

## **DEMOCRACIES AT RISK – THE CARIBBEAN UNDER VENEZUELAN INFLUENCE**

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The English-speaking Caribbean is one of the very few regions in the developing world where supranational integration has been an ongoing topic. But other than for example the African Union, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) has been successful in spurring economic integration. But due to the size of the territories in the region, its remote location and a large number of problems the region is facing (HIV/AIDS, climate change, globalization of the economies, etc.), integration has always been in peril. This would not only bring the achievements at risk, but could also damage the democratic societies in the region.

Whereas the Western world still tries to bring peace, democracy and human rights to many African and Asian countries (sometimes at large costs), many Caribbean countries are multiparty, democratic countries where different ethnicities live together and respect their human rights. There are not many countries in the world that officially celebrate Christian, Islamic and Hindu holidays like Trinidad and Tobago does. High literacy rates, low child-mortality rates and other indicators show what the region has already achieved.

But the remoteness of the region, the fact that most of these countries have small undiversified economies, nationalism and high public costs hinder the Caribbean to achieve an economic standard of living that would mirror its social achievements.

Next to the intention to deepen integration, the region faces the attempts of Venezuela to increase its influence. By setting up a regime that offers the region "cheap" oil, it wants to influence the market structures of these countries and achieve political dependency. Many countries in the region find this offer attractive, but mainly because they are lacking alternative offers. The newly introduced Economic Partnership Agreement between some Caribbean countries and the European Union can only be the first step of the Western world to make the region a respected partner and help it towards further development. Especially the European Union should assist the regional institutions to promote economic and political integration. Most of the important international organizations in the Caribbean have their role models in the European Union. This should not only be seen as a compliment, but also as a chance to increase influence in the region. By giving a long-term trade perspective and institutional support, the European Union could strengthen what has already been achieved; it should not bring these successes at risk by letting Venezuela getting more influence.

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