

# Imaginaries about the *Northern border* in the discourse of Argentine national press

## Imaginarios sobre la *frontera norte* en el discurso de la prensa nacional argentina

### *Imaginários sobre a Fronteira Norte no discurso da imprensa nacional argentina*

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**ABSTRACT** | This paper studies the imaginaries attached to the Northern border of Argentina in the discourse of its national press during the presidential transition between Kirchnerism, of national-popular ideology, and conservative-neoliberal Macrism (2015-2016). In the north, Argentina shares international borders with all its neighboring countries: the entire border with Bolivia, Paraguay and Brazil, and part of the border with Uruguay and Chile. However, the name northern border has not been precisely defined in the academic or official discourse. Despite this, in journalistic discourse it has often been empirically associated with the international border that Argentina shares with Bolivia and Paraguay. A critical discourse analysis was applied to 47 journalistic articles that mention the Northern border of Argentina, published in *La Nación* (conservative) and *Página/12* (progressive), national newspapers based in the political-administrative center of the country, the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. The results show that there are differences in the treatment of the subject, consistent with their respective editorial lines, although they coincide in representing the Northern border of Argentina as a distant, degraded and disadvantaged territory.

**KEYWORDS:** imaginaries; Northern border of Argentina; press discourse; national press; Argentina; journalism.

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**RESUMEN** | Este artículo estudia los imaginarios asociados a la frontera norte de la Argentina en el discurso de su prensa nacional durante la transición presidencial entre el kirchnerismo, de ideología nacional-popular, y el macrismo, conservador-neoliberal (2015-2016). En el norte, la Argentina comparte fronteras internacionales con todos sus países limítrofes: toda la frontera con Bolivia, Paraguay y Brasil, y parte con Uruguay y Chile. Sin embargo, la denominación frontera norte no ha alcanzado mayor precisión en el discurso académico y oficial. Pese a ello, en el discurso periodístico se fue asociando empíricamente, con frecuencia, a la frontera internacional que la Argentina comparte con Bolivia y Paraguay. Se aplicó un análisis crítico de discurso a 47 artículos periodísticos que mencionan la frontera norte de la Argentina publicados en *La Nación*, de línea editorial conservadora, y *Página/12*, de línea editorial progresista, diarios de circulación nacional con base en el centro político-administrativo del país, la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires. Los resultados muestran que estos difieren en el tratamiento del tema, consistentemente con sus respectivas líneas editoriales, aunque coinciden en representar a la frontera norte de la Argentina como un territorio lejano, degradado y desfavorecido.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** imaginarios; frontera norte de la Argentina; discurso de la prensa; prensa nacional; Argentina; periodismo.

**RESUMO** | Este artigo estuda os imaginários associados à *Frontera Norte* da Argentina no discurso da imprensa nacional daquele país durante a transição presidencial entre o kirchnerismo, da ideologia nacional-popular, e o macrismo, conservador-neoliberal (2015-2016). No norte, a Argentina compartilha fronteiras internacionais com todos seus países limítrofes: toda a fronteira com a Bolívia, o Paraguai e o Brasil e parte da fronteira com o Uruguai e o Chile. No entanto, o nome *Frontera Norte* não alcançou maior precisão no discurso acadêmico e oficial. Apesar disso, no discurso jornalístico foi associando-se empiricamente, com frequência, à fronteira internacional que a Argentina compartilha com a Bolívia e o Paraguai. Uma análise crítica do discurso foi aplicada em 47 artigos jornalísticos que mencionam a fronteira norte da Argentina publicados no *La Nación*, de linha editorial conservadora, e o *Página/12*, de linha editorial progressista, jornais de circulação nacional baseados no centro político-administrativo do país, a Cidade Autônoma de Buenos Aires. Os resultados mostram que estes jornais apresentam diferenças no tratamento do tema, consistentemente nas suas respectivas linhas editoriais, ainda que coincidem em representar à *Frontera Norte* da Argentina como um território afastado, degradado e desfavorecido.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** imaginários; *Frontera Norte* da Argentina; discurso da imprensa; imprensa nacional; Argentina; jornalismo.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper reflects on the links between the discourse of the press and the constitutive historical dynamics of the nation. Specifically, it delves into the role of the national press in the symbolic construction of Argentina's *Northern border* during the recent presidential transition from Kirchnerism to Macrism (2015-2016).

This article is not intended to provide a precise definition of the northern border of Argentina. It rather seeks, from a genealogical methodological strategy, to recognize the empirical meanings and geographical references with which this category has been associated. In the north, Argentina shares international borders with all its neighboring countries: the entire border with Bolivia, Paraguay and Brazil, and part of it with Uruguay and Chile. Nevertheless, the name northern border has not been precisely defined in the academic and official discourses. Despite this, journalistic discourse frequently and empirically associates it with the international border that Argentina shares with Bolivia and Paraguay.

