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DIÁLOGO POLÍTICO

State Capture.
Crime and Illicit Economies in Latin American Goverments

Pablo Zeballos y Douglas Farah

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State Capture

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Summary

In Latin America, organized crime has ceased to be merely a public security problem and has become a political actor capable of shaping elections, capturing bureaucracies, and even infiltrating the armed forces and police. Against a diagnosis dominated by the language of security, this article proposes a shift in perspective and its own analytical framework — the illicit value chain, the corridor manager, the hourglass theory, and extralegal and hybrid governance — to explain how criminal structures replace or co-opt state functions in countries as diverse as Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Haiti, and Costa Rica. In the 2025–2027 electoral supercycle, understanding this political dimension of crime is key to protecting regional democratic integrity.

Introduction

Public debate on organized crime in Latin America has, thus far in 2026, continued to be dominated by the frameworks that have prevailed over the past several decades: public security, illicit economies, and law enforcement cooperation. Meanwhile, for the third consecutive year, the Indice de Riesgo Político América Latina 2026 (2026 Latin American Political Risk Index) compiled by the Center for International Studies at the Centro de Estudios Internacionales de la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (CEIUC), identifies "state capture by organized crime" as the region's foremost political risk, ranking it ahead of fiscal vulnerability, the instrumentalization of migration, and the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China.

Yet this diagnosis continues to be analyzed primarily through a security lens: how much violence has increased, how much territory has been lost, and how many police forces are needed. This article proposes a shift in perspective—from viewing crime as a public order problem to understanding organized crime as a political actor capable of shaping governance, capturing political representation, and reconfiguring state legitimacy.

The central argument is that contemporary criminal organizations in Latin America no longer operate merely as illegal markets that the state seeks to combat from the outside. Rather, they are rapidly evolving into systems of territorial, economic, and political governance that compete with, substitute for, or capture core state functions. This convergence creates a relationship of codependence between formal governments and criminal organizations, in which neither side can afford genuine transparency, public accountability, or independent media investigations without exposing the democratic façade and laying bare the alliance that underpins it.

Understanding this transformation requires recognizing the changes that reveal a new criminal paradigm, rather than remaining confined to exclusive conceptual definitions or analytical tools borrowed uncritically from criminology or conventional security studies.

This article draws on six concepts developed through field research conducted over the past decade—the illicit value chain; the concept of criminal systems as an alternative to the traditional structure/illicit economy dichotomy; the corridor manager; the hourglass model; extralegal and hybrid governance; and the Fourth and Fifth Wave framework of

transnational organized crime—and applies them to the specific question of how organized crime interacts with elections, political parties, subnational bureaucracies, and political narratives. The boxed text below briefly defines each concept for readers encountering this analytical framework for the first time; the remainder of the article develops and applies them in depth.

Methodological Box

The following six concepts constitute an original analytical framework developed by the authors based on more than two decades of fieldwork. The analysis of these phenomena is now a central focus of our work at The Resilience Collaborative. These concepts are not presented as closed categories or as established notions within conventional criminology, but rather as operational tools for examining dimensions and transformations of transnational organized crime that traditional approaches to citizen security, criminal prosecution, or territorial control often fail to capture.

The purpose of this framework is to shift the focus away from visible organizations and toward the systems that sustain their resilience: value chains, logistical corridors, mobility managers, forms of extralegal governance and their legitimacy, critical territorial nodes, and adaptive capacities in response to political, technological, climatic, and geopolitical changes.

Illicit Value Chain.

A model that allows organized crime to be understood not as a fixed vertical organization, but as a modular, multiproduct, and adaptable system. Its links—production, transportation, storage, protection, corruption, money laundering, economic integration, and political placement—may be operated by different and

interchangeable actors. This logic explains why the capture or downfall of a specific actor rarely disrupts the flow of illicit economies or diminishes territorial control: when one operator disappears, the system is designed with internal resilience, and another actor fills the vacancy as long as the value chain remains profitable and functional.

Criminal Systems.

A concept that seeks to overcome the traditional dichotomy between “criminal structure” and “illicit economy.” For decades, the war on drugs assumed that neutralizing the structure—the leader or high-value targets, the organization, or the visible cartel—could dismantle the economy exploited by that structure. This logic had some degree of effectiveness against more vertical and centralized organizations, as occurred with the Medellín Cartel following the death of Pablo Escobar in 1993, although a substantial part of that structure remains operational to this day, albeit less visible in the media. However, the most sophisticated contemporary criminal organizations

increasingly operate as systems: networks capable of regenerating leadership, redistributing functions, rebuilding alliances, modifying routes, and sustaining the flow of value beyond the capture or death of an individual. Thinking in terms of criminal systems, rather than merely structures to be decapitated, provides a better understanding of the resilience of contemporary organized crime.

Corridor Manager.

A strategic actor within contemporary criminal ecosystems. This actor does not necessarily control an entire organization or appear as a visible leader but performs a critical function: managing the criminal connectivity of a corridor. The corridor manager connects territories, transporters, suppliers, corrupt officials, local communities, storage points, border crossings, river corridors, urban networks, illicit markets, and legal or informal economies. Their power lies in knowing where to pass, when to move, whom to pay, which authorities to avoid or corrupt, which means of transportation to use, where to conceal people or goods, and how to resolve contingencies when a route is disrupted. In this sense, the corridor manager is not merely a logistical intermediary but rather an administrator of criminal mobility and extralegal governance over corridors where the state arrives late, arrives only partially, or has been captured.

Exploratory Hourglass Model.

A territorial model that makes it possible to identify where the real capacity for non-state governance is concentrated. At the wide ends of the hourglass are illicit production and consumption; at the narrow neck are concentrated the critical points of connection and vulnerability: border crossings, ports, river routes, road nodes, storage centers, or logistical platforms. It is not always necessary to control an entire territory; often, controlling the bottleneck that connects the flows is sufficient. Therefore, state monitoring should prioritize these choke points, where a small number of actors can condition the movement of multiple illicit economies. These are also strategic points where criminal groups' resilience capacity is lower because the work is more specialized and has less redundancy.

Extralegal and Hybrid Governance.

