

March 15, 2023

## Argentine Sovereign Bonds<sup>1</sup>

Even for the financially isolated Argentina, international flows produce positive correlations between assets. 2022 has been a rough year for bond markets. The upsurge in inflation expectations, Central Bank rate hikes around the globe, and the excessive prices of bonds exhibited at the beginning of the year created a lethal combination. As shown in the chart below, Argentine bonds suffered during most of the year. Nevertheless, Argentina has performed slightly better than EMHY since October (GD38 and EMHY ETF are both normalized in the chart below). We like to use EMHY as a benchmark since both government and low rating (below BB) bonds represent nearly 50% of the ETF's allocations.



Source: Sekoia Research, Bloomberg.

What is happening with Argentine bond markets? Where did this over performance come from? We think there are a number of reasons to explain this behavior.

1. **Higher Beta.** As shown in the chart, GD38 and EMHY have both delivered a similar return in the last twelve months. The main difference is explained by volatility. Higher beta, higher volatility. During the bear market, Argentine bonds performed the worst, whereas, during the bull market, they performed much better.
2. **The Fiscal Side.** Since Sergio Massa was appointed as Minister of Economics, we noticed some improvements on the fiscal side. During Martin Guzman's last year in office, fiscal expenditure grew more than 10% above fiscal revenues. Since Massa took charge, fiscal expenditure increased below revenues. Unorthodox measures like the preferential foreign exchange rate for

<sup>1</sup> This report uses closing prices as of 03/14/23.

soybean exports (higher export taxes) and the acceleration of the inflation rate helped to improve the fiscal balance. However, other expenditure lines have also shown an improvement.

3. **Presidential Election.** Economic and political expectations are huge price drivers. A change in the National Government after the general elections seems to be the base case scenario. We believe that the anticipation of a change towards a more pragmatic economic agenda would create a decoupling between the prices of *Globales* and the rest of the emerging bond markets.
4. **Government Repurchase Program.** The Central Bank has been purchasing more than 1.600 billion *Globales* (nearly USD 525 billion) during this year, but we believe that this particular flow increases prices only temporarily, for a few weeks.

We think Argentina will face a very challenging year. The country's macroeconomic imbalances are already huge and we need to add a new factor in 2023, the worst drought in many years. Forecasts for this season's soybean and corn harvests show a reduction of around USD 15.000 bn. due to a historic drought and mid-summer frosts. This currency flow cannot be replaced by any other means and the balance of payments will be tight. The Central Bank will want to avoid a discrete devaluation of the official FX rate, so import controls would be the adjustment variable with well-known consequences: inflationary pressure, deeper recession, and wider spread between the official FX rate and the blue-chip swap. Argentine perspectives look unpleasant in the short term.

Having said that, we consider that potential outcomes look asymmetric over the longer term, bond prices have more room to rise than to fall. The main drivers of this asymmetry are the price level (24/30 cents) and the presidential election this year. A possible change of Government in December would bring a more pragmatic economic and political agenda, and we believe this would be a breath of fresh air for prices (*Globales* around 40 cents?). To reach a higher level of parities, around 50-60 cents, the market needs to see a real change in economic policy after 2023. This new agenda would need to attain a primary fiscal balance and restore the stock of international reserves in the short term. There is no economic room for gradualism this time, Argentina must reestablish its repayment capacity and the new government must restore its tarnished international reputation.

Argentina's public debt reaches 80% of GDP (official number). This measure is very sensitive to the official FX rate, and we know that a devaluation is knocking on the door. In the chart below we use official data. If we stress the data with a higher real exchange rate (weaker peso) the ratios increase. If we remove intra-public debt, which represents nearly 35% of GDP, and if we adjust the data with a higher real exchange rate, the net debt ratio is still below 50% of GDP<sup>2</sup>. At first sight, the level is not the main concern. From our point of view, the problems are the composition (given that approximately 80% of the net debt is denominated in foreign currency), the flows (fiscal and current accounts deficits), the weak international reserves, and the horrible reputation making it impossible to rollover.

