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The Terrorist Spectacle Revisited: Assemblages of Terror from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine to the Islamic State

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Abstract

This article employs the assemblage thinking to further the debates on the nature of terrorist spectacle. The spectacular nature of terrorism – inducing shock on the wide part of the public – is widely regarded as one of the defining traits which distinguish it from other forms of political violence. So far, most studies have focused on the role of modern media in enacting the terrorist spectacle, showing how violent actions are conveyed via media straightforwardly to audiences who react to the (spectacular) acts with the feeling of terror. To nuance these works, I suggest adopting the prism of assemblage which highlights how various human and non-human elements co-constitute the social and political world(s). The 'assemblage thinking' makes it possible to discern two features crucial for studies of terrorist spectacle. First, it highlights how it emerges from the interplay of particular objects that carry within them wider meanings, various historically situated modes of transmitting information and images, and broader civilisational fears related to the perpetrators' identities. Second and relatedly, I show that rather than a wilful strategy pursued by human actors, the terrorist spectacle is a contingent phenomenon produced by the interplay between various elements and practices. I illustrate these points by juxtaposing Palestinian groups' plane hijackings in the 1960s and 1970s and the recent ISIS attacks.

Keywords: terrorism, spectacle, assemblage thinking, PFLP, ISIS

Introduction

On 23 July 1968, members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) hijacked a plane of EL AL, the Israeli national airline, heading from London to Tel Aviv via Rome. Throughout the decade following the first hijacking, the Palestinian groups conducted a series of similarly high-profile operations, the most notable of which was the so-called Dawson's Field hijacking in September 1970 when four planes belonging to different companies were successfully hijacked by Palestinian operatives, and three of them landed at the airfield in Jordan. These events were heavily discussed at the time, and just like subsequent operations conducted by the PFLP and other Palestinian factions, they were viewed by millions of people worldwide. Almost half a century later, on 19 December 2016, Anis Amri, a Tunisian national who had failed to receive asylum in Germany, drove a lorry into a crowd of people attending a Christmas market in Breitscheidplatz in Berlin, killing twelve people including the driver of the vehicle. Following the attack, the Islamic State (ISIS) released a video in which Amri pledged allegiance to its leader, and investigations revealed that he was instructed by the organisation. Clips of the events were instantly circulated by global media outlets and shared with viral speed, as were many other ISIS-affiliated attacks.

Discussions of the two (sets of) events bear similarities in terms of the extraordinary qualities assigned to these actions: While the Palestinians' tactics of hijacking planes were thought to present origins of 'modern, international terrorism' (Hoffman 2006: 63), the ISIS-inspired attacks were said to pose an 'unprecedented threat' to Europe (Rotella, Edge & Pollack 2016). At the same time, their modus operandi was completely different, with largely bloodless plane hijackings on the one hand, and a murder spree on the other. But what connects them is the spectacular nature of these actions, a quality that, as a rich literature now demonstrates, is one of the key features distinguishing terrorism from others kinds of political violence.

This article juxtaposes the actions of the Palestinian militant groups in the 1960s and the 1970s with ISIS attacks in order to interrogate what constitutes the 'terrorist spectacle' and how it comes into political existence. There is a wide agreement in the literature that terrorism obtains its political and societal salience via this 'unusual or unexpected' quality 'that attracts attention, interest, or disapproval' (Cambridge Dictionary 2024) of large segments of the public, and that modern media are crucial for the emergence of modern terrorism, with its goal to instil fear in the population by connecting violent events with mass audiences (Boggs & Pollard 2006; Kellner 2015; 2004; Kraidy 2017; Livingston 2019; Matusitz 2015). However, the existing literature does not really deal with the

exact process of enacting certain acts of (political) violence as instances of terrorist spectacle, and they approach these dynamics in a somewhat straightforward fashion: In these accounts, certain actions are captured by media and conveyed to the audience, and this leads to affective reactions defined by 'terror' on a wide scale. In this article, I problematise this understanding of how spectacle comes into being by building on the works which attend to the interplay of human and non-human elements in construing the phenomenon of terrorism: Rather than treating technologies, material artefacts and physical space 'as merely incidental or instrumental objects, vehicles for violently carrying out pre-existing political aims' (Larabee 2015: 442), I follow scholars who have foregrounded the importance of more-than-human agency in the emergence of terrorism (see de Goede 2012; de Goede & Sullivan 2016; Amoore & de Goede 2008).

In particular, taking cues from the existing literature which has employed this prism to investigate the politics of terrorism (Puar 2007; Sharma & Nijjar 2018; Telford 2020), I draw on the concept of assemblage to demonstrate how (particular constellations of) objects, perpetrators, civilisational anxieties and media technologies create a terrorist spectacle. As I discuss more extensively below, the assemblage thinking, first laid out by Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari 1987), adopts a perspective that takes into account how 'humans and their constructions' as well as 'some very active and powerful nonhumans' (Bennet 2005: 446) form contingent networks that act in and upon the world. It is this 'mode of ordering heterogeneous entities so that they work together for a certain time' (Müller 2015: 28) that enable these various entities to come together and produce differentiated versions of the spectacle. In what follows, I argue that the assemblage thinking enables us to discern the politics of the terrorist spectacle in a more nuanced manner. Specifically, I pursue two interrelated arguments that further the existing debates by interrogating the foundational elements of these phenomena.

First, while I acknowledge that modern mass media – in their various modalities – are indeed crucial in the process of enacting a spectacle, and thus establishing certain acts of political violence as 'terrorism' (see for example Boggs & Pollard 2006; Livingston 2019; Kraidy 2017), I extend the analytical breadth by arguing that this process needs to be considered with regard to additional key nodes of the assemblage in a more complex manner. I show that the wide resonance of certain acts of violence is a product of interplay between three key elements: various available media technologies that are able to capture and transmit only certain kinds of social reality, thus engendering historically differentiated forms of spectacle; specific types of objects employed by the human actors which are embedded in much wider networks of meaning and thus carry specific political salience; and the civilisational anxieties related to the perpetrators' identities these acts tap into. What I thus argue is that the quality of spectacle and its political salience are

related to registers that involve but also exceed the modern communication realm and their role in conveying the violent actions, and that the notion of 'modern media' effectively blackboxes the various modalities of these means.

Second, and relatedly, I depart from the existing works on the terrorist spectacle which posit it as a wilful strategy pursued by certain actors-cum-terrorists who utilise the modern media milieu to use violence to produce spectacular events to be consumed by large segments of the society (see for example Matusitz 2015; Spencer 2018; Kellner 2015; 2004). By drawing on the assemblage-oriented perspective, in the article I show that while human perpetrators are an integral part of the network of agents, objects and discourses that together generate the spectacular qualities, their intentions do not determine the network's particular forms, nor its societal and political effects. In line with the larger propositions of the assemblage approach, I thus demonstrate that rather than a calculated scheme, the spectacular effect that (co-)defines certain actions as terrorism should be conceived as a contingent phenomenon whose exact articulation is a product of interplay between human as well as non-human elements.

In what follows, I utilise the assemblage thinking to demonstrate these arguments via discussion of Palestinian operations and ISIS attacks. These sets of events have been chosen since, as noted above, they have been described as 'unprecedented' and spectacular instances of terror in spite of vast differences between them: They are not only temporally distant from each other by some four decades, but they are also defined by divergent characteristics, such as existing technologies, adopted methods, objects used in the attacks and the wider (geo)political context in which they took place. Their comparison thus enables us to better discern how spectacles come into being via different means and with divergent qualities. Importantly, use of this empirical material does not seek to be exhaustive and comprehensive in terms of exact reconstruction of the respective assemblages producing 'attention-grabbing occurrences' (Kellner 2002: 2) on the part of large segments of society. Rather, it draws attention to the various elements which constitute these phenomena, how they work together and how they undergo historical change. As such, this article poses as an exploration seeking to provide a novel prism regarding how we can think through the notion of the terrorist spectacle in a more nuanced way.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section starts by noting the common human-centred bias of much of the scholarship on terrorism, and briefly discusses the recent academic efforts to address it. It then introduces the assemblage perspective that guides this paper. After that, I turn to works that deal with the notion of spectacle and its terror-related instances: I show how they mostly underappreciate the various modalities and components of how the spectacle comes into being, and how these shortcomings can be addressed by the assemblage perspective that makes it possible to capture both different modalities of modern mass media and

how these modalities relate to other processes, objects, practices and rationalities. The Palestinian plane hijackings and ISIS attacks are then discussed in the next section, illustrating my claims regarding the differentiated qualities of terrorist spectacle that defined them. The conclusion briefly discusses the political stakes of the article's arguments.

Modern-then-Human Studies of Terrorism and Assemblage Thinking

Terrorism has been infamously hard to define (see e.g. Stampnitzky 2017). The conventional approach usually hinges on several key characteristics: terrorists have political goals; they are non-state groups; they target civilians; and terrorism uses fear to achieve its goals (Hoffman 2006; Richards 2015). This mainstream understanding of terrorism largely subscribes to state definitions, something that has been subjected to extensive critique (Blakeley 2007; Jackson, Murphy & Poynting 2009). By contrast, critical scholars emphasise the arbitrariness and political situatedness of these definitions (Bhatia 2005; Ditrych 2014; Khan 2023; Stampnitzky 2013; Zulaika 2018) and point out the power-laden effects of such selective designations which facilitate employment of measures which would be otherwise impermissible (Bartolucci 2010, 2012; Jackson 2007). But much of this literature is still tied to the understanding of terrorism as a result of human agency, even if authors recognise the salience of technologies within these efforts, such as relying on mass media to amplify a perpetrator's message (cf. Hoffman 2006; Laqueur 1977) or utilising novel technologies for inflicting large-scale harm (see e.g. Kurtulus 2011).

But as already mentioned, more recently scholars have set out to challenge the human-centrism of much of the existing scholarship (see Larabee 2015). This paper is particularly engaged with scholarship which traces how 'terrorism' emerges through material-semiotic practices as 'a specific social problem' (Stampnitzky 2013: 17; see further de Goede 2012; de Goede & Simon 2013; de Goede & Sullivan 2016; Sullivan 2020; Amoore & de Goede 2008). These works show that constructing terrorism is not simply a matter of language, as exploring 'the (discursive) problematisation' of terrorism is accompanied by 'analysis of the ways in which the problem is rendered technical, how alliances are forged in its name [and] how it acts in local setting' (de Goede & Simon 2013: 317). Approached this way, terrorism is a phenomenon which emerges from the work of heterogenous networks that consist not only of human actors such as 'government officials, security experts, risk analysts' but also 'the technological constructs articulated and deployed by these experts, including transactions data algorithmic risk models, network charts and risk indicators' (Amoore & de Goede 2008: 178). It is through these emergent forms that terrorism is rendered an 'object of knowledge' (Stampnitzky 2013: 5) which then 'enable[s] practices of intervention' (de Goede & Simon 2013: 325). While this paper works in the same direction as paying attention to various ele-

ments going into establishing terrorism, its focus is not on how this phenomenon is constructed as a knowable and (ideally) governable reality. I rather contribute to the critical studies of terrorism by investigating how particular acts of violence are enacted as instances of terrorism by focusing specifically on how this understanding is tied to the quality of spectacle. To do so, I utilise insights from the literature on the social and political lives of assemblages.

Assemblage Thinking

Having originated in Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) work and developed extensively by DeLanda and others (DeLanda 2006, 2016; Nail 2017), the notion of assemblages has entered social theory and has been utilised in various fields and disciplines, including international politics and security (Abrahamsen & Williams 2011; Acuto & Curtis 2014; Collier 2006; Sassen 2008). Understood broadly as 'an approach that is capable of accommodating the various hybrids of material, biological, social and technological components that populate our world' (Acuto & Curtis 2014: 2), assemblage thinking makes it possible to go beyond the commonly reified categories of social and political analysis. I do not strive to offer here a full overview of the scholarship on assemblages and a comprehensive exploration of its genealogies and possibilities, a task that far exceeds the scope of this paper. What rather guides this section is the proposition that assemblage thinking enables consideration of the politics of terrorist spectacle in a way that departs from the dominant focus on the role of modern media technologies. Accordingly, I utilise several points salient to utilise the notion of assemblages 'as a way of thinking analytically' (Bleiker 2014: 77) about how these dynamics constitute subjects and objects of social life.

First, the prism of an assemblage draws our attention to the multiplicity of various elements which go into establishing entities and phenomena that constitute the fabric of the social and the political. Deleuze's often quoted definition talks about an assemblage as 'a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms' (Deleuze & Parnet 2007: 69). Building on this broad proposition, Bennet argues that elements of assemblage include a wide spectrum of agents, from human actors to 'animals, vegetables, and minerals; nature, culture, and technology' (Bennet 2005: 445). It is this quality, the ability to capture various types of actors and objects within one frame to better understand how they operate in the world, that is appealing to many students of the social. Since the notion of assemblage enables 'eschewing the nature–culture divide' (Müller 2015: 29), it allows us to make better sense of how seemingly disparate elements can work together and form new realities.

What is crucial for comprehending the assemblage dynamics is that various elements that compose them are related to each other in a strategic manner – there is heterogeneity but also relationality at play. Deleuze continues his definition by noting there are not only heterogenous elements that constitute an assemblage

but also 'liaisons, relations between them'; assemblages exist thanks to 'a symbiosis, a "sympathy"' as well as 'alliances, alloys' (Deleuze & Parnet 2007: 69). DeLanda (2006: 11) proposes that 'the properties of the component parts can never explain the relations which constitute a whole', showing that it is the coming together of the distinct parts that make assemblages distinct and salient. In doing so, they are also generative as they do not merely exist as entities composed of various parts linked to each other, they also 'produce new territorial organisations, new behaviours, new expressions, new actors and new realities' (Müller 2015: 29). Indeed, it is this quality that has made them such a worthwhile object of study across disciplinary fields: Foregrounding assemblages enables us to revisit political processes and dynamics, and study novel forms of agency and action. At the same time, this does not mean that there is some kind of key actor or strategising rationale which dictates actions and movements of the individual parts, or an assemblage as a whole. Bennet (2005: 445) expresses a wide understanding when she argues that an assemblage is 'not governed by a central power: no one member has sufficient competence to fully determine the consequences of the activities of the assemblage'. While assemblages give rise to new social forms and political realities, they are not 'directed' by an articulated goal.

Assemblages are further inherently non-stable, ever undergoing changes and shifts. Even though they can 'become relatively stabilised in their co-functioning' (Bourne 2019: 148) in particular periods, this stabilisation is never indefinite as all assemblages are 'historically contingent entities' (Acuto & Curtis 2014: 4) whose compositions are in flux and unable to be clearly delineated. Even entities foundational to the social and political world we inhabit are undergoing transformations in their precise articulations and manifestations derived from organisation of composing elements: Acuto and Curtis (2014: 7) note that 'something like "the state" can only be talked about in terms of the heterogeneous elements that comprise specific historically situated states, and the processes and mechanisms that provide it with the emergent properties and capacities of statehood'. Assemblage thinking demonstrates that there is no transcendence of phenomena, but rather that we need to attend to their particular contextual forms.

This also means it is impossible to establish boundaries between different assemblages. While scholars do limit their inquiries to specific formations – such as a power grid (Bennet 2005), or a state (Sassen 2008) – these are pragmatic, necessary and heuristic analytical decisions. Since elements that are engaged in one assemblage can become a part of a different one, adopting this prism means that we cannot conceive of specific entities as isolated from other ones. Some assemblages are further subsets of others that populate this world as they 'are born into a pre-existing configuration of other assemblages' (Acuto & Curtis 2014: 8), while different ones overlap (DeLanda 2016). The existing empirical investigations have demonstrated that we simply cannot think of social reality in terms

of clearly delineated and self-contained entities (Abrahamsen & Williams 2011; Sassen 2008). I employ these assemblage-centred insights in the rest of the article to provide a more nuanced understanding of the emergence of terrorist spectacle.

Terror Assemblages: Between Spectacle and (Modern) Media

While the quest for the definition of terrorism remains elusive (Stampnitzky 2017), much of the literature converges on the proposition that one of the crucial components of a 'terrorist' attack is its spectacular and affective nature. In 1975, Jenkins already argued that 'terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not at the actual victims. Terrorism is a theatre' (quoted in Matusitz 2015: 163). While the definitions of terrorism are rather diverse and emphasise different aspects, they largely agree that the key element of what becomes known as an instance of terrorist violence is not primarily the physical, 'objective' damage the particular action inflicts. Schmid (Schmid 2013: 80) echoes much of the existing literature (Boggs & Pollard 2006; Kellner 2004, 2015; Mirgani 2017) when he argues that in terrorist action 'direct victims are generally only passive tools for the realization of terrorist goals' since they are 'mere props for the staging of a violent spectacle meant to influence the perception and behaviour of one or several other audiences – the ultimate targets in the macabre spectacle of terror'. It is thus the psychological impact on those who come witness the act of violence – via different means, as I discuss below – which is then translated into a larger societal and political effect within the given polity that makes terrorism a particular political phenomenon.

This is why I focus on the spectacle as one of the most clearly distinguishable qualities of terrorism when compared to other forms of organised violence that operates via this psychological-cum-political effect on the public. Relying on Debord's (1995) work on the society of the spectacle, many authors (Boggs & Pollard 2006; Giroux 2007; Kellner 2004, 2015; Livingston 2019; Mirgani 2017; Weber 2002) have gone beyond Jenkins's observations by proposing that what establishes actions as terrorism is not the nature of the act itself but rather the images and notions of threat and indiscriminate violence that these actions evoke. In Debord's classic work, the spectacle is both a product and a defining feature of the capitalist era 'in which representation dominates social life and images mediate human relations' (Kraidy 2018: 41). Commodification and fetishisation of the visual on a global scale mean that the spectacle should be 'viewed as a weltanschauung that has been actualized, translated into the material realm – a world view transformed into an objective force' (Debord 1995: 13). Debord's ideas have been taken up by scholars to account for the specific qualities of terrorism, with most conceding that it is the quality of spectacle which endows terrorist actions with such political and societal resonance. As noted above, conceived in terms of 'violence-based communication' (Schmid 2005: 140), experts argue that the audience of terrorist actions is much more important than its victims.

Thus, what is at stake in terrorist acts is not their damage and the casualties themselves but their visibility and the affective reactions they evoke in the onlooker (Kraidy 2017). Relatedly, authors in most cases focus on modern media as facilitating the spectacle which, in this understanding, 'is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images' (Debord 1995: 12). Accordingly, this literature highlights 'the centrality of the new visual media' (Giroux 2007: 17) in enacting the terrorist spectacle (Kellner 2015; 2004). In a nutshell, it is the theatrical and performative quality of the given act (rather than the actual physical damage), and its imprint on the audience(s), mediated by modern communication technologies, that distinguishes terrorism from other forms of political violence (see for example Hoffman 2006; Laqueur 1977; Schmid 2005).

While it would indeed be misleading to downplay the importance of modern media technologies in constructing terrorism as a public event, what is problematic about these accounts is that they effectively treat spectacle in a straightforward and somewhat deterministic way. They posit media as conveyors and amplifiers of the given acts and the audience as a site where the spectacular nature of the terrorist incidents becomes intersubjectively felt after consuming images of violence. In other words, these accounts do not engage the questions of what images become conveyed, how exactly they reach the audience, under what conditions, what other elements (such as spaces and objects) are involved, how these relate to existing pertinent discourses and imaginaries, and so on. For example, Spencer (2018: 279–80) argues that 'the use of more spectacular coordinated violent tactics is one way of gaining greater media coverage' by perpetrators and that their logic is that 'the larger, more coordinated, and more dramatic the attack, the bigger the audience will be'. Similarly, in the quoted remark above, Jenkins talks specifically about hostage-taking as drawing the watchers' attention without elaborating on why this particular practice poses as 'a theatre'. These accounts thus effectively blackbox what goes into rendering something a (terrorist) spectacle, focusing instead solely on how media capture and convey the given acts of violence to the audiences who react in affective ways, feeling 'terror' when exposed to these images. They thus effectively circumvent the question of what constellations make these reactions possible. The matter is not just that the 'symbolic significance' of terrorist attacks is 'multifaceted' as they 'mean different things to different observers' (Juergensmeyer 2017: 73). Without dismissing that it is indeed the case that social identities do impact viewers' understandings of events, it is simplistic to assume that only audience matters in constructing an event as a spectacle in a straightforward manner in which exposure to violence, amplified by mass media, establishes the given act as an instance of terrorism on the part of the public.

This paper argues that the assemblage prism makes it possible to account for these shortcomings by adopting of a much wider analytical perspective – one that

considers various elements and agents as I demonstrate below. But what is crucial here is that the assemblage perspective further enables the problematisation of 'modern media' by differentiating between their various modalities and the effects of these modalities. The popular media from the late 19th century onwards are clearly important for coming to terms with how the terrorist spectacle comes into being – that is, the speed with which they can connect the audiences with the captured events, and the mass nature of this audience are indeed crucial for generating widely spread effects of awe and terror throughout the social body (Kellner 2015). But the assemblage thinking helps address how the notion of 'modern media' often works to blackbox the different articulations of communication means in the 20th and 21st centuries: The treatment of 'modern media' in the literature glosses over different modalities and forms that the means of communication and representation take, which has a crucial impact on the nature of spectacle (co-) engendered by specific technologies. By adopting the assemblage perspective and approaching not only the terrorist spectacle but also modern media themselves as ever-changing networks of devices, human actors, captured realities, distribution technologies and the affects they generate, we can better discern how different forms of modern communication generate divergent enactments of the spectacle.

The visual mass media – such as TV and still images circulated via newspapers that I briefly discuss – were crucial in setting up the conditions for the emergence of the terrorist spectacle as they quickly connected the object of reporting with broad audiences (Mirgani 2017).[1] The visual component was indeed crucial in these dynamics as TV footage and photographs could convey the nature of the concerned attack (and thus co-generate its spectacular nature) in a more visceral – and hence efficient – way than could written accounts. At the same time, to visually capture the given events required specific technical means and professional expertise (such as a trained TV crew with adequate equipment), and hence only certain kinds of events could be captured. For most of the modern period, moving images in particular were usually consumed in particular settings, such as living rooms equipped with TV sets (cf., Schulz 1997). The mass media, even as they reached a mass audience, were thus limited in terms of what kind of (visual) content they could convey, and often in terms of in what kinds of spaces they would be consumed.

By contrast, social media, a crucial part of the current media landscape, still operate via both mass and visual registers as they provide immediate information to millions of users, but they are defined by several novel features. Through their reliance on sharing and reposting, they eschew the traditional hierarchies and

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1   A thorough discussion of modern media in their various modalities are outside of the scope of this paper. Here, I focus only on the aspects most important for the paper's arguments.

authority, and circumvent gatekeeping practices (Bro & Wallberg 2014). Effectively, they then enable a viral and immediate spread of information pertaining to the concerned events which can be generated and distributed by myriads of accounts, thus very quickly oversaturating the public space and people's news intake with images and data, and their various interpretations, which form the terror spectacle. Furthermore, they present a more embodied experience of consuming the news and information as they can be accessed essentially everywhere on mobile phones and other devices: from a family gathering in living rooms, the venue of consuming 'traditional' visual TV media, to jogging in a park or commuting on a train (Munster 2011). Due to their pervasive presence across different registers, they thus construe much closer and ubiquitous engagements with the events-cum-spectacles.

It is thus not just the speed and mass reach that matter, but also the situated, sensual and material properties of media, and their interaction with the consumer and her surroundings and wider conditions, that impact the process of enacting meaning and generating affect. As a result, the various media forms (re)assemble the news, human actors (both producers and consumers), technologies and objects in widely different ways – and with divergent affective responses. What this means for the topic at hand is that the assemblage thinking reveals that enacting a terror spectacle is multifaceted not only in terms of actors, technologies, objects and discourses that participate in it. It also helps discern how media – usually treated in a somewhat uniform fashion – can contribute to this process in differentiated ways. As I will show below with reference to the Palestinian and ISIS actions, it is the (im)possibilities to capture the terrorist events-in-becoming and the modes of spreading and consuming news and information that should be taken into account when discerning the process of enacting the spectacle.

Terrorist Spectacular Assemblages in History

This section utilises the conceptual framework of the paper to discuss construing terrorist spectacles via various assemblages with regard to the Palestinian hijackings in the 1960s and the 1970s, and the more recent ISIS-affiliated attacks. These two cases share some similarities: The perpetrators in question were members of non-white communities and were posited as a racialised Other (Bhattacharyya 2013; Jannack 2021) – a framing which facilitates establishing them as terrorists in the mainstream Western discourse (Cainkar & Selod 2018; Selod 2018) – and they could not achieve the same status of a shocking threat if it was not for cutting-edge media in the respective periods. However, as I demonstrate in what follows, the specific nature of spectacle which posited Palestinians and ISIS-affiliated individuals as terrorists engaging in 'unprecedented' violence was vastly different, derived from quite divergent sources and had rather disparate effects.

I discuss how the spectacular quality is more than simply 'a social relation' emerging from circulation of mediated violence per Debord: how it is derived not only from the site of the audience but also the attackers' identities, which tie specific acts to larger geopolitical and civilisational constellations, framing these actions as politically significant and concerning; how there are different ways in which media actually connect the audiences with events that are then rendered terrorism; and how different objects contribute in divergent ways towards the spectacular nature of a given attack. In making these points, the paper nuances our understanding of how a spectacle comes to be and, more generally, how particular actions can become understood as terrorism. I thus show that it is contingent and contextual 'sympathies' between the communication means through which these actions are conveyed worldwide, the objects employed, and the fears pertaining to the perpetrators' identities and their positioning within larger civilisational frames that allow these events to 'gain significance' as 'actual configurations' with a global imprint (Collier 2006: 400) in the form of terrorist spectacles.

First International Terrorism

Arguably the most stunning operation of all the Palestinian plane hijackings was carried out in September of 1970: In the span of four days between 6 and 9 September, PFLP operatives and their sympathisers sought to hijack five planes of different airlines. While not totally successful, the Palestinians and their allies managed to gather three planes at Dawson's Fields, a former RAF base in Jordan, an accomplishment that captured global attention. Although the so-called Dawson's Fields hijackings led to Black September, a de-facto civil war between the Palestinian factions and the Jordanian governmental forces which proved to be highly detrimental for the Palestinian cause (Sayigh 2004: 262–281), this does not diminish the world-wide resonance of the hijackings which was immediate and massive. In total, various Palestinian groups hijacked 16 planes between 1968 and 1976 (Byman 2011: 40).

As suggested above, a number of authors (Jackson 2005; Zulaika 2018; Bartolucci 2012; Bhatia 2005) have demonstrated that there is a glaring discrepancy between the material costs of terrorism and the perceptions and imaginaries it generates. In this regard, terrorist actions against aerial targets in the 1970s are very illustrative. Even Hoffman, who was quoted in the introduction to underscore the literature's contention with regard to establishing Palestinian actions as the commencement of international terrorism, notes the following regarding aviation security:

> Serious and considerable though the above trends are, their implications for — much less direct effect on — commercial aviation are by no means clear. Despite media impressions to the contrary and the popular misper-

ception fostered by those impressions, terrorist attacks on civil aviation
— particularly inflight bombings or attempted bombings — are in fact
relatively rare. Indeed, they account for only 15 of the 2,537 international
terrorist incidents recorded between 1970 and 1979 (or .006 per cent)
and just 12 of 3,943 recorded between 1980 and 1989 (an even lower .003
percent). (Hoffman 1997: 10)

Rather than the material costs imposed by these actions, it is the peculiar
quality – the spectacle – that grants terrorism its prominent position in political
discourse and public consciousness. In the case of the Palestinian groups' plane
hijackings, this effect is intimately linked to the emergence of the aerial business
as marker of the global at the time. As argued by Adey (Adey 2004: 1368),

> The growth of air transport is a relatively recent phenomenon. The air-
> ports we know today have become necessary only since the development
> of mass air transportation in the late 1960s. Before the introduction of
> wide-body jets, airports and planes were filled by upper-class and business
> passengers. Air travel was still heroic and romantic.

It is important to note here that the hijackings were largely bloodless operations
(which contrasts with the ISIS's actions discussed in the next section) as in most
cases, passengers were either released right after landing or later exchanged for ap-
prehended terrorists. Rather than violence against civilians, 'the hijackings would
transfix the world' (Byman 2011: 40) by targeting and disrupting practices that
stood for progress and novelty. The increasing availability of commercial flights
meant that this form of travel came to mark the process of internationalisation
and interconnectedness of the world, a development enjoyed and witnessed by an
increasingly growing segment of the population (at least in the West) which could
then better relate to Palestinian actions and be impacted by them, even if only in
a mediated form. In one sense, it was the new qualities of this form of mobility
that significantly facilitated Palestinian action. Due to this novelty, 'there seemed
to be no coherent defence against such attacks as the world aviation industry was
not equipped to deal with the gigantic task of checking individually the millions
of passengers who travelled each year' (Choi 1994: 14). Palestinian actions could
thus become successful (indeed, become spectacular) thanks to these particular
material and organisational arrangements.

In order to better comprehend this process, we need to point out the several
crucial nodes of the given assemblage. First, it was the airplanes, the objects that
were both the embodiment and the conductor of dynamics of internationalisation,
that played a key role in establishing Palestinian actions as instances of terrorism
via their prominent position within these developments: The assemblage of the

spectacle was related to, and intersecting with, those networks that constituted 'the international'. The Palestinian operations took place during a period in which airplanes, although specific material artefacts, effectively became crucial sites for performing the global interconnectedness and diminishing of distances. In this context, plane hijackings did not only target individual travellers and companies as they rather related to the very fabric of the emerging notion of the international space. Stampnitzky (2013: 26–27) shows how, in the US context, policy-makers and experts were especially concerned with the transnational quality of violence across national borders, and it was these concerns which gradually posited terrorism as one of the leading threats in the 1970s. The plane hijackings were then seen as especially serious as they were threatening 'aeromobility's centrality to American global power' (Hazbun 2021: 226). In this regard, the planes were crucial nodes as they carried these international qualities inherently within them, surpassing the immediate act of seizing control of particular physical objects by human perpetrators.

The spectacular and supposedly novel nature of the Palestinian groups' actions must thus be situated vis-à-vis these larger developments as it was derived from being situated within much wider popular imaginaries, going beyond, but also feeding into, the symbolism and the materiality of the aircrafts. In other words, the shocking nature of the hijackings was co-generated by the sake of also being a part of other assemblages related to the air travel as the 'international' phenomenon that was imbued with extraordinary social and political status during this period. Tapping into wider socio-technical networks further enabled the Palestinian groups' actions to be enacted as international and hence spectacular actions. These actions had 'alarming implications for an increasingly interconnected international system' as the 'the PFLP moved its regional struggle into the international sphere not just in the ideological dimension . . . but in a physical sense' (Chamberlin 2012: 72). Put differently, the international element of Palestinian actions, and their resulting imprint on the global public's attitudes, did not rely solely on their agents crossing state boundaries in pursuit of their actions but in tapping into the very channels that established the international. It was via utilisation of the planes – embedded in much wider networks of discourses, materialities and practices – that facilitated 'the internationalization of the Palestinian question' by 'targeting global networks of transportation' (Chamberlin 2012: 72), and enacted the Palestinian actions as *unprecedented and international terrorism*: They would become spectacular because they revolved around objects that were embedded in other sets of practices and realities which made the Palestinian operations recognisable as terrorism (rather than a 'mere' crime) and granted them such salience and resonance. Furthermore, by posing a threat to the 'increasingly interconnected and diverse global economy' (Hazbun 2021: 234), the Palestinian actions had the potential to disrupt the flow of international capital

that is, per Debord, crucial for the emergence of the spectacle – a constellation which further intensified the political salience of these acts.

At the same time, the role of the planes as objects granting the spectacular quality to the actions of the PFLP and other Palestinian groups was related to the aforementioned spread of modern media. During the 1950s and 1960s, television became commonplace in the Western countries as 'small black-and-white television sets had become an affordable and increasingly essential item of domestic furniture in even the most modest household'; by 1970, there was on average of one television set per four people in Western Europe (Judt 2005: 345). Obviously, these developments transformed how politics and public reactions to political events unravelled, which concerned acts of terrorism as well. Chamberlin acutely observes that Palestinian hijackings and other violent actions 'exploited recent communications technology and the growing interconnectedness of the late Cold War world' (Chamberlin 2012: 72), highlighting the importance of the medial landscape for the emergence of 'international' terrorism.

As has been discussed above, modern media are often posited as a crucial element in the 'becoming' of terrorism as they enable vast audiences to connect with the particular act of violence, and the technological developments that took place in the 1950s and 1960s did indeed facilitate the Palestinian actions' wide circulation and global attention (Porat 2022: 1075–1077). However, to simply point out the role of the media in establishing a public spectacle negates the other elements which go into this process. It also simplifies the relationship between particular media constellations and specific actions captured by them, and how this interplay engenders enactments of various types of spectacles. In the case of the Palestinian operations, it was not only the spread of TV per se which facilitated hijackings as an international phenomenon. Given the state of technology at the time, camera crews would not have been able to follow fast-paced movements and actions (such as individual bodily attacks conducted by ISIS, as discussed later). However, the hijacked planes, especially once landed and steady, lent themselves as satisfactory objects whose images could be captured by cameras and transmitted globally by television networks (see archival footage in British Pathé 2014) and then as still images further distributed by major newspapers across different international contexts (Porat 2022: 1075–1077). The massive objects could also be spectacularly blown up in the presence of journalists and their devices, and subsequently could be conveyed to the viewers in their homes, theatres and offices.

