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A comparative reassessment of regional parliaments in Latin America: Parlasur, Parlandino and Parlatino

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Abstract

The present article assesses and compares the MERCOSUR Parliament, the Andean Parliament, and the Latin American Parliament as instruments to insert political representation and parliamentarians in their respective integration projects. It is argued that the development of regional parliaments in Latin America, however, has not produced substantial changes in regional decision-making processes, which remain the exclusive domain of intergovernmental or interpresidential exchanges.

Keywords: Regional integration; Latin America; Democracy; MERCOSUR Parliament; Andean Parliament; Latin American Parliament.

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Introduction

Regional integration processes in Latin America present differing institutional dynamics which guarantee coordination between member states. Although it is possible to find some similarities in the results of integration, this article points out that these are not always obtained through the same procedures and institutions. For this purpose, this article examines how the specific structures and procedures of three Latin American regional parliaments influence the dynamics among member states, particularly with regard to the democratic content of the respective integration processes.

The institutionalisation of a parliament in the organisational structure of an integration process is always associated with the intention to decrease the democratic deficit inherent in such processes. It is generally thought that the existence of a legislative institution reduces this problem by adding legitimacy to regional decision making. We start with the contention that there is a gap

between the intended objectives of the founding of a parliament as part of integration processes' institutional structures, and the actual results. All Latin American projects at regionalism have, to some extent, been influenced by the European integration. In this sense, the European Union (EU) has served as a case of a successful supranational integration project, and its institutional structure is widely acknowledged as a template. The experience of European integration has influenced such projects in Latin American, particularly concerning the formation of adequate institutional configurations. Even though there is not much political will to increase the autonomy of the integrative structures in Latin American countries, the democratisation of integration processes and public participation in regional policies remains a relevant concern (Mariano et al. 2001; Ribeiro et al. 2007; Drummond 2010).

The objective of this analysis is to discuss as to what extent the founding of a regional parliament alters the decision making processes in regional integration, and whether it does indeed promote greater democratisation. We agree with the assumption that parliamentarians have a positive influence on the democratisation of regional integration but, as it will be demonstrated, this effect is not automatic. The institutionalisation of a parliament does not necessarily lead to more democracy or a deepening of the integration process. This is going to be demonstrated by assessing two variables: direct elections and institutionality. We depart from the hypothesis that regional democratisation is associated with the acceptance of more profound integration and, therefore, the existence of regional institutions with a higher degree of autonomy from national governments.

Although our aim is not to analyse the European integration case, it is important to remember that the EU experience has involved the transfer of competences and autonomy from states to supranational institutions. This has raised the issue of a democratic deficit, considering that the influence of supranational institutions on the daily life of citizens increases, without those being subjected to similar checks and balances that enable democratic supervision of national institutions (Hix and Follesdal 2006).

In this context, the European Parliament (EP) has become increasingly visible and gained power, which served as justification for the establishment of direct election of its members. Even though these developments are at present insufficient to establish a European democracy, it would be impossible to perceive democratisation of the EU's decision-making processes without the existence of a parliament with increased competences (Costa 2009; Goetze and Rittberger 2010; Kreppel 2002; Noury and Roland 2002).

Latin American integration projects also possess or are discussing the constitution of parliaments, and some countries have provided direct elections of their representatives (Cera 2009). Nonetheless, road maps towards increasing the competences of these parliaments and the establishment of a supranational logic that would provide regional institutions with more autonomy have not been consolidated so far. Moreover, comments by negotiators suggest that governments are mostly interested in keeping integration issues at an intergovernmental level rather than the supranational one (Luciano et al. 2014b).

This does not mean that there exist no democratic deficits in Latin American integration processes. Different from the European experience, it is more focused on the democratic content

of Latin American countries' foreign policies. Supranational organs have little impact on decision-making processes in this area, which remain firmly in the hands of national governments (Malamud 2007; Ventura 2003). Nonetheless, a growing preoccupation with the inclusion of parliaments in regional decision-making processes and their strengthening through direct elections has arisen over the last years. The results achieved by the EP, particularly in decreasing the democratic deficit in the EU, have been used as arguments in favour of this strategy.

