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THE PROBLEMS OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN LATIN AMERICA

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Abstract. *Introduction.* The article presents the contemporary problems facing governance in Latin America. The paper demonstrates that the fissures that weaken institutional and democratic stability in the region respond to a set of aspects subordinate to the crisis of expectations regarding the permanent promise of economic development. *Methods and materials.* The research problem was based on Leonardo Morlino's theory of democratic unanchoring. We indicate that the objective of the work is to show five explanatory variables of the erosion of democracy, based on the historian's classic documentary methodology. *Analysis.* Fundamentally, it shows 1) the high level of disaffection and discomfort with the political classes; 2) the risk of a new wave of populism and authoritarianism; 3) the implications of poor economic performance post-pandemic; 4) the repercussions of high rates of insecurity, violence, and organized crime; and 5) the problems in achieving regional integration and relevant global participation. *Results.* The picture of the Latin American situation raises critical knots in its democratic governance, which deserve to be reviewed in depth in order to recognize relevant lines of action for researchers, decision-makers, and public policy managers. The answer to the problems of democratic governance in Latin America can be found in the thesis of political, economic, and social delegitimization in the processes of lack of efficiency in the administration of the democratic regime in the last fifty years, beyond the factors of historical inheritance or global conjuncture. *Authors' contributions.* Pedro Martínez Lillo determined the basic concept of the article as well as formulated and analyzed the main results of the study; Javier Castro Arcos prepared the structural composition of the study and analyzed the methodological foundations of the study.

Key words: Latin America, democratic governance, democracy, populism, political instability.

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ПРОБЛЕМЫ ДЕМОКРАТИЧЕСКОГО УПРАВЛЕНИЯ В ЛАТИНСКОЙ АМЕРИКЕ

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Аннотация. *Введение.* В статье рассмотрены современные проблемы управления в Латинской Америке. Показано, что кризисы, ослабляющие институциональную стабильность в регионе, вызваны завышенными ожиданиями граждан из-за популистских политических заявлений в ходе избирательных кампаний. *Методы и материалы.* Методология исследования основывается на теории демократического транзита Леонардо Мор-

лино. Цель работы – показать пять стадий эрозии демократии, опираясь на классическую методологию Морлино. *Анализ* показывает: 1) высокий уровень недовольства по отношению к политическим классам; 2) риск новых волн популизма и авторитаризма; 3) негативное влияние низких экономических показателей после пандемии; 4) снижение уровня безопасности, рост насилия и организованной преступности; 5) проблемы в достижении целей региональной интеграции и глобального влияния. *Результаты*. Ситуация в Латинской Америке высвечивает проблемы в ее демократическом управлении, которые заслуживают внимательного изучения для выработки политических рекомендаций. Ключевой проблемой управления для стран Латинской Америки в последние пятьдесят лет является снижение уровня доверия избирателей из-за дискредитации демократических институтов в результате безответственных действий политиков-популистов. *Вклад авторов*. Педро Мартинес Лилло определил основную концепцию статьи, а также сформулировал основные результаты исследования; Хавьер Кастро Аркос подготовил структурную композицию и разработал методологические основы исследования.

Ключевые слова: Латинская Америка, демократическое управление, демократия, популизм, политическая нестабильность.

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Introduction. Between 2010 and 2022, democratic governance in Latin America has experienced a gradual state of disaffection and fragility in its institutional stability, accompanied by growing political polarization, economic frustration, and symptoms of profound citizen unrest. Since the global economic crisis of 2008 [4; 7], the decline of liberal democracy as the current and permanent political model in developed and developing countries has become increasingly evident in the perception of citizens. This is mainly explained by the crisis of unmet expectations regarding the promised development in capitalist societies, in which the new needs for social advancement of the emerging and vulnerable middle classes grew very rapidly in the last 30 years, and their main social demands were not met, especially in the areas of housing, health, education and pensions. In 2019, “democratic fatigue” manifested itself with a wave of protests of regional scope and new episodes of social frustration, which tested the weak democratic systems, their aging state apparatuses and fragmented party systems, divided parliaments, without solid forces and stable majorities, and a high polarization that makes consensus difficult [17, p. 2].

