

# CIVIC PARTICIPATION, DEMOCRATIC SECURITY, AND CONFLICT BETWEEN POLITICAL CULTURES. FIRST NOTES ON AN EXPERIMENT IN THE CITY OF BUENOS AIRES.

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## 1 Introduction

The goal of this article is to present a specific experiment in public safety policy being carried out in the city of Buenos Aires (Argentina). This experiment enables us to reflect on the role of civic participation and the State in the dissemination of a new concept of “democratic security.” The National Ministry for Security was created in December 2010 at a time of crisis when a land occupation was violently repressed<sup>1</sup> in the city of Buenos Aires. From the time of the first announcement and steps taken to break the stalemate and peacefully resolve the land occupations, the new ministry expressed a wish to propose goals and tools based on an idea of “democratic security.” One of the elements of change was the systematic implementation of civic participation<sup>2</sup> by means of the National Plan for Community Participation in Safety (hereinafter PNPCS), which was launched in April 2011. This plan was designed to apply information management and deploy preventive action to disseminate the new paradigm of “democratic security” that was intended to replace other, more repressive ideas centered on penal solutions and the criminalization of poverty. The implementation of the PNPCS achieved some notable successes, but not without the conflicts, obstacles, and challenges typical at the beginning of a process seen as part of a cultural change.

The method chosen for the analysis and the description of this experiment assumes that the goal of working with public policies can be found not only in their enunciation but also in the description of the context and an analysis of their implementation. The data for working on this latter aspect were obtained from the fieldwork and relationships I have built with the players while working on my doctoral

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*Notes to this text start on page 170.*

thesis.<sup>3</sup> The structure of the article is as follows: first, I show data necessary for understanding the complexity of the context in which the public policy under analysis is being implemented. I then examine the definition of the idea of “democratic security” as used by the National Ministry of Security, the description of the participation tools designed to disseminate it, and some of the changes and results that can be seen within the first six months of the PNPCS’s implementation. Finally, I analyze some of the conflicts that have arisen during its implementation, with an emphasis on two areas: a) the resistance to change and the relationship between the police and the public; and b) resistance deriving from the confrontation between the Ministry’s agenda and the agendas of civil society organizations. I argue that both issues go back to the conflictive meeting between the new paradigm of “democratic security” and what I call a “neighborhood political culture” of participating in public safety.

## 2 Context of the implementation

The context in which this new policy is being implemented is complex because it is based on a territorial strategy of participation and cultural change. In Argentina over the last fifteen years, the rhetoric of “punitive demagoguery” was the order of the day in politics, in mass communication media, and in the recommendations of some “experts” (CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS LEGALES Y SOCIALES, 2004; KESSLER, 2009; SOZZO, 2005). At the same time, the erratic and inconsistent nature of the policies implemented by various levels of government (national, provincial, municipal) regarding citizen participation has produced frustration and, in the most promising cases, participatory experiments have supported self-organization and autonomy. These two factors (wide circulation of punitive demagoguery rhetoric and scarce and frustrating presence of the authorities) have contributed to the emergence of what I call a “neighborhood political culture” in relation to safety, which I will describe later, but which is strongly inflected with a repressive approach to public safety. Moreover, the activities of the Democratic Security Agreement, constituted in 2009 and to which I will refer later, constituted a counterweight to the repressive rhetoric in the public sphere and initiated the founding of the new paradigm of “democratic security” adopted by the Ministry. The arrival of this new paradigm on the ground has inevitably produced a conflict between political cultures. This conflict reflects an interesting dynamic when examined in light of the real challenges that the dissemination of a “democratic security” model may face.

Another fundamental contextual fact pertains to the legal and political status of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. Since 1880, the city has been the capital of the Argentine Republic. During almost the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was subject to a system of “federalization” whereby the executive authorities were not elected by its inhabitants but rather appointed by the President of the Republic. Among the various consequences resulting from this lack of autonomy, one in particular is worth mentioning here: the impossibility of having its own specific police force. Instead, the Argentine Federal Police were appointed. In 1996 the city finally won its autonomy, and its authorities were elected by its citizens for the first time. The city’s constitution was passed in the same year, and states in article 34 that “Public

security is an irrefutable duty of the State and is provided equally to all inhabitants”. It also placed citizen participation at the center of its crime prevention strategies, holding that “The city government should contribute to public safety by developing multidisciplinary policies for the prevention of crime and violence, setting up and facilitating channels for community participation.” Despite these declarations of good intentions, the security policies in the city were marked by the impossibility of reaching an agreement with the national government on how to transfer control from the Federal Police to the city government. The fact that the city lacked its own police force, together with the absence of a political decision from all levels of government authority to sustain the participatory experiments, caused cyclical phenomena in which various disconnected citizen participation safety initiatives co-existed in the same area at various times (“Neighborhood Security Councils” organized by the City Government in 1998, “Community Participation Councils” organized by the Federal Police force itself and the National Government in 1998, “Pilot Plan” organized by the National Crime Policy Directorate, a dependency of the National Government Justice Ministry, in the Saavedra neighborhood from 1997 to 2000); these alternated with other periods of total absence of participatory safety initiatives. From 2003 to 2006 local and national governments reached an agreement and, during this period, the neighborhood associations of the National Crime Prevention Plan (PNPD) functioned with certain regularity (CIAFARDINI, 2006; LANDAU, 2008). Within this framework, the city legislature passed law 1689 in 2005 to organize and regulate the Security and Crime Prevention Council, enshrining community participation in safety as a right of the city’s inhabitants and a duty of the State, according to article 11 of that law. Despite achieving this legal recognition, community participation entered a new period of limbo in 2006 when the National Crime Prevention Plan was abandoned. The arrival of a new ideologically conservative administration in 2008 resulted in the creation of a new police force (the Metropolitan Police), without the transfer of power from the federal police. This explains why two police forces have co-existed in the city since 2009, one answering to the National Government and a new force answering to the City Government.

