

COVID and Cartel Wars: The Pandemic's Impact on Narcotrafficking in Chile and Argentina

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Abstract

What would happen if two problems were amplified between them, and governments could not mitigate their consequences? In recent decades, narcotrafficking has been a defining feature in Latin America's transnational criminal activities and its regional socio-political landscape. The Southern Cone has portrayed a relatively effective response towards these potential threats compared to its neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, significant shifts were noticed during the later stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in the southern region, with an increase in illicit activities related to drug cartels. Through a comparative analysis of Chile and Argentina, examining their political histories and analyzing their relationship with both issues, this paper explores the impact of COVID-19 governmental policies on the development of the drug market and its adaptive strategies to the sanitary crisis. Despite sharing regional power status, the countries' conflicting political conditions before, and during the pandemic, led to contrasting responses, by illustrating divergent dynamics on the narcotrafficking issue. First, a historical context will be discussed, as well as narcotrafficking's influence in the Southern Cone, including COVID-19's impact on both Chile and Argentina. Finally, a comparative approach to both countries will be provided with policy proposals to address these issues.

Keywords: Narcotrafficking, Transnational Crime, Drug Market, Illicit Activities, COVID-19, Governmental Policies, Chile, Argentina, Southern Cone.

I. Introduction

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), narcotrafficking - traditionally known as drug trafficking or drug trade - "is a global illicit trade involving the cultivation, manufacture, distribution, and sale of substances that are subject to drug prohibition laws."¹ Directly associated with organized criminal factions, it is their primary source of revenue, among other

sectors of the black economy, such as arms trafficking, human trafficking, and migrant trafficking, comprising on a local scale, a spectrum of minor crimes. The Southern Cone region —comprising Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, and the South of Brazil— has displayed rigorous rhetoric against drug cartels coming from the North. Particularly: Mexico, in which cartels generate between 19 and 29 billion USD from drug sales in the US;² Colombia;

¹ UNODC. *UNODC World Drug Report*. 2010. [Link](#)

² CNN Editorial Research. "Mexico Drug War Fast Facts". March, 2022. [Link](#)

and Peru, considering the vulnerability of its borders due to their geographical remoteness and insufficient state presence, thus being strategic checkpoints for drug trade.³ Furthermore, recent coordinated efforts in Chile and Argentina have illustrated the complexity of this issue. For instance, on October 30th, 2024, a narco-plane carrying 475 kilos of cocaine was intercepted by an operation comprising the Air Force, the Joint Aerospace Command and the National Gendarmeries, in Santiago del Estero.⁴ Similarly, on October 25th of the same year, a joint operation with the West Metropolitan Prosecutor's Office and the PDI (*Policía de Investigaciones*) seized 55 homes and 33 arrested suspects associated with a criminal organization in the district of Maipu in Santiago de Chile.⁵ These examples illustrate the ongoing situation in both countries, labelled as uncommon in comparison with previous years and with their reputation, being traditionally labeled as the South-American “oasis free of crime.”⁶

II. Historical Context

The political context of both countries plays a pivotal role in understanding the current circumstances. In Chile, during President Piñera's administration, social discontent

defined the last trimester of 2019 -known as *estallido social*- manifested in protests against the State's inability to satisfy the citizenry's socio-economic needs, particularly in major metropolitan areas. Both peaceful demonstrations and riots shaped the Chilean social landscape before the pandemic and the new constitutional project.⁷

In the case of Argentina, on October 27th, 2019, Alberto Fernández, with Cristina Fernández de Kirchner as Vice-President, won the election against former President Macri, paving the way for the redevelopment of Peronism in the public administration.⁸ The new government inherited a long historical burden of political instability and critical socioeconomic conditions, considering that 40% of the population is below the poverty line.⁹ During his campaign, Fernández promised negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and suggested rescheduling the debt due dates to solve the crisis. However, in the following months after the election and the onset of the pandemic, the country faced severe socio-economic devastation compounded with a debt crisis of colossal proportions.¹⁰

Both countries exhibit differences in the economic and political spectrum. However, polarization and ineffective

³ O. Quiñones Marriaga. “Transnational Consequences of the Colombia - FARC Peace Process.” *Revista Seguridad y Poder Terrestre*, 3 no. 2 (2024). [Link](#)

