

THE RIGHT-WING TURN IN URUGUAY, ITS POLITICAL ECONOMY AND
FOREIGN POLICY (2020-2023): IMPULSES AND BRAKES

*A GUINADA À DIREITA NO URUGUAI, SUA ECONOMIA POLÍTICA E POLÍTICA
EXTERNA (2020-2023): IMPULSOS E FREIOS*

*EL GIRO A LA DERECHA EN URUGUAY, SU ECONOMÍA POLÍTICA Y LA POLÍTICA
EXTERIOR (2020-2023): IMPULSOS Y FRENOS*



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ABSTRACT: The right-wing turn in Uruguay, driven by a coalition of parties led by President Luis Lacalle Pou, has introduced significant reforms in the domestic sphere. Based on the Liberal Theory of International Relations and Comparative Political Economy, we demonstrate how the socio-economic coalitions supporting the government have achieved the satisfaction of many of their preferences in various public policies, with a focus on key areas of political economy. Furthermore, in foreign policy, changes consistent with this domestic model have been promoted. However, they have not been realized to the extent that international political dynamics, especially sub regional ones, act as a hindrance to the government's objectives in international matters.

KEYWORDS: Foreign policy. Uruguay. Political economy. Right-wing parties.

RESUMO: *A guinada à direita no Uruguai, impulsionada por uma coalizão de partidos liderada pelo presidente Luis Lacalle Pou, introduziu importantes reformas no âmbito doméstico. Com base na Teoria Liberal das Relações Internacionais e na Economia Política Comparada, mostramos como as coalizões socioeconômicas que sustentam o governo têm obtido a satisfação de muitas de suas preferências em várias políticas públicas, com foco em áreas-chave da economia política. Ao mesmo tempo, na política externa, têm sido promovidas mudanças coerentes com esse modelo doméstico. No entanto, essas mudanças não têm se concretizado, na medida em que as dinâmicas políticas internacionais, especialmente as sub-regionais, atuam como um obstáculo para a concretização dos objetivos do governo em questões internacionais.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Política externa. Uruguai. Economia política. Partidos de direita.*

RESUMEN: *El giro a la derecha en Uruguay, impulsado por una coalición de partidos liderada por el presidente Luis Lacalle Pou, ha introducido importantes reformas en el ámbito doméstico. Con base en la Teoría Liberal de las Relaciones Internacionales y la Economía Política Comparada, mostramos cómo las coaliciones socioeconómicas que sustentan al gobierno han obtenido la satisfacción de muchas de sus preferencias en varias políticas públicas, con foco en áreas claves de economía política. En política exterior también se han promovido cambios concordantes con este modelo doméstico. Sin embargo, estos no han logrado concretarse de la misma forma que aquellos otros, en la medida que las dinámicas políticas internacionales, especialmente las subregionales, se constituyen en un freno para la concreción de los objetivos del gobierno en materia internacional.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Política exterior. Uruguay. Economía política. Partidos de derecha.*

Introduction

In 2020, a majority coalition of five right and center-right parties took office in Uruguay, after 15 years of leftist mandates. This change is part of a broader political cycle of right-wing advance in Latin America (MONESTIER; VOMMARO, 2021; LUNA; ROVIRA KALTWASSER, 2021). The new government, headed by President Luis Lacalle Pou of the National Party (PN), is guided by a series of programmatic guidelines that express a clear change in the direction of public policies with respect to the orientations of the Frente Amplio (FA) governments. The change is observed in key areas of political economy and had its correlate in foreign policy. This paper explores these transformations, analyzing the elements that favor their impulses and their brakes, based on domestic and systemic (regional and global) factors.

The analysis is based on two theoretical premises. The first assumes that, in programmatic party systems, party alternation in terms of the political sign of the government implies changes in the substantive content of public policies (BOIX, 1998). In this case, this political turn occurs in a country with an institutionalized party system and, therefore, with stable inter-party competition patterns, deep roots in the social fabric, and legitimacy of both party actors and the electoral process (MAINWARING; SCULLY, 1995). Uruguayan parties are programmatic, fractionalized and highly disciplined (CHASQUETTI, 2014), and occupy a central place in the political system (CAETANO *et al.*, 1987). Previous analyses show how, in this context, Uruguayan foreign policy can be read as a programmatic and governing party policy, just like other public policies, without denying the specificities of this policy (LÓPEZ BURIAN, 2015a).

The second refers to the close relationship between domestic and international policy. We assume that foreign policy is linked to the main components of the political economy model implemented by a government, especially economic policies, those related to the regulation of labor relations and social welfare. Particularly when foreign policy has a strong commercial economic component, as in the case we are analyzing. In this framework, foreign policy is functional to this model of political economy, and at the same time it may involve decisions with distributive impacts. We understand that articulating analytical elements of Comparative Political Economy and contributions from the Liberal Theory of International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis allows us to adequately address the relationship between both dimensions, paying particular attention to the influence that domestic political processes have on foreign policy, in which actors that may occupy asymmetric positions

engage in a game of cooperation and conflict that inform policy outcomes (MORAVCSIK, 1997; PUTNAM, 1988).

From this theoretical basis and an empirical analysis of the case that draws on the review of multiple sources (press and documentary analysis, survey data, bibliography), we argue that the socio-economic coalitions supporting the right-wing coalition government in office from 2020 in Uruguay have obtained the satisfaction of many of their preferences in several public policies. This is especially true in key areas of political economy, which, in turn, had concordant reflections in foreign policy. However, the government's aspirations found their limit in international political dynamics, especially subregional, inhibiting the coalition from agreeing on its objectives in this area. As can be seen, the research problem addressed demands the dialogue of different analytical perspectives that share common basic assumptions. This decision is based on guiding our research from an empirical puzzle that we wish to solve, for which the analysis of the systemic and domestic levels and their interactions is unavoidable.