The logic of this reasoning centres on the problem of treating different processes of cooperation between countries as "regional integration", which establishes a false image of homogeneity because it presupposes equivalent phenomena. When processes are considered similar, a tendency arises to view the more advanced ones (by being older or more ambitious) as references or models, as is the case with the EU. However, differences in objectives and the degree of commitment of participants are often overlooked (Dri 2010; Lenz 2012).

This article lies on the performance and role of parliamentary institutions in Latin American integration projects. Therefore, some relevant aspects will be addressed: their contribution to democratisation in the respective regions, direct parliamentary elections, representativeness of members of parliament (MPs), parliaments' position in the hierarchy of integration processes and, finally, the challenges and obstacles that parliamentarians face. Through this analysis we will present some of the difficulties and limitations that parliaments have to deal in becoming strong and independent actors in Latin American integration processes.

Therefore, the purpose of this analysis is to demonstrate that, despite the assumption that the institutionalisation of a regional parliament and the direct election of its members would strengthen that parliament and give legitimacy to the integration effort as a whole, the Latin American cases show that parliamentary institutionalisation does not coincide with a greater influence on the integration process, its agenda and consolidation.

In this article we analyse three Latin American regional parliaments: the Andean Parliament (Parlandino), the MERCOSUR Parliament (Parlasur) and the Latin American Parliament (Parlatino). Despite all the differences concerning the origins and contexts of these parliamentary institutions, one important similarity between the three cases exists: an emphasis on intergovernmental institutions, which decreases interest in the function and efficiency of parliaments. This analysis argues that while the parliaments are being consolidated, an inversely proportional process of separating them from decision making processes occurs.

In the first part of the article, a short history of each of the analysed parliaments is presented, showing their main characteristics, their role in the institutional context of the respective integration processes, and their capacity to influence decision making. In the second part, the different cases are compared, highlighting recurrent variables and explaining the position of the various parliaments in their own regional integration processes. The last part consists of a discussion and the conclusions which were drawn in this study.

Another aspect considered in the three cases is direct parliamentary elections. We question the assumption that direct elections automatically translate into stronger parliaments and more democracy, which is largely based on the European experience where, despite the critics, such

results were obtained to some extent. The main arguments in favour of direct elections of regional parliaments point to their ability to positively influence the integration effort. Firstly, they can bring regional integration closer to the electorate by adding social issues traditionally addressed in a national context to the communitarian agenda. Secondly, they can strengthen the legislative branch of the integration process, because the exclusive dedication of MPs to a regional parliament means that they are able to gain a higher degree of independence from national politics, as the European case demonstrates. We are going to demonstrate how these two elements – institutionalisation and direct elections – have been addressed in the three Latin American cases this study has analysed.

The Andean Parliament (Parlandino) and the scepticism on Andean regional integration

The Andean Community was founded in the late 1960s under strong influence of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the EU's predecessor. It was the first South American supranational integration project to establish a parliament and direct elections of its representatives (Bustamante 2006; Cera 2009). The main difference between the Andean Community (AC) and other Latin American integration projects lies in the fact that, inspired by European integration, a principle of supranationality was inserted from the start (Dri 2009). However, the AC has suffered some review in this field, which is underlined by the persistently intergovernmental character of decision-making processes. For the last decade, national governments have opted for retaining and strengthening the principle of intergovernmentalism, where member states, rather than AC institutions, take the lead in decision-making (Bustamante 2006).

This change of course impacted directly Parlandino, one of AC's supranational institutions. It was created in 1979 as a deliberative and consultative body of the AC, responsible for providing normative suggestions aimed at harmonising national regulations. In addition, it has the function to strengthen relations with national parliaments in order to stimulate their involvement in Andean integration (Avendaño 1999).

Parlandino has constituted an instrument of parliamentary diplomacy of the Andean integration. Not only has it facilitated the international engagement of its members – both formally (institutionalised dialogues) and informally (promoting meetings and friendship groups) – but also has assisted in the dialogue between representatives of national parliaments and other extra-regional parliamentary organisations in international/regional issues and forums (Erthal and Albarracín 2010).

Parlandino consists of five titular representatives per country, elected by the citizens of each member state (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru). At the beginning, representatives were appointed by national parliaments, but a directive was issued in the 1990s, stating that Andean parliamentarians should be directly elected. This decision intended to increase the democratic content of the AC, as well as populations' involvement in the Andean regionalism.

