



From Post-Hegemonic Regionalism to the Liquid: An Assessment of Social Participation in Mercosur

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Introduction

The different waves of regionalism in the Americas have promoted commercial, political, economic, and social experiences of integration and cooperation mostly overlapping and not lasting. In that regard, “an important lesson in studies on regionalisms is that these are not linear processes. On the contrary, they are marked by tensions, crises and setbacks.” (Mariano & Menezes, 2021: p. 175).

In the 21st century, the emergence of a new wave of South American regionalism generated great enthusiasm in the specialized literature about the transformations that would be taking place in the region (Sanahuja, 2010; Riggiozzi & Tussie, 2012); but the exhaustion of the cycle that propelled it generated institutional uncertainties and

distrust of these processes. In this way, this article intends to deepen the understanding of the present regional dynamics in South America, based on a reflection of Mercosur in the last twenty years under the topic of social participation.

In the first section of the text, we carry out a bibliographic review on the dynamics of South American regionalism in the 2000s and the inflections that allowed an expansion of spaces for social participation. With the objective of reflecting on the elements that structure the discussions on regional integration in the Americas at the beginning of the 21st century, as well as understanding the social impacts of these processes.

In the second section, we guide the analysis towards a conjunctural reflection on Mercosur and the changes in the direction of South American regionalism, based on the theoretical proposition of Mariano et al. (2021) of Liquid Regionalism. In order to understand Mercosur with the end of the progressive cycle in the region and the impacts on the bloc's institutional structures and social participation.

In conclusion, we aim to summarize the key concepts presented in the article and contemplate potential shifts in the Latin American context, influenced by signs of a resurgence of a progressive era in the region. This will guide our exploration of research priorities in the field of regional studies.

Post-Hegemonic Regionalism and the Expansion of Social Participation in Mercosur

The beginning of the 2000s in Mercosur marks the beginning of the formation of a new stage in the regional integration process, provided by the emergence of progressive governments in the region, a phenomenon known as the “pink wave”. This phenomenon refers to the emergence of left and center-left governments in Latin America in the early 2000s, which enabled the production of a scenario of political convergence in foreign policy among the political leaders. The specialized literature converges in pointing out that the changes in the domestic policies of the countries in the region were decisive to produce a new agenda in Mercosur regionalism (Serbin, 2012; Ramanzini Júnior, 2015).

In 2002, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's government plan demonstrated the intention to promote a shift in relation to the previous stage of open regionalism, based on economic and commercial issues: "It is necessary to reinvigorate Mercosur, transforming it into a zone of convergence of industrial, agricultural, commercial, scientific and technological, educational and cultural policies (PT, 2002: p. 6).

In Argentina, Néstor Kirchner ascended the presidency, initiating a confluence of progressive governments in the region. According to Russell and Tokatlian (2011), Néstor Kirchner came to power with a view that neoliberalism and foreign policy had been the two main factors in the successive crises that the country experienced at the turn of the century and advocating a more balanced relationship between the State and the market, oriented towards the social question. The authors also point out that although Kirchner did not define a clear and well-defined foreign policy agenda; he highlighted the importance of Latin America and regional integration as essential for the country's international insertion, with emphasis on the relevance of Mercosur.

In addition to the emergence of progressive governments in Argentina and Brazil, we have the same political phenomenon occurring in other Mercosur member countries: in Uruguay, with the governments of Tabaré Vázquez and José Mujica; Fernando Lugo in Paraguay; and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. In short, the alignment of these rulers facilitated a common agenda to be carried out in Mercosur, a factor of paramount importance in regional integration processes.

In this scenario, in October 2003, the Buenos Aires Consensus was signed between the Argentine and Brazilian governments, which sought to reinforce their commitment to working to strengthen bilateral and regional relations. In addition to the primacy of the regional axis as an international insertion strategy, we can highlight some points: the vision of the need to strengthen state action in the pursuit of public policies, in clear opposition to the neoliberal rise, through the fight against poverty, promotion of public education and the search for social justice. The document¹ highlights the issue of civil society participation and the search for dialogue at the government-society interface in the regional integration process.

The configuration of this new South American regional scenario at the beginning of the 21st century is described by the literature as “post-hegemonic or post-liberal regionalism” (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012; Grugel; Riggirozzi, 2009; Sanahuja, 2010). The concepts expressed something in common: a re-politicization of the agenda and the shifting of the agenda from merely commercial and economic issues to include political and social matters.

