



Latin America in its labyrinth

**Six keys on the state of democracy
in the region**

Sebastian Grundberger, Ángel Arellano

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DIÁLOGO POLÍTICO is a platform for democratic dialogue among political opinionmakers about topics of relevance in Latin America, based on the values of freedom, solidarity, and justice. It connects the region with the great geostrategic debates in the world. It is a window for publicizing projects of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Latin America.

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Latin America in its labyrinth

Six keys on the state of democracy in the region¹

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Summary

What is Latin America looking to be? Where is politics going in the region? We developed six keys that will help us understand the state of Latin American democracy. We focus attention on the main alarms: trust in institutions and pluralistic elections has declined; tolerance for the possibility of coups d'état as a solution to management problems has increased; and the enchantment of authoritarian populism has gained grounds. We take an analytical approach to the democratic moment in the region, its main challenges and the pending tasks for the political system.

The shortsightedness of the democratic reflection

The political year in Latin America began with the summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in January. Like few other spaces, it clearly showed where Latin America's democracy is heading. Although the meeting was not the scene of great debates, it made evident the performance of the new political map marked by the majority of governments located from the center to the left and the three left-wing authoritarianisms. The discourse that worked as a unifying force was to bet, at least symbolically, on the new integration of the Americas. Does this match the reality? This is poorly supported by programmatic agreements and multilateral agenda in the second region of the world with the largest number of democracies.

At the Celac summit there were only two dissenting voices in the chorus. First, that of Uruguay,

which called for prioritizing trade agreements over ideological affinity, and criticized the participation of states that do not respect democracy or human rights. Second, that of Paraguay, which demanded not to ignore other uncomfortable discussions for the political left, such as the Venezuelan diaspora, one of the largest displacement of refugees in the world after the Syrian crisis². Are these clues for the pending debates in the region?

The outcome of the most important regional meeting in a long time was a lengthy 111-point resolution signed by all the members³. What does it contain? Nine references to the defense of human

¹ The authors thank the editorial team and the network of authors of *Diálogo Político* for generating information and analysis that nurtured this document with diverse data and perspectives.

² See: Lacalle Pou called for Celac not to be a "club of ideological friends". (2023, January 24). *La Diaria*. Available here; Mario Abdo Benitez: "No podemos mirar a otro lado cuando siete millones de venezolanos han abandonado sus hogares". (2023, January 24). *Infobae*. Available here.

³ Celac is composed of 33 States: Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, St. Kitts and Nevis, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Commonwealth of Dominica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Lucia, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay and Venezuela (Celac, 2023).

rights, which sought to emphasize a superlative commitment to this issue. Three references to the rule of law, three to democracy, one to political parties and one to democratic institutions. Thus, at least semantically, the proclamation prioritized the defense of democracy.

However, the bitter taste of seeing democratic states and authoritarian states sharing the same values at the same table was inevitable, despite the fact that some respect them and others do not. Is the commitment on human rights and the division of powers in Chile, Uruguay and Argentina the same as in Cuba or El Salvador? Does it make sense to give an international platform to speak about the defense of institutionality to representatives of the governments of Venezuela and Nicaragua, which are States that have overturned it by deeds and that persecute dissidence?

There is a talk about respect for democracy, human rights and care for institutions. Clearly, there are countries here that do not respect democracy, institutions or human rights. Let us not have a hemiplegic vision of the defense of democracy, human rights and institutions, according to an ideological profile. (Luis Lacalle Pou, President of Uruguay, at the Celac Summit, January 2023).

Not all political leaders in Latin America run on the same track. On the one hand, there are those who live within competitive systems, with greater or lesser institutional strength, depending on the case. On the other, those who have undermined the alternation of the party-state but feel free to proclaim democracy, civic-mindedness and republicanism, while keeping their populations under siege and persecuted. Is this the best example of the shortsightedness of the region's democratic reflection?

After the CELAC summit, Daniel Ortega's regime in Nicaragua banished 222 political prisoners from the country, including journalists, political leaders and civil society activists. He sent them to the United States, his greatest rhetorical enemy. These prisoners mainly include journalists, presi-

dential candidates, intellectuals and activists⁴. He put them on a plane on February 9 with no prior warning and, as a corollary, he stripped them of their nationalities and their property in the country. They became pariahs, without the right to self-defense or dignified treatment, people who swell the list of political asylum seekers⁵. In Latin America, this had repercussions on the press, but not on the foreign ministries nor on the Twitter accounts of the presidents. Only Chile, Colombia and Uruguay spoke out against it. The others were between silence and omission. Another symptom of democratic shortsightedness? The Celac declaration is not in line with the events that took place immediately afterwards. This is a recent alarm of an old problem, the degradation of democratic space in Latin America.

We analyze six keys that help understand the state of democracy in Latin America:

1. Degradation of democratic space

According to *The Economist*, Latin America, the most democratic region in the developing world, is heading in a worrying direction⁶. In the last seven years there has been a serious decline in democratic quality and only Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay appear as full democracies. Meanwhile, four countries (Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela) are classified as authoritarian regimes. The alarm is presented in the drastic increase of hybrid regimes: from 2008 to 2022, systems with some democratic qualities but serious institutional weaknesses and questions, rose from three to eight. No region in the world has dropped so drastically in this index.

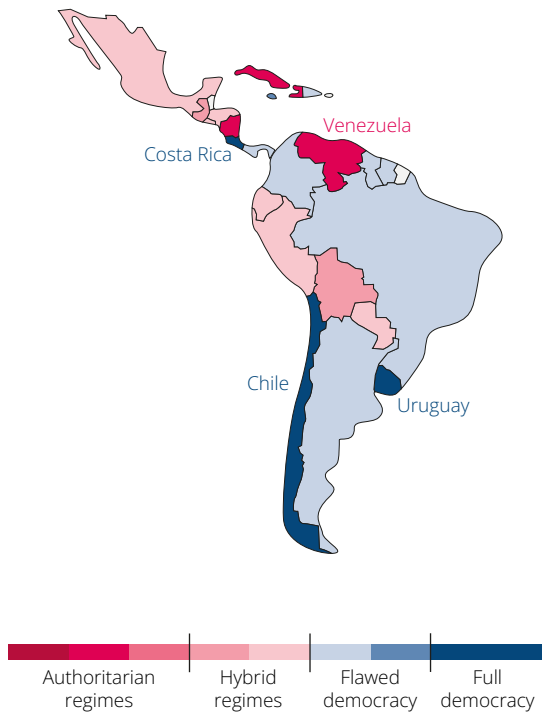
We are facing the degradation of democratic space. In Latin America, its clearest symptom is the decline in support for democracy and the

4 GAISER, E. (2023, February 17). De la cárcel al sol de la libertad. Habla un preso político nicaragüense. *Diálogo Político*. Available here.

