



Regionalism and Ideology: Assessing the Impact of Presidential Changes in the Evolution of Mercosur

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Introduction

Created during the early 1990s, Mercosur had its roots in the concept of “open regionalism”, as its primary goal was the creation of a common market between the founding states (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay) to favour their integration into the process of globalisation driving the world economy (Briceño-Ruiz & Ribeiro Hoffmann, 2021). In the early 2000s, under the impulse of the left-wing governments in Brazil and Argentina, which were critical of the limited – commercial – scope of the organisation, the bloc started to evolve and cover other dimensions – institutional and political as well as in the social and industrial field (Briceño-Ruiz, 2021, pp. 69-75).

Then, the wheels turned again in the mid-2010s when new leaders came to power in the region, retrieving the model of flexible and open regionalism of the origins. The arrival of Mauricio Macri in Argentina and Michel Temer in Brazil restored indeed the old paradigm of the regional bloc as an instrument to foster the members' integration in the global economy (Briceño-Ruiz, 2021, p.78). Two conflicting views dominated those years –one defending the revision of the Mercosurian institutional design to a lighter trade-oriented structure and the other supporting the course constructed during the early 2000s–.

Since the mid-2010s, the organisation has entered a stalemate that derives largely from the opposing views held by regional leaders on the bloc's role. There were requests from several governments across the region for flexibilization and a renewed emphasis on economic liberalisation and negotiation of free trade deals (Caetano Hargain, 2021; Frenkel, 2018). In parallel, Latin America perceived the reduction of its influence at the international level (Schenoni & Malamud, 2021); re-designing Mercosur, therefore, was a strategy to increase its margin of manoeuvre.

Because of that, it has become common knowledge that Mercosur is in a deep crisis (Barrenengoa & Barceló, 2021; Briceño-Ruiz, 2021; K. L. P. Mariano & Menezes, 2021). Moreover, a significant share of the responsibility for such troubles is often assigned to the political alternation that occurred over the past years (Gardini, 2011; Luciano & Campos, 2021; A. Malamud, 2005; K. P. Mariano et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, which kind of crisis is in place? Is every single dimension affected, or only specific elements of the regional bloc are being questioned? And can the current turmoil be traced back to the views and approaches of the leaders in power?

The present article aims to tackle these questions. More specifically, it verifies whether the orientation of the incumbent presidents in the member states can explain the variations in the state of the regional bloc (measured primarily on the intensity of the intra-regional trade) and the political scope of the organisation (whether intended exclusively as a trade-oriented endeavour or as a broader integration scheme). In doing so, a mixed-method approach is adopted. The role of the ideological variable is firstly assessed via a statistical analysis

encompassing the four Mercosur members in the 1991-2020 period, followed by a case study section that analyses the experience of Macri's government in Argentina.

Since Lula's election in Brazil, South American integration and Mercosur have been in discussion once more. The expectations are to recover elements from the third wave of regionalism by fostering other dimensions rather than trade –such as infrastructure, democracy protection, labour rights, and culture– (Almeida, 2023; Milani & Ives, 2023). That said, analysing the impact of the Blue Tide (the successive accession to power of right-wing presidents in several Latin American countries from 2012 onwards) contributes to understanding how this transition may occur and to what extent ideology plays a role in fostering regional integration.

Theoretical Framework

Mercosur's history experienced different phases in the effort to create a South American alternative that promoted economic development, given the international constraints (K. L. P. Mariano et al., 2015; K. L. P. Mariano & Menezes, 2021). Given the scenario in the 1990s, one of the main priorities was the liberalisation of trade as a mechanism for fostering the regional market and favouring the members' insertion into the globalised international system.

Several authors have traced the organisation's flaws to its intergovernmental structure, which is highly conditioned by political circumstances (Gardini, 2011). Although intergovernmental decision-making processes are not a problem per se, in this case, every new government might have a distinct willingness to participate and advance the integration. Given the inexistence of empowered permanent bodies and compulsory legal frameworks (Jerabek, 2016), the decisions rely on the consensus between the member states. Because of that, a branch of the scholarship has relied on the idea of hyper-presidentialism to explain Mercosur's successes and pitfalls (A. Malamud, 2003, 2005). More broadly, due to the characteristics of South American political systems –which tend to assign, although in various degrees, considerable powers to the executive branch–, the presidential figure is widely considered one of the most decisive actors in the foreign policy realm (Borges

& Chagas Bastos, 2017; Malamud, 2015; Van Klaveren, 1992). The relevance assigned to the presidency in the conduct of foreign affairs and, for our case of interest, regional issues, underlies the decision to focus on presidential alternation.