The article, which constitutes a first exploratory advance on our research topic, is structured as follows. Next, the research problem and the theoretical categories that guide its approach are presented. Subsequently, an analysis of the Uruguayan case is offered, organized in three subsections. The first presents the map of socioeconomic and political actors that play a leading role in the domestic political game under study. The second outlines the main components of the political economy of the shift to the right in the country. The third examines the correlates of these transformations in the foreign policy promoted by the government, identifying the limits to its implementation in the international political dynamics. The final considerations discuss the elements resulting from the analysis in the light of the theoretical considerations guiding the study.

Research problem and theoretical tools

Our research problem points to the link between the change of ideological sign of the Uruguayan government, in 2020, and the reorientation or attempts to reorient the country's political economy model and its reflections especially in foreign policy. Our argument establishes, more precisely, that the ruling coalition adopted measures that sought to respond to the demands of the socioeconomic actors that constitute its support base and to carry out the electoral promises it had made with a clear liberal ideological orientation. In key areas of

the political economy, the thrust of this model was relatively successful. The changes promoted in the orientation of foreign policy, however, although they were in tune with this model and the domestic political dynamics that sustain it, encountered a brake as a result of the incidence of international factors. These linkages of public policy arenas define the theoretical framework that guides our analysis, articulating theoretical elements of International Relations, Foreign Policy Analysis and Comparative Political Economy. The theoretical choice made in order to account for this research problem, moreover, necessarily requires the association of domestic and systemic, global and regional factors.

In relation to domestic factors, the first point of view to be developed theoretically highlights the relevance of government ideology for analyzing changes in public policies. In programmatic party systems, the change of ideological sign of the government implies a substantially different reorientation in public policies, especially those related to the economy, development and welfare (BOIX, 1998). Foreign policy is a public policy whose decisions are linked to the type of economic and development model promoted by the government in office (GARCÉ; LÓPEZ BURIAN, 2014). In this sense, the decisions made by governments in the external sphere have distributive impacts, and therefore may generate incentives for actors to seek to position themselves strategically in front of their electorate, without this implying that positioning in this arena has the same costs as in domestic policies (ONUKEI; OLIVEIRA, 2010). The Uruguayan literature on foreign policy has highlighted the relevance of political parties as central actors in the formulation of foreign policy, articulating the interests of other social and corporate actors. Similarly, these studies have highlighted the programmatic nature and ideological stability of the parties as an explanatory factor of foreign policy reorientations (LÓPEZ BURIAN, 2015b; CAETANO *et al.*, 2021).

The second theoretical aspect to be developed in this section leads us to incorporate theoretical perspectives of International Relations to show how these domestic factors are linked to others of a systemic nature. In relation to this aspect, this text chooses to study the Uruguayan case on the basis of Liberal Theory, more specifically in the analytical proposal of Andrew Moravcsik⁴. According to the author:

[...] the relationship of states to the domestic and transnational social context in which they are embedded—have a fundamental impact on state behavior

⁴ A precedent for the application of this approach to the Uruguayan case is the work of Vanessa Affonso (2019), which uses theoretical elements of Moravcsik (1997) together with Putnam's (1988) two-level game model to study the negotiation of a free trade agreement between Uruguay and Chile. This contribution serves as a guide in the application of this theoretical framework for a more comprehensive analysis.

in world politics. Societal ideas, interests, and institutions influence state behavior by shaping state preferences, that is, the fundamental social purposes underlying the strategic calculations of governments (1997, p. 513, our translation).

Moravcsik's (1997) approach is based on three assumptions regarding the nature of social actors, the State and the international system (GRASA, 2015).

The first assumption postulates the primacy of social actors. For Moravcsik:

The fundamental actors in international politics are individuals and private groups, who are on the average rational and risk-averse and who organize exchange and collective action to promote differentiated interests under constraints imposed by material scarcity, conflicting values, and variations in societal influence (1997, p. 516, our translation).

This presupposes a bottom-up way of constructing policy within the domestic framework of States, which, in terms of foreign policy, is projected from the "inside out". In other words, foreign policy, from this approach, should be understood as the result of a domestic process of interaction between social actors that will then be conditioned by interactions at the international level. This conception assumes actors in relations of conflict and cooperation that seek to promote a foreign policy that responds to their preferences. Considering the Uruguayan case, we can consider political parties as part of this set of social actors, which also have the capacity to articulate the interests of other actors, for example, economic and social actors (LOPEZ BURIAN, 2015a).

Accordingly, Moravcsik's second theoretical assumption states that: "States (or other political institutions) represent some subset of domestic society, on the basis of whose interests state officials define state preferences and act purposively in world politics" (MORAVCSIK, 1997, p. 518, our translation). Thus, the state is conceived as representative of a subset of society whose particular interests determine state preferences in foreign policy. These preferences are shaped by political dynamics among social actors, which are channeled through the strategic calculations of the rulers. This approach underlines a key conception of the liberal theoretical approach in International Relations: since the state is not considered a unified rational actor, the realist notion of national interest, be it security, development or some other good or objective, needs to be problematized. Unlike a realistically defined "national interest", in the liberal approach we take as a starting point, the national interest is the result of a political process that is not free of disputes. It is the social actors who, in a dynamic of relations in which different interests and identities are at stake, marked by asymmetry in power resources and specific social practices and representative institutions, put

pressure on decision-makers to promote foreign policies that converge with their preferences. In this sense, Rafael Grasa recalls the importance, when adopting the chosen theoretical perspective, of paying attention to the political struggle of domestic actors:

[...] representative institutions and practices will be the transmission belts through which the preferences and social power of different individuals and social groups will be translated into the public policies of the State. What is being asserted [...] is not anything like a pluralist view of domestic politics, which undermines the power of the state or equates it with that of individuals and social groups, but an assertion that state policies are constrained by the underlying interplay of values, interests and power of individuals and groups within and outside the state apparatus, as they constantly strive, through political representation and other social processes, to have their preferences met (GRASA, 2014, p. 115, our translation).

