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## POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN TIMES OF CRISIS

### *LA GRIETA* AND ITS IMPACT ON ARGENTINE DEMOCRACY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC<sup>1</sup>

#### ABSTRACT

The article discusses how the Argentine socio-political polarization known as *la grieta* has influenced the country's politics and impacted democratic standards during the Covid-19 pandemic. It uses qualitative data to present the nature of Argentine socio-political polarization, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Argentina and new areas of polarization that emerged in the country under the pandemic situation, mainly the quarantine measures and vaccination campaign. The paper also takes a look on potential challenges for the Argentine democracy in a post-pandemic reality.

**Keywords:** Argentina, Covid-19, democracy, polarization, *la grieta*

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## INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt that political pluralism and ideological diversity are fundamental elements of contemporary liberal democracies. The existence of differing views between particular social groups is not a negative phenomenon and does not necessarily lead to social conflicts. Yet, a problem emerges when those differences deepen to the extent that makes it impossible to conduct an effective debate and solve problems that affect society. Political polarization may be a threat when major forces fail to see politics as a service toward public good and begin to treat it as a struggle between the good and the evil. Strong polarization may also be dangerous to democratic systems when it leads to reduction of democracy to electoral procedure and a struggle for power.

Such deep political divisions are now seen in various countries around the world, which creates a global challenge for democratic order. Argentina, the second largest state in Latin America, may serve as a good example to illustrate this phenomenon. The increasing socio-political polarization observed in today's Argentina is commonly referred to as *la grieta* (the crack). This term, coined in 2013 by the Argentinian journalist Jorge Lanata, boils down to the conflict between supporters and opponents of the so-called Kirchnerism – the currently dominant Peronist political movement, identified with the presidencies of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015). Each group represents about a third of society, with the rest not supporting either side. Although conceptually referring to the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *la grieta* has a very long tradition in Argentina. Strong political divisions began to appear as early as the period of the independence struggle, continuously leaving their mark on Argentine society and the state of democracy in Argentina.

Strong polarization that defines the contemporary Argentine politics has gained an enormous importance in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. The outbreak and rapid spread of the virus has exposed several structural imperfections and weak points within countries around the world, mainly those that were already suffering from democratic fragility. As stated by Michael J. Abramowitz, president of Freedom House, *what began as a worldwide health crisis has become part of the global crisis for democracy*.<sup>2</sup> According to Freedom House's report, since the beginning of the pandemic, the condition of democracy and human rights standards has worsened in 80 countries, including 12 in Latin America.<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly, the Covid-19 crisis has aggravated numerous problems that Latin American countries have been struggling with for most of its democratic history: social and economic inequalities, inefficient institutions, corruption, lack of universal

<sup>2</sup> Freedom House, *New Report. Democracy under Lockdown – The Impact of Covid-19 on Global Freedom*, 2 October 2020, at <https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-democracy-under-lockdown-impact-covid-19-global-freedom> – 27 December 2021.

<sup>3</sup> S. Repucci, A. Slipowitz, *Democracy under Lockdown. The Impact of Covid-19 on the Global Struggle for Freedom*, Washington 2020, p. 2, at [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/COVID-19\\_Special\\_Report\\_Final\\_.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/COVID-19_Special_Report_Final_.pdf) – 27 December 2021.

access to basic services, personalist style of government, leaders that only represent interest of narrow groups. As Freedom House states in its report, Argentina has been one of the Latin American countries (alongside Paraguay, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Guyana) where democracy has grown weaker during the pandemic. This assessment has been confirmed by the Democracy Index 2020, where Argentina suffered a regional downgrade and remains a flawed democracy.<sup>4</sup> Even though support for democracy in Argentina stays high compared to other Latin American countries, it continues to fall (75% in 1997, 63% in 2007 and 55% in 2020). The Argentine society is also very far from being delighted with the system. Levels of trust in government and public institutions are low, and only 5% of the people believe that the distribution of wealth in the country is fair.<sup>5</sup> In this context, given the low trust in efficiency of democratic institutions and a persistent polarization of the society, the Covid-19 pandemic became a test for the Argentine political elites constantly speaking of the need to put an end to *la grieta*. Indeed, it is not possible to take fully effective measures against a serious crisis (as well as its socio-economic consequences) under deepened polarization and internal struggles between political factions.