⁴ De Los Santos, G. “Interceptaron una Avioneta Narco, Secuestraron 475 Kilos de Cocaína y Detuvieron al Piloto”, *La Nación*, October, 2024. [Link](#)

⁵ Arriaza, J. “Tráfico de Drogas: PDI Logra Detener a más de 30 Personas tras Operativo en 55 Domicilios de la RM”, *La Tercera*, October, 2024. [Link](#)

⁶ Ariet, A. “Chile ya no es un Oasis ante el Crimen Organizado,” *DW*, May, 2024. [Link](#)

⁷ Riffo-Pavón I. “El Estallido Social Chileno de 2019: Un Estudio A Partir De Las Representaciones E Imaginarios Sociales En La Prensa.” *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales*, 66 no. 243 (2021). [Link](#)

⁸ GIGA Focus Latin America. “Argentina 2019: Broken Economy, Strengthened Democracy”, 2019. [Link](#)

⁹ GIGA, “Argentina 2019.”

¹⁰ Choroszczucha, S. “Argentina: Descontento Ciudadano en medio de la Crisis Sanitaria.” *Agenda Pública*. September, 2020. [Link](#); and GIGA, “Argentina 2019.”

administrative action -customary traits in the past- became more pronounced in the months leading up to the health crisis.

III. Narcotrafficking in the Southern Cone

Moreover, the influence of narcotrafficking in South America is not new. It has impacted governmental dynamics both directly and indirectly, shaped by factors such as territory, demographics, time period, and administration. Driven by globalization, its transnational trait facilitated a quick development of adaptive strategies in response to societal and technological shifts.

Although one may assume that borders play a protective role, Riquelme (2019) states that Latin America is a boundaryless hub for transnational organized crime, where regional networks and trade arrangements extend into the global sphere, which has been fueled by the expansion of drug cartels from Mexico, the proliferation of trafficking routes through Africa to Europe, and a significant rise in the global narcotics demand.¹¹ According to the UNODC, narcotrafficking in the Latino-Caribbean space has been a lucrative business for producers, transporters, and dealers, generating over \$150,000 billion, considering it is the biggest cocaine and marihuana producer.¹² On this matter, an increase in coca cultivation and cocaine production in

South America has been linked with a growing demand from the Global North - comprising the United States and the European Union. This demand has transformed the international drug trade's *modus operandi* by affecting non-production countries through the illegal use of their ports. Furthermore, stringent controls in Colombia, Peru, and Brazil have led to a shift in drug trafficking routes southward.¹³

Regarding our region of interest, the domestic demand for narcotics is notorious, bearing in mind that Chile is the main marihuana consumer. Closely followed by Argentina, it keeps high levels of consumption of both marihuana and cocaine, with interregional and intertemporal variations, which are still relatively lower levels in comparison to Brazil, Mexico, and the Caribbean.¹⁴ Even so, the expansion of northern cartel networks is showcased in the manipulation of non-traditional ports, such as the Chilean port of San Antonio, the Argentinean port of Buenos Aires, and the Uruguayan port of Montevideo.¹⁵ These port centers have grown considerably in terms of commercial streams, but have several vulnerabilities due to the lack of recognition of maritime drug trafficking, even though the sea routes are widely used for global trafficking, in addition to the low level of police capacity and the significant institutional corruption.¹⁶ For instance, the

¹¹ Riquelme Rivera, J., Salinas Cañas, S., and Franco Severino, P. "El Crimen Organizado Transnacional (COT) en América del Sur: Respuestas Regionales." *Estudios Internacionales (Santiago)*, 51 no.192 (2019). [Link](#)

¹² Jimenez García, F. "Lucha contra el Narcotráfico en América Latina-Caribe. La Labor de la Organización de Estados Americanos (OEA)". *Revista de Estudios en Seguridad Internacional*, 7, no. 1 (2021), pp. 161-166. [Link](#)

¹³ Sampó, C. and Troncoso, V. "Cocaine trafficking from non-traditional ports: examining the cases of Argentina, Chile and Uruguay." *Trends Organ Crim* 26, 235-257 (2023). [Link](#)

¹⁴ Flom, H. "Política, Policía y Violencia: Regulación del Narcotráfico en el Cono Sur." *Revista de Estudios en Seguridad Internacional*, 4, no. 1, (2018), pp. 17-53. [Link](#)

¹⁵ Sampó et al. "Cocaine trafficking."

