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WELCOME

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

Building on the momentum of our Autumn 2024 issue, this Spring 2025 issue, Tipping Point, features a record number of articles. We are enormously grateful for the continuing student enthusiasm for Leviathan Journal, as we witness several seismic shifts in politics, democracy and critical engagement across the world. Though there has never been a dull moment in global politics, our generation of current undergraduates has come of age amidst a worldwide pandemic, the rise of right-wing populism, social media and misinformation, and more. Our political consciousnesses have been formed in an era of disruption and disarray. The theme of Tipping Point evokes this sense of unprecedented and profound change, as our authors explore an array of political changes, offering both hope and uncertainty for the times ahead.

Cultivating the platform for students to engage critically with such political ideas creatively and rigourously would not be possible without the incredible work of the entire editorial team, who have risen to the challenge of increasing participation yet again.

Within this issue, each author has carved out their own niche, offering readers the opportunity to learn about political issues with both depth and breadth. This issue features an amazing array of political issues, movements and actors often not discussed in mainstream discourses, as well as fresh perspectives on significant moments in political history.

The issue begins with an exploration of the relationship between politics and religion and their ability to mobilise movements, as authors bring understudied elements of contemporary religious conflicts to the fore: Mariela Brown's analysis of the Taliban's propagandistic destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, Ross Doran's exploration of the role of class and fear in legitimising paramilitary violence in the Troubles, Kyle Scorgie's recentring of the long history of anti-Zionism in the Jewish tradition, and Isabelle Galloway's critique of the Orientalist framing of Islam.

Several articles then draw crucial attention to issues of Indigenous communities around the world and critical tipping points in oppressive policy structures, including Lucy Barrett's study of Arctic Indigenous Peoples in northern Russia, Liam Burgess's critique of Australia's unjust attempts to assimilate Aboriginal Australians, rather than uplift them, and Finley Farrell's analysis of Indonesia's cummulatively oppressive policies towards Indigenous West Papuans.

Our authors offer new insights on critical social movements in modern history: Cerys Jones looks at the recent Giséle Pelicot case in France and its implications for the legal treatment of violence against women, Zofia Jastrun revisits the Stonewall riots and their impact on the LGBTQ+ movement, Theo Webb assesses Rappler — a grassroots social media platform working against former President of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte's authoritarian tendencies, Zikra Zuhuree highlights the shortcomings of the U.S. healthcare system, Desiree Amir-Aslani studies the catalysts for the Arab Spring uprisings, and Georgi Mitchell-Jones analyses the rise of the Reform UK Party in rural, conservative heartlands of the United Kingdom.

Diving into an exploration of the law, Jonathan Vickers considers the stability of the UK's asymmetric constitutional system, Marie Sheets critiques the structural inequalities of Jordan's treatment of Palestinian residents, Maya Pearson analyses the enduring neocolonial aspects of EU Member States' citizenship policies and the EU's inaction to rectify this contradiction of the Union's founding values, and Alma Hein assesses how international human rights regimes and courts are adapting to new challenges brought on by climate change.

Luca Freeman and Finn Hughes continue to explore the critical tipping points of climate change, analysing geoengineering's reinforcement of the structural flaws of capitalism and the green technology industry's reliance on unsustainable and inhumane mining practices in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, respectively. And, Clara Ricketts explores the geopolitical implications of the U.S.'s moves towards energy self-sufficiency for alliances between Gulf States and rising Asian powers.

Joanna Saunderson opens a series of economic explorations with an analysis of how Saudi Arabia is using investment in sports to diversity its economy as well as strengthen its nation-building project. Subsequently, Max Pohlman assesses the likelihood and potential impacts of waning U.S. dollar hegemony for the international monetary system, and Jaroslav Vlasak highlights the structurally unequal nature of the U.S.'s coercive sanctions against their Latin American neighbours.

Building on the themes of democratic instability, Dikran Bakkalian and Matías Lea Plaza analyse Argentinian President Milei's rise to power and his use of underdog and outsider narratives to propel him to popularity. Noémie Valéry develops a portrait of Salvadorian President Bukele's leadership as simultaneously attentive governance and a potential threat to democratic stability. Rodrigo Ramos assesses Mozambique's struggles to democratise after gaining independence 1975, and Layla Osama Zaki analyses the confluence of internal instability and external involvement in Sudan's recurring violent conflicts.

Mathew Huang shifts focus towards the shortcomings of the nation-state and cohesive governance in Southeast Asia as transnational criminal organisations continue to evade law enforcement in the region. Taylor Cameron assesses the implications of the fall of the al-Assad regime in Syria for the semi-autonomous region of Rojava, dominated by Kurdish political movements. Continuing this thread, Aisyah Ab Halim analyses why an independent Kurdistan remains elusive. Bringing these themes of statehood and stability to Eastern Europe, Ornela Beqa explores the contributing factors to the fall of Yugoslavia through various eras of leadership and the Kosovo conflict. Lastly, Eva Chown analyses Georgia's turbulent relationship with Russia, as the state has faded in and out of Russian influence throughout the twenty-first century, and Oleksandra Zhyhalkina highlights the significant ramifications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine from 2022 to present on the global food supply chain.

We are also honoured to publish the six winning essays from the Ukrainian Politics Network's Student Essay Competition. These six essays featured at the end of this issue undertake multifaceted explorations of both topical and underappreciated political complexities. As Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine continues, Leviathan is proud to support the mission of the Ukrainian Politics Network to understand Ukrainian politics on its own terms, not exclusively in the shadow of Russia. In the face of such oppression and destruction, academia plays a critical role in both raising awareness to understudied or underdiscussed aspects of the conflict but also deepening our understanding of the structural roots at play.

We hope that these essays, as well as our thirty-three articles, offer new perspectives and insights into contemporary political issues, enriching our readers' worldview and making factual, critical analysis accessible to all. Though we cannot predict what the future may entail, these political analyses allow us to better understand the world we live in and how we may change it for the better.

Sincerely,

Grace Hitchcock
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Eleanor Doyle
DEPUTY EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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EDITORIAL TEAM

CONTENTS

8
Deconstructing the Optics of Cultural Terrorism
by Mariela Brown

14
'Not an Inch': An Exploration of Protestant Paramilitary Violence in Northern Ireland
by Ross Doran

22
The Reniassance of Jewish Anti-Zionism
by Kyle Scorgie

28
From Rituals to Revolts: Rethinking Islam's Role in Middle Eastern Politics
by Isabelle Galloway

34
Arctic Empire: Russia's Internal Colonisation of Indigenous Communities
by Lucy Barrett

40
Closing the Gap: A False Promise of Change for Aboriginal Australians
by Liam Burgess

48
Marginalisation, Murder, and Silence in West Papua
by Finley Farrell

54
The Gisèle Pelicot Case and its Implications for Rape Culture and Legislation in France
by Cerys Jones

62
Stonewall: True Tipping Point or an Oversaturated Symbol?
by Zofia Jastrun

68
The Fall and Rise of Rappler and Maria Ressa Under Duterte's Dictatorship
by Theo Webb

74
Deny, Defend, Depose: How Healthcare in the United States has Strangled the 99 Percent
by Zikra Zuhuree

82
The Arab Spring: Unveiling the Dynamics of a Political Tipping Point
by Desiree Amir-Aslani

90
Fields of Change: The Rise of Reform in 'Rural Right' Conservative Heartlands
by Georgi Mitchell-Jones

98
Is the UK at a 'Tipping Point' for Federalist Reform?
by Jonathan Vickers

104
A Nation for Palestine, but Not for Palestinians
by Marie Sheets

110
Enduring Coloniality
by Maya Pearson

116
The Human Rights-Based Approach to Climate Change Law
by Alma Hein

CONTENTS continued

122
Engineering our way out of Catastrophe?
by Luca Freeman

130
The Paradox of Progress
by Finn Hughes

138
Has the U.S. Move towards Energy Self-Sufficiency Incentivised Gulf States' Foreign Policy Activities towards Asia?
by Clara Ricketts

144
Kicking Off a New Era: Saudi Arabia's Use of Sport to Unlock Social and Economic Reform
by Joanna Saunderson

152
The Fate of the Greenback
by Maxwell Pohlman

160
Carrot and Stick: Coercive Economic Sanctions in U.S. - Latin American Relationship
by Jaroslav Vlasak

166
Milei's Libertarian Phenomenon
by Dikran Bakkalian and Matías Lea Plaza

172
El Salvador's 180-Degree Turnaround and Nayib Bukele's Rise to Power
by Noémie Valéry

180
Maputo Unraveling: The Cry of the Mozambican Nation
by Rodrigo Ramos

186
A Silenced War: The Role of Internal and External Influences in Perpetuating Sudanese Conflict
by Layla Osama Zaki

194
Unintended Sanctuary: The Institutional Failures Behind Southeast Asia's New Criminal Landscape
by Mathew Huang

200
The Security of Rojava in a Post-Assad Syria
by Taylor Cameron

206
Has the Independence Movement of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq Reached a Point of No Return?
by Aisyah Ab Halim

212
When Yugoslavia Fell, Serbian Nationalism Rose: The Kosovo Conflict
by Ornela Bega

218
A Tipping Point in Georgia's Balancing Act
by Eva Chown

226
Grain Chain: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and the Collapse of Global Food Sovereignty
by Oleksandra Zhyhalkina

UKRAINIAN POLITICS NETWORK
STUDENT ESSAY COMPETITION

232
IN COLLABORATION WITH
THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH & TARAS SHEVCHENKO NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF KYIV

234
Strengthening Scotland-Ukraine Ties in the Context of Russia's Full-Scale Invasion
by Iryna Cheban

240
Recentring the Donbas: Forging a Lasting Peace in Ukraine
by Ross Doran

246
British Peace Enforcement in Ukraine
by Artur Levko

252
Nuclear Shadows
by Oleksandra Zhyhalkina

258
In Pursuit of Agency: Understanding Ukraine's Foreign Policy Post-2014
by Yaroslav Smovzh

264
The Security of Ukraine is in the Arms of the EU
by Kateryna Lozovenko

DECONSTRUCTING THE OPTICS OF CULTURAL TERRORISM

THE PROPAGANDISTIC MOTIVES FOR THE TALIBAN'S DESTRUCTION OF THE BAMIYAN BUDDHAS AND THE WESTERN OUTCRY

MARIELA BROWN

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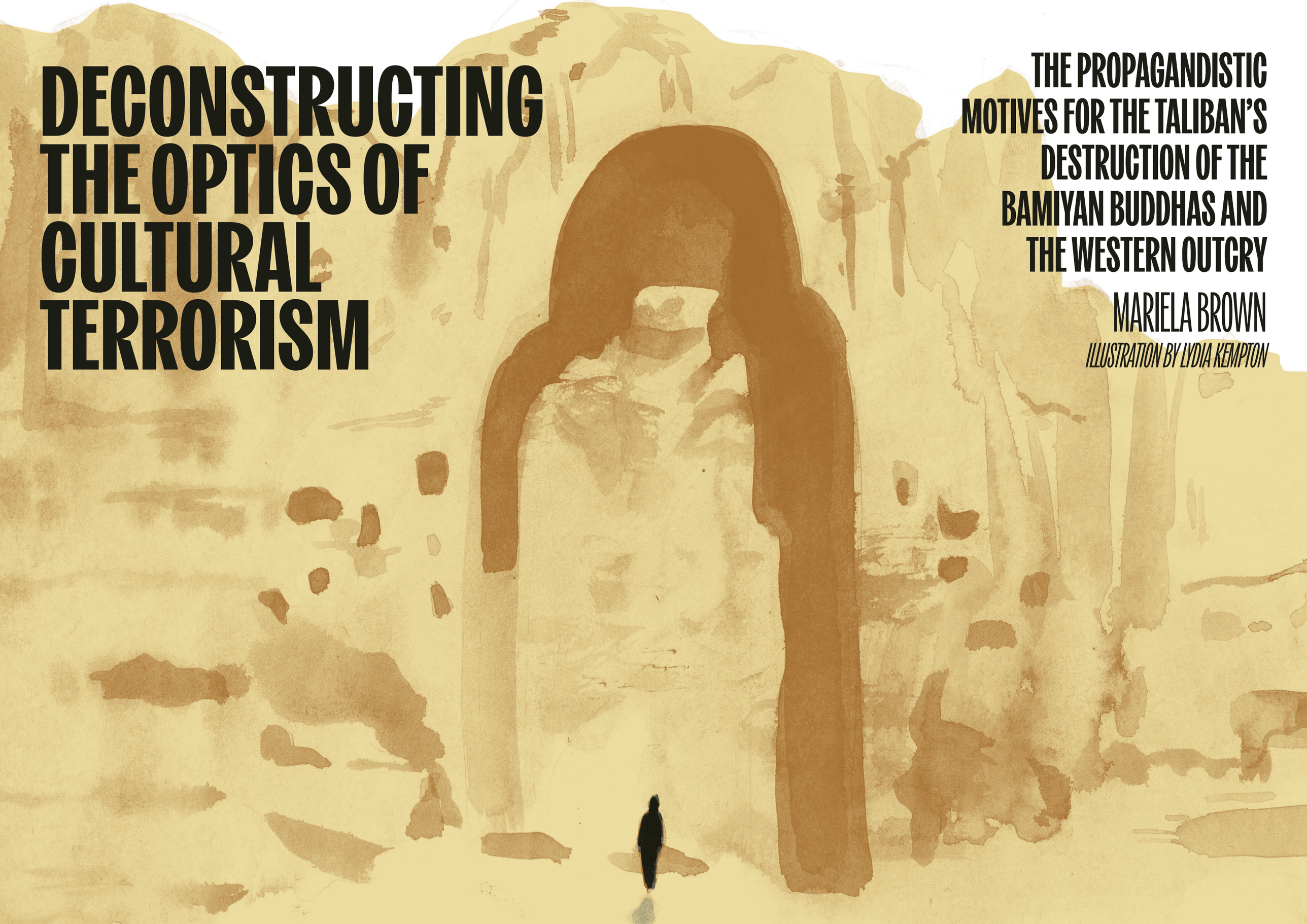

DECONSTRUCTING THE OPTICS OF CULTURAL TERRORISM

MARIELA BROWN

Since its invasion in 1996, Afghanistan has been under the yoke of the Taliban government and the extremist ideology it promoted (Atai, 2019, p.304; Crossette, 1996). On 1 March 2001, the Taliban announced the destruction of all anthropomorphic statues in Afghanistan. From 2 March, the ancient Buddhas of Bamiyan were summarily destroyed by explosives; the footage of this destruction was published on the internet and fervently criticised by those whose attention it attracted (Constable, 2001; Harding, 2001). Crucial to the extent of international condemnation was the unprecedented nature of the event and the inception of a new mode of cultural terrorism (Flood, 2002, p.651).

The international condemnation largely focused on the purported religious justifications for the iconoclasm committed by the Taliban. Iconoclasm refers to the rejection of images, icons and monuments for religious or political reasons. However, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was a form of 'instrumental' iconoclasm rather than the 'expressive' kind, as the act had broader political aims rather than simply expressing the Taliban's strict adherence to aniconism, defined as the rejection of depictions of non-Islamic religious figures (Gaifman, 2024). While the Taliban did claim that such acts of cultural terrorism were supposedly underpinned by an extremist interpretation of the Hadith - an oral tradition within Islam that comprises the purported sayings, deeds, and tacit approvals of the Prophet Muhammad (Hadith: 7.834, 7.840, 7.844, 7.846; Sayeed, 2024) - this was likely not the primary motivator. The attack's reception became defined by the optics and its impact upon global cultural heritage rather than the acute human suffering caused by the Taliban. The international outrage led to the widespread dissemination of the video across various media channels. Following the research of Cunliffe and Curini (2018, p.1105), it has been shown that the sharing of images of cultural terrorism has a positive correlation to the recruitment of extremist members. This is due to the powerful effect of destructive imagery in tandem with anti-Western sentiment (Cunliffe and Curini, 2018, p.1105). Therefore, with the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas being one of the first attacks of this nature, this destruction likely became an inciting event which came to characterise later attacks such as the destruction of Mosul in 2015 or the Arch of Palmyra in 2016 in Syria by ISIS (Cunliffe and Curini, 2018, p.1094; De Cesari, 2015, p.22). In the burgeoning technological age, the attack on the Bamiyan Buddhas unveiled the internet's propagandistic value as it garnered global attention by affronting the humanitarian Western gaze (Harmanşah, 2015, p.175).

Without doubt, many principles of the Taliban rest on a reactionary rendition of Islamic scripture, however, examining the complete context and consequences of the 2001 attack helps provide further explanation of the true incitement, which cannot be reduced to pure religious dogma. The Taliban did punish the local Hazara community for their culture's minor detraction from the Taliban's extremist ideal, but not in the way conceptualised by Western reporters. To adhere to the Western media's portrayal of the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas as solely an act of 'Islamic' iconoclasm deems the event completely devoid of its wider political context (Flood, 2002, p.651). With the Taliban recapturing Afghanistan on 15 August 2021, it is now especially important to understand the mechanics of contemporary acts of iconoclasm so as not to feed the Taliban's online propaganda machine should another piece of cultural heritage be destroyed (Cunliffe and Curini, 2018, p.1096; The Visual Journalism Team, 2021).

ISLAMIC ICONOCLASM

The Western media's portrayal of the destruction focused on the reactionary facets of the Taliban's extremist ideology, promoting an orientalising dichotomy. The narrative gave primacy to the incompatibility between the Taliban's social regression and repression of cultural difference and the Western notion of the cosmopolitan ideal, rather than an accurate depiction of the Taliban's multi-faceted motivations (Flood, 2002, p.641). This was effective in evoking global outrage but unwittingly facilitated the Taliban's propaganda machine. (Flood and Elsner, 2016, p.134). The consequential outrage only led to the increased dissemination of the images of destruction, allowing their propagandistic material to reach a wider audience and attract further sympathisers. Integral to the Western narrative was the suggestion that the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was consistent with the Islamic rejection of all depictions of non-Islamic religious figures. However, the relative survival of the Bamiyan Buddhas until the twenty-first century reveals the uncommonness of Islam's aniconism possessing many iconoclastic tendencies before the inception of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda (Flood, 2002, p.646).

Moreover, the Taliban's attitude to the Bamiyan Buddhas was initially ambivalent. In 1997, following the Taliban's capture of Kabul, Mullah Muhammad Omar, founder and leader of the Taliban, stated that his government considered the Bamiyan statues a potential major source of income from tourists to Afghanistan, necessitating their protection (Morgan, 2012, p.3). Even during the initial

The consequential outrage only led to the increased dissemination of the images of destruction, allowing their propagandistic material to reach a wider audience and attract further sympathisers.

invasion, soldiers participated in the partial destruction of the statues, only for these acts to be disallowed by the central Taliban authority (Morgan, 2012, p.8). However, in 2001, Mullah Muhammad Omar issued a revised edict where he stated that '[A]ll statues and non-Islamic shrines located in different parts of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan must be destroyed. These statues have been and remain shrines of unbelievers and these unbelievers continue to worship and respect them' (Morgan, 2012, p.15). What followed, beginning on 2 March, was the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan spanning over several weeks. Dario Gamboni (2001, p.11) posits that the destruction of the Buddhas was used as a cover to traffic pre-Islamic artefacts to the Pakistani market. He also suggests that the ransom offered by the West to purchase the statues while Afghan people were dying from a partially man-made famine was resented by the Al-Qaeda members among the Taliban who disliked the diplomatic relations between both actors, and so manipulated the destruction of the Buddhas (Gamboni, 2001, p.11). Alongside the sentiments of Finbarr Flood and Ömür Harmanşah, the act had propagandistic intentions rather than solely religious motivations. By filming the attack, the destruction appealed to the debased 'consumerist habit[s]' of the Western audience (Harmanşah, 2015, p.172). This distracted from the Afghan people who were suffering the true effects of the Taliban's doctrine of violence (Flood, 2002, p.651).

LOCAL IMPORTANCE OF THE BUDDHAS

The Buddhas of Bamiyan held obvious religious significance to the Buddhist community - the cliff on which the relief was carved is honeycombed with caverns where Buddhist monks would seek shelter in the third century, which now function as refuges for vulnerable inhabitants in the vicinity (Chiovenda, 2014, p.410; Warikoo, 2017, p.39). For this reason, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was linked to more than Afghanistan's descent into war, but also the ravaging of the safe havens which physical examples of cultural heritage can offer to local communities.

The Buddhas also held immense folkloric importance to the Hazari people, one of the ethnic and religious minority groups in Afghanistan (Chiovenda, 2014, p.411). According to tenth-century Hazara mythology, the largest statue was named Salsal and was supposedly the son of Pahlavan, an important folkloric figure. The smaller statue was named Shahmama and was allegedly the daughter of the Mir of Bamiyan (Reza, 2012, pp.24–26). Although they later became symbols of the Buddhist religion, the pair of statues remained icons of folk identity for the Hazaras but were opportunistically propagated by the Taliban (Reza, 2012, p.27). This confirms the destruction as not only an attack on global cultural heritage, but on a local sense of belonging. The Hazaras also demonstrated the peaceful co-existence of the diverse ethnic and religious communities within the Afghan Islamic diaspora. This image was inconsistent with the rigidity of the Taliban's interpretation of Islam. The Hazari traditions had detracted, to some extent, from Islamic aniconism, as these statues were of central importance to their folk traditions, irrespective of their original religious affiliations or connotations (Reza, 2012, p.26). More importantly, the Hazari people were instrumental in the local resistance against the Taliban. For example, the Hazara political party and resistance movement, Hizb-I Wahdat, captured and recaptured Bamiyan and its adjacent areas from the Taliban in 1997 (Morgan, 2012, p.19). The Hazara community threatened the Taliban's image of unified control over the Islamic peoples of Afghanistan, and their proposition of an extremist axiom. Thus, the attack on the statues may have been a retaliation by the Taliban to the Hazari resistance and their waning influence in the region. What is clear is that the Western media neglected to document the importance of the suffering and rebellion of the local population.

The focus of the Western media on the violence committed against cultural heritage distracted from the acute human suffering of the Afghan people. Notably, the Harazi people were neglected by the Western press. Almost none of the Hazara beliefs concerning the statues' origins were noted and only a few articles

referenced the names of Salsal and Shahmama (Chiovenda, 2014, p.417). At best, the importance of the statues to the Hazaras is noted in tandem with their importance to 'common world heritage', equating the cultural significance of Hazara folklore to that of the comparatively disconnected West (CNN, 2001; Morgan, 2012, p.19). Western news reports played into the Taliban's theological arguments for the destruction of the statues, and sought to further promote a false dichotomy between the 'civilised' West and 'non-civilised' people of Afghanistan, that is to say, the Christian West and the Islamic East (Chiovenda, 2014, p.411). Thus, the Western narrative tactlessly centred global heritage, to the detriment of the local people whose acute human suffering went comparatively unregistered.

THE WESTERN RESPONSE

After the destruction was documented on video, many Western users had an immediate visceral reaction and shared it to inform others of the situation in Afghanistan and to declare their own opposition to the event (Harmanşah, 2015, p.172). This can be understood as 'performative' iconoclasm, whereby the Taliban effectively targeted the Western conception of world cultural heritage and elicited their intended response (Gamboni, 2001, p.34). Not only did this unknowingly spread the propaganda of the Taliban worldwide, but prompted the Western witnesses to reproduce Orientalist tropes whereby the Western civilised onlookers condemn the uncivilised acts happening in the East (Harmanşah, 2015, p.172). This is not to suggest that the Taliban's cultural terrorism was not injurious, but rather that the spreading of this content only advanced the Taliban's aims further. The success of the Taliban's propagandistic iconoclasm only encouraged more acts of recorded cultural destruction thereafter. Ultimately, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was a reprehensible act of violence intended to harm local communities and to divert the Western gaze away from the human suffering occurring in the region. Put bluntly by *The Economist* at the time, it was dismal 'to observe that the world seems to care more about the destruction of two stone statues, which – let's be honest – hardly anyone had even heard of until ten days ago, than about 100,000 refugees who have been starving and freezing to death a few hundred miles away from them' (Morgan, 2012, p.27). The debate on anastylosis—the complete or near-complete reconstruction of a ruined monument, preferably using the original materials—has now come to define Western principles towards the Bamiyan Buddhas. The 2001 destruction violated the Hague Convention, which states that 'damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of mankind' (UNESCO, 1954, p.8). Consequently, the cultural branch of the UN, UNESCO, has been frequently called upon to reconstruct the statues. On the one hand, complete or partial anastylosis of the Buddhas could attract tourism and allow the Afghan people to reclaim their historical heritage, helping ameliorate the socio-economic subjugation forced upon them (Janowski, 2011, p.54). This was also the justification for the Taliban's initial protection of the Buddhas during the early occupation, and is the argument advanced by the local populations, who have most acutely suffered the harsh economic decline caused by the Taliban's occupation.

On the other hand, the West should feel desirous of helping the Afghan people, but this cannot be done by privileging material culture over the political and economic needs of living and suffering human beings (Janowski, 2011, p.54). The prioritisation of 'art' over essential humanitarian needs leads to the silencing of the voices of local people in favour of international actors, and ultimately leaves both the local communities and their heritage sites exposed to further acts of violence (Isakhan and Meskell, 2023, p.385). With the failure of the West to adequately document human suffering in 2001, it is essential that the arguments for and against reconstruction centre the needs of the Afghan people rather than the immediate emotional reactions of Western observers. In doing so, we diminish the optic power of the Taliban's propaganda machine and, in turn, can help ameliorate further instances of human suffering.

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This article has been edited by Oleksandra Zhyhalkina (International Editor) and Harry Johnson (Chief Regional Editor), copy edited by Ace Bailey Parr (Copy Editor), Isabela Prendi (Copy Editor), Khanak Gupta (Copy Editor) and Lucy Barrett (Chief Copy Editor), peer reviewed by Silvan Bieri (Peer Reviewer), checked and approved by Grace Hitchcock (Editor-in-Chief).

NOT AN INCH

AN EXPLORATION OF PROTESTANT PARAMILITARY VIOLENCE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

ROSS DORAN

ILLUSTRATION BY VITTO GINEVRI

NOT AN INCH AN EXPLORATION OF PROTESTANT PARAMILITARY VIOLENCE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

ROSS DORAN

Many 'ordinary' working-class Protestants were driven to join paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland during The Troubles, yet there remains a significant gap in understanding the reasoning behind these actions. Histories of the period tend to focus on nationalist terror groups, particularly the Irish Republican Army (IRA) (Finn, 2019), while the attention given to loyalist paramilitaries is minimal. Where loyalist paramilitaries are the focus, accounts tend to rely on personal testimony taken at face value and have not developed a comprehensive explanation for loyalist violence, focusing far more on immediate motivations (Crawford, 2003; Phillips, 2015). By drawing on a broad range of historiography to push for a more comprehensive account of loyalist violence, this essay begins to bridge this gap. In doing so, it problematises arguments that seek to reduce the conflict to ethnic-cultural factors, neglecting religion. Instead, this essay finds that theology, specifically Calvinist theology, played a significant role in prolonging sectarian violence (Southern, 2004; Southern, 2010; Badham, Wells and McForan, 1998).

Hence, the main focus is on the Protestant population, and the Catholic population are only discussed in relation to their impact on the behaviour of loyalist paramilitaries. Although nationalist mobilisation had a significant effect in prompting loyalist violence (Phillips, 2015), this essay emphasises how the marginalisation of Catholics, baked into the fabric of the Northern Irish state, and its subsequent entrenchment by Calvinist theology, constructed violence as a legitimate enterprise to defend Ulster* when Catholics began agitating for civil rights. The nature of Protestant society in Northern Ireland was one constantly on the cusp of violence. The tipping point for loyalist violence was Catholic civil rights agitation, which exacerbated increasing paramilitary organisation as both communities became radicalised and polarised. Therefore, this essay argues that loyalist pursuit of violence against Catholic civilians can be explained by the continuous othering of the Catholic community, combined with Calvinist theology. Together, these produced a constituency prepared to give 'not an inch' to their Catholic compatriots (Rolston, 2006, p.659), a belief that would tip Ulster into a violent and bloody conflict.

THE CONCEPTION OF THE STATE

Anti-Catholic sentiment was not simply a feature of the Northern Irish state but its *raison d'être.* Unionist leaders were in a permanent crisis mindset, viewing Northern Ireland as constantly under siege from external and internal enemies (Jackson, 2014; Morris, 2011). Henry Patterson (2014, p.692) demonstrates how the image of the '"Ulsterman" as the embodiment of honesty, hard work, resolution, and resourcefulness' was contrasted to his Southern, Irish neighbour, who were 'at best, dreamy and impractical and, at worst, feckless and lazy'. Similarly, Loughlin (2007) explores how loyalists attempted to use geography and landscape to assert the geographical difference between the North and the South. This led to the mistrust and subsequent exclusion of the Catholic minority, seen as a subversive element (Jackson, 2010; Patterson, 2014; Bew, 2011; Riordan, 2018; and Hennessey, 1996). In the nineteenth century, Protestants became increasingly concerned with the rise of these supposedly subversive elements in Ireland (Holmes, 2018, pp.331–342). Henry Cooke, a Presbyterian minister, advocated for Protestant unity in the face of Catholic mobilisation, leading to an era of evangelical ascendancy as Presbyterianism and Anglicanism consolidated a Protestant church alliance (Holmes, 2018, p.334). McBride reveals how this was primarily consolidated against the threat of Catholicism. This demonstrates how Protestant unity in Northern Ireland was predicated not on theological cohesion but on anti-Catholicism (McBride, 1996), which would have a strong legacy in the construction of the Unionist state, clearly present in the Ulster Covenant and Women's Declaration (Walker, 2016; Morris, 2011). The Women's Declaration emphasises 'uncompromising opposition' to Home Rule (Morris, 2011, p.18). As Stewart (2023) argues, Ulster women used the document as an assertion of their agency, enthusiastically committing themselves to the Covenant's promise of using 'all means which may be found to defeat the present conspiracy' (Bourke and Gallagher, 2022, p.140), demonstrating genuine fear of free state control (Stewart, 2023; Connell, 2012). Therefore, widespread fear of Catholic domination was endemic in Northern Irish society, so much so that armed struggle against it constituted a justifiable last resort. The foundations of Unionism in fear of Catholicism produced a defensive Northern Irish Protestant state.

ECONOMIC STRUGGLE AND COMMUNITIES OF SOLIDARITY

Working-class Protestants exhibited an unwavering zeal in defence of the Protestant state despite their dire living conditions. In 1938, 92,000 people of Northern Ireland were on the dole, while 29.5 percent were unemployed (Jackson, 2010, p.346; Ollerenshaw, 2014). This atrocious state of affairs continued throughout

* Ulster will be used interchangeably with Northern Ireland. Although the historic province of Ulster encompasses 9 counties, the 6 counties that make up the state of Northern Ireland were considered by Loyalists as Ulster.

Therefore, widespread fear of Catholic domination was endemic in Northern Irish society, so much so that armed struggle against it constituted a justifiable last resort.

the Troubles. By 1963, the economy had begun to decline, with linen and shipbuilding, providing the bulk of employment in Belfast, losing trade to competitors abroad (Jordan, 2011, p.48). Many Protestants who joined paramilitaries had similar living conditions to Catholics (Ferguson and McAuley, 2017). Campbell (2017, p.99) demonstrates how 70 percent of Rathcoole Estate, a strongly loyalist area, were in receipt of state benefits in 1984. However, this lack of economic opportunity was not matched with an equivalent level of anti-state politicisation and trade union organisation, which is expected in times of financial hardship. Although the Ulster Unionist Party saw a substantial decline in electoral fortunes from 1925, which Jackson (2010, p.313) attributes to growing disillusionment, Riordan (2018, pp.313–314) outlines how Labour parties were also relatively unsuccessful in winning much popularity in general elections, revealing an absence of class based solidarity.

The only large-scale Protestant working-class mobilisation was the Ulster Workers Council's (UWC) strike, which successfully blocked power sharing in the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973 (Campbell, 2017, p.91; Badham, Wells and McForan, 1998, pp.52–53). The UWC strike demonstrated potential for Protestant working-class mobilisation. However, it did not crystallise against the state but rather as an articulation of Protestant loyalism. The Sunningdale Agreement was intended to facilitate power sharing with nationalist communities within the Northern Irish state while granting the Republic of Ireland more influence in Northern Irish affairs. It was hoped that this would bring an end to sectarian violence by alienating militant republicanism and loyalism alike. Therefore, when working class protestants were mobilised, it was in defence of unionism and the unionist state rather than for class interest, demonstrating the salience of national over class identity (Campbell, 2017; Badham, Wells and McForan, 1998). Subsequently, when this identity was threatened, militant loyalism would be summoned to defend it.

PAISLEY AND PROTESTANT THEOLOGICAL INFLUENCE

The trigger of unionist working-class violence and engagement with paramilitary groups remains unclear. Although certain historians have sought to diminish the influence Ian Paisley, the fundamentalist Presbyterian preacher, had on motivating paramilitaries, he remains central in perpetuating and legitimising the paramilitary defence of Ulster. These interpretations have understood the Troubles as a non-religious conflict, where Protestant and Catholic are socioeconomic, cultural or ethnic markers of identity, and theology is sidelined (Wallis, Bruce and Taylor, 1987; Ganiel and Dixon, 2008). Meanwhile, others failed to recognise Paisley's role in providing theological justification for the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), Ulster Defence Association (UDA), and even the groups he founded, such as the Third Force and Ulster Resistance (Southern, 2010, p.143; Gallagher, 1981). Paisley's role in the Troubles should be understood as hardening and consolidating unionist desires to resist any concession to the Catholic nationalist minority, primarily by providing a theological justification for sectarian violence.

Core to Paisley's fundamentalism was the belief that power sharing with the Catholic community was a betrayal of the Covenant, which granted Ulster to the Protestants, and thus would bring the wrath of God (Southern, 2004). Paisley's Free Presbyterian Church (FPC) was an expression of this hardline Protestant conviction. Ivan Foster, a FPC minister, echoing Edward Carson, a prominent Unionist leader, saw Ulster as a chosen province, saved by God from the 'papist' South (Southern, 2010; Badham, Wells and McForan, 1998, p.53). Foster's beliefs echo a commitment to a pure textualist reading of the Bible typical of Calvinist theology. Jordan articulates how segregationist views were justified by evangelicals in the American South and were entertained by Paisley, who attended the Bob Jones Bible Conference (Jordan, 2011). The Calvinists further shunned any Protestant who did not believe in predestination and premillennialism (Jordan, 2011). Carl McIntire, a Presbyterian minister, united dissident church groups under the FPC to join the International Council of Christian Churches, an alternative to the World Council of Churches, which argued that liberal Protestants 'had long forsaken the faith of their fathers […] in direct conflict with the Scriptures'

(Jordan, 2011; International Council of Christian Churches, 2023). The very name 'Ulster Covenant' invokes the Calvinist belief in 'Covenant', embodying the idea that God enters into 'contracts' with earthly polities to uphold Christian values (Ganiel and Dixon, 2008; Campbell, 2017). Therefore, the Northern Irish State was not simply created by political machinations but was a contract between devoted Protestants, God's elected people, and God himself. This means that anything which compromises the Protestant nature of Ulster also compromises this covenant, making it sacrilegious and a betrayal of God himself. Turning to ecumenism, particularly embracing Catholicism, would result in submission to the Roman Catholic church. Any reconciliation was the first step towards a united Ireland and Papal domination (Southern, 2004; Gallagher, 1981). Therefore, political concessions to the Catholic minority were condemned as inherently heretical.

TIPPING POINT FOR VIOLENCE: REACTIONARY OR BURGEONING?

These preconditions created a Northern Irish society that was primed for Unionist paramilitary violence; introducing Catholic civil rights to this dangerous context led to implosion. Commentators have often seen Unionist paramilitary violence as a reaction to Republican terrorism rather than being prompted of its own accord. Indeed, many interviews with former UDA members indicate that when they enlisted, they did so due to their anger caused by Republican violence (Crawford, 2003). Certainly, Loyalist terrorism did not exist in a vacuum; Republican violence had a radicalising effect on Protestants. Phillips' (2015) research has demonstrated how competing violent rivalries between terrorist groups consolidate and contribute to the longevity of terrorist violence, with sectarian attacks encouraging citizens to take a side, reinvigorating a sense of purpose, and building solidarity. Such exacerbation can be seen in the retaliatory bombings carried out between Republican and Loyalist terrorists. The McGurk Bar was bombed because the clientele was predominantly Catholic, and was justified as a reaction to an escalation of IRA bombings (Crawford, 2003; Phillips, 2015). Billy McQuiston and Sam Duddy became involved with Loyalist paramilitarism after witnessing instances of Republican terrorism (Phillips, 2015; Crawford, 2003, pp.53–62). Similarly, John White articulated his belief in Catholic complicity, as they allowed the IRA to operate, which legitimised sectarian violence against all Catholic civilians (Crawford, 2003, pp.90–95). Thus, many became involved with Loyalist paramilitaries in reaction to Republican violence.

However, some Protestants felt violence was justified prior to the IRA bombing campaign. The reformation of the UVF in 1966 was likely a response to the mobilisation of Catholic civil rights protests (Wood, 2009), legitimised by the popularisation of the FPC's preaching. Ian Paisley mobilised many Protestants supposedly to defend Ulster, with 100,000 gathering in Belfast for the 'Ulster Says No!' rally in 1985. Paisley dominated the event, directly appealing to the memory of the Covenant and quoting Edward Carson: 'we ask for no privilege, but we are determined none shall have privilege over us' (Campbell, 2017, p.104). In doing so, Paisley demonstrated the potent fear that Ulster was under threat of subordination to the Irish Republic. Considering that Paisley won the most significant vote share (29.8 percent) in the 1979 European parliamentary election (Wallis, Bruce and Taylor, 1987), it is clear how popular Paisley was. His providentialist Calvinist rhetoric, therefore, permeated deeply into Unionist society and thus provided a theological justification for the actions of Protestant paramilitaries (Ferguson and McAuley, 2017; Southern, 2004). Furthermore, Goalwin demonstrates how paramilitary groups used murals to express communal self-identification and legitimise a mythologised central narrative that furthered their ideological goals. Phrases that echoed Paisley's firebrand rhetoric were common on loyalist murals: the UVF, 'For God and Ulster'; UDA, 'No Surrender' and 'Not an Inch' (Goalwin, 2013; Wood, 2009, p.20; Rolston, 2006, p.659). This reflected the Calvinist idea that the territorial integrity and Protestant character of Northern Ireland could not be sacrificed, or it would violate the Covenant.