In opposition to the open regionalism of the 1990s, based on trade liberalization, the search for the promotion of intra-regional trade, fiscal adjustment processes, state retraction and the search for measures that would encourage foreign direct investment in the domestic sphere; post-hegemonic regionalism was based on a set of regional structures and hybrid practices emerged to replace others immersed in commercial logics so far hegemonic (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012). In this sense, Serbin, Martínez and Ramanzini Jr. (2012) argue that these processes differ from the neoliberal character of the 1990s by three significant returns: the return to strengthening the State; the return to the politicization of regional relations; and the return to a developmental social agenda.

Therefore, the advance of integration was not harmful to the autonomy of the countries, as it was not thought to foster them economically or create a political unity. (Vigevani et al., 2014). The objective of the institutions of this period was not to present themselves as an alternative to trade regimes, but to transcend trade integration, including other modalities of regional cooperation beyond the restrictions generated by the predecessor regimes (Lima, 2013).

From that moment onwards, a closer approach was also sought with civil society in the member states with a view to promoting greater participation and social legitimacy in regional integration processes. (Sanahuja, 2010). Granato (2019) highlights a significant event in the effort to expand Mercosur’s scope beyond economic concerns. This occurred during the 2003 Mercosur Summit Meeting, where they approved the ‘2006 Goal,’ a work program spanning 2004-2006, which incorporated political and social dimensions.

In Common Market Council Decision No. 26/2003, the mentioned work plan, Mercosur's priority in the social agenda is strengthening civil society participation from that moment forward. In addition, the document mentions the search for the articulation of study centers in the member states to conduct reflections on social issues; the search for events that promote greater cultural visibility of the regional integration process; the effort to strengthen the Forum for Political Consultation and Conciliation (FCCP); the promotion of workers' rights; and the search for a strengthening of Mercosur institutionalist.

As a result, there was a great effervescence in Mercosur's social agenda, resulting in the creation of various institutions, instances and regulations that aimed to embrace the emergence of these new themes, such as human rights, the issue of economic asymmetry between member countries, the participation of civil society in the regional integration process, among others. Among these we can mention the creation of the Mercosur Parliament (PARLASUL), in 2006, the Mercosur Social Institute (ISM) in 2007, the Institute for Public Policies on Human Rights (IPPDH) in 2009, and the Social Participation Support Unit (UPS by its initials in Spanish) in 2010.

In the context of pursuing a greater approximation between State and society in the regional integration process, the Social Summits –held from 2006 onwards– were one of the main initiatives established in this period. According to Ramanzini Júnior (2015), the Social Summits were constituted as a space for political debate on the directions of regional integration, providing the participation of various non-state actors, such as social movements, public policy networks, epistemic communities, together with government actors.

According to Baptista and Siman (2021) the Social Summits, which ran concurrently with the Presidential Summits, should not be perceived as 'anti-Mercosur' but rather as a complementary effort to official activities. In 2012, the Social Summits were incorporated into Mercosur's institutional framework, through the decision of the CMC No. 56/2012, which establishes that they should be held every six months and that their organization would be the responsibility of the *pro tempore* presidencies in coordination with the other member states and with the support of the UPS coordinator.

In a study carried out by Silva and Martins (2016) on Social Summits, it's evident that a significant regional social mobilization surrounded their implementation. When the data is disaggregated by the nationality of the civil society representatives, the authors reached the conclusion that there was a prominence of the participation of Uruguayans (about 702), followed by Brazil (498) and Argentina (415). Despite the importance played by the Social Summits in providing greater dialogue between the governments and societies of the member states, they have ceased to be held since 2015.

Another important initiative created at this time is by IPPDH, which in 2015 created the Social Participation Forum based on a “participatory planning strategy”, understanding that social participation is a human right and that it is essential for the strengthening of democratic regimes (IPPDH, 2015). This Forum encompasses two mechanisms for civil society participation: public consultations and dialogues.

Despite the less restrictive rules, the participation of civil society during the Social Summits had great oscillations along the historical path with a peak in participation in 2010. However, the Social Summits mobilized regional civil society around pressing issues for the regional integration process in Mercosur. Since Haas (2004), the importance of the involvement of different actors in the regional integration process has been highlighted since the formation of perceptions and interests beyond the national scope help to deepen the integration process.