When the National Ministry for Security began implementing the new National Community Participation in Safety Plan in Buenos Aires, the city was governed by an administration ideologically opposed to that of the National Government. The City Government adheres to a concept of security that is dispersed and contradictory in its rhetoric, and is guided by an increase in vigilance and repression in its specific practices. It therefore vetoed initiatives to organize citizen involvement,<sup>4</sup> while it publicly advocated toughening the laws and the Criminal Code as a way of addressing the “lack of security” (MINISTERIO DE SEGURIDAD DE LA CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES, 2010). The city government’s biggest efforts were focused on increasing security cameras in public spaces, and organizing a police force (the Metropolitan Police), supposedly as “neighborhood police.” However, the Metropolitan Police has already been the subject of scandals such as spying, and is not subject to civil authority or external oversight (CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS LEGALES Y SOCIALES, 2008). The context therefore consists of a civic participation policy aimed at boosting a democratic security concept in a territory

where security must be managed jointly with another government authority, which prefers a punitive demagoguery and has thus done all it can to create obstacles to prevent the implementation of any mechanisms for participation.

### 3 The idea of “democratic security” and the planning of civic participation mechanisms

In 2009, a significant number of specialists, researchers, activists, and politicians in Argentina signed a Democratic Security Agreement (ASD). This founding document systematizes what is understood by “democratic security” as a new paradigm. The agreement was to insist that the State assume responsibility for building security institutions “committed to democratic values and the rejection of demagogic and improvised policies,” of “heavy-handedness,” and the delegation of security to the police forces. Among the guidelines to be followed in a democratic security policy was the configuration of:

*A highly professional police force with commensurate remuneration to carry out effective prevention; a criminal justice system to investigate and judge at the opportune time those who infringe the law, guaranteeing full observance of the rules of due process and the right to defense during trial, and a penitentiary system ensuring humane conditions of imprisonment and sentences carried out with an aim of social rehabilitation.*

(ACUERDO DE SEGURIDAD DEMOCRÁTICA, 2009, p. 2).

It also calls for a political decision to embrace the democratic administration of security institutions, the dismantling of criminal networks, the use of non-violent methods in police operations in public areas, and humane conditions for serving sentences aimed at social rehabilitation. It is important here to discuss the relationship proposed between “democratic security,” understood as a broad and integral concept of security that seeks to reduce “violence in all its forms,” and civic involvement. The question of civic involvement is not explicitly specified, although it is alluded to when it is suggested that “the planning and implementation of democratic policies should result from diagnoses based on information that is reliable and accessible to the public” and that the police forces should, on the one hand, be integrated with the “community and the local governments in the social prevention of violence and crime” and, on the other, controlled by external, civilian authorities.

The integrants of the ASD presented their guidelines to the country’s President in June 2010. Six months later, when the crisis of the Parque Indoamericano once more underlined the exhaustion of a security model based on self-governing police forces, the creation of a new National Ministry for Security was again put forward based on the ASD’s recommendations. Various specialists selected to be part of this new ministry came from organizations subscribing to views similar to those of the ASD. In terms of public involvement, a National Community Participation Office was created within the Secretariat of Preventive Policies and Community Relations, and Dr. Martha Arriola, a specialist with a long career in questions of

public participation in security<sup>5</sup> and one of the driving forces behind the ASD, was nominated as its chief. The PNPCS was officially launched on April 4th, 2011 with a mission to “promot[e] the development of a new paradigm of public security in the community,” a paradigm that is described as “conflict management,” as opposed to an already exhausted “paradigm of order,” which “always reduces conflict to negative expressions and translates into responses that are merely repressive... given its manifest incompatibility with constitutional and democratic order”(MINISTERIO DE SEGURIDAD DE LA NACIÓN, 2011a).

The Ministry’s resolution 296/11, creating the community assembly as a place for participation, states that: “the National Ministry for Security promotes the development of a democratic security model that implies deploying actions that affect society’s cultural dimension for which reason public participation constitutes one of the central strategies” (MINISTERIO DE SEGURIDAD DE LA NACIÓN, 2011e).

In the same resolution, participation is also approached from a human rights perspective, making reference to a number of international rulings and declarations on the subject.<sup>6</sup> In this way, public participation and the new paradigm of “democratic security” are irrevocably associated. But if public participation can be conceived as a right, it can also be seen as a government policy that can be articulated in mechanisms directed toward various objectives. Thus, one must go further when creating mechanisms in order to ensure that participation is effectively conceived, from a medium- to long-term perspective, as an experience of cultural change that is fundamental to disseminating and sustaining a new understanding of “democratic security.” But participation also appears, when planned in a specific way, as a government tool directed at fulfilling the goal of recovering civilian control of security. The crucial fact in this latter sense is, obviously, the new administration’s expressed wish to end years of police self-government, which resulted not only from corporate resistance to outside control, but also from the disinclination of the State, and of society in general, to become involved (SAÍN, 2008). This recovery of security by civilian government is one of the tenets of the concept of “democratic security.”

The new paradigm is translated into a series of specific dimensions in the PNPCS. First, the scope of the concept of “security” is expanded from simple crime prevention to “community prevention of violence.” This implies the inclusion of other forms of conflict beyond crime, the emphasis on multi-agency strategies and integration by means of not only economic but also symbolic resources and those defining identity such as culture, art, and sports. Second, the practice of prevention and the relationships of the police forces are altered. Situational prevention, which has been one of the fundamental axes of civic participation experiments until now in Buenos Aires, is a further component of the community prevention program. Although it also includes the possibility of putting into practice actions to reduce opportunity and increase risk for potential offenders, it also emphasizes the appropriation and use of public spaces by the community. For this reason the name of the community prevention and control program is “Taking over the street.” The police, on the other hand, must become the object of control and continuous evaluation by those who participate. Third, cultural

change necessitates the training of participants not only in questions of safety and prevention, but also in participation, socio-political analysis, etc. These aspects involve the two participation mechanisms designed to put the plan into action: the neighborhood assemblies and the participation schools. Both have immediate antecedents in the Neighborhood Security Forums and participation schools in the previously mentioned mandates of León Carlos Arslanian while he was head of the Buenos Aires Provincial Security Ministry.