What the assemblage perspective reveals is that the terrorist spectacle was not merely brought on by the presence of modern communication means in the late 1960s and the 1970s that had been utilised by the Palestinian militant groups. Rather than being merely a function of the media's reach that drew 'unprecedented global attention to the terror organization' (Porat 2022: 1076), it was the physical properties of planes which made the media coverage and circulation of the

Palestinian actions possible given the state of the media technology. At the same time, these actions were so attention-worthy because of their (abovementioned) 'international' symbolic salience, thus highlighting how the material and the sign blend into each other within assemblages (cf. Nail 2017). Furthermore, the relative lack of existing footage (which had to be captured by media professionals and with the use of expensive devices), and the prominent position of established media meant that much of the global audiences were exposed to the same visual material. The resulting terrorist spectacle thus emerged through a particular assemblage constituted by the Palestinians' actions, materiality and symbolism of the planes, and media technologies available at the time. This illustrates not only that the relationship between media, audiences and the emergence of spectacle is far from straightforward, but also how the perpetrators' actions are translated into awe-inspiring political effects via an interaction of numerous agents, objects and practices that compose the given assemblage, a result exceeding the strategic consideration of human attackers.

Lastly, the reasons for establishing Palestinian actions as such a striking case of political violence relates to the wider milieu and histories in which they were embedded, and the civilisational fears they tapped into. Palestinian actions in the late 1960s and the 1970s claim a prominent position in the historical accounts of terrorism as the Palestinian groups were said to 'revolutionize terrorism by making it global' (High Level Military Group 2016: 23) by forming close alliances with aligned violent groups from other countries, from the Red Army Faction in Germany to the Japanese Red Army, while also conducting operations that defied established borders (Hughes 2015: 460–462). More importantly, the actions of the PFLP and other Palestinian armed factions were significant due to the fact that they were a prominent part of the growing discontent within the global distribution of power (Chamberlin 2012). The Palestinians' actions fed into the Third World movements that challenged the Global North's dominance in international politics and over the power of labelling different forms of political violence. Relatedly, this resulted in contestations over the very definition of terrorism in international forums (Ditrych 2014: 55–75). The actions of the PFLP were thus related to global struggles over the current order and Western superiority along with disrupting the global interconnectedness.

The Palestinian terrorist spectacle assemblage at the time was thus also closely related to assemblages of anticolonial resistance, and it was these interlinkages which endowed them with even more resonance and allowed Palestinian terrorism to acquire such a prominent position on the international stage. It was not just the acts of violently taking control of the planes themselves and their media representation which granted these actions the status of the spectacle. As noted by Stampnitzky (2013: 1–3), in the early 1960s plane hijackings were still considered 'only' a criminal endeavour, an understanding which changed dramati-

cally over the course of the next decade. Among other reasons this was because of their international dimension, an aspect especially important in the case of the Palestinian actions that effectively negated state borders. These practices were further rendered as politically significant because they were embedded in a particular historical moment, a connection that amplified the significance and resonance of the act itself. Altogether, then, enactment of this violence as terrorism was thus produced by webs of heterogeneous practices, objects and bodies of knowledge which involved not just the actions of the Palestinian human actors and the actual hijackings, but also the TV and newspaper networks that facilitated the global circulation of images of the hijacked planes, and connections with the anti-colonial transnational assemblages that were challenging the existing global distribution of power and notions of civilisational superiority. It was due to these connections that the Palestinian actions obtained their saliency as 'collectives in which power and actors emerge' (Bourne 2019: 148) and that generated the affective and societal resonance thanks to these particular synergies.

Embodied Horrors of ISIS

The perpetrator of the Berlin attack in 2016, Anis Amri, first murdered Łukasz Urban, the driver of the truck that Amri subsequently used to plow into crowds at a Christmas market at Breitscheidplatz, killing eleven people. He then escaped and was shot in Italy several days later (BBC 2016). According to some commentators, the attack struck the German public with such force because the country had largely been spared from political violence in the era of 'Islamic terrorism'. For example, an article written on the first anniversary of the attack noted that 'the assault on the popular Christmas market brought home to Germans the reality that as part of Europe they, too, are a target for mass terrorist attacks' (The Local 2019), thus underscoring that the terrorist spectacle is linked to the novelty of its enactment. Furthermore, the site of the attack appears to have contributed to the shock that defined the German public's reaction. Breitscheidplatz Square is widely considered one of Berlin's central attractions, sought by tourists and locals alike, and its Christmas markets are renowned. Conducting an attack in Germany in general (a country largely spared from this particular type of political violence) and the square in particular (a space considered serene and peaceful) shows some degree of organisational strategy, thus highlighting the human agency in terrorist attacks. Nonetheless, in what follows, I show that the emergence of the Berlin attack as a major instance of terrorism was embedded in webs of realities that contain but also go beyond ISIS's intentions. Compared to guerrilla operations, establishment of governance structures, and public executions and torture – which the organisation had conducted in Syria and Iraq – ISIS-linked activities in Western Europe and the US were of a radically different nature. Crucially for this article, they were also distinct from the spectacular international operations

of the Palestinian groups discussed above and obtained their terrorist qualities because of vastly different features when compared to those that positioned the PFLP as terrorists four decades earlier.

For starters, the properties at the site of the attack pertained not only to the symbolic level but also to its physicality, which facilitated certain actions. Unlike in other parts of the world, which had to deal with similar acts of political violence, German public spaces in general, and Breitscheidplatz Square in particular, were largely unprotected from this modus operandi: Only following the attack did German authorities install wire and sand baskets, steel pedestals and mobile bollards at the square and other sites across Berlin, with costs totalling some 2.5 million euros (The Local 2019; Walsh 2018). In other words, space not only played a symbolic role but the physical objects became parts of the assemblage facilitating the spectacular nature of the terrorist act.

In a way that relates to but at the same time differs from the importance of planes as objects embedded in wider networks of materiality and meaning discussed above, the physical means and artefacts employed by the ISIS-affiliated attackers are key for establishing the sense of spectacle. Amri's use of a vehicle to conduct his attack subscribes to the dominant modus operandi of ISIS-affiliated attackers: Since 2015, ISIS-linked attacks in Europe and the US were conducted by persons who resorted to individual, so-called 'lone-wolf' attacks against civilians in urban settings. These attacks were mostly carried out with the use of common objects like kitchen knives or consisted of car-ramming attacks. Everyday objects thus became an integral part of the networks that established acts of terrorism by their appropriation by the attackers, which then meant that the terrorist threat became effectively omnipresent since anything could be weaponised. This was explicitly argued by a CNN article (Bergen 2016) which described trucks as 'killing machines', hinting at a world in which a mundane device can become a means of imposing harm. In contrast to the planes – themselves elements of the assemblage constituting 'the international' – hijacked by Palestinian groups some half a century before, in the case of the terrorist spectacle defining ISIS actions, it was mundane everyday objects that became integral to constellations which produced images of individual bodies exposed to physical harm. In this regard, the ISIS actions echo histories of car bombs utilised to 'terrorize populations' by weaponising widely available and inconspicuous vehicles (Davis 2007: 5).

While the tactics of using mundane objects to conduct what becomes rendered as a 'catastrophic event' is thus not novel – one can further point to the planned use of widely available chemicals in the purported 2006 liquid bomb plot to carry out 'catastrophic' attacks (Hoijtink 2017) – its entanglement with other practices and aspects of ISIS operations led to the emergence of an apparently 'unprecedented' spectacular threat with unique characteristics and resonance. The Berlin attack is exemplary in terms of how ISIS actions enacted a specific

kind of fear and the resulting terrorist spectacle by enacting the possibility of omnipresent violence in everyday life against individual bodies via use of otherwise 'non-political' objects. Knives, axes and cars, part and parcel of mundane and common use, can be instantly turned into tools imposing harm, thus installing uncertainty and fear among Western publics whose members are not in general used to this constant presence of danger. In this regard, it is noteworthy that a museum in Bonn has expressed interest in obtaining and displaying the truck used in the attack (Kroet 2017), explicitly, even if inadvertently, highlighting the political salience of everyday objects.

Importantly, in contrast to the ISIS attacks and violent rule in Iraq and Syria that have been described as 'medieval brutality' (Wyke 2015), the ISIS attacks in Western countries in general did not claim massive casualties, and they have been miniscule in comparison to the suffering imposed by ISIS and other armed groups in the Middle East (and beyond). And yet, the ISIS-affiliated individuals' actions in Europe did also enact a particular terrorist spectacle, though quite different from the performative brutality of the group's governance in the proclaimed Caliphate in Syria and Iraq. What went into rendering events such as the Berlin attack as spectacular in terms of their political impact and societal resonance was how the possibility of using everyday objects for political violence generated the highly individualised and embodied nature of the ISIS attacks. Amri's murder of Urban, the Polish driver, and hitting dozens of people with a truck constituted an attack against identifiable human victims, and many other ISIS-linked attacks resulted in the murders of individual victims rather than a massive death toll. As such, the spectacle established through these actions is strikingly different from the hijacking of planes or ISIS operations in the Middle East: Its dreadfulness is not derived from brazen disruptions to the flow of global exchanges nor mass casualties, but from harm imposed on individual bodies via mundane objects. The theatrical qualities are rooted in the images of gruesome damage whose sources are (at least potentially) omnipresent in daily life. These qualities were then enhanced by fears that such violence can always further proliferate, as again illustrated recently by the concerns that ISIS-affiliated individuals might adopt this modus operandi in the wake of the 2025 New Orleans attack that bore clear resemblance to the Berlin events (Guardian 2025).

This embodied quality intertwined with physical means of violence then relates to the particular mode of media technologies facilitating the viral spread of these images and fears. In this regard, there are indeed parallels with the Palestinian actions that became globally prominent (aside from other features) because of the introduction of new forms of media. Nonetheless, this comparison glosses over important differences between the mass use of TV in the 1960s and smartphones in the 2010s, as consuming the media content in the two cases is a vastly different experience. The availability of devices conveying information nowadays means

that nearly everybody can be constantly exposed to images, eye witnesses and descriptions of the attacks in a manner which is next to impossible to escape. For example, in the case of the Berlin attack, 51,000 tweets related to the incident were identified (Fischer-Preßler, Schwemmer & Fischbach 2019), manifesting the circulation of the attack in online spaces.

In contrast to the mass communication modalities discussed above, social media enable a multiplicity of actors to produce visual materials pertaining to the attack and its interpretations. Effectively, then, the spectacularity of the attacks is multiplied as its depictions and impressions virally spread throughout the online sphere and break into the shared social space. This also highlights how the agency in enacting the spectacularity of such incidents pertains to a number of various actors and material constellations, from the individual perpetrators to the social media users, communication companies, the apps' technical properties and so on (cf. Bennet 2005). As such, the impact of the ISIS attacks is derived from, but also exceeds, individuals' actions: While the Islamic State–affiliated perpetrators were aware of the existing media technologies, the spectacular nature of their actions resulted from these multi-agential assemblages connecting physical actions utilising specific objects to wide technological networks in which various elements partook, and which generated political effects which were not under the control of the specific attackers.

Importantly, the comparison with the Palestinian hijackings and their representation via communication means highlight how it is not just the *mass* quality of media but also the (im)possibilities of dissemination of these representations that are pertinent to the politics of generating the terrorist spectacles. The omnipresence and immediacy of social media's dissemination of news and images bring about a radically different experience in comparison to seeing TV footage or newspaper photographs of the plane hijackings. The constant and detailed exposure means that we all can rather vividly imagine ourselves in the place of victims and relive the attack. This is even enhanced by the possibility of consuming this content on a street, or when taking a bus – that is, sites at which the attacks took place, thus further narrowing the gap between the viewer and the victim in addition to the individualised nature of the attacks. In the case of the ISIS attacks, the '"spectacular theatre" of violence' (Juergensmeyer 2017: 73) is composed not only by the (human) act itself, but also by the (technologically facilitated) viral spread of its accounts and the embodied, even if still mediated, quality that enables media consumers to more closely relate to the acts of violence. In the case of ISIS spectacle, it was the linkages between everyday objects, human bodies and specific media technologies that co-constituted particular assemblages which gave rise to terror spectacle revolving around immediate and personalised bodily harm.

Nonetheless, it is not only the specificity and embodied nature of the terrorist attacks mediated by viral communication means which triggered grave concerns

on the part of many Western security professionals as well as the general public; the everyday weaponisation appears threatening because the current online technologies and social media enable potentially wide recruitment. The capabilities of ISIS in this domain – the sleekness of their recruitment videos, the appeal of the messages and efficient targeting of those who might be susceptible to the group's message – led to tangible fears that home-grown radicalisation would become a mass phenomenon. These worries were confined not only to academics (Awan 2017) but also think-tanks (Ward 2018), security agencies (Steinbach 2016) and citizens broadly (Koerner 2016). Thus, the issue is not only that anything can become a weapon. Because of these socio-technological developments, the possible scope of who might resort to violence is ever-increasing and potentially overwhelming. It is the combination of the weaponisation of mundane objects and (supposedly) wide recruitment which granted the ISIS violence such a resonance on the part of audiences consuming the media coverage of these events – due to these confluences, attacks against individual bodies could exponentially increase into boundless series of violent incursions.

Last, these fears cannot be disentangled from imaginaries of certain populations that posit them as prone to becoming terrorists: There is now a wide body of literature clearly demonstrating that terrorism has become highly racialised and construed in terms of Huntingtonian civilisational hierarchies in the Western discourse and counter-terrorist practice (Cainkar & Selod 2018; Selod 2018; Khan 2023). This effectively means that the actions by Amri and other ISIS-affiliated individuals are perceived in a much wider interpretative framework; these prejudices render actions pursued by members of certain ethnic groups more threatening as they cross from mere individual acts into the realm of a collective threat. This was further enhanced by the so-called 'refugee crisis' in Europe in 2015–16, which triggered civilisational anxieties, affective states that ISIS attacks on the European soil tied into as they seemed to validate fears surrounding Islamic fundamentalism (Kaplan 2015). Both the immediate political context and the long genealogies of civilisational Otherness further shifted the meaning attached to individual violent acts, positing them as a much larger threat and endowing them with resonance that enabled the actions to emerge as public spectacles, a product of assemblage comprising a wide variety of elements.

Conclusion

This article has proposed that it is analytically productive to rethink the notion and dynamics of the terrorist spectacle in terms of assemblage, and that this prism opens space for a more careful consideration of how this phenomenon comes into social and political being. Building on, but also departing from, the usual focus on (modern) media in construing this phenomenon, this article has argued that we should pay more attention to the various elements that constitute a spectacle,

and how exactly they come together to be posited as such a spectacular event. Importantly, recognising that this perspective presents 'less of a *theory* and more of a repository of methods and ontological stances towards the social' (Acuto & Curtis 2014: 3), this paper does not seek to argue that it provides some kind of prescriptive, stable conceptualisation of how terrorist spectacle comes into being – a position which is very much at odds with the main tenants of the assemblage thinking. Rather, this is a tentative exploration which sought to demonstrate how the notion of spectacle is composed of various elements and intersects with other assemblages. In other words, it sought to demonstrate that we should investigate how the spectacular qualities of terrorism emerge in particular circumstances, via particular means, and with particular affective, societal and political effects.

At the same time, this perspective also speaks to the political stakes of critical research on terrorism sensitive to both positing certain actions as 'terrorism' and the power-laden effects of acceptance of this label with regard to particular groups and people. As noted above, this burgeoning body of scholarship has both historicised our understanding of 'terrorism' as a social and political phenomenon, and powerfully criticised the power-laden implications and underpinnings of using this label to categorise some groups and violences, dynamics which both reflect and reproduce the existing civilisational, racialised and gendered hierarchies. Nonetheless, less attention has been paid to how these registers intersect with (also historically contextual) means and networks which construe given actions as instances of 'spectacular' terrorism. This paper has argued that a more detailed investigation of these elements and their constellations should be seen as complementary to the focus on discursive formations, as they together construe terrorism as an object of societal concern.

By taking seriously the proposition that 'assemblages become the component parts of other assemblages' (Acuto & Curtis 2014: 8), this paper is thus also an invitation to further appreciate how the perpetrators' identities and the larger discourses that surround them – themselves embedded in various assemblages (Puar 2007; Sharma & Nijjar 2018; Telford 2020) – interact with the networks which produce specific acts as matters of public interest and, indeed, terror. The paper thus shows that more detailed investigations of how terrorist spectacle emerges via given assemblages can further enhance our understanding of how the situated nature of 'terrorism', and the exclusionary practices it entails, figures in collective life. By relating the elements of the given assemblages to larger historical discourses and power-laden formations, we can better comprehend the politics of terrorism and its construction in the public sphere – and, perhaps, also contribute to the contestations and struggles against its discriminatory and repressive usages.

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China's Normative Balancing: Global Security Initiative and Middle East Security Architecture

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Abstract

This article examines China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) as a soft balancing strategy, specifically in the form of normative balancing. It employs a qualitative approach based on data collected from the official website of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as secondary sources including journal articles, newspapers and online news platforms. The study analyses the GSI as a normative balancing strategy and explores its implications for the security architecture of the Middle East using a normative balancing conceptual framework. As an effort by China to challenge the dominance of the United States through the promotion of alternative security norms, the GSI has implications for the Middle East security architecture in three key areas: first, it counters the United States' common security rhetoric by advancing the concept of indivisible security; second, it introduces a Sino-centric perspective on regional security issues; and third, it emphasises the norm of non-interference as an alternative to the United States' interventionist approach in the region.

Introduction

During President Xi Jinping's keynote address at the China-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit in December 2022, he openly invited the Gulf States to join the Global Security Initiative (GSI) as part of a 'joint effort to uphold regional peace and stability' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2022b). The GSI is a Chinese-led security initiative aimed at 'eliminating the root causes of international conflicts, improving global security governance, encouraging joint international efforts to bring more stability and certainty to a volatile and changing era, and promoting durable peace and development in the world' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs The People's Republic of China 2023b). According to Alice Eckman, the GSI serves two broader strategic objectives for China: building an alternative global 'security architecture' and positioning itself as a model for developing countries in various sectors (Eckman 2023). Additionally, the Chinese government explicitly highlights a 'new vision of security' in its GSI concept paper (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023b). The Middle East is a competitive and fragmented region characterised by interstate rivalries and identity politics, often manifesting as inter-religious and inter-communal conflicts (Esteshami 2016). As Julia Gurol notes, the region 'has always been prone to external influence, particularly in matters of security' (Gurol 2020: 23). Historically, the United States has been the dominant external actor in the Middle East, with its influence growing significantly after the Cold War (Byman & Moller 2016b). The region has traditionally been viewed as a central focus of US foreign policy (Al Sarhan 2017). In recent years, however, China has emerged as an increasingly important external player in the Middle East. The invitation for Middle Eastern countries to join the GSI was not only extended directly by Xi Jinping but also explicitly included in the GSI concept paper.

This article argues that the GSI represents China's normative balancing strategy to constrain US hegemony. The GSI serves as a rhetorical tool for China to promote an alternative security architecture grounded in the principles of non-interference, indivisible security and Sino-centrism. The article aims to analyse the GSI as China's soft balancing effort in the form of normative balancing against the United States and the implication of the GSI as normative balancing strategies for the Middle East's security architecture. To support this argument, the article applies the conceptual framework of normative balancing to explain the GSI as China's alternative security architecture designed to counter US dominance through the promotion of alternative security norms. A qualitative research approach is employed, drawing primarily on data from the official website of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as secondary sources such as journal articles, newspapers and online news. Keywords guiding the research include 'China', 'United States', 'Sino-American rivalry', 'Global Security Initiative', 'soft balancing', 'security norm', 'security architecture' and the 'Middle East'.

This article makes two key academic contributions. First, it introduces the concept of normative balancing as another form of soft balancing against United States hegemony, highlighting how China employs the GSI as a core component of this strategy. Second, it enriches the discourse on Middle East security architecture by examining China's active efforts to invite Middle East countries and by using the GSI as the security norm in Middle East security issues. The article is structured into five sections. The first section is the introduction. The second section delves into the conceptual framework of normative balancing. The third section explores the interests of China and the United States in the Middle East. The fourth section analyses China's GSI as a normative balancing strategy toward United States hegemony and its implication on the Middle East security architecture.

China global initiative security and the limit of soft balancing concept

Soft balancing emerged as a concept in the mid-2000s to explain the lack of hard balancing behaviour towards US hegemony after the Cold War (Ferguson 2012). Robert Pape (2005), a leading scholar on the topic, defines soft balancing as 'actions that do not directly challenge U.S. military preponderance but that use nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine U.S. unilateral aggressiveness'. Lanteigne (2012) elaborates that traditional hard balancing has become strategically risky in the post–Cold War context. As a result, states have turned to more indirect, nonmilitary means such as diplomatic or economic measures to counter dominant powers. The concept has since been interpreted and refined by various scholars. Paul (2005) describes soft balancing as the formation of limited coalitions and the upgrading of alliances to constrain hegemonic behaviour. Similarly, Walt (2009) argues that soft balancing under US dominance involves coordinated diplomatic actions to achieve outcomes opposed to US preferences – outcomes unattainable without multilateral support. The main idea of soft balancing efforts is that the state does not necessarily have to increase its relative power by using military force and other material capabilities to balance the threatened state. As argued by Wivel and Paul (2020), soft balancing is the opposing strategy of hard balancing, which relies on arms build-up and formal alignments. These scholarly perspectives underline that soft balancing is a strategic adaptation that allows states to exert influence in a unipolar system without engaging in open confrontation.

However, over the past decade, the global order has undergone significant changes. The perception of US decline, the rise of China as a competing power and a general shift toward multipolarity have altered the dynamics of power. Consequently, scholars have debated the continued relevance of soft balancing in this evolving context (Lanteigne 2012). Critics question whether soft balancing, originally framed within a unipolar world, remains applicable (Brooks & Wohlforth

2005). In response, He and Feng (2008) argue that soft balancing is not merely a balancing act in unipolar power distribution but also a rational behaviour under conditions of economic interdependence. Expanding on this, scholars have since analysed soft balancing behaviours within bipolar and multipolar systems (Feng & He 2017; He & Feng 2008; Paul et al. 2025). A prominent case of contemporary soft balancing strategies can be seen in China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) to counterbalance US dominance through alternative security frameworks. The GSI provides an illustrative example of soft balancing that avoids direct military confrontation with the US-led order, which China perceives as a source of instability (Freeman 2023). Yip (2024) notes that the GSI is not merely a reactive policy but reflects China's long-term vision for international security. Xiangying (2024) emphasises that the GSI promotes core norms such as peace and non-hegemony, positioning China as a responsible global actor. Through the GSI, China constructs an alternative security norm system that implicitly critiques and counters the US practices. The concept paper for the GSI, for example, states that it aims to 'eliminate the root causes of international conflicts' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs the People's Republic of China 2023). Furthermore, China's official discourse such as in documents like 'U.S. Hegemony and Its Perils' and 'The State of Democracy in the United States: 2022' portrays the United States as a source of global instability, war and democratic coercion.

However, soft balancing appears to have limitations in fully explaining the GSI as China's soft balancing strategy. While the GSI could be seen as China's soft balancing efforts toward the United States, it is not an institution and has not yet taken an institutional form. Rather, the GSI represents China's normative effort to counter US hegemony in security affairs through rhetorical mechanisms such as the promotion of alternative security norms. The concept of soft balancing has limited explanatory power in this context because the soft balancing concept emphasises the use of institutional mechanisms to balance against hegemonic powers. As Paul (2018) notes, one of the key features of soft balancing is the use of institutional constraints. Moreover, Paul et al. (2025) identify four primary instruments of soft balancing: international institutions, limited alignments, economic sanctions and the denial of legitimacy. Many scholars also emphasise the presence of institutions as a major and important element in the soft balancing strategies of China and Russia toward the United States. For example, BRICS has developed into a robust soft balancing coalition (Papa & Han 2025), and China has used the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to engage in soft balancing behaviour against the United States (Song 2013). In contrast, China's GSI is a new security framework promoted and led by China, but it lacks an institutional mechanism. This makes the GSI a form of soft balancing that does not rely on the traditional institutional features typically considered essential to soft balancing strategies. Institutions are considered primary instruments of soft balancing because they

provide weaker states with a means to balance against the hegemon. Institutions offer states legitimacy to deny the hegemon's behaviour or interests. As noted from Finnemore (2009), legitimacy is 'tacit acceptance of the social structure in which power is exercised'. Institutions provide weaker states or those seeking to counterbalance a hegemon with a 'corridor' to resist or constrain its actions without resorting to military force. This ability to oppose lies in the legitimacy conferred by the institutions. As Wivel and Paul (2020) explain, institutions can grant weaker states the legitimacy needed to implement economic and political sanctions against more powerful states, which are essential elements of a soft balancing strategy.

However, China's GSI lacks institutional mechanisms, so China's establishment of the GSI may be perceived as ineffective when evaluated through the lens of soft balancing theory. Nevertheless, China has clearly positioned the GSI as a strategy aimed at balancing against the United States through noncoercive means. This suggests that the GSI showed the limitations of the soft balancing concept in explaining China's recent strategic behaviour. However, soft balancing in the last two decades has also undergone several expansions as a concept to explain state strategies to balancing hegemonic power. The concept has undergone three key dimensions of expansion. First, it has seen vertical expansion, with scholars applying soft balancing arguments to historical cases beyond the unipolar context (Saltzman 2012). Paul (2018) emphasises that soft balancing is not confined to second-tier states responding to a hegemon but has been used as a security strategy for over two centuries. Second, horizontal expansion extends the concept's applicability beyond great powers to include small and middle powers (Paul et al. 2025). Third, and perhaps most significantly, scholars have refined the theoretical framework of soft balancing by identifying different types and mechanisms of such behaviour (Paul et al. 2025). This broadening of the concept highlights that the changing structure of international power does not diminish the relevance of soft balancing. Rather, it expands its applicability, giving rise to a variety of non-coercive strategies. For example, Kai He (2008) introduces the notion of 'institutional balancing', where states pursue security through multilateral institutions in an anarchic international system. This involves inclusive and exclusive strategies, depending on whether institutions are used to integrate or exclude specific actors. Other scholars, such as Kelley (2005), underscore the role of norms and institutions in shaping soft balancing behaviour. Ferguson (2012) further identifies the use of 'normative' power resources by China and Russia, such as alternative political norms to challenge US ideological influence.

Normative balancing as a variant of soft balancing strategies

The expansion of the soft balancing concept has opened up the possibility that it could be adapted to explain a wider range of contemporary state balancing strate-

gies that do not necessarily fit within its traditional assumptions, especially where institutional functions are emphasised within soft balancing mechanisms. While the GSI lacks institutional mechanisms, it could still be considered a variant of soft balancing strategies. According to Paul et al. (2025), scholars advancing soft balancing theory must clearly delineate what qualifies as soft balancing and what does not. Definitions of soft balancing vary widely. Some view it as any action by weaker states to influence stronger ones, while others limit it to coordinated responses to security threats from a hegemon (Whitaker 2010). The most commonly used definition of soft balancing is from Pape (2005) who describes it as actions that do not directly challenge US military preponderance but that use nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate and undermine aggressive unilateral US military policies. But because the soft balancing concept is quite broad in definition it has gathering critics that argue that soft balancing interprets nearly all strategies of opposition as responses to the balance of power, instead of considering other possible motivations (Brooks & Wohlforth 2005). However, Hurrell (2006) argues that 'those who take a skeptical view of soft balancing risk setting the bar is too high and underplay the role of United States power and United States policies in shaping policy across a range of apparently very diverse issue areas', including using values and norms to justify hegemonic power behaviour and interest toward another state.

Hegemonic power could push certain values and norms to be adopted and label other states that do not follow those values and norms as 'norm-violators'. Hence, hegemonic power then could use values and norms to dominate other states. The United States, as a hegemonic power, has been using normative reasons to justify its foreign policies. For example, the United States NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011 is justified using the 'responsibility to protect' norm (Dunne & Gifkins 2011), and the United States military intervention in Bosnia and Somalia in 1992 was justified as a humanitarian action to stop human rights violations (Western 2002). However, the United States using human rights values to justify its military intervention, has been criticised for having double standards. As noted by Turner (2003), the United States' NATO-led intervention in Kosovo in 1999 was justified because the Kosovo Liberation Army violated human rights by committing killings, abducting and detaining Serbian police as well as Serbian and Albanian civilians. However, the United States also supports Turkey as a key regional ally even though the Turkish government has committed extrajudicial killings and human rights abuses against the Kurdish population. China's government has also addressed the United States' double standard on human rights. United States Secretary of State Anthony Blinken stated there are ongoing human rights abuses in China where, in Xinjiang, the Chinese government continues to carry out genocide and crimes against humanity against predominantly Muslim Uyghurs. In response, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said

that if the United States cared about human rights, it should address its foreign policy impact, especially in the Gaza Strip, where the United States vetoed the UN Security Council's efforts for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza four times (Staunton 2024). Furthermore, the United States also uses normative reasons to push behavioural change in other states. An example is the United States' coercive promotion of democracy in Iraq. According to Whitehead (2009), the United States justified its military operations in Iraq by arguing that it would trigger a new surge of democratisation. The United States also formulated Iraq's new constitution and forced Iraq to become a democratic country. But the coercive democracy promotion by the United States in Iraq created a system dependent on divergent sectarian interests (Ottaway 2023). Using normative reasons to fight the authoritarian regimes and to promote democracy, the United States not only justified its military intervention in Iraq but also enforced behavioural change on the state, pushing it to adopt democracy and Western liberal values and norms. China has heavily criticised the United States' normative reasons as hegemonic behaviour that creates conflict and disturbs peace.

The GSI then represents China's effort to balance United States hegemonic power through norms. China's GSI aims to challenge the United States' existing security framework by introducing alternative norms, even though it lacks formal institutional mechanisms. The GSI represents a variant form of soft balancing strategies, referred to in this article as 'normative balancing'. This variant helps explain China's strategy to counter the US hegemony through noncoercive means, despite the absence of institutional structures traditionally associated with soft balancing. Normative balancing can be described as state actions or efforts to challenge the United States or hegemonic powers through nonmilitary means by introducing alternative norms specifically aimed at countering the dominant norms used by the hegemon to legitimise its actions. The normative balancing conceptual framework integrates elements of neorealism and constructivist theory. Indeed, realist and constructivism theories seem to oppose each other; neorealism emphasises the importance of material power and its capabilities among states in the anarchic world that shape state interest, while constructivism focuses on the importance of social norms and ideas rather than material conditions that shape actor interest. However, as Samuel Barkin (2003) stated, constructivism and realism are compatible and 'not that constructivism is necessarily realist, but that constructivist research is as compatible with a realist worldview as with any other'. According to Lebow (2004), the synergy between realists and constructivists could contribute to studying international relations. Moreover, Mattern (2004) elaborates on Barkin's argument about realist constructivism, which primarily focuses on how 'power structures affect patterns of normative change in international relations' and 'how a particular set of norms affects power structure'. In this sense, normative balancing assumes that norms

not only govern state behaviour by following the logic of appropriateness, but also serve as a source of power for hegemonic actors to govern and influence the behaviour of other states or to justify their own actions.

States choose normative balancing strategies as their soft balancing approach because they aim to introduce norms that are not yet institutionalised. This becomes an important departure point for the GSI, as China's strategic behavior could be explained using normative balancing. As China has perceived the United States using certain norms and values to exert its hegemonic power, the GSI can be seen as Beijing's attempt to act as a norm entrepreneur by promoting new security norms, positioning China as the primary norm-setter. Norms should not be taken for granted but understood as continuously negotiated and challenged. As noted from Nanda and Permata (2024), states can influence global affairs by introducing and persuading certain norms because norms do not emerge in a vacuum but are actively promoted and built by norm entrepreneurs and continuously compete with other norms. The concept of the norm entrepreneur can be traced to Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) argument that certain actors introduce and persuade states to adopt specific norms; these actors are referred to as norm entrepreneurs. A norm entrepreneur plays a crucial role in promoting norms because norms compete with each other (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

Hence, the concept of normative balancing can help explain the lack of institutional mechanisms in the GSI as China's soft balancing strategies. China will then seek to promote and persuade other actors to accept its new security norms. Through this process, the norms may eventually become institutionalised or, in the most advanced stage, internalised and regarded as taken for granted. China's GSI is then positioned as an alternative security norm that challenges US political intervention and security alliance, and emphasises dialogues and multilateralism to manage conflict. According to China's vice minister of Foreign Affairs Chen Xiandong, the GSI represents Xi Jinping's thoughts on diplomacy in international security. The GSI calls for 'extensive consultation and joint contribution for shared benefits instead of the hegemon dictating all' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs the People's Republic of China 2024). The hegemon that the GSI challenges is the United States because China stated that 'in order to maintain its hegemony, the US has long been monopolizing the definition of "democracy," instigating division and confrontation in the name of democracy' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023c) and 'The United States has developed a hegemonic playbook to stage "color revolutions," instigate regional disputes, and even directly launch wars under the guise of promoting democracy, freedom and human rights' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023). China believes that the United States has used certain values and norms to justify its geopolitical agenda, maintain and preserve its hegemony, and mold other countries with its values and political system.