Because of the scenario described above, democratic institutions, which aim to create a harmonious, stable, and effective framework in the lives of political institutions, have suffered from the rise of leaderships that promise to channel and strengthen regional democracy. However, in

cases such as El Salvador, Nicaragua, or Venezuela, the cost of putting an end to Latin America’s ills seems to be the price of democracy itself. It is important to point out that the context of the erosion of democracy in Latin America not only responds to the discontent of the region found in the global south but is also part of a complex global recession of Western democracy. According to reports from the Centre for the Future of Democracy at Cambridge University, 2019 represented the highest level of global democratic dissatisfaction on record [8, pp. 2-3].

Based on the approaches of the United Nations, governance can be defined as the series of interactions between state and non-state actors to formulate and implement social, economic, and institutional policies and reforms related to the access to and/or exercise of power, with the objective of improving the governability of political systems. In other words, to provide courses of action so that human, social, and economic development can be achieved in optimal and equitable ways under the sovereignty of the rule of law that guarantees the principle of legality and the administration of justice, among others [26, p. 11].

As stated by Bitar, taking into consideration the postulates of the United Nations, ideally good governance implies that in Latin America, governments are legitimately elected through fair and transparent voting, and are capable of effectively promoting inclusive, sustainable, and equitable economic and social progress. At the

same time, it must demonstrate a suitable management to lead a process of continuous strengthening of democracy, resilient without ruptures or serious interruptions, which takes place through institutional and peaceful paths within the framework of the rule of law, supported by an electoral and parliamentary majority. Its solidity is enhanced by a strategic narrative aiming at a shared future and by a government capable of satisfying the basic demands and aspirations of the most vulnerable sectors [4, p. 86].

However, the reality is very different from the ideal political theory. In the last decade, democracy in Latin America has presented a paradox: it is the only region in the world where there is a combination of democratic regimes in almost all the countries that make it up, with large sectors of its population living below the poverty line (about 30%, according to ECLAC), the most unequal income distribution in the world, the highest homicide rates on the planet, and very high levels of corruption. In no other region of the world does democracy have this unprecedented combination [34, p. 4].

The region's growing social unrest, civic insecurity, and political polarization are undermined by weak and unaccountable public institutions, which have created fertile ground for the growth of organized crime, fueling violence and insecurity. According to Insight Crime indicators, Latin American and Caribbean countries continued to record high homicide rates in 2022 as cocaine production reached new highs, criminal groups continued to fragment, and the flow of weapons throughout the region continued to grow [12]. The World Drug Report 2023 indicates that cocaine manufacture in South America reached a record 2,304 tons (pure cocaine) in 2021. For this reason, the Americas are affected by the increase in cocaine trafficking, linked to the unprecedented levels of cocaine manufacture in South America. As a result, illicit drug economies and related crime, population displacement, and conflict are accelerating environmental destruction and degrading human rights, particularly among vulnerable groups in the Amazon Basin [31].

The situation of democratic governance in the region in the post-Covid-19 stage is more complex. According to ECLAC studies, Latin America and the Caribbean account for 8.4% of the world's population, and by February 28, 2022,

there had already been almost 66 million infections (15% of the world total) and 1.65 million deaths (28% of the world total) [5, p. 17]. The impact of the pandemic was severe on socioeconomic indicators. Poverty and extreme poverty reached levels not seen for at least a decade. In 2021, the number of people in extreme poverty would have reached 86 million (13.8% of the Latin American population), and people in poverty would reach 201 million (32.1% of the Latin American population), figures much higher than those of 2019 (70 million people and 187 million people, respectively). This increase was particularly marked in 2020, the year in which the pandemic began, and could have been worse had it not been for the emergency social protection measures adopted to curb it [5, p. 18]. In 2020, the contraction was expressed in a drop of 6.8% of GDP and 7.7% of GDP per capita, the largest annual drop in the region's 120-year statistical history [5, p. 18]. On a regional scale, it is estimated that the unemployment rate will increase by three percentage points between 2019 and 2020: from 6.8% to 9.8% [5, p. 19]. Finally, Latin America is currently the most indebted region in the developing world, with the highest weight of external debt in GDP (77.6%).

Methods and materials. Precisely, our research problem is inscribed in Leonardo Morlino's thesis, which explains that the problems of democratic governance crises in Latin America are not only related to an unfavorable global situation or to a heavy historical legacy but arise from society-state disengagement due to the absence of state, economic, and political legitimization of democracy by citizens, for reasons of:

a) paralysis of the functioning or malfunctioning, according to the existing rules, of some crucial structures, mechanisms, or processes of the democratic regime, as well as, for example, of the legislative and executive relations or of other structures specific to each type of bureaucracy or magistracy;

b) distancing or malfunctioning of relations between society and parties or between groups, parties, and structures of the democratic regime, which manifest themselves in the form of demands expressed by civil society and which do not or cannot be translated (crisis of expectations of democratic development), for different reasons, into decisions taken by the democratic regime [21, p. 152].

