DP
ENFOQUE

DIÁLOGO POLÍTICO

From the Pitch to Power: Football and Politics in Latin America

David Gómez

Number 19

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

DIÁLOGO POLÍTICO

DP Enfoque n.º 19
From the Pitch to Power: Football and Politics in Latin America
David Gómez

FUNDACIÓN KONRAD ADENAUER
Plaza Independencia 749, of. 201, Montevideo, Uruguay
Tel.: (598) 2902 0943/ -3974
E-mail: info.montevideo@kas.de
http://www.kas.de/es/parteien-lateinamerika
@KASpartidos
www.dialogopolitico.org - @dplatinoamerica

Director
Henning Suhr

Subdirector
Ulrike Carrillo

Editorial Coordinator
Ángel Arellano

Editorial Assistant
Agustina Lombardi

English Translation
Mirtha Tovar

Design and Setup
Yamila Murán Leivas
@cretayam

ISBN 978-9915-9908-0-4

DIÁLOGO POLÍTICO is a platform for democratic dialogue among political opinionmakers about topics of relevance in Latin America, based on the values of freedom, solidarity, and justice. It connects the region with the great geostrategic debates around the world and serves as a window for showcasing projects by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Latin America.
DIÁLOGO POLÍTICO is part of the Regional Program on Political Parties and Democracy in Latin America (KAS Partidos). Its aim is to reduce political polarization through constructive and informed pluralist debate oriented to the common good, to strengthen the political center from its Christian-social, liberal and conservative roots.

www.dialogopolitico.org - @dplatinoamerica

Contents

From the Pitch to Power: Football and Politics in Latin America

Summary

The politics of football in Latin America reveal a sport that transcends the pitch: it shapes national identities, fuels historical rivalries, and advances political agendas. How did the world's most popular game become a stage for power, diplomacy, corruption, and violence across the turbulent Latin American region? How does the ball reflect the region's social tensions and help illuminate its deepest crises, alliances, and disputes?

1. Introduction: Anatomy of Football's Power in Latin America

Football is one of the foremost mass phenomena in Latin America. Owing to its immense popularity, the sport has also acquired a significant geopolitical dimension. Its development has reflected the region's political, geographical, and social divisions, as well as some of its most outstanding dynamics: regional hierarchies, foreign intervention, and the tensions between integration and fragmentation.

The evolution of Latin American football cannot be understood as an exclusively internal process, but rather as the result of the region's uneven incorporation into the global economy and into the spheres of influence of international powers, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom.

Since its introduction in the second half of the nineteenth century, Latin American football has been characterized by considerable diversity, both in sporting and institutional terms. In Latin America, professional football is organized around two major footballing blocs: the Confederation of North, Central America and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF) and the South American Football Confederation (CONMEBOL). Both are officially recognized by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA).

This division within Latin American football reflects two distinct geopolitical spheres: a South American axis, marked by greater historical cohesion, and another encompassing the countries of North America, Central America, and the Caribbean, which is more diverse and more heavily shaped by the dominance of the United States.

CONMEBOL, the world's oldest regional football confederation, has established itself as a compact institution comprising ten members. Its composition, however, does not respond strictly to geographical criteria, but also reflects political, linguistic, and cultural affinities. Evidence of this can be seen in the exclusion of those South American territories whose official languages are neither Spanish nor Portuguese, such as Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana. Likewise, CONMEBOL does not recognize the Falkland Islands, as its member states support Argentina's sovereignty claims over this British Overseas Territory.

CONCACAF, for its part, constitutes a more fragmented space. Unlike CONMEBOL, this confederation includes several non-Latin American countries among its members. It consists of 41 national federations and is divided into three geographical zones: North America, Central America, and the Caribbean. Its membership includes Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana.

Nevertheless, the fragmentation of football in Latin America has not prevented sporting exchanges between both confederations. The participation of six CONCACAF members in the 2024 Copa América—the CONMEBOL national team tournament—represents the most recent example of this cooperation. Likewise, several CONMEBOL members, such as Brazil, Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador, have taken part in various editions of the Gold Cup organised by CONCACAF.

This interaction has also extended to club football. A paradigmatic example is the Copa Libertadores, CONMEBOL's main annual club competition, which invited Mexican clubs between 1998 and 2016. At times, both confederations even organised joint tournaments, such as the Copa Interamericana, which between 1969 and 1998 pitted the Copa Libertadores champion against the winner of the CONCACAF Champions' Cup.

The historical cooperation between CONCACAF and CONMEBOL constitutes a clear example of sports diplomacy, even if such collaboration has been driven primarily by commercial and media expansion strategies. However, attempts at cooperation **have not eliminated the disparities within Latin American football.** These differences have also been reflected on the pitch.

Historically, the international success of CONMEBOL countries has contrasted sharply with the results achieved by CONCACAF national teams. The South American confederation accounts for ten World Cup titles, concentrated in three countries: Brazil (five), Argentina (three), and Uruguay (two). By contrast, the best performance by a CONCACAF team in a World Cup remains the third-place finish achieved by the United States in the inaugural edition in 1930.

These differences have deeper geopolitical roots. Football developed more rapidly in South American countries, which were more strongly exposed to the United Kingdom's economic and cultural influence (Miller, 2007, p. 4). This diffusion was linked to the integration of South American states into global markets, their processes of modernisation, and the expansion of colonial empires. In contrast, in North American, Central American, and Caribbean countries, the establishment of the game was shaped by competition with baseball, in a context marked by the influence of the United States and its military interventions in the region. As a result, the sporting map of Latin America reproduces the zones of influence of the United States and the United Kingdom in the region (Alabarces, 2018, p. 35).

On the one hand, football symbolised the ideas of progress, modernity, and civilisation with which the native bourgeoisie identified. On the other, it provided a space through which these societies could distinguish themselves from the British and define their own national narratives.

2.Football and Identities in Latin America

2.1. Football as a Tool of National-Building

The nation is not a natural entity, but a social construct. Anderson (1993) defines it as an imagined political community—both limited and sovereign. When it comes to articulating identities, football emerges as one of the most effective mechanisms of *banal nationalism*, that is, the everyday forms through which a specific national identity is reproduced (Billig, 2014). Hobsbawm (2012) argued that this imagined community becomes tangible when it is embodied by eleven footballers wearing the national team jersey. Citizens of a country become aware of their nation when they watch their national team compete in an international tournament.