In Mercosur, history, politics, economy, and union elites coexist within spaces of social participation, such as the Labor, Employment and Social Security Subgroup (SGT-10) and the Economic-Social Consultative Forum (FCES). SGT-10 was the first institutional space for social dialogue in Mercosur (Mariano, 2011). Likewise, FCES reflects union's action in search of new partners in civil society to influence the process of regional integration (Mariano, 2015).

However, Mercosur's bureaucratic expansion, which initially opened spaces for non-state actors' participation, did not lead to substantial changes in its decision-making process. It also failed to significantly broaden the spectrum of social actors involved, mainly comprising economic and labor unions (Baptista, 2020). Despite numerous questions about their efficiency and effectiveness to guarantee the

democratization of access to integration policies, the Social Summits managed to expand the participants in the spaces of participation of Mercosur compared to the 1990s.

Since several issues interfere with the number of participants in these mechanisms, it is crucial to note that contributor involvement demands careful organization, preparation of the participating actors, understanding of bureaucratic procedures, and financial resources. In this way, if non-state actors consider that the mechanisms in which they participate have no practical effects or that their demands will not be contemplated, they may consider these participatory institutions as inefficient and gradually stop participating, causing an emptying of the mechanisms. Other elements also interfere with the availability of non-state actors to participate, such as the unavailability of dialogue, the lack of transparency and prior information accessibility from government actors, among others.

In this context, the establishment of UPS was indispensable, aimed at coordinating the key components of the Somos Mercosur program. Its primary purpose is to bolster the inclusion of organizations, ensuring a vital institutional channel for dialogue with society and social movements. UPS plays a crucial role in supporting the organization of Social Summits, providing financial assistance for social participation, and cultivating a collective memory of events involving civil society organizations.

Tallberg, et al. (2014) argue that access is different from participation, as the former refers to the institutional mechanisms through which transnational actors can partake in the political process of international organizations, which can be guaranteed by member states or international bureaucracies. On the other hand, participation is related to the presence of these actors in the mechanisms. UPS tried to suppress the historically consolidated difficulties for the participation of non-state actors in Mercosur, but it did not achieve this objective. The initiative encountered challenges in securing funding for its activities and maintaining autonomy vis-à-vis the national focal points. These focal points exhibited significant organizational heterogeneity, posing limitations on the broad and autonomous participation of civil society organizations (Baptista, 2020).

Another crucial aspect to explore regarding civil society participation is its influence. This involves understanding the extent to which the demands presented by civil society within these participatory institutions are acknowledged and incorporated into the decision-making process. This is particularly relevant since non-state actors are typically excluded from Mercosur's decision-making process. This is an issue that researchers who study this subject find very difficult in the case of Mercosur as well as other international organizations, since the unavailability, incompleteness and fragmentation of information make the researcher's task an arduous work and not always possible (Baptista, 2020; Baptista & Siman, 2021; Gomide Junior, 2020).

In most cases, the only way to understand such issues is through interviews, which means the perception of the actors involved (perceived influence). However, there are other obstacles when it comes to conducting interviews, like the unavailability of the participant actors, the fact that many civil society organizations cease to exist over time, among other issues.

In a study developed within the scope of the IPPDH, Gomide Junior (2020) listed that all the organizations interviewed by him considered their experience of participating in public consultations to be satisfactory; despite the need of improvements: the issue of financing participation; there is a need for increased openness and information for non-state actors, the holding of more meetings, and the establishment of mechanisms to monitor the results and commitments achieved through these participatory processes.

The analysis of participation as a positive element for leaders of organizations engaged in social involvement in Mercosur is confirmed in other studies based on interviews. Baptista (2020) illustrates that Brazilian trade unionists express high satisfaction with the personal and organizational benefits of social participation, viewing it as a valuable political training ground, despite its limited political impact. Another notable example of robust civil society engagement is the Specialized Meeting on Mercosur Family Agriculture, recognized for its extensive and interactive discussions (REAF) (UPS, 2016, Ferreira, 2021). In this context, Mercosur presents various instances of civil society organizations' participation, which are considered positive and unique in their own right (Mariano, 2011; Baptista, 2020; Gomide Junior, 2020;

Ferreira, 2021). Additionally, it includes the involvement of subnational governments (Junqueira, 2019). Despite this period being marked by a political and ideological convergence between governments in South America, which allowed for a common agenda to be carried forward in the Mercosur regional integration process based above all on the search for institutional deepening and greater dialogue with civil society, it is noted that all the achievements towards greater democratization of the process were lost as soon as the regional political configurations changed, leading to a crisis of regionalism and a dismantling in the participation of civil society, something that we will go into detail in the next section.

