

**The Mercosur in the midst of the crisis**

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## ABSTRACT

Since 2016, the four States Parties to the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) - Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay - are experiencing internal political and economic crises that cannot be understood without observing the South American regional context. With the pandemic of the new coronavirus, the crisis also took on a health dimension, whose repercussions in 2021 made the celebration of the bloc's thirty years a moment of reflection on the effectiveness of the integration process, due to the absence of territorial management that addresses the Mercosur needs. The purpose of this text is to discuss the measures adopted in the context of Mercosur in the face of the current pandemic, economic and political crisis. The methodology used for the elaboration of the text included a bibliographic review on the regional integration process in Mercosur and the analysis of news about the situation and the measures adopted to contain the effects of the crisis in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay.

**KEYWORDS:** Regional Integration. Crisis. Mercosur

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Since the 16th century, Latin American countries have participated in the hierarchy of the modern colonial world-system as subordinates. This position was imposed by the standards of coloniality and modernity based on the European experience, which was also recognized only as the center of the capitalist system due to the geosocial construction of America (QUIJANO and WALLERSTEIN, 1992).

Even in the face of the impossibility of achieving the European development standard, Latin countries use strategies to try to overcome the gulf they have in relation to the center of the world system. Among these strategies, we can mention the adoption of the policy for the substitution of imports from the first half of the twentieth century. We can also indicate the regional integration initiatives from the breakdown of the agreements covered by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), of which the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) was one of the main ones.

Mercosur was created in the context of open regionalism, the liberalization of economies and the consequent competitive insertion of countries in the international market. In order to contemplate the vertical demands, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay saw the opportunity to increase bargaining power in international negotiations through the bloc.

Since the signing of the Treaty of Asunción in 1991, which established the bloc, Mercosur has not yet achieved one of the first and main goals: to become a common market in the first years after its formation. This was also a goal based on the European experience of integration, disregarding the historical development and particularities of the countries involved in the two initiatives. The mirroring in the experience of the European Union is the show that the imposition of the European standard covers all spheres of economic, political and social organization not only of Mercosur states parties, but also of all Latin countries.

Even with the "left turn" from 2003 and with some advances in the debate on asymmetries in the bloc, the changes were not structural, so they proved insufficient to break the imposed standards of modernity and coloniality that directly affect the organization and functioning of the bloc, as is the case of asymmetric and dependent relations with the central countries.

From 2016 on, the weakening of the regional integration process was accentuated. The milestones of this weakening were: the election of former Argentine President Mauricio Macri and the impeachment of former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff. These events were followed by pro-flexibilization statements by the bloc.

The current context of pandemic, political and economic crisis has evidenced the political and institutional fragility of the bloc. Moreover, the crisis we are experiencing imposes new challenges and demands new responses to problems that have had their consequences expanded in this period, such as asymmetries and regional inequalities.

The aim of this text is to discuss the measures adopted under Mercosur in the face of today's pandemic, economic and political crisis, the effects of which have all the members of the bloc.

The methodology used for the preparation of the text included a bibliographic review on the process of regional integration in Mercosur and the analysis of news about the situation and the measures adopted to contain the effects of the crisis in states parties.

To this do so, the text is divided into two main parts. The first, "The process of regional integration in Mercosur: antecedents and evolution", deals briefly with the rapprochement between Argentina and Brazil and the consequent formation of Mercosur, including Paraguay and Uruguay, in addition to the process and crisis of integration in the bloc. The second part, "The effects of the pandemic in Mercosur and the measures taken in the face of the crisis", indicates the decisions taken within the framework of the bloc to contain the effects of the pandemic, as well as presents the individual situation of each country.

## **2 THE PROCESS OF REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN MERCOSUR: ANTECEDENTS AND EVOLUTION**

Mercosur is the result of the long-alet rapprochement of Argentina and Brazil, whose effect was the replacement of the geopolitics of the conflict by cooperation in the Prata Basin. According to Oliveira (1998), the rapprochement between the two countries was, among other things, the agreement for the use of water resources in the Paraná Basin and the positioning of pro-Argentina, Brazil in the Falklands War. The rapprochement between the two countries resulted in the Economic Integration and Cooperation (PICE) (PICE) (1986) and Integration, Cooperation and Development Treaty (ICTD) – 1988-1991. These agreements aimed to promote and progressively expand cooperation between the two countries.

As a result of the results of the agreements mentioned in the previous paragraph, Paraguay and Uruguay also adhered to the integration process. The four countries, after signing the Treaty of Asunción in 1991, created Mercosur and came to be named as States Parties – nomenclature adopted for the members-effective of the bloc. The following map (Figure 1) shows the participation of South American countries in Mercosur.