5 ARELLANO, Á. (2023, June 20). Asilo, guerra y dictaduras. *Diálogo Político*. Available here.

6 Latin America is under authoritarian threat. (2023, February 15). *The Economist*. Available here.

Democracy Index (2022)



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit (2023).

increase in tolerance for coups d'état carried out by the government or the military as long as they "solve" the people's problems. According to Latinobarómetro (2023), 54% of Latin American citizens would not mind a non-democratic government reaching power if it solves problems. In 2002, this percentage was 44%. Truth versus illusion. On the one hand, democracy as a substantive reality, the best system in existence, proven to the point of exhaustion. On the other, the belief that magic solutions, even if they require the use of force, and despite the odds, can be a quick and instantaneous way out. The growing tolerance for these forms is alarming.

In the last two decades, the opposition of Latin American citizens to coups d'état, whether by the Executive or the military sector, has varied with respect to measurements taken at the beginning of this century. A reliable source of information is the AmericasBarometer, which in its latest edition (2021) shows worrying contrasts.

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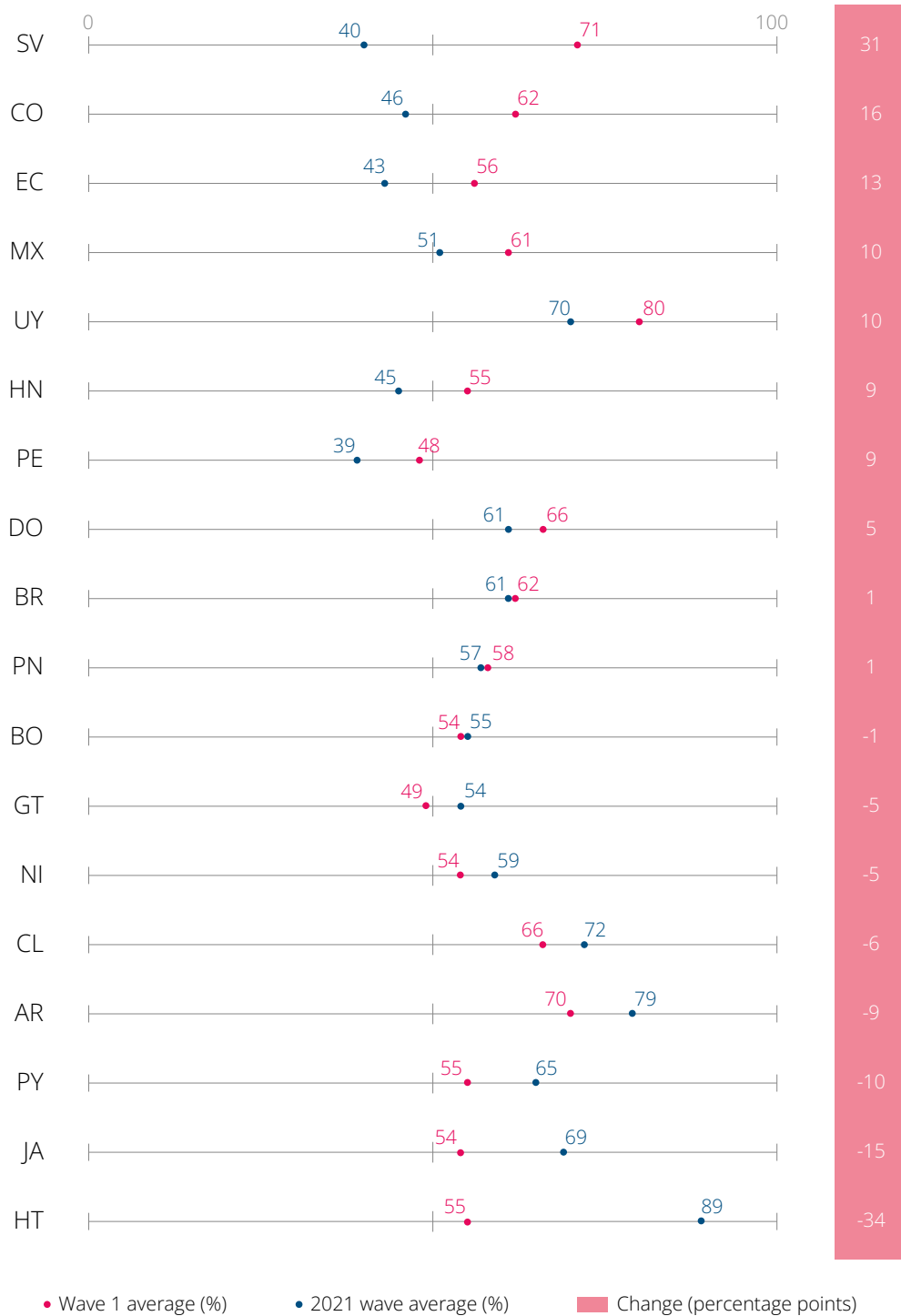
As for the coups d'état coming from the Executive, the numbers are no less negative. By contrast, in several of the countries there is a decline of twenty percentage points or more. In other words, it is a significant increase in the tolerance for this undemocratic way of accessing power. So far this century in El Salvador, opposition to the coups of the Executive fell from 85 to 49%, in Colombia from 87 to 66%, in Mexico from 83 to 68%, in Peru from 74 to 55%, in Guatemala from 84 to 62%, in Haiti from 87 to 56%, among others.

What elements drive this disbelief towards the democratic election of public representatives? The region has diverse structural problems. We will focus on three that stimulate distrust in political institutions: corruption, poverty, and the influence of autocratic tendencies.

