

MERCOSUR and Pacific Alliance Responses to the Pandemic

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Abstract: This paper aims to identify the responses that regional institutions (MERCOSUR and the Pacific Alliance) have had to the Covid-19 pandemic. Taking into consideration perspectives from South American Regionalism Studies, the paper analyses the institutional responses of these regional arrangements from the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 up to March 2022. Despite South American regional governance having already been in crisis before the pandemic's arrival, this paper aims to highlight firstly the incapacity of these institutions to take advantage of previous regional institutional capacities, and secondly that intergovernmental ideological convergence or divergence is crucial to reach regional agreements. The health, economic and social consequences brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic would have been better managed with regional policy co-ordination. First, the paper analyses the situation of regional governance in the pre-pandemic context. Regionalism's crisis is made manifest on the fragmentation of previous ideological intergovernmental convergence. Subsequently, an analysis centred on the empirical exercise of mapping the MERCOSUR and Pacific Alliance responses will follow. The differences between the two cases' responses to the crisis and their consequences for regional governance will be highlighted with data from the content analysis strategy used to study the cases.

Keywords: regional governance; Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) and Pacific Alliance Covid-19 responses; health public policies; regionalism; regional crises.

Introduction

This article aims to identify the different responses that two regional institutions, MERCOSUR and the Pacific Alliance (PA), have had in dealing with the novel coronavirus outbreak. Taking into consideration perspectives from South American Regionalism Studies, the paper enquires into the regional responses to the crisis. Both cases are considered regional institutions with many differences but with something in common: the need to deal with intergovernmental institutionality and capacities to achieve common goals.

Further, it proposes that South American regionalism was already in crisis prior to the pandemic, in large part due to the decline in the promotion of regional governance seen

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recently. Since the beginning of the 21st century, significant progress has been made in and through regional co-operation. Despite this progress, since 2018 an increasing number of restrictions have been placed on regional institutions. This kind of crisis could be identified historically in the trajectory of South American regionalism, and many studies have characterized it as cycles of (de)politization (Dabène 2009) or as a structural problem derived from the lack of supranational institutions (Malamud 2010).

Different conceptual constructions and their empirical manifestations led scholars to designate Latin American regionalism using different adjectives (Perrotta and Porcelli 2019) such as autonomous, strategic, open, post-neoliberal, post-hegemonic, and so on, according to the common goals that the members shared in each period (Briceño Ruíz 2007; Motta Veiga 2007; Bizzozero 2011; Riggirozzi and Tussie 2012). Likewise, they have contributed to the construction of South American regionalism narratives that understand that there is more than one possible project for regional governance in the region. In this sense, this two-case research study is also grounded in those narratives. The chosen cases are justified by their differences which represent variances in the projects of regional governance.

The paper proposes to study the crisis context in focus and attempts to characterize it specifically as a missed conjunctural opportunity to construct regional governance. Consequently, it argues that the lack of ideological intergovernmental convergence diminished regional capacity to manage the crisis. The region's countries were unable to take advantage of prior regional institutional capacities, such as the Unasur South American Health Council. The health, economic and social challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic affecting the region would have been better managed by adopting regional policy co-ordination.¹ The region's former institutional capacities in health were addressed by Agostinis:

Through these institutions, South American states have cooperated in the fight against infectious diseases (e.g., HIV, malaria, and dengue) through the adoption of shared epidemiological and sanitary practices. In the early 2000s, a broader regional health governance architecture started to emerge, under the initial impulse of Argentina and the subsequent leadership of Brazil (Agostinis *et al.* 2021: 17).

The article begins by laying out the pre-pandemic context of regional governance, highlighting that the crisis of regionalism started in 2012 when ideological convergence among the governments started to fragment, becoming more prone to polarization since 2018 (Granja and Mesquita 2020) por serem modificadas e criadas instituições e arranjos normativos que, posteriormente, arrastam consequências importantes para a configuração do cenário regional. Assim, se pretende analisar o caso da União de Nações Sul-Americanas (Unasul). Therefore, the crisis of South American regional governance was already underway when the pandemic arrived (Mijares and Nolte 2018; Sanahuja 2019; Riggirozzi 2020; González *et al.* 2021; Svampa 2021).

This paper intends to identify and map the different responses to the crisis from the MERCOSUR and PA regional governance arrangements. Thinking about the co-ordination

and co-operation in terms of health needed at the regional level to manage the consequences of the pandemic crisis, the paper proposes to map those responses using the qualitative content analysis technique. It thus codifies all the collective decisions that the two cases studied have taken in response to the pandemic, taking their official documents as primary sources. The research analyses the content of MERCOSUR and PA decisions in 2020 using a software program² to better develop the process of codification and categorization. The scope of the sources that support the decision-making content analysis research is: 15 decisions of the MERCOSUR Council of the Common Market (CMC, for its Spanish acronym); 16 records of the Health Sub-Working Group (SGTS, for its Spanish acronym); and 2 declarations of the MERCOSUR Health Ministers Meeting. For the PA, the total scope for analysis of material produced by their different entities comprises 30 documents,³ as well as presidential declarations and official press releases. In 2021 both institutional arrangements were practically indifferent to the pandemic's consequences.⁴

Compared with an ideal collective reaction, the expected results are poor in light of the unilateral responses seen in 2020, but some of the mapped decisions could provide some insights non-evidenced *a priori*. Considering the path of South American regionalism, if the previously created regional health institutions had been leveraged, it is likely that the regional governance responses to the crisis would have been different. MERCOSUR's previous institutional capacities were considered conditions that, *a priori*, would bring incentives to regional co-operation in health. Those instances are the MERCOSUR Meeting of Ministers of Health and Working Group n° 11 of the MERCOSUR's Market Group (GMC, for its Spanish acronym). From the PA perspective, the Inter-institutional Co-operation Agreement reached by the health authorities and signed in April 2011 is also considered a previous institutional capacity. As the analysis will show, none of those capacities were taken into consideration at the start of the crisis. Here is where intragovernmental ideological convergence comes in to explain the different paths of reaction that each case followed during the studied period (Molano Cruz and Briceño-Ruiz 2021).

Even though some of those responses were announced relatively early, such as the MERCOSUR virtual meeting in April 2020 that enlarged MERCOSUR's Structural Convergence Fund (FOCEM) budget for a project in Biotechnologies applied to Health,⁵ they did not reach the expectations and have not had any officially reported impact since then.⁶ On the contrary, all the national responses to the pandemic were un-coordinated, unilateral, and insufficiently planned (if not completely improvised) (Saraiva and Granja 2022). All vaccine purchases in the region were also unilateral and with no hint of unified negotiations. These would have been better managed if there had been institutional capacity to handle such negotiations jointly and if the intergovernmental arrangements had managed the crisis as an emergency at the regional level.

This paper has three parts. First, the crisis in South American regional governance is addressed looking particularly into the role of ideological convergence patterns in the institutional construction of regional governance. Next, the analysis focuses on the empirical exercise of mapping the responses of the two case studies separately. Finally, MERCOSUR and PA responses to the pandemic are compared analysing the different responses and their consequences for regional governance.

