as 'problematic', and which suggests that the traditional EU message of engagement has fallen on deaf ears within the government, though this is to be confirmed in the interviews (Interview, Honduran official, 2013).

Indeed, Frank (Interview, 2013) went much further, arguing that the presence of the EU in the country – as well as the presence of other organizations – and their recognition of the incoming government has an *adverse* effect on the country because it legitimizes both the government which – according to her – came to power through a fraudulent election and its policies, which are merely militarizing a situation which parts of the same government have little to no interest in solving.

It is difficult to draw definitive conclusions yet on the Honduran case, as most interviews are still outstanding and the political situation is in a state of considerable flux, seeing as we are in the middle of a government transition. Yet, the rhetoric employed by the incoming president – security, security, security and with an iron fist – does suggest certain disconnect between his priorities and the EU's main focus of activities, as outlined above. In fact, the heavy focus of EU activities on the economy, promoting regional integration, the environment, education etc. indicates a focus on 'traditional' EU strengths in countries considered to be poor and in need of development. It may, at the same time, also indicate a realization on the part of the EU of its own limitations – a focus on what *can* be done, rather than one on what the EU thinks *should* be done. It can also be seen as recognition that those areas provide the most *room* for cooperation which may lead to spillover into other areas in which the EU

is not *directly* involved. There are clear examples of this in the Association agreement with Central America which, whilst focusing heavily on trade issues, does also talk about the engagement of civil society, respect for human rights etc. (European Commission, 2012d). In other words, the EU focusses on what it knows how to do which is also, by and large, what other countries *allow* it to do. What impact this will have on the conflict remains to be seen.

Even within that context, there is one outstanding practical question: Bearing in mind the fragility of the Honduran state – and, indeed the fragility of most of the states in the region – how *effective* can any regional structure be, however well-intentioned it may be? By the same token, then, how effectively can the EU measure the impact, results and progress of its projects in such circumstances? In other words, can regionalism structured through regional institutions work effectively in a region where the institutional structures of the states taking part in the process of regional integration are weak and often characterized by rampant corruption? Can there be effective control of regional agreements and practical actions in a region in which states often are unable to exercise control over the entirety of their national territory, a problem extensively highlighted by a series of special programs about Honduras by the BBC?¹¹

A similar panorama can be observed in South America. Here, the EU is – just like in Central America – seen as an incredibly important actor economically to whose market *most* countries would like to have access for economic and – therefore – practical reasons which often cross ideological divides (Venezuela being seemingly the exception to that rule). As shown, Colombia, for instance, already has an agreement with the EU, whilst Ecuador would like one, even though the two countries – at least rhetorically – pursue very different economic paths.

‘Model Europe’ therefore has ‘pulling power’ up to a certain point and within a certain context but its impact on the conflicts in question is, at best, indirect and often local. The Colombian case provides the two clearest examples of this. First, as already mentioned, the Colombian-EU association agreement does address some of the issues that, in a complex fashion, gave rise to the initial conflict, such as indigenous rights and

¹¹ See the BBC’s three-part series of *Hardtalk*, shown in 2012: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01kxtv8>

rights of rural workers. Part of the outstanding research will focus on whether this has had an impact on the ground when it comes to engaging the conflict parties, at least at a local level over particular issues. In order to assess this, the visit to Colombia will try to establish the impact of the so-called 'Peace Labs', already mentioned, one of the key EU initiatives, the second key example of 'model Europe' in action. 'Peace Labs' are clearly designed to establish trust between the conflicting parties and therefore change the local patterns that sustain the conflict. In some ways, it can be argued that they are trying to replicate patterns of European action post-World War II, when one of the central planks underpinning the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community was also to establish trust between conflict parties through very practical policies which would, amongst other things, create mutual benefits and establish interdependencies.

However, there are also critical differences between the processes of regionalism that need to be taken into account when assessing the question of *model Europe*. First, the Colombian conflict is seen as an *internal* conflict whilst the EU is an *external* actor. As such, the circumstances within which it can act are significantly different to its own experiences. Second, and as shown, the EU's actions on the ground are far more limited than they were in Western Europe at the time of the ECSC's formation or indeed in Eastern Europe after the collapse of Communism. As such, one would expect its impact to be more limited.

Thirdly, there is far less synergy between the governments of the countries involved (Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador) about what the conflict is, what it represents and what should be done to stop it. This being the case, the EU – or any other organization for that matter – has very limited possibilities to scale its activities across various levels and across various governments. It will simply encounter too much resistance along the way from one side or another. This, in fact, is true even for economic questions, bearing in mind the enormous differences between, in particular, Colombia and Venezuela. Cross-border work, then, is difficult for a series of factors.

