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# Politicised crime: causes for the discursive politicisation of organised crime in Latin America

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## ABSTRACT

Why do criminal groups decide to adopt political discourses? We argue that an armed group's discursive politicisation (the public declaration of political motivations) is more likely when the state declares the organisation to be an existential threat, militarises the fight against it (securitisation), and when the leaders of the armed group have had political training. This discourse aims to reduce the state's military actions against them and gain civilian support. This argument is demonstrated through a qualitative comparative analysis of six Latin American cases: Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia and Los Rastrojos (Colombia), Militarizado Partido Comunista del Perú (Peru), Primeiro Comando da Capital (Brazil), Tren de Aragua (Venezuela), and Cartel de Sinaloa (Mexico). Three of them adopted a political discourse, and the others did not. We provide an analytical framework for criminal actors who do not necessarily fit into insurgent, paramilitary or simple criminal group typology.

## KEYWORDS

Criminal politicisation; organised crime; Latin America; securitisation; qualitative comparative analysis; global security

## Introduction

Multiple authors agree that insurgent or paramilitary groups criminalise when they meddle in illegal markets to support their political pretensions in some armed conflict settings. With the end of the Cold War, international financial support for some causes practically disappeared, and these groups were forced to move into criminal economies. Moreover, the disappearance of an ideological narrative in the international system that justified their existence as armed groups forced several organisations to reformulate (or, in some cases, abandon) their political discourses<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, the armed organisations may not only criminalise, but they can also politicise. In other words, despite apparently having emerged with criminal intentions, they acquire a discourse with which they justify their violent actions over time.

Literature on this second process is less abundant. That does not, however, mean it is unimportant. The fact that some transnational organised crime (TOC) groups have a political discourse raises various questions about the confrontation between said organisations and the state. It is unclear if these confrontations should be considered armed conflicts, what are the appropriate tools to combat the criminal organisations

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(militarily, like insurgents, or by the police, like all the other crimes), and the legal possibility of negotiating with TOC actors. Although we address some of these discussions, this article focuses specifically on why some TOC groups politicise.

Politicisation is the rational, conscious and intentional process of an armed group presenting itself as politically motivated to gain support from the civilian population and reduce the legitimacy of state military action. We propose the term ‘politicised armed groups’ (PAG) to refer to those organisations that, after beginning their operations, have initiated this process of politicisation and successfully adopted a political discourse as justification for their criminal acts. A PAG is understood as one that has made a public declaration. It defines: i) its motivation to take up arms, ii) that this motivation is a response to the political system, and iii) rules of behaviour for its members. This means that the PAG category is not intrinsic to the nature of the armed group but is socially constructed. Nor does it mean that it is a perennial category: if the political discourse of the armed actor disappears, it ceases to be a PAG and becomes a criminal group once again. This term is intended to serve as a guide for the study of those organised crime groups that, although they cannot be defined as insurgents or paramilitaries, do not entirely fit into the typologies offered by studies on organised crime due to the presence of the political discourse.

To understand the conditions necessary for the politicisation of the PAGs, we compare six TOC actors in Latin America: *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* (AGC) (Gaitanista Self-Defence Forces of Colombia), or *Clan del Golfo* as the Colombian authorities has named them, and *Los Rastrojos*, in Colombia; *Militarizado Partido Comunista del Perú – Sendero Luminoso* (MPCP) (Militarised Communist Party of Peru – Shining Path) in Peru; *Tren de Aragua* (Aragua Train) in Venezuela; *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC) (First Capital Command), in Brazil; and *Cartel de Sinaloa* (Sinaloa Cartel), in Mexico. All these groups share common characteristics such as participation in illegal markets and the use of violence, or its threat, as central elements in their actions. Nevertheless, three of these groups have become politicised, while the other three have not or have failed in their strategy to do so.

Through a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), we consider five explanatory conditions that the literature has potentially related to this process: i) state capacity, ii) role in the drug trafficking production chain, iii) armed competition, iv) securitisation, and v) the trajectory of criminal leaderships. The results allow us to affirm that a criminal organisation’s politicisation is more likely when the state in which it operates has declared the armed group to be an existential threat and has militarised the fight against it (securitisation). Additionally, when the organisation’s leaders have previously had political training, politicisation is also more likely due to expertise that permits them to develop a discursive strategy. Politicisation is thus a response to state pressures but requires expertise in the construction of political discourses. Securitisation is therefore necessary, but not sufficient, to activate politicisation. According to our argument, if the state declares an armed group, whose leaders have a political background, an existential threat, this organisation’s response will likely be discursive politicisation.

For its part, the non-politicisation of an armed group can occur in three scenarios. Firstly, politicisation can fail when the criminal leaders’ lack of political trajectory hinders the articulation of a coherent strategy and, consequently, the state and society reject it. Secondly, if there is state securitisation, but a politicisation process is not attempted, there

may be a process of military rearrangement and/or institutional co-optation<sup>2</sup>. Finally, when there is no securitisation of organised crime, criminal organisations do not have to politicise because the state's actions do not threaten their existence.

The reason why the conditions were dichotomised responds to a search for parsimony and clarity in the results. While many social issues, such as the discursive politicisation of criminal groups, have fuzzy borders, they tend to be grouped into fuzzy sets for the application of QCA. However, given the small number of cases and our interest in showing the phenomenon above and below a minimum threshold, we are inclined to group the conditions into dichotomic crisp sets.

## Theoretical argument

Given that this research seeks to understand the transition of some criminal organisations to organisations with apparently political motivations, we argue that the adoption of these discourses in TOC groups: i) responds to an attempt to desecuritize the fight undertaken against them by the state, ii) occurs with a greater probability according to the trajectory of the organisations' leadership – if the leadership was part of political organisations or was politically trained, this makes politicisation more predictable–, and, iii) this discourse allows the construction of a kind of organisational identity.

We start from critical constructivism because we assume that discourse plays a constitutive role. This is because discourse configures actors' identities and develops within the dynamics of specific power relations. Discourse may clash or converge with the discourses of the other actors who participate in identity construction. This discursive confrontation depends on the power relations between the two actors and their possibilities to establish their discourse as dominant. Therefore, discourses are understood as systems of significant practices that form the identity of the subjects. Words are important, but also images, material objects, and the actors' social institutions. Thus, discourse is not considered neutral. Instead, it reflects how the actors observe themselves and others<sup>3</sup>.