In our work, we propose five aspects that, due to democratic disengagement, and specifically, the second aspect raised, disengagement due to distancing and malfunctioning between social groups, parties, and the democratic regime, exemplify the complexity of democratic governance in Latin America. These are: 1) governance crises and political disaffection; 2) populism and authoritarianism; 3) economic performance and the eternal promise of development; 4) violence, insecurity, and organized crime; 5) regional integration and global participation. These aspects are selected because of the main indicators of multidimensional democratic governance that show economic, social, political, security, and transparency disengagement.

The methodology of this research is documentary in nature, based, as we emphasize, on recent indicators and studies of democratic governance in Latin America, which show the erosion of democracy in the selected dimensions of analysis. The following are the indicators of democratic governance in Latin America based on the work of Mainwaring and Pérez Linán [15, pp. 452-453].

Analysis. Crisis of democratic governance and political disaffection. During the first decades of the 20th century, a significant number of Latin American countries established democracies led by political networks and oligarchic economic elites, many of them dependent on North American hegemony in the region. After the Great Depression of the 1930s, a period of greater democratization was made possible due to the great social transformations required by the lower and middle urban strata, which severely experienced the consequences of the world depression. Between the forties and fifties, authoritarian governments emerged, alternating their administrations with popular fronts that achieved democratic power. However, and almost in a pendulum effect, during the 1960s and 1970s, more than half a dozen military regimes re-emerged in various Latin American countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Peru, blocking democratic options [9, p. 12].

Latin America began the “third wave” of democracies in 1978 in the Dominican Republic and Ecuador, and it spread in successive stages: first to the Andean region, then to Central America and the Southern Cone, and finally to Paraguay and Chile in 1989, and to Nicaragua in 1990 [34, p. 2]. However, the quality and health of Latin

American democracy have been questioned for their imperfect consolidation and for being contrary to the values of democracy due to the persistence of economic inequality, poverty, and regional injustice. As the *Latinobarómetro 2023* reports show, until 2008, when the subprime economic crisis broke out, most of the countries in the region were democracies, which, however, showed significant signs of erosion and disengagement. For a global overview of the context, see the table of governance indicators in the region.

The citizens’ despair with the liberal initiative in political and economic terms, at the same time, led to the renewal of the regional political class, which resulted in new populisms. We understand populism as the demagogic use that a charismatic leader makes of democratic legitimacy to promise the return of a traditional order or access to a possible utopia and, once triumphant, to consolidate personal power outside the laws, institutions, and freedoms [13]. Some of those populist proposals with radicalized discourses did not know how to take advantage of the economic resurgence at the beginning of the 21st century. They ended up financing the erosion of democracy and the concentration of power in the president [24, p. 43]. The advent of populism represented by the regime of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela introduced new alternatives to overcome regional challenges under the paradigm of “21st century socialism.” However, Chávez’s proposal derived from the implementation of hyper-presidential regimes as a model to be followed in countries such as Bolivia or Ecuador. In Venezuela, Chavism maintained liberal-democratic formalities, but in parallel developed an eminently authoritarian legislation and political culture, which, by the way, weakened individual liberties and the system of political representation [17, p. 2]. According to figures from the UN Agency for Refugees, UNHCR, currently more than seven million people (around 20% of the country’s total) have left Venezuela, seeking protection and a better life [22]. For the United Nations High Commissioner in his report “Human Rights Violations in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela: a downward spiral that seems to have no end”, explains that the increasing number of Venezuelans fleeing their country is the starkest reflection of the deteriorating socio-economic and human rights situation, and indeed the state of democratic governance, in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela [22, p. 6].