The main goal of this paper is to discuss how Argentine socio-political polarization known as *la grieta* has influenced the country's politics and impacted democratic standards during the Covid-19 pandemic. To what extent were the political elites, both representing the Kirchnerist and anti-Kirchnerist movements, willing to cooperate in order to provide safety to citizens? Has the pandemic indicated new levels of socio-political polarization? The paper uses qualitative data in the form of journal articles, monographs, documents, research papers and media articles, analyzed with qualitative research methods. It is structured as follows: in the first section, the phenomenon of *la grieta* and the nature of Argentine socio-political polarization will be presented. The second section will discuss the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Argentina and the measures taken by the authorities to prevent the spread of the coronavirus and ensure the safety of citizens. The third section will elaborate on the areas of polarization in Argentina under the pandemic situation and the impact of *la grieta* on Argentine institutions. The conclusions will focus on the challenges and threats to the Argentine democracy.

## 1. POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY ARGENTINA

The term *la grieta* has gained immense popularity in Argentine public debate of the last decade. It was due to Jorge Lanata's statement during the Martin Fierro Awards gala in 2013, in which he claimed that Argentine society is suffering from broad divisions that separate families, friends and partners on political, social, and even cultural level. La

<sup>4</sup> *Democracy Index 2020: In Sickness and in Health?*, The Economist Intelligence Unit, London 2021, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> *Informe 2021. Adiós a Macondo*, Latinbarómetro, Santiago de Chile 2021, p. 44.

*grieta is the worst that is happening to us*, Lanata said.<sup>6</sup> From this moment, the issue of socio-political polarization in Argentina has become one of the central elements of media coverage as well as discussions between politicians. In this context, it is important to stress that Argentine political history has indeed been marked by conflicts and Manichaean divisions in which ultimately one side had to beat the other with little room for compromise. Such was the case of the dispute between Mariano Moreno and Cornelio Saavedra during the May Revolution, as well as later disputes: between federalists and unitarians on the organization of the independent state, liberals and protectionists on the Argentine trade policy, conservatives and radicals on political emancipation of broader segments of society.<sup>7</sup> The current conflict between followers and opponents of the Kirchners is rooted in ongoing differences between Peronists and anti-Peronists that date back to Juan Domingo Perón's rise to power in 1945. Kirchnerism has clearly dominated the Peronist movement in the post-2001 crisis Argentina, though Néstor's original political line was rather consolidation-oriented and did not foreshadow immense animosities or exceptional levels of polarization. According to both researchers and the media, the contemporary crack among Argentinians emerged during the presidency of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.<sup>8</sup> Undoubtedly, her administration was using confrontational rhetoric from the very beginning of its mandate, and the escalation occurred just a year after she took office.<sup>9</sup> The 2008 conflict with the rural sector when the agricultural producers opposed a governmental decision to raise export taxes was the biggest political crisis since the 2001/2002 economic collapse. Kirchner's intransigence towards farmers strongly divided the nation and caused a rupture between the government and major media conglomerates, especially Grupo Clarín and La Nación. It is salient to note that in comparison to other Latin American countries, mass media in Argentina play an enormous role in shaping political attitudes and defining the course of public debates.<sup>10</sup> It was the media that promoted the term *la grieta* and started to attach it to every political disagreement.

Considering the high level of mediatization of socio-political polarization in contemporary Argentina, coming up with a formal definition of the term *la grieta* is a difficult task. Surely, it is analytically correct to talk about polarized social groups that differ in terms of beliefs (conservatives vs. liberals and leftists), socioeconomic status (those

<sup>6</sup> *Programa periodístico en TV: Periodismo para todos – Martín Fierro 2013*, YouTube, 7 August 2013, at <https://youtu.be/fCwNwipAdoc?t=136> – 27 December 2021.

<sup>7</sup> D. Pogliaga, "La Grieta como Negación de la Política," *Bordes. Revista de Política, Derecho y Sociedad*, 18 June 2017, at <http://revistabordes.com.ar/la-grieta-como-negacion-de-la-politica/> – 27 December 2021.

<sup>8</sup> A. Grimson, *¿Qué es el peronismo? De Perón a los Kirchner, el movimiento que no deja de conmover la política argentina*, Buenos Aires 2019, p. 367; V. Smink, "Qué ganó y qué perdió Argentina durante el kirchnerismo," BBC Mundo, 25 October 2015, at [https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/10/151022\\_elecciones\\_argentina\\_kirchnerismo\\_vs](https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/10/151022_elecciones_argentina_kirchnerismo_vs) – 27 December 2021.

<sup>9</sup> M. Artese, J. Castro Rubel, H. Tapia, "Explorando «la grieta». Representaciones de las divisiones y la conflictividad social en miembros de la pequeña burguesía urbana," *Estudios Sociales*, vol. 56, no. 1 (2019), p. 150.

<sup>10</sup> *Informe 2021. Adiós a Macondo...*, p. 53.

who benefit from foreign exchange and participate in international production chains vs. those working in industrial sectors of low global competitiveness) or opportunities based on the place of residence (big cities vs. province). Strong socio-political polarization in Argentina undeniably builds on those differences, though not solely on them. The political factor is a key element, too.