In particular, the present article expands on the impact of government changes by observing a key aspect of politics: ideology. Although it remains clear that the left-right divide does not bound behaviours, several studies have provided evidence of the weight of presidential ideologies on the overall direction of Latin American foreign policies. For instance, in their analysis of the sources of foreign policy change in the region, Merke et al. (2020) have found that variations in the presidency's ideological stance carry most of the explanatory power. The analysis provided by Merke and Reynoso (2016), based on experts' evaluations, also demonstrated that the left-right divide tends to reflect divergent positions on crucial topics for regional foreign policies – such as the relationship with the United States, the geopolitical (whether directed towards the Global South or North) and the commercial orientation (whether more prone to integrating in the global economy or more protectionist). Moreover, the link between presidential ideologies and the success of regionalist projects has already been studied and validated. For example, Baracaldo Orujela and Chenou (2019) have recently shown how the ideological affinity among South American leaders has affected the advancements of various organisations within the region.

Mercosur's historical trajectory seems to confirm these reflections. During the 2000s, Latin American countries elected a series of leftist presidents (a phenomenon known as the Pink Tide), who led to the inclusion of political and social topics on the regional agenda (Dabène, 2007; Klemi & Menezes, 2016; Legler, 2013). However, with the return of rightist parties to the governments, several criticisms were raised against those advancements, and more broadly against multilateral institutions and regional organisations (Sanahuja & Burian, 2022). As a matter of fact, many have argued that the new cycle would be characterised by the re-emergence of the open regionalism logic and the consequent abandonment of the institutions created during the post-hegemonic wave (Briceño-Ruiz, 2018; Fernandes & Wegner, 2018; K. P. Mariano et al., 2021). After all, there is a general trend that associates the right with economic liberalism and open regionalism (Bobbio, 2011; Power & Zucco Jr., 2011).

Given the consolidated knowledge about the role of leaders' ideology and the historical trajectory briefly sketched above, this paper aims to assess the impact of right-wing presidencies on Mercosur. Do they display disruptive behaviours that –as it has been argued over the recent years– risk reversing the regional scheme? Furthermore, is regionalism itself questioned or, on the contrary, are only specific dimensions targeted by right-wing leaders?

To answer these questions, this paper starts with a minimal definition of what integration means. In order to make cross-time comparisons, we take the exports of each Mercosur member to South America as a proxy for the intensity of regional integration. We are aware of the limitations of equalling the conception of regionalism to international trade, and we do acknowledge the existence of other levels of regionalism (Deciancio, 2016; Perrotta & Porcelli, 2019).

Figure 1 shows the exports to South American partners over the decades, highlighting when the state was governed by a right-wing president. Between 1991 and 2002, every country was ruled by a right-wing party. The first election of Lula inaugurated, within Mercosur, the predominance of left-wing presidents (Ayerbe, 2008; Vázquez & Briceño Ruiz, 2009). This was particularly true for the period between 2008 and 2012 when Lugo held the Presidency in Asunción (López, 2010). After that, all member states started turning to the Blue Tide, with the return of right-wing leaders (Benzi & Narea, 2018).

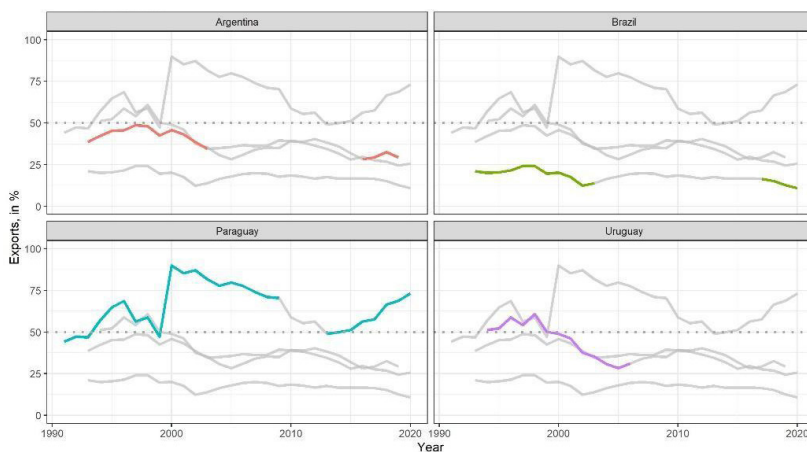


Figure 1. Exports to South America. Source: Own work based on UNComtrade (2021)

In general terms, it can be noted that there is a relative ideological convergence among Mercosur countries. That is to say, the left and the right alternated themselves with common intervals in the four countries. Despite that, there is no clear pattern about the exports, which is our variable of interest. The figures present high variability with cross-country differences (Saraiva & Briceño Ruiz, 2009; Tussie, 2009; Vanbiervliet, 2014). Among other explaining factors, when analysing their foreign policies over the years, there are contrasts in how much Mercosur was important for each government.

