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## Central America Facing the Bicentennial Crisis: Political Uncertainty, Economic Hardship and Climate Challenges

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**Abstract.** Central America meets the bicentenary of its independence in the midst of a threefold crisis: a political crisis marked by democratic regression; an economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 maelstrom and the subsequent collapse of international trade and tourism; finally, a humanitarian crisis generated by the pandemic and climate change. In this article we will focus our attention on how this triple crisis has hit five Central American republics — the three that make up the so called Northern Triangle, as well as Nicaragua and Costa Rica. This article will look at the political level by country and jointly address the problems created by the pandemic and the challenges and costs posed by the climate crisis. Based on the complex nature of the crisis the defended theses are threefold. The first is that the democracy of the prevailing political regimes has been eroded in the 21st century. In some cases, as a result of the collapse of the traditional party systems, in other cases due to a lack of public confidence, and in some cases due to the increase of power in the hands of presidents. The second thesis relates to unexpected natural phenomena, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters, for instance, hurricanes. These phenomena increased the demands on weakened institutions and highlighted the precariousness in which the majority of the population lives. The third thesis points out that in order to cope with the political and humanitarian crisis many of the region's citizens opted to migrate northwards. Central Americans' individual preference for emigration implies the dismissal of the possibility of seeking social improvements through collective commitments and struggles in their own country.

**Key words:** Central America, political crisis, climate crisis, authoritarianism, violence

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## Двухсотлетие независимости стран Центральной Америки в условиях кризиса: политическая неопределенность, экономические трудности и климатические проблемы

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**Аннотация.** Центральная Америка встречает двухсотлетие независимости государств региона в условиях триединого кризиса: политического кризиса, вызванного деградацией демократических институтов и процедур; экономического кризиса, связанного с пандемией COVID-19 и спровоцированным ею сокращением

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международной торговли и туризма; наконец, гуманитарного кризиса, вызванного пандемией и климатическими изменениями. Авторы фокусируются на том, как этот кризис ударил по государствам Центральной Америки — странам так называемого Северного треугольника, а также Никарагуа и Коста-Рике, которая в целом является некоторым исключением в регионе и выделяется относительным благополучием. Проводится анализ политических аспектов кризиса как на страновом, так и на региональном уровне. Выделены общие проблемы, возникшие в странах региона в результате воздействия пандемии и климатических изменений, и выдвинуто несколько объяснений сложившейся кризисной ситуации. Во-первых, на протяжении XXI в. в странах Центральной Америки отмечалась деградация демократических институтов и процедур, которая в ряде случаев была вызвана кризисом традиционных партийных систем либо дефицитом общественного доверия к сложившимся политическим системам, а иногда была следствием концентрации властных полномочий в руках президентов. Во-вторых, кризис связан с природными явлениями, например, пандемией и природными катастрофами, в частности ураганами. В результате воздействия этих явлений усиливается давление на ослабевшие политические институты и обнажаются тяжелые жизненные условия, в которых живет большинство населения региона. В-третьих, для того чтобы справиться с последствиями политического и гуманитарного кризиса, многие жители региона мигрируют на Север. Выбор жителей Центральной Америки в пользу эмиграции с некоторой уверенностью позволяет говорить о том, что они не рассчитывают на улучшение ситуаций путем коллективного действия в их собственных странах.

**Ключевые слова:** Центральная Америка, политический кризис, климатический кризис, авторитаризм, насилие

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## Introduction

Central America meets the bicentenary of its independence in a difficult period for the region. The emancipation celebrations in the Isthmus' republics have been overshadowed by a triple crisis. A political crisis determined by democratic regression, an economic crisis stemming from the COVID-19 crisis and the subsequent collapse of international trade and tourism, and a humanitarian crisis generated by the pandemic and climate change.

In this article we will focus on how these multiple crises have affected five of these republics: the three of the so called Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador), Nicaragua and Costa Rica. The choice of these five republics responds to the anniversary mentioned in this article's opening remarks: the republics celebrating Central American Independence in September 1821.

Most of the five republics that are the focus of this text, the four southern republics, share many of the same problems. Costa Rica, although also involved in many of the regional dynamics in which its northern neighbours are immersed, can position itself as a counterpoint.

