

THIRTY YEARS OF THE SOUTH AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF THE SOUTHERN COMMON MARKET (MERCOSUR)

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Abstract: In the course of the prolonged economic and political crises fuelled by the COVID-19 global pandemic, cooperation among countries in different areas is perceived as a discouraging or re-encouraging factor necessary for handling the crises. Since the 2008 global financial crisis, Latin American countries have been faced with many sensitive issues. One of them relates to furthering long-term cooperation in economic and political matters as a prerequisite to avoiding the possibility of inter-state conflicts. This paper aims to evaluate the nature and validity of multi-level cooperation among the member states of the international intergovernmental organization officially known as the *Southern Common Market* (in Spanish – *Mercado Comun del Sur* – MERCOSUR), in conditions that are not at all easy to overcome the current crisis. The paper emphasizes the necessity of the MERCOSUR action to stop any turmoil and violence within the states, especially in countries with weak democracies. Relying on the fact that in the last thirty years there has been a change in the political climate in the member states of the MERCOSUR, the paper examines the causes of the decline in mutual cooperation. The author came to the conclusion that the current relationship between these member states should be redefined in the spirit of non-ideological belief. To provide an argument in favor of redefining relations within the MERCOSUR, the author pointed to the example of divergent Brazilian policies towards Argentina after 2018, which

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threatened the survival of the MERCOSUR, especially with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: MERCOSUR, economic and political crises, co-operation, Brazil, Argentina, COVID-19 pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

The overall impression is that the world has been in one crisis after another since 2008. The global financial and, more broadly, the economic crises, have led to a severe economic downturn and global recession (Martin, 2009, Rogoff, 2002).¹ Shortly after the global economic crisis, political crises followed, which only deepened in the coming years.

The outbreak of the global migration crisis in 2015 brought about both the deepening and prolongation of political crises in some parts of the world, including Latin American countries. Good-neighborly cooperation among countries on migration was a litmus test for political stability in countries receiving immigrants and for sub-regional integration processes. It was a test of political stability, which may explain why, for example, after many years of delay, the United States (US) erected a wall along the border with Mexico to prevent illegal immigrants from entering not only from Mexico but also from Central and South American countries (Eichstaedt, 2014; Grandin, 2019; Sistema Económico Latinoamericano y del Caribe – SELA, 2009; Dujčić, 2020, pp. 733-752).² Apart from the migration crisis, 2015 saw significant changes

¹ While it is a widespread belief that the global recession began after the global financial crisis, Rogoff, citing Martin, points to the emergence of the recession as early as 2001. In his explanation given on the occasion of the publication of the document “World Economic Outlook” for 2002, published by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Rogoff points to a sharp drop of 12 percent in world trade from 2000 to 2001.

² Apart from immigrants from Mexico and Central American countries, immigrants from South American countries, including the MERCOSUR member states, also come to the US, though to a lesser extent. As a result of its geographical distance from the MERCOSUR member states, the US conducted a different foreign policy in relation to Mexico and Central American countries. This is evidenced by the fact that, compared to Mexico and Central American countries, before the global economic and migration crisis, the US reported fewer deportations of criminally prosecuted immigrants from South America. The extent to which the Mexico-US border was a sensitive issue during the global economic crisis can be seen in the US efforts to find an answer to the question of authority to operate and control the border with Mexico. The view was adopted that only the US, as a single federal country, had authority to control and manage the border