Methodology and Data

The current study adopts a mixed-methods approach employing a quantitative analysis, followed by a case study (Aguilera & Chevalier, 2021; Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). This research design allows us to explain a general pattern, while performing an in-depth analysis of a specific observation. The regression contributes to elaborating an answer that is valid in different contexts, abstracting from the particularities of each phase and each president that passed through Mercosur's history. Moreover, this sequence provides insights from the statistical part to understand how a right-wing government acts towards Mercosur. Consequently, the qualitative section allows us to expand on specific dimensions of regional integration, interpreting how it operates in practice.

In the first part, we employ an Ordinary Least Squares regression, which can measure the effect of multiple variables against the dependent variable –formulated as exports– holding every other indicator constant. The percentage of exports to South American partners has been extracted from the United Nations (2021). While it is true that exports from one country become imports for another, the rationale behind the employment of this variable is to measure how much Mercosur is relevant for that specific exporting country.

Regarding the dependent variable, we analyse the exports from each of the four analysed states to all its partners in South America. The decision to collect data regarding the entire subcontinent was based on the enlargement that Mercosur experienced over the years. Currently, every South American state is either a full or associated member of

the bloc (Mercosur, 2022). In addition to the founding members, Venezuela and Bolivia signed for full membership in 2006 and 2012, respectively¹. On the other hand, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, and Suriname are associated states with free trade agreements with Mercosur. Both associated and member states integrate the free trade area, contributing to intra-regional trade.

To operationalise the concepts related to ideology, most of the independent variables were collected from the Varieties of Democracy’s database (V-Dem, 2022a, 2022b), which is an institute specialised in gathering cross-country information by surveying country experts on political and social aspects. The yearly records provide data on characteristics of ideology, such as nationalism and the placement of the president’s party on the left-right continuum. This is measured in a seven-category scale: far-left; left; centre-left; centre; centre-right; right; and far-right. As seen in Figure 2, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (CFK) in Argentina (2007-2015) was calculated as the most leftist president, while the Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) was the extreme value in the right-wing side of the spectrum. This calculation assumes 0 as the political centre, with positive values approaching the right and negative values to the left.

Ideology of Presidents’ Parties in Mercosur



Figure 2. Ideology of presidents’ parties in Mercosur. Source: Own work based on V-Dem (2022b)

Ideology is a concept that covers several elements, including the economic perspective on foreign trade (Bobbio, 2011; Milner & Judkins, 2004). Broadly speaking, the left tends to consider the country's development as an inward-looking process, based on the reinforcement of national companies and the attempt to minimise the risks of exposing the economy to foreign actors, while the right supports opening the market, seeing foreign trade and investments as mechanisms for developing the economy. In addition, nationalism is a feature of ideology that is not bound by the left-right cleavage and covers elements such as openness, national culture, and economic development.

The information regarding the coalition size came from the Database of Political Institutions (Cruz et al., 2021), while the presidentialism index is provided by the V-Dem (2022a). Election was manually coded, assigning 1 when there were elections for presidents and 0 if there were for other offices or no elections. These variables correspond to our emphasis on the impact of the national executive branch and the literature that discusses the impact of hyper-presidentialism in Latin American political systems. The presidentialism index measures how strong the president is and, therefore, how much she/he can determine foreign policy. In the same vein, the coalition size reflects how much political support the president has. Finally, the electoral calendar indicates the exact moment when presidents need to focus on domestic politics to gain elections.

In view of the evolutions throughout the decades, the bloc experienced different phases. To operationalise the institutionalisation of the bloc, a binary variable has been coded to identify the period when there was convergence to foster more solid institutions for regional integration. From the 2000s onwards, this study assumes that Mercosur presented a higher degree of institutionalisation. Finally, GDP in constant dollars is available at the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) database (CEPAL, 2022). This macroeconomic indicator works as a control for the size of the markets, given the disparity between Brazil and the other states.

Finally, the analysis of Macri's government is justified as the most adequate to provide explanatory richness (Sposito et al., 2022). The Argentinian case allows us to contrast two consecutive presidencies

characterised by opposite political stances on a wide number of issues, including regionalism and Mercosur. Therefore, it serves as a diagnostic to explore the relationship between ideology and integration (Gerring & Cojocar, 2016).