Due to its historical and geopolitical importance, the northern border of Argentina is the subject of specific semantic disputes. One of them is related to the migratory phenomenon: the two main immigrant communities in Argentina, the Paraguayan and the Bolivian, enter through the northern border (Benencia, 2012), and they are linked to different stereotypes and imaginaries (Miranda, Cravino, & Martí, 2012; Benencia & Canevaro, 2017). Another dispute has an axis in organized crime and drug trafficking, with Argentina as a consuming country and Bolivia or Paraguay as producers (Renoldi, 2014; Campero & Del Prado, 2016). Due to the legitimacy of their discourse and the massiveness of their reach, the media have a central role in these arguments concerning meaning.

The objective is to review the discourse of two national newspapers with divergent editorial lines (*La Nación*, conservative, and *Página/12*, progressive) and their participation in the production, reproduction or circulation of imagery on the northern border of Argentina during the last year of presidency of Cristina Fernández (2015) and Mauricio Macri's first year (2016). This transition is relevant for the country's recent history, since it meant the end of 12 years of Kirchnerism, a political movement of national-popular ideology, and the beginning of the government of Macrism, of conservative-neoliberal ideology.

Modern nation states have been built from their territorial definition. This implied the material and symbolic establishment of borders that would allow constituting a national unity and differentiating from neighboring countries. As spatial devices, the borders of the modern nation-state have three components: 1) the sphere in which social border relations are established, 2) the frameworks of

social interaction that operate on broader scales, and 3) the imaginaries concerning borders, the subject of this research.

The borders of national states can be conceived as contingent and dynamic realities, defined by the material and symbolic practices of different social agents. They are the core symbolic devices of territorial construction, since they complete the cohesive mission of the modern national state by drawing a line that allows to imagine a *us*, here, *on this side*, different from the *others*, there, *on the other side*.

The images derive from the human condition of having perceptual and cognitive systems (Hiernaux & Lindón, 2012). Through them, people appropriate their environment and create mental representations. Narration, visualization, and conceptualization are some of the processes by which images about the surrounding reality are created and recreated. Social imaginations are constructed from the interweaving of images, meanings and valuations —crossed by power relations.

Imaginaries about national borders are permeated by fears regarding those who, from the *other side*, might cross to *this side*. They cover assignments and moral sanctions on the dangerous, prohibited, and unwanted (Alonso & Balbuena, 2004) and are frequently manipulated by those in power to build hegemony (Zusman, 2013).

## GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

### Locating the northern border of Argentina

Each country has different ways of naming borders or parts of them. For example, the expression *Triple Border* is used in scientific literature, tourism planning and the press to account for the trifinio formed between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, and is strongly associated with terrorism and drug trafficking (Giménez-Béliveau, 2011). Between Portugal and Spain, *raia/raya* is the expression that identifies the shared border. In Tijuana and San Diego, Spanish speakers refer to that border as *la línea* (the line), but they also use *bordo*, from the English border.

In different Latin American countries, the expression northern border is used with different degrees of institutionalization in the common geographic vocabulary; the Mexican is probably the most studied, mentioned and recognized, often associated with the hope of the American dream, but also with death, pleasure, danger, and the forbidden (Alonso & Balbuena, 2004). Of course, despite its political, economic and sociocultural complexity, it is relatively easy to geographically circumscribe the northern border of Mexico, because it is adjacent to one single nation, the United States, and extends from one end of the continent to the other.

References to the northern border of Argentina are more imprecise. When describing the limits of the national territory, the classic nationalist geopolitical literature made no reference to such a term, segmenting the borders according to the neighboring country (Daus, 1957; Rey Balmaceda, 1979; Milia, 2015). In scientific articles that critically address the international borders of Argentina, this expression has not been cultivated either: they mention the Argentine-Bolivian border (Campisi, 2001), the Argentine-Bolivian border space (Domenach, Celton, Arze, & Hamelin, 2007), the northern border of Argentina with Bolivia (Caggiano, 2007), the Argentine-Paraguayan border (Linares, 2009) or the border of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil (Renoldi, 2013). In academic discourse, the concept of the northern border of Argentina has not been consolidated, and when used, the term is merely descriptive –not conceptual– and interchangeable with others (Caggiano, 2007).

In other types of discourse sources, reports and webpages of national public organizations, there are no references to the northern border of Argentina before 2015. Among them are a statement from the Ministry of Security, dated August 2016, entitled *Ministerio de Puertas Abiertas: Frontera norte, narcotráfico y seguridad* (Open-Door Ministry: Northern Border, Drug Trafficking and Security), which mentions “the Northern Border of our country”, although without specifying a clear empirical reference for that term (Ministerio de Seguridad, 2016, par. 3). Another statement from the same body was entitled *Avances en el control aéreo y terrestre en la frontera norte* (Advances in air and land control of the Northern border), but it fails to specify its geographical scope (Ministerio de Seguridad, 2018). This suggests that in the discourse of the Argentine national state there is also no precision on the scope of what is sometimes called the northern border of Argentina.