At first glance, the PA had the best conditions to take decisions affecting management of the crisis, but it had limited impact in its scope (digital inclusion, trade, and gender). On the other side, MERCOSUR would probably have had more resources to manage the crisis if the first decision taken by the Council of the Common Market (CMC) in 2020 had been followed up. However, the co-operation process to manage the crisis at the regional level was not continued.

Regional governance in crisis

Alberto Van Klaveren (2018) makes an appeal to the myth of Sisyphus to refer to Latin American regional integration, imagining an eternal cycle of construction where the regional project—like Sisyphus' boulder—is hefted towards pinnacles of achievement, only to roll back down to start over again. Nonetheless, Van Klaveren considers that there is a certain regional construction which ends up being the product of shared ideas and values common to the region. Thus, he establishes that although Latin American regionalism is not now at the top of the agenda, it continues to generate synergies upon which institutions may be built. A quick review of the periodization carried out by scholars of regionalism illustrates this idea: there are different moments in which certain ideological and political elements seem to be (re)created, and many other moments where integration institutions are removed by the successor institution (Perrotta 2013; Deciancio 2016). In a sense, those processes leave a certain shared institutional trajectory for regionalism and the stone's rapid descent rolling off the region's institutional cliff leaves a new foundation for the next round of regional governance-building.⁷

Some studies argue that regional integration in Latin America has never reached a point of success in comparison to Europe. However, they do recognize the creation of institutions achieved by several regional projects that have accounted for different paths or cycles in the construction of regional governance (Malamud 2010; Nolte 2014; Mariano, Bressan and Luciano 2021). It could be said that new institutions always retain something from their predecessors (Briceño-Ruiz and Puntigliano 2020).

Van Klaveren's metaphor conveys the vision that there would be an eternal return to Latin American regional construction after reaching peaks, almost always made possible by intergovernmental ideological convergence in the fundamental aspects of integration (purpose, instrumentality, and objectives). For these reasons, any analysis in relation to the conformation of regional governance must look directly at the ideological convergence or divergence among governments and their regional policies. In this sense, when there has been more ideological convergence in the subcontinent, the foundations of regional institutionality have been laid, despite evolving and having their own rhythm and cadence over time. Furthermore, moments of institutional breakdown have generally occurred from ideological twists (or shifts) in the governments that initiated differences in the focus of integration and in its objectives, as well as on the different ways to achieve an adequate institutionality for it.⁸

Thus, the regional governance crisis is perhaps more of a structural characteristic of regional governance than a conjunctural state. To account for the crises, it would be more important to highlight the moments in which they emerge, which are always related to ideological motivations. Ideological divergences explain differences in the main objectives of regional institutional arrangements, which are themselves the result of previous short periods of ideological convergence at the regional level.

In addition, ideological divergence among the region's governments does not come as a surprise. Research has been done on changes in the regional trajectory, as well as the model of regionalism⁹ within which it is framed and the different institutional constructions associated with regional governance from Regionalism Studies, where this paper is grounded (Dabène 2012; Briceño-Ruiz 2013; Puntigliano and Briceño-Ruiz 2013; Gardini 2015; Nolte and Comini 2016).

In the case of MERCOSUR, the multiple changes it experienced in the last 30 years have demonstrated the importance of the creation of regional institutions with 'credible commitments' (Moravcsik 1998). In particular, and even when they are not the same as those of European institutionalization, the 'credible commitments' that MERCOSUR made were effective in consolidating democracy in the region, for example (Lima Soares de 2000). The role that they play in preserving the resilience and evolution of MERCOSUR's regional project is highly relevant at the commerce level, as well.

The ideological convergence between its leading governments (Argentina and Brazil) accounts for a large part of the accelerated institutionalization and changes that MERCOSUR experienced over time (Granja 2019; Vadell and Giaccaglia 2020). The opposite is also true: when divergences between the two leading countries appear, the likelihood of achieving agreements declines. Most recently, this has been heavily evidenced in the risk posed by an increase in deinstitutionalization and decision-making paralysis. Claims for greater flexibility and the debate regarding the supposed lack of importance of MERCOSUR's institutionalality also show this dynamic.

The Paraguayan impeachment in 2012 began a new period of ideological divergence among the Mercosur governments that lasted only until 2016, when the impeachment of Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff framed the start of a new ideological convergence (Granja 2016; Vázquez 2017). Nowadays, MERCOSUR is in its worst intragovernmental ideological divergence, the one between the Argentinian and Brazilian governments. The consequences of those changes began to appear relatively soon in MERCOSUR's co-operation pattern, where decision-making processes started to be threatened.

Similarly, the PA began to suffer constraints derived from intergovernmental ideological divergences, although this did not take place at the same time as for MERCOSUR. Taking into consideration that it was created relatively recently (2011), the case of the PA might be an expression of the consolidation of the old vision of open regionalism, in opposition to the vision of South America as a geopolitical actor in the global system and a unique space of action and enunciation constructed in the postliberal period. It also represents the return of Mexico to the regional scene, and all the countries that compose

the PA have signed bilateral free trade agreements with the United States (Vadell and Giaccaglia 2020).

The creation of the PA illustrates that there is not just one regional project in South America, nor is there a 'one model fits all' scheme of regional governance (Briceño Ruíz 2017). The different projects are dependent on the intergovernmental ideological convergence between the countries that are part of them.

Intergovernmental convergence was never total for either the PA or MERCOSUR. Despite the right-neoliberal convergence in 2011, the governments of Ollanta Humala (Peru, 2011–2016) and Michelle Bachelet (Chile, 2014–2018) initiated the period of slowing down the decision-making process, even when it was never compromised. The ideological convergence among PA governments was partially fragmented by the Peruvian government crises (2016) and Mexico's turn to the left in 2020. But with Peruvian and Chilean turns in 2021, and more recently Colombian turns in 2022, we can say that ideological intergovernmental convergence in the PA has been variable during the studied period.

These characteristics are important when comparing the PA's reactions to the pandemic crisis with those of MERCOSUR, as well as for understanding the current dynamics of regionalism in South America.

In 2018, regional governance showed a scene of relative internal convergence within these two opposite regional projects: government visions of regional integration as an instrument for global insertion, or as an instrument for development (Deciancio 2016). These two different projects could be understood as the already asserted 'Atlantic-Pacific division': countries with policies that have traditionally privileged trade relations with Europe and the United States, and countries whose goals include extending their relations with Asian countries (Briceño Ruíz and Morales 2017). But there is still more complexity in those different projects, interests, and ideologies (Sanahuja 2017).

In 2019, the co-ordinated knock-out given to Unasur and the planned, but not yet realized (and less likely to be realized over time) Prosur,¹⁰ are also examples of the existence of opposite regional projects. They illustrate how the ideological convergence among governments of the region is particularly significant in maintaining, changing or imploding regional institutional constructions over time (Granja and Mesquita 2020) por serem modificadas e criadas instituições e arranjos normativos que, posteriormente, arrastam consequências importantes para a configuração do cenário regional. Assim, se pretende analisar o caso da União de Nações Sul-Americanas (Unasul).