In the case study, discourse analysis has been employed to examine Mauricio Macri's speeches. These are understood as representations of reality, i.e., they should be analysed as a public image of the individual in a position of power (Dunn & Neumann, 2016). The texts used were the discourses made at Mercosur presidential summits in 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, and 2019.

Empirical Analysis

Considering the interest in analysing the effect of right-wing presidents, we analyse both ideological features and presidential powers as independent variables. Therefore, in the first model, we include ideology, which measures the incumbent parties' position on the left-right continuum, and presidentialism, which indicates how concentrated the power is in the hands of the executive branch. Moreover, the variable institutionalisation measures the creation of new social and political bodies and the expansion of the themes covered by the regional organisation. This model directly and parsimoniously responds to our research concerns (ideology, hyper-presidentialism, and institutions). In addition, in this and every other model, the analysis was performed using GDP as a control variable to reduce the distorting effect of the existing asymmetry among the Member States.

In model 2, we delve into the ideological discussion by incorporating a specific dimension of ideology, which is nationalism. This feature relates to the way the interaction with the international system is perceived and which development model is preferred –whether more inward- or outward-looking–. So, this model allows us to measure one of the distinctive elements of rightist governments. Therefore, the presidentialism index is not included, allowing the focus on ideological dimensions –independently from the concentration of power or the peculiarities of each national political system–.

The third model, instead, opens room for the discussion on the role of presidents as leaders who head the negotiations, the execution, and the impetus for regional integration. For this reason, two variables are added to the presidentialism index: electoral year and size of coalition. The first relates to the strategic political calendar, while the second assesses the domestic support that the government holds. Controlling for the year of presidential elections is important since it corresponds to the moment in which national leaders tend to concentrate their attention on domestic politics, seeking support for the re-election or indication of a successor. Because of this, international politics might be secondary for the government. In summary, this model responds to the concerns regarding hyper-presidentialism, checking not only ideology but also their power in conducting the country's politics.

Finally, the fourth model aggregates all the variables considered in this study, with a comprehensive view of all the mentioned aspects. In Table 1, the results are shown.

Table 1. Results for the regression

Results				
Dependent variable:				
exports				
OLS				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
ideology	3.175*** (1.177)	5.046*** (1.065)	3.373*** (1.238)	4.458*** (1.329)
nationalist		22.791*** (5.502)		17.805** (8.684)
institutionalization1	3.234 (2.828)	4.363 (2.767)	2.871 (2.888)	3.892 (2.888)
presidentialism	37.668*** (10.542)		35.778*** (11.011)	12.155 (15.824)
election1			-1.671 (2.688)	-1.854 (2.649)
coalition			-0.055 (0.096)	-0.005 (0.097)
gdp	-0.00001*** (0.00000)	-0.00002*** (0.00000)	-0.00001*** (0.00000)	-0.00002*** (0.00000)
Constant	38.617*** (3.011)	39.167*** (2.710)	42.579*** (6.791)	39.041*** (6.909)
Observations	112	112	112	112
R ²	0.627	0.640	0.629	0.644
Adjusted R ²	0.613	0.626	0.608	0.620
Residual Std. Error	11.904 (df = 107)	11.692 (df = 107)	11.974 (df = 105)	11.795 (df = 104)
F Statistic	44.905*** (df = 4; 107)	47.532*** (df = 4; 107)	29.713*** (df = 6; 105)	26.846*** (df = 7; 104)

Note:

* p < 0.1
** p < 0.05
*** p < 0.01

Statistical significance was determined using p-values and adjusted R^2 . In view of the above, Model 2 offers the best explanation for our research problem. As seen in Figure 3, ideology has a positive coefficient, meaning that the more rightist a party is, the more exports the country will have towards Mercosur. With strong evidence, the model reveals that under a right-wing government, there is an increase in the share of intra-Mercosur exports. This directly responds to the questions posed at the beginning of the article. These governments apparently do not have disruptive behaviours regarding regional integration (intended in its commercial dimension) since there are positive results in stimulating exports to other member states.

In addition, the model suggests the same tendency with more nationalist governments. The distinction between right-wing and nationalist governments has the advantage of pointing out different elements of ideology, incorporating of other dimensions beyond the left-right divide. Indeed, while we can find nationalist right-wing presidents, such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, we can also observe nationalist left-wing presidents, such as Cristina Kirchner in Argentina.