Estadio Centenario de Montevideo, host venue of the 1930 FIFA World Cup

Source: www.estadiocentenario.com.uy

In Latin America, this nationalist dimension of football has been particularly significant. In most cases, the expansion of the game occurred at a time when the majority of states in the region were already well established. However, this diffusion developed in parallel with the modernisation processes experienced by Latin American countries between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The construction of railways and the rapid urbanisation of cities enabled the practice of football to spread beyond British schools.

The game underwent a process of nationalisation. During this period, local elites adopted the sport introduced by British communities and endowed it with a national identity of its own

In that context, football underwent a process of nationalisation in Latin America. Local elites, particularly in South America, adopted the modern sports introduced by British communities and gradually began to appropriate them. On the one hand, football symbolised the ideas of progress, modernity, and civilisation with which the native bourgeoisie identified. On the other, it provided a space through which these societies could distinguish themselves from the British and define their own national narratives.

Thus, in contrast to clubs of British origin, the first criollo clubs emerged in South America. Some incorporated patriotic references into their names, such as Club Argentino de Quilmes in Argentina and Club Nacional de Football in Uruguay. At the same time, a distinctly *criollo* and *Río de la Plata* style of football was promoted. In opposition to the physical, long-passing game associated with the British, *la nuestra* emerged in Argentina—a style of play

based on short passing and dribbling flair (*gambeta*) (Rodríguez, 2017, p. 27).

Similarly, football became intertwined with the myths of popular culture in these countries. In Argentina, the footballer came to be associated with the figure of the *gaucho*—the popular, anti-oligarchic hero who embodied the rural traditions of the countryside. Meanwhile, in Uruguay, the national team symbolised the *garra charrúa*, a reference to the most prominent Indigenous people who inhabited that territory. In both countries, football has served as an effective instrument of national integration.

Another Latin American country that experienced its own process of *criollización* in football, albeit at a later stage, was Mexico. However, this process did not emerge in opposition to the British, but rather to Spanish clubs. The Spanish community, which had grown significantly during the *Porfiriato*, established new clubs as a means of asserting its elite status. In response, criollo teams reaffirmed their distinct identity. The disputes between clubs were ultimately settled in 1945, when President Manuel Ávila Camacho issued a decree regulating the number of foreign players, with the aim of limiting the economic dominance of Spanish teams (Alabarces, 2018, p. 157).

Brazil constitutes a particular case. As in neighbouring countries, football became a central pillar of Brazilian popular culture. However, the identity of Brazilian football possessed a strong racial dimension. Its development was grounded in the integration of *mulato* and Afro-descendant players. Much like samba and capoeira, football came to be conceived as an artistic expression associated with these communities. In a country marked by profound racial inequalities—Brazil was the last Latin American country to abolish slavery, in 1888—football served as a vehicle for social mobility among the Black population. For Filho (2003, p. 234), it represented the fulfilment of Brazil's racial democracy, embodied in stars such as Garrincha and Pelé.

The Copa Libertadores and the CONCACAF Champions League are the most prestigious club football trophies in South America and in North and Central America, respectively. Both are organised by their respective regional confederations, CONMEBOL and CONCACAF.

Source: Conmebol

2.2. Identity in Latin American Football

Likewise, football has contributed to the opposite phenomenon: the fostering of distinct regional identities within Latin American countries themselves. Its development in the Río de la Plata countries has highlighted the asymmetric relationship between their capitals—wealthier as a result of maritime trade with the United Kingdom—and the inland provinces.

These territorial dynamics were particularly pronounced in Argentina, where the elites of Buenos Aires, advocates of a liberal and centralised state, historically clashed with the interior regions, which demanded a federal and decentralised model. Initially, the Argentine Football Association (AFA) included only clubs from Buenos Aires Province. Clubs from Rosario—Rosario Central and Newell's Old Boys—Santa Fe—Colón and Unión—and Córdoba—Belgrano and Talleres—did not become part of the AFA until 1939, almost half a century after its foundation.

Chile has not been immune to this situation either. From its origins, Chilean football has been shaped by the territorial rivalry between the centre and the regions, embodied by Santiago and Valparaíso. Unlike Argentina and Uruguay, however, Chile's principal port city was not the capital. Whereas Valparaíso illustrated British influence in the region, Santiago's clubs presented themselves as the criollo—albeit aristocratic—resistance.

Regionalism in football has nevertheless manifested itself more strongly in countries with vast geographical extension and greater difficulties in integrating their territory. Three Latin American states exemplify this regionalist tendency: Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico. In contrast to the centralism of Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, or Peru, the evolution of football in these countries has been characterised by its simultaneous development across different regions.

In Brazil, tensions between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo have structured the national football landscape. To this day, both states maintain

Regionalism in football has nevertheless manifested itself more strongly in countries with vast geographical extension and greater difficulties in integrating their territory.

their regional championships—the Campeonato Carioca and the Campeonato Paulista—which were established before the creation of a national Brazilian tournament in 1937. The rivalry between *carioca* and *paulista* clubs is rooted in historical factors. While Rio concentrated political power during the Empire of Brazil, São Paulo emerged as the centre of economic and industrial power. Other major footballing hubs later joined these territories, including Minas Gerais and Rio Grande do Sul.

In Colombia, meanwhile, football's regional diversity has been even more pronounced, owing to the country's longstanding geographical, social, and cultural fragmentation since independence (Cuevas, 2018, p. 18). In fact, Colombia did not establish a national football league until 1948, and its creation was motivated, among other factors, by political interests. The foundation of the Major Division of Colombian Football (Dimayor) took place only months after the Bogotazo—the riots that erupted following the assassination of the liberal politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán—which triggered a conflict known as *La Violencia*. In that context, the Conservative government supported the creation of a national championship as a.

2.3. From Elite Sport to Mass Phenomenon

The expansion of football in Latin America unfolded in two distinct stages. In an initial phase, the game underwent a process of nationalisation. During this period, local elites adopted the sport

introduced by British communities and endowed it with a national identity of its own. However, the appropriation of football by the local bourgeoisie did not immediately lead to its diffusion among the popular classes.