Indicators of Governance in Latin America

COUNTRY	Annual per capita GDP growth, %	Homicide Rate	GINI Index	Control of Corruption Index (2020)	Rule of Law Index (World Rank)
Argentina	0.4	5.3	42.3	-0.12	56 th
Bolivia	1.8	7.0	43.6	-0.76	129 th
Brazil	1.0	22.5	48.9	-0.34	77 th
Chile	2.4	4.8	44.9	1.15	32 nd
Colombia	1.8	22.6	54.2	-0.18	86 th
Costa Rica	2.6	11.2	49.3	0.78	31 st
Cuba	2.9	5.0	–	-0.13	n.a.
Dominican Republic	3.5	8.9	39.6	-0.68	94 th
Ecuador	0.8	7.8	47.3	-0.54	92 nd
El Salvador	1.4	37.2	38.8	-0.59	95 th
Guatemala	1.5	17.5	48.3	-1.10	109 th
Haiti	-0.1	6.7	41.1	-1.32	132 nd
Honduras	1.4	36.3	48.2	-0.86	126 th
Mexico	0.5	28.4	45.4	-0.85	113 th
Nicaragua	2.0	7.9	46.2	-1.25	131 st
Panama	3.2	11.6	49.8	-0.51	71 st
Paraguay	1.3	6.7	43.5	-0.87	96 th
Peru	2.8	7.7	43.8	-0.49	87 th
Uruguay	1.8	9.7	40.2	1.42	25 th
Venezuela	–	49.9	44.8	-1.56	139 th

Note. Source: [17, pp. 452-453].

From 2000 onwards, the rise of populist leaderships – from left and right – with little political experience and questionable commitment to democratic principles caused the erosion of democracy, represented by very low levels of trust in political parties (13%, Latinobarómetro, 2021) and in parliaments (20%, Latinobarómetro, 2021). When faced with the statement “Political parties work well,” the response is strongly against parties: 77% disagree with the statement, in contrast to only 21% who agree with it. In 2023, there is not a single country in Latin America where the majority of citizens perceive that political parties work “well” [11, p. 46]. Likewise, 53% of citizens in the region think that most or all people in the office of the prime minister or president are involved in corruption, and 52% of senators or parliamentarians at the national level (Transparency International, 2019). 77% of citizens considered that their countries were governed in the interest of a few powerful groups and not for the good of all [26, p. 21]. As evidenced in the last decade, the feeling of democratic weakening and broken expectations, due to having economies with high income inequality, inefficient political classes, corruption scandals, and prolonged moments of mediocre economic growth, have

been a central reason for social tensions in the process of democratic governance in Latin America [26, p. 10].

As studied by Talvi, the punishment vote in the face of the aforementioned context explains the shift to the left experienced in the region since 2018. Most of the largest countries, after four years of stagnation, were governed by the right: Michel Temer in Brazil, Enrique Peña Nieto in Mexico, Iván Duque in Colombia, Mauricio Macri in Argentina, Martín Vizcarra (successor of Pedro Pablo Kuczynski) in Peru, and Sebastián Piñera in Chile. In the case of countries where the left was governing, such as Ecuador in 2018 and Uruguay in 2019, right-wing or center-right governments were elected. The punishment vote is exercised against those who exercise power, not because of the voter’s ideological turn [29, p. 7]. The main risk of politics under “the punishment vote” is the door that opens to anti-democratic leaderships and populist presidents with authoritarian styles and polarizing speeches, as is the case of Bukele in El Salvador or the former president Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, who in the October 2022 elections mobilized 58,206,354 votes in his favor, reducing to less than 1% the difference in votes with respect to his opponent, Ignacio Lula

da Silva (who won with 60,345,999 votes) – point not only to a conjunctural turn to the right or a punishment vote against center or left governments, but also, as Pirker points out, to the resilience of authoritarian values associated with reactionary projects [25, p. 8].

Once the newly elected governments are in office, citizen support for the presidents varies rapidly. In Chile, President Gabriel Boric saw his approval rating drop below 40% in only 5 weeks in office, while in Colombia, President Gustavo Petro increased his disapproval by 20 points in only 2 months. Meanwhile, the presidents of Argentina and Peru exhibited approval levels below 30% in 2022; in short, most Latin American presidents exhibit low levels of citizen approval. According to the Political Risk Study in Latin America (CEIUC), between 2019 and 2021, in 13 of the 14 presidential elections, voters changed political signs, with the exception of Nicaragua. The reality shows a more pragmatic, ideologically “unfaithful,” and impatient citizenry, whose demands are increasing and accelerating as a result of social networks. While Latin American society has changed in the last two decades, states continue to operate with 20th-century logics [27, p. 16].

