

UNEARTHING THE PURPORTS OF TRUST IN AUTHORITIES AND POWER OF AUTHORITIES IN THE LATIN AMERICAN TAX CLIMATE

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Abstract

In tax behavior research field, two dimensions compiling the “slippery slope framework” are regarded as main drivers of compliance, i.e., perceived trust in authorities and perceived power of authorities. The former grasps citizens’ cognitions towards the efforts tax authorities render in benevolently supplying public goods. The latter covers general cognitions about authorities’ capacity of detecting and efficiently inflicting punishments on tax dodgers. Following interactions which involve both parties of the tax game, a society’s common good is secured through the ensued tax compliance level. Nevertheless, like any outcome depending on cooperation, compliance is frail. This happens mainly because authorities are called to mediate an ongoing clash between citizens who abide by legal prescriptions, through voluntary or enforced compliance, and citizens who eschew them if opportunities arise, through avoidance or evasion. Depending on the chosen mediation approach (trust-based or power-based), one type of compliance prevails over another. The present writing explores new insights of the framework’s chief dimensions within the perimeter of the Latin American interaction tax climate (viz. Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Peru) by dint of economic, fiscal and psychological determinants. The proposed methodological apparatus ranges from operationalizing World Bank governance indicators (government effectiveness, rule of law, regulatory quality, control for corruption) as trust and power proxies, assessing economic growth through chain base indexes and rating ease of tax compliance based on reliable benchmarks (e.g., Paying Taxes indicators, shadow economy, corruption perceptions). The leading goal of the study is to make authorities, investors, international organizations and laypeople cognizant of the role trust in and power of authorities play for compliance levels reached in the Latin American tax climate. Grounding decision-making on comprehensive valuations of trust and power may prove cost-effective for any authority concerned with enacting the appropriate weighting of tax incentives and enforcement strategies in order to enhance compliance; it may urge taxpayers to match the actions of an equitable authority and cooperate; it may serve investors as a guide to determine the efficiency, credibility and stability of Latin American fiscal systems; it may assist financing international organizations to detect the possible risks and vulnerabilities of the relationship between authorities and taxpayers and evaluate the headway/regress registered by a particular country within this tax climate. In terms of trust, various countries in the region have implemented solid strategies to sustain competitiveness, infrastructure, innovation or health. In terms of power, several tax authorities are deemed as rather weak in mitigating noncompliance. Nevertheless, massive investments in infrastructure prove commitment in nixing evasion.

Keywords: trust in authorities, power of authorities, Latin American interaction tax climate, tax behavior.

JEL classification: F30; F62; G18; G28; H26.

1. Introduction

Pinpointing the gist of discovery, Marcel Proust used to say that the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands, but in seeing with new eyes. Trust in authorities and power of authorities trace the confines for a land of perceptions regarding tax behavior, wherein both citizens and authorities can grasp additional meanings regarding compliance, can adopt tax regulations, can adapt fiscal policies and strategies. Following the train of Proustian thoughts, the unearthing voyage proposed by this paper consists in seeing trust and power in the Latin American tax climate (viz. Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Peru) with new eyes, i.e., understanding, analyzing and explaining it with the help of psychological, economic, financial determinants. The aim of the new perspective on trust and power is to make authorities, investors, international organizations and laypeople aware of the role trust in and power of authorities play in collecting public levies within Latin American tax climate. Adopting macro and microeconomic decisions based on ample in-depth assessments of trust and power could prove to be cost-effective for any authority preoccupied to improve tax behavior through the means of a balanced weighting between tax incentives and enforcement policies; it could serve investors as a tool for evaluating the efficiency, transparency and stability of Latin American fiscal systems; it could incentivize citizens to obey tax regulations and comply; it could provide international institutions landmarks in identifying potential threats for the relation governments-citizens and in measuring the evolution of a certain state pertaining to this tax climate.

As pointed out by the “slippery slope framework” (Kirchler, Hoelzl and Wahl, 2008) [8] and its various empirical investigations on professionals and laypeople (e.g., Kasper, Kogler and Kirchler, 2013; Kogler et al., 2013) [6]-[10], trust in authorities grasps taxpayers’ comprehension of authorities’ endeavor to willfully provide high quality goods and services. Power of authorities captures taxpayers’ comprehension of authorities’ ability to uncover noncompliance, chase evaders and inflict sanctions for deterring similar future acts. While trust fosters voluntary tax compliance, power increases enforced compliance. In addition to disentangling the nature of compliance, the suggested framework raises awareness on the importance of tax authorities’ approach towards contributors: the interaction climate becomes antagonistic if authorities use a “cops and robbers” attitude or synergistic if they avail a “service and client attitude”.