Several factors contributed to its popularisation. First, football stood out as an inexpensive and easily accessible sport. These logistical advantages allowed it to be played virtually anywhere. At the same time, the rapid growth of cities fostered the development of new means of transport, such as trams and railways, as well as the construction of stadiums. Football clubs suddenly emerged as vehicles of cohesion and socialisation within urban neighbourhoods. Above all, these institutions were closely tied to the communities of their immediate surroundings.

Argentina provides a paradigmatic example of this phenomenon. During the first decade of the twentieth century, numerous clubs with popular roots were founded in Buenos Aires. All of them asserted a strong neighbourhood identity: Boca Juniors was established by Italian immigrants in La Boca; Huracán was deeply rooted in Parque Patricios; and San Lorenzo de Almagro originated through the initiative of Lorenzo Massa, a Salesian priest from Boedo.

Nevertheless, the spread of football among the porteño working classes failed to win the sympathy of left-wing groups, whose trade union activity was particularly intense in Buenos Aires. They regarded it as a bourgeois manoeuvre designed to distract workers from class struggle.

The game underwent a process of nationalisation. During this period, local elites adopted the sport introduced by British communities and endowed it with a national identity of its own.

At the time, the promotion of football through schools, parishes, and companies was closely aligned with the hygienist doctrines disseminated at the end of the nineteenth century. Local elites sought to replicate the British football model. Football was intended to discipline workers and steer them away from sex, tobacco, and alcohol during their leisure time.

As football expanded among the plebeian sectors, a new class-based identity axis emerged, alongside national, regional, and local identities. In the United Kingdom, this identity was fundamentally working-class. In Latin America, it emphasised the game's popular character. Nevertheless, some clubs exceptionally drew explicitly upon their proletarian roots. In Argentina, notable examples include Chacarita Juniors, founded in an anarchist bookshop, and Argentinos Juniors, initially named Mártires de Chicago in homage to the workers killed during the protests of 1 May 1886 in Chicago, which demanded the eight-hour working day. Yet perhaps the clearest embodiment of this working-class identity was Corinthians Paulista, founded in Brazil by railway workers.

In Brazil, precisely, the diffusion of football among the popular classes was also accompanied by a strong racial component. The emergence of plebeian clubs enabled the incorporation of Afro-descendant footballers into the game, from which they had largely been excluded, particularly in the highly elitist football culture of Rio de Janeiro. The popularisation of football in Brazil led clubs such as Flamengo, despite its aristocratic origins, to recruit the most prominent Black players and transform itself into the favourite club of Rio's popular classes, in contrast to its principal rival, Fluminense. A similar process occurred in Peru, where the rivalry between Alianza Lima and Club Universitario de Deportes symbolised two competing visions of the Peruvian nation: one associated with Afro-Peruvians and the popular classes, and the other linked to the white and European elite.

In Brazil, precisely, the diffusion of football among the popular classes was also accompanied by

a strong racial component. The emergence of plebeian clubs enabled the incorporation of Afro-descendant footballers into the game, from which they had largely been excluded, particularly in the highly elitist football culture of Rio de Janeiro. The popularisation of football in Brazil led clubs such as Flamengo, despite its aristocratic origins, to recruit the most prominent Black players and transform itself into the favourite club of Rio's popular classes, in contrast to its principal rival, Fluminense. A similar process occurred in Peru, where the rivalry between Alianza Lima and Club Universitario de Deportes symbolised two competing visions of the Peruvian nation: one associated with Afro-Peruvians and the popular classes, and the other linked to the white and European elite.

There is, however, one notable exception in Latin America to the association between football and the popular sectors: Cuba. On the island, baseball—not football—became popularised as a symbol of modernity and resistance to Spanish colonialism, with football being identified instead with Spanish influence.

3. Football as a Political Instrument

3.1. Professionalisation and Politicisation

The popularisation of football and the growing presence of working-class players paved the way for the transition from amateurism to professionalisation. In South America, this process unfolded during the 1930s, whereas in Central America it would develop later, during the 1950s. Until then, Latin American football had been shaped by what became known as amateurismo marrón—a system whereby players were indirectly compensated in order to prevent them from leaving their clubs. However, the shift towards professionalism fuelled schisms between its supporters and opponents within each country.

In any event, the rise in stadium attendance transformed the very nature of football in Latin America. With its popularisation, football ceased to be a sport conceived primarily to be played and instead became a spectacle designed to be watched (Huizinga, 1957). The emergence of supporters identifying passionately with one team or another turned the game into a mass phenomenon.

With its popularisation, football ceased to be a sport conceived primarily to be played and instead became a spectacle designed to be watched (Huizinga, 1957). The emergence of supporters identifying passionately with one team or another turned the game into a mass phenomenon.

At the same time, other factors contributed to this transformation. One was the expansion of the press and of new media such as radio, which amplified the reach of the sport across Latin America. Another was the organisation of the first international tours and tournaments. Throughout the 1920s, clubs such as Boca Juniors of Argentina, Nacional of Uruguay, Paulistano of Brazil, and Colo-Colo of Chile travelled to Europe to compete against European clubs.

The tours undertaken by Latin American clubs across the Old Continent consolidated their prestige abroad. Domestically, they also reinforced the narrative of a distinctly Latin American style of football, differentiated from that of Europe. Even more significant was the emergence of the first international tournaments between national teams. Uruguay's victories at the 1924 Paris Olympic Games and the 1928 Amsterdam Olympic Games—the latter against Argentina—

confirmed the Río de la Plata region's hegemony in world football.

International matches between national teams, however, also created a space in which regional rivalries could flourish even further. A clear example was the first FIFA World Cup, held in Uruguay in 1930. During that tournament, Argentina and Uruguay replayed the Olympic final contested two years earlier. Tensions between the two sides escalated to the point of provoking a dispute over which ball would be used during the match. Uruguay's 4–2 victory sparked unrest in Buenos Aires, where attacks against the Uruguayan embassy were reported.

The transformation of football into a mass spectacle facilitated its politicisation. From 1930 onwards, state intervention in the development of the game became a recurring trend throughout Latin America. Governments across the region became involved in disputes surrounding professionalisation and promoted the construction of new stadiums, such as Santiago de Chile's Estadio Nacional, a state-owned venue inaugurated by President Arturo Alessandri in 1938.