in the political climate in Latin American countries. The decline of the Left and the rise of the Right created a different political climate compared to the one at the turn of the 20th century and during the first 15 years of the 21st century. This shift is especially noticeable in the South American countries, characterized by solid and close ideological ties between their presidents. In the years of the global migration crisis and changes in the political climate among Latin American countries, there was a regional-scale Zika virus outbreak with an epicenter in Brazil (Hempel, 2018, pp. 175-176). However, thanks to the measures taken and timely comprehensive international cooperation, the possibility of the Zika virus spreading to all countries of the New World and reaching global dimensions was avoided. However, nobody expected that the coronavirus, now known as COVID-19 or SARS-CoV-2, would appear later and grow into a global pandemic, leading to a new crisis with an uncertain outcome – the global health crisis (Osler, 2020).³ Fuelled by the global financial, migration and health crises, protracted economic and political crises have occasionally contributed to the weakening of close cooperation among Latin American countries, especially South American ones, which have pursued convergent policies to avoid possible inter-state conflicts. The aim of this paper is to provide an answer to how steady the cooperation of the MERCOSUR member states is during the global health crisis – thirty years after its founding. At the same time, it focuses on assessing the nature and effectiveness of this cooperation at different levels. Finally, the paper emphasizes the need for the MERCOSUR to remain a significant factor in preventing all forms of instability within the member states, especially in politically unstable states with weak democracies. Relying on the fact that the political climate has changed noticeably in the last thirty years, the dynamics of inter-state cooperation in South America has been reflected in the intensity of cooperation among the MERCOSUR member states. This fact is crucial to comprehend why changes in the political climate are a challenge to a deeper and broader understanding of the importance of relations among the MERCOSUR member states from the viewpoint of global migration and the health crisis. The paper draws on the hypothesis that the global crises from 2008 onwards and COVID-19 as a health crisis, as well as changes in the political climate, encourage the MERCOSUR member

with Mexico. Finally, the global migration crisis after 2015 caused the US to erect a wall along the border and the Rio Grande towards Mexico.

³ It is interesting that Osler published his work on the development, spread, and protection against the coronavirus epidemic back in 2019.

states' cooperation aimed at confronting the crises. Even though the global financial crisis seems to have been overcome, the paper uses the methods of comparison, historiography, and statistics to analyze the state of affairs within the MERCOSUR to answer whether COVID-19 makes it (im) possible for the MERCOSUR to survive. Since it is a prominent political actor on the international scene, the MERCOSUR's task is to postpone the intra-state turmoil and violence and, in general, to delay inter-state conflicts. The conclusion summarizes the main points given in the paper and points to the significance of Serbia's cooperation with the MERCOSUR member states.

THE MERCOSUR FROM 1991 TO 2021 - CRISIS RESISTANT COOPERATION

The global crises since 2008 have disrupted the normal sequence of events in both complex and different inter-state relations and relations among states, including the MERCOSUR member states. In the global health crisis period, the sequence of events is influenced by the ongoing fight against COVID-19, which is trying to hinder the accelerated development of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. At first glance, COVID-19 poses a severe threat to the overall industrial progress in the 21st century, particularly in the time of blockchain technologies, which tend to be an important factor and part of the Latin American economy and political culture. Could Latin American countries, including the MERCOSUR members, become more politically stable by adopting blockchain technologies and thus raising their political culture to a higher level? The example of Venezuela, which became the fifth member state of the MERCOSUR illustrates that greater political stability and better political culture are not naturally occurring phenomena (Institute for the Integration of Latin America and the Caribbean – IDB-INTAL, 2013, p. 168). Attempts to advance political culture in Venezuela with a view to joining the MERCOSUR have failed due to the deep and protracted crisis following the death of President Hugo Chávez de Frías (International Crisis Group, 2020, p. 1). The extent of the Venezuela crisis can be seen in the Democracy Index, published annually by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU). According to the latest data for 2021, Venezuela is ranked 151st and classified as an authoritarian regime, which is a low ranking compared to the MERCOSUR founding states. For example, Uruguay ranked 12th, which is very high according to the Democracy Index, meaning that it is classified as a full democracy country (EIU, 2022, pp. 12, 16). Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay are found between Uruguay and Venezuela as two extremes in democratic development. While the first