The implementation of direct elections was not simultaneous, and the first country to organise elections for Parlandino was Venezuela, in 2002 and 2005. Among the AC member states, Ecuador has held elections most frequently; in 2002, 2009 and 2013. Peru elected its representatives in 2006, and again in 2011. Bolivia was the last country to hold elections for Parlandino; in 2014 Bolivian voters could elect 8 individuals to be their representatives in Parlandino, Parlatino, Parlasur and the Indigenous Parliament of America.

Colombia held elections twice; in 2010 and 2014. The results of the first election were contested due to the fact that the number of blank and invalid votes exceeded the number of votes for the biggest party fraction. Despite this imbalance, the electoral commission declared the election as valid. After this phenomenon had repeated itself in 2014, though, the Colombian government decided to annul the results and revert to appointing Parlandino representatives.

Parlandino possesses a formal seat in Bogotá, Colombia, and has its own Secretariat. This, in combination with the fact that three out of four member states directly elect their MPs, guarantees the regularity of the parliament's activities. Within its framework, several themes are addressed, ranging from economics to commerce, energy and food safety. Even though Parlandino is an important dimension of the Andean regionalism, its potential role as a decision maker institution is often marginalised by leaders of member states. However, it is important to note a significant degree of politicisation in the debates and deliberations of this organ.

Against the backdrop of the concurrence of a certain disillusion with supranational integration and the rise of new integration projects with different ideologies, like the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America (ALBA) and the Pacific Alliance, the recent decade has been marked by a restructuring of the Andean integration effort. A polarisation between member states regarding external and regional positioning can be seen, which has further slowed down the integration process (Bressan and Luciano 2014).

Countries like Peru and Colombia have sought to amplify their insertion into the global economy with policies aimed at opening up to foreign products, services and investments. In 2012, these two countries reaffirmed their commitment to trade liberalisation by joining the Pacific Alliance, of which Mexico and Chile are also members. On the other hand, Bolivia and Ecuador joined ALBA. By doing so, these countries have opted for a new kind of post-liberal regionalism that prioritises the non-commercial dimension of integration with a decidedly leftist approach (Veiga and Ríos 2007).

It was in this context that the AC commissioned a study by the Economic Commission of Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) and the Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV) to assess the problems and obstacles that Andean integration faces. The report concluded that not only was a institutional reform of the AC necessary, but also the position of Parlandino in regional issues should be strengthened, and its competences, thematic focus, as well as the activities of MPs should be more clearly defined (Luciano et al. 2014a).

However, contrary to the recommendations of the CEPAL-FGV report, the leaders of AC member states proposed the dissolution of Parlandino during a meeting in Lima in 2013 and suggested that this organ should be integrated into the planned South American Parliament, as

part of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) context. Politicians and media outlets in Colombia, where Parlandino is seated, have strongly supported this proposal. Parlandino representatives and Secretariat staff, on the other side, fiercely criticised it, pointing out that this suggestion firmly contradicted the results of the commissioned study (Monsalve 2013).

This clash demonstrates the lack of political will among governments to consolidate the structures of democratic representation in the Andean regionalism. This is particularly evident in the case of Parlandino, whose resolutions have not been applied by AC member states. Moreover, the conflict confirmed that national actors hold very different views on the role of Parlandino within Andean integration.

Following the repercussions of the decision by government leaders and the polemics it created among public opinion in Andean countries, Parlandino resisted the proposal for its dissolution voiced by the Colombian congress and have proceed with its institutional agenda, maintaining regular activities, and is selecting a new board.

With regard to the general population in South America, it was found that 87.7% of the respondents have expressed support for regional economic projects, which indicates strong popular support for regional integration. On the other hand, in the Andean countries a mere 26% of the respondents had knowledge about the Andean Community, the continent's oldest regional integration project. In the MERCOSUR member states that percentage was at 65.2% (Latinobarometer 2010).

The fact that the AC is little known among the general public, despite the existence of a parliament associated with it and direct election of its members, underlines the distance between this regional integration platform and the citizens of its member states. This distance is largely due to the lack of public participation and the inability of the Andean Parliament to formulate social policies, a problem which also occurs in the case of MERCOSUR. A higher degree of institutionalisation in the AC, the creation of Parlandino, and the holding of direct elections have failed to increase the visibility of AC institutions. We can also affirm that the existence of Parlandino and the exclusive dedication of its members have not strengthened Andean integration or led to a democratisation of its decision making processes. To the contrary, the AC is currently characterised by a tendency towards disintegration.