On the other hand, in the main Argentine graphic media, the first mention of the northern border of Argentina (of which there is a record) appears in a news item from *La Nación* in 1996, almost a decade earlier than in reports and webpages of public organizations. It states that “the main flow of drugs entering the country is coming through the northern border...”, without specifying the empirical reference of the term (*Avanza el Gobierno...*, 1996). On *Página/12*, the oldest reference to the northern border of Argentina is from 2005, in an article that mentions the “defenselessness of the northern border”, assimilating the term to the Northwest Argentine region and, again, associating it with drug trafficking (Cecchi, 2005). In other words, the press has referred to the northern border for more than two decades, and in its first appearances it has a strong negative connotation. However, there are no studies that have deepened the further development of this concept in this type of discourse.

### Press discourse and construction of reality

The press has historically been a main agent in the constitution of imagery about the national in modern states, since the legitimacy of its discourse mediates and assembles the different voices, often contradictory or mutually unintelligible, that exist within a territory (Anderson, 1993). In addition, the discourse of the press has become especially important at specific historical moments, in the different national states and with respect to specific enclaves such as the one studied in this article, modeling certain imagery about the reach of the nation, its limits, its *us* and its *others* (Rubilar Luengo, 2015).

To shape news events, the media employs discursive operations deciding what, how, and when will be informed (Conboy, 2010). Thus, journalistic discourse semantically constructs a reality that most people are unable to access directly. This is important when national media refer to realities that occur in the confines of the country. In these cases, the vast majority of the population, who live far from these places, only have a secondary experience of them, mediated by the informative discourse. Furthermore, due to the very dynamics of the information production, the media discourse, even without intending to, acts in favor of the reproduction of the status quo, reinforcing and perpetuating the dominant values and ideas in a given society (McQuail, 1994).

Although the borders of the national state constitute a topic frequently addressed by the media in different countries, beyond some isolated efforts (Grimson, 1998; Alonso Meneses, 2013; Antolínez Merchán & Rivero Recuenco, 2016), there is not a substantive corpus of academic studies on the relationship between journalistic discourse and the border. Consequently, the scope of the different denominations assigned by the media to the different borders, their development and importance regarding certain historical and political moments in the development of national states, are unknown.

Argentina is a particular case of media centralism. The country has 2,700,000 square kilometers in area and some 9,800 kilometers of land borders. The main Argentine media are located in the political-administrative center, the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, very far from the borders with Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Bolivia (approximately 670, 1,350, 1,250 and 1,700 kilometers away, respectively). The editorial offices of the main national newspapers are located there, including those analyzed in this article, *La Nación* and *Página/12*. In this regard, the media's discourse on the nation's borders is made in an extremely remote place. Paradoxically, they are the only way in which most citizens can find out what is happening in those places.

*La Nación*, founded in 1870, is one of the oldest Argentine newspapers. Its origin and development were linked to sectors with governmental, military, business, and intellectual hegemony. Therefore, beyond the nuances, it has maintained a politically editorial line with a liberal-conservative vision throughout its history, and its discourse has aimed to represent, especially, the most empowered sectors of society (Sidicaro, 1993; Zimmermann, 1998).

On the other hand, *Página/12* was founded in 1987, a few years after the end of the last civic-military dictatorship, in a process marked by the recovery of democracy and freedom of expression. In that context, it has managed to position itself as a newspaper aimed especially at a young audience, belonging to middle and upper-middle socioeconomic strata, with progressive ideology and a certain enlightenment, who are drawn to it by its style and content, related to the defense of human rights, and a transgressive use of language (González, 1992).

### **The Kirchnerism-Macrism presidential transition**

Born in the context of the Argentine economic-political-social crisis that exploded in 2001, Kirchnerism had three consecutive presidencies: that of Néstor Kirchner –from whom this political movement takes its name–, from 2003 to 2007, and those of Cristina Fernández, from 2007 to 2011, and from 2011 to 2015. Its progressive and national-popular discourse helped it to differentiate from the failure of the conservative and neoliberal regime that had prevailed in the 1990s. In that sense, throughout much of their governments, Kirchnerism resorted to a discursive polarization with the mainstream media, especially print, such as the newspapers *La Nación* and *Clarín* that, in turn, assumed a strongly critical editorial position regarding Kirchnerism. For those governments, the strategy of confronting the discourse of the mainstream media was useful to develop a “model of controlled communication” and to fight a battle for the control of information and interpretations of reality (Vincent, 2017, p. 102). This allowed, on the other hand, the mainstream media to become representatives of the voices of the political opposition.

Mauricio Macri –the expression Macrism used to refer to his political sphere derives from his surname– assumed the presidency in December 2015 and ended his term in December 2019. Twice head of government of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires and son of an entrepreneur known for his business with the national state, Macri, however, came to the presidency with a discourse in which he presented himself as alien to traditional politics, a common citizen close to the reality of the people (Annunziata, Ariza, & March, 2018).