A concept describing the point at which criminal organizations cease merely evading the state and begin to replace, capture, or complement it in specific functions: conflict resolution, local economic regulation, expedited justice, protection, social assistance, access control, punishment, and the everyday administration of order. The institutional façade may remain intact, but effective authority and legitimacy among the population regarding daily life within a territory become fully or partially controlled by criminal actors. This constitutes hybrid governance because it does not necessarily eliminate the formal state; rather, it coexists with it, infiltrates it, uses it, or selectively replaces it. The pact between Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the Bukele government in El Salvador represents a model that allowed the state to dismantle certain of the gang's most widely condemned forms of control, reduce homicide rates, and incorporate group members into government positions to ensure access to state benefits. Both sides exchanged specific forms of power (territorial control, impunity for homicides, and extortion by MS-13) for specific benefits (lower homicide rates, economic gains, and influence within the state).

Fourth and Fifth Waves of Transnational Organized Crime.

Fourth Wave describes the diversification, professionalization, and expansion of criminal networks beyond traditional drug trafficking, including their insertion into legal markets, informal economies, public and private corruption, logistical services, money laundering, illegal mining, human trafficking, environmental crimes, and fragmented territorial control. The Fifth Wave, still under conceptual development, is defined by the convergence of four initial drivers: first, the adoption of disruptive technologies—artificial intelligence, unmanned vehicles, encrypted communication systems, and automation tools—by both criminal organizations and the states confronting them; second, geopolitical transformations that reorder alliances, routes, markets, and spheres of influence; third, climate change and associated migration patterns, which create new corridors of vulnerability and new populations susceptible to exploitation; and fourth, the erosion of democratic values amid insecurity crises, which allows populist leaders to weaken institutional checks and balances in the name of effectiveness. These drivers are accompanied by enabling variables, including criminal governance of prisons—prisons as command, recruitment, and extortion centers—and control over maritime-port ecosystems, understood as critical nodes within the illicit value chain.

How they are used in this article: The Illicit Value Chain and Criminal Systems organize Section I; the Corridor Manager concept is developed in both Section I and Section III; the Exploratory Hourglass Model and Extralegal and Hybrid Governance framework inform Section II and the territorial indicators discussed in Section VII; and the four drivers and two enabling variables of the Fifth Wave structure Section VI as a whole, with particular emphasis on the fourth driver—the erosion of democratic values—in the analysis of security-focused populism.

I. Organized Crime as a Political Actor: From Illicit Economies to Institutional Capture.

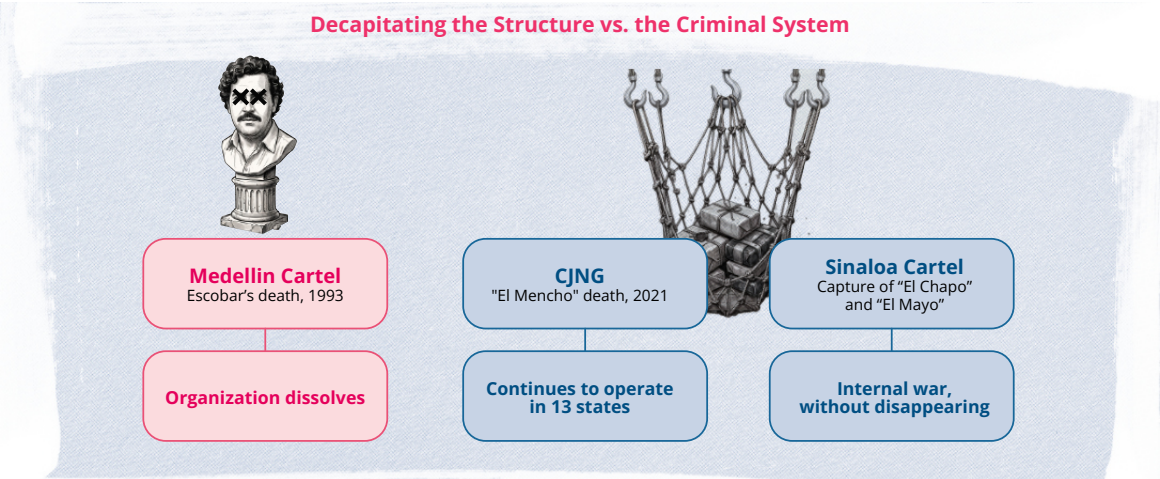
The first necessary analytical step is to abandon the image of organized crime as a collection of vertically structured organizations dedicated to a single illegal market—drug cartels, human trafficking rings—and replace it with that of an Illicit Value Chain: a modular, multiproduct, and multijurisdictional system in which different links in the chain (production, transportation, money laundering, protection, and political placement) are operated by interchangeable actors who connect and disconnect according to opportunity and risk.

This modular structure has enabled the region's illicit economies—which, according to International IDEA's report "Criminalidad y Democracia en America Latina" (Crime and Democracy in Latin America), account for more than 20 percent of the region's GDP —to diversify simultaneously into illegal mining, human trafficking, cybercrime, extortion, and public corruption, without depending on a single hierarchical structure that the state can decapitate.

The Corridor Manager requires regulatory predictability, judicial protection, and access to public contracts. Those are political goods that only formal politics and legal governance can provide.

Within this value chain, the figure we have termed the Corridor Manager may be the critical link connecting the world of illicit economies with formal actors, including those operating within institutional politics. The Corridor Manager does not necessarily fit the familiar profile of either the hitman or the visible kingpin. Rather, this is the operator—whether a businessperson, lawyer, landowner, public official, community leader, campaign adviser, or another intermediary—who manages the movement of illicit goods, money, and protection across jurisdictional boundaries, whether local or international. To do so, the Corridor Manager requires access to state institutions and political actors. This actor, typically invisible in media coverage focused on violence, is what transforms a criminal organization into an actor capable of penetrating politics—not because the organization necessarily seeks to govern directly, but because the Corridor Manager requires regulatory predictability, judicial protection, and access to public contracts. Those are political goods that only formal politics and legal governance can provide.

This shift—from illicit economies to institutional capture—is now recognized by international organizations and research centers as the region's foremost political risk. The CEIUC report itself describes a landscape characterized by "professionalized transnational criminal structures" that governments are finding increasingly difficult to confront, in a context further complicated by Venezuela's political transition following the capture of Nicolás Maduro and the resulting reconfiguration of criminal networks throughout the Andean and Caribbean corridor. This article argues that such professionalization is not merely operational—better routes, more advanced technology, more sophisticated money laundering—but institutional, reflected in more effective, though not necessarily greater, access to political power.