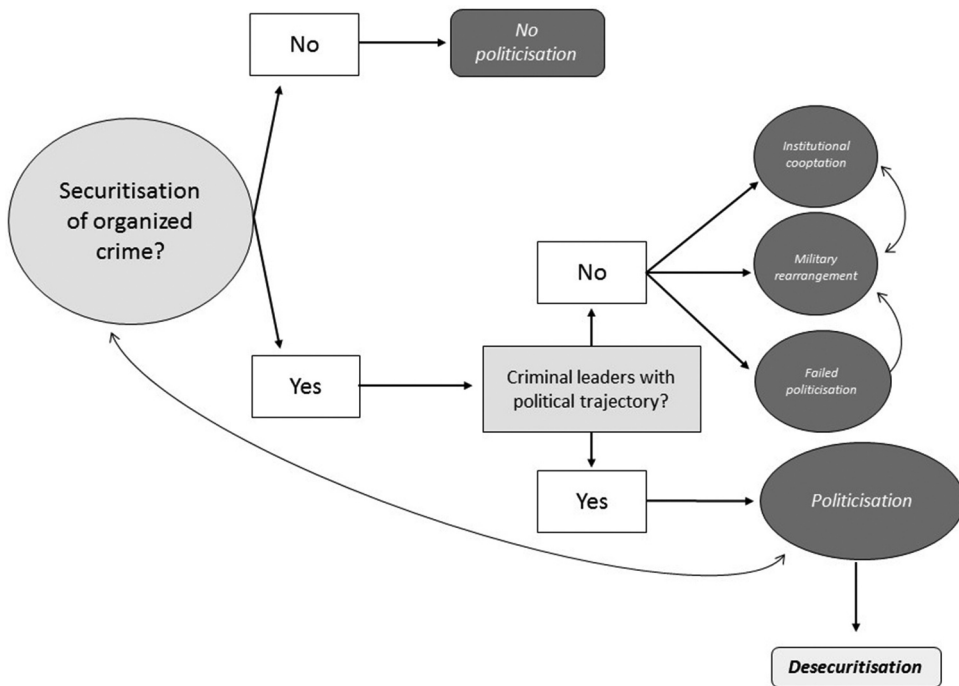
Furthermore, we use the concept of securitisation of the Copenhagen School as the axis of this explanation. This concept indicates the situations in which an issue is successfully presented as an existential threat, thus legitimising exceptional measures. Therefore, it is argued that no phenomenon belongs inherently to the security sphere. Rather, issues become security issues through 'acts of speech' and part of a determined audience accepting them. It is not only necessary to configure a discourse, but also some conditions for success, including sufficient social and political capital to convince the audience of the existence of an existential threat to security and the association of this threat with historical connotations of damage and danger, or a history of hostile sentiments. Consequently, there is a continuum with three specific points: non-politicisation, politicisation, and, finally, securitisation. The step from the first two points to the final one on the spectrum is known as securitisation, and its opposite is desecuritisation<sup>4</sup>.

The securitisation of TOC groups implies i) the militarisation of the conflict by the state, ii) the establishment of some political barriers to eventual negotiations, and iii) the construction of a violent 'other' without any ideological motivation. Facing this, armed organisations react by politicising. That is, they transform their identity by assuming a discourse that attempts to avoid their being considered simply profit-seeking actors

without any political justification. In the same way, and given that successful depoliticisation implies no longer being considered an existential threat to the state, the objective becomes the reduction of the public force in their areas of influence and operations, or, at least, the delegitimisation of the state's justification for combatting them with exceptional measures. These organisations try to transform their relationship with the state from a purely military one to a *military-political* one. Even if they do not necessarily avoid force against them, they may be capable of acquiring legitimacy.

Moreover, this discourse allows TOC groups to construct an organisational identity. This attempt at politicisation responds not only to a strategic logic facing the state's actions but is also based on identity roots that help them construct a particular image of themselves. By politicising their struggle, it is possible that they transform from dispersed and divided groups to being, or at least appearing to be, highly organised and hierarchical groups with a greater capacity to disturb public order. This final fact also impacts the reputation of the armed group among other TOC actors.

However, not all armed groups respond to securitisation with politicisation. This is because the trajectory of the criminal leadership is what determines this response. Successfully politicising implies prior knowledge of how to transmit a discourse, which discourses to employ successfully, and how to make them public. Thus, those leaders who have been trained in politics or who have belonged to a political organisation are more inclined to politicise than those who have not had either of these experiences. When criminal leaderships do not have any prior political experience, the response to securitisation is not to adopt a political discourse but instead to rearrange their operations in military terms, institutional co-optation, or failed politicisation. Figure 1 condenses this argument.



**Figure 1.** Mechanism of crime politicisation. Source: Elaborated by the authors.

## **Method**

The chosen methodological design is comparative. The QCA method is applied. There is a change that must be explained (politicisation) and some factors that, hypothetically, give rise to this change, justifying the use of the QCA method<sup>5</sup>. The QCA was conducted following the four phases proposed by Ragin<sup>6</sup>: i) literature review to identify relevant cases (with and without the outcome) and causal conditions that scholars have identified as explanations for this outcome; ii) truth table to identify the combinations of explanatory conditions most likely to explain the outcome; iii) simplification of the truth table to identify the minimally sufficient solution most likely to lead to the occurrence of the outcome; and iv) explain how the causal conditions are related to lead to the outcome. The explanatory conditions are operationalised based on dichotomous criteria (*crisp set*) and expanded with qualitative analysis. This implies that '0' is scored when the factor is absent and '1' when present.

## **Causal conditions**

The outcome is dichotomous and defined as 'politicisation of the transnational organised crime group'. A group is considered politicised if it has made public declarations to explain political justifications for its armed struggle. Thus,  $Y = 1$  when there are declarations by the armed group, and  $Y = 0$  when these do not exist, are not public or do not refer to political justifications.

The literature on organised crime has not systematically addressed the adoption of political discourses by criminal organisations. In this sense, the selected explanatory conditions were defined based on other discussions related to the construction of armed orders<sup>7</sup>, the participation of organised crime in electoral dynamics<sup>8</sup> and the transactional chains of illegal markets<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, it is not a matter of forcing these categories, but instead of using them as a starting point to explain a phenomenon that, although related, is essentially distinct but has been ignored by academic study.

## **V1: state capacity**

For Zalar (2004) and Koonings and Kruijt (2007), criminal actors meddle in politics due to limited state capacity<sup>10</sup>. In contexts of institutional weakness, the state cannot provide essential goods and services, guarantee citizens' security and encourage the arrival of private sector actors to contribute to the development of legal economies. In these scenarios, organised crime groups may have incentives to politicise, given that they must generate criminal governance systems that are not necessarily sustained by violence alone<sup>11</sup>. The political discourse can contribute to generate legitimacy for established armed orders. Thus, state fragility is filled by violence and other political discourses that legitimise the presence of an armed actor, its rent-seeking activities, and the illegal and legal economies it appropriates.