Unlike Kirchnerism, which used the figure of anachronism, referring to the past to insert its project in the national and democratic tradition interrupted by

neoliberalism, Macrism was constructed discursively from an opposition to the past, presenting itself as the embodiment of the Argentina of the future (Dagatti, 2017). Throughout his electoral campaign and his mandate, Macri had strong support from most of the main national media, including the newspaper *La Nación*. On the other hand, *Página/12*, that had supported Kirchnerism during its successive presidencies, became one of the main opposition media to Macri's government.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Design**

The methodological strategy is qualitative and transversal, since it seeks to know the development of the object of study —the imagery on the northern border of Argentina in the discourse of two media outlets of national circulation, *La Nación* and *Página/12*— throughout a certain period, the two years corresponding to the last Argentine presidential transition.

### **Procedure and selection of the corpus**

We selected all the articles with the term northern border published between 1/1/2015 and 12/31/2016 in the online editions of *La Nación* and *Página/12* (these editions were used for a criterion of accessibility and ease for the database computerized processing, but we verified that each news piece corresponded verbatim with its printed version). Those in which the term northern border referred to borders of other countries were discarded. The chosen period corresponds to the presidential transition between the last year of Kirchnerism government —ended on December 9, 2015— and the first year of Macrism government —started on December 10, 2015. The search was limited to these two years to apprehend the transition from one government to another, which probably would have been diluted if a longer period had been selected. The corpus of analysis was made up of 47 articles: 33 of them were published in the newspaper *La Nación* and the remaining 14, in *Página/12*.

### **Data processing and analysis**

Two databases were created, each corresponding to the discourses of one of the two newspapers analyzed. Using the *Atlas.ti* qualitative analysis software, we identified the citations mentions to the northern border of Argentina in each article; each citation was assigned an ad hoc code based on its content, and the relationships between codes were identified. Thirty-one codes (such is the name applied by the *Atlas.ti* program) were assigned to the citations, each corresponding to a unit or thematic nucleus of the phenomenon studied. To advance from codification to a degree of conceptualization, we interpreted the data through a critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1990), which allows the discourses to be



related to their contexts of production and circulation. Specifically, we have worked with what the author calls ideological structures of discourse (Van Dijk, 2003), i.e., ways in which ideology is evident in the way of structuring the discourse, in relation to categories of analysis such as “themes” that stand out in the treatment of each news item, the global and local “coherence” between the themes, the “level of description” or “degree of detail” given to the different parts of the discourse, operations such as “implications” or “assumptions”, the “synonymy”, the “contrast”, the way in which the “actors” are presented and the “ambiguity and vagueness” in certain descriptions (pp. 58-68).

### **RESULTS: THE NORTHERN BORDER OF ARGENTINA ACCORDING TO LA NACIÓN AND PÁGINA/12**

During the last year of Kirchnerism, *La Nación* published five news pieces that mention Argentina’s northern border. In them, 12 thematic nuclei were identified, each associated with a number of citations or text fragments: increase in drug trafficking (10 citations); hot zone (9); gateway for drugs, immigrants or merchandise smuggled into the rest of the country (9); weakness, disorganization, or lack of state resources (9); unequal fight against drug trafficking (8); concern (8); need to control stop something (8); strength, organization and power of drug trafficking (8); remote area (5); problem area (4); Bolivia as a country of origin of drugs, immigrants and smuggled merchandise entering the country (4), and Paraguay as a country of origin of drugs entering the country (1). During the same period, *Página/12* published four news pieces on the northern border and eight topics were identified: tax evasion (5 citations); poverty (5); inequality (4), political/electoral campaign (2); dissociation between the northern border and crime or drug trafficking (1); Güemes (1); need to control or stop something (1), and strengthening military participation to control the northern border (1).

Therefore, we can observe that, although the number of news pieces of both media on the northern border is similar in this period (five and four, respectively), the treatment of the subject is different. In *La Nación*, concern about the increase in drug trafficking prevails, the characterization of the northern border as a *hot zone* and a gateway for undesirable elements, as well as a negative profile of the state regarding its ability to combat that threat. On the other hand, on *Página/12* there is concern regarding tax evasion and social phenomena such as poverty and inequality. Thus, there is a glimpse of an articulation between the editorial line of each newspaper, the ideological tendency of the current government and the thematization of the northern border. *La Nación*, opposed to the government, discursively constructs a situation of increasing threat, and focuses on the

weakness of the state to stop it. *Página/12*, related to the government, focuses on broader and structural problems, and does not criticize the state.

The increase in drug trafficking as the main theme in *La Nación's* discourse in this period is supported by different narrative resources. In an article entitled *Habló el juez de Orán sobre narcotráfico: 'Son mil causas por empleado; hacen lo que pueden'* (The Oran judge spoke about drug trafficking: 'There are a thousand cases per employee; they do what they can'), the newspaper refers to "drug trafficking on the northern border" as a "growing problem" and quotes a border judicial authority, who points out that "the number of cases that enter is unceasing" (Habló el juez..., 2015). The newspaper locates drug trafficking on the northern border and characterizes it as an unsolved problem, where a weak and disorganized state faces an unequal fight against a phenomenon that continues to grow.