In the case of Argentina, *la grieta* refers to divisions that result from political governance that is geared toward disunity. Interestingly, the two sides of Argentine political debate agree that it is possible to run the country without reinforcing those divisions; after all, both Kirchnerists and anti-Kirchnerists call for an end to *la grieta*. Such promise was also made by the center-right politician Mauricio Macri, who took office as president of Argentina in 2015. His presidency was meant to be all about restoring the economy, rebuilding international trust and improving living conditions for citizens.<sup>11</sup> In practice, the program he launched amounted to a reversal of most of the solutions maintained in Argentina during the Kirchners era. Yet, growing criticism of Argentina's economic performance under Macri resulted in an intensification of attacks against Kirchnerism by him and his allies. Macri was speaking of a 'heavy legacy' and accused the ex-president of leaving the country 'broken' and 'empty.'<sup>12</sup> Such rhetoric was aimed at reinforcing divisions and drawing a clear line between 'us' and 'them,' which served to deepen the already evident polarization Macri promised to fight.

Macri did not manage to gain reelection. In 2019 presidential election, he lost to Alberto Fernández, a Peronist candidate perceived as moderate and willing to compromise. By having Cristina Kirchner as a running mate, but also keeping her in his shadow during the campaign, Fernández managed to attract both Kirchnerists and also those dissatisfied with Macri's policies. However, the narrow difference between the two candidates (Fernández received 48% of votes and Macri 40%) indicated that the Argentine society was still very strongly polarized.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. COVID-19 IN ARGENTINA

When taking office, Alberto Fernández promised to pursue a different, more moderate line in order to end with *la grieta*. *Betting on the fracture and the crack [la grieta] means betting that those wounds will continue to bleed. Acting in this way would be the same as pushing ourselves into the abyss*, he stated during his inaugural speech.<sup>14</sup> The new

<sup>11</sup> M.V. Murillo, S. Levitsky, "Economic Shocks and Partisan Realignment in Argentina," in N. Lupu, V. Oliveros, L. Schiumerini (eds), *Campaigns and Voters in Developing Democracies: Argentina in Comparative Perspective*, Ann Arbor 2019, p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> A. Grimson, *¿Qué es el peronismo?...*, pp. 406-407.

<sup>13</sup> M. Sendra, "Elecciones 2019 en Argentina. ¿Hacia un bipartidismo de coaliciones entre peronismo y anti-peronismo?," in M. Alcántara Sáez (ed.), *América Latina vota (2017-2019)*, Madrid 2020, p. 57.

<sup>14</sup> *Palabras del presidente Alberto Fernández en su acto de asunción ante la Asamblea Legislativa*, 10 December 2019, at <https://www.casarosada.gob.ar/informacion/discursos/46596-palabras-del-presidente-alberto-fernandez-en-su-acto-de-asuncion-ante-la-asamblea-legislativa> – 27 December 2021.

administration was supposed to focus on improving the country's economic situation, tackling the social impact of the crisis (Argentina was in recession, with high inflation, unemployment, and poverty rates) and renegotiating Argentina's debt with international financial institutions. However, unexpectedly for everyone globally, those priorities had to be redefined. On 3 March 2020, the first case of novel Covid-19 coronavirus infection was confirmed in Argentina. Less than a week later Argentina was the first Latin American country with a Covid-caused death. To limit the spread of the disease and prevent the health system from collapsing, measures were taken on the national level. On 19 March 2020, the president announced a Preventive and Mandatory Social Isolation (*Aislamiento Social Preventivo y Obligatorio*, ASPO), which meant a very strict lockdown.<sup>15</sup> The isolation was to be maintained at least until the end of March, but due to the rapid spread of the virus, restrictions were repeatedly extended. As a result, the ASPO lasted several months, depending on the severity of the pandemic situation in individual provinces.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the highest number of cases in Argentina were reported in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (*Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires*, AMBA), the agglomeration composed of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires and 40 nearest districts of the Buenos Aires province. AMBA is the most populated area of the country, inhabited by a third of all Argentinians. Despite generating almost a half of the country's GDP, it is also the second poorest region, where millions of people suffer from marginalization, illegal and precarious work conditions, unemployment or even hunger. In this situation, cutting off social interactions and preventing people from perusing their money-earning activities proved to be extremely difficult.<sup>16</sup>

In countries with a federal system, like Argentina, an effective cooperation between federal (president) and provincial authorities (governors) proves to be a key element in conducting a successful pandemic control policy. In the case of the AMBA, such cooperation was also needed on the regional level: between the Peronist governor of the Buenos Aires province, Axel Kiciloff, and the center-right Chief of Government of the City of Buenos Aires, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta. Importantly, whereas the former is one of the closest allies of Cristina Kirchner (and an ex-Minister of Economy in her government), the latter is considered a close ally of Mauricio Macri and a possible future presidential candidate from Macri's PRO party. Both leaders had spared no criticism towards each other, which made their potential cooperation a challenge. Yet, in the face of a deepening health crisis, the opponent politicians decided to work with the president in order to combat the pandemic as effectively as possible.