Citizen support and the assurance of democratic governance appear to depend fundamentally on performance in managing the economy [1]. Just as recession favors the opposition, economic growth favors the government because voters hold it accountable for performance. The model of European social democracies combines universal public services with institutions and policies and encourages private sector growth and investment. In Latin America, the deterioration of the business environment has made it difficult to revive economic growth. The influence of organized crime, corruption, and narco-politics in Mexico or Ecuador, where presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio was assassinated in August 2023, does not seem to be receding. Serious situations that accentuate a frank deterioration of institutionality. In addition, social injustices persist due to continually high inequality, regressive tax rates, and informal labor markets that exclude the poor from basic legal protections and services [8, p. 29]. Finally, between 2019 and 2020, protests and mobilizations, or “social outbursts,” took place

in countries such as Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia, and Colombia. The massive social protests and discontent were stronger, and people took to the streets even in the midst of the pandemic [26, p. 27].

Populism and authoritarianism.

The weakened Latin American democracy has among its recent history twenty-one presidents convicted of corruption, and a total of twenty Latin American presidents in nine countries between 1985 and 2023 have had to leave office before the end of their term, not because they were interrupted by military coups but mainly because of corruption scandals [11, p. 7]. Others, such as Chávez, Ortega, or Bukele, in order to assert their personalism, interfere with the rules of reelection, modifying them at their convenience. These actions end up delegitimizing the value of democracy and the political system.

As mentioned above and quoting Krauze, we understand that populism is defined by the consolidation of personal power outside the rules of the democratic game, the rule of law, and respect for freedoms. In this sense, we can identify as common denominators of Latin American populist politics specific styles of governing that emphasize the centrality of traditional authority figures – the caudillo or the strongman – or the use of polarizing rhetoric and binary schemes [25, p. 13]. The strategies of the new caudillism go beyond the left-right ideological frameworks; the objective is to concentrate power and wear down democratic institutional structures, limiting the control capacity of other counterpowers, especially the judiciary and the legislature. We understand that populism contributes to the dismantling of the democratic legitimacy of political institutions and, therefore, erodes the political stability of the political regime.

According to Ziblatt and Levitsky, populists are characterized by an anti-establishment profile, claim to represent the true “voice of the people,” and identify the common enemy in a corrupt and conspiratorial elite that hijacked democracy and, therefore, the opportunities for progress for the majority. They deny partisan legitimacy by labeling parties as unpatriotic. When populists are elected, democratic institutions suffer major setbacks. In Latin America, for example, of the fifteen presidents elected in Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela between 1990 and 2012, five were upstart populists: Alberto Fujimori, Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Lucio

Gutiérrez, and Rafael Correa. And all five ended up weakening democratic institutions through the following actions:

- a) the rejection (or weak acceptance) of the democratic rules of the game;
- b) the denial of the legitimacy of political adversaries;
- c) the tolerance or encouragement of violence;
- d) the predisposition to restrict the civil liberties of the opposition, including the media [33, pp. 32-33].

There are currently four authoritarian regimes in Latin America: Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Haiti (the latter having become a failed state). At the other extreme is Uruguay, the best quality democracy in the region. El Salvador has ceased to be a democracy and has become a hybrid regime [27, p. 13]. The risk of the empowerment of authoritarian leadership in the region is growing [20]. Support for democracy in the region has fallen 12 percentage points in the last decade (from 70% in 2008 to 58% in 2017), with a steeper drop (8 percentage points) from 2015 to 2018. In tune with previous results, 46% of citizens share the perception that democracy does not work well, and 55% of the Latin American population indicated that they would not mind having a non-democratic government as long as it was effective [26, p. 25].

In 2023, only 48% supported democracy in the region, down 15 percentage points from 63% in 2010. Dissatisfaction with the political system is 69% [11, p. 18, 36]. In addition to the clear lack of confidence in democracy as a desirable political system, populism finds an ideal breeding ground to validate a discourse of anti-systemic and authoritarian malaise, especially in a context in which democracies can fail at the hands not of generals but of elected leaders, presidents, or prime ministers who subvert the very process that brought them to power [33, pp. 11-12]. Worryingly, according to the Latinobarometro studies, the minority of democrats are among the youngest, which makes the future of democracy in Latin America even more alarming. Age is what most differentiates authoritarians, since the younger they are, the more authoritarian they are [11, p. 33].

Economic performance and the eternal promise of development. The Latin American economy began the 21st century in a period of stagnation that involved major collapses and sovereign debt crises, the best-known episode being the “Argentinean corralito”. Subsequently,

between 2004 and 2013, about 10 years of brief bonanza were experienced (Latin America grew at an average rate of almost 5% per year), which were abruptly halted by the global financial crisis in 2008. In less favorable global conditions, the region entered an economic stagnation that has lasted from 2014 to the present day, intensely aggravated by the 2020 pandemic [30, p. 16]. The effect of the pandemic will accentuate the Latin American development deficit. The falls in regional GDP (7.7%) and GDP per capita (8.5%) in 2020 point to the possibility of a new lost decade [4, pp. 40-44].