Source: Own elaboration using AI, based on information from Diálogo Político

It is worth pausing to examine one of the assumptions that underpinned the war on drugs for decades: the notion that "criminal structure" and "illicit economy" are two distinct phenomena, and that neutralizing the former—by capturing or killing its leader—necessarily dismantles the latter. This decapitation logic initially enjoyed genuine empirical support. The death of Pablo Escobar in December 1993 effectively marked the end of the Medellín Cartel as an organization, although its decline had been underway for several years. At that point, its centralized structure, heavily dependent on a single leader, did not survive its founder. Yet this early success is also the reason much of Latin America's anti-drug policy continues to be designed as though every criminal organization were a replica of the Escobar model. Even in that case, however, cocaine flows never declined to the extent anticipated, suggesting from the outset that dismantling a vertical organization did not eliminate either the market or the production that sustained it.

More recent field evidence suggests the opposite. Once criminal structure and illicit economy merge into what we define as a Criminal System—a network capable of regenerating leadership, redistributing routes, and sustaining the flow of value independently of any individual—the decapitation of leaders no longer guarantees organizational disruption.

The death of Nemesio Oseguera, "El Mencho," during a military operation in Jalisco in February 2026 fragmented the Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (Jalisco New Generation Cartel, CJNG), triggering internal disputes and leading, weeks later, to the capture of a presumed successor known as "El Jardinero." Yet it did not dissolve the organization. The cartel continued operating—violence included—in at least thirteen Mexican states as well as across its international network. The same pattern emerged with the Sinaloa Cartel following the capture and extradition of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán and, more recently, Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada. Although the organization entered into an internal conflict between rival factions—the Chapitos and the so-called Mayiza—it continues to function, as a system, as one of the hemisphere's dominant drug trafficking actors.

The difference between the fate of the Medellín Cartel and that of these more recent criminal systems is not primarily a matter of the operational effectiveness of the states that pursued them, but of organizational architecture. Thinking in terms of Criminal Systems, rather than structures to be decapitated, represents the conceptual adjustment this article proposes. Doing so helps explain why the high-profile operations discussed later in this section—such as the Rocha Moya case in Sinaloa—generate headlines without, by themselves, disrupting the functioning of the Illicit Value Chain.

Finally, it is important to clarify that our observations and research indicate that the Illicit Value Chain does not function as a monopoly. It

more closely resembles a competitive service market, in which multiple Corridor Managers may compete to control the same link in the chain—the same border crossing, port, or regulatory authorization. Rather than weakening the system, this competition makes it more resilient in the face of state intervention. When one Corridor Manager is removed, the flow does not stop; it simply creates a vacancy that another operator—often already embedded within the same network, including its political protection mechanisms—can fill with minimal transition costs. This is the structural reason why high-profile arrests generate headlines but rarely produce lasting disruptions to the functioning of the Illicit Value Chain.

II. The Displacement of State Authority: When Organized Crime Replaces the State in Everyday Life

Extralegal and Hybrid Governance describes the point at which criminal organizations cease merely evading the state and begin replacing it in specific functions, such as resolving neighborhood disputes, regulating business hours, collecting "protection taxes," administering expedited justice, and even providing employment and social assistance during times of crisis.

This does not mean that these organizations operate in failed states in the classical sense. Rather, they function within hybrid institutional arrangements in which the formal state retains its façade—mayors, judges, schools, police stations—while effective authority over the daily lives of entire neighborhoods and strategic corridors is exercised, wholly or in part, by a criminal structure.

The region's most extreme case illustrates this point. In 2026, Human Rights Watch documented that criminal organizations controlled approximately 90 percent of Port-au-Prince, establishing parallel governance structures that have rendered traditional security cooperation frameworks largely irrelevant. This reality has compelled external actors, including the United States, to shift from bilateral military cooperation toward humanitarian assistance and support for United Nations peacekeeping missions. Haiti represents one end of the spectrum, but the underlying mechanism—the gradual replacement of state functions by criminal governance—operates to varying degrees in border corridors, urban peripheries, and mining regions across virtually every country in Latin America, including those considered institutionally stronger. In urban areas of San Pedro Sula, Honduras, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) now imposes curfews in the name of public safety, provides employment, distributes school lunches to children, and offers work—particularly to single mothers—through home-based maquila operations established within the areas under its control.

Extralegal and Hybrid Governance describes the point at which criminal organizations cease merely evading the state and begin replacing it in specific functions

This is where the Exploratory Hourglass Model helps explain the phenomenon. At one broad end of the hourglass lies the subsistence-level illicit economy—small-scale cultivators, transporters, and low-level extortionists. At the opposite broad end are demand and final consumption. Connecting these two ends, however, is the narrow neck of the hourglass, occupied by a relatively small number of Corridor Managers and political protection structures that control the mandatory passage between them. It is this narrow bottleneck that acquires governance capacity because it controls the scarcest resource: regulated access to movement. Understanding criminal governance therefore requires identifying where the neck of the hourglass is located within each territory—a border checkpoint, a seaport, a river corridor, or a wholesale market—rather than simply counting combatants or drug seizures.

The Desaguadero corridor, located along the Andean border between Peru and Bolivia, provides a paradigmatic example of such a bottleneck. In practice, it consists of a bridge and a small binational town spanning only a few blocks, through which a disproportionately large volume of smuggled goods, informal commerce, and, increasingly, chemical precursors and other supplies used in cocaine processing pass en route to Pacific markets. Whoever effectively controls this bottleneck—not necessarily through violence, but through tacit understandings with customs, municipal, and police authorities on both sides of the border—controls a volume of traffic that far exceeds the formal oversight capacity of the two states involved. It is precisely this type of node, rather than the border territory as a whole, that an effective monitoring strategy should prioritize. Similar chokepoints can be found throughout the region.