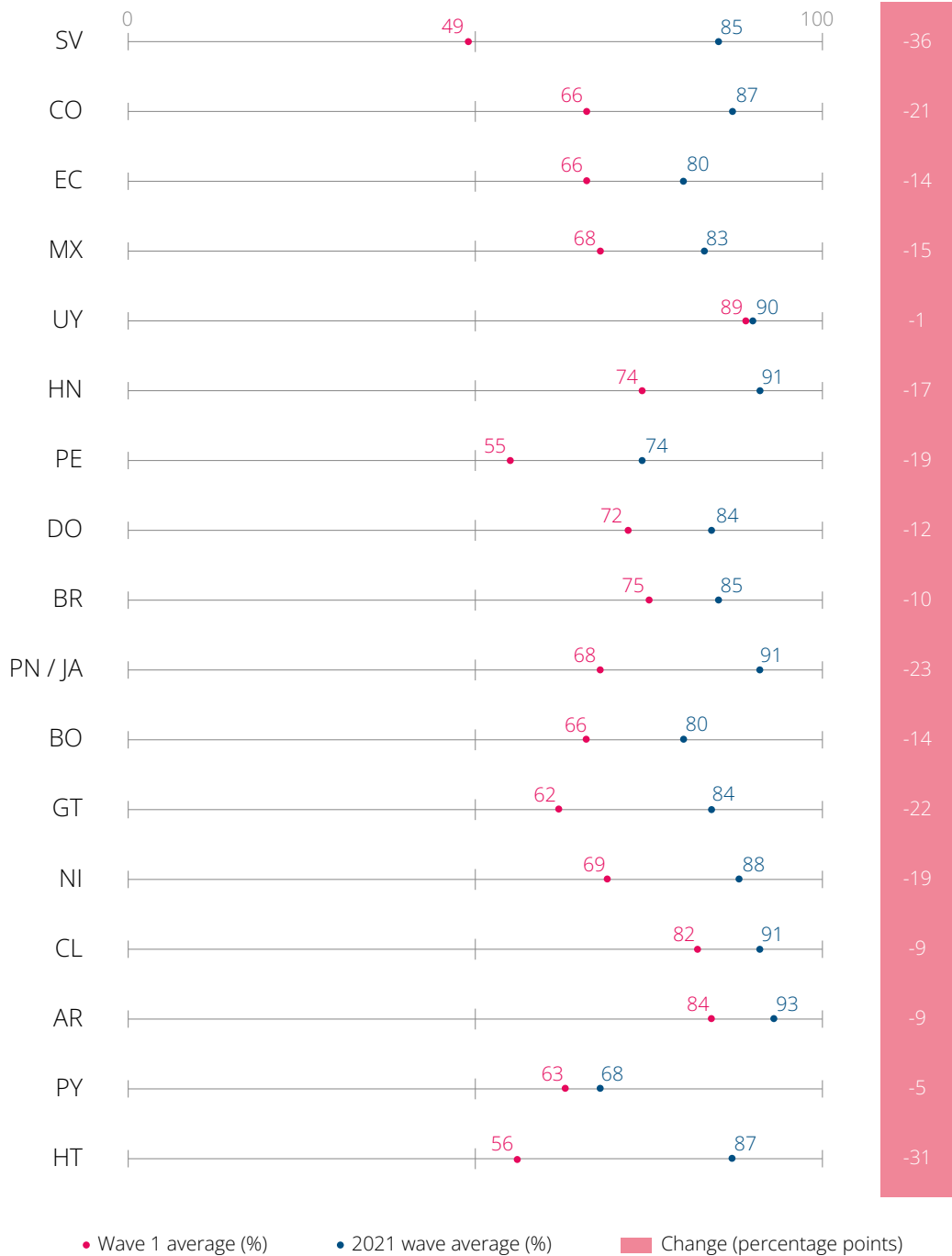
According to Transparency International and its 2022 report on the perception of corruption in the world, Latin America is one of the regions in the red. This NGO compiles an index among 180 countries based on a scale of 100, where zero is highly corrupt and 100 is a country clean from corruption. Venezuela, Haiti and Nicaragua are listed as the most corrupt in the region. Specifically, out of a total of 32 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, 21 show a score of less than 50 (corrupt or very corrupt) and 11 countries show a score of 50 to 74, which is the value of the least corrupt (Uruguay and Canada).

Changes regarding opposition to military and executive coups between 2021 and the first wave of the AmericasBarometer in each country

Opposition to military coup



Opposition to the Executive's coup



Source: Lupu y Schiumerini (2022).

Chronic corruption in most countries is a constraint on the State's ability to offer solutions to the population and a scourge that encourages poor evaluation of the political system. Among these expected solutions, the fight against poverty stands out. Almost all Latin American countries have a third or more of their population below the poverty line, i.e., citizens whose income does not allow them to meet their minimum needs. According to World Bank statistics (2020), Guatemala and Haiti would have almost 60% of their population in that situation, while Mexico, Colombia and Argentina, three of the most densely populated countries, have more than 40% of their population in the same condition. Only Jamaica, Chile and Uruguay are below 20% on the list.

Thus, Latin American states are mostly fragile solvers and the political systems that lead them are incapable of meeting society's expectations. This scenario is the context for the third problem, the threat of authoritarian influence.

The rise of new types of autocracies, both sweetened and modern, has its correlation in the region. These are no longer military men in uniform with truncheons in their hands. These are sophisticated practices that are tailoring a system to suit their needs, allowing continuous elections, while power is controlled by a few and the head of the Executive attacks the other branches of government, introduces pseudo-legal reforms and erodes freedoms. The region is impacted by these practices whose main exponents at the global level are China and Russia. In the neighborhood, Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua are the triad of non-democratic regimes that have been consolidated. They are constantly linked to direct participation in the internal affairs of other countries for purposes of promoting their model.

The expanding narrative is that democracy, as we know it, is no longer the panacea. That other more efficient ways are possible. Also at the local level, experiences such as the government of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador with its extrajudicial proceedings, the questioning of judicial and electoral institutions by Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, crowned by the failed assault on State institutions led by his

These are no longer military men in uniform with truncheons in their hands. These are sophisticated practices that are tailoring a system to suit their needs, allowing continuous elections, while power is controlled by a few

supporters on January 8, and the electoral reform of López Obrador in Mexico, indicate that these practices have been becoming normalized.

Among the democratic institutions, the electoral authority has a special importance, because the election of authorities relies on it. From twenty countries surveyed by the AmericasBarometer in 2021, **only four of them registered a confidence in elections above 50%**. In other words, in the other 16 countries, less than half of the population trusts the most emblematic act of democracy.

2. More alternation than "new wave"

For the first time in the history of the continent, the top five economies in the region are governed by different self-perceived left-wing political forces: Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia and Chile. Similarly, the map of the region indicates that the vast majority of countries are being governed by left-wing forces. However, before summarizing the analysis in the observation of a second *pink tide*, it is necessary to clarify some points.

In the vast majority of Latin American countries there are free and periodic elections. Consequently, the main aspect that makes them democratic regimes is fulfilled. While the three hegemonic authoritarianisms continue to consolidate in the heat of a region that sees its political sign swinging like a pendulum, the norm in the region

Transparency International Corruption Index for the Americas (2023)

Ranking	Country	Score
#177	Venezuela	14
#171	Haiti	17
#167	Nicaragua	19
#157	Honduras	23
#150	Guatemala	24
#137	Paraguay	28
#126	Bolivia	31
#126	Mexico	31
#123	Dominican Republic	32
#116	El Salvador	33
#101	Ecuador	36
#101	Panama	36
#101	Peru	36
#94	Argentina	38
#94	Brazil	38
#91	Colombia	39

Ranking	Country	Score
#85	Guyana	40
#85	Suriname	40
#77	Trinidad and Tobago	42
#69	Jamaica	44
#65	Cuba	45
#51	Grenada	52
#48	Costa Rica	54
#45	Dominica	55
#45	Saint Lucia	55
#35	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	60
#30	Bahamas	64
#29	Barbados	65
#27	Chile	67
#24	United States	69
#14	Canada	74
#14	Uruguay	74