Junqueira (2021) assesses that the expansion and shifting of the agenda within Mercosur was accompanied by the increase of a strong sovereign discourse in which countries were unable to deepen the dynamics of regional integration due to nationalism and corporatism. The author contends that Mercosur's integration in Latin America reinforces the role of the national state, which makes it dependent on party and governmental interests to the detriment of strengthening regional initiatives and institutions.

The participation of civil society in Mercosur has never been autonomous, which is explained by the prominence of States to the detriment of regional societies. Meaning that in Latin America, we primarily witnessed the establishment of strong states, and our democratization has always been induced from 'above'. We count on reactive and non-propositional national societies, thus, the participation of civil society in the discussion and management of public affairs – whether in the domestic spheres or at the regional level– has always been dependent on the will of political circumstances. All these factors are strongly related to the idea described by O'Donnell (1994) of “delegative democracy”, linked to the personalist and individualist regional tradition, where there is a strong concentration of power over the Executive and a weak vertical and horizontal accountability.

We can say that this moment is marked by a phenomenon that we can call “Declaratory Regionalism” (Mariano, 2022), through the dissonance between speech and action. On the discursive level, we can see the presence of a rhetoric based on pursuing to deepening proximity between institutions and citizens. However, during the post-hegemonic

era, the establishment of numerous organizations, institutions, and forums addressing the vibrant social agenda and involving civil society participation was not driven by a vision of autonomy. Instead, they were primarily initiated and directed by government authorities.

In view of this, the participation of civil society remained strongly dependent on political circumstances, and as we know, these spaces are easily created and dismantled depending on the political project and consensus (or lack thereof) on the part of government actors. As well as social participation remained dependent on self-financing, making it impossible to continue the engagement of entities with low financial capacity, guaranteeing perennial participation only to employer confederations and trade unions.

Liquid Regionalism and Social Participation in Mercosur

Post-hegemonic regionalism challenged the discourse about dependent economies that collectively react to the external forces of globalization without constituting a unitary project against the neoliberal economic agenda (Tussie & Riggiozzi, 2012). However, the construction of new institutions resulted in an overlap of actors, members, and attributions between regional organizations, defined as overlapping regionalism.

Nolte (2016) points out that this phenomenon is not necessarily negative, because when institutions have complementary characteristics or division of tasks among themselves, they can deepen regional integration. Similarly, Briceño Ruiz (2016) does not understand the juxtaposition of regimes as a problem as it can enable a variety of processes and initiatives in which countries participate as they interest them.

However, the proliferation of institutions responded to the accommodation of national interests and the possibility of increasing bargaining, without guaranteeing them any kind of decision-making or coercive power (Ribeiro, 2016). Mostly, regional institutions in Latin America have an exclusionary character, being always sub-regional without an integrating center, moving away from hemispheric or subcontinental integration (Malamud & Gardini, 2012). This level of fragmentation

reflected the convergence of interests in the region, which impacts expectations regarding integration and long-term commitments to cooperation proposals (Mariano & Ribeiro, 2020).

In the Southern Cone, several organizations coexist with similar mandates and territorial dimension with little difference –usually due to the exclusion of some neighbor(s) without prejudice to their relationship in other spaces–. In addition to the overlap with other regional institutions, there are overlaps of internal competences, as in the case of Mercosur with the different labor bodies, subordinated to different bodies of the bloc with themes that are not always coordinated (Ribeiro, 2016).

However, Sanahuja (2016) argues that this process was also characterized by building a light '*ligero*' regionalism, because it had little institutional density and an intergovernmental character. According to the author, the aim of defending sovereignty and avoiding the construction of onerous structures did not allow the transfer of state responsibilities to other institutions and the construction of a common legal system (Sanahuja, 2016).

In this sense, Malamud and Gardini (2012) argue that Latin American regionalism did not evolve into another paradigm, but it rather overflowed without deepening or returning to standard cooperation arrangements. Overall, this cycle rested on strong presidential leaders who projected ambitious integration goals (Sanahuja, 2016), but it did not overcome government policies to build institutions that were distant and resistant to the region's political cycles.

The limitations within post-hegemonic regional institutions underscore the challenges in establishing institutions with greater autonomy from individual states in Latin America. The ineffectiveness of institutions and legal frameworks added to the lack of political will in Latin American countries and the inability to materialize integration into benefits for the population (Pozo, 2019).