**Operationalisation:** We take the following dimension from the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI)<sup>12</sup>: 'government capacity to effectively formulate and implement sound policies'. This dimension has two indicators

- (1) **Government effectiveness (GE)**: this captures perceptions of the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and its degree of independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of government commitment to those policies.
- (2) **Regulatory quality (RQ)**: this captures perceptions of the government's ability to formulate and implement sound practices and regulations that allow and promote private sector development.

High state capacity ( $X1 = 1$ ) is considered to exist when both indicators score between 0 and 2.5. Low state capacity ( $X1 = 0$ ) is considered to exist when one of the two indicators, or both, score between 0 and  $-2.5$ .

### *V2: role in the drug trafficking production chain*

Illicit drug trafficking is the main activity of a significant part of the criminal actors in Latin America and is one of the most significant causes of violence<sup>13</sup>. However, this is a complex activity. It involves transnational production chains that go from the cultivation of the raw material and its transformation, to its transportation and commercialisation in consumer markets<sup>14</sup>. According to Trejos and Sanandr es (2016), the drug trafficking production chain is composed of six phases: cultivation of the coca leaf, primary processing of the leaf, sale of the coca leaf base to an intermediary or distributor, processing and transformation into cocaine, transport abroad, and distribution in cities<sup>15</sup>. The first four phases imply territorial control, given the need to regulate social relations and construct armed orders to avoid affecting processes that must be sustained over time to be effective<sup>16</sup>. The other two phases imply a more sporadic relationship with society. On the one hand, the resource is exhausted in the commercial transaction (in the case of distribution), and, on the other, very few actors are involved<sup>17</sup>.

To construct a dichotomous explanatory condition, we group the first four phases into the 'extractive phase' and the final two into the 'distribution phase'. When the armed actors' fundamental role is to participate in the extractive phase, the need to maintain long-term relationships with the civilian population involved in the cultivation and processing of drugs can create incentives to politicise, as this would provide them with legitimacy and contribute to their orders being obeyed in favour of their struggle. On the contrary, when the actors are concentrated in the distribution phase, the incentives for politicisation are lower, as violence functions as a critical organising element of social relations, and they do not need long-term relationships with the civilian population.

**Operationalisation:** We use reports of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and governmental and non-governmental organisations to determine that:

- (a) Territories with crops for illicit use coincide with those with the sustained presence of the armed actor.
- (b) The majority of the resources of the armed organisation come from the extractive phase.

The group is mainly in the extractive phase ( $X2 = 1$ ) if either of the two situations occurs. If neither of them occurs, the group is considered mainly in the distribution phase ( $X2 = 0$ ).



### ***V3: armed competition***

Criminal actors must not only face the state to guarantee their survival, but they may also find themselves in conflict with other organisations of their nature<sup>18</sup>. In this sense, authors like Alonso, Giraldo, and Sierra (2006) and Tuirán and Trejos (2020) have defined the spaces in which one or more illegal actors challenge the hegemony of another armed group, or in which they fight to consolidate hegemony, as ‘armed competition scenarios’ or ‘disputed territories’<sup>19</sup>. In these settings, the population can play a role in consolidating the hegemony of one of the actors. In the end, hegemony implies armed domination and the capacity to regulate social interactions. For this reason, armed competition scenarios may produce greater incentives to politicise as, through this discourse, groups can gain legitimacy among the population and symbolic resources for their struggle.

**Operationalisation:** If the armed actor coincides with other criminal groups with violent interactions before politicisation in their zones of operation,  $X3 = 1$ . If there are no other relevant armed actors, or the interaction is non-violent,  $X3 = 0$ .

### ***V4: securitisation***

Although the literature on TOC has not considered that securitisation affects criminal organisations’ politicisation, in this text, we do consider it an explanatory condition to be taken into account. When the state securitises the fight against TOC, criminal organisations are usually presented as existential threats and, thus, the use of extreme measures to combat them is justified. These extreme measures tend to include the militarisation of the fight and, consequently, an increase in troops in the criminal organisation’s operation areas. This may create incentives for these actors to decide to adopt a political discourse. These organisations attempt to convert their relationship with the state from a purely military one to a *military-political* one in which, even if they do not necessarily avoid actions of force against them, they may be capable of acquiring a type of legitimacy that helps them to justify the granting of legal benefits.

**Operationalisation:** We undertook an analysis of the content of 83 speeches by the presidents of the countries studied. To do this, we used the political discourse analysis (PDA) method proposed by Fairclough and Fairclough (2012)<sup>20</sup>. In those speeches, we sought to determine the values associated with organised crime. In such manner,  $X4 = 1$  if, in the speeches of the presidents, organised crime was associated with historical connotations of damage (terrorism, violence, conflict, drug trafficking, kidnapping) or as a threat to the state (to national or international security, to humanity, to democracy or institutionality, to family, to the community, or to the stability of the country)<sup>21</sup>.  $X4 = 0$  if organised crime does not appear (in the values of the arguments) as a specific category or is not associated with being a serious threat to the state.

### ***V5: trajectory of the criminal leaderships***

This explanatory condition is also absent from the reviewed literature. However, we propose that politicisation necessarily implies political expertise in those who decide to undertake it. Political activity implies costs: information about political processes is necessary to undertake politicisation. Time and resources must be dedicated to it, two things that are crucial for an armed actor<sup>22</sup>. Therefore, adopting a political discourse comes from knowing both the benefits of doing so and how this discourse should be built. We propose that the trajectory of the leaders of an armed organisation will

**Table 1. QCA truth table.**

Case	State capacity <i>Statecap</i>	Role in the drug trafficking chain <i>Drugprod</i>	Armed competition <i>Armcomp</i>	Securitisation <i>Securitis</i>	Trajectory of the criminal leaderships <i>Leadtraj</i>	Outcome: Politicisation
Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia	0	1	1	1	1	1
Militarizado Partido Comunista del Perú	0	1	0	1	1	1
Primeiro Comando da Capital	0	0	0	1	1	1
Los Rastrojos	0	1	1	1	0	0
Tren de Aragua	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cartel de Sinaloa	1	0	1	1	0	0
# Implicants: 4						
statecap*drugprod*SECURITIS	0					
DRUGPROD*armcomp	0					
armcomp*SECURITIS	0					
SECURITIS*LEADTRAJ	0					
# Solutions: 1						
SECURITIS*LEADTRAJ						
		Primeiro Comando da Capital, Militarizado Partido Comunista del Perú	Primeiro Comando da Capital	Primeiro Comando da Capital	Primeiro Comando da Capital, Militarizado Partido Comunista del Perú	
		Primeiro Comando da Capital, Militarizado Partido Comunista del Perú, Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia				

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

determine politicisation. Politicisation is more plausible if the organisation's leaders, those with the capacity to make decisions that affect the whole armed group, have belonged to the political cadres of organisations such as belligerent groups, counterinsurgencies, or political parties, or have trained in some political doctrine.