In any case, beyond the singularities and particularities of each country, it is crucial to point out how the crises that occurred in the first quarter of the 21st century may be viewed as a continuation of the region's political, social, humanitarian, and climatic evolution. It is clear that there is a domestic component in the crisis that punishes each of the countries but it is also necessary to see that the challenges and dynamics of all reflect a regional dimension of the crisis.

To this end, the text is divided into four parts: the first examines political life, the second analyses the impact of the COVID-19 health crisis and climate change, the third highlights the human tide of the migration crisis to Mexico and the United States, and to Costa Rica in the case of Nicaraguans, and the last, as a synthesis, sets out the region's challenges in the near future.

## Political Uncertainty

On the political level, the most conflictive case is that of Nicaragua, where the institutions have been co-opted by the FSLN since Daniel Ortega's return to the presidency in 2007. This situation has led Nicaragua to evolve towards a

personalist political regime (Martí i Puig, 2019, p. 10).

President Ortega inaugurated his fourth presidential term in January 2022, after several reforms to the 1987 Constitution (Cuadra Lira, 2016, pp. 95—99). Before these elections, the country underwent a serious political crisis — that of April 2018 — due to social unrest that erupted among the youth and which was joined by a number of groups (Martí i Puig, 2019, pp. 11—14). The government responded with unprecedented violence. Since then, protest and dissent have been suppressed and the work of the opposition has been undermined by a battery of legislation orchestrated through laws on “cybercrime,” “foreign agents” and the “defense of rights, independence, sovereignty and self-determination” (Martí i Puig & Rodríguez Suárez, 2021, pp. 326—330). This legislative compendium has been the basis upon which the judicial encirclement of the opposition has been organized.

The direction taken by the Ortega regime put international institutions on alert, but the pressure was not enough to challenge the authoritarian rationale underpinning the elections (Martí i Puig, 2021, p. 7—11). This approach was cemented by a series of reforms: members of the Electoral Council were chosen from among government supporters, several opposition parties were stripped of their legal status, and their potential candidates were arrested or went into exile. The November 2021 general elections thus further consolidated the Ortega — Murillo partnership in power beyond the levels it already held. According to the official results, the FSLN increased all its quotas of power.<sup>1</sup> But these elections were rejected by the opposition and various international organizations due to a lack of guarantees and the violation of rights and freedoms.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the official

turnout rates were called into question, with several opposition groups pointing out that voter participation did not exceed 20% in any case, far from the 65% proclaimed by the Ortega regime, and that more than 80% of the electorate had abstained from voting.<sup>3</sup>

Against this background, in early 2022, the governments of the United States, the EU and Canada pushed for new sanctions against the Nicaraguan government,<sup>4</sup> which in turn has also threatened to leave the Organization of American States (OAS).<sup>5</sup>

However, the problems besetting Nicaragua are not unique to this country. Politics in Honduras has also been undergoing a decline since the coup d'état orchestrated against Mel Zelaya in 2009. After the coup against President Zelaya, Congress elected the liberal, Roberto Micheletti, to replace him, and months later the National Party candidate, Porfirio Lobo Sosa, won the elections (Sosa, 2011, pp. 21—42).

Subsequently, in the elections held at the end of 2013 and at the end of 2017, the National Party candidate won, but not without dispute (Rodríguez & González Tule, 2020). Until January 2022, the country's president was Juan Orlando Hernández, who was re-elected after a first term in office. During his two presidential terms, the country experienced strong political polarization, cases of corruption due to links

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América. 30.11.2021. URL: <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/es-possible-repetir-elecciones-nicaragua-como-propone-luis-almagro-/6334539.html> (accessed: 03.01.2022). (Voice of America is recognized as foreign agent media in Russia. — *Editor's note*).

<sup>3</sup> Noveno informe: Radiografía de la farsa electoral // Urnas Abiertas. 22.11.2021. URL: <https://urnasabiertas.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Informe-9-Urnas-Abiertas-7N.pdf> (accessed: 03.01.2022.).

<sup>4</sup> Canadá estudia nuevas sanciones al régimen de Ortega tras las de UE y EEUU // EFE. 10.01.2022. URL: <https://www.efe.com/efe/america/politica/canada-estudia-nuevas-sanciones-al-regimen-de-ortega-tras-las-ue-y-ee-uu/20000035-4714505> (accessed: 12.01.2022).