¹⁶ Sampó et al. "Cocaine trafficking."

security of the port of Buenos Aires is managed by the Customs and the *Prefectura Naval*, who face legal challenges when it comes to checking containers for three reasons: 1) according to port's officers, state control is limited; even if there is technology available, no political decision has commanded to do so; 2) the controls are flexible, given the competition with Montevideo's port, and 3) the international treaties between Paraguay and Bolivia, stating that they can use the port for transit, disables the Prefectura's intervention given their jurisdiction. This last point was evidenced by the discovery in 2021 of a cocaine cargo in Antwerp and Hamburg coming from Buenos Aires, which had been in transit from Paraguay.¹⁷

Likewise, Chile is no exception, given its porous borders with Bolivia and Peru, the lack of police control, and its long coastline which facilitates access for drug traffickers.¹⁸ From its ports, cocaine shipments destined for Europe, the United States, Oceania, and Asia are re-exported through non-traditional ports.¹⁹ Paraguay is responsible for the majority of cannabis contraband entering the country, but Colombian *crepey* - a variation of marihuana - has grown in popularity, and domestically grown marijuana is also part of the market.²⁰ Global seizure of grass Cannabis registered in Latin America and the Caribbean increased from 20% in 2012 to 30% in 2013, given the large seizures in Paraguay,

Colombia and Brazil, which translated into an increase of almost 60% of the volume seized in South America, which rose from 821 to 1,308 tons.²¹

IV. Covid 19's Impact

As previously mentioned, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the international drug market is well-evidenced. Given the social context and the pre-existing development of transnational criminal organizations in the Southern Cone, the response to the sanitary crisis will be discussed to establish a clear relationship.

According to a report from EUROPOL, in the early stages of the pandemic, in the EU, a shift in supply-demand dynamics was expected to disrupt illegal supply channels, consumer stockpiling of certain drugs, and supply shortages in essential chemicals used in drug production, which would impact production output and inflation.²² This shift is defined as the primary cause behind the development of illicit activities in Argentina and Chile, reflecting the pandemic's impact on the drug market's economic model and the domestic economies of these countries.

Argentina

In Argentina, the federal government implemented several health measures, including a nationwide mandatory

¹⁷ Sampó et al. "Cocaine trafficking."

¹⁸ Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, "Chile", Índice Global de Crimen Organizado, 2023. [Link](#).

¹⁹ Global Initiative, Índice Global de Crimen Organizado "Chile."

²⁰ Global Initiative, Índice Global de Crimen Organizado "Chile."

²¹ Ministerio de Justicia, UNODC, Fiscalía General de la Nación. *Informe Técnico de la Caracterización Química, Taxonómica y de Mercado de la Marihuana Producida Y Consumida en el País*. 2015. [Link](#)

²² EUROPOL. *Pandemic Profiteering: How Criminals Exploit the COVID-19 Crisis*. March 2020. [Link](#)

quarantine, and a temporary border blockade, which helped mitigate the spread of COVID 19, but significant deficits in key areas were reported, and inequalities accentuated the risks faced by the low-income population. In this regard, 4 million people live in densely populated neighbourhoods and face significant housing shortages, with limited access to basic services.²³ Subsequently, the economy contracted by 5% to 7% of GDP in 2020, driven by lower exports, declining prices, capital outflows, greater uncertainty around consumption and investment, as well as fiscal deterioration, with the recession impacting tax revenue and the adopted measures expanding public spending.²⁴

Chile

In Chile, the country dealt with strong pressures due to social unrest, with low poverty levels but high inequality (GINI coefficient of 44 points), along with the demands of the middle class and widespread perceptions of inequality which led to severe disruptions in the functioning of the productive sector, particularly affecting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in urban centres.²⁵ At the beginning of the pandemic, a projected increase in the fiscal deficit was reported, alongside reduced demand from China (Chile's top copper buyer) compounded by a decline in international copper prices, regardless of the final export

destination.²⁶ In the first two weeks, the sanitary strategy focused on regulating the population's mobility to prevent the spread of the virus, however, the authorities soon began to give guidelines and interim solutions, leading to a gradual and episodic approach to confinement known as the *Plan Paso a Paso*.²⁷ On a regional scale, different contagion "waves" hit the country, with a considerable impact in the Metropolitan Region in 2020, which saw the highest number of cases.²⁸ In 2021, sporadic, but frequent, waves were reported across all regions of the country.²⁹