**Operationalisation:** Through documentary sources, we determine whether the leadership of the criminal organisation was, at any moment, part of the political cadres of organisations or was trained in a political doctrine ( $X5 = 1$ ). If neither of these two conditions is present ( $X5 = 0$ ).

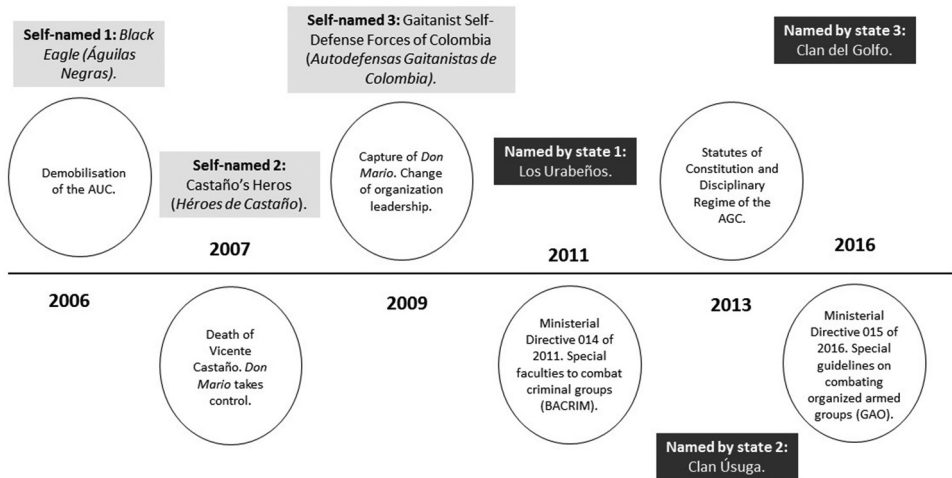
## Interpretation of results

The QCA produces two conditions necessary for politicisation: the securitisation of organised crime by the state and the political trajectory of the criminal organisation's leaders. As shown in Table 1, only the AGC, the MPCP, and the PCC were politicised, while Los Rastrojos, the Tren de Aragua, and the Cartel de Sinaloa were not. The cases of Los Rastrojos and the Cartel de Sinaloa demonstrate that securitisation alone does not produce criminal groups' politicisation. The Tren de Aragua case supports the idea that politicisation is also not possible without securitisation. Securitisation is a necessary condition but is insufficient because it alone does not produce the result being explained. The trajectory of the criminal leadership is, for its part, an explanatory condition that is also present in the three cases of politicisation and absent in the three cases of non-politicisation. In this way, it is possible to affirm that when the leaders of a criminal organisation have political training and act in a state that has securitised the fight against organised crime, its politicisation becomes plausible. Other explanatory conditions, such as state capacity, armed competition, and role in the drug trafficking production chain, were not relevant in explaining the politicisation process.

### Case 1: *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia*

The AGC appeared in 2006, following the demobilisation of the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC) (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia). The AGC was founded by Vicente Castaño and Daniel Rendón, alias *Don Mario*, a well-known drug trafficker from Amalfi, a rural town in the Urabá subregion of the department of Antioquia. Don Mario was, from a young age, involved in drug trafficking. He was part of some self-defence organisations and later became a leader of the AUC. However, his functions were always related to drug trafficking and the armed group's finances<sup>23</sup>. In its first three years of existence, the AUC became known by various names, including the *Águilas Negras* (Black Eagles) and *Héroes de Castaño* (Castaño's Heroes), with the latter term coined by Don Mario following the death of Castaño, the first boss of the organisation.

Nevertheless, in 2009, the group changed its name to the *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* and began to deepen a political strategy that had not been so clear until that moment. The armed group began a process of identity construction that included a logo, military uniforms that they displayed to the populations in their operation zones, a website that claimed to spread their 'socio-political thinking and achievements,' and a declaration recording their main ideas.



**Figure 2.** Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia timeline. Source: Elaborated by the authors.

This politicisation process began in 2009 and coincided with the change of leadership in the organisation. With Don Mario's capture, command of the organisation passed to Dairo Antonio and Juan de Dios Úsuga, who had started their criminal career in the *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (EPL) (Popular Liberation Army). This Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group was demobilised in 1991<sup>24</sup>. The Úsuga brothers modified the command structure of the organisation. They invited other ex-guerrilla fighters (such as alias *Gavilán*, alias *Negro Sarley*, alias *Don Leo*, and aka *Belisario*) to form part of the military core of the organisation<sup>25</sup>. Many of them ended up as members of the General Command, implying a complete transformation at the top of the AGC.

The Colombian state has refused to use the name AGC. It has constantly changed the epithet by which it refers to the armed group: firstly, *Los Urabeños* (2011), later *Los Úsuga* (2013), and finally, the *Clan del Golfo* (2016)<sup>26</sup>. By not recognising them as political actors, the Colombian state has taken extraordinary measures, such as establishing Ministerial Directives 014 of 2011 and 015 of 2016. The Colombian Ministry of Defence has permitted, among other things, bombings against the group. Similarly, an operation is currently being carried out to dismantle the AGC, Operation Agamemnon II, the most prominent military and police strategy against drug trafficking in the country's history.

The AGC claims to justify its existence based on the Colombian state's failure to comply with what was agreed in the demobilisation process of the AUC, which culminated in 2006. They claim to adhere to Jorge Eliécer Gaitán's ideas (hence their name) and have a disciplinary regime for both their members and the communities in which they operate<sup>27</sup>. Their declarations are dated 25 September 2013, the date of the first AGC national conference. In these declarations, the organisation renounced the counterinsurgent nature of the AUC and assumed a defensive position against what they call persecution by the state and other armed organisations against the demobilised members of the AUC. Thus, they claim to be an organisation of 'armed civil resistance.' In this way, they detach themselves from the parastatal nature that characterised the AUC in the past. They understand the state as one of their main

enemies (art. 3 of the Statutes of Constitution and Disciplinary Regime of the AGC of 2013). The process of the creation and transformation of the AGC is shown in Figure 2.

In summary, in this case: i) the state capacity of the Colombian state in the regions where the AGC is active is low according to the criteria analysed; ii) the AGC is in the extractive phase of the drug trafficking production chain (coca leaf cultivation and processing areas); iii) they are amid various processes of armed competition; iv) the state securitised the fight against them; and v) their leaders were trained in politics during their time in the EPL.