The paper is structured in the following fashion: section 2 renders few landmarks regarding the Latin American tax systems; section 3 explains trust and power through several governance indicators; section 4 draws conclusions.

2. Milestones in the Latin American tax systems

In a comprehensive view on the economic history of Latin America following the independence, Bulmer-Thomas (2003: 1-5) [4] opines that, besides the language, culture and geographical position, its countries are bound by colonial experience which shaped there economic development. Boasting a large variety in terms of natural resources, economic development (low vs. middle income countries; “pockets of wealth” vs. destitution), number of inhabitants (small cities vs. megalopolises; 75% urbanization rate and demographic booms) or political regimes (stable vs. frail democracies), Latin America has gained world’s attention especially in the wake of its economic development started in 2003. By applying solid fiscal reforms which triggered reductions in debt levels, increased effectiveness of public expenditures and fiscal space (KPMG, 2012; OECD, 2011, 2012) [9]-[11]-[12], governments in the region have attracted rising flows of foreign direct investments.

For a five-decade time span (1960-2012), we determined the average GDP per capita of the Latin American tax climate and compared it to global values, with a design to highlight the region’s economic performances. Figure 1 witnesses the conspicuous upsurge of all six economies’ GDP per capita, following the global trend. This evolution is generally due to a hike in the GDP of all Latin American economies considered. Particularly, some aspects are worth to be mentioned. By the end of the ‘70s, except for Argentina (which entered the 1960s with a four-digit GDP) and Peru (with a stable three-digit GDP), the rest of the analyzed countries have turned their GDP per capita from a three to a four-digit number.

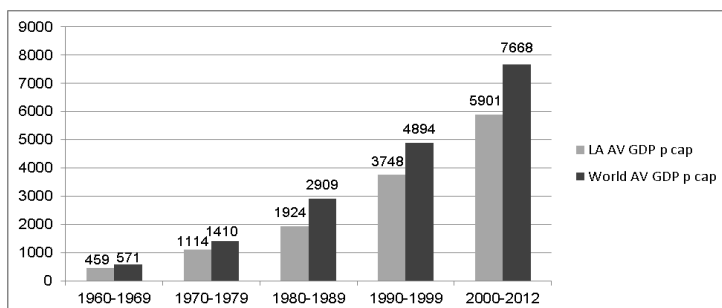


Figure 1. Five decades of Latin American (LA) GDP per capita with respect to world GDP per capita (current \$US)

Source: Authors' computation based on World Bank Data (1960-2012).

By the end of the '80s, Brazil and Costa Rica have surpassed Argentina. Until the end of 2012, the best performer in terms of GDP per capita has been vacillating between Argentina and Brazil. The aforementioned conclusions are supported by the chain base indexes (table 1). Although decreasing, the variation corresponding to all four decades remains positive.

Table 1. Analysis of chain base indexes for Latin American and World average GDP per capita, 1960-2012

	1970-1979/ 1960-1969	1980-1989/ 1970-1979	1990-1999/ 1980-1989	2000-2012/ 1990-1999
Latin American AV	142.95%	72.7%	94.78%	57%
World AV	147%	106.21%	68.25%	56.69%

Source: Authors' computation based on World Bank Data (1960-2012).

A major culprit of the Latin American tax climate (Castelletti, 2008; OECD, 2012) [5]-[12] is that the vast majority of employees (e.g., 90% in Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica) earn below the taxable threshold. Because of this, there are substantial disparities between the number of registered taxpayers and inhabitants: e.g., in Brazil, out of 185 million people, 20 million are registered contributors. Income taxes represent only 4% of the total fiscal revenues, compared to the OECD countries where they amount to 27%. Furthermore, overall fiscal revenues are far from the OECD average (30% of GDP) in all countries, except for Argentina and Brazil.