Because China's normative balancing aims to constrain hegemonic efforts to use norms and values as tools of domination, the GSI's alternative security norms and values serve as a competing security norm that challenges the prevailing hegemonic security norm. A study by Markey and Larsen (2022) explain that the GSI is not only a response to the Ukraine War but also appears to be a Chinese grand strategy for a global alternative to the United States–led security institutions. In the context of the GSI itself, as an alternative security norm the GSI possesses six core concepts and principles (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023b), where it will commit to (1) a vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security, (2) respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, (3) abiding to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, (4) taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries, (5) peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation, (6) maintaining security in both traditional and non-traditional domains. According to the GSI core concept, China has ruled out unilateralism and hegemony, and believe a balanced, effective and secure architecture should be established.

China, United States and Middle East security architecture

United States interest and Middle East security architecture

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States' foreign policy has heavily focused on the Middle East (Ashford 2018; Salman et al. 2015). This focus stems from the United States' grand strategy, which has aimed to establish and manage a global security system to contain and deter external threats (Jeffrey 2016). Byman and Moller (2016) explain that United States' interests in the Middle East can be categorised into five main areas: securing access to oil supplies, preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, combating terrorism, safeguarding Israel's security and encouraging the spread of democracy. Though according to the testimony of the United States deputy assistant secretary for Regional Security in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs on 10 August 2021, US involvement in the Middle East is primarily aimed at disrupting international terrorist networks, deterring Iranian aggression and supporting the territorial defence of its partners and allies (United States Department of States 2021). At the same time, according to Katulis (2025), a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute, United States security interest in Middle East is energy security, support for US partners, regional stability, freedom of navigation, prevention of war, counterterrorism, containment of Iran and non-proliferation. The United States' security interests can be summarised as ensuring energy security, particularly access to oil, counterterrorism, supporting its allies (especially safeguarding Israel's security as its main ally in the Middle East) and containing Iran, which is also linked to concerns over nuclear proliferation. Aside from the United States' traditional energy security interests, counterterrorism has become a primary focus of US security policy in the Middle East, as

Washington policymakers have long viewed the region as a breeding ground for terrorism. Following the September 11 (9/11) terrorist attacks, a belief emerged that one of the root causes of Islamic extremism lies in the repressive nature of Middle Eastern regimes (Hobson 2005). The United States has also been a strong supporter of Israel, a stance that has generated widespread discontent among both governments and populations across the Middle East (Alterman 2024). US Efforts to contain Iran and its nuclear programme were evident in 2017, when President Donald J. Trump persuaded Saudi Vice Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to support the formation of the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), a NATO-style security pact aimed at countering Iran's growing regional influence through collective action by Arab nations. The proposed alliance was envisioned to include Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Jordan and Egypt as member states (Farouk 2019; Oztig 2021).

The United States has been using two norms to manage its primary security interests and justify its foreign policies in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War: promoting democracy norms through intervention and advancing security alliances based on the norm of collective security. Intervention to promote democracy has been utilised by the United States to tackle its main security interest in the Middle East, such as counterterrorism, especially in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush's administration identified several causes of violent extremism; however, the prevailing assumption was that terrorism stems primarily from nondemocratic governance (Morris et al. 2021). During President George W. Bush's administration, spreading democratic values and norms was seen as a solution to the problem of terrorism in the Middle East and served as a strategy in his global 'War on Terror' campaign. President Bush's stance for democratic solutions for the terrorism problem is showed as the traditional United States stances for its foreign policy that is based on the liberal internationalism principle. As liberal democracy spreads, peace will be attained. As Diamond (1992) argues, a more democratic world would be a safer, saner and more prosperous world for the United States. Democratic countries do not go to war with each other, sponsor terrorism against other democracies or build weapons of mass destruction to threaten one another. Democratising Arab regimes was seen as a pathway to securing peace in the conflict-ridden Middle East, which was also closely tied to the US interest in protecting Israel. In his 2002 Middle East Initiative, President George W. Bush stressed the need for change, stating: 'It is untenable for Israeli citizens to live in terror. It is untenable for Palestinians to live in squalor and occupation.' He called on Palestinians to build a democracy based on tolerance and liberty, promising that if they pursue these goals, 'America and the world will actively support their efforts' (PBS News 2002). The United States' invasion of Iraq was also justified to impose a democratic regime in Iraq that would defeat part of

the 'axis of evil' which was seen as a serious threat to both the United States and the broader international community. The justification included claims that Iraq possessed nuclear, biological and chemical weapons (NBCWs) (Wood 2019). Political and military interventions justified by spreading liberal democracy, topping regimes possessing weapons of mass destruction and protecting the security of its allies have become central elements of the United States' approach to security in the Middle East.

MESA, as part of the United States' security architecture for the Middle East, aims to strengthen partnerships among Arab countries to confront extremism and terrorism, and to promote peace, stability and development at both regional and international levels (Lopez 2019). The establishment of the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) reflects the United States' approach to shaping regional security based on the principle of collective security. From the United States' perspective, promoting MESA supports key strategic interests, especially containing Iran and curbing their nuclear ambitions, and ensuring Isreal's security, because Iran is considered its primary regional adversary. MESA has been widely viewed as an anti-Iran initiative due to Tehran's exclusion and its portrayal as a threat to regional stability. It has even been described as an attempt to create a Middle Eastern version of NATO, or an 'Arab NATO'. This framing was evident in a 2019 joint statement emphasising efforts to advance MESA and build greater cooperation in the Gulf region in the face of common threats (United States Department of States 2019). The use of 'common threat' highlights the collective security principle underlying MESA. Critics argue that MESA represents a United States–driven effort to institutionalise collective security in the region, primarily to counter Iran and reduce the influence of China and Russia (Farouk 2019). This strategy aligns with existing regional defence structures that also operate on collective defence principles, such as the Arab League's Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation, the Gulf Cooperation Council's Peninsula Shield Force, the GCC Joint Defense Agreement and the Joint Arab Force (Farouk 2019). The GCC itself, consisting of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, was established in 1981 as a political and economic alliance with defence elements, although it does not identify a specific adversary (Jones 2009). However, recent United States–GCC meetings have increasingly focused on Iran. At a May 2024 meeting in Riyadh, former United States Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Dana Stroul noted that discussions centred on Iran as the most urgent threat, including steps to strengthen collective defence (Stroul 2024). A joint statement from the September 2024 United States–GCC meeting reaffirmed commitments to closer cooperation across defence and security and reiterated a shared determination to address Iran's destabilising regional activities (United States Department of States 2024). In sum, the United States has consistently pushed for collective security norms in Middle East security architecture, with Iran framed as the principal source of regional instability.

The Middle East in China's global strategy: Interests, critique and alternatives

China has emerged as a significant actor in the Middle East in recent decades. As Fulton (2021) notes, China has evolved from a marginal external player to an influential power in the Middle East. Not long ago, its engagement in the region was considered limited and primarily driven by its energy needs (Alterman & Garver 2008). According to Watanabe (2023), China remains principally a geo-economic actor, focusing on energy security and investments to support its supply chain. However, China's role has become increasingly multifaceted. One notable area of China's interest in expansion is in security-related activities. While avoiding a dominant leadership role, China has gradually increased its involvement in regional security through peacekeeping missions and anti-piracy operations. Additionally, it has engaged in several key regional issues, including the Iranian nuclear programme, the Syrian conflict and the Palestine-Israel dispute (Sun & He 2015). Sun and He (2015) also argue that Middle Eastern countries are generally receptive to China's involvement in conflict resolution, viewing it as a noncolonial and nonhegemonic actor. As the only developing country among the permanent members of the UN Security Council, China is seen as a more neutral alternative to Western powers in the region.

China's interests in the Middle East include securing energy resources, maintaining regional stability, promoting economic ties through exports and countering terrorism. Its concern with regional stability and security is closely linked to the smooth implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the protection of its energy interests (Wu 2021). China considers the Middle East an important region for securing energy resources, expanding markets for its goods and investments, and advancing infrastructure development and connectivity. Beijing believes that sustained peace and stability in the region are crucial to fully achieving the economic gains from its involvement (Liangxiang 2020). China's energy security is closely linked to stability in the Middle East. This connection became clear during the 2003 Iraq War, which disrupted oil exports from the region and underscored the urgent need for China to diversify its energy sources. In response, China expanded its search for oil to other parts of the world, including Central Asia, South America and Africa. Nevertheless, even with the growing volume of imports from these areas, China's dependence on Middle Eastern oil has remained substantial. Projections indicate that by 2030 53% of China's oil imports will still originate from the Middle East. As such, the region will continue to play a vital strategic role in China's energy landscape (Niu 2021).

At a glance, China's interest in Middle East security is primarily linked to its energy security and the need to maintain regional stability to support its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. In fact, China's energy security is also intertwined with that of the United States, as China remains reliant on the American

security umbrella in the Middle East. As Singh (2021) observes, it is the United States Navy, not the Chinese Navy, that secures oil shipments bound for China through the Strait of Hormuz. The United States maintains a strong naval presence across the region, with its Fifth Fleet headquartered in Manama, Bahrain, while China has been dispatching naval vessels on counter-piracy missions in the Arabian Sea since 2008. These Chinese vessels have occasionally made port calls in Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), signalling a growing but still modest regional engagement. Given that both the United States and Chinese economies depend heavily on global seaborne trade, much of which passes through Middle Eastern Sea lanes, maintaining the stability in the Middle East remains a shared strategic interest between the United States and Beijing. But, while China's and the United States' interests seem 'in the same shoes' in the context of regional stability and energy security, China has a different approach in engaging with Middle East security and political issues. This difference stems from China's approach for its global strategy. According to Niblock (2020), there are six key elements of China's global strategy which are: safeguarding China's sovereignty; China's rejection of strategies based on 'hegemony, expansion or spheres of influence'; actively contributing to building a community with a shared future for mankind; creating structures of cooperation among countries whose interests and values are deemed to be complementary to China's; building a fortified national defence and a strong military; and promoting China's economic interests on the world stage.

Hence, China's approach to its interests in the Middle East differs significantly from that of the United States, even though they may share common interests in certain issues, such as energy, commerce and energy flow through Middle East Sea Lane, and regional stability. The United States primarily pursues its security interests in the region through military intervention and by actively building collective security alliances. This approach has been heavily criticised by China, particularly the use of norms such as promotion of democracy and collective security, which China views as sources of instability. In contrast, China's global strategic approach directly challenges and critiques the US strategy in the Middle East. The rejection of hegemony in international relations and the assertion that respect for national sovereignty must be the guiding principle in all interstate relations are recurring themes in the speeches and official documents issued by Chinese leaders and government bodies. China's appeal to countries in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America largely centres on this anti-hegemonic stance (Niblock 2020). The United States' hegemonic practice is also mentioned by various Middle East state leaders. According to President of Iran Masoud Pezeshkian, under his administration Iran 'will champion the establishment of a "strong region" rather than one where a single country pursues hegemony and dominance over the others' (Pezeshkian 2024). Furthermore, during the 2024 BRICS Summit in Kazan, President Xi Jinping met with President Masoud Pezehkian who asserted that Iran is ready to

collaborate with China to maintain strong mutual support for their core interests and to oppose hegemony and bullying. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, when giving an interview with China Central Television (CCTV), also mentioned that China plays an important role as a superpower and stated that 'when it talks about partnership, it talks about a new principle, not about hegemony' (Ali 2023). Like Iran, Syria also established a strategic partnership with China during President Bashar al-Assad's visit to Hangzhou on 22 September 2023.

China has clearly emphasised its distinct approach to security issues in the Middle East and how it pursues its interests in the region. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that 'in the eyes of the United States, international law seems to be a tool that can be used whenever it finds useful and discarded if it does not want to use it' (Alterman 2024). This statement underscores China's criticism of the United States for selectively applying international law or norms that have been institutionalised to justify its actions and foreign policies, which China views as reflecting hegemonic tendencies. As China's government stated through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs official website, 'Democracy is a common value of humanity and must not be used as a tool to advance geopolitical agenda or counter human development and progress. However, in order to maintain its hegemony, the US has long been monopolizing the definition of "democracy", instigating division and confrontation in the name of democracy' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023c). China showed its strong stance against the United States's hegemonic practice in the Middle East and mentioned Iraq as an example. As noted from Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin on 20 March 2023 'The US decision to wage the Iraq War was based on a lie. The war wreaked havoc on Iraq and the Middle East, and had a devastating impact on world peace and stability. . . Hegemonism must be firmly rejected' (Embassy of the PRC in Montenegro 2023). Furthermore, as M. Singh (2016) argues, the United States advances its interests through a robust military presence, generous military and economic aid to allies, the promotion of political and economic development, and both diplomatic and occasional military interventions. In contrast, China has sought to cultivate cordial relations with all governments in the region, through dialogue, non-interference, multilateralism and against the collective security approach that the United States pushes in the Middle East region. In order to balance the United States's approach in the Middle East that China's government has labeled 'hegemonic', the Chinese government then soft balances it through normative balancing efforts by creating the GSI as a new security norm that serves as an alternative for Middle East security architecture that was led and dominated by the United States.

The GSI and Middle East security architecture

Because the GSI represents China's normative balancing against the United States, it functions as a rhetorical instrument within security discourse aimed at con-

straining US dominance. Through the GSI, China positions itself as a norm entrepreneur, promoting alternative security frameworks that challenge US influence, particularly in the Middle East. This strategy exemplifies a form of soft balancing, which has become increasingly pronounced amid the intensifying Sino-American rivalry. While the rivalry began to surface during President Barack Obama's 'Pivot to Asia', it was under President Donald Trump that it became institutionalised. Within his first year in office, the Trump administration released a new National Security Strategy that reclassified China from a strategic partner to a strategic competitor, framing the bilateral relationship as a zero-sum contest (Hu 2020). Unlike the Cold War, the Sino-American rivalry is not rooted in opposing political ideologies but in a contest for global influence within a deeply interconnected international system. As Rudolf (2021) argues, this rivalry differs significantly from the US-Soviet dynamic, given the high level of economic interdependence between China and the United States. This interdependence makes the competition one of influence and strategic positioning rather than ideological confrontation. In this context, China seeks to counter what it perceives as US hegemony through soft balancing measures, avoiding direct military confrontation or coercive tactics. Despite overlapping interests in some areas, China's global strategic approach remains firmly opposed to hegemonic practices, particularly those associated with the United States. This position is reflected in numerous statements by senior Chinese officials. From China's perspective, the United States is unlikely to allow any unchecked expansion of Chinese global influence, especially as the rivalry has intensified since Trump's first term. On the other hand, the US increasingly views China as a revisionist power aiming to reshape the international order. As (Perthes 2021) notes, the Sino-American rivalry is a multidimensional contest that spans economic, technological and geopolitical domains. Therefore, as explained in the previous section, although China and the United States may share the same interests in the Middle East, China has consistently emphasised that its approach to the region is fundamentally different from that of the United States. Beijing views the United States as a hegemonic power whose use of norms such as democracy promotion to intervene and collective security has contributed to instability and conflict in the region. As the Sino-American rivalry intensifies, China is increasingly positioning itself in opposition to US hegemony in the Middle East. In this context, China is using the GSI as a normative balancing strategy to counteract US dominance and promote an alternative security framework.

   The Middle East is cited as a priority region in the GSI, which outlines a 'five-point proposal on realizing peace and stability in the Middle East' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023b). Even before the official launch of the GSI in 2022, President Xi Jinping had already advocated for a common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security architecture in the region during the 8th Ministerial Meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) in 2018 (China

Institute of International Studies 2022). The GSI represents China's soft balancing in the form of normative balancing against US hegemonic practices in the region. The United States promotes collective security as the guiding norm for Middle East architecture, relying on military alliances to maintain its influence. It also uses norms such as promotion of democracy and human rights to justify political and military interventions. In contrast, China's GSI emphasises security through dialogue, negotiation and multilateralism. Unlike the US alliance-based model, China rejects exclusive blocs in favour of inclusive and cooperative mechanisms. It has also strengthened ties with Arab states through multilateral platforms. As Foreign Minister Wang Yi noted, the CASCF serves as an engine driving the development of China-Arab relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs thePRC 2018). At the Second Middle East Security Forum in 2022, Wang reiterated that the GSI offers a platform for cooperation with Middle Eastern countries and the international community to jointly build a new regional security architecture (China Institute of International Studies 2022). Because the GSI functions as China's normative balancing against the United States' hegemonic presence and policies often justified through democracy promotion and collective security, the GSI is then positioned as a counter-norm to the United States' approach in the Middle East. The GSI reflects China's efforts to promote alternative norms that shape how security issues should be managed. In the context of Middle East security, the GSI embodies a security norm that challenges the norm principles that United States employs to advance its security interests in the region. China, as a norm entrepreneur, actively promotes three key security norms through the GSI: non-interference, indivisible security and Sino-centrism. The three main security norms of the GSI will have implications for the security architecture of the Middle East if China successfully promoted the norms, as they directly challenge the traditional security approach of the United States. Ultimately, this may influence how security is structured and managed across the region.

The first security norm that China promotes through the GSI is non-interference. This norm directly challenges the United States interventionist approach to Middle East security, which has been evident since the end of the Cold War through military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as in the broader context of how the United States manages and protects Israel security issues as one of its key security interests in the region. The non-interference aspect of the GSI is clearly reflected in the GSI Concept Paper, which emphasises the importance of 'respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries' and asserts that 'a country's internal affairs stream has no external interference'. These principles underscore China's commitment to a security approach that contrasts sharply with the interventionist policies often pursued by the United States in the Middle East (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023b). The non-interference norm of the GSI differentiates China's approach to the Middle Eastern security architecture from

that of the United States. From China's perspective, the United States has used various norms and values to justify and maintain its entrenched hegemonic position in the region. In contrast, China emphasises a principle of non-interference. As stated in the GSI Concept Paper, the initiative advocates non-interference in internal affairs and respect for the development paths and social systems independently chosen by the people of different countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs the People's Republic of China 2023e). This principle was reaffirmed at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2024, where Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Chen Xiaodong stated that China will continue to explore the Chinese way to address hotspot issues featuring a commitment to non-interference in internal affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2024a).

China has actively cultivated relations with various Middle Eastern countries on the basis of these non-interference principles. This commitment was exemplified during President Xi Jinping's meeting with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian at the BRICS summit in Kazan, where both leaders affirmed their mutual support and commitment to upholding the non-interference norm (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2024d). The partnership between China and Iran reflects the broader application of Wang Yi's four proposals for a new security architecture in the Middle East, which are positioned as key elements of the GSI (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2022a). First, all countries' legitimate security concerns should be respected, and no state should seek unilateral or absolute security. This reflects the norm of indivisible security. Second, the dominant role of Middle Eastern countries in regional affairs must be upheld, reinforcing the principle of non-interference. Third, all parties should abide by the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter, reflecting China's emphasis on multilateralism. Fourth, regional security dialogue should be strengthened through platforms such as a proposed Gulf security dialogue, promoting mutual trust and common security through diplomacy. This reflects China's diplomatic approach with Chinese characteristics to addressing security issues in the Middle East.

The implications of China's GSI and its non-interference norm could potentially be significant for Middle East security architecture. On 12 June 2025, Israel launched Operation Rising Lion, a series of missile strikes targeting the Natanz nuclear facility in Iran. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that the attack was aimed at 'the heart' of Iran's nuclear programme (Lam et al. 2025). Iran then retaliated by launching a series of missiles to Israel's capital Tel Aviv. Iran retaliation against Israel sparked a reaction from Washington. The United States' political elites remain divided over how to respond to the escalating conflict between Israel and Iran. Republican hawks were quick to express their support for Israel, despite the fact that Israel first initiated the missile strikes on Iran. In contrast, progressive Democrats criticised Israel's actions, emphasising that a war with Iran would not serve the strategic interests of the United States (Al Jazeera

2025). President Trump himself stated that the United States may or may not join Israel's campaign against Iran, reflecting Washington's ambiguous stance on the conflict (Holland et al. 2025). In contrast, China adopted a more decisive and clearly pro-Iran position. Beijing strongly condemned Israel's actions, asserting that they violated fundamental norms of international relations. However, unlike the debate among American political elites regarding the possibility of direct military intervention, China clearly emphasised the need to deescalate the conflict through dialogue despite Beijing's strong support toward Iran. President Xi Jinping stated that 'the force used by Israel against the Iranians cannot establish lasting peace between the two sides', while Foreign Minister Wang Yi affirmed that 'China is ready to play a constructive role in containing the escalation of the conflict between Tehran and Tel Aviv' (Helmy 2025). China's approach reflects its broader interest in maintaining regional stability, as prolonged political turmoil in the Middle East could seriously disrupt its energy supply. Throughout the crisis, China consistently promoted a non-interference approach, in contrast to the interventionist strategies often pursued by the United States. This position was reiterated by Xi Jinping during a summit with five Central Asian nations in Kazakhstan on 17 June 2025, where he declared that 'China opposes any actions that infringe upon the sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity of other countries' (Wang & Lee 2025). If China and its non-interference approach are increasingly accepted as the correct framework for managing conflicts in the Middle East, with China positioned as a central negotiator, then the United States' traditional military intervention to secure its interests in the region may face strong backlash. China could use the non-interference norm as a rhetorical tool to exert pressure on Washington. In such a scenario, the United States would find it increasingly difficult to justify its interventionist actions by invoking the rhetoric of democracy promotion, whether to overthrow authoritarian regimes or to support its strategic allies.

The second security norm that China promotes through the GSI is indivisible security. Indivisible security refers to the idea that the security of states within a region is interconnected and that no country should pursue its own security at the expense of others (Freeman & Stephenson 2022). In the context of the GSI, China extends this principle to include a comprehensive view of security, encompassing individual, traditional and non-traditional aspects, as well as balancing security rights with security obligations, and linking security with development. China has designed the GSI around the concept of indivisible security to counter what it views as the hegemonic role of the United States. From Beijing's perspective, the United States is responsible for numerous global conflicts caused by its bloc politics by creating collective security alliances to contain certain countries. The GSI therefore serves as an alternative security norm for the United States' collective security norm. The GSI principle of indivisible security is evidently from the

GSI concept paper as well as from Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China H.E Chen Xiandong, who stated that the GSI highlights 'the indivisibility of the security community of mankind' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2024c). The indivisible security norm promoted by China through the Global Security Initiative may align it with like-minded countries in the Middle East that seek protection from United States hegemony. A key example of this is Iran. In a statement released on 26 October 2024, the Iranian Foreign Ministry responded to Israeli aggression targeting Iranian military sites by asserting that military and political support from the United States and other Western countries for Israel is the primary source of tension and insecurity in the Middle East (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran 2024).

The United States has long been motivated to establish a security bloc in the Middle East to deter Iran. According to Vice President Kamala Harris, Iran is considered the United States' main adversary (Al Jazeera 2024). Tehran's status as a key opponent cannot be separated from Iran's nuclear programme, accusations of Iranian government support for terrorist organisations, and its opposition to US allies in the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Following Iran's launch of 200 ballistic missiles at Israel in retaliation for the killing of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, Vice President Harris stated that 'Iran has American blood on their hands'. The GSI functions as a form of normative balancing aimed at countering the security blocs that the United States promotes in the Middle East, particularly those designed to deter Iran. According to Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Esmaeil Baqaei, 'The real threat to regional security and stability is posed by the military presence of extra-regional actors, their military bases, and the Israeli regime, which is considered the root cause of all insecurity and a threat to Islamic countries' (Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024). The reference to 'extra-regional actors' clearly points to the United States, underscoring the perception within the Iranian government of a hegemonic American presence in the region. The GSI clearly stated that indivisible security means that the 'security of one country should not come at the expense of that of others' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023b). Indivisible security will challenge the United States' bloc politics in the Middle East, which Washington actively builds through the GCC and MESA, which will constrain the United States' domination. China is clearly opposing the United States' bloc politics that Beijing perceives as the 'source' of the problem in the world, and the GSI is emerging as a solution.

The third security norm that China promotes through the GSI is Sino-centrism. Sino-centric refers to China's multilateral mechanisms, which it has developed to set or influence regional agendas and ensure its interest are addressed (Freeman et al. 2024). The GSI reflects China's intention to reshape global security norms to favour a Sinocentric order (Kim 2024). China will balance the United States' hegemonic domination by inserting various Chinese characteristics through the

GSI. Today, China is a rising power and a proactive norm entrepreneur seeking fundamental institutional and normative changes to global governance. The GSI is part of China's normative platform to build a community of common destiny (CCD) for mankind, serving as an alternative world-order vision (Kewalramani 2024). CCD refers to a group of nations bonded together by a common interest and fate. Zhang (2018) explained that CCD derives from traditional Chinese culture, which values peace and cooperation. CCD is closely linked to concepts of 'harmony being the most precious' (*he wei gui*), 'one world' (*shijie datong*) and 'harmony between heaven and humanity' (*tianren heyi*). One example of the implementation of the GSI in the Middle East, which China always refers to as a GSI achievement, is the diplomatic normalisation of Saudi Arabia and Iran. On 6 March 2023, China successfully brokered a discussion between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Beijing that led Tehran and Riyadh to normalise relations (Fantappie & Nasr 2023). Iran and Saudia Arabia are two Middle East regional powers arguing that rival relations are narrated as 'the Middle East Cold War' (Grumet 2015; Hiro 2019; Tzemprin et al. 2015). This success is heavily linked with the GSI approach which asserts that security can be brought about through 'political dialogue and peaceful negotiation' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs the People's Republic of China 2023b). China, through its state-owned newspapers like the 'Global Times', already endorsed the successful negotiation as example of the GSI in practice (Long 2023).

China then balances the United States through normative efforts by actively engaging in various Middle East security issues using the approach with 'Chinese characteristics' that emphasise cooperation, negotiation and harmony. This normative approach is quite different from the United States' approach in the Middle East, assertively instilling democracy in the Middle East. The United States' democracy initiative in the Middle East aims to spread American values and democracy to improve the security of the United States. In the minds of US political elites, especially during the George W. Bush administration, as democracy grows in the Middle East, the region will stop generating anti-American terrorism (Gause 2005). Based on China's report for implementation of the GSI released in 2024 by the China Institute of International Studies, 'China affirmed its support for the Arab countries to solve security issues in the region [Middle East] through solidarity and cooperation' (China Institute of International Studies 2024). Furthermore, based on the GSI implementation report, China has actively facilitated the political resolution of various hotspot issues in the Middle East, from Syrian issues to a two-state solution for the Palestine issues. China will always position itself as the central piece, whether as an initiator or facilitator, and use a diplomatic approach with 'Chinese characteristics' and use its multilateral organisations to further its role in Middle East security architecture. These multilateral organisations include the Shanghai Cooperation Organizations (SCO), the BRICS+ group of states, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia

(CICA), the 'China + Central Asia' mechanism, the Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan and the China Horn of Africa Peace, Governance and Development conference (Mariani 2024).

Conclusion

The United States has long been the dominant external actor shaping the Middle East's security architecture. However, the growing presence of China in the region and Beijing's invitation for Middle Eastern countries to participate in the Global Security Initiative signal a potential shift in the regional order. The Global Security Initiative represents China's normative balancing strategy: a form of soft balancing aimed at constraining the United States' hegemonic influence without direct confrontation. Through the GSI, China promotes a set of alternative security norms – indivisible security, Sino-centrism and non-interference – as a counter-framework to the norms traditionally advanced by the United States.

China positions the GSI as a pathway to reshape the security architecture of the Middle East. Indivisible security appeals to countries like Iran that have long been sidelined by US-led collective security efforts. While Washington has pursued alliance-based strategies that frame Iran as a regional threat, Beijing's approach emphasises mutual security and cooperation across the region. The Sino-centric dimension of the GSI reflects China's ambition to act as a central diplomatic actor by promoting solutions to regional issues through platforms and mechanisms designed with Chinese characteristics. This approach reinforces China's aspiration to play a leading role in regional governance. The norm of non-interference serves as a direct critique of the United States' interventionist policies and capitalises on growing dissatisfaction in the region with external military involvement. By emphasising respect for sovereignty and local agency, China seeks to offer a more acceptable and less intrusive model of engagement. Taken together, these norms form the foundation of China's normative balancing strategy and present a challenge to the existing US-led security order. As more Middle Eastern states engage with the GSI, the region's security architecture may gradually shift toward one that reflects China's vision for a more inclusive, multilateral and sovereignty-oriented approach.

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What Happens When Non-Western Voices Enter International Relations? Kautilya and the Politics of Access

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Abstract
This paper shifts the focus from the familiar question of why is there no non-Western theory in International Relations (IR) to a process-oriented inquiry of what happens to non-Western perspectives when incorporated into IR? While critical IR scholarship has explored the way ethnocentrism, essentialism and empire shapes knowledge within IR, the mechanisms and processes of marginalisation that occur when non-Western voices are included in IR remain less understood. To address this gap, the paper conceptualises marginalisation not as a static outcome but as a dynamic process unfolding in stages. Drawing on the case of Kautilya, an Indian strategic thinker, and autoethnographic accounts of engaging with Kautilya as student, researcher and teaching assistant in both India and Canada, I develop the concept of 'exclusion with access'. I argue that 'exclusion with access' encompasses two key dynamics. First, 'exclusion with access' offers a lens to analyse the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in IR, particularly the superficiality, tokenism and symbolism of diversity and inclusion in the discipline. Second, 'exclusion with access' represents a distinctive stage of integrating non-Western thought into IR, one succeeding the stages of exclusion and formal exclusion. Ultimately, by proposing the lens of 'exclusion with

*access', I propose challenging the binary of inclusion-exclusion in IR and exploring
the specifics, conditions and mechanisms of integrating non-Western voices into IR.*

Keywords: *Kautilya, exclusion with access, exclusion, inclusion, Non-Western Theory*

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Introduction

Global IR and related approaches can be seen as responses to the foundational
question, 'Why is there no non-Western theory in IR?' by Acharya and Buzan in
2007. Over the past fifteen years, critical scholarship in International Relations
(IR) has attempted to rigorously answer this question, succeeding in explaining
the ways by which ethnocentrism, essentialism and empire affect knowledge
production in the discipline (Jones 2006; Persaud & Sajed 2018; Darby & Paolini
1994; Obendorf 2015; Vitalis 2018). Several approaches, such as relational IR (Qin
2018), worlding in IR (Tickner & Waever 2009) and others, validate these find-
ings, highlighting how non-Western voices are marginalised and systematically
neglected in the discipline. Despite the widespread use of the term 'marginali-
sation' in IR, little remains to be studied about the processes, mechanisms and
specifics of marginalisation in IR and how it operates. For example, while it is
true that questions of race, gender and colonialism (Chowdry & Nair 2002; Bell
2013; Parashar 2016; Chowdry & Ling 2010) have remained at the margins of the
discipline, recent developments have shown an increasing engagement with these
questions, be it via conferences, thematic issues, coursework, etc. This then invites
the question, what should one make of 'marginalisation' in IR, given the evolv-
ing contours of the discipline? This contribution addresses this gap by moving
beyond the well-known question 'Why is there no non-Western theory in IR?' to
a specific and process-oriented question: 'What happens to non-Western voices
when they are introduced in IR?'[1]

Given the depth of explanations for why there are no non-Western voices in
IR, exploring the 'what' question becomes logical, as it allows for examining the
multiple layers and meanings of marginalisation within the discipline. This line
of inquiry becomes important for a) uncovering the hierarchies and nuances
that exist among non-Western traditions themselves (Bilgin 2008) and b) for
understanding positionality and its role in the construction of marginalised or
non-marginalised in the discipline (Gani & Khan 2024). Second, the 'what' ques-
tion allows us to conceptualise marginalisation not as a fixed outcome but as a

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1   In this context, 'non-West' is used as a shorthand to refer to critical traditions in IR,
    such as race, gender, queer, indigeneity and other marginalised perspectives within
    the discipline.

dynamic process unfolding through distinct steps, phases or cycles. Moreover, asking 'what happens' allows to move beyond the binary understanding of traditions and discourses as marginalised or non-marginalised by encouraging us to view marginalisation along the spectrum, encompassing formal inclusion, partial inclusion and ghettoisation stages.

In this context, I turn to the case of Kautilya, an Indian thinker popular for his work on statecraft, economics and public administration, for conceptualising 'exclusion with access' in IR.[2] It is important to note that the novelty of this contribution does not lie in its focus on Kautilya per se, as numerous works on the interpretation and application of Kautilya precede my own. Rather, the innovation lies in conceptualising 'exclusion with access' through my engagement with Kautilya as a student, researcher and teaching assistant in India and Canada, and through autoethnographic accounts of my experiences. Autoethnography as a methodology entails evaluating self as a source of knowledge and knowledge building (Brigg & Bleiker 2010). Autoethnography as a methodology is central in circumventing the self–other dichotomy or researcher–researched dichotomy, subjecting self to rigorous reflection and interrogation, and highlighting the inevitability of self in research (Löwenheim 2010; Doty 2010; Hamati-Ataya 2014). The roots of autoethnography can be traced to critical traditions of research in social sciences, such as feminism, postcolonialism, relationism and others, often writing about the personal experiences of exclusion and marginalisation and the need to be seen, heard and recognised (Brigg & Bleiker 2010). Autoethnography, therefore, offers space for developing connection with research and writing by increasing its intelligibility and receptivity to its readers (Doty 2010). Critiques of ethnography often focus on its perceived lack of rigour and its supposed self-indulgence as a research practice (Brigg & Bleiker 2010: 781). Such critiques, however, conflate science and knowledge into a singular enterprise, aligning with the neopositivist strand of science. These views overlook pluralist conceptualisations of science advanced by Jackson (2011, 2015), which recognise the distinctive role of reflexivity and reflexive methods in research methodology. Moreover, the predominant scepticism toward autoethnography arises from hegemonic approaches, as autoethnography challenges dominant ways of knowing by exposing the tensions between hegemonic expressions of power and the particularities of lived experience (Hamati-Ataya 2014).