V. Chile's Case

Regarding narco trafficking, Chile's case has evidenced a strong commitment against the expansion of narco trafficking networks. For example, the State has ratified key international agreements, such as the 2000 UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocols, which were later incorporated into Chilean domestic law in 2004 through Decree No. 342 by the Ministry of FA, introducing new regulations and crimes to modernize the judicial system.³⁰ Additionally, the recent *Política Nacional contra el Crimen Organizado 2022-2027*, marks critical progress, due to the recognition of the importance of this issue, while also establishing strategies

²³Bastos, F. R. et al. "El Impacto del COVID-19 En Las Economías De La Región Del Cono Sur." *Informe macroeconómico de América Latina y el Caribe 2020: Políticas para combatir la pandemia*, 10 (2020): 4. [Link](#)

²⁴Bastos et al. "El Impacto del Covid-19", 5.

²⁵Bastos et al. "El Impacto del Covid-19", 16.

²⁶Bastos et al. "El Impacto del Covid-19", 17-18.

²⁷Gonzales L. "Desde el Estallido Social Chileno a la Pandemia COVID-19: Aproximaciones de un Cambio Profundo". *Revista de Comunicación y Salud*, 10, no. 2 (2020): 417-429. [Link](#)

²⁸"COVID-19 en Chile, Análisis de su Impacto por Olas y Regiones". Ayala A, et. al. 2023. [Link](#)

²⁹Gonzales. "Desde el Estallido Social Chileno."

³⁰Meersohn, P. G. et. al. "Crimen Organizado: Análisis y Desafíos para Chile." *Revista De Derecho Y Ciencias Sociales*, 29 (2023): 241-277. [Link](#)

on how to address narcotrafficking on a normative, institutional, operational, and resource scale.³¹ These efforts are no coincidence since the growing concern of Chilean society on security matters underlines the impact of narcotrafficking groups in specific areas of the territory. To illustrate, the *Encuesta Nacional Urbana de Seguridad Ciudadana* of 2022³² placed the security issue as a priority, emphasizing the need for legislative projects regulating criminal networks that have been appropriating stateless territories in the borders, and creating anti-democratic pressure on government institutions and their markets.³³

In particular, the northern macro zone -comprising the regions of Arica y Parinacota, Tarapacá, Antofagasta, and Atacama- has been a criminal activity hotspot. More specifically, the region has been a circulatory center for Peruvian, Colombian, Venezuelan, and Haitian immigrants looking to settle in the country, creating a singular dynamic at the border. Precisely, the extensive northern border between Peru, Chile, and Bolivia -extending 1000 kilometers, and comprising official and clandestine routes from Arica and Colchane- has witnessed both the constant entrance of Latin-American migrants and the transit of drug trafficking and other illicit crimes (human and migrant trafficking) despite border controls.³⁴

During the sanitary crisis, between March and May 2022, 20,291 foreigners entered illegally, a 135% increase compared to the same period in 2021, which coincided with a rise in the of drugs seized: the first and fourth trimesters of 2020 reached 14,3 and 12,6 tons, respectively.³⁵ These periods coincided with the pre and post-closure of borders as a health measure to prevent COVID-19 spreading.³⁶ According to the same report cited, the strategy used by transnational criminal organizations, such as the Venezuelan criminal organization *Tren de Aragua*, was to exploit the arrival of a large number of irregular immigrants.³⁷ These migrants were coerced into smuggling drugs by carrying oval capsules inside their bodies or hiding the substances in their luggage when crossing the border.³⁸ This highlights the adaptive strategies that narcotrafficking has recently adopted as a way to “blend in” into the migration streams and confuse the authorities. Authorities that were already allocated across the border and focused - in terms of resources and operations - on the sanitary crisis. However, it is wrong to presume that all efforts have always been worthless since coordinated strategies between the three bordering countries have been effective. For instance, in 2017, a tri-national operation in the northern macro zone succeeded. Authorities installed various checkpoints and seized 2.2 tons of drugs in 14 days.³⁹ This prevented the

³¹Chilean Ministry of Internal Affairs and Public Security. *Política Nacional Contra el Crimen Organizado*. December 2022. [Link](#)

³² [Link](#).

³³Meersooh, P. G. et. al. “Crimen Organizado.”