In turn, the idea of remoteness associated with the northern border is recurrent in the discourse of *La Nación* during the last year of Kirchnerism. In an article entitled "*Nuevos indicios de la elaboración de drogas en el país*" (New evidence of drug manufacturing in the country), it is stated that "the circulation of cocaine leaves in the North is not surprising, cocaine is rooted in Jujuy, Salta and Catamarca", but "the seizure of a large shipment of leaves well away from the northern border can open a new and worrying front regarding the penetration of drug trafficking in the country", adding that "the shipment was camouflaged among a shipment of clothing that had as a final destination the province of Buenos Aires, clearly outside the area where cocaine consumption is an ancestral social custom" (Gallo, 2015b). The narration establishes, in addition to the geographical distance between Buenos Aires —place of enunciation— and the northern border, a cultural distance that delimits what is or is not accepted in each context. The irruption of drug trafficking in Buenos Aires territory, far from the borders and near the political, economic and administrative center of the country, is themed as a novel and worrying phenomenon, since it threatens the permanence of those cultural distances rooted in differentiated traditions.

In addition, *La Nación* repeatedly refers to the northern border with the adjective *hot*, reinforcing the idea of a problem that raises temperature and must be stopped or controlled by the state in a context of struggle: "The porous border of northwestern Argentina is one of the Achilles' heels in the fight against drug trafficking. The State must increase its presence there" (En la caliente frontera..., 2015). With the permeability metaphor, the northern border is presented as weak in the face of threats originating in two countries: Bolivia and, to a lesser extent, Paraguay (Gallo, 2015a; Gallo, 2015b; En la caliente frontera..., 2015).

In contrast to *La Nación*, *Página/12*'s main themes in relation to the northern border in the last period of Cristina Kirchner's government are tax evasion, poverty and inequality. An article entitled "*Ventas con nombres y precios falsos*" (Sales with false names and prices), states that the Federal Administration of Public Taxes "detected fraudulent export operations for 25 million dollars through the Northern Border operation" and there is a textual quote from Ricardo Echegaray, head of that national public administration body, who specifies that "the maneuvers were carried out by two dispatchers who used ten low-income individuals as front men, and evaded taxes [...] in export duties for undervaluation of prices in the offices". It is also noted that "among the low-income individuals is a construction worker who was registered as an exporter, lending his name to document sales of more than a million dollars" (*Ventas con nombres...*, 2015).

It is observed that in *Página/12*'s discourse during the last year of Kirchnerism the national government is presented as a sensitive agent to the vulnerable and tough on the powerful. In turn, the northern border is not themed as the place where elements of foreign origin enter, but where local agents evade taxes by exporting goods abroad. Beyond the differences in the treatment of the subject, during this period both newspapers coincide in not assigning a precise location to the northern border. Sometimes it is assimilated to cities near the Argentine border with Bolivia, such as Oran –located about 50 kilometers from the limit– (*Habló el juez...*, 2015), or with Paraguay, such as Posadas (Gallo, 2015a). In other cases, it is interchangeable with other terms: "the border between Argentina and Bolivia", the "Paso Internacional Aguas Blancas-Bermejo" or the cities of Aguas Blancas and Salvador Mazza (*En la caliente frontera...*, 2015). Sometimes the term lacks localization (*Salta: claro triunfo...*, 2015), and others it is associated with the provinces of Salta (*Conteo manual de los votos...*, 2015; *Este proyecto nacional...*, 2015) or Formosa (*Ventas con nombres...*, 2015); in other cases, there is no reference (Verbitsky, 2015).

After the Kirchnerist government ended, during Macri's first year in the office, *La Nación* mentions the northern border in 28 news pieces. 23 thematic nuclei were identified: recovery of power or state organization (69 citations); more evenly fight against drug trafficking (41); strengthening of the northern border (39); weakness, disorganization, or lack of state resources (32); strengthening of military participation to control the northern border (30); gateway for drugs, immigrants or merchandise smuggled into the rest of the country (30); criticism of the Kirchnerist government (27); increase in drug trafficking (20); need to control or stop something (19); international cooperation in the control of the northern border (15); Public Security emergency (14); Bolivia as a country of origin for drugs, immigrants and smuggled merchandise entering the country (12); strength, organization and

power of drug trafficking (10); geographic/physical characteristics of the northern border (7); terrorism/counter-terrorism (6); unequal fight against drug trafficking (5); problem area (5); concern (4); remote area (4); Paraguay as a country of origin for drugs entering the country (2); Brazil as a country of origin for drugs entering the country (1); meat exports (1), and Güemes (1).