two countries are classified as flawed democracies, ranking 50th and 47th, respectively, Paraguay is ranked 77th in the Democracy Index table that includes hybrid regimes, from countries with authoritarian regimes to countries with flawed democracy (EIU, 2022, pp. 13-14). Which countries are considered the founding states of the MERCOSUR, and have they had a stronger democracy in the last three decades of the twentieth century when viewed collectively? In 1991, four South American countries, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, prepared the ground for long-term mutual cooperation by creating the MERCOSUR (Arieti, 2006, p. 764). To this end, on March 26 of the same year, these states signed the Treaty of Asuncion (Tratado de Asunción) when they became signatories and founders of the MERCOSUR from the standpoint of public international law (Dirección de Tratados República del Paraguay, 1991, p. 11, Artículo 24; Dujic, 2016). The MERCOSUR covers a common area of 14.87 million square kilometers (MERCOSUR, 2021). The first step in paving the way for multi-level cooperation among the MERCOSUR founding states was to break with dictatorships, which gradually strengthened democracy that prevailed as political discourse in Argentina and Brazil. These states have taken the first step towards establishing mutual cooperation by signing the Declaration of Iguacu (*Declaración de Iguazú*), confirming the multi-level cooperation discourse. Following the fall of the dictators, Argentina and Brazil turned to each other with the intention of establishing, strengthening, and deepening mutual cooperation and developing mutual trust (Agencia Brasileño-Argentina de Contabilidad y Control de Materiales Nucleares – ABACC, 1985, p. 7, Para, 18). The second step towards mutual cooperation, which would later expand to Paraguay and Uruguay, implied a seemingly impossible vision of creating a common space for international trade and implementing economic and other decisions. This vision was concretized by creating the MERCOSUR, which survived despite crises both within and among member states. However, it turned out that Argentina and Brazil, as the first initiators of the MERCOSUR, did not allow their mutual differences to prevail and, accordingly, led to the weakening and possible termination of the MERCOSUR, especially in the case of disagreements on further implementation of convergent policies. The same holds for the period without intra-state political turmoil and violence during the presidency of Raúl Alfonsín and Mauricio Macri in Argentina as well as the presidency of Jose Sarney and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil. The end of Lula's term of office did not mean the end of the tacit manifold influence of Brazil in the South American countries. The victory of Dilma Vana Rouseff in 2010 resulted from Lula's further efforts to maintain the foreign policy course

with the goal of giving Brazil hegemonic status. Until 2015, when Rousseff's second term began and when the global migration crisis broke out, Mauricio Macri was elected in Argentina (De Kirchner, 2019, p. 21). Argentina and Brazil, equally capable of founding the MERCOSUR, seemed to have taken a significant step towards political development, leaving behind a period of dictatorship and the Cold War. However, reality has shown that both Argentina and Brazil plunged into political crises during the period from 2015 to 2018 – with the Right entering the political scene. The fact is that the wrong economic and political decisions made by Cristina Fernández led to her losing her popularity, which resulted in the Right's victory (Barrera, Leiva, Martínez-Toledano, and Zúñiga-Cordero, 2021, p. 6). Was the victory of the Right in Argentina and its gradual rise in Brazil at the time of the global migration crisis outbreak a hint of reconsideration and/or weakening of the rooted values underpinning the MERCOSUR? When Michel Temer took over the office of President of Brazil in 2016 from Rousseff, political crises raised the question of the long-term survival of the Left in power but also of sustainable political stability. According to the Fragile States Index for 2021, political stability in Argentina and Brazil is not the same – the former is ranked 137th and classified as a more stable state, while Brazil is ranked 70th and classified in the elevated warning group (Fund for Peace – FFP, 2021, pp. 6-7). Were Argentina and Brazil ranked the same by the 2016 Fragile States Index in the year when the global migration crisis occurred? Based on the factors that affect a country's stability, in 2015, Argentina and Brazil were placed 140th and 119th, respectively, by the Fragile States Index. This means that at the onset of the global migration crisis, Argentina was already in the group of more stable countries, while Brazil was better ranked and classified in the warning group of states (Fund for Peace – FFP, 2016, p. 6). Unlike Uruguay, which ranks 158th in the Fragile States Index and belongs to the very stable countries group, Paraguay is ranked 105th and classified in the warning group. As for Venezuela, which became a member of the MERCOSUR 21 years after the signing of the Treaty of Asunción, it ranks 25th in the Fragile States Index and is classified among the countries with alert (Fund for Peace – FFP, 2021, pp. 6-7). However, the International Crisis Group report for 2022 states there is a chance to overcome the long-lasting economic and political crisis in this country. Analysis of the Venezuelan political milieu shows that the economic and political crisis are the aftermath of not only the authoritarian regime established by Nicolás Maduro after the death of Hugo Chávez but also of serious disagreement in global public opinion over whether Maduro's survival in power should be supported. A prolonged crisis in the form of food shortages, a halt to oil