### Case 2: Militarizado Partido Comunista del Perú

The MPCP is an armed organisation that appeared at the beginning of the millennium due to the strategic defeat of the Sendero Luminoso and its break up after the capture of Abimael Guzmán during Operation Victory in 1992. In its first years, the MPCP underwent a criminalisation process, as it turned its efforts to penetrating and then strengthening drug trafficking activities<sup>28</sup>. Likewise, during this period, the MPCP began to manage new ties to the population, not through ideological links but rather through strengthening economic activities in its main operation zone<sup>29</sup>. Until 2006, the MPCP did not make any explicit ideological claim, meaning that we assume their re-politicisation began on November 1 2007, when they presented the ‘General Revolutionary Programme of Peru’ at the Ocobamba police station in the Apurímac region. In this declaration, they affirmed their promotion of ideas based in Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, ‘principally Maoism applied to the specific conditions of the Peruvian Revolution, in the particularly Peruvian style’<sup>30</sup>. This document (which is assumed as a statute), signed by the Leadership Committee, clarifies the ideological proposition of the armed group and makes explicit its programme of action and the change in the relationship they assume with the population.

On the one hand, the politicisation of the MPCP responds to the securitisation process that began in the government of Alan García in 2006, when he presented the ‘Plan VRAE’ and subsequently declared the operation zone of the armed group to be of ‘national interest,’ meaning the adoption of extraordinary security measures to confront organised crime in the region<sup>31</sup>. In 2009, the government created the Military Region of the Valley of

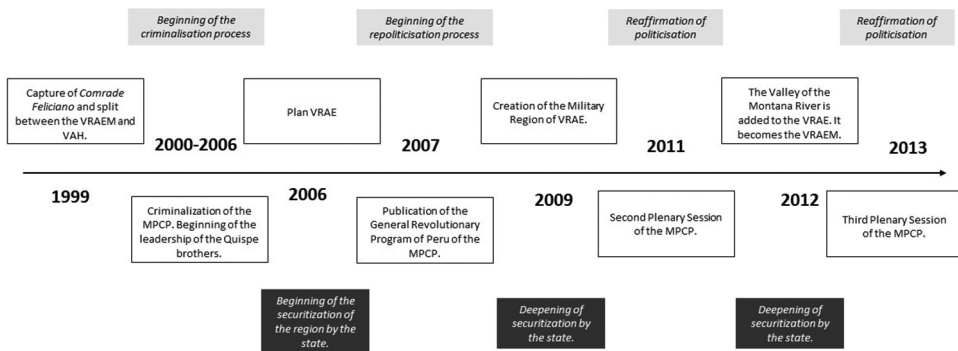


Figure 3. Militarizado Partido Comunista del Perú timeline. Source: Elaborated by the authors.

the Rivers Apurímac and Ene (RM-VRAE) via Supreme Decree N° 001–2009-DE/EP, with which it militarised the zone. It strengthened the army to face the MPCP in the region<sup>32</sup>. In this context, the MPCP held its Second Plenary Session in 2011, reaffirming its ideological principles and its programme of action. One year later, the Peruvian government included the Valley of the River Montana in Plan VRAEM 2012, which the MPCP perceived as a military escalation and led to a Third Plenary Session in 2013 to rethink its military and political strategy<sup>33</sup>.

On the other hand, re-politicisation coincided with the Quispe Palomino brothers' leadership, sons of a historic member of the Sendero Luminoso from Ayacucho. Jorge Quispe Palomino (*Comrade Raúl*) is the movement's ideologue, and Marco Antonio Quispe Palomino (*Comrade Gabriel*) was the political leader until the public force killed him. At the same time, Víctor Quispe Palomino (*Comrade José*) was the organisation's most senior leader. Due to their years of militancy, the Quispe Palomino brothers knew well the political postulates of the Sendero Luminoso, as evidenced in the documents in which they record their ideology, which is no more than a reformulation of the insurgency of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, the MPCP has recently manifested its desire to seek a peace negotiation with the Peruvian state, coinciding with the idea that politicisation also implies an attempt to transform the conflict with the state from military to military-political, to be a legitimate actor during any eventual negotiations. [Figure 3](#) synthesises the transformation process of the MPCP since the turn of the millennium.

In summary, in this case: (i) the state capacity of the Peruvian state in the regions where the MPCP is active is low according to the criteria analysed; (ii) the MPCP is in the extractive phase of the drug trafficking production chain (spaces for growing and processing coca leaf); (iii) this armed group did not have to face processes of armed competition, as it was a hegemonic actor; (iv) the state securitised the fight against them; and (v) its leaders were trained in politics during their time with the Sendero Luminoso guerrillas.

### **Case 3: *Primeiro Comando da Capital***

The PCC was born in 1993, following the Carandiru massacre, in which 111 prisoners were killed during a riot. Despite this, the Brazilian authorities denied its existence for several years until that discourse became untenable due to the group's actions in prisons<sup>34</sup>. Episodes such as the mega-rebellion of 2001, in which around 27,000 inmates participated, were the starting point for the Public Prosecutor's Office to label them a 'criminal organisation'<sup>35</sup>. Although the PCC has usually been studied concerning its transformation into a TOC organisation, our interest in this research relates to understanding its politicisation process<sup>36</sup>.

In 2001, several Brazilian newspapers published the Statute of the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* PCC 1533, which the group constantly updates via its website. In this declaration, the PCC establishes that its existence as an armed organisation is due to an unjust prison system that does not guarantee human rights. Therefore, its objective is to pursue the guarantee of human rights for all Brazilians. In other words, based on the group's discourse, they are – paradoxically – a criminal organisation that defends human rights. They have rules of behaviour and a 'disciplinary dictionary.' They specify the meaning of

every term they use and the penalties incurred by those who do not comply with the behavioural manual<sup>37</sup>. Moreover, they utilise a logo and a flag, which appeared for the first time in 1998.