Fernández, Kiciloff and Rodríguez Larreta (members of the two polarizing factions) appeared together in several press conferences to report on the pandemic situation and communicate decisions on the measures to be taken. Images of the three influential

<sup>15</sup> *Aislamiento Social Preventivo y Obligatorio, Decreto 297/2020*, Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 19 March 2020, Boletín Oficial de la República Argentina 2020, no. 34.334 – Primera Sección, pp. 3-6.

<sup>16</sup> J.I. Bonfiglio, A. Salvia, J. Vera, *Empobrecimiento y desigualdades sociales en tiempos de pandemia: informe de avance: mayo 2020*, Buenos Aires 2020, at <https://repositorio.uca.edu.ar/bitstream/123456789/10217/1/empobrecimiento-desigualdades-sociales-pandemia.pdf> – 27 December 2021.

politicians sitting at the same table and talking about the same objective sent a strong message in a country so deeply marked by socio-political polarization.<sup>17</sup> Doubtlessly, such cooperation with the opposition was particularly beneficial for the federal government, as it helped to strengthen the conciliatory image of Alberto Fernández. The president had promised to put an end to *la grieta*, and his emphasis on cooperation in managing the pandemic crisis seemed to confirm his effectiveness. According to the survey conducted at the beginning of the quarantine, Fernández's approval rating reached almost 80%, which was a high number compared to his electoral result or even to his positive image before the pandemic.<sup>18</sup>

However, with the extension of quarantine measures (the ASPO was prolonged several times between March and August 2020) regardless of clearly alarming economic situation in Argentina, the solutions introduced by the authorities began to raise resistance from a part of society, mainly those already opposed to the government. The struggle against the pandemic became yet another platform for deepening socio-political polarization in the country.

### 3. NEW AREAS OF POLARIZATION

The economic problems that Argentina had faced before the pandemic clearly worsened as the lockdown progressed. Despite increased social spending, large numbers of people experienced a significant deterioration in their standard of living. Job losses and inability to perform work by those relying on informal economy (street vendors, housekeepers, gig workers, etc.) led to the lack of income and an increased level of poverty, particularly among the most vulnerable communities. The extension of the quarantine also affected the economic situation of the Argentine middle-class members active in services or tourism. Those circumstances resulted in the rise of protests demanding a loosening of restrictions, with the first ones happening as early as May 2020. Over the following months, as the number of infections was steadily increasing, the 'anti-quarantine' marches were called all over the country, with the biggest one in Buenos Aires on 17 August 2020. Brought under criticism, the president called the opposition's attitude irresponsible and defended his approach that prioritized saving lives. However, such arguments did not seem convincing to a large part of the public opinion, mostly those sympathizing with the anti-Kirchnerist opposition. According to surveys, as the health system was more and more able to meet the demands, the fear of infection was giving way to other concerns such as unemployment or inflation.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, the Argen-

<sup>17</sup> L. Goyburu, "El caso argentino. Un virus sobre la grieta," in S. Martí i Puig, M. Alcántara Sáez (eds), *Política y crisis en América Latina. Reacción e impacto frente a la Covid-19*, Madrid 2020, p. 28.

<sup>18</sup> "Alberto Fernández, el dirigente político con mejor imagen del país," *Página12*, 7 April 2020, at <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/257853-alberto-fernandez-el-dirigente-politico-con-mejor-imagen-del> – 27 December 2021.

<sup>19</sup> M.L. Tagina, "Presidential Approval During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Argentina," in M. Fernández, C. Machado (eds), *Covid-19's Political Challenges in Latin America*, Cham 2021, pp. 126-127.

tine society, which had already been affected by *la grieta*, split into two groups, virtually identical with the already existing lines of polarization: supporters and opponents of quarantine measures.