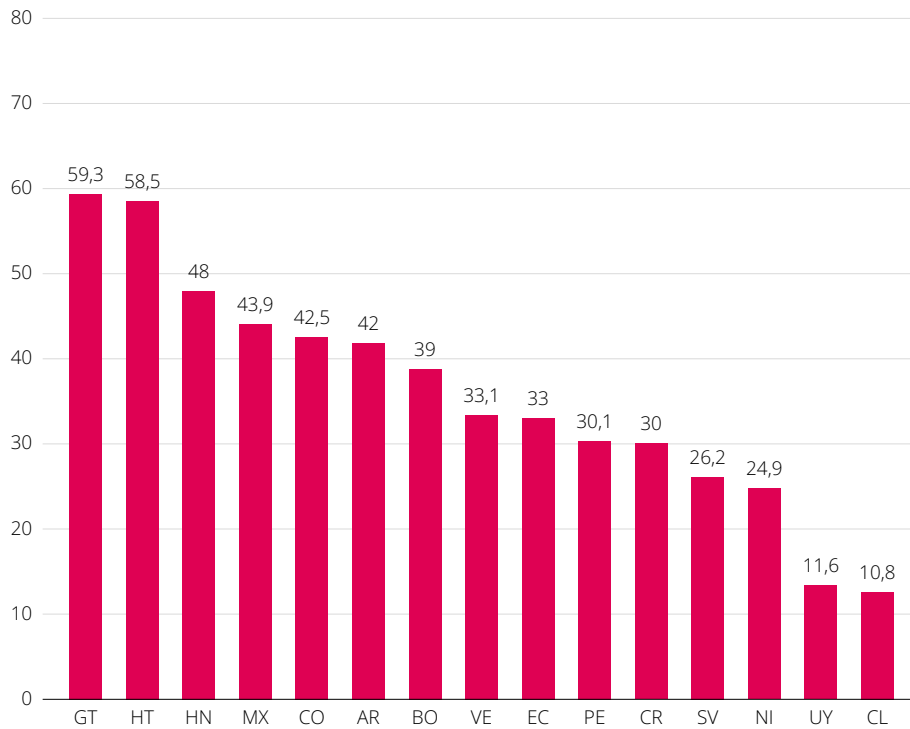
Source: Transparency.org

is that a government can lose the election. And indeed, this has been the case. Since 2018 and up to the writing of this article in August 2023, only one national government has managed to repeat in office (twice). We refer to Paraguay with the Republican Renewal Alliance, known as the Colorado Party. However, even in Paraguay there is also a nuance, because the president who won in 2018, Mario Abdo Benítez, was from a different sector than his predecessor, Horacio Cartes, who then imposed his candidate, Santiago Peña, as his

successor in the 2023 elections. In such a way that this case also showed some alternation.

The truth is that, out of fourteen presidential elections, there was continuity in only two -those already mentioned-. In the other twelve, the opposition won, mostly identified with parties located from the center to the left. The following table serves to illustrate the new Latin American political chess. Although we refer here only to presidential elections, it is necessary to mention

Population below the poverty line



Data Source: The World Bank, 2022

the Chilean constitutional referendum of September 2022, which resulted in a heavy defeat for the leftist government, as well as the national primaries in Argentina in August 2023, in which the Peronist government was the main loser. In addition, none of the options with chances of reaching the presidency of Ecuador in October represents the continuity of President Guillermo Lasso.

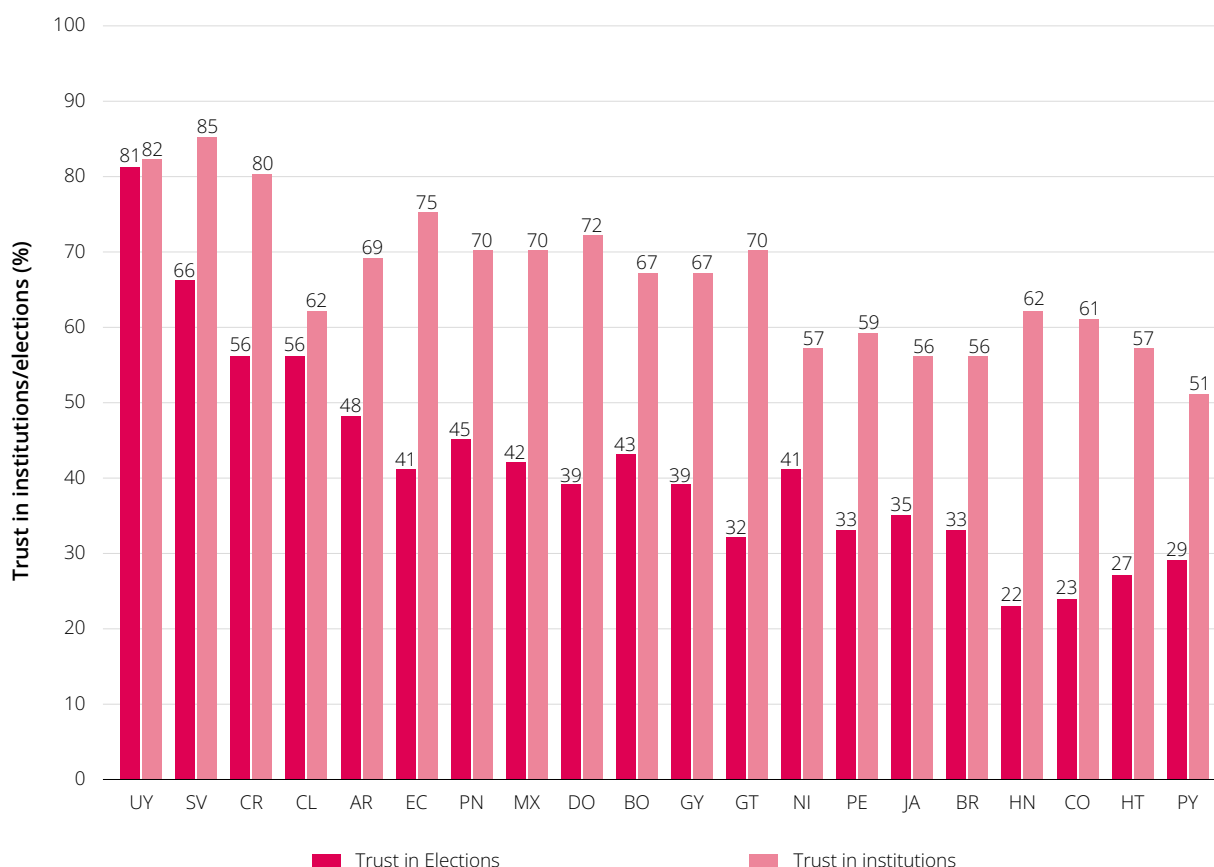
This change brought about a new relationship of forces and allowed left-wing voices to predominate in the regional agenda. However, unlike the first *pink tide* or *progressive wave*, this new framework of *progressive* governments is less powerful in its Latin Americanist group cohesion, as well as in its proposal to transform the political logics of their countries under new banners and management promises (Arellano, 2023b).

With the triumph of Luiz Inácio *Lula* da Silva (Brazil, 2022), the new *tide* found a leadership of greater global density to crown a succession of triumphs in the electoral super cycle (Zovatto,

2022), the most emblematic figures of which are Andrés López Obrador (Mexico, 2018), Alberto Fernández (Argentina, 2019), Gabriel Boric (Chile, 2021) and Gustavo Petro (Colombia, 2022).