Figure 1 - Map of the participation of South American countries in MERCOSUR



Map drawn up by the author

As mentioned earlier, Mercosur has been mirrored in the European integration experience, reproducing as an international insertion strategy the European standard of development and political organization. However, this mirror did not consider that the common market formed by the European Union in 1992 had been experiencing an intense gradual integration since the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, as well as the creation of the European Economic Community in 1957.

Os caminhos seguidos para a integração entre União Europeia e MERCOSUL foram distintos, pois no caso do MERCOSUL, apesar de algumas iniciativas serem parecidas àquelas tomadas na União Europeia, elas não renderam o mesmo efeito. Isso ocorreu por conta da distinção na natureza dos acordos, das capacidades em arcar com os custos da integração (sobretudo em relação aos transportes), do estabelecimento de metas ambiciosas a serem cumpridas em um curto prazo etc. (CRUZ, 2019, p. 33).

Mercosur's ambitious goal was to achieve common market status in the early years. In the face of frustration, Mercosur remains an imperfect customs union, thus maintaining a list of exceptions to the common external tariff (KUME; PIANI, 2011), even thirty years after the signing of the Treaty of Asunción.

Mercosur has long remained focused only on the economic aspects of regional integration. With the "left turn" of 2003, the bloc went through a process of inclusion of new agendas resulting from the change in the regional political scenario. Consequently, specific forums have been set up for the debate on gender issues, human rights, health, education, etc. Although economic discussions continued as protagonists within Mercosur, the creation of

dialogue for the discussion of new themes corroborated the expansion of the concept of integration in the region, demonstrating that although important, the economic aspect is not the only one to be considered, since it impacts and is impacted by all other aspects mentioned (health, education, human rights, gender issues, etc.).

From the economic impact on all aspects of the regional development and integration process, in 2004 the Mercosur Structural Convergence Fund (Focem) was created in order to support and finance the projects developed in the bloc, mainly by the smaller members (Paraguay and Uruguay). The one hundred and twenty-seven million dollar fund, maintained by annual, voluntary and non-reimbursable contributions made by States Parties, considers the distribution and contribution of resources based on existing asymmetries. Although the total value of the fund falls short of mercosur needs, especially of the smaller members, the fund's proposal was innovative (LIMA, 2013; CRUZ, 2019).

In the last five years, Mercosur has been characterized by the political and economic crisis. The great example of this crisis was the suspension and boycott of Venezuela in 2016, whose entry into Mercosur was ratified in 2012. After four years of participation in Mercosur and in a distinct political scenario in relation to Venezuelan membership of the bloc, the creation of ideological narratives and discourses around Venezuela's internal scenario was the basis for the other States Parties to take the decision to suspend it indefinitely from the bloc, formalized in August 2017.

The export agenda of Mercosur's effective members, mostly composed of commodities, and the lack of conduct and continuity of the adoption of measures that would delay the effects of the 2008 economic crisis on Mercosur's effective members.

The effects of the crisis have had major impacts due to new political change in the countries of the region, whose milestone was the impeachment of former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and the election of Mauricio Macri, former Argentine president. In this context, the bloc's pro-flexibilization discourse was adopted, which accompanied the beginning of the crisis between the four States Parties and Venezuela, as well as internal political and economic crises, which are being aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **3 THE EFFECTS OF PANDEMIC IN MERCOSUR AND THE MEASURES TAKEN IN THE FACE OF THE CRISIS**

At the very beginning of the crisis, on March 18, 2020, Mercosur states signed the "Declaration of Mercosur presidents on regional coordination for the containment and mitigation of coronavirus and its impacts" (MERCOSUR, 2020). The declaration contained the need to create a space for dialogue focused on the problem of COVID-19 for the adoption of a strategic and solidarity perspective.

The countries have ratified the following referrals: facilitating the return of citizens residing in the States Parties to their respective countries of origin; consider the specificities of border regions; notify the other effective members of the bloc of the measures taken at the borders; reduce barriers to the circulation of supplies related to health care, food and hygiene; evaluate the possibility of reducing the tariffs applied to supplies related to health care due to the health emergency; organization of virtual meetings for information sharing, coordination of

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actions and good practices; convene multilateral credit organizations such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Financial Fund for the Development of the Silver Basin (FONPLATA) and the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF) to evaluate joint actions to address COVID-19 (MERCOSUR, 2020).

Despite the importance of the referrals indicated, as well as in other situations, the declaration remained restricted to the discourse, because in reality, the coordination between countries to face the crisis was put into practice. The last measure effectively taken jointly between the States Parties is on the block's own website. This is the emergency approval of SIXTEEN million dollars of Focem for the fight against the pandemic in April 2020, when Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay totaled only two hundred deaths (MERCOSUR, 2020b).