Ideological convergence has been studied as a critical variable to enhance or improve regional governance. Considered a necessary but not sufficient condition to achieve regional benefits, as disparities in Unasur's leadership diffusion in sectoral co-operation show (Quiliconi and Rivera 2019), ideological convergence has been understood as a key factor to conceptualize South American regional governance, looking at different patterns of ideological convergence/divergence and their implications for institutional regional commitments (Saraiva and Granja 2019, 2021). But ideological convergence among South American governments is not enough. To explain regional governance patterns,

leadership and pragmatism are also important factors that must be considered (Alvarez 2021). Those conceptual statements are the basis of the categories developed for the content analysis that follows this section.

As previously mentioned, different scholars agree with the notion that regional governance in Latin America was already in crisis before the Covid-19 pandemic. Most of their explanations stem from the constant exhaustion that different models of regionalism suffered over time, such as open regionalism, post-liberal, etc. But addressing the motives of this structural condition in South American regionalism implies looking into the different moments of change from an integral and historical perspective that could account for those dynamics. Many studies understand that the ideological divergence among governments in the region is one of the most important reasons for that particular crisis in 2018, especially when looking at Venezuela's crisis management¹¹ (Vadell and Giaccaglia 2020), and even the institutional dismantling of Unasur and subsequent creation of Prosur (Granja and Mesquita 2020).

Brazil's and Mexico's lack of leadership capacity (and of political will) was also pointed out as a reason for the paralysis in most of the regional mechanisms of governance (Caetano, López Burian and Luján 2019; Vadell and Giaccaglia 2020; Frenkel and Azzi 2021; González *et al.* 2021) and it further demonstrates the ideological limitations of the respective foreign policies of these countries.

As has already been pointed out, the 'double crisis of Latin American regionalism and of Interamerican multilateralism' affected the region's ability to manage the pandemic crisis (González *et al.* 2021). We can imagine that collective action would have been the best response to deal with the negative global challenges raised by the Covid-19 pandemic. Since it is on the periphery, Latin America has the dilemma of collectively considering both intra- and extra-regional relations.

The lack of regional leadership and ideological fragmentation characterize the region's 'bad moment', and their consequences are leaving Latin America deliberately empty of its former agent capacity as a global actor (González *et al.* 2021; Frenkel and Azzi 2021). The choice not to take the collective path was a product of the prior fragmented condition. Regardless of their specific internal situations, ideological divergence among the governments made them unable to manage the situation collectively. Further, the general idea of the return of the state (as a strong actor) also tends to privilege internal agendas and portray regional and multilateral actions as unnecessary or even undesirable. The context of the return of the state as a public goods supplier (of education and health, for example) naturalises the shift to internal solutions and opens the way for many nationalist tendencies. Simultaneously, a sincere debate about the role of the state in controlling and caring for citizens is not endorsed (Svampa 2021). This allows for individualism and gives rise to the uncoordinated stances that South American countries have adopted since 2020.

Unilateralism was already an option for many countries in the region, in contrast to the construction of a region that has the capacity to enhance its voice in a multilateral global system. This can be seen in Chilean foreign policy in the 1990s and in the changes to Brazil's foreign policy implemented by President Jair Bolsonaro's administration

even before pandemic, which were characterized as one-sided and solitary (Vadell and Giaccaglia 2020).

Ideological motivations for the uncoordinated responses were also stressed by Alberto Fernandez, the Argentinian president, at the Puebla Group meeting in May 2020: ‘There was a time when we all agreed to make a united and more supportive Latin America. That sadly was broken by conservatism [...] We are on time. The pandemic gives us the opportunity to build unity in Latin America’ (Grupo de Puebla 2020 author’s translation). The Puebla Group can be seen as a progressist ideological alliance in opposition to the Lima Group, which emerged in 2019 as a liberal-conservative alliance against Unasur (Granja and Mesquita 2020; Frenkel and Azzi 2021). It represents the progressive forces that understand Latin American unity as an instrument for development. Many of the leaders who constructed the regionalism of the postliberal period on this basis are part of the Group and have actively fought for regional and co-ordinated responses to the crisis. Both Groups are evidence of the ideological differences that have polarized the decision-making process in South American regional institutions. In the case of the Lima Group, it has played an important role in the process of emptying Unasur and did not hide the ideological motivations for doing so. These groups also show the capacity of ideological convergence in the region to (de)institutionalize specific mechanisms at critical junctures.

As previously mentioned, ideological convergence is a necessary condition for improving regional co-operation, but not a sufficient one (Quiliconi and Rivera 2019). However, when combined with regional leadership (Alvarez 2021), intergovernmental ideological convergence in South America can explain many of the regional governance constructions over time.

Argentinian–Brazilian relations are crucial for South American regionalism, but the current ideological divergence between the two governments makes it almost impossible for the previous bilateral constructive relations to emerge.¹² This tension is manifest in MERCOSUR’s agenda in demands for flexibilization¹³ and also in the impossibility of moving forward on the EU–MERCOSUR agreement, which both Bolsonaro’s and Fernandez’s foreign policies place limits on, even when they are opposite in essence.

The uncoordinated and individual responses of governments in the region were probably expected, considering the previous crisis of South American regionalism; this paper contributes to showing that previous institutional capabilities were under-exploited in that context. Important regional organizations, such as the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), advised regional governments to increase co-ordination, as illustrated by the following statement:

We call on national and local health authorities to work even more closely together to contain the spread of the virus and support health systems capacity. Countries are realizing that we must work together to strengthen pharmaceutical, vaccine and medical device supply chains in addition to our food systems. We also need to explore

regional investments in manufacturing these fundamental tools and reduce our dependency on imported products (PAHO 2020).

Calling for co-ordinated and co-operated responses to the pandemic crisis at all governance levels, especially with regional economic organizations, was also supported by the World Health Organization (WHO) at its 73rd World Health Assembly in May 2020. Even important regional multilateral organizations such as the Interamerican Development Bank (IDB) and Development Bank of Latin America (CAF) gave the same advice (Molano Cruz 2020). Those multilateral institutions have had some impact on the regional management of the pandemic crisis acting through indirect or orchestrated governance (Zamúdio 2021).

Other regions such as Asia and Africa, within their respective regional institutions, followed those suggestions and have also managed the pandemic as a regional crisis. Latin American regionalism has turned its back on the dominant trends of regionalism in the world (González *et al.* 2021).

The governments' unilateral decisions have violated or made more vulnerable their citizens' individual rights and liberties: in many of the countries a state of emergency was declared, an exception that enabled constraining people's mobility and limiting some rights related to meeting in groups, among other fundamental rights, in order to prevent and reduce the spread of contagion (Molano Cruz 2020; De Freitas Lima Ventura and Costa Bueno 2021).