In the same period, *Página/12* mentions the northern border in 10 news pieces, which contain 13 thematic nuclei: criticism of Macri's government (present in 11 citations); human rights (7); need to control or stop something (6); dissociation between the northern border and crime or drug trafficking (5); Public Security emergency (5); Güemes (5); strengthening of military participation to control the northern border (4); international cooperation in the control of the northern border (1); criticism of the Kirchnerist government (1); weakness, disorganization, or lack of state resources (1); unequal fight against drug trafficking (1); gateway for drugs, immigrants, or merchandise smuggled into the rest of the country (1), and remote area (1).

Thus, the arrival of Macrism to power serves *La Nación* to articulate a narrative in which its initial concerns are deepened, particularly regarding the increase in drug trafficking, but in turn shows the image of a government that, unlike the former, is willing to tackle the problem, even with military participation. *Página/12*, which had remained uncritical regarding the state's participation on the northern border during the Kirchnerist government, changed when Macrism came to power, criticizing the new government and reinforcing the social and human rights issues typical of its editorial line. In turn, due to the disparity of space that they give to the treatment of the northern border, we can observe that the subject is more akin to the editorial line of *La Nación* than that of *Página/12*. This is striking, since it shows that, despite its efforts to thematize it in a progressive tone, *Página/12* seems not to be able to conceive the northern border as one of the newspaper's subjects.

In this period, we observe how *La Nación* begins early to build the image of a government that, from its point of view, seriously and firmly faces the control of the northern border. Thus, in an article published on January 2, 2016 –less than a month after President Macri's inauguration– entitled “*La agencia antidrogas, otro paso que se dará*” (The anti-drug agency, another step to be taken), it states that “while establishing the mechanism to launch the federal anti-drugs agency, the Government plans to strengthen the northern border with a greater deployment of policemen” (Gallo, 2016a). Here, the use of the verbs *to strengthen* and *deploy* fulfills a double function: it presents the Macrist government as an actor determined to regain the strength and organization of the state, and it takes up again the idea of weakness, disorganization or lack of state resources in control of the northern

border that it had begun to outline during the last year of the Kirchnerist presidency, but detaching it from the new government, thematizing it as a situation inherited from the precedent presidency.

In turn, criticism of Kirchnerism helps to describe the deficiencies in the control of the northern border as a situation inherited by Macrism. In some cases, to channel those criticisms, the newspaper quotes the testimony of sources close to or belonging to the new government. For example, an article states:

In recent years, there was no great dedication from Kirchnerism to combat drug trafficking on the country's northern border. We just need to ask the current Defense Minister Julio Martínez, who began to verify that several radars on the border are not operative, and that the North Shield anti-drug operation located along the triple border area had been almost dismantled for lack of budget (Dinatale, 2016a).

On other occasions, the media itself speaks, in line with its discourse, to criticize the previous government and highlight the efforts of the new presidency. Thus, in one of its editorials, a journalistic genre that par excellence represents the opinion of the newspaper, we can read:

As the power of drug trafficking grew as never before in Argentina during the Kirchnerist era, official data and statistics on drug trafficking and chemical precursors diminished, making it difficult for the new national authorities to measure precisely their exponential increase in order to face this problem [...] Meanwhile, the radar installation in the northern border is delayed in Formosa, governed by Gildo Insfrán, since the provincial authorities did not prepare the premises where a new radar manufactured by Invap will operate. Insfrán was one of the governors most loyal to Cristina Kirchner (La decisión de luchar..., 2016).

Similarly, since January 2016 the newspaper's discourse begins to reflect two interconnected thematic axes: the declaration of emergency in Public Security issued by a Macri presidential decree that same month, and the strengthening of the military presence to control the Northern border established in that directive, presented as examples of a more active policy in the fight against drug trafficking by the new government. Thus, in an article entitled "*La emergencia en seguridad habilita el derribo de vuelos narcos*" (The security emergency enables shooting down narco flights) it is stated that "the Government authorized the military to open fire on 'hostile' aircraft in Argentine airspace", highlighting that "the need to complete the radar installation in the northern border and the adoption of the necessary measures for the acquisition of material and technological technical devices is enabled immediately",

and concludes that “the axis of the security effort will be placed, according to that decree, in stopping the entry of drugs in northern Argentina” (Gallo, 2016b).

The imaginary of a serious and efficient government, determined to amend the mistakes of the previous administration, which begins to reorganize the state to control the northern border, is completed with a series of mentions to the request for international support for these tasks, and a new element arises regarding that collaboration: terrorism, understood as a new security threat on the northern border, which had not been mentioned by the newspaper in the discourses produced during the last year of Kirchnerism.