<sup>5</sup> Salinas Maldonado C. Ortega anuncia la salida de la OEA tras el rechazo a las elecciones de Nicaragua // El País. 20.11. 2021. URL: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-11-19/ortega-anuncia-la-salida-de-la-oea-tras-el-rechazo-a-las-elecciones-de-nicaragua.html> (accessed: 06.01.2022).

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<sup>1</sup> Elecciones Generales 2021 // Consejo Supremo Electoral de Nicaragua. 07.11.2021. URL: <https://www.cse.gob.ni/es/elecciones/elecciones-generales-2021> (accessed: 16.01.2022).

<sup>2</sup> Hernández D. ¿Es posible repetir las elecciones en Nicaragua como propone Luis Almagro? // La Voz de

between drug trafficking and the political class, and the complex work carried out by the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras, which operated between January 2016 and December 2019.<sup>6</sup>

In 2021, after the internal party elections in March, the presidential, legislative, local, and Central American Parliamentary elections were held in November. The LIBRE Party secured the presidency with Mel Zelaya's wife, Xiomara Castro. For the first time in Honduran history, a woman became head of the Executive Branch and Head of State. The two-party system that had dominated the country for decades was also overturned. In the National Congress, the legislative chamber, the LIBRE party gained 50 of the 128 deputies and the two long-standing traditional parties, the National Party and the Liberal Party, won only 66 deputies.<sup>7</sup> The new president won the presidential ticket over her opponents with 51.12% of the votes.<sup>8</sup> The only case when the LIBRE party was not a clear winner was at the municipal level since the traditional parties were still very well established in the national territory, despite multiple scandals affecting them.<sup>9</sup> The change in government and presidency may restore some calm, but conflict, violence and polarization look set to continue.

As for the situation in El Salvador, tensions between the government and the opposition are

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<sup>6</sup> Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras: OAS General Secretariat Communiqué on the termination of the MACCIH // Organización de los Estados Americanos. January 17, 2020. URL: <https://www.oas.org/es/sap/dsdme/maccih/new/comunicacion.asp> (accessed: 12.01.2022).

<sup>7</sup> Domínguez E. Resultados diputados: Así queda integrado Congreso 2022—2026 // El Heraldo. 29.11.2022. URL: <https://www.elheraldo.hn/interactivos/1504656-529/resultados-congreso-nacional-diputados-declaratoria-cne> (accessed: 29.12.2021).

<sup>8</sup> Elecciones Generales de Honduras. Escrutinio General. Fórmula presidencial // Consejo Nacional de Honduras. 28.11.2022. URL: <https://resultadosgenerales2021.cne.hn/#resultados/PRE/HN> (accessed: 19.01.2022).

<sup>9</sup> García J. El triste panorama electoral de Honduras // El País. 14.03.2021. URL: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-03-16/el-triste-panorama-electoral-de-honduras.html> (accessed: 11.12.2021).

also the norm. No presidential elections were held in this country in 2021, but legislative and municipal elections did take place. In these, the current president, Nayib Bukele, presented a party made up of family members and close associates, called *Nuevas Ideas* or *New Ideas* in English (Cedillo Delgado, 2022, pp. 45—79). A party just over two years old, which managed to clearly impose itself on the parties that had shaped institutional life since the 1992 Peace Accords: the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) and the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN).

El Salvador's legislative and municipal elections, held in February 2021, yielded a result that left Bukele's party in absolute control of the Legislative Assembly, with 56 out of the 84 seats.<sup>10</sup> These elections also determined the members of the Municipal Councils. At the municipal level, the presence of the president's party was also overwhelming in 152 of the 262 councils at stake.<sup>11</sup> As in Honduras, these elections overturned the traditional two-party system.