Neighborhood assemblies are the mechanism designed for the territorial approach of community participation. They are spaces set up mainly by non-governmental organizations or entities carrying out their projects in a particular neighborhood, brought together and coordinated by Ministry employees to undertake diagnoses, prepare local security plans, and further attempts at crime prevention and community integration. The work of these assemblies implies the use of some of the methodological tools already used in the Buenos Aires Province Neighborhood Security Forums (such as the “neighborhood maps for the prevention of violence”), which generate information from non-police sources and make it available for the political management of security. It also affirms the presence of this administration’s representatives in the territory, interrupting or mediating the circuit of information established between the police and certain community sectors that may collude with police self-government practices. However, in terms of the Neighborhood Forums, there are some noteworthy changes in the preparation of this new mechanism of neighborhood assemblies, including modifications that seem to have originated in a critical evaluation of some of the previous experiments at the provincial level. The main differences lie in the following points:

- a) Broader participation. Only organizations with a formal structure and legal status could participate in the Neighborhood Forums, which left out a range of organizations arising after the 2001-2002 crisis. The neighborhood assemblies have made this more flexible by requiring that organizations only need “recognized performance” in the community sphere to participate. Moreover, for the first time, the participation of political parties, which was explicitly excluded from the Forums, is permissible. In practice, the flexibility is even greater, given that “individuals of the community” who are not associated with organizations can be accepted, although they are recommended to mobilize as organizations.<sup>7</sup>
- b) The Neighborhood Forums sphere of action coincided with precincts of the Provincial Police. In this new experiment, the sphere of action is not the precinct but the “neighborhood,” a concept that takes into account “the social and cultural characteristics that make people feel part of a common space, with shared identities, horizons and problems” (MINISTERIO DE SEGURIDAD DE LA NACIÓN, 2011c). The various neighborhood assemblies should therefore organize themselves according to zones, which in this case coincide with the jurisdiction of Buenos Aires City police precincts. This alteration adapts the mechanism to the institutional geography of the City rather than that of the Province.

The second mechanism designed for the implementation of the PNPCS includes the participation in community security schools. These were proposed as elements in a transversal, rather than territorial approach, and thought of as spaces for debating the general model of security to be designed, rather than about specific local problems. The content of the study programs is comprised of a familiarization course in the concept of “democratic security” as proposed by the Ministry. Its modules include the description and explanation of the founding principles of the PNPCS, the “socio-political analysis of the current reality”, the various models of public security, community integration and prevention of violence, and the links between security, habitat, gender, prevention of drug addiction etc.

The concrete implementation of these mechanisms began, in experimental manner, at the beginning of 2011 in the neighborhoods of Fátima and Ramón Carrillo in Villa Soldati, located in the southwest of the city. This zone was chosen to carry out this pilot project because it contains vulnerable communities. However, this was also the zone in which the conflicts caused by the occupation of the Parque Indoamericano and its subsequent suppression took place. The extremely fractious relationship between the inhabitants and the Federal Police revealed in this pilot assembly was one of the fundamental factors in the formation of the Unidad Cinturón Sur Plan, launched at the end of June 2011, which deployed 2,500 officers of the National Gendarmerie and Naval Prefecture to the south of the city. According to a survey carried out by the Ministry itself, in the Ramón Carrillo neighborhood, 89% of those interviewed said that the number of police and the quality of emergency response had improved (MINISTERIO DE SEGURIDAD DE LA NACIÓN, 2011b). Soon after this first pilot program, the Plan was officially launched in April 2011. In the first six months of its implementation, some thirty neighborhood assemblies were formed, which included around 450 organizations. These assemblies are currently at various stages of progress. The coordinators of the assemblies usually recognize two stages: one of “structuring” and the other of “opening up” the assembly. This difference is not insignificant because, as will be seen later, it is related to the homogeneity or heterogeneity of each of the assemblies. The information that arose from these spaces for participation was used in the planning of large-scale deployment of security forces, informing not only the implementation of the above-mentioned Unidad Cinturón Sur Plan, but also of other plans such as the Urban Security Plan and the Access Points to the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires Control Plan.

Another important step forward in terms of the Plan’s goals was to open up participation to those who were not previously involved in participatory security experiments: political groupings, grassroots organizations, human rights organizations, etc. This decision can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it is a pragmatic decision that enables the construction of a series of neighborhood assemblies with the presence of a majority of political and social organizations favoring the Ministry’s plan. In this sense, it facilitates committed support from the majority of players (a central question for beginning any participatory process) but it could also make the assemblies be seen by certain sectors as “politicized” sectarian spaces. On the other hand, the presence of these new players allowed

the introduction of new issues related to human rights, to cultural initiatives to promote community integration and to the social prevention of violence, topics usually absent from the citizen security agenda. These changes include symbolic issues, which are valuable to the extent that they favor dialogue between the citizen security and human rights agendas (which, in Argentina, have been historically separate). For example, the assembly linking organizations from the Floresta Sur and Parque Avellaneda neighborhoods has its headquarters in the same building where a secret detention and extermination center called “El Olimpo” functioned during the military dictatorship (1976-1983). The fact that several assembly headquarters are situated in locations linked to political groups shows that the proposal to open up to new players is working. Other initiatives have a direct impact on urban space and quality of life. The participants in the Flores and Parque Chacabuco neighborhoods, for example, identified an abandoned and dangerous space at the entrance to a subway station, intervened, and transformed it into an amphitheater (called “La Negra Sosa”, a tribute to singer Mercedes Sosa, who died in October 2009), which was inaugurated on October 17, 2011. This broadening of the citizen security agenda was evident in many of the assemblies, and above all, in the five participation school programs launched since June 2011, where there were also interesting exchanges between social organizations, specialists, and academic researchers. In September, the first 83 participants received their diplomas from these participation schools.

However, as will be seen in the following section, the dissemination of a new paradigm of “democratic security” also faced resistance, obstacles, and challenges during the first six months of the Plan’s implementation that derive, in large part, from the various players in the field of participatory public safety, many of whom can be described as being part of a “neighborhood political culture” of participation in security, strongly anchored in ideas owing their origin to a common authoritarian meaning.