Similar religious convictions are hinted at and sometimes explicitly mentioned in Unionist paramilitary interviews, with Sam Duddy swearing allegiance to 'God and country and the UDA' (Phillips, 2015, p.58). Billy Mitchell, a UVF brigadier, saw Catholic civil rights as subverting the Protestant state and acting as a front for Catholic domination by Ireland (Garland, 2008), while one of Gusty Spence's co-accused admitted that Paisley had a strong influence on him (Wood, 2009). This is clearly reflected in the number of Catholic civilians that loyalist paramilitaries were responsible for the deaths of — '63 [percent] of the 677' killed during the Troubles (Mesev, Shirlow and Downs, 2009, p.898). Therefore, loyalist paramilitaries were initially pushed to violence by the threat Catholic protest posed to the purity of the Northern Irish state. With no concessions on Catholic civil rights, this snowballed into counterattacks by Nationalist paramilitaries and led to a large-scale escalation of the Troubles.

CONCLUSION

The animosity felt towards Catholics that built the foundations of the Northern Irish state and the pervasiveness of these beliefs across Protestant communities demonstrate how Northern Irish Protestants were susceptible to Paisley's firebrand preaching. Through his popularisation of Calvinist theology, paramilitary violence was the inevitable result. All it needed was a tipping point, found in Catholic mobilisation for civil rights in the 1960s, perceived as an existential threat to the integrity of Ulster and therefore Protestants' relationship with God. The defence of the Northern Irish state was thus essential, no matter the cost. This need for defence resulted in the first bouts of loyalist terror that inevitably snowballed into retaliatory sectarian violence with Nationalist paramilitaries and produced the protracted and bloody conflict that we now know as the Troubles.

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THE RENAISSANCE OF JEWISH ANTI-ZIONISM

דִי רענעסַאנס פֿון ייִדישן אַנטי־ציוניזם

KYLE SCORGIE

ILLUSTRATION BY CLAIRE MARTIN

Recent decades have witnessed an unprecedented wave of Jewish anti-Zionist sentiment, particularly since the collapse of the Oslo Accords and the dashed optimism of the nineties (Gilani, 2024). Attitudes have shifted from viewing the State of Israel as a rallying point against antisemitism toward voicing profound doubts about whether nationalism, and the occupation that sustains it, can genuinely offer peace for the Jewish people (Pew Research Center, 2021; Kamarck and Muchnick, 2023). From university campuses to global activist networks, groups such as IfNotNow and Jewish Voice for Peace have flourished, urging an end to the Genocide in Gaza and condemning the human rights violations in the West Bank (Jewish Voice for Peace, 2024; Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2024).

However, the intellectual underpinnings of anti-Zionism extend deep into Jewish history, long before the critics in the nineties. This essay argues that today's upsurge in Jewish anti-Zionism would not, and could not, exist in its present form without the earlier, often marginalised critiques of Zionism that flourished in religious, socialist, and anti-colonial circles well over a century ago (Balthaser, 2020; Berkman, 2021). These early anti-Zionist ideas influenced the modern movement by forming the basis for contemporary critiques, mobilisation strategies, and ethical frameworks. Far from a new development, the defiant insistence that one can be Jewish without endorsing a Jewish state reflects a robust intellectual lineage which is now emerging in popular consciousness, propelled by the ongoing genocide in Gaza (Beiraghdar et al., 2023; Boisen, 2024).

THE RISE OF MODERN DISSENT IN THE SHADOW OF OSLO

Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, mainstream Jewish institutions in North America and Europe considered support for Israel as nearly synonymous with Jewish identity, especially following the Holocaust (Musolff, 2015). That stance began to crack following Israel's occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Golan Heights in 1967 (Rached and Bali, 2017). Yet these fractures did not fully rupture until after the Oslo Accords — the ill-fated attempt in the 1990s to arrive at a two-state solution — collapsed amid renewed violence and what many saw as entrenched Israeli expansionism (Gilani, 2024). Hopes for a peaceful compromise gave way to repeated military incursions into Gaza and a permanent, punitive blockade (Oxfam International, 2019; International Rescue Committee, 2025). Although these events are typically viewed as tragic escalations in a protracted conflict, this shift also moved anti-Zionist arguments from the fringes into broader communal conversations.

Amid the unrelenting humanitarian crises, organisations such as Jewish Voice for Peace (Jewish Voice for Peace, 2024) and IfNotNow embodied a new wave of criticism. Their members insisted that opposition to Israeli policies did not equate to antisemitism, arguing instead that ethical obligations inherited from Jewish history demanded solidarities that reached beyond ethnic or national boundaries (Keren-Kratz, 2023). Survey research confirmed these changes in attitude, with younger Jews in particular showing an unprecedented willingness to label Israeli policies as 'apartheid-like' (Kamarck and Muchnick, 2023). Yet the moral vocabulary that animates such critiques — emphasising universal justice, grassroots solidarity, and deep suspicion of nationalist power — was in no way invented by the current generation. Instead, it is the echo of diverse intellectual legacies forged in direct tension with Zionism from its very inception (Balthaser, 2020). These legacies run the gamut of Jewish historical tradition, ranging from traditional religious critique to early socialist and humanist currents, to Cold War era anti-imperialist solidarity.

EARLY ANTI-ZIONIST CRITIQUES: THE BUND'S SOCIALIST 'HERE-NESS'

Among the most prominent of these legacies is the socialist critique epitomised by the General Jewish Labour Bund in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia, usually called the Bund. Founded in 1897, the same year as the First Zionist Congress, the Bund contested the notion that a territorially based Jewish state was necessary or desirable as the first organised, secular group to do so (Mendes, 2021). While Theodor Herzl's Zionism rallied around political sovereignty in Palestine, Bundists championed a diasporic cultural identity rooted in the Yiddish language, proletarian solidarity, and class struggle. In practice, this opposition manifested in organising local labour actions across ethnic lines, establishing Yiddish cultural institutions, and vocally challenging the notion that a Jewish nation-state was the sole answer to antisemitic oppression across the many halls of Jewish society.

Central to the Bund's worldview was the concept of *doikayt* ('here-ness'), which asserted that Jews should remain and fight oppression in their present homelands rather than

uprooting themselves for a distant national project. This position rested not merely on logistical objections but also on principled commitments. Theoretically, it rested on a belief that socialist revolution alone would transcend ethnic and religious divisions. Strategically, it rested on the idea that forging alliances with non-Jewish workers would ultimately prove more durable than seeking refuge in a discrete, separatist polity (Balthaser, 2020). These ideas resonate powerfully with modern-day Jewish anti-Zionism. The Bund's emphasis on collective struggle over nationalist aspirations set a template for questioning whether sovereign power could truly emancipate Jews or whether, as many believe today, the cost of sovereignty has included complicity in violence against Palestinians (Boisen, 2024).

By championing the diaspora as a legitimate and liberatory form of Jewish identity, the Bund established a precedent that today's anti-Zionists invoke when declaring that Jewish security need not hinge on territorial exclusivity. Therefore, the Bund's intellectual heritage illuminates the crucial role early socialists played in shaping the moral and strategic vocabulary that has found renewed prominence in our current era of disillusionment with two-state solutions like that of Oslo. Furthermore, in practice, the Bund-funded schools maintained cultural organisations. They even developed mutual aid networks that functioned as a prototype for diasporic Jewish autonomy, facilitating cross-community solidarity and ensuring that Jewish identity thrived outside the confines of a nation-state.

RELIGIOUS DISSENT: NETUREI KARTA AND THE ETHICS OF EXILE

A second major current of early Jewish anti-Zionism arose from devout religious communities that rejected Zionist claims on theological grounds. One of the most notable examples is Neturei Karta, formed in the early twentieth century, whose name means 'Guardians of the City' — a Talmudic reference highlighting their vision of themselves as guardians of the Torah, and the grand religious traditions that flow from it (Keren-Kratz, 2023). Unlike the Bund, Neturei Karta's focus was not on class struggle but on what they believed to be a divinely ordained exile — any attempt to accelerate Jewish sovereignty before the Messiah's arrival constituted an act of hubris. This meant that Neturei Karta regarded Zionism as a transgression against divine will, undermining the faithful observance of exile and the covenant the Jewish people had made with HaShem (Keren-Kratz, 2023).

Critically, Neturei Karta's stance extends beyond strict theology to encompass ethical condemnation of the dispossession of Palestinians. They argue that a Jewish state, especially one employing military force to maintain occupation, cannot be reconciled with Torah teachings on compassion and justice (Keren-Kratz, 2023). Similarly, today diaspora activists who refuse to equate Jewish security with unconditional Israeli military power might often cite Jewish ethical teachings from Talmudic discussions of the stranger to rabbinical commentaries on peace to argue that endorsing occupation runs contrary to core Jewish values (Jewish Voice for Peace, 2024). While some may dismiss Neturei Karta's stance as an ultra-Orthodox outlier, these religious dissidents preserved an alternative understanding of Jewish destiny in which establishing Israel was not a triumphant consummation of Jewish history, but a grievous sin. Even secular activists who do not share Neturei Karta's theological worldview draw unconsciously on the moral tradition that insists a Jewish state must align with the highest standards of justice. The religious critique, therefore, serves as another foundational strand that explains how present-day anti-Zionism has emerged with moral force and historical grounding.

THE NEW HISTORIANS

Significantly, postcolonial scholarship has reframed the conversation around Zionism from one of 'Jewish liberation' in isolation to one that implicates colonial power structures (Vogt, 2023). Rather than seeing Israel as the inevitable outcome of millennia of Jewish longing, these scholars consider it a nationalist movement born amid the collapse of empires shaped by European ideas of territorial conquest and racial hierarchies. By weaving Jewish anti-Zionist voices into this broader tapestry of decolonisation struggles, they have emboldened present-day critics to situate their activism within global social justice movements rather than viewing it as a fringe anomaly. As such, this perspective not only represents a distinct third strand of anti-Zionist thought rooted in postcolonial analysis and historical revisionism, but it also acts as a crucial amplifier for earlier anti-Zionist critiques, elevating them from historical footnotes to active elements in contemporary political discourse.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, pro-Israel narratives not only dominated Jewish communal spaces but also shaped historical scholarship, often depicting the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 as the near-inevitable culmination of Jewish history, especially after the Holocaust (Musolff, 2015). In such accounts, anti-Zionist groups, such as the American

Many Jews are finding solace in rediscovering that the critique of a Jewish nation-state does not equate to a denial of Jewish peoplehood or safety. Instead, it resonates with a far older notion that Jewish identity thrives through diaspora...

Council for Judaism, Neturei Karta, and numerous Yiddish-socialist critics, were marginalised as naive or self-hating (Saltzberg, 2024). However, a new generation of historians — known within Israel itself as the New Historians — have challenged these narratives, scrutinising archival documents to demonstrate the forced displacement of Palestinians during Israel's founding, while also highlighting internal Jewish dissent during this period that questioned the ethics of establishing a Jewish nation-state in a multi-ethnic land (Lesch, 1986; Pappe, 2007). Similarly, in the diaspora, evidence of anti-Zionist movements has been unearthed, revealing the serious, persistent debate over Zionism, pre-existing Israel's establishment (Berkman, 2021; Balthaser, 2020).

As a result, the assimilation of these once-marginalised perspectives into mainstream Jewish historiography has profoundly shifted how many diaspora communities and even some Israelis interpret their collective pasts. Grassroots organisations like IfNotNow and Jewish Voice for Peace routinely cite the work of New Historians and revisionist scholars when asserting that opposing Zionism aligns with longstanding Jewish concerns about justice and ethical consistency (Jewish Voice for Peace, 2024; Hersh and Boxer, 2023). What was once taboo — insisting that Jewish security and identity are not synonymous with a Jewish state — now draws on a substantial scholarly lineage to bolster its claims. By recovering the voices of early critics, revisionist historians have provided present-day anti-Zionists with both intellectual legitimacy and a tangible historical lineage. This transformation empowers activists to see themselves not as heretics or interlopers but as heirs to a tradition that has contested Zionist orthodoxy from the start.

A CENTURIES-LONG DEBATE OVER JEWISH IDENTITY

The contemporary surge of Jewish anti-Zionism is not just a response to the horrific genocide in Gaza, but also the culmination of a centuries-long conversation about what it means to be Jewish in a modern world that has often treated Jews as outsiders (Red Cross 2025; Verdeja 2025).

The Bundists, the religious traditionalists of Neturei Karta, and the anti-imperialist thinkers of the mid-twentieth century all raised the issue of whether Jewish existence should depend on building territorial power, or whether Jewish ethics demand forms of solidarity that reject ethno-national exclusivity. Their answers diverged in emphasis — Yiddish socialism, divine exile, class struggle, anti-colonial activism — but they shared a conviction that Zionism was neither inevitable nor without moral consequence (Keren-Kratz, 2023). All three ideas underpin the modern shift toward Jewish anti-Zionism, with their influence reverberating in every new protest, open letter, and diaspora-led boycott of Israeli institutions - indeed, groups such as Jewish Voice for Peace openly acknowledge drawing on these historical precedents when framing their demands for justice, showing how older critiques continue to shape the moral and strategic backbone of contemporary activism (Lorber, 2019).

In the wake of repeated military assaults on Gaza, it is no coincidence that diaspora Jews revisit earlier anti-Zionists' warnings with renewed urgency. Where Herzl saw a protective haven for persecuted Jews, these critics see a potential moral trap: the risk that a Jewish state, born from historical trauma, could perpetuate violence rather than end it (Balthaser, 2020). Thus, the point remains clear that modern-day Jewish anti-Zionism could not exist in its present, potent form had these earlier voices not articulated an enduring alternative to the Zionist project.

CONCLUSION: A PERSONAL RECKONING WITH THE PAST - AND FUTURE

For those raised in environments that equated Jewish identity with fervent support for Israel, embracing anti-Zionism entails an intensely personal

reckoning. It means grappling with ancestral fears of persecution, acknowledging the historical impetus for a Jewish homeland, yet also recognising how the forced displacement of Palestinians subverts the very ethics that Jewish tradition espouses (Boisen, 2024; Keren-Kratz, 2023). It means feeling heartbreak not only for the anguish of Palestinians but also for the family members who look upon the Jewish state as a bulwark that once offered hope after centuries of pogroms and the Shoah (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Many Jews are finding solace in re-discovering that the critique of a Jewish nation-state does not equate to a denial of Jewish peoplehood or safety. Instead, it resonates with a far older notion that Jewish identity thrives through diaspora: building solidarity with other marginalised groups, maintaining vibrant cultural practices, and championing justice as a core Jewish value (Jewish Voice for Peace, 2024; Balthaser, 2020). If present-day Jews speak more confidently about dismantling the illegal occupation of Palestine and Zionism itself, it is because they stand on the shoulders of generations who insisted that Jewish liberation need not — and must not — entail another people's subjugation.

No one can say how this new moral awakening will transform Jewish life. If it ultimately leads to a vision of Jewish belonging that is rooted in a diaspora ethic of co-responsibility and universal justice, then it will be fulfilling the promise laid out long ago by anti-Zionists who refused to accept that the only path to Jewish survival lay in sovereignty over Palestinian land. Their ideas — socialist, religious, anti-imperialist — once seemed buried by the heavy weight of twentieth-century traumas. Today, in the face of Gaza's ongoing genocide, those same ideas have found urgent new life in synagogues, newspapers, and dinner-table discussions. What once appeared to be a minor footnote in Jewish history is a vital reminder that Jewish identity has never been a single story and that solidarity demands a painful but necessary break with power. The personal and communal heartbreak that accompanies such a break can be wrenching, yet in that heartbreak lies the possibility of a more inclusive future for Jews and Palestinians alike.

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FROM RITUALS TO REVOLTS

RETHINKING ISLAM'S ROLE IN MIDDLE EASTERN POLITICS

ISABELLE GALLOWAY

ILLUSTRATION BY MAISIE NORTON

ISABELLE GALLOWAY

Western media and Orientalist literature have perpetuated the illusion that the paramount danger of our time resides in the rise of political-religious movements, such as IS and Al-Qaeda, creating an inextricable link between religion and political extremism in the Middle East. Defined by Edward Said as a critique of the widely accepted rhetoric of the 'Orient' (2003, p.1), Orientalist literature or Orientalism is a socially constructed field of study around the geographical region of the Middle East and Asia that reduces a large, diverse geography into a singular place, 'uncivilised' compared to the West. Orientalist literature, which has often dominated the study of Islam, has presumed that an anthropology of Islam is diametrically opposed to a Christian one and is inherently more political. Such a construction of Islam misunderstands the relationship between modern religion and the nation state. The ability for modern state institutions to implement religious ideas in the contemporary age has expanded, thus, that may be what makes some religious ideas politically malleable (Asad, 1992, p.11). Despite classic secularisation theory and the belief in the separation of church and state in Western countries, this political salience of religion, which may be more obvious in the Middle East, is by no means exclusive to the region or Islam, as seen in the resurgence of the Christian Right in the United States. With the legacy of Western interventions in many conflicts in the Middle East, and the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict, it is more important than ever to interrogate the systemic issues that bias mainstream and Western discourses around religion and political movements.

This essay formulates its approach around the epistemology of the 'new' anthropology of Islam, following the roadmap set out by John Bowen (2012) in *A New Anthropology of Islam*, meaning 'focusing inward' (Bowen, 2012, p.3) on the emotions and intentions of Muslims that surround specific practices. Such an analysis pays particular attention to the individual testimonies of those in the Middle East and narratives around sacred sites. This affirms that people's lives and experiences are not entirely religious or political in nature. Consequently, it will also 'open outward' (Bowen, 2012, p.4) to the cultural context that affects these inward intentions' expression or suppression, and the social significance of how these religious traditions are presented. To critique the classical Orientalist paradigm, building off the foundations of Edward Said, I intertwine textual insights with ethnographic testimonies to understand the relationship between traditional practices and modern political movements. The intention here is to draw attention to the fact that not all Middle Eastern people are Muslim, nor are all Muslims Middle Eastern; thus, not all practices in their society are inextricably linked to the Islamic tradition (Abu-Lughod, 1992, p.294). Therefore, it is crucial to avoid the essentialist presumption that an anthropology of Islam necessitates an anthropology of the Middle East.

TRANSFORMING TRADITION: MOSQUES AND SHRINES AS SITES OF POLITICAL MOBILISATION

The relationship between modern political movements and traditional religious practices in the Middle East reflects an ongoing discourse in which varying power dynamics influence Islamic traditions' expression and development, such as the state's involvement with veiling practices. However, this observation does not imply that Islam and its practices are inherently linked to modern political movements, which is the dominant idea developed by Orientalist literature (Said, 2003). Rather, in formulating an analysis of any religion, it is necessary to look beyond the formal scope of a religion's practices and ask how deeply those practices influence everyday lives. In reality, modern secular states have many far-reaching legal systems that regulate nearly every aspect of daily life. The ability of contemporary state institutions to implement religious ideas in the modern age has expanded, which makes religion so politically malleable. Contrary to the Orientalist narrative, this is not isolated to Islam alone, and can be seen in the state-enforced dress codes in Myanmar (Lewis, 2015) and 'faith-based' welfare initiatives in the United States (Cnaan and Boddie, 2002). Essentially, the desire to standardise people's beliefs and practices and secure their loyalties by creating minority and majority groups is a cornerstone of the modern nation-state. Though the contemporary nation-state claims to be 'secular' and not 'religious' (Asad, 1992, p.11), often these state apparatuses reinforce the 'coercive universalisation of modern morality, knowledge, law and nation-statehood' (Asad, 1992, p.16). Therefore, it is crucial to discuss religious traditions' adaptability within socio-political frameworks and the forces that drive their transformation.

EGYPT'S ARAB SPRING: UNDERSTANDING THE VALIDITY OF 'MOSQUE TO SQUARE'

'Focusing inward' on the personal motivations behind political mobilisation, it is important to interrogate the motivations behind the 'mosque to square' narrative (Hoffman and Jamal, 2014, p.594). Journalist Khaled Abu Toameh (2011) argued that mosques not only functioned as loci for agitation but also served a logistical purpose for preparing demonstrations, regarding uprisings in Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Jordan. The height of this interest was formed around the Arab Spring, and debates around the characterisation of the potentially religious nature of the uprising. The Arab Spring was a series of anti-government protests and armed rebellions that began in Tunisia and expanded to areas of North Africa and the Middle East. Part of the narrative surrounding the uprisings was focused on protesters walking from their Friday sermons to squares in Egypt, demanding the removal of the regime after hearing this sentiment at their mosques (Hoffman and Jamal, 2014, p.593). Ghattas remarked on the diversity of those who gathered in the squares on 25 January 2011:

Women with coiffed hair and designer bags or tightly wrapped veils and long manteaus, bearded sheiks and teens in jeans and football jerseys, peasants in gallabiyas and businessmen in suits, all converged on Tahrir Square… they inhabited different planets, but they met as Egyptians for the first time (Ghattas, 2020, p.266)

Tahrir Square translates to 'liberation square' in Arabic, and was a focal point for the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 and other subsequent protests. However, looking beyond the 'Mosque to Square' narrative, it is essential to consider other factors. Arguably, there is an essentialism of the Arab Spring as the 'Islamic Spring' in the 'Mosque to Square' idea, suggesting that the uprisings were driven primarily by Islamist movements migrating from religious space to public protests. The initial surge of protests in Egypt—expressing anger over economic inequalities, widespread injustice, and elite corruption—was only one part of the regional rise in protest (Noueihed and Warren, 2012, p.304). Yet many observers immediately cast this in religious terms, forming a perception of Islam as an inherently political religion, when in fact this case study is an example of an overemphasis on traditional religious practices to support a certain perception of events. Such frequent misunderstandings of the 'Arab Spring' reinforce the importance of formulating understandings from 'bottom-up social processes' that focus on the discourses outside just religion, which influence everyday socio-political activism (Bayat, 2007, p.187). Only by doing so does a more accurate representation of the interaction of culture and political power influencing the everyday lives of those in the Arab world become clear.

INTERROGATING THE SHRINE PROTECTION NARRATIVE

Sacred sites and the traditional religious practices and values that embody them are consistently used by religious groups as agents of political mobilisation for modern movements. Examples of this include the Shi'i Mosques in Iran for Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's supporters (Kurzman, 2005), as well as Buddhist Pagodas in Myanmar during the Saffron Revolution (Walton and Hayward, 2014). Subsequently, this mode of political mobilisation has drawn academic interest, including Benjamin Isakhan (2018, p.725), who focused on social movement theory and the use of Shia religiosity for mobilisation in order to understand the complexities of the 'shrine protection narrative'. A popular iteration of social movement theory states that religion 'provides ready-made symbols, rituals and solidarities that can be accessed and appropriated by movement leaders' (Tarrow, 1998, p.112). Social movements in Syria and Iraq utilised this dynamic in the sectarian violence between the Sunni jihadist network Islamic State (IS) and several Shia Arab populations. Part of this revolved around the perception of Shia shrines and mosques as objects of idolatry (*shirk*) by IS, as they were seen as confusing people about the oneness of God and encouraging the worship of false idols (Isakhan, 2018, p.725). It is important to recognise that this does not constitute the totality of motivations behind the IS movement in Syria and Iraq, as it operated within 'historically complex combinations and sequences' (Goodwin, Jasper and Khattra, 1999, p.36). Several actors were able to motivate transnational mobilisation through poems, battlefield cries, and songs which drew on rich Shia historical memories, justifying political violence in the name of protesting their sacred spaces. The Iraqi Armed Forces' (IAF) operation to liberate Anbar directly invoked the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali, grandson

The ability of contemporary state institutions to implement religious ideas in the modern age has expanded, which makes religion so politically malleable. Contrary to the Orientalist narrative, this is not isolated to Islam alone…

of the Prophet Muhammad, using the code-name for the operation *Labayka ya Husayn* ('We are here for you, O'Husayn') (Mukhopadhyay, 2015). In doing so, they galvanised support on a day of profound Shia religious significance, his birthday. By framing the liberation of Anbar as a service to Husayn, the IAF tapped into rituals of remembrance (*ta'ziyya*) and communal mourning as a way of transforming the campaign into a sacred duty (Gholami, 2019). Such symbolic appropriation speaks to Geertz's (1983, p.124) ideas about symbolic forms being at the centre of society and often contributing to shifts in power by realigning loyalties and legitimising emerging power structures. In this case, a military offensive was reframed by the IAF as a cosmic struggle for which it was Shia's duty to support in the name of Husayn, deepening sectarian solidarity. Similarly, the 2002 siege of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Palestine, resulted in a 39-day standoff with Israeli forces (Ahmed, 2022), underscoring how the sanctity of religious sites is compromised in arenas of hostility. In the recent conflict, Israeli forces' use of Gaza's heritage sites as battlegrounds has resulted in 'cultural genocide' (Saber, 2024). Crucially, equating such actions with an idea of Islam as an inherently political religion risks obscuring the fact that it is individual political actors, rather than the religion itself, who weaponise Islamic symbols and sites for political means.

CONCLUSION

At the core of this essay is the recognition that the anthropology of Islam is uniquely positioned to challenge essentialist presumptions about the relationship between traditional religious practices and modern political movements in the broader context of Muslim societies. A recurring theme is monolithic portrayals of Islam as a singular tradition, or an immutable force in modern political movements. This analysis demonstrates the variance in traditional Islamic practices and how their surrounding environments continuously shape and reshape them. Embedded within a tumultuous time for the Arab world, Western anthropologists need to interrogate their positionality in formatting the dominating scopes of analysis and understanding within the discipline and engage with the power dynamics inherent in the production of knowledge about Islam. By centering the lived experiences of Muslims and interrogating assumptions underpinning dominant discourses, this field can contribute to a more equitable and accurate representation of contemporary societies in the Middle East.

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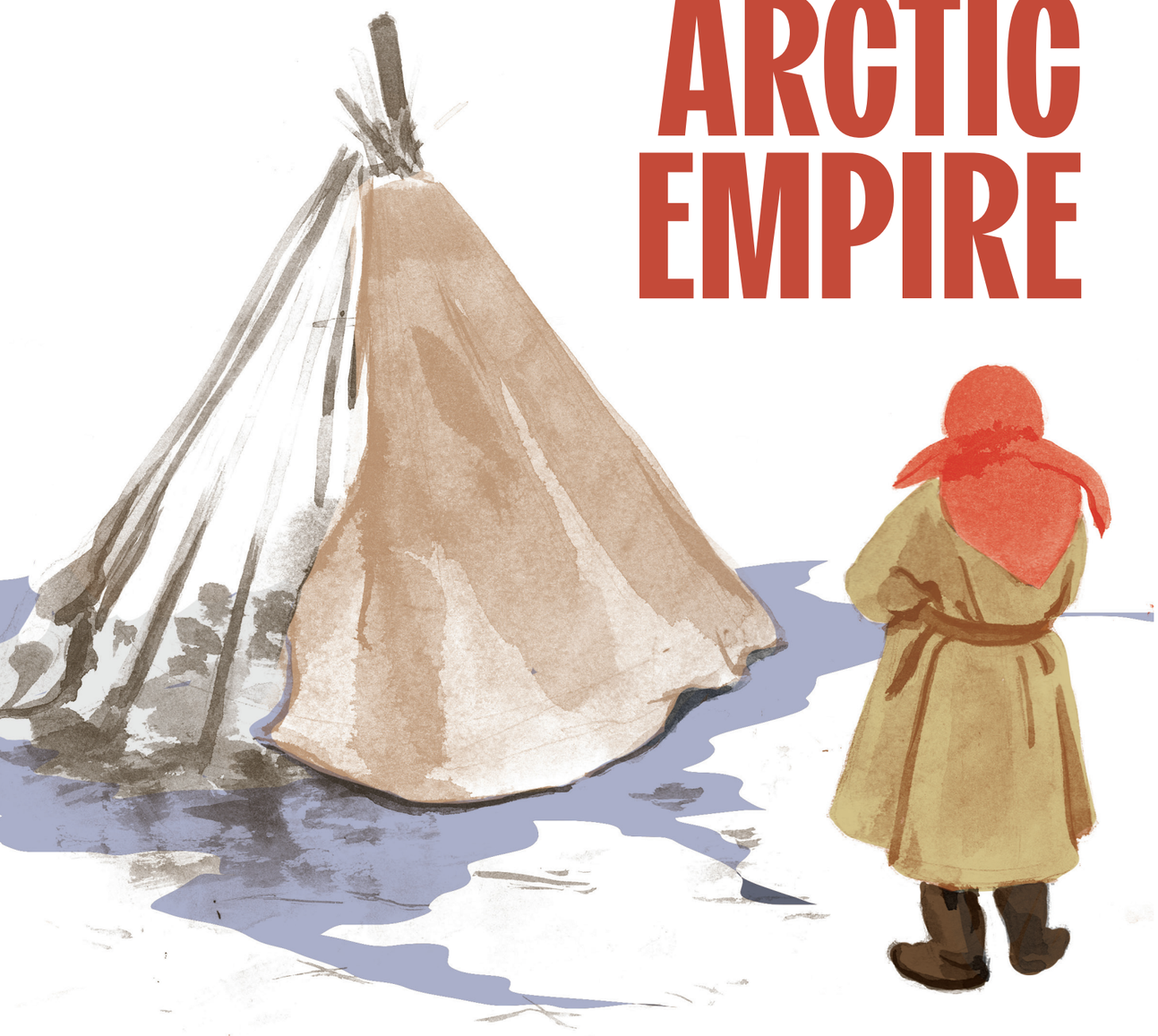
ARCTIC EMPIRE



RUSSIA'S INTERNAL COLONISATION OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

LUCY BARRETT

ILLUSTRATION BY LYDIA KEMPTON

The escalating repression of vulnerable Russian domestic populations, particularly Arctic Indigenous people, is persistently overshadowed by President Vladimir Putin's external imperial tendencies. This article argues that President Putin's intensified internal colonisation in the Russian Arctic marks a distinct shift in relations with Indigenous Arctic communities. This intensified repression is marked by a deepening metropolis-satellite relationship, with Moscow functioning as a culturally distinct coloniser which persistently exploits and marginalises these peripheral regions. Together, these elements constitute an existential threat to Indigenous identity and survival.

Building on Khomyakov's (2020) analysis, this essay examines three central dimensions of this new colonising wave: intensified territorial exploitation, reinforced dependence, and new methods of cultural suppression and control. Unlike previous waves, the current era of internal colonisation is marked by significant structural change and legal erosion. Together, these developments pose an existential threat to Indigenous rights and survival in the Russian Arctic. Applying the theory of internal colonisation is key to reveal the distinct marginalisation of Arctic Indigenous communities from broader patterns of authoritarian repression in Russia. When internal colonisation theory is applied, a metropolis-satellite dynamic between Moscow as a distant political and economic centre that extracts Arctic resources while marginalising Indigenous communities becomes clear.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This essay employs Russia's territorial-ethnic definition of Indigenity, as outlined in the 1999 Federal Law No. 82-FZ, which classifies the Indigenous Numerically-Small Peoples of the North (*korennye malochislennye narody Severa*; KMNS) as those who live 'on their traditional lands' while 'maintaining their traditional lifestyle, economic activities and crafts', number 'less than 50,000 people', and 'recognise themselves as an independent ethnic community' (Sharapova et al., 2022, p.290). While this territorial-ethnic definition deviates from international standards and arbitrarily excludes larger groups such as the Yakuts (Sharapova et al., 2022, p.287), it is used in this essay as it reflects central government perspectives. Under this classification, approximately 258,000 individuals are officially recognised as Indigenous within Russia's Arctic regions (Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, 2024).

KMNS populations within the Arctic Circle, representing eleven diverse groups across eight regions (Maslennikov, 2021), are largely overlooked in analyses of internal colonisation, despite the theory's prominent application to Russia (Etkind, 2013). The framework is applied here to understand the 'domination and exploitation of natives by natives' (Gonzalez Casanova, 1965, p.27), making it relevant to the renewed phase of domination faced by the Arctic Indigenous population at the hands of the central state.

Since the discovery of valuable natural resources in the eighteenth century, the Russian state has facilitated the exploitation of Indigenous lands, undermining their way of life through migration and large-scale infrastructure projects. The completion of the Trans-Siberian Railway in 1916 triggered an influx of ethnic Russians (Sablin and Savelyeva, 2011, p.84), initiating the first wave of cultural and linguistic erosion, economic marginalisation, and social crises. While Soviet policy had mixed effects—ending trade exploitation but engaging in Russification (Sablin and Savelyeva, 2011, pp.90–91)—the early post-Soviet era initially saw a growing acknowledgment of Indigenous rights. However, under President Putin, this trajectory sharply reversed. Unlike global trends that have expanded Indigenous rights, Russia has intensified repression, leaving Arctic Indigenous groups 'outcast in their own lands' (Sulyandziga and Sulyandziga, 2020, p.304).

INTENSIFIED TERRITORIAL EXPLOITATION

Resource extraction has been central to debates about Siberia's 'servile' position (Kovalaschina, 2007, p.88) and internal colonisation theory more broadly. State-driven resource extraction affects Indigenous populations globally and exemplifies the Kremlin's broader exploitation of peripheral regions through 'strong vertical dominance of the centre' (Busygina and Filippov, 2023, p.160). However, the denial of KMNS land rights exacerbates this exploitation, effectively framing the land as *terra nullius* (land belonging to no one). Russia's eighteenth-century colonisation of Siberia prioritised resource extraction alongside land allocation and agriculture for serfs and criminal exiles (Sablin and Savelyeva, 2011, p.83). In recent decades, the Kremlin's focus on resource extraction has intensified due to rising energy demands and President Putin's vision of a greater Russia (Baev, 2013). Coupled with eroded legal protections, this has led to a heightened exploitation of KMNS lands under a new wave of internal colonisation.

This new wave mirrors the nineteenth

ARCTIC EMPIRE: RUSSIA'S INTERNAL COLONISATION OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

LUCY BARRETT

The coloniser state continuously enables resource-rich KMNS land exploitation despite formal legal safeguards.

century, when the state removed impediments to facilitating third-party resource exploitation, effectively making businesses the *de facto* colonisers (Khomakyov, 2020). Today, third-party actors are increasingly incentivised to exploit Indigenous lands in service of Kremlin objectives. Operating within a more direct and systematic framework, these actors reinforce and consolidate the new wave of internal colonisation.

Compared to the expansive Indigenous claims in the United States and Canada, KMNS land claims are relatively modest, 'focusing on the right to preserve a traditional lifestyle' and limited property rights (Donahoe, 2012, p.45). While proving indigeneity is a problem faced by Indigenous groups around the world, the debate in North America centres on title to land and treaty recognition. Contrastingly, Russia's civil law system and superficial priorities mean that leases are the predominant measure for securing territorial rights. Early post-Soviet measures offered hope for greater protections, including Presidential Edict 397 in 1992 which opposed the exploitation of KMNS lands (Fondahl et al., 2020, p.128) and Article 72(1)(l) of the 1993 Constitution, which recognised the need to protect the 'traditional way of life' and 'habitat'. Despite these legal safeguards, and President Putin's public endorsement of KMNS culture 'over oil and gas', Indigenous claims continue to be sidelined in favour of economic priorities (Zaikov, Tamitskiy, and Zadorin, 2017, p.127). Furthermore, many activists argue that without secure land rights, such provisions 'merely become "paper" rights' (Sulyandziga and Sulyandziga, 2020, p.313). However, while these formal measures exist, the state can argue that sufficient protections are in place, overshadowing KMNS concerns. Subsequent federal legislation between 1999 and 2001 expanded on the rights established after the USSR's collapse, introducing Territories of Traditional Use (TTPs) and Obshchinas as spatial mechanisms for protection (Fondahl et al., 2020, p.129). While these frameworks ostensibly support activities central to Indigenous identity and livelihood—such as reindeer herding, which requires thousands of hectares of land—they remain inadequate, as land title ownership remains with the state (Sulyandziga and Sulyandziga, 2020, p.313). This leaves KMNS communities vulnerable to state-prioritised resource extraction.

Furthermore, these protection mechanisms rely on Indigenous groups requesting their establishment, making knowledge of the system and resources necessary to gain protection in this way. Under the new wave of internal colonisation, contradictions and legal erosion have further undermined protections. For example, the 2014 establishment of Territories of Priority Development explicitly prioritised resource extraction over KMNS rights (Fondahl et al., 2020, p.136). Similarly, a 2007 amendment to TTP regulations revoked the provision granting KMNS land 'in perpetuity' (Sulyandziga and Sulyandziga, 2020, p.310), undermining long-term security and planning for Indigenous communities.
The coloniser state continuously enables resource-rich KMNS land exploitation despite formal legal safeguards. Siberia is often framed as a 'treasure trove' for Russia (Vinokurova, 2018, p.6), while Arctic KMNS territories hold 60 to 80 percent of Russia's natural resources and contribute twenty percent of its GDP (Sulyandziga and Sulyandziga, 2020, p.305), making them key to driving Russia's economy and reinforcing national identity—particularly in opposition to Western environmental priorities. As Kremlin policy increasingly prioritises non-renewable resource extraction, KMNS rights are increasingly deprioritised in favour of profit (Fondahl et al., 2020, p.136).

A notable case occurred in 2012 when the mining company Yuzhnaya threatened to destroy the last five Indigenous homes on Beregovoy coal mine territory. Shortly after, the homes were burned down in arson attacks, effectively clearing the land without accountability (Sulyandziga and Sulyandziga, 2020, p.307). Beyond displacement, extractive industries also pose long-term health risks, including water contamination and elevated radiation exposure (Vladimirova, 2024, p.8). This ongoing environmental and social degradation reinforces the colonial perception of Indigenous lands as *vacuum domicilium*—wild, empty, and open to destruction—epitomising the new wave of internal colonisation.

REINFORCED DEPENDENCE

KMNS communities derive no benefits from resource extraction, a hallmark of Russian colonialism in Siberia (Kovalaschina, 2007, p.88), rooted in the 'paternalistic presence' maintained since the Soviet and Imperial eras (Vinokurova, 2018, p.4). Economic dependence remains a central strategy (Khomyakov, 2020), but Russia's internal colonisation is now marked by systematic reliance on the state for rights implementation, locking KMNS communities into structural dependency and limiting resistance.
Historically, KMNS populations have been economically dependent on the federal metropolis, with most income directed to the centre after resource extraction (Heleniak, 2010). Meanwhile, Arctic Siberia contributes disproportionately to the federal budget, as the use and export of its natural resources account for 55 percent of federal revenue (Sulyandziga and Sulyandziga, 2020, p.305). The central collection of taxes in Moscow before redistribution to the regions characterises Russian centre-periphery relations throughout Russia (Busygina and Filippov, 2023); however, Siberian regions with KMNS populations inordinately contribute as 'donors' (*sub"ekty-donory*) to the federal budget without corresponding improvements in quality of life (Vinokurova, 2018, p.4). The federal government has acknowledged the hardship this causes, in particular in the 2009 Federal Government concept paper on enhancing KMNS outcomes (Sharapova et al., 2022, p.296); however, in practice, economic dependence persists.