This approach is in line with previous studies on the Uruguayan case: that foreign policy is an arena in dispute where there are winners and losers, whose changes and continuities are determined by political dynamics among social actors, with the political parties playing a central role in the process (LOPEZ BURIAN, 2015a).

Moravcsik's last theoretical postulate refers to the International System. The author states that the interdependence of state preferences determines the behavior of states (MORAVCSIK, 1997). This idea aims to visualize how systemic and domestic factors coexist and interact in foreign policy. While different domestic social actors dispute the construction of the preferences that the State will project in its foreign policy, this foreign action will also be shaped by the preferences of other States, which will also condition the projected foreign policy. Cooperation between States is the result of convergent interests, but if this does not occur and, on the contrary, the preferences of a State are divergent or its foreign policy negatively affects other States, conflict is to be expected.

Like Moravcsik, Robert Putnam (1988) starts from the interconnection between international and domestic politics. In his work on two-level games, he proposes how the winning set (i.e., the possible agreements between international negotiators representing states) depends on elements that correspond to both levels: the strategies of negotiators at the international level and domestic factors. Thus, what is agreed internationally must necessarily be acceptable to the actors at the domestic level. Therefore, in order to understand foreign policy, it is essential to explore the preferences of the actors, the coalitions they form and the political dynamics of their relations. In the Uruguayan case, for example, when analyzing the history of attempts to liberalize foreign trade, it can be seen how the preferences expressed by political actors in relevant decision-making positions frequently clash and are limited by the

coalitions they are part of. Even when opposing positions are not necessarily a majority in the coalition, they may end up imposing themselves based on the dynamics of relations (programmatic agreements, historical positions or possible responses from actors with broad mobilization capacity, typically trade unions) (LÓPEZ BURIAN, 2015a).

The third and last theoretical aspect considered is the perspective of Comparative Political Economy, as a disciplinary field that articulates studies of public policy, comparative politics and international relations. We construct the analysis based on two contributions provided by this sub-discipline, one related to the analytical lenses it proposes and the other related to its object of study.

Regarding the first point, Comparative Political Economy as an analytical approach to political science leads us to ask, when dealing with a given phenomenon, who gets what, when and how (BLYTH, 2009). Thus, from this point of view, actors and power are in the foreground. In examining the arrangements that organize these components in each country, Comparative Political Economy assumes that they are not random, automatic or inevitable. On the contrary, it postulates that they are the product of normative and political decisions taken by governments, which in turn are backed, or have as their background or basis, political disputes between social actors (MENZ, 2017). This approach is in line with the International Relations perspective outlined above because it requires focusing on the analysis of the relationship dynamics between governments and economic and social actors when understanding public policy formation processes, and against more traditional institutional perspectives in political science, understands that the resulting institutions are neither neutral nor the product of equilibria, but the product of conflicts between actors (BRIL MASCARENHAS; FREITES, 2015). In addition to bringing actors back to the foreground, the approach leads us to ask ourselves about power when analyzing the domestic sphere and its political dynamics. Faced with every public policy decision, this leads one to ask: How are power and resources distributed among social groups? And above all, who benefits in their interests from certain economic and social arrangements (HALL, 1997). These analytical keys must be considered if we want to analyze the domestic sphere from the approach proposed by the Liberal Theory outlined above, because it provides us with a lens that focuses precisely on the social actors and power games among them that have just been settled in the government and that is therefore conducive to the adoption of certain foreign policy orientations and not others.

On the other hand, in terms of the object of study, from the perspective of Comparative Political Economy it is important to approach our research problem by studying the public policy decisions that are crucial in the definition of the regulations and institutions that structure key aspects of the organization of the models and varieties of modern capitalism. This implies attending to state-market relations, and the specific configuration of labor markets, educational systems, and countries' welfare policies, as well as analyzing the patterns of variation in economic policy and the distributional outcomes that result from such a combination (MENZ, 2017). We understand that the study of foreign policy is inseparable from these substantive dimensions of interest that are the subject of study of this subdiscipline. The foreign policy decisions of governments must be understood in their interrelationship with the decisions they make in these other arenas. This relationship is reciprocal, since it is also necessary to ask how developments regarding international linkages influence Latin American political economies (LUNA; MURILLO; SCHRANK, 2014). The starting point of this paper is that the models and dynamics of the political economy, in an interconnected world, also cannot be understood separately from the foreign policy that links the country to an international sphere that constrains them in their margins of maneuver and stimuli, which assumes special importance in a small country (MENZ, 2017).

Analysis

A look at the actors

The starting point of this paper is that the center-right coalition that took office in Uruguay in 2020 adopted public policy measures in key areas of political economy and foreign policy that represented a turnaround with respect to the actions of left-wing governments during the previous fifteen years. Once in government, with parliamentary majorities, the coalition sought to respond to the interests of the socioeconomic actors that constitute its support base. The government's ability to implement its program at the domestic level, however, depends not only on its willingness to fulfill its electoral program, but also on the correlation of forces among the actors and their relative power. In other words, it depends on the game of agreements, negotiations and brakes that are generated both among the opposition actors and those who support the government, as well as among the coalition partners themselves. In terms of foreign policy, moreover, the success of the implementation of the model will depend not only on domestic dynamics and results, but also on the

opportunities and systemic constraints faced. Before describing the public policy transformations of interest, therefore, it is worth pausing to present the map of domestic actors involved in the process under study.