Although the initial management of the crisis currently presents some differences in March 2021, all countries face the worst moments of the pandemic. Table 1 shows the number of confirmed cases and deaths in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay on March 7, 2021. These numbers increased along with the deepening of economic and political crises in the respective countries.

Table 1 - Cumulative number of confirmed cases and deaths from COVID-19 in Mercosur states parties until March 7, 2021.

Countries	População total	Confirmed cases	Deaths
Argentina	45.541.623	2.149.636	52.880
Brazil	210.147.125	11.019.344	265.411
Paraguay	7.200.985	168.043	3.318
Uruguay	3.481.540	63.837	651

Data source: Sistema Nacional de Emergencias (Uruguai); Ministério da Saúde (Brasil); Ministerio de Salud (Argentina); Ministerio de Salud Pública y Bienestar Social (Paraguai). Organized by the author.

Brazil is the country with the worst management of the crisis in Mercosur. The difficulty in political coordination between federal entities, the discourse of protagonism and the dissemination of fake news shared by the president of the republic himself (Jair Messias Bolsonaro), the crisis in the Ministry of Health and the exchange of three ministers within a period of one year, the difficulty in establishing agreements for the purchase of vaccines, and the controversies regarding the adoption of social isolation measures are some of the characteristics of Brazilian mismanagement in the face of the effects of the pandemic. On the lack of political coordination between federal entities, Cruz (2020) highlighted the following example:

O presidente da república, Jair Messias Bolsonaro, contrariando as indicações da Organização Mundial da Saúde (OMS) e sem respaldo científico, defendeu o “isolamento vertical” da população de risco composta por pessoas acima de sessenta anos, enquanto os governos estaduais declararam isolamento social para toda a população durante o período da quarentena, buscando achatar a curva viral do COVID-19 para que o Sistema Único de Saúde não entre em colapso. Um dos episódios mais marcantes da divergência entre os entes federados foi a reunião entre os vinte e sete governadores dos estados brasileiros e do distrito federal, no dia vinte e cinco de março de 2020, que não incluiu o presidente da república (CRUZ, 2020, p. 156).

Brazilian mismanagement worries other South American and Mercosur neighbors, as well as the United Nations (UN), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). On March 10, 2021, Venezuela filed a request for intervention at the UN for the agency to intervene in the health crisis in Brazil, given that the situation in the country could be configured as a risk to South America. By June 2020, Venezuela had already sent a letter to the UN informing them of the health crisis in Brazil.

In the case of Argentina, it is observed that Alberto Fernández's initial expectation when assuming the presidency of the republic was frustrated, because when he took office as president with high popularity in early 2020 it was expected that his government would overcome the crisis left by the predecessor government of former President Mauricio Macri. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the difficulty of coalition interests in a polarized country have been a major challenge for the current management of the Argentine government.

Unlike Brazil, at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 the country decreed quarantine and encouraged the use of prevention measures (social distancing, use of personal protective equipment - EPIs), so there was no peak of the initial contagion curve. However, the rapid adoption of the quarantine created discontent in the opposition with the organization of protests calling for a return to "normality" and criticizing the "eternal quarantine"<sup>1</sup>.

In September of the same year (2020), with the resumption of activities due to the flexibilization of quarantine, there was no same adoption of measures in the interior of the country in relation to the capital. This would be the reason for the rapid spread of the virus and inclusion of Argentina in the list of countries with the highest number of daily cases, surpassing Chile, Colombia, Peru and Mexico in October 2020<sup>2</sup>. The country that was once seen as an example in Latin America quickly saw the spread of the disease in its national territory.

At first, Uruguay also had a good management of the crisis, but currently suffers from the increase in the number of cases of the disease. Initially, the cases were detected and isolated, most of which were imported from Argentina or Brazil<sup>3</sup>. However, the false impression that the increase in cases would not be as severe as in other countries. Six months after the onset of the pandemic, the number of cases began to increase. Unlike Mercosur's neighbors, the first stage of vaccination in the country began with people up to 59 years old who occupy positions such as education professionals, firefighters and military<sup>4</sup>.

Uruguay is concerned about the cities that are located on the border with Brazil, especially Rivera (twin city of Santana do Livramento in Rio Grande do Sul). Argentina also shares the same concern having decreed the closure of the border with Brazil because of the Brazilian variant of COVID-19, as well as Paraguay, especially in relation to the daily circulation on the Friendship Bridge that connects the two countries between Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad del Este.