Nevertheless, this new generation of leaders bears little resemblance to the previous one: among its major references there is a diversity of career political leaders and, therefore, members of the political *status quo*, such as Lopez Obrador, Petro and Lula; emerging figures in politics such as Boric and *outsiders* such as the former president of Peru, Pedro Castillo. From the rest, it is more the differences that can be found with the naked eye. In the first place, a political project where the refoundational and the indefinite reelection are not the norm, and the conflict with neoliberalism does not appear (depending on the cases) as the main rhetorical instrument, but the adherence to the Constitution generally prevails (with exceptions). Then, a more pragmatic link with the United States as the main hemispheric power.

Trust in institutions and elections (2021)



Source: Lupu and Schiumerini (2022) with AmericasBarometer data.

Finally, a substantial difference is that these governments have a more heterogeneous support base, without a large parliamentary majority, limited popularity and very limited political *honeymoons*. The new Latin American governments today do not have the bonanza that characterized the region's growth between 2003 and 2015. This has limited the possibilities of meeting society's expectations and makes them more vulnerable than their predecessors to the complex problems of today's world.

The absence of re-election seems like good news because governments should not be omnipotent and eternal. In a self-respecting democracy, governments lose elections. However, the lack of continuity and the almost generalized triumph of the oppositions also speaks of a high level of social weariness with the governments. In this

sense, the pandemic and its consequent economic crisis accentuated the fragilities when it came to weathering the storm and, consequently, the citizenry made definitions. As Noam Lupu points out in an interview for *Diálogo Político*, "there is a perception that politicians are not responding to the preferences of the citizenry, but rather to their personal interests."

3. The return of the establishment

Social protests have been the most relevant political phenomenon before and after the pandemic. The emblematic case is Chile, where violent demonstrations shook a country that previously presented itself as a stable democracy. This occurred on a smaller scale in Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala and Peru. All these cases shared the

Alternation in Latin American presidential elections (2018-2023)

Year	Country	Condition	Ideology
2018	Paraguay	Government	Right
2018	Colombia	Opposition	Right
2018	Brazil	Opposition	Right
2019	Uruguay	Opposition	Right
2019	Argentina	Opposition	Left
2020	Bolivia	Opposition	Left
2021	Ecuador	Opposition	Right
2021	Peru	Opposition	Left
2021	Chile	Opposition	Left
2022	Costa Rica	Opposition	Right
2022	Colombia	Opposition	Left
2022	Brazil	Opposition	Left
2023	Paraguay	Government	Right
2023	Guatemala	Opposition	Left

rebellion of a variety of pressure groups, sometimes around a single claim, against the political and economic elite. On the other hand, weak and ill-prepared governments to address social crises were unable to react adequately.

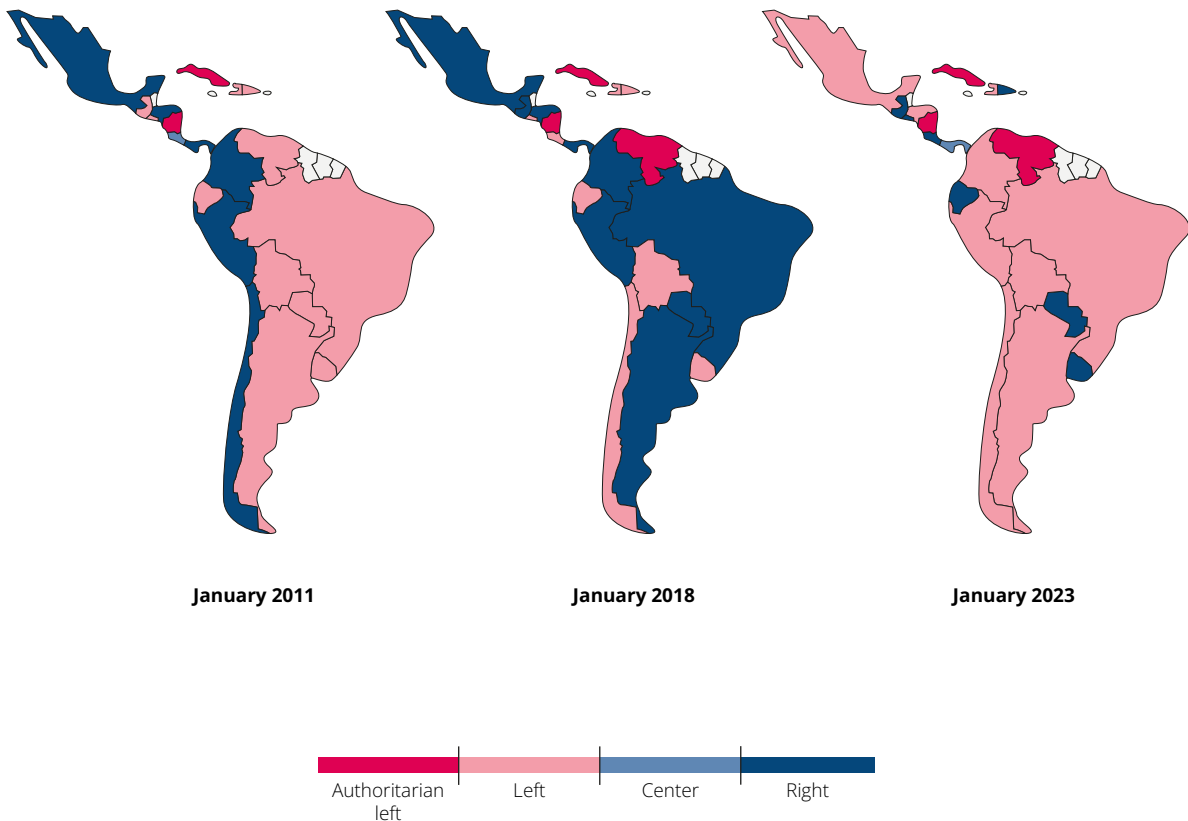
In Chile, the radical spirit of the social movements that spearheaded citizen discontent over claims related to access to basic services led to a Constituent Assembly that, with revolutionary fervor, drafted a Constitution full of identity utopias that was widely rejected at the ballot box. The government of Gabriel Boric, the only one in Latin America truly coming from these movements (the case of Pedro Castillo in Peru is less clear), whose support base is the Frente Amplio, a leftist coalition armed in the heat of the protests, lost

considerable political capital in its support for this draft Constitution.

The government's defeat in the constituent process had an ebb of support for the populist right, which now leads Chile's second constituent attempt. Along the way, and with a view to generating stability in his government, Boric replaced ministers from the Frente Amplio and social movements with professional politicians from traditional center-left parties, and has expressed optimism in the Constituent Council with a right-wing majority, which some analysts call a tactical retreat⁷. Thus, the reviled establishment was useful to rescue a precar-

⁷ MOSCIATTI, T. (2023, June 9). Puro cálculo. *BioBioTV*. Available here.

Ideology of the Presidents of Latin America (2011-2023)



Source: The World Order.

ious governability that could not be guaranteed by the social movements.

Current Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador could have hardly won his election in 2018 and then give support to his government without the help of traditional politicians who, judged by their track record, are in ideological antipodes. It is especially noteworthy that the former secretary general of the National Action Party and former president of the Christian Democratic Organization of America (ODCA), Manuel Espino, transmuted to become an ally of Obrador's National Regeneration Movement (Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional de Obrador) government.