The preference for the constitution of intergovernmental processes, and in many cases interpresidential (Malamud, 2003; 2005), allowed initiatives to work only as long as there were collective understandings. However, with the growth of dissent, the economic crisis and the new

dynamics of the international system, the fragility of these institutions drained their functioning, and their mandates began to be carried out by other juxtaposed organizations.

The advances obtained in this process were few, and did not endure, with this Latin American regional integration remains sensitive to ideological and conjunctural changes with no prospects for progress (Granato & Batista, 2018). Even if generic, political affinities between governments in the region in the 2000s were not strong enough to deepen integration policies (Vigevani et al., 2021). Although the narrative prefers political construction, the role of the State and new models of development, institutional weaknesses and South American asymmetry vis-à-vis the main international actors pave the way for the resumption of the neoliberal agenda and the weakening of the State (Serbin, 2018).

The rapid obsolescence of the post-liberal/post-hegemonic experience is related to the disintegration of its organizations, which proved incapable of detecting and preventing failures and with a weak institutional design (Mijares & Nolte, 2018). The attempt to consolidate a “challenging regionalism” failed to break with its function of complementarity with neoliberal globalization being impacted by its negative and pernicious effects (Serbin, 2018).

In its current form, neoliberal globalization is a relevant factor for understanding these issues. This develops into an elementary contradiction: on one hand, it fosters interdependence to guarantee free trade in goods, services, people, and ideas; on the other hand, it promotes regional fragmentation, overlapping regimes and multiple forms of dependence (Serbin, 2018).

The constant Latin American political-electoral turns are an element of constraining stress for regionalism, as pointed out by Weiffen (2021) “power shifts have led to struggles for regional leadership (...). This resulted in the reform of old and the foundation of new, often overlapping, regional organizations” (p. 24). In Latin America, from the second half of the 2010s onwards, we have a new political configuration markedly to the right. In this period, a new scenario is formed in Latin America, where is observed a “turn to the right” or “blue/conservative wave” as designated by some authors (Vigevani et al., 2021; Junqueira,

2021). Exemplified in the election of Mauricio Macri in Argentina, in 2015; in Brazil, the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and the rise Michel Temer as well as the election of a far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro in 2018; Mario Abdo Benítez in Paraguay since 2018; and Lacalle Pou in Uruguay since 2020.

Sanahuja (2019) designates this new moment as the “liberal-conservative turn”, and one of the factors that would explain the emergence of this new scenario would be the end of the favorable economic cycle caused by the commodities boom, provided by the Chinese rise in the early 2000s, which in the author’s view would have been responsible for providing the material resources that supported more assertive foreign policies in the region. Like the one led by former President Lula da Silva in his search for greater autonomy in the region in the face of historic US interference in political and economic relations in Latin America (Vigevani & Ramanzini Júnior, 2011).

In the broader Latin American context, we have the emptying and paralysis of Union of South American Nations (Unasur) between the years 2017-2019, the creation of the Lima Group (2017) as an instance of debate and political dialogue, mainly to address the political crisis in Venezuela (Barros & Gonçalves, 2019) and the creation of Forum for the Progress and Integration of South America (Prosur) in 2019. Mariano, et al. (2021) characterizes these initiatives as ideological consultation and opposition to previously constituted processes, highly volatile and underperforming. The constitution of these new instances of dialogue is strongly anchored in an argument that sought to “de-ideologize” the relations between the countries of the region (Alvarez, 2020).

According to Briceño-Ruiz (2021), this new moment is clear from the arrival of Mauricio Macri to power, in 2015, when he criticized Venezuela’s entry into the bloc and prioritized the trade dimension, proposing a flexibilization of Mercosur, especially in what regarding economic negotiations with third parties –currently carried out as a block (CMC decision nº 32/00) –. Brazil has also moved in the same direction, arguing in favor of reducing the TEC and making the regional integration process more flexible.

In the last decade, Nolte and Weiffen (2020) argue that regionalism is “under stress”, in Europe with the Eurozone crisis: Brexit; the migrant and refugee crises; in Latin America with stagnation and decline in regional cooperation –with the dismantling of Unasur and the absence of regional leadership–. Weiffen (2021) indicates different stressors elements for regionalism, such as: economic, security, socio-cultural, and political challenges in addition to power shifts. These pressure factors can result in two processes: resilience or disintegration (Nolte & Weiffen, 2020). Over the decades, the literature has pointed out several hypotheses for the propensity of crises in Latin American integration initiatives, such as: low economic interdependence; institutional fragility (mainly weak oversight mechanisms); and the intergovernmentalism/presidentialism contradiction (Agostinis & Nolte, 2021).