Furthermore, individual national negotiations are leaving South American governments at a disadvantage with respect to the power possessed by multinational laboratories and the medical supplies industry (Lima and Albuquerque 2020; Molano Cruz 2020). The case of Brazil is eloquently unique in that sense, considering the paradox that the government of the most qualified country in Latin America, with capability for its own research on and production of vaccines (Gómez and Perez 2016), was unable to craft a good policy on that issue. Bolsonaro's foreign policy changed Brazil's international course of action on health diplomacy. Brazil went from being one of the most important voices in assuring access to medicines to being one of an observer and rule-taker (Coelho and Rodrigues 2021; De Freitas Lima Ventura and Costa Bueno 2021).

All the conceptual characteristics of South American regionalism that have been pointed out in this section and the analysis of recent regional governance and ideological sway in the region make it possible to characterize regional governance as in crisis even before the pandemic arrived, while also showing the institutional capabilities that regional arrangements used to have. Because of that, a close look at the responses these institutions had to the pandemic crisis is needed to clarify the current regional context. The next two sections attempt to do that by analysing the content of the official documents that those institutions have issued in the last two years, with special focus on conjunctural responses to the pandemic, particularly those taken in 2020.

The following sections develop a content analysis of the official documents available from both cases, MERCOSUR and the Pacific Alliance, in the period under study (March 2020 to March 2022). As stated in the introduction, content analysis is a technique to

identify qualitative information from the sources and interpret it from a conceptual point of view (Silva and Hernández 2020). To do that, a categorization process was developed based on the conceptual review applied to this section, and with an open system of categories, meaning that many of them could appear, or acquire relevance, during the codification process. This explains why the categories are not the same for the two studied cases. The topic categorization was made following a frequency criterion. This means that when a theme appeared, it gained a categorization for each case's documents (*ergo* the categories are not equal due to the different treatment of each case on each issue). Despite this, 'planned collective actions' were categorized in all documents. This process consists of reading all the sources line by line, conducting a thematic analysis to identify the different topics that could have a conceptual or empirical meaning (Silva and Hernández 2020). Thus, the following content analysis focuses on the presence or absence of certain analytical categories derived from conceptual, theoretical or even empirical roots, as may be shown for each case's respective sections.

MERCOSUR's responses to pandemic

Despite the relative urgency that the MERCOSUR council meeting injected in March 2020, co-ordinated and shared responses to the crisis are still lagging.¹⁴ The Presidency, held by Paraguay, acted with relative haste, promoting a FOCEM project budget enlargement with special focus on detection and prevention of Covid-19. The project was to jointly develop a diagnostic test and medical kits, and it was the first decision taken by the CMC in 2020. It gave an extra US\$28m to a FOCEM project on 'research and education in health biotechnologies for Covid-19 sanitary emergency' (Dec CMC n° 1/2020).

Unfortunately, the CMC did not take another decision with respect to the pandemic until December, when they submitted an agreement to regulate and define the digital signatures and different aspects of e-commerce, which had increased due to pandemic restrictions (Dec CMC n° 15/2020). Given that the CMC is MERCOSUR's most important instance or collective decision-taking forum, their poor performance in 2020 (just one relevant decision in response to the pandemic) illustrates the regional governance crisis and lack of ideological convergence among the governments. More important in MERCOSUR than in the PA, the ideological divergence between Fernández and Bolsonaro (the Argentinian and Brazilian Presidents, respectively) and their opposite reactions in domestic management of the crisis explain the poor performance of MERCOSUR in the period. In short, of 15 decisions taken by the CMC in 2020, just two of them had a direct impact on managing the crisis. The other decisions took the traditional space of action of MERCOSUR's normal functioning (designation of authorities and budgets, and customs issues) as a main objective. The 2021 and (up to March) 2022 decisions also had this topic distribution, showing indifference in MERCOSUR's management of consequences of the crisis in the 'post-pandemic period'.

The official MERCOSUR document that most focuses on responding to the crisis is the Presidential Declaration of 18 March 2020. It lays out the need to 'coordinate regional

actions to contain and mitigate the impact of coronavirus’, and states that the ‘pandemic does not recognize borders, so an efficient and permanent regional coordination is required’. MERCOSUR’s presidents committed to the following:

- 1) Facilitate the return of citizens and residents in MERCOSUR countries;
- 2) Consider the specific characteristics of border population communities;
- 3) Notify other members of decisions made in order to manage the situation at the borders;
- 4) Identify and remove obstacles to the circulation of goods and services, adopt facilities for the transport and transit of first necessity products, including food, hygiene and health goods;
- 5) Evaluate the option to reduce the external tax of health and prevention products (MERCOSUR Presidential Declaration 2020, author’s translation).

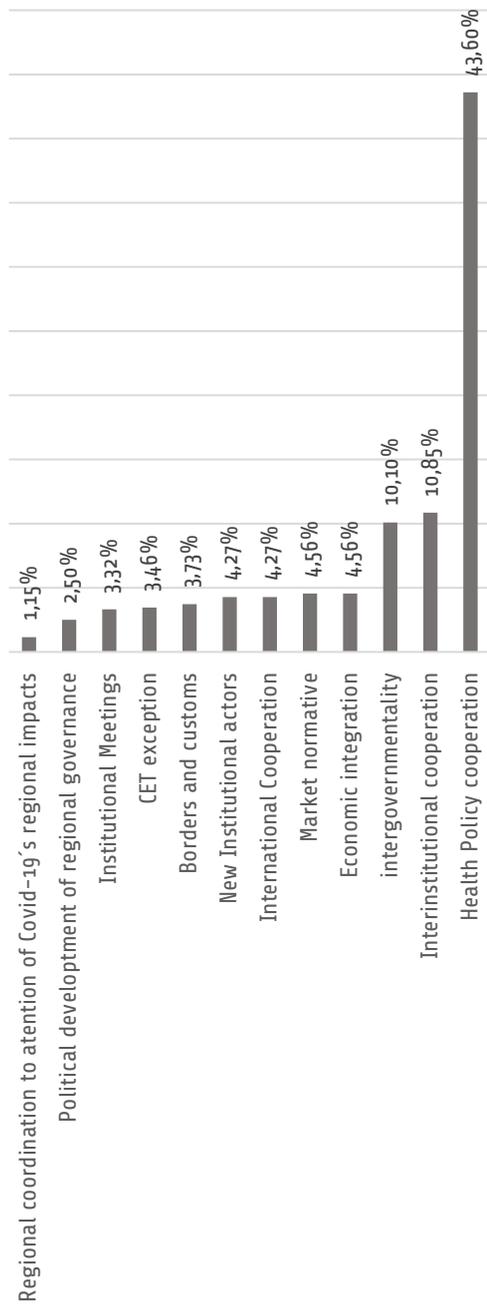
However, these commitments are not enough for a serious regional strategy aimed at managing the crisis. These attempts directly clash with domestic sanitary management and show the intrinsic limitations of this management focus. The codified categories of this Presidential Declaration are shown in the graph in Figure 1, where the other topics treated in the joint declaration, which are equally negligent of handling the pandemic, are also shown.