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) stated that Latin America is about to experience a new shock, with very low economic growth projections, between 0.7% and 1.7% of GDP in 2023. This is a lower growth indicator than those experienced in the “lost decade” (the 80’s). Venezuela’s public debt is the highest in the region at 307% of GDP, followed by Brazil (91.9%), Bolivia (86.1%), El Salvador (82.6%), and Argentina (74.4%). According to ECLAC and the International Labor Organization, after COVID-19, 25 million jobs were lost, and poverty reached 33.7% in 2020.

Currently, about 50 percent of the economy operates in informality, of which 60 percent of its workers are young people [27, pp. 19-20]. The vulnerable population, measured by income between \$5.50 and \$13 (in PPP), has remained relatively stable over time, with a rate of about 35 percent of the population. In other words, vulnerability in the region has remained stagnant and persistently high for more than 20 years [26, p. 13].

In 2021, foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows to Latin America totaled US\$142.794 billion, 40.7% higher than the previous year but lower than the pre-pandemic US\$159 billion. Much of this investment came from one major source: China. According to the World Economic Forum, China’s trade with the hemisphere grew 26-fold between 2000 and 2020, expected to double by 2035 to more than US\$ 700 billion [23, p. 430]. Foreign direct investment (FDI) from China and Hong Kong as a whole had a steady growth from 5.5% of the world stock of FDI outflows in 2000 to 11.3% in 2019 [5]. In 2022, trade between the Asian giant and the Latin American region grew by nearly eleven percent and reached about 437 billion euros, according

to official Chinese statistics. Beijing has become the main trading partner for most South American countries.

However, questions about Latin America's possibilities of overcoming the model of an economy exporting raw materials continue to intensify, basically because the main negotiations with China are about natural resources (minerals (35%), soybeans (17%), mineral fuels (12%), meat (7%), and copper (6%)). Recently, the debate over lithium rights as a strategic energy resource in the "White Gold Triangle" of Bolivia, Argentina, and Chile, which concentrates about 60% of the world's reserves, reinforced China's will and role as a major global economic player for the region. China's possibilities of conditioning and subordinating Latin America's economic development to the pace of its own growth are clearly expanding.

One of the pressing economic challenges for Latin America is income distribution and socioeconomic inequality. Based on Gini coefficient measurements, Latin America continues to be the second-most unequal region in the world. LAC Equity LAB estimates for the year 2000 were, on average, 0.56, while in 2018, the same coefficient only dropped to 0.52 [26, p. 14]. The figures confirm the reasons for the frustration and economic vulnerability of the middle class, the persistent income inequality, and the growing perception of a culture of privilege rooted in political elites and those who profit from the state.

In Latin America, the richest 1% concentrate 42% of the wealth, and the top 10% concentrate 71.2% of the total wealth [26, p. 15]. Of the ten most unequal countries in the world, five belong to Latin America, including Brazil, which accounts for a third of the region's total population. Although at the beginning of the century inequality was reduced in some countries as a consequence of economic growth and social policies, one of the challenges of the region is still to reduce the deep social inequalities. This undoubtedly affects the economy itself, the options for achieving development, social cohesion, and the feeling of collective identity, which are so important for improving participation and the democratic regime [18, p. 134].

The described inequality, a highly volatile economy prone to recurrent crises (exchange,

banking, and sovereign debt) and incapable of developing and sustaining a convergence dynamic, as the Asian tigers did, installed the perception that Latin America lives in a chronic failure, being defined as "the region that will always be of the future" [30, p. 1].

Violence, insecurity, and organized crime. Among the most important reasons and difficulties for stable democratic governance in the region are the problems associated with the prevalence of violence. Organized crime thrives where the state is relatively weak, institutions are corrupt, and informal economies with high rates of inequality and poverty predominate, with inevitable fatal consequences. Latin America and the Caribbean represent about 8% of the world's population, and the region accounts for more than 33% of global homicides. Transnational organized crime in Brazil, Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Colombia has had a devastating impact on democracy at the local level, often with profound consequences for politics at the national level. In many places, criminal organizations limit or destroy the possibility of free and fair elections by coercing candidates and voters [15, p. 451].