#### **4 The conflict with the “neighborhood political culture” of participation in security**

To speak of a “field of participation in security” means recognizing that the public policy driving civic participation was not implemented in a vacuum or in virgin territory. On the contrary, fifteen years of debate about public safety as one of the central topics in the public, political and media agendas has left a trail of experiments, of methods of mobilizing, organizing, and making claims, as well as of interpretive frameworks to give meaning to the cyclical crises in managing security. The various levels of government play a central role in this phenomenon, having implemented and abandoned many successive participatory processes since 1997. When the State abandons these processes, many members of the public who participated in them consider the experiment to have ended, and with great frustration, retreat again to the private sphere. But others persist, and thus autonomous forms of organization emerge. Many of those, having no channels through which to communicate with the authorities, adopt their own separate agendas and goals. In this field, the phrase “their own” does not equate



to “spontaneous” or “authentic”. Instead, it almost always refer to goals that are strongly influenced by conventional wisdom and by the discourses that circulate in the mass media, fanned by lobbyists and moral entrepreneurs of all kinds. The “field of participation in security” is formed, therefore, by individuals, associations, and organizations of varied stripes, governmental or not, many of which can be considered as a “residue” of the abandoned participatory experiments once sponsored by the State. These organizations compete for various material and symbolic resources.

It is in this “field” that what I call the “neighborhood political culture” of participation in security emerges. It is comprised of webs of meaning, interpretive frameworks, discursive resources, and practical knowledge that a variety of social players who call themselves “neighbors” use and adopt with certain regularity. The term here does not only denote their condition as “inhabitants” of a particular area, but also activates a historically consolidated political meaning that is used to denote a distancing from “an other:” “the politicians”, “the militants”, “the civil servants,” etc.<sup>8</sup> A fairly stable set of features defines this “neighborhood culture.” The first, as mentioned previously, is a constant rejection of “the politicians” and civil servants, as well as the invocation of the supposedly apolitical nature of the demands and new organizations, both of which are epitomized in the conventional wisdom notion that the “lack of security is not a matter of the left or the right: it has no ideology.” The second feature is the spasmodic nature of these organizations’ claims. Mobilizations that, fanned by highly visible cases, attract a high number of citizens are alternated with very low levels of participation when participation means a constant commitment, and with the ephemeral nature of many of the organizations. The third feature is the circulation and adoption of certain diagnoses to explain the “lack of security” (based on the criminalization of poverty, of immigrants, of addicts, or of youth), which slide almost naturally toward repressive options as the only imaginable solutions. The fourth feature is the demand for immediate solutions for their complaints, a demand whose virulence increases in inverse proportion to the concrete results (none, or meager at best) that have been achieved by public safety policies until now. This demand is accompanied by an insistence on “greater police presence” as the main solution to the “lack of security.” Some more formalized experiences formed neighborhood networks that deployed situational prevention practices, running the risk of producing socio-spatial segregation as a result. The fifth feature is the notion that participation is not linked to a citizen’s right or duty. Rather, it fits into a tradition that associates participation with denunciation or complaint, and sees it as a transitory solution for a specific situation in which, faced with the inability or ineffectiveness of the State, citizens must do what the State does not do, in line with some of the postulations of neoliberalism. The neighborhood associations usually hold beliefs such as “we should not have to exist,” which is paradoxically – or, perhaps, not so much – accompanied by a petitioning habit that puts the solution to all problems in the hands of the State. (SOZZO, 2000; PEGORARO, 2001; CROCCIA, 2003; TUFRÓ, 2007). In short, the repudiation of politics, the demand for immediate solutions, the ephemeral nature of any commitment and the supposition that the State alone is

responsible for safety are factors that feed a resistance to the construction of more or less formal spaces of participation guided by the State and capable of surviving over time. For many, “institutionalization” is equivalent to “politicization. The implementation of the PNPSC in the city of Buenos Aires has meant a conflict between the idea of “democratic security” and the “neighborhood political culture” of participation, which is managed according to the criteria explained above.

This said, it is unsurprising that the opening up of community assemblies to political players by the Ministry has been perceived by other sectors as an original sin of “politicization”. On the other hand, as has already been said, if various neighborhood assemblies have shaped themselves into heterogeneous spaces, many others, and especially the participation schools, have basically been constituted by organizations that are politically sympathetic to the national government, favoring a perception of a certain sectarianism which, from the point of view of the “neighborhood political culture” of many sectors of the community, is characterized simply as “politicization.” This conflict may serve thus as a trigger to analyze the challenges to the dissemination of the concept of “democratic security” by the State. I turn now to this analysis, addressing two issues that highlight resistance to the new paradigm: the ways of perceiving the public/police relationship and conflicts in defining the priorities, goals, and methods of local public safety agendas.

#### *4.1 The conflict over a new role for the police*

Some of the abandoned participatory experiences have left more or less active “trails,” as I have previously mentioned. Among them are the so-called Community Prevention Councils (CPC), which have functioned since the end of the 1990s in several Buenos Aires city precincts. Since they began, these Councils have channeled, under a new framework of “citizen participation,” more traditional links forged by the police force with enclosed and specific sectors of the community, selected according to “the principles of renown and social recognition which the police wisdom classifies as ‘decent people,’” which means having a “previous and personal relationship with the commissioner” (EILBAUM, 2004, p. 190). The logic of the CPCs seems to proceed as follows: a group of “decent people” from the neighborhood forms around a commissioner, who serves as an amplifier of the police discourse, reproducing its smallest issues (such as the dissemination of practical advice on crime prevention, precinct and patrol telephone numbers, etc.) and its more important claims, that is, demands for increased economic, logistic, and human resources, dissemination of repressive ideological stances in relation to public safety policies, etc. The concrete relationship between the police functionaries and the members of the CPCs can be summed up by the “small bed sheet” metaphor, an argumentative procedure that I witnessed firsthand at almost all the CPC meetings I attended. The metaphor refers to a supposed scarcity of resources that prevents the fulfillment of all demands, because “if we cover one side, the other is left uncovered.” The “small sheet” is complemented by complaints over the supposed softness of the laws against delinquents, and from this combination arises the most often heard diagnosis: “the hands of the police are tied.” The members

of the CPC are the ones in charge of disseminating the police discourse to the community. The metaphor of the “short sheet” produces three main effects: a) it portrays the police force as a “scarce commodity” over which one has to dispute, thereby producing “petitioning neighbors” whose idea of participation consists of making one’s own voice heard louder than the other groups so as to ensure one’s share of police protection, without bothering with a vision of the whole; b) it places all the responsibility for inadequate policing and the “lack of safety” on the government of the moment, and above all on the “politicians;” c) it confirms that a “greater police presence” is the solution for “lack of safety,” a mantra that is used in almost all the neighborhood movements created around the subject. As a result of all these issues, experts consider the CPCs examples of “bad practice in participation” (CIAFARDINI, 2006), given that they are organized and coordinated by those that should be controlled, that is, the police force.