Although the PCC does not publicly accept a senior leader, Marques<sup>38</sup> (2010) affirms that the de facto leader is Marcos Willians Herbas Camacho. Alias *Marcola*, as he is known, was not among the founders of the PCC. Still, he was very close to *Geleião* and *Cesinha*, the first PCC leaders, until, in the words of Geleião himself, Marcola 'overthrew' them<sup>39</sup>. Despite not having belonged to any political organisation before being imprisoned, Marcola claims to have spent a good part of his time in prison reading political texts. In fact, during an interrogation conducted by eight deputies of the Parliamentary Investigations Committee, recorded by the press and subsequently published in full by the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies<sup>40</sup> (2006), the PCC leader claimed to have based the structure of the organisation on the ideas of Lenin, and even that many of the *irmãos*, as the members of the armed group are known, had also been encouraged to read Marxist texts. Similarly, Souza<sup>41</sup> highlights Mauricio Hernández Norambuena, an ex-guerrilla fighter and ex-commander of the *Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez* (Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front) in Chile, and who had been close to guerrilla organisations in Colombia. From very early on, Hernández Norambuena taught the PCC leaders guerrilla tactics. These two influences in the organisation's leadership allow us to explain the leftist hues that can be seen in the PCC statute, even though the organisation does not explicitly label itself as Marxist<sup>42</sup>. It should also be remembered that the PCC's politicisation coincided with the era of the securitisation of organised crime in Brazil. In the years following the declaration of their political status, this securitisation acquired a deeper nature during the government of Lula da Silva.

In summary, in this case: (i) the state capacity of the Brazilian state in the regions where the PCC operates is low according to the criteria analysed; (ii) the PCC is in the distribution phase of the drug trafficking production chain (distribution of drugs in the Brazilian market and export to international markets); (iii) this armed group did not have to face armed competition, as it was a hegemonic actor before its politicisation; (iv) the state securitised the fight against them; and (v) its leaders have trained in politics thanks to Hernández Norambuena's influence and *Marcola's* self-training.

#### **Case 4: Los Rastrojos**

The Los Rastrojos armed organisation was born in 2002 within the *Cartel del Norte del Valle* (CNDV) (Northern Valle Cartel). This drug trafficking group emerged after the dissolution of the *Cartel de Cali* (Cali Cartel). Los Rastrojos were born as the armed wing of the drug trafficker Wilber Varela, alias *Jabón*, fighting a battle against Diego Montoya, alias *Don Diego*, another member of the CNDV.

Varela has an extensive criminal record. He began as a hitman for the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers' clan and undertook his first cocaine shipments to the USA in their company until their capture. He later established an alliance with two other drug traffickers to take over the drug emporium in the Norte del Valle region and started a war against his former partners<sup>43</sup>. Amid the securitisation process being undertaken by the Colombian government against organised crime groups, Los Rastrojos decided to ally with the AUC to enter peace negotiations with the state. For this reason, they quickly changed their name

to the *Rondas Campesinas Populares* (RCP) (Popular Peasant Rounds) and called themselves a counterinsurgent group. Nevertheless, this transformation was never recognised by either the Colombian government, which excluded the group from the demobilisation process, or the local population, who told the Peace Process Support Mission of the Organisation of American States (OAS) that Los Rastrojos were recruiting people from the region to swell their ranks and make it appear that they were part of the AUC<sup>44</sup>.

Faced with the failure of their politicisation strategy, Los Rastrojos quickly renounced their supposed counterinsurgent nature. They began a military expansion towards the Colombian coffee region, the Nariño and Cauca departments, and later to the Colombia-Venezuela border<sup>45</sup>. *Jabón* was killed in Venezuela in 2008 by alias *Comba*, who later became one of the organisation's leaders. By 2009, the public force had obtained a document where Los Rastrojos retook the RCP name and claimed to have an 'anti-subversion structure' to 'combat any armed group outside the law'<sup>46</sup>. However, this was quickly dismissed within the country for two reasons. First, this was an uncoordinated politicisation process: although the group was recognised as counterinsurgent, having Che Guevara's face as its organisational logo demonstrated the superficiality of its attempt at political recognition. Secondly, in those days, Los Rastrojos made pacts with the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) (National Liberation Army) in the Cauca department<sup>47</sup> and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC-EP) (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) in the department of Chocó<sup>48</sup> to avoid confrontation in the territories where they acted side-by-side, demonstrating again that this attempt at politicisation did not harbour any practical manifestation. In this sense, Los Rastrojos never managed to deepen their politicisation process, and, on the contrary, in both 2006 and 2009, this failure preceded a process of military rearrangement in their operations.

In summary, in this case: i) the state capacity of the Colombian state in the regions where Los Rastrojos operate is low according to the criteria analysed; ii) Los Rastrojos are in the extractive phase of the drug trafficking production chain (cultivation and transformation of coca leaf); iii) this armed group has been involved in various processes of armed competition since its creation; iv) the state securitised the fight against them; and v) their leaders were not trained in politics, given that they had careers in drug trafficking organisations.

### **Case 5: Tren de Aragua**

The Tren de Aragua is a Venezuelan 'mega-gang' born in Aragua in the centre-north of the country and consolidated in the Aragua Penitentiary Centre, better known as Tocarón. It is currently considered the most powerful mega-gang in Venezuela. It has over 1,500 members and has become a transnational organisation in Brazil, Peru, and Colombia<sup>49</sup>. The armed group's activities are focused on two fronts: on the one hand, the management of prisons and extortion of inmates, and on the other, drug and arms trafficking and urban crime activities in Venezuela, Colombia and Peru.

The Venezuelan state has not securitised its fight against organised crime. It has been accused of using organisations like the Tren de Aragua to temporarily intimidate political opponents. The Minister for the Prison Service herself, Iris Varela, has claimed that, in



a foreign invasion, 'she would turn those deprived of liberty into soldiers of the Bolivarian revolution'<sup>50</sup>. According to research by Insight Crime<sup>51</sup>, Varela has channels for regular communication with *Niño Guerrero*<sup>52</sup>, the organisation's leader.

When Varela took office, the 'prans'<sup>53</sup> had defied the Venezuelan authorities and considerably increased prison murders. Since 2012, there has been a decrease in these figures due to establishing a *pax mafiosa* between the state and the 'prans,' who took power inside the prisons in exchange for the obligation to reduce the use of violence and avoid media attention<sup>54</sup>. This power has made the prisons practically a parallel state, with people in Aragua even buying food there when there are shortages<sup>55</sup>.

Thus, the Venezuelan state has not securitised its fight against organised crime because it serves some of its interests. On the one hand, these organisations can potentially serve as irregular armies if needed, either to face opponents of the state or deter foreign threats. On the other hand, by establishing a 'para-state' inside prisons, organised crime avoids the Venezuelan authorities' questioning in the media and reduces violence. The Tren de Aragua does not need a political justification for its armed activities because its links with the Venezuelan state mitigate the threats to its existence.

In summary, in this case: i) the state capacity of the Venezuelan state in the regions where the Tren de Aragua operates is low according to the criteria analysed; ii) the Tren de Aragua is in the distribution phase of the drug trafficking production chain (transporting drugs to international markets); iii) this armed group is not in the midst of armed competition; iv) the Venezuelan state did not securitise the fight against them; on the contrary, they have alliances; and v) their leaders were not trained in politics.