III. Elections and Political Parties Under Threat: Illicit Financing, Voter Coercion, and the Capture of Local Power

For more than a decade, InSight Crime has documented paradigmatic cases of this dynamic, to the extent that it has even helped establish concepts of its own, such as “narcovideo.” One of the most notable visual testimonies of this type occurred in Honduras and showed Carlos Zelaya, brother-in-law of Honduran President Xiomara Castro, negotiating bribes with drug traffickers during the 2013 presidential campaign. Zelaya's explanation was that he believed he was dealing with legitimate businesspeople. Other examples include armed groups in Colombia that shape local elections and influence municipal authorities; gangs in the Northern Triangle of Central America that sell votes in their areas of control to the highest bidder and halt the electoral campaigns of losing candidates; and Mexican cartels that, during

electoral periods, resort to violence to intimidate, co-opt, or eliminate candidates unwilling to negotiate. The most significant case of the 2026 electoral cycle is the indictment filed on April 29 by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York against Rubén Rocha Moya, governor of Sinaloa, and nine other officials, for allegedly providing institutional protection to the Sinaloa Cartel in exchange for electoral support during the 2021 elections. Rocha Moya's resignation from

office two days after rejecting the charges illustrates a pattern in which the boundary between illicit campaign financing and post-electoral capture of the state protection apparatus has, in practice, become indistinguishable.

The mechanism does not always require visible violence. The International IDEA report cited above emphasizes that criminal enterprises often operate more effectively without violence because this approach is more profitable. This produces what Juan Pablo Luna and Andreas Feldmann describe as "criminalized politics": the infiltration and corruption of key rule-of-law institutions—police forces, courts, and prosecutors' offices—to secure specific criminal interests through the silent capture of campaigns, parties, and candidates.

Criminal enterprises often operate more effectively without violence because this approach is more profitable. This produces the infiltration and corruption of key rule-of-law institutions—police forces, courts, and prosecutors' offices—to secure specific criminal interests through the silent capture of campaigns, parties, and candidates.

In Peru, following the conclusion of the 2026 general elections, the Observatory of Crime and Violence recorded that 78 percent of citizens believed that illicit economies such as extortion, drug trafficking, and illegal mining could influence electoral outcomes. Former Interior Minister Ricardo Valdés described this perception as "alarming," but also as an indication of an influence that could have a "very serious" impact on the next "body of vacancies" represented by the positions being contested.

From the perspective of Corridor Managers, campaign financing is not discretionary spending; it can be a structural investment in the Illicit Value Chain that enables the purchase of legislative protection, the securing of appointments in local prosecutors' offices or police commands, and influence over the allocation of public works contracts that, in turn, serve as mechanisms for money laundering.

Electoral capture, in this sense, does not seek to place openly criminal candidates in office—a strategy involving high reputational risk—but rather to finance individuals who are elected through conventional channels, thereby guaranteeing access without public exposure.

The Colombian case in 2026 provides a field-based illustration of this mechanism. The Misión de Observación Electoral (Electoral Observation Mission, MOE) identified 185 municipalities facing overlapping risks of violence and electoral fraud, of which 94 were classified as being at extreme risk. This occurred in a country where, according to the Fundación Ideas para la Paz (Ideas for Peace Foundation, FIP), the number of members of armed groups increased by 23.5 percent in one year, surpassing 27,000 members, driven by diversification into illegal mining, extortion, and human trafficking. The result, described by analysts as a "two-speed democracy," is the coexistence of a free and competitive urban electoral process in major cities with a silenced and coerced rural electoral process in peripheral areas, where political violence is no longer limited to the assassination of leaders but operates as a form of criminal governance capable of determining who may campaign and under what conditions. This coexistence of two electoral regimes within a single formal election is, in itself, the clearest symptom of capture of political representation visible in the region, a phenomenon increasingly evident in Central America, Ecuador, and other countries across Latin America.

IV. Captured Bureaucracies: Territorial Control and the Co-optation of Municipal Government

If electoral capture secures access to formal authority, bureaucratic capture secures its day-to-day exercise. Subnational governments—municipalities, provincial or state governments, and regional administrative agencies—concentrate many of the administrative functions of greatest value to organized crime. These often include authority over land-use and mining permits, public

works procurement, oversight of freight transportation, property registries, and the management of ports and secondary border crossings. Infiltration does not necessarily require bribing the mayor. More often, it is enough to place or co-opt a traffic director, a public works chief, or a licensing official—positions with a low political profile but effective control over the neck of the hourglass described in the previous section.

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The case of Crucitas, in northern Costa Rica, illustrates with particular clarity how a vacuum in local governance can ultimately be filled by criminal structures. Following the judicial cancellation of the formal mining project operated by Industrias Infinito, the area was left without a clear framework of state control. That vacuum was gradually occupied by clandestine mining camps, which expanded from a footprint of barely two square kilometers to approximately thirty. This illicit value chain involves local coligalleros and undocumented migrant miners, intermediary networks that provide financing and equipment, and buyers who process the extracted material—many of them operating on the Nicaraguan side of the border, with documented involvement by Chinese companies capable of achieving extraction yields far exceeding those of artisanal mining.

Fuente: Presidencia de Costa Rica; Laguna artificial para extracción ilegal de oro en Crucitas.

Today, the Costa Rican government spends approximately one million U.S. dollars per month on operations that have failed to halt these flows, while the Constitutional Chamber has ordered a permanent police presence in response to the inaction of five government ministries. The case is particularly relevant to this analysis because, beyond illustrating the capture of local bureaucracy, it also exposes its binational dimension. Daniel Ortega's government in Nicaragua has granted large-scale mining concessions to a Chinese company in the border region while officially denying the existence of illegal mining on its side of the river, thereby shifting political responsibility entirely onto Costa Rica.

Chile, meanwhile, presents a different but equally revealing case: not the capture of civilian officials, but the infiltration of the very military and police institutions responsible for combating organized crime. Between 2022 and 2025, the Northern Macrozone witnessed a succession of infiltration cases, including military personnel and Carabineros officers implicated in the theft and sale of state-owned weapons in Arica; fourteen Carabineros officers charged with accepting bribes from Bolivian truck drivers at border crossings; and, finally, the pretrial detention of five former Air Force personnel accused of transporting drugs aboard military aircraft between Iquique and Santiago. Chilean analysts have begun describing this phenomenon using a concept that the U.S. Southern Command refers to as narco-capture: a situation in which the state's own logistics, internal intelligence, and weaponry are ultimately placed at the service of transnational criminal organizations.

This represents the most extreme form of bureaucratic co-optation discussed in this section, because it does not operate through a traffic department or a municipal licensing office, but rather through the very security apparatus that should constitute the state's last line of institutional defense.