Since Bukele came to power in June 2019, his presidential term has been dominated by a personalistic style linked to the use of social media (Grassetti, 2020, pp. 205—224). This is why it has been labelled millennial with traditional religious and social values. One notable measure has been the adoption of bitcoin as legal tender, making El Salvador the first nation in the world to introduce this initiative.<sup>12</sup>

Bukele's alliance with the armed forces and his willingness to fight the two political parties that have given stability to Salvadoran democracy over the last thirty years suggest that

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<sup>10</sup> Nuevas Ideas, partido de Bukele, logra 56 diputaciones y mayoría de alcaldías // EFE. 20.03.2021. URL: <https://www.efe.com/efe/espana/mundo/nuevas-ideas-partido-de-bukele-logra-56-diputaciones-y-mayoria-alcaldias/10001-4492557> (accessed: 23.01.2022).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Vázquez Rojo J. La distopía de bitcoin en El Salvador, un país camino del default // El Salto. 03.02.2022. URL: <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/analisis/bukele-distopia-bitcoin-el-salvador-pais-camino-default> (accessed: 03.02.2022).

an authoritarian involution of the regime is on the horizon. The Salvadoran president's statements defining the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords as a "farce" are a step in this direction.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, during the last months of 2020, political violence reappeared in the country following dozens of "mysterious" killings of FMLN members.<sup>14</sup> Added to this were three incidents: the first was the political crisis of February 2020, when the president accompanied by the army entered the Legislative Assembly in an attempt to impose his criteria. The second occurred on 1 May 2021 when the decision was taken to dismiss the judges of the Constitutional Chamber and the attorney general.<sup>15</sup> And the third was the drive for measures against organized "Mara" crime in March 2022 that entailed the imprisonment of minors, restrictions on freedom of expression and the declaration of a state of emergency.<sup>16</sup>

No elections were held in Guatemala in 2021. However, at the political level, the country is also undergoing a process of

<sup>13</sup> Luz Nóchez M. Académicos a Bukele: le corresponde honrar la memoria de los Acuerdos de Paz // *El Faro*. 10.01.2021. URL: [https://elfaro.net/es/202101/el\\_salvador/25125/Acad%C3%A9micos-a-Bukele-%E2%80%9Cle-corresponde-honrar-la-memoria%E2%80%9D-de-los-Acuerdos-de-Paz.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202101/el_salvador/25125/Acad%C3%A9micos-a-Bukele-%E2%80%9Cle-corresponde-honrar-la-memoria%E2%80%9D-de-los-Acuerdos-de-Paz.htm) (accessed: 03.02.2022).

<sup>14</sup> Rauda N., Cáceres G., Reyes D. Cronología del asesinato de dos efemelenistas // *El Faro*. 03.02.2021. URL: [https://elfaro.net/es/202102/el\\_salvador/25205/Cronolog%C3%ADa-del-asesinato-de-dos-efemelenistas.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202102/el_salvador/25205/Cronolog%C3%ADa-del-asesinato-de-dos-efemelenistas.htm) (accessed: 05.12.2021).

<sup>15</sup> See: Guzmán V., Rauda N., Alvarado J. Bukele mete al Ejército en la Asamblea y amenaza con disolverla dentro de una semana // *El Faro*. 10.02.2020. URL: [https://elfaro.net/es/202002/el\\_salvador/24008/Bukele-mete-al-Ej%C3%A9rcito-en-la-Asamblea-y-amenaza-con-disolverla-dentro-de-una-semana.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202002/el_salvador/24008/Bukele-mete-al-Ej%C3%A9rcito-en-la-Asamblea-y-amenaza-con-disolverla-dentro-de-una-semana.htm) (accessed: 05.12.2021); Alvarado J., Lazo R., Arauz S. Bukele usa a la nueva Asamblea para tomar control de la Sala de lo Constitucional y la Fiscalía // *El Faro*. 02.05.2021. URL: [https://elfaro.net/es/202105/el\\_salvador/25451/Bukele-usa-a-la-nueva-Asamblea-para-tomar-control-de-la-Sala-de-lo-Constitucional-y-la-Fiscal%C3%ADa.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202105/el_salvador/25451/Bukele-usa-a-la-nueva-Asamblea-para-tomar-control-de-la-Sala-de-lo-Constitucional-y-la-Fiscal%C3%ADa.htm) (accessed: 05.12.2021).