In the city of Buenos Aires, the CPCs coexist with the new neighborhood assemblies. Until now, the National Ministry for Security has not required the CPCs to close. There have been negotiations with some of them, and in some cases, attempts to merge them with the newly formed neighborhood assemblies. However, the philosophy of this new participatory program is fundamentally incompatible with the working methods of the CPCs. The Ministry’s new idea is to break the circuit that enables certain representatives from the local community to communicate directly and without mediation with the police management and to set up a new circuit instead: organized community - political management of the police (that is, the Ministry). This circuit allows the police to be called whenever is necessary, but always through the political mediation of Ministry representatives. “Breaking” this pre-existing circuit means not only opening up new spaces for exchange, but literally interrupting certain patterns of interaction and conversation to prevent these new spaces from establishing and reproducing the old patterns of exchange between “notable” community representatives and a self-governing police force. I witnessed one of these interruptions at a neighborhood assembly: someone made a particular public complaint and the commissioner, as he jotted this down in his notebook, said to the man, “Come see me tomorrow at the precinct and we can discuss this in greater detail.” A high functionary at the Ministry who was present that day immediately interrupted the conversation to request that both the citizen’s complaint, the response, and the commissioner’s commitment be made public within the assembly and be recorded in the assembly’s public minutes.

This new way of viewing the relationship between neighbors and police officers, with the mediation of the political administration, creates resistance among the CPC members for various reasons. First, as broadcasters of the police discourse, these sectors uphold the view that the police cannot be controlled by or held accountable to the public (which is one of the central tenets of the neighborhood assembly proposal). They, therefore, seem to become spokespersons for police malcontents unhappy with what they consider interference into the Federal Police’s powers (deployment of the forces) and rights (evaluation of performance and decisions over promotions and raises). Moreover, if information is no longer managed on a personal basis between the commissioner and the member

of the neighborhood, but rather has to be made public within the framework of the assembly, many of these organizations lose their symbolic capital, since it is precisely their privileged position in relation to police information that legitimizes them in the eyes of other sectors of the community, and information on security is a highly valued merchandise in local spheres.

In her speech at the launch of the National Community Participation in Safety Plan, the minister Nilda Garré spoke of the goal of fighting “against the fundamentalism of keeping alive an institutional culture that cultivates secrets” (MINISTERIO DE SEGURIDAD DE LA NACIÓN, 2011d). The goal of making information public is mainly to guarantee control of police performance by the community, but it has the secondary effect of diluting these players’ capital. This explains the resistance and obstacles to the generation of new spaces and the implementation of new organizational methodologies that postulate a very different idea of participation than that held by the CPCs or other similar organizations, such as “Friends of the Precincts Associations,” which are charged with collecting funds for the police from among the area’s storekeepers. These organizations resisted joining the neighborhood assemblies, arguing against the assemblies’ “politicization”. But they carry on with their activities, parallel to the assemblies. The following dialogue, taking place in one of the community participation schools, is an example of a grievance of a member of the neighborhood assembly of Parque Patricios in relation to this issue:

*Neighbor:* Some organizations [like ours] want to know the details, the resources that each precinct has, and when we don’t get this information, participation is discouraged. I’ll tell you what the neighbors say: [*The neighborhood assemblies project*] is great, but the people from the ministry come here to get the information that they don’t get from the precinct, but when we ask, there’s a limit to what we’re told. The CPC works in Parque Patricios. Nowadays there’s more unofficial information coming from the CPC than from the commissioner.

*Ministry employee:* The commissioner should go to the assembly to provide information. It’s the only way for this to work. The resources are public. It’s important, when one designs a local plan, to know what resources are available.

*Neighbor:* Because these groups - the CPCs, the Friends of the Precinct - cooperate, getting together unofficially, and this takes the place of what’s official.

In this complaint, we can see various symptoms of the conflict I have described. First, the participant in the assembly senses a degree of impotence on the Ministry’s part, expressed in the idea that the Ministry seeks information from the neighborhood assemblies that it cannot obtain from the precincts. This is not far from reality: although I do not know the degree to which the police gives information to the Ministry, it’s clear that it seeks in the neighborhood assemblies information to complement, act as a counterweight and work as a control for the “official” information produced by the precincts. But, at the same time, the police also refuse to give information to the neighborhood assemblies. And the

organizations that are “friends” of the police continue functioning, but now unofficially (since the neighborhood assembly is supposed to be the official one). Given that “unofficial” agencies continue to receive information that the official ones do not get, the “unofficial” replaces the official, and, in the eyes of the participants, the neighborhood assemblies lose much of their content. Therefore, if the Ministry is not able to make this information circulate publicly, those who possess it are able to reproduce, despite the existence of these new participatory spaces, asymmetries regarding the circulation of information which create a caste of “neighborhood” representatives that often clashes with the state’s representatives (LANDAU, 2008). In this case, the dispute is not only over the legitimacy of the organizations in the eyes of the local community, but also between two models of relationship between the community and the police, one of which reproduces the practices of police self-government, while the other dictates civilian control as a part of the political management of safety. The place of the “petitioning neighbor” who limits himself to demanding greater police presence on his block, who accepts police explanations based on a lack of resources and concludes that that “the politicians” are to blame (the typical stance of the “neighborhood political culture”), is to be taken by a citizen who is active in controlling the police and connected with the political administration of the force, a position coherent with a paradigm of “democratic security.” This is the point that creates resistance.