In El Salvador, the Bukele administration ceded control over the Social Fabric Directorate, sectors of the Ministry of Security, and parts of the Attorney General's Office to third parties with direct ties to the gangs, enabling them to gain access to state resources, intelligence, and guarantees of impunity while operating within the framework of the pact.

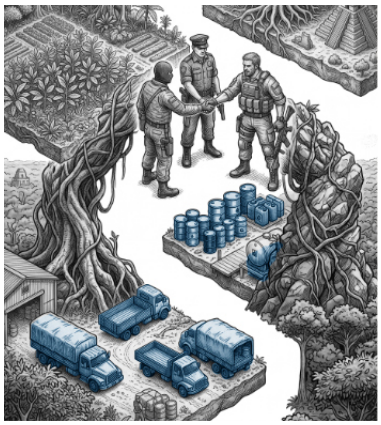
V. The Comparative Dimension: Regional Commonalities and National Specificities

A comparative view of the region reveals a common pattern—the convergence of illicit economies and political power, resulting in Hybrid Governance that enjoys a high degree of legitimacy within the communities it controls. This pattern, however, manifests itself in markedly different national forms, all of which can be understood through the lens of the Illicit Value Chain and the position each territory occupies within it. In Mexico, co-optation has reached the level of state governorships, as illustrated by the Sinaloa case, within a federal system where the territorial power of the cartels is directly reflected in local party structures.

In Colombia, beyond the electoral dynamics discussed in Section III, illegal gold mining—which, according to figures cited during the 2026 presidential debate, now generates more revenue than drug trafficking itself—has prompted the state to intervene in 2,086 mines during the first quarter of the year alone and to launch the Ecodorado Strategy to wrest control of an economy that is now largely captured by criminal organizations.

The Amazonian tri-border region shared by Brazil, Colombia, and Peru is perhaps the region's most advanced laboratory of Extralegal and Hybrid Governance. According to International Crisis Group's report El saqueo de la selva (The Plunder of the Jungle) (May 2026), the Brazilian criminal organization Comando Vermelho now controls this area, using the Peruvian side as a center for coca cultivation and the Solimões River corridor as its principal route into Brazil. According to official sources and press reports, it also maintains control of a prison in Ucayali from which it directs drug trafficking routes.

The report further documents how organizations with purely urban origins—including Brazil's Primeiro Comando da Capital (First Capital Command, PCC), Ecuador's Los Lobos, and Colombia's Comandos de la Frontera (Border Commands)—have expanded into the Amazon Basin in search of gold, strategic minerals, and new cocaine trafficking routes. These organizations have forged alliances that cross national borders with a fluidity that, as the report's authors themselves observe, no state has been able to match. Today, coordination among criminal groups operating across the Amazon surpasses cooperation among the governments that share the region. The outcome, also documented by Amazon Underworld and Amazon Watch, is the consolidation of what local journalists openly describe as “criminal governance” over Indigenous and riverine communities, including the regulation of river transport, the collection of extortion payments, and the informal administration of justice.



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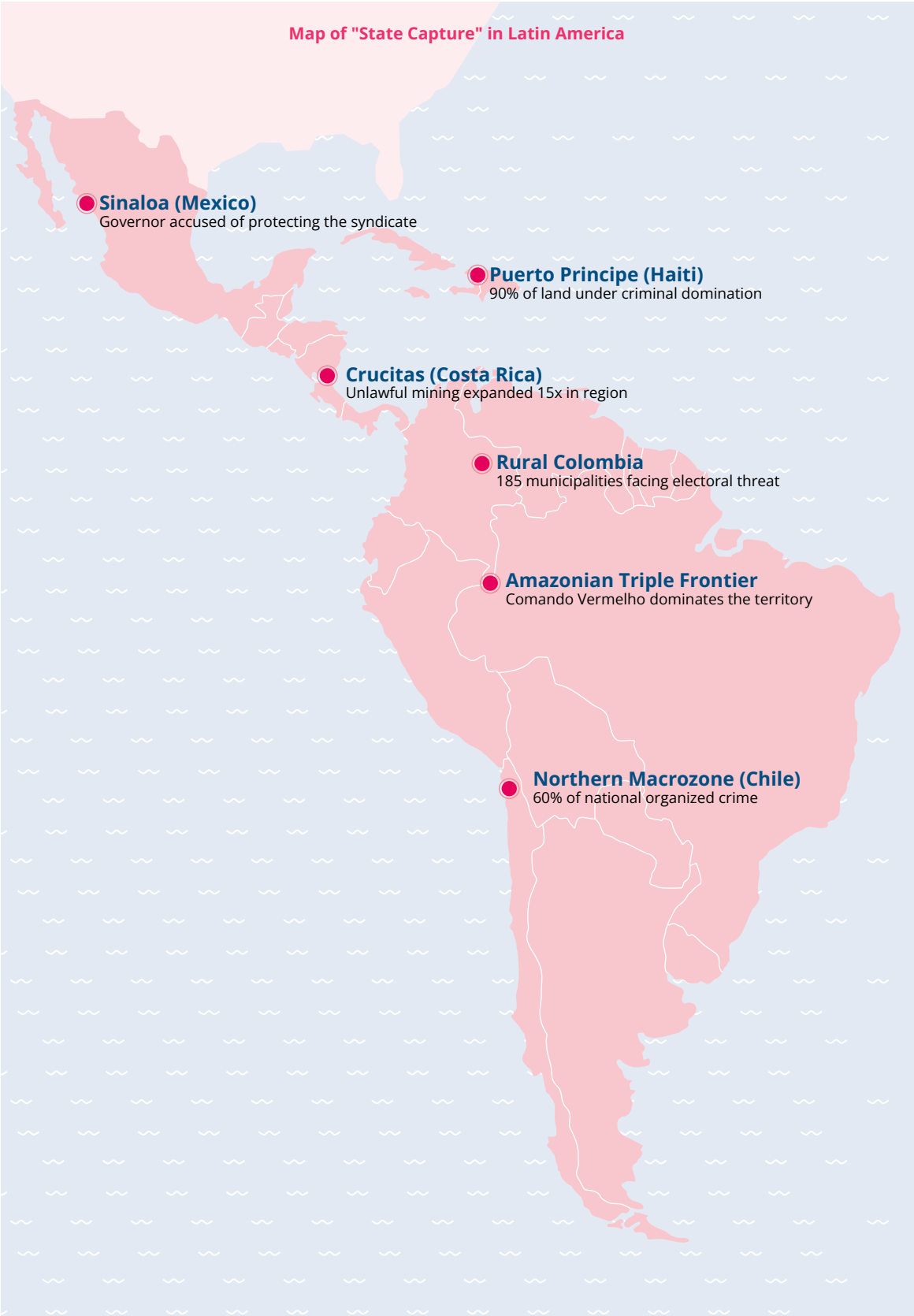