In this essay, I argue that 'exclusion with access' represents two key dynamics. First, exclusion with access offers a lens to analyse the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in IR, particularly the superficiality, tokenism and symbolisms associ-

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2   I would like to acknowledge Dr Jayashree Vivekanandan, 'The eyed side of the glass: transnational curation and the politics of exhibiting the Empire in a post-imperial world' for its thought-provoking engagement with ideas of inclusion and exclusion and inspiring this thematic section.

ated with diversity. Second, it represents a distinctive stage of integrating non-Western IR thought into IR led by contestations and struggles over inclusion of critical voices in the discipline. This third stage is characterised by the increased presence of marginalised perspectives in the discipline, with inclusion existing in appearance but not in substance. This stage presents a moment in critical scholarship when non-Western voices are granted access into IR but without power, recognition and freedom. To make the abovementioned points, I will first start by problematising the inclusion–exclusion binary in IR by looking at works on pedagogy in IR and political theory. In the next section, I present a conceptualisation of 'exclusion with access in IR' to think of inclusion–exclusion in the field. Finally, I reflect on personal experiences of reading Kautilya and coming to a similar conclusion of 'exclusion with access'.

Problematising the inclusion–exclusion binary

The debate on inclusion and exclusion in International Relations (IR) has a long and complex history, originating notably in the postcolonial critiques of the 1990s (Krishna 1993; Darby & Paolini 1994; George & Campbell 1990). Since then, the discourse has evolved, intersecting with several major epistemological and ontological divides within the discipline, such as the positivist versus post-positivist, materialist versus ideational and Western versus non-Western dichotomies. Central to these are questions of knowledge production, such as whose knowledge is recognised, how it is constructed and what approaches are valid for understanding global realities (Acharya & Buzan 2007, 2017; Lundborg & Vaughan-Williams 2015; Witt et al. 2022). These debates have catalysed in the emergence of diverse and innovative approaches to IR, calling for the exploration of new research terrains or rethinking the boundaries/relevance of the discipline itself (Acharya 2014; Tickner & Blaney 2012; Layug & Hobson 2022). While these questions have always constituted the heart of discussion of IR discipline, the discussion of non-inclusion and inclusion have become prominent since the postmodernist and postpositivist turn in IR and the changing power configurations in the international system – i.e. the rise of Asia, the Global South and BRICS. These developments and discussions have put non-inclusion back on the table, pursued rigorously since the 2000s. Despite the proliferation of these critical interventions, a persistent limitation remains – i.e. under theorisation of inclusion in IR. Most critiques of Western IR do not sufficiently interrogate the meaning of inclusion, nor do they address the dynamics that follow once alternative approaches are included within the discipline. This points to a need for nuanced analysis that moves beyond the binary of inclusion and exclusion and scrutinises the politics of practices of recognition, validation and marginalisation in knowledge production in IR. To advance this argument, it is instructive to turn to scholarship on pedagogy in IR and political theory, which illustrates the inadequacy of simplistic approaches of inclusion.

For instance, Stienstra (2000) makes a valuable contribution by arguing that teaching sensitive issues such as female genital mutilation requires more than incorporating gendered perspectives into reading lists. She emphasises the necessity of engaging with broader issues like cultural narrowness, the nature of resources used and the pedagogical techniques that shape learning (Stienstra 2000: 241). Drainville (2003) extends this critique by warning against the alienation that can occur when International Studies is taught abstractly, removed from the lived realities of students and communities. He advocates for pedagogy that is attuned to material realities and recognises the political character of teaching practices (Drainville 2003: 245), resisting the tendency to merely 'add voices' to the discipline. In the context of postcolonial IR, Behera (2007) underscores the structural challenges faced by scholars in the Global South, particularly the expectation to either align with Western epistemic standards or risk marginalisation. Her work reveals how systemic biases continue to frame the terms of participation within the discipline (Behera 2007: 359). Complementarily, Hagmann and Biersteker (2014) call attention to the gaps between critical scholarship and teaching practices in IR, advocating a shift away from publications analysis as a marker of progress in the discipline to investigating ways of teaching IR in everyday academic contexts. Andrews (2020) provides empirical support for this, revealing that non-Western, feminist, Marxist and postcolonial approaches remain marginalised even within top graduate schools around the world. He emphasises that even where their perspectives are included, they are often exoticised or peripheral, reinforcing existing hierarchies within the discipline (Andrews 2020: 377). Discussing the African context, Andrews highlights the stark dependency of African IR syllabi on Western intellectual traditions or the absence of structured introductory courses in many African institutions (Andrews 2020: 377). This broader pedagogical–publishing divide, as noted by Ettinger (2020), reinforces the pedagogy and scholarship divide with the relationship between critical research and teaching remaining weak (Ettinger 2020: 344). Together, these interventions demonstrate that discussions around inclusion and exclusion in IR obscure embedded forms of epistemic politics than elaborate the same. Therefore, it can be concluded that what is often celebrated as 'diversity' or 'inclusion' in IR remains entangled in processes of marginalisation, exoticisation and tokenisation in the IR discipline.

Another factor in understanding the inadequacy of the inclusion–exclusion debate is the varied disciplinary understanding. An example is IR practices in the Arab world where IR, despite American influence, has a disciplinary practice in the region of American dominance with localisation and innovation of pedagogy – i.e. syllabi and scholarship (Darwich et al. 2021: 414). This brings to attention the spatiality of discussions of inclusion and exclusion in IR and the need for specificity in inclusion–exclusion discussion and asking the question: for whom? Another factor that explains the fragility of the inclusion–exclusion debate is

discussions on 'what is IR?' Thaddeus Jackson (2017) offers a compelling analysis when he asks IR readers and practitioners to move beyond the conversation from 'This is/is not IR' to 'Why is this IR?' Furthermore, he claims:

> The open-ended question rather than the categorical statement allows for responses and dialogues, rather than procrustean efforts to fit non-traditional objects, approaches, and orientations into prefabricated definitions or efforts to storm the academic castle and throw out the rulers, only to establish new rulers in their places. (Jackson 2017: 35)

The analysis blends with Kamola's (2020) argument about the reification of IR as an object with expectations mounted on critical work to transform IR into something while ignoring the material relations that organise its disciplinary practices (Kamola 2020: 249). On critical approaches and Global IR itself, Kamola finds these critiques hard to reach their full potential given the neoliberal environments in which they exist (Kamola 2020: 265). The struggle of decolonisation Kamola describes is not only of including new voices, approaches and lenses to IR but also of remaking the discipline by engaging with the realities of higher education around us (Kamola 2020: 270). These claims highlight another central limitation of the inclusion–exclusion debate, one that is of believing that adding new voices in IR is sufficient for unmaking the discipline (Ettinger 2020). All of this makes one rethink that boundaries of inclusion–exclusion in IR circumvent simplistic understandings of diversity and plurality of voices in the representative sense and include more substantive engagement with materiality, context and space (Drainville 2003; Stienstra 2000; Kamola 2020).

Alongside pedagogical research in IR, another field that challenges the inclusion–exclusion debate is political theory, in particular discussions on cross-cultural comparison and dialogue as a tool for deparochialisation of political thought. Highlighting the limits of simplistic cross-cultural comparisons, Jenco (2007) challenges simplistic inclusion–exclusion debates, arguing that merely incorporating non-Western content into Western theoretical frameworks risks reinforcing ethnocentrism (Jenco 2007: 741). She proposes a 'methods-centred approach' that prioritises non-Western interpretive practices, engaging with them as sources of both substantive and methodological insight (Jenco 2007: 741–742). Through detailed analysis of Chinese thinkers Wang Yangming and Kang Youwei, Jenco (2007) illustrates how practices like Wang's 'study of the mind-and-heart' (Jenco 2007: 746) and Kang's 'study of the classics' (Jenco 2007: 750) offer alternative epistemologies grounded in their own cultural and linguistic contexts. These methods, which involve embodied, exegetical engagement with classical texts, reveal non-Western traditions as sites of knowledge production, not merely objects of inclusion (Jenco 2007: 751–752). Similarly, Tully's (2020) approach to 'dialogue' as a tool for deparochialisation presents an interesting

standpoint for considering inclusion and exclusion in political thought. His concept of dialogue, especially the distinction between 'genuine' and 'false' dialogue, plays a central role in illustrating the dangers of self-serving and deceptive dialogue, risking an understanding of the other on its own terms (Tully 2020: 28–31). Tully (2020), drawing on Gadamer, distinguishes 'genuine dialogue' from 'strategic-instrumental' and 'deliberative-imperative' dialogues (Tully 2020: 28), with 'genuine dialogue' standing for 'openness and receptivity' (Tully 2020: 26) and 'false' dialogue for disingenuousness and deception. Therefore, Tully's (2020) focus on dialogue and deparochialisation presents a novel way of thinking about inclusion–exclusion in IR. Instead of understanding inclusion as adding voices and exclusion as erasing one, it makes one think of inclusion–exclusion through the lens of dialogue and the characteristics of that dialogue. This approach helps circumvent the 'us' vs 'them' dichotomy and moves towards an intersubjective understanding of inclusion–exclusion. In sum, the above discussion highlights the inadequacies of mainstream understandings of inclusion and exclusion in IR and the need for engagement with specificities, dynamics and differences in understanding inclusion-exclusion in IR.

Conceptualising 'exclusion with access'

As established above, the inclusion–exclusion debate is not necessarily helpful given the broad stroke characterisation of inclusion–exclusion in discussion and the challenges of considering the two together. While 'exclusion with access' comes across as a new term, I believe the term shares resonances to discussions of tokenism, ghettoisation and partial inclusion in social sciences. Blending some of the earlier discussions and the specifics of IR, I propose an understanding of 'exclusion with access', both as a concept and a process.

As a concept, I propose understanding 'exclusion with access' as a standpoint for interrogating the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in IR and thinking about the two together. It is useful for escaping the binary of the inclusion–exclusion debate within IR and critiquing discussions of diversity in IR. Furthermore, the concept is helpful in focusing attention on practices of tokenism and symbolism in IR and rethinking the meaning of inclusion and exclusion in IR. 'Exclusion with access', therefore, offers us the lens for investigating the working of power in discussions of inclusion–exclusion in IR, prompting one to question if visibility alone is a sufficient bar for inclusion or if we could think of visibility as a mask for pacifying demands of disciplinary transformation. Emphasising the superficiality of 'inclusion' in IR, the concept of 'exclusion with access' highlights the need for engaging meaningfully with questions of difference, critique and epistemic boundaries to think about deparochialisation and decolonisation in IR reflexively. The analytical framing of 'exclusion with access' offers a useful device for dissecting inclusion from empowerment, and access from representation.
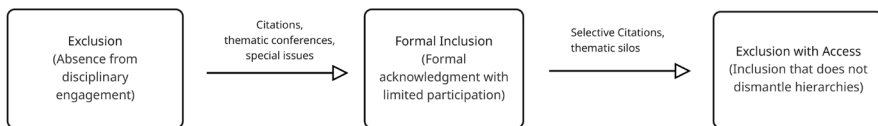
Beyond understanding 'exclusion with access' as a conceptual tool, I also propose an understanding of 'exclusion with access' as a stage in integrating non-Western thought into IR scholarship, one succeeding the stages of exclusion and partial integration. To start, the first stage of non-western scholarship can be called 'exclusion', characterised by the dismissal of non-Western voices in IR due to lack of scientific rigour, objectivity and relevance. The exclusion is justified by the support of Eurocentric/positivist paradigms in the discipline and the portrayal of non-Western voices as unscientific, particular and localistic. The second stage of scholarship is 'formal inclusion', where paradigm/research shifts cause contestations and struggles for inclusion of non-Western voices in the discipline, creating space for critical voices in the discipline. This stage of having a seat at the table or a voice in the system is supported by developments like thematic sections, special issues and acknowledgements, marking the inclusion of non-Western voices in the discipline. However, having a seat at the table does not translate into integration – i.e. meaningful inclusion and disciplinary transformation.

The inclusion of non-Western voices in IR is often marked by disciplinary containment, with non-Western voices formally present but with circumscribed influence. This represents the third stage of 'exclusion with access', where the presence of non-Western voices neither dismantles disciplinary hierarchies of positivism, rationalism and Eurocentrism, nor challenges their fixation to specific journals, special issues or comparative cases. Moreover, while much of the discussion on 'exclusion with access' centres on structural hierarchies between the Global North and South, it is important to recognise that similar hierarchies also exist within the Global South itself. Certain intellectual traditions, regions or linguistic communities often enjoy greater visibility and legitimacy than others, shaping whose voices are amplified and whose remain marginalised. Recognising these intra-South dynamics shows that 'exclusion with access' operates along multiple, intersecting hierarchies rather than a simple North–South binary.

The differing feature between 'exclusion with access' and 'formal inclusion' is the difference in the degree of intentionality, with the former marked by a strategic espousal of representation and diversity, and the latter marked by the enthusiastic stage of welcome and reception. Access therefore becomes a mask for hiding hierarchies in knowledge, characterised by intellectual silos and silencing, with non-Western voices recognised not for influencing the pedagogical and research priorities of the discipline but for their representational use. This poses a challenge for critical scholarship in IR with increased access on one hand and limited epistemic influence on the other, inviting questions on relevance, efficacy and the utility of critical voices in IR. In sum, 'exclusion with access' captures a stage in scholarship where critical voices are neither outside

the discipline nor empowered enough to alter its foundations. Critical voices within IR have had limited success in influencing transformative outcomes. Despite the epistemological advancements of critical scholarship, the translation of these perspectives into classroom discussions or introduction into the mainstream remains severely limited (Hagmann and Biersteker, 2014; Ettinger, 2020). Even in instances where critical approaches are incorporated into the mainstream, they are often constrained by practices of othering or essentialism. They either face assimilation into the mainstream frameworks because of the terms set by the Global North or they are marginalised as alternatives or peripheral in discussions (Behera 2007; Acharya & Buzan 2007, 2017). The disconnect between scholarly advancements and pedagogical and policy influence highlights the powerlessness of critical scholarship in pursuing deparochialisation. Recognising this is essential not to dismiss progress, but to diagnose the limitations and challenges of existing mechanisms and thinking in the meaning of decolonisation and pluralism in IR.

Figure 1: Exclusion with Access

Source: Author

Engagement with Kautilya: Reflections and experiences

To better understand the workings of exclusion, inclusion and 'exclusion with access' in IR I now turn to my own experiences of learning and teaching Kautilya in India and Canada. To give some background, Kautilya, also known as Chanakya or Vishnugupta, was an ancient Indian scholar, strategist and statesman traditionally credited as the chief adviser to Chandragupta Maurya, founder of the Mauryan Empire (c. 317–293 BCE). He is renowned for the *Arthaśāstra*, a seminal work on statecraft, economics and warfare. While popular tradition links him directly to the Mauryan court, scholarship suggests the text may be a layered compilation from different periods, with portions possibly added centuries later (Gautam 2013: 39). Kautilya within IR has often been understood as a realist, alongside thinkers like Thucydides, Clausewitz, Machiavelli and Morgenthau (Liebig 2013; Gray 2014) with parallels drawn between theories of the *Mandala* (circle of states), *Matsya Nyaya* (law of the big fish) and *Shadgunyas* (principles of foreign policy) and ideas like anarchy, balance of power and prudence in politics. While particularities of these ideas remain challenged in scholarly works, (see Shahi 2014; Dutta & Dadbhade 2014; etc.) the predominant perceptions of Kautilya remain similar to those that have been presented.

My engagement with Kautilya began in August 2020 when I started a Master of Arts in Diplomacy, Law and Business in India. The degree was my first formal entry into IR, as IR constitutes a specialised degree in India, offered predominantly at the master's level. As an enthusiast uninitiated into the discipline, my introduction to IR began with training in the isms (realism, liberalism and constructivism) and a survey of themes like feminism, critical security, Marxism, among others. During the time I pursued my degree, there was no mention or inclusion of Kautilya in course manuals or in class discussion. My introduction to Kautilya was accidental as I heard his name during a Zoom webinar. The webinar was intended to recruit research interns for a research centre, with Kautilya being one of the thinkers included in a research pitch for the project 'Indian Political and International Thinking'. Listening to Kautilya, a familiar reference motivated me to join the centre and to be associated with the research project. My interest in joining the project stemmed from my fascination with learning about Kautilya and exploring links between Kautilya and IR.

While serving as the research assistant on the project, I began looking into IR – in particular the relationship between Kautilya and IR. Before starting, my preliminary thoughts of Kautilya oscillated between the two extremes: exclusion and inclusion. On one end, there rested a belief that Kautilya could be a possible case of exclusion in IR because of the absences of his name in the courses I audited or the difference in contexts of the 3rd Century BCE and the 21st Century. On the other end, there also rested a belief that Kautilya could possibly be included in IR in India given the grandeur and memory associated with the person locally. One central observation that emerged from researching Kautilya and IR was that scholarship on Kautilya has grown rapidly over the past decade compared to before. Yet, the overall body of work could be said to be limited when compared to political thinkers like Machiavelli, Hobbes and Plato. Second, there exists two dominant strands of scholarship on Kautilya. The first is the generalist account on Kautilya, the second is the specialised accounts. The generalist accounts on Kautilya were characterised by attempts at translating or simplifying ideas to new audiences for mass or general consumption (for example Boesche 2003; Vittal 2015; Jha 2016; Singh 2016) of enquiry. On the other, specialised accounts of knowledge on Kautilya are characterised by discussions that go beyond simplistic ideas of translating his words to exploring questions of method, history and interpretation (for example, Gautam 2013; Olivelle 2013; McClish & Olivelle 2012; McClish, 2019). The former dominates the latter and constitutes the base for the day-to-day/popular understanding of Kautilya with the public and in rhetoric. Another observation on the scholarship on Kautilya is the attempts at comparing Kautilya to Western thinkers and their likes as a means to reassert legitimacy of Kautilya as a thinker (for example, Sil 1985; Boesche 2002; Dutta & Dadbhade 2014). Alongside this, a reactive and an emerging scholarship has taken shape that actively tries

to dislodge the assumptions and parallels of Kautilya with Western thinkers by advocating an understanding of Kautilya on its own terms (for example, Shahi 2014, 2019; Bisht 2019; Gray 2014).

Starting with exclusions, Kautilya as a thinker has not made inroads into the IR classroom, as it is omitted from both syllabi and classroom discussions. This is not to discount that there are spaces wherein Kautilya is discussed and made part of classroom training; however, this does not seem to be a pan-Indian reality. On the other, it is more common to find Kautilya in Political Science syllabi of universities, offered as an elective under the broader course titled Indian Political Thought.[3] For example, my own classroom experience had nothing to offer on Kautilya as Kautilya was neither on the reading list nor explicitly discussed. Moreover, my attempts at engaging with Kautilya or his work was met with either indifference or passing remarks about his work. However, there was no deep discussion about why, how or in what ways Kautilya is relevant to IR or his relevance to the discipline. Even the electives I pursued, that offered critical perspectives on IR, did not include him in any meaningful way. What I encountered during my master's was the dominance of simplistic perceptions of Kautilya (folklore, stories and popular culture) rather than nuanced understandings of his thought.

In contrast to this pedagogical neglect and exclusion of Kautilya in India, a parallel development I observed during my master's in India was the resurrection of Kautilya as a thinker and seminal figure in international politics, economics and public administration. For instance, there were efforts at portraying/recognising Kautilya as the bedrock of Indian strategic thought (Kamal 2023) or as foundation of Indian foreign policy (Liebig 2013). There were also attempts to reinterpret the past by linking Kautilya to heads of state; one case in point is Nehru who mentions Kautilya in his book 'Discovery of India' to assert the timelessness of Kautilya in India's past. Alongside this, I also witnessed the growing invocation of Kautilya over the past decade, be it in naming institutions, events, conferences or fellowships. For example, the think tank India Foundation offers the Kautilya Fellow Programme to foster conversations and research on Kautilya. Similarly, the Indian Ministry of Finance and NITI Aayog organises the annual Kautilya Economic Enclave to deliberate India's geopolitical, economic and technological rise and to articulate India's long-term leadership vision. The establishment of the Kautilya School of Public Policy is another example of invoking Kautilya in attempts to reform public policy education in India and contextualise policymaking to domestic needs. References to Kautilya in public speeches, journalistic writings and policy documents have increased over the last decade, with senior diplomats, ministers and heads of state invoking Kautilya in their speech-acts (Liebig 2013).

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3   I hereby draw attention to the artificial divide observed between IR and Political Science in India, with departments of IR existing independently.

Much of this renewed interest is linked to India's geopolitical rise and efforts to shape a distinct identity of India in global politics. It is to this end that Kautilya is used symbolically as a token of national pride and means for articulating India's position domestically and internationally. This resurgence is visible in academia as well, with a growing number of publications, conferences and multi-volume works such as 'Indigenous Historical Knowledge: Kautilya and His Vocabulary' on Kautilya. Transnational interest in Kautilya can also be observed from collaborative projects, such as those between the Institute of Defence and Strategic Analysis (IDSA) in New Delhi and the South Asia Institute (SAI) at Heidelberg, Germany, or the one between IDSA and the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) in Singapore, exploring Kautilya in a transcultural perspective.

While one can observe simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of Kautilya in India, can inclusion and exclusion alone explain the developments around Kautilya? My experiences suggest that Kautilya's introduction into public, academic and policy discourse cannot be understood simply by categories of exclusion and inclusion alone and are exemplary of 'exclusion with access'. Kautilya's incorporation into public, academic and policy domains follows the trajectory of exclusion, formal inclusion and exclusion with access, unfolding through the layered process of symbolic recognition, selective incorporation and academic containment. The proliferation of conferences, fellowships and policy references to Kautilya indicates a deliberate move to reclaim indigenous intellectual tradition and asserting a distinct identity of India in global politics. On the other, the aversion to Kautilya in teaching raises concerns about the meaningfulness of his inclusion and the scope of critical research on the thinker. The symbolic inclusion of Kautilya limits the possibilities on what Kautilya could mean for Indian IR, as strategic inclusion contains the epistemic influence of the thinker. All these characteristics, features and processes reflect the conceptualisation of 'exclusion with access' presented above – a space where inclusion is celebrated yet constrained, acknowledged yet instrumentalised.

I would now like to draw attention to my experience researching and teaching Kautilya in Canada. To start with, it is important to note that Kautilya is not as widely known in Canada as in India, except to those situated in South Asian studies, departments of religion or East Asian culture. This is to say that Kautilya is a case of exclusion in Canada given the dominance of the 'canon' and European thinkers in the curriculum. My engagement with Kautilya in Canada occurred on two fronts, first as a research assistant and, second, as a teaching assistant. As a research assistant, I was involved in a project aimed at deparochialising the political theory teaching; my role was to prepare a resource guide for instructors interested in teaching Kautilya. The task for my position included introducing and explaining Kautilya to pedagogues, while highlighting the thinker's relevance and potential for integration in syllabi. This experience in research differed from

my earlier experience researching Kautilya in India, where limited access and guidance restricted the depth of my understanding. Another factor that shaped my engagement with Kautilya was my situatedness in pedagogical and epistemological debates, enabling me to understand epistemic and ontological questions surrounding Kautilya.

Second, my engagement with Kautilya included introducing Kautilya in a 100-level course in Politics and IR. Kautilya is a part of two undergraduate courses in my department: first a 100-level course in Politics and IR, and second a 200-level course in Political Theory. Within the 100-level course Kautilya is introduced alongside Plato under discussions of propaganda as a source to explain how states exercise control. On the 200 level, Kautilya is introduced directly through first hand translations for exploring ideas of authority, state and society in his work. The 100-level course that I assist uses Kautilya in a representational way, adding diversity to sources of ancient and classical wisdom. Kautilya in this course is introduced as a Hindu/Indian thinker to illustrate for learners that discussions of statecraft predate centuries and that they have been part of political life across space and time. The resource used to introduce Kautilya in the classroom is an Oxford Learning biographical entry of the thinker. On the other hand, the second course engages with translations of Kautilya, such as 'King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kautilya's Arthasastra, a new annotated translation' by Olivelle (2013), which encourages students to read the thinker and understand his thought on its own terms. The approach of this course is not to introduce Kautilya as a look-alike of a Western contemporary but to acquaint students with plurality of thought and interpretations of politics for reaching their own understandings of just and good in society.

While dominance of Western canon and training explains the exclusion of Kautilya in Canada, the openness and receptiveness to Kautilya can be best understood via debates on deparochialisation, decolonisation and creolisation of political science in the West. Long decades of postcolonial, feminist, Marxist and decolonial scholarship have pointed to the Eurocentrism of Political Science and the need to widen the scope of the discipline via different means, such as inclusion, abandonment, contrapuntal reading, erasure of disciplinary boundaries and others, to counter the dominance of the West in Political Science. To these ends, a number of organisations, groups, scholarship and institutions have emerged, trying to broaden the scope and practice of Political Science in the West and Canada. Universities and departments to this end have offered appointments, hirings and funding for projects for teaching post-colonial thought, indigenous thought, comparative political theory and others. The majority of non-western thinkers included in Canada has been an outcome of movements at deparochialising political science and the increasing student interest in learning non-Western political thought. The strategies of inclusion of non-Western thought, however,

differ across the aisle with pedagogies having a textual and comparative understanding of Kautilya to pedagogies using the thinker representationally.

Once again, can categories of inclusion and exclusion explain engagements with Kautilya in Canada? I would argue that concepts of inclusion and exclusion are insufficient to explain engagements with Kautilya in Canada. Often, exclusion and inclusion are used authoritatively as positions on discourses, speaking rarely on the journeys and processes underlying the inclusion/exclusion. Moreover, exclusion and inclusion fail to explain the simultaneity of processes of inclusion and exclusion at one time, turning a blind eye to co-constitution of processes. Therefore, 'exclusion with access' best explains experiences of engagement with Kautilya as it highlights the visible yet marginal space Kautilya occupies in Canada. To note, 'exclusion with access' operates differently in the Canadian context as Kautilya is neither a national symbol nor a part of public life in Canada. However, this does not mean that 'exclusion with access' does not apply in Canada. We can observe 'exclusion with access' playing out in the academic sphere in Canada, where Kautilya occasionally appears in specialised seminars, guest lectures or thematic conferences, with his presence rarely translating into integration within core curricula or theoretical debates. This reflects the conceptualisation of 'exclusion with access', where access granted through selective invitations, academic acknowledgments or niche research projects remains circumscribed, preventing any meaningful disruption of Eurocentric disciplinary hierarchies. In the Canadian context, the symbolic recognition of Kautilya as part of broader efforts toward deparochialising or diversifying coexists with institutional and epistemic structures that limit his influence to comparative or area studies rather than framing him crucial for theory. The result is carefully managed inclusion, one that satisfies calls for pluralism and representation while ensuring the unchanging theoretical and pedagogical core.

Conclusion

To conclude, the engagement with Kautilya in India and Canada reveal an 'exclusion with access' of Kautilya in both political science and social science. Despite inclusion in pedagogy or scholarship in India and Canada, the engagement with Kautilya is constrained and limited, by not being subject to freedom, recognition or power like others such as Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Carr or others. Most discussions situate Kautilya into either the realist or the Hindu camp, circumscribing its application. 'Exclusion with access' provides a critical lens to problematise the inclusion of Kautilya in Western and non-Western contexts and to probe the conditions, forces and mechanisms of incorporation/exclusion of non-Western thought. This helps in conceptualising non-Western thought in scholarship, pedagogy and politics, inviting scholars to assess whether the visibility of non-

Western thinkers contributes to structural change in knowledge systems or if it merely satisfies diversity goals. It pushes us to question whether inclusion that does not disturb the dominant paradigm is inclusion or merely a sophisticated mechanism of containment. The concept thus holds relevance beyond Kautilya, offering broader applicability in assessing the ways power, representation and epistemology shape global knowledge systems.

While the concept of 'exclusion with access' provides a useful standpoint to examine the conditional inclusion of non-Western thought in IR, it is not without limitations. First, the term risks being conflated with other concepts such as tokenism or symbolic inclusion, which, although related, do not fully capture the strategic, structural and epistemic containment of knowledge. Second, the idea of a 'stage' in the integration of non-Western thought may inadvertently imply a linear or teleological progression, which may not hold across all contexts or thinkers. Third, while this paper reflects on Kautilya, the application of the concept to other thinkers, traditions or geographies would require further contextualisation and comparative analysis. Moreover, the framework primarily draws from interpretive and critical traditions in IR, and its applicability across positivist or post-positivist paradigms remains underexplored.

Future research could explore how 'exclusion with access' plays out across different disciplines beyond IR, such as anthropology, economics or development studies. Comparative studies involving other non-Western thinkers, such as Ibn Khaldun, Confucius or other philosophers, could further refine the concept and its relevance. An interesting area of intervention in this debate could be comparison between the Chinese school of IR and debates on 'exclusion with access', in particular the self-identification of Chinese IR as a school in the discipline, as opposed to attempts of contained inclusion and containment elsewhere. A comparative study could reveal insights into the efficacy and productivity of respective approaches and discussions of academic decolonisation and deparochialisation. Similarly, a comparative study on the Chinese school of IR and Indian IR can reveal to what extent ideology, power and position in the international system shapes the trajectory of 'schooling' or 'exclusion with access' in IR. Additionally, empirical studies on curriculum design, publication patterns and institutional dynamics in both the Global North and South could provide concrete evidence of how 'access' is managed and negotiated. There is also scope to explore how digital platforms, open access repositories and transnational academic networks may either reinforce or challenge the phenomenon of 'exclusion with access'. Finally, interdisciplinary engagement with critical pedagogy, sociology of knowledge and postcolonial theory may offer valuable insights into how to meaningfully move beyond mere access toward epistemic transformation.

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Thematic section
Exclusion with Access: Performative Inclusivity in Global IR

Crossing the 'Global South Frontier': Mapping Latin American Presence in International Relations Publications

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Abstract

Despite increasing calls to globalise and pluralise the field, International Relations (IR) remains dominated by institutions based in the Global North. This paper engages with the theme of exclusion with access by complementing ongoing critiques of the discipline's epistemic hierarchies by examining how Latin American scholars are represented in top-tier IR journals. While the inclusion of Global South voices has become more visible, such inclusion is often symbolic, conditional and structurally constrained. By mapping Latin American authors who published in ten prestigious IR journals from 2010 to 2024, we analyse training backgrounds, publication locations, co-authorship networks and research themes to reveal the material and epistemic barriers that shape visibility and legitimacy in IR. We conceptualise these barriers as part of a broader 'Global South frontier' that limits transformative participation. With its hybrid position as Westernised yet peripheral, Latin America offers a unique lens for interrogating the discipline's persistent inequalities. This paper contributes to

broader debates on knowledge production, reflexivity and structural gatekeeping in IR by centering the publication process as a key site of disciplinary power.

Introduction

Mainstream International Relations (IR) grapples with parochialism as its dominant theories and concepts are mainly developed in the Global North, especially the United States and Western Europe, and are presented as universal tools for explaining international phenomena (Bilgin 2008). Leading publishers, influential scholars and flagship journals are mostly based in the Global North, reinforcing its status as the central hub of IR knowledge production (Biersteker 2009; Kristensen 2018). This has led to ongoing critiques that IR maintains an exclusion of Global South scholars, whose contributions are, at best, superficially acknowledged in paradigmatic debates, academic venues and university curricula (Loke & Owen 2024). Although their work may be cited, their frameworks and insights are frequently dismissed as context-specific, anecdotal or lacking in theoretical rigor, reflecting a core-periphery structure of knowledge production rooted in Western ontological and epistemological assumptions (Blaney & Tickner 2017). In response, calls to globalise or de-Westernise IR aim to break down this structure by bringing marginalised knowledge to the core, working toward more diversity and pluralism in the discipline (Buzan & Acharya 2019; Gelardi 2020).

There are many ways to engage with IR knowledge production from a non-Western standpoint, including detaching, emulation, localisation, pluralisation or emancipation, depending on the complex issues surrounding identification, material and spatial context, and institutional setting (Loke & Owen 2022). Regarding pluralisation or diversification, it can involve examining how IR scholarship is taught and researched in non-Western regions (Medeiros et al. 2016), advocating for Indigenous theorising and incorporating local voices and experiences (Acharya et al. 2022), or promoting the dissemination of 'national schools', such as the Chinese or Indian Schools (Zhang & Kristensen 2017). In these cases, the goal is not to erase but rather to include and adapt the existing centre by exploring how homegrown theories and perspectives from the periphery can be transformative (Azdinli & Biltekin 2018). Many, however, remain sceptical, arguing that such efforts risk merely 'cataloging theoretical Others' in isolation from the mainstream, while still perpetuating the same type of parochialism they critique (Chu 2022; Vasilaki 2012). Some postcolonial scholars also contend that Global IR initiatives

may only serve as performative strategies, providing access through symbolic inclusion to non-Western scholars while ultimately denying them substantial influence over the discipline's core structures (Barnett & Zarakol 2023). Instead, these scholars promote epistemic disobedience, refusing to conform to embedded hierarchies while creating alternative spaces for knowledge production beyond the confines of the North (Mignolo 2009).