The 'perpetual dependency' of Arctic KMNS populations on the federal metropolis for core rights (Donahoe, 2011, p.412) is a central feature of the new wave of internal colonisation, although this unique KMNS vulnerability is less recognised in the literature. Under President Putin, centralisation has deepened, reducing regional autonomy and creating a legal environment where federal law undermines local protections. Even where regions offer stronger protections, federal law supersedes them (Article 4(2) Russian Constitution, 1993), so unification efforts undermine progressive reforms. For example, local and regional authorities' ability to grant TTPs is constrained by the prevalence of federally owned land (Sulyandziga and Sulyandziga, 2020, p.310). Despite over 500 regional or local TTP creations since the 2001 law on TTPs, none have been established or confirmed at the federal level (Fondahl et al., 2020, p.134). Therefore, while the metropolis has the ability to stimulate stability for KMNS populations, uncertainty is chosen instead.

More fundamentally, accessing KMNS rights is increasingly complex and state-controlled. Proving Indigenous identity is a prerequisite for claiming rights but is hindered by inconsistent regional practices and bureaucratic barriers. The 2007 removal of nationality information from passports left the system in limbo (Zmyvalova, 2020, p.341), with the gradual removal of information on national identity leaving KMNS populations without a framework to register as such. Although a 2020 federal register aimed to streamline this process, it was created with little KMNS involvement, resulting in high burdens of proof and substantial exclusions (Fondahl, Filippova, and Savvinova, 2020). This has further alienated KMNS from institutional processes when asserting their Indigenous identity and rights.
Institutional homelessness—the shifting responsibility between government departments—exacerbates neglect and facilitates control (Sulyandziga and Sulyandziga, 2020, p.312). Between 2001 and 2014, three separate departments oversaw Indigenous affairs before responsibility was transferred to the Ministry of Culture, which reduced protections to performative cultural events while neglecting real issues of exploitation and land rights (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2015). By disregarding Indigenous priorities and centralising power, the state keeps KMNS in a perpetual state of subjugation, preventing their transition from 'subjects' to 'citizens' of Russia (Donahoe, 2011, p.413). Their 'subject' status further reinforces dependency on the central state for rights by restricting avenues for challenging decisions and advocating against the centre. Under the new wave of internal colonisation, Indigenous populations are increasingly alienated from the very institutions that claim to protect them, with bureaucratic barriers and institutional homelessness serving both as tools and consequences of internal colonisation.

SUPPRESSION OF CULTURE AND TRADITIONAL PRACTICE

Political and economic factors often overshadow the crucial cultural and social aspects of internal colonisation (Chaloult and Chaloult, 1979, p.87). Russian internal colonisation features continual redefinition of what constitutes 'internal' and Russian versus 'external' and non-Russian, alongside efforts to Russify Indigenous populations (Khomyakov, 2020, p.234) and suppress Indigenous knowledge and practices. This cultural suppression is central to the new wave of internal colonisation and its evolving mechanisms of intervention and repression. More broadly, cultural repression links to the broader devaluation of Indigeneity, exemplified by the 2020 constitutional amendment to Article 68(1), which designates Russians as the 'state-forming people' (Zmyvalova, 2020, p.350), thereby disregarding the long-term presence of KMNS populations.

While some Indigenous representation exists, particularly through cultural symbols at festivals, these remain largely 'symbolic', depoliticising threats to Indigenous identity (Martin, 2017,

p.13). By disconnecting culture from land rights and self-determination, the colonising state undermines the profound cultural and spiritual connection between KMNS and their lands. Laws like the 2008 auction system, which requires land payments, dishonour this relationship by reducing it to an economic transaction (Fondahl et al., 2020, pp.131–32). The threat to traditional lands and practices constitutes a threat to the survival of the population itself: '"Without reindeer, we are not Evenki" (or Eveny, Netsy, Chukchi, etc)' (Fondahl et al., 2020, p.127).

Autocratic developments have introduced new methods for eroding KMNS rights, especially through stringent NGO restrictions. The 2022 Non-Commercial Organisations law, which requires NGOs with foreign connections to register as Foreign Agents and comply with strict regulations, disproportionately impacts KMNS organisations. These groups primarily rely on international support due to limited domestic funding opportunities and their cross-border representation. Foreign agent status also intimidates organisations, including the Fund for Sami Heritage, which faced threats of inspection after raising concerns with the UN about the reassignment of hunting grounds (Zmyvalova, 2020, p.348). These developments suppress KMNS autonomy, limiting avenues for cultural preservation and advocacy against state policies.

New forms of militarisation have added new layers of cultural suppression. Historically, militarism has served to repress Indigenous groups through environmental degradation and military relations with KMNS communities (Vladimirova, 2024). However, new mechanisms of exploitation have emerged and intensified, particularly with Arctic KMNS communities' disproportionate conscription for the Ukraine war (Zmyvalova, 2023, p.72). The targeted conscription of Indigenous men from small settlements, sparing those from large population centres and production hubs, poses a new threat to the sustainability of these communities (Zmyvalova, 2023, p.72). Moreover, the war has disrupted vital international cooperation, most visibly in the suspension of the Arctic Council due to Russia's chairmanship, further isolating Global Arctic Indigenous populations. Isolationist policies also extend to KMNS communities supporting the war, even when this is due to a 'lack of reliable and objective information about the war in Ukraine' (Zmyvalova, 2022, p.411). For example, the Kola Sámi Association, who have voiced support for the war in Ukraine, face non-cooperation from the Sámi Council, a body which brings together representatives of the Sámi group across four countries. Russia's recent external imperial ambitions have thus intensified the internal colonisation of Arctic Indigenous communities. As Russia turns inward, new methods of cultural suppression emerge, combining militarism, legal constraints, and cultural repression to dismantle the rights of KMNS peoples, deepening the subjugation within this new wave of internal colonisation.

CONCLUSION

While Russia claims to protect Arctic KMNS rights, a new wave of internal colonisation is unfolding, characterised by increased territorial exploitation, perpetual economic and rights dependence, and new methods for suppressing traditional culture. This new wave is not merely a continuation of past internal colonisation but a deeper and more systematic erosion of rights. While greater analysis of Indigenous perspectives and voices was not possible here due to the scope of the essay, it would enhance understanding of the new wave of internal colonisation.

External pressures, such as the war in Ukraine, exacerbate the autocratic measures of President Putin's regime, compounding this new wave of exploitation. The push to leave ancestral lands threatens Indigenous status, while those who remain face the degradation of traditional practices and an intensified pressure to assimilate. If this new wave continues, a tipping point will soon arrive where survival on ancestral lands becomes untenable, driving both the community and culture toward extinction.

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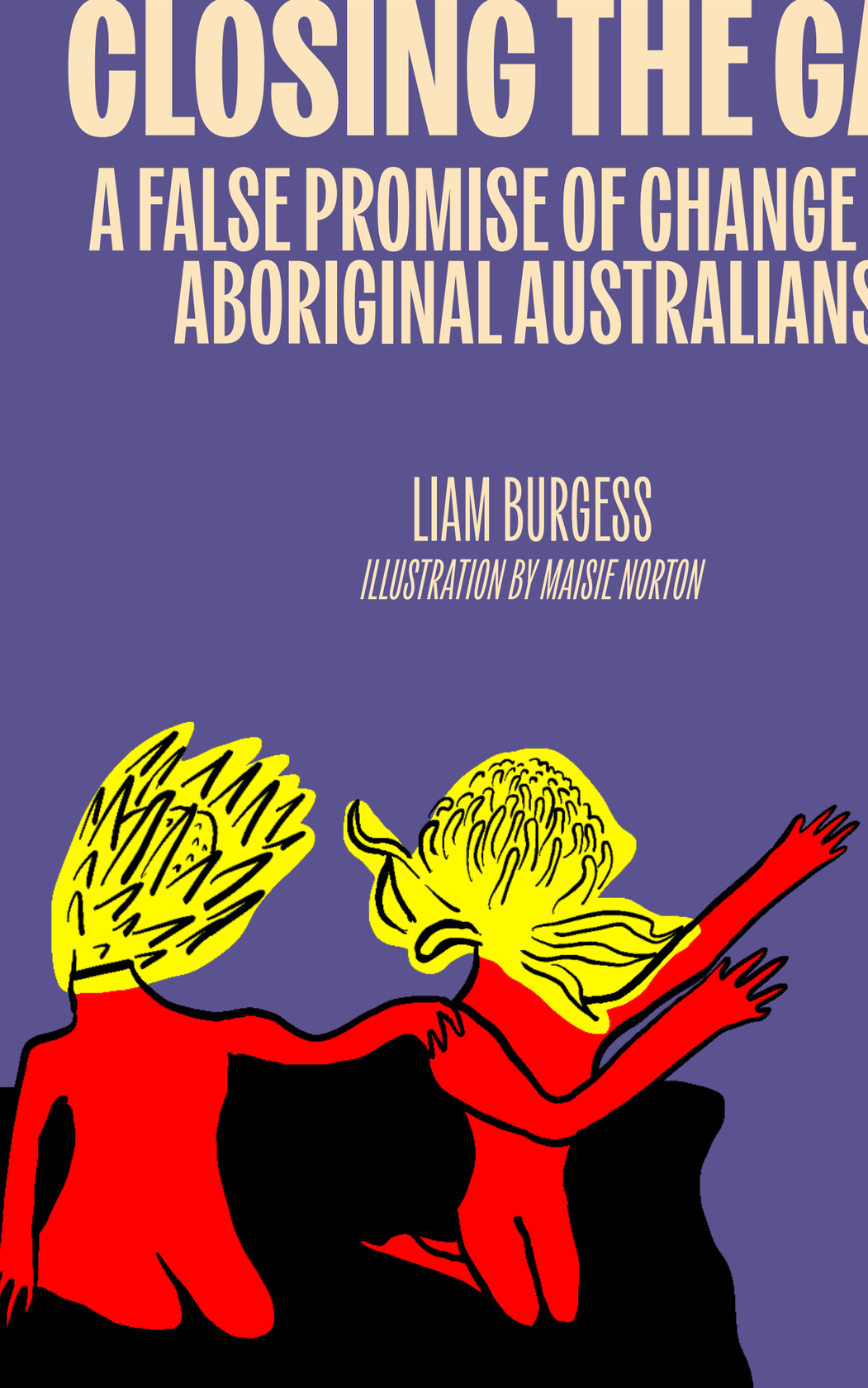
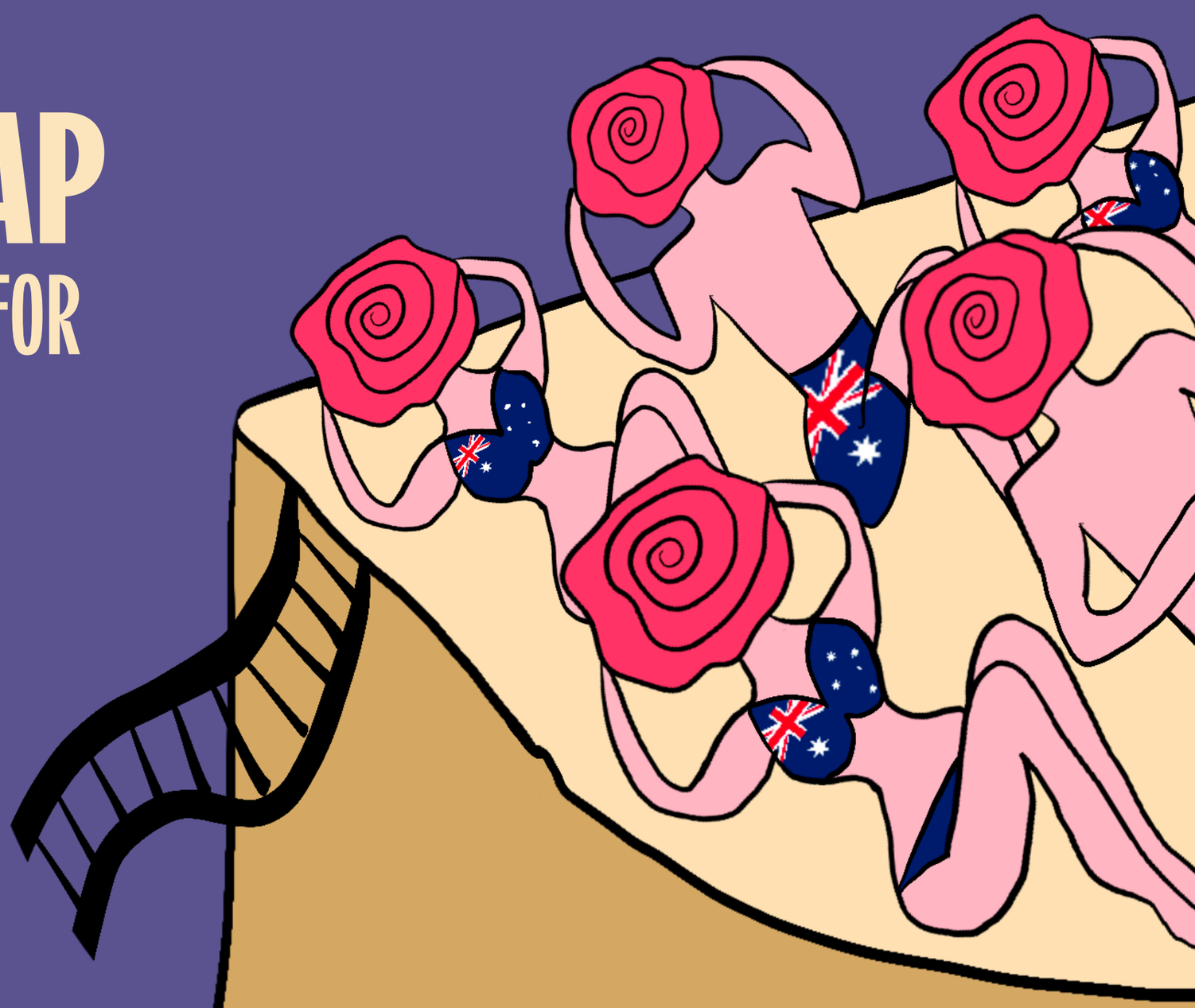
CLOSING THE GAP

A FALSE PROMISE OF CHANGE FOR ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS

LIAM BURGESS

ILLUSTRATION BY MAISIE NORTON





CLOSING THE GAP: A FALSE PROMISE OF CHANGE FOR ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS

LIAM BURGESS

The legacy of Australian colonialism remains readily apparent in the contemporary relationship between Indigenous Australians and their non-Indigenous counterparts. While the 2008 national apology by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd acknowledged the injustices of settler-colonial policies, its symbolic weight was undercut by the enduring structural inequalities that continue to marginalise Indigenous Australians. At the time, Indigenous communities in Queensland had an average life expectancy that was 9.7 years lower than that of non-Indigenous Queenslanders and experienced nearly three times the rate of unemployment (Queensland Government, 2009, p.8). Claiming a renewed moral commitment to rectifying its past neglect of Indigenous Australian communities, the Australian Government launched the 'Closing the Gap' (CTG) initiative to reduce statistical disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This article analyses how the CTG initiative, through its paternal, data-centric, and homogenising approach to Indigenous Australian issues, contains a strong colonial dogma in its methodology, language, and culpability for the economic disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Overall, I argue that the CTG initiative continues the assimilation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians into the wider settler-colonial Australian state and thereby provides valuable insight into the continuing legacy of racialised colonialism in present-day Australia.

COLONIAL LANGUAGE AND NARRATIVE

The language of the CTG initiative further maintains the power imbalance between Indigenous communities and the Australian government, which takes a paternal, colonial approach to the treatment of Indigenous populations, creating what is known to scholars as a 'benevolence/self-reliance' narrative (Moore, 2012, p.3,9).

In the 'benevolence' aspect of the narrative, the Australian government is portrayed as noble and moral for tackling the burden of Indigenous inequality. For example, in PM Gillard's CTG speech, she praised former PM Rudd's 'intelligence and determination to Closing the Gap for Indigenous Australians' (Moore, 2012, pp.8–9). This narrative allows the government to distance itself from the ongoing legacy of settler-colonialism and of previous attempts to assimilate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, specifically the 'stolen generations'. This group is made up of the victims of late 19th and early 20th century government policies, such as the Northern Territory Aboriginals Act 1910 that made a state official the legal guardian of every Indigenous child and allowed the removal of mixed-race Indigenous children from their families to be raised by white families or the church (Haebich, 2015, p.24). The self-reliance aspect of the narrative is the mechanism through which the government makes Indigenous communities responsible for reducing inequality, advocating for 'hard-work', 'opportunity', and 'effort', thereby distancing blame for the inequality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from the settler-colonial system and attributing it to a supposed lack of engagement with the dominant settler-society (Moore, 2012, pp.9–10). This narrative mirrors the shift of government policy, from the 1940s onwards, away from the biological absorption of Indigenous Australians and towards their cultural assimilation, illustrated by policies such as the intensification of training and education for Indigenous workers alongside exemption from discriminatory laws on the condition that indigenous people '[gave] up traditional Aboriginal practices and communal associations' in order for them to be more easily integrated into white society (Moran, 2005, pp.178–179). In this regard, the CTG initiative does not act as a reckoning with Australia's colonial legacy at all, but rather a continuation of previous assimilationist policies and narratives wherein the government burdens Indigenous communities with assimilating into the dominant neoliberal system in order to improve their living standards.

DATA COLONIAL POLICIES AND ECONOMIC AND HEALTH DISPARITIES

The CTG initiative opts for a quantitative analysis of health, relying on data-driven statistical analyses rather than considering the socio-economic context of Indigenous communities embedded in the Australian settler-colonial legacy (Pholi, Black, and Richards, 2009, pp.6–7). This approach takes a binary view of the issues that impact Indigenous Australian communities; for instance, the CTG initiative has attributed Indigenous health issues to common causes such as individual diet, lifestyle, and health choices (Pholi, Black, and Richards, 2009, p.10) rather than tracing these systemic issues to historical colonial policies. This argument highlights the failure of the CTG initiative to reconcile the lasting consequences of its own oppressive colonial-era laws with the current health outcomes in Indigenous communities. To be specific, legislation such as Victoria's Aboriginal Protection Act 1869 drove Indigenous communities into poverty, restricting them to overcrowded reservations marked by poor nutrition and limited job opportunities (Sherwood, 2014, pp.31–34). These conditions led to declining living standards and a rise in poverty-related diseases such as tuberculosis, leprosy, and trachoma, which are still disproportionately prevalent in Australian Indigenous communities (Sherwood, 2014, p.31). Similarly, in the late 20th century, members of the Stolen Generation were often subjected to physical, psychological, and nutritional neglect (Kidd, 2000, p.61). As Atkinson (2002, p.67) describes, these purposefully constructed community-traumas led to the widespread usage of binge-drinking alcohol as a means to cope, as well as an increase in domestic violence within incarcerated families and the destruction of the family unit. Therefore, the trauma resulting from colonial practices is reproduced across generational lines, directly impacting modern Indigenous health standards through the lack of family support available and the prevalence of harmful coping mechanisms which are learned from previous generations.

As a result, the legacies of these same colonial policies can be seen as directly causing or complicating the contemporary health issues of Indigenous Australians. Therefore, the attempts of the CTG initiative to equalise Indigenous and non-Indigenous living standards are founded on an injustice - seeing the deficit in Indigenous health as simply a result of individual choices rather than the result of these colonial practices. As Durie (2004, p.1139) argues, 'concern about the health standards of [Indigenous peoples] needs to take into account the broader perspective of a worldview that has been seriously fractured'. It is only through recognising the existence of Indigenous health issues within the context of colonial practices and the dissolution of Indigenous community systems that the issue can be properly addressed. Otherwise, attempts to achieve statistical equality are merely tackling minor causal factors of the health gap - individual choice of diet, lifestyle - while ignoring the larger systemic causes of poverty and a lack of healthy community support options which originate from historical attempts to assimilate Indigenous peoples into the wider Australian colonial state.

An analysis of sharply escalating youth suicides in Indigenous Australian communities throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s reveals the failure of individualistic mental illness approach - the traditional Western view of suicide as a symptom of depression - to prevent Indigenous suicide. Such a perspective fails to realise that many motives of Indigenous Australian suicide originate outside of mental illness, instead arising from a loss of autonomy over ones life or the broader oppression which accompanies the title Aboriginal (Tatz, 2004, p.21). To effectively resolve the issue, Australian healthcare must move away from simply prescribing medication or counselling; instead, perhaps implementing a unique approach incorporating Indigenous viewpoints and political campaigns for autonomy would best address the rise in Indigenous youth suicide (Tatz, 2004). Instead, by relying on statistics to understand Indigenous Australian quality of life, the CTG initiative ignores the settler-colonial foundations of current Indigenous health issues and focuses on the statistically deficient typical Indigenous person. Nakata (2006) previously noted how Aboriginal identities are often reduced to these indicators as it is the only way for the dominant majority to acknowledge Indigenous individuals as authentic. In conjunction with this, Paradies (2006) argues that this reductionism forces Indigenous peoples to be in accordance with these statistical deficiencies - being ill, impoverished - or have their indigeneity called into question. Applying these two arguments to the Closing the Gap framework, it is clear to see how the initiative labels entire communities with these deficiencies simply because they are Indigenous - ignoring how the colonial policies resulted in this status quo - as it is only in this negative light that the majority feel able to engage with Australian Aboriginal communities. To remedy this, the initiative prescribes solutions based on Western health models that are simply incapable of treating broader systemic issues.

CLOSING THE GAP INITIATIVE AS AN ASSIMILATIONIST MECHANISM

Moreover, such blind faith in the power of data to inform non-Indigenous policymakers on the lived experiences of Indigenous Australians has resulted in a 'deficit data/problematic people correlation' (Walter, 2016, pp.82–83). As Walter (2016) argues, this correlation maintains that Indigenous Australians, through their racially aligned social practices, are directly responsible for their inferiority, inherently unfit to look after themselves, and therefore must be

assimilated into the Australian settler-state. This attitude is prevalent in the CTG's use of statistics to inform its policy choices. Rather than affording Indigenous Australians autonomy over their health decisions, deficit-data creates a narrative where the deficiencies of Indigenous Australian culture justify their assimilation 'towards another set of characteristics that currently belong to the dominant, non-Indigenous ideal' (Pholi, Black, and Richards, 2009, p.10). For example, in 2003, less than half of Indigenous people aged fifteen to nineteen attended secondary school, compared to 70 percent of non-Indigenous Australians of the same age (Ridgeway, 2003, p.194). At the same time, 40 percent of Indigenous adults were employed, compared to 74 percent of non-Indigenous Australians (Trewin and Madden, 2005, p.10).

It is the CTG initiative's focus on statistical differences such as these that inform its viewpoint of Indigenous culture as deficient and requiring improvement. While providing a good account of Indigenous living standards, these statistics provide no insight on the causes of Indigenous inequality. Instead, they merely report that Indigenous peoples are disadvantaged and need to hasten their adoption of Western ideals to improve on metrics such as employment and education. Moreover, these statistics serve to represent these people as simply a group of individuals, rather than a cohesive community, prefacing the CTG's blame of individuals rather than the legacies of colonialism. Overall, the CTG initiative serves to consolidate government control over Indigenous communities and legitimise the replacement of apparently flawed Indigenous cultures with the dominant Western cultural standard based on statistics.

Furthermore, the issue of the 'deficit data/problematic people correlation' falls into the sociology of new racism - the continuation of racism not through racialised biological superiority, but through non-white cultural inferiority (Wren, 2010, pp.143–144) - thus formulating the CTG initiative as a continuation of the subjugation of Indigenous communities to the settler-colonial state. Although many academics agree that devolving power to Indigenous communities is key to closing the gap, the CTG initiative persists in denying Indigenous populations autonomy and input over their own outcomes. In particular, Holland (2018, pp.26–29) argues that the CTG initiative exists only in name due to the lack of national-level implementation and the inability of Indigenous communities to hold the government accountable for this failure. Rather than simply not existing, there are elements of the CTG initiative that passively harm the campaign for Indigenous autonomy from the Australian government.

An example of this assimilationist mechanism is the proposition of a Universal Basic Income - an unconditional periodic cash grant to Indigenous individuals to alleviate the poverty found in Indigenous communities - for Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders (Fouksman and Klein, 2019, pp.494–496), thus perpetuating Indigenous dependency on the Australian government. Moreover, the CTG initiative also opposes the widespread call for constitutional reform to empower Indigenous communities and end the 'torment of [their] powerlessness' (Fouksman and Klein, 2019, pp.494–496; The Uluru Statement, 2017). This highlights how the settler-colonial structure of the Australian government's Indigenous Social Policy never diminished, with the government still aiming for control over the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations through mechanisms like the CTG initiative.

The CTG initiative's culturally removed implementation is further illustrated by top-down policy initiatives that seek to homogenise Indigenous communities. There is 'no evidence that the policy juggernaut is countenancing "flexible tailored local solutions"' (Altman, 2009, p.13). Therefore, in neglecting the unique and separate communities that make up Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, the Australian government subsumes each Indigenous identity into one homogenous, featureless group made up of various separate people-groups. In the process, each community's culture, language, and value systems can be completely stripped away and disregarded. As Wolfe (2006, p.388) argues, 'settler colonialism destroys to replace', and the hierarchical, top-down structure of the CTG initiative serves to systematically destroy the individual traits of each Indigenous culture. In doing so, it allows for the easier assimilation of these groups into the settler-colonial state.

Finally, the CTG initiative retains the common trope of blaming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for their suffering at the hands of the settler-colonial system. As previously mentioned, the language used in the CTG initiative was criticised for its narrative, which put the responsibility of reducing inequality on the Indigenous communities themselves, pushing them to embrace the opportunity of further integration into the dominant settler-colonial society. In response to these criticisms, and the fact that most of the key target areas were not on track, reforms were made to the initiative in 2020 that expanded the target areas and involved more consultation with Indigenous communities (Biddle, 2019). While these reforms are welcome, Dillon (2018, p.4) notes that concerns remain over the weakening of targets in the reformed approach. Specifically, the reformed initiative still fails to address the socio-economic underpinnings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inequalities that the CTG initiative perpetuated. Moreover, there are concerns that greater consultation from the Coalition of the Peaks, a representative body of community-controlled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, may allow the Australian government to blame the peaks for future failures to close the gap, a scenario reminiscent of when the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission was criticised for not fixing Indigenous health and was subsequently abolished by the Howard Government in 2004 (Bond and Singh, 2020, p.198). Overall, for Indigenous equality to be realised in Australian society, it is critical to empower Indigenous leadership and governance, as well as to formulate policy around Indigenous knowledge and community.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the methodology, language, and reforms of the CTG initiative reveals its inability to effectively decrease inequality in standards of living between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Instead, the initiative takes on an assimilationist perspective, framing the structural inequalities affecting Indigenous communities as self-induced, while distancing the Australian government from the ongoing legacies of colonisation and its traumatic impact on Indigenous peoples. Additionally, CTG language reinforces negative stereotyping of Indigenous peoples in Australia. Meanwhile, reforms made in response to criticisms of the policy do not go far enough in empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and offering these communities paths to self-determination. Ultimately, the most effective means to improve the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would be to respect their self-determination, thereby alleviating the communities of the settler-colonial legacy which continues to reinforce their oppression and inequality.

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MARGINALISATION, MURDER, AND SILENCE IN WEST PAPUA

WHEN DOES SYSTEMATIC OPPRESSION BECOME GENOCIDE?

FINLEY FARRELL

ILLUSTRATION BY MAISIE NORTON

Indigenous citizens of Indonesian West Papua face daily police and military surveillance as well as isolation from the global stage against a backdrop of wealth and opportunity inequality. Human Rights activists have argued that state and systemic violence in Indonesia constitutes genocide under the UN Genocide Convention, pointing to systemic human rights abuses, mass displacements, and attacks on the health and socioeconomic standing of Indigenous Papuans (Wing and King, 2005). The Indonesian government defends its directorial role in the violence as a response to isolated acts of terror and to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Pohlman, 2020, p.117). Other organisations, such as Genocide Watch and the Peter Tatchell Foundation, describe the actions as 'slow-motion genocide', emphasising the gradual and systemic nature of state action (Gregoire, 2025; Tatchell, 2020). This term was coined by Jim Elmslie and Camellia Webb-Gammon to conceptualise the specific genocidal action in West Papua (Elmslie and Webb-Gannon, 2013, p.144). It describes the ethnic cleansing in West Papua as aiming for the destruction of the Indigenous Peoples of West Papua over generations, mostly through Indonesian state programs (Elmslie and Webb-Gannon, 2013, p.144). Thus, the term 'slow-motion genocide' is apt for understanding the uniqueness of the West Papuan Indigenous struggle. A complex system of securitisation is in place, where legitimacy for emergency action is created by labelling an issue as an existential threat that is too developed to be resolved through standard means (Taureck, 2006, p.54). This justifies state violence as self-defence, hiding the true extent of violence and its genocidal motivation. There is sufficient evidence for ethnic cleansing through national programmes and internal discrimination, lowering birth rates and health outcomes, and silencing or discrediting journalism reporting on the lives of Indigenous West Papuans (Elmslie and Webb-Gannon, 2013, pp.148–152). These methods obscure Indonesian Papua's ethnic cleansing, while limiting global awareness of the growing crisis. As the Indonesian political climate lurches further towards nationalism, understanding how ethnic cleansing operates and is concealed by the government is essential for understanding the future of West Papuan rights and lives.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Indigenous Peoples of West Papua experienced a form of double colonialism: first under Dutch rule until 1962, and then under Indonesian control, which continues to the present day (Braithwaite et al., 2010, pp.55–60). The transition of colonial rulers, met with a strong independence movement, led to a brutal integration that killed at least 100,000 Papuans (Glazebrook, 2008, p.23; Martinkus, 2002, pp.1–2; Macleod, 2011, p.5). From 1967, the new Suharto regime implemented militarisation, increased foreign capital, established mass migration programmes, and sustained violence (Mollet, 2011, p.234; Macleod, 2015, p.56; Asian Human Rights Commission, 2013, p.26). This period saw the intersection of several violent cultural and economic oppressions. As Tony Barta has argued, most definitions of genocide emphasise the need for a cohesive and singular programme, putting intentionality as the defining characteristic rather than the destruction of a Peoples itself (Barta, 1987, p.238). In the case of West Papua, the complexity of programmes that propagate ethnic cleansing requires that we focus on how these programmes work together to culminate in the destruction of Indigenous West Papuans, rather than singularly on intention. Today, the population of Indigenous West Papuans, compared to ethnically Indonesian Papuans, has lower birth rates, poorer health outcomes, and negative socioeconomic indicators, showing the adverse effects of these attacks. Much like previous oppression under the Dutch or Suharto regime, freedom of movement and erosion of cultural identity both are key components of Indonesian-state programs that culminate in ethnic cleansing (Elmslie and Webb-Gannon, 2013, pp.145–146; Braithwaite et al., 2010, pp.53–54). Any hopes to limit violence in the twenty first century are yet to be realised given that nationalist parties such as the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, Demokrat, and Golkar, continue to run Indonesian politics (Lee and Paath, 2019). There has been a further swing towards ultranationalism with the victory of the Gerinda party in the 2024 election. The new President, Prabowo Subianto, has strong links with the military and various paramilitary groups, and was a commander in the East Timor massacres (Priamarizki and Haripin, 2024). In previous attacks on Indigenous West Papuans under Suharto, these paramilitary groups and military factions were at the forefront of occupation, violence and ethnic cleansing. The reemergence of these groups in prominent areas of government suggests a return to a more military focused government, which could escalate the current situation. This backdrop of ultranationalism and paramilitary groups indicates that President Subianto may move to intensify attacks against Indigenous Papuans in the near future.

SECURITISATION

The Indonesian government masks

and justifies its ethnic cleansing of Indigenous West Papuans by claiming they pose security threats. A framework of manufactured primitive/civilised and terrorist/civilian dichotomies is useful for understanding why securitisation is effective for the Indonesian government to justify its actions. This framework is apt for understanding Indonesian policy, for example using terrorist designations for the OPM (Free Papua Movement) (Pamungkas and Permana, 2024, p.64).

A key example is the 1971 Operation Penis Gourd, a campaign that aimed to discourage the traditional dress of Indigenous West Papuans. In the campaign, 'civic action teams' of soldiers targeted tribes such as the Dani and Ekari, placing piles of Western clothes in towns and beating tribesmen until they were worn (Webster, 2001, p.517). Both these tribes were displaced because of the violence, showing how attacks on culture can sharply turn into mass displacements and deaths. This operation succeeded in removing the penis gourd from day-to-day use, transforming it into a prosecutable symbol of Indigenous resistance and anti-Indonesian violence (Braithwaite et al., 2010, p.77). Similar campaigns target literature, specifically those resistant to oppressive health and social campaigns, and iconography of an independent West Papua (Glazebrook, 2008, p.17; Rasidjan, 2024, p.411; Martinkus, 2002, p.11). Military checkpoints exclusively for Indigenous Papuans and visible police and army presence are examples of how this 'securitisation programme' is implemented (Braithwaite et al., 2010, pp.53–54). This justifies oppressive military operations in the name of responding to 'a serious threat to the sovereignty of Indonesia and the development program in Papua', as a member of the Indonesian government stated (Pamungkas and Permana, 2024, p.64). The frequent reference to the 'development programme in Papua' (Survival International, 2013) used by Indonesian politicians reaffirms the distinction between civilised Indonesians and Indigenous Papuans, creating a racial nationalist and economic vision of West Papua as uncivilised, which drives ethnic violence. The transmigration programs between 1995 and 2000 were justified on the claim of expanding West Papua's agricultural sector, demonstrating how these programmes alienate Indigenous West Papuans in the name of Indonesian development (Mollet, 2011, pp.234–235). The real effect of these programs has been to make Indigenous farming methods obsolete and displace many from the farming land (Mollet, 2011, p.235). Alienating resistance to the 'development programme' (Macleod, 2016, p.45) creates legitimacy to enact state violence and defend against ethnic cleansing accusations under the guise of economic or social development.

DISCRIMINATION IN HEALTHCARE

The most potent yet concealed method by which Indigenous West Papuans are driven towards ethnic destruction is unequal access to healthcare. The National Family Planning programme of the 1980s exemplifies Indigenous West Papuans' alienation from healthcare services. Operating as a nation-building project to create ideal 'Indonesian/Malay' families (Rasidjan, 2024, p.410) in West Papua, allowed the Indonesian state to expand its control over Indigenous West Papuan women's bodies. Surveillance was central to the programme and women were obliged to accept house visits from state clinic workers to monitor birth-control usage and sexual activity. Women were also obliged to visit *kaders*, community health workers employed specifically to monitor Indigenous West Papuan women's use of birth-control (Rasidjan, 2024, p.409). Military personnel often accompanied house visits, especially for the more coercive practice of surveillance of sexual practices. This represents a Foucauldian 'biopower', meaning the politicisation of the body and a state's control over the bodies of a population (Foucault, 1976, p.137). Here, the surveillance and quotas over the body—its 'biopower'—is used to impose the ideal of a homogeneous Malayan family, one that excludes Indigenous West Papuan families and bodies. As evidenced by the forceful involvement of the military and state in enforcing oppressive healthcare regulations, the healthcare system is 'imposing measures intended to prevent births in a group', and causing 'serious bodily [and] mental harm to members of the group' in an effort to displace the Indigenous Peoples of West Papua, using the definition of Genocide under International Law (*Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, 1948, p.1). As the name National Family Planning programme demonstrates, these measures are hidden either under nationalist agendas or by removing access to healthcare through infrastructure and social alienation. The 'biopower' held over Indigenous Papuans, and its use for population control, is one piece of a 'cumulative slow-motion' genocide. It is essential to see this discrimination in healthcare as a key part of the total ethnic cleansing in West Papua.

The result of these oppressive medical policies is that Indigenous West Papuan women in the last decade suffer nearly double the maternal mortality rate compared to the Indonesian national average (Nababan et al., 2017, p.16), and a fertility rate ten times less than the Indonesian average (Rasidjan, 2024, p.410). This is the effect of removing the Indigenous West Papuan families from the Indonesian state programme and enforcing a health system set up to surveil Indigenous West Papuan bodies. As Marani Rasidjan (2024, p.408) notes: 'Papuan women [are] simultaneously invisible [in terms of their Blackness] and hypervisible [in terms of statistics on fertility]'. These ethnic cleansing-oriented healthcare outcomes demonstrate the trend towards population replacement, minoritising Indigenous West Papuans (Elmslie, 2010) through low population growth compared to the non-Papuan growth rate in Indonesia and mass migration programmes (Elmslie, 2010, p.3; Glazebrook, 2009, p.25). The material effect of 'biopower' over bodies shows how effective it is in genocidal attempts to displace a population.

In the case of West Papua, the complexity of programmes that propagate ethnic cleansing requires that we focus on how these programmes work together to culminate in the destruction of Indigenous West Papuans, not on the singularity of intention.

The HIV/AIDS crisis among Indigenous West Papuans is a key study to understand how control over Indigenous bodies affects all areas of health (Butt, 2013, p.182). The heart of the crisis lies in a deep anxiety and fatalism relating to the health system; a common sentiment is that this is the 'final generation' of Indigenous West Papuans (Rasidjan, 2024, p.408). The term 'final generation' encapsulates the fear of future Indigenous West Papuans being unable to prosper and losing the Indigenous community. The memory of previous generations' suffering is deeply felt and is compounded by the Malay domination of health care staff, and a lack of critical infrastructure in Indigenous West Papuan areas, making it difficult for Indigenous West Papuans to receive treatment (Pamungkas and Permana, 2024, p.68). The Indigenous Peoples of West Papua tend to socially and physically withdraw from life when diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, often fatally (Butt, 2013, p.180). They not only struggle to proceed with antiretroviral treatment, but suffer worse outcomes even on effective treatment due to communication barriers and stigma in the administration of treatment (Sianturi, et al., 2020, p.7). State healthcare protocol enables greater HIV/AIDS stigma and fatalities within the Indigenous West Papuan population by underfunding infrastructure, having sparse healthcare centres in Indigenous West Papuan areas, and implementing military checkpoints beside healthcare centres that reject Indigenous West Papuans' entry (Butt, 2013, pp.180–181). Additionally, the higher HIV/AIDS rate itself has been used to stereotype the Indigenous Peoples of West Papua as 'uncivilised' or 'sexually perverse', particularly in healthcare centres, perpetuating their exclusion from state apparatus (Hanner, 2022, p.7). These examples show the state's intent to control Indigenous West Papuan lives through their health.