<sup>16</sup> Bukele contra las maras: 3 polémicas medidas aprobadas por El Salvador para combatir a las pandillas // *BBC News*. 06.04.2022. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-60989174> (accessed: 07.04.2022).

permanent crisis. In Guatemala, the "main" issue on the political agenda is corruption, especially since the expulsion in 2019 of the International Commission against Impunity (CICIG), which was interpreted as a "Corrupt Pact."<sup>17</sup>

This "pact" entailed the co-optation by the political class of the legislative branch, the judiciary and the Constitutional Court, which meant a step backwards in terms of transparency, justice and the fight against organised crime. Against this backdrop, the current president, Alejandro Giammattei, has been questioned both for the corruption of his administration and for his mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic (Guerrero Garnica, 2020, pp. 183—199).

An example of this was the wave of protests at the end of 2020 following the approval of a bill in the National Congress that cut education and health care spending. At the same time, an increase in spending on allowances and services for legislators and an increase in infrastructure spending through concessions to the private sector were proposed.<sup>18</sup>

The case of Costa Rica, as usual, is a relative exception. However, political instability and uncertainty have also become entrenched in the nation. Thus, the campaign for the 2022 presidential and legislative elections was dominated by issues of corruption, nepotism, economic crisis and personal attacks among candidates.

Fabrizio Alvarado, defeated in the second round by ex-president Carlos Alvarado in the previous elections,<sup>19</sup> returned as a presidential

<sup>17</sup> Sáenz de Tejada R. Guatemala contra el pacto de corruptos // *Nueva Sociedad*. Agosto 2021. URL: <https://nuso.org/articulo/paro-corrupcion-derecha-giammattei-fiscal-investigacion/> (accessed: 23.01.2022).

<sup>18</sup> Sáenz de Tejada R. Guatemala: ¿después del fuego, qué? // *Nueva Sociedad*. Diciembre 2020. URL: <https://nuso.org/articulo/guatemala-despues-del-fuego-que/> (accessed: 23.01.2022).

<sup>19</sup> Murillo Á. Fabrizio Alvarado: un candidato caído del Cielo // *El País*. 05.02.2018. URL: [https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/02/05/america/1517865061\\_521252.html](https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/02/05/america/1517865061_521252.html) (accessed: 10.12.2021).

candidate, and did so with a new party of a markedly evangelical character — Nueva República or New Republic (Pignataro & Treminio, 2019, pp. 239—263). The Evangelicals tried to capitalize on the fragmentation of the vote in a country that since the beginning of the 21st century has left behind the two-party system that had provided political stability for half a century.<sup>20</sup> However, Carlos Alvarado's presidential ticket failed to make it to the second round. The two candidates were former President, José María Figueres, with the National Liberation Party (PLN), and Rodrigo Chaves, former finance minister and former World Bank official, through the young Social Democratic Progress (PSD) party. The latter was the winner after receiving 52.84% of the vote cast,<sup>21</sup> and will have to govern with a highly fragmented Legislative Assembly, with the support of only 9 out of its 57 seats (Treminio Sánchez, 2022), and without a party structure.

### COVID-19 Pandemic and Climate Issues

Not only has the region been shaken politically in recent years. Central America has also been beset by other threats that have led to two major crises: a health crisis and a climate crisis. In terms of the health crisis, Costa Rica has been the only country that has pursued a coherent policy. The swift and coordinated actions of President Carlos Alvarado's government with the Legislative Assembly managed to contain the first wave of the pandemic (Cascante Matamoros & Aguirre Raftacco, 2020). On the other hand, the existence of one of the most robust public health systems in the subcontinent also helped the country's management of the pandemic to outshine that of its neighbors. Yet, despite this,

<sup>20</sup> Kourliandsky J.-J. Democracia, evangelismo y reacción // Nueva Sociedad. No. 280. Marzo-Abril 2019. URL: <https://nuso.org/articulo/democracia-evangelismo-y-reaccion-conservadora/> (accessed: 23.01.2022).

<sup>21</sup> Resultados Provisionales 3 de abril de 2022 // Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones República de Costa Rica. 04.04.2022. URL: [https://www.tse.go.cr/svr2022\\_II/](https://www.tse.go.cr/svr2022_II/) (accessed: 11.04.2022).

the economic effects of the pandemic were more controversial. As in other countries, the pandemic was not confined to the issue of health, but also had other consequences, such as unemployment, the closure of businesses and companies, as well as bringing tourism to a standstill. In a country like Costa Rica, which relies on tourism as its main source of foreign exchange and which employs a significant percentage of its population, the impact of the pandemic has had profound economic effects.