It is noteworthy that the '17A' demonstration was supported by the anti-Kirchnerist opposition along with Mauricio Macri. The former president was calling for the restoring of freedoms and lifting of the quarantine (which was already more than 150 days long in Buenos Aires). In the first interview since leaving the presidential office, Macri accused Fernández's government of abusing power and moving towards 'soft authoritarianism.' *Pandemic should not be confused with a tool to affect freedoms*, stated the ex-president.<sup>20</sup> Importantly, Macri's criticism towards the president was a result of several measures taken by the government during the pandemic that were both controversial and not directly linked to fighting the coronavirus. The most notable was the Judicial Reform Bill, presented by Fernández on 29 July 2020, that aimed at remodeling Argentina's judiciary system. Launched as a presumed way to improve transparency and fairness of proceedings, the reform met with strong resistance from the anti-Kirchnerists. The opposition, including Macri, perceived the bill as a tool to manipulate the jurisprudence and protect Cristina Kirchner (who faced numerous corruption charges) from justice. Other examples of controversial decisions included imposing a new one-time tax for the wealthiest, expropriating an agro-export company Vicentín (from which the government eventually withdrew) or granting house arrest to former vice-president Amado Boudou who served a prison sentence for corruption.

The opposition's consolidation towards the reforms carried out during the pandemic, especially the participation of prominent figures from the PRO party in anti-governmental protests, deepened the impression of widespread rejection of Fernández's policies. Politicians such as the chairwoman of the PRO, Patricia Bullrich, or the former ministers in Macri's cabinet, Andrés Horacio Ibarra and Hernán Lombardi, were giving credence to the narrative that under Kirchnerism, Argentina was restricting democratic freedoms or even drifting toward authoritarianism.

The only member of the opposition who dissociated himself from anti-government protests in 2020 was the aforementioned Chief of Government of the City of Buenos Aires, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta. He consistently avoided making explicit statements about the potential negative effects of the quarantine and refrained from criticizing the federal government's agenda. However, this changed during the second wave of the pandemic that affected Argentina in April 2021 after restrictions had been partially lifted earlier that year.

Due to the increasing number of infections, on 15 April 2021, Alberto Fernández decided to use his power to issue decrees with the force of law (*decretos de necesidad y urgencia*) and introduced new measures to curb the second wave of coronavirus, which included the closure of schools in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area.<sup>21</sup> Suspension

<sup>20</sup> "Mauricio Macri, el expresidente de Argentina entrega sus impresiones sobre Latinoamérica," La Otra Mirada, 8 July 2020, at <https://laotramirada.com/conferencias/mauricio-macri> – 27 December 2021.

<sup>21</sup> *Medidas generales de prevención, Decreto 241/2021*, Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 15 April 2021, Boletín Oficial de la República Argentina 2021, no. 34.633 – Primera Sección, pp. 3-8.



of in-person classes, which was to be effective from 19 April to 30 April 2021, was protested by Buenos Aires city officials, including the Chief of Government. Referring to the data available, Rodríguez Larreta refused to close schools arguing that there were no health indicators to justify such a move. He also stressed that the government's decisions were taken without prior consultation, which broke the principle of government-opposition dialogue and cooperation developed since the beginning of the pandemic. *The most dangerous classroom of all is the closed classroom*, stated Rodríguez Larreta.<sup>22</sup>

On the one hand, he certainly expressed a substantial systemic problem of the Covid-19 education crisis. According to UNICEF, Latin American countries were the most affected by school closures during the pandemic and suffered from the largest number of students out of access to education because of the pandemic.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, though, Rodríguez Larreta may have been aware that his positive attitude towards the federal government's actions was seen as a sign of weakness among the core anti-Kirchnerist members of the PRO party (including its chairwoman Patricia Bullrich), which could be problematic in the context of the leadership struggle within the opposition. By breaking with his conciliatory image maintained since the beginning of the pandemic, Rodríguez Larreta returned to the polarizing narrative characteristic of *la grieta*. Not only did he refuse to implement solutions introduced by the president, he also decided to start a legal battle. On 16 April 2020, the City of Buenos Aires filed the case before the Supreme Court alleging that the presidential decree violated the local autonomy and, therefore, was unconstitutional. After two days the Administrative Court sided with Rodríguez Larreta and overruled the closure of schools in Buenos Aires. The decision was later maintained by the Supreme Court.<sup>24</sup> The images of students attending classes in the City of Buenos Aires and of those staying home in the Buenos Aires province became a symbolic picture of divisions that prevailed in Argentina during the pandemic.

The Court sentence was strongly criticized by the entire governing coalition. Alberto Fernández stated that seeing *the decrepitude of the law converted into sentences* was sad for him as a lawyer.<sup>25</sup> Cristina Kirchner used even harsher terms, speaking of a coup against democratic institutions.<sup>26</sup> Such words were essentially part of Kirchner's

<sup>22</sup> "Rodríguez Larreta sobre el cierre de las escuelas: 'Los chicos y las chicas de la Ciudad el lunes tienen que estar en las aulas,'" Buenos Aires Ciudad, 16 April 2021, at <https://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/jefedegobierno/noticias/rodriguez-larreta-sobre-el-cierre-de-las-escuelas-los-chicos-y-las-chicas-de> – 27 December 2021.