Source: Own elaboration using AI, based on information from Diálogo Político

At the southern end of the continent, northern Chile exhibits an earlier—but rapidly advancing—stage of the same process. The phenomenon is concentrated in the Northern Macrozone—Arica and Parinacota, Tarapacá, and Antofagasta—where, according to the Public Prosecutor's Office, 60 percent of the country's organized crime-related offenses are concentrated. The state's response has relied primarily on military deployment and technological measures—including the Border Shield Plan, the Integrated Border System (SIFRON), and successive extensions of the Armed Forces' deployment. Yet, as the Chilean Association of Municipalities has warned, this response remains heavily urban-centered, leaving rural areas as an institutional "sacrifice zone." Where the state fails to provide services and protection, organized crime arrives with limited forms of welfare, gifts, and a false sense of order to cultivate community loyalty—the same mechanism of substituting state functions described in Section II, now operating in rural rather than marginal urban settings.

Haiti represents the extreme case of the collapse of formal governance in the face of near-total territorial control by criminal organizations. Costa Rica, traditionally regarded as Central America's democratic stronghold, has experienced what specialized media in 2026 describe as a "silent transformation" into a territory that facilitates organized crime, marked by the consolidation of a transnational Southern Caribbean Cartel and by a historic constitutional reform that, for the first time, authorized the extradition of Costa Rican nationals. Peru exhibits a more diffuse pattern of criminal penetration, linked to illicit economies centered on extortion and illegal mining. According to figures cited by InSight Crime and Human Rights Watch for 2026, these dynamics are already reflected in increases of between 10 and 12 percent in homicides and between 27 and 30 percent in reported extortion cases in the period preceding the electoral process.

Viewed through the lens of the Illicit Value Chain, the common denominator is that every country occupies a different position within the same regional structure. Some serve primarily as production zones, others as transit corridors, and still others as centers for money laundering and consumption. All, however, share Corridor Managers who operate with increasing frequency across national borders rather than within them. National specificity, therefore, lies not in the nature of the phenomenon—which remains the same modular structure described in Section I—but in the particular link of the chain that each country contributes and in the degree of institutional capture that this position enables criminal organizations to achieve.

VI. Democratic Risks: How Authoritarian Populism Instrumentalizes Fear of Crime

The expansion of organized crime does not constitute only a direct threat to security; it is also the political fuel for leaders who offer a hard-line approach as a substitute for institutional reconstruction. To understand why this phenomenon has gained such strength in the current cycle, it is useful to place it within the four determinants of the Fifth Wave of Transnational Organized Crime defined in the methodological framework, which are rarely examined together despite their mutually reinforcing effects.

The expansion of organized crime does not constitute only a direct threat to security; it is also the political fuel for leaders who offer a hard-line approach as a substitute for institutional reconstruction

The first determinant—the adoption of disruptive technologies—is no longer a future hypothesis but a measurable operational reality. Between 2024 and 2026, the use of unmanned aerial vehicles by criminal organizations increased dramatically across the region. The Colombian Army recorded nearly 400 drone-related incidents since April 2024, including swarm attacks against military bases; Mexico's CJNG formalized internal units of "drone operators"; and in Argentina, Córdoba's judicial authorities dismantled a criminal group

Foto: Shutterstock

in 2025 that operated seven drones to supply cocaine and mobile phones to a prison complex, further illustrating the convergence with the reinforcing variable of prison governance discussed below.

States are responding on the same technological battlefield. The U.S. Southern Command announced in early 2026 a new command dedicated to autonomous and unmanned platforms, and that same year the LAAD Defense and Security Exhibition in São Paulo showcased artificial intelligence systems—such as IndraMind and Shield AI maritime surveillance drones—already being offered commercially to Latin American governments.

The strategic consequence is a technological race in which costs are low for criminal organizations and high for the state: a modified commercial drone represents a marginal investment compared with institutional defense systems costing more than one hundred thousand dollars.

The second determinant—ongoing geopolitical transformations—is reflected in the growing U.S. militarization of the Caribbean and the eastern Pacific following the capture of Nicolás Maduro. Operation Southern Spear, launched in September 2025 to eliminate "narco-boats," and the subsequent creation of the multilateral Shield of the Americas initiative, backed by a dozen Latin American countries, are redefining the region's security cooperation framework in a more unilateral and militarized direction, while occurring simultaneously with the expansion of Chinese defense cooperation described in Section III.

The third determinant—climate change and migration—already appears, as noted in the Introduction, among the ten political risks identified by the CEIUC for 2026. It is also materializing concretely in the way organizations such as Tren de Aragua exploit migratory flows along Chile's northern border to establish operations and take advantage of border vulnerabilities, as documented in Section V.

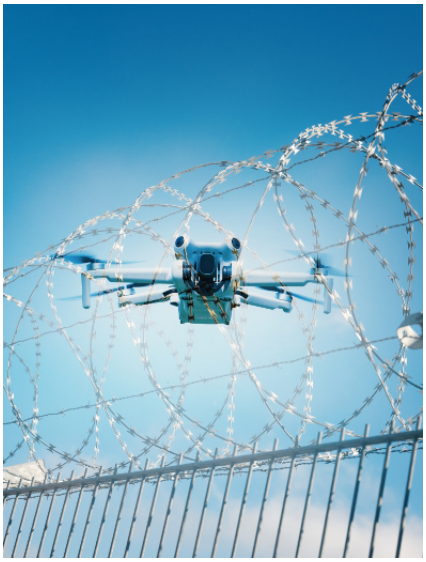
It is, however, the fourth determinant—the erosion of democratic values in response to insecurity crises—that produces the deepest effects on the region's institutional quality and therefore deserves the most detailed examination in this section.

The Salvadoran case is the unavoidable regional reference point and merits detailed analysis because it encapsulates, more clearly than any other, the tension between verifiable results and institutional erosion.