Therefore, the fact that both the Colombian diplomat interviewed so far, as well as Ramirez, did not mention either the EU in general, or the Peace Labs in particular, as important in the broader context of the conflict, is hardly surprising. As already stated, in terms of changing the conflict pattern, the focus for the diplomat should be on reducing

the demand for drugs in Europe. Interestingly, the academic specialist stated quite categorically that she believed the current peace negotiations between the government and the FARC would be brought to a successful conclusion in which case the main focus of activity would switch to the reintegration of FARC fighters into civilian life and of the organization into political life. It would be interesting to know how the EU is preparing for this possibility and whether and how it intends to assist in this process, should it occur but, unfortunately, all requests for an interview with the EU delegation in Colombia have so far, been refused.¹²

In relation to the other issues raised by the Colombian conflict and its consequences – particularly the refugee issue – it seems clear that the EU plays a quite significant – and welcome – role in the administration of that particular issue, in the case of Ecuador often in conjunction with the United Nations, whose representatives in the country will determine. Yet, within this context it is also noteworthy that one manager at the UN World Food Program (WFP) in Ecuador was very critical of the way the EU administers its programs, arguing that the organization is not flexible enough in its dealings with those it funds and does not have a clear understanding of the complexities of the situation on the ground that those organizations it funds confront (Interview, Senior WFP official, 2014).

Therefore, and just like in the case of Central America – the EU does what it has experience of doing, what it is good at doing, and what it is allowed to do. That means that, in terms of the pathways of EU influence, we can make some preliminary observations.

As far as compulsion is concerned, the scope for the EU to oblige South American countries in general – or the case study countries in particular – is generally limited because of two principle reasons. One, as mentioned, the EU, generally speaking, has a small role in relation to conflicts. As it also employs relatively few resources, it has very little scope to *oblige* countries to follow its lead.

¹² See Nussio & Howe (2012) on the question of a possible FARC demobilization,

Yet, even in areas where it specifically puts obligations into an agreement – say, to respect the rights of indigenous people in Colombia – there seems to be very little by way of enforcement mechanisms to punish any possible breach, thereby almost eradicating any means of deterring breaches. This issue will have to be further explored in the interviews that are to come, but the EU does not have a great deal of scope to make threats that it can actually follow-up on, with the possible exception to this is the area of commerce.

This leaves the idea of the EU as a model and, whilst quite a bit has been said about this already, it is worth going back to this issue within the current context of Latin America as it is something that has come up again and again in the interviews, both as a positive and a negative point. To illustrate this point, it is worth quoting two officials, one an EU ambassador in South America, the other a senior Brazilian diplomat with responsibility for South American relations and cooperation:

‘We are a strong reference point [for regionalism] in the region, in a very general way, a kind of ideal, but in general [South Americans] do not understand what we are or [what we do]’ (EU ambassador, Interview EEASS, 2013c)

‘I think the EU is absent [in] South America...Perhaps the EU needs to update its [understanding] of what is South America, the importance of South America in today’s world...They do not have a vision for the region, they do not understand the particularities of each country...[We] need to get to know each other’ (Interview Brazilian Government, 2013b).

These quotes hint at a *mutual* lack of understanding which would obviously have an impact on the role that the EU can play both in terms of promoting regionalism and in terms of resolving conflicts. At the same time, it clearly suggests that regionalism in South/Latin America will continue to be of a very different character than it is in Europe, with consequences for regionalism’s influence on conflicts. The rest of this paper will deal with some of the issues such a conclusion throws up.

One of the striking things about the interviews with South American policy-makers is the combination of admiration they express for the European Union and their fondness

of regionalism, on the one hand, and their absolute insistence that South America is different and therefore cannot and should not be compared to the European experience.

As previously outlined, this belief is based on a different history, different political processes, different economic structures, different world-views, different objectives and, crucially in my view, a different *way* of thinking about - and dealing with – problems and challenges and, therefore, of doing politics. The main criticism that has been voiced in interviews has been the impression that the EU is not really interested in learning about – and understanding – these differences. As one diplomat put it: ‘I think when the EU sees South America, they see Brazil and that is [who they are dealing with]’ (Interview Brazilian government, 2013b).

Yet, according to this line of argument, understanding these differences is critical to making sense of South- and Latin American regionalism. Looked at from Europe, Venezuela’s approach to regionalism, for instance, seems to make little sense – taking part, as it does, in the supposedly free-market MERCOSUL and the Bolivarian Alliance at the same time – but from a South American perspective, it is a perfectly logical thing to do, trying to exercise political influence on the one hand whilst dealing pragmatically with economic necessities on the other. It is a societal trait to ‘keep one’s options open’, and the seemingly random creation of regional organizations reflects this, as well as the tendency to live in the ‘here and now’ rather than think ahead long-term. Such cultural issues matter, as Arías (2011) has shown.

With this in mind, a second point becomes crucial which has already been touched upon several times in this paper: there is a widespread feeling that – on the whole – the region is doing well – certainly much better than it has done historically – and that, therefore, regionalism is a political *choice* to pursue particular objectives rather than a necessity. Critically, the EU is often seen here as a successful experience in conflict *transformation*, but, since, looking from here, there is no need to *transform* the Latin American continent, local regionalism is *inevitably* different.

Looked at like this, the criticism from one EU ambassador that South American leaders ‘do not really understand what we do’ can be seen in a different light. It simply does not appear that South American leaders *want* to understand what the EU does – other than

in very general terms - because the reasons for the EU's creation and existence do not apply to Latin America at this moment in time. The EU, then, is admired but cannot exert a lot of influence because it is 'different' and because South America does not display the same need for regionalism as Europe displayed.