These discussions about the diverse practices of International Relations (IR) across different positionalities, contexts and institutional settings raise important questions about how inclusions and exclusions are assessed and measured within the discipline. Shaped by inherently unequal spaces of knowledge production, the field reflects a complex, spatialised and situated landscape that resists easy transformation (Loke & Owen 2022). Engaging with ongoing debates about exclusion and access in knowledge creation, this paper maps Latin American scholars publishing in top-tier IR journals to provide further evidence that inclusion is often selective, conditional or symbolic. Peer-reviewed journals are crucial spaces where disciplines advance or stagnate. They serve as platforms for presenting and debating ideas, which are then disseminated among peers and students as established knowledge. Additionally, publications are vital for academic career progression, affecting hiring decisions, tenure and funding opportunities. Consequently, journals often act as mechanisms of leaping forward or gatekeeping within academia. Globalising IR, therefore, requires diversifying not only the content of journals but also who gets to publish. However, Biersteker (2009) points out that journals remain a central site of American and English-speaking dominance in the field, both in terms of authors and editorial boards. Despite positive, though gradual, changes in recent years, publishing trends, such as the increasing influence of indexes and citation rankings, can have the opposite effect, helping to maintain or even deepen existing hierarchies (Koch & Vanderstraeten 2021).

This paper explores who gets to represent Latin America in top IR journals, moving beyond binary notions of inclusion and exclusion by emphasising the structural conditions that enable or hinder participation. Instead of focusing on what is produced and consumed within Latin America, we invert our analytical lens to investigate how Latin American scholars are integrated into mainstream spaces where IR is shaped and made universal. By analysing where these scholars were educated, where they publish, their co-authorship networks and their chosen topics, we aim to interrogate the material conditions of research and the epistemic and ontological aspects of publications that enable ideas to move from the local to the 'global'. In doing so, we consider whether a 'Global South frontier' – rooted in epistemological hierarchies – exists, serving as a set of barriers that may restrict the spread of knowledge from the Global South and that only a few scholars can navigate successfully to gain visibility in spaces regarded as mainstream within the discipline.

We approach Latin America as a strategically significant case to explore experiences of the Global South and to examine issues of exclusion related to access and epistemic hierarchies in IR. Factors like inequalities, material constraints, colonial legacies and dependency dynamics set the region's academic landscape apart from that of the Global North. Ontologically, it occupies a complex position: being Westernised but not in the West (Fawcett 2012; Villa & Pimenta 2017; Gelardi 2020). For decades, Latin America has been relegated to the status of a US sphere of influence (Tickner 2003). Consequently, many IR scholars have historically overlooked the region, with some claiming it lacks independent agency both academically and politically (Turton 2015). However, this claim lacks a solid empirical foundation. Latin America has made significant contributions to international thought and has developed sophisticated, locally rooted traditions in law, security and political economy (Acharya et al. 2022). It hosts well-established academic networks and epistemic communities in IR, even though its global visibility remains limited. Therefore, Latin America can be understood as occupying an 'in-between location' within the discipline – geopolitically in the Global South but epistemically intertwined with Western traditions. We argue this position makes the region a valuable site for examining the epistemic barriers that continue to shape knowledge production in IR.

This paper is part of a discussion on reflexivity and knowledge production while examining the conditions for an essential disciplinary practice: publishing peer-reviewed articles. Our analysis focuses on Latin American authors based in institutions both in and outside the region who have managed to overcome what we identify as Westernised structural gatekeeping, along with the conditions under which this occurs. Our contribution lies in shedding light on the structural, material and immaterial barriers faced by Global South scholars when they attempt to contribute to IR's globalisation. Our findings support the idea that international academic experience outside the region has often served as a 'make it or break it' factor for publishing in the discipline's most prestigious outlets. This reinforces the perception that scholars must conform and 'speak in the idiom of the North' to gain recognition and legitimacy within the field – an issue that Tickner (2003) and Kristensen (2015) have already emphasised.

Nevertheless, disciplinary gatekeeping does not necessarily operate through outright exclusion but rather by controlling access and visibility for those trained in the 'hidden curriculum' (Barham & Wood 2022). In other words, academics in the Global South, whether in the periphery or semi-periphery, such as in Latin America, are given a chance at inclusion as long as they are willing to learn and incorporate the written and unwritten rules of mainstream academic spaces. That is what we, following the term proposed by this thematic section, refer to as 'exclusion with access'. This term helps us emphasise the complexity of this issue and how hierarchies can persist even when they are seemingly fading.

While we recognise the validity of critiques that question the usefulness of reformist approaches to such entrenched epistemic hierarchies, we argue that having a unified academic community, even if imperfect, is preferable to its complete absence (Sylvester 2007). To advance this argument, the paper is divided into four parts. First, we examine reflexivity and knowledge production within IR. Second, we describe our methodology for analysing the selected journals. Third, we summarise our findings. Finally, we discuss the implications and conclude by emphasising the importance of structural gatekeeping and the need for more active and deliberate strategies to reform the discipline.

The (in)material structures of IR knowledge production: Limited diversity and conditional inclusion

The call for globalising IR arose from concerns over the field's persistent Eurocentric and North American biases, despite claiming to study global affairs (Chakrabarty 2000; Aydınlı & Biltekin 2018). When theories and concepts are mainly based on a narrow set of experiences, their claims to universality are not only questionable, but can reinforce problematic conceptions of science as neutral and separate from material realities and political interests (Escobar 2003; Lander 2005). The Global IR initiative thus aims to highlight alternative experiences, actors and frameworks for understanding international dynamics. It involves reimagining the field as a global discipline that is more inclusive in how it understands, teaches and practices IR (Acharya 2011). To promote this inclusivity, we need to first examine who holds epistemic power and what mechanisms maintain and reproduce these hierarchies.

While acknowledging ongoing debates about IR's disciplinary status, we view IR as a field of study that engages multiple objects and brings together a diverse community of scholars interested in international affairs by establishing knowledge production practices, identity markers and institutionalisation mechanisms (Corry 2022). A field does not require a single origin, as knowledge often emerges and circulates unevenly across different parts of the world. Instead, a field solidifies through widespread but shared practices of identity-building, research, publishing and teaching (Bueger & Gadinger 2007). While it may be challenging to define a clearly bounded domain for IR, there is general agreement that it remains anchored in a subject matter (the 'international arena' where actors interrelate) that provides direction, means and institutional spaces for its continued operation.

A disciplinary field is thus a knowledge complex that organises and regulates an academic community by setting norms, practices and parameters of legitimacy (Corry 2022). In IR, insights about international affairs are discussed and circulated through scholarly publications, moving the discipline as a living body. However, not everyone has equal opportunities to write or be read – knowledge production is deeply entangled with material, institutional and symbolic inequalities. As

Wallerstein (2000) observed, the social sciences have predominantly been produced by those with more resources, causing lasting distortions in what is known and by whom. Addressing these disparities requires challenging the structures that uphold them.

Scientific communities simultaneously enable and constrain their members, articulating professional identity and solidarity, as well as negotiating consensus on methods, relevance, and research agendas (Bueger & Gadinger 2007). As in all fields, global material and political asymmetries are reflected in and reproduced by IR (Rosenberg et al. 2022). What counts as valuable knowledge – and who gets to produce it – is constantly shaped and reshaped by power relations and interests both inside and outside the discipline. No science is made in a vacuum, and disciplines are a constitutive element of general politics as they produce knowledge that guides decision-making across many areas of life (Grenier 2015). Understanding how a field is structured is therefore essential to recognising and addressing its embedded hierarchies (Alejandro 2019).

Peer-reviewed journals play a fundamental role in shaping any academic discipline's contours by acting as legitimacy and visibility holders. Through editorial decisions and peer review, journals decide which ideas are circulated and define the epistemological, methodological and thematic boundaries of what is considered valid knowledge (Forsberg et al. 2022). Therefore, journals are essential tools for authors to establish themselves as knowledge authorities: They are where research becomes accessible for peers to read, discuss and teach. Publishing in these journals offers status and intellectual authority and opens many doors to access selective associations, funding and networks. In this way, they are not neutral spaces but active participants, both influenced by and reproducing existing disciplinary hierarchies (Grenier & Hagmann 2016; Koch & Vanderstraeten 2021).

Wæver (1998) pointed to US dominance in the discipline by examining geographical trends in publication within IR journals, while Risse et al. (2022) demonstrated that little has changed in the core-periphery structure of the field. Due to material differences, access to academic institutions – such as universities, research centres, journals, grants, conferences and seminars – remains highly unequal between the Global North and the South. Editorial boards, review standards, language requirements and citation practices thus eventually act as gatekeeping mechanisms by establishing standards that reflect socioeconomic inequalities (Loke & Owen 2022). For many non-Western scholars, barriers extend beyond content or a paper's originality; they include navigating unspoken discipline rules, such as fluency in English, specific theoretical frameworks, methodological choices and Western stylistic conventions. Disparities in institutional prestige, funding, mobility, access to data and information, and library and laboratory infrastructure worsen these challenges.

In this sense, context, whether material, political, embodied, temporal or spatial, matters. As Loke and Owen (2024: 63) argue, context in IR knowledge production

is 'a bounded and situated relational structure that links the individual scholar to their environment, conditioning and shaping knowledge production practices and, consequently, knowledge claims'. This is not to say that context predetermines scholarly work but that it highlights the agent–structure dynamics inherent in knowledge production and the social practices that sustain it. Academia is shaped by a range of institutions that provide the material conditions under which scholars operate – conditions that affect individuals differently depending on their location, resources available, work precariousness and the political environments surrounding their intellectual labour. Therefore, epistemological debates about who produces knowledge must connect to material realities, as these are inherently reflected in what is published at the top. As Fonseca (2019) put it, a critical engagement with globalising IR must explore the exclusionary effects of global material inequalities in higher education.

Kristensen (2018) argued that publishing in Global North journals has traditionally conferred legitimacy and academic capital. As such, many scholars, regardless of their origin, are motivated to publish in these outlets to improve their impact factors and secure funding and consequently boost their careers. However, gatekeeping operates not only through exclusions but also by disciplining authors, rendering certain forms of knowledge visible only when reformulated according to dominant standards, as they must speak the 'language of the North' (Tickner 2003). If indeed most authors from the Global South publishing in these journals have some prior training in the Global North, it indicates that access alone does not translate into greater epistemic equality; it signals, hence, conditional inclusion.

Conditional inclusion dialogues with 'exclusion with access', the theme of this issue. It describes situations where groups or ideas traditionally barred from an intellectual framework begin to be formally included but remain largely restricted from transforming such structures. Their inclusion is mainly symbolic and performative, often serving as a token with limited impact rather than a genuine driver of change. In IR knowledge production, the pressure to follow a 'hidden curriculum' (Barham & Wood 2022) as an easier way to get published operates as a mechanism of exclusion with access, since it can isolate authors unwilling or unable to conform. This conditional inclusion in perceived internationalised spaces reinforces long-standing patterns of what counts as acceptable academic work by only accepting a few pieces of non-Western knowledge that fit its criteria. Consequently, it sustains existing hierarchies between the core and the periphery in IR (Risse et al. 2022) while establishing new hierarchies within the periphery between those who can engage with the centre and those who remain confined to 'local' spaces.

Methodology

We map how many Latin American authors have published in ten 'top' peer-reviewed IR journals from 2010 to 2024: the European Journal of International

Relations (EJIR), International Affairs (IA), International Organization (IO), International Security (IS), International Studies Quarterly (ISQ), International Studies Review (ISR), International Theory (IT), Review of International Organizations (RIO), Review of International Studies (RIS), and World Politics (WP). We selected these journals based on Clarivate's Journal Impact Factor (JIF) for the field of Political Science and International Relations.[1] We excluded broader Political Science (PS) journals since IR is not considered a subdiscipline of PS in all countries.

Data collection was conducted manually by reviewing all research articles published in each issue of the ten selected journals throughout the period.[2] We define Latin America as including the countries of South America, Central America and Mexico. An author is considered Latin American based on two criteria: (1) explicit self-identification as being born in one of these countries, or (2) completion of a bachelor's degree at an institution located in the region. To gather this information, we consulted the authors' Curriculum Vitae, which were, in most cases, accessible through their institutional or personal websites or via LinkedIn. We included all articles that featured at least one Latin American author, including those co-authored with scholars from outside the region, regardless of authorship order.

Our methodology has some potential limitations. First, since data collection was conducted manually, it is naturally prone to human error. Second, because most authors do not disclose their nationality on their CVs or personal websites, we used the country where they obtained their bachelor's degree as a proxy for regional origin. Although this method is not perfect, we observed a strong correlation between birthplace and undergraduate education in cases where both pieces of information were available. Finally, although it is possible some authors might have bypassed our dual criteria, we believe such cases are few.

Despite its limitations, the data we collected achieved our goal of providing an accurate depiction of Latin American authors publishing in top-ranked journals while contributing to Global IR discussions. Our criteria include scholars who are originally from but no longer reside in Latin America, excluding those from other regions who live or have lived there. Although their number is small (only nine according to our database), these experiences highlight the complexities of belonging and inclusion. While these scholars, originally from and trained

1   Data from access in March 2023. More info on JIF is available at Clarivate's website: https://clarivate.com/academia-government/scientific-and-academic-research/research-funding-analytics/journal-citation-reports/. We recognise the limitations of using quantitative data such as citation reports; however, it is indisputable that they constitute an important reference by which academic work is judged.
2   We only investigated research articles, removing from the sample research notes, research essays, symposiums, book reviews, book review essays, authors' answers, errata and corrections. This way, we included original works that (likely) passed the peer-review process.

in the Global North, have certain advantages, they also work or have worked within the material constraints of Global South institutions; the opposite applies to Latin Americans working in the Global North.

We recognise that the notion of 'belonging' to a region, especially within broader debates on Global South representation, can be highly contested. While some authors have emphasised how everyday life experiences can influence academic work (Tickner 2003), others have highlighted differences in undergraduate or graduate curricula and training that may play a part in shaping future academic careers (Tickner & Weaver 2009; Colgan 2016; Barasuol & Silva 2016). The Global IR project itself argues that including 'marginal' voices in the debate can have meaningful effects not only on what kinds of phenomena are analysed within 'IR' but also on how we understand them. At the same time, it is equally important to stress that academic careers are becoming more globalised, and many scholars find themselves in 'third' (Chagas-Bastos et al. 2023) or liminal spaces that are often difficult to navigate. Our goal here is not to diminish the complexity of these experiences or to define a fixed idea of what it means to be Latin American, but rather to highlight how different trajectories influence the likelihood of publication in mainstream journals.

Results

We examined 5,626 research articles published between 2010 and 2024 in ten IR peer-reviewed journals and found 140 articles with at least one Latin American author, accounting for 2.5% of the total sample. Table 1 displays the distribution of these articles, which suggests that Latin American authors are significantly underrepresented or marginalised in high-impact IR publishing. ISR has the highest representation, while IT and IS have only published one and two articles with Latin American authors, respectively, over the course of 15 years.

Figure 1 illustrates this distribution by year and journal. Although there has been a noticeable increase in these publications since around 2015, the possible upward trend cannot yet be considered a clear or consistent trajectory. It is essential to consider factors such as special issues, which can create temporary spikes. For instance, in 2017, IA published a special issue on 'Brazil and the graduation dilemma', which accounted for all the articles by Latin American authors published in the journal that year.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of authors by country, with a clear dominance of Brazilians (33.6%), followed by Argentineans (24.8%), Mexicans (13.6%) and Colombians (9.6%). Several aspects of this distribution are noteworthy. While Brazil's share is fairly expected given its population size and GDP, Mexico seems underrepresented relative to its demographic and economic weight. On the other hand, Argentina's participation is surprisingly high. Although the Argentinian government's spending on tertiary education is not particularly remarkable, the

Table 1: Research articles with at least one Latin-American author (2010–2024)

Journal	Total Research Articles	Articles with one or more Latin American authors	Percentage
European Journal of International Relations	595	8	1.3%
International Affairs	1024	34	3.3%
International Organization	329	9	2.8%
International Security	284	2	0.7%
International Studies Quarterly	1199	29	2.5%
International Studies Review	524	20	3.8%
International Theory	321	1	0.3%
Review of International Organizations	326	9	2.8%
Review of International Studies	756	11	1.4%
World Politics	273	17	6.2%

Source: Authors

country has the region's highest rate of higher education enrollment, which may explain its strong representation.[3]

We also analyse the authors' backgrounds and institutional affiliations through their CVs. A clear pattern emerges: Many articles were published while authors were affiliated with non-Latin American universities. Brazil, however, is an exception, with most articles published when the authors are affiliated with a Brazilian institution. Figure 3 displays these findings.

Notably, some countries 'lose' more scholars than others. For instance, Brazil has retained much of its academic expertise, while others have seen significant outflows. While differences in higher education expenditure may be part of the explanation, they hardly paint a complete picture, as all countries in Figure 3 have similar rates.[4] Factors such as quality of life, funding availability, job opportunities and prospects for career advancement also influence the situation. In short, fully understanding these differences would require a deeper look into the dynamics of 'brain drain', which is beyond this article's scope.

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3 All data is sourced from the World Bank Database (https://data.worldbank.org/). In 2020, Argentina had the highest higher education enrolment rate at 99%, followed by Chile (89%) and Uruguay (65%). Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador reported around 55%, and Mexico 45% (data for several countries was unavailable).
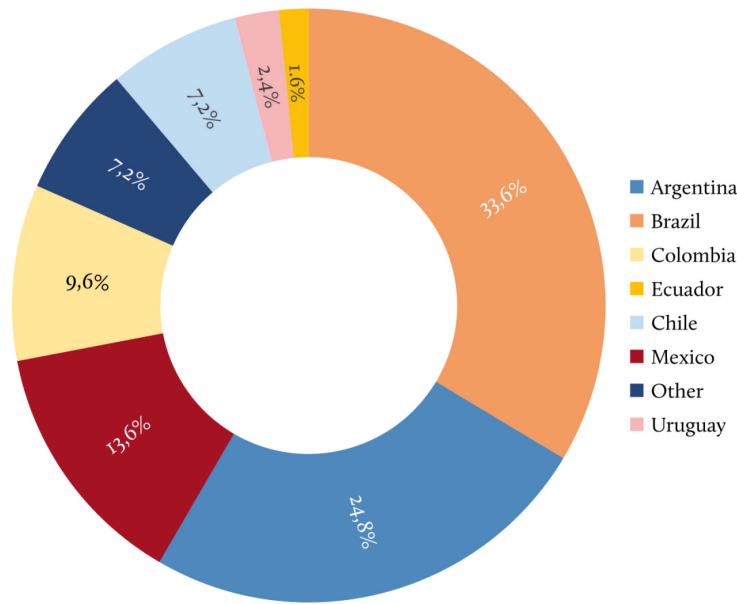
4 Data from the World Bank Database as footnote 5.

Figure 1: Research articles with at least one Latin American author by year and journal
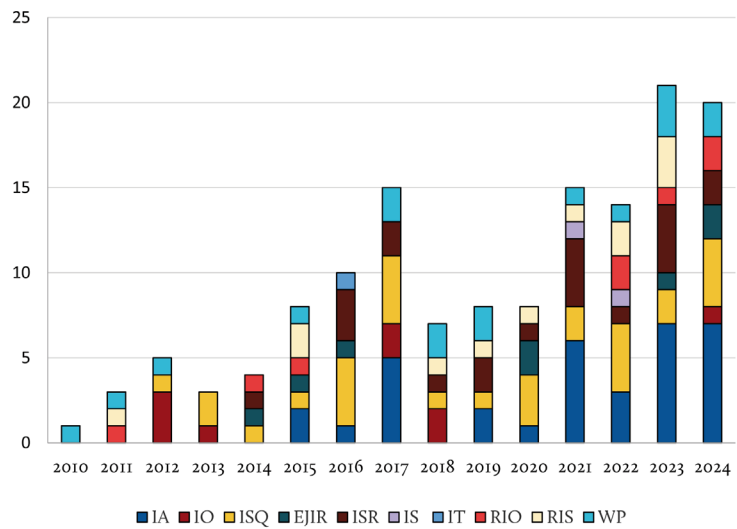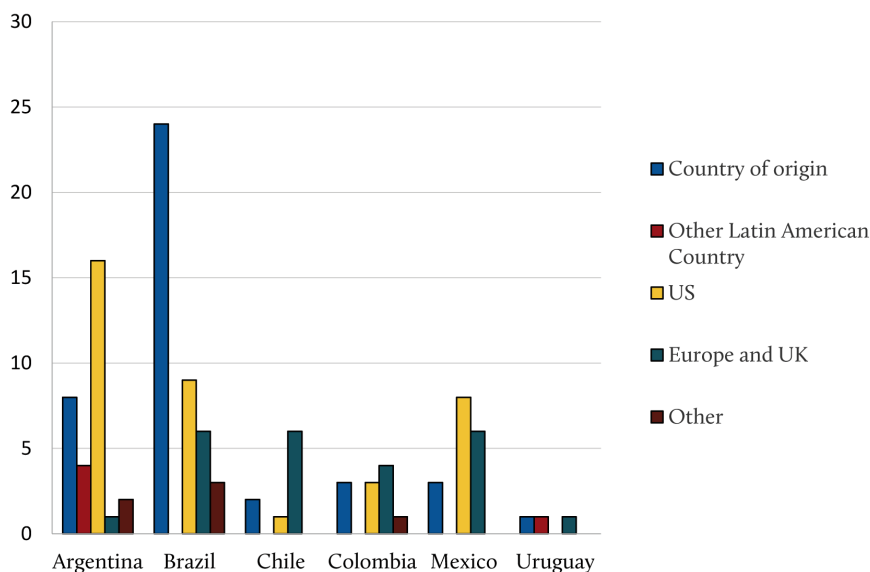

Source: Authors

Figure 2: Distribution of authors by country

Source: Authors
Note: The category Other includes Bolivia (2), Costa Rica (1), El Salvador (1), Peru (2), Puerto Rico (1) and Venezuela (2).

Figure 3: Where authors were based when articles were published
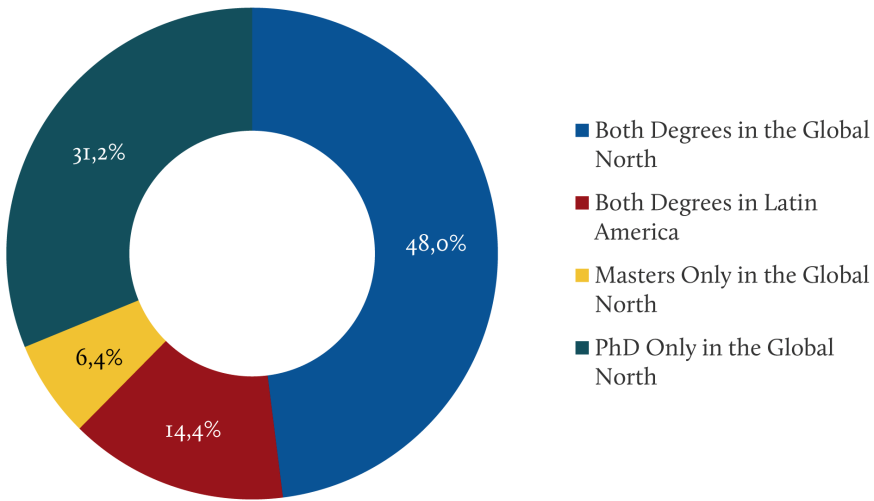

Source: Authors
Note: For easier visualisation, we only included nationalities that were represented three or more times. The category 'Other' includes Canada, Australia and the United Arab Emirates.

Although we cannot explain the causes, we can consider the implications. An author's regional background continues to shape and impact their academic work, even if they no longer live there. However, being affiliated with an institution in the Global North offers both tangible and intangible benefits. In fact, it is notable that most authors in our sample have spent some time at Northern academic institutions, as shown in Figure 4.

Of the 125 authors analysed, only 14.4% completed both their master's and PhDs in Latin America. Adding the 6.4% who have completed only a master's abroad, this means 20.8% earned their PhDs in the region. Among these, all but two are Argentinians or Brazilians who received their degrees in their home countries. Notably, about one-third of them (7 out of 19) later spent time as postdoctoral researchers, visiting scholars or fellows in the United States, Europe or the United Kingdom. Overall, nearly 80% have earned either their PhD or both their master's and PhD in the Global North, and 85% have spent professional time abroad. Figure 5 illustrates this distribution of PhD locations.

Most authors completed their PhDs in the US, Europe or the UK. Since a PhD is likely the most important degree for a researcher and possibly the key experience that shapes many of us into researchers, it is easy to understand the importance of these figures. Figure 6 summarises these findings by showing the movement of researchers from Latin America to the Global North to earn their PhDs, with many staying there to build their academic careers.

Figure 4: Where authors completed their master's and PhDs

- Both Degrees in the Global North
- Both Degrees in Latin America
- Masters Only in the Global North
- PhD Only in the Global North

Source: Authors
Note: We could not find the source of eight of the 125 authors' master's degrees. In four cases, we found that their PhD was obtained in the US, meaning they likely did not pursue a separate master's degree.

Figure 5: Countries where authors completed their PhD

- US
- Canada
- UK
- Latin America
- Europe
- NA
- Australia
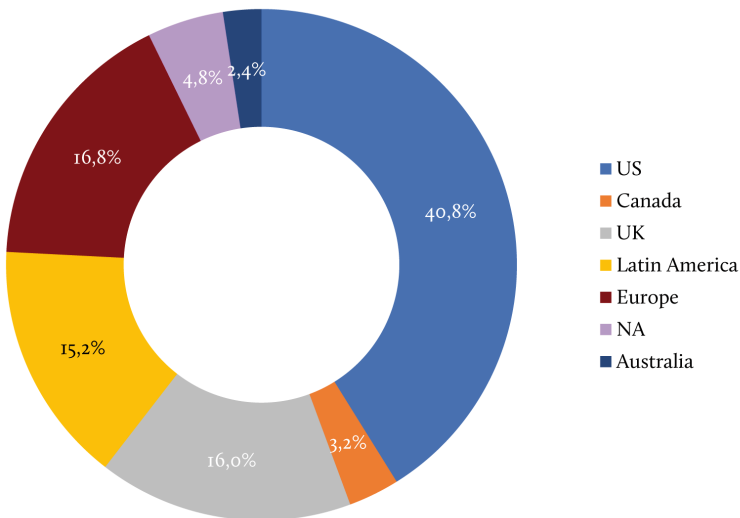
Source: Authors
Note: The category 'Other' (too small to be labelled in the figure) accounts for a researcher who did their PhD in Japan and one who did theirs in Turkey. N.A., in many cases, means the authors have not completed a PhD.

Figure 6: Career paths of authors who completed PhDs in the US, UK or Europe
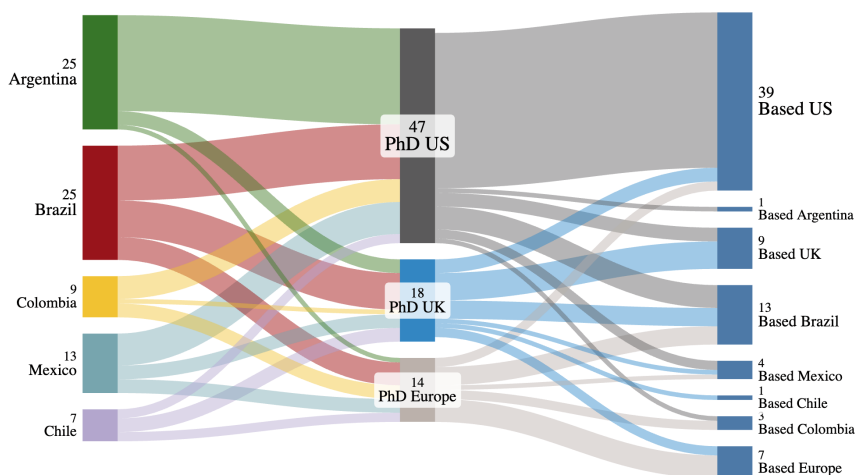
Source: Authors

We also examined the co-authorship patterns shown in Figure 7. Single authorship makes up a significant portion, indicating a level of academic autonomy among Latin American researchers. For articles with multiple authors, co-authorship with non-Latin American scholars exceeds that with Latin Americans. Several assumptions can be hypothesised. First, Latin American researchers might simply be publishing together in other outlets. Second, limited resources or career expectations may influence external publication efforts at Latin American institutions. Third, co-authorship with non-Latin American colleagues could reflect an internationalisation of research and a preference for cross-regional collaboration, possibly due to access to better resources, networks or funding. Fourth, these collaborations might be a strategic move to improve acceptance prospects, as Western colleagues are often more familiar with the publication process. Finally, it may suggest these researchers are truly integrated into the academic systems to which they migrated. However, none of these hypotheses can be proven with our data and would require further investigation.

Turning to the articles' characteristics, we start with the issue of methodology, as shown in Table 2. We classified the methodology by reviewing each article's abstract, introduction and/or methodology sections. Any statistical analysis of data was classified as quantitative, while qualitative methods include all data treatment that is not quantitative.[5] Some articles did not specify any methodology or

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5 Qualitative methodologies include case studies, ethnography, archival research, semi-structured interviews, discourse analysis, surveys with non-quantifiable results, process-tracing.

Figure 7: Type of authorship

- Single authorship
- With LA co-authors
- With non-LA co-authors
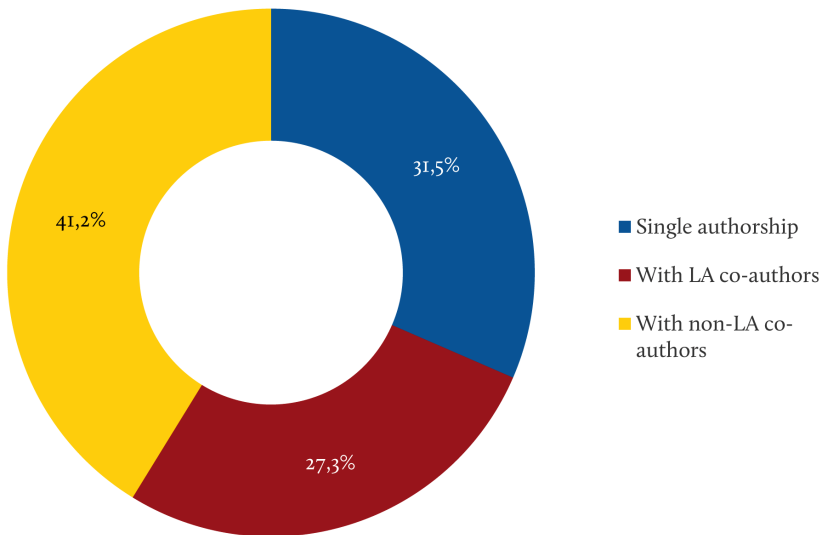
Source: Authors
Note: This data counts each instance of authorship individually, meaning that both authors (those who published multiple times within our sample) and articles (those with more than one Latin American author) may appear more than once.

were purely conceptual or theoretical, such as describing a specific author's work or developing but not applying a new framework or concept, and were therefore classified as 'unspecified or purely conceptual.'

The most striking result of our findings is that a large percentage (33%) of articles employ quantitative methods or formal modelling. This is much higher than what is shown in TRIP's database of journal articles, where, in 2018, only about 6% employed quantitative methods.[6] While this discrepancy is probably due in part to differences in coding, our results are still impressive compared to those published in Latin America.[7] Using a coding similar to ours, Medeiros et al. (2016) revealed that only 4.82% of articles published in 35 South American journals use quantitative methods. Notably, only 13% of articles in their sample clearly specify the use of any methodology, a result echoed in Carvalho et al.'s (2021) analysis of Brazilian journals, where they identified that less than half of the articles ex-

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6   TRIP (Teaching, Research and International Policy) results were accessed via their dashboard, available at https://trip.wm.edu/dashboard/journal-articles.
7   TRIP codes quantitative research as this methodology involves numerical values for both the IVs and DVs and some way of linking the IV and DV values. Hence, articles that contain only descriptive statistics that illustrate an empirical trend do not qualify and should instead be categorised as descriptive. We did not verify whether statistical treatment was given to both IVs and DVs.

Table 2: Methodology according to the journal

Journal	Quantitative or Formal Model	Qualitative	Mixed Methods	Unspecified or Purely Conceptual
EJIR	2	5	0	1
IA	0	18	0	16
IO	5	4	0	0
IS	0	0	1	0
ISQ	18	6	4	1
ISR	1	4	0	15
IT	0	1	0	0
RIO	8	1	0	0
RIS	0	5	0	6
WP	11	2	1	0
Total	45	46	6	39

Source: Authors
Note: We could not access the full text of one *International Security* article and three *World Politics* articles, so we could not establish the methodology by reading the abstract alone in these cases.

plicitly describe their methodological design. Our share of articles with specified methodologies is much larger (more than 70%). That might also explain why our proportion of quantitative and qualitative methods is significantly higher – 34% in our sample versus 6.2% in Medeiros et al. (2016).

We also examined the themes of these articles. We identified eight broad categories based on the current sections of the ISA: 1) IR History; 2) Sociology, Pedagogy and Knowledge Production; 3) International Economy; 4) International Law, Governance and Organisations; 5) Subnational Politics; 6) IR Theory; 7) Foreign Policy and Security; and 8) International Security. Table 3 presents the results. Articles predominantly fall under the theme of International Law, Governance and Organisations (30 in total), which includes discussions about international courts, multilateral organisations and global governance. The second most common themes are Foreign Policy and Security and IR Theory (each with 23 articles), mainly focusing on Latin American contributions to the field's overall development, both theoretically and empirically. Articles on the International Economy (21 in total) mainly focus on trade, regulation and finance issues. Sociology of IR and IR History are more niche areas, with fewer publications (4 and 9, respectively). The distribution of themes appears to mirror the main goals of each journal, with no significant anomalies; for example, IA covers a broader range of topics, while IO or RIS are more focus-driven.