Sanahuja (2018) considers the current crisis of regionalism to be more than a cyclical phenomenon as it expresses the limits of the existing financialized economic model –its disconnection from the productive economy, the lack of regulation and the high risks for the stability of the system–. This process would be the end of the post-Fordist cycle in the face of new technological and digital changes that profoundly affected fiscal, employment, social welfare policies, and the entire present social and political organization. (Sanahuja, 2018).

The crisis of governance, the difficulties of States and western democracies opened gaps for the questioning of political elites favorable to globalization, causing widespread social discontent and enabling the emergence of new actors opposed to regional integration processes –many of them from far right– (Sanahuja, 2017). This development highlights a crisis in the legitimacy and representation of the State, including its predominant hegemonic elites, observed in the political situations of both the European Union and Latin America.

The disintegration of South America highlights a problem of collective action, compounded by the absence of regional leaders or collectively perceived threats (Mijares & Nolte, 2018). In this sense, Mariano and Neves (2022) argue that the present tension in South American regionalism has its origins in the death of Hugo Chávez in 2013, which was followed by a series of events in the countries of the region that distanced them from post-liberal experiences. The new regional

initiatives were characterized by presenting a limited institutional design, configuring ideological alliances that did not seek to deepen the regional agenda (Mariano et al., 2021).

South American governments are questioning multilateral cooperation, so a discussion on the interrelationship between multilateralism and regionalism becomes indispensable (Comini; Frenkel, 2020). This fact reinforces that the integration processes in South America are subordinated to domestic political logics and their electoral changes in member countries, a fact that intensifies regional instability, already subordinated to economic and political instability (Mariano & Neves, 2022). The absence of political consensus and the fragmentation of organizations, institutions and cooperation mechanisms are direct reflections of the historical instabilities of Latin American domestic policies.

Mariano, Bressan and Luciano (2021) characterize this new moment experienced in the processes of regional integration in the Americas as “Liquid Regionalism”, which would be defined by fluidity in regional arrangements, as opposed to a sedimented order, marked by flexibilization, deregulation and liberalization. In the authors’ argument, the stable regionalist model began to be diluted in the phase of post-liberal regionalism, during the first decade of the 21st century, which can be considered an intermediate phase where solid regional structures begin to “smelt”.

Mariano, Bressan, and Luciano (2021) argue that the fluid nature of regionalism in the Americas led to a flexible structure. This structure emerged in response to the crisis of regional institutions and influenced the discourse and actions addressing the role and importance of multilateralism and regionalism. The impact of regionalism stressors is closely linked to the characteristics of the region, the existence of norms, procedures and/or regional leadership allows for greater resilience in cases of crisis, and their absence can have disintegrating effects (Weiffen, 2020).

In this way, Comini and Frenkel (2020) point out factors of attention to South American processes, such as low adaptability to global transformations and lack of cohesion in the face of these challenges, diverse guidelines on foreign policy with a deficit of governability, low

capacity to contain threats and to promote alternative policies. In the same sense, Mariano and Menezes (2021) highlights the low levels of economic complementarity and interdependence as characteristics of the agreements in the region; in contrast to the high political and economic asymmetry and the large bureaucracy to internalize the commitments made.

Even before Jair Bolsonaro came to power in Brazil, his Minister of Economy, Paulo Guedes, declared that Mercosur and Argentina would not be a priority for Brazil, arguing that the formation of the regional integration process was ideological, which would have generated a “cognitive prison” (Clarín, 2018). The differences between the Brazilian government of Jair Bolsonaro and the Argentine Alberto Fernández have marked the relations between the two main partners of the regional bloc since then. Furthermore, differences have been growing since Uruguay engaged in a bilateral free trade agreement with China, without negotiating with the bloc, something provided for in the institutional framework of Mercosur, in a 2000 decision.

Brazil insistently sought a reduction in the Common External Tariff (TEC) by 10%, something that was only achieved in 2022, through the decision of CMC n° 08/22. This “commercial turn” (Caetano, 2019) and the search for a return to what Mercosur once was, becomes explicit from the self-proclaimed “new Brazilian foreign policy”, headed by former chancellor Ernesto Araújo who defined Mercosur as a distorted bloc, which isolated the region from the world, and which should have its logic reversed to recover its initial role and limit it to a negotiating platform (FUNAG, 2019).