Pacific Alliance responses to the pandemic

The first common declaration of the PA was on 13 March. The High-Level Group (GAN, for the Spanish acronym; made up of Foreign Affairs and External Trade Undersecretaries from Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru) evaluated the ‘conjunctural effects’ that the pandemic ‘could have in regional economies’.¹⁶ The GAN also laid the foundations for the information exchange system to ‘support citizens abroad’ and began consular co-operation to provide assistance in ‘land, air, and maritime logistics aspects, for all segments of the economy and foreign trade’ (Pacific Alliance GAN Declaration, March 2020). Hence, the most important objective of the PA’s decisions with regard to Covid was the maintenance of commerce flows.

The frequency of GAN meetings was intense, showing more concern for pandemic impacts at the regional level than MERCOSUR’s government representatives. Since April 2020, the GAN has co-ordinated the exchange of information regarding trade decisions, trying to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on intra-regional commerce. It established a calendar of meetings to co-ordinate efforts and identify the potential damage to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and selected products that could complement and generate the productive chains necessary to overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in food supplements and cosmetic products. The GAN also co-operated to accelerate and promote e-commerce by creating a virtual platform¹⁷ that subsequently trained SMEs to facilitate trade exchange, among other actions (PA official news, 17 April 2020).

Figure 1: Analytical categories for MERCOSUR Presidential Declaration, 2020 (% of coverage in the document)



Source: Author's database.

The most relevant topic codified in the declaration is health policy co-operation (43.6%), but observation of how events evolved indicates this was mere rhetoric. The other topics with significantly less relevance that were identified in the codification of the document were: interinstitutional co-operation (10.85%), referring to an expressed intention to co-operate at a regional level among both national and international institutions; and intergovernmentality (10.1%), meaning the declared intention to create intergovernmental instances to co-operate. Both are conceptual categories derived from regionalism studies that attempt to identify the political will of the analysed sources. Other topics present in the Presidential Declaration analysis are the traditional topics from MERCOSUR negotiations, such as economic integration (4.56%), border issues (3.73%) and CET exceptions (3.46%). Curiously, the topic that was least present in the document was regional co-ordination of attention to the impact of Covid-19, covering less than 2%.

As shown, just two of the 15 CMC decisions taken in 2020 were about the Covid-19 pandemic, with a clear predominance of the topic in the first decision, while the second referred only to one aspect of pandemic: virtuality. This is clear evidence of the ideological divergence among MERCOSUR's principal governments noted above,¹⁵ considering that consensus is the pre-condition to a decision being taken on that instance. The same could be assumed about the sole presidential declaration made in that year. Even when they were specifically about MERCOSUR's responses to Covid-19 and could be considered early reactions, their intentions did not materialize—or worse, the commitments made were forgotten during the year.

If we compare MERCOSUR's 2020 performance with its path on taking common decisions (at the CMC level) or its joint presidential declarations, the results are very disappointing, as the pandemic worsened.

Digital issues were one of the most important topics on the PA's agenda; they included not only promoting and assisting SME e-commerce, but also creating innovation programs¹⁸ that encourage research in particular areas, such as *Talento Digital*, a program launched in July 2020 to promote dialogue between private institutions and the public sector. It consists of a set of webinars and workshops that are actively committed to integrating the business sector in the construction of a digital talent roadmap.¹⁹ On 11 December 2020, the Santiago Declaration at the XV Summit finally established the Digital Declaration of PA countries. This Presidential Declaration also serves as an important resource in that it summarizes all PA reactions to the crisis during 2020, along with their plans to confront the pandemic in 2021. Presidents expressed a high commitment to post-pandemic economic recovery and strengthening of public health systems. Inter-regional co-operation with the European Union (EU) was also highlighted as critical to development. Topics of focus during 2020 further included 'digital issues, the implementation of the circular economy, reactivation of tourism, and the certification systems of labour competencies' (Santiago Declaration 2020). The PA focused on the reactivation of tourism, strengthening basic education teachers' digital skills, telework, and e-commerce co-operation programs, along with 'the establishment of the Social Observatory that will monitor policies to combat multidimensional poverty' (Santiago Declaration 2020).

The role of founding organizations and financial institutions that co-operate with the PA was emphasized in the Santiago Declaration, illustrating that multilateral development institutions are still important to promote recovery efforts in the region, as in the following statement: ‘Our gratitude to the permanent collaboration and support in the fulfilment of our objectives granted by the IDB, the CAF, the SELA²⁰, the ECLAC and the World Bank’ (Santiago Declaration 2020). These organizations brought technical and financial co-operation in helping the PA’s strategy.

The ‘Gender Declaration’ that established the PA’s concern regarding increased gender inequality in the region, which became more visible during the Covid-19 crisis, was also signed during the PA’s XV Summit. The PA acknowledged the

fundamental role played by women in all their diversity, both as businesswomen, entrepreneurs, workers, consumers, and in unpaid work, in the growth and development of our countries with special mention to women in vulnerable situations, women with disabilities, women from rural areas and indigenous women (PA Gender Declaration 2020).

Gender was a principal topic on the PA’s agenda in 2021. Creative economy and digital regional markets were the most referenced topics from 2021. The Santiago Declaration included an appendix laying out the future agenda on ‘the economic empowerment and autonomy of women’, otherwise known as Gender Declaration Implementation Plan to ‘adopt public policies and common actions between PA members, private sector, strategic partners and international organizations, jointly’ (Santiago Declaration Appendix II 2020).

Within the proposal set out by the PA, there were goals focused on ‘promoting economic reactivation in the context of the economic crisis derived from the COVID-19 pandemic’. This illustrates advances and deepened efforts for financial integration, with a special emphasis on ‘promoting sustainable and resilient economic recovery in our countries’. The PA’s proposals also encouraged innovation in the financial sector and the ‘digitization of economies’ focused on ‘the development of the Fin Tech industry and other sectors.’ Other objectives laid out in the Santiago Declaration include supporting the ‘integration of financial markets under a sustainable financial approach, in accordance with best practices and international trends, along with efforts to raise the standard and obtain improvements in the structuring of infrastructure projects held under the Public-Private Association contracting modality’; ‘[d]esigning a Policy for the Management of Psychosocial Factors and Promotion of Mental Health at Work’; conducting ‘an impact study on the economic growth of multidimensional poverty and the effects caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic’; and implementing ‘the PA’s Social Observatory to collect, systematize, administer and publish updated information on the social sector to strengthen the design and implementation of public policies’ (Santiago Declaration Appendix II 2020).