We were also interested in which articles were driven by country cases and whether there was a relationship between the selected country case and the author's

Table 3: Themes and journal distribution

| Research themes	IO	ISQ	IT	IS	WP	EJIR	RIO	IA	RIS	ISR
IR History	1	2	-	1	3	1	1	-	-	-
Sociology, Pedagogy and Knowledge Production	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	1	1
International Economy	3	8	1		-	2	4	1	-	2
International Law, Governance and Organisations	5	7	-	-	3	3	1	6	-	5
Subnational Politics		3	-	1	8	1	-	4	3	-
IR Theory	-	3	-	-	-	1	1	5	3	10
Foreign Policy and Security	-	4	-	-	1	-	2	14	-	2

Source: Authors

country of origin. First, we divided the 140 articles into two groups, finding that 58 focused on Latin America, while 82 did not (or not exclusively) on the region. Second, we examined these 58 articles to identify country prominence, as shown in Figure 8, concluding that 19% focused on Brazil and 5.2% on Argentina. However, the majority (58.6%) concentrated on the region more broadly, exploring regional socio-political dynamics, organisations, integration efforts or patterns of interaction between countries.

Finally, we analyse the authors' countries of origin and whether their articles focus on their own country, another Latin American case, a non-Latin American case or address broader themes unrelated to a specific country or region. Figure 9 presents these findings, emphasising the total number of authors rather than articles. Argentinians and Brazilians have a more varied thematic focus, not limited to their own countries. Interestingly, Mexicans, Chileans, Uruguayans, Bolivians and Venezuelans did not publish about their home countries but instead concentrated on other cases. When considering the proportions, Colombians are more likely to focus on their own country than other authors. In conclusion, these results reveal a clear interest among authors in discussing broader regional issues rather than solely focusing on their own countries, highlighting a preference for studies that go beyond national and regional borders.

Finally, many authors appeared repeatedly, explaining why our database contains 125 authors but 140 articles. A total of 26 authors published more than one article; 10 were based in Latin America and 16 in the Global North at the time of data collection. One author had four articles, and five authors published three articles each. This pattern suggests that these individuals may have 'cracked the code' of publishing in top journals by internalising the 'hidden curricula' – adapting to these top journals' stylistic, thematic and epistemologi-

Figure 8: Case focus on Latin American-themed papers
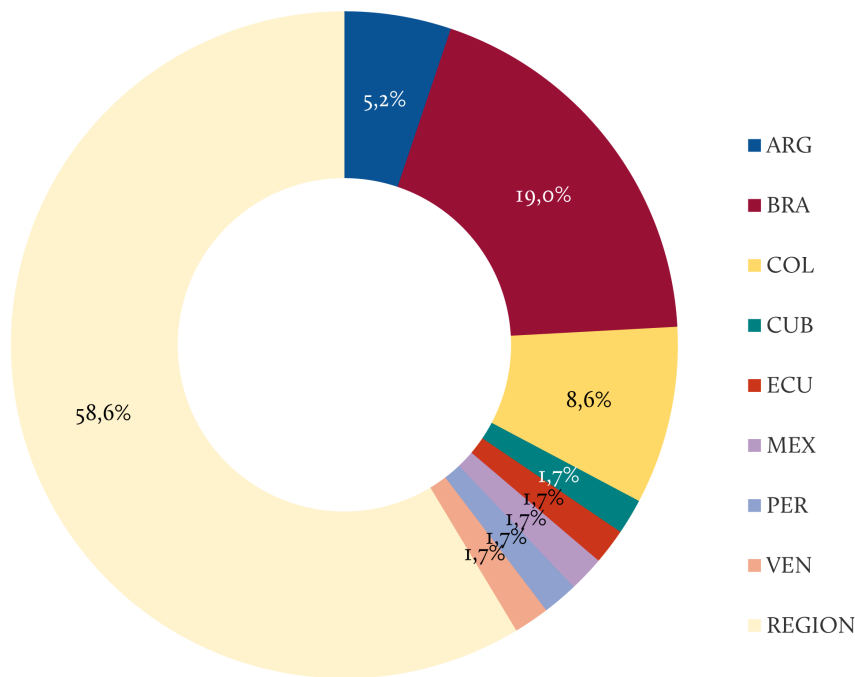
Source: Authors

Figure 9: Authors and Country Cases
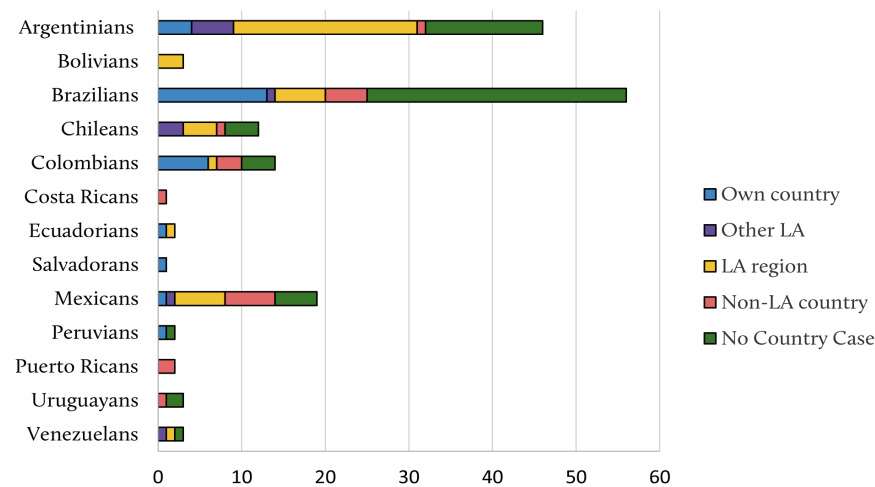
Source: Authors

cal expectations. This finding also complicates discussions around exclusion and access, highlighting how inclusion often remains selective and narrower than it may initially appear.

Discussion

The first point that must be emphasised is how unexpectedly low the results were. Despite Latin America's long-standing intellectual traditions, including dependency theory, critical approaches to political economy and postcolonial thought, its presence in top IR journals remains surprisingly limited. Within our already small sample, some countries are far more represented than others, indicating not only an imbalance in visibility but also a systematic marginalisation of many national scholarly communities. Therefore, our data raises a pressing question: If Latin America is such a fertile ground for original scholarship, why are so few of its voices present in the most prestigious IR publication venues?

A first hypothesis is that Latin Americans submit to 'top' journals at a much lower rate than other scholars from the Global North. Although we lack submission data for most of the journals we examined, some earlier studies support this hypothesis. Breuning et al. (2018) studied submission patterns to the American Political Science Review (APSR) in 2010 and 2014, revealing that only 6.5% of submissions came from authors in the 'periphery'. Similarly, Chagas-Bastos et al. (2023) note that submissions to ISA flagship journals mostly originate from authors affiliated with US, UK or European institutions, while submissions from Global South authors ranged from 12% (to ISQ) to 26% (to both International Studies Perspectives and ISR).

To better understand this pattern of submissions, Montal et al. (2024) conducted a conjoint survey experiment involving 446 Latin American scholars. Their results indicate that the geographic location of a journal (whether in their home country, another Latin American country or the Global North) does not seem to influence submission choices. This finding appears to contradict the data presented by Breuning et al. (2018) and Chagas-Bastos et al. (2023). However, when considering where respondents obtained their PhDs, the experiment shows that US-trained academics prefer publications based in the Global North. This supports our findings that these scholars are more likely to publish in 'top' journals, suggesting that this outcome may come from their initial submission choices. Additionally, Montal et al. (2024) found that US-trained academics prefer journals where their colleagues have not published. Although this finding might seem puzzling, it seems to indicate, as we have suggested, the development of new hierarchies within academic spaces in the Global South, where specific subsets of scholars try to stand out through their connections and ability to 'speak to' the Global North. It is also worth noting that efforts to 'internationalize' scholarly output are often a product of pressures from the job market or career advance-

ment systems increasingly relying on impact metrics like citation counts. These pressures are not only present in the Global North but are also widespread in the South, including Latin America (Koch & Vanderstraeten 2021).

A second factor to consider is that, beyond submitting fewer manuscripts, Latin American authors also tend to face lower acceptance rates compared to their Global North counterparts. Available data supports this pattern. Breuning et al. (2018) report that in 2010 none of the articles submitted by periphery scholars to APSR were accepted, and in 2014 only one was accepted, while the global acceptance rates were 6.3% and 6.4%, respectively. Although Chagas-Bastos et al. (2023: 5) do not provide acceptance rates for ISA journals, they highlight a significant disparity in acceptance rates between Global North authors and the rest of the world; only a small fraction (ranging from 0 to 9% across different journals) of accepted articles were authored by Global South scholars. This indicates that structural inequalities still exist not only in access but also in the likelihood of being published. This may be related to the fact that most reviewers tend to come from Global North countries, predominantly the US (Publons 2018), although verifying this is difficult due to the lack of data specifically related to IR. Regardless of nationality, it is important to emphasise the role reviewers play in evaluating and enriching research, but also in gatekeeping and 'disciplining' it (Vanderstraeten 2022).

We argue that the disparity in acceptance rates, different submission strategies and the fact that most Latin American authors in our sample were trained in the Global North point to the existence of a 'Global South Frontier': a complex network of material and immaterial barriers that scholars from the Global South must navigate. It is already widely acknowledged that universities in the Global North benefit from greater access to research funding, well-resourced libraries and databases, administrative and research support, funding for international conferences, better working conditions and more available staff – all of which directly affect a scholar's ability to conduct and publish research. However, beyond these structural disparities lies a 'hidden curriculum', a set of informal norms, rules, expectations and skills that inform the 'ways of doing' in academic practice (Barham & Wood 2002: 324).[8] That includes knowing how to structure and pitch an article, what rhetorical and stylistic conventions to follow and how to navigate journal placement strategically. In terms of research, this is how IR academics learn to 'speak the language' of the Global North (Tickner 2003), making their research palatable in content and form to implicit expectations of editors and reviewers.

Hence, although only academics currently affiliated with Global North institutions benefit from direct material advantages, those trained within these

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8   It is considered hidden given that in contrast to the curriculum proper, it is not learned in formal spaces of lectures or seminars, but rather informally and, in some cases, even incidentally and tacitly (Elliot et al. 2016).

institutions also possess an additional, often less visible asset: They have been socialised into both the formal and informal aspects of the discipline as defined at its core. This likely explains why 80% of the authors in our sample were educated in the Global North, with many also holding positions there today. Notably, this applies to all authors who appear three or more times in our dataset. This group highlights the selective inclusion of Latin American voices, as they often learn the language and adopt methods, theoretical frameworks, data sources and rhetorical styles deemed acceptable by dominant standards. Consequently, they exemplify the dynamic of exclusion with access: gaining entry into the discipline's most prestigious platforms through conformity with central expectations.

That is not, of course, to diminish the contributions or lived experiences of scholars from the Global South who have been trained in the North or who now navigate academic life from within 'third spaces'. Many of these scholars grapple with the tensions of intellectual hybridity and positionality. However, their selective inclusion in top-tier journals may contribute to obscuring the broader diversity of Latin American scholarly voices that remain unheard in mainstream disciplinary spaces. These silenced voices may radically depart from the Western canon and also represent hybrid traditions that do not fit neatly within dominant paradigms. For example, Latin America has a long tradition of Political Economy (Luna et al. 2014) and studies that fit into a more 'essayist' style (Mansilla 2003), which are seldom visible in high-prestige IR journals. The marginalisation of such contributions reveals the limits of current inclusion efforts. It also underscores the need to broaden not just who is included but also what kinds of knowledge are recognised as valid.

What are the implications of this selective and conditional inclusion? Our results indicate that these journals have only made a narrow contribution to the broader goal of globalising IR thus far. While there is a modest upward trend in the number of Latin American scholars being published – and recent efforts to diversify editorial boards (Chagas-Bastos et al. 2023) are certainly steps in the right direction – these changes remain limited. The pattern of inclusion we observe, which favours a certain scholar and scholarship profile, raises questions about the true transformational intent of these efforts. Are they genuinely aimed at challenging the epistemological hierarchies that structure the field? Scepticism, reinforced by our empirical analysis, may indicate that these efforts are better understood as mechanisms of selective access that still exclude many.

Conclusions

The pluralisation of voices in top-ranked journals is an essential step toward globalising IR, making it more diverse and reflective of the multiplicity of experiences that shape the discipline worldwide. Academic journals play a central

role in this process, functioning as platforms for knowledge dissemination, disciplinary advancement, status building and scholarly legitimacy. Meanwhile, as our study reaffirms, they also serve as active agents in maintaining epistemic hierarchies. By deciding who gets published, these journals shape the field's boundaries, either limiting or broadening the recognition of knowledge produced outside traditional centres. Examining the presence and participation conditions of Latin American scholars in these spaces helps illuminate the tensions between inclusion and marginalisation.

Our findings reveal an uneven landscape: Not only is the region under-represented, but the scholars who succeed in publishing are overwhelmingly trained in or affiliated with Global North institutions. Despite the region's rich intellectual contributions, it accounted for only 2.5% of the 5,626 research articles published in the ten journals over the 15 years we examined. This number raises questions about the structural and epistemic mechanisms through which IR continues to reproduce exclusion, even under the guise of inclusion. Therefore, our paper engages with discussions on exclusion and access by pinpointing possible conditions in which some are included through integration, while most remain excluded for not adapting or fitting in. Our results show that the 'make it or break it' factor relates to previous international experience and gaining familiarity with a 'hidden curriculum' that orients individuals to conform to implicit norms and expectations. This raises concerns about the limits of Global IR and its effort toward epistemic pluralism: Does it function only as a performative gesture?

Until we recognise the essential role of material gatekeepers, we will not fully realise the potential of globalising IR. Journals are not just passive venues for intellectual exchange but central mechanisms through which recognition, legitimacy and authority are granted or withheld. Reforming editorial structures, expanding citation practices and amplifying the space for Global South publications should be part of a deep disciplinary reckoning. We conclude by remembering that transforming epistemic hierarchies takes a village. Building on our analysis, future research should examine other regions in the Global South to better understand how structural gatekeeping functions across different geopolitical contexts. In this way, collaboratively and exploratively, we can further improve our understanding of knowledge production conditions to promote greater equality and diversity.

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Conflict of interest statement
No conflict of interest was reported.

Data availability statement
The dataset contains names and other personal information and, as such, is not shared alongside this article. For further inquiries about the dataset, please contact the Authors.

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Thematic section
Exclusion with Access: Performative Inclusivity in Global IR

The Global South as 'Europe's Jungle': A Postcolonial Critique of EU Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order

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Abstract

The global world order has been transforming, becoming increasingly less Europe-centred. In this context, the paper critically examines how European Union (EU) foreign policy narratives are structured by the coloniality of power, as conceptualised by Quijano, with a focus on Josep Borrell's 2022 'Garden and Jungle' speech. The empirical analysis is situated in the post-2022 geopolitical context, in which the EU's foreign policy narrative has shifted from positioning itself as a 'soft power' to adopting the 'language of power'. The EU's relative weight in global geopolitics is declining and the EUropean leaders strategically mobilise colonial tropes in political discourses to signal a dominant position over the Other and mark a clear border between the imagined Europe and the 'Jungle'. Drawing on postcolonial theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study seeks to empirically reveal how official EU foreign policy narratives reproduce asymmetrical power structures rooted in Western European colonialism, within the post-2022 geopolitical context. Borrell's framing of EUrope – using colonial tropes of moral and developmental superiority, especially in its relations with Latin America – reinforces the coloniality of power contributing to the EU's attempt to reassert the global dominance Western Europe lost after the collapse of the colonial empires.

> *Those that do not know their history run the risk of revisiting it.*
> Elie Wiesel (Lewis 2022: 3)

> *We're so used to this reality*
> *that we forget it is no historical accident.*
> Kehinde Andrews (2022: xii)

Introduction

> *Europe is a garden . . . the rest of the world is a jungle, and the jungle could*
> *invade the garden. The gardeners should take care of it, but they will not*
> *protect the garden by building walls.* (Borrell 2022b)

These are the words of Josep Borrell, the high representative/vice president (HR/VP) of the European Union (EU) between 2019 and 2024. He addressed the speech to an audience of young European diplomats in Bruges, intending to pass on old wisdom from one generation of European diplomats to the next.

In this study, I argue that this narrative shift towards a 'more geopolitical EU' that defends itself from Others outside the imagined European terrain has become normalised in mainstream foreign policy discourse post-2022. Borrell's strategic use of colonial narratives serves geopolitical positioning and reinforces the EU's coloniality of power in relation to Latin America, which also exerts an influence on framing current conflicts between Russia and Ukraine and Israel and Palestine (Oleart & Roch 2025: 3). Introducing the concept of coloniality helps capture 'the long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration' (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 243).

In this light, the Garden-Jungle distinction is understood as the core of power, based on the racial division between Europeans and non-Europeans and on the myths of the superior European civilisation (Quijano 2000: 533, 542). These elements, as Quijano argues (2000: 533) are fundamental to the Eurocentric rationality that defines the corroding, yet still globally hegemonic power which inherently implies coloniality. To capture the coloniality in EU foreign policy discourse, I first critically examine the Eurocentric truth and knowledge production with a

special focus on the logic of Othering and the role of stereotyping which inform the century-old Jungle trope in discursive practices present in HR/VP Josep Borrell's narrative (Wilkens 2017: 5; Bhabha 1994; Bhambra 2007; Gandhi 2020, etc.).

Based on the empirical findings, I further argue that despite the end of direct colonial administration in the 1960s, the collective social and political consciousness still has not undergone a transformative historical disruption at the EU level. This is due partly to the widespread historical amnesia (Pasture 2018) in mainstream EU policymaking, European public discourse and academia regarding the historical context in which the EU's predecessors were conceived – namely, the collapse of the European colonial empires. Moreover, the colonial narrative endures partly because of the 'forgetting and forgiving' of the founding Member States (MSs) that accumulated wealth through colonial systems. The EU's reinforced hegemonic rhetoric remained a tool attempting to present itself as a dominant actor in the shifting global world order (Böröcz 2021).

Before introducing the logic of colonial discourse and its reproduction in 21st century EU foreign policy discourse, I define how the concept 'Europe' is understood in this paper and reflect my research position as a woman from Budapest, Central-Eastern Europe (CCE). Generally, postcolonial literature often portrays colonisers as synonymous with 'Europeans', treating the region as a homogenic entity. It is, however, imprecise because European societies have vastly different experiences with colonialism. Since Western MS benefit from the privileges and the power associated with imperial legacy, the wealth and the enduring sociocultural and cognitive dominance manifest in EU governance regarding, for example, migration and border policies, the 'Eastern Enlargement' and the foreign policy (Böröcz 2001).

Therefore, building on József Böröcz' works (2009) I use the word *EUrope* to depict the concept of Europe as Borrell understands it in his speeches: It refers to EU member states, more precisely, to those Western societies that have been historically shaped by the material and cognitive implications of imperial colonialism. EUrope is, thus, a concept linked to the collective EU identity that merges different European histories, with a default emphasis on Western Europe's hegemonic role in the world. (Pasture 2018).

I wish to contribute to the body of critical knowledge on contemporary European identity construction and global power hierarchy reproduction between former colonies and colonisers from a historical perspective. Both endeavours are influenced by my research position, rooted in a Central-Eastern European socio-economic background and a feminist analytical lens which critiques cemented and normalised power structures from the standpoint of the 'oppressed'. Similarly to the feminist point of view on the oppressive system of patriarchy, the decolonial thinking sees 'projects of inclusion into existing dominant orders' critically as well (Orbie et al. 2023: 6).

From this standpoint, both social entities exist in a state of 'exclusion with access', a concept that also informs my analytical lens (Vivekanandan 2020). In a EUropean sense, it means inclusion in privileged places formed by the Western EUropean and male power, such as that in the EU polity and Western European academic spheres; however, mechanisms of exclusion are in play when it comes to transformative access for Central-Eastern European or female actors. These social and cognitive positions of the researcher inform postcolonial critique of EU foreign policy specifically in understanding the process and nuances of Othering. Postcolonial and feminist standpoints are mutually helpful when deconstructing the naturalised and neutralised White European and male points of views and power.

Based on the empirical and theoretical understanding of *exclusion with access,* I apply this concept to the complex relationship between Latin America and the EU. Vivekanandan (2020: 5) defines *exclusion with access* based on the empirical case of a museum in the former colonial centre which displays works of art previously appropriated from the ex-colonies in the ex-colonial place, which is the paradox of accessibility and exclusion. When locals gain access to view the exhibited colonial history, they can never truly reclaim ownership of the objects; moreover, the colonial seizure itself remains unacknowledged in the process of glorifying the common heritage in the present (Vivekanandan 2020: 5).

This logic is also apparent in Borrell's discourse towards former Latin American colonies because he frequently recalls the 'rich cultural and linguistic similarities between Europe and Latin American countries' and highlights the 'common history' and, consequently 'Latin America's closeness to Europe'. This seemingly inclusive mode of speech, used by the Spanish-origin HR/VP, highlights the 'similarities' in speeches frequently delivered in Spanish, but fails to address the root of these shared – or rather, imposed – cultural features: brutal European colonialism. Meanwhile, he constructs difference and exclusion through Othering in his speeches and imposes Europe's supposed civilising power onto his Latin American addressees.

Following this introduction, I outline the historical context in which the European Union emerged in the 20th century. Contrary to the mainstream discourse which holds that Western European countries established the EU's predecessor, the European Economic Community (EEC), to 'overcome internal conflicts on the continent', I argue that the 'forgotten history of the EU's conception' is crucial for developing a critical understanding of how colonial logic has been adapted into EUropean institutional and academic discourses enabling enduring legacies of colonial structures to sustain.

> *Whatever Europe is,*
> *cannot be understood outside of its imperial relationships.*
> Gurminder Bhambra (2007: 19)

The European project: From Eurafrica to the universal goodness

The European Union's self-proclaimed foundations are rooted in a selective historical narrative in which the European community is based on the 'cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of inviolable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law' (European Union 1992). The mention of the common European inheritance on which the future of the Union lies presupposes some historical awareness of the MS' past.

However, as pointed out by Böröcz, the Eurocentric narrative of the European Union's history is constructed through 'forgetting and forgiving' those member states – Belgium, Denmark, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Portugal – that actively practised brutal colonial oppression in the past (2021). This selective memory is what Nicolaïdis (2015: 285) calls a 'virgin birth' and Pasture (2018: 7) defines as 'institutional amnesia'.

Many scholars (Böröcz 2021; Nicolaïdis et al. 2015 and Hansen & Jonsson 2015) apart from the mainstream EU studies, argue that the genesis of the European Union was largely induced by the collapse of the former colonial Empires and bound to the collective colonial project of Eurafrica. The 'imperial enterprise', called 'Eurafrica', was Europe's endeavour to step up as a third global power next to Cold War–era rivals – the United States and the Soviet Union (Hansen & Jonsson 2015: 217). The ultimately unsuccessful objective of EUropean integration in the 1950s was framed with the slogan: 'promote progress, happiness, and democracy in Africa' (Hansen & Jonsson 2015: 209), which showed a clear civilising mission ideology right at the start of the joint European project.

The endeavour to maintain EUrope's hegemonic position in the world once afforded by the expanded colonial empires has been present in the HR/VP's speeches, legitimised by the universalist frame, promoting democracy and human rights (Andrews 2022: 24).

The colonial past has passed . . . or not entirely?

This paper argues that coloniality remains deeply embedded in EU policy discourse. The power over Eurocentric knowledge production has adapted to changing global political dynamics. The currently shifting liberal international order is based on the presumption that European colonialism was only a historical episode in the past, and now the global system relies on rules which bind equally the sovereign states of the world (Cox 1996; Nicolaïdis et al. 2015: 2). It is suggested in mainstream discourses that with the end of administrative colonialism in the 1960s, imperial rule ceased to exist in the EUropean consciousness (Nicolaïdis et al. 2015: 6). This narrative is present in Borrell's foreign policy discourse as well, exemplified when he confidently declares that Western powers have 'overcome the hegemonic temptations of the old European countries that marked the world with

their colonial empires' (Borrell 2023a), suggesting that the EU does not consider the former imperial and colonial order that keeps shaping many of its MS' current societies' economic, political and cultural realities. Colonial empires fell in the middle of the 20th century; therefore, Western European colonial countries began losing the hegemonic positions they had held in the global order. According to a growing body of critical scholarship, two main incentives backed the establishment of the transnational European Union.

The first was the relatively small global economic weight of individual Western European states (Böröcz 2009: 51–52). The second was the geopolitical power shrinkage which followed Western Europe's loss of expanded economic, political and social control over large overseas territories. To cure the disappearing source of Europe's hegemonic power position, a joint exploitation of the African continent seemed a lucrative solution not only to the main advocate, France, but to other European MS as well (Hansen & Jonsson 2015: 210). So, at the very conception of the European Economic Community, the Eurocentric and imperial narrative constructed Africa as a civilising project for Europe, justifying Africa's dependence on Europe, thereby cementing the continent's relative underdevelopment.

In conclusion, these two notions about the foundation of the EC/EU indicate clearly that the Union has, from early on, had global geopolitical and economic incentives to preserve its global relevance and Eurocentric identity. This historical development is the reason why current EUropean discourse on geopolitical positioning and power still holds onto elements of coloniality, such as the classification of world population around the idea of race and naturalised Eurocentric perceptions of the world (Quijano 2000: 533).

Fading EUropean hegemonic power: 'Merry crisis'

By the time the EU won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012, the success story of European integration had been dissolving. Mainstream EUropean public discourses have normalised the notion of 'crisis' year after year. The optimistic narrative that has surrounded eight decades of the EUropean project has begun to rust. Borrell himself unfolds his speeches around the conviction that 'We, the EU' live in a constant crisis management, repeating that what the EU has to face today is 'crisis, crisis, crisis' (Borrell 2022a). Although the sequence of sudden political, economic and social events in the last two decades have caused instability in the world, and consequently in Europe, crisis has been constructed in EUropean discursive spheres as a permanent state which justifies paradigms of hard power.

Critical researchers on the world order, such as Cox (1996) and Böröcz (2009), argue that what is framed narratively as a 'crisis-ridden world' is indeed the non-Europeanisation of the world order since the 1970s–1980s. It means that EUrope has been losing its credibility as an actor of hegemonic nature, including the

corroded ability to shape what is deemed 'normal'. In the post-2022 geopolitical context, systemic rivals – such as China, Russia and potentially the United States – are challenging EUrope's ability to 'maximise its power by influencing other actors' (Pardo 2012: 6) (Oleart & Roch 2025: 4). So, EUropean leaders imply that this conflict-ridden environment calls for a strengthened European sovereignty and defence against those not considered part of the European 'We' (2025: 4). This discursive shift is also evident in HR/VP Borrell's speeches, where he highlights the importance of the 'fight with narratives' (Borrell 2022a). An example of this discursive battle is when he called for persuading 'swing states' to join 'the right side of history' (Borrell 2022a; 2022c) in international institutions such as the United Nations (UN).

To explore the discursive expressions of attempts to re-establish EUropean hegemonic influence – rooted in Eurocentric rationality and coloniality – in the following, I outline the postcolonial theoretical framework and the method of Critical Discourse Analysis.

Postcolonial theoretical frame and critical discourse analysis

We live in an era – according to postcolonial scholars – which does not simply chronologically follow centuries of direct European dominance, economic exploitation, systematic racism and violence against natives (Loomba 2015). On the contrary, from a postcolonial theoretical perspective, the new 'architecture of the world' has not entirely replaced the colonial past (Gandhi 2020: 6). Thus, in a postcolonial frame, questions are asked about present issues while considering the historical structures, colonial dependencies and cultural codes that continue shaping global relations after the end of direct colonial rule (Wilkens 2017). Robert J. C. Young (2001: 4) defines postcolonialism as a critical theory which is 'united by a common political and moral consensus towards the history and legacy of western colonialism'.

Young (2001) and other postcolonial scholars (Bhabha 1994; Bhambra 2007; Gandhi 2020; Go 2013) claim that global capitalism emerged and entangled deeply with the European conquest missions to Latin America, Asia and Africa. European colonisers restructured non-capitalist economies in the conquered territories to consolidate European capitalism and economic powers in the metropoles (Loomba 2015). Hence, the current global economic world system features asymmetrical economic ties between formerly colonised territories and European centre economies. Based on these material power structures, vivid and resistant imperial and colonial discourses, cultural stereotypes, representations and ideologies constitute Western economic and symbolic dominance. Elements of power manifest in Western-centred public knowledge, artworks, scientific literature, trade agreements, treaties and diplomacy (Go 2013; Nicolaïdis et al. 2015; Young 2001). Thus, concludes Quijano, (2000: 548) the coloniality of power

is 'tied up to the concentration in Europe of capital, wages, the market of capital, and finally, the society and culture associated with those determinations'.

Since the postcolonial theorists are interested in cognitive power structures in the first place and challenge historically normative narratives, the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is often applied in this field of research. CDA is a methodological approach that aims to unravel the hidden as well as more visible 'structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language' (Wodak 2009: 10). Although the unit of analysis is semiotic data, such as policies, text or talk, CDA investigates the deeper ideologies and power manifested in language as a social practice (Wodak 2009: 2–3 and 5–6).

Discourse, in this sense, is not only a language in use but also a social practice which dialectically constitutes political situations, knowledge and social relationships between different identities (2009: 6). Therefore, political discourses carry a certain control and power within them which reflect the dominant ideologies in the social structures that frame the linguistic expressions. CDA critically deconstructs the often neutralised and naturalised meanings in mainstream discourses pointing out the hidden power structures and asymmetrical power relations.

In the following, I establish the logic of colonial discourse, then analyse Borrell's Garden and Jungle speech to empirically show how his narrative reflects and reinforces power relations and cognitive patterns echoing colonial ideas adapted to the 21st century geopolitical environment (Bhambra 2007).

The colonial discourse and its reproduction in the 21st-century EU foreign policymaking

Bhabha (1994: 67) defines colonial discourse as a 'form of discourse crucial to the binding of a range of differences and discriminations that inform the discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchisation'. The process of colonial discursive framing and articulation entails social codes, shared perspectives and expectations that link individual perceptions and choices into a wider semantic context (Carta 2020: 50).

Furthermore, colonial discourse can also be defined as a narrative, according to Bhabha (1994: 70–71), 'whereby the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognisable totality. It employs a system of representation, a regime of truth, structurally similar to realism'. The system of representation is constructed by stereotypes, which cannot be considered only a simplified version of reality because their meanings are fixed and told by the position of the powerful – i.e. the coloniser's point of view (1994: 75). Moreover, stereotypes are not mere false images either that create a basis for discrimination, as many moralist critiques of the colonial discourse point out, but an ambivalent body of projection, metaphoric strategies and fantasies that result in opposite positions (Bhabha 1994: 81–82).

Colonial discourse used to seek to establish a form of governmentality that controls and dominates social narratives, politics and the economy within colonial regions (Bhabha 1994: 83). The basic logic behind this colonial mindset entails the perceived otherness of the native non-European – as informed by racial and cultural hierarchisation – portrays the colonised as incapable of self-governance and progress in the Western manner (1994: 82–83). Consequently, the civilising mission of the European 'White Man' is seen as necessary and justified both morally and normatively from a Western perspective (Sachseder & Stachowitsch 2023: 412). In conclusion, the colonial narrative uses the stereotype of the racialised Other to legitimise the paternalising role in which the West tends to regularly position itself (Bhabha 1994: 83).

In the analytical frame based on postcolonial recognition of colonial rhetoric, what is analysed here is not the direct meaning or the morality of the statements in the High Representative's speeches, but the strategic use and the power structure of symbolic representations (Bhabha, 1994: 36). As the Jungle and Garden express in this discourse the most blatant categorisation of 'the two-class population of the world', non-Europeans and the Europeans, I continue with the conceptualisation of the function of Othering.

> *No one has ever seen a peach that smelled like that,*
> *this is not the scent of a peach but the idea of the scent of a peach.*
> Édouard Louis (2018: 131)

The strategic role of stereotyping the 'other'

The dominant way of constructing the European Other usually involves 'a diffuse sense of threat emanating from chaotic, dysfunctional non-European spaces and described in particularly racialised terms with reference to postcolonial regions including South America' (Sachseder & Stachowitsch 2023: 412-413). Keeping the process of Othering in focus, I begin by conceptualising the Other, and then reconstruct the narrative of the 'Jungle speech', which encapsulates the coloniality of power that positions non-Europeans as naturally inferior.

The most sympathetic strategy to the colonial logic is to split the world into two 'inherently opposite' spheres, as well as their populations. Over the centuries of direct European colonial rule, the division realised materially when the colonisers set the metropoles and settlers' town apart from the colonised places and the natives (Fanon 1963). This practice of dividing places between the settlers' town and the colonised reservation has largely ended, although this logic is still in function for instance in the case of Palestine. In hegemonic Eurocentric discourses, however, mentally differentiating the Other remains the fundamental logic and an essential basis of the coloniality of power after the end of direct colonial administration (Böröcz & Sarkar 2012).