Countries such as Venezuela will have a rate of 40.9 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2021 [27, p. 10]. Seventeen of the 20 countries with the highest homicide rates in the world are in Latin America. As of 2018, there have been nearly 2.4 million homicides in Latin America. In 2018, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela, and the countries of northern Central America (an area consisting of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), which together account for 68% of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean, accounted for 93% of the region's homicides and 46% of global homicides [10, p. 122].

Most of the high homicide areas are territorial spaces with a widespread presence of organized crime, especially linked to drug trafficking, diversifying criminality in illicit activities such as human trafficking, total control of villages, trafficking of weapons, ammunition, and explosives; money trafficking (money laundering); illegal exploitation of natural resources; forced displacement; and trafficking of goods (smuggling and counterfeiting) [28, p. 29]. Including the infiltration of political parties, the powers and administration of the state, the

police, and the Armed Forces, all of which are detrimental to democratic coexistence and open a crack of constant impunity [26, p. 32].

The centrality of drug trafficking in organized crime and the high levels of regional violence are fundamental to understanding the phenomenon. Latin America accounts for all of the world's coca leaf production. In 2020, both cultivated hectares and cocaine production in Colombia reached record levels, with 245.000 hectares and 1,010 metric tons, respectively, representing a 15% increase in cultivation over 2019 [27, p. 19]. By 2021, cocaine manufacture in South America had reached a record 2.304 tons (pure cocaine) [31].

The magnitude of the drug business has meant that in recent decades, the traditional Colombian and Mexican cartels have transnationalized their operations, causing the region as a whole to participate in all phases of the activity and value chain: production, trafficking, and consumption in local markets of different sizes [10, p. 130]. The growing transnationality of the criminal phenomenon in the region is largely due to the geographic opportunity provided by the porosity of land and river borders, as well as the lack of control of airspace (narcoflights) [3, p. 49]. It is estimated that 24.000 combatants are part of both armed groups and organized crime in urban and rural areas. The number of criminal groups in Mexico doubled between 2010 and 2020, reaching more than 200, according to a data analysis by Crisis Group [14].

The emergence of powerful organized crime groups is also explained by the weakness, incapacity, or absence of the state in areas of high conflict and extreme poverty. It is the lack of state mechanisms for governance and regulation of illicit markets and the inability of the state to control its territory – an unbridgeable abyss – that transfers the responsibilities of territorial control to Mexican cartels or groups of micro-traffickers in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro that operate in similar ways [2, p. 8]. In other words, organized crime in Latin America, encompassing multiple large, medium, and small illegal entrepreneurs, not only produces illicit rents but also, depending on its capacities and networks, exercises territorial control, provides public services, and imparts justice, becoming in many cases a substitute, competitor, or collaborator of the state and local institutions. Through nodes, these groups interconnect regionally and locally and, in many cases, exercise the functions of the state [32, p. 4].

According to Crisis Group reports, public displays of narco violence have become increasingly massive, taking advantage of social media to spread the word. In Colombia, groups such as the Clan del Golfo, currently the country's most important criminal organization, give away new schools and toys as they expand into new territories. But at the same time, they apply ruthless forced confinement to residents. More than 100,000 people were victims of forced confinement in 2022, many of them members of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities along the Pacific coast [14]. Unfortunately, the port cities of Guayaquil and Rosario, in Ecuador and Argentina, respectively, as well as Costa Rica, Panama, and Paraguay, have been plagued by extraordinary outbreaks of violence. Criminal groups in Ecuador have intimidated local communities with violent tactics such as hanging dead bodies from a pedestrian bridge, detonating explosives in stores and residential areas, and beheading members of rival groups [14].

Official responses to drug trafficking have been insufficient, first because of the great power of the cartels to penetrate the state administration itself and the broad territorial dominance of organized crime at the local level. When strategies to fight them head-on were applied, they led to more violence against the civilian population and atomization among criminal groups [23]. In some cases, security policies and the fight against organized crime have triggered the fragmentation of the “criminal world” and competition among these groups for illicit markets, thus increasing the level of criminal violence. In Mexico, for example, state interventions generate imbalances of power among cartels, creating incentives for others to take advantage and initiate “wars of conquest,” accompanied by sharp increases in the level of violence [2, p. 11].