These findings help to clarify which type of crisis is in place, which is the main goal of this article. The results suggest that right-wing governments tend to positively influence the integration process as long as the trade-related aspects are considered. Indeed, their economic focus seems to be matched by higher levels of regional exports. Nevertheless, this does not eliminate the impact of other variables transcending the left-right divide as the results on nationalism indicate.

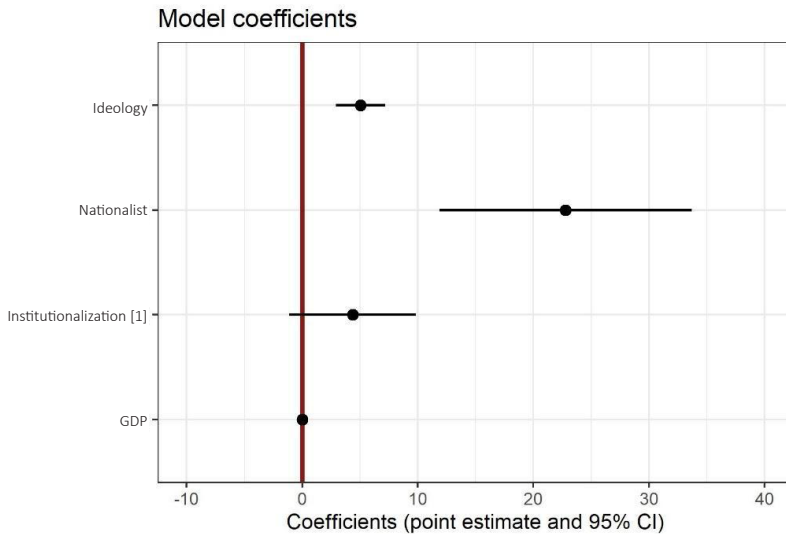


Figure 3. Coefficients

On the other hand, we found that larger GDP reduces the intra-regional trade. As a control variable, this finding is coherent with Mercosur reality. Considering that Brazil presents the highest GDP values and the lowest export percentages in the time span considered here, this result addresses the scenario of the largest economy in the bloc. Another relevant finding is that the model focused on ideology explained more variance than the others, which incorporated political and institutional variables. Thus, while the role of presidents remains important, ideological differences seem more effective in explaining the variations on the dependent variable.

In view of the above, holding the emphasis on the ideological features, the findings apply to all four countries in different periods and can be understood in light of the trade-oriented economic perspective that rightist governments usually promote. There is evidence of this behaviour with Carlos Menem in Argentina, Fernando Cardoso in Brazil, Juan Wasmosy in Paraguay, and Julio Sanguinetti in Uruguay to name a few.

This section has demonstrated that regional integration is fostered along with right-wing presidents, given that there is an increment in the share of exports to South America. In addition, we did not find evidence of disruptive behaviours of right-wing governments towards

Mercosur in this aspect. Indeed, the results of the regression analysis indicate that the economic dimension of the bloc is consolidated, which is not surprising considering the general perspectives that right-wing governments have on international affairs.

The initial research puzzle was to identify which type of crisis affects Mercosur. As the present study was designed, the linear regression indicated that the bloc had not been negatively affected by the presence of right-wing presidents on trade-related matters. However, a note of caution is due here, since Mercosur is a multi-faceted regional project that comprises other dimensions of integration. Therefore, these results need to be incorporated into an in-depth analysis to understand how ideology influences regional integration and might contribute to a critical scenario.

Macri and Mercosur

To explore the insights from the statistical part, this section delves into the foreign policy of one president towards Mercosur, aiming to understand which role ideology played in shaping the preferences regarding the bloc. Mauricio Macri's government (2015-2019) was selected, since it fostered the model of open regionalism regarding Mercosur and headed significant initiatives to transform the bloc. Moreover, the Argentinian case allows us to compare two consecutive governments markedly separated by their ideological stances. Indeed, according to the V-Dem (2022b) dataset, Macri ranks 1.427 (right-wing), while Cristina Kirchner -1.686 (left-wing).

When Mauricio Macri was elected in December 2015, radical transformations were expected. As a candidate, Macri had strongly insisted on the need to change the path upon which the previous administrations had set the country; his political project aimed at a deep reform of the country's development model and, at the same time, a radical re-orientation of its foreign policy (Busso, 2017; D'Alesio, 2019; Frenkel, 2016).

Concerning Mercosur, Macri's position was intimately connected to what Tokatlian and Russell (2017, p. 218) have defined as "a frank adherence and a singular optimism regarding the globalisation

process and its benefits”. Indeed, the organisation’s relevance was not overlooked, but its purpose was conceived differently than in the past: Macri envisioned Mercosur as a commercial tool for favouring and speeding up its member countries’ insertion into the world economy, while the space for other areas of regional cooperation (social, political), which had become central during the previous decade, was very much limited (Frenkel, 2016, pp. 20–21).