<sup>23</sup> UNICEF, "Covid-19 and School Closures. One Year of Education Disruption," March 2021, at <https://data.unicef.org/resources/one-year-of-covid-19-and-school-closures/> – 27 December 2021.

<sup>24</sup> M. Rochi Monagas et al., "Argentina: Legal Response to Covid-19," in J. King et al. (eds), *The Oxford Compendium of National Legal Responses to Covid-19*, Oxford 2021.

<sup>25</sup> "Alberto Fernández, tras el revés en la Corte por las clases presenciales: 'Me apena ver la decrepitud del Derecho convertido en sentencias,'" *Clarín*, 4 May 2021, at [https://www.clarin.com/politica/alberto-fernandez-encabezara-acto-nicolas-trotta-espera-fallo-corte-escuelas\\_0\\_jq\\_ByVjIK.html](https://www.clarin.com/politica/alberto-fernandez-encabezara-acto-nicolas-trotta-espera-fallo-corte-escuelas_0_jq_ByVjIK.html) – 27 December 2021.

<sup>26</sup> "Cristina Kirchner calificó el fallo de la Corte Suprema por las clases presenciales como 'un golpe contra las instituciones,'" *Infobae*, 4 May 2021, at <https://www.infobae.com/politica/2021/05/04/>

general inclination to question the independence of judges in Argentina and accuse the judicial system of politicization. Regardless of the sentence itself, it is salient to note that the conflict over physical attendance at classrooms represents an alarming trend in which the difficulties to reach political agreements lead to judicialization of politics.<sup>27</sup> Assigning the judiciary a decisive role in the matters that should be resolved at the legislative level demonstrates a weakness of federal institutions and clearly indicates how the polarization affects the quality of democracy in Argentina.

Further signs of socio-political polarization in Argentina emerged around the Covid-19 vaccination. The issue was not the question of whether or not to vaccinate: according to survey conducted in 2020, 76% of Argentines were willing to be vaccinated, which is higher than the global average of 71%.<sup>28</sup> What caused a widespread controversy was the product that was to be used during the vaccination throughout the country. On 10 December 2020, Alberto Fernández announced that the government had signed an agreement with Russia for the arrival of the Sputnik V vaccine.<sup>29</sup> Argentina was to be the third country after Russia and Belarus to administer that vaccine. However, as Sputnik V had been approved for use before clinical trials were complete and published by the Russian Gamaleya Research Institute, the vaccine did not receive authorization from the World Health Organization (WHO) or the European Medicines Agency (EMA). Despite a lack of data, Covid-19 vaccination in Argentina started in 2020, with medical workers and individuals over 60 years old being the first to get the shot. The government's prompt decision on this matter, justified by the concern for health and safety of those particularly vulnerable to Covid-19, split the society along the familiar lines of division.

According to the polls conducted in January 2021, the Argentinians' attitude toward the Sputnik V vaccine was in line with their stated political preferences. A strong degree of confidence in the Russian vaccine was expressed by as many as 72% of Kirchner supporters and only 10% of Macri supporters.<sup>30</sup> The anti-Kirchnerists regarded as the most reliable the German-American Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and the British Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine. However, those shots were not available in Argentina in early 2021. While the government's plan to produce the AstraZeneca vaccine with Mexico was held up due to the lack of components, the early negotiations with Pfizer

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<sup>27</sup> J. Gazmuri Mujica, "Argentina en pandemia ¿Se profundiza la grieta?," Foro Permanente de Política Exterior, 3 May 2021, at <https://foropoliticaexterior.cl/argentina-en-pandemia-se-profundiza-la-grieta-por-jaime-gazmuri-mujica/> – 28 December 2021.

<sup>28</sup> "Encuesta Vacunas y Covid-19," WIN 2020 and VOICES! en Argentina, Buenos Aires 2020, at <https://www.voicesconsultancy.com/Informes/Encuesta-Vacunas-y-Covid-19> – 28 December 2021.

<sup>29</sup> "Coronavirus: Alberto Fernández anunció que el Gobierno firmó el acuerdo con Rusia para la llegada de la vacuna Sputnik V," Cancillería Argentina, 12 December 2020, at <https://www.cancilleria.gob.ar/es/actualidad/noticias/coronavirus-alberto-fernandez-anuncio-que-el-gobierno-firmo-el-acuerdo-con-rusia> – 28 December 2021.