#### *4.2 The conflict over the “security” agenda*

The conflicts over defining what constitutes “security” are not merely conceptual or semantic, but rather bring into play interpretive frameworks and argumentative resources that guide the selection of priorities, signaling of intervention targets, action, etc. In this sense, another one of the important resistances that the concept of “democratic security” upheld by the Ministry has faced in its territorial implementation has been the accusation of “politicization” from various sectors. It is worth noting which characteristics of the participatory process these kinds of accusations address. The National Ministry for Security holds that the “heterogeneity” (which presumably refers to the heterogeneity of the participants) is simultaneously a value, an achievement and a characteristic of the neighborhood assemblies (MINISTERIO DE SEGURIDAD DE LA NACIÓN, 2011b). Nevertheless, certain complexities must be recognized in this “heterogeneity.” First, the implementation process in many of the neighborhood assemblies seems to consist of two stages, which assembly coordinators define as an assembly’s “moment of configuration” and “moment of opening up.” In the first stage, for reasons of pragmatism, priority is given to the convocation of social and political organizations sympathetic to the Ministry’s project. The majority of active assemblies are still in this first stage, but will soon progress to the stage of “opening up” to other types of organizations. The decision to begin in this way was a response to pragmatic issues: levels of conflict needed to be minimal in order to initiate and consolidate a participatory space. Nevertheless, the price of this decision is that other sectors (especially those enrolled in the “neighborhood political culture” of participation

in security) perceive the nascent assemblies as “politicized” or “pro-government” spaces. This assessment leads to a decision not to take part in the assemblies. Even more reactionary strategies are based on these same arguments, such as that of an employee of the Buenos Aires City Government who interrupted an assembly in the Versailles district and accused the National Government of wanting to create, through the assemblies, “committees to defend the revolution”<sup>9</sup> to control the police, and of seeking to make “this like Cuba in ’61.” These extreme positions are fortunately marginal, but they form part of the discourse about the neighborhood assemblies that is aimed at discrediting them.

The assemblies set up according to the logic of these two phases (“configuration” and “opening up”) are those with the most ideologically homogenous participants. They are also more effective at translating the proposals of the new paradigm of “democratic security” into specific initiatives. The Ministry’s official version says that in other areas of the city of Buenos Aires, the assemblies were formed by “spontaneous demand” because there were serious problems in these neighborhoods that created the demand. In cases of this kind that I observed, it was more than just a “spontaneous demand” from the local players; the neighborhood assembly was also a response to an offer by the Ministry to organize situations of protest and agitation. Finally, there are other “mixed” cases, such as Liniers that I will analyze later where a call to convoke politically sympathetic organizations coexisted with the presence of “neighbor” previously mobilized to demand “greater safety.” The latter of these two kinds of cases are those in which the assembly participants were less politically homogenous, and there was a greater distance between the ideas of safety held by the participants (or some of them) and the Ministry’s proposal of “democratic security,” which created conflict over defining the group’s goals and methodologies, with specific resistance and protestation about the working tools and logic proposed by the Ministry. These conflictive situations are not in themselves negative. The problem lies in the fact that, if conflict is a desirable phenomenon in every participatory democratic process, then it must be given a framework and be channeled for the process to be productive and enriching. This constitutes a challenge for both the State and social organizations. When conflict is not channeled in the participatory environment, withdrawals and schisms appear and expose the impossibility of different views coexisting in the same space. Thus the participatory process is impoverished.

I was able to witness an example of this logic in the Liniers neighborhood assembly, on the western side of Buenos Aires. At the time of the launch of the PNPCS, there was a conflict in this neighborhood regarding criminal episodes that had mobilized various groups of inhabitants. At the beginning of 2011, the murder of a taxi driver in Liniers sparked a series of street demonstrations to demand “greater safety.” These demonstrations mobilized pre-existing organizations in the area to work together with others that had formed during the heat of the protests, forming a committee called the “Liniers Self-Convended Neighbors.” This space took upon itself the task of collecting stories from the press and complaints made by those affected by various kinds of crime in the neighborhood over the previous two years. They called this report the “Crime Map” and presented it to the federal and city security ministries. They hoped to get an official answer from ministry officials, and hoped

that the report would result in concrete action on the ground. They received no answer and the actions carried out were seen as slow and insufficient. The contact had, however, served to raise the group's profile and as a result, they were invited to take part in the launch of the Liniers neighborhood assembly on June 2, 2011. This assembly was composed of heterogeneous organizations, and during the first meeting, I was among the many members that clearly saw a dividing line between the participants. A member of the "self-convened neighbors" described it as follows: "What one notices is that there were many Kirchnerist militants,<sup>10</sup> from various groups but ideologically united under this banner, and then the neighbors. It was a clear division, even in the seating arrangement..." (L., member of the Liniers Self-Convened Neighbors).

This dividing line between "neighbors" and "militants," which follows the categories of the "neighborhood political culture," led to some minor tensions at the first meeting. For example, when one of the "self-convened neighbors" suggested that there was a relationship between the degree of danger in a particular neighborhood street and the presence of the Bolivian community in the area. At this point, other assembly participants ("militants" according to the categories of the "neighbors") immediately intervened, repudiating the "neighbors" discriminatory allusions. Nevertheless, the main conflict at that first meeting was over a different issue. While the "self-convened neighbors" group wanted immediate answers to the complaints in the report they had compiled two months prior, Ministry officials proposed to follow a specific working methodology that would include the collective configuration of a "violence prevention map." The neighborhood groups mentioned above interpreted this as a lack of recognition of their work, saying that the "crime map had already been drawn by them." The Ministry representatives insisted that the information collected had been "valuable," but that technically, it did not constitute a "crime map." However, they did not clearly explain why the community report could not form the basis for the diagnosis and management control programs proposed by the neighborhood assemblies,<sup>11</sup> nor did they show the need for a methodology standardized with that of the other assemblies. Caught in the middle of these discussions between Ministry representatives and the "self-convened neighbors," and without the power to take part in them, was a group of members of political and human rights organizations sympathetic to the National Government project, but which had never worked on citizen safety issues before.