The MERCOSUR Parliament (Parlasur) and the institutional reformulation of MERCOSUR integration

MERCOSUR was formally established in 1991 amidst a context of increasing regionalism, and is considered the most successful of the three due to the significant growth in interdependence it has generated among its member states. At the end of the 1990s and in the first years of the 21st century, the commercial achievements of MERCOSUR were questioned, due to the economic instability brought about by the devaluation of the Brazilian real and the financial and political crisis seen in Argentina in the following years. The project gained momentum after 2003, when

the governments of MERCOSUR countries announced a reformulation MERCOSUR's objectives towards more profound integration through the strengthening of its institutionalisation and the creation of a MERCOSUR parliament, known as *Parlasur* (Mariano et al. 2014).

Since it was launched, MERCOSUR has had an organ of parliamentary representation, but only after the Ouro Preto Protocol (1994) did the Joint Parliamentary Commission (JPC) received a formal status as a MERCOSUR institution, responsible for accelerating the incorporation of MERCOSUR norms and regulations into national legal systems (Drummond 2011).

Despite its formal status, the JPC remained marginalised in the negotiations regarding MERCOSUR integration and the incorporation of common norms, nor was it able to insert MERCOSUR debates to national parliaments (Mariano 2001; 2011). Nonetheless, it developed an internal discussion about how to increase its competences by transforming the JPC into a MERCOSUR parliament. These discussions gained momentum after 2003, when the newly elected governments of Brazil and Argentina¹ pledged to renew the scope of MERCOSUR with the purpose of inserting civil society in the process². *Parlasur* was founded in 2005 by the Constitutive Protocol of the MERCOSUR Parliament, and approved by MERCOSUR's Common Market Council (CMC). Along general lines, the Constitutive Protocol lists the following basic functions of *Parlasur*: strengthening the cooperation between national parliaments; streamlining the incorporation of MERCOSUR norms into national law; facilitating the participation of civil society in communitarian issues; and increasing the democratic content of the MERCOSUR project.

Furthermore, *Parlasur* has become a key institution of parliamentary diplomacy, particularly within the Southern Cone. Notable in this sense has been the establishment of relations with the European Parliament, due to the European Union's support to the institutionalisation of *Parlasur's* Secretariat (Dri 2010), as well as the meetings and visits to other Latin American regional parliaments – such as *Parlandino* and *Parlatino*. This body, moreover, has established a *locus* for national parliamentarians and political parties of member states to interact and develop common ideological and identity linkages (Caetano et al. 2009).

From the moment it was founded in 2007 *Parlasur* has sought to become a relevant institution and increase its weight in MERCOSUR decision making, but the steps taken in that direction have been small and insecure. In the first place, *Parlasur* has to deal with the difficulty of becoming a priority for its own members. This is reflected in the fact that parliamentary sessions, originally intended to take two days to provide ample time to debate the issues at hand, have gradually eroded to less than one day. The Argentinian delegation, before the direct elections, for instance, often withdraws in the early afternoon, alleging they need to get back in time for national parliamentary meetings.

Parlasur convenes once a month, and its discussion agenda consists of issues raised by the Common Market Group (MERCOSUR's executive organ) and parliamentarians. The latter normally refer to matters of national interest, for which they seek political support at a regional

1 Néstor Kirchner and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, respectively.

2 Buenos Aires Consensus, signed between Brazil and Argentina on 16 October 2003, available online at: http://www2.mre.gov.br/dai/b_argt_385_5167.htm.

level. Up to now, parliamentary action has generated very little real impact on integration at a broader scale, but there is consensus in discussions about the necessity to use *Parlasur* as a means to decrease the democratic deficit in MERCOSUR (Erthal 2006; Medeiros et al. 2010).

Low levels of commitment of *Parlasur* members resulting from their double mandates (both national and regional) were already a concern during the negotiations for its constitution. In this sense, it was decided that this situation would only persist in the transition stage, during which negotiations concerning proportionality rules for the size of national delegations and the realisation of direct elections were to take place. A directly elected MP cannot simultaneously serve as member of a national parliament, a rule that also applies to other functions in MERCOSUR institutions (*Parlasur* 2005).