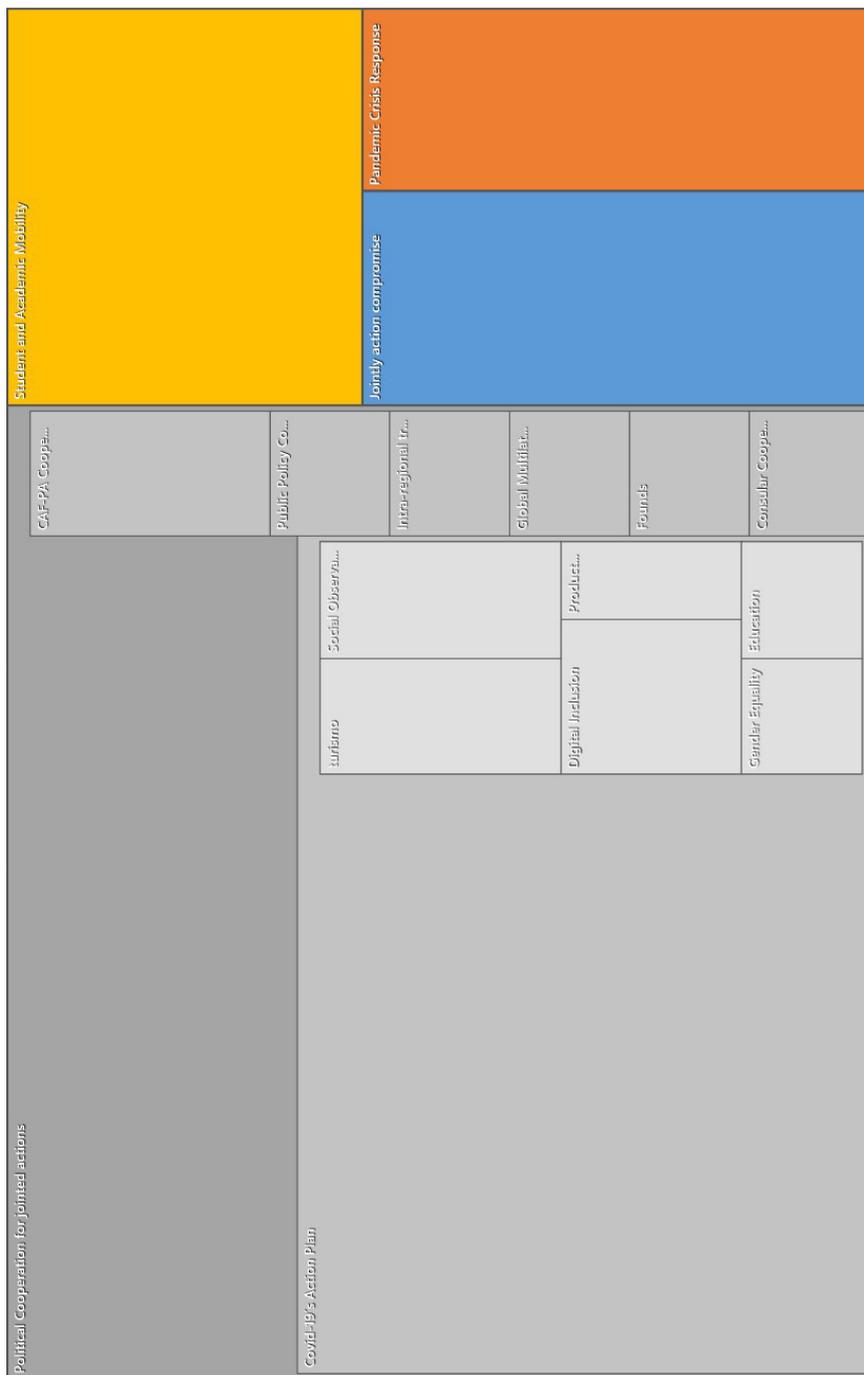
Finally, the PA wants to be recognized

as a mechanism whereby challenges and opportunities of the pandemic can be resolved, as an active instrument for regional economic reactivation/recovery, an instrument for articulating joint efforts in favor of the well-being of citizens through the design and execution of a communication strategy (Santiago Declaration Appendix II 2020).

In this sense, the unilateral adoption of precautionary procedures initiated in March 2020 was expected to be mitigated during the year. Playing an active role in collecting and publishing information on each member's decision, they created a systematic information base that can be accessed via their official website. Afterwards, the Chilean Presidency had many successful initiatives to maintain the frequency of virtual working group meetings in order to prepare the XV Summit, which also showed all common efforts to react to the emergency and mitigate the consequences of the crisis in the medium and long term (specially in trade, digital inclusion and gender equality).

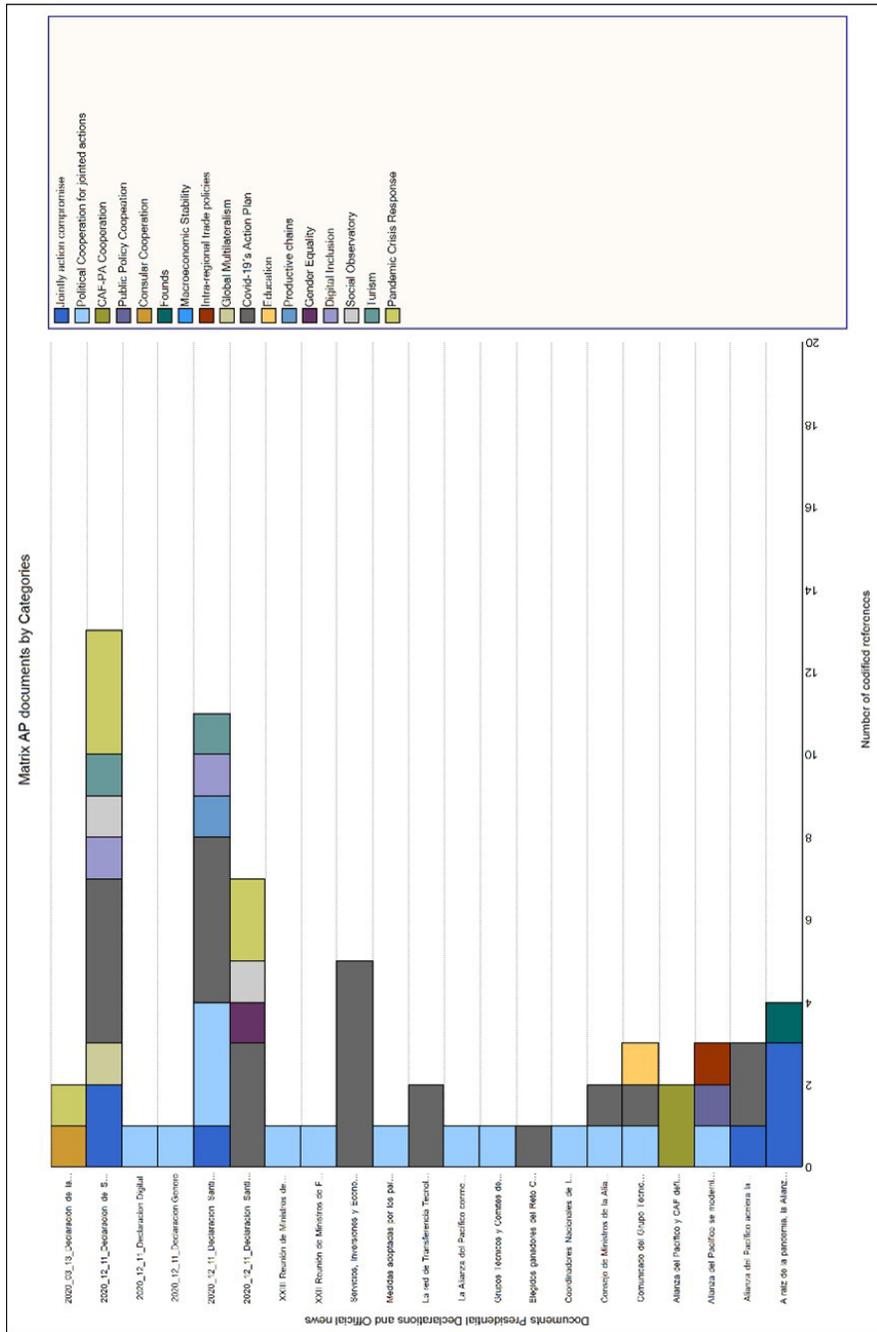
The following figure shows the content analysis of eight PA Presidential Declarations and 38 official news items that were codified in the software. The hierarchical map shows the different categories that were created to identify the level of commitment and the intention of the reaction. The size of each rectangle represents the codified references, and the colour represents the number of documents. The graph plots selected categories to show the scope of the topics that the PA treated as outcomes to the pandemic crisis and it represents the percentage of each document (lines of text) codified in each analytical category. Both figures sum up the previous analysis for PA responses to the pandemic.