Lula da Silva, the leading exponent of Brazil's leftist elite, won his narrow presidential victory over Jair Bolsonaro with the support of much of the center-right establishment. The most notorious

examples are: the support of former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, from the traditional Brazilian Social Democracy Party, the support of former governor of Sao Paulo and now vice-president Geraldo Alckmin, and the creation of a cabinet that mixes leaders of social movements with traditional parties such as those that served as the basis for Bolsonarism. Two examples of this are the Brazilian Labor Party, which leads the Defense portfolio, and Union Brazil, which manages Communication and Tourism.

In Colombia, the former guerrilla, veteran parliamentarian and former mayor of Bogota, Gustavo Petro, represented the political elite against the insurgent candidate Rodolfo Hernandez. Despite his fervent traditional anti-political discourse, Petro was supported by much of the establishment he criticized. This was consolidated when center-right parties formally entered their governing coalition.

The establishment has maintained its influence in the new governments, despite the fact that these sectors rose to power promising a fight against the same traditional elites that, paradoxically, have made their existence viable

And, although crises within his government led to a sudden cabinet reshuffle in May 2023 and to the diminishment of the broad base with which he sought to portray his government as a consensus-builder, professional establishment politicians remain in key positions in the Administration.

In Peru, Pedro Castillo, an *outsider* president from the social movements, was ousted in December 2022 after a crude coup attempt. It was the establishment who pulled his finger down. The power of the establishment, especially the economic one, appears as the only constant in a situation that is increasingly out of control. While the replacement of Pedro Castillo by Vice President Dina Boluarte has followed the path outlined by the Constitution, the political crisis is far from eased.

In neighboring Ecuador, the impeachment process of President Guillermo Lasso in May 2023, spurred by the indigenist movement and articulated in the National Assembly by the leftist party Revolución Ciudadana, would not have succeeded without the support of the traditional Social Christian Party. The establishment was key to generating the conditions for Lasso's resignation via *cross-death*, a mechanism that empowers the president to dissolve Parliament and call for early general elections.

It is uncertain how the struggle between emerging social actors, *outsiders* and leaders critical of

the system, and the political establishment will develop in the near future. However, the cases described above show the system's ability to adapt to political storms. The establishment has maintained its influence in the new governments, despite the fact that these sectors rose to power promising a fight against the same traditional elites that, paradoxically, have made their existence viable.

4. The "charm" of Bukelism and the legitimation of the results

The region's hard right has a new *rock star*, Najib Bukele, president of El Salvador. The Colombian magazine *Semana*, emblematic media of the Latin American right-wing media, dedicated one of its covers to "the Bukele miracle" with an uncritical article to present him as the messianic leader who ended the violence in that country.⁸

One of the most recent "achievements" of this "miraculous" man was the opening of a mega-prison for 40,000 gang members, the largest on the continent. The young politician boasts of having dramatically decreased homicides in the small country which, according to official figures, went from 106 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2015 to 7.8 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, a number close to that of the United States. Although this data may not be verifiable, the success of his heavy hand is in plain sight. In August 2023, four years into his tenure, his popularity climbed to 90%.⁹

The paradox of El Salvador is that of the belief in democracy and authoritarianism at the same time. That is, faith in democratic institutions and in the arbitrary procedure of the Executive. The country has a high level of trust in institutions; in fact, it is the country with the highest score according to the AmericasBarometer 2021, with 85%, above full democracies such as Costa Rica and

8 El Milagro de Nayib Bukele. (2023, March 11) *Semana*. Available here.

9 Spanish Oppenheimer: Nayib Bukele, el presidente más popular de América Latina. (2023, August 1, 2023). *Los Angeles Times*. Available here.

Uruguay. Likewise, it maintains a confidence in the elections of 66%, higher than the regional average. But, on the other hand, it endorses with high acceptance the authoritarian performance of Bukele, who has stood out for a management resistant to the division of powers and a refoundational pragmatism without institutional mechanisms.

Three emblematic facts demonstrate Bukele's anti-democratic character. First, the assault on Parliament with the military in December 2020 to order the approval of extraordinary resources to the government's security policy, under threat of dissolving the Legislative Power. Second, the extrajudicial action in the fight against gangs, which has led to various warnings for the violation of the human rights of innocent civilians. Third, the reduction in June 2023 of the number of parliamentarians in the Legislative Assembly and municipal governments at the request of the president, under the argument of reducing bureaucracy and expanding centralism. Thus, El Salvador decreased the seats of representatives to the House from 86 to 60; and the number of municipalities from 262 to 44.

The aforementioned paradox also has a peculiar detail: in the last 20 years, El Salvador's society increased its rejection to military coups by 31 percentage points, from 40% to 71%, while in terms of coups by the Executive, in the same period the opposite happened: rejection dropped 36 percentage points, from 85% to 49% (AmericasBarometer, 2021). In such a way that Bukelism has made possible the coexistence between democratic belief and authoritarian practice with a cloak of legitimacy emanating from social validation (or submission).

The root of Bukele's popularity lies on his arbitrary approach to public management, which rejects normative setbacks and institutional counterweights. In order to strengthen this way of exercising its presidency, Nuevas Ideas received the support of 66% of the electorate in 2021, obtaining 56 of the 84 parliamentarians to the Legislative Assembly and 51% of the votes at the municipal level, which resulted in obtaining 152

of the 262 municipalities. This popular delegation in the figure of Bukele and his standard bearers gave him majority power in the Legislative and territorial governments.

The honeymoon with the charismatic and popular leader has serious consequences for Latin American democracy. A clear example of its *for-export* model is the management of the insecurity crisis. The Bukele administration claims to have dramatically decreased homicides in the country, one of the most violent in the continent. However, this has been achieved at a high cost in terms of human rights and violation of due process. The country has lived in a state of emergency with the suspension of constitutional guarantees and unlimited powers for the Executive since March 2022, when the president declared war on the *maras* or gangs, the main actors in drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion and other serious crimes¹⁰. To this end, the State allowed the discretionary detention of thousands of people, suspected or not. As a result, many innocent people, mostly young people from poor neighborhoods, were imprisoned¹¹.

Can the Bukele case be replicated in other territories in the region? At the moment there is no way to say. There are followers of the Bukelist security policy in other Latin American countries who name it as their benchmark. Among them are presidential candidates such as the Argentine Javier Milei, the Ecuadorian Jan Topic, the Chilean José Antonio Kast, the Guatemalan Zury Ríos Sosa, the Paraguayan *Payo* Cubas and the Colombian senator María Fernanda Cabal.

5. Spaces of coordination between democratic and authoritarian forces

A constant in the region is the confluence of democratic and authoritarian parties and movements

¹⁰ El Salvador aprueba nueva prórroga a estado de excepción. (2023, February 14). *Los Angeles Times*. Available here.