In Uruguay, the arrival to government of the Multicolor Coalition led by Lacalle Pou in March 2020 has been considered the Uruguayan expression of the end of the shift to the left, or the reflection of the right-wing political cycle observed at the regional level in recent years (ROSSEL; MONESTIER, 2021; MONESTIER; VOMMARO, 2021; QUEIROLO, 2020). However, in the Uruguayan case the process of post-neoliberal consensus alternation did not imply a structural ideological realignment (LUNA; ROVIRA KALTWASSER; 2021). Nor did it coincide with the collapse of the party system, as in other neighboring countries (MONESTIER; VOMMARO, 2021). The main coalition partners are the two traditional parties of the Uruguayan right and center-right, the PN and the Colorado Party (PC). It is true that they were joined by a third relevant actor in the coalition, *Cabildo Abierto* (CA), which burst onto the political scene in the 2019 elections (SANAHUJA; LÓPEZ BURIAN, 2021). However, the dynamics of the party system remained the same as in the last decades, in that it has been functioning in two clear programmatic blocs that have the same electoral weight: one center-left and the other center-right (BUQUET; PIÑEIRO, 2014; NOCETTO; PIÑEIRO; ROSEMBLATT, 2020).

In ideological terms, the PN, which is the majority party of the coalition and to which the president belongs, resembles other conservative parties in Latin America, promoting a liberal economic agenda (QUEIROLO, 2020). In foreign policy it had for much of the 20th century a matrix that harmonized its nationalism with regionalist elements (REAL DE AZÚA, 1959). However, since the 1990s the party has begun to assume an open-minded stance towards the world, with a commercial and pragmatic emphasis, which perceives the region as an obstacle to the country's external relations. It should be noted that this characterization fits better with the international matrix of *Herrerismo*, the majority and hegemonic faction, for an important period of time, in the PN (LÓPEZ BURIAN; HERNÁNDEZ NILSON, 2021a; 2021b).

In terms of development model, the PC has historically had a social democratic and state interventionist streak that distinguished it from the PN, but which has faded in the post-transition period in favor of a strengthening of its liberal positions in economic matters. The liberal matrix of the PC in international affairs has been identified as universalist (REAL DE AZÚA, 1959) and can be associated with a view of international relations that currently

corresponds to some features of neoliberal institutionalism (LÓPEZ BURIAN; LUJÁN, 2021).

On the other hand, CA, although it positions itself economically with a mostly pro-market discourse (although with important nuances and some statist features), in tune with its partners, raises substantive differences with them in terms of development model. In particular, it questions the advantages received by large companies and international economic groups in defense of a competitive economy among small and medium Uruguayan entrepreneurs. CA has been defined as a party belonging to the neo-patriot ultra-right family, with ideas that can be traced back to Uruguay's conservative Catholic, ruralist and militarist movements, a populist rhetoric and moral conservatism, and a nationalist, sovereigntist and anti-globalist discourse (SANAHUJA; LÓPEZ BURIAN, 2021).

The economic elites have been typical support bases of the Latin American right wing, together with the Catholic Church and the Armed Forces (MONESTIER; VOMMARO, 2021). In Uruguay, the relationship between parties and businessmen has been peculiar. Historically, the economic elites have been "more dominant than leading" (REAL DE AZÚA, 1969). Generally, businessmen have acted politically as a pressure group in the public policy decision-making process, with low direct participation of businessmen in politics (LANZARO, 1992; CAETANO, 1992; SERNA; BOTINELLI, 2017). However, the traditional Uruguayan center-right parties have been closer to this sector, with the PN being more akin to rural entrepreneurship and the PC to urban entrepreneurship (SERNA; BOTINELLI, 2020, 2016). On the other hand, the center-left parties have been closer to trade unionism, with a link of "historical brotherhood" between the FA and the trade union movement, represented by the single workers' center, the Inter-Union Workers' Plenary - National Workers' Convention (PIT-CNT) (DOGLIO; SENATORE; YAFFÉ, 2004).

During the period under study, the link between the government and the business sector in its organic aspect has been less strong than in other cases of the Latin American right-wing cycle, although representatives of business associations have been appointed to positions in key sectors, such as the Ministry of Livestock, Agriculture and Fisheries (CIANELLI; GUARNASCHELLI, 2022; CARNEIRO *et al.*, 2020). Thus, businessmen have had favorable expectations before the inauguration of the new government and have remained supportive so far in this administration (CONSULTORA EXANTE, 2022). In contrast, the coalition's relationship with trade unionism has been tense since the beginning of the government's term in office (CARNEIRO *et al.*, 2020).