Parlasur's Constitutive Protocol also calls for the realisation of direct elections for the parliamentarians that will represent the populations of MERCOSUR countries. At present, Paraguay has elected its representatives on two occasions (2008 and 2013). Argentina held its first elections in the second half of 2015, simultaneously to the Presidential elections. In Brazil, discussions in the National Congress about the regulations that will govern *Parlasur* elections have come to a standstill, and in Uruguay, too, there has been little progress (Luciano 2014).

However, as the Paraguayan case has demonstrated, the results of exclusive *Parlasur* membership are below expectations; in some cases, only one member of the delegation was present in *Parlasur* sessions. Furthermore, most Paraguayan representatives possess little or no parliamentary experience and lack the skills to exercise their functions in an efficient manner. Another point of interest is the distance between *Parlasur* delegations and the work of national parliaments, considering that in most cases that link runs through intra-party, rather than official channels.

It should also be noted that Paraguay's suspension in MERCOSUR, resulting from the impeachment of president Lugo, has resulted in a conflict among MPs. The Argentinian delegation took the position of its government and suggested that the Paraguayan delegation should be suspended from participating in parliamentary activities. The Paraguayan delegation reacted and stated it did not have a direct link with the government and could therefore not be suspended.

In accordance with the internal rules of *Parlasur*, the absence of a national delegation automatically suspends plenary sessions. This aspect and the formal autonomy of the Paraguayan delegation were strong arguments against suspension. As a response, Argentina chose to withhold its own representatives, which paralysed *Parlasur* for a period of almost three years. Between 2011 and 2013 only two meetings took place; one preparatory meeting in the end of 2011, and the first plenary session following the interruption in December 2013.

The interruption of *Parlasur* sessions has not affected the overall continuity of MERCOSUR activities, which has proceeded normally according to its regional agenda. This fact stresses two of the main issues of this regional case which are deeply interconnected: the superficiality/formality of its democratic and representative preoccupations and the absence of parliamentary participation in the regional decisions.

The involvement of MPs in the decision process of the regionalism is encumbered by various factors. In the first place, MERCOSUR countries lack a tradition of parliamentary intervention in

foreign policy, which is normally dominated by the executive branch. Secondly, the organisation of supranational party fractions in Parlasur is a difficult process, because political parties in MERCOSUR countries, with the exception of centre-left parties, tend to be characterised by a low degree of transnational political identity (Malamud and Dri 2013).

A central issue in understanding the functioning of Parlasur is to consider its place in the institutionalization of MERCOSUR. From its constitution onwards, the parliament has met strong resistance from national governments to become a clear supranational organisation. MERCOSUR's decision-making process remains firmly centred in intergovernmental and consensual negotiations, without the existence of supranational institutions which can overrule national governments.

This principle is essential in governments' strategies with regard to MERCOSUR, and is shared in good measure by Brazilian and Argentinian parliamentary representatives. In their defence of intergovernmentalism, they point to the risks of investing too much power in supranational institutions, which they fear could turn them into independent actors, able to develop and defend their own autonomous positions within the integration project.

The consolidation of Parlasur is a necessary element in the democratisation of MERCOSUR, but in itself insufficient to strengthen the integration process. Democracy presupposes the possibility of resolving conflicts of interest through balanced, regulated disputes between citizens and social groups. In MERCOSUR this does not happen because the balance of power is heavily based on national executive powers.

Similarly, direct elections of MPs have not improved the perception of regional integration by the general public. In Paraguay, for instance, many voters did not realise they were voting for Parlasur due to the fact that the voting lists were mixed with candidacies for other public offices and appointments. In Argentina, the Compulsory and Simultaneous Open Primaries system ensured a higher visibility of Parlasur candidacies, since a part of these were synchronised with candidate lists for the presidency³. However, Parlasur representation and the parliamentary immunity of its members did gain some notoriety as a result of the conviction of MP José López (ex-secretary of public works in the Kirchner governments) for allegedly hiding US\$ 8 million in bribes. This event strengthened the negative image of Parlasur as a safe haven for corrupt ex-government officials after the 2015 election⁴.