¹¹ El Salvador: A un año del régimen de excepción, las autoridades cometen violaciones de derechos humanos de forma sistemática. (2023, April 3). *Amnesty International*. Available here.

In such a way that Bukelism has made possible the coexistence between democratic belief and authoritarian practice with a cloak of legitimacy emanating from social validation (or submission)

at the same table. It occurs in spaces boldly integrated by authoritarian actors to standardize their practice with that of systems that guarantee freedoms. This is especially noticeable on the left spectrum, where there is a historical tradition of admiration for the Cuban Revolution as a Latin American political reference (Pedrosa, 2023).

From the center to the right, the coordination instances are summarized in organizations of collaboration between political parties, such as the Christian Democratic Organization of America (ODCA) or the Union of Latin American Parties (UPLA). In the conjunctural, the center-right has had efforts such as the Lima Group to deal with the political and social crisis in Venezuela. On the other hand, the populist right organized a Conservative Summit of the Americas in 2019 under the auspices of Jair Bolsonaro and has remained active in extracontinental spaces such as the Madrid Forum¹². However, ODCA and UPLA do not welcome authoritarian governments, the Lima Group was diluted with the triumph of new left-wing governments in the region and the Conservative Summit did not go beyond the first edition.

The main spaces for effective political coordination that contribute most to the consolidation of

autocratic regimes in Latin America are the São Paulo Forum (SPF) and the Puebla Group (PG). On the other hand, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), a subregional platform that covers more a club of presidents than a formal multilateral body, has been useful in validating authoritarian governments in the region.

5.1. The São Paulo Forum

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and communism in Europe, the SPF was founded, which “has its origin in the call made by Lula da Silva and Fidel Castro to left-wing parties, movements and organizations, in July 1990, to reflect on the post-fall events of the Berlin Wall and the alternative and autonomous paths possible for the left in Latin America and the Caribbean.” It sought, among other objectives, to “advance with proposals for consensual unity of action in the anti-imperialist and popular struggle” and to promote a “new concept of continental unity and integration”.¹³

The germ of the SPF was not in an articulation between democrats, but in an alliance between leaders and movements that define themselves as left-wing regardless of their degree of commitment to democracy. For example, in 1995, Hugo Chávez Frías joined this space that has since been actively promoted by the Venezuelan government.

The SPF had its moment of greatest prominence during the first *pink wave*, between 2005 and 2015. According to the SPF website, it is currently made up of 123 political parties, among them, actors with a democratic tradition such as the Workers’ Party of Brazil, the Socialist Party of Chile or the Frente Amplio of Uruguay. Also, actors such as the Communist Party of Cuba, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela or the Sandinista National Liberation Front of Nicaragua, which are referents of regional authoritarianism.

The SPF’s public communiqués mix the vindication of democratic values and the propaganda of dictatorial regimes. They denounce legal wars

¹² The Madrid Forum is a group of conservative, ultraconservative and far-right parties and organizations formed in 2020 under the auspices of the Spanish party Vox.

¹³ Taken from the SPF website: www.forodesaopaulo.org

For the time being, even though left-wing leaders point to the resurrection of Unasur as the meeting point of progressive Latin Americanism, there is more that separates them than unites them

against progressive leaders and omit the persecution of oppositions in left-wing authoritarianisms. They amplify a polarizing discourse against the right, neoliberals and imperialism, while claiming their adherence to anti-democratic practice in the Cuban, Venezuelan and Nicaraguan regimes.¹⁴

5.2. Puebla Group

A recent creation for the integration of political actors that includes democratic and authoritarian leftists has been the Puebla Group, founded in 2019. This space functions as a club of Ibero-American personalities that includes former heads of state such as Dilma Rousseff (Brazil), Evo Morales (Bolivia), Fernando Lugo (Paraguay), Rafael Correa (Ecuador), José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (Spain), Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and current president Alberto Fernández (Argentina), Spanish judge and activist Baltazar Garzón, former Chilean congressman Marco Enríquez-Ominami and current Argentine president Alberto Fernández.

In its founding declaration, the PG defines itself as “a space for reflection and political exchange [...], with the objective of analyzing common

challenges and outlining joint initiatives for the integral development of our peoples”¹⁵. Two of the last initiatives supported by this group were the World Forum on Human Rights, in March 2023, in Buenos Aires, a space that was co-opted by its referents under the auspices of UNESCO,¹⁶ and the S&D Latin America Day, a meeting with the Socialist Group of the European Parliament, in June 2023. Both have served as an echo for the anti-capitalist discourse, the impulse of polarization and the relativization of the actions of left authoritarianisms. At a global level, this platform finds support in the Progressive International promoted by The Sanders Institute, of the U.S. Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders, who has in his team of collaborators spokespersons such as the former Ecuadorian presidential candidate Andres Arauz, the current Vice-President of Colombia, Francia Márquez, and the ideologist of the Movement towards Socialism of Bolivia, Álvaro García Linera.

It should be noted that both the SPF and the PG maintain cooperation with certain academic, cultural and media institutions¹⁷. Although these spaces are not provided with the resources that were available during the rise of the first pink wave, they have a structure that allows them to promote solidarity between authoritarian lefts and democratic lefts.

From these spaces discursive blows are introduced into public opinion against democratic practices that contribute to the weakening of these before public opinion. They thus create an environment from which presidents and parties that defend authoritarian practices from the left take advantage.

¹⁴ Base document of the XXVI Meeting of the São Paulo Forum (2023, June 14). *São Paulo Forum*. Available here.

¹⁵ Declaration of Puebla. (2019, July 14). *Grupo de Puebla*. Available here.

¹⁶ The Puebla Group will hold the international meeting in support of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner within the framework of the III World Forum on Human Rights. (2023, March 17). *Puebla Group*. Available here.

¹⁷ To expand on the role of academia, culture and the media in promoting authoritarian platforms in the region, it is recommended to see *Between geopolitics and ideas. Reflections for a Democratic Renewal*, by Chaguaceda and Pedrosa (2021), and *Así nos habla el Kremlin*, by Cilano and Puerta (2022).

5.3. UNASUR and Latin American integration

With a Latin Americanist and integrationist vocation fostered by the strategic alignment between center-left and left-wing governments, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of America (Alba, 2004) and the Union of South American Nations (Unasur, 2008) were created at the beginning of the century. These multilateral organizations were configured as spaces for cooperation that ended up being clubs of presidents with ideological affinity for solidarity between their governments.

Over time both bodies fell into disuse and lost regional relevance. At present, and despite the revitalization of the left on the regional map, the exacerbated interest of yesteryear in managing an agenda of joint activism between governments of the same ideological line has not been identified.

There is an intention to re-establish Unasur, an effort led by Brazilian President *Lula da Silva*, who called for a *retreat* of South American presidents in May, an event that had not been held for several years. A stellar figure of the left, former Uruguayan President José Mujica, warned against “repeating the same mistakes of the past”, in reference to the situation that kept Unasur fleetingly on the map. However, no greater progress is expected, at least in the short term, given that there are conceptual differences among the presidents of the subregion on the issues to be discussed on the agenda and their institutional approach. For the time being, even though left-wing leaders point to the resurrection of Unasur as the meeting point of progressive Latin Americanism, there is more that separates them than unites them.¹⁸

In the current context, the only instance that calls for an effective confluence of heads of state from all the political spectrum is the Celac. This, as we refer to at the beginning of this document, has been the place of formal participation of both

democratic and non-democratic regimes and a formal instance of confrontation between the two.