The Latin American interaction climate between authorities and taxpayers can be somewhat mirrored into the evolution of *Paying Taxes* indicators: number of tax payments (NP), number of hours to comply with main taxes, viz. profit, labor, mandatory contributions, consumption taxes (NH); total tax rate (TTR). By means of information retrieved from eight *Paying Taxes* reports (2006-2013) [14], averages of all three indicators were computed and represented in the next figures. It is of note that all three indicators record a general decline, in keeping with the world general trend. Notwithstanding this, South America has the highest NH, more than twice the world value, the second highest TTR in the world after Africa (*Paying Taxes* 2014 report). Among the indicators, only NP has fallen below the world average.

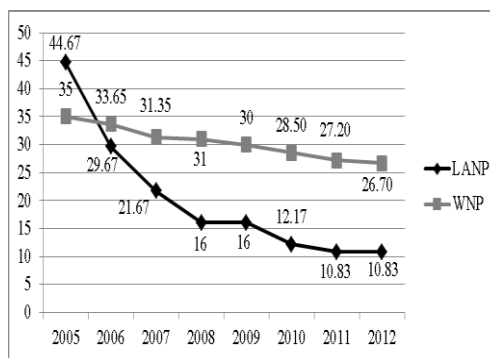


Figure 2. Average Latin America and World Number of Tax Payments (NP)

Source: Authors' computation based on *Paying Taxes* reports (2006-2013).

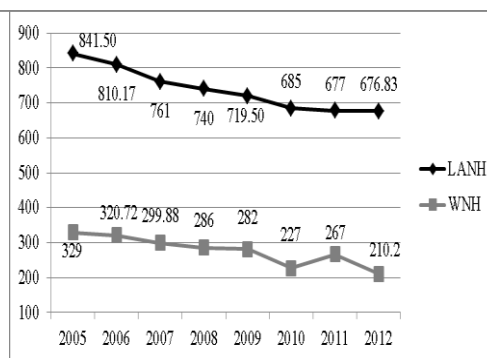


Figure 3. Average Latin America and World Number of Hours to Comply (NH)

Source: Authors' computation based on *Paying Taxes* reports (2006-2013).

Starting with 2006, the LANP has been falling short of the WNP as all countries strive to adopt strategies and reforms of the tax systems. Of the total NP, 50% involve “other taxes”. Regarding our sample, Colombia has registered the biggest reduction in NP, from 68 (2005) to 10 (2012), after introducing a unified online social security contribution payment system (*Paying Taxes* 2014 report).

South America has the highest time to comply in the world, with consumption taxes requiring the most numerous NH, in spite of authorities' efforts to implement electronic filing and payment (*Paying Taxes* 2014 report). In the same vein, figure 3 displays the LANH as being well above the WNH. The result unveils that Latin American countries still lack the ability to entirely refine their tax systems in order to attain a drastic step-down in the NH. At the country level, although five economies have registered slight decreases of NH, Brazil remains the outlier across the entire period with the biggest NH, i.e., 2600 (approx. 108 days).

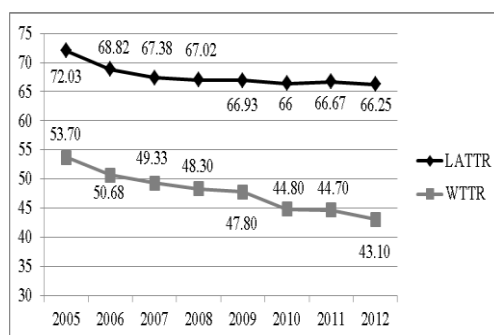


Figure 4. Average Latin America and World Total Tax Rate (TTR)

Source: Authors' computation based on *Paying Taxes* reports (2006-2013).

The values embodied in figure 4 illustrate an overall loose drop of the LATTR, underway since 2005, though LATTR still remains above the WTTR. The biggest reduction was registered in 2006 when: Argentina operated an abatement in the corporate tax from 10.7% (2005) to 6%; Costa Rica increased corporate tax from 10% (2005) to 19.8%, but decreased other taxes from 42.8% (2005) to 6.6%; Mexico opted to raise its corporate tax from 5.3% (2005) to 22.4%, but diminish labor taxes from 30.2% in the previous year to 26.9%.