### **Case 6: Cartel de Sinaloa**

The Cartel de Sinaloa (or Cartel del Pacífico) is a drug trafficking organisation that mainly operates in the Mexican state of Sinaloa and is also present in a good part of the country, other Central American states, and with alliances in some South American countries. Although its roots can be traced to the mid-1980s when the Guadalajara Cartel broke up and gave rise to the Tijuana, Juárez, and Sinaloa cartels<sup>56</sup>, its emergence as a solid and pre-eminent organisation in the drugs trade began at the turn of the millennium. With the dismantling of the main Colombian drug cartels and the campaign of ex-President of México Vicente Fox against the Tijuana and Juárez cartels, a favourable scenario was created for other armed organisations to take over a still lucrative market in which the main actors were weakened<sup>57</sup>. Among these emerging groups was the Cartel de Sinaloa, led by Joaquín Guzmán Loera, alias *El Chapo*. By 2003, the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels were the main drug trafficking organisations in the country.

The presidency of Felipe Calderón, beginning in 2006, was the turning point for the securitisation of organised crime in Mexico. However, the state's increased pressure did not mean an end to the violence derived from organised crime but rather a steep increase in its manifestations<sup>58</sup>. The cartels rearranged militarily and responded with attacks against police stations and headquarters, the murder of political leaders, and attacks against the civilian population<sup>59</sup>. Nevertheless, violence was not the only response to securitisation. Estrada et al. (2016) affirm that organised crime built complex corruption schemes through bribery and armed pressure, allowing the groups to remain active despite greater state

repression<sup>60</sup>. Several state institutions, including the public force, were accused of collaborating with the Cartel de Sinaloa instead of fighting them with the same intensity as other Mexican drug traffickers. Both corruption and increased violence between the Mexican cartels were constant and did not disappear with either the implementation of international cooperation initiatives against crime or increased troop numbers.

Corruption is an almost constant element in organised crime manifestations and is not a new phenomenon for the Mexican political system<sup>61</sup>. However, the high levels of state co-optation that occurred during the presidency of Calderón<sup>62</sup> allow us to infer that corruption was effectively a response to the securitisation process undertaken by the state. Thus, institutional co-optation was the response of organised crime to increased repression by the Mexican state, alongside its military rearrangement and the brewing conflict between the cartels, as shown by the steep increase in violence.

In summary, in this case: (i) the state capacity of the Mexican state in the regions where the Cartel de Sinaloa operates is high according to the criteria analysed; (ii) the Cartel de Sinaloa is in the distribution phase of the drug trafficking production chain (transport of drugs to international markets and distribution in the local market); (iii) this armed group has experienced several processes of armed competition with other Mexican cartels; (iv) the Mexican state securitised the fight against organised crime, arguing that they pose a threat to democratic stability and Mexican families; and (v) their leaders were not trained in politics.

## Conclusions

In this research, we propose the concept of ‘politicised armed groups’ (PAG) to refer to those organised crime groups that, although not initially founded with an ideological logic, have adopted a political discourse with which they attempt to justify their actions. This transition to becoming a PAG is explained by combining two explanatory conditions: the securitisation of the fight against organised crime and the criminal leadership’s political trajectory. The first is a necessary condition to establish politicisation, and the second is the factor that triggers politicisation in states where TOC is securitised effectively. In addition to these two explanatory conditions, three more which, according to the literature, could influence politicisation, were studied: state capacity, role in the drug trafficking production chain, and armed competition. However, the qualitative comparative analysis showed that these explanatory conditions are not essential to understanding the phenomenon.

The six case studies made it possible to demonstrate the politicisation process in three of them (the AGC, the MPCP, and the PCC) and analyse the reasons for non-politicisation in the other three (Los Rastrojos, the Tren de Aragua, and the Cartel de Sinaloa). Politicisation tends to occur through the same process. The state securitises its fight against organised crime and, based on the criminal leadership’s political trajectory, the armed group politicises or not. A significant finding in this research is that although the objective of this politicisation is the desecuritisation of organised crime, what is shown in the cases of the adoption of political speeches is a reinforcement of securitisation by the state. Thus, criminal organisations respond to this reinforcement by deepening their political strategy by making their political speeches more evident, showing themselves

as forces with their points of view and opinions on the destiny of their societies, and not simply as criminal enterprises. However, in none of the cases mentioned above was there a successful desecuritisation process.

The three remaining cases present different scenarios. In the case of Los Rastrojos, an attempt at politicisation was rapidly abandoned due to its non-recognition by both the state and local populations, resulting in its military rearrangement and the expansion of its activities after each failed attempt to politicise. For its part, the case of the Cartel de Sinaloa shows that its response to securitisation by the Mexican state was military rearrangement, leading to a significant increase in the manifestations of violence by organised crime and institutional co-optation, allowing the organisation to remain active despite the rise in police and military initiatives against it. Finally, in the case of the Tren de Aragua, there has been no securitisation by the Venezuelan state due to the benefits it obtains from organised crime through possible pacts to establish criminal governance inside prisons and to reduce rates of violence. Interestingly, this finding reports that, given the tacit tolerance of the state towards the organisation, it has not needed to politicise its discourse as the national authorities have not threatened its existence. However, given Venezuelan socio-political volatility and the trends in changes in internal relations, this result is subject to potential variations; therefore, it requires permanent observation.

This research is relevant for studies on organised crime and armed conflict in Latin America, given that it questions their interpretative frameworks by considering that some of the organisations studied do not fit completely into the typologies they offer. Moreover, it is novel in that it offers an analytical framework for criminal organisations' politicisation processes, an issue that has not been dealt with systematically by existing literature.

The concept of PAG is useful to understand that discourses shape the identity of armed actors but that this does not necessarily imply perennial commitments to them. That is, politicisation is contingent and will depend on the moment and the audience to be successful. Initiating a process of politicisation does not necessarily turn a criminal group into a PAG: recognition of that status by the audience is necessary.

This article does not consider the kind of motivations behind a PAG. However, it assumes that the mere fact that they justify their existence in the political system makes them discursively committed to that cause. Understanding them in this way allows us to overcome the ideological discussions that prevent some authors from recognising them beyond the classic typologies (insurgents, paramilitaries or criminals). These categories may not circumscribe these groups because their objective is not to seize power or contribute to a cause but to improve their strategic conditions. The political dimension of their discourse is mouldable and context-dependent. Future research will have to study how and why the depoliticisation process of these armed groups might occur (our evidence does not allow us to answer this question beyond theory).