The Latin American Parliament (Parlatino) and the challenges of constituting a comprehensive Latin America regional project

Lastly, CELAC is the most recent proposal to integrate Latin American. It was elaborated in a context of strong criticism of the open regionalist model, but has not yet been fully implemented

3 Law 27.120, which governs the election of Parlasur members, envisages a mixed system in which 24 candidates are elected; one for each province and the capital, whereas 19 are elected nationally according to the D'Hondt system (Argentina, 2014).

4 With regard to immunity, salary, work descriptions, protocol and social welfare, Law 27.120 equals representatives of Parlasur to members of the national parliament (Argentina, 2014).

and congregates members of two anterior integration projects (Aravena 2011). Proposals have been put forward to nominate the Latin American Parliament (Parlatino) as CELAC's parliamentary dimension. Interestingly, Parlatino is the oldest parliamentary institution in Latin America as it predates all other attempts at integration in the region.

Parlatino was created in December 1964 in Lima and, unlike the other two cases analysed in this study, it has no formal association with a regional integration organisation. Its constitution coincided with the founding of the Latin American Free Trade Association (LAFTA), and though it was intended to become a parliament for this organisation, a formal link between the two was never formalised. The relevance of Parlatino lies in the historical context in which it was established, when several Latin American countries suffered strong ruptures in their democratic regimes. During this time, Parlatino served as a strong advocate for democracy and political pluralism, positioned itself as a 'moral tribune' (Stavridis 2006) for the Latin American regimes that have violated human rights and democratic principles during the second half of the twentieth century.

Parlatino is a unicameral parliament, and its members are representatives from the national parliaments of Latin American states. The latter may send delegations of up to 12 members. Although Parlatino began its activities in the mid-1960s, it was only formally institutionalised in 1987. It is a permanent representative organ responsible for promoting and harmonising regional integration between the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean. Like the other two parliaments, it is organised in permanent commissions which address various issues deemed important by member states (Parlatino 1987).

In contrast to Parlandino and Parlasur, the constitution of Parlatino imposes some limits on its consolidation (Mergulhão 2014). Its first drawback is the inexistence of a formal association with an actual regional integration project. Secondly, the parliament is not organised into political party fractions, and parliamentarians are merely associated along informal alliances loosely based on ideological affinity. Thirdly, the electoral connection is quite fragile; with the exception of Venezuela and Bolivia, which hold direct elections for their representatives.

In 2005, its seat was transferred from São Paulo to Panama City, and despite the logistical problems associated with the move, parliamentary plenary sessions have taken place regularly. Parlatino's new seat was inaugurated in 2013, and the institution can now rely on a team of exclusively secretariat staff (Parlasur 2015).

This bureaucratic consolidation was, however, not followed by an increase in the parliament's political prominence. The relation between Parlatino and national parliaments is marked by detachment, and political discussions from Parlatino are not usually incorporated by national parliaments. As Mergulhão (2014) argues, this link utterly depends on the individual posture of MPs, and how they bring the political decisions from Parlatino's permanent commissions to their respective national congresses.

Regarding these circumstances, there does appear to have been an evolution in the proceedings and institutionalisation of Parlatino over time. However, the peculiarities of this organ, guided by international treaties rather than an association to any particular integration project, render it fragile, and put it in a difficult position to implement decisions and evolve its activities. According

to Cofelice, “only parliamentary organs of regional or subregional organizations may be endowed with some degree of oversight, co-legislative, budgetary and consultative powers at the same time” (Cofelice 2012, 24).

The behaviour of MPs has not changed significantly during the course of Parlatino’s existence. Their actions are usually guided by national interests and in some cases by ideological affinities, though as mentioned before, the latter has not given rise to the formation of political fractions in the parliamentary context. It is possible to observe a division along ideological lines, something that has also been pointed out by MPs who are uncomfortable with the informality and implicitness of this division.

Parlatino has established a regular political dialogue with the EP since 1974, as parliamentary dimension of the interregional ties between Europe and Latin America. This cooperation was institutionalised in 2006, with the creation of the European-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly (EUROLAT). This inter-parliamentary organisation not only structures the relation between Parlatino and the EP, but also relations between the latter and other regional (Parlandino, Parlasur and Central American Parliament) and national (Chile and Mexico) parliaments, which send their representatives to its meetings (Stavridis and Ajenjo 2010). According to Malamud and de Sousa (2005), Parlatino has lost much importance since the consolidation of democratic regimes in the region during the 1980s and 90s, and the constitution of parliamentary bodies that are part of specific integration projects, such as Parlasur and Parlandino. They stress that the main challenge of Parlatino is the fact that its existence, mission and functioning are not integrated into a regional organisation.