Macri’s vision can be detected by analysing his speeches at the various Mercosur summits (Macri, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019a). During his first summit in Asunción (December 2015), Macri argued that there was no pre-determined “single manual” for the integration process, suggesting that a different course from the one followed until then was indeed possible (Macri, 2015). The role assigned to the bloc and the underlying logic: “A space for strengthening economic and commercial relations among us and with the world”, was also stated (Macri, 2015).

Macri’s first speech also clarified the main goals he had imagined for the organisation. Coherently with his idea of an open and flexible bloc (Ramos, 2018, p. 110), the Argentinian president intended to “advance in the agreement between Mercosur and the European Union” and “keep bringing positions closer” with the Pacific Alliance (PA) (Macri, 2015). Finally, there was also space for Venezuela’s political crisis, as the Argentinian president called on Caracas to release all political prisoners and the other member countries to “work relentlessly to consolidate a truly democratic culture in our region” (Macri, 2015).

Macri’s discourse remained consistent throughout his presidency. In 2017, the Argentinian President reiterated the appeal for a “renewed vision of regionalism” (Macri, 2017) and his perspective on the bloc’s priority: “The negotiation of agreements that allow us to better insert ourselves into the global economy” (Macri, 2017). And neither was missing, regarding the Venezuelan situation, the “call to respect human rights, release political prisoners and promptly adopt an electoral calendar” (Macri, 2017).

Similar continuities could be found in the following statements. For instance, both in 2018 and 2019, Macri stressed that “the integration of our region in the world is fundamental” (Macri, 2018) and Mercosur should be “an open, competitive, dynamic bloc, committed to

integration, trade and clear rules of the game for investing and doing business” (Macri, 2019a). The Venezuelan crisis also remained one of the focal points of Macri’s speeches; the tone of Macri’s references, however, turned much less conciliatory. In 2018, the Argentinian President defined Maduro’s regime as “a dictatorship that conducted a fraudulent electoral process” (Macri, 2018).

Then, by comparing Macri’s speeches with those of his predecessor, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, it is possible to detect the chasm that separated the two perspectives on Mercosur and the transformation the incoming President intended to promote (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparison between Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and Mauricio Macri

PRESIDENTS/ THEMES	The external environment/ Globalisation	Integration	Mercosur’s goals/priorities	Venezuela
Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015)	Reproduction of inequalities among countries	Defensive tool to protect the region	Political and economic coordination, via expansion over South America	Crucial for political reasons, but also for its natural resources
Mauricio Macri (2015-2019)	Positive process, offering opportunities for growth	Bridge to connect regional economies to global markets	Negotiation of free trade agreements	Obstacle to the bloc’s negotiations with third markets

The first divergence regards how the external environment was perceived and the judgement of globalisation. While Macri—as already mentioned—maintained a positive view, CFK’s position was particularly critical (Frenkel, 2016, p. 18). In her speech at the 2013 summit in Montevideo, for instance, she stated that in “the world we are living in [...] there are new forms of colonialism, more subtle than those we experienced two centuries ago” (Kirchner, 2013). Similarly, during the 2014 summit, CFK warned the audience against those politicians asking for integration in the global market and stressed that “the market is a euphemism” behind which the interests of a few countries and individuals were hidden (Kirchner, 2014).

The distance separating the perceptions of Macri and CFK on this point helps explain their divergence on two other crucial elements: firstly, how the two Presidents conceived the bloc’s integration, and secondly, and relatedly, the bloc’s goals and priorities. Differently from Macri, CFK considered Mercosur a tool for reinforcing regional economies and defending them against the concealed protectionism of the major economies: “Integration cannot be confused with subordination”, and “we cannot accept a type of integration in which

we are tributaries and lose”, she argued in 2014 (Kirchner, 2014). This “defensive” understanding of the bloc was coherent with the idea of a hostile world that underlaid CFK’s discourse –and, more broadly, the entire period of *kirchnerismo*– (Frenkel, 2016, p. 18).

This perspective is also reflected in the goals assigned to Mercosur. CFK recurrently emphasised the bloc’s social and political achievements in her speeches. In 2015, she insisted that Mercosur was more than an economic tool, as “conflicts [...] continue to be deeply political, they continue to have to do with power, with geopolitics” (Kirchner, 2015).