Governments even supported the construction of new club stadiums through low-interest loans. This enabled clubs such as River Plate and Boca Juniors to build their current stadiums—the Monumental and La Bombonera—during the presidency of General Agustín Pedro Justo. Under his administration, political interference in football became increasingly evident. Indeed, his son-in-law, Eduardo Sánchez Terrero, assumed control of the Argentine Football Association (AFA) during this period.

3.2. Varguismo and Peronism: Football as State Policy

The figure who ultimately consolidated the use of football as a political instrument in Latin America, however, was Getúlio Vargas, who served as Brazil's president during two separate periods between 1930 and 1954. Varguismo represented one of the first successful populist movements in Latin America. Under Vargas's leadership, Brazil implemented the Estado Novo, an authoritarian and nationalist regime established under the pretext of containing an alleged communist threat. During this period, football played a central role in the political strategy of varguismo.

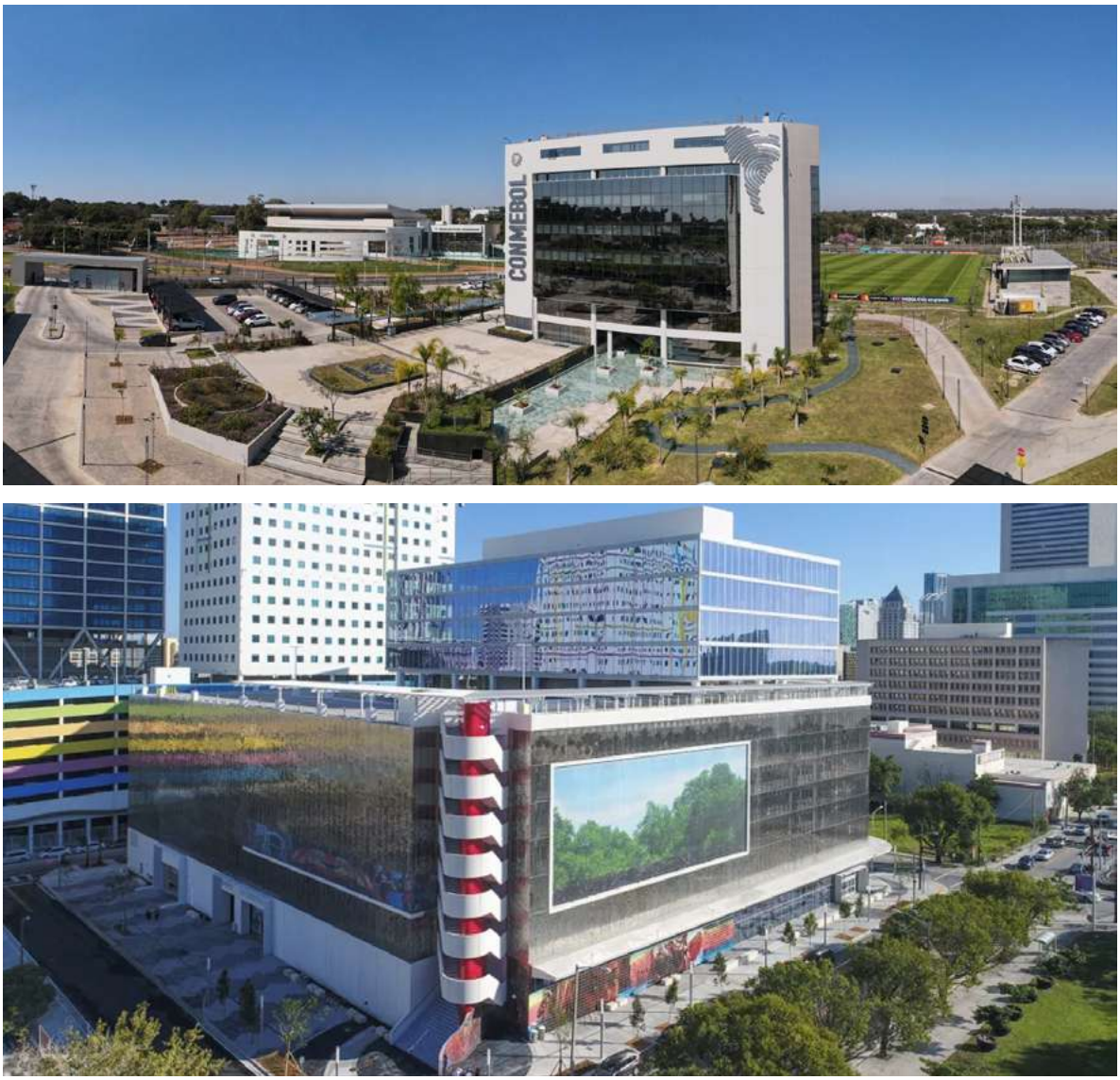
The 1934 World Cup, organised in Fascist Italy, and the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, held in Nazi Germany, had demonstrated the potential of sport as an instrument for nationalist propaganda, the construction of a cohesive national identity, and the domestic legitimisation of political leaders. Following these examples, Vargas promoted the development of Brazilian football through state intervention. Varguismo accelerated the construction of large stadiums—such as São Paulo's Pacaembu Stadium—and the creation of the National Sports Council, the first institution designed to implement a coordinated national sports policy in the country.

Beyond institutionalising Brazilian football, Vargas intensified its dissemination throughout the national territory via Rádio Nacional, created in 1936. As part of this strategy, the Brazilian leader encouraged the national team to include players from different regions of the country, rather than exclusively from Rio de Janeiro, as had largely been the case until the early 1930s. The objective was to foster broader identification with the national team and to construct a genuine "Brazilian race" (Guterman, 2009, p. 81). Through this process, football established itself as one of the foremost symbols of Brazilian culture. At the same time, Brazil laid the foundations to challenge the footballing hegemony of Argentina and Uruguay in Latin America.