The measures to address COVID-19 promoted by the governments of the four northern countries in the region, regardless of the political persuasion of their presidents, were ineffective. Structural factors that are difficult to solve in the short term such as high levels of labor informality, poverty, precarious housing and, above all, the state's weak infrastructural capacity, all worked against them.

Thus, for the citizens of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua, the coronavirus pandemic has added to the risks to which the population is already subjected in their daily lives (Prunier & Salazar, 2021). On the health crisis, however, the Nicaraguan case deserves an aside. The handling of the pandemic in Nicaragua was, to say the least, odd: at the beginning, government authorities chose to deny the fact that COVID-19 was lethal and argued that the infection and the virus itself were bourgeois in nature.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the Ortega — Murillo presidential duo promoted popular rallies in support of the regime with the slogan “Love in the times of COVID-19” (Jarquín, 2020, p. 234). Later, when the health crisis could not be denied, the Nicaraguan government tried to justify its position by claiming that Nicaragua had adopted the “Swedish model” in its fight against the

<sup>22</sup> Mendoza A. ¿Se puede comparar el régimen Ortega Murillo con el modelo sueco? // Confidencial. 29.05.2020. URL: <https://www.confidencial.com.ni/opinion/se-puede-comparar-el-regimen-ortega-murillo-con-el-modelo-sueco/> (accessed: 11.12.2021).

pandemic.<sup>23</sup> A model that, according to the authorities, was the one best suited to the situation in the country, since in Nicaragua neither the economy nor its people could withstand an indefinite labor shutdown.

The incidence of COVID-19 in Central America, almost two years after the start of the pandemic, shows the following cumulative data on detected cases: in Costa Rica, 701,471, in Guatemala 694,513, in Honduras 391,874, in El Salvador 135,109 and in Nicaragua 17,709. These data is relevant as of February 1, 2022 and come from the Johns Hopkins University of Medicine Coronavirus Resource Center.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, if we cross-reference the recorded infections with the number of deaths, using the same source and date, we obtain the following figures: Costa Rica — 7,593, Guatemala — 16,401 deaths, Honduras — 10,512, El Salvador — 3,914 and Nicaragua — 220.<sup>25</sup>

The above figures already provide some significant data and should be assessed and handled with a certain caution, mainly due to the existence of a clear under-reporting in some countries, especially with regard to Nicaragua, and to the concordance that can be established between tests carried out and confirmed cases. In any event, it will be very difficult for countries in the region, especially the four northern ones, to combat the pandemic until the vaccines arrive through the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access Facility (COVAX). This is a public-private initiative that aims to promote equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines around the world but is far from

achieving its intended goals (Eccleston-Turner & Upton, 2021, p. 445).

Besides the pandemic, the other major crisis experienced has been the climate crisis. In 2020, the threat of climate change eventually materialized in the form of the most active hurricane season in the region's history with a total of 30 storms, 13 of which were classified as hurricanes.<sup>26</sup> The most intense storms, Iota and Eta, occurred at the end of the year. The region had to deal simultaneously with the health crisis caused by the pandemic and the aftermath of the hurricanes. Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua were the hardest hit, although El Salvador and Costa Rica were also affected. The impact on crops and infrastructure was also devastating. All sources agree that the 2020 climate disaster was greater than that experienced in 1998 following Hurricane Mitch. However, this time the reaction of the international community was virtually non-existent. While Mitch sparked a huge wave of international solidarity worldwide, the ravages of Eta and Iota went unnoticed on a planet caught up in the COVID-19 pandemic. According to data provided by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in a report dated late December 2020, 4.5 million people were affected by Eta and Iota in Honduras, 1.8 million in Nicaragua, and 1.8 million in Guatemala.<sup>27</sup>

The devastation caused by Hurricanes Eta and Iota had multiplier effects due to their proximity in time. In early November 2020, the first hurricane hit the region and, two weeks later, the second, more intense hurricane arrived without time to recover. According to UNICEF, the two hurricanes affected more than

<sup>23</sup> La Falta de Información, Prevención y Atención Médica Sobre la Crisis de COVID-19 en Nicaragua: Evaluation Report // Observatorio Ciudadano COVID-19 Nicaragua y Red Internacional de Derechos Humanos (RIDH). Managua: Observatorio Ciudadano COVID-19 Nicaragua. 30.09. 2020. URL: <https://ridh.org/la-falta-de-informacion-prevencion-y-atencion-medica-sobre-la-crisis-de-covid-19-en-nicaragua/> (accessed: 20.01.2022).