<sup>30</sup> "Coronavirus: Confianza en las vacunas," Poliarquía Consultores, 11 March 2021, p. 5, at <https://poliarquia.com/es/coronavirus-confianza-en-las-vacunas/>.

were rejected due to ‘inacceptable conditions’ imposed by the American company.<sup>31</sup> The lack of international approval for the Russian vaccine, as well as the government’s difficulties in obtaining shots from other countries brought criticism from the opposition that accused President Fernández of improvised actions. What is more, some anti-Kirchnerist politicians, including the leader of the Civic Coalition party Elisa Carrió, refused to be vaccinated with Sputnik V, claiming that the Russian vaccine may be dangerous. In an interview given to the leading anti-Kirchnerist media conglomerate *La Nación*, Carrió emphasized that the vaccine didn’t have international guarantee. *This is a great national scam. The government is lying to us*, she said.<sup>32</sup> This narrative was reinforced by the opposition media, which contributed to deepening *la grieta* among the Argentine society.

President Fernández repeatedly asserted that Sputnik V was safe and that he would be among the first to receive it in order to strengthen public confidence in the vaccine. However, the government’s efforts to increase public trust were largely undermined by the so-called ‘VIP vaccination’ scandal that came to light in February 2021 and resulted in the resignation of the country’s Minister of Health, Ginés González García. After a public confession of a journalist Horacio Verbitsky, who admitted being vaccinated thanks to his friendship with the Minister of Health, it was revealed that dozens of people with close connections to the government received a vaccine on irregular basis, way ahead of schedule set by the authorities. Among the 70 vaccine recipients were prominent members of the Peronist Party, trade unionists, government officials and allies, as well as their families. The ‘VIP vaccination’ scandal caused a huge criticism and made thousands of Argentines take to the streets to protest against the government. President Fernández distanced himself from the case, claimed that he had never approved any irregular vaccination, and condemned the unethical conduct of those directly responsible. Regardless of the president’s direct fault or a lack thereof, the scandal caused a significant loss of credibility of the government. Distribution of vaccines among those sympathetic to Kirchnerism was commonly perceived in terms of corruption and abuse of power.<sup>33</sup> This was a particular blow for President Fernández, who has always portrayed himself as a politician close to ordinary people. However, a wave of criticism over vaccines fell on the opposition, too, as its leader Mauricio Macri decided to be vaccinated in the United States, which was also seen as a *VIP vaccination*.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Ginés González García, *sobre Pfizer: ‘Nos pidieron condiciones inaceptables’*, YouTube, 16 December 2020, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kShc3t7X2QE> – 28 December 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Elisa Carrió, *sobre la vacuna rusa: ‘Es una gran estafa nacional’*, YouTube, 21 December 2021, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCOQ5zldOJ0> – 28 December 2021.

<sup>33</sup> A. Cipolla, “Keys to the ‘VIP Vaccination’ Scandal that Shook Argentina,” *Latin American Post*, 23 February 2021, at <https://latinamericanpost.com/36097-keys-to-the-vip-vaccination-scandal-that-shook-argentina> – 28 December 2021.

<sup>34</sup> N. Barral Grigera, “Macri busca politizar la pandemia en Argentina mientras se vacuna en Miami,” *The Washington Post*, 18 May 2021, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/es/post-opinion/2021/05/18/mauricio-macri-vacunado-miami-vacunas-vip-argentina-coronavirus/> – 28 December 2021.

By widening the gap between common people and ruling elites, the vaccination scandals contributed to a decline in trust in democratic institutions (and those in charge of them), which has been one of the most pressing problems of Argentine democracy. This was also exacerbated by further problems arising from vaccination campaign throughout 2021. Delays in deliveries of the Russian vaccine in mid-2021 forced the authorities to administer second doses of Moderna and AstraZeneca vaccines for those who received a first shot of Sputnik V, as well as renew negotiations with Pfizer to buy more vaccine doses. Another pressing issue was the continued lack of authorization of the Russian vaccine by WHO and EU. In the second half of 2021, this effectively excluded people vaccinated with Sputnik V from travelling to a number of countries, including the United States. It should come as no surprise that difficulties in receiving international recognition of the Russian vaccine gave rise to criticism from the anti-Kirchnerist opposition. Its members were drawing attention to potential problems resulting from not being able to travel abroad (for work, family, business or medical reasons), and urged the government to introduce an option for citizens to choose their preferred vaccine.<sup>35</sup> Despite the fact that the lack of international authorization could potentially affect more than 11 million of Argentines vaccinated with Sputnik V, the issue was being raised almost exclusively by the opposition. Unlike the middle and upper class Macri's supporters, travelling abroad during pandemic was not a priority for most of Kirchnerists voters. Nevertheless, the discussion on vaccines in Argentina remains a constant element of *la grieta*, which is unlikely to change regardless of Sputnik V international approval or the lack thereof.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Covid-19 pandemic had a profound impact on Argentina's socio-political situation, not only because it completely redefined the priorities of President Alberto Fernández's new cabinet. The emergence of a novel coronavirus brought unexpected problems that had to be solved quickly and effectively. Fighting against an invisible threat was a completely new challenge, therefore the Argentine government (as well as most of other world governments) had to make decisions that could not be based on experience. Even though Fernández's crucial Covid-19 strategies were based on scientific data and clearly explained, the multitude of different solutions introduced around the world were naturally increasing uncertainty among Argentines forced to struggle both with the health crisis and the socio-economic impact of a prolonged lockdown. The observed politicization of science<sup>36</sup> as well as the impossibility of verifying alterna-