This affinity between the government and some socioeconomic sectors is projected onto foreign policy, particularly as a result of the historical link between the PN and the agro-export sector, the most economically powerful organized domestic actor. This link helps to explain the change that the PN has undergone in the 21st century in foreign affairs, particularly its vision of the region. It can be associated with a change of interests and opportunities for those sectors, in the context of the evolution of the international system and the world market, namely: bilateralization of trade liberalization and the rise of the Asia-Pacific region, with high purchasing power, demanding and not very productive in relation to the main goods of the Uruguayan export basket. Thus, the aforementioned regionalist vocation of the PN is abandoned, arising from the intention of overcoming the Import Substitution Model (unfriendly to the agro-export sector) in a period of international protectionism and economic boom in the USA, a producer and protector of the goods exported by Uruguay. In the current context, the left appropriates the regionalist tradition of *Herrerismo* (LÓPEZ BURIAN, 2015b), although the PN nevertheless maintains the pragmatic legacy, which allows us to assess how external factors influence foreign policy changes. At the subsystemic level, the regionalist boom associated with the Latin American left turn (2003-2016) also helps to explain nationalist suspicions towards the region. In sum, in the 21st century, the PN, the main party of the coalition, assumes an open-minded stance in the economic and commercial dimension, based on pragmatism, and critical of the difficulties in advancing regional integration.

The political economy of the shift to the right in Uruguay

The "*Compromiso por el País*" (Commitment for the Country) was the electoral platform of the Multicolor Coalition in the 2019 presidential elections and became the government's program once it assumed power. In terms of development model, the document reflects ideas that promote market mechanisms as efficient allocators of resources, in tune with the typical orientation of Latin American right-wingers (LUNA; ROVIRA KALTWASSER, 2014).

When examining in political and domestic terms the implementation process of the coalition's model, two distinct stages can be observed in the contents prioritized to be promoted as well as in the dynamics of the power game among the actors that characterized them. The first stage (2020-2021) laid the foundations of the model, through a broad and heterogeneous set of measures approved in an "omnibus" law, the law of urgent consideration

(LUC), and the budget law. In the second stage, from March 2022, the government focused on consolidating and deepening the model by promoting substantial reforms.

In economic matters, the coalition prioritized deregulation and fiscal deficit reduction. Upon taking office in 2020, it established a 15% limit on public spending and made an austere budget proposal in areas such as education and housing. The LUC followed this line, introducing the fiscal rule, promoting competition in the mobile telephony market and prioritizing mercantile criteria in fuel prices. For the sake of "financial freedom", the mandatory use of electronic means for payments and services to the State was also eliminated, reducing the criteria for their use in important transactions (ICD, 2022; CHASQUETTI, 2021; UYPRESS, 2021; PORTAL DE LA UDELAR, 2023; HERNÁNDEZ; LÓPEZ, 2020).

Another pillar of the political economy model is social policy. In this aspect, the coalition maintained the transfer programs instituted by the FA (NOCETTO; PIÑEIRO; ROSENBLATT, 2020), as did other governments of the recent Latin American right-wing political cycle (NIEDZWIECKI; PRIBBLE, 2017). During the pandemic, these programs became the main means to support the informal and most vulnerable sectors (OBSERVATORIO ECONÓMICO Y COMPORTAMENTAL, 2021). However, their implementation and management were guided by concerns about targeting, control of considerations and use of resources, which specialized literature links to a liberal perspective (LA DIARIA, 2022; 2022b; MEDEROS, 2021; ROSSEL; MONESTIER, 2021). The government's orientation in this arena can also be seen in the change in the territorial management model of the Ministry of Social Development, which replaced co-management with social organizations with direct implementation by ministerial technicians (CIANELLI, 2022).

The change in labor relations sought to satisfy business demands without dismantling collective bargaining, as promised in the campaign⁵. In the negotiations, the Executive Branch generally leaned in favor of business, affecting real wages (ICD, 2022; CARNEIRO *et al.*, 2020). Another example of this orientation is the limitation of the right to strike introduced in the LUC, in response to a complaint previously made by employers before the International Labor Organization, and the approval of a law on the legal status of unions that generated rejection in the social movement. Together with the anti-union rhetoric of many of its

⁵ From a historical perspective, the processes of state withdrawal in Uruguay can be generally characterized as gradualist and buffered by different political and social dynamics (FILGUEIRA *et al.*, 2003).

representatives, this government line will be maintained throughout the period. (PERRONE RAMOS, 2021; RIGUETTI; RÓMBOLI, 2021).

The most significant efforts to halt the advance of the model proposed by the coalition came from the trade union movement. In particular, the PIT-CNT, together with other social organizations and the FA, promoted a referendum to repeal 135 articles of the LUC. The campaign forced the government to focus on defending what had been achieved, limiting its ability to deepen the implementation of its program until, with a narrow margin of victory, in March 2022 the election was resolved in its favor.

Despite the limitations faced, the coalition achieved a rapid and successful implementation of its program in the first two years. The business community maintained the high levels of approval of government management that it had at the beginning of the period (CONSULTORA EXANTE, 2022). The main business chambers, such as the Rural Association of Uruguay (ARU) and the Confederation of Business Chambers of Uruguay, expressed their support on several occasions. For example, they highlighted as positive several measures of the LUC, such as the creation of a Rural Security Directorate to combat cattle rustling, the promotion of financial freedom, the fiscal rule, the educational transformation and the reform of the State (SALVETTI, 2022).

The successful implementation of the coalition's program in the first two years of government was favored by two additional political factors: the prolonged "honeymoon" of the president, which he obtained in return for the high public approval of his response to the pandemic, and the unity achieved among the coalition partners, who aligned in defense of the LUC, postponing the discussion of sensitive issues (QUEIROLO, 2020; CHASQUETTI, 2021; ROSSEL; MONESTIER, 2021). While the first two years of Lacalle Pou's administration were marked by the COVID-19 crisis, which emerged shortly after he took office, slowing down the implementation of some important reforms that the coalition sought to push forward, the government's response to the pandemic did not significantly alter its liberal reformist approach. On the contrary, it aligned itself with that orientation, including maintaining its fiscal targets, against the backdrop of the Keynesian turn that was taking place in the rest of the world. (HERNÁNDEZ; LÓPEZ, 2020; CHASQUETTI, 2021).