The last and most evident divergence between the two Presidents can be detected in the Venezuelan issue. As already discussed, Macri made constant references to Caracas’ institutional crisis, intensifying his criticisms against Maduro over time. As noted by several observers (Frenkel, 2016, pp. 24-25; Ramos, 2018, p. 110), beyond Macri’s personal beliefs and his intention to align the country to the US position on Venezuela, the attention to Caracas was also dictated by another, practical motivation: the recognition that its membership could represent an obstacle to the flexibilisation of the bloc and the negotiations with third markets.

On the contrary, CFK considered Venezuela’s accession to Mercosur as a turning point in the bloc’s history (Kirchner, 2013). Beyond the political significance, she added that Venezuela’s “immense capacity of natural resources [...] makes it vital to this integration process”; indeed, according to CFK, closing “the energy equation” was crucial for guaranteeing the region’s autonomy: “Because food, energy and technology are going to be the three vectors, the three great keys to development of this coming world” (Kirchner, 2013).

Beyond the declaratory plan, however, it is fundamental to analyse how Macri’s ideas informed and guided his policies. The detailed analysis of all the initiatives implemented by Macri’s administration is beyond the scope of this paper. However, some of Macri’s policies are particularly pertinent to the present analysis (Table 3).

Table 3. Mauricio Macri’s initiatives in foreign policy

Macri’s initiatives	Results	Relevance
Convergence with the PA	Plan of Action between Mercosur and the PA (2018)	Opening new channels with the PA and Asia via the TPP
Negotiations with the EU	EU-Mercosur deal (2019)	Integrating regional economies into global value chains
Venezuela’s suspension	Caracas’ suspension (2017)	Smoothing negotiations with international partners
Parlasur’s direct election	Suspension of the direct elections (2019)	Reducing efforts in areas deemed less relevant (political/institutional integration)

The first two initiatives worth mentioning are related to the Pacific Alliance and the European Union. Regarding the former, after Argentina’s admission as an observer state in early 2016, Macri attended for the first time (July 2016) the summit of the PA in Chile (Cancillería Argentina, 2016). Two years later, Mercosur and the PA signed a Plan of Action (Araujo & Gonçalves, 2021, pp. 209-210). As expressed in the Joint Declaration, the plan had to represent the first step towards a free trade agreement between the two organisations (Alianza del Pacífico, 2018). Although the advancements since then have been missing, the convergence with the PA was in line with Macri’s goals, as it offered to Mercosur’s members the prospect of new commercial opportunities (Villarroel, 2021) and a bridge towards Asia via the Trans-Pacific Partnership (Zaccato, 2018).

It is regarding the EU, however, that the most tangible results were obtained. Indeed, after almost two decades since the start of the negotiation talks, an agreement between Mercosur and the European Union was reached in June 2019 (Argentina, 2019). Emblematically, the deal was signed during the Argentinian presidency of the bloc, and Macri was eager to present it as a milestone that had to shape the organisation’s future (Macri, 2019c). From his perspective, the agreement was also the culmination of the transformation ignited by his administration, a testimony of the country’s capacity to reintegrate into the international community (Macri, 2019b). Although the agreement with the EU cannot be reduced just to its commercial dimension, the advancements made during Macri’s term on this

front –and those registered with the PA– reflect his economic-centred perspective on Mercosur.

The other relevant side of Macri's policy towards Mercosur is related to Venezuela. Indeed, the criticism towards Maduro that emerged in Macri's speeches was matched by the active effort to isolate and exclude Caracas from the organisation (C. Malamud, 2017). After the temporary suspension of Venezuela in late 2016, the decisive step came in mid-2017. Indeed, soon after the election for the Constituent Assembly in late July, Caracas' second suspension from the bloc became official (August 5); the decision was based on the violation of the democratic clause (article 5) of the Ushuaia Protocol (Mercosur, 2017). Buenos Aires had a pivotal role in the diplomatic bargaining preceding the resolution. Indeed, Macri sent his foreign minister, Jorge Faurie, to Montevideo the day before the São Paulo summit to break the impasse and obtain Uruguayan support for Caracas' suspension (El País Uruguay, 2017).

Venezuela's exclusion had a highly symbolic relevance. Back in the day, its inclusion came as the peak of the process of political integration envisioned by some of the leading players of the Pink Tide –including, as we have mentioned, CFK– (Briceño Ruiz, 2009). Caracas' suspension, therefore, symbolised the interruption of that process. And while this event can be interpreted as proof of the organisation's strength and level of institutionalisation –as it derived from the application of the democratic clause– it also represented a testimony of the bloc's transformation in the direction expected by Macri. Indeed, as already recalled, Macri aimed to overcome, through Venezuela's exclusion, one potential obstacle to the organisation's negotiations with other regional blocs (Frenkel, 2016, pp. 24-25; Ramos, 2018, p. 110). It is not by chance that the advancements with the PA and the EU mentioned earlier came only after Caracas' suspension.