<sup>24</sup> Coronavirus Resource Centre // Johns Hopkins University & Medicine. February 5, 2022. URL: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> (accessed: 05.02.2022).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Toro Nader M. Así fue la desastrosa temporada de huracanes 2020 // CNN en español. 01.06.2021. URL: <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2021/06/01/asi-fue-la-desastrosa-temporada-de-huracanes-2020-huracan-2021-orix/> (accessed: 18.12.2021).

<sup>27</sup> Centro América: Tormentas Tropical Eta & Huracán Iota: Seis semanas después // Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). December 22, 2020. URL: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2020-12-23%20W%20After%20%28SPA%29.pdf> (accessed: 02.01.2022).

9.3 million people in seven countries, 3.5 million of them children.<sup>28</sup> The aid from the administrations was scarce, delayed in time and included an element of promise that failed to become a reality.

### The Border as an Added Risk

The combination of the above, the political, health and climate crises, has only increased the poverty, insecurity and vulnerability already existing in the region. This backdrop of permanent and ongoing crisis can help us to understand the migratory pressure in the region. This is forced migration, with the population of the Northern Triangle countries heading towards Mexico and the United States, and Nicaragua's population heading south towards Costa Rica, and also northwards. In terms of northbound migration, the closure of borders due to the pandemic and the different agreements with the United States have made the passage through Guatemala and Mexico much more complicated for migrants, thus modifying their repertoires of action.

For most people, the way to emigrate is still on an individual basis and oriented towards the United States. In recent years, however, the focus has been on the so-called "migrant caravans" (Torre Cantalapiedra & Mariscal Nava, 2020). There are many objective reasons that justify the existence of massive US-bound migrant caravans. However, the contexts in which they usually take place are striking. Among them, it is necessary to highlight those that have to do with US domestic politics: the start of the US election campaign, the day that Trump's second impeachment procedure began, and the inauguration of Biden's presidential office. However, despite pursuing these windows of opportunity, the chances of success are not guaranteed, as witnessed by the end that many of them have met since 2018. The repression of

migrants organized in caravans comes from a variety of sources in transit countries and is not just limited to repressive state apparatuses. Such was the case of the migrant caravan organized from Honduras in January 2020. This caravan did not reach the southern border of Mexico due to the repression exercised by the Guatemalan government and society and the military deployment carried out by the Mexican government along the banks of the Suchiate River near Tapachula. Border points between Guatemala and Mexico have become scenes of government violence against migrants stranded at the border.<sup>29</sup>

This climate of permanent cross-border tension is still awaiting promised and undelivered reforms. The arrival of Joe Biden in the White House seemed to indicate that the situation could change but hopes have been dashed (Villafuerte Solís & García Aguilar, 2020, pp. 103—127). While it is true that the new US administration has made gestures, including the rescission in February 2021 of the border emergency declaration between Mexico and the United States decreed in 2019, and the freezing of funds earmarked for the construction of the "wall," it is no less true that immigration reform remains blocked in Congress. This reform, which was intended to create a pathway to citizenship for the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States,<sup>30</sup> leaves the lives of many Central Americans in a vulnerable situation even when they are settled in the United States.

In other respects, some of the regulations that bear the imprint of former President Donald Trump are still in force. These include the controversial Title 42, an emergency order that

<sup>28</sup> El impacto de los huracanes Eta e Iota // UNICEF. 01.03.2021. URL: <https://www.unicef.org/lac/historias/impacto-de-los-huracanes-eta-e-iota> (accessed: 12.11.2021).

<sup>29</sup> Tema migratorio // Instituto Nacional de Migración. 23.10.2021. URL: <https://www.inm.gob.mx/gobmx/word/index.php/tema-migratorio-241021/> (accessed: 18.01.2022).