In the last period, the bloc suffered from two strategies of dismantling the participatory spaces: the cut in funding; and the changes in the rules and institutions that favor the participation of civil society. In a seminar about thirty years of Mercosur, organized by the Alexandre de Gusmão Foundation in 2021, Ambassador José Eduardo Martins Felício—former director of the International Security Mechanism (ISM)—reported that the social agenda suffered with the cut of resources in recent years. The Ambassador believes that the ISM is struggling to survive, and he contends that it was essentially ‘abandoned’ after its creation.

In his report, the Ambassador denounced that Brazil did not contribute to the ISM budget, despite being responsible for 39% of it; and that in the two years that he was director, the agency maintained itself with loans from the Mercosur Secretariat. With the aggravating factor that ISM employees were without wages for three months in 2020 and four months in 2021, with internet disruptions and threats of water and electricity shortages; in addition to discussions about possible unification with the Institute of Public Policies on Human Rights of MERCOSUR (IPPDH) (FUNAG, 2021).

Elements that highlight the lack of transparency in accessing Mercosur's budget data. For example, in relation to the ISM there is no data available since 2017 and the IPPDH since 2021. In addition, there is low transparency of UPS spending in its funding and support efforts so that social organizations in the region could contribute in participatory mechanisms within the framework of Mercosur.

Recently CMC's decision nº 04/22 updated the institutional structure of Mercosur and indicated the need to update the functioning of the mechanisms of participation of the social society, indicating that the Social Summits should be held every six months with the support and assistance from the Mercosur Secretariat. Therefore, the possible reactivation of the Social Summits combined with the transfer of the management of social participation from the UPS to the Secretariat under the pretext of providing greater rationality, agility and cohesion to the institutional structure of Mercosur.

According to Mariano and Menezes (2021), when examining Mercosur's historical trajectory over the past three decades, a conflict emerges between proponents of a 'Maximum Mercosur,' envisioning a path similar to the European Union (though recognizing differences), and advocates of a 'Minimum Mercosur' advocating for a more limited integration focused primarily on trade. Per the authors, in recent decades there has been an alternation between these two groups, without building consensus on what would be the goals that the integration process should achieve, which constituted an obstacle to the consolidation of Mercosur.

In a previous study, Mariano (2015) argues that the transition from a vision of Minimum to Maximum Integration would depend on greater institutionalization, and this would allow institutions to gain their own dynamics that would be independent of the political will of government actors and their interests in the short term. In the author's view, Mercosur has not yet reached such a level.

When we analyze the trajectory of civil society participation from Post-hegemonic Regionalism to the Liquid, we precisely observe this process, the refusal to allow institutions to become autonomous, something that remained only on the discursive and rhetorical plane. According to Malamud (2010), presidential intervention has become a structural feature of the regional integration process in Mercosur. One of the reasons that explain the prominence of the heads of the Executive in the integration process is due to the institutional weakness of Mercosur, given that there are no actors and no veto power that constitute obstacles to presidential performance.

Martins and Pennaforte (2017) argue that the bloc did not build mechanisms that allow coexistence and its functioning in dynamics of plurality of party and ideological convictions. Mercosur can do little to resist the emptying of its structures and unfavorable changes, as its institutional design was not developed to impose itself on its members' domestic situations (Hoffmann, 2020).

Institutional fragility and the difficulty of implementing the decisions taken permeate the entire existence of Mercosur (Mariano & Menezes, 2021). In Mercosur's history, all the transformations were not able to "neutralize the structural weaknesses of the countries, or to insert the regional dynamics in the domestic policy agendas" (Vigevani et al., 2021: p.47). There is no institutional architecture that allows the organization's interests to override domestic interests (Martins & Pennaforte, 2017).

Thus, as Mariano and Menezes (2021: p. 175) point out, the integration process in the Southern Cone lives with a persistent dilemma: "For those who want more, it always seems insufficient, and for those who want less, it seems too bloated". In this sense, convergence in Mercosur occurs through dissatisfaction, which generates negative expectations for its surroundings (Mariano & Menezes, 2021).

The intergovernmental, and sometimes interpresidential, logic limited Mercosur, reduced the engagement and legitimacy of its bodies. Likewise, it restricted the consolidation of human resources capable of developing cooperation strategies and autonomous actions, at times due to a lack of political will, and at other times due to insufficient financial resources.