While the Indonesian state would disregard inequalities in healthcare as 'naturally' lower health outcomes, conscious state action—rhetorically and materially—has ultimately caused avoidable deaths and a marked decline in birth rates in the Indigenous West Papuan community, resulting in a 'slow genocide' (Elmslie and Webb-Gannon, 2013, p.144).

CENSORSHIP

Accurate information is key to prosecuting genocidal action; terms such as ethnic cleansing and genocide can only be adopted once clear evidence is shown. Therefore, by censoring human rights violations, Indonesia can hide its systemic and ethnic violence (Pohlman, 2020, p.117). Martinkus (2002, pp.13–14) reports on a militant OPM member, Peter Tabuni, who kept a ledger of Indigenous West Papuans killed by either Indonesian soldiers, fleeing from soldiers, starvation, or other environmental factors. These numbers are local to his province, span 30 years, and rely on first-hand, orally transmitted accounts. The thoroughness of the ledger shows the importance of information for the OPM as a means of challenging the Indonesian government's attempts to mask ethnic cleansing. It also shows how censored these figures are to the international community, leading to a convoluted image of the ethnic oppression of Indigenous West Papuans.

Media censorship in West Papua is key to hiding the ethnic cleansing of Indigenous West Papuans through journalistic rights violations and blackouts. This conceals the extent of oppression and offers the option of plausible deniability in the face of international scrutiny (Robie, 2020, p.27). Indonesia was ranked 111th out of 180 countries in the 2024 RSF World Press Freedom Index and there have been further concerns over former Indonesian President Joko Widodo's concessions against press freedom in favour of militant groups (Reporters without Borders, 2024). This will likely worsen under President Prabowo Subianto, a far-right leader with strong links to the military and militant groups. Foreign reporters have had difficulty reporting in West Papua and have frequently had to enter disguised as tourists due to the lack of permission from Jakarta (Robie, 2018, p.27). This can damage the international legitimacy of the evidence found while also putting the reporter in danger of police and militant brutality (Robie, 2018, p.27). Victor Mambor, an Indigenous West Papuan reporter, was discredited, harassed, and expelled from all credible Indonesian outlets after reporting on the 2019 Papuan protests and internet blackout (Wesley, 2020, p.38). Mambor's case indicates the efforts to discredit and ultimately stop reporting from inside West Papua to international and domestic audiences. Hiding the wider picture of population displacement is a key part of Indonesia's defence against genocide as it allows each element of oppression to be seen as unrelated.

A further example of this tenacious media hegemony is the campaign to stifle online protest (Robie, 2020, p.25). Armies of bots and online journalists obscure key words and hashtags with anti-independence rhetoric to prevent growing independence sentiments in West Papua (Robie, 2020, p.29). An investigation by *Jubi*, a West Papuan journalistic organisation, found eighteen online media platforms disrupting genuine reporting by publishing fictitious and propagandistic news to undermine online protest efforts (Sarmento and Mambor, 2020, p.110). The state itself enables this disingenuous reporting by censoring reliable news outlets such as foreign NGOs, ambassadors, journalists, and West Papuan voices. In this way, the Indonesian government hides and delegitimises information to mask the ethnic violence and human rights violations, hiding state violence behind the façade of individual or unique perpetrators.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, there is sufficient evidence to suggest the ethnic cleansing of the Indigenous West Papuan Peoples, executed through gradual, but hugely damaging, state programs and violence. The current governing Gerindra Party aligns itself with the nationalistic and authoritarian values of the Suharto regime, showing how the violent apparatus has persisted across generations moving in 'slow motion' (Elmslie and Webb-Gannon, 2013, p.144). Increased militarisation, due to the Gerindra Party's focus on security and nationalism, could flare the West Papuan struggle into an outright campaign of violence or, more likely, a forced mass displacement into neighbouring Papua New Guinea. There is fear that the methods of subjugation and hidden oppression will be intensified to the point of inhospitality and then used to justify the violence. However, fears for the future do not dilute the Indigenous West Papuans' struggles of past and present. Navigating a web of imprisonment, surveillance, and alienation from state services—especially fertility healthcare—are insidious forms of violence. This can obscure violence to the outside world through a discrediting and banning of journalism and information from West Papua, and it can also make the struggles of Indigenous West Papuans seem existential and deterministic. These state apparatuses all intentionally target Indigenous West Papuans and attempt to slowly destroy them over generations; their obfuscation in the case of West Papua reveals how vigilant anti-genocide action must be. Identification of developing crises and action towards existing ones can only be done if the ways ethnicities are othered and how violence is perpetrated are understood. The struggle of the Indigenous Peoples of West Papua is not given the international acknowledgement it deserves due to these insidious state apparatuses. It is imperative to understand the struggles faced when confronted by government structures designed to erode a population, and legitimising this through international recognition of ethnic cleansing or genocide.

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THE GISELE PELICOT CASE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR RAPE CULTURE AND LEGISLATION IN FRANCE

CERYS JONES

ILLUSTRATION BY CERYS JONES

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CERYS JONES

This article contains detailed discussions of sexual violence, rape, child sexual abuse, and victim testimony. It includes descriptions of real court cases and references to explicit content presented during legal proceedings, which some readers may find distressing.

In Autumn of 2024, Dominique Pelicot stood trial alongside 50 other men for the abuse of Gisèle Pelicot, whom he repeatedly drugged and raped, and enabled her rape by strangers, over the course of nearly a decade. The Gisèle Pelicot case has been seminal in highlighting flaws in the French political and legal system that undermine the credibility of women's experiences of sexual violence. France has historically failed to adequately support victims of sexual harassment and assault. Madame Pelicot's case, specifically her bravery in waiving anonymity and the discussions it has encouraged, has elevated this problem to the political forefront. A historical analysis of sexual violence in France, a comparative European study, and an exploration of the broader political, societal, and legislative implications of the case, all underscore the urgent need for legislative reform. Such reform is essential for effecting widespread change in societal attitudes to sexual violence against women. Madame Pelicot has highlighted this necessity, exposing the pressing need for a consent-based definition of rape in France.

THE CURRENT LEGAL APPROACH

Rape is a serious and prevalent crime that is rarely prosecuted effectively. In France, one of the most glaring issues in rape legislation is the absence of a consent-based definition. Since 1980, French law has defined rape as 'any act of sexual penetration, whatever its nature, committed against another person by violence, constraint, threat, or surprise' (*Code pénal 1992,* Articles 222–23). Thus, French rape law fails to require explicit consent, instead defining rape as the forcible overcoming of a victim's refusal to consent. Consent, however, is not a binary concept; it operates on a spectrum where the absence of a 'no' does not imply the presence of a 'yes'. By focusing solely on the perpetrator's use of force rather than the victim's affirmative consent, the law neglects the fundamental principle that consent must be actively given, not merely the result of coercion or acquiescence. As a result, French legislation places an undue burden on victims, requiring proof of physical resistance. This additional responsibility also disregards the realities of sexual violence. As emphasised in an article by Amnesty International, 'women and girls are often raped by a friend or partner, or have a shock reaction and freeze' (Amnesty International, 2020). Such cases would require no violence on the side of the perpetrator to overcome physically, and so would not be classified as rape under the current definition.

This burden placed on the victim to prove their innocence directly impacts the number of rape cases that go to trial. Fear of police, legal scrutiny, and the societal stigma that associates sexual violence with shame and provocation, deters many survivors from coming forward (Isis International, 2025). As such, conviction rates for rape in France are incredibly low, as exemplified in the published reports by the Ministerial Statistical Service for Internal Security (SSMI). In a 2023 survey carried out by the SSMI, published in French Newspaper *Le Monde*, 270,000 women reported experiencing physical sexual violence, and 1.14 million reported non-physical sexual violence. However, only six percent of victims of sexual violence filed a police report, and of those, approximately 94 percent of cases were dismissed (Boudoussier, 2024). Of those who decided against filing a complaint, 23 percent believed that it 'would have been useless', another 23 percent felt 'it wasn't serious enough', and fifteen percent feared it would 'not have been taken seriously' (Boudoussier, 2024). These statistics emphasise the widespread perception among victims that the legal system is inaccessible, ineffective, or dismissive—factors that contribute directly to the low prosecution rates of sexual violence in France.

The Gisèle Pelicot case further demonstrates the harmful flaws of current French legislation. One of the most striking aspects of the case is the profiles of the perpetrators and victims. The profiles of the former are varied, yet unextraordinary: aged 22 to 67 and employed in traditional careers, like construction or transport, these men are unremarkable—often described by the media as 'Mr. Everyman' (*monsieur tout-le-monde)* (Gozzi, 2024b). They were fathers, brothers, and fully integrated into society, challenging the stereotype that rapists are outsiders or deviants—an assumption reinforced by the current legal definition of rape.
Equally significant is the profile of Madame Pelicot herself. A once-married grandmother, she defies entrenched victim-blaming narratives that suggest women must dress or behave a certain way to avoid sexual violence. Her case forces a reckoning with the reality that rape is not an extraordinary crime committed by strangers against stereotypical victims; it is widespread and indiscriminate, unaffected by a victim's actions or appearance.

Furthermore, during the trial, many defence lawyers of the accused exploited the law's requirement of intent and its failure to require explicit consent. A significant proportion of those charged have denied committing rape, arguing that they had gained what they believed, under French law, to be sufficient consent through Madame Pelicot's husband, Dominique. Others claimed they thought it was a game and that she was only pretending to be asleep (Chrisafis, 2025c). This underscores the shortcomings of French rape law and the opportunities it provides perpetrators to exploit legal ambiguities.

Guillaume de Palma, defence counsel for six of the accused, argued, 'Without the intention to commit it, there is no rape… In France, proof of intent is required' (Goury-Laffont, 2024). This statement highlights the limitations of the French law, which prioritises the necessity of intent to rape over a focus on the absence of consent. Accordingly, legal scholar Mélanie Vogel asserted that this defence only emphasises the need to reform the legal definition of rape: 'The media coverage of the trial and the defence used by the lawyers have highlighted that this is a flaw, and today society no longer tolerates this flaw' (Goury-Laffont, 2024). Carole Hardouin-Le Goff, a legal professor specialising in sexual violence, also stated that 'If we write into the law that a person must make sure their partner consents, there is no possible defence for these 50 men' (Jabkhiro, 2024). Hardouin-Le Goff's assertion further supports the necessity for clear, consent-based legal definitions, indicating that such reform would close existing loopholes that allow for the evasion of responsibility. Thus, legislative reform is a crucial first step in achieving widespread cultural change. However, while a consent-based legal definition of rape will act as a fundamental starting point for a widespread shift in behaviours and attitudes, they must be reinforced by a concerted effort to dismantle harmful rape myths and gender stereotypes. The Gisèle Pelicot case has exposed the dangerous legal loopholes that persist in France, pushing the debate on consent and rape law to the forefront of political discourse.

THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

The development of a standardised European definition of rape has been slow, but progress is ongoing. In March 2022, the European Commission published a proposal detailing a unified definition of rape as: 'any non-consensual act of vaginal, anal, or oral penetration of a sexual nature, with any bodily part or object' (European Commission, 2022, p.35). This definition encourages an affirmative model of rape, in which 'only yes means yes', and has been proven to better protect women's sexual autonomy (European Women's Lobby, 2023). For instance, an assessment of the impact of Sweden's incorporation of an affirmative model by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention discovered that the number of reports, prosecutions, and convictions all increased after their modification of the law, with the latter increasing by 75 percent (Brå, 2020). These figures suggest that an 'only yes means yes' definition can lead to more effective enforcement and greater justice for victims. However, the push for an EU-wide adoption of this model has met resistance. Several countries, including France, opposed the proposition (Zamfir, 2024). President Emmanuel Macron later clarified that while he supports redefining French rape legislation, he does not see the issue as a European prerogative (Goury-Laffont, 2024). As such, France's resistance to adopt the affirmative model places it behind the European standard, despite the evidence supporting a unified, consent-based approach.

Feminist and human rights organisations have duly criticised France's reluctance to align its legal framework with evolving European standards. In 2003, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) held that states have a positive obligation 'to enact criminal-law provisions effectively punishing rape', including 'any non-consensual sexual act, including in the absence of physical resistance by the victim' (Lannier et al., 2024, p.36). While nineteen EU member states now define rape as sex without consent, legal definitions continue to evolve: Spain and Finland have recently adopted consent-based definitions of rape, following the examples of Slovenia in 2021 and Denmark in 2020 (Zamfir, 2024, pp.11–12, 21).

Since the passing of the 2022 Bill on the Comprehensive Guarantee of Sexual Freedom, known as Spain's 'yes means yes' (*solo sí es sí*) law, Spanish legislation now includes positive sexual consent in its definition of rape (Zamfir, 2024). Before this reform, Spanish law specifically required proof of 'violence or intimidation' for an act to constitute rape; otherwise, such acts qualified as the lesser offence of sexual assault (*Criminal Code*, 2016, Article 178). This legislative shift was catalysed by the widely publicised 'Wolfpack' (*La Manada*) case, in which five men raped one girl (Amnesty International, 2020). This case, like that of Madame Pelicot, drew intense public attention and demonstrates how the visibility of a single trial can become a catalyst for national protest and substantive legal reform. In the initial trial, the court determined that the absence of overt resistance precluded a rape conviction, and so the perpetrators were found guilty of sexual abuse—the lesser offence (Amnesty International, 2020). Following the outrage of advocacy groups, however, this ruling was overturned by a higher court, which successfully convicted the perpetrators

THE GISELE PELICOT CASE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR RAPE CULTURE AND LEGISLATION IN FRANCE

CERYS JONES

of rape (Amnesty International, 2020). The protest and discussion sparked by the 'Wolfpack' case exposed the inadequacy of the existing rape legisation in Spain, as the perpetrators were able to benefit from the lack of a consent-based definition. Following the case, a 2022 reform brought Spanish law in line with international standards by focusing the legal definition of rape on consent (Amnesty International, 2020). Its influence on Spanish law reform illustrates the capacity of individual cases to galvanise public support and prompt legislative change, and therefore offers a valuable precedent in considering the potential for the Pelicot case to prompt a similar legislative shift towards the affirmative model of rape.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Historically, feminist movements and individuals in France have been instrumental in pushing for change. The *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF), formed in 1970, worked with notable feminist activists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Gisèle Halimi to advocate for bodily autonomy through peaceful protest (Picq, 2002; Robson, 2015, p.48). While the organisation fought against against rape culture and entrenched gender roles, its most significant victory concerned abortion, which was illegal at the time. Under Beauvoir's leadership, the MLF produced the 'Manifesto of the 343'— a declaration signed by women who openly admitted to having had illegal abortions—in a call for access to contraception and legal abortions. In response, Halimi formed the feminist group *Choisir* ('to choose') to protect the manifesto's signatories (Barker, 2013, p.108). The collective actions of Beauvoir, Halimi, and the MLF paved the way for the passing of the Veil Act in 1975, which legalised induced abortion in France (Olszynko-Gryn and Rusterholz, 2019, p.129). This history of organised feminist activism in France demonstrates that public mobilisation, with the support of a few key figures, has previously been a powerful force in prompting legislative change.

Senator Vogel has been particularly vocal in advocating for a consent-based definition of rape, first proposing a change to the legal definition of rape in 2023 (Goury-Laffont, 2024). Likewise, other French politicians, such as Véronique Riotton and Marie-Charlotte Garin, have also campaigned for this reform, highlighting a growing consensus among politicians on the need for legislative change (Chrisafis, 2025b). Beyond the political sphere, public advocacy has been led by the efforts of Caroline Darian, Gisèle Pelicot's daughter. Through her online movement 'Don't Put Me Under' (*#MendorsPas*), Darian has raised awareness about drug-facilitated sexual violence and provided aid for its victims (Chrisafis, 2025a). The campaign has been supported by several French celebrities, and states on its website that 'Our collective goal is that public authorities and civil society take action' (MendorsPas, 2024). She has also published a memoir, *I Will Never Call Him Dad Again*, in which she speaks openly about the trauma of discovering her father's crimes, writing in the preface that 'I bear a crushing double burden: I am the child of both the victim and her tormentor' (Darian, 2025, p.vii). As seen in their support of Darian's campaign, celebrities have become increasingly involved in the ongoing appeal to modify French law. Over 140 public figures signed a petition published in *Le Monde*, where they label the 'rate of dismissals of complaints of sexual violence' as 'unacceptable' (Chrisafis, 2024d). Therefore, while opposition to repressive legislation has been a permanent feature of modern French society, only following the case of Gisèle Pelicot has the movement gained the momentum necessary to instigate a change to the legal definition of rape that has been in place since 1980.

PUBLICITY AND PROGRESS

As stated, the desire for reform has been persistent and widespread, arising from feminist groups, celebrities, and international organisations. Covered across traditional and social media, the momentum caused by the Gisèle Pelicot case could elevate existing debates to greater political prominence in France and Europe, instigating meaningful discussion and reform. During the case, Madame Pelicot opted to waive anonymity, advocating with her legal team for video documentation of her rapes and assaults to be shown in court (Harding, 2024). Despite opposition from judges, who deemed the videos too explicit and shocking, she and her team maintained that it was important for the public to be confronted with the extremity of the footage. As Madame Pelicot testified, 'When you're raped there is shame, and it's not for us to have shame, it's for them' (Chrisafis, 2024c). International politicians praised her bravery, including Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, who wrote on the social media platform X, *Cuánta dignidad. Gracias, Gisèle Pelicot. Que la vergüenza cambie de bando* ('What dignity. Thank you, Gisèle Pelicot. Shame must change sides') (Sánchez, 2024). As such, Madame Pelicot's decision to waive anonymity has elicited public announcements of support among leading politicians, thus increasing the pressure for legal reform in France.

Madame Pelicot's testimony has also resonated powerfully with the public, transforming the understanding of the nature and boundaries of sexual violence and domestic abuse. Throughout the trial, several marches and demonstrations have occurred across France in support of Madame Pelicot, with supporters applauding her as she arrived and departed from the courtroom. In mid-September, feminist groups organised around 30 protests in cities including Paris and Marseille (Saintourens, 2024). During a November protest in Paris, Femi Otitoju, a member of the campaign group Million Women Rise, told *Sky News* that sexual violence was 'widespread' and that 'what's really happening here is that we are getting a little bit of an insight into the every day, the banal violence that women face on a day-to-day basis' (Lynch, 2024). Furthermore, victims have already begun to draw inspiration from Madame Pelicot's courage. In a case involving the sexual abuse of up to 299 children by a retired surgeon, one victim, Louis-Marie, told *Reuters* that he was inspired to testify publicly: 'There has been the #MeToo movement, there has been Mrs. Pelicot who was extremely brave, and I think she's right, it's not for us victims to feel shame' (Jabkhiro, 2025). Thus, the trial has inspired a national conversation about rape culture in France. As Madame Pelicot's lawyer, Antoine Camus, told *Time*, 'This is the first time in France you have deep thinking on this' (Walt, 2025).

The Gisèle Pelicot trial concluded on 19 December 2024. Dominique Pelicot, Madame Pelicot's husband and the orchestrator of the abuse, was sentenced to twenty years in prison, with the possibility of parole after two-thirds of his sentence. Of the other defendants, 46 were found guilty of rape, two of attempted rape, and two of sexual assault. With the exception of Dominique, these sentences were all shorter than those demanded by prosecutors (Gozzi, 2024a). Furthermore, seventeen of the accused—excluding Dominique—have appealed the verdicts, with a second trial set to take place in late 2025 (Robert-Diard, 2024). As such, while all defendants were found guilty, the sentences fell short of the demands of prosecutors and public expectations, highlighting the shortcomings of the French justice system. Moreover, France's current political instability makes immediate legal reform challenging.

Nevertheless, the Pelicot case has generated undeniable momentum, as widespread public outrage indicates that lawmakers can no longer ignore demands for consent-based definitions in rape laws. Despite this, some prominent political figures still oppose reform. Former Justice Minister Éric Dupond-Moretti argued that changing the legislation would run the 'risk of sexual relations becoming contractualized' (Goury-Laffont, 2024). Even Louis Bonnet, the Mayor of Mazan, trivialised the case, stating, 'When there are kids involved, or women killed, then that is very serious because you can't go back. In this case, the family will have to rebuild itself. It will be hard, but no one died. So, they can still do it' (Harding, 2024). This statement illuminates the extent to which harmful attitudes towards rape victims continue to permeate French society.

On the other hand, Sarah Legrain, a lawmaker from the left-wing France Unbowed party, has insisted that France must act quickly on this matter (Goury-Laffont, 2024). And, in many ways, it has. Following Madame Pelicot's bravery during the trial and the mass protests it prompted, women's protection against sexual violence has been prioritised. On 21 January 2025, a parliamentary report was presented, acknowledging the necessity of updating the French rape law to include a clear reference to consent (Chrisafis, 2025b; Assemblée nationale, 2025b). The report recognises that legal and societal development must occur in tandem, stating that 'the fight against rape culture needs a law that is clearer', while emphasising that legislative reform would 'not be enough on its own' (Chrisafis, 2025b; Assemblée nationale, 2025a). Instead, the report emphasises the importance of a widespread 'paradigm shift' (Chrisafis, 2025b; Assemblée nationale, 2025a). This report represents a crucial turning point, demonstrating that the Pelicot case has not only exposed the limitations of existing legislation, but has also forced political institutions to prioritise the amendment of such issues.

CONCLUSION

The Gisèle Pelicot case has exposed the inadequacies of France's rape laws—particularly the absence of a consent-based definition—and has encouraged widespread public and political discourse, increasing pressure on lawmakers to implement reforms. By redefining consent in legal terms and reshaping societal attitudes, France can move towards a justice system that prioritises the protection of victims of sexual violence. Although progress may be slow, the case has already been instrumental in instigating national reflection and highlighting the need for both legal and cultural change.

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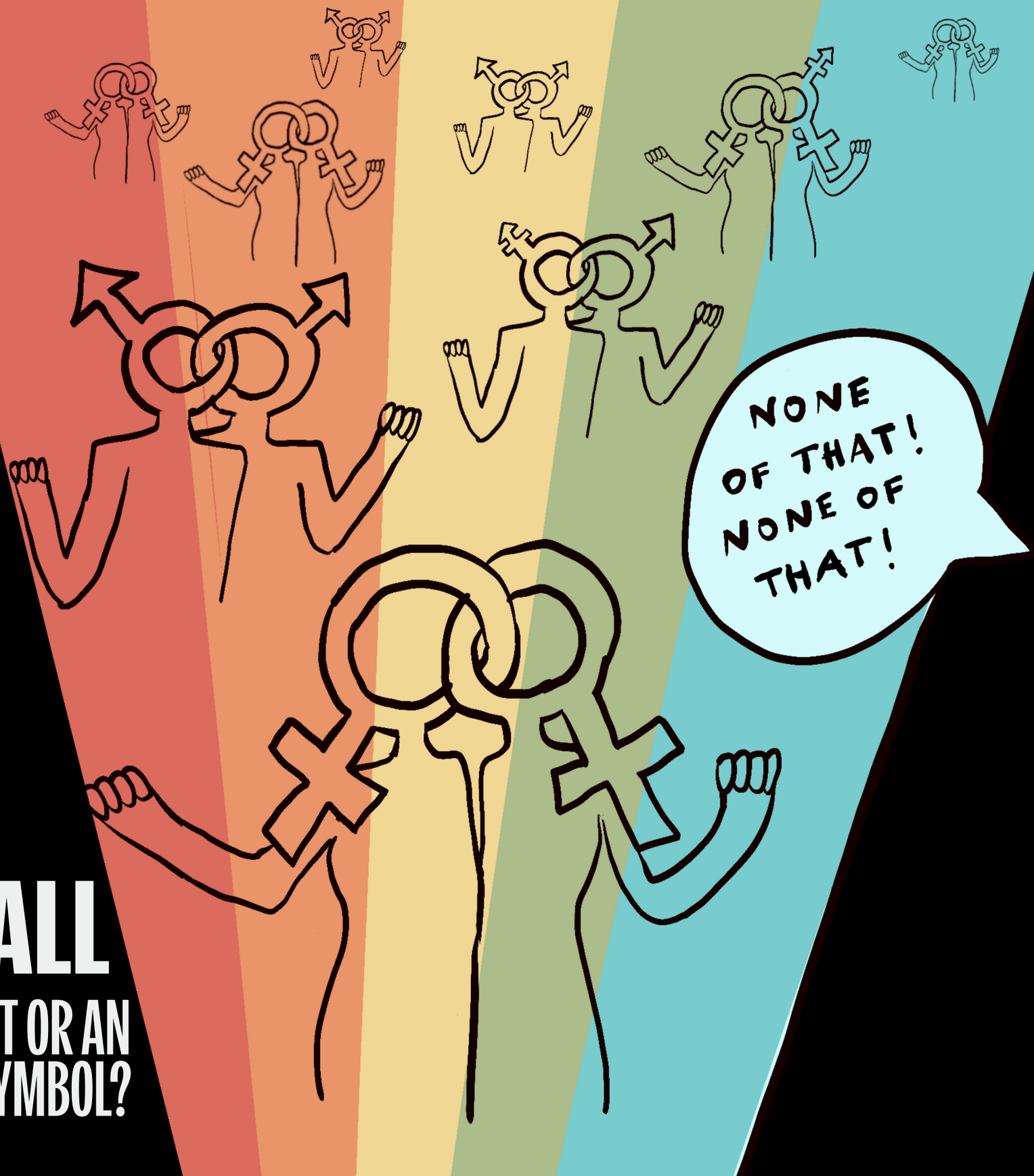

STONEWALL

TRUE TIPPING POINT OR AN OVERSATURATED SYMBOL?

ZOFIA JASTRUN

ILLUSTRATION BY MAISIE NORTON

STONEWALL: TRUE TIPPING POINT OR OVERSATURATED SYMBOL?

ZOFIA JASTRUN

The Stonewall riots are often regarded as the most well-known and iconic event in the history of the LGBTQ+ movement. LGBTQ+ organisations around the world are named in its honour, including Stonewall (UK), Stonewall Group (Poland) and Stonewall Community Foundation (USA). Countless movies and books, such as *Stonewall* (2015) directed by Roland Emmerich, Jason Baumann's anthology *The Stonewall Reader* (2019) or David Carter's *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution*, have been written about the event, showing how it is commonly considered a turning, or sometimes starting, point of the movement. Yet, many historians are beginning to question that narrative. D'Emilio (2002, p.89) characterises the history of the LGBTQ+ rights movements as 'alternating cycles'—with 'leaping' followed by periods of slower change. D'Emilio's approach sees Stonewall as part of a repeating pattern rather than an isolated turning point, potentially diminishing its importance. However, there are several reasons why the Stonewall riots have gained an iconic status in popular consciousness. This essay argues that the Stonewall riots were responsible for significant impacts on the identities of LGBTQ+ individuals, the radicalisation of the LGBTQ+ rights movement, and the transformation of its public perception, thus making it a transformative event. While overly focusing on the Stonewall riots risks marginalising the contributions and experiences of trans people, people of colour, and activists outside the US, treating these riots as a moment of radical change ultimately does not distort LGBTQ+ history.

The Stonewall riots broke out on the morning of 28 June 1969 in response to a police raid on a gay bar named The Stonewall Inn. The uprising involved clashes with the police, refusing arrest, and the throwing of bottles and cobblestones. When it culminated, the protesters set the bar with police officers barricaded inside on fire. The protests continued for five more days (Stein, 2019, pp.3–5). This happened at a volatile time in American history, marked by violent social protests including the Black Power movement, the anti-war movement, a growing culture of student activism, and bar-based resistance led by the LGBTQ+ community. The movement built on networks previously formed by the homophile movement, one of the predecessors to the contemporary LGBTQ+ rights movements, which largely 'endeavoured to advance the cause of equal rights through conformance with the heterosexual norms prevalent at the time' (Pettis, 2008, p.1). Yet, as Carter (2009) points out, four features separated the riots from any previous event in LGBTQ+ history: they lasted five days, involved thousands of people, received extensive media coverage, and inspired a new kind of militant organisation and a new ideology of 'gay liberation'. In this context, the extent of Stonewall's transformative nature is analysed.

IDENTITIES OF LGBTQ+ INDIVIDUALS

Stonewall marked a critical shift in how members of the LGBTQ+ community regarded themselves and related to one another. The unprecedentedly large media coverage allowed the news of the event to reach those not directly involved in the LGBTQ+ rights movement. This was crucial in showing closeted individuals that they were not alone. Apuzzo (2011) recalls in an interview how profoundly the news impacted her: 'Stonewall gave me the courage to say, yeah, gay is good'. She left the convent that she had joined to make sense of her homosexuality, ultimately campaigning for LGBTQ+ rights as the executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and, later, an advisor to President Bill Clinton (Carter, 2009). The riots also impacted those already involved in the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights, showing them new capabilities and providing a new source of empowerment. One witness recalled, 'I developed…a sense of street fighting tactics…I was really experiencing liberation and radicalization' (Eisenbach, 2006, p.94). However, some LGBTQ+ historians believe that the most significant change brought about by the Stonewall riots was the centring of ideas concerning coming out and pride (D'Emilio, 2002, p.83). The emphasis on coming out and coming to terms with one's own identity brought the movement closer to other social movements of the 1960s, like the Civil Rights Movement and the women's movement, that largely merged the private with the public as personal experiences and identities became deeply intertwined with broader societal issues and activism. It also allowed for the formation of LGBTQ+ communities on a larger, international scale. Motschenbacher (2020, p.64) studied language used pre- and post-Stonewall to uncover changes in discourse and, subsequently, the movement itself. One of the changes he found was a move from 'an individualistic to a community-based conceptualization of sexuality'. Research shows that first-person singular pronouns (I, me, my) were key in narratives collected before Stonewall, but became largely replaced by first-person plural pronouns (our, we) (Motschenbacher, 2020, p.68). This showcases that, before Stonewall, homosexuality was considered a more individual experience with little room for communality (Motschenbacher, 2020, p.68). Thus, Stonewall helped create a group identity for Queer individuals and develop a sense of a common struggle, with the event marking a tipping point in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights.

Stonewall radicalised and expanded the movement by expanding participation and leaving behind the strategy of conformity to heterosexual ideals.

However, this evidence is limited to recorded materials and thus largely reflects the changes among the more privileged members of the LGBTQ+ community. More underprivileged groups, including the trans community, people of colour and individuals outside of the US, lacked the means or opportunities to document their experiences. Kennedy (1995) collected oral histories from working-class lesbians living in Buffalo, New York in the 1940s and 1950s. Even before Stonewall, she found that the subjects were becoming more confident and developing a sense of community, building 'a public social life…[wearing] their men's clothes…and [fighting] back when needed' (Kennedy, 1995, p.66). This raises questions for the narrative that the Stonewall riots catalysed an LGBTQ+ community and a spirit of resistance. Yet, while these communities existed, they were not representative of the entire movement. Kennedy (1995, p.65) highlights how working-class lesbians were much more likely to come out due to a lack of alternative sources of community. Contrastingly, middle-class women tended to conceal their sexualities to benefit from the safety networks provided by their heteronormative lifestyles. Despite evidence of a strong sense of pride and community among certain groups, the Stonewall riots and their legacy helped to spread such an approach of openness and unity to the more mainstream and visible strands of the movement, transforming the fight for LGBTQ+ rights.

RADICALISATION OF THE MOVEMENT

Stonewall radicalised and expanded the movement by expanding participation and leaving behind the strategy of conformity to heterosexual ideals. In the months leading up to the Stonewall riots, there were only 50 homophile organisations in the US. Four years later, that number grew to 800 and, by the end of the decade, into the thousands (D'Emilio, 1998, p.238). This trend was also reflected in the number of people participating in LGBTQ+ rights demonstrations. Up until 1969, the homophile movement in Philadelphia organised an Annual Reminder March on 4 July, attended by 45 participants in 1969. Then, during the 1969 Eastern Regional Conference of Homophile Organizations in November, the decision was made to transform the Annual Reminder March into the Christopher Street Liberation Day, a march commemorating Stonewall (Armstrong and Crage, 2006, p.738). Within a year of its commencement, on 28 June 1970, the number of participants was already in the thousands, while the New York participants' estimates ranged from 3,000 to 20,000, the police confirmed it was over 1,000 (Fosburgh, 1970). Marches took place in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, giving the event national significance.

Beyond the growth in attendance numbers, the 4 July and Christopher Street parades reflect the changing nature of the movement. At the Annual Reminder March in 1969, there was a strict dress code, and the protesters were required to behave in a dignified and orderly manner, illustrating the cautious and moderate nature of the event (Hall, 2018, p.228). When two women held hands, Frank Kameny, one of the organisers, yelled, 'None of that! None of that' (Eisenbach, 2006, p.108). Contrarily, the 1970 marches became a stage for expressing LGBTQ+ identities. The parades were 'large and colourful' and were meant to be visible, subverting the idea of homosexuality as 'private and shameful' (Armstrong and Crage, 2006, p.742). This mirrors the wider difference between the homophile movement of the 1950s and 1960s and post-Stonewall LGBTQ+ organisations like the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance. Stonewall and the commemorative marches marked a break from the traditions of the homophile movement, which relied on a quiet compromise, securing some limited rights in return for remaining largely non-confrontational. However, this move towards a more radical approach was not entirely new. Painting it as such would, once again, sideline many of the minority groups within the LGBTQ+ community who had already been advocating for and adapting such methods. As Armstrong and Crage (2006, p.744) suggest, 'Street queens and hustlers—marginalized by class, gender-presentation, and often race—were more willing than others to confront police'. This was evident in the 1966 Compton cafeteria disturbance in San Francisco, when the police raided a cafeteria frequented by drag queens, trans women, and street hustlers,

leading to physical resistance and an eruption of violence (Pasulka, 2015). However, the popularisation of this more radical approach—through the publicisation and commemoration of Stonewall—enabled it to be exercised on a larger scale, leading to more fruitful outcomes.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND VISIBILITY OF THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

Finally, Stonewall was transformative in altering the public perception and visibility of the LGBTQ+ community, helping lead to tangible change and legal reform. Stonewall undermined the previously held images of gay men as feminine, which people also took to mean weak and incapable of fighting back. The violent nature of Stonewall—throwing bricks at the police and setting the Stonewall Inn on fire—was incongruous with the popularly held image of gay men. Gay men could no longer be dismissed and overlooked; they were making their voices heard. This increased visibility was reflected in the extensive media coverage. The *New York Times* ran a front-page story on the march, broadcast internationally by the Agence France-Presse, the Canadian Broadcasting Company, and additionally by all New York network affiliates. They emphasised how the march 'display[ed] the new strength and pride of the gay people' (Fosburgh, 1970). This largely differentiated the Stonewall riots from all previous acts of defiance that often went unreported or were described in a purely negative light. This increased representation was not limited to the media. During the first commemorative march, police were present to help manage the event, showing how the LGBTQ+ rights movement was shifting from the margins and becoming more integrated into mainstream society (Armstrong and Crage, 2006, p.742). This increased visibility allowed the newly emerged LGBTQ+ liberation movement to gain more traction. Some resulting successes were the American Psychiatric Association's 1973 decision to remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders; the repeal of sodomy laws by more than half of US states in the 1970s; and the elimination of the Civil Service Commission's ban on employing lesbians and gay men (D'Emilio, 1998, p.238). While some of the gains of the Stonewall era were later reversed following the election of President Ronald Reagan and the rise of a more conservative political climate in the 1980s (D'Emilio, 2002, p.84), these achievements are still a testament to the revolutionary impact of Stonewall.

While it is crucial to remember that Stonewall drew on the networks of the pre-existing homophile movement, the legacy of the social movements of the 1960s, and the work of the more radical LGBTQ+ activists of previous decades, it is not misleading to consider it a moment of radical change. It was a tipping point in popularising the movement, expanding its membership and increasing its visibility among the general public, as well as in radicalising it by changing its methods and objectives. However, it is also crucial to keep in mind that overly focusing on Stonewall brings about the risk of neglecting minority history and narratives. Many of the things which Stonewall brought to the fore of the movement, such as violent resistance and a group identity, were already happening within non-white and non-male LGBTQ+ communities - the trans community, the lesbian community and among working-class LGBTQ+ people and people of colour. Nonetheless, it is fair to consider it a tipping point for the movement given the changes it brought to the mainstream of LGBTQ+ activism.

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THE FALL AND RISE OF RAPPLER AND MARIA RESSA UNDER DUTERTE'S DICTATORSHIP

THEO WEBB

ILLUSTRATION BY AKIN ARTAR

This article discusses violent threats and hateful online messages, including rape and murder. Some readers may find this content distressing.

An increasingly porous relationship is developing between personal safety and free speech. Under the authoritarian rule of President Rodrigo Duterte, journalism, originally seen as a tool of public accountability, became a target of state repression. This shift underscores the fragile nature of free speech and personal freedom in the Philippines, and across the world. The case study of the suppression of Rappler, a digital media company focused on investigative journalism (Wake, 2021, p.161), highlights not only the perils facing independent media but also the broader implications for the future of free speech in states where press freedom is under threat. This essay first discusses the background of Maria Ressa, founder and chief executive of Rappler, then the significant impact the publication has in increasing the online nature of news-mediated public discourse and how this has influenced political narratives in the Philippines. Further, Rappler and other independent news organisations have the potential to combat authoritarian dictators who attempt to deploy a populist rhetoric by challenging the state's populist narrative. Finally, this essay argues that independent news organisations need to strengthen their own publishing and editorial practices, as well as show solidarity with each other, in order to survive in the midst of repression. Authoritarian leaders use the media to control the political narrative. Rappler juxtaposes this, disrupting populist media narratives and exposing governmental wrongdoing, often at heavy cost. While direct threats and increased danger are a deterrent to reporting, it is imperative to continue producing critical journalism.