<sup>30</sup> Beauregard L.P. La política migratoria de Biden sigue a la espera del gran giro prometido // El País. 09.11.2021. URL: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-11-09/la-politica-migratoria-de-biden-sigue-a-la-espera-del-gran-giro-prometido.html> (accessed: 16.12.2021).

allows the government to turn away most people arriving at the border and that *de facto* keeps the border closed to asylum seekers and migrants.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, some measures that were suspended after Joe Biden came to power have gradually been restored. One example of these repeals that have ended up being reinstated is the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPPs). Through this regulation, asylum seekers are kept on the Mexican side of the border while awaiting US immigration court dates.<sup>32</sup>

To all this should be added an issue that clearly attests to the continuity in recent years of US admission policies: the number of refugees. During Trump's four years in office, the number of refugees fell drastically. Prior to the Trump Administration, the annual ceiling for refugee admissions was set at 85,000; Trump reduced it to 15,000.<sup>33</sup> Biden has maintained this limit and subsequently, after some lobbying, has raised the ceiling to 62,000.<sup>34</sup> However, the actual figures for the fiscal year 2021 are revealing: the number of refugees admitted in 2021 stood at just 11,411.<sup>35</sup>

It is widely believed that the Biden Administration has continued with most of the agenda put in place by his predecessor. Election promises and gestures in his first months in the White House have remained merely a declaration of intent. However, it has also been reported that immigration policy is being deployed in a more humane way, such as

limiting the detention of pregnant women or suspending immigration raids at workplaces, common practices during the Trump administration.

### Past, Present and Future

The foregoing does not give enough cause for optimism. The past weighs like a stone on the present and the present projects itself onto an unpromising future. Thus, the worst aspect of the situation in the region is the lack of short- and medium-term prospects. None of the current governments have proposals that ensure that the multiple needs of the population will be met. Rather the opposite seems to be the case: democratic institutions are clearly weak, and the leaders' agendas fail to reflect solid public policies and economic plans that could redress the dire conditions in which most of the countries in the region live. In many cases there is a lack of will, in others a surplus of voluntarism — and in all cases, resources, especially financial resources, are lacking.

For the rest, the economic and political elites seem more concerned with defending their own interests than those of a population that has been too severely punished so far this century. Politics is being discredited resulting in disenchantment, given that the pact or coexistence with interest groups of uncertain integrity is there for all to see. Internally, in each country, the weakness of the party system and the inconsistency of new party formations can be seen. These parties tend to fall apart in the polls when the leader who gave them life disappears from the political frontline. On the other hand, the polarization and ideological baggage of the candidates means that each new presidential inauguration is fraught with tension and in many cases violence (Rodríguez Ariano, 2020, pp. 76—78).

In this context, two centuries after the independence of the Central American republics, the region is mired in a threefold crisis that might find some relief in region-wide

<sup>31</sup> Arredondo A. Mayorkas: El Título 42 se mantendrá mientras haya razones sanitarias // *La Voz de América*. 26.05.2021. URL: [https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/inmigracion\\_mayorkas-titulo-42-mantendera-hasta-no-haya-necesidad-salud-publica/6074156.html](https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/inmigracion_mayorkas-titulo-42-mantendera-hasta-no-haya-necesidad-salud-publica/6074156.html) (accessed: 16.12.2021).

<sup>32</sup> Barros A. ¿Qué ha ocurrido con los cambios migratorios impulsados por el presidente Biden a comienzos de 2021? // *La Voz de América*. 28.12.2021. URL: <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/cambios-politica-migratoria-joe-biden-2021/6371194.html> (accessed: 16.12.2021).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

unity, in joint action. As a global actor, Central American Integration System (SICA) seems to be the best tool for building a common project that is capable of overcoming, or at least facing, the great challenges that lie ahead for the region. This may be one of the keys to the future: SICA's success, especially in the economic sphere, where the flow of trade within the common space already accounts for a quarter of its members' trade, but also in

international fora, where its members are capable of articulating a single discourse when they propose to do so. This show of institutional health reflects the strength of one of the continent's most crisis-resistant integration systems. It is from here, from unity in a solid space of integration, that a system of social protection can be generated that guarantees the right to life and security and preserves civil and political liberties.

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