³⁴ Bravo Acevedo, G. “Migraciones, Narcotráfico y Frontera, la Situación en la Macrozona Norte de Chile, 2020-2022.” *Diálogo Andino*, no.73 (2024). [Link](#)

³⁵ Bravo. “Migraciones, Narcotráfico y Frontera.”

³⁶ Bravo. “Migraciones, Narcotráfico y Frontera.”

³⁷ Bravo. “Migraciones, Narcotráfico y Frontera.”

³⁸ Bravo. “Migraciones, Narcotráfico y Frontera.”

³⁹Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Control del Narcotráfico en Zonas Fronterizas,” *Chile en el Exterior*, November, 2017. [Link](#)

distribution of 5 million narcotic doses and \$10 million in revenue.⁴⁰ Still, during the pandemic, several vulnerable areas did not have effective control. For this reason, state capacity was questioned, given the use of empty spaces in the border for smuggling and trading with the involvement of the biggest cocaine producers in Latin America, such as Peru and Bolivia.⁴¹

On top of that, COVID-19 intensified the pre-existing inequalities and social demands, which created the perfect environment for the development of drug-related illicit activities. According to Gomez (2022), the causes of narco-trafficking in Chile are mainly the following: i) inequality, in terms of income, opportunities access and fragility of agricultural communities, since agriculture is often associated with poverty; ii) economic incentives, where the absence of state subsidies, aid, and general public monitoring led communities to replace these elements with economic incentives offered by the drug cartels; and iii) narco-trafficking takes advantage of political consequences and socio-economic phenomena directly related with state absence.⁴² This is supported by the findings of Centro de Estudio y Análisis del Delito (2024). Between 2017 and 2023, micro-trafficking, drug production and substance trafficking reached high levels.⁴³ In 2006, 5,653 crimes were

registered. This number rose to 15.974, in 2017; and 16,630, in 2023.⁴⁴ Micro-trafficking saw a massive increase, while drug production arrests remained low ranging between 2700 and 1500 detentions.⁴⁵

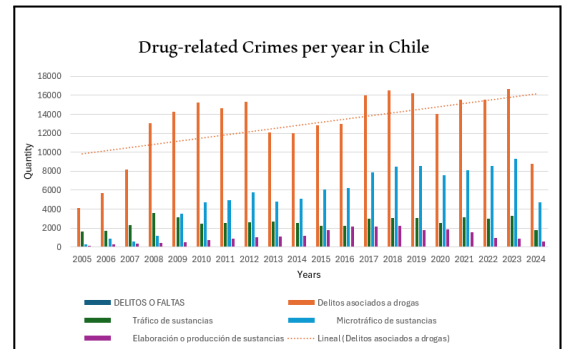


Fig. 1: Graph on Drug-related Crimes per year in Chile.

Source: Portal CEAD, 2024.

VI. Argentina's Case

Alternatively, Argentinian society was impacted on several fronts during this period, on which familiar issues for the Argentinian population were magnified, and new problems emerged in a non-traditional manner. When the pandemic began, Argentina was already in a serious economic crisis, with an urgent need to settle the external debt (representing 90% of its GDP at the time) and negotiate with the IMF, since SMEs, which generated 75% of employment in the country, were the ones suffering the most because of the lockdown, among other exceptional circumstances.⁴⁶ Precisely, according to a survey by the Argentine Confederation of Medium-sized Enterprises (CAME), more than 41,000 SMEs closed in 2020, while

⁴⁰Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Control del Narcotráfico."

⁴¹ Ovando C, et. al. "Dimensiones Tradicionales y Emergentes de la Seguridad Fronteriza Chilena del Extremo Norte de Chile." *Estudios Fronterizos*, 21, (2020). [Link](#)

⁴² Gómez F. "Perspectivas sobre el Narcotráfico y su Situación en Chile", 2020. [Link](#)

⁴³ Centro de Estudios y Análisis del Delito (CEAD). *Estadísticas Delictuales*. 2024. [Link](#)

⁴⁴ CEAD. *Estadísticas Delictuales*.

⁴⁵ CEAD. *Estadísticas Delictuales*.