To conclude, a possible explanation of the entire picture is that, although Latin America's indicators slip on a general slope thanks to various fiscal reforms and regulations, excessive bureaucracy and threadbare fiscal systems slow down the declining pace and make NH and TTR confront some of the highest values in the world. Only when authorities will become aware that augmenting citizens' trust and power could turn the actual climate into a (more) synergistic one, they will operate consistent betterment at the fiscal systems (e.g., make the electronic filing and payment available for all taxes and taxpayers).

3. Trust in authorities and power of authorities bearing upon the Latin American tax climate

The ensuing section embarks upon scrutinizing trust in and power of authorities dimensions in the spirit of Batrancea and Nichita (2014) [2]. As prompted by the authors, several World Bank governance indicators (Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi, 2010) [7] will be used to appraise the two cardinal dimensions incorporated within the “slippery slope framework”. Accordingly, trust will be explained by means of government effectiveness and regulatory quality, while power will be expounded through control for corruption and the rule of law.

The government effectiveness indicator gauges citizens’ cognitions on the quality of public goods, on strategies’ outline and enactment, on government’s accuracy in applying certain strategies. The regulatory quality indicator measures the extent to which authorities are perceived by citizens as efficient in stimulating private sector growth. The grounds for which the dimension *trust in authorities* is best appraised by these indicators are countless, as states with highly trusted authorities: have policy makers who design governing strategies based on fairness and efficiency; finance the public system which supplies quality goods; register high tax compliance rates, low tax evasion levels (hence small underground economies) and thriving economic environments; regard taxpayers as partners in the public goods game, therefore treat them with respect.

Control for corruption measures the degree in which decision makers use public power to acquire personal advantages (by engaging in acts of corruption, either grand or petty) and the degree in which public power is controlled by elites and interest groups. Last but not least, rule of law appraises general cognitions on compliance with the law (i.e., property rights, judicial system, crime and violence perspective, enforcement of contracts). *Power of authorities* is properly rated by the two indicators for various reasons. Firstly, policy makers and taxpayers meet along the line of legal precepts, the former by detecting and punishing tax noncompliance, the latter by declaring all taxable revenues. Secondly, states where legal precepts are efficiently and thoroughly compelled boast low figures regarding the informal economy and corruption. This happens because most civil servants perform their responsibilities out of duty and not to obtain private gains.

In the following, we discuss the unfolding of the abovementioned governance indicators across an eleven-year period. The sample includes six countries, spread across all Latin American regions (i.e., Middle and South America, Caribbean): Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Peru. Percentile ranks among all countries are regarded as yearly data, ranging from 0 (lowest) to 100 (highest).

Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., the renowned US Supreme Court Justice, used to state that civilization is bought through taxation. It goes without saying that one country’s level of tax compliance and the effectiveness with which its government manages public funds drives public goods quality, which is an expression of civilization. As pointed out in the figure below, the analyzed Latin American nations cluster around the middle of the percentile range, with few of them surpassing the value of 60. In the eyes of their citizens, governments still have to improve the quality of supplied goods via better tax collection and wealth redistribution strategies. As a matter of fact, some fiscal shortcomings of the Latin American tax climate are the narrow tax base, low level of fiscal revenues and inappropriate structure of public expenditures (OECD, 2012: 10-11) [12]. The outliers in terms of government effectiveness are Costa Rica (closely followed by Mexico) and Peru, the former registering the highest values across the entire period and the later scoring the lowest.

Costa Rica’s leading position within the sample is certified by other organizations. Since 2011, researchers of the ADEN Business School have investigated the competitiveness level of 18 most important Latin American countries which generate 99% of the regional GDP [16]-[18]. The variables of interest included: supply of basic needs, institutional features, infrastructure, health, education, macroeconomic stability, citizens’ expectations, efficiency regarding labor rapports, access to technology and market competition.

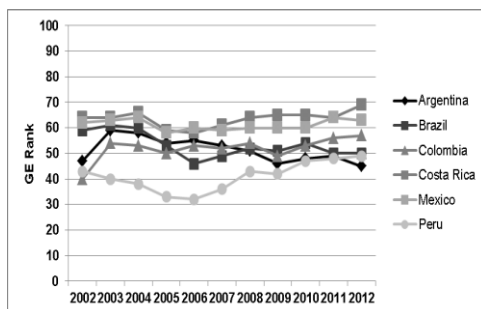


Figure 5. Government Effectiveness (GE)
Source: World Bank Data (2002-2012).