Since March 2022, the state of exception decreed by Nayib Bukele has been extended without interruption—the fifty-first extension was approved in May 2026—suspending guarantees such as the inviolability of communications, extending detention periods without judicial authorization, and allowing collective trials. The Salvadoran government itself highlights the results: homicides fell from 6,656 in 2015 to 82 in 2025, a figure that the security minister describes as the first time the country has ended a year with a two-digit homicide count, although the statistic excludes a dozen categories of violent deaths that were removed from official records by the government in 2021. This reduction, combined with the intensive and direct use of social media as

a communication channel with citizens—a characteristic that analysts at CIDOB identify as a defining component of "Bukelismo," distinct from previous hard-line security policies in the region—has produced approval ratings that polling firm CB Consultora placed at 70.1 percent in April 2026, the highest in the region.

This legitimacy, built on results, has nevertheless been leveraged to dismantle institutional checks and balances far beyond the realm of public security. The decision by the Legislative Assembly to approve presidential reelection despite its explicit constitutional prohibition in 2021, as well as the documentation by human rights organizations such as Cristosal—now operating in exile—and media outlets such as El Faro, alongside the more than 91,000 arrests claimed by the government (of which more than 7,000 people had to be released after it was determined that they had no links to gangs, and approximately 27,000 showed no indication of gang membership), has included allegations of clandestine burials of detainees who had not been convicted. The classification of public expenditure information as restricted for seven years, the dismantling of what was once an exemplary system for public access to information held by public officials, and the criminalization of any political discourse not approved by Bukele represent other significant steps.



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The World Bank, meanwhile, has recorded that alongside the decline in homicides, poverty increased to 9.6 percent in 2025 and 44 public schools in rural areas were closed. This debate is not secondary to the objectives of this article. The relevant question is not whether the Salvadoran model reduces homicides—the official evidence suggests that it does—but whether such a reduction requires, as a necessary condition, the permanent elimination of the checks and balances that allow citizens to reverse the model if circumstances change. It also requires support in controlling territory and extracting resources to govern gangs, criminal groups, and regional organized crime structures.

The "Bukele effect" has, in any case, become a political export rather than transferable technical evidence. In 2026, Honduran legislators formally requested the adoption of the Salvadoran model, although Honduras's own Security Minister opted instead for a "homegrown model." Costa Rica, in response to the deterioration of its security situation described in previous sections, announced the adoption of El Salvador's "Zero Leisure Plan" (Plan Cero Ocio) and laid the foundation stone for a High-Containment Center for Organized Crime (CACCO) in the presence of Bukele himself. Meanwhile, political voices in Panama, Chile, Argentina, Peru, Colombia, and even Bolivia have proposed replicating the model, even though, according to an analysis by the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs' (CIDOB), the security situation in most of these countries is not comparable comparable to that of El Salvador in 2022.

What is being exported, in other words, is not necessarily a replicable public policy, but rather a discursive repertoire—order, results, direct communication, and contempt for institutional checks and balances—that conservative and populist parties throughout the region are incorporating into their electoral platforms, in a context that Latinobarómetro describes as growing citizen indifference toward the type of political regime, provided that it "delivers results."

The fourth determinant of the Fifth Wave does not operate in isolation; it is reinforced by the variable of prison governance described in the

methodological framework. El Salvador's own CECOT—with capacity for forty thousand inmates and, according to reports cited by El Faro, operating under conditions of extreme overcrowding—and its announced replica in Costa Rica represent both a security policy instrument and a political symbol of the model: the megaprison as a stage for direct communication with citizens, not merely as penitentiary infrastructure.

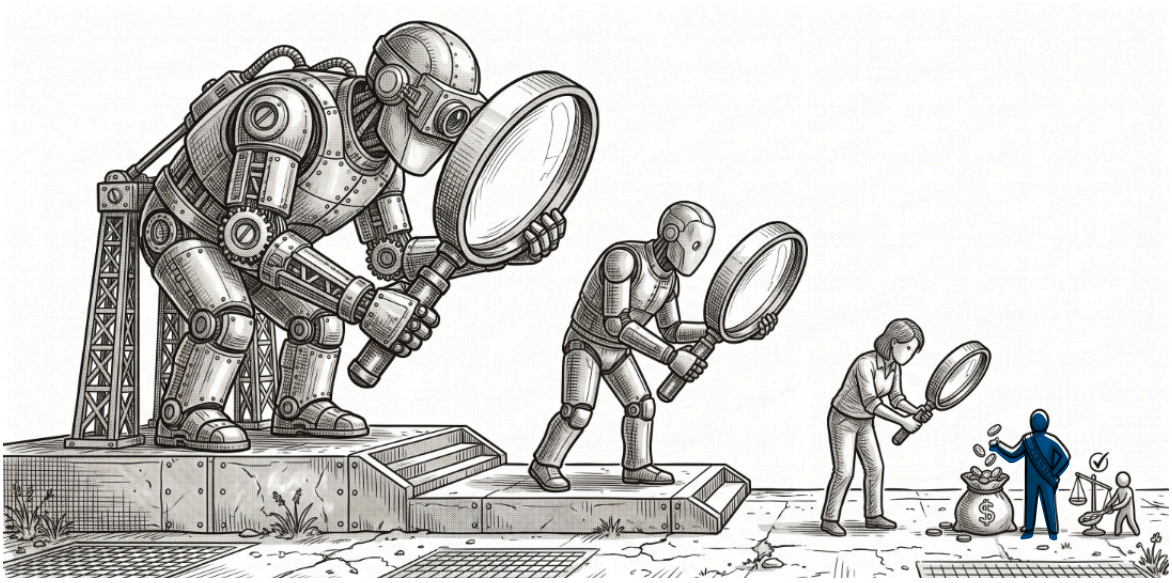
The same variable, examined in Section IV regarding the control exercised by Comando Vermelho over an entire prison facility in Ucayali, reveals the exact opposite side of the phenomenon: whereas the Salvadoran state uses the prison as a stage for the exercise of state power, Amazonian organized crime uses it as a criminal command center. It is the same variable—the governance of prisons as a power node—operating in opposite directions depending on who controls the institution.

Under this fourth determinant, organized crime ceases to be merely the object of political discourse and becomes a narrative resource, as the fear it generates turns into exploitable rhetorical capital for both democratic leaders with legitimate security concerns and openly anti-system political projects. The Salvadoran model, replicated more as a political brand than as a public policy, is the clearest expression of this mechanism to date.