On the other hand, there is an emphasis in profiling the northern border as a porous and permeable space that, despite the efforts of the new government, continues to operate as a gateway for drugs, immigrants and merchandise smuggled to the rest of the country. For example, an article entitled “*Marea verde: queman en Mar del Plata 4800 kilos de marihuana*” (Green tide: 4800 kilos of marijuana burnt in Mar del Plata) talks about the confiscation and incineration of the “most important marijuana shipment ever intercepted” on the way to the city of Mar del Plata, located about 400 kilometers south of the Federal Capital, and specifies that “nine people were involved, with different degrees of participation in the organization that brought drugs into the country from the northern border” (Marea verde ..., 2016). Here we can see the idea of shortening the distances between the northern border, as the point where the drug enters, and the center of power of the national state. In addition, the *green tide* metaphor reinforces the idea of drug trafficking invasion from the borders of the country to the rest of the national territory. In this scenario, the main origin of the unwanted elements continues to be Bolivia, mentioned in 12 citations, characterized as a focus of drugs, contraband and human trafficking, and to a lesser extent, Paraguay (two citations), and Brazil (one quotation).

In this period, the northern border is themed by *La Nación* as problematic and hard to control, not only for its sociocultural complexity but also for its physical or geographical characteristics. In this regard, it is mentioned that the new Minister of National Security of Macri’s government, Patricia Bullrich, “said that ‘the northern border of the country is very large, there are many paths through which the drug can enter and thus, there are problems there’” (López, 2016). The difficulties that arise from the geography of the place are repeated in other citations:

Members of Squadron 22 San Antonio de los Cobres chased a vehicle that had attempted to evade a route control at 3,900 meters above sea level. The Police reported that to perform the arrest and subsequent inspection of the suspected van, the gendarmes had to travel 360 kilometers for ten hours on a winding road in the high mountains, with gravel and in poor condition (Fueron secuestrados..., 2016).

In this context, the new government is portrayed as an agent attentive to the complexity of the area and travels to the distant and problematic northern border to listen to those who live there. In turn, it is shown as an actor willing to adopt measures to face the problem:

On a trip to the Salta border cities of Salvador Mazza and Aguas Blancas, the Minister of Security, Patricia Bullrich, listen to the practical problems –fundamentally related to mobility– of the Police to cover the area ‘bombarded’ with cocaine (Gallo, 2016c).

As previously mentioned, if the arrival of Macrism to the presidency served *La Nación* to establish a certain discursive relationship with the new government and to insist on certain imaginaries about the northern border that it had already begun to outline during the last year of the Kirchnerist government, something similar happened in the case of *Página/12*. Thus, the five topics most present in the discourse of *Página/12* on the northern border in this period are criticism of the new government, human rights, the need to control the northern border, the dissociation between the northern border and crime or drug trafficking, and the declaration of the Public Security Emergency. Often, these thematic nuclei appear intertwined in a narrative that deepens the differentiation between the progressive ideology that characterizes the editorial line of the newspaper and that of the new management, which is portrayed as reactionary, undemocratic and contrary to human rights.

In a news piece entitled “*Emergencia en seguridad, ‘otra oportunidad perdida’*” (Security emergency, ‘another missed opportunity’), the newspaper quoted almost completely a letter criticizing that measure (Emergencia en seguridad..., 2016). Thus, the extensive space given to reproduce a statement contrary to Macri’s security policies –and his conception of the northern border– is a manifestation of the newspaper’s support for the content of the letter, reinforced by the use of a mixed citation in the title that, although includes textual content (in quotation marks), does not indicate a source, and therefore it is attributable to the newspaper.

In another news piece, signed by Horacio Verbitsky with the title “*Otra vez el flagelo*” (Once again, the scourge), the journalist criticizes the aforementioned Macri emergency declaration and points out that “without any serious diagnosis, the emergency focuses on the northern border as the main cause of the drug trafficking problems” (Verbitsky, 2016). This text fragment is practically identical to one of the statement mentioned above –which states that “without having any diagnosis, the emergency focuses on the northern border as the main cause of drug trafficking problems” (Emergencia en seguridad..., 2016)–, among whose signatories is Verbitsky himself, as president of the NGO Centro de Estudios Legales

y Sociales. Both discourses merge in their criticism of Macrism using the same textual arguments and expressions interchangeably, without citing each other, as if they shared the same place of enunciation.

On the other hand, of the 11 citations associated in this period with the code *criticism to Macri's government*, seven are also linked to the *human rights* issue, showing a discursive strategy of opposition between the ideology of the newspaper, presented as a defender of human rights, and that of Macrism, which would be apart from these precepts.

Nevertheless, beyond the profusion of images, metaphors, and meanings linked to the northern border of Argentina, the empirical reference of that category remains blurred in the discourses of both *La Nación* and *Página/12*. In most of the cases analyzed, no specific location is attributed to the expression. References to the “northern border of Argentina”, “northern border”, “borders with Bolivia, Paraguay, and Brazil” or even to the “border posts of La Quiaca, the Triple Border and Aguas Blancas” are used interchangeably (Dinatale, 2016b), and sometimes assimilated to the territory of the province of Salta (O'Donnell, 2016; Una reivindicación de Güemes..., 2016; Un país, un libro abierto..., 2016).