THE RISE OF MARIA RESSA AND RAPPLER

Maria Ressa is the founder and chief executive of Rappler. In 2021, Ressa and Dimitry Muratov, former editor-in-chief of Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, were named as joint winners of the Nobel Peace Prize. Ressa has collated a plethora of other awards for her journalism and courage in the face of oppression: the World Association of Newspapers' Golden Pen of Freedom Award, the International Centre for Journalists Knight International Journalism Award, and was named Time Magazine's Person of the Year in 2018. These awards came as a result of her work in combating President Duterte's authoritarianism. In particular she criticised his authoritarian War on Drugs, which by 2016 was killing an average of eight people a night (Wake, 2021, p.163). In this function Rappler is acting as a watchdog, and as such is powerful in combating the administration (Schudson, 1995). Rappler published articles that were heavily critical of the administration, leading to significant consequences for Ressa. Duterte antagonised her with an army of online trolls and brought multiple legal cases against her and her publication. For example, the government filed eleven cases against

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Rappler in 2018. Ressa was arrested twice in a five-week period in 2019, and in 2020 was found guilty of cyber libel–spreading false information about another person through a news or internet network. This conviction was for a story published eight years earlier, when the law that they supposedly violated did not yet exist (Wake, 2021, p.163). Several theoretical perspectives enhance understanding of the case study of Rappler and Maria Ressa; Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model, explains how media can be co-opted to serve state interests (Herman and Chomsky, 1988), and Zeynep Tufekci's concept of 'Networked Authoritarianism', highlights how social media is both a tool for repression and resistance (Tufekci, 2017).

RAPPLER'S RISE AS AN ONLINE MEDIA GIANT IN THE PHILIPPINES

Rappler is a portmanteau of the English word 'rap', purposefully connoting the spread of information, and 'ripple', which means to make waves (DBpedia, 2021). This is indicative of the style of journalism that Rappler undertakes, which was shown when combating Duterte. Its popular status was evident from the start, receiving over three million page views per month in the first six months after its creation (Quinn and Busch, 2013, p.43). However, this kind of journalism generates backlash, especially with a populist President who has a vested interest in maintaining a positive public image.

As early as 2014, Rappler began exposing online 'Black Ops' campaigns that Duterte used to tarnish Rappler's reputation. Rappler created a database designed to survey the emerging information ecosystem, which Ressa describes as 'a kind of Interpol for disinformation networks' (Jansen, 2023, p.4826). The database indicated that journalism was severely under threat, and could no longer function as a bearer of facts and information.
This, in turn, creates a commodification of news media, monetising page views and engagement times, favouring sensationalism over informative journalism backed by empirical fact.

This is corroborated by Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, where the lines between reality and artificial copies of such, become blurred (Thiry-Cherques, 2010). He discusses simulacra–copies without an original–where media no longer represents reality. Still, the media is replaced with a fabricated version, and this can be seen with political propaganda that portrays Duterte as a strongman, despite his human rights violations. This changes the direction of news-media, as they now have to contend with avoiding populist, often hate-fuelled, responses to their content, rather than simply government backlash. As authoritarian leaders attempt to involve the public by 'weaponi[sing] the internet' (Ressa, 2021b), dictators can both control the political narrative and surveil the population. Cumulatively these processes damage media independence. This links with the Herman and Chomsky Propaganda Model, where structural, political and the economic interests of elites all influence media content and performance, which contrasts with the popular narrative that much of the media is independent (Mullen and Klaehn, 2010, p.217). This creates a culture of combative opinions and disinformation on social media sites; 'Social media rips apart context, atomises meaning' (Wake, 2021, p.163). It is difficult to measure the difference between this simply being in the public eye, and it being a hate campaign - but with Ressa receiving over 99 hate messages a day (Wake, 2021, p.163), the psychological impact of this is undeniable. This effect is furthered by the severity of the attacks, with phrases used such as: 'I hope you get raped'; 'You're just one bullet away'; or 'Wait till you cross that corner' (Tapsell, 2021, p.2199). Language of this nature goes beyond personal critique and aligns with definitions of hate crime under international legal standards such as that of Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This is supported by Zeynep Tufekci's concept of 'Networked Authoritarianism', where social media can become a tool for both repression and resistance (Tufekci, 2017). Duterte, in this case, used social media as a tool to bolster his populist narrative, encouraging his hard-line supporters to spread misinformation about Ressa and Rappler's stories. Nevertheless, Rappler maintained a popular user base, being the fourth most visited news site online by the end of Duterte's tenure in 2022 (Chua, 2022). As such, social media is important in challenging populist dictators like Duterte, as positive social media campaigns can serve to redevelop narratives and engage a populace in content outside the mainstream (Pernia, 2019, p.66). The perilous threshold between social media as a positive and negative influence is especially pertinent here.

CRITICISM CREATES CONSEQUENCES

Free speech consistently became a target when Duterte's administration was threatened. As Rappler's readership grew, so did the visceral nature of Duterte's attacks on the paper. Multiple

...social media is important in challenging populist dictators like Duterte, as positive social media campaigns can serve to redevelop narratives and engage a populace in content outside the mainstream.

arrests have had not only a profound impact on Ressa's personal life, but also on Rappler, as it was necessary for the founder to be physically present in various court locations. During this time Rappler also saw a sharp reduction in advertising revenue (Tapsell, 2021, p.2200). Scholars like Denis McQuail (1983, pp.85–86), a key proponent of Mass Communication Theory, propose that authoritarian leaders subordinate the press in order to control society, through methods such as censorship, direct state control of media production, controlled import of foreign media, or legislation. This is a marked difference from simple online criticism, which seeks to undermine transparency and journalistic integrity. When such a prominent figure supports this, it cements the marginalised status of independently owned organisations such as Rappler. This, combined with online threats from pro-Duterte accounts, created a harsh environment for critical news organisations, and heightens the fact that 'online violence is real-world violence' (Ressa, 2021a).

RAPPLER'S STRATEGY: LESSONS FOR INDEPENDENT MEDIA

In 'How to Stand Up to a Dictator' (Ressa, 2022), Ressa advocates for a three-pillar journalism reform strategy in order to combat authoritarianism. First, to hold technology accountable through regulation that protects journalistic standards and ethics; second, to grow investigative journalism; third, to build global communities of action to protect frontline journalism through collaborations among the free press, media and civil society groups (Jansen, 2023, p.4825). Dictators exert control and curtail criticism. Duterte, for example, directly combats Rappler in his Second State of the Union Address. He said that it was 'fully owned by Americans', and claimed that 'not only is Rappler's news fake, it being Filipino is fake' (ABS-CBN News, 2024). Thus, the need for independent news media to respond grows rapidly. Media outlets must engage in producing content that backs their production, as opposed to developing contrarian but truthful analysis. This can be done by reinforcing and adapting traditional reporting practices, for example, by engaging a wider viewer base rather than pursuing a narrow audience, so that news organisations can strengthen their credibility.

Overall, independent media sites must do more than simply report. They must advocate for their own freedom and legitimacy, especially in a world where populism is on the rise and attacks on alternative narratives are ever-present. Rappler engages in this by, in some cases, simply continuing to report despite facing threats, criminal charges, and arrests. They also reported extensively on Duterte's War on Drugs, which has led to the deaths of over 30,000 Filipinos to date, a liberal estimate, with Duterte reportedly paying officers up to one million PH pesos (GB pound 13,200) per killing, although this is alleged in parliamentary hearings and not corroborated with evidence (Ratcliffe, 2025). Transparency is also important in the editorial process, so the public knows that the leadership teams are independent of any malign interests. Furthermore, solidarity must be shown between independent media sites to combat populist rhetoric from larger news sites with a vested interest in remaining supportive of populist regimes, maintaining a *quid pro quo* state of affairs with the governing bodies (Tapsell, 2021, p.2194). Even within the information that the media provide, included in this must be advocacy pieces for press freedom such as denouncing attacks on the independent nature of the press and asserting the right to media access so that nothing can go unreported (Macaraig and Hameleers, 2022, p.2087). This can alter public opinion as it diversifies the information presented to them.

CONCLUSION

Maria Ressa and Rappler illustrate how small news sites build trust and repel populist, authoritarian and uninformed criticism. Their example effectively demonstrates how other independent journalists can maintain their work in authoritarian regimes.

Despite multiple threats from Duterte, Rappler has continued to report on Duterte's War on Drugs and become a beacon for independent news reporting in the shadow of larger, more biased, news organisations. Following Rappler's model, independent news organisations can combat this by going beyond their traditional reporting practices, through backing their own editorial methods as well as the credibility of other small news sites. Alongside reporting news and ensuring transparency in government and other organisations, they must bolster their own legitimacy, displaying strong editorial and reporting standards, while maintaining solidarity with other independent media sites. These steps will ensure public trust in this type of media, switching the narrative away from populist rhetorics. Without this vital source of critique, atrocities such as Duterte's drug war may be both accepted by the public, and facilitated by those in power. The media, if it retains its resilient independence, is an important actor in both stopping and shedding light on abuses of power.

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DENY DEFEND DEPOSE

HOW HEALTHCARE IN THE UNITED STATES HAS STRANGLED THE 99 PERCENT

ZIKRA ZUHUREE

ILLUSTRATION BY TY RAMAGE

DENY, DEFEND, DEPOSE: HOW HEALTHCARE IN THE UNITED STATES HAS STRANGLED THE 99 PERENT

ZIKRA ZUHUREE

'United Healthcare CEO Fatally Shot outside Manhattan Hotel' (Halpert, 2024).

Countless headlines have outlined the events of December 4, which caused public outcry on many levels. However, the killing of Brian Thompson, CEO of UnitedHealthcare, was not a sudden event, and represents a much deeper problem within American society. Despite having promised prosperity to many as proclaimed in the Constitution, the United States has always faced difficulties in its follow through, perhaps most notably when it comes to basic healthcare. As of 2023, 26 million Americans are not covered by health insurance and an additional 23 percent of the population is underinsured with their current coverage (Collins and Gupta, 2024, p.1). Yet these low rates are not a recent phenomenon. This paper investigates how privatised healthcare within the United States has become increasingly predatory, leading to a shared sentiment of despair and resentment among working and middle class Americans. Moreover, it explores how public policy and attitudes are shaped to ensure that there is enough public opposition to the idea of universal healthcare, despite the tens of millions who would benefit from it. This intersection between inaccessible public and private healthcare has ultimately created a tipping point for the American public, where growing and widespread resentment has resulted in events such as the assassination of the UnitedHealthcare CEO by an ordinary American citizen.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF PUBLIC HEALTHCARE

The weaponisation of the American Dream and its values is integral in shaping population disdain for public healthcare. As Edward Kennedy said, 'most Americans agree that good health is an essential part of the American dream' (Kennedy, 1998, p.6). This elusive idea of the American Dream has shaped much of the debate surrounding both private and public healthcare on both sides. While proponents, including civilians and lawmakers, such as Edward Kennedy, believe that healthcare is paramount to the American Dream, its critics instead argue that universal healthcare goes against the ideals of grit and accountability (Wetherell, Reyna, and Sadler, 2013). For years, critics of public healthcare have justified their perspective by claiming that reform would lead to 'economic inefficiency, overreaching government intervention, and even socialism' (Wetherell, Reyna, and Sadler, 2013, p.43).

Furthermore, the idea of the American Dream has led others to believe in the stereotype that 'policy beneficiaries violate cherished values, such as hard work' (Wetherell, Reyna, and Sadler, 2013, p.44). Thus, both liberals and conservatives view those who benefit from public assistance as more responsible for their circumstances and therefore less deserving of such assistance due to their perceived slight of American values (Morgan, Mullen, and Skitka, 2010). Furthermore, influenced by media rhetoric, many assume that these public beneficiaries are 'lower-status individuals such as the poor, unemployed, immigrants, [and other racialized groups], i.e. groups frequently accused of violating values' (Wetherell, Reyna, and Sadler, 2013, p.44). Despite the conflation of public beneficiaries and racialised groups—a message upheld by a long history of racism in the U.S.— 43 percent of recipients are white people, and only 26 percent and 23 percent are Hispanic and Black, respectively (Minton and Giannarelli, 2019, p.7). This attitude permeates most of the public opinion surrounding welfare projects, such as universal healthcare, especially because public opinion is shaped to view these groups as violating precious values and therefore unworthy of costly reforms (Wetherell, Reyna, and Sadler, 2013, p.45). Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that many beneficiaries of public healthcare do not benefit from these reforms to the extent that anti-public policy lobbyists argue. Critics of a public healthcare system within the United States have created a narrative that is not only inaccurate, but pervasive and successful in fostering resentment.

PREDATORY PRACTICES OF PRIVATISED HEALTHCARE

In the U.S., where working class power has greatly eroded, inequalities in healthcare are highlighted by the private market. As Christiansen (2017, p.84) observes, 'healthcare is generally treated as a commodity', ensuring that private insurance companies have an 'economic incentive to deny coverage or care' even if those that are denied are 'well positioned enough to have coverage'. The commodification of healthcare has worsened inequalities within the U.S., as those who are considered 'high-risk' – often low-income or racialised individuals – by insurance companies are more likely to be denied coverage despite being disproportionately affected by disease (Sommers et al., 2017, p.44). The lack of support for Medicaid, a public healthcare program, has also become more noticeable with the privatisation of hospitals, as the share of hospital beds at government-owned hospitals saw a decline of 40 percent, with a disproportionate decrease in Medicaid patients (Wilson, 2023, p.1). Acting as market competitors, hospitals are incentivised to accept fewer Medicaid patients and, as a result, public hospitals, which are struggling to stay afloat due to limited government funding, making them vulnerable to significant budget cuts, are forced to turn away Medicaid patients, causing a steeper divide between the care services available to low-income and high-income patients (Crawford, 2023, p.1).

This also contributes to the public perception of private healthcare. A poll by the NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that public satisfaction with the healthcare system in the U.S. is 'remarkably low', with fewer than half of Americans saying it is handled well (Seitz, 2022). In fact, only twelve percent of Americans believe that the healthcare system is handled 'extremely or very well' (Seitz, 2022, p.1). Ultimately, the simmering resentment towards the current system of privatised healthcare has been growing at an alarming rate for many Americans.

Furthermore, this public disdain is being continuously reinforced by the rising prices of private healthcare. The cost of purchasing privatised healthcare insurance has skyrocketed in recent years, having increased 72 percent since the end of the Bush Sr. administration in 1993 (Clement, 2007, p.147). According to the US Bureau of Labour Statistics (Matsumoto, 2024), from December 2005 to December 2022, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for medical care increased by 67.8 percent, with an average annual increase of 3.1 percent. Indeed, when Thompson was shot, he was on the way to UnitedHealthcare's annual investors conference, and if past trends were to be followed, we can assume that there would have been another increase in coverage prices for the consumer who has only seen a stagnation in their wages (Nesterak, 2024). This pattern across private healthcare practices has become the rule; despite the U.S. spending twice as much as other high-income countries, it performs worse on measures of health and healthcare (Gunja, Gumas, and Williams II, 2023, p.20).

Furthermore, the public healthcare system is 'designed to discourage people' from using the appropriate services (Gunja, Gumas, and Williams II, 2023, p.20). According to a Stanford study, when public healthcare becomes privatised, patients lose and profits skyrocket (Duggan et al., 2023). As stated, private operators increase profitability through a reduction in employment of staff – leading to an inefficient and stressful work environment – while increasing 'the mean revenue per patient' (Duggan et al., 2023, p.2). The profit from the patient is achieved by 'cream-skimming more profitable patients and services, as well as by increasing prices' (Duggan et al., 2023, p.2). In this sense, patients are essentially being exploited for profit, while paying exorbitant amounts to receive healthcare that does not reflect the paid quality.

Despite these predatory practices in private healthcare, the American public has re-elected a President, Donald Trump, who actively tried to sabotage the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which granted healthcare insurance to nearly 20 million Americans (Thompson, 2020; Sommers et al., 2017, p.44). By cutting the ACA's subsidies, discouraging legal 'aliens' from enrolling, and ensuring that those who are enrolled would receive lower-quality insurance, President Trump began chipping away at the only stable healthcare system within the United States. This allows private healthcare insurance companies to further prey on the vulnerable, leading to an increase in those who are underinsured or uninsured. The U.S.'s healthcare bubble, which allows for the cost of insurance to far exceed its value, only exacerbates this (Thompson 2020, pp.2–3; Chen, Liang, and Lin, 2016, p.100). By forcing its citizens to pay exorbitant amounts of money out-of-pocket, the U.S. is slowly causing more resentment for the insurance system to embroil. Although private healthcare exists in other OECD countries such as France and Australia, they have a mixture of public and private healthcare which allows them to receive a base level of care without being forced to insure it (McGough et al., 2024, pp.2–5). Evidently, these sentiments have the ability to bubble over into a more violent resistance.

Regardless of President Trump's efforts, the ACA has stood strong, exemplifying how necessary a stable healthcare system is for the American public (Sen, 2015). Despite critics claiming that big government overreach could potentially affect the population in an obstructive manner by involving themselves in private affairs and that reform is too costly, research shows something quite different. According to the Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker, 'relative to the size of its economy, the U.S. spends a greater amount on healthcare than other high-income

ZIKRA ZUHUREE

By forcing its citizens to pay exorbitant amounts of money out-of-pocket, the U.S. is slowly causing more resentment for the insurance system to embroil.

nations' (McGough et al., 2024, pp.1–2). In fact, comparatively, the U.S. spends twice as much as other wealthy countries when it comes to healthcare spending (McGough et al., 2024, p.2). The United States's lag in achieving universal healthcare (UHC) is made more obvious when compared to poorer countries and regions that have managed to achieve effective healthcare at a low cost for a majority of the population (Sen, 2015, p.2). In Rwanda, for example, premature mortality has fallen and life expectancy has doubled since the mid-1990s. Sen (2015, p.3) clearly establishes how many of these states have achieved a healthcare model that can be easily implemented, despite economic critics claiming that it would bankrupt the economy. In reality, multiple regions have proven why this is false and why a universal healthcare system actually boosts the economy. Furthermore, by implementing UHC, many nations such as Japan and Singapore have seen a positive effect for their economies due to 'the greater productivity of a healthy and educated population, leading to higher wages and larger rewards from more effective work' (Sen, 2015, p.7). While this connection may be unsurprising to many, the fact that UHC has the ability to ensure this clearly emphasises how a stable insurance system would allow many – including those who are vulnerable – to have access to efficient and quality care.

Furthermore, within the current system, 44 percent of Americans receive employer-based healthcare, reducing labour market flexibility and forcing Americans to suffer in jobs in order to ensure that they are insured (US Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2023, p.1; O'Brien, 2023, p.12). As shown in polls, positive outlooks considering the quality and coverage of healthcare in the United States have steadily decreased with only 44 percent of Americans claiming that it is very good. Furthermore, only 19 percent of Americans are satisfied with the cost of healthcare (Brenan, 2024, pp.1–9). This further increases the resentment many American citizens have towards their current system, as they realise the predatory practices of the privatised healthcare system they have today.

However, it is important to recognise the flaws within the ACA and the current Medicaid program. Although it has its advantages, the current political landscape has also ensured that further amendments to Medicaid go through rigorous debate, and often rejection, evidenced by 19 states opting out of the Medicaid expansion to cover more people from lower income backgrounds (Gaffney and McCormick, 2017, p.1443). Furthermore, the ACA runs on 'value-based delivery provisions' which leads to an excessive focus on 'pay-for-performance' programs which tends to lead to the siphoning of resources from doctors who provide services to disadvantaged groups (Gaffney and McCormick, 2017, p.1444). This further isolates already disadvantaged groups from the system that is supposed to be caring for them, leading to further divides within the debate regarding healthcare within the United States.

CURRENT AFFAIRS AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

Recently, when addressing the healthcare system, current affairs have come to play a significantly more important role with the assassination of Thompson. While the shooting shocked many, the American public's response to the situation, and specifically towards the suspected assassin Luigi Mangione, has clearly exposed the deeper undercurrents of bitterness running through the American public. When asked about their feelings on the shooting and who they sympathised with, 45 percent of young American respondents chose Mangione, 17 percent chose Thompson, and 37 percent said neither (Pandey, 2025, p.1). Mangione has now amassed a large following on his personal social media where many are praising his actions, claiming him to be a Robin Hood-like figure for the public (Schmunk, 2024). While Schmunk (2024) says that 'a CEO makes an easy villain', many others believe that the disdain for healthcare companies caused by the direct suffering they inflict on the American public may have played a bigger role (Demby, 2024). Although there are various reasons for Mangione's fame, not limited to but including his privileged status as a white male within American society, the anger at the system has become violent and suddenly obvious to many.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, while the United States leads in healthcare research, its capability to deliver an embellished healthcare system to all its citizens, including the vulnerable, is severely lacking. Although there has been a historic separation of the government and private affairs in the U.S., they are severely behind countries of a similar economic and social standing that are working on universal healthcare becoming more of a basic right and the standard. This reflects the inefficiency of the current system and lends itself as a primary reason why there is so much dissent within the American public as they are forced to battle with artificial and insensitive companies who do not care for the average American. Even though the shooting was a tragedy, it symbolises a darker transition to resistance that the American public feels forced to turn to, and may significantly impact how healthcare reform is conducted within the country in the future. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that this article primarily emphasises the effects of the privatised healthcare system within the U.S. – many of which are negative – and does not focus on the disadvantages that are also present in a universal healthcare system. Ultimately, governments and corporations should look towards a future in which both systems can co-exist in a manner which does not negatively affect the general population as healthcare should be a right, not a privilege.

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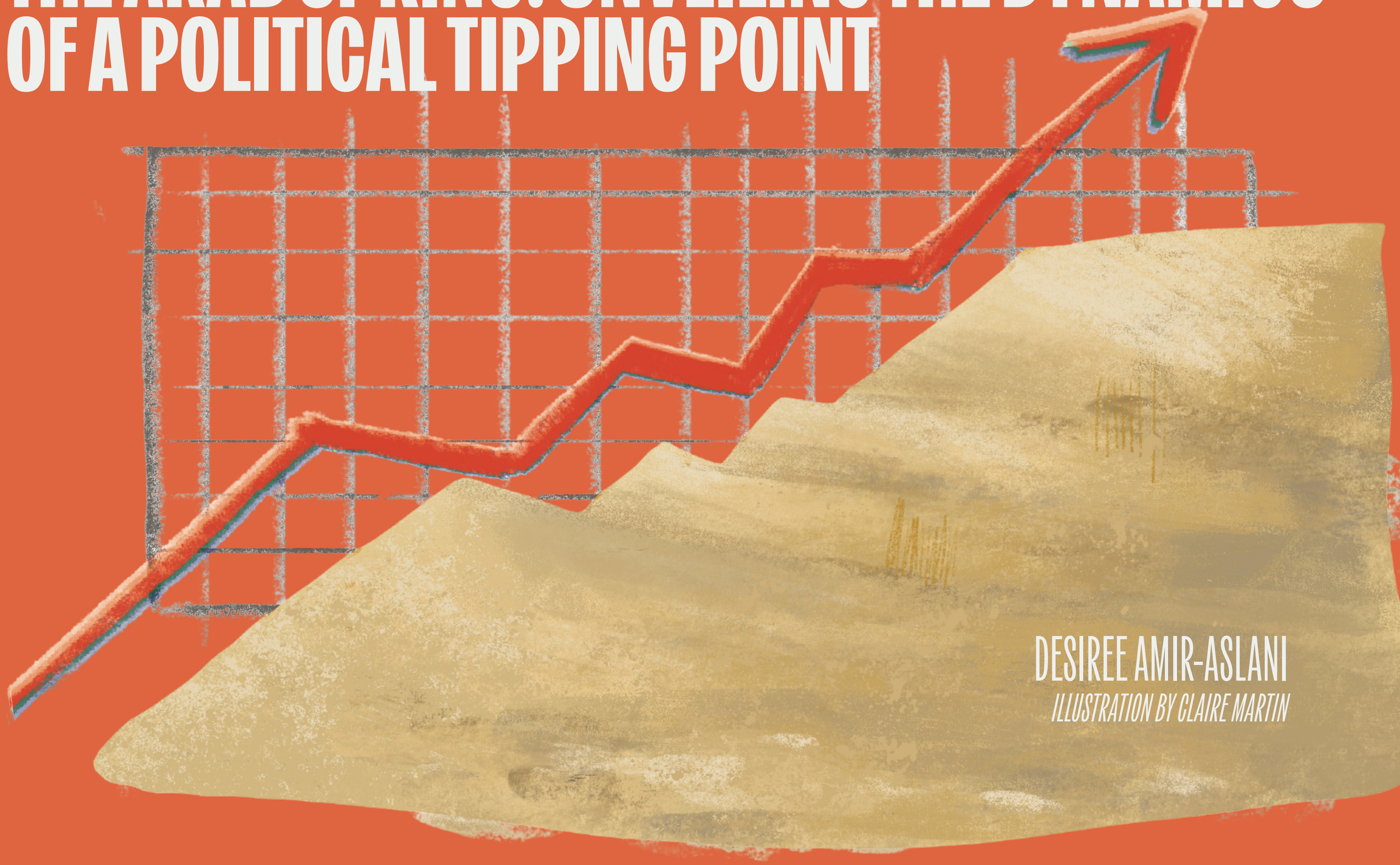
THE ARAB SPRING: UNVEILING THE DYNAMICS OF A POLITICAL TIPPING POINT



DESIREE AMIR-ASLANI

ILLUSTRATION BY CLAIRE MARTIN

THE ARAB SPRING: UNVEILING THE DYNAMICS OF A POLITICAL TIPPING POINT

DESIREE AMIR-ASLANI

The Arab Spring, which swept across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2011, was an economic paradigm shift — a moment when long-standing structural pressures, once contained within existing political and economic frameworks, escalated beyond control, triggering systemic upheaval. What appeared to be sudden eruptions of dissent were, in fact, the result of long-standing economic grievances that eroded the very foundations of the status quo. As these pressures intensified, widespread frustration transformed into mass mobilisation, triggering a wave of protests that quickly spread across the region. Though each uprising unfolded within its own national context, together, they underscore the role of financial precarity in shaping political trajectories. This essay contends that economic factors, particularly unemployment, inflation, and crony capitalism, were the primary forces driving these revolts, demonstrating that economic instability, rather than political ideology alone, was the central catalyst of the Arab Spring (Devarajan and Ianchovichina, 2018). However, while this wave of unrest succeeded in toppling certain regimes, its failure to deliver meaningful economic reform raises urgent questions about the cyclical nature of instability in the region, suggesting that unresolved structural inequalities may continue to fuel future crises.

ECONOMIC WEAKNESS AS CATALYST

A key structural factor contributing to the Arab Spring reaching its tipping point was the region's demographic imbalance, fuelling high levels of youth unemployment. The MENA region experienced one of the highest rates of youth population growth globally, while economic expansion failed to keep pace, resulting in widespread underemployment. By 2011, over 60 percent of the region's population was under the age of 30, with youth unemployment rates in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen exceeding 30 percent, among the highest in the world (World Bank, 2011; Mina, 2022). According to the 'Youth Hypothesis', countries with disproportionately young populations and insufficient labour markets are more susceptible to political unrest, particularly when educational attainment rises but economic prospects remain limited (Campante and Chor, 2012, p.179). This mismatch between rising expectations and stagnant opportunities aligns with Gurr's (1970) theory of relative deprivation, emphasising how frustration emerges from poverty and the perceived gap between anticipated and actual life outcomes. For many educated youths, the inability to secure stable employment reinforced a sense of exclusion and disillusionment with the broader economic order. This perception of systemic and enduring marginalisation intensified grievances, with digital platforms serving as conduits for individuals to disseminate their frustrations, engage in political discourse, and coordinate collective action (Howard and Hussain, 2011).

The significance of economic stability on demographic pressures is further underscored by the contrast with Gulf Cooperation Council countries, where similarly youthful populations did not lead to revolt. In these nations, substantial oil revenues enabled governments to implement extensive public sector employment schemes and maintain generous subsidies, effectively mitigating potential unrest, showcasing that economic strength stabilises demographic pressures. However, such measures have led to bloated public sectors and have failed to address employment challenges (International Monetary Fund, 2016, pp.11–13). This contrast highlights that youth-driven unrest was not inevitable but contingent on structural economic weaknesses. It also demonstrates that what veered societies into revolt was not simply demographic pressure but the widespread recognition that existing economic systems were structurally incapable of delivering on the promises of modernisation, thereby eroding the legitimacy of both the state and market.

CONNECTIONS OVER CALIBRE / HOW CRONIES OF CAPITALISM DELIGITIMISED THE STATE

In addition to demographic pressures, escalating inflation in food and fuel prices was critical in pushing economic grievances beyond the breaking point. By 2010–2011, global food prices had risen by 32 percent (Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2011), placing acute pressure on import-dependent MENA economies, where wages remained stagnant and subsidies steadily eroded (World Bank, 2011). These dynamics disproportionately affected low-income and informal workers, who lacked access to social protection. In Tunisia and Egypt, inflation on essential goods exceeded fifteen percent, significantly reducing real incomes and deepening financial insecurity (World Bank, 2011). Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor who was subjected to police harassment while being stifled by dire financial circumstances, led him to self-immolate and become emblematic of this structural exclusion, highlighting the intersection of precarious labour conditions and bureaucratic repression (Bishara, 2021). Rather than alleviating the burden, state responses shaped by years of neoliberal restructuring prioritised fiscal discipline over redistribution. Under pressure from the International Monetary Fund

For many educated youths, the inability to secure stable employment reinforced a sense of exclusion and disillusionment with the broader economic order.

(IMF), governments introduced austerity reforms that included subsidy cuts and reduced public spending, further straining the livelihoods of economically marginalised populations (Hertog, 2014, pp.5–6). These measures neither addressed underlying inequalities nor restored public confidence, instead they simply shifted the costs of the crisis onto the most vulnerable while leaving elite privilege intact. When state institutions fail to respond to broad-based hardship, legitimacy is eroded, creating a catalyst for rupture. This dynamic reflects Theda Skocpol's (1979) theory of social revolutions, which emphasises how structural weaknesses exposed within state systems when legitimacy collapses can lead to mass uprisings. In this context, economic policymaking appears to citizens as a mechanism for preserving elite interests and maintaining international financial credibility rather than a response to citizen welfare, reducing trust in government decision-making. The convergence of inflation, retrenched welfare, and elite detachment in Arab Spring countries did not simply expose weaknesses in the economic model but fundamentally delegitimised the state, positioning revolt not as a spontaneous reaction but as a rational rejection of a system that had forfeited its moral and political authority.

Furthermore, crony capitalism entrenched inequality and fuelled widespread perceptions of economic injustice, reinforcing structural inequality and preventing upward mobility. Rather than operating as liberal market economies, many regimes in the region maintained hybrid systems where political connections mediated access to wealth and opportunity (Kırşanlı, 2023). These hybrid arrangements enabled the entrenchment of crony capitalism by blurring the boundaries between public authority and private gain, allowing elites to monopolise resources through informal networks of patronage (Diwan, Malik and Atiyas, 2019). In Tunisia, Ben Ali's family reportedly controlled up to 50 percent of the economy during the Arab Spring, using regulatory powers to eliminate competitors and channel state contracts to regime insiders (World Bank, 2017; Kırşanlı, 2023, p.9). In Egypt, military-owned enterprises dominated entire sectors, enabling the consolidation of economic privilege within a narrow ruling class while sidelining private initiative and suppressing market entry (Sayigh, 2019, p.13, 92; Diwan, Malik and Atiyas, 2019, pp.8–10). These exclusionary practices were not concealed; they were highly visible and widely resented, particularly among educated youth who remained excluded from formal employment despite possessing qualifications that, in theory, should have secured them stable jobs (Sika, 2012).

The perception that access to economic opportunity was determined not by merit but by loyalty to the regime and generational wealth eroded public faith in the legitimacy of both the economy and the state. As Springborg (2020) observes, economic marginalisation in the region was not simply the consequence of inefficient governance but an intentional strategy of political control, designed to distribute patronage and suppress dissent. The persistence of these clientelist networks after the uprisings, most clearly in Egypt under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, demonstrates that regime change did not dismantle the economic structures that had sparked the unrest (Kandil, 2014). What began as frustration with limited opportunity evolved into a broader recognition that the economic order itself was designed to entrench inequality. In this sense, crony capitalism was not merely a peripheral issue but a fundamental obstacle to reform. Its persistence underscores how the Arab Spring was driven not only by material hardship but also by the perception that the prevailing economic system systematically favoured entrenched elites over broader societal advancement.

While shared economic grievances helped ignite the Arab Spring across the Middle East and North Africa, the movement's uneven outcomes underscore the decisive role of state-specific responses in shaping its trajectory. (World Bank, 2015; Massoud, Doces, and Mageeet, 2019). The swift dissemination of protest imagery and narratives through social media platforms created an information cascade, wherein demonstrations in one nation inspired activists in others, reinforcing the perception of systemic economic injustice across the region (Howard and Hussain, 2011; Smidi and Shahin, 2013). This phenomenon aligns

with Granovetter's (1978) threshold model of collective behaviour, which posits that individuals are more likely to participate in collective action when they observe a critical mass of others doing so, especially in environments where political repression has previously deterred dissent (Granovetter, 1978). The initial uprising in Tunisia served as a catalyst, and its momentum quickly spread to Egypt and subsequently to Libya, Syria, and Yemen (Lageman, 2020). However, the contagious effect was not uniform across the region. Wealthier Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, managed to avert mass uprisings by deploying extensive fiscal measures, including increased public sector employment, expanded subsidies, and direct financial incentives to alleviate immediate economic grievances (Maestri, 2015). These interventions temporarily mitigated public dissatisfaction by addressing some material conditions that could lead to unrest. Although despite these preventive measures, underlying issues such as youth unemployment and economic diversification remain challenges for these nations (World Bank, 2015). The varied outcomes of the Arab Spring emphasise the complex interplay between economic pressures and governmental responses, illustrating that while shared grievances can spark movements across borders, the trajectory and impact of such uprisings are profoundly influenced by each state's unique socio-economic landscape and policy choices.

CONTINUING VULNERABILITIES

Despite the scale of these uprisings, post-revolutionary regimes largely failed to implement meaningful economic reform. In Egypt, President Mohamed Morsi's administration inherited a deteriorating economy and struggled to address its structural problems, leading to further instability and his eventual removal in a military coup led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in 2013 (Atlantic Council, 2012; Nugent, 2020). Under President Sisi's leadership, economic control became increasingly centralised, with military-affiliated enterprises expanding their dominance over key sectors, which stifled private sector growth and exacerbated economic disparities, failing to implement meaningful reform (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020). Tunisia, despite a more successful democratic transition, continues to grapple with high unemployment and inflation, fuelling public frustration (The Finance Association, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war further exacerbated these socio-economic vulnerabilities, slowing economic growth (International Federation of the Red Cross, 2022; United Nations Development Programme, 2020). In Syria and Yemen, initial uprisings escalated into prolonged conflicts, devastating economic infrastructure and leading to economic collapse, leaving essential commodities like food out of reach for most families (International Federation of the Red Cross, 2022).

External factors have also played a significant role; international financial institutions, notably the IMF, imposed austerity measures as conditions for financial assistance, often resulting in reduced public spending and increased taxation. These policies disproportionately affected vulnerable populations and sparked public dissent, as seen in protests in Jordan (Eurodad, 2017; Oxfam International, 2019). Skocpol's (1979) theory of social revolutions suggests that while mass mobilisation can dismantle existing governments, establishing enduring change requires robust political will, effective governance structures, and comprehensive economic planning. The experiences of these nations post-Arab Spring reaffirm this theory, revealing that the absence of these elements can perpetuate cycles of disillusionment and instability. Furthermore, revolutions driven primarily by economic desperation rather than a coherent ideological framework may lack the vision needed to establish sustainable economic models, leaving nations susceptible to counter-revolutionary forces or ongoing instability (Mazarei and Mirzoev, 2015). In essence, the aftermath of the Arab Spring demonstrates that while economic crises can act as catalysts for revolutionary movements, achieving substantive and lasting economic reform demands more than the overthrow of existing regimes; it requires the cultivation of resilient institutions, strategic economic policies, and a steadfast commitment to addressing the root causes of public discontent.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Arab Spring revealed the fragility of political systems built atop decades of economic exclusion and unaddressed structural inequality. Far from being spontaneous expressions of discontent, the uprisings were the culmination of long-standing grievances rooted in unemployment, inflation, and crony capitalism (Sika, 2012; Kırşanlı, 2023). These economic pressures, compounded by unfulfilled expectations and the visible entrenchment of elite privilege, gradually eroded the legitimacy of ruling regimes (Devarajan and Ianchovichina, 2018). Though the revolts succeeded in toppling several authoritarian leaders, the post-revolutionary period has demonstrated that dismantling a regime is not equivalent to dismantling the economic structures that sustained it. In many cases, new governments either reproduced old patterns of exclusion or lacked the institutional capacity to enact transformative change (World Bank, 2015; Diwan, Malik, and Atiyas, 2019). The persistence of structural inequality and the failure to deliver tangible economic improvements have contributed to renewed cycles of frustration, disillusionment, and, in some cases, authoritarian resurgence (Beck and Huser, 2012). Ultimately, the Arab Spring serves as a potent reminder that economic justice is not merely a peripheral concern in the pursuit of political reform—it is a prerequisite. Without addressing the deep-rooted economic conditions that fuelled the unrest, the region remains vulnerable to future tipping points.

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FIELDS OF CHANGE: THE RISE OF REFORM IN THE ‘RURAL RIGHT’ CONSERVATIVE HEARTLANDS

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ILLUSTRATION BY TY RAMAGE

FIELDS OF CHANGE: THE RISE OF REFORM IN THE ‘RURAL RIGHT’ CONSERVATIVE HEARTLANDS

GEORGI MITCHELL-JONES

The 2024 UK general election saw the Conservative Party suffer their worst electoral defeat in history whilst the Labour party gained a 174-seat majority. Whilst first impression might suggest the political Left are the sole winners of this election, due to the intensity of the swing from Conservative to Labour, the reality is much more multifaceted. Aggregate data collection allows us to better understand regional voting patterns and showcases significant electoral gains for the Liberal Democrats, Green Party and Reform UK. Rural vote analysis exposes that geography was fundamental to the election result (Curtice, 2024) and forces reconsideration over left-behind communities illustrating the damaging socio-political effects of urban and rural disconnection (Jones, 2023, p.29). This paper uses 2024 English election data to analyse and evaluate rural electoral shifts focusing on the rise of the Reform party in the ‘Rural Right’ (Labour Together, 2024). Fragmentation on the political Right calls for academic inquiry to realise the extent of political and social isolation in rural areas, a known catalyst for political disillusionment (Olsen, 1969; Hook, 1949).