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<sup>1</sup> Information available in the report of the El País (2020): "Argentina, de exemplo regional a país encurralado pela covid-19", published on 15 October 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Information available in the report of the BBC (2020): "Covid-19: como a Argentina se tornou um dos cinco países com mais casos no mundo", published on 16 October 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Information available in the report of the Folha de São Paulo (2021): "Antes exemplo no combate à Covid, Uruguai vê alta recorde de casos", published on 14 January 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Information available in the report of the BBC (2021b): "Covid-19: piora da pandemia no Brasil leva países vizinhos a reforçarem medidas nas fronteiras", published on 13 March 2021.

In a way, Brazil's situation is a major concern for Mercosur's neighbors, and not only for them, but also for other South American neighbors, since Brazil has land borders with all South Americans except Chile and Ecuador. Moreover, in October 2020, the borders were open for the entry of Brazilians only in 52 countries of the world<sup>5</sup>.

Faced with discontent with Paraguayan management in confronting the pandemic, the collapse in the health system and the economic crisis of the pandemic, on March 5, 2021, there was a protest in the pro-exit country of President Mario Abdo Benítez<sup>6</sup> (REVISTA FÓRUM, 2021), continued in the following days due to the lack of hospital infrastructure. The protesters who suffered reprisals from the police forces demanded not only impeachment, but the adoption of a new stance in the face of the economic and pandemic crisis<sup>7</sup>.

In the case of Paraguay, with the health urgency caused by the new coronavirus, the country's government bought vaccines from China irregularly, without opening bids<sup>8</sup>. Irregularities in the purchase of the vaccine and complaints of overbilling in the purchase of EPIs have increased speculation surrounding the opening of the president's impeachment process. Impeachment has not been directed, but the deepening of the economic and political crisis in the country is undeniable.

In general, we find similarities in the challenges imposed in relation to addressing the effects of the pandemic in the four Mercosur States, especially in relation to the existence of conservative groups that press the State for "return to normality"; the lack of resources for the creation of new beds, for the increase of hospital infrastructure and for the purchase of vaccines; the exhaustion of human health resources; demands for the adoption of reforms and neoliberal adjustments as an alternative to contain the crisis; the intensification of political polarization and transformation of the adoption of prevention measures into an agenda.

#### **4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Mercosur, created on the basis of the European experience of integration, has indicated, since the signing of the Treaty of Asunción, ambitious rules and targets impossible to achieve. The disregard of the effects of colonial history and the perpetuation of the search for the pattern of development of others reinforces the role of countries in the bloc as semi-peripheries (Argentina and Brazil) and peripheries (Paraguay and Uruguay), which are subjugated to the lower positions in the hierarchy of the world system.

Even with the expansion in the discussion agenda in the bloc between the years 2003-2015, the changes in the organization and management in the bloc were not structural, which explains the rapid and overwhelming crisis that began in 2016, whose pillars were the defense of flexibilization in the bloc, the boycott of Venezuela, and the institutional coup that occurred

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<sup>5</sup> Information available in the report of the *Jornal do Comércio* (2020): "Uruguai: viagens seguem suspensas para brasileiros, avisa Abav-RS", published on 11 October 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Information available in the report of the *Revista Fórum* (2021): "Má gestão na pandemia: Paraguaio tomam as ruas de Assunção em ato gigante contra o presidente", published on 14 January 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Information available in the report of the *Carta Capital* (2021): "La gota que colma el vaso: como o colapso na saúde levou milhares às ruas no Paraguai", published on 14 March 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Information available in the report of the *BBC* (2021): "Covid-19: o colapso de saúde que levou multidões às ruas e ameaça presidente do Paraguai", published on March 9, 2021.



in Brazil. The first results were: Brazil's alignment with the United States, from Presidents Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump, as well as Argentina's support to the Pacific Alliance as an "Observer State".

In South America, the crisis in regional integration was not exclusive to Mercosur. The Union of South American Nations experienced an even more severe crisis with the voluntary departure of most of its members: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay and Peru. The countries left for the creation of the Forum for the Progress of South America (PROSUL) in March 2019, based on the alleged "neutrality" and "debureaucratization of the integration process".

The crisis of the process of regional integration in Mercosur must be understood as part of a regional movement intertwined in the transformations of the South American political scenario. This crisis is being aggravated by the pandemic of the new coronavirus, whose economic impacts have made even more fragile the ability to coordinate economic and social policies in the bloc.

It is observed the discommitment (especially in Brazil) and the slowness in creating and proposing measures aimed at minimizing the impacts of the ongoing crisis, or seeking cooperation as a possibility for the purchase of vaccines or conducting research.

In 2021, in the year of commemoration of thirty years of the bloc, the political, economic and sanitary crisis that plagues MERCOSUR has put to the test the effectiveness of the process of regional integration, resulting from the absence of a management of the territory that really addresses the needs of the countries involved.

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