and oil products refining, on which Venezuela's economy depends, as well as the financial and, more broadly, economic sanctions imposed by the US and finally the coronavirus, have made Venezuela lose its "land of hope" status. Nevertheless, restoring the state's activities, reviving the judicial system, and opening the way to free and fair elections could be achieved if the US lifts sanctions (International Crisis Group – ICG, 2022, p. 29). A deeper analysis reveals that Venezuela has not solved the perennial problem of pursuing an appropriate economic policy. Its economy should not rely solely on the export of oil and oil products or on their refining, but also on, for example, digital technology development – the basis of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. In their research, Di Tella, Donna, and MacCulloch (2014, p. 409) note that the Venezuelan economy's dependence on oil is associated with adopting a discourse on the Left or Right. Current economic and political decisions regarding oil show that the prevailing political discourse favors the Left, which since the beginning of this century, especially during Hugo Chávez's service, has used oil revenues to support social policies and conduct "social power diplomacy" towards some South American countries not being members of the MERCOSUR (Kennemore and Weeks, 2011, p. 272). Overall, the MERCOSUR member states differ not only in the development of democracy and political stability but also in the level of human development. According to the statistics from the Human Development Index (HDI) for 2020, the MERCOSUR member states have not pursued a policy of reducing disparities in this regard. Visible differences are observed in the cases of Argentina and Uruguay, which took 46th and 55th place, respectively, and are classified as countries with a very high level of human development (UNDP, 2020, p. 241). Unlike Argentina and Uruguay, Brazil, Paraguay, and Venezuela rank 84th, 103rd, and 113th, respectively, and are among the countries with a high level of human development (UNDP, 2020, p. 242). Uneven human development within the MERCOSUR member states is a result of different circumstances that characterize them, including historical ones. Occasional crises and wars from gaining independence in the early 19th century to the Fourth Industrial Revolution indicate that these countries have fought against dictatorships and social inequalities to advance human development. The key question here is: Has the human development level in the MERCOSUR member states changed compared to 1991, 2008, and 2015? The HDI published in 1992, the year of the MERCOSUR establishment after the Cold War, differed from the most recent one. In 1991, Uruguay was ranked 29th, while Argentina and Venezuela were placed 43rd and 44th, respectively (UNDP, 1992, p. 20). It is noted that Uruguay and Venezuela were ranked better than

in the crisis periods since 2008. Brazil and Paraguay were significantly lower-ranked, ranking 59th and 78th, respectively (UNDP, 1992, p. 20). It should be pointed out that in 1991, according to the HDI, the MERCOSUR member states were not classified as countries with very high, high, medium, or low levels of human development. Instead, they were ranked in descending order. According to the HDI published in 2009 and referring to 2008, when the global financial crisis began, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Venezuela were classified in the group of countries with a high level of human development. While Argentina and Uruguay were placed 49th and 50th, respectively, Venezuela was ranked 58th and Brazil 75th. Only Paraguay, which came under a medium level of human development, took 101st place (UNDP, 2009, pp. 143-144). The beginning of the global migration crisis found the MERCOSUR member states unequal in terms of human development, which is confirmed by statistics from the 2016 Human Development Index. Of the MERCOSUR member states, only Argentina was classified as a country with a very high level of human development and was ranked 45th, while other countries were ranked among countries with a high and medium human development level. Even though they shared the same space with non-MERCOSUR member states, as well as with non-Latin American countries, Uruguay, Brazil, and Venezuela were in the group of countries with a high level of human development. Again, only Paraguay was classified as a country with a medium level of human development, ranking 110th (UNDP, 2016, pp. 200-201). Statistics for 1991, 2008, and 2015 indicate that Argentina was classified as a country with a very high level of human development in all these years. In general, in periods of occasional economic crises and political changes, Argentina managed to maintain a very high level of HDI, while in other MERCOSUR member states, there were significant changes in terms of further progression, stagnation, and regression that reflect the level of human development. Moreover, the end of the second decade of this century was marked by obvious changes in the human development level within the MERCOSUR member states. While Argentina held the same rank, owing to appropriate policies, Uruguay managed to restore its place among the countries with a very high level of human development. Entering the group with Argentina and Uruguay as countries with a very high level of human development would not have been possible without the appropriate policies of President Tabaré Vázquez. Thanks to his policy of preventing a decline in real gross domestic product (GDP), employment rate, total factor productivity, and capital stock, Uruguay has managed to avoid the fate of Brazil and Paraguay and regain its position among the countries with a very