Regional integration and global participation. Latin American countries have shared similar socioeconomic problems since the dawn of their republican history. The convergence to deploy joint and multilateral proposals in the region's face challenges has been unsatisfactory. In a recent test of the state of inter-American multilateralism, regional integration was found to be in a state of paralysis and lethargy in the face of the recent impact of the pandemic. In the face of the health emergency, the solutions to the calamity

worked to the extent of the autonomous management of each country, an issue that frankly shows that the inter-American system is in a state of considerable weakness. As a consequence, this affects the state of democratic governance among neighbors. To date, there is no consistent regional cooperation plan in matters of public health or post-COVID socioeconomic support. This is evidence that forum diplomacy urgently needs to update its real implications in the face of Latin American dilemmas.

Since the middle of the 20th century, a number of initiatives have been implemented, such as the Organization of American States (OAS, 1948), the Latin American Free Trade Association (LAFTA, 1960), the Andean Pact (1969), the Latin American Integration Association (LAIA, 1980), or the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA, 1994). Each of them sought to strengthen multilateral channels in favor of regional multilateralism and integration, but with not very encouraging results.

On the other hand, the role of the United States in Latin America has always played a centripetal role, i.e., seeking to concentrate regional hegemonic power and alienate Latin American countries in a capitalist formula for development. The so-called Washington Consensus of the early 1990s promised “the end of Latin American history.” However, at present, the real political and economic implications for the United States are becoming increasingly remote due to its loss of relative regional power in contrast to China’s commercial power.

Under the progressive era of the early 2000s, the renewal of Latin American multilateralism was characterized by certain strong ideological tendencies, such as opposition to the neoliberal (post-liberal or post-trade) model or the promotion of international solidarity [6, p. 13]. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of the Americas (ALBA) emerged in 2004, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR, 2008) in 2008, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in 2010, and the Pacific Alliance in 2011. They were added to existing organizations, such as the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR, 1991), or even the Central American Integration System (SICA, 1991).

However, there are no better economic or political integration results with the new regional platforms. According to Elodie and Parthenay, the

accumulation of divisions, the coming to power of conservative and other populist governments and the multiplication of political crises in several of the region’s states, nurtured by the recomposition of international balances of power, have fed a dynamic of politicization of the various forms of cooperation during the last decade [6, p. 15]. This is connected with the present complex of multilateralism at the global level, which would coincide with the crisis of extensive distrust in a large part of the public institutions of Western countries. Pierre Rosanvallon argues that democratic distrust and structural distrust converge and consolidate. It is these different factors that have led to the emergence of a “society of generalized distrust” to describe the contemporary world [19, p. 55].

Furthermore, there is still controversy about countries that prefer to link up with the world through free trade agreements with the world powers rather than articulating themselves in regional blocs (Chile has free trade agreements with China, the United States, and more than twenty other countries). Or the fact that Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina have never put together an agenda to bring it jointly to the G-20 has led to the region being seen by the rest of the world as a group of unconnected states, powerless to negotiate as a bloc with large trading partners [27, p. 36].

According to the UNDP-IDEA 2022 analysis, among the most relevant consequences for regional integration and democratic governance are: the lack of consideration of the international and regional nature of many of the risks and challenges to governance, including organized crime, migration, drug trafficking, corruption, and climate change. Also, there is less international cooperation, which can translate into lower-quality public policies and the loss of knowledge transfer and best practices. In addition to the above, there are low levels of economic integration and trade exchange and reduced opportunities for civil society participation with its peers in the region [14, p. 35].

Conclusions. The problems of democratic governance in Latin America are urgent to address from a transformative perspective. The aspects outlined in this paper summarize those issues that we consider relevant to prioritize when diagnosing and evaluating sustained actions for the benefit of regional democracy.

We affirm that the elements proposed as aspects for analyzing the problems of regional

governance account for the institutional disengagement between the democratic regime and the citizenry, which does not find political, economic, and even social legitimacy in the official channels of the democratic regime. This condition causes a critical erosion of democracy and enhances Latin American political fragility.

Economic inequality, lack of social inclusion, and lack of protection for the middle and lower sectors have undermined confidence in democratic institutions as the engines of Latin American development. The feeling of a return to conditions of vulnerability and multidimensional poverty due to poor management of economic crises is combined with the impotence and discomfort generated by the endemic corruption of the bureaucracy, the impunity of the elites, the scarcity and legitimacy of channels of representation, and the resolution of judicial conflicts [16]. All these problems end with the loss of respect for the rule of law as a fundamental mechanism in democratic political culture.

It is highly important to promote regional integration and cooperation in the design of strategies and policies that promote the education of a democratic conscience and the will to participate politically and electorally, despite the serious problems mentioned above.

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