In the postcolonial world, it is at the cognitive level where the image of the Other is produced, and where the distance between the European self and the 'rest of the world or Other' has been cemented through stereotypes (Bhabha 994: 45). Although it is not inherently colonial to point out certain cultural, social, political and racial differences, in a colonial sense, the difference is deliberately kept and functions as a manifestation of power relations (Memmi 2003: 115). Thus, while EUrope is in the position of inherited power and economic wealth and can construct its identity based on modernity, high moral standards, social discipline and rationality, the Other is conceived as inevitably inferior because of the supposed lack of virtue, order and modernity (Memmi, 2003: 115). Therefore, the colonial rhetoric embodies power relations between the perceived culturally and technically, economically superior European culture and the 'rest of the world' (Spurr 1993: 6).

The function of these rhetorical modes and the colonial logic of representing the Other was to justify the maintenance of colonial rule and administration. In contemporary global affairs, the continuous reproduction of these stereotypical and antagonistic binaries between EUrope and the rest of the world reinforces EUrope's claim to power and influence as a global actor. Polarity and the discursive construction of the Other are central elements of the coloniality of power, which filters through political practices in the non-discursive field as well.

Since the study seeks to demonstrate how HR/VP Josep Borrell constructs the EU's role in the current geopolitical global environment while strategically attempting to control and influence Latin American countries by colonial power, the empirical analysis draws on his speeches. Due to the limits of the paper, I focus mainly on the most infamous speech of his late career, the 'Jungle speech' (Borrell 2022b).

> *Among ourselves we operate on the basis of laws . . . but when we are*
> *operating in the jungle, we must also use the laws of the jungle.*
> Robert Cooper (2002)

The Jungle speech sets the tone

The Garden and Jungle trope has been a quintessential portrayal of the division between the civilised and the uncivilised places – in this case, Europe and the 'rest of the world' for centuries (Weisberg 2015). The reason I find the Jungle speech key in examining the discourse on EUropean foreign policy is that these statements do not function in isolation from statements in Borrell's other speeches. I base my main argument on one speech because I regard it as an integral part of Borrell's overall narrative, because a speech or trope does not function separately from the whole EU foreign policy discourse. In the Foucauldian tradition, the true sense of a statement is formed based on its coexistence with other statements in the

same narrative (Foucault 1972). Also, one statement, whether it be a sentence, a passage, a trope or a stereotype, inherently presupposes other statements in different speeches because it is embedded into the discursive field, as in a net, where every statement is surrounded by 'coexistence, effects of series and succession, a distribution of functions and roles' of other statements (Foucault 1972: 99).

Choosing the HR/VP as the speaker is a decision rooted in the CDA that emphasises the significance of who has the opportunity to speak and who decides what is considered legitimate knowledge. However, the analysis does not dwell on the subjective speaker but rather considers the speaker's position in the social, political, economic and cultural hierarchy (Carta 2020). Josep Borrell does not produce his discourse individually. His role as the high representative of the Union, or as he refers to himself, the 'Foreign Affairs Minister of Europe' (Borrell 2022a), is embedded into a broad institutional setting of EU foreign policy and diplomacy. Thus, the HR/VP has the legitimacy to speak and manage the shared knowledge and narrative within the discourse he produces. Therefore, he constructs a certain discursive space according to which certain policies, and external actions can be carried out.

In his 2022 speech, Josep Borrell stated:

> Europe is a garden. We have built a garden. Everything works. It is the best combination of political freedom, economic prosperity and social cohesion that humankind has been able to build - the three things together. And here, Bruges is maybe a good representation of beautiful things, intellectual life, and well-being. (Borrell 2022b)

The HR/VP's Eurocentric point of view regards EUrope as distinguished from 'the rest of the world' exceptionally and hierarchically: 'We are privileged people . . . and we cannot pretend to survive as an exception' (Borrell 2022b) because EUrope stands above the rest (Bhambra 2007: 5). He continues to emphasise that in his narrative the 'the rest of the world' metaphorically equals the jungle which not only represents the inability for self-government, but also a threat to the rule-based orders, such as EUrope (Borrell 2022b). In the following, I empirically walk through the logic of the coloniality of power based on the process of Othering, dividing spaces and consequently justifying intervention into native societies.

Civilised Europe vs. dangerous jungle

Borrell's statements on the Jungle and Garden set the tone because they indicate an institutional narrative strongly inspired by a specific historical period when European powers dominated and exploited major parts of the world. In Western consciousness, the Jungle represents a mythical sphere in a pre-civilised condition: It is wild and dangerous for those who are not native to the '*Jungle's Book*' and thus the jungle symbolises both a threat and a source of desire in the Western mind

(Said 1978). This cognitive pattern is undoubtedly present in HR/VP's narrative when he explains that:

> The jungle could invade the garden. The gardeners should take care of it, but they will not protect the garden by building walls. A nice small garden surrounded by high walls in order to prevent the jungle from coming in is not going to be a solution. Because the jungle has a strong growth capacity, the wall will never be high enough in order to protect the garden. (Borrell 2022b)

According to this narrative, the 'nice garden, Europe' can be destroyed, despite its distinction from the 'brutes' which is so concrete and prominent as to be a physical wall. Later, in another speech, the trope of the alarmed EUropean mindset appears when Borrell refers to Africa, from where, according to him, the 'problems came' and which 'destabilise Europe' by causing migration crisis (Borrell 2023a). This narrative similarly projects the image of the invasive jungle analogically onto masses of refugees and immigrants from outside Europe.

Fanon (1963: 30) remarks on the psychological effect of forcefully claiming native territories, dividing the world into two opposite zones with 'reciprocal exclusivity' and setting up a 'strongly built colonial town with stone and steel'. When reconstructing the settler colonisers' narrative of how the excluded people supposedly look at the privileged European places, Fanon (1963: 30) argues that it is an envious glance; moreover, the native constantly dreams of taking the settler's town. This is reflected in Borrell's words when he emphasises: 'the rest of the world will invade us, by different ways and means' (Borrell 2022b).

Controlling the bad grass

The underlying power structure is consistently present in the narrative because it reinforces the political vision of reality, promoting maximum difference and discrimination between the 'normal' (the Europeans) and the 'foreign' (the Orient) (Said 1978: 43; Bhabha 1994). This has implications in the colonial discourse and the non-discursive political field too: By establishing the Other as inferior to EUrope, it is justified to establish an administrative system and Western influence in the 'uncivilised' Global South. This is the logic behind the HR/VP's words when he orders young European diplomats to go outside EUrope and take care of the unstabilised regions of the world (Borrell 2022b). Just like the gardeners tame the jungle, according to Borrell (2022h). This conviction is rooted in the Western narrative of modernisation, according to which the civil state is the inevitable sign of human rationality and morality far from the unruly state of nature (Bhabha 1994: 43).

The Jungle trope has captured the fantasies of travellers, writers, artists and philosophers who constructed the foreign place that needs Europe's guidance to finally arrive at modernity and a higher level of governance. It mirrors the follow-

ing lines, where he once again explicitly backs the binary opposition and implies that the EUropean economic, political, legal, social, educational and democratic systems place EUrope in a superior position:

> There is a big difference between Europe and the rest of the world – well, the rest of the world, understand me what I mean, no? - is that we have strong institutions. .. The big difference between developed and not developed is not the economy, it is institutions. Here, we have a judiciary – a neutral, independent judiciary. Here, we have systems of distributing the revenue. Here, we have elections that provide a free vote for the citizens. Here, we have the red lights controlling the traffic, people taking the garbage. We have these kinds of things that make the life easy and secure. (Borrell 2022b)

Interestingly, the disappearing rubbish as a marker of high-level civilisation was already present in Fanon's (1963) explanation of the differences between the settler's town and the 'uncivilised' native's town during the direct European colonial rule. (It is quite ironic for the HR/VP to say this from the EU's symbolical capital, Brussels, where the public rubbish situation has famously been an odyssey.)

In the garden metaphor, which stands for the civilisation mission, the gardeners, who have the authority to bring order and civilisation into the wild, are sent to bring institutions and administrative systems to the native land as he states: 'But your duty will not be to take care of the garden itself but [of] the jungle outside' (Borrell 2022b). This motif of sending experts, as English diplomat Balfour states in the peak era of British colonialism, sending 'our very best to these countries' has always aimed to direct and force the country of influence according to European standards (Said 1978: 35). The attitude is rooted in the Orientalist knowledge production of the Eastern Other from the position of power. This is also a discursive strategy to portray 'us', Europeans, as the masters of knowledge of the controlled territory, as it appears in the Orientalist, English politician, Balfour's words: 'never in all the revolutions of fate and fortune have you seen one of those nations of its own motion establish what we, from a Western point of view, call self-government' (Said 1978: 33). The presumed lack of ability of self-government in the East calls for EUropean action in this narrative, 'the world needs Europe' as their 'beacon' to tame the unruly jungle (Borrell 2022b).

Fanon (1963: 201) observes the same logic of the dominant portrayal of the Algerian scenery, very much jungle-like, which according to the colonial mind, justifies the French colonial presence: 'Hostile nature, obstinate and fundamentally rebellious, is in fact represented in the colonies by the bush, by mosquitoes, native and fever, and colonisation is a success when all this indocile nature has finally been tamed. Railways across the bush, the draining of swamps'. In Borrell's speech (2022h), this type of modernisation and infrastructure development of the

Jungle appears in a self-contradiction by him rejecting the idea of neo-colonialism. First, he declared that:

> We can build a road. We can go with a bulldozer and money and workers, and we can build a road (Borrell 2022b).

However, then he continues with attempting to dissolve his rhetoric's orientalist undertone, by stating that he 'cannot go to emerging countries and build institutions for them [because] otherwise it would be a kind of neo-colonialism' (Borrell 2022b).

Attempting to dismiss the orientalist undertone of his rhetoric of the Jungle trope he explicitly denies neo-colonial objectives of EUropean foreign policy. In Critical Discourse Analysis, however, it is important to acknowledge the denial of certain truths of the (colonial) discourse in certain historical periods because it is in itself an important part of creating the discourse – the role of taboos. Nevertheless, in the closing remark of the Jungle speech, he keeps justifying the EU's intervention while failing to acknowledge the imperial process that strengthened Europe's position of power (Bhambra 2007):

> Believe me, Europe is a good example for many things. The world needs Europe. My experience of travelling around the world is that people look at us as a beacon. Why [do] so many people come to Europe? Are there flows of illegal or irregular migrants going to Russia? Not many. No, they are coming to Europe but for good reasons. (Borrell 2022b)

This quote also showcases another feature of Othering, already addressed above, namely the strong grammatical distinction between 'We/Us' and 'They/Them' in the narrative of the EU foreign policy. Forming the opposite of 'Us' and 'Them' reproduces unbreakable distance and signifies otherness.

A broader perspective on European hegemonic worldview

Moving on from colonialism, a historical period ending in the mid-20th century, enduring cognitive, social, political and economic power structures of that era are still functioning in the post-2022 geopolitical environment. To understand why these expressions of old EUropean power resist the changes of different time periods, I introduce the concept of hegemony.

Robert W. Cox (1996) argues that historical time consists of certain periods in which three forces – material capacities, ideas and institutions – define the hegemonic world order (Cox 1996: 98). Institutions 'reflect the power relations prevailing at their point of origin', while the stabilisation of an order works through certain values, ideas and shared meanings of social relations (1996: 98–99). Analysing the HR's narrative, all three factors are important; however, the influence of norms and institutions in shaping what is considered acceptable and normal thinking

is particularly essential. Borrell speaks from an institutionalised power position, representing economic power and a hegemonic understanding of a Western-led world order.

The Gramscian concept of hegemony depicts power as a combination of coercion and consent, where the latter is more prominent (Cox 1996: 127). Bieler and Morton (2004: 87) suggest that being in a hegemonic role, as some European powers were at their at peak of their colonial imperialism (Spain, France and the Great Britain) is an 'opinion-moulding activity' where hegemony ensures conformity in people's behaviour (Cox 1996: 127) and values that constitute the hegemonic social or world order (Bieler & Morton 2004: 87).

In the HR/VP's narrative, the 'shared notions of the nature of social relations' are historically conditioned in the period when the colonial difference used to order relationships between European powers and the 'rest of the world' (Cox 1996: 98). Although this colonial logic of social order between different groups of people (Cox 1996: 99) has lost its legitimacy in political, cultural and social discourses due to decolonising social forces, the renewed hegemonic discourse still can normalise the conviction of difference (Böröcz 2009). Not by accident, this is the central logic of the EU foreign policy narrative: To reproduce the garden-jungle narrative with the help of the underlying material structures rooted in the extraction of colonial wealth from states in the Global South.

The main sources of justification for a distinction between the peaceful inside and the threatening outside from which the logic 'hardening up' originates, are events that frame as 'crisis, crisis, crisis' (Borrell 2022b). These crises are usually framed as existential threats to the liberal, multilateral world order for at least a decade, and are exemplified as irregular migration, terrorism, global pandemic, the Russian war against Ukraine and the humanitarian crisis in Palestine. Discursively, these 'dangers' are the main legitimation for a more active engagement on the part of the EU, to protect and maintain the hegemonic status quo in the fading Western-centred international world order. In the face of great crisis-narratives, prominent EU leaders construct a discursive context in which they can formulate political objectives and interests (Cox 1996: 146).

For example, Borrell reasons for the necessity of evolving a strategic partnership with Latin America in most of his speeches, emphasising that improving from a 'natural partnership' (Borrell 2023b) is a natural process, particularly in the current geopolitical environment. From this Eurocentric perspective, the depth of the relationship between Europe and Latin America is attributed to their close 'alignment in terms of interests and values', with the notion that 'Latin America is a product of European civilization' (Borrell 2023b). This case highlights that when the EU seeks to maintain a historically conditioned hegemonic power – particularly in relation to former colonial counterparts – it utilises obvious civilising motifs rather than critically reflecting on the legitimacy of long-standing colonial power relations.

The narrative of the EU as an economically, socially superior and politically consolidated entity omits the fact that the current status has been achieved through lasting economic exploitation of the European colonies and wealth accumulation through value extraction and slavery. This unreflectiveness is clearly present in the HR/VP's framing of the EUropean self as an exceptional model 'where everything works' in all social spheres. His boldest example of this logic is the garden-jungle metaphor: The garden, the symbol of EUropean order, built by 'Europeans' is narratively the best combination of political, social and economic progress (Borrell 2022b). Accordingly, the rest of the world is phrased as mere opposition to this ideal garden: It is ruled by the brute force of nature, and it is just as chaotic as a jungle (Borrell 2022b).

It is a rhetorical strategy featured by both historical amnesia – failing to recognise European colonialism's role in the dependencies of former colonies – and denial, that Borrell explicitly exercises when he misses out the fact that the colonial legacy somewhat contributed to 'high fiscal pressure, extreme poverty, and social inequality' in Latin America and the Caribbean (Borrell 2023a). Cox (1996: 89) points out that those prominent actors at certain institutionalised positions and reproducers of knowledge about the world would think 'in fixity' regarding universal values and social, political and symbolic order and 'are biased and are comfortable within the given order'.

Historical structures and shared meanings of EUrope's historical relation to Latin America are thus pre-set, with specific colonial and imperial codes (Diez 2001: 90). So, the speeches given by the HR/VP on a micro-interpersonal level can only be understood and strategically applied because they were constructed into a widely consented social order.

Conclusion: Disrupting the hegemonic framing of the Jungle

In this study, I argued that the coloniality in EU foreign policy discourse realised in Josep Borrell ex-HR/VP's speeches functions through deep cognitive paradigms rooted in inherited hegemonic structures, called colonial imperialism (Nicolaïdis et al. 2015: 9). Metaphors of such discourse, like the jungle and garden, are understood as hegemonic because they are widely recognised as the *normal* and *neutral* order of the world. Dominant meanings are transmitted through these hegemonic visions even long after the official end of direct European colonial administration and still function as markers of the colonial difference.

The essentialised hegemonic logic is argued to be present in the EU foreign policy discourse post-2022, and it centres on the construction of EUrope as an authority of current historical events and the stereotyped Other (Said 1978). The suggested developmental difference in Borrell's speeches eventually justifies why 'the rest of the world' must follow the 'European recipe of prosperity' (Borrell 2022a; 2023a). These examples illustrate how discursive hegemony works: No coercion is needed

to prompt other international actors to act according to the challenged hegemonic worldview that is reflected in Borrell's narrative as the *natural* way of order.

The imperial nature of enforcing 'nineteenth-century standards of civilisation' is recognisable in these EU institutional behaviour patterns towards former colonies (Nicolaïdis & Onar 2016: 116). The Western European colonialism marks the period when Western powers consolidated their hegemonic position in the world order. So, in a Gramscian sense of hegemony, Western European states rose into hegemonic status which was cemented by economic structures and 'broader social discursive terms' (Manners 2013: 200). This was the era when certain social and cultural meanings became fixed. Moreover, it was also the historical period, when colonial discourses distinguished the Other by alienating groups of people and societies from Europe on a racialised and culturalist basis through 'displacements, violence, silencing, humiliations and dispossessions' (Sabaratnam 2013: 272 in Sebhatu, 2020: 45).

The strong binary opposition between the competent EUrope and 'the rest of the world', as argued in previous chapters, condenses in the symbol of the jungle metaphor expressed in Borrell's 2022 speech. This trope is remarkable because it very clearly captures the very essence of the colonial logic of difference. However, it did not puzzle the research initiative because of its obvious and discriminatory Eurocentric projection onto the non-European world, nor because its reckless use in contemporary EU foreign policy so clearly demonstrates the EUropean project's failure to live up to its own values. This trope consists of functions in a web of other statements of the same institutionalised discourse; therefore, the expressions are understood in relation to each other. That is how the coloniality of power functions through language, revealing itself in the most obvious references to colonial rule; however, control and domination filter through more hidden meanings as well.

Furthermore, this speech is the crown jewel of the Borrell's power discourse because it *works*. The single word 'jungle' invokes in a split second a mixture of strong visuals and sensations of what unmistakably *is* a jungle. Without any further explanation, which is key in political rhetoric, a vision of a mysterious, dense, humid and dark place is provoked in the imagination of the Western audience. It is assumed that everyone *knows* that the jungle is an untamed mass of nature beyond the familiar order of human civilisation, which both dangerously lures and repels the outsiders into the unknown.

This rich, layered imaginative terrain (Weisberg 2015: 171), the Jungle can in fact set the tone for the complete EU foreign policy discourse because it is a hegemonic term that encapsulates four centuries of the dominant European perceptions of the world order. It is understood from the perspective of the late colonial explorers, travellers who imprinted the Jungle as the 'outer extreme of colonial expansion' into the collective Eurocentric consciousness (Weisberg 2015: 171). The contemporary non-European agency over their own experience is not backed by cemented

economic and discursive structures. Thus, even when the rich and critical body of knowledge outside Europe has long existed, the non-EUropean intellectual and political agency has been pushed to the margins in Eurocentric knowledge production. According to the EUropean narrative, therefore, it is the EUropean masters who presume to define how the Jungle should be understood; consequently, EUrope sets the forms of relations with its counterparts in the Global South, aligning with hegemonic EUropean narratives.

In conclusion, the constructed extreme nature of the Jungle and its deep embeddedness into the classic European culture and symbolic spaces facilitate the hegemonic associations and eventually the delivery of a clear political vision of reality. This metaphor gained meaning in the nineteenth-century colonial discourse – 'the apparatus of power' (Bhabha 1994: 70) – and it now functions as a vessel of the coloniality of power in the 21st century EU foreign policy narrative.

One thing remains clear, the European Union is facing a non-EU, not-Western-centred world order. So, the post-2022 geopolitical context could mark a postcolonial turning point in the EU's foreign policy strategies, which currently echo Eurocentric and colonial narratives in the discursive process of self-positioning and interest realisation. Without a critical and self-aware understanding of the EU's colonial past and its complex historical legacies in the Union's external (and internal) relations, the EU might risk, quoting Böröcz' (2022) drastic yet actual metaphor, becoming an 'open-air museum to a Europe-centred phase of global history' which clings to its own fading coloniality of power.

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Thematic section
Exclusion with Access: Performative Inclusivity in Global IR

Navigating Borderlands: Civil Society and Relational Narratives in Georgia's EU Candidacy

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Abstract

This paper investigates how civil society organisations (CSOs) navigate and reshape geopolitical narratives within the European Union's evolving candidacy framework. By highlighting the performed inclusivity of EU narratives, it offers a nuanced perspective on the socio-political dynamics of accession processes and promotes a more pluralistic interpretation of the EU candidacy approach. Focusing on Georgia's EU candidacy application, it examines how CSOs, situated in semi-peripheral borderlands, address the complexities of accession processes, structural inequalities and the exclusionary practices embedded in performed inclusivity. The analysis unfolds in three parts. First, it situates the study within the broader context of the politicisation of EU candidacy narratives and introduces the conceptual framework based on relational narratives. Building on the scholarship of strategic narratives and structural narratives, it explores how relational approaches can contribute to the pluralistic understanding of emerging narratives. Second, in a methodological section, it outlines the empirical approach to study relational narratives, based on narrative analysis. Third, through engaging with Georgia's EU candidacy application process, it analyses how civil society organisations narrate Georgia's candidacy to address the

geopolitical tensions through relational narratives, highlighting their efforts to contest the EU's limited geopolitical framing. In conclusion, the paper discusses how civil society organisations use relational narratives and offer a nuanced understanding of the socio-political dynamics of accession processes, advocating for more pluralistic interpretations of the EU's borderlands to counter performed inclusivity.

Keywords: *performed inclusivity, geopoliticisation, relational narratives, EU candidacy, Georgia, EU borderlands*

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Introduction

The shifting geopolitical landscape, often described as the 'geopolitical turn', provides a backdrop for exploring how social relational theories contribute to a pluralistic understanding of the narratives surrounding Georgia's European Union candidacy. By examining how civil society organisations engage with geopolitical tensions and narrate the dominant approaches of EU enlargements, this study offers insights into the role of relational narratives in challenging performed inclusivity.

This article examines two interrelated dynamics through the lens of narrative analysis. First, it interrogates the notion of performed inclusivity as articulated in EU communications and documents, which, while signalling openness, tend to obscure the structural conditions of the candidacy process. Drawing on the politics of inclusion, performed inclusivity is conceptualised as an idealistic and often symbolic gesture of inclusion that lacks substantive engagement (Zembylas 2019; Cutri & Whiting 2025). In the context of Georgia's EU candidacy, this article explores how such performed inclusivity is embedded in official statements and policy discourse. Second, the analysis outlines the geopoliticisation of candidacy narratives as constructed by local civil society actors in Georgia. To counter the performed inclusivity, these actors relationally reframe the EU candidacy as a geopolitical claim – an assertion of belonging and alignment within a contested regional order. Conceptualising geopoliticisation as an interpretive and cultural practice (Kuus 2010; Agnew 2004), the article foregrounds the discursive production of space and power, where candidacy becomes embedded within broader struggles over identity, sovereignty and regional positioning in the EU's evolving borderlands (Kazharski & Makarychev 2015; Cadier 2019).

The analysis focuses on Georgia's 2022 EU candidacy application. Georgia signed an Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, in force from 2016, establishing political and economic ties, including visa-free travel and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). By 2022, Georgia, Ukraine and

Moldova were implementing the AA and DCFTA as part of gradual EU integration (Samadashvili 2022; Gogolashvili 2018). However, EU membership had not yet been pursued. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 created a historic window for accession bids. That year, Ukraine and Moldova gained candidate status, while Georgia received a membership *perspective*, contingent on fulfilling 12 priorities set by the European Commission (Akhvlediani 2022; Samadashvili 2022; Grigoriadis & Gugulashvili 2022; Crombois 2023). These reflect the 1993 Copenhagen criteria, covering governance, rule of law, human rights, market economy and EU alignment. Following progress reviews, the Commission recommended candidate status for Georgia on 8 November 2023, confirmed on 14 December 2023. As of mid-2025, Georgia holds official EU candidate status, granted in December 2023 following the European Commission's recommendation. However, the accession process has effectively stalled due to concerns over democratic backsliding, particularly the adoption of a controversial 'foreign influence' law, suppression of dissent and the disputed 2024 parliamentary elections. The European Council has since declared Georgia's accession path 'de facto halted', with accession talks suspended until at least 2028.

At this critical juncture in Georgia's EU candidacy, civil society organisations (CSOs) have become politically and analytically central. Despite ongoing scholarly debates over the contested nature of civil society (Buzogány 2024; Luciani 2021; Kamilsoy 2025), many local actors self-identify as CSOs and occupy a unique intermediary role between the state, international actors and the public. Unlike political elites, CSOs offer insights into how democratisation and Europeanisation policies are interpreted and implemented at grassroots and meso-institutional levels. The Rose Revolution highlighted both their influence and limitations – mobilising public sentiment and reform demands, but also revealing vulnerabilities to cooptation and institutional fragility (Broers 2005). In this context, CSOs have emerged as key agents in implementing EU external governance. Initiatives like the Eastern Partnership and the Civil Society Forum (CSF) were designed to empower CSOs in reform and democratic consolidation (Císař 2010; Nizhnikau 2015). Their role is not merely symbolic; they help translate and localise EU norms within Georgia's political context. Though initial engagement was limited by weak institutional capacity, the CSF gradually formalised civil society's role in EU-Georgia relations (Rommens 2014). However, post–Rose Revolution, foreign-funded NGOs became highly politicised, prompting a preference for the more neutral term 'civil society' (interview GE03_16052023).

This paper analyses the relational narratives of organisations, that – regardless of funding origin – self-identify as CSOs, forming overlapping communities of practices (COP) aligned with EU integration and democratisation goals. In the current geopolitical context, CSOs emerge as not merely implementers or observers of political reform, but also active meaning-makers and norm entrepreneurs

whose practices, discourses and networks articulate broader societal responses to both domestic politics and international interventions. Their narratives provide a relational and situated perspective on democratisation that complements and challenges elite-centric analyses.

Based on empirical research conducted in Spring-Summer 2023 in Georgia, this analysis focuses on the intermediary period between Georgia receiving a European perspective and being granted candidate status (2022–2024). Guided by the question of how CSOs navigate performative inclusivity within the EU's evolving candidacy framework, the paper proceeds in three steps. First, it contextualises the politicisation of EU candidacy and introduces a relational narrative framework to counter reductive geopolitical framings. Second, it outlines the empirical methodology. Third, it analyses how CSOs narrate Georgia's EU candidacy to address geopolitical tensions, offering alternative interpretations to the EU's limited framing. The conclusion discusses how civil society organisations use relational narratives and offer a nuanced understanding of the socio-political dynamics of accession processes, advocating for more pluralistic interpretations of the EU's borderlands to counter performed inclusivity.

A conceptual framework: relational narratives

This paper explores how civil society organisations engage with and reinterpret geopolitical tensions and contested understandings of the EU borders through the lens of relational narratives, emerging from empirical fieldwork. This section presents a conceptual framework centred on these relational narratives to illuminate how organisations navigate, negotiate and forge connections amidst geopolitical uncertainties.

Narratives have gained prominence in interpretive political science since the 'narrative turn', with scholars focusing on meaning-making through discourses and narratives based on shared sociocultural repertoires (Shepherd 2008; Shenhav 2006; Stone 1989; Patterson and Monroe 1998; Suganami 1999; Holland & Mathieu 2023). Freistein, Gadinger and Groth (2024) distinguished three research streams for narratives: narrative as scholarly intervention, social practice and strategy. This paper adopts a perspective that views relational narratives as social practices of communities, merging insights from both narrative as social practice and narrative as strategy.

Relational narratives, on the one hand, build on the conceptualisation of strategic narratives and structured narratives. Strategic narratives are conceptualised by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle (2013) as 'means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle 2013: 2). A more recent take on narratives is conceptualised by Holland and Mathieu as structured narratives, with a focus on 'the more nuanced relational identities' (2023: 1). Following the literature of strategic narratives, they define structural

narrative power as the momentum a story gains as it unfolds in expected ways – a softer strategy that narrows alternatives and creates specific expectations (Holland & Mathieu 2023: 5). This concept builds on the idea that narratives structure and exercise power (Hagstrom & Gustafsson 2019; Holland & Mathieu 2023), portraying structural narratives as journeys that start with a critical juncture, proceed through a development phase and aim for a projected new equilibrium (Feldman & Almquist 2012; Hagström & Gustafsson 2019; Franzosi 1998). While this framework broadens our understanding of strategic narratives, it remains too closely embedded in a linear, stage-based approach to policymaking.

On the other hand, relational narratives are embedded in the 'relational turn' in international relations, public policy and global studies (Kurki 2022; Nordin et al. 2019; Lovato & Maurer 2022; Marion Suiseeya et al. 2021; Qin 2016; Trownsell et al. 2021; Arts & Van Tatenhove 2004; Bertelli & Smith 2009; Koliba et al. 2017; Pera & Bussu 2024). As relational approaches encompass a wide range of conceptualisations from individualist to holistic understandings, as well as spanning from instrumental-strategic to critical-reflexive approaches, it is necessary to narrow the scope and focus for a conceptual approach (Bartels & Turnbull 2020). A relational approach to narratives underscores the intricate processes of meaning-making and highlights the inherent connection between power and agency (Bevir & Rhodes 2010; Clarke et al. 2015; Dobson 2015; Kurki 2022; Stout & Love 2015; Wagenaar 2012).

Relationality, in my understanding, follows the interpretivist paradigm, with a critical-reflexive approach to power relations, emphasising the 'theoretical and analytical significance of connections, ties, transactions and other kinds of relations among entities' (Jackson & Nexon 2019: 583). Relational narratives are strongly embedded in socio-political and historical contexts, and through meaning-making practices reveal the contested dynamics that shape and are shaped by multiple, co-existing narratives (anonymised, forthcoming). In these narratives, the focus is not essentially on the storyline, but on the co-constitutive approach of these narratives, highlighting how these interrelations influence perceptions, power structures and socio-political practices. This paper aims to extend this framework with the understanding of emergent practices and narratives shaped by relational exchanges among various actors and networks.

Analysing relational narratives requires a methodological framework based on interpretive ontology and epistemology. In the next section, I outline the methodological approach to narrative analysis that I followed to analyse relational narratives.

A methodological approach: researching relational narratives

This study of relational narratives is grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which entails specific ontological, epistemological and methodological commitments (Yanow 2009; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012; Gherardi 2008). Interpretive research emphasises human meaning-making, contextual understanding and

researcher reflexivity (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012; Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2017). It prioritises how actors construct meaning in specific settings and uses ethnographic methods – such as interviews and close textual analysis – to capture the depth of these interpretations (Schwartz-Shea 2015). Reflexivity and positionality are central, recognising the researcher's influence on the research process and the co-constructed nature of knowledge (Holmes 2020; Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2017).

My research approach and positionality are shaped by these concepts: Following a critical-interpretive lens – informed by training in anthropology and political science and grounded in ethnographic practice – I tend to focus on situated manifestations as power dynamics. In this research context, as an Eastern European female researcher, I have navigated varying perceptions across institutional contexts – seen at times as a fellow regional insider, at others as a Western academic. This in-between or 'halfie' position (Doyle 2018) enabled reflexive and dialogical engagement with themes of EU candidacy and regional geopolitics, while also shaping how I approached knowledge production in the inter-imperial context of the South Caucasus.

This paper builds on a methodological approach to the analysis of narratives, as outlined by Freistein, Gadinger and Groth (2024). This narrative analysis examines the three core elements of narratives: (1) plot, (2) characterisation and (3) topoi (2024). The plot – or emplotment – is defined as 'the chronological succession of events', a process binding together events and characters in stories to a meaningful whole (Franzosi 1998: 520). It draws on the patterns of a (dis)equilibrium cycle – beginning with a critical juncture or a breakdown of a status quo, advancing through a transformation process narrated through causal links and a temporal sequence (Spencer 2016; Hagström & Gustafsson 2019). Characterisation is guided by questions such as 'Which actors are recognisable, and how are they characterised?' and 'What are their roles, actions, and perceptions?' Led by these questions, it looks at 'the way in which actors are defined and related to one another' (Holland & Mathieu 2023: 6). These actors, whether individuals or groups, are often cast as protagonists and antagonists – heroes and villains. Although they might seem to represent binary oppositions, the narratives co-construct them relationally, linking each character through a dynamic interplay of actions and reactions that connect them both to one another and to the unfolding plot (Freistein et al. 2024). Finally, the topoi, as socially grounded and shared 'reservoirs of generalised key ideas', serve as conceptual repertoires that narratives draw upon (Richardson 2004: 230). Emerging as a relatively stable set of concepts, metaphors and images, as well as complex plots, they connect the narratives to specific debates or discourse strands.

This paper follows these elements in the analysis of Georgia's EU candidacy narratives as a methodological guide to analyse EU policy documents and semi-structured interviews. The 41 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Georgia in spring-summer 2023 with representatives of civil society organisa-

tions. Interlocutors were identified through initial desktop research and mapping, followed by snowball sampling. Starting with larger, internationalised CSOs, the sample expanded to include smaller grassroots initiatives to reflect a broad spectrum of NGOs – ranging from pro-EU to more critical voices, including both foreign-funded and independent organisations. The aim was to explore their meaning-making practices through interviews and observations. Snowballing provided direct access to a variety of CSO actors – researchers, project managers and leaders who often held multiple roles. Interviews, conducted in English at locations chosen by participants, were recorded with consent, anonymised, transcribed, coded and securely stored in line with ethical guidelines.