Finally, it should be mentioned that the objective of this research is to act as the basis for further empirical work on transnational organised crime. Despite reconstructing six cases in the present text, it is necessary to test our hypothesis in different contexts and find organisations that do not fit into the typologies. The non-securitisation of organised crime in Latin America is, as in Venezuela, an anomaly. Nevertheless, it would be worth considering whether the hypothesis is sustained in contexts where securitisation has not

occurred. Likewise, it is necessary to examine other politicisation cases not considered in this study to extend the analysis and strengthen the conclusions reached here. In this sense, this article can reach conclusions regarding the cases studied, but no generalisations can be made.

## Notes

1. Trejos, "Colombia: una revisión teórica."
2. As we will show below, in the face of the Mexican state's military offensive against organised crime, the Cartel de Sinaloa deepened its bid to co-opt the Mexican police and military forces. In doing so, through corruption, they were able to reduce military pressure.
3. Fierke, *Critical Approaches to International ...*; Howarth and Stavrakakis, "Introducing Discourse Theory"; Mutimer, "My critique is bigger"; Weldes, *Constructing National Interests*; Weldes et al., "Introduction: Constructing Insecurity."
4. Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, *Security*; McDonald, "Securitization and the Construction"; Stritzel, "Towards a Theory of Securitisation: Copenhagen and Beyond"; Wæver, "Securitization and Desecuritization"; and Wæver, "Insecurity, security, and asecurity."
5. Baptist and Befani, "Qualitative Comparative Analysis"; and Schatz and Welle, *Qualitative Comparative Analysis*.
6. Ragin, "The Comparative Method."
7. Arjona, *Rebelocracy*; Desmond, "The Dynamics of Criminal"; Staniland, "Armed politics"; and Schultze-Kraft, *Crimilegal Orders, Governance and Armed Conflict*.
8. Albarracín, "Criminalized Electoral Politics"; Ponce, "Violence and Electoral Competition"; Ponce, Velázquez and Sáinz-Santamaría, "Do Local Elections Increase."
9. Labrousse, *Geopolítica de las drogas*; and Sampó, "Una primera aproximación al."
10. Zaluar, "Urban Violence and Drug"; and Koonings and Kruijt, "Fractured Cities, Second-Class Citizenship."
11. Lessing, "Conceptualizing Criminal Governance."
12. Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi, *The Worldwide Governance Indicators*.
13. Sampó, "Una primera aproximación al."
14. Labrousse, *Geopolítica de las drogas*; and Pyszczek, "Geografía del circuito productivo."
15. Trejos and Sanandrés, "Actores transnacionales clandestinos."
16. Tuirán and Trejos, "Debilidades institucionales."
17. Wilson and Stevens, *Understanding drug markets*.
18. Chwiej, "The Efforts to Combat."
19. Alonso, Giraldo, and Sierra, "Medellín: el complejo camino"; and Tuirán and Trejos, "Gestión territorial y violencia."
20. Fairclough and Fairclough, *Political Discourse Analysis*.
21. Balzacq, "Securitization theory." The author affirms that the audience is crucial in securitisation processes, as they are the actor which determines if a phenomenon is securitised or not (if it is legitimised, it was securitised). In this sense, the selected categories make it possible to identify historical connotations of damage in the audiences of the countries in which the criminal groups under study operate, exactly the reason for which they were chosen.
22. Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood, "Ideology in Civil War"; and Lee, "Who Becomes a Terrorist?"
23. McDermott, *¿La última bacrim en*.
24. Insight Crime, "Los Urabeños."
25. McDermott, "La victoria de los Urabeños."
26. El Tiempo, "En contexto."
27. Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, *Historia de las Autodefensas*.

28. Antezana, *De Sendero Luminoso a Neosenderismo Articulado Al Narcotráfico*; Díaz, "El Perú y sus"; and Santillán, *Sendero Luminoso: evolución histórica*.
29. Díaz, "Por el camino del neosenderismo"; Roberts and Escalante, *Narco-Terrorismo en Perú*.
30. MPCP, 2006.
31. Gurmendi, "The Era of Terrorism"; Niño, "Post-senderismo, meta-seguridad y meta-violencia."
32. Reynoso, "Región militar en el VRAE."
33. Personal communication, July 10, 2020. Although the Peruvian Police has obtained the documents of the Second and Third Plenary Sessions, it has not yet registered those of the First, although it is assumed to have taken place in 2008.
34. Sampó, "Brasil."
35. Ferreira, "Brazilian criminal organizations"; Sampó, *De la reclusión en las prisiones al control del tráfico de cocaína*.
36. Although the PCC was born as an organisation that demanded improved prison conditions, here we assume that the politicisation process began later, when they made their declarations public and advocated the establishment of a specific model of society.
37. Primeiro Comando da Capital, *Dicionário Disciplinar Atualizado 2018*.
38. Marques, "'Liderança', 'proceder' e 'igualdade.'"
39. Costa and Adorno, "Como eu fundei o PCC."
40. Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, 'CPI – Tráfico de armas.'
41. Souza, 'PCC, A Facção.'
42. Feltran, *Irmãos*.
43. El Espectador, "Wilber Varela, alias 'Jabón'."
44. MAPP/OEA, *Sexto informe trimestral*.
45. CNMH, *Rearmados y reintegrados*.
46. El País, "Regresa el temor por."
47. Buitrago, "La relación entre las."
48. CNMH, *Noriente y Magdalena Medio*.
49. Insight Crime, "Venezuela's Tren de Aragua."
50. Martínez, "Muerte de un 'pran'."
51. Insight Crime, "La delegación del poder."
52. Héctor Rusthenford Guerrero Flores, alias *Niño Guerrero*, is the leader of the Tren de Aragua and is the 'pran' of the Tocarón prison.
53. The 'pranato' is a criminal system inside prisons that is directed by the 'pran', the inmate leader of the prison. The 'pran' is the prisoner who has imposed himself as leader by force, and turns the prison into a centre of operations for illegal activities (Bartolomé 2015; Figueredo 2015). The word 'pran' comes from '*preso-rematado-asesino-nato*', an approximate translation is 'absolute, natural-born, assassin, inmate'.
54. Insight Crime, "GameChangers 2019."
55. Insight Crime, "Venezuela supera escasez comprando."
56. López-Muñoz, *Criminalidad organizada y terrorismo*.
57. Pereyra, "México."
58. Guerrero, "Pandillas y cárteles."
59. Lessing, "Logics of violence."
60. Estrada, Moscoso and Andrade, "Políticas de seguridad contra el narcotráfico."
61. Andreas, "The Political Economy of Narco-Corruption in Mexico."
62. Kassab and Rosen, *Corruption, Institutions, and Fragile*; and Palifka, "Corruption, organized crime and the public sector in Mexico."

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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