This paper examines existing understandings of rural voting behaviours and considers how immigration as a policy concern has deepened divides in the Right wing. The subsequent fragmentation of the political Right has the potential to destabilise the political system, facilitating the emergence of extremist rhetoric in rural areas of England as evidenced in the rise of Reform UK. Throughout quantitative data analysis, this paper seeks to highlight the dangers of a continued focus on urban narratives and the risks of metrophilia - ‘the fashionable yet uncritical embrace of city-centric narratives of development in place-based policymaking’ (Waite and Morgan, 2019, p.382)

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RURAL VOTING PATTERNS

Analysis of voter behaviour in rural areas relies on the understanding of two factors: firstly, the relationship between voter age and party preference and secondly, the relationship between voter age and geography. A wealth of literature indicates that the Conservatives do particularly well at the ballot box with older voters (Tonge, Loughran, and Mycock, 2021; Davidson, 2005). This relationship has been attributed to the Conservatives assumed proficiency with economic handling (Gamble, 2017), in particular, protecting wealth accumulated through years in the workforce and retirement (Bale and Webb, 2018) and lower tax rates (Bale and Webb, 2010). To this end, older voters typically vote for economically moderate and socially conservative political parties. In the 2024 general election, the relationship between the favorability of conservative politics and the older generation was strikingly clear in polling data with 61 percent of over 70’s voting for the political Right as opposed to seventeen percent of 18–24-year-olds (McDonnell, 2024).

In terms of the relationship between voter age and geography, Government statistics show that in rural areas, ‘more people are between 50–59 than any other age group’ and that the average age in rural areas has ‘been over 40 for some years’ (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2024, p.10). These foundational insights form a solid basis to suggest that rural areas, dominated by older voters are more likely to vote Conservative. The Labour sponsored think tank, Labour Together, echoes this through their label of this geographic voting block as the ‘Rural Right’ (Labour Together, 2024). They note that ‘the Rural Right are older voters…over a third of them are retired’ and ‘are more than twice as likely at most to care about immigration and asylum’ (Labour Together, 2024). Whilst Labour Together acknowledge that ‘the Rural Right have historically proved the Conservatives’ most loyal supporters,’ (Labour Together, 2024) they were quick to acknowledge changing UK geographies in the lead up to the 2024 election stating that ‘support for the Conservatives has collapsed dramatically’ (Labour Together, 2024). Now, only 40 percent of the Rural Right support the Conservatives, almost entirely due to the ‘dramatic surge’ of Reform UK, challenging the Conservatives from the Right. Therefore, the 2024 general election can be labelled as ‘realigning’, characterised by the ‘weakening social and psychological bonds between voters and parties’ (Evans and Norris, 1999, p.30). The Conservatives’ declining support in rural areas can be attributed to several interlocking factors. Rural economic and infrastructural growth remains slow, reinforcing perceptions of neglect among rural communities. Large-scale housing developments on the green belt, often framed as a solution to the UK’s housing crisis, face mounting opposition from local residents who view such projects as a threat to the environmental integrity and cultural identity of their communities. Concerns over increased pressure on already overstretched rural public services such as healthcare, transport, and education further deepen this opposition, exacerbating a sense of geographic and political marginalisation.

This growing rural disillusionment has created fertile ground for the rise of an alternative right-wing force, such as Reform UK, which has successfully mobilised Rural Right voters who feel abandoned by political elites. The party’s rhetoric exploits anxieties over economic stagnation, demographic shifts, and the urban-centric nature of policy-making, resonating with rural constituencies that perceive themselves as overlooked in national discourse. This trend aligns with critiques of metrophilia, the political and cultural bias towards cities that favours urban narratives in policy-making at the expense of rural discourses.

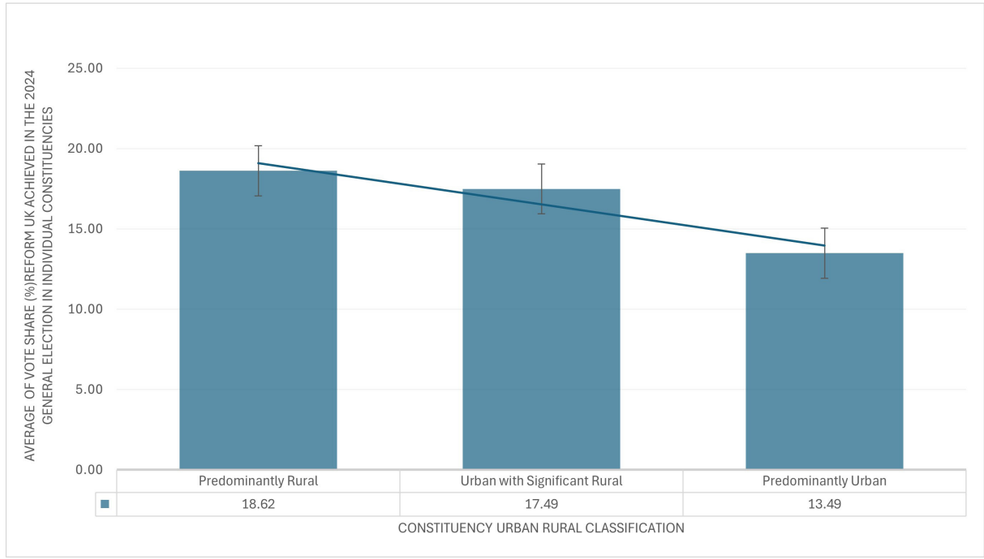

FIGURE 1: Average Reform Vote Share by Constituency Urban Rural Classification
Data gathered from: House of Commons, 2024a, House of Commons, 2024b, Office for National Statistics, 2016

THE RISE OF REFORM

The Reform Party, led by Nigel Farage, is often viewed as the latest iteration of the UK’s populist movement, which is frequently linked to patriotism, nationalism, anti-immigration policies, and a focus on popular politics. The party’s predecessors, UKIP and the Brexit Party, had limited representation in Parliament with only two MPs, both a result of Conservative defections. However, 2024 saw Reform win five parliamentary seats, all in former Conservative constituencies marking a large-scale defeat of the Conservative ‘Rural Right’. Reform secured 14.3 percent of the vote with candidates in 609 of 650 UK constituencies (Stewart, 2024). Although disadvantaged by the simple plurality system of First Past the Post (FPTP), their electoral popularity across the country was clear with the party coming second in the polls in ninety-eight seats (Stewart, 2024). Reforms’ five seats were won in the East Midlands (Ashfield, Skegness and Boston) and the East of England (Great Yarmouth, South Basildon, and East Thurrock).

METHODOLOGY

Great Yarmouth’s boundaries remained unchanged from the 2019 general election following the 2023 boundary review. In total, 65 parliamentary seats saw no alterations to their boundaries from 2019 to 2024 under this review. To better understand Reform UK’s electoral performance across constituencies, this study applies pre-2023 urban-rural classifications from the Office for National Statistics (2017) to determine whether a constituency is predominantly rural or urban. By overlaying these classifications onto the unchanged boundaries, we can isolate constituencies where geographies remained the same in 2024 as they did when these

classifications were made, allowing for a more controlled comparison of Reform’s vote share in 2024. This methodological approach provides a clearer insight into the extent to which rural voters aligned with Reform in 2024.

FINDINGS

The results in Figure 1 indicate that Reform UK saw, on average, a 5.13 percent higher vote share in predominantly rural areas than in predominantly urban areas. This result can be attributed, in part, to Reform’s popular hardline anti-immigration stance. According to YouGov polls, 34 percent of respondents who voted for Reform UK labelled controlling immigration as their primary concern (Smith, 2024). Immigration policy is particularly polarising both generationally and geographically. Whilst electoral priorities vary between voters, the Migration Observatory notes that ‘compared to people over age 45, younger people are less likely to say that immigration is a bad or very bad thing for Britain’ (Migration Observatory, 2023). Aside from age, another explanation for the popularity of Reform in rural areas is psychologies of scale. When media reports highlight the arrival of 1,000 migrants in a single day (Lee, 2021), those in urban areas may perceive this as a relatively small figure, given that the UK has 95 cities with populations ranging from 100,000 to one million (World Population Review, 2024). However, for rural residents, this same number can feel far more significant–equivalent to the combined populations of ten to fifteen villages or hamlets–amplifying the perceived impact of immigration on public services in their local communities. This felt pressure on public services demand has the power to create fragile social landscapes that breed intercommunal resentment. Academia has regularly detailed how ethnic minorities, or ‘othered’ peoples, can become easy targets for social blame and scapegoating (Goodfellow, 2020). Chakroborti and Garland (2004) note how anxieties surrounding the demand for rural services often result in the scapegoating of ethnic minorities. These anxieties, which manifest in broader attitudes towards immigration, are often perpetuated by media outlets and online chat rooms where binary language opposites are produced (Jones-Garcia and Touboulic, 2022; Andersen, 1991, p.27).

The results in Figure 1, whilst only covering ten percent of the UK constituencies, provides an initial insight into the relationship between predominantly rural areas and the popularity of the Reform party. Capturing the essential trends, it provides a basis for further consideration and exploration particularly regarding attitude shifts in rural centres. Whilst significant research exists suggesting older rural voters tend to hold stronger anti-immigration stances (Migration Observatory, 2023), simply accepting this fact without acknowledging root causes risks normalising geographic xenophobic tendencies. This could inadvertently worsen the ever deepening urban-rural divide which frames urban centres as progressive and rural landscapes as regressive (Jones, 2023; Davidson, 2005). Understanding differing perspectives on immigration is essential in bridging this gap and promoting a greater level of socio-political understanding.

REAPING WHAT WE SOW

If current trends continue, political fragmentation on the Right has the potential to intensify in future political landscapes. The Conservative Party, perceived as failing to deliver on promises to rural areas, has overseen a decline in rural public services for over a decade. From 2011 to 2023, England experienced a twenty percent reduction in bus service provision, which has left rural regions particularly vulnerable to the effects of worsening social infrastructures. These service disparities reflect broader issues of equity between urban and rural areas (Rural Services Network, 2024). Meanwhile, Labour as an alternative has become decreasingly appealing to the rural electorate, especially those connected to the agriculture sector, following their changes to inheritance tax and Agricultural Property Relief (Cooper, 2024; Kovacevic, Reuben and Georgieva, 2024; Kumah and Prior, 2024; White, 2024).

Politicians and policymakers alike should be concerned by the fragmentation of the political Rights and the attitude shift of the rural electorate. The weakening of traditional rural party allegiances, whereby rural areas have typically aligned with conservatism, signals a growing political fragility, which has been easily exploited by extremist parties like Reform UK. Far-right parties, such as Reform UK, have historically capitalised on this instability by scapegoating minorities and using systematic othering as a political strategy to gain traction in communities that feel neglected (Poulter, 2019). This sense of abandonment extends beyond politics into economic marginalisation. Although Labour positioned food security as a key national security issue (Labour Party, 2024), the government’s neglect of rural concerns and unpopular agricultural policies have alienated

This growing rural disillusionment has created fertile ground for the rise of an alternative right-wing force, such as Reform UK, which has successfully mobilised Rural Right voters who feel abandoned by political elites.

parts of the rural electorate, fostering distrust in political leadership. This growing scepticism may push young people away from the agricultural sector if they feel their interests are overlooked and the industry’s future is uncertain, leading them to seek better economic opportunities elsewhere. This outmigration risks triggering an agglomeration effect, where urban areas become oversaturated with workers, driving up housing demand and straining job markets.

Such conditions may further amplify Reform UK’s rhetoric, enabling them to portray rural decline as the erosion of traditional English heartlands, scapegoat minorities for urban overcrowding, and fuel the rise of right-wing populism. As young people leave rural areas, the economic sustainability of these communities will come under increasing strain, particularly for small businesses and family farms. Many small farms may be forced to sell up to twenty percent of their land simply to cover increased inheritance tax under the agricultural property relief changes (Sims, 2024), while others may be compelled to sell land to urban developers to remain financially viable. Both scenarios would lead to a significant loss of UK, particularly English, farmland, thus threatening the sustainability of British food production (Bradshaw, 2024). If farmland is lost to development, domestic food production will decline, weakening national security. This has the potential to leave the UK vulnerable to external shocks and global food price volatility. This metrophilia political rhetoric, emphasised by the appointment of Steve Reed - MP for Croydon North, an inner city constituency, as the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs secretary - overlooks the fragility of the UK’s food production system, risks worsening rural economic decline and creating immediate and long-term national security concerns. Albeit indirectly, these potential outcomes are due to the current two-party system’s inability to successfully provide rural areas with a credible alternative making Reform UK an increasingly attractive political prospect.

CONCLUSION

Metrophilia, encouraged by the ease of data collection in densely populated areas, poses limitations on researchers’ abilities to gain a rounded understanding of the UK electorate and their differing motivations at the ballot box (Hildreth and Bailey, 2023; Waite and Morgan, 2019). The political fragmentation of the Right in rural Britain signals a significant shift in voter allegiance, with Reform UK emerging as a key beneficiary of growing dissatisfaction towards the Conservatives. Historically, rural communities have aligned with conservative parties due to their emphasis on agricultural interests and traditional values. However, as mainstream conservatism increasingly fails to address rural concerns, alternative rhetorics are becoming increasingly popular. Reform UK has positioned itself as the only party willing to stand against urban-centric governance, be tough on immigration and perceived threats to rural life.

This paper has demonstrated that by framing issues such as immigration as existential threats to traditional rural identity, Reform UK has successfully pulled disillusioned rural voters further to the right. The consequences of this shift are profound, not only for the electoral landscape but also for the broader urban-rural divide, which is exacerbated by metrophilia research biases that neglect rural political dynamics. If research fails to consider the impact of the rural vote, it risks contributing to the growing political dissatisfaction and socio-cultural isolation already experienced in rural areas throughout the UK (De Koning, Stathi, and Richards, 2017; Kelly et al., 2019; Monk, 2014; Wheeler et al., 2021; Williams, Lakhani, and Spelten, 2022).

This is particularly important when we consider that the relationship

between Right-wing political support and a country’s rural heartland is a well-studied dynamic across the UK and Europe (Mamonova, Franquesa, and Brooks, 2021; Mamonova and Franquesa, 2020; Berlet and Sunshine, 2019; Hildreth and Bailey, 2023). Moving forward, it is crucial that scholars and policymakers pay closer attention to the mechanisms through which Reform UK consolidates rural support. This requires both quantitative analysis of voting patterns and qualitative engagement with rural communities to fully understand the motivations behind their political realignment. Without such scrutiny, the deeper structural issues driving rural political disillusionment will remain unaddressed, further entrenching divisions and allowing populist movements to reshape the political landscape unchallenged.

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IS THE UK AT A TIPPING POINT FOR FEDERALIST REFORM?

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE LEGAL AND POLITICAL CONSTITUTIONS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM AND THE UNITED STATES

JONATHAN VICKERS

ILLUSTRATION BY KATY PILLING

IS THE UK AT A TIPPING POINT FOR FEDERALIST REFORM? A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE LEGAL AND POLITICAL CONSTITUTIONS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM AND THE UNITED STATES

JONATHAN VICKERS

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is a constitutionally and politically complex union of nations. Great Britain was founded by the Acts of Union of 1536 and 1707, the former incorporating Wales into England and the latter unifying the Kingdoms of England and Scotland (Wallenfeldt, 2018). The Acts assimilated Welsh law into English common law, which remains the case today, while Scotland retained its respective legal system, known as Scots law (Johnson, 2015). Crucially however, the power to enact legislation from this point was held by Westminster. Northern Ireland is the most complex nation within the union, established as a distinct political entity following the Government of Ireland Act 1920 (Beckett, 1971, p.123) amidst sharp and complex religious and political tensions. A further constitutional shift in 1997–1998 emanated from devolution referendums and subsequent legislation, affording varying legislative competences to three of the constituent nations within the United Kingdom (UK). The unequal manner in which these competences have been allocated has prompted the classification of the UK's constitution as 'idiosyncratic' (Jeffery, 2009, p.289) or 'asymmetrical' (The Constitution Society, 2021).

Given this long history, it can be inferred that the union is harmonious; however, such a view is superficial. Evidence of a disharmonious union is clear in Northern Ireland, plagued with long-repressed republican and unionist groups fighting for political self expression (Beckett, 1971, p.121). Additionally, divergent political culture drives the Scottish independence movement (Hughes, 2014). This secessionist sentiment was further illustrated by Scottish voters in the UK-wide referendum on European Union membership, in which every constituency in Scotland voted to remain despite an overall result to leave (Goodwin, 2017, p.109). This disharmony is therefore characterised by a lack of political consensus and opposition to the union within the constituent nations of the UK, damaging the legitimacy of the union. As such, this article analyses unionism within the UK as a cause of disharmony, while secondarily evaluating the merits of federal reform as a solution to this issue, utilising the United States as a comparison for federalism. To facilitate this discussion, the key concepts of parliamentary sovereignty and federalism in the context of legal and political constitutions are further distinguished.

UNIONISM: A PRIMARY CAUSE OF DISHARMONY?

To contextualise this discussion, it is important to elaborate on the UK's constitution. The UK is a unitary state, made up of four constituent nations, with an uncodified constitution. As such, there is no single written document with special legal status known as 'The Constitution'. This leads to assertions of the constitution's 'elusive' character (Laffin and Alys, 1999, p.97), synonymous with the view that it is 'unwritten' (Laffin and Alys, 1999, p.94, 96). However, conflating the two is a misconception: the constitution is 'written' within multiple sources, including statutes, judicial decisions, constitutional conventions, and international law (Elliott and Thomas, 2024, pp.63–71). Further to the sources of the constitution are the three 'branches' of government: the executive, known as the UK government, sitting within the legislature, which comprises the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and the judiciary, with the UK Supreme Court (UKSC) as the court of final appeal for all UK civil cases and criminal cases from England, Wales and Northern Ireland (from Scotland only in limited circumstances). The devolved legislatures, known as the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Parliament and the Northern Irish Assembly, all fit within this structure asymmetrically.

The defining principle underlying the structure of the constitution is parliamentary sovereignty. Tomkins (2003, p.102) expresses this principle in 'orthodox' Diceyan terms of there being no higher source of law in the UK than an Act of Parliament. As such, the Crown-in-Parliament can make or unmake any law on any subject matter, and no court or body may overturn an Act. This concept, whilst simple in nature, is the *causa causans* of much controversy and legal debate, particularly in relation to the constitutional status of Community, or EU law, after the UK's legal accession to the European Communities Act in 1972 (Tomkins, 2003, p.103). Crucially, due to this principle, there is no strict entrenchment within UK constitutional law. The orthodox theory suggests that even Acts of constitutional significance are equally subject to repeal as an Act on any other subject. If Parliament willed, it could repeal devolution legislation and unilaterally return full legislative authority to Westminster. However, restraints to this have been suggested in the common law. In *Thoburn v Sunderland City Council* (2002), the legal distinction between an ordinary and constitutional statute was introduced, with the latter not subject to implied repeal, thereby requiring a subsequent Act to expressly repeal a contradictory Act. While an influential decision, this distinction is yet to be treated as authoritative by the Court of Appeal or UKSC. As such, it can still be validly inferred that an orthodox conception of parliamentary sovereignty, which entails great constitutional flexibility, can be taken as a premise for this analysis.

Applied to the UK, if civil society has a central role in fostering a harmonious political culture, then the effect of federal reform may be ineffective and reduced to symbolic change.

This flexibility, particularly in constitutional convention, arguably facilitates disharmonious political culture. Jaconelli (1999, pp.45–46) characterises convention as 'inter-party social rules of a specifically constitutional character', which can be reduced conceptually as social rules and agreements of matters relating purely to the constitution, emphasising that these rules have social, and subsequently 'non-legal' status. This is reinforced by the Sewel convention, stipulating that Westminster will not normally legislate in areas of devolved competence without the consent of the devolved legislature. This was held to be a nonjusticiable political convention; codifying it in section 2 of the Scotland Act 2016 did not change this status (*R (Miller) v Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, 2017*). This nonjusticiable status was illustrated in the enactment of the Internal Market Bill (later the Internal Market Act 2020), where a consent motion failed in both the Scottish and Welsh devolved legislatures. However, the Act was still enacted in exercise of Parliament's legislative supremacy, thereby disregarding the Sewel convention (Scottish Government, 2021). Simultaneously, support for Scottish independence rose above 50 percent (Statista, 2025). This concurrence, associated with this political controversy, suggests that the reliance on informal, nonjusticiable convention enables the government to act unilaterally, eroding trust and cooperation between the devolved institutions, thereby fostering a culture of political discontent and disharmony among its citizens.

In evaluation, it may be argued that generally executive power (the Crown-as-Executive) is increasingly subject to judicial review and henceforth limiting the extent of the role of political actors in fostering a disharmonious union. A notable and recent example is Boris Johnson's decision to prorogue Parliament for five weeks under prerogative power, which was held to be unlawful and thus void (*R (Miller) v The Prime Minister, 2019*). However, this does not change that an Act of Parliament reigns supreme in the legal constitution and cannot be struck down or declared invalid by any court or administrative body. Contrastingly, the accepted legal and political proposition that the written constitution is the 'supreme law of the land' in the federal United States makes it possible to render incompatible Acts of Congress unconstitutional and subsequently void (*Marbury v Madison, 1803*). This comparison reveals that the flexible and uncodified nature of the UK constitution facilitates a lack of legal accountability with respect to legislative acts which have material consequences in the political constitution, particularly in the context of the devolved legislatures.

FEDERALISM: AN EFFECTIVE SOLUTION?

Before evaluating the merits of federal reform, it is important to elaborate on the meaning of federalism. A federal system is a constitutional settlement that divides sovereignty and entrenches it in regional and federal governments (Melding, 2022), both of which have significant levels of autonomous authority within their respective jurisdictions (Laffin and Alys, 1999, p.90). This is illustrated in the codified constitutions of the United States, Germany, and Australia, which have a stronger focus on the entrenched division of powers between central and regional governments (Elazar, 1997, p.241). Federalism is typically associated with a system of governance embodying a 'pure' or 'quasi-pure' separation of powers and as such a judiciary with authority to review acts of the executive and the legislature in light of a codified constitution; this view being reflected with the example of *Marbury* above.

The implications of a federalist system in the UK would be numerous. Tomkins' (2005, pp.131–132) work on proposals for a republican constitution focused on the abolition of prerogative power to enable closer executive scrutiny, enacting laws for more open government, and increased democratic accountability in the House of Lords. He proposes that it would entail full codification, with the sovereignty of all the nations comprising the UK

recognised, and UK-wide matters conferred on Westminster. This raises many implications for devolution. Importantly, the questions of whether Scotland's current devolved powers would be retained and whether Welsh private law's assimilation with English private law would remain untouched are left unanswered. While these issues would need surmounting before formal reform, this discussion will focus separately on the merits of federal reform.

The primary benefit of federalism is the structural and institutional clarity it provides in relation to the division of sovereignty. Douglas-Scott (2023, p.87) effectively highlights the core benefits of federalism as 'splitting the atom of sovereignty', as argued by James Madison. Pluralism, cultural and linguistic diversity, and encouraging greater political culture at the local level are core positives of federal reform, consistent with the principle of subsidiarity found in EU jurisprudence: governance at the closest level to the citizen. This would be most effective, as previously illustrated, through the formalisation of the relationships between Westminster and the devolved governments of the UK.

If a codified UK constitution required the consent of the devolved government before legislating in an area of their competence, the previously discussed Internal Market Act 2020 would likely be classified as unconstitutional. Under this model the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish executives would be able to challenge this on the legal basis of infringing constitutional sovereignty and successfully have the Act struck down. Whilst a hypothetical argument, the facts would be materially similar to *New York v United States* (1992), in which part of an Act of Congress was struck down for forcing a state to enact a law. In this case, the United States Supreme Court concluded that the Act of Congress threatened state sovereignty in violation of the Tenth Amendment. Extending this principle to the UK, if there were more formal limitations on the unlimited sovereignty of Parliament, it seems that reform would foster a greater political partnership between Westminster and devolved governments (Walker, 2024), via further empowerment of their legal sovereignty, and therefore a more harmonious union. By implication this highlights the normatively damaging role an orthodox conception of parliamentary sovereignty has in the political constitution.

However, it cannot be stated conclusively that federal states are significantly more politically unified than unitary states. The United States is a key example of both political and emotional polarisation, resulting in personal dislike of opposing parties (Kleinfeld, 2023). The legal division of sovereignty in the US bleeds into political polarisation, classifying states in popular media as either blue democrats or red republicans depending on their voting history. The political and legal division within the federal system is currently (as of April 2025) illustrated by democratic Californian Governor Newsom seeking to defy republican President Trump in pursuing free trade options for the state in light of federally imposed tariffs (France24, 2025). Kennedy (2020, p.33) offers reasoning for this, explaining that the political practices, or conventions, of federalism are more important than the formal institutions that embody it. He further highlights that civil society has a greater role in establishing a political culture conducive to the practices of federalism (Kennedy, 2020, p.36). Applied to the UK, if civil society has a central role in fostering a harmonious political culture, then the effect of federal reform may be ineffective and reduced to symbolic change. Empirically, therefore, it follows that federalism may not be the perfect solution for disharmony under unionism.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, full federalist reform is not the ideal solution in the search for harmony in the legal and political union of the United Kingdom. Unionism in the UK's context contributes to disharmony, primarily due to the flexibility offered to political actors from a lack of codification. However, reform toward federalism would likely not address these issues. Political polarisation remains equally possible, suggesting that civil society has a greater role in stimulating political harmony than constitutional structures. Academic discussion should turn to the factors influencing the political culture of civil society. It is likely that the constitutional solution lies within a mixed reform model, qualifying the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty to further empower the devolved governments to enable judicial review of an Act of Parliament in addition to exercise of the prerogative by the executive.

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A NATION FOR PALESTINE, BUT NOT FOR PALESTINIANS

AN ANALYSIS OF JORDAN'S CONTRADICTORY REFUGEE POLICIES

MARIE SHEETS

ILLUSTRATION BY MAYA BEAUCHAMP

A NATION FOR PALESTINE, BUT NOT FOR PALESTINIANS: AN ANALYSIS OF JORDAN'S CONTRADICTORY REFUGEE POLICIES

MARIE SHEETS

While the nation of Palestine itself often dominates the news headlines, the overseas treatment of Palestinian refugees remains crucial though often overlooked. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) defines Palestinian refugees as 'persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict,' noting that only 'descendants of Palestine refugee males' are eligible to register for Palestinian refugee status (UNRWA, 2025). As of 2024, unofficial estimates suggest that 60 percent of the Jordanian population descends from Palestinians, although demographic distinctions between West Bank and Gazan ancestry are not publicly available (BTI, 2024, p.4). Since its founding in 1948, Israel has promoted the 'Jordan is Palestine' narrative – the Israeli hope that Jordan can provide a permanent solution to the Palestinian issue via Palestinian resettlement, and thus serve as an 'alternative homeland' (Perez, 2011, p.5). This narrative continues to permeate Jordanian politics today, demonstrated by Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi's firm rejection of U.S. President Donald Trump's proposal to permanently resettle Gazans in Jordan through the claim that 'Jordan is for Jordanians, and Palestine is for Palestinians' (Jordan Times, 2025). This has cemented the nation's commitment to the creation and facilitation of a Palestinian state. By exploring the background of Palestinian presence in Jordan, alongside Jordan's public commitments to the protection of Palestinian Statehood and refugee rights on the international stage, it becomes clear that Jordan adopts a contradictory approach to Palestinian livelihood. While publicly promoting Palestinian Statehood and the Right of Return, they simultaneously enforce restrictive domestic citizenship policies that subject long-term Palestinian refugees to economic marginalisation and a perpetual state of impermanence in Jordan.

POLITICAL CONTEXT

Mass Palestinian displacement from historic Palestine is thought to have occurred in two waves. The first mass exodus of Palestinians, the *Nakba* (Catastrophe), took place during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. This conflict, which resulted in the creation of the Israeli state, led to the rapid displacement of an estimated 70,000 to 100,000 Palestinians to Jordan, tripling the Jordanian population in a mere two years (Gabbay, 2014, p.115). The second large-scale displacement occurred in 1967, during which Israel annexed the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, Golan Heights, and Sinai Peninsula following victory in the Six-Day War, resulting in over 200,000 Palestinian refugees entering Jordan (Bastaki, 2020, p.159). In response to this demographic shift towards a large Palestinian diaspora in Jordan, the kingdom has consistently adopted a position which 'supports all serious efforts that seek to achieve the two-state solution' (Department of Palestinian Affairs, 2024). More significantly, Jordan seeks to fulfil its responsibilities for the rights of citizens of Palestinian refugee origin, with explicit mention of protecting the Palestinian 'Right of Return' (Department of Palestinian Affairs, 2024). The Right of Return, widely regarded as a fundamental human right, 'guarantees all individuals a fundamental right to return to their homes of origin whenever they have become displaced from them due to circumstances beyond their control' (Khasawneh, 2007, p.71). On the international stage, Jordan has reaffirmed its commitment to the Palestinian cause through endorsement of the 1965 Protocol for the Treatment of Palestinians in Arab States, or the Casablanca Protocol. The Casablanca Protocol called upon members of the League of Arab States, also known as the Arab League, to treat all Palestinian refugees on par with their citizens, specifically via equal employment rights and citizen travel documents (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1965). In general, Jordan's public commitments to the preservation of Palestinian statehood suggest a largely linear policy position in support of Palestinian refugees. Yet, the sincerity of this policy position remains in question, with Jordan's domestic treatment of Palestinian refugees revealing a largely performative and surface-level commitment to Palestinian rights and integration.

JORDAN'S RESTRICTIVE CITIZENSHIP POLICIES

Jordan's increasingly restrictive citizenship policies, justified by the need to preserve the Palestinian Right of Return, systematically marginalised Palestinian refugees. Through the denial of full legal and social integration, these policies reinforce Palestinians' status as temporary members of Jordanian society. Initially, the 1954 Jordanian Nationality Law provided the domestic foundation on which Jordan constructed their Palestinian refugee policy, stating that 'every non-Jewish person who held the Palestinian Nationality prior to 15 May 1948 and is habitually residing in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan during the period extending from 20 December 1949 to 16 February 1954 is a Jordanian National' (Khasawneh, 2007, p.60). This law extended Jordanian citizenship to Palestinians in the West Bank, which was under Jordanian jurisdiction at the time, highlighting an early commitment to the treatment of Palestinians as equal members of Jordanian society. For many Palestinians, Jordanian citizenship is viewed as a 'means to some sort of stability' and protection of rights without negating their Palestinian identity or right of return (Bastaki, 2020, p.169). However, the preservation of a strong Palestinian identity suggests that bestowing citizenship doesn't necessitate assimilation. Given their dual-identities as Palestinian and Jordanian, these refugees exist in a liminal space in which they don't fully belong to either state. This subsequently prompts further separation from Jordanian society, and thus reaffirms Palestinian presence as temporary (Soh, You and Yu, 2016, p.5).

Given their dual-identities as Palestinian and Jordanian, these refugees exist in a liminal space in which they don't fully belong to either state.

In 1974, however, a unanimous Arab League resolution deemed the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, subsequently placing pressure on Jordan to release authority over the West Bank to foster Palestinian sovereignty. This culminated in King Hussein's 1988 'administrative and legal disengagement' from the West Bank, causing many Palestinians residing in the West Bank at the time to lose their Jordanian citizenship and be reclassified as Palestinian nationals (Human Rights Watch, 2010, pp.2, 17). Regardless of the fact that many had gained Jordanian citizenship under the 1954 nationality law, the disengagement effectively revoked these rights for West Bank residents, rendering many of them stateless or lacking full legal status overnight. Instead, many were issued temporary passports, renewable every five years, which continue to serve solely as travel documents and do not confer citizenship through a national identification number or permanent residency right (The Palestinian Return Centre, 2018, p.12). It is important to note that Palestinians who had relocated to Jordan before the 1988 disengagement were generally exempt from this withdrawal of citizenship.

Regardless, Jordan has since begun an arbitrary citizenship withdrawal process from its Palestinian demographic, with around 2,732 citizenship withdrawals taking place between 2004 and 2008 (Human Rights Watch, 2010 p.27). While these are defended on loose interpretations of the 1988 disengagement, conditions for withdrawals are unclear and unwritten. Furthermore, Palestinians are not informed of this process whilst the decision is made; instead, they are simply told during routine bureaucratic interactions such as passport or driver's license renewals, complicating and delaying any potential appeal process that could take place (Gabbay, 2014, p.114). This lack of transparency leaves refugees in a 'protection gap,' in which Palestinians are caught between the rights promised by Jordanian citizenship and the rights denied by Palestinian living (Soh, You and Yu, 2016, p.13).

While ostensibly falling under the umbrella term of 'Palestinian,' Gazan refugees have been treated vastly differently from their West Bank counterparts by the Jordanian government. Despite arriving with West Bank refugees in 1967 and onwards, Gazan refugees were never bestowed Jordanian citizenship. Instead, they were given temporary two-year passports, serving the same purpose as West Bankers' passports, only with increased renewal-rate rights (The Palestinian Return Centre, 2018, p.12). The revocation and denial of citizenship rights for Palestinian refugees in Jordan illustrates how Jordanian commitment to the Right of Return directly impacts the treatment of their Palestinian diaspora, specifically through the prioritisation of the Right of Return over the well-being and stability of the Palestinians. By advocating for the Right of Return, Jordan reinforces the notion that the Palestinian refugee diaspora regardless of their permanent settlement status in Jordan since 1947 onwards is not Jordan's permanent responsibility but rather just an issue concerning the temporarily displaced. This raises the question of where Jordan is willing to draw the line in terms of support for Palestinians, not only whether Jordan doesn't want to be the permanent caretakers of their Palestinian refugees, but if their public commitment to the cause is genuine.

PALESTINIAN ECONOMIC MARGINALISATION AND AID DEPENDENCY

Jordan's restrictive citizenship policies

have led to the systematic exclusion of Palestinians in the labour market, with limited economic opportunities and subsequent aid reliance perpetuating Palestinians' 'temporary' status in Jordan. While the Casablanca Protocol called for equal employment rights, non-citizen Palestinians are largely excluded from working in the public sector, except for menial office jobs, which are already extremely limited (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014). In the private sector, Palestinians face severe restrictions in profession choices. For instance, many professions such as law, engineering, medicine, and dentistry have mandatory associations that employees must join to practice. However, because membership is limited to only Jordanian nationals, stateless Palestinians are barred from these professions (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014).

Even if privately employed, Palestinians are often exploited by their employers, with reports of lower pay, longer hours, and exclusion from medical insurance schemes (El-Abed, 2014, p.56). As a result, many turn to the informal sector by seeking employment in semi-skilled vocational and technical work, although vocational work often lacks employee regulations and insurance benefits (El-Abed, 2014, p.55). All in all, limited employment opportunities have resulted in increased poverty rates for citizenship-less Palestinians in Jordan. 41 percent of Gazans in the Jerash 'Gaza' refugee camp, given their heightened barriers to the workforce, are in the lowest income quintile; in comparison, only nineteen percent of combined Palestinian refugees fall into this group (Kvittingen et al., 2019, p.35). The economic marginalisation of Palestinian refugees reveals a stark contrast between Jordan's public position on protecting Palestinian rights and its domestic policies. Despite their long-term presence in the country, citizenship-based barriers to employment and subsequent poverty prevents Palestinians from establishing roots in Jordan, forcing them into a state of limbo in which they aren't members of either Palestinian or Jordanian society.

This economic marginalisation is further exacerbated by the 'invisibilisation' of non-citizen Palestinians, whose systematic exclusion from socio-economic and political rights renders them 'invisible' to the Jordanian state (El-Abed, 2020, p.2). Due to limited opportunities for economic integration, many Palestinians turn to external aid services such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) for survival. Established in 1949, the UNRWA serves to provide assistance and protection to Palestinian refugees within the organisation's field of operation, including via basic education, primary health care, social services, and emergency assistance (UNRWA, 2024a). Because many Palestinian refugees, particularly those without Jordanian citizenship, face restrictions in accessing public services and formal employment, UNRWA essentially serves as a substitute welfare system to the Jordanian state. For instance, UNRWA provided 57,247 Palestinian refugees in Jordan with cash and food assistance in 2023 under the 'Social Safety Net' program, providing essential support for Palestinians that the state doesn't offer (UNRWAb, 2024, p.3). This reliance on UNRWA assistance over government aid further highlights the nation's commitment to the Right of Return; by outsourcing welfare services to external organisations, Jordan ensures that the issue of Palestinian refugees remains an international problem rather than a domestic one, rejecting the permanent status of Palestinians in Jordan. Moreover, UNRWA reliance suggests the creation of a permanent 'underclass' of Jordanian residents, in effect, Palestinians. Regardless of whether they were born or raised in Jordan, their societal alienation and status as Palestinians with a Right of Return indicate that the Jordanian State refuses to acknowledge their longevity and permanence; instead, they are repeatedly overlooked by the state in fear of refugees abandoning hope of returning home.

CONCLUSION

Jordan's public commitment to the Palestinian Right of Return and statehood, notably through implementation of the Casablanca Protocol, sharply contrasts domestic policies that systematically subjugate Palestinian refugees through restrictive citizenship laws and economic exclusion. Citizenship revocations under the pretext of protecting the Palestinian Right of Return subject Palestinians to subsequent economic marginalisation, and thus underscore their 'temporary' status in Jordanian society. This inconsistency exposes Jordan's superficial support for the Palestinian diaspora's wellbeing, in which the championing of Palestinian livelihood remains limited to surface-level international decrees. Ultimately, as the genocide in Gaza continues to leave Palestinians seeking refuge, the future of the Palestinian diaspora remains at stake - without meaningful policies, Palestinian refugees in Jordan remain trapped in the same cycle of statelessness and economic instability that has long defined Palestine.

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ENDURING COLONIALITY

HIERARCHICAL CITIZENSHIP LAW OF EU MEMBER STATES VIS-À-VIS THE CENTRAL VALUES OF THE EU

MAYA PEARSON

ILLUSTRATION BY VIK BALT

The foundational values of the European Union (EU) include the promotion of equality, non-discrimination, and well-being to citizens of its member states; in reality, the EU enables actions which directly contradict these principles. This paper examines the citizenship regimes of the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, showing how their sovereign ability to decide upon their own citizenship regimes - the ability of a state to decide who is legally included within the state's population and thus who is entitled to the certain rights concomitant to citizenship - is in contention with the EU's wishes for equality and non-discrimination. This examination illuminates the disparity between current and former colonised people's ability to enjoy certain citizenship rights, and the EU's failure to promote equality within its member states. As such, the continued existence of these neo-colonial, hierarchical structures within member states' citizenship regimes undermine the stated central values of the EU.