Above all, however, varguismo created a model that other leaders would emulate in order to instrumentalise football for political purposes. One of the figures who followed Vargas's example was Juan Domingo Perón. During his first period in power, between 1946 and 1955, Peronism transformed sport into a state policy. It was to serve as entertainment for the masses, but also as a vehicle for propaganda and for promoting the

principles of the Peronist movement, associated with the national and the popular. In this context, the Argentine government launched the Evita Games in 1948. Named after First Lady Eva Perón, the competition fulfilled several functions: expanding access to sport for underprivileged youth, promoting physical health, and fostering the cult of personality surrounding Peronist leaders. Football, as the most popular sport, did not escape this process of Peronisation. Although Perón never publicly identified himself with any particular club, Argentine teams sought political patrons who could bring them closer to the president. The most prominent of these figures was Finance Minister Ramón Cereijo, known for his support for Racing Club de Avellaneda. His influence enabled Racing to finance the construction of its new stadium—named Presidente Perón Stadium—and ensured that passports were denied to the club's leading players in order to prevent their transfer abroad. Perón also capitalised on the successes of the Argentine national team for political ends. The most paradigmatic example occurred in 1953, when the *albiceleste* defeated England for the first

The CONMEBOL building in Luque, Paraguay, and the CONCACAF building in Miami, Florida, USA



Source: Irmo Celso / *Placar* - Official Corinthians website.

time in Buenos Aires, by a score of 3–1. The press of the period used the sporting feat to exalt the criollo style of Argentine footballers. Indeed, one Peronist minister famously declared: "First we nationalised the railways; today we nationalised football." As a consequence, the Peronist government established the date of that match, 14 May, as Footballer's Day in Argentina (Rodríguez, 2017, p. 108).

3.3. Rivalries and Diplomacy: The Symbolic Power of Football

The rivalry between Argentina and England illustrated one of the principal dimensions of football's political influence: its role as a symbolic battlefield (Dávila and Londoño, 2003, p. 140). For Argentinians, matches against the English national team became one of the foremost expressions of nationalist pride. As Guttmann (1994) argues, sport offered the dominated the possibility of defeating the dominant. Within this narrative, Argentina perceived football as an opportunity to subvert Britain's historical influence in the country and, above all, to alleviate the grievance represented by London's control over the Falkland Islands.

This became particularly evident during the quarter-finals of the 1986 World Cup. In that match, Argentina defeated England through two historic goals scored by Diego Armando Maradona: one with his hand, the other after dribbling past several opponents from midfield. That victory provided Argentina with a form of symbolic revenge for its defeat against the United Kingdom in the Falklands War, which had begun four years earlier.

There were moments, however, when football transcended its symbolic dimension and emerged as an arena for direct political tensions between states. The most notable episode in Latin America was the armed conflict between Honduras and El Salvador, which Ryszard Kapuściński famously termed the "Football War" (Kapuściński, 2006). The conflict erupted on 14 July 1969, two weeks after both countries had faced one another in a qualifying playoff for the 1970 World Cup in Mexico.

The creation of CONMEBOL represented the first expression of regional integration in South America, long before the emergence of political initiatives such as the Andean Community or Mercosur.

The two matches were played in an atmosphere of escalating confrontation between Honduras and El Salvador. Violent incidents were recorded during both encounters. Nevertheless, football was not the true cause of the war. Beneath the conflict lay a range of economic and social factors, including land concentration in El Salvador, the migration of poor Salvadoran peasants into Honduras, and the agrarian reform promoted by the Honduran government, which began expelling Salvadoran peasants from its territory.

Although football has predominantly functioned as a space of competition in Latin America, it has also displayed certain signs of Latin American unity. The creation of CONMEBOL represented the first expression of regional integration in South America, long before the emergence of political initiatives such as the Andean Community or Mercosur.

Another significant development in this regard was the emergence of the first international club competitions during the 1960s. The invitations extended to Mexican teams in the Copa Libertadores, as well as the creation of the Copa Interamericana, were driven primarily by one objective: the expansion of television markets. Indirectly, however, these initiatives also nourished the notion of the patria grande promoted by Simón Bolívar—that is, the idea of a political union in Latin America encompassing all Hispanic American nations.

1978 World Cup, Argentina

Source: www.conmebol.com.

3.4.Football and Dictatorships: From Soft Power to Protest

The political use of football, developed by the principal Latin American populist movements of the twentieth century, reached its peak during the 1970s. In the midst of the Cold War, several nationalist, conservative, and anti-communist military dictatorships came to power in South America with the backing of the United States. The emergence of these regimes formed part of the context of Operation Condor, a system of intelligence-sharing and repression designed to persecute political opponents, primarily from the left.

In this climate, football did not escape the control of military regimes. Their leaders focused considerable attention on the game for several reasons. The first was the desire to strengthen their international image through soft power. Soft power refers to a country's ability to influence the actions of other actors through cultural, ideological, and diplomatic means, as opposed to economic or military power (Nye, 2005). Guided by this logic, Latin American dictatorships sought to use football to project a more benign image of their regimes and present themselves to the world as modern, advanced countries respectful of human rights.

Official propaganda promoted nationalist pride through the national team and portrayed sporting triumphs as achievements of the political system itself. Football also functioned as a mechanism of social control, diverting public attention away from criticism and repression directed against political opponents.

Al mismo tiempo, estos regímenes dictatoriales At the same time, these dictatorial regimes viewed football as a tool through which to gain domestic legitimacy and reinforce national cohesion. Official propaganda promoted nationalist pride through the national team and portrayed sporting triumphs as achievements of the political system itself. Football also functioned as a mechanism of social control, diverting public attention away from criticism and repression directed against political opponents.

The most emblematic example of this strategy was Argentina's military dictatorship. From the outset, the military authorities understood the importance of football within Argentine society. Indeed, on the day of the 1976 coup d'état, the broadcast of the uprising itself was interrupted only to televise a match involving Argentina in Poland.

In Brazil, football not only became a form of resistance against the dictatorship, but also contributed decisively to the country's democratisation. During the final years of military rule, in the early 1980s, Brazilian football witnessed an unprecedented democratic experiment: Corinthians Democracy.

This importance became especially evident during the organisation of the 1978 World Cup. The tournament represented a unique opportunity to consolidate the dictatorship's international standing. As a consequence, the Autonomous Entity for the 1978 World Cup was created to oversee its organisation, and more than 700 million dollars were invested—three times the amount spent on the subsequent edition in Spain. Part of those funds was allocated to a United States advertising agency that orchestrated the regime's image-laundering campaign. At one point, the magazine El Gráfico even published a fabricated letter allegedly written by Dutch footballer Ruud Krol to his three-year-old daughter, claiming that the military fired "flowers" rather than bullets (Rodríguez, 2017, p. 168).