high level of development until the beginning of 2020 (IMF, 2021, p. 16).⁴ It is debatable whether Luis Alberto Lacalle Pou, who was elected President of Uruguay in the first quarter of 2020, will be able to maintain Uruguay's high position on democracy development during the global pandemic, as well as the results of Vásquez's policy in the field. Research dealing with the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic shows that there is a possibility of democracy weakening (EIU, 2021, p. 14), as well as regressing in human development, which occurs in the "full-fledged human development crisis" (UNDP, 2022, p. 120). At the time of fully-fledged crises, solutions are always sought to overcome them. From international relations' standpoint, the ability to avert crises so as not to impair inter-state relations presupposes the state's capacity to act for the benefit of international relations. In the case of the MERCOSUR member states, this means the tacit commitment of each state to deal with its own crises. However, from the beginning of the global migration crisis until 2022, the resolution of economic and political crises in each of the MERCOSUR member states gradually became less dependent on mutual ideological proximity and shared support of the Left, as was the case during the first decade of this century. This is evidenced by the change in Brazil's political climate in the period from 2016 to 2018, which culminated in the election of a president from the Far-right party. The victory of Jair Messias Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections was an indication that the Brazilian Left has weakened since the termination of Rousseff's second term and her resignation, as well as during Temer's short-term mandate. The Brazilian Left's decline was nailed down by additional weakening "(...), democratic institutions, as well as of the main political parties and leaders that had been running for the Presidency of the Republic since the mid-1990s, were (in the meantime strengthened and again) consolidated" (De Macedo Duarte and de Assis César, 2020, p. 5). In short, the continued survival of democracy and its institutions within the MERCOSUR member states is possible provided that the Treaty of Asunción, which ensures close and multilateral cooperation among the member states over the long term, is not called into question. This cooperation should be retained and even strengthened in the period of the global health crisis. With a stable MERCOSUR, neither democratic institutions will deteriorate, leading to intra-state turmoil and violence, nor

⁴ The same goes for Argentina and Brazil. See Figure 13 in the IMF document for the seven Latin American countries in which the largest decline in GDP of 4.85 percent was recorded by October 2021.

will COVID-19 suffer in the long run as a result of inter-state conflicts among its member states.

CONCLUSIONS

Why is cooperation among the MERCOSUR member states necessary? Considering the spread of the global COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the equally significant concerns about climate change, the MERCOSUR member states are not interrupting the cooperation they have nurtured for decades. For the survival of the MERCOSUR, they continue to work on harmonizing their decisions. As such, they should be a challenge for Serbia to strengthen cooperation with that part of the world. The argument for strengthening Serbia's cooperation with the MERCOSUR member states should not be boiled down exclusively to economic issues. It should also include issues related to promoting and protecting human rights, the environment, and intellectual property as crucial factors in the dynamic development of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Furthermore, through more extensive cooperation, Serbia could get closer and directly learn about the different levels of development of democracy and political culture in the MERCOSUR member states. As an observer of the activities of the MERCOSUR and other international organizations of the New World, Serbia should create in its foreign policy a clear vision of learning from Latin American countries with established democracies how to become a country with a stronger political culture. Even in the established democracies of the MERCOSUR member states, Serbia could recognize a pattern for its own development, even though the MERCOSUR member states are achieving different levels of overall development. The fight to overcome the global crisis since 2008 should direct Serbia towards more substantial and deeper cooperation with, for example, Argentina, and especially Uruguay, with the aim of promoting democracy and human development. This is especially important if one bears in mind that, according to the Democracy Index, Serbia is ranked 63rd (EIU, 2022, p. 13), and by the HDI, it is placed 64th and 65th with Kuwait. Currently, Serbia is at the very bottom of the table of countries with a very high level of human development (UNDP, 2020, p. 242). Intensified multi-layered cooperation between Serbia and Uruguay could improve Serbia's ranking in the table. On the other hand, in the period of the global health crisis, Paraguay and Venezuela are faced with the seemingly unsolvable task of strengthening democracy and improving the level of human development. This would make it easier for the MERCOSUR as a whole and as an actor in international relations to cope with current crises as it would

reduce the existing disparities on these issues. Once the differences in democracy and the human development level among the MERCOSUR member states are mitigated, the MERCOSUR, as an international inter-governmental organization and trade block, will appear on the international stage with indisputable values.

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