Figure 2: Hierarchical map of PA codified categories (% of references in the documents)



Source: Author's database.

Figure 3: PA Documents sorted by analytical categories (% of codified references):



Source: Author's database.

As shown, the total scope of PA official documents in 2020 is by far more relevant than those of MERCOSUR. In the latter's case, for example, the official documents are made available on the website only at the end of each semester, making it difficult to analyse a conjunctural decision-making process.

The figure also shows that the scope of PA documents addressing the pandemic's (direct or indirect) consequences is larger than that of MERCOSUR, and that the issue was present all year in all institutional instances. Note that this is remarkably different from MERCOSUR's treatment of pandemic, where the issue had been absent in most of the year's negotiations.

Political co-operation for joint actions and for Covid-19 action plans are the analytical categories most present in all documents. Also acquiring relevance is international co-operation at the multilateral level as one of the most important actions taken during 2020, as the graph also shows.

In summary, the PA reacted better than MERCOSUR in handling the pandemic crisis at the regional level due to the presence of ideological convergence (even considering that Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador is a left-wing politician) during the period. Interestingly, despite all the decisions taken by the PA to manage the crisis, the institutional capacities already in place were not taken into consideration; instead, new institutions were created, such as the Social Observatory. Even though MERCOSUR already had more institutional capacity than the PA, the latter had better management of the crisis at the regional level, as shown by the analysis. MERCOSUR's prior institutional capacities were neglected by the CMC, which could be explained by the ideological intergovernmental divergence. The GMC—the specialized Health Working Group—has addressed pandemic issues in their meetings, but their recommendations did not resonate at the presidential and ministerial decision-making levels (even when the MERCOSUR Health Ministers Meeting also had Covid-19 as a topic on the agenda).

Final Words

Despite previous experiences in health co-operation, South American countries have either ignored those institutions and opted for individual and uncoordinated reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic or chose the creation of new ones. Contrary to the common good, the institutional capacities that many regional governance mechanisms possessed were not taken into consideration and the opportunity to explore this previous co-operation more fully was missed.

Regional health co-operation in Latin America has a long tradition. The Pan American Health Organization was founded in 1902 (Santos Lima and Villarreal Villamar 2021) and, since 1971, the Andean Community (CAN) has the Andean Health Organism-Hipolito Unanue Agreement. Health constituted the first regional public policy in South America, as it has had a sectorial subunit ever since the Pan American Union, a predecessor of the Organization of American States (OAS), was established (Hoffmann 2019; Molano Cruz 2020). Unasur's South American Institute for Health Governance (ISAGS in Spanish) was

identified as the most important regional institution to develop regional health policy. In 2006, it co-operated with the Andean Health Organism, with MERCOSUR's sectorial group n° 11 and with the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO) to elaborate a regional health plan that harmonized agendas, creating a long-term common interest arena that allowed Unasur countries to act proactively in international organizations. ISAGS's achievements were considered a success in that they improved regional health coverage, the import of medicines, and co-ordination in the regional production of medical supplies, and defended a unified stance in international negotiations. However, South American countries chose to take a much more difficult path during the Covid-19 pandemic (Santos Lima and Villarreal Villamar 2021). The previous regional institutions focused on health (including but not limited to ISAGS, as seen in the MERCOSUR and PA analysis) were not completely explored in their capacities to lead during the crisis. Without political will, institutional arrangements were not enough to react jointly to the pandemic.

MERCOSUR and PA had a timid reaction with respect to controlling the epidemic, developing co-ordinated programs and investing in critical areas. The content analysis conducted on the official documents of the two studied cases revealed some intergovernmental concern in dealing with the pandemic crisis, but it was insufficient for articulating a planned and controlled regional policy to manage the crisis at this level. In the PA's case, the plans sped up and were boosted but their limited scope meant they had a low impact. They have more impact, as they were destined to, on enterprises and SME capacities to face the difficulties in maintaining commerce flows. But even when they may have succeeded, they were not enough to maintain the flows of commerce at pre-pandemic levels.

In MERCOSUR's case the timid responses offered in 2020 would have had more impact if the outcomes of the FOCEM project had been more directed toward people. However, its direct impact on the population's access to health (e.g. vaccine autonomy) is not evident in the short term. The FOCEM project is still being executed; the first actions taken in 2020 that had the most impact were those to improve capacity for diagnosing the virus in MERCOSUR countries and the opening in August 2021 of the Biosecurity Laboratory in San Lorenzo, Paraguay; and the Center for Innovation in Epidemiological Surveillance, in Uruguay. However, these were already in the original project (prior to pandemic crisis).

South American regional governance was unable to confront the pandemic's impacts at this level. As proposed by this paper, one possible explanation could be regionalism's previous state of crisis at the political level. South American regional governance was in crisis because of the current ideological fragmentation that is unprecedented in the trajectory of South American regionalism. Despite the intergovernmental ideological convergence never being complete in regional institutional arrangements, when it did reach high levels, this institutionalization had greater capacity to deal with regional public policies, as in health. On the other hand, even as ideological divergences among members of a regional institution appeared from time to time, the path of co-operation and resilience had been difficult to break. Actual conditions of ideological intergovernmental fragmentation could be an exception in this trajectory.