⁴⁶"Impacto de la Pandemia COVID-19 en Argentina y el Escenario Regional", Puente M. Lopez A. May 2021, p.54. [Link](#)

unemployment increased from 8.9 to 11%, a figure that reflected only formal employment between 2019 and 2020 (taking into account that 40% of work is informal).⁴⁷

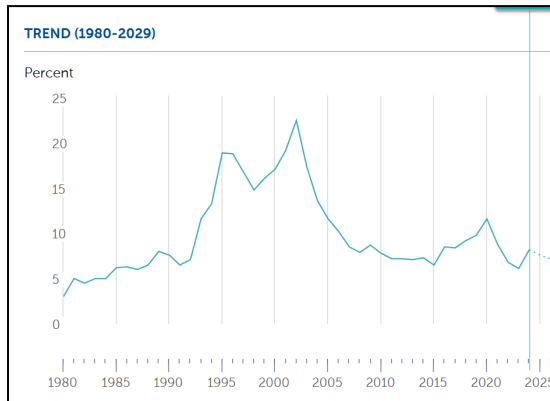


Fig. 2.: Graph on Unemployment Rate per Year in Argentina.
Source: International Monetary Fund, 2024.

As expected, social discontent rose, but the sanitary restrictions of COVID-19 have curtailed the demonstrations. This does not mean that the problems that sparked them have been overcome, instead a pessimistic post-pandemic scenario has been predicted for Argentina: highly socio-economically vulnerable, and an expected rebirth of protests, which could also become increasingly violent.⁴⁸

Fernandez's national government took office in December 2019, marking the return of Peronism after four years under Mauricio Macri's government. Macri, the former mayor of the city of Buenos Aires, led a coalition between his party, the center-right Republican Proposal, the *Unión Cívica Radical*, and the *Coalición Cívica*, both

social democratic.⁴⁹ Thus, it is evident that Peronism's victory was the consequence of the political unity of its various factions -divided since the 2013 legislative election. Additionally, the level of polarization in the election, as both candidates concentrated 88% of the valid votes, reflected the fragmentation of Argentine politics around the Kirchnerism/anti-Kirchnerism cleavage.⁵⁰

As this transition was underway when COVID emerged, the Argentinean State initiated a series of coordinated efforts, such as the monopolization of respirators in a landmark partnership with autonomous governments to favor collaborative solutions, and implement health measures within its provinces and municipalities.⁵¹ Nonetheless, this posed a challenge for synergic action. The breaking point of the consensus came with the government's untimely retention of the Buenos Aires Federal Co-participation Funds to create a Financial Strengthening Fund for the province of Buenos Aires.⁵² As the period of collaboration came to an end, the prior growing opposition was coupled. And so, the effects of uncertainty were mitigated, and Argentinean politics were reorganized in the Kirchnerism - Anti-Kirchnerism conflict.⁵³

As the narco trafficking problem was pushed into a secondary plane, cartels and organizations reinvented themselves and persisted, including: *Cartel de Sinaloa*,

⁴⁹“Argentina, Políticas y Conflictos en la Pandemia del Coronavirus COVID-19”, Cravacuore D. 2021. p. 164. [Link](#)

⁵⁰ Ibid. p.165.

⁵¹ Ibid. p.170.

⁵² Ibid. p.172.

⁵³ Ibid. p.176.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid, p.61.

Cartel Jalisco de Nueva Generación and *Los Gallegos* (faction of the *Cartel Tren de Aragua*), adapting to the sudden border closures and the new legal scenario.⁵⁴

Similar to the case in Chile, Argentina remained a key transit country for the regional cocaine trade, mainly smuggled through the sparsely populated northwestern region, as the Argentina-Bolivia border is a heavily traveled route that also connects Paraguay. And through maritime routes, that across the Atlantic connect to Europe and Asia.⁵⁵

On the same line, in the triple border between Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina -particularly in Foz de Iguazú, Ciudad del Este, and Puerto Iguazú- two Brazilian criminal organizations, *Comando Vermelho* and *Primeiro Comando da Capital*, both with a clear hierarchical structure, have participated in the region's illicit activities. The authorities have not been able to define the scope of their activities -what is trafficked in the triple border, or if this traffic is provided by smaller criminal gangs from Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay.⁵⁶ According to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) (2024), the expansion of the *Comando Vermelho* into Rio's West Zone contributed to a 50% surge in political violence in 2023.⁵⁷ As the gang

sought to reclaim territories long dominated by police militias, violence has remained high ever since, causing a serious threat for Brazil's neighbouring countries in the East and South.^{58,59}