To systematically analyse the EU enlargement narrative regarding Georgia, primary documents were purposively selected from the official EU enlargement portal for Georgia, hosted by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR).[1] Chosen for their relevance to official discourse, they were triangulated with other public communications to capture strategic framing, normative themes and geopolitical positioning. This enabled a systematic narrative analysis, allowing for systematic comparisons between EU-produced narratives and those emerging from Georgian civil society interlocutors, thereby enriching the paper's relational and interpretive approach.

After data collection, I transcribed and analysed the material through qualitative coding using MAXQDA. Following Saldana's (2013) approach, I conducted four coding cycles. The first identified key topics, actors and networks. The subsequent cycles applied qualitative document analysis (QDA) to both interviews and EU documents, guided by sensitising questions focusing on plot, characterisation and topoi. Through narrative analysis, I explored how their interpretations and anticipations inform the broader discourse on the country's EU integration prospects, and compared them with the EU narratives based on published communications and documents, presented in the next section.

The relational narratives of EU candidacy

For the understanding of the diverse narratives surrounding Georgia's EU candidacy application, this section discusses the relational narratives of civil society organisations. These relational narratives emerged along the plurality of narratives, and placed Georgia's candidacy application into a geopolitical space. The narratives emerged from the qualitative coding of the EU documents and interviews along the three main elements of narrative analysis: the plot, characterisation and topoi. Below, I analyse these elements and introduce narrative examples as part of the analysis.

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1   Key documents listed for Georgia's EU candidacy: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/georgia_en

The plot: Georgia's EU candidacy

The plot, as a starting point of a narrative analysis binds together the events and characters into a storyline, with some recognisable elements, such as a definite starting point, a transformation process, a closure or suspense (Spencer 2016; Hagström & Gustafsson 2019). Below, I outline the parallel narratives of the plot, as emerged from the EU documents as well as through the interviews.

The EU's narrative of Georgia's candidacy begins on 3 March 2022, when Georgia and Moldova submitted their membership applications. While interviews and EU documents reference a broader timeline, the official narrative frames the process as linear and technocratic, focused on institutional benchmarks rather than geopolitical urgency. It traces a path from the 2014 Association Agreement and 2016 DCFTA enforcement to Georgia's 2022 application, omitting the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a key catalyst.[2] From 2022 to 2023, the EU storyline centres on compliance, marked by the June 2022 Council's 12 priorities, the 2023 analytical report on acquis alignments, progress updates and the November 2023 Commission recommendation. These steps reinforce a logic of incremental progress, suggesting accession is contingent on technical reforms rather than reactive to security imperatives. However, alternative narratives emerge in political statements and media, referencing civil protests against the 'transparency of foreign influence' law (May 2024), parliamentary elections (October 2024) and the 2024 Enlargement Package. While such events reintroduce democratic and geopolitical concerns, indicating a parallel discourse, they remain secondary to the dominant institutional framing focused on procedural milestones.

Based on these timelines and documents, a singular, EU-Georgia relationship-based plot emerges, where Georgia 'all of a sudden' applies for EU candidacy, where in response the EU recommends a 'perspective' to become a member of the EU, based on 'political criteria, economic criteria and the ability of the country to assume the obligations of EU membership (EU *acquis*)' (EC 2022a).

> The European Commission assesses that Georgia has a foundation in place to reach the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities, even if recent developments have undermined the country's progress; it has achieved a good degree of macroeconomic stability and has a sound record of economic policy and a favourable business environment, but further reforms are needed to improve the functioning of its market economy; and overall, Georgia has established a solid basis for further alignment with the EU acquis.
>
> On this basis, the Commission recommends that Georgia be given the perspective to become a member of the European Union. It should be

2   The Appendix lists the EU documents used for narrative analysis

granted candidate status once a number of priorities have been addressed. (EC2022a)

In this narrative, the European Commission outlined the requirements as obligations of the EU membership, formulated as 12 priorities (EC 2022b; EEAS 2022). The Twelve Priorities recommended by the European Commission were mainly concerned with the strengthening of the independence and functioning of state institutions; the separation of powers and especially the 'de-oligarchisation' by eliminating economic, political and public influences; ensuring an independent media environment; the protection of human rights of vulnerable groups; and the involvement of civil society in decision-making processes, in line with the Copenhagen Criteria (Bitsadze 2018; EC 2020). The plot closely follows the fulfilment of these priorities, and only in the published 2024 Enlargement Package concludes that the accession process is *de facto* halted, and does not project any future (EC 2024).

The plot from the perspective of the local civil society organisations runs a different course. In this context, Georgia's EU candidacy application remains a central narrative device, but it is embedded within a broader temporal and geopolitical framework. These narratives span multiple temporal horizons, linking recent events – such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine – with earlier national traumas like the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, and projecting forward to both the anticipated near-term decision on EU candidacy and the long-term aspiration of full membership. By evoking the Soviet past and envisioning divergent futures – ranging from European integration to a potential regression into authoritarianism – these narratives construct a cyclical sense of historical disequilibrium and continuity, as shown in the excerpt below:

> If Georgia doesn't get the candidacy status, we'll have greater risk (in) relations with Russia. . . . based on our experience in recent, like 30 years, we see that, showing weakness to Russia and getting isolated, staying alone with Russia is a recipe for more conflict, more war, and more interference in the Georgian politics. . . . This is why, you know, like building democracy, democratic institutions are obviously the main goal. But, you know, one of the . . . main aspects here is also the security aspect. So Georgia needs democratic institutions, and Georgia needs greater integration with the EU in order to be safer from Russia. . . . So it's not strictly about, you know, corruption and democratic institutions. It's also about just basic safety from conflict and war. (GE28_14062023)

In these plots, two contrasting narrative trajectories emerged: one envisions EU candidacy and eventual membership as a pathway to stability, security and democratic consolidation; the other anticipates the failure of candidacy, resulting in a prolonged Russian geopolitical presence and a return to authoritarian uncertainty.

As outlined, the key distinction between the plots lies in their degree of geopolitical embeddedness. On the one hand, the EU narrative portrays Georgia's candidacy as a normative and institutional journey, downplaying the war-driven urgency that prompted the application, and reinforcing the EU's self-image as a rules-based community rather than a reactive geopolitical actor. On the other hand, the civil society narratives align Georgia with broader Euro-Atlantic security frameworks and democratic values, framing EU integration as both a normative and existential goal, shaped by historical traumas and fears of renewed isolation or domination by Russia. According to the categories developed by Minesashvili (2021) to analyse Georgian identity narratives, the plot based on civil society narratives falls in line with the Westerniser and Accommodationist narratives, envisioning the future along EU integration, where Europeanisation represents a future-oriented, transformative, as well as pragmatist promise.

Characterisation: protagonists and antagonists
Characterisation, as a second aspect of narrative analysis highlights the various actors and the roles they play. Actors can be individuals, organisations or groups, emerging as protagonists and antagonists of the narratives. In this aspect, I analysed how the characters co-constructed relationally, following guiding questions such as: Who are the recognisable actors? How are they characterised? What roles and actions are attributed to them?

The analysis of EU candidacy and enlargement documents concerning Georgia reveals a marked binary structure in the construction of political actors. On the one hand, the European Union is depicted as a coherent, authoritative actor that speaks with a unified voice. This 'EU voice' is constructed through statements issued by a network of institutions and high-level representatives, including the European Commission, the European Council, the Delegation to Georgia and DG NEAR, as well as key figures such as Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, High Representative Josep Borrell, Vice-President Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos. Despite the institutional plurality, the discourse merges these voices into a singular, normative authority, speaking *on behalf of* 'the European Union'. This narrative homogenisation performs an important discursive function: It legitimises the EU's external role as both an arbiter of standards and a custodian of democratic values.

On the other side of this narrative framework is 'Georgia', initially portrayed as a coherent, undifferentiated entity in its role as a candidate state. However, in more recent statements, this monolithic depiction becomes more fragmented. Georgia is increasingly differentiated into specific actors with contrasting roles, particularly in response to political developments such as the 'foreign agent' law and contentious electoral dynamics. Official EU communications distinguish between multiple domestic actors: The *Georgian government* is cast as a problem-

atic or resistant entity, while *Georgian citizens* are portrayed as democratic agents aligned with EU values and aspirations. This discursive shift is exemplified in statements such as: 'Georgia's citizens are demonstrating their strong attachment to democracy. . . . The Georgian government should heed this clear message . . . Georgia is at a crossroads' (von der Leyen 2024).

These statements illustrate several key discursive strategies through which the EU constructs a narrative of integration populated by clear protagonists and antagonists. First, actor differentiation separates the Georgian state apparatus from its civil society, allowing the EU to express disapproval toward the political leadership while continuing to endorse the aspirations of the broader population. In this framing, civil society emerges as the protagonist of the European project – portrayed as a democratic force aligned with EU values – while the government is cast as the antagonist, resisting reform and deviating from normative expectations.

Second, moral positioning reinforces this binary by assigning legitimacy to the civic actors and delegitimising the state leadership. Citizens are framed as democratic agents whose actions – such as protest and public mobilisation – signal their commitment to a European future. The government, by contrast, is portrayed as obstructive, invoking conditionality as a corrective mechanism. Third, temporal framing positions Georgia as being 'at a crossroads' or progressing along a 'path', embedding the narrative in a teleological structure.

These narrative configurations reveal a fundamental tension. While civil society is rhetorically elevated as the EU's primary interlocutor – cast as the authentic bearer of European values and national aspirations – the actual enlargement process remains firmly anchored in state-level negotiations and conditionalities. This dual framing creates a paradox: The EU discursively sidelines political elites in favour of civil society, constructing protagonists and antagonists to reinforce its normative authority, yet in practice it continues to operate through intergovernmental mechanisms. As a result, civil society's legitimising role is symbolically foregrounded but procedurally marginal, complicating its position within the enlargement architecture.

From a civil society perspective, the discursive construction of actors mirrors the EU's narrative structure in terms of protagonists and antagonists, yet it is notably more geopolitically embedded. Through narrative analysis, it becomes evident that Georgian civil society organisations (CSOs) strategically reframe the national subject, positioning themselves not merely as implementers of reform, but as protagonists actively shaping Georgia's European trajectory. In their accounts, 'the Georgian people' are narratively constructed as a collective actor, distinct from and often in opposition to political elites.

This protagonist role is not symbolic but performative: CSOs report concrete contributions toward fulfilling the EU's 12 priorities – drafting policy proposals, facilitating reform dialogues and engaging with EU institutions. These actions

serve not only technical ends but also form part of a narrative strategy to assert legitimacy and credibility, especially in contrast to state actors. In doing so, CSOs construct a *topos of responsibility*, whereby the absence of political will among the ruling elites and fragmented opposition justifies the civil sector's self-ascribed leadership. As one interviewee stated:

> We were telling the government what is needed to be done . . . not only the government, but also the opposition. . . . But the government did not fulfil. And that's why we saw that Georgia did not receive candidate status. (GE40_21062023)

Here, the antagonists are constructed as internal: The political elite – both government and opposition – are cast as either inert or obstructive. This moral dichotomy deepens the narrative tension and sharpens the civil society's contrast with formal political actors.

Yet, external antagonism also plays a central role. In many civil society narratives, 'Russia' is constructed as a *metanarrative antagonist* – not merely as a geopolitical actor, but as a force of disruption to Georgia's European alignment. This framing introduces a topos of existential threat, where EU integration is not only a normative aspiration but a geopolitical safeguard. As one civil society actor articulated:

> We are kind of asking the EU to grant candidate status, not only with the technical assessment . . . but also for the political decision, because, you know, when it comes to EU integration . . . Russia is trying to push back all the time. So it's kind of a struggle of Russia and Europe here . . . like in Ukraine. (GE40_21062023)

Overall, the EU's discourse does not merely describe political developments; it narrates them through a narrative tool that shapes perceptions of legitimacy, agency and belonging. By casting civil society as the protagonist and the state as a potential antagonist, the EU strengthens its role as a geopolitical actor and a moral narrator of European integration in its Eastern neighbourhood. This framing is mirrored and amplified by civil society organisations themselves, who position their work not only as technical reform but as part of a broader geopolitical struggle against authoritarian influence, particularly from Russia. By drawing parallels with Ukraine and invoking shared struggles for democratic sovereignty, Georgian CSOs situate themselves within a transnational community of pro-European actors resisting authoritarian influence. This narrative framework positions civil society as both a normative and strategic interlocutor, not only compensating for domestic political dysfunction but also actively engaging the EU through a shared geopolitical vocabulary. Mirroring the EU's discursive tendency to cast civil society as the legitimate protagonist, CSOs deploy relational narratives

that connect Georgia's trajectory to that of neighbouring candidate states, while reinterpreting conditionality as political recognition. These relational narratives aim to reframe civil society as agents of Europeanisation instead of as technical implementers, seeking not only validation of reforms, but affirmation of their geopolitical role within Europe's contested borderlands.

Topoi

Topoi, as socially and locally grounded conceptual repertoires, are underlying and connecting the narratives to existing and embedded debates (Freistein et al. 2024; Richardson 2004).

The EU's enlargement discourse, particularly in the 2024 Enlargement Package, articulates candidacy as both a legal obligation and a normative-geopolitical mission (EUR-Lex 2025). On one hand, the accession process is grounded in the *topos of acquis*, based on the *acquis Communautaire* – a binding and evolving body of EU law – structured into thematic clusters such as the rule of law, internal market and sustainable development (EC 2023). On the other hand, the *topos of enlargement* incorporates broader narrative elements: historic destiny, normative universality and geopolitical urgency. As President von der Leyen asserts, 'The tense geopolitical context makes it more compelling than ever that we complete the reunification of our continent, under the same values of democracy and the rule of law.' At the same time, conditionality remains central: 'The enlargement process continues to be merit-based and depends on the objective progress made by each of the partners' (EC 2024).

This dual framing presents the EU as both legal authority and moral arbiter, constructing enlargement as a teleological journey towards European unity under shared values. However, the candidacy process also introduces differentiated expectations for candidate states. While framed as a strategic and symbolic opportunity, the *acquis* is often criticised for enforcing a homogenised model that overlooks local contexts and reinforces asymmetrical power dynamics. Scholars have underscored how this conditionality gives the EU coercive leverage over domestic policymaking (Grabbe 2003; Trauner 2009; Economides & Ker-Lindsay 2015; Berisha & Cotella 2024), highlighting the tensions between normative discourse and political practice.

From the perspective of civil society actors, both dimensions of the *acquis* have been critically assessed. The benchmarking function is often embraced as a tool for advocacy, enabling CSOs to promote reforms and align with EU norms, casting themselves as key drivers of change. In contrast, the gatekeeping function has drawn significant criticism. Civil society representatives have questioned the fairness and consistency of accession criteria, noting the lack of clarity around compliance thresholds, shifting policy priorities and opaque hierarchies of tasks and stakeholders (Grabbe 2003). Some have even argued that several existing EU

member states would struggle to meet the very standards imposed on candidates, further highlighting the structural imbalances in the accession framework.

Through interviews with Georgian civil society actors, a relational narrative of EU enlargement emerges, contrasting with the EU's primarily bilateral framing of candidacy. While the EU and Russia are often constructed as central protagonists and antagonists, respectively, civil society actors introduce alternative narrative topoi, particularly through comparisons to other countries' candidacy paths, to situate the narrative frames in a wider context. These topoi, based on comparisons to parallel and previous EU candidacy decision models, were mostly referred to as the 'Albanian model' and the 'Bosnia and Herzegovina model', next to comparisons with the parallel candidacy applications of Moldova and Ukraine

Georgian civil society actors frequently interpret the EU candidacy process through comparative narrative frameworks, drawing on regional precedents to make sense of Georgia's position and potential outcomes. Two dominant scenarios are often invoked: the 'Bosnian model' and the 'Albanian model'. These models serve as narrative tools for anticipating how the EU might respond to Georgia's candidacy, while also reflecting broader concerns about symbolic recognition, political accountability and geopolitical alignment. Rather than viewing the EU's decisions as purely technical, these scenarios embed the candidacy process within relational and political dynamics, highlighting both the symbolic and strategic dimensions of enlargement. Through these narrative comparisons, civil society actors articulate expectations, express anxieties and position Georgia within a shared regional storyline of conditional integration and democratic aspiration.

The 'Albanian model' of EU candidacy is narrated as a strategic sequence where political change, particularly leadership turnover, becomes a prerequisite for candidate status, rather than referring solely to Albania's reform path – building on the broad range of political, economic and social reforms marked by institutional restructuring, anti-corruption efforts and alignment with EU norms (Panagiotou 2011; Peshkopia 2014). The Albanian model is not merely invoked as a technical roadmap, but as a strategic and symbolic narrative that civil society actors in Georgia deploy to reframe their own candidacy trajectory. The success of Albania's judiciary reform since 2016 is positioned as a narrative exemplar – a story of transformation and compliance that Georgia might emulate to legitimise its European aspirations (Samkharadze 2020). This comparative framing does more than highlight institutional parallels; it constructs a relational narrative that links Georgia's post-2003 democratic path to a broader regional storyline of delayed, yet possible, accession.

Contrasting it with the 'Bosnian model', where candidacy was granted symbolically to the people rather than the political elites, an interlocutor noted:

> Well, basically, there are two scenarios I would say. We are calling it tentatively the Bosnian scenario and the Albanian scenario. The Bosnian

scenario means that when last year it was the candidate status was given to Bosnia, the commissioner . . . actually said . . . during the press conference that this is . . . given to the Bosnian people and political elites have to deliver on that still. . . . And the second one is the case of Albania . . . the Commission said that, okay, we see that there is some progress, but since there is an election in Albania in 2012, we will also take this into consideration. And they decided the fate of Albania, whether to grant candidate status or not, only after it kind of organised the election and only after the Prime Minister was ousted from the office. So these are like two probable and likeable scenarios that might happen here in our case. (GE17_30052023)

In light of the broader relational and geopolitical narratives discussed earlier, the invocation of the 'Bosnia and Herzegovina model' functions less as a direct institutional comparison and more as a symbolic narrative device. While Bosnia's EU trajectory is shaped by its post-conflict political fragmentation and slow reform progress (Cotella & Berisha 2016; Kollias & Messis 2020), Georgian civil society actors appropriate this model to articulate a discourse of symbolic recognition. As one interviewee remarked, 'the Bosnian scenario means that . . . [the EU candidacy] is something that Georgian people get, not the Georgian Dream' (GE17_30052023). Within this framing, the EU is called upon to distinguish between the public – constructed as the moral and democratic protagonist – and the governing elite, portrayed as the antagonist obstructing reform. This narrative strategy seeks to reconfigure the logic of enlargement away from elite-state compliance and toward popular legitimacy and geopolitical solidarity. By referencing Bosnia, civil society actors narrate their struggle for EU candidacy not only as a technical endeavour but as a normative and political claim for inclusion, recognition and alignment with democratic values under threat.

Adding a second dimension of relational topoi, the narratives emerging from civil society interviews reveal how the EU's differentiated treatment of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine fuels contestation around legitimacy, fairness, and symbolic inclusion. One interlocutor asserts:

What they're telling us from the EU side is that, for example, in purely technical measurements, we are better than Moldova, basically. I don't compare us with Ukraine. That's really a different thing. But if you compare like points of corruption, state availability, democracy, free media, everything is better here in terms of numbers. . . . They just say that, well, we saw a political will, a readiness from the Moldovan side to   . . . work with us. But we didn't see any of that from your side. (GE22v_07062023)

This narrative frames Georgia as a 'deserving' subject of enlargement, yet structurally sidelined. It constructs a relational topos where Georgia's candidacy is not only assessed against accession benchmarks, but also against peer states who have

received different outcomes under similar or less favourable conditions. In narrative terms, this positions Georgia as a protagonist unfairly overlooked, and the EU as an ambiguous adjudicator whose decisions risk undermining its credibility.

Through this lens, civil society actors narrate the candidacy process as a struggle not just for technical recognition but for relational justice, seeking acknowledgement of Georgia's reforms, aspirations and strategic position within the regional geopolitical configuration. The differentiated treatment becomes a discursive site of contestation, where civil society challenges the EU's narrative authority and calls for a more transparent and equitable enlargement discourse. The emphasis on relative merit and geopolitical solidarity thus transforms candidate status into a narrative tool for negotiating belonging, legitimacy and alignment within the European project.

These relational topoi were further contextualised on two accounts: considering the emerging EU-scepticism, as well as Russia's imperial aims. On the one hand, the differentiated treatment of Georgia's EU candidacy – especially in comparison to Moldova and Ukraine – emerges in civil society narratives as a key site of tension, particularly around reform benchmarks and political will, framed not just as technical assessments but as perceived injustices. This creates fertile ground for Eurosceptic counter-narratives to flourish. One interviewee warns:

> The government tries to send messages that they did everything, and if we don't receive candidate status, this means that the EU is reluctant to give us confidence, that the EU loves more Ukraine and Moldova . . . and Georgia is discriminated. And this kind of stupid messages, they influence of course the minds of certain population. (GE34_16062023)

Here, the plot shifts from one of merit-based integration to one of symbolic exclusion: The differentiated treatment of the application risks fuelling Eurosceptic narratives within Georgia, transforming the EU from a gatekeeper of democratic values into a distant and possibly biased actor. While some civil society groups continue to support the logic of conditionality, they also recognise how these standards can be rhetorically manipulated by domestic elites to stoke public disappointment and resentment toward the EU. This framing fosters a perception of unfairness and exclusion, which can deepen public disillusionment with the EU.

On the other hand, the Russian threat emerges as a central argumentative topos in civil society's strategic narrative appeals to the EU, framing enlargement as both a geopolitical imperative and a moral duty. One interlocutor articulates this discursive strategy clearly:

> So when we are talking about EU institutions, the [main request] from our side is not to leave Georgian people alone before the threats of Russia. Because people actually are clearly pro-European. And this is attested by numerous statistical data and surveys and also number of people demon-

strating in Tbilisi in support with Ukraine or support with EU integration, against Russian laws. But the political situation is like a very, very, very complex here (GE16_30052023).

Through narrative analysis, this statement reveals a clear character structure: The Georgian people are cast as pro-European protagonists; the political elite, described as entangled in complexity and lacking democratic legitimacy, act as ambiguous or even antagonistic intermediaries; and Russia appears as the primary external antagonist. This triadic structure reinforces a relational narrative of democratic struggle, in which civil society appeals to the EU not merely as a gatekeeper, but as a protective ally in a broader ideological confrontation. Russia's narrative role extends beyond its geopolitical presence – it embodies a normative counterforce to European values. References to 'Russian laws' invoke domestic legislative efforts that echo Russian-style constraints on civil society, such as Georgia's proposed 'foreign agents' law. These allusions heighten the stakes by positioning the EU candidacy as a bulwark against creeping authoritarianism.

Conclusion

This paper explored how civil society organisations in Georgia navigate performative inclusivity through geopolitical narratives within the European Union's evolving candidacy framework. Using a conceptual framing of *relational narratives*, the analysis approached EU enlargement discourse as a pluralistic and contested space, shaped by both institutional and grassroots actors. Methodologically, the study applied narrative analysis – focusing on plot, characterisation and topoi – to EU communications and documents alongside 41 semi-structured interviews with Georgian CSO representatives.

The narrative analysis revealed parallel and at times conflicting trajectories: While the EU's official discourse – despite the rhetoric of a 'geopolitical Commission' – remains rooted in bilateral and technocratic logics, civil society actors embed Georgia's candidacy within a broader geopolitical and normative struggle. This divergence is reflected in the characterisation of protagonists and antagonists, where CSOs cast themselves and the Georgian public as agents of Europeanisation, juxtaposed with a domestic political elite seen as obstructive, and Russia as the primary external antagonist. The topoi invoked – particularly those comparing Georgia with Moldova, Ukraine, Albania and Bosnia – extend the discourse beyond procedural benchmarks to questions of fairness, symbolic recognition and strategic alignment. Through this relational narrative framework, CSOs seek to reframe EU candidacy as not only a merit-based process, but a geopolitical and moral act of solidarity.

At the core of this divergence lies the EU's *performed inclusivity*. From the perspective of Georgian civil society, the momentum created by Ukraine and Moldova's applications presented a genuine window of opportunity; however,

EU institutions largely framed this as symbolic, without embedding it in a meaningful geopolitical context. While official documents occasionally reference the 'complete reunification of our continent', the underlying plotlines remain technocratic, omitting the broader historical and security developments that motivated Georgia's application. This performed inclusivity also surfaces in the narrow characterisation of actors and in the prevailing *topos* of enlargement as conditional on acquis compliance. The EU's strong gatekeeping function – through ambiguous standards, shifting priorities and a hierarchy of reforms – can be interpreted by hopeful actors as strategic ambiguity, yet from a narrative perspective, it reveals a constrained and depoliticised understanding of enlargement. Civil society actors, in response, use relational narratives to reframe candidacy not merely as a legal status, but as a political and moral recognition of Georgia's democratic aspirations and geopolitical vulnerability.

Building on this topological and relational framing, civil society narratives do not merely contest the EU's bilateral and technocratic approach – they actively reconfigure the meaning of borders, belonging and responsibility. Rather than accepting the static spatial logic of EU enlargement, CSOs construct a mobile and dynamic vision of Europe, one in which Georgia is already embedded within a shared European normative and cultural space. These narratives contextualise Georgia's EU candidacy both in time and space: temporally, by embedding the application within a longer historical arc of European integration and democratic struggle; spatially, by geopoliticising the landscape through characterisations and topoi that transcend national borders and reimagine regional interconnections.

Within this framework, civil society actors draw on relational topoi – particularly models where candidate status was granted symbolically to the people rather than state institutions – to assert their own legitimacy and appeal for recognition. These appeals refract candidacy not simply as a technocratic outcome of reform benchmarks, but as an act of democratic solidarity and geopolitical alignment. The EU is called upon not just as an institutional arbiter but as a normative actor capable of affirming popular will.

Crucially, the Russian threat becomes a central narrative device: not only a rationale for urgency, but also a lens through which both domestic dysfunction and EU hesitation are interpreted. By invoking Russia, civil society actors reposition EU enlargement as a moral and strategic imperative, arguing that inaction risks enabling authoritarian influence, while symbolic inclusion would reaffirm the EU's commitment to democratic resilience at its periphery. In this way, enlargement is narratively recast not just as a matter of conditionality, but of responsibility, shifting the stakes from procedural compliance to questions of geopolitical ethics and solidarity. Through this lens, civil society actors dissolve rigid boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside', emphasising shared geopolitical threats, notably from Russia, and invoking solidarity with other Eastern Partnership countries. In doing so, they

construct what Mezzadra and Neilson (2012) describe as *geopolitical topologies* – fluid, relational spatial imaginaries that challenge the fixed binaries of accession politics. As Awan (2016: 280) notes, border topology approaches highlight bordering processes as dynamic and ecological, enabling an understanding of EU enlargement not as a bounded institutional progression, but as a contested and evolving field shaped by moral, political and geopolitical claims. Ultimately, civil society narratives perform a strategic reconfiguration of Europeanness itself, foregrounding a claim to belonging that is not contingent upon formal status, but rooted in shared values, common threats and a lived commitment to the European project.

As a concluding reflection, the analysis revealed two dominant relational topologies structuring civil society narratives: first, the EU–Georgia–Russia triangle, which reorients the focus from a bilateral EU-Georgia framework toward a more situated understanding that includes the persistent influence of Russia; and second, a symbolic circle of candidate states across the Black Sea and the Balkans, which serves to draw parallels with prior EU candidacy decisions and challenge perceptions of exceptionalism or exclusion (Figure 1). These relational topologies function as narrative devices that unsettle the EU's practices of performed inclusivity – practices that, as Korosteleva (2017) critiques, have consistently failed to imagine a *new social order* capable of recognising the relational value of the 'other' within the Eastern Partnership. The EU's normative and civilisational framing has produced a rigid power structure in which perspectives from Europe's margins – such as Georgia – are acknowledged only instrumentally. In contrast, the relational narratives advanced by civil society actors reintroduce the geopolitical

Figure 1: Relational topologies
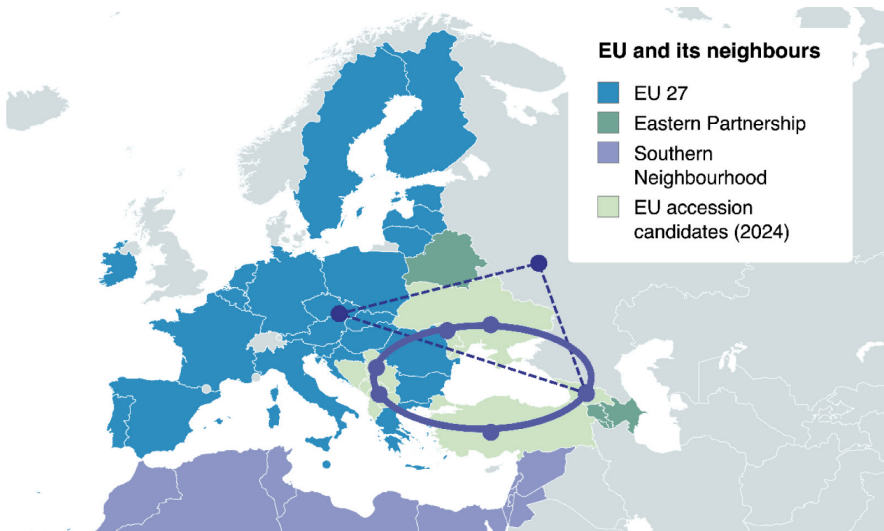
Source: Author

dimension, insisting on a more embedded, context-sensitive understanding of power, belonging and solidarity in the EU's neighbourhood policy.

<p style="text-align:center">↷</p>

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Appendix table 1: EU documents

Document Title	Publication Date	Document Type	Issuing Body	URL
Association Agreement between the European Union, the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part	2014 June	Legal summary (secondary source)	EUR-Lex / European Commission	https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/agree_internation/2014/494/oj/eng
Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part	2016 July	Legal Agreement (primary source)	Official Journal of the European Union	https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/documents/treaties-agreements/agreement/?id=2014007
The European Commission Recommends to Council Confirming Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia's Perspective to Become Members of the EU and Provides Its Opinion on Granting Them Candidate Status	2022 June	Press Release / Policy Communication	European Commission	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/european-commission-recommends-council-confirming-ukraine-moldova-and-georgias-perspective-become-2022-06-17_en
Opinion on Georgia's application for membership of the European Union	2022 June	Opinion	Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/opinion-georgias-application-membership-european-union_en
Commission's analytical report on country's alignment with EU acquis	2023 February	Analytical Report	European Commission	https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/commission-analytical-report-georgias-alignment-eu-acquis_en

Georgia 2023 Report accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement policy	2023 November	Commission Staff Working Document	European Commission	https://enlargement. ec.europa.eu/georgia-report-2023_en
Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy	2023 December	Communication	European Commission	https://enlargement. ec.europa.eu/2023--communication--eu-enlargement--policy_en
European Council conclusions	2023 December	Conclusions	European Council	https://www. consilium.europa. eu/en/press/press--releases/2023/12/15/ european-council-conclusions--14-and-15-december-2023/
Statement by President von der Leyen on the situation in Georgia	2024 May	Statement	President von der Leyen	https://enlargement. ec.europa.eu/news/ statement-president-von-der-leyen--situation-georgia-2024-05-01_en
Statement by High Representative Josep Borrell with the European Commission on the adoption of the 'transparency of foreign influence' law in Georgia*	2024 May	Statement	High Representative Josep Borrell	https://enlargement. ec.europa.eu/news/ statement-high--representative--josep-borrell--european-commission-adoption--transparency-foreign-2024-05-15_en

Statement by the European Commission and the HighRepresentative Josep Borrell on the Parliamentary elections in Georgia	2024 October	Statement	High Representative Josep Borrell	https://enlargement. ec.europa.eu/news/ statement-euro-pean-commission--and-high-repre-sentative-josep--borrell-parliamen-tary-elections-geor-gia-2024-10-27_en
2024 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy	2024 October	Communi-cation	European Commission	https://enlargement. ec.europa.eu/2024--communication--eu-enlargement--policy_en
Statement by the High Representative / Vice-President of the Commission Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos on Georgia	2024 December	Statement	High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for enlargement Marta Kos	https://enlargement. ec.europa.eu/news/ statement-high--representative--vice-president--commission-kaja--kallas-and-com-missioner-enlarge-ment-2024-12-01_en
Commission proposes to sus-pend visa-free travel for offici-als from Georgia	2024 December	Proposal	European Commission	https://enlargement. ec.europa.eu/news/ commission-pro-poses-suspend--visa-free-travel--officials-geor-gia-2024-12-20_en
Statement by High Represen-tative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for enlargement Marta Kos on the situation in Georgia	2025 February	Statement	High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for enlargement Marta Kos	https://enlargement. ec.europa.eu/news/ statement-high--representativevice--president-kaja--kallas-and-com-missioner-enlar-gement-marta--kos-2025-02-07_en

Georgia: Joint Statement by High Representative/ Vice-President Kallas and Commissioner Marta Kos on latest developments	2025 April	Statement	High Representative/ Vice-President Kaja Kallas and	https://enlargement. ec.europa.eu/news/ georgia-joint-state-ment-high-repre-sentativevice-
			Commissioner for enlargement Marta Kos	president-kallas--and-commissio-ner-marta-kos-la-test-2025-04-02_en
Joint Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas and Commissioner Marta Kos on Georgia's Foreign Agents Registration Act	2025 May	Statement	High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for enlargement Marta Kos	https://enlargement. ec.europa.eu/news/ joint-statement--high-representa-tivevice-president--kaja-kallas-and--commissioner--marta-kos-georgi-as-2025-05-31_en

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