Two weeks later at the second neighborhood assembly, the evident tension between the two clearly differentiated groups exploded again over an apparently minor and anecdotal issue. Some of the participants belonging to the group I have already mentioned, of political and social militants inexperienced in safety issues, suggested the need for the "self-convened neighbors," with greater experience in the area, to somehow bring themselves to the same level of knowledge on the subject as the other participants, so as to be able to begin the process on an equal footing. "As I am a political militant, you are security militants," held one woman. The "self-convened neighbors" thought it absurd to have to "lower their level;" and said that, rather, the others should raise theirs to meet them. However, it was above all

the categorization of “security militants” that was perceived as an insult by those who constantly defend the “non-political” nature of their activities. They also said that they had been accused of being “de-stabilizers” by the pro-government militants present at the assembly.<sup>12</sup> Offended by this, the “self-convened neighbors” stopped attending the neighborhood assembly and only one of them continued to participate. As this shows, short circuits in communication and difficulties reconciling their agendas contributed to a conflict, which resulted in the defection of one of the groups interested in the community’s safety. As another member of the “self-convened neighbors” organization said:

*The neighbors were attacked by the same Kirchnerist militants, with provocations, provocations like “you are security militants, you want to destabilize the government,” and you have to put up with it and move on. But beyond this, what the neighbors see is no progress. The real neighbors, that is, who had been here for four months, neighbors that have been working for many months, were made to draw a red circle, when we had handed over a map on April 6, in other words, two months before they arrived, the neighbors said, “We want answers to what we have given you”.*

(M, member of Liniers Self-convened Community Members).

The conflict, therefore, runs through two levels that are constantly confused with each other. On the one hand, the wound to the “apolitical” sensibilities of the “self-convened neighbors” is a result of the tension that appeared in the meetings between those who, without prior experience in issues connected to urban safety, had experienced political militancy and supported the “democratic security” project proposed by the national Ministry of Security, and those, on the contrary, who defend their lack of political ideology and have a long history with neighborhood demands for “greater safety.” Nevertheless, this tension was able to emerge due to another dispute in the assembly. This other dispute was not connected to questions of categorization and political (or “apolitical”) sensibilities, but rather an issue between the Ministry representatives and the “self-convened neighbors” over how to define the structure of the participatory space, the methodologies to apply, and the assembly’s agenda. What constitutes a “crime map,” and what does not? Why adopt a methodology proposed by the Ministry, when the “self-convened neighbors” group has already carried out work showing the community’s problems? Why, instead of starting another diagnosis, are solutions not being found immediately and implemented to solve the problems already diagnosed? These are the questions that were at play from the viewpoint of the “self-convened neighbors.” The idea put forward by the Ministry to use a participatory methodology in order to warrant the sustainability of the participatory space in the long term was not congruent with the goals, the working methods and, ultimately, if I may say so, with the “political culture” of the “self-convened neighbors.” In practice, the Liniers neighborhood assembly has not yet been successful in creating a space that could house and connect the three experiences: that of the “self-convened neighbors,” that of the political and social militants, and that of the Ministry representatives, with their proposed methodology.



## 5 Conclusions

The experiment launched by the National Ministry for Security in April 2011 is, in many ways, a move encouraged by sectors committed to the dissemination of a democratic concept of public safety. Public participation appears in this context as not only a government technique aimed at regaining civilian control over the security forces, but also as the start of a process of cultural change over the medium and long terms, which will obviously require the permanent renewal of political support to sustain participatory processes until they can be instituted as State policy.

I have tried to show that the decision to implement a territorial strategy to disseminate the new paradigm of “democratic security” meant intervening in a complex situation, in which, in addition to the resistance expected from some police forces accustomed to self-government, other important political players arose who are hostile or indifferent to the new paradigm (the Buenos Aires city government), and also sectors of the organized communities who have their own ideas on public security, often colored by repressive axioms incompatible with the safeguard of human rights. It is on this point that the scuffles and open conflicts described in the second half of this article are produced. It is clear that participation refers not only to government technique or a rhetorical appeal, but also to an environment of conflict and negotiation between particular levels of government (national, provincial, or municipal government agencies; police departments, etc.) and a sector to which all this is directed (“the community,” “the neighborhood”) that does not exist as a unit but as an open set of conflictive groups and interests, with very different political cultures and local issues. The “self-convened” organizations, the residual sediment of other participatory experiments and the police forces (Federal and Metropolitan) constitute the players in what we could describe as participation in security “field,” in which, without a doubt, there are various capitals at play (BOURDIEU, 1995). New players then enter this field: the National Ministry for Security and political and social groupings which, until now, were at the margins of these discussions. This entry provokes a conflictive dynamic, which is still ongoing. The conflicts described in this article represent a temporal cross-section, a “photograph” of a process which in fact is dynamic, where the modes of linkage between the players change, partly also as a consequence of the participatory process itself. The PNPCS has only been running for some months, and these notes are therefore provisional, but I believe they serve to reflect on some of the practical problems that the processes of cultural change promoted by the State can expect to face.

The new experiment in participation proposed by the National Ministry for Security begins with some very promising axioms, but also with the need to articulate with preexisting players in the complex local fields of participation. Two lines of tension appear to be drawn in this scenario. The State faces the challenge of being both articulator and player. It must be the guarantor of a space where enriching conflicts can emerge and be sustained, and at the same time be a disseminator of ideas, of its own and of society’s participation project. This means working in a delicate balancing act and conceiving of possibilities to address the problem that take into account the perceptions and sensibilities of those who for years have been cultivating a systematic

lack of trust in the State in general and as guarantor of public safety in particular, at the same time as considering it to be the only authority capable of solving all problems.

On the other hand, for all those players interested in committing to participation understood as democratizing cultural change, come they from the State or from organizations, a tension emerges between participation as a government dynamic requiring time and perseverance; the urgency to show results (“efficiency”); and the conflicts that emerge every time that spaces are built which, to a greater or lesser degree, presuppose a relinquishing of power by government authorities which they subsequently cannot control (CIAFARDINI,2006). It is no accident that the most “efficient” assemblies at adopting and disseminating the new paradigm appear to be, up till now, those that have greater homogeneity among their participants. In this sense, the achievement of participation as part of a change in political culture and as a condition of disseminating the new paradigm of “democratic security” could come into conflict with the practical need to deactivate a particular potentially explosive situation, as has already happened in previous experiments. The challenge of sustaining the spaces despite these urgencies constitutes the specific content of what is called “political decision-making.”