The specific democratic risk, therefore, is not that organized crime will directly seize power—a scenario that remains exceptional even in the most serious cases—but rather that its mere existence, and the fear it generates, may enable legitimate political actors to gradually dismantle institutional checks and balances in the name of effectiveness, without guaranteeing the long-term survival of democratic regimes.

It is important to emphasize, in recognition of the available evidence, that there is a genuine empirical and normative disagreement in the region regarding this issue. For a significant portion of citizens and governments considering emulating the model, the verifiable reduction in homicides and extortion outweighs concerns about the concentration of power. For human rights organizations and much of the comparative academic community, however, the permanent nature of exceptional measures transforms any security gains into a long-term liability for democratic quality.

This article does not seek to resolve that debate, but rather to establish that both sides of the dilemma are real and that any democratic integrity agenda addressing organized crime must confront both simultaneously.



VII. Strategic Proposals: Institutional Resilience, Electoral Integrity, and Democratic Counter-Narratives

Strategic Proposals: Institutional Resilience, Electoral Integrity, and Democratic Counter-Narratives

Faced with a phenomenon that operates simultaneously at the economic, territorial, and narrative levels, the response cannot be limited to strengthening electoral bodies. As the analysis of the Mexican case indicates, no electoral authority, regardless of how technically impeccable its administration may be, can substitute for the state in guaranteeing minimum conditions of political freedom in the face of intimidation, illicit financing, or territorial control. Electoral integrity must therefore be understood as a responsibility of the entire state apparatus, not solely of the electoral authority.

No electoral authority, regardless of how technically impeccable its administration may be, can substitute for the state in guaranteeing minimum conditions of political freedom in the face of intimidation, illicit financing, or territorial control.

Campaign finance traceability through the lens of the Illicit Value Chain: audit not only the amount of contributions but also their trajectory through shell companies, public works contractors, and identifiable Corridor Managers, rather than limiting oversight to legally declared thresholds.

- Territorial electoral risk indicators based on the Exploratory Hourglass Model: prioritize monitoring of the "necks"—border crossings such as Desaguadero, ports, and mining routes—rather than the entire national territory, thereby optimizing limited oversight resources and following the logic already applied by Colombia's Electoral Observation Mission (MOE) in its classification of 185 municipalities at risk.

- Enhanced protection and security protocols for candidates and local authorities in corridors with high concentrations of illicit economies, with early warning mechanisms shared among prosecutors' offices, electoral observers, and civil society.

- Specific safeguards for low-profile but high-value bureaucratic positions vulnerable to capture—traffic authorities, licensing offices, public works departments, registries, and, in the most serious cases, mid-level military and police commands—through rotation policies, strengthened asset declarations, and periodic external audits, taking into account the lessons from the narco-capture pattern documented in Chile's Northern Macrozone.

- Narrowly tailored exceptional clauses for states of emergency in security matters: verifiable time limits, independent judicial review, and mandatory periodic accountability before the legislature, so that short-term effectiveness does not automatically translate, as the debate surrounding the Salvadoran model warns, into a permanent architecture of exception.

- Democratic counter-narratives in response to security populism: public communication that documents verifiable results from institutional security policies within the framework of the rule of law, preventing evidence gaps from being filled by hard-line security narratives lacking safeguards and mechanisms for reversal.

- Regional financial intelligence and judicial cooperation that follows the Corridor Manager across borders, rather than limiting criminal prosecution to isolated national jurisdictions, replicating at the state level the transnational logic already employed by networks such as Comando Vermelho and Comandos de la Frontera in the Amazon Basin.

- These lines of action do not seek to exhaust the agenda, but rather to anchor it in the diagnosis developed throughout this article: the institutional response must operate at the

same level of structural sophistication—modular, transnational, and focused on critical nodes—as the criminal networks it seeks to contain, without abandoning, in the process, the democratic checks and balances that distinguish it from its adversaries.

VIII. Conclusion: Toward a Comprehensive Approach to Democracy and Organized Crime

Organized crime in Latin America has ceased to be, if it ever fully was, a phenomenon confined to the realm of public security. With increasing empirical evidence and recognition by organizations such as CEIUC and International IDEA, it has become an actor capable of shaping elections, capturing bureaucracies—including, in their most extreme forms, the armed forces and police institutions themselves—replacing state functions in territories as diverse as the Amazon Basin, Chile's northern border, and the Crucitas corridor, and providing the narrative fuel for political projects that, in the name of security, erode the very foundations of the democracy they claim to defend. This cycle benefits both the authoritarian governments that are currently consolidating themselves and criminal groups, which become embedded within state structures, gaining the benefits of legitimacy and impunity. Understanding this actor requires analytical tools commensurate with its sophistication: the Illicit Value Chain, the Corridor Manager, the Exploratory Hourglass Model, and Extralegal and Hybrid Governance provide a framework for identifying not only where crime is most visible, but also where its capacity for effective governance is concentrated.

No clear boundary between the security problem and the democratic problem. Increasingly, they are the same issue viewed from different angles.

The year 2026, the second year of the region's 2025–2027 electoral supercycle, presents both the highest risk and the most concrete opportunity in recent years for political parties, electoral observers, civil society, and international cooperation actors to incorporate this political-institutional approach into an agenda that, until now, has been dominated almost exclusively by the language of security. The comparative experience examined in this article—from Mexican and Colombian electoral capture to the narco-capture of armed institutions in Chile, and including the political export of the Salvadoran model—shows that there is no clear boundary between the security problem and the democratic problem. Increasingly, they are the same issue viewed from different angles. The pending task is to build democratic alternatives to illiberal hard-line approaches, without relinquishing the institutional effectiveness that citizens legitimately demand.

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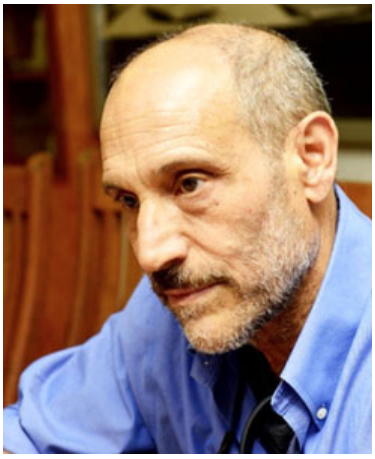

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