<sup>35</sup> "Vacunas: la oposición reclama al Gobierno que regularice la vacunación de quienes deban viajar y tengan Sputnik V" *Cronista*, 1 October 2021, at <https://www.cronista.com/economia-politica/juntos-por-el-cambio-le-pide-al-gobierno-que-regularice-vacunas-para-quienes-deban-viajar-y-tengan-sputnik-v/> – 28 December 2021.

<sup>36</sup> B.T. Rutjens et al., "Attitudes towards Science," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 57 (2018), pp. 125-165; A.N. Washburn, L.J. Skitka, "Science Denial across the Political Divide: Liberals

tive measures were basic factors that contributed to the reinforcement of socio-political polarization in Argentina during the pandemic.

Despite the calls for national unity, high level of uncertainty about the future situation (both in terms of health and economy), controversial measures introduced by the government when fighting the virus (closing schools, judiciary reform) led to a significant deepening of the already existing divisions, with Kirchnerists and anti-Kirchnerists clearly indicating their full support or utter criticism of government's response of the Covid-19 crisis. Argentina introduced one of the longest and most stringent quarantines in the world, and still thousands of people died because of the virus. That fact, combined with lockdown's negative effect on economic activity, had an enormous polarizing impact on the Argentine society. What is more, scandals such as 'VIP vaccination' led to the public suspicion that the government did not comply with the rules imposed on the society. It also demonstrated that Argentina is still very much prone to malpractices such as corruption or abuse of power, both significantly harmful to democracy.

There is little doubt that problems with democratic performance in Argentina do not lie in the political system or lack of universal freedoms.<sup>37</sup> Yet, the Covid-19 pandemic aggravated the already evident flaws that significantly impact its quality, such as corruption, economic instability or growing distance between elites and common people. Under strong socio-political polarization, those urgent problems became even more difficult to solve. As presented above, every issue raised in public debate – from the quarantine measures to the vaccination campaign – were submitted into the dynamics of *la grieta*<sup>38</sup>. The pandemic has clearly demonstrated that the dominance of opposing Kirchnerist and anti-Kirchnerist coalitions makes it practically impossible to develop solutions which would satisfy a vast majority of society. Therefore, *la grieta*, undoubtedly affecting the stability of the Argentine political system, deprives the Argentine democracy of one of its essential elements. In times of crisis, when taking substantial measures is of particular importance, continued polarization often leads to democracy fatigue: a phenomenon already observed in Argentina.<sup>39</sup> The 2021 parliamentary election, in which the far right and the Trotskyist left made significant gains in the Congress, demonstrates the radicalization of the Argentine society, where more and more people cease to believe that democracy serves to solve people's problems.<sup>40</sup>

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and Conservatives Are Similarly Motivated to Deny Attitude-Inconsistent Science," *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, vol. 9, no. 8 (2018), pp. 972-980.

<sup>37</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2021. Argentina*, at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/argentina/freedom-world/2021> – 28 December 2021.

<sup>38</sup> M.E. Casullo, "Why Argentina's Politics Are Surprisingly Stable," *Americas Quarterly*, 23 August 2021, at <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/why-argentinas-politics-are-surprisingly-stable/> – 27 December 2021.

<sup>39</sup> *Informe 2021. Adiós a Macondo...*, p. 21.

<sup>40</sup> U. Goñi, "Argentina's Far Right and Far Left Make Big Gains in Congressional Elections," *The Guardian*, 15 November 2021, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/15/argentina-congressional-elections-far-right-far-left-make-big-gains> – 27 December 2021.

The future of Argentine democracy, although unthreatened in procedural terms, will bring new challenges in the post-pandemic times. Unquestionably, one of them will be the ongoing polarization and its impact on rebuilding the country after the crisis. It is difficult to expect that political divisions would completely disappear from Argentine political life, given how strongly they are embedded in the public debate. Yet, as stated in the introduction, the existence of differing views in a democratic country does not necessarily lead to conflicts. However, without significant effort on the part of both Kirchnerists and anti-Kirchnerists, as well as mainstream media conglomerates, *la grieta* will remain a damaging phenomenon that effectively erodes the Argentine democracy.

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