6. The invasion of Ukraine and its repercussions in Latin America

Several German commentators listened with astonishment to *Lula da Silva*'s statements next to German Chancellor Olaf Scholz during the press conference they both held in the framework of Scholz's first visit to Brazil in January 2023. *Da Silva*, despite the German request, refused to send ammunition to Ukraine to help defend against Russian aggression. For observers of Brazilian foreign policy, this attitude was not surprising. In an interview in May 2022, the then presidential candidate had argued that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was “as responsible for the war as Putin, because in war there is no single culprit.”¹⁹

While the countries of Europe and much of the West provide military support to Ukraine and isolate Vladimir Putin's Russia through resolutions and embargoes, the position of many Latin American countries could not be more different. What defines the reaction of the largest economies in the region, governed by different shades of the left, is a strategic ambiguity behind a pacifist rhetoric. Thus, what you hear from Brasilia, Buenos Aires, Bogota or Mexico City sounds very similar with respect to what happens in Ukraine.

The clearest exponent of this has been Colombian President Gustavo Petro, who stated that he does not support NATO or Putin: “Even if that remains as scrap metal in Colombia, we do not deliver those weapons to continue a war,” he said in his refusal to send weapons to cooperate with Ukraine. Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said that his country did not agree to the shipment of weapons because “we are pacifists”, in the same line as his counterpart Alberto Fernández of Argentina.²⁰

¹⁸ Retiro de presidentes: declaración final no menciona a la Unasur, pero sí señala compromiso con la democracia y los derechos humanos. (2023, May 30). *El Observador*. Available here.

¹⁹ *Lula: Zelenski es tan responsable como Putin de la guerra*. (2022, May 5). *DW*. Available here.

²⁰ CNN ESPAÑOL. (2023, January 26). *Presidentes de Colombia y México rechazan el envío de armas y tanques a Ucrania*. *CNN*. Available here.

The region seems to be accustomed to a vicious circle consisting of the waiting for a messiah who promises everything in the short term, and the lack of fulfillment of those commitments resulting in frustration with politics and democracy

It was not surprising that both Russian state authorities and media in the orbit of the Russian state celebrated such statements. They highlighted the resistance of these governments against the requests of the United States. Anti-imperialism is a central motive of the Russian media in its propaganda and disinformation campaign. According to official sources, in 2020 alone Russia Today (RT) content on Youtube reached a traffic of ten billion views. The secret of the success of Russian media in Latin America is based on their ability to successfully adapt to the interests of the regional public (Cilano and Puerta, 2022). One indicator of this success is social media reach. RT's Spanish-language channel reached 17 million followers on Facebook in August 2023, three million more than CNN in Spanish. Twitter/X has 3.5 million followers. It shares influence with satellites in the region such as the Telesur network and media related to authoritarian states such as *Correo del Orinoco* (Venezuela), *Granma* (Cuba) and TN8 (Nicaragua).

But, although successful disinformation campaigns and anti-imperialist and anti-U.S. sentiment explain part of the success of Russian narratives, the "Russian-Latin American links transcend the codes of conventional diplomacy" (Cilano and Puerta, 2022). Since the beginning of the government of the late Hugo Chávez in

Venezuela, a strong alliance between Putin's Russia and left-wing autocrats began. The union, in opposition to the United States, built this link as a kind of historical reconstruction of the Soviet alliance with Cuba. Russian-made weapons have been used in the repression of citizen protests on more than one occasion, although Russian arms exports have fallen substantially since the start of the aggression against Ukraine. Cooperation went so far that Nicaragua, one of the Kremlin's gateways to the region, participated in 2022 in military exercises in Russia alongside countries such as China, Syria and Belarus.²¹

Alliances between global autocrats and leftist regimes have provided players like Russia, and also China, with a unique favorable platform to expand their geopolitical interests in America.²²

Despite the increase of Russian disinformation in the region, there is a noticeable change since the beginning of the war. Russia has never had such a bad press as in recent months. It is practically impossible for the Kremlin to counteract the news that, in the vast majority of Latin American countries, with or without censorship, comes through the big news agencies and social networks. After the brutal images of razed cities like Butcha or Mariupol, it will be harder for the Russian government to maintain the success of its disinformation campaigns.

21 ISACHENKOV, V. (2022, September 1). Tropas de Nicaragua realizan maniobras militares con Rusia. *Tampa Hoy*. Available here.

22 On Chinese influence in the region, see CARDENAL, J. P. (2021). *The art of making friends*. DP Enfoque, 3. Available here.

Conclusions

Populism, revolutionary promises, democratic erosion and inequality. Latin America is entangled in its own labyrinth.

The decline in opposition to military coups and executive coups is a clear sign of the danger to democracy in the region. This tolerance is the breeding ground for the assimilation of authoritarian regimes with the illusion of quick and effective solutions. Furthermore, the influence of authoritarian powers in the region is gaining ground in the promotion of a “different” democracy where freedoms are not among the priorities, but rather discretionary, pseudo-legal and institution-destroying practices. This is one of the main alarms that should call to action parties, think tanks, institutions and democrats in different spaces of discussion of ideas, culture and media, to channel the social dissatisfaction and claims to the political system within a framework of protection of the democratic regime and the debate of conditions within a plural legality that guarantees civic freedoms.

It is delusional to think that many of the structural problems can be solved overnight or in the short term. The long and difficult road to reversing some of Latin America’s challenges begins with a realistic vision. The region seems to be accustomed to a vicious circle consisting of the waiting for a messiah who promises everything in the short term, and the lack of fulfillment of those commitments resulting in frustration with politics and democracy.

The authoritarianisms and populisms that find support in coordination arenas such as the São Paulo Forum, the Puebla Group and their intellectual, cultural and political satellites have followed a strategy of dividing and polarizing societies, destroying spaces of community and coexistence. The more time is lost, the more ground is gained by the promotion of a “different” democracy.

The alternative to this scenario is that political parties loyal to democracy put their conviction in favor of institutionalism over circumstantial inter-

ests that could lead to authoritarianism. Needless to say is that it is necessary to listen attentively to society and its demands.

Topics such as technological progress, artificial intelligence and environmental sustainability challenge our way of life and demand clear proposals from the political center. The impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the energy markets and the Western need to diversify supply chains are a great possibility for Latin America.

Confronting authoritarian networks requires exposing their activities. To counteract the polarization and tension promoted by radical discourse, it is necessary to work on dialogue and a sense of republican coexistence. Rebuilding the social fabric and civic friendship is perhaps the strongest weapon against dictatorships.

More than a magic recipe, it is a continuous construction from democratic spaces at all levels. This is the reflection that the state of democracy in the region leaves us in search of a way out of the labyrinth.

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