After overcoming the health emergency and resolving the referendum, from March-April 2022, the coalition focused on consolidating and deepening its model, seeking to implement other important reforms promised in the Commitment for the Country.

One of the key reforms was education. The LUC had modified educational governance, limiting teacher participation, but the pandemic postponed the implementation of the curricular transformation until early 2023, when it was decided that it should be implemented quickly. This change was aligned with business demands, as it sought to establish a competency-based model. The reform generated opposition from teachers' and students' unions, who questioned the lack of participation in the process and the scarcity of resources for its implementation, in a context of falling public spending on education (FRANCO, 2022; LA DIARIA, 2023; ÉTCERA.UY, 2022).

Another major reform was that of social security, motivated by the need to guarantee the fiscal sustainability of the system due to the country's high social security expenditure. The LUC established the Commission of Experts on Social Security, which prepared a diagnostic report and proposals that served as the basis for the bill presented by the Executive. The bill was supported by the coalition and business representatives in the commission, but was rejected by representatives of the FA, workers and retirees (CINVE, 2022). The reform covers several aspects, such as the increase of the retirement age and the creation of the Common Pension System, in addition to the mandatory contribution to the Pension Savings Fund Administrators⁶ for all people, even those with lower salaries. While the coalition argues that the reform limits spending without increasing contribution rates or taxes, its opponents argue that it forces people to work more and receive fewer benefits, and that it does not comprehensively address social protection or revise employer exemptions (LA DIARIA, 2023b; UDELAR, 2023). The president sought to resolve the issue before the start of the electoral campaign, due to the low public acceptance of this reform (FACTUM, 2023). This led to a rapid processing of the reform, which implied the modification of several substantive aspects in a short time as a result of bilateral negotiations, which generated friction even within the coalition. In particular, it was difficult to obtain the votes of CA, for which the partners had to maintain benefits for the military in the law and commit themselves to approve other controversial projects promoted by this party (LA DIARIA, 2023b; MAJLIN, 2023).

In this second stage of deepening of the model, in fact, the main domestic political challenge facing the coalition is the growing tension between CA and the rest of the majority partners. On issues related to the development model, CA had a strong clash with the PN and the PC when it voted with the opposition on forestry issues. In other policies, CA supported

⁶ These are private financial institutions in charge of managing workers' pension savings. The Uruguayan pension system is mixed.

its partners, but with caution, as in relation to free trade zones: the government agreed to eliminate tariffs on production with Brazil, promoted new zones to attract investment and strengthened the agency in charge of their management, changes that CA supported, but advocated greater parliamentary control in the approval of permits for free trade zones. To improve international insertion and attract investments, other policies to be highlighted are the fiscal stimulus for companies of all sectors, the simplification of the requirements to obtain tax residency in Uruguay and the reduction of the minimum amount to access the investment promotion law (PRESIDENCIA, 2023; 2022; LA DIARIA, 2022).

This brief description of the political economy model implemented by the government would not be complete without mentioning the policies aimed at the agricultural sector, recognized in the Commitment for the Country as the "engine of the economy" (p.13). Recently, the president reaffirmed: "if agriculture does well, the country does well" (PRESIDENCIA, 2023B). Along these lines, among other measures, infrastructure in rural areas and connectivity with Brazil was improved, the National Meat Institute was strengthened and the Single Registry of Meat Companies was created. One challenge facing the government is the "exchange rate backwardness" that is negatively affecting the sector's competitiveness. The business associations also expressed concern about the increase in fuel prices. However, they continue to support the government's policies and recognize its efforts to address these issues. In any case, the sector has experienced record exports in the last two years, and its representatives affirm that "it is felt that this is a government that is very close to the agricultural sector", in comparison with the previous one, with which "although there was a good relationship, they did not pay attention to it" (CIANELLI; GUARNASCHELLI, 2022, our translation).

As we will see below, the components of the political economy model reviewed in this section are reflected in foreign policy, where the government will basically aim at trade openness and flexibilization, according to the preference scheme of its base coalition, although it will find some brakes to its project.

Lacalle Pou's foreign policy: an attempt at a turnaround

The Lacalle Pou administration also introduced changes in foreign policy, especially in the area of trade, seeking to align international insertion with economic policy reforms. Its modifications reflect the political-ideological orientations of the rulers and the sectoral

interest of those socioeconomic actors, especially those associated with the PN, the agro-exporters.

In contrast to the incremental tradition of gradual adjustments that has characterized the dynamics of Uruguay's foreign policy (FERRO, 2006), the Lacalle Pou government attempted to make a major shift in foreign policy during the first two years of its term. This is evidenced in the proposal to make the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) more flexible and the exploration of an FTA with China. However, the turn constituted a broader movement, whose two faces are the relegation and distancing from the region, and the search for a rapprochement with the world powers.

Foreign policy was not a major topic of debate during the electoral campaign. However, the will to boost foreign trade beyond Mercosur, through trade agreements, as well as to distance from regional processes in crisis, associated to the Latin American left-wing cycle, such as the Union of South American Nations (Unasur), had already been expressed since then. In his inauguration speech, Lacalle Pou stated: "We must strengthen the region, Mercosur and, at the same time, make the bloc more flexible so that each member can advance in bilateral processes with other countries" (PRESIDENCIA, 2020, our translation). This implied a continuity of the FA's foreign policy: calling for changes in Mercosur but maintaining it as the first circle of insertion. However, the discourse already underlined the intention to deepen the link with the powers, opening the possibility of an implementation at different speeds: "We must finish the processes and internalize the treaty signed by Uruguay and Mercosur with the European Union" (PRESIDENCIA, 2020, our translation). In addition, the speech reflects the pragmatism characteristic of *herrerismo*: "This world, in which modern dynamism, where politics, clearly mediate between supply and demand, forces us to act fast and clear" (PRESIDENCIA, 2020, our translation).