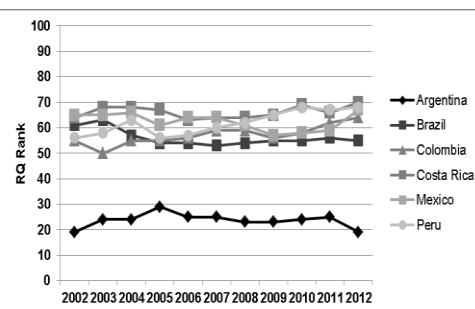


Figure 6. Regulatory Quality (RQ)
Source: World Bank Data (2002-2012).

If in 2011 the country ranked fifth, in 2012 it managed to advance in the ranking as fourth (i.e., following Chile, Panama and Mexico) and in 2013 it was designated as the third most competitive country in the region (after Chile and Panama). As for public goods quality, various countries ranked first with respect to a particular area: Costa Rica in health; Argentina in education; Brazil in infrastructure; Mexico in efficiency of labor rapports.

With reference to regulatory quality, except for Argentina, the other countries rank above the middle of the range during the entire time span. As figure 6 shows, Costa Rica leads with values around 70, because central efforts of supporting private sector growth have been mirrored by citizens' growing trust in authorities' diligent actions. Due to efficient policies concerning tourism, industrial development and agriculture promoted by administrations during the last decade (i.e., following the focus on industrial development promoted by the Asian tigers), Costa Rica has registered great progress in the region, being regarded as one of the “tiger cubs” in terms of competitiveness, alongside Panama. Having tourism as one of the main drivers of economy, the country has managed to become the most visited region in Central America and among the few ones with real ecotourism in the world.

Governing authorities in Brazil, the biggest economy in the region and the “best placed among the BRICS to achieve long-term social solutions” (OECD, 2012: 18) [12], have also witnessed substantial advancement in terms of innovation, within the past decade. Since 2008, it has focused on an efficient development policy with financial support from the Brazilian Development Bank (BNDES) and, like Mexico and Argentina, Brazil has managed to match innovation advancements with development capabilities. Moreover, the country has experienced important progress in terms of strategic planning capacities and engaging civil society in the quest of mitigating social disparities and alleviating destitution (BertelsmannStiftung, 2014: 8) [3].

Like aforementioned, the use of public power for personal gains (i.e., either serving interest groups or mere individuals) and inefficient fiscal policies trigger the sinking of taxable activities into the underground economy, hence severely corroding the power of authorities. When citizens realize that authorities lack capacities in dampening such phenomena, their propensity for compliance is replaced by the focus on noncompliance opportunities. The subsequent figures underline citizens' cognitions regarding control for corruption and the rule of law for the Latin American sample. The outliers are Costa Rica and Brazil, with long-term strategies regarded as more prominent in counteracting lack of cooperation.

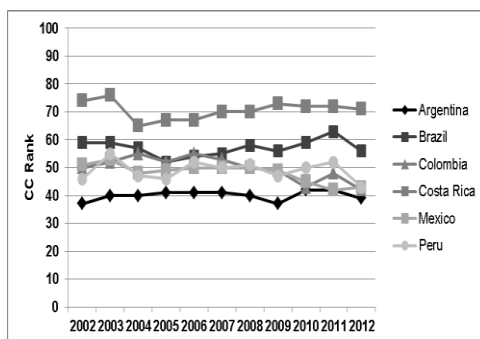


Figure 7. Control for Corruption (CC)

Source: World Bank Data (2002-2012).

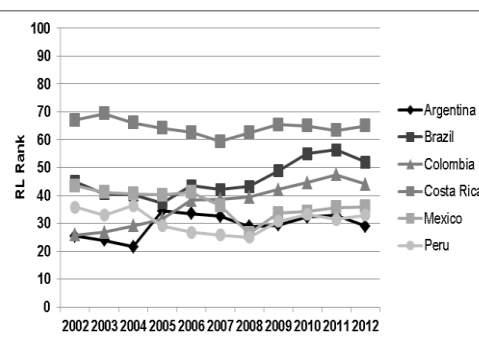


Figure 8. Rule of Law (RL)

Source: World Bank Data (2002-2012).