Win or lose, democracy must always prevail

Corinthians players unfurled a banner during the final of the Paulista Championship against São Paulo, played on 12 December 1982, at the height of the Brazilian military dictatorship.

Source: Irmo Celso / *Placar* - Página web oficial de Corinthians.

Joseph "Sepp" Blatter, FIFA General Secretary (1981–1998), and João Havelange, FIFA President (1974–1998), with the official Adidas Tango Spain match ball.

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The control exercised by South American dictatorships over football ultimately generated the opposite effect. Contrary to their interests, the sport helped to make opposition to military rule more visible.

The Argentine authorities also became notorious for their interference during the tournament. Reports indicated that the leader of the military junta, Jorge Rafael Videla, entered Peru's dressing room alongside United States Secretary of State Henry Kissinger before Peru's match against Argentina. The game, which ended in a 6–0 Argentine victory, secured the albiceleste a place in the final, where it defeated the Netherlands to claim its first World Cup title. Argentina achieved this triumph at the newly renovated Monumental Stadium, located only a short distance from the dictatorship's principal torture centre: the Navy Mechanics School *(Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada* -ESMA).

A similar situation unfolded in Chile, where a coup led by Augusto Pinochet overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende in 1973. In the years that followed, the Pinochet dictatorship intervened in the national football association and used Santiago's National Stadium as a detention and torture centre for political prisoners.

Yet the control exercised by South American dictatorships over football ultimately generated the opposite effect. Contrary to their interests, the sport helped to make opposition to military rule more visible. In Argentina, for example, the organisation of the World Cup did not prevent national team captain Jorge Carrascosa from refusing to participate in the tournament.

The World Cup also enabled the international press to witness firsthand the demonstrations of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, who denounced the disappearance of their relatives.

Likewise, in Brazil, football not only became a form of resistance against the dictatorship, but also contributed decisively to the country's democratisation. During the final years of military rule, in the early 1980s, Brazilian football witnessed an unprecedented democratic experiment: *Corinthians Democracy*. This system was promoted by Corinthians sporting director Adilson Monteiro Alves together with the players, among whom left-wing footballers such as Sócrates stood out prominently. Under this initiative, the club's principal decisions were made through joint voting by players and coaching staff.

The sporting and economic success of this self-managed experiment led Corinthians players to display political messages on their shirts. The squad openly supported the Diretas Já movement, which demanded direct presidential elections in Brazil. Ultimately, however, the movement's defeat in the parliamentary vote of April 1984 brought about the end of Corinthians Democracy and prompted Sócrates's departure from Brazilian football (Alabarces, 2018, p. 241).

The control exercised by South American dictatorships over football ultimately generated the opposite effect. Contrary to their interests, the sport helped to make opposition to military rule more visible.

3.5. Club Owners and Heads of Government: Football as a Political Platform

With the exception of Corinthians Democracy, the 1980s marked the beginning of the commodification of football. On the one hand, the arrival of João Havelange to the FIFA presidency in 1974 initiated the transformation of football into a global entertainment industry. Under his leadership, the game expanded worldwide, major brands entered the business, and revenues from television broadcasting rights soared. On the other hand, the international context favoured this process.

During these years, with Ronald Reagan in the White House and Margaret Thatcher in Downing Street, neoliberal free-market doctrines gained increasing influence in Latin America. All of this, combined with mounting club debt, facilitated the entry of major business magnates into football. For these tycoons, the beautiful game offered a platform for media exposure, political networking, and social legitimisation. It was therefore hardly surprising that some would use football to lay the foundations for future political careers.

The most prominent international reference point was Silvio Berlusconi, owner of the media conglomerate Mediaset and president of AC Milan, who would later become Prime Minister of Italy. In Latin America, several figures would subsequently replicate his model. One of the pioneers was the real-estate businessman Mauricio Macri, who became president of Boca Juniors in 1995. Under his leadership, the xeneize club experienced the most successful period in its history, winning four Copa Libertadores titles and two Intercontinental Cups. Macri capitalised on his experience as Boca president to launch his political career. In 2007, he became Chief of Government of the City of Buenos Aires, and eight years later he was elected President of the Argentine Republic.

Like Macri, another businessman who used football as a political platform was the Chilean Sebastián Piñera. After being defeated in the 2005 elections, Piñera became the largest individual shareholder in Blanco y Negro, the company controlling Colo-Colo. Four years later, he would be sworn in for the first time as President of the Republic of Chile. A similar trajectory was followed by Horacio Cartes, who presided over Club Libertad between 2001 and 2012 before being elected President of Paraguay.

4. Corruption and Violence: Endemic Ills of Latin American Football

The creation of an international football industry systematised one of the structural pathologies of Latin American football: corruption. For decades, South American football has been affected by scandals involving bribery, money laundering, and the allocation of tournaments, broadcasting contracts, and commercial rights. Among the factors that help explain this problem, the concentration of institutional power stands out as the principal cause.

The main football organisations, from FIFA to national federations across Latin America, have been characterised by unusually long leadership tenures. The most emblematic figure is João Havelange himself, who presided over FIFA for twenty-four consecutive years, between 1974 and 1998. Other Latin American football administrators followed a similar path. Julio Grondona, president of the AFA, led Argentine football from 1979 until 2014 and also served as a FIFA vice-president. Ricardo Teixeira,

Latin American football has replicated the institutional weaknesses inherited from regional politics, characterised by fragile democratic institutions.

Havelange's son-in-law, headed the Brazilian Football Confederation between 1989 and 2012. And Nicolás Leoz presided over CONMEBOL for twenty-seven years.

The closed and insulated structure of South American football, together with the limited renewal of its leadership, has fostered clientelism, a lack of transparency, and virtually no accountability. At the same time, the use of football as a political platform has facilitated links between football governing bodies and political power. Above all, Latin American football has replicated the institutional weaknesses inherited from regional politics, characterised by fragile democratic institutions.