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## NOTES

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1. The Parque Indoamericano, located in the far southwest of the City of Buenos Aires, was occupied at the beginning of December 2010. This occupation was first dislodged (by the Federal Police and the Metropolitan Police) and subsequent armed conflict left three dead and various wounded. The complex web of economic, political and criminal interests behind these episodes needs to be exhaustively studied. For an initial understanding see Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales – CELS (2011).
2. The classification used by the National Ministry for Security is “community participation”. The appeal to the “community” in matters of safety has been criticized as vague, controversial and even risky when one is slipping toward moral authoritarianism (CRAWFORD, 2002) or when one refers to a supposedly “natural” environment in opposition to the constructed and artificial environment of the political spaces (ROSE, 2001). In this case, the notion of “community” refers more properly to the concept of “organized community”, as in the political ideology of Peronism: this does not refer to “natural” links, but to politically constructed social organizations.
3. Research financed by the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas [National Council of Scientific and Technical Research] (CONICET) and undertaken within the sphere of Doctorate in Social Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires. Its provisional title is “Lack of Security, culture and the production of subjectivity. The construct of *vecino* (neighbor) in the public communication of public safety. Metropolitan Buenos Aires, 1997-2011”
4. In November 2008 a new public safety law for the City was passed. This law created the Metropolitan Police and established, in tune with the previous law of 2005 that “community participation” is a citizens’ right and a duty of the State. But it also indicated what would be the specific authorities to channel this participation: the Public Safety Forums. These forums were created by law 3267 passed in November 2009. Two articles of the law (3 and 7) included in the attributes of the Forums that of taking part in the “design and preparation of the Public Security Plan”. The Head of the City Government, engineer Mauricio Macri, vetoed this law in January 2010, considering that the design and preparation of the Plan were the exclusive prerogatives of the Executive Branch. In this way the Forums were deprived of a large part of their content. Moreover, almost two years later, they have yet to be constituted.
5. Licentiate Martha Arriola participated in the two mandates of León Carlos Arslanian as the head of the Security Ministry of Buenos Aires Province (1998-1999 and 2004-2007) and was the creator and principal promoter of the Safety Forums, until now one of the few serious and systematic experiments in citizen participation in public safety in Argentina. In 1999 and in 2008, in each of Arslanian’s mandates, the Forums stopped receiving state aid and political support and left to their own devices, so that today only a few still function in an isolated and autonomous fashion. Many of the tools developed for the Forums were taken up for use in the current experiment of Community Assemblies in the City of Buenos Aires, which I have described in this article.
6. As regards citizen participation as a right that must be guaranteed by the State, resolution 296 refers to article 2 of the American Convention on Human Rights, article 20 of the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 25 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, the Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Child and article 4 of the Convention of Belém do Para.
7. In this emphasis on pre-existing organizations and on the recommendation to organize those who have not yet done so, the previously mentioned question of the “organized community” is given visibility. On the other hand, this ideological option has a very clearly pragmatic dimension: it is very difficult to sustain participatory processes over time if they are not involved in the same organized nuclei guaranteeing participant stability. Regarding this, see Landau (2008).
8. The political tradition that sees the figure of the “community member” as supposedly apolitical and non-participatory in any factional interest goes back at least to the Community Organizations arising during the uncontrolled growth of Buenos Aires’ city fabric in the 1920s and 1930s (DE PRIVITELLI, 2003). At that time, the “community member” was seen as a subject only interested in achieving material improvement for his own community, and supposedly uninterested in questions of political or ideological partisanship.
9. In reference, obviously, to the Revolutionary Defense Committees created in 1960s by the Fidel Castro regime, a capillary structure combining the functions of the dissemination of doctrine with practices of social action, civil vigilance and political control.
10. That is, supporters of the National Government headed by Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.
11. Among other questions, the almost 160-page report prepared by the “self-convened community members” did not provide precise territorial references at the time of the recorded criminal episodes, neither did it prepare time and space patterns of the crimes committed, patterns of avoidance behaviors, etc., features of the “prevention mapping” technique. Nor did it include other questions in the definition of “violence prevention” as part of the “democratic security” paradigm put forward by the National Ministry of Security, such as the problems of public spaces, social conflicts, etc. Its sources were mainly news articles. It nevertheless provided precise information on the location and functioning of various brothels, data used to carry out certain police operations, although not all of those demanded by the “community members” who had authored the report.
12. I was present on this day (June 16, 2011) at the community assembly meeting, and although I heard perfectly well the name “security militants” muttered by a woman taking part in the assembly, at no time did I hear the “self-convened community members” accused of being de-stabilizers. They affirm, however, that they were indeed so accused.

## RESUMO

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O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar uma experiência concreta de política pública de segurança que está sendo implementada na Cidade Autônoma de Buenos Aires (Argentina): o Plano Nacional de Participação Comunitária em Segurança (PNPCS), lançado em abril de 2011 pelo Ministério de Segurança da Nação. O plano tem como um de seus objetivos principais a difusão de um novo paradigma de “segurança democrática”. Proponho-me a analisar alguns dos conflitos que surgiram na implementação desse plano, focalizando duas questões: a) as resistências à mudança na relação entre a polícia e a comunidade; e b) as resistências derivadas do confronto entre a agenda do Ministério e as agendas de organizações da sociedade civil. Argumento que ambas as questões remetem ao encontro conflitante entre o novo paradigma de “segurança democrática” e o que denominarei de “cultura política vicinal” de participação em segurança.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

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Participação cidadã – Políticas públicas de segurança – Mesas de bairro – Segurança democrática – Cultura política vicinal

## RESUMEN

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El objetivo de este artículo es presentar una experiencia concreta de política pública de seguridad que se está llevando adelante en la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires (Argentina): el Plan Nacional de Participación Comunitaria en Seguridad (PNPCS), lanzado en abril de 2011 desde el flamante Ministerio de Seguridad de la Nación. El plan tiene como uno de sus objetivos principales la difusión de un nuevo paradigma de “seguridad democrática”. Me propongo analizar algunos de los conflictos que emergieron en la implementación del mismo, focalizando dos cuestiones: a) las resistencias al cambio en la relación entre la policía y la comunidad; y b) las resistencias derivadas de la confrontación entre la agenda del Ministerio y las agendas de organizaciones de la sociedad civil. Argumento que ambas cuestiones remiten al encuentro conflictivo entre el nuevo paradigma de “seguridad democrática” y lo que denominaré una “cultura política vecinal” de participación en seguridad.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

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Participación ciudadana – Políticas públicas de seguridad – Mesas barriales – Seguridad democrática – Cultura política vecinal