Therefore, a greater involvement of other political actors, especially the legitimate representations of civil society, is essential to build or reactivate a strategic sense for the integration process in the Southern Cone. It becomes an essential issue for the continuity of the integration process in the region, which its legitimacy is based on other structures, in addition to tariff regimes, trade preferences and governmental political projects.

Recently, in April 2023, the pro-tempore presidency of Argentina, through the official channels of communication², announced that through a joint decision between all Member States, the Forum for Political Consultation and Conciliation (FCCP) decided to resume the holding of the Social Summits, which will take place remotely with the aim of allowing as many organizations and social movements as possible to participate (Mercosur, 2023).

In this way, it is worth noting the decision taken at the end of March 2023 by the Mercosur Secretariat to carry out a new register of organizations and social movements that operate within the scope of the regional integration process, arguing that the participation of these actors constitutes an essential for the deepening and success of the process, contributing for the citizens of the Member States to become aware of the benefits and rights that come from this integration process.

From the above, we can observe that there is a contemporary interest in reactivating important mechanisms of dialogue between the governments and civil society, as is the case of the Social Summits, and that this work of coordination that was once centered around the extinct Social Participation Support Unit (UPS), is now managed by the Secretariat (SM). This change seems to reflect a scenario of thinner budgetary resources for financing social participation.

The interest in reactivating participatory mechanisms and engaging the civil society in issues that permeate Mercosur is closely related to the emergence of a new political scenario in the region, markedly to the left of the political spectrum, a phenomenon designated as “new pink wave” by the specialized literature (Junqueira & Milani, 2022). In this new context, it’s evident how influential the leadership of the Brazilian Chief Executive, Lula da Silva, has been in not only rekindling social participation in the regional integration process but also in revitalizing Mercosur comprehensively, spanning both its commercial and political dimensions.

Final Thoughts

Over its decades of existence, Mercosur has faced various challenges, and the coexistence and endurance of these factors have been defining characteristics of its experience. In a brief span of time, economic, political, socio-cultural challenges, and power shifts all coexisted without a single dominant stressor element, with distinct national and regional dynamics at play. Regional organizations in Latin America are highly resilient to crises and almost never die (Agostinis & Nolte, 2021). This element of resilience is perhaps one of the main characteristics of Mercosur and one of the reasons that, even after different critical periods that it has experienced, it remains central to the strategy of international insertion of all member countries.

In this article we seek to present the history of social participation in Mercosur with the rise of post-hegemonic regionalism and the proliferation of mechanisms of social participation resulting from the institutional expansion experienced by the bloc. We argue that, despite being substantial, these changes did not take effect and did not alter the Mercosur decision-making process. The fragility of this experience did not result in a better institutionalization of South American regionalism. Likewise, the expansion of non-state actors engaged with Mercosur has not resulted in the improvement of its persistent democratic deficit.

From what was discussed, we could observe a dissonance between the rhetorical level and the action during Post-hegemonic Regionalism about social participation, considering that the rhetoric of the search

for an institutional deepening and approximation of governments with civil society was not reflected in an autonomous participation of non-state actors. Throughout the historical trajectory analyzed, it is noted that social participation in Mercosur has always been conducted and mediated by government actors, which its participatory mechanisms are strongly dependent on circumstantial political wills. Thus, in the absence of minimum consensus on the process of regional integration and a “turn to the right” in the governments of the region from the second half of the 2010s, a moment designated as Liquid Regionalism, the advances once achieved by civil society in relation to the possibility of engagement in the issues that permeate the region were gradually being dismantled from the emergence of this new political scenario.

However, recently, from the formation of a new regional political scenario markedly to the left, coined by the specialized literature as a “new pink wave”, we can observe that the issue of civil society participation has gained a new agenda and importance in Mercosur, as demonstrated by the decision to reactivate the Social Summits –an important mechanism for dialogue between the governments and civil society–, allowing the regional process to gain greater visibility and legitimacy among the citizens of the Member States.

These facts launch a challenge on the meaning of regional integration. Thus, we agree with the propositions and arguments of Mariano, Bressan and Luciano (2021) that we live with different perceptions about regional integration that do not help us to identify and understand the phenomenon. In the Americas, we experienced several waves of regionalism that bequeathed dozens of institutional arrangements for cooperation and integration that did not achieve their initial objectives and had their functionalities reduced or extinct. In anticipation of structural transformations, the solid melted into thin air.

NOTES

- 1 Available in: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/brasil/ult96u54487.shtml>
- 2 Available in: <https://www.mercosur.int/cumbre-social-mercursosur-2023/>

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