In terms of corruption perceptions, the sample records a wide variety, ranging from 40 (Argentina) to 80 (Costa Rica). Where governing positions are deemed the chief tool of personal wealth (mainly Argentina, Peru and Mexico), authorities are labeled as corrupt throughout the entire decade. A similar path of results is reported by the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index [15], which in 2012 rated Costa Rica (score 54) as the least corrupt, followed by Brazil (score 43), Peru (score 38), Colombia (score 36), Argentina (score 35) and Mexico (score 34).

According to analyses commissioned by the IMF with respect to the underground economy (Singh, Jain-Chandra and Mohommad, 2012) [13], untaxed activities in this tax climate can upsurge from 20% to more than 40% of the GDP. When referring to tax evasion as part of the shadow economy, Castelletti (2008) [5] signals that illegal tax noncompliance may not be the main cause of the substantial tax-collection gap, but the limited taxbase. Like previously stated, countries in the region collect insufficient tax revenues (compared to developing or developed ones) because the vast majority of citizens generate incomes below the minimum taxable threshold.

Irrespective of the major driver for increasing shadow economies, authorities within the Latin American tax climate have started to implement various strategies in fighting tax evasion. As tackled in Batrancea et al. (2012) [1], the most substantial investments and efforts of mitigating noncompliance in the region are made by the Brazilian tax authorities,

which received the moniker “Lion” after their official logo. Making use of 12,000 federal employees, the tax agency is considered one of the best in collecting revenues, viz. either regular or overdue payments. For example, in 2011, their intense activity triggered an increase of 10.1% in public funds. Due to the agency’s effectiveness, other state governments (i.e., Chile, China, Tanzania) expressed their willingness to learn from the “Lion” and trained staff in Brazil. By favoring a “cops and robbers” approach (e.g., assessing properties’ sizes by helicopter overflight; monitoring alcohol production through beer kegs; raiding locations with special army troops) and increasing power with significant costs, Brazilian tax authorities have managed to raise compliance levels on the short run. The forthcoming years will show whether the strategy aimed also the long run.

4. Conclusions

Our focus on the Latin American tax climate, represented here by Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico and Peru, stems from the significant economic development registered by various nations in the region. During the last decade, countries like Brazil, Costa Rica or Mexico have made headlines for implementing efficient governing strategies with the aim to mitigate income disparities, boost collection of tax revenues, increase competitiveness on the global market.

The present research takes the path adopted in Batrancea and Nichita (2014) [2] and adapts it to the Latin American tax climate. Accordingly, the two dimensions of the “slippery slope framework”, trust in and power of authorities, are tackled by operationalizing four governance indicators determined yearly by the World Bank, i.e., government effectiveness, regulatory quality, control for corruption, rule of law). The methodology used aggregates evaluations of economic development via chain base indexes and appraisal of tax compliance process via indicators like corruption perceptions, shadow economy or “Paying Taxes” variables.

As pinpointed in section 2, the challenges faced by countries belonging to the Latin American tax climate revolve around burdensome total tax rates, excessive bureaucracy during the taxpaying (e.g., 2,600 hours needed by Brazilians to comply), a narrow tax base, large tax-collection gaps, high levels of shadow economy and perceived corruption and very low tax revenue to GDP ratios (in comparison with developed and developing countries). We opine that trust in authorities and power of authorities are solid tools in overcoming such challenges and improving general tax compliance. Supplying citizens with high quality public goods (e.g., facilitating education, health care, infrastructure) augments citizens’ trust in the governing power, making them more prone towards cooperation. On this line, countries like Brazil and Costa Rica have enacted efficient strategies in supporting innovation, infrastructure, health and competitiveness. In terms of power, many of state authorities are perceived as rather weak in their fight to damper noncompliance and rising shadow economies. Some tax authorities have shown commitment in nixing tax evasion through massive investments in cutting edge strategies. Overall, the most prominent performers of the Latin American tax climate, viz. Costa Rica and Brazil, have registered level of perceived power, the former being the most stable country in the region and the latter being among the most important emerging markets within BRICS.

Although the six analyzed countries as well as the whole Latin American region have witnessed significant progress in terms of tax compliance, the chosen indicators come to epitomize the features of the Latin American tax climate and ultimately call for an overhaul of the country tax systems.

5. Acknowledgements

This work was supported by a grant of the Babeş-Bolyai University through the Grants for Young Researchers Programme, project no. GTC 34048/01.11.2013.

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