As a result, Latin America has been implicated in the major corruption cases that have shaken world football in the twenty-first century. The clearest example of this phenomenon is the FIFA scandal. A Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) investigation in the United States led in 2015 **to the arrest in Zurich of sixteen Latin American officials from CONCACAF and CONMEBOL**. Almost the entire leadership of both confederations was dismantled, accused of corruption in negotiations over broadcasting rights for international tournaments. However, leadership changes within these organisations have not led to the dismantling of the structures that enabled such scandals.

Systemic corruption in Latin American football has been accompanied by another endemic problem: violence. In this regard, organised crime has played a crucial role. The expansion of football as a television-driven industry from the 1970s onwards **occurred in parallel with the rise of drug trafficking—particularly cocaine**—to the United States and Europe. This context encouraged leading drug cartel figures to become involved in football as a means of laundering money, improving their public image, and building networks of influence.

Narco-football reached its epicentre in Colombia. Throughout the 1980s, Colombian football experienced its second golden age, fuelled by money derived from illicit activities. In Valle del Cauca, the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers, leaders

Fans of Club Atlético Peñarol and Club Nacional de Fútbol

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

of the Cali cartel, took control of América de Cali. In the department of Antioquia, executives linked to Pablo Escobar, head of the Medellín cartel, assumed control of Atlético Nacional and Deportivo Independiente Medellín. And in Bogotá, Millonarios came under the influence of another Medellín cartel boss: Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, known as *El Mexicano* (Cuevas, 2018, p. 30).

Despite the sporting success achieved by Colombian clubs during this period, *narco-football* reflected the harsh reality of Colombia's internal conflict between guerrilla groups and paramilitaries, as well as the strengthening of drug cartels. Indeed, **the wave of violence that affected the country during these years also extended to football.** In 1989, referee Álvaro Ortega was murdered on the orders of Pablo Escobar after Deportivo Independiente Medellín lost to América de Cali, leading to the suspension of Dimayor's competition. However, the most widely known case was the assassination of Colombian international player Andrés Escobar, days after he scored an own goal that eliminated Colombia from the 1994 World Cup.

The other violent phenomenon that has characterised Latin American football is that of barras bravas and torcidas. These are organised groups of football supporters known for their fanaticism and fervour, but also for their violence, illicit activities, and territorial control. The origins of barras bravas date back to 1958 in Argentina.

At that time, the country was marked by political instability—following the banning of Peronism—economic precarity, and social conflict. This context was exacerbated by Argentina's football crisis after its early elimination from the 1958 World Cup. At the same time, a parallel process of football industrialisation was underway. Football as a business brought with it an increasingly institutionalised organisation of supporter groups (Romero, 1986).

However, the expansion of these groups as a regional phenomenon across Latin America took place from the 1970s onwards. Violence

Although countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay remain footballing powers at national-team level, the performance gap between European and Latin American clubs has widened as a result of structural changes in the football landscape.

increased as consumer society consolidated and the working class weakened, in a process comparable to the rise of hooliganism in England during the governments of Margaret Thatcher. Barras bravas thus emerged as a youth subculture grounded in strong group identity, a sense of belonging, and extreme violence.

At the same time, the growth of the football industry enabled barras to engage in illicit economic activities such as ticket resale, parking control, club merchandise sales, and drug trafficking. They have even obtained financial benefits linked to player transfers, as occurred with Los Borrachos del Tablón—River Plate's barra—which reportedly received a percentage of the transfer fee when Gonzalo Higuaín moved to Real Madrid (Lezcano, 2024).

Nevertheless, barras bravas are also notable for their direct links to political power. During the first half of the 1980s, with the return of democracy in Argentina, trade union leaders and politicians used barras bravas as shock groups to attack opponents or provide security at political rallies. A representative example of these connections is Rafael Di Zeo, one of the leaders of Boca Juniors' barra, known for his links to former president Mauricio Macri and to Carlos Stornelli, federal prosecutor and former Minister of Security of Buenos Aires Province.

LATIN AMERICAN FOOTBALL TALENT MIGRATION (2020–2025)

Annual average of players transferred to foreign clubs.

1 **BRAZIL 3.020** players per year

2 **ARGENTINA 2.171** players per year

6 **MEXICO 100-150** players per year

3 **COLOMBIA 1.000** players per year

4 **URUGUAY 750** players per year

5 **PARAGUAY 150-300** players per year

LATIN AMERICAN RANKING

(Annual average of international player

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Brazil leads worldwide in international football player transfers.
- Argentina is the region's second-largest football talent hub.
- Colombia and Uruguay stand out for their high transfer rates relative to population size.
- Football international transfer dominance in Latin America is driven primarily by CONMEBOL nations.

PLAYER MIGRATION FLOWS FROM BRASIL, ARGENTINA AND COLOMBIA (2020-2025)

Main destinations for football players competing for clubs

BRAZIL

Global and diversified network
Presence across all continents and in more than 90 countries.

ARGENTINA

Hybrid migration flow
Strong links with South America and a significant presence in Europe.

Germany

England

3

France

Portugal

1

Spain

2

Italy

Japan

South Korea

United States

Chile

Peru

Brazil

Mexico

Panama

Venezuela

COLOMBIA

Primarily regional network
Strong presence across Latin America with secondary access to Europe.

KEY FIGURES

BRAZIL
7800
Approx. number of players abroad

ARGENTINA
5000
Approx. number of players abroad

COLOMBIA
2200
Approx. number of players abroad

REFERENCES

EUROPE
LATIN AMERICA
ASIA
NORTH AMERICA
MAIN FLOWS
SECONDARY FLOWS

Number of players exported between 2020 and 2025, by country of origin.