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this work has been to reconstruct the imagery on the northern border of Argentina in the discourse of two newspapers of national circulation (*La Nación* and *Página/12*). These newspapers have different trajectories, both temporal and ideological: while the first is a centennial newspaper with a liberal-conservative orientation, the other is just over three decades old and has a progressive editorial line. Each of them had a strong identification with one of the two antagonistic political trends that recently followed one another in the leadership of the Argentine government. *Página/12* was related to Kirchnerism government; *La Nación*, to Macrism. From the analysis of all the news pieces on the northern border published by these newspapers during the period 2015-2016, coinciding with the presidential transition between these two governments, it is possible to draw the conclusions summarized below.

Both newspapers assume the existence of the northern border of Argentina as a singular area, which needs to be addressed by the press. However, even though they assign multiple meanings to it, they do not clearly locate or delimit that area from a geographical point of view. More or less tacitly, it is inferred from the discourses of *La Nación* and *Página/12* that the northern border refers mainly to Bolivia, frequently to Paraguay and, sometimes, to Brazil. Some easily



recognizable crossing paths are also identified (La Quiaca, Puerto Iguazú) and the vast majority are ignored (La Mamora, Andresito, for example). In short, we see no interest in the discourse of these newspapers of national circulation, produced in the political-administrative center of the country, to make known the northern border of Argentina in its geographical, historical, and social aspects. The term is used, rather, as a container for problems that can be seen as such from the capital, fundamentally related to another national state, usually Bolivia or Paraguay.

The northern border is imagined by both newspapers as a peripheral and strange phenomenon, to be interpreted from the center and from the meanings with which the center associates it. Thus, beyond the information provided, the northern border is a topic to produce a narrative that shows achievements and failures, successes and errors, past or future, of the country's conflicting political trends, with which these newspapers align, sometimes undisguised. The prism on the northern border has a locus external to its concrete reality. As posited by Zusman (2013), it is probable that this center-based imagery on the *northern border* is less about an empirical referent located in the confines than about the power dynamics decided in the country's administrative political center; in that regard, "an interesting way to work would be to articulate the relationship between hegemonic geographic imageries and the geographic imageries that negotiate and resist the former, and that end up reconfiguring material geography" (p. 62).

The border condenses meanings, albeit divergent, about nation building and the foundations of nationalism. While *La Nación* associates the northern border recurrently with drug trafficking, threats, and illegality (which come especially from Bolivia), *Página/12* links it more with poverty and inequalities. In addition, although with less emphasis, there is the issue of control. In turn, *La Nación's* narrative on the border seems to condense a more bellicose sense of nationalism: the need to fight against the threat represented by those who come from the other side, while in *Página/12* a friendlier nationalism prevails, presenting a vision more consubstantiated with human rights and the Latin American spirit.

The political position of the newspapers (sometimes explicit; at other times, overlapped by different rhetorical figures) and their editorial lines is also evident. Thus, generally, the discourse on the northern border of *La Nación*, of a conservative editorial line, is functional to Macrism, a conservative-neoliberal government, and the discourse of *Página/12*, more progressive, is favorable to Kirchnerism, the government of national-popular ideology. In addition, there is a disparity between the two newspapers regarding the space given to information about the northern border. *La Nación*, with a conservative tendency, dedicates more news pieces (33) to reporting what is happening on the northern border, from a perspective of

concern about the dangers of security issues and drug trafficking as threats to the status quo. On the other hand, *Página/12*, with a progressive line, devotes less informational space to the northern border (14 news pieces, less than half that of *La Nación*) which, ironically, reinforces the invisibility and stigmatization of that territory: less emphasis in reporting what happens there can be interpreted as the recognition that there is no alternative way (more akin to a progressive discourse) to approach the subject consistently over time.

On the other hand, the northern border is news when traumatic, undesirable, and problematic events occur (drug trafficking, terrorist threat, violence). Based on these events, the analyzed media discourses thematize the northern border as a space that seems intrinsically degraded, negative, and disadvantaged. At this point, there are no major differences between the discourse of *Página/12* and *La Nación*: either from more progressive or conservative perspectives, both narratives reproduce a sense of strangeness and remoteness of this border that, it seems, is intrinsically different to the capital from which it is being watched. Incidentally, and going back to the idea that, due to its own dynamics, journalistic discourse often acts in favor of the reproduction of the dominant values and ideas in a given society (McQuail, 1994), we could ask ourselves about the deepest origins of these representations on the northern border that the recent media narratives help to disseminate or amplify.

Finally, it is necessary to specify that these findings are limited to a specific border, the northern border, and to the discourse on it by two of the main graphic media of national circulation. It would be important for future studies to deepen the analysis of other media (for example, local media, based on the territory studied) and other relevant Argentine borders (such as the border between Argentina and Chile) that a priori could be linked to different imaginaries than those analyzed in here. Likewise, comparative studies between borders of the region's countries would be very useful.

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