In the first months of government, changes in the relationship with three areas were verified: the region; the U.S. (including the Inter-American system); and the international system, especially China. However, the pandemic delayed the approach to some issues until 2021, in particular the flexibilization of Mercosur and the exploration of bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs). Although in a context of uncertainty and global crises it was risky to innovate, once the limits of the crisis seemed to be glimpsed, signs of change began to appear.

The main component of the proposed shift was an energetic proposal to make Mercosur more flexible, which from then on became a banner of the new government's foreign policy. Since the return to democracy (1985), the region had been the country's

privileged circle of international insertion, enshrined in the integration to Mercosur (1991) and maintained by all previous governments. But Lacalle Pou burst in 2021 with an emphatic proposal for flexibility on two points: reduction of the Common External Tariff (CET) and support for partners to individually negotiate trade agreements with third countries. This proposal was not only a symptom of the Mercosur crisis and Uruguayan dissatisfaction with the integrationist process, but also a condition for the possibility of advancing in the negotiation of FTAs. The economic authorities of Jair Bolsonaro's government showed signs of convergence with the Uruguayan proposal, contrary to Itamaraty's foreign policy guidelines (which also maintained its role as the central coordinating actor of Brazilian foreign policy).

The drive to make Mercosur more flexible and the criticism of Latin American regionalism must be understood in a context of very low intensity of these processes, in the absence of regional responses to the pandemic, the change of ruling parties in several Latin American countries and the reconfiguration of the inter-American order promoted by the Donald Trump administration. Among these aspects, the case of Brazil stands out, which during Bolsonaro's mandate (2019-2022) reduced Brazilian protagonism in the region (SARAIVA; COSTA SILVA, 2019; FRENKEL; AZZI, 2021). When Lacalle Pou took office, Mercosur was in a deep crisis: a paralyzed integration agenda; divergences between Argentina and Brazil; and repeated failures in initiatives to revive foreign trade policy⁷. This fact, together with other obstacles that were arising in the European Union (EU) to the final approval of the interregional agreement, catalyzed Uruguay's call for bilateral negotiations with third countries.

The Uruguayan approach caused tension in Mercosur and was reflected in bilateral ties. For example, at the Extraordinary Summit of Presidents, organized to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the Treaty of Asuncion, there was a harsh exchange between Lacalle and the Argentine President, host of the event. Since then, there have been permanent differences with Argentina, whose position was also tied to the demand for the reduction of the CET (supported by Brazil), which represented a threat to Argentina's economic policy, in a context of vulnerability. At the bilateral level, there were disagreements on other issues, such as the aforementioned law on tax exemptions for foreigners who establish tax residence in Uruguay, which attracted Argentines with high purchasing power, and river and maritime infrastructure issues. In addition, Lacalle Pou's media projection in the Argentine press made

⁷ For example, Argentina announces in 2020 its exit from negotiations with the European Union, to which several European countries are also expressing resistance, and the convergence initiative with the Pacific Alliance fails.

visible his liberal approach to combat the pandemic, in contrast to the restrictive mobility regime adopted in Argentina.

On the other hand, with Brazil, in the 2020-2021 period, there was a good understanding, overcoming the distrust that had prevailed with the pro-Andean governments since the Impeachment of 2016. Brazil was the only Mercosur partner to admit Uruguay's flexibilizing proposal, although the support seemed to be confined to the economic portfolio and did not consist of a general guideline for Brazilian foreign policy. Uruguayan authorities completed several missions to Brazil in an attempt to secure support for the proposal and to negotiate possible intermediate solutions, at least with respect to the CET. However, this good relationship was not accompanied by a deepening of bilateral relations on substantive issues. For its part, Paraguay did not respond as the Uruguayan government had hoped, given its status as a small partner, and did not support the Uruguayan government's proposal for flexibility.

The flip side of this approach in Mercosur was the search for new trade agreements with the powers, particularly with China, in addition to exploring an FTA with Turkey and advancing in the accession to the Trans-Pacific Partnership. In this regard, Lacalle Pou's bet, based on a discourse that emphasized pragmatism, is reflected in his conviction of being able to strengthen ties simultaneously with China and the US, despite the peak of their global dispute. In the end, this possibility began to be questioned by the colorado partners of the coalition, more idealistic and liberal institutionalists than pragmatists, and more inclined to privilege hemispheric relations.

In a second circle of regional relations, at the Latin American level, the government's shift focused on the political dimension. Uruguay was profuse in its criticism and condemnation of Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua, countries which it accused of not respecting democracy and Human Rights during the VI Summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), repeating the statement shortly after during Lacalle Pou's speech at the UN General Assembly. Other examples of this change of attitude were the exit from Unasur and the Bank of the South, organizations that were remnants of the so-called "post-hegemonic regionalism" (RIGGIROZZI; TUSSIE, 2012), associated with the Latin American shift to the left at the beginning of the 21st century.

This foreign policy trend of the first years of Lacalle Pou's administration began to change in September 2021, when Argentina and Brazil negotiated bilaterally a reduction of the CET lower than what Brazil and Uruguay were demanding, a decision supported by

Paraguay shortly thereafter. The Uruguayan government then saw how the claim on the negotiation of agreements with third countries was "disengaged" from the tariff discussion. At the Mercosur Summit of December 2021, the reduction of the CET was included in the final declaration that Uruguay did not sign, a practice of dissent that was repeated in the following summits, until the last one prior to the publication of this text, in July 2023.