This is obviously a very crude and abbreviated summary of a much more complex question and it raises serious issues about communications between the two sides. Do South American leaders know what the EU is *today* and how it has evolved? Does the EU know how to *engage* with Latin America bearing in mind the region's current view of itself, coupled with the EU current problems, the colonial legacy but continuing economic importance? To illustrate the disconnect that exist on this point, it is worth noting that lots of EU officials interviewed for this research do not see the colonial past of some EU countries in the region as 'a big issue'. Yet, for lots of diplomats and policy-makers from the region itself, this legacy *is* an issue with serious implications for what seem to be minor things. For instance, one EU diplomat argued that the EU had 'limited influence' in South America (Interview, EEAS, 2013c). In response, one local diplomat argued that even the seemingly innocent use of the word 'influence' has significant consequences in South America 'because of its colonial implications'. For this diplomat, the EU has to update the way 'it talks to us' in order to seriously engage. There are, then, crucial differences in the way the two sides *see* and *understand* the region within – and about – which they interact, suggesting that a process of mutual learning needs to begin (Interview, Brazilian government, 2013a).

More specifically in relation to the project – and within the broader context outlined above - does the EU know how to engage in fragile countries or fragile sub-regions within the context of seeing regionalism as a pragmatic tool to address specific issues rather than a tool for the profound transformation of entire regions? It seems that there is no appetite on the part of leaders in Latin America to even *risk* profound transformation since this would put at risk the region's new-found (at least perceived) standing in the world. Why transform something that is improving anyway?

This all leads to some interesting conclusions and further questions.

5. Conclusions

In many ways the above confirms the conclusions already reached by other scholars that South/Latin America is a region of ‘modular regionalism’, i.e. one with a complex web of organizations which deal with a multitude of issues in a patchwork manner rather than in a strategic manner. Regionalism is something pragmatic and, I would argue, quite often something reactive, as can be clearly seen in relation to the creation of the UNASUL Health Council.¹³ A specific problem arose and, in response, there was the creation of a specific regional framework. Whether this will lead to wider efforts of integration even within this specific area of public policy (health) in the long-term is, I would argue, highly doubtful.

The engagement of the case study countries, and indeed the regions within which these countries are located, with the EU can be seen in the roughly the same light. The EU is sought as a pragmatic partner to achieve particular aims within a framework of general admiration for the organization but a clear idea that Latin America as a whole is different.

It seems to me that it is at this level that the EU will have to engage with the region for the foreseeable future and, in many ways, there are signs that the EU is already doing so. As shown, the EU clearly engages differently with different countries across time and space. For instance, it deals quite differently with Colombia than it does with Venezuela. It has clearly shown much more interest in dealing with Brazil than it has in dealing with Argentina. It is clearly far more focused on dealing with humanitarian issues in Ecuador than it is in dealing with the bi-lateral political relations between Ecuador and Colombia or trying to promote regionalism between Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela. From the EU’s point of view, such type of engagement seems logical bearing in mind the landscape it is confronting and dealing with.

Yet, as touched upon in the last section, the EU has been criticized for not *knowing* enough about the region to be able to deal with it in a more coherent manner. In other words, whilst the EU may argue that it is adopting a ‘modular approach’ to the region out of necessity (because that is the way South/Latin American cooperation works),

¹³ See Buss & Ferreira (2011)

many from within the region would argue that it is adopting such approach because it does not know any better and, as such, *couldn't* influence the development of South American regionalism even if it wanted to. Bearing these two different perspectives in mind, as already mentioned, it seems crucial that the two sides engage more profoundly about the crucial questions of how one side sees the other, what their areas of common interest are, what these mean for common actions and purposes and what can then be done.

Whilst these issues, I think, apply equally to Central America, it is also crucial that there is a consciousness about the differences that exist *within* the broader region, between sub-regions and between countries. In Central America, for instance, there clearly seems to be more coherence in terms of regional institutions, objectives of regionalism and the definition of common problems. Equally, though, there clearly seem to be much more severe problems in terms of the ability of the states to exert control over their territories and, therefore, be able to successfully implement and advance regionalism across the region. In South America the states' capacity appears stronger but the coherence of thought in terms of regionalism and its potential benefits is much less developed. In other words, it is absolutely crucial that the EU adapts to the particular circumstances it finds and develops strategies that 'fit'. Whether it is in the process of doing so will be one of the questions to be answered in the field work still to be undertaken.

Finally, the broader question that hangs over all the issues discussed here which the EU will have to address is that of drugs, the key link between South and Central America on the one hand and Europe (and North America, for that matter) on the other. Bearing in mind the generally pragmatic nature of Latin American regionalism, it seems crucial that the EU become more engaged across the region on this issue, responding to the questions that both the Colombian and Honduran diplomats posed during interviews: What is the EU doing to dampen demand in its market? Answering this question, there may well be scope for it to promote regionalism if it can show that this will help change the dynamics that are sustaining the current status quo.

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