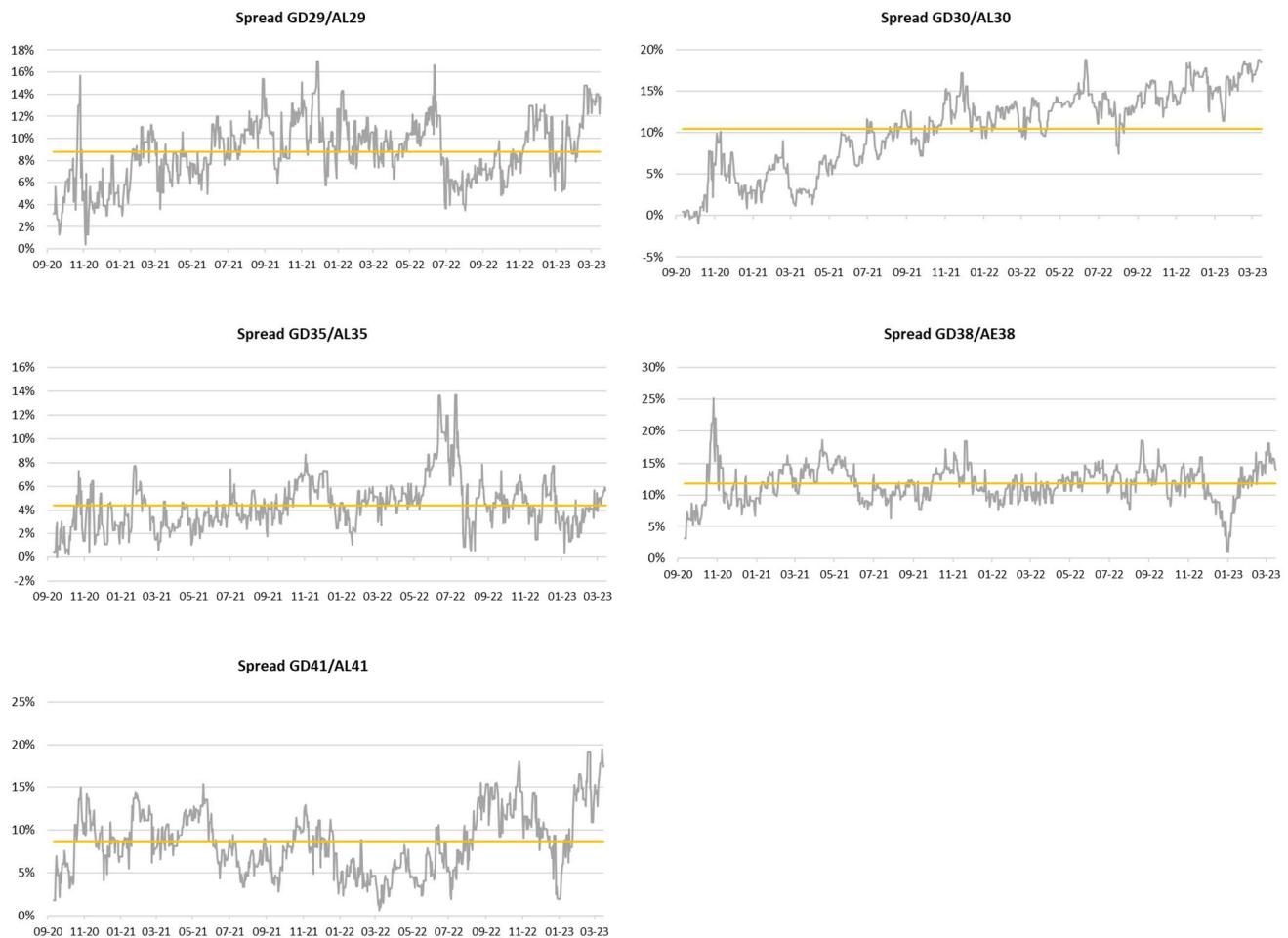
<sup>2</sup> We call "net debt" to bonds held by private sector and debt with International Organizations (IMF, WB, CAF, IDB, etc.)





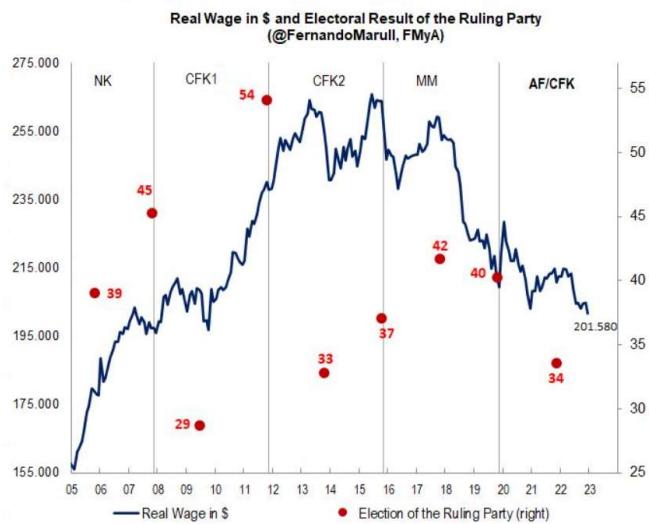






**Source:** Sekoia Research, Bloomberg

A final remark about the general elections. As shown in the chart below from FMyA's consultant, real wages fell throughout the Fernandez Government period. When real wages fall, results for the ruling party get worse. If we use dollar wages or consumer confidence instead of real wages, the charts would illustrate the same result. Moreover, ruling parties in Latin America were defeated during the last elections, regardless of their political spectrum. We consider that a defeat of the governing coalition is the most likely scenario. The main threat to this scenario is a break inside Juntos por el Cambio.



Source: @FernandoMarull, FMyA.

## Summary

The decision of which Argentine sovereign bonds to choose depends on the investors' perspectives. Conservative bondholders should go for New York law bonds with 2005 Indenture, we like GD38. Also, we like GD38 for coupon lovers. From more risk-averse investors we also like GD35 (2016 Indenture) because of its low parity, which means a higher hedge in case of a default scenario. GD35 and GD38 are our top picks. However, for truly optimistic investors who see a sharp spread compression in the future, shorter-duration bonds look appropriate, particularly AL30 in the case of Argentina can avoid another restructuring process.

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