Since then, the reformist impulse in this political arena continued to weaken and seemed to run out of steam in 2023, with the change of government in Brazil with the return of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to the Presidency, and China's evident lack of interest in continuing to explore bilateral negotiations with Uruguay, outside Mercosur. Lula da Silva immediately restored ties with Argentina and there were signs of resuming the integrationist process, even proposing a regional currency for intra-bloc trade. In addition, Brazil and Argentina supported Latin American regionalism at the VI CELAC Summit held in Buenos Aires. After visiting Argentina, Lula paid an official visit to Uruguay, during which he showed signs of receptiveness to Uruguayan proposals on the integration process, but called for maintaining the common trade policy so as not to weaken the bloc. In addition, several bilateral initiatives were launched on the occasion, which indicate Brazil's intention to resume its regional leadership.

In addition, the change of government in Brazil reinforces the little interest that China has been showing in the negotiations for an agreement with Uruguay. China favors good relations with Brazil and avoids straining a priority integration bloc for the South American power's foreign policy by entering into a trade agreement with a small country.

Consequently, during 2022 and 2023 there has been a notorious moderation in the government's expectations regarding an agreement with China. Lacalle Pou has recognized that the conclusion of the agreement depended on China (VAMOS A, 2022), while at the same time he valued the progress achieved in the strengthening of bilateral ties and in the establishment of talks on an FTA with a view to the next government eventually concluding such a treaty with the Asian power. An official mission to China by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, in April 2023, found a clear message from the counterpart: any agreement should be negotiated "in tune" with Mercosur (TLC CON, 2023). In November 2023 Luis Lacalle Pou visited China. Almost a month later, China's ambassador to Uruguay, Huang Yazhong, stated that: "we have to recognize that on this issue of bilateral free trade there is a discrepancy in Mercosur. Both Brazil and Argentina are also important trading partners and our friends -for

Uruguay too- and that is why we cannot ignore this concern, uneasiness, of our partners." (CHINA ESTÁ, 2023, our translation).

Also at the systemic level, the war in Ukraine had an impact on relations with the Asian powers, which was pointed out by some coalition partners, particularly the PC, skeptical of the relevance of advancing in an agreement with China in the current world context. Thus, the effect of international transformations at the systemic and sub-systemic levels on the changes promoted by the government for Uruguayan foreign policy is clear.⁸

Final considerations

In this paper we assume the importance of understanding the weight that party alternation and the link between domestic policy (especially political economy) and foreign policy have in Uruguayan political dynamics. The change of government that took place in 2020, when a center-right coalition came to power after 15 years of center-left bloc administrations, represented a reconfiguration in the repertoire of public policies in the areas of interest.

At the domestic level, the government coalition managed to implement measures that harmonize with the preferences of the socioeconomic actors that sustain it and that it promised in its government program. The coalition was relatively successful in meeting the challenges posed by opponents of the model largely due to its ability to remain cohesive on the priorities of its agenda during the first three years of government. This model of domestic political economy, which arises from the dynamics generated by a specific configuration of actors with asymmetrical resources in a given institutional context, constitutes the basis from which the guiding lines of the foreign policy that sought to be in tune with it are projected. The emphasis on openness, which seeks to "cut ties" with the region, has been consigned as a "national interest" based on the result of who wins what, how and when they do it. If we take this up again in the light of the connection that we theoretically assume between domestic and

⁸ Another element to be highlighted is the changes in the Foreign Affairs portfolio. The government began with a foreign minister of the Colorado Party, Ernesto Talvi, who resigned from the post and retired from political activity four months after the beginning of the government period. He was replaced by a career diplomat of white affiliation, Francisco Bustillo, who resigned in November 2023. He resigned in November 2023 in the context of a political crisis in the government due to the so-called "Masset case" (delivery of Uruguayan passport to drug trafficker Sebastián Masset, which also led to the resignation of the Minister of the Interior, Luis Alberto Heber). After Bustillo's resignation, Omar Paganini, also of white affiliation, took over as Minister of Foreign Affairs.

international politics (MORAVCSIK, 1997; PUTNAM, 1988), we observe how these interests -as well as ideas- influence the State's foreign behavior, shaping its preferences.

However, in contrast with the capacity to implement the model at the domestic level, these preferences projected in foreign policy encountered a key obstacle during this period: the preferences of neighboring Mercosur member states, as well as their capacity to influence relevant countries in the international system. This regional subsystem, in which Brazil stands out in particular, acted as a brake on the impulses of the foreign policy agenda of Lacalle Pou's government. This is even true for issues related to great powers such as the U.S. or China, since these relations cannot be understood without taking into account the regional subsystemic dynamics. In short, although the preferences expressed in Uruguay's foreign policy marked an openness and distancing course from the region, in accordance with the dynamics of the country's internal political economy and the coalition-building between socioeconomic and political actors that shaped it, the preferences of the regional subsystem states put a brake on these preferences, pointing out the costs that more disruptive decisions have for Uruguay.

This balance allows us to consider how subregional dynamics are key elements in generating conditions of possibility or obstacles to the strategies of small countries such as Uruguay, especially when regional integration spaces exist (regardless of the quality of their functioning). In this case, systemic factors, and subregional factors in particular, took precedence over domestic factors in determining the success of its foreign policy. However, in the domestic sphere, the government's foreign policy positions are political signals that seek to generate revenue for its support base, even if the changes promoted do not materialize, while in the international sphere they generate effects of various kinds on the perception of the regional integration process.

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