Another significant evolution was the decision to uphold the direct election of the members of Parlasur. The original 2005 Protocol had established a transitory phase during which each country's representatives would come from the national parliaments; however, the goal set in the document was to hold simultaneous and direct elections in all countries (Mercosur, 2005). Nevertheless, only Paraguay (2008) and Argentina (2015) had complied with the rule. Then, in

2019, the member countries decided to suspend the articles of the 2005 Protocol on Parlasur's direct election and recede to the transitory norm (Mercosur, 2019). The resolution represented another symbolic blow to the political integration projects, even though the process had already entered a stalemate. After all, a few weeks before the resolution, Macri did not try to hide his view on the institution when he defined the direct election of the parliament as "an unnecessary cost" (Molina, 2019).

The evidence presented above on Macri's approach and policies towards Mercosur is far from exhaustive. Nevertheless, it further confirms the role of presidential ideologies. Firstly, by analysing Macri's speeches, the central elements of his vision for Mercosur –and the link with his ideas on the world and Argentina's role– have been recalled. The comparison with CFK's discourse, then, has stressed how their different ideological stances translated into divergent positions on Mercosur and which components were privileged or opposed by each. Finally, some of Macri's initiatives have been highlighted to demonstrate that his ideas on Mercosur were translated into concrete actions to transform the bloc rather than being limited to the declaratory plan.²

Overall, the Argentinian President had a precise vision of the new foreign policy path his country had to follow, and that vision presented many of the elements usually associated with rightist political positions (Merke & Reynoso, 2016). In this perspective, Macri's conception of regionalism and Mercosur –as tools for liberalising trade, eliminating the barriers to good and capital flows, and integrating into global value chains– was undoubtedly coherent: the organisation's *raison d'être* was economic and commercial rather than primarily political (Frenkel, 2016). This last point appears in line with the results emerging from the previous section, as it suggests that right-wing leaders do bring a different and somewhat more limited (compared to left-wing presidents) vision on Mercosur, which does not necessarily imply the dismissal of the bloc but certainly its transformation and adaptation.

Final Remarks

Regional integration is a complex process with far-reaching implications for state actors and societies at large. Neither can its evolution be understood through monocausal explanations, nor can its effects be appreciated in the short period. Bearing these cautionary notes in mind, the present article has attempted to verify the impact of presidential changes and ideology throughout Mercosur's trajectory and to unveil the specific features affected by those variables. Based on this logic, the present article has approached regional integration as a multi-faceted phenomenon, whose current crisis should be analysed accordingly. Approaching the trade aspect of integration conveys a few limitations when analysing a multidimensional scheme such as Mercosur. Namely, the quantitative element does not consider such aspects as institutional consolidation, legislative harmonisation, and coordination of policies, for instance. Because of that, the qualitative section has sought to expand on the political features of Mercosur.

Overall, our findings invite two contrasting reflections. On the one hand, regionalism remains a disputed and divisive issue. Political leaders tend to hold opposite views on how regional integration should be pursued and which goals should be prioritised. Therefore, leadership changes inevitably lead to sensible transformations in how regional schemes are carried through. Nonetheless, this needs to be qualified to understand which facet of the bloc is impacted. As Macri's case shows, right-wing presidents tend to impact the bloc's political and institutional features, with turbulent consequences on the projects and processes already in place.

On the other hand, the alternation between presidents coming from different ideological positions does not entail, *sic et simpliciter*, the end of regionalism. In particular, the case of Mercosur shows that the election of right-wing leaders does not automatically imply the dismantling of the organisation; instead, it leads to the adaptation and modification of the bloc's policies, and purposes. This last element suggests that Mercosur remains a resilient and enduring project despite the transformations induced by the handovers between presidents with different ideological stances.

NOTES

- 1 The Bolivian accession is pending due to the Brazilian ratification.
- 2 The events mentioned—from the agreement with the EU to Venezuela’s suspension—cannot be ascribed exclusively to Macri’s intentions. Other factors have played a role: the rising international pressures on Maduro or the arrival of a likeminded president in Brazil such as Michel Temer, just to name a few. While Macri’s agency has certainly been relevant, therefore, it is the intertwining between those multiple factors that better explain the turn in Mercosur’s trajectory. The intention here—admitting the multicausality of such complex phenomena—was to highlight the relevance, among others, of the ideological variable.

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