This paper first highlights instances of racialised and exclusionary citizenship statuses within selected former and current EU member states. Colonial-era ideologies regarding race, worthiness and inclusion remain embedded in the citizenship frameworks of EU member states, perpetuating and promoting neo-colonial behaviours which subjugate former colonised peoples. This occurs through the creation of bifurcated citizenship states between those from previous colonial territories and the metropole. Despite recognition as citizens, they are legally segregated in their access to rights. Subsequently, an examination of European case law exposes the deferential disposition of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) in matters of exclusionary citizenship law. Despite its large sphere of influence and ability to interpret laws and condemn practices of hierarchical citizenship, the CJEU has repeatedly missed opportunities to ensure that the core values of the EU are adhered to and woven into the domestic law of all member states. Such failures call into question the credibility of the EU as an institution which purports to uphold equality, non-discrimination and the well-being of its citizens.

HIERARCHICAL CITIZENSHIP REGIMES IN FORMER AND CURRENT EU MEMBER STATES

Citizenship regimes are determined *intra vires* (within the power) of each EU member state. European Citizenship, which grants freedom of movement and work within all member states, is derived from member state citizenship, as outlined by the *Treaty of Maastricht* (1993), also known as the Treaty on the European Union. As such, the conferral of European Citizenship requires one to be a full citizen of an EU member state. However, just as a state can use their sovereign jurisdiction over citizenship law to include individuals, they can equally employ this authority to exclude others. In this way, the state's autonomy over which citizens are granted certain rights has resulted in the transplantation of colonial conceptions of race, power, and inclusion into citizenship regimes, reproducing colonial-era disparities between racialised individuals and those from the metropole. Resultantly, certain racialised individuals, despite having citizenship, are not awarded the same rights as others. This is highlighted by the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, prior to the 2020 completion of the *EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement*, who have separate citizenship statuses for former colonial subjects. Such disparities in citizenship status not only directly impact the rights of these individuals, but also show the persistence of inequalities within member states, the existence of which contradicts key EU values.

The Kingdom of the Netherlands

An exclusionary citizenship regime can be noted within the Netherlands, where the historical disposition of the Dutch to regard their controlled territories as tools for economic advancement and distinct entities separate from the metropole, has seeped into their citizenship regime (Karapetian, 2020). As a result, instead of signalling complete legal inclusion within the state, citizenship law is shaped by the Netherlands' colonial history, rendering citizenship an unreliable indicator of legal and social equality (Jones, 2012). As such, those from Aruba, Curacao and Saint Martin, despite possessing Dutch citizenship, are not automatically entitled to voting rights and residency within the Netherlands; concomitantly, they do not enjoy the many rights conferred upon individuals by EU citizenship (Jones, 2012). Dutch citizenship does not unilaterally award rights, and instead creates a framework for the exclusion of colonial citizens which reinforces neo-colonial power structures.

The purposeful creation of differentiated citizenship status expands Brubaker's (1992, in Benson and Boatcă, 2023, p.153) assertion that '[c]itizenship is internally inclusive, that means it extends rights to all those defined as citizens and at the same time it is externally exclusive because it restricts the access of non-citizens to the same rights'. Analysis of segregated citizenship regimes suggests that the type of citizenship an individual possesses, stemming from ethnic origin, acts as a bulwark against access to basic rights. This example further demonstrates how enduring coloniality continues to contribute to the bifurcated citizenship statuses between citizens from the metropole and those from colonial territories, embedding itself in member states' citizenship laws. Such practices reveal the contradiction between the values

ENDURING COLONIALITY: HIERARCHICAL CITIZENSHIP LAW OF EU MEMBER STATES VIS-À-VIS THE CENTRAL VALUES OF THE EU

MAYA PEARSON

of the EU and the behaviour of certain member states.

The United Kingdom

Although the UK's withdrawal from the European Union prevents the EU from addressing the unequal application of rights concomitant to citizenship, the UK's actions while being a member of the EU offer insight into these bifurcated and hierarchical citizenship regimes. The lack of universal rights ascribed to certain types of British citizenship demonstrated an absence of cohesion between citizenship laws across EU member states. For example, the *British Nationality Act* (1981) created distinct citizenship statuses, so that individuals from former British colonial territories or current British-controlled territories do not receive full British citizenship and are excluded from full rights. This demonstrates how colonial legacies still impact citizenship policy today, leaving many Britons from former colonial territories unable to access the same rights as those from the metropole. For example, British Overseas Citizenship (BOC) is granted to those who were born in British-controlled territories and were unable to acquire citizenship therein following decolonisation. Importantly, despite being born in a British territory, subjected to British control, and being in possession of a form of British citizenship, BOC citizens are not automatically entitled to the same privileges as those born within the metropole (Dummett, 2006). Such stratified British citizenship 'reflects imperialist priorities of controlling racialised people and communities who are linked to former colonies' (Naqvi, 2022, p.519). It solidifies the notion that some, by virtue of where they are born and their ethnicity, are '"undeserving" racialised groups unworthy of being [fully] British' (Webber, 2022, p.3). Although the United Kingdom is no longer an EU member state, its use of bifurcated citizenship statuses during its time as an EU member exposes the colonial ideologies which underpin conceptions of belonging. This shows how enduring coloniality shapes citizenship regimes, undermining the EU's professed commitment to equality and non-discrimination.

JUDICIAL DECISIONS OF THE CJEU ON BIFURCATED CITIZENSHIP STATUS

The EU exists in a state of legal limbo, as its ability to intervene directly in the domestic matters of its member states is limited. While the EU and its Court has authority over domains such as trade and competition, in areas such as citizenship and migration, its power is limited to exerting pressure and influence. The supranational composition of the EU comes into contention with individual states' sovereignty as states have the *de jure* ability to formulate their own citizenship laws. This precarious position has been exemplified by recent judgements of the supranational Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) in citizenship hierarchy cases. Despite clear instances of discrimination, the Court has taken a non-interventionist approach towards these matters. Although unable to legislate upon these matters directly due to this being within domestic jurisdiction of member states, the Court has repeatedly failed to use its influence to condemn these discriminatory practices and push member states to reform their citizenship law practices.

This non-interventionist approach is shown in the 2001 case of *R v Secretary for the Home Department, ex parte Manjit Kaur*, which occurred prior to the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. Kaur, a British Overseas Citizen (BOC), asserted that by virtue of her British citizenship, she should be entitled to EU citizenship and consequently benefit from EU rights. However, the CJEU ruled against Kaur, as the UK had specifically delineated that only certain British citizens would constitute as nationals of the UK for the purposes of EU citizenship - to which BOCs were never included (para 20–27). The CJEU therefore ruled against Kaur. Although the CJEU's findings were legally valid, the Court missed an opportunity to bring discriminatory citizenship hierarchies to an end and protect against the unequal treatment of colonial citizens. Despite the CJEU's inability to legislate upon the citizenship law practices of the United Kingdom, it failed to make any meaningful statement condemning such practices and did not use its influence to encourage that domestic citizenship regimes be in line with the EU values of equality and non-discrimination of all. This silence in part condones the unequal treatment and disparity of rights of citizens from colonial territories, discrediting the egalitarian nature of the EU's core values.

The case of 'Eman and Sevinger v Netherlands' (2007), heard again by the CJEU, further reaffirmed the non-interventionist approach of the EU towards differentiated citizenships. Eman and Sevinger, two Dutch citizens from the territory of Aruba, attempted to exercise voting rights in the Dutch European Parliament elections. They were denied such rights on the basis that their status as Dutch citizens of Aruba made them ineligible to vote

...the Court has repeatedly failed to use its influence to condemn these discriminatory practices and push member states to reform their citizenship law practices.

in EU elections. Although the CJEU recognised that Dutch citizens of Aruba were indeed EU citizens, the Court nevertheless upheld the Netherlands' authority to determine which citizens were entitled to electoral rights in the EU. The Court found that, in the case of 'Eman and Sevinger', their disenfranchisement was not arbitrarily imposed, therefore there was no violation of EU law. This judgement highlighted the political dimensions which underpin EU citizenship (van Eijken and van Rossem, 2016) and showed that '[d]espite the formal acknowledgement that these territories are part of the EU… official EU discourse foregrounds continental Europe to the detriment of its territories acquired through colonialism' (Benson and Boatcă, 2023, p.155). Thus, the Court underscored the territorial limitations of EU law and the privileges that EU citizenship confers. The Court asserted that EU privileges, such as voting rights, are not automatically granted to those residing in non-EU territories despite national citizenship. Again, by deferring the jurisdiction to the member state without using its influence to pressure the Kingdom of the Netherlands to end such exclusionary practices, the lack of action by the Court can be regarded as condoning the distinction between those from the metropole and those from colonial territories, furthering the historical legacies of perceived inferiority, subjugation, and restricted access to rights. This also shows the direct contradiction between the actions of the Court, which through its silence showed its acceptance of exclusionary practices between different citizens, directly contradicting the EU's core values of equality and non-discrimination.

The judgments of the Court in these cases allow the continuation of racialised citizenship and demonstrate the EU's indifference to hierarchical citizenship regimes within member states. In the case of 'Eman and Sevinger', although the EU citizenship of Dutch-Aruban citizens was recognised, the CJEU also affirmed the Netherlands' legal right to delineate which citizens were eligible to partake in EU elections without condemning these practices, therefore validating their use of differentiated citizenship. The silence of the Court following the 'Kaur' judgement, suggests that despite the use of exclusionary citizenship statuses which directly contradicts the central values of the EU, the Court does not prioritise the use of its influence to pressure member states to ensure their domestic law is in compliance with these values.

In both cases, the CJEU failed to meaningfully address the racialised and hierarchical colonial structures underpinning segregated citizenship rights which disproportionately affect non-white individuals and enable discrimination. By refusing to condemn these practices, the EU's legal system enables the persistence of colonial inequalities between those from the metropole and those from former and current colonial territories, further demonstrating the EU's divergence from its commitment to be an institution which promotes egalitarianism.

CONCLUSION

As analysed above, the inaction of the EU with regards to bifurcated citizenship policies within certain current and former EU member states perpetuates the belief that '[a]s a community of values, the European Union reinforce[s] hierarchies between… multiple and unequal Europes' (Benson and Boatcă, 2023, p.155). Hierarchical citizenship laws have been utilised by certain member states to exclude individuals from access to EU rights. This clearly contradicts the EU's professed principles of non-discrimination and equality, and demonstrates the failures of the CJEU in addressing these inequalities, implicating the EU as an institution which enables such neo-colonial policies. The judgements in 'Kaur' and 'Eman and Sevinger' show the contradiction between the values that the EU purports to uphold and its actions. Without decisive action, the EU risks further reneging on key objectives and undermining their own legitimacy as an international institution. To show that it is a truly egalitarian organisation, the EU must tread a delicate line between respecting state sovereignty and taking action to hold member states accountable to its central goals – an endeavour that will face innumerable barriers.

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THE HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO CLIMATE CHANGE LAW

ALMA HEIN

ILLUSTRATION BY MAYA BEAUCHAMP

In 2024 the mean global temperature reached 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels for the first time in history (Hawkins, 2025). Thus, the world is off track to meet the aims of the Paris Agreement: to keep warming well below 2°C and ideally under 1.5°C (United Nations Environment Programme, 2024). Climate change does not exist in isolation; its adverse effects impact a wide range of human rights safeguarded by regional and international human rights law (Levy and Patz, 2015). Recognising this, human rights-based arguments are increasingly being used in climate change litigation across different regional and international judicial and quasi-judicial bodies. Specifically, this article evaluates the use of a human rlights-based approach before Human Rights Treaty Bodies (HRTBs), regional human rights courts, and international courts and tribunals. All of these bodies have recently dealt with such cases, and because the approach is relatively new, these legal developments are helping to shape and define the law in this area. Overall, these developments are significant because the use of human rights-based arguments creates opportunities for litigants to hold states accountable and to address the previously lacking connection between human rights violations and the impacts of climate change.

The jurisdiction or authority of a judicial or quasi-judicial body over advisory and contentious proceedings (disputes between parties) may be based on the subject matter, the territorial extent, or the parties involved. HRTBs are quasi-judicial committees of independent experts, each established under one of ten different human rights treaties (Knur, 2014, p.45; Solnetsev, 2024, p.366). Each HRTB's jurisdiction is limited by the scope of its treaty. Regional human rights courts have territorially-limited jurisdictions to act in judicial and advisory capacities. International courts and tribunals are not territorially limited, but can only hear cases brought by state parties to their establishing treaty. Only the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has a general subject matter jurisdiction under a variety of treaties. The jurisdiction of the body impacts how influential it is.

Climate change litigation consists of cases brought before judicial and quasi-judicial bodies that involve material issues of climate change science, policy or law (Setzer and Higham, 2024, p.7). The Sabin Centre for Climate Change Law's database for climate change-related litigation currently counts 2,666 cases and notes a trend towards the human-rights-based approach (Setzer and Higham, 2024, p.2). This approach focuses on how the effects of climate change violate human rights, specifically the right to a healthy environment. Recently, this right was recognised by the UN Human Rights Council (2018), the UN General Assembly (2022) (UN Development Programme, 2023; UN General Assembly, 2022), and over 150 states in some way at the national or regional level (Cogan, 2023, p.129).

HUMAN RIGHTS TREATY BODIES

One avenue for applying the human rights-based approach is through HRTBs. They monitor the implementation and compliance of state parties to various treaties. For instance, they consider complaints and communications from citizens who allege state violations of the relevant treaty (Solnetsev, 2024, pp.366–367). Crucially, the treaties of the HRTBs do not make explicit references to climate change. However, recognising the effect of climate change on human rights allows these bodies to give the treaties a wider interpretation, thereby allowing them to hear climate change-related complaints and communications.

So far, HRTBs have considered three climate change-related complaints or communications. The Human Rights Committee heard Ioane Teitiota v New Zealand in 2020, the world's first decision on climate refugees. This was significant as the Committee held that receiving states have a duty not to forcibly return climate refugees to places where climate change poses a real risk of irreparable harm (Sinclair-Blakemore, 2020). In 2022, it heard the Torres Strait Islanders' Petition, which was the first case where an HRTB found that a state's failure to protect people from the consequences of climate change could amount to a violation of international human rights law (Solnetsev, 2024, p.377). Third, the Committee on the Rights of the Child heard 16 children v Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany, and Turkey in 2019. While it declared the complaint inadmissible, the Committee found that every state has responsibility for the negative impact of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions on children's rights, both within and outside its territory (Solnetsev, 2024, pp.375–376).

Though these results are promising, HRTBs have structural limitations: their decisions are not legally binding, can only monitor but not enforce decisions, and they can only hear complaints from citizens whose states have enabled the complaints procedure (Solnetsev, 2024, p.379, 382). Overall, HRTBs demonstrate the importance of the human rights-based approach as they provide legal remedies for violations, create opportunities to develop legal principles, and provide new avenues for litigation by non-state actors.

The combined effect of these advisory opinions and the cause law that develops from them is to develop the law in this area and create opportunities for accountability, stronger domestic regulations and the payment of damages.

REGIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS COURTS

Beyond the international level, developments before two key regional human rights courts require due consideration: the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR).

The ECtHR can hear cases on alleged violations of state parties' obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). The ECtHR heard three climate change-related cases in 2024, but only one was declared admissible and decided (European Court of Human Rights, 2024a). In Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz and Others v Switzerland (2024, (2)(c)(ii)(a)), the court found that individuals have the right 'to effective protection by the State authorities from serious adverse effects of climate change'. Importantly, this case recognised positive state duties and obligations, which can be used to hold states accountable. Switzerland had failed to comply with its positive obligations concerning climate change, thereby violating the applicant Verein KlimaSeniorinnen's Article 8 ECHR rights (2024, (2)(d)(ii)). If the ECtHR finds there has been a violation, it can provide remedies to the victim, namely a payment of just satisfaction, individual and/or general measures. Compliance with a decision is then monitored by the Council of Europe (Tobin, 2025). Non-compliance can result in soft or diplomatic consequences, for instance naming and shaming among states. Such rulings also have the potential to be directly influential on domestic law-making. For instance, in the UK, the Human Rights Act 1998 section 2(1)(a) requires domestic courts to take ECtHR decisions and judgements 'into account' in cases concerning ECHR rights.

The IACtHR has jurisdiction over several countries in the Americas. In 2017, it issued an advisory opinion recognising the human right to a healthy environment, the adverse effect of climate change on human rights, and certain positive state obligations (Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 2017). In March 2024, in La Oroya v Peru, it found that Peru violated the aforementioned right to a healthy environment by failing to prevent pollution from a metallurgical complex in the city of La Oroya (Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 2024). This case demonstrates the value of advisory opinions, as they can clarify and develop the law, but also create specific rights and duties which can form the basis of litigation. The court is currently considering another advisory opinion, this time on the scope of state obligations in responding to climate change under international human rights law (Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 2023). The combined effect of these advisory opinions and the case law that develops from them is to develop the law in this area and create opportunities for accountability, stronger domestic regulations and the payment of damages. Further, the developments in one body are not limited to that specific jurisdiction. For instance, while discussing jurisdiction in the 2021 communication, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2021, 9.4 and 9.5) cited ECtHR, the Human Rights Committee, and the IACtHR's 2017 advisory opinion, demonstrating how interconnected these legal bodies are.

Additionally, these courts have built on existing legal concepts to respond to issues raised by the intersection of human rights and climate change law. One such issue is standing, which is the ability to bring an action before a court. In Verein KlimaSeniorinnen, the ECtHR noted that as anyone may be directly affected or at risk from the direct effects of climate change, it is necessary to distinguish who has standing. The ECtHR held that to have standing, applicants must show personal and direct effect to a significant extent and the absence or inadequacy of reasonable measures to reduce harm (2024, (2)(c)(i)(a)). Interestingly, the court found that the four individual applicants did not have victim status as their risk of and actual exposure was not apparent, and could be alleviated by personal adaptations and measures available in Switzerland. However, the Verein—a group of senior women in Switzerland advocating for climate justice—did have standing (2024, (2)(c)(ii)(a)). Arntz and Krommendijk (2024) argue that this makes it easier for associations than individuals to bring climate change actions before the Court. These legal developments will thus impact future litigation at the ECtHR. Further, they can be utilised and developed by other domestic, regional and international courts.

However, it is critical to acknowledge that the role and effectiveness of regional courts depends on the region and state. Regional courts can be crucial if domestic legal systems are weak or do not take a case seriously, as seen in Verein KlimaSeniorinnen. A weakness of all regional courts however, is that whilst legally binding, their decisions are not enforceable and might not be complied with. Despite the ECtHR having a high compliance rate, the Swiss Parliament voted to reject the Verein KlimaSeniorinnen ruling (Foulkes, 2024). Further, Asia and Oceania have no regional human rights courts which accept complaints from individuals or NGOs (Solnetsev, 2024, p.362). Thus, not all states that host such a court recognise its jurisdiction, limiting practical access to justice. Nonetheless, several recent reasonings and decisions from regional human rights courts are shaping the human rights-based approach and providing accountability and remedies for victims.

INTERNATIONAL COURTS AND TRIBUNALS

As of yet, no cases relating to climate change have been heard before international courts and tribunals. This is because only states can be parties to disputes before these bodies but they are generally reluctant to initiate proceedings against other states (Verheyen and Zengerling, 2016). The practical limits of these bodies are compensated, in part, by the theoretical value of their advisory capacity. Advisory opinions are important because, while not binding, they can influence international norms, clarify issues and points of law, and affect future domestic litigation (Cannon et al., 2024).

In 2023, the UN General Assembly requested an advisory opinion from the ICJ on state obligations to protect the climate and the environment for present and future generations, and on legal consequences for states which significantly harm the climate and the environment. The court is expected to issue its advisory opinion sometime in 2025.

The International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) was also requested to give an advisory opinion on climate change, which it issued in May 2024. While not human rights-focused, it demonstrates the value of advisory opinions. ITLOS found that climate change and its impacts are within the scope of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) by expanding the definition of 'marine pollution' to include GHG emissions. Under Article 194 of this convention, states must 'take all necessary measures' to reduce, control and eventually eliminate marine pollution (International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea, 2022).

Scholars such as Yiallourides and Deva (2024) argue that ITLOS' advisory opinion was 'a landmark ruling', as it extended positive state obligations under the treaty by its interpretation of the UNCLOS.

Climate litigation needs legislation on which to base arguments, and bodies where this litigation can occur (Jegede, 2024, p.47, 67). The jurisdiction of judicial and quasi-judicial bodies is determined by the agreement they are established under. Different international climate change agreements provide ways for parties to settle disputes, often the ICJ, but in these contentious proceedings, only states have standing (Verheyen and Zengerling, 2016). Human rights-based arguments and broader interpretations of legislation mean that these bodies can hear climate cases, thereby providing the framework for litigation at the regional and international level (Knur, 2014, p.52).

EVALUATION

These decisions and cases demonstrate the practical and theoretical value of the human rights-based approach, along with the expanding legal recognition of positive obligations of states relating to climate change. Litigation at an international level can provide international publicity (Knur, 2014, p.49) and present an opportunity to elevate the status of climate cases (Carlarne, 2020, p.40). The rulings and legal concepts developed in such cases can have hard or soft effects on litigation in national courts, depending on if the judgement is binding or persuasive. They can also influence national legislation (Setzer and Higham, 2024, p.6) or public discourse. Another strength of the approach is that these bodies can develop on each other's reasoning and decisions. The UN system, encompassing HTRBs and international courts and tribunals, facilitates the development of consistent legal reasoning and conceptualisations of issues like

standing or jurisdiction (Solnetsev, 2024, p.382). Yiallourides and Deva (2024) expect that responses of international courts and tribunals 'will be consistent and complement each other'. While regional courts are outside this system, they have already shown to affect and be affected by reasoning and decisions by each other and by bodies within the UN system. The treaties which establish these bodies have a high level of ratification over all. Notably, the ICJ has jurisdiction over all UN member states. Therefore, the decisions of the bodies are influential, if not binding, across the majority of states simply due to their broad jurisdiction.

However, the partial effectiveness of the decisions issued at this level is limited. Litigation is generally costly, time-consuming, and complicated. Even if a case is raised before a relevant body, it might be declared inadmissible due to issues of burden of proof - the obligation on a party to prove a fact or issue, in these cases generally difficult to discharge - and standing (Jegede, 2024, pp.51–53). HRTBs and regional courts require the exhaustion of all available domestic legal remedies first, creating great expense and delay. The theory behind the approach has also been critiqued. Carlarne (2020) argues that human rights law is inherently anthropocentric and individualistic, and using this approach draws attention away from the fact that climate change is a 'planetary crisis'. If climate law is too dependent on human rights, the current pressures on the rule of law and human rights could negatively affect it by association. There are also difficulties in articulating a 'right to the environment' and accounting for the interests of future generations (Carlarne, 2020, p.38). It is important to discuss these limitations, but they should not negate the value of addressing the clear violations of human rights caused by climate change and exacerbated by state inaction.

In conclusion, failing to reduce the harm of climate change is a clear violation of state obligations under international human rights law, for which they can and should be held accountable. These judicial and quasi-judicial bodies can respond to real threats to human rights, and provide remedies (Carlarne, 2020, p.40) and accountability frameworks for damages (Knur, 2014, p.47). Even in current uncertain times, international law still creates obligations, legal concepts and norms, which can influence policy-making and public discourse. While it has limitations and should not be seen as a cure-all approach nor the sole approach to climate litigation, the human rights-based approach is important, and will increase in importance as the law develops and the adverse effects of climate change worsen.

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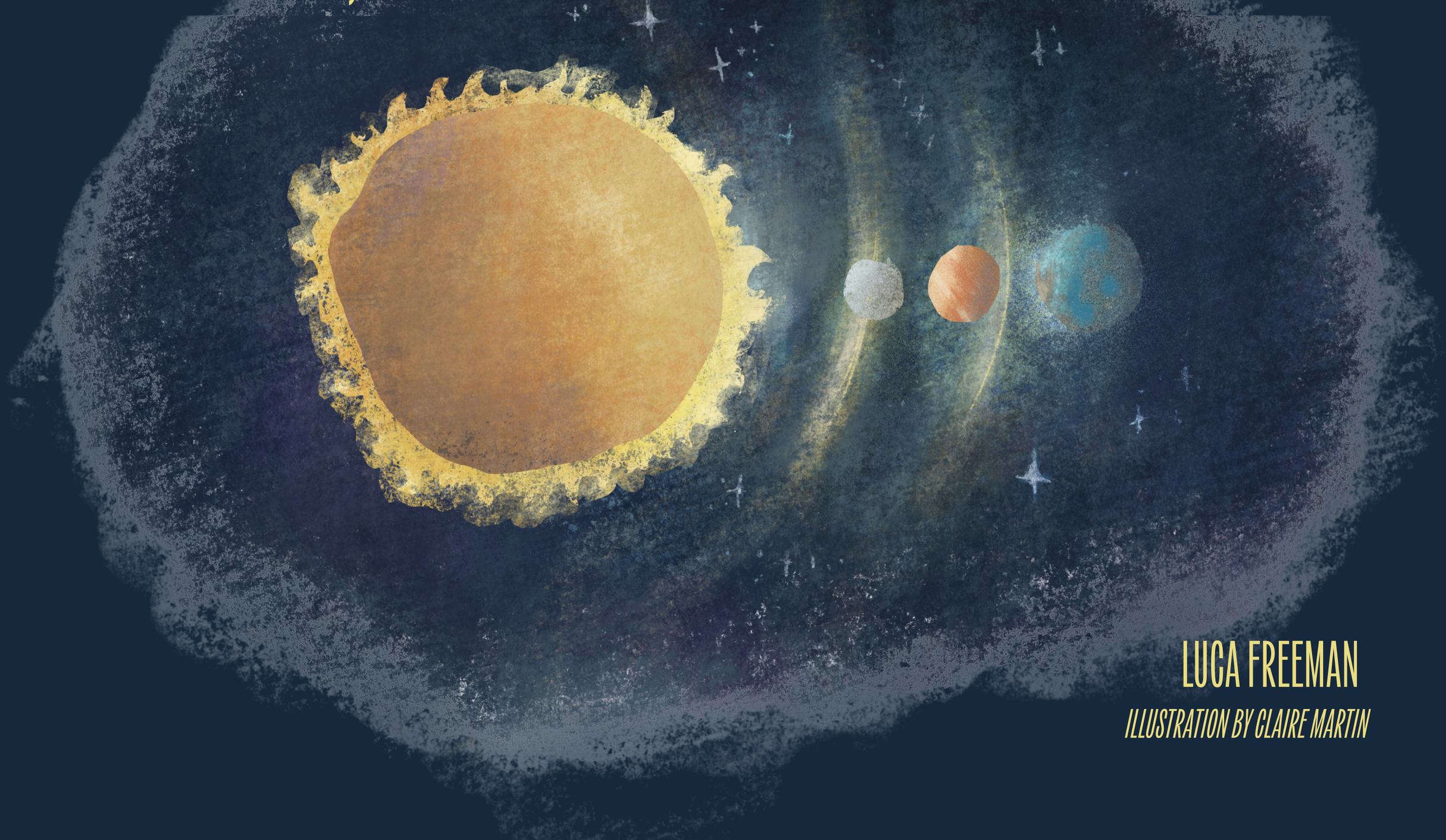
ENGINEERING OUR WAY OUT OF CATASTROPHE?

SOLAR GEOENGINEERING, CLIMATE CHANGE AND CRISES OF CAPITALISM



LUCA FREEMAN

ILLUSTRATION BY CLAIRE MARTIN

ENGINEERING OUR WAY OUT OF CATASTROPHE? SOLAR GEOENGINEERING, CLIMATE CHANGE AND CRISES OF CAPITALISM

LUCA FREEMAN

With climate change progressing at alarming rates, geoengineering – the deliberate large-scale manipulation of the planetary environment – has emerged as an increasingly appealing potential countermeasure (Shepherd et al., 2009, p.3). This essay argues that this growing interest in geoengineering is symptomatic of the tendencies and tensions within the current global political economy, specifically those of contemporary capitalism. Even in its green incarnation, capitalism is incapable of resolving the contradiction between systemic reproduction and ecological stability. An ecologically-oriented Marxist analysis of solar radiation management (SRM) reveals geoengineering not only as a means to address the climate crisis, but more critically as a vehicle to ameliorate the structural contradictions between capitalism and the climate itself, and the subsequent crisis of capitalism's political economy these could engender. This essay begins by analysing the emergence and evolution of geoengineering science and advocacy, documenting the shifts in geoengineering discourses from reactionary conservative approaches to its contemporary 'ecomodern' iterations. These dynamics are then contextualised within the ecological contradictions of capitalism generally, particularly by considering the emergence of the green capitalism model and emphasising its irreconcilable tensions and the limits of the green transition. This is primarily due to green capitalism's inability and unwillingness to bring about radical and rapid change, inadvertently raising the possibility of necessary hard state intervention – or alternatively, total climate collapse – which could ultimately threaten its own political economy. In light of this threat, geoengineering is, in theory, a way out of the impasse between preserving green capitalism and achieving a semblance of climate stability. This is because of its potential to provide a new means of climate action for fossil and green capital that avoids an undesirable reckoning with either the need for radical action or the fundamental unsustainability of capitalism's ecological dynamics. Overall, geoengineering promises to preserve capitalism while further displacing capitalism's inherent ecological contradictions through a newfound socio-ecological fix, potentially delaying the underlying need for structural change with scientific innovation – though not without significant risks and uncertainties.

THE RISE OF GEOENGINEERING

Solar radiation management (SRM), in particular stratospheric aerosol injection (SAI), is the most prominent form of geoengineering. It aims to reduce global temperatures by injecting particulate matter into the stratosphere to reflect a portion of solar radiation back into space to therefore reduce solar heating of the Earth (National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, 2021, p.34). From a scientific perspective, despite its acknowledged potential to address some of the most existential risks posed by climate change, significant risks are also hypothesised. These include disruptions to the ozone layer, hydrological and meteorological patterns including monsoons and tropical cyclones, and potential impacts on biodiversity and public health, the effects of which may vary by region (Huynh and McNeill, 2024). As a result of these risks, and the general uncertainty surrounding the technology, both the technology and research thereon remains controversial within the scientific community and outside it. For example, the Union of Concerned Scientists has voiced strong opposition (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2019), and over 570 other academics and 2000 civil society organisations have supported the international Solar Geoengineering Non-Use Agreement (Solar Geoengineering Non-Use Agreement, 2021). However, despite this resistance, interest in the technology has increased significantly, especially in the US. There has been a new research programme at Harvard University, a four million US dollar Congressional appropriation for research at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and a 2021 report recommending future research from the National Academies; through such endeavours, the US has become the undisputed centre of SRM research (Surprise and Sapinski, 2023, pp.539–541). Overall, SAI has increasingly become an established and recognised scientific area of research, offering both great promises and perils.

Turning to its political instrumentalisation, the first wide-scale advocacy campaigns for SAI as state policy originated primarily in conservative, fossil-backed American think-tanks, such as the Hoover Institution, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Heartland Institute. Their early promotion of the technology emphasised SRM as the most economical, least disruptive, and perhaps the only workable and desirable solution to mitigate the impacts of climate change. This advocacy discourse was underlined by an evaluation of the technology's utility through the neoliberal framework of simple cost-benefit analyses combined with a heavy emphasis on a false exceptional choice between catastrophe and salvation (Sikka, 2012, p.173). From this initial framing, those arguing for more research into geoengineering – mainly those scientists and engineers themselves involved in it – tended to focus on geoengineering as a response to the supposed failures or impossibilities of sufficient emissions reductions in their public-facing interventions. They combined the aforementioned logics of neoliberalism and crisis exceptionalism with a cynical 'industrial fatalism' that is skeptical of the effectiveness of political processes in stopping climate change, thus creating the impetus for geoengineering as an inevitable substitute that provides a necessary and purely technological climate fix beyond political complications (Anshelm and Hansson, 2014, pp.110–113). However, as geoengineering gained mainstream traction and the media hype and sensationalism around the technology died down, this 'Plan B' framing encountered greater pushback. SRM faced two criticisms. Primarily, it was opposed due to its inherent dangers, but secondarily, some raised the issue of positioning SRM as a potential alternative to pre-existing mitigation methods. This positioning could create a form of 'moral hazard' for both policymakers and citizens, as the necessity of reducing emissions or other social changes could be undermined if geoengineering is seen as an 'insurance' against climate change (Corner and Pidgeon, 2010, pp.30-31). In light of these framings, SRM was dismissed in much of the media as simplistic, hubristic or dangerous. (Anshelm and Hansson, 2016, pp.3–4). For later incarnations of geoengineering advocacy however, their hegemonic geoengineering discourse underwent significant evolutions in both its contents and its advocates.

Subsequently, geoengineering has been reframed in various ways. From an emergency substitute to a rational complement to the existing climate-mitigation toolkit, now functioning to 'peak-shave' – in effect using moderate, targeted and time-limited SAI deployment to suppress extreme shocks – the worst climate impacts that could occur if temperature thresholds are breached despite assumedly rapid decarbonisation efforts (Malm, 2022, pp.30-33). Concurrently, a temporal shift in geoengineering's hypothetical deployment has occurred, taking it from the distant future to the near-term of current climate policy (Surprise and Sapinski, 2023, p.552). Advocates argue that, given the potentially multi-decade time barriers for developing effective SRM programmes, governance and investment must begin now to preempt tipping points that emissions mitigation cannot address quickly enough, such as Arctic or Antarctic ice sheet collapse or ocean current changes (Markusson et al., 2014; Surprise, 2018, p.1241; Smith, 2024, pp.10–13). Overall, this evolution in advocacy means that geoengineering is no longer a reaction to a future climate threshold breach, but something which may be actively deployed before such a crisis develops. Therefore, it is no longer pitched as an exceptional emergency response, but instead as a mechanism to both ameliorate the impacts of climate change that slow emissions mitigation fail to address and 'buy time' for the eventual implementation of that mitigation (Surprise, 2018, p. 1241; Surprise and Sapinski, 2023, p.558). Interestingly, this position appears far closer to the positions of scientists on geoengineering, who explicitly argued that geoengineering is not a substitute for mitigation (Shepherd et al., 2009, p.58).

However, behind this shift lies deep changes in the networks of political actors that underpin both SRM advocacy and science. Surprise and Sapinski's (2023, pp.539–547) analysis of contemporary SRM advocacy networks shows that the preceding prominence of the fossil fuel industry has been replaced by the 'technodollar coalition'. This group is an amalgamation of Silicon Valley tech, finance, billionaire-philanthropists, and NGOs explicitly concerned with environmental sustainability. This change signifies that the support of SRM advocacy has in effect moved from its origins in multinational fossil capital to this new (American) green capital, resulting in the formulation of new progressive and ecomodernist discourses surrounding geoengineering espoused by more respectable and legitimate actors. In addition, through these actors' political and financial support of the growing but still niche U.S. research community around SAI, geoengineering advocacy has reached the 'highest echelons of US state power' in recent years, forming connections with established scientific, academic, and policymaking institutions (Surprise and Sapinski, 2023, p.557). This reorientation from fringe conservative concept to institutionally-networked and mainstreamed policy reflects a new reality: SRM geoengineering, contrary to many of its critiques, is no longer predominantly advocated for or promoted by fossil capitalists or those strictly against climate action (Malm, 2022, pp.4–5; Surprise and Sapinski, 2023, p.541). Instead, SAI is championed by interests highly invested in the green transition. Furthermore, these actors now largely align with the geoengineering research community's framing and evaluation of the technology; conversely, many of these researchers have now more actively intervened in the public discourse, thus bringing advocacy and science ever closer. This shift, with a technology that offers to compensate for too-slow emissions reductions now supported by green capitalists who

could benefit from the intensification of such mitigation policies, appears somewhat contradictory. I argue this shift can only be understood by examining deeper dynamics within capitalism, green or not, to assess geoengineering's appeal beyond fossil capital through its potential function as a tool for green capital.

CAPITALISM, CLIMATE, AND CONTRADICTIONS

Many Marxist scholars have conceptualised the links between the climate and ecological crises and capitalism (Foster, 2000; Clark and York, 2005; Moore, 2015; Malm, 2016). Central to all of these theses is the contradiction between capitalism's need to accumulate capital through the endless expansion of commodity production, which necessitates the depletion of environmental resources, and the biosphere's finite nature. The result of this contradiction is almost certain ecological damage. Metabolic rift theory has been particularly influential in analyses of climate change. This theory links the historic rupture of sustainable carbon cycles with the adoption of fossil fuels in the Industrial Revolution and the resulting overaccumulation of atmospheric carbon (Clark and York, 2005). This process spawned fossil capital – capital reliant on the extraction, commodification, and/or utilisation of fossil fuels for its own reproduction and valorisation – which subsequently became a dominant force in industrial capitalism, thereby indirectly embedding fossil fuels into the fabric of the economy (Malm, 2016). Capitalism's ecologically destructive tendencies are exemplified by this contradiction between continuous growth in fossil capital and the resultant overaccumulation of atmospheric carbon.

Throughout its development, however, capitalism has periodically ameliorated this fundamental contradiction through reformulations of its 'world-ecology'. This concept refers to the networks of nature that capitalism subsumes, appropriates, and eventually depletes for its reproduction, allowing new frontiers to be unlocked and contradictions displaced through combinations of 'capital, empire and science' (Moore, 2015, p.11). The Industrial Revolution's combination of fossil fuels, industrialisation, and imperialism represented such a world-ecological revolution, opening and appropriating new frontiers of nature for capital to mobilise and exploit (Moore, 2015, pp.83–87). Moore (2015, pp.165–167) then subsequently brings this argument into the contemporary situation, suggesting that the globalisation of capitalist accumulation and its related contradictions may have produced an 'epochal crisis', wherein new frontiers are few and such contradictions, and their negative effects, cannot be readily displaced. Consequently, capitalism begins to undermine itself, as the consequences of its appetite for fossil fuels eventually destabilise its existential conditions of reproduction, such as a stable climate and biosphere, in a form of 'cannibal capitalism' (Fraser, 2022). This self-destructive tendency invariably creates a risk of systemic collapse, either in the form of extinction or some form of political action to restrain capital. Evidently, either scenario jeopardises the structural identity of contemporary capitalism.

