The first idea that springs to mind when I think of Latin America is that we are not confronted with the cultural differences that we mentioned when discussing the Muslim world or Africa. Throughout recent history the American continent was modelled by Europeans; since then they have acquired independence but this continent shares the same cultural heritage. Today we might venture that as Europeans we share the same values of democracy and freedom as this continent.

We should not forget that Simon Bolivar came to France to find inspiration in the French Revolution and that he was educated in Spain. The Constitutions of the Latin American countries are over 150 years old.

When we analyse the history of democracy on this continent, from the hopes of the first republics until today, the way has been marked by military juntas and dictatorial regimes but overall their history is not much different from the one Europe experienced during the 19th and 20th centuries.

In its capacity as a political foundation the FAES has been working in Latin America for the last 12 years. In that time we have financed more than 500 seminars in 17 countries and are in contact with about 20 foundations and political parties representing around a thousand political figures on all levels.

Twelve years ago we witnessed the transition of Latin America, with dictatorial regimes, civil wars and terrorist problems (guerrilla).

Since then the situation has only half changed. The democratic idea has spread across the continent but regimes still exist that do not respect the basic citizens' rights.

Today new problems have emerged along with new threats against democracy.

We often hear that the 1990's was a lost decade in terms of democracy but I believe that this is not the case at all. Most countries now have a better system of economic management and the days of galloping inflation are part of the past. However it is still true that some countries are having to confront very serious crises once more.

One of the advantages of the present situation is that foreign investors and the international community are able to evaluate the various countries and their merits to a far greater degree.

Last year we witnessed a blunder; the poor macro-economic management in some countries in the region and an inability to establish a system able to manage the civil service long term. In addition to this corruption in the civil service along with social exclusion are still a problem.

After having seen that these democracies were undergoing a crisis we might support the idea that the main danger lies in the rise of populism.

We can take Argentina as an example, where, in spite of all of the suffering the population was submitted to an authoritarian settlement of the situation did not occur. Hence democracy as a concept or value is not threatened but the new dangers caused by populism do exist.
There are a certain number of countries in Latin America where the political system and the democratic process have not succeeded in improving the population's living conditions.

One of the answers provided to these problems might be a process of integration; integration on a political and economic level. The last decade has witnessed the birth of NAFTA, the Mercosur and commercial exchanges have developed thanks to the bilateral agreements between the EU, Chili and even Mexico. Regional and economic integration is an objective that we must support together in spite of the populist temptations that I just made mention of.

I also said that corruption in Latin America was the enemy of democracy and we must do everything we can to promote a less opaque and more equitable political system.

I would like to mention specific cases from the region.

The FAES is working towards the fulfilment of the Varela project in Cuba. With our American friends from the NDI we received Mr. Osvaldo Paya in Europe when he was awarded the Sakharov Prize by the European Parliament. This pacific project aims to bring together the 10,000 signatures required by the Cuban Constitution to enter suggestions for laws on Parliament's agenda, notably a law aiming at the country's economic and social transformation. The signatures for this latest initiative were collated but Castro's regime did not take any notice of this. The continuation of this objective is vital. We are supporting the nomination of Mr Paya for the Nobel Peace Prize.

In Venezuela the political system broke down, the traditional parties lost all credibility and have almost all disappeared from the political arena since they did not succeed in satisfying the hopes set down by the people. The newly elected President of the Republic suggests a modification of the Constitution and is trying to set up a "personalised regime", that is not really comparable with the normal types of democratic regime. We are supporting Chavez' opponents so that they might create a modern political platform.

We are obliged to support the parties in Latin American countries in order that a new generation of politicians might emerge. Too often we wait for the "next redeeming President" who will settle all problems together. Will President Lula be a model for the South American continent? In any case he is determined to face up to crucial challenges both in the mid and long term.

Often South American leaders approach problems in too nationalistic a manner and dialogue between them encounters obstacles.
In this respect the EU might be a model:
- For integration (how to integrate countries that have their national particularities)
- For reforms (how to succeed in accomplishing structural reforms).

To conclude in terms of the process of democratisation in Latin America we must be optimistic even though substantial support has to be provided to political parties in order to improve their efficiency and transparency.