Regionalism was in crisis before the pandemic arrived, but it further deepened the (in)capacity to manage the crisis at regional level. The intergovernmental ideological convergence as an intra-regional mechanism to generate consensus was determined by this paper as a variable that could affect the expected outcome of each studied case. Given the previous regional capacities, both were expected to have been different at first glance for each case. After the content analysis, the research shows that previous regional capacities in MERCOSUR were underrated, even when the main decision taken as a response to the pandemic was rated with a high degree of effectiveness, due to its budgetary character. This non-expected action could be explained by the intra-MERCOSUR ideological divergence among governments. PA intergovernmental ideological convergence was variable (non-constant), but previous regional institutional capabilities were low. Performance was better in terms of decisions taken in response to pandemic, but with a low or even residual effect on regional management of the crisis. This paper aimed to gain a better understanding of actual conditions in South American regionalism and took the pandemic issue as a conjunctural moment that tests its capacities to react to and manage the situation.

Notes

- 1 A similar argument was made by Parthenay looking for the bureaucracies' capacities in the analysis of Central American Integration System (SICA) and Caricom responses to the pandemic crisis (Parthenay 2021). Better evidence on that argument should appear in future comparative research considering Central American and Caribbean regional mechanisms (see also Caldentey and Pozo 2021). For the former regional health institutional capacities see (Agostinis *et al.* 2021).
- 2 Nvivo from Qualitative Social Research International, in its 11 Pro version.
- 3 This allows for comparison between the two institutions with an almost equal scope of official documents in the studied period.
- 4 In 2022, the PA Presidential Declaration from January has just a brief consideration on 'continuing the joint actions to promote the economic recuperation' and a special mention of the youth role in this context. While in the 2021 Presidential Declaration, creative economy is briefly mentioned as an instrument for reactivation of the economy in a post-crisis period. They concentrated their joint actions in a Digital Regional Market Plan that had some impact on the reactivation of intra-regional commerce. MERCOSUR's decisions also show a lack of importance of the topic: in 2021, of 21 decisions that CMC took, none of them had a reference to the topic of pandemic or Covid-19. The 2022 decisions are not fully available at the official website.
- 5 CMC Decision n° 1/2020.
- 6 CMC decision n° 20 of 2021 ratifies the extra-complementary budget that the previous decision had assigned (CMC n° 1/2020), and shows some details in the rates that each country has from the project's execution yet.
- 7 A similar structural argument could be seen in Liquid Regionalism (Mariano, Bressan and Luciano 2021).
- 8 In this sense, this paper agrees with Vadell and Giaccaglia's statement that it is not possible to attribute the crisis of Latin American regionalism to a lack of institutionality, but to an intrinsic redefinition of their motivations that comes from domestic and systemic changes (Vadell and Giaccaglia, 2020).
- 9 In some bibliographies named as different types of regionalism (in the sense that is constructed inter-governmentally) autonomous or *cepalino* (ECLAC's strategies for the region); open, strategic, etc.
- 10 Union of South American Nations (Unasur in Spanish) and Forum for the Progress and Development of South America (Prosur in Spanish).
- 11 In this particular case, the internationalization of Venezuela's crisis opens the frame for external actors to

enter the scene, such as the United States of America, China, Russia and Iran, and is one of the expressions of the failure of Latin American regionalism (and of the OAS) to manage the crisis, even under the direct consequences of migration (González *et al.* 2021).

- 12 Even when not in complete ideological convergence, the bilateral Argentinian–Brazilian construction of regional governance has had an important role in MERCOSUR's genesis (Saraiva 2012) and its later development (Granja 2016), as well as in the Buenos Aires Consensus in 2003 (Vázquez 2017).
- 13 Note that flexibilization has been a demand on MERCOSUR's agenda since the previous period of neoliberal convergence, even though now it is also on the menu, mainly on the initiative of the Uruguayan government.
- 14 The MERCOSUR Council is the bloc's executive entity and is formed by Presidents, and Economy and Foreign Affairs Ministers of member countries. It is the institution with the capacity to take mandatory decisions for all the countries.
- 15 The year 2020 was conjunctural for MERCOSUR's intragovernmental ideological convergence. The shift of the Argentinian government in December 2019 broke the (already weak) ideological convergence between the former president, Macri, and the current Brazilian government. Also, in 2020 the Uruguayan government shifted its ideological spectrum but both took a different position from the Brazilian government at the domestic level and placed a flexibilization demand on MERCOSUR's agenda (closer to Bolsonaro's position than the Argentinian government). The Paraguayan government has adopted pragmatic behavior since 2018 and had some regional initiatives during 2020 when holding the MERCOSUR Presidency.
- 16 The PA's Educational Technical Group has also had an early reaction, emitting a joint statement on 11 March to inform students in mobility programs, and acted continuously in giving systematic information on PA's Academic and Student Mobility Platform.
- 17 Entrepreneurship and Innovation Ecosystem of the Pacific Alliance.
- 18 'The COVID-19 Challenge for innovators, entrepreneurs and researchers of the PA, 396 initiatives with innovative solutions to mitigate the effects of the pandemic were evaluated and 8 initiatives were selected, 2 from each country in areas of health, education or community, granting seed capital and accompaniment in your endeavors' (Santiago Declaration 2020).
- 19 The digital talent roadmap 'can include specific actions of public policies and business initiatives aimed at the creation, acceleration and sustainability of digital talent in our countries. Addressing these challenges is essential for the future recovery of our economies.' Undersecretary of International Economic Relations of Chile, Rodrigo Yáñez (PA Official News 22 July 2020) and was finally signed as the 'PA Digital Declaration' in December's Summit.
- 20 Latin American and Caribbean Economic System.

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Respostas do Mercosul e da Aliança do Pacífico à Pandemia

Resumo: Este documento tem como objetivo identificar as respostas que as instituições regionais (Mercosul e Aliança do Pacífico) tiveram à pandemia da Covid-19. Levando em consideração as perspectivas do regionalismo sul-americano, o documento analisa as respostas institucionais que esses arranjos regionais tiveram entre o início da pandemia, em março de 2020, e março de 2022. Apesar da governança regional sul-americana já estar em crise antes da chegada da pandemia, este documento tem como objetivo destacar como as consequências sanitárias, econômicas e sociais trazidas pela pandemia do Covid-19 teriam sido melhor administradas com a coordenação de políticas regionais, tirando vantagens das capacidades institucionais regionais anteriores. Primeiramente, o documento analisa a situação da governança regional no contexto pré-pandêmico. A crise do regionalismo se manifesta na convergência ideológica fragmentada entre os governos da região. Posteriormente, seguirá uma análise centrada no exercício empírico de mapeamento das respostas do Mercosul e da Aliança do Pacífico. As diferenças entre as respostas dos dois casos às crises, e suas consequências para a governança regional, serão destacadas com dados da estratégia de análise de conteúdo utilizada para estudar os dois casos.

Palavras-chave: governança regional, Mercado Comum do Sul (Mercosul), Aliança do Pacífico, respostas Covid-19; políticas públicas de saúde; regionalismo; crises regionais.

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