However, the advent of green capitalism and the seeming progress of renewable energy questions this narrative. As McCarthy (2015) argues, if capital's reproduction is only contingently dependent on fossil fuels, this could indicate the potential for the climate-capital contradiction to be displaced or ameliorated, as opposed to being necessarily epoch-defining. The emerging possibility of a renewables transition may thus represent the newest technological frontier providing temporary relief to capitalism's contradictions, tempering arguments on the innate impossibility of capitalist decarbonisation or climate action (McCarthy, 2015, p.2485–2486). However, as Surprise (2018, p.1233) highlights, 'the central variable… determining this strategy's effectuality is time: can it prove effective faster than the rate of climatic change'. For green capitalism's current model, founded on market-based interventions and managed by private capital, the answer is an emphatic no. Despite the cheapening of renewables and the increased state support for green capitalist initiatives, two central problems have confounded the so-called green transition. First, despite their cheapness, renewables fail to be significantly and consistently profitable, and therefore market investment and deployment remains insufficient (Christophers, 2024). Second, fossil fuels continue to be exceptionally profitable with investment continuing apace: indeed, the 'transition' investment plans of oil-majors BP, Shell, and Total all evidence an attachment to the abundant profits fossil fuels provide, with renewables clearly sidelined (Christophers, 2022, pp.153–157). Given the enormous scale of already-existing fossil capital and the political power of the industry, green capitalist development cannot risk initiating policies, beyond minimal market adjustments, which significantly disrupt fossil capital's reproduction and valorisation in the short term. If, for example, fossil fuel usage above the Paris Agreement's 1.5 degrees Celsius proposed allowance was strictly prohibited, between thirteen and seventeen trillion US dollars in fossil fuel assets would be 'stranded' and thus devalued for capital (Hansen, 2022, pp.1–2, 8). Such a prospect would likely provoke significant intra-capitalist political conflict, between its fossil and green factions whose interests would come into direct opposition. This tension has produced a situation in which, at best, the energy transition becomes an energy addition, as green capital slowly grows alongside fossil capital's hegemony rather than rapidly replacing or dethroning it (York and Bell, 2019). The implications of this political economy for climate change are evident – given that climate change demands a rapid and sustained decrease in absolute emissions through active suppression of fossil fuels, market-led green capitalism may prove constitutionally incapable of meaningful climate action (York and Bell, 2019, p.43). Thus, with capital's apparent inability to manage the climate crisis at an effective rate under its own auspices, another central factor in the consideration of green capitalist transitions – the role of the state – becomes crucial.

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THE STATE: BETWEEN CONTROL AND COMPROMISE

The state already plays a central role in climate action, including coordinating the disparate factions of capital involved in the green transition and providing the governance, regulatory and legal frameworks within which such an endeavour can possibly function (McCarthy, 2015, pp.2498). In this task, the state faces a difficult balancing act between managing necessary state intervention on climate change whilst also preserving the fundamental rules of capital. In view of the entrenchment of fossil capital and slow progression of renewables under market governance, however, the state inarguably must expand its role if the climate crisis eventually intensifies to an untenable position and radical action is required. The implications of such a situation for capital would be significant: it would likely warrant direct interference with the mechanisms of capital as the state implements 'massive, lengthy, single-minded interventions… into the day-to-day workings of the capitalist economy' (Malm, 2020, p.144). This may entail a centralisation of power akin to wartime mobilisations. In these circumstances, the state would operate under a 'state of exception', commanding the rapid deployment of renewables alongside the complete dissolution of fossil capital (Delina, 2020, pp.125–126). In essence, states pursuing meaningful mitigation under current policy options would need to initiate an unprecedented destruction of capital, not just limited to fossil capital but rippling outwards through networks of financial interdependencies (Malm and Carton, 2024, pp.69–75). This would result in a significant restructuring of capitalism's political economy, as the state necessarily intrudes into the sacrosanct 'hard core' of capitalist relations of production (Surprise and Sapinski, 2023, p.551) and reflecting the kind of forceful restraint of capital's quintessential logics that could threaten its social position. Accordingly, radical state intervention of this nature is typically rejected by elite actors. Into this predicament, geoengineering offers a different approach to climate action: it allows sufficient reductions in global temperatures without commensurately high reductions in emissions, thus avoiding the undesirable implications of radical emissions reductions for the capitalist system (Malm, 2020, p.146). Indeed, the underlying assumptions of much geoengineering advocacy – for example, its industrial fatalism, political cynicism and appeals to necessity – rely on an implicit naturalisation of the current capitalist system and the limits of its actions as 'set in stone' (Malm, 2020, p.147). Therefore, geoengineering's offering to climate policy must be understood as inseparable from the context of this current historical conjuncture within capitalism, borne out of its fundamental ecological contradictions.

SRM can hence be understood as a temporary fix (rather than a permanent resolution) for these tensions within green capitalism's political economy, displacing capitalist ecological contradictions by functioning as

a safety valve for the emergent pressures of such tensions. Therefore, geoengineering can prevent the radical changes that could emerge if capitalism's ecological crisis reached a breaking point, thereby enabling the maintenance of a stable capitalist hegemony (Surprise, 2018, p.1241). In this way, geoengineering is related to the notion of the spatio-temporal fix. SAI promises to produce more 'atmospheric space' by 'expanding the atmosphere's capacity to absorb carbon dioxide without attendant warming', thus delaying and minimising the intensification of the climate-capital contradiction (Surprise, 2018, pp.1239–1240). Moreover, this fix serves to unite the fossil and green factions of capital behind a singular strategy, reconciling tensions between their disparate interests through a state-led intervention. Through this, fossil capital can avoid the immediate destruction of its investments, whilst green capital can continue its gradual 'passive revolution' strategy of incremental, market-based change (Surprise, 2018, p.1230). Accordingly, geoengineering presents a strategic pathway for capital interests in light of the threats that other options – climate collapse on the one hand, heavy state intervention and politico-economic dismemberment on the other – pose to their reproduction and dominance.

CONCLUSION

The rise of geoengineering must be understood within a wider social and political context where capitalism is unable to resolve the climate crisis in a timely manner under current conditions. A Marxist political-economic analysis helps situate geoengineering within the wider development of global capitalism, revealing the intensification of its essential structural ecological contradictions and the threat these pose to its social reproduction. Geoengineering's allure is then tied to its promise to ameliorate and displace these contradictions by possibly creating a new stratospheric frontier for expansion, hypothetically enabling the immediate stabilisation of the climate system without threatening the overall hegemony of capital. By suppressing the underlying ecological ramifications of capitalism, it could blunt the potentially radical challenges to capitalism that could emerge from either drastic state-led mitigation or unmanaged climate catastrophe, allowing the political economy of green capitalism to continue on unabated. Overall, geoengineering is a uniquely powerful means, and potentially the only means, by which capitalism can simultaneously manage the climate crisis and preserve itself when faced with the sharpening of its own contradictions. But this preservation will only be in the short term. As such, the future of this technology in official climate policy – at least if the green transition persists in the face of resurgent fossil capital and the spectre of a more stringently denialist fossil fascism (Malm and Zetkin Collective, 2021) – is likely to be a key issue for both policymakers and environmental activists in the coming years.

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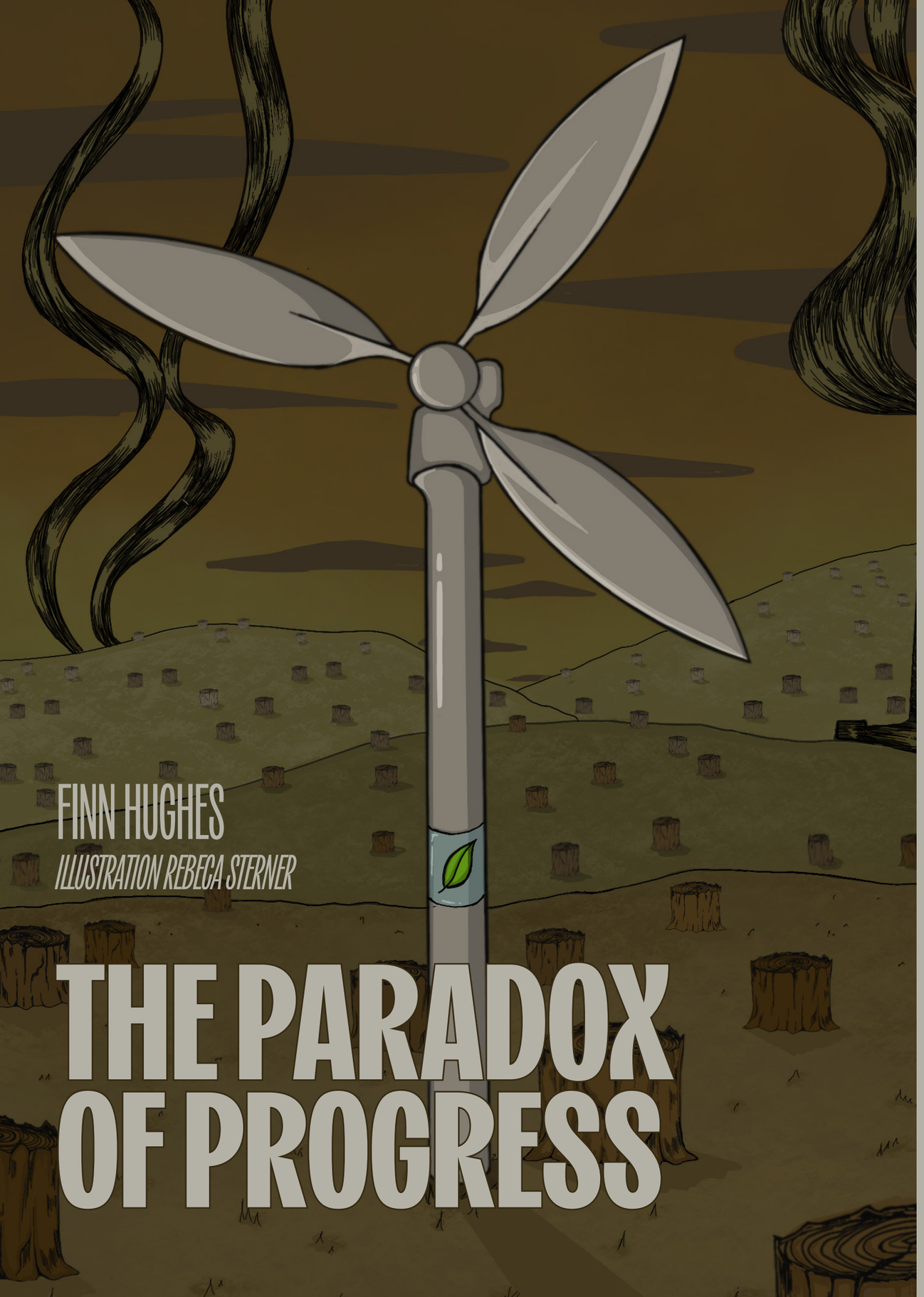

THE PARADOX OF PROGRESS

FINN HUGHES
ILLUSTRATION REBECA STERNER

THE GREEN TECHNOLOGY INDUSTRY AND ITS RELIANCE ON UNSUSTAINABLE PRECIOUS METAL MINING IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

In the quest to combat climate change and become green, global attention has increasingly turned toward green technology. It is at the forefront of this movement that the green technology sector broadcasts a dual message: that both economic and environmental prosperity can be achieved. This message is based on the assumption that green technologies such as electric vehicles, solar panels, and wind turbines offer market-based solutions to climate change by earning profit while making the economy low-carbon. More intense criticism, however, suggests an error in the argument. If the critical metals that underpin green technology are mined in ecologically ruinous and exploitative ways within the Global South, then the industry's sustainability promise is inherently undermined (Carr-Wilson, Pattanayak and Weinthal, 2024). This paradox is particularly visible in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's (DRC) cobalt mining industry, particularly in Haut-Katanga province, where environmental degradation and structural exploitation undermine the quest for green technology (Sovacool, 2020). The coercive nature of the industry towards its modus operandi of extraction not only taints its self-avowed sustainability agenda but also perpetuates neocolonial relationships that push precarious communities to the margins for corporate agendas. This paper argues that contradictions within the green technology supply chain at a structural level—between profit-making and sustainability promise—virtually dismantle the industry's legitimacy. Here, the green technology sector is not seen as a rescuer of global injustice but complicit in the very structures it ostensibly challenges.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL TOLL OF COBALT MINING IN SOUTHEASTERN DRC

In the DRC, resource extraction starkly illustrates the moral dilemma facing the green tech sector. The Katanga Copperbelt, straddling the DRC's Southeastern border, produces over 50 percent of the world's cobalt (International Crisis Group, 2016, p.7). However, its resources are depleting at an ever-increasing rate (International Crisis Group, 2016, p.7). A case study experiment conducted in the town of Kolwezi, within the Copperbelt, specifically found conclusive results on the effect these facilities have had on neighbouring populations and regional biodiversity (Nkulu et al., 2018, p.496). The study examined two test areas on the west side of the city, two kilometres apart, one in immediate proximity to mining operations and the other more distant. Despite the seemingly insignificant distance between the two locations, Nkulu et al. (2018, p.495) determined that the concentration of heavy metals, including Manganese, Nickel, and Uranium, within the dust particles was 70 times more concentrated in the location closer to the mines (Nkulu et al., 2018, p.497). The environmental consequences of these metal concentrations are extensive, as the study conclusively found levels of biodiversity decreasing among all five classifications of vertebrate animal populations in the DRC (Nkulu et al., 2018). This land degradation presents an omnipresent phenomenon wreaking havoc on towns like Kolwezi. The DRC has historically been a renowned ecological centre hosting the world's second-largest rainforest and leading area of carbon sequestration globally (United Nations Environment Programme, 2023). However, sixteen million hectares of rainforest have been removed in fourteen years, eighteen times the total area of neighbouring Rwanda (Tyukavina et al., 2018). The repurposing of natural land for production and extraction facilities, at the cost of habitat conservation and carbon sequestration, highlights the disingenuousness of the green technology industry's claims. Their assumption that they provide a complete solution to global climate change is, in fact, a misleading notion.

Despite these environmental violations, the DRC's economic reliance on mining discourages legislative decisions regarding environmental protection. Mining accounts for over 40 percent of the DRC's GDP, and influential bodies such as the World Bank have stated in their market analysis that DRC domestic mining will only be subject to further expansion (Radley, 2021). Regulatory policy on this industry has thus become extremely difficult to implement, although it hasn't terminated efforts for current President Felix Tshisekedi's Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDSP) party. The UDSP has aimed to monitor and enforce requirements for environmental impact assessments to attempt to reduce the ensuing pollution (United Nations Development Programme Climate Promise, 2023). The UDSP's efforts align with their higher prioritisation of social welfare and environmental protection, differing from their opposition.

Although not as environmentally conscious in their manifesto, the former President Joseph Kabila's People's Party for Reconstruction and Democracy (PPRD) saw some substantial progress in regulation during his presidential tenure. The PPRD set regulatory goals, working towards lowering greenhouse gas emissions in compliance with the Paris Agreement and pursued further partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which is still being pursued today under the UDSP (United Nations Environment Programme, 2024). Although these efforts appeared valiant, foreign investment and economic progression

THE PARADOX OF PROGRESS: THE GREEN TECHNOLOGY INDUSTRY AND ITS RELIANCE ON UNSUSTAINABLE PRECIOUS METAL MINING IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

FINN HUGHES

were prioritised under President Kabila's rule, often deprioritising environmental protection when needed. These trends were visible within the PPRD's term in the deals over ownership of mining sectors, most notably in the 2008 Sicomines agreement (Shen and Fu, 2024, p.25). The Sicomines agreement was a six-billion U.S dollar arrangement which granted a Chinese consortium access to key mining facilities across Katanga and other key provinces in exchange for investment in infrastructure systems (Shen and Fu, 2024, pp.25–28). The Sicomines agreement further demonstrates the approach by which President Kabila's PPRD tried to use the privatisation of mining as a driver for foreign investment to build the foundations for economic growth. Critics have argued, however, that President Kabila's aims of moving towards an economically more stable state are unachievable due to the paradoxical nature of their relationship with mining companies like that of Sicomines.

Occurring at a time in history when sustainable development was just starting to gain political traction, deals such as the Sicomines agreement didn't mandate any formal requirements for strict environmental protection. Furthermore, as reliance for economic prosperity shifted to Chinese conglomerates (Makengo et al., 2022, p.1–11), this distance between green tech firms and raw material extraction made it easier to mask harmful practices, allowing them to maintain a façade of transparency and moral superiority. The actions within the convoluted supply chain of these minerals highlight that it is not only a moral obligation to discuss the environmental cost of cobalt extraction, but also essential to the integrity of the green technology industry. Refusing to address these issues permits the industry to continue a cycle of exploitation, undermining its sustainability assertions. Thus, without concrete action to align practices with ethical and environmental demands, rhetoric for sustainability becomes empty, implicating the industry in the very excesses it says it is trying to combat.

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND LABOUR CONDITIONS

Beyond environmental legislation, there are glaring loopholes in the labour rights of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Even as labour unions are trying to protect miners' rights, the extent and complexity of the Congolese mining industry make it difficult for workers in the sector to receive good coverage and protection. Without regulations, a plethora of unsuitable working practices ensue, creating one of the most dangerous jobs in the world even more hazardous (Schleich, 2024, pp.135–150).

A study from the United States Department of Labor (Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2023) found that over 15% of the mining population in the DRC are children, violating Article 32 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) which states that 'governments must protect children from economic exploitation and work that is dangerous or might harm their health, development or education'. Regardless of age, most domestic mining operations, particularly in ASMs, come with increased danger to labourers, with unstable working conditions resulting in numerous recorded tragedies every year (Tsurukawa, Prakash and Manhart, 2011, pp.19–20). The 2019 failure of one of the Kamoto Copper Company (KCC) mines in the DRC that killed 43 is an example of the utmost negligence of regulation and enforcement of safety in the mining sector (Al Jazeera, 2019). Despite a warning from the union about visible cracks a few days earlier, no remedial action was taken (Reuters, 2019). Glencore-owned KCC listed the victims as illegal miners (McAllister and Taj, 2019), yet the same pit had killed seven workers just three years previously (Al Jazeera, 2019). Glencore's inability to provide suitable working standards starkly reflects how companies permit minimal investment in worker safety and oversight in pursuing profit and economic growth. Furthermore, Glencore establishes a foundational framework that encourages subsequent participants in the supply chain utilising these minerals in renewable technologies to adopt similar practices, potentially disregarding safety requirements that could hinder their operations.

In addition to continuous poor working conditions, workers also receive dismal wages. To attract foreign investment, the Congolese government places minimal labour requirements in their contracts with foreign investors, meaning corporations can pay trivial wages to workers and are bound by limited labour protection obligations (Ngunza, 2025). A lack of labour requirements creates a footing to facilitate the inexpensive global supply of metals required for green technologies, promoting an intrinsically unscrupulous supply chain. Between 2000, when a global shift towards renewable energy and more sustainable production began, and 2020, the international demand for cobalt increased 78-fold (Gulley, 2023, p.1). China accounted for 82 percent of this demand, with its domestic Cobalt refinery industry also growing to 76 times its original size (Gulley, 2023, p.1). Amid unprecedented growth in the international cobalt market, backed by massive Chinese investment that drives expansion, activist groups

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have worked tirelessly to organise resistance and raise the alarm. Their calls for assistance, however, in most cases, have fallen on deaf ears, an indicator of the worst chasm between the struggle for sustainability fought by the green technology movement and what occurs on the ground, impacting communities in the DRC. This lack of action compounds the social and environmental issues of cobalt mining and illustrates the refusal of the industry to acknowledge its complicity in environmental degradation and human rights violations (Schleich, 2024, p.138). The implications of this complacency are profound: if the green technology sector fails to listen to calls for reform and accountability in its supply chain from activists until the root incentives that drive exploitative action are countered, the green industry's farce of sustainability is increasingly hollow (Sanders and Mazibuko, 2023, p.3). The foundation of the green revolution would thus be an expertly designed illusion, sustained by intentional blindness and profit, founded not on justice and equality but on continuous suffering and exploitation of the vulnerable (Tyukavina et al., 2018, pp.1–12). The opposition on the sectoral side to reforms initiated by activists represents an interest in preserving these asymmetries rather than abolishing them.

Despite the anti-corruption advocacy carried out by the Congolese population, financial corruption continues rampantly, affecting the mining sector heavily. The Congolese government established anti-graft bodies like the General Inspectorate of Finances and the Financial Intelligence Unit, both of which were strengthened under Prime Minister Sylvestre Ilunga Ilunkamba's tenure (2019–2021). However, their roots trace back to earlier administrations to combat corruption. Yet, embezzlement and corruption waste as much as fifteen billion US dollars annually (Lee-Jones, 2020, p.7). Corruption in the DRC has endured from one political regime to the next. However, there has been some modest progress since President Tshisekedi was elected in 2018, primarily through the establishment of the Agency for the Prevention and Fight Against Corruption (APLC) (United Nations Development Programme Climate Promise, 2023). Yet, this does not undermine the levels of corruption, as only 0.1 percent of APLC policies are fully enacted, reflecting the continued setbacks (Sanders and Mazibuko, 2023, p.7). These serial government failures sharply highlight the structural deficiencies that make exploitative strategies pay under the guise of sustainable development, to justify the argument that green transitions in the present day may be being built on uncertain and discriminatory premises.

Despite incremental progress in corruption levels, a concentrated elite ruling the Congolese system continues to control the majority of wealth in the country (Donner, Hartmann and Steinkamp, 2024, pp.4–6). Moreover, they do not disperse it to create a welfare state, leading to some of the lowest living standards in the world. This failure to reinvest capital for the public good further shows how the green transformation in the DRC prioritises profit over people, a misstep against its claim of sustainable and equitable development (Smith, 2018). A significant portion of the population survives on criminally low wages that they earn by exposing themselves to dangerous working conditions daily, simply so their families can survive on necessities (Amnesty International, 2023). Together, these realities expose the deep contradictions at the heart of a so-called green revolution built on systemic inequality and exploitation.

THE ROLE OF CONFLICT IN MINING REGIONS

The diversion of state revenues to the pockets of influential stakeholders is symptomatic of unhealthy underlying systemic conditions in the DRC's governance. As seen in other decolonised nations, there has been a precipitous rise in rebel groups attempting to initiate the downfall of the ruling administration and coerce the establishment of their legal institutions (Mampilly and Stewart, 2020). This development is a testament to the

complexity of political authority and resource distribution in the framework of post-colonial governance.

The North and South Kivu provinces are the focal points of this conflict. Although they are not major mining hubs for cobalt, they currently produce a variety of metals, primarily gold and silver, which are exported for production within Western countries (Yager, 2023, p.11.1). Though indirectly utilised for renewable energy, gold is acquired for various rechargeable batteries (Radley, 2021, p.399), while silver remains a key element used in solar panel production due to its excellent thermal and electrical conductivity (Hallam et al., 2022, p.2).

Situated on the eastern border of the DRC, the North and South Kivu conflicts erupted following the Rwandan and Burundian genocides in the early to mid-nineties (Stearns, 2024). With forced migration of refugees and combatants to the DRC resulting from these genocides, various groups were attracted to the resource-rich regions (Center for Preventive Action, 2025). There is a broad range of armed groups in the Kivu provinces that engage in the contestation of resources and people-rich territories, increasing coercion and insecurity within the region. After the Rwandan genocide, many Hutu genocidaires fled to eastern DRC. They were assimilated into rebel movements that are active in North Kivu, and Burundian rebel factions ignited war in South Kivu (Stearns, 2012, p.41). These have battled others such as the Ugandan-supported Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and, more recently, the Congolese M23 movement. The majority of these militias undertake illegal mining, using forced labour and violent means of extraction to fund their activities and acquire de facto control of the local populace and resources (Irenge, 2017, p.22). Their entrenchment in the resource economy reveals how conflict belligerents act knowingly to employ mineral riches in securing both their power and the violence upon which their power rests, revealing a darker underbelly to the international green change that is based on these very resources. The ongoing conflict is a testament to the desperation of the native population, ensnared in a cycle of violence for resource access. The green technology sector's decision to continue to mine metals for economic use under such volatile conditions makes it an active participant in perpetuating the instability and demonstrates the lack of ethics in the industry. The need for precious metals provides an incentive for armed groups to excavate areas of resources during conflict, creating more human rights violations and environmental destruction. Thus, the quest for clean energy sustains war and suffering in those regions that produce valuable raw materials, making it even more complicated for the industry to adopt appropriate practices.

The Katanga Province also suffers from serious conflicts, albeit not of as severe a nature. This violence stems from rebel groups like the Bakata Katanga, who have tried to assert power over the province and its sections following several attempts at seceding from central authorities (McGregor, 2014). Such tension has instigated violent separatist militancy, particularly within populated hubs like Lubumbashi, the capital of Haut-Katanga (International Crisis Group, 2016, pp.17–25). The province's metal and cobalt mines have become the focal point of this power struggle, with rebel groups vying to dominate mining operations. This resource conflict has only served to worsen the abysmal living conditions of the Congolese, as the Bakata Katanga faction has committed extrajudicial killings, rape, and property destruction against perceived foes of their secessionist cause (Stearns, 2012).
This regional de facto governance stems from two primary sources. Firstly, the DRC has not been able to achieve stable backing for its government. The spectre of colonialism still haunts the country, but it is essential to note the DRC's efforts to shape its fate. Foreign assistance has been lacking, even from ex-colonial powers and the UN. Critics have argued that the inability to secure long-term partnerships from an organisational perspective has led to internal instability of governance in the DRC. The abuse of power and governance problems reflect the complexities the country is facing as it works to find its independence and create a more equitable future for its people. These challenges are exacerbated by the green technology industry's reliance on cobalt sourced from the region, which perpetuates cycles of exploitation and hinders genuine progress towards sustainability and equity within the DRC. Without addressing these governance issues, the promise of green technologies will continue to unravel under the weight of historical injustices and socio-economic disparities.

Flaws in the DRC's governance have also amplified the role of private operators in the green technology sector, who control the majority of the country's mines. Their unethical disregard for equality in the distribution of government revenue exacerbates the misery of the Congolese people. This condition creates a dangerous situation with violations of human rights that force individuals to reside in inhumane conditions or risk displacement. Without fundamental changes in governance and corporate accountability, the vision of a sustainable future based on green technology remains unrealised.

CONCLUSION

The rising global cobalt demand, driven by the green tech sector, is a hostile irony in the name of sustainability. Green technology has been celebrated as an honourable solution for the problems of the environment, although seemingly at the expense of horrific social, ecological, and human rights abuses in cobalt mining in Haut-Katanga and other vulnerable regions. The exploitation of the DRC's abundant mineral wealth has continued to fuel dangerous working conditions, environmental degradation, as well as vast economic inequalities, particularly in mining regions such as Haut-Katanga. Efforts by political and corporate elites to regulate the sector have been negligible, mainly due to corruption and the smothering influence of foreign investment. Such dependency on Congolese cobalt desecrates the green revolution's moral stances, reinforcing how sustainability measures will inevitably dig deep into the same distortions they are meant to address unless such paradoxes are broken. The chronic demand for cobalt indicates a larger imperative for a broader vision of green technology: a vision that incorporates the social and environmental expense of mineral extraction and ensures that the drive to construct a sustainable future does not widen existing inequalities.

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HAS THE U.S. MOVE TOWARD ENERGY SELF-SUFFICIENCY INCENTIVISED GULF STATES' FOREIGN POLICY ACTIVITIES TOWARD ASIA?

CLARA RICKETTS

ILLUSTRATION BY YU WU

HAS THE U.S. MOVE TOWARD ENERGY SELF-SUFFICIENCY INCENTIVISED GULF STATES' FOREIGN POLICY ACTIVITIES TOWARD ASIA?

CLARA RICKETTS

The Persian Gulf is undergoing a significant shift in patterns of economic and strategic alliances. Historically, the US' interest in the region has revolved around energy resources, with a guarantee of security provisions in exchange for the reliable supply of energy. Recent shifts in the Gulf-US partnership have come as America moves towards energy independence while decreasing its commitment to the region. Resultantly, Gulf states have sought to reduce their reliance on the US by strengthening partnerships with rapidly growing Asian economies such as China, India, South Korea, and Japan. This shift reflects a hedging strategy aimed at mitigating risks associated with traditional Western alliances while securing strategic influence in an increasingly multipolar world. This essay argues that the US' drive towards energy independence has prompted Gulf States to deepen ties with Asian powers and pursue foreign policy diversification, thereby advancing their pursuit of autonomy and reshaping regional and global power dynamics.

US-GULF TIES

The US shale revolution has pushed America-Gulf relations to a tipping point; decreased US dependence on Gulf Oil, and subsequent disruption of traditional energy alliances has compelled Gulf states to forge alternative economic partnerships. The shale revolution transformed the US into a net exporter of petroleum by 2020 (Environmental Investigation Agency, 2024), sharply reducing the need for foreign oil imports (Guliyev, 2020, p.8). As the US became more energy independent, military involvement in the Gulf ceased to be a necessary element of US foreign policy (Westphal, Overhaus and Steinberg, 2014, p.16). This change has also led to a significant shift in the global security architecture, eroding Gulf States' confidence in US security commitments. The US's response to attacks on Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) oil infrastructure in 2019 and Abu Dhabi in 2022 was notably muted (Parker and Bakir, 2024, p.129), reinforcing the perception that the US is less committed to defending the region. These attacks, along with US withdrawal from Afghanistan, have contributed to growing concerns in Gulf States about the reliability of American military protection (Parker and Bakir, 2024, p.120).

The loosening of US-Gulf ties stem primarily from the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and subsequent inability to construct a stable democratic Iraqi state, deepening scepticism about US hegemony in the Middle East (Sim and Fulton, 2023, p.15). It underscored the perception of American unreliability, motivating Gulf States to pursue independent foreign policy alignments. Gulf States are increasingly adopting a hedging strategy to reduce dependence on the US amid growing uncertainty surrounding its regional policies (Samaan, 2019, p.80). This strategy involves both investing in alternative relationships to mitigate risks associated with the absence of US military cooperation and seeking greater control over their own security dynamics (Samaan, 2019, p.47). This demonstrates why Gulf States have been realigning with rising powers in Asia to pursue their economic interests, while simultaneously protecting themselves from unpredictable US foreign policy and potential American retrenchment in the region.

PIVOT TO ASIA

Asian powers, offering both economic opportunities and a pathway to diversify diplomatic ties, have emerged as critical partners for Gulf States. Gulf states, like rentier states, are incentivised to prioritise economic interests for political stability given that regime legitimacy in these autocratic states often hinges on economic performance (Ismail, 2024, p.9). In 2019, hydrocarbon revenues made up between 65 percent to almost 90 percent of total government revenues, with the exception of the UAE, where they made up 40 percent (Sim, 2024, p.635). The global balance of power has been shifting from the West to the East, driven by rapid economic growth of emerging powers such as China and India (Samaan, 2019, p.4).

Petroleum imports are the most vital part of India-Gulf trade, with India dependent on Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, and the UAE for its energy security (Sim and Fulton, 2023, pp.110–111). India's oil demand is projected to increase from 4.7 million barrels per day in 2017 to ten million barrels per day by 2040 with over 50 percent of its total hydrocarbon imports coming from the Gulf (Sim and Fulton, 2023, p.19). By 2009, China had become Saudi Arabia's largest oil customer (Samaan, 2019, p.3), reflecting Asia's growing energy needs and the Gulf's strategic realignment towards emerging markets. In 2020, Gulf countries supplied 38 percent of India's oil, 90 percent of Japan's and 60 percent of South Korea's imports (Mosly, 2022, p.7). As these nations expand, they increasingly rely on Gulf oil and gas to fuel their growth (Samaan, 2019, p.24). Resultantly, China, India, Japan, and South Korea have become key importers, providing Gulf States opportunities to enhance their strategic autonomy (Piet and Wright, 2016). This oil-based 'East-East camaraderie' is both generating higher economic growth in Gulf countries and meeting Asia's growing economies' energy needs (Sim and Fulton, 2023, p.157).

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BEYOND ENERGY

Strengthening Gulf-Asia ties now extends beyond energy. Sectors such as nuclear energy, banking, and real-estate in Gulf economies — traditionally controlled by Western consortia — are increasingly being managed with or by Asian companies (Samaan, 2019, p.29). For instance, India has become the largest foreign investor in Dubai's real-estate market (Khan, 2023). Japan and Qatar signed an economic agreement in 2006 and created a Japan–Qatar Joint Economic Committee (Samaan, 2019, p.29). Singapore signed the GCC-Singapore Free Trade Agreement in 2008, making the UAE and Saudi Arabia its first and second largest trading partners in the Gulf by 2017 (Samaan, 2019, p.30). In the nuclear sector, the UAE awarded a contract for its first four nuclear plants to a South Korean consortium in 2009 (Samaan, 2019, p.31), showcasing the growing role of Asia partners.

China and Gulf countries are forging new economic partnerships through China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Gulf States' ambitious development agendas. These include Iran's five-year 'economic development plan', Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain's respective Vision 2030 initiatives, Oman's Vision 2040, New Kuwait 2035, and the UAE's 2050 Energy Strategy (Sim and Fulton, 2023, p.40). Together, these initiatives align strategic objectives, creating a platform for collaboration in infrastructure, trade, renewable energy, and industrial diversification, thereby unlocking significant mutual economic activities (Chaziza, 2023, p.141). By 2017, the volume of trade between China and the Persian Gulf States reached approximately US dollars 197 billion (Kamrava, 2020, p.492). President Xi Jinping's '1 (energy) + 2 (construction and infrastructure, trade and investment) + 3 (nuclear energy, aerospace and new energy)' framework, introduced in 2014, solidified the Gulf's strategic importance in China's global ambitions (Mason, 2023, p.149). For Gulf States, aligning with the BRI creates opportunities to showcase themselves as critical trading partners globally.

Diplomatic and military ties have also grown. Since 2009, Arab Gulf leaders have conducted numerous visits to China, Japan, South Korea and India, reinforcing these partnerships (Samaan, 2019, p.3). The invitation for Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran to join the BRICS bloc highlights their rising global influence and underscores the Gulf's shift towards a multipolar approach in international relations (Lee and Sims, 2024, p.2). By joining BRICS, these Gulf States have aligned themselves with countries that aim to rebalance global power dynamics, challenging the political and economic influence of Western powers (Lee and Sims, 2024, p.2). Yet, Saudi Arabia's hesitation in accepting BRICS' invitation reflects the complexity of aligning with Iran, a regional rival (Stuenkel and Treadwell, 2024), and balancing diverse relationships — particularly with the US, its long-standing security partner.

STRATEGIC HEDGING

Gulf States are thus pursuing their own strategies at balancing diverse partnerships. Although there is a general regional trend in the Gulf towards a rapprochement with Asian powers, policies aimed at hedging against a perceived decline of US power are unique to each state (Samaan, 2019, p.5). Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman, have led efforts to diversify partnerships, driven by aspirations for strategic independence and a recognition of the shifting global order (Samaan, 2019, p.6). In contrast, Kuwait is carefully expanding its relations, whilst maintaining a close alignment with the US, on which it heavily depends for security (Samaan, 2019, p.52). Following the successful liberation of Kuwait in the 1990–1991 Gulf War, the US established a lasting military presence in the region (Parker and Bakir, 2024, p.120). This significantly influenced Kuwait's confidence in this relationship, facilitating a long-term security partnership (Parker and Bakir, 2024, p.128). Consequently, Kuwait has aligned with US policy, most notably illustrated by its support of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Parker and Bakir, 2024, p.128).

While Kuwait has strengthened ties with Japan, it has not diversified its defence partnerships to the same extent as its neighbours, prioritising instead its strategic relations with the US (Parker and Bakir, 2024, p.127). Kuwait's commitment to its security partnership underlines the sentiment among Kuwaiti officials that 'America will always be

number one in the Gulf' (Parker and Bakir, 2024, p.128). Other Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, exemplify a position of strategic neutrality, balancing partnerships with powers that have competing interests. Riyadh's deepening economic ties with Beijing, alongside its historical military partnership with Washington, illustrate its intent to balance competing interests (Samaan, 2019, p.34). Similarly, the UAE pragmatically diversifies its partnerships, exemplified by defence agreements with South Korea and selective cooperation with China (Samaan, 2019, pp.50–51). The Gulf States' strategic neutrality aligns with the neorealist assumption that states seek to avoid dependence on one state and are engaging with several global powers to better adapt to a multipolar system.

Economic and diplomatic ties between the Gulf and Asia are increasingly shaping the region's security landscape. Historically, the US has served as the Gulf's primary security provider. However, due to increased reliance on Gulf energy imports, Asian powers have begun to safeguard against regional instability (Andrijanič, 2015, p.269). China has indicated moves towards playing a security role in the Gulf, conducting joint drills with the Saudi Navy in 2019 and supplying arms to Gulf states when they have been unable to purchase from the US (Sim and Fulton, 2023, p.20). The evolving economic interdependence between the Gulf and Asia may foster shared security interests that could redefine the region's power dynamics. Their growing involvement, particularly through China's BRI, signals the potential for a more pronounced security presence in the region. Nonetheless, Gulf States remain reliant on the US for core security needs, as America continues to dominate arms sales and maintain a robust regional naval presence (Zenko, 2024). Balancing their relationship between the US, their security guarantor, and China, a vital economic partner, Gulf States currently take a policy of non-alignment (Al Shidhani and Baig, 2024, p.20). The Gulf's pivot towards Asia has evolved into a strategic shift that changes the historical dominance of US diplomatic and military influence in the region, allowing them to avoid overreliance on any single partner (Kaiser-Cross, 2015, p.123). While the US' move toward energy self-sufficiency and reduced regional role has influenced this shift, the Gulf States' pursuit of greater strategic autonomy has been a key motivator for diversifying their partnerships. Nevertheless, while Gulf States explore partnerships with Asian powers to diversify their security options, these relationships remain in their infancy compared to their deep-rooted ties with the US.

A key distinction in these partnerships lies in their underlying political dynamics. The US often links its security framework to political demands, such as democratisation, which Gulf States view as intrusive (Sun, Yang and Liu, 2024, p.197). In contrast, China prioritises economic cooperation without pushing political reform agendas (Sun, Yang and Liu, 2024, p.197–198). China, in particular, adopts a horizontal approach to engagement, respecting Gulf sovereignty (Sun, Yang and Liu, 2024, p.197). This stance resonates with Gulf States, which seek to avoid the perception of 'neocolonialism' often associated with Western policies. For Gulf leaders, China's focus on equitable economic partnerships offers a compelling alternative to the US' hegemonic approach. This shift reflects notably Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE's pursuit of strategic autonomy, as they aim to maintain independence without direct external interference in their governance (Samaan, 2019, p.36).

CONCLUSION

Gulf States are increasingly pursuing a strategy of hedging to