With the constitution of CELAC in 2010, members of Parlatino expressed a strong interest in inserting their parliament into this new Latin American institution. This was emphasized by Parlatino representatives at the first CELAC summit in Caracas, where it was observed that Parlatino was willing to alter its legal foundation aiming to be part of this new regionalism and offering its seat in Panama City to further CELAC political meetings (Parlatino 2015).

Comparative analysis of the parliamentary cases

The consolidation of parliaments at the regional level has aimed certain objectives, such as democratic development, increased control over regional policies and achieving more autonomy for supranational institutions. However, as the analysed cases have shown, these goals are hindered by the limitations their own institutional configurations impose on them and by the performance of parliamentarians in regional integration issues.

A comparative analysis of the three parliaments, as shown in Figure below, presents the particularities of each case, as well as some similarities in the institutionalisation of regional parliaments in Latin America.

Figure 1: Comparison among Latin American Regional Parliaments

	MERCOSUR Parliament (PARLASUR)	Andean Parliament (PARLANDINO)	Latin American Parliament (PARLATINO)
Member States	5	4	23
Formally incorporated in integration project	Yes (MERCOSUR)	Yes (Andean Community)	No
Legislative competences	Consultative	Consultative	Consultative
Directly elected MPs	Paraguay and Argentina	Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru*	Venezuela and Bolivia
Representation per country	Proportional	Egalitarian (5 per country)	Egalitarian (12 per country)
Formalised party fractions	Yes	No	No
Decision-making system	Different majorities	Simple majority	Simple majority
Parliamentary commissions	Permanent	Permanent	Permanent
Acts of Parliament	Directives, Normative Projects, Preliminary Norm Drafts, Declarations, Recommendations, Reports and Law Proposals	Recommendations	Agreements, Recommendations, Resolutions, Motions, Projects and Declarations

* Colombian MPs were directly elected from 2010 until 2014 when they returned to be appointed by the Colombian National Congress.
Source: Elaborated by authors, based on Malamud and Sousa (2005).

Based on the information in the table above, we may conclude that Parlasur is the case that demonstrates the highest level of institutional complexity. Despite the fact that only the representatives of Paraguay and Argentina are directly elected, Parlasur is composed according to the principle of proportionality and allows for the formation of transnational fractions. The different types of majority by which decisions are reached reflect the diversity in legislative typologies that exist within the parliament. High impact Acts of Parliament (which are to be directed to the CMC or national parliaments), such as revisions of internal procedures, directives, normative legislation and preliminary drafts require special majorities, whereas a simple majority suffices for declarations and consultations (Dri and Paiva 2012).

Although Parlandino is older than Parlasur, and its representatives are directly elected in most member states, it has less institutional complexity and produces different types of legislation than the latter, which reduces its influence on the AC decision-making processes. Venezuela's admission to MERCOSUR and the possible accession of Bolivia and Ecuador, in combination with host country Colombia's scepticism are testament to the marginalisation of Parlandino and the Andean integration project as a whole in the face of newer initiatives like UNASUR and the Pacific Alliance (Bressan and Luciano 2014).

Parlatino, on the other hand, has more member states (23 in total) and has been active for 28 years. It has a low degree of institutions in comparison with Parlandino and Parlasur, which is largely due to the absence of any formal link with a regional integration project (its incorporation into CELAC has not yet concretised). For this reason, its resolutions, agreements and recommendations do not carry much weight in Latin American countries. Moreover, Parlatino is characterised as an 'international parliamentary organisation', rather than an 'international parliamentary organ'

inserted in a defined regional integration block, as is the case with Parlasur and Parlandino (Cofelice 2012). Even though each one of the analysed regional parliaments present different organisational configurations, all of them could represent important instruments of parliamentary diplomacy in Latin America, favouring the relations among regional and extra-regional parliaments, as well as contributing to the dialogue with national legislative bodies. Meanwhile, in the Latin American integration cases analysed, the setting up of parliamentary structures has not brought about the desired effects in the sense of consolidating democratic representation. Initially, it was thought that the constitution of directly elected parliaments would attract popular support for supranational integration efforts and increase the representativeness and legitimacy of these projects. However, the creation of parliaments has not fundamentally changed the distribution of power, which remains firmly in the hands of national governments and is exercised almost exclusively in the environment of intergovernmental and interpresidential decisions, with low degrees of transparency and accountability.

So far the introduction of elections for the assessed parliaments has not generated an automatic increase of their power and influence, nor has it led to more democracy or consolidation in regional integration efforts. It is interesting to think that Parlasur, although it was founded with the intention to strengthen the communitarian cooperation in MERCOSUR, remains subjected to the whims of national governments.

Parlandino shows that the lack of a relevant function, legitimacy and popular support can open the way for opposition to the very existence of a regional parliament. In addition, proposals for the creation of parliaments linked to other integration projects such as UNASUR and CELAC tend to further erode the relevance of institutions like Parlasur and Parlandino.

The two-year period of Parlasur inactivity demonstrates that the disappearance of regional parliaments in South America does not imply relevant consequences for the functioning of other institutions related to an integration process. It does, however, represent a decline in the efforts to democratise the political processes of regional blocks.

Conclusion

In recent years, new proposals and integration models have instigated a discussion about how regional integration is progressing and how these processes can be redirected (Sanahuja 2010; Serbin 2011; Söderbaum 2015). On the other hand, the current environment of political and economic crisis fuels dissatisfaction with the existing integration projects.

Based on the research, it can be perceived that in recent years there has been a decrease in the support for political cooperation between countries, turning regional integration into a tool for immediate problem-solving rather than a long term project aimed at facing together the challenges of a changing global order. The parliamentary structures themselves, being public and transparent organs by nature, have also become objects of criticism and dissatisfaction (Lesston-Bandeira 2002).

This paper assessed and compared three regional parliaments in Latin America: Parlandino, Parlasur and Parlatino. After introducing the history and fundamental characteristics of the parliamentary cases addressed, we have qualitatively compared their institutional configurations. Although all cases present differences in institutional characteristics, member numbers and foundational context, they all share the same limitations regarding their consultative role within regional integration decision-making processes.

The contemporary creation of new regional parliaments such as Parlasur and the establishment of direct elections for their members have not changed their marginalised position within the integration initiatives they are part of. Particularly in the case of Parlatino, the potential to become an influential actor in Latin American regionalism is even more distant, considering that this body has yet to establish itself as the parliamentary dimension of the recently created CELAC. The evolution of Parlandino and the direct election of its members in all AC member states are testament to the difficulties experienced by the population in the Andean subregion of South America in comprehending the significance and importance of regional integration for their lives.

Nevertheless, these regional parliaments can be considered as relevant instruments for the development of parliamentary diplomacy and the democratisation of regional integration, bringing parliamentarians, political parties and, ultimately, citizens closer to the discussion of regional issues. As yet, though, they have not managed to establish effective mechanisms to influence Latin American regional decision making, which remains firmly in the hands of national governments and presidents.

The explanation for this parliamentary fragility can be found in the hypothesis presented at the beginning of this article: the democratisation of regional integration is associated with the acceptance of a deepening of this process and the subsequent existence of regional institutions with a certain degree of autonomy from national governments. In Latin America, the initiatives aimed at strengthening the position of regional parliaments are restricted to reaffirmations of the desire to cooperate and overcome the problems and crises faced by organisations like the AC and MERCOSUR. It is evident that both these integration processes have suffered difficulties in consolidating arrangements and creating an atmosphere of internal and external confidence.

On the other hand, the European case demonstrates that the establishment of a strong regional parliament, embedded in the organisational structure of the block and its decision-making processes, does have a relevant impact on the integration process as a whole. As such, the EP has been involved in important negotiations about the future of the European project like the Single European Act and the Treaty of Maastricht.

The problem with the Latin American cases is that the measures to decrease the democratic deficit and consolidate regional integration have come in a context of crisis and fragilisation of regional integration platforms. As a result, despite the good intentions of presidents and their publicly expressed commitment to taking regional integration forward, MERCOSUR and the AC are subjected to the instability generated by doubts about the real commitment of member states to honouring the agreements.

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