1	Brazil	3,020	26	Austria	372
2	France	2,293	27	Paraguay	363
3	Argentina	2,171	28	Switzerland	351
4	England	1,510	29	Ireland	340
5	Spain	1,106	30	Norway	332
6	Germany	1,095	31	Cameroon	327
7	Colombia	1,077	32	Slovakia	321
8	Nigeria	926	33	Greece	319
9	Serbia	915	34	Australia	289
10	Croatia	855	35	Mexico	283
11	Netherlands	812	36	Scotland	270
12	Portugal	783	37	Czech Republic	259
13	Uruguay	750	-	Poland	259
14	Ghana	677	39	Slovenia	254
15	Belgium	625	40	Venezuela	249
16	Sweden	550	41	South Korea	238
17	Ukraine	530	42	Ecuador	217
18	Senegal	511	43	Canada	207
19	Denmark	498	44	Mali	202
20	Ivory Coast	484	45	Romania	197
21	Russia	456	46	Montenegro	196
22	USA	450	47	Georgia	193
23	Japan	422	48	Hungary	186
24	Italy	413	49	North Macedonia	182
25	Bosnia/Herzeg.	383	50	Finland	159

Source: CIES Football Observatory, Monthly Report 100, May 2025

5. A Region of Exporters: Globalisation in Latin American Football

Another negative impact experienced by Latin American football in recent decades has resulted from globalisation. Although countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay remain footballing powers at national-team level, the performance gap between European and Latin American clubs has widened as a result of structural changes in the football landscape. In Europe, the increase in revenues from broadcasting rights and advertising dramatically boosted the income of clubs and competitions, leading to massive financial expansion.

In parallel, advances in European integration have also paved the way for European clubs. The establishment of the European Union through the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 enabled, three years later, the implementation of the Bosman ruling, which removed restrictions on EU clubs signing players with EU passports. In this way, the Bosman ruling facilitated the recruitment of foreign players by European teams.

From that point onwards, Latin America became an exporter region of football talent. The transfer of Latin American players, particularly from South America, has mirrored the broader commercial dynamics of leading South American economies, which are characterised by the export of raw materials. This pattern has continued to the present day.

Today, Brazil and Argentina are among the countries with the highest number of players abroad. The Brazilian market exports more footballers than any other in the world. It is estimated that a total of 3,020 Brazil-born players are currently playing outside the country. They are followed by France, with 2,293 players, and Argentina, with 2,171.

Most Brazilian professionals are concentrated in Portugal and in Asian countries such as Japan, the United Arab Emirates, and South Korea. By contrast, Argentine players tend to migrate primarily to neighbouring countries such as Chile, Peru, Ecuador, and Uruguay, as well as Spain (CIES Football Observatory, 2025).

Another Latin American country positioned high on the list is Colombia, the seventh largest exporter of footballers worldwide. In its case, as in Argentina, most players prioritise destinations within Latin America, although there is also a significant presence in the United States, Mexico, and Central American countries.

6. Conclusion

Football has shaped the history of Latin America over the past 150 years. Its internal dynamics reflect the political, economic, and social trends that have characterised the region throughout its contemporary history. From its introduction to its consolidation as a mass phenomenon, football has been closely linked to processes of modernisation, shifts in the international context, and the construction of national and regional identities.

The divergences between CONCACAF and CONMEBOL reflect the fragmentation between South American countries and those of North and Central America. These differences are rooted in geopolitical factors such as the influence of the United States and the United Kingdom, which helps explain the divergent trajectories of football across the region. At the same time, football has functioned as a tool of social cohesion and national integration, helping to shape distinct national narratives in response to external influences.

However, this capacity to articulate identities and mobilise mass audiences has also facilitated its political instrumentalisation. Populist governments, military dictatorships, and various Latin American leaders have used football as a tool of legitimisation, propaganda, and social control. At the same time, the beautiful game has also revealed its other side: it has served as a space of resistance and democratic expression for opposition groups.

Finally, corruption, violence, and the presence of organised crime in Latin American football highlight the region's political and institutional weaknesses, as well as the main security challenges that continue to persist today. For all these reasons, football constitutes a privileged lens through which to understand the geopolitics of Latin America.●

7. References

Alabarces, P. (2018). *Historia mínima del fútbol en América Latina.* El Colegio de México.

Anderson, B. (1993). *Comunidades imaginadas: reflexiones sobre el origen y la difusión del nacionalismo.* Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Billig, M. (2014). *Nacionalismo banal.* Capitán Swing Libros.

Brito, X., y Vayas, S. (2022). Geopolítica del fútbol: sobre la globalización del balón. *Academo Revista de Investigación en Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, 9*(1), 103-112.

Cies Football Observatory. (2025). Monthly Report 100: Football expatriates 2020-2025.

Cuevas, J. (2018). *Fútbol e identidad nacional en Colombia entre 1985 y 1994.* Universidad de Navarra.

Dávila, A. y Londoño, C. (2003). La nación bajo un uniforme. Fútbol e identidad nacional en Colombia 1985-2000. En P. Alabarces (Ed.), *Futbologías: fútbol, violencia e identidad en América Latina* (pp. 135-153). Clacso.

Filho, M. (2003). *O negro no futebol brasileiro.* Mauad.

Galvis, A. (2008) *100 años de fútbol en Colombia.* Planeta Colombia.

Guterman, M. (2009). *O futebol explica o Brasil: uma história da maior expressão popular do país.* Editora Contexto.

Guttmann, A. (1994). *Games and Empires: Modern Sports and Cultural Imperialism.* Columbia University Press.

Hobsbawm, E. (2012). *Nación y nacionalismo desde 1780.* Planeta.
Huizinga, J. (1957). *Homo ludens.* Emecé.
Kapuściński, R. (2006). *La guerra del fútbol y otros reportajes.* Anagrama.
Lezcano, A. (2024, 15 de marzo). Barras bravas en Latinoamérica: el negocio del sentimiento. Jot Down Sport.
Miller, R. (2007). Introduction: Studying Football in the Americas. En R. Miller y L. Crolley (Eds.), *Football in the Americas: fútbol, futebol, soccer* (pp. 1-34). Institute for the Study of the Americas.
Nye, J. (2005). Soft power: *The Means to Success in World Politics*. PublicAffairs.
Rodríguez, X. (2017). *La pelota no se mancha: una historia del fútbol argentino.* T&B Editores.
Romero, A. (1986). *Muerte en la cancha (1958-1985).* Nueva América.

David Gómez

Analyst at *El Orden Mundial*, the most widely read Spanish-language platform for accessible international analysis. Screenwriter and contributor to the podcasts *Real Politik FC* and *No es el fin del mundo*, winner of the 2025 Premio Ondas for Best Conversational Podcast. Specialised in political and electoral analysis, as well as in the study of the relationship between sport and politics.

X: @David_Gmez99
LinkedIn: David Gómez Martínez
Instagram: @david.gmez99