Despite the seemingly catastrophic scenario, which resembles the situation in the Mexican-U.S border, the Administration acted decisively. Federal Forces increased cocaine seizures by 70%, and synthetic drugs by 19% compared to 2019, confiscating 73,781 kilos of drugs between January and September 2024.⁶⁰ According to Patricia Bullrich, Minister of Security under Milei's current administration, Argentina is currently at the forefront of South-America's fight against drug trafficking. Evidenced with the gradual improvement on drug control, after initiating 13% more procedures, which resulted in a 16% increase in the number of arrests for drug trafficking crimes.⁶¹

⁵⁴ "Los Dos Principales Cártels de la Droga Mexicanos Aterrizan en Chile". *El País*, by R. Montes, and A. Santos-Cid, June 2022. [Link](#); AND Puente M. Lopez A. May 2021. [Link](#)

⁵⁵ "Global Organized Crime Index". Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023. [Link](#)

⁵⁶ "El Crimen en América Latina: Desorden, Fragmentación y Transnacionalidad", Uribe P. December, 2021. [Link](#)

⁵⁷ "Regional Overview of Latin America and the Caribbean, August 2024". *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED)*, September, 2024. [Link](#)

⁵⁸ "Red Command Advances in Triple Border Between Brazil, Colombia, Peru". *Diálogo Américas*, by Nelza Oliveira, October 2024. [Link](#);

⁵⁹ "Regional Overview of Latin America and the Caribbean, August 2024". *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED)*, September, 2024. [Link](#)

⁶⁰ "Cifras Récord en la Lucha Contra el Narcotráfico: Incremento del 70% en la Incautación de Cocaína en 2024". Gobierno de Argentina, October, 2024. [Link](#)

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

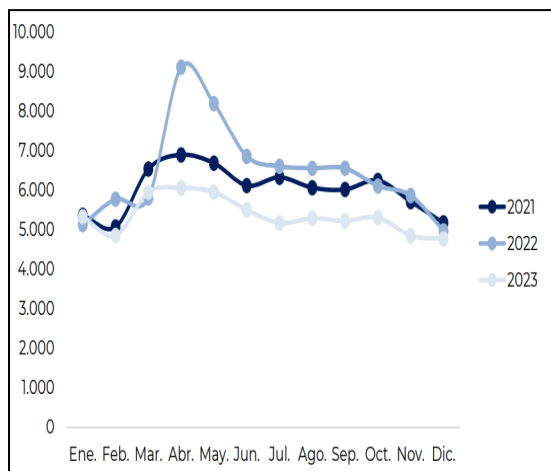


Fig. 3: Graph on Violations against Law 23.737, regarding the possession and distribution of drugs per year in Argentina. Source: Argentinian Ministry of National Security and NDEC, July 2024.⁶²

VII. Policy Analysis

Both Chile and Argentina portray similarities and differences on the same issue. Regarding their demographic dynamics, both countries illustrate similar patterns in illicit activities, as borders and vulnerable areas in big cities are the main hotspots for transnational criminal organizations. In cities like Rosario, Santa Fe, Antofagasta, and Santiago, illicit actors have obeyed state measures, such as curfews, while also imposing their own rules and providing aid in response to gaps left by insufficient state actions.⁶³ Their influence is evident in activities such as vending, and other small-scale commerce, where control over local street space is key.⁶⁴

⁶²“Informe del Sistema Nacional de Información Criminal: Año 2023”, Sistema Nacional de Información Criminal - Sistema Alerta Temprana (SNIC - SAT), Ministerio de Seguridad de la Nación and NDEC, July 2024. [Link](#)

⁶³Davis, DE., and Hilgers, T., 2022. [Link](#)

⁶⁴Ibid, p. 242.

The pandemic has amplified calls for urban sovereignty at the local level. These demands come partly from shared commitments or a sense of “imagined community” that unites residents with both legal and illegal governing actors to navigate the crisis, consequently creating ungovernable areas challenging the States’ capacity to act according to the rule of law.⁶⁵ Consequently, many criminal groups at an international level, presumably influenced by the gap in the legal supply, took advantage of existing infrastructures through the network and home delivery to sell online through open or clandestine networks such as the Deep Web, which has adapted its intractability.⁶⁶

Similarly, both countries have suffered political transitions and social discontent at different scales, which has intensified the polarization, macroeconomic shift, and pre-existing inequalities, giving room to transnational criminal organizations. It is wrong to assume that the phenomenon has been identical in both scenarios, given the divergent political histories and administrative control of their respective territories. On the one hand, Chile transitioned from Piñera’s pro-neoliberal agenda, led by a right and center-right winged coalition, to a social-democrat approach, led by left-wing parties under Gabriel Boric’s administration since 2022, in the middle of a social and sanitary crisis generally defined by a constitutional dilemma. On the other hand, Argentina transitioned in 2019 from a similar liberal administration towards a Peronist ideology under Fernández and

⁶⁵ Ibid, p.252.

⁶⁶“Impacto del COVID-19 en Distintas Formas Delictivas”. Agustina, J. R., et al. 2020. p.20-21. [Link](#)

Kischner, however, in late 2023 Milei won the presidential elections paving the way for a libertarian-populist project on which several transformations are expected in the public administration.

Under this pretext, Chile has recommended coordinated prevention and persecution of transnational organizations and illicit drug trafficking, with a goal of zero micro trafficking on a municipal scale and more efficiency in border controls of chemical substances for the elaboration of narcotics. In order to mitigate drug cartels' economic incentive and an extensive review of judicial mechanisms to sanction these activities.⁶⁷ As for Argentina, the aim is to break the connection between organized crime and territorial violence; through the coordination of federal agencies, the 24 jurisdictions, the State and international organizations that promote security policies (OAS and UN for instance), to consolidate the influence of INTERPOL, AMERIPOL and the links, among others, with EUROPOL.⁶⁸

Assuming a critical perspective, these measures seem to be convincing in the short-term, as it is customary in Latin American presidential regimes to implement policies labelled as *mano dura* ("tough hand"), which are politically convincing when it comes to security crises. Nevertheless, this allows a progressive militarization of state security forces, the legalization of gun possession among civilians and immunity for police officers in service, which may

contribute to increasing illicit activities within societies, as well as a weakening perception towards the state and the rule of law, considering the history of social uprisings in both countries.⁶⁹ Under this argument, only the symptoms will be addressed instead of the origin of the cause. The logical relationship between cause and effect will be completely ignored, including the deep-rooted institutional issues that have been unaddressed even before the mainstream development of the drug market.

As an alternative, a Human Rights narrative is proposed, in line with International Law initiatives, that include establishing a Corte Penal Sudamericana, which would guarantee the integration of juridical norms of UNASUR member states.⁷⁰ However, a unanimous consensus would still be needed, so more efforts are required to materialise this initiative, and also design other new solutions.

VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a clear relationship between COVID-19 and the expansion of narcotrafficking in Chile and Argentina, which offers a general representation of this challenge in the Southern Cone region. Several countries are involved, even some outside of the continent. Meanwhile, transnational criminal organizations are exploiting the current vulnerabilities of their Administrations, such as immigration, ineffective state control, and the sanitary crisis' "leftovers". However, this must not be mistaken with a causal statement. Even if these

⁶⁷"Plan Nacional contra el Narcotráfico, 2014-2022" Ministerio del Interior y Seguridad Pública, Gobierno de Chile, 2014. [Link](#)

⁶⁸"Plan Federal de abordaje del Crimen Organizado 2021-2023" Ministerio de Seguridad Argentina, 2021. [Link](#)

⁶⁹Jimenez Garcíá, F, 2021. [Link](#)

⁷⁰ Riquelme Rivera, J., Salinas Cañas, S., and Franco Severino, P, 2019.

phenomena are correlated, there is no empirical evidence to confidently establish causality between COVID-19, the immigration crisis, social inequality, and the narco-trafficking business.

Henceforth, the region has been impacted by their local grievances and institutional flaws which date back to the pandemic and the mainstream character of narco-trafficking. It is precise to note that one is intensifying the other's outcomes.

Finally, solutions have been developed by both governments, but more efforts are required to propose a holistic crisis-management approach aligned with democratic principles, the rule of law, and international cooperation between neighbouring countries - even if their internal policies are not in the same ideological framework - to efficiently eradicate the networks' influence in remote municipalities, and modernise their security bodies, so they cannot reach highly populated areas. Lastly, given the complexity of the issue, research in other sectors, such as social psychology or education, is recommended, in the hope of acquiring perspective on recruitment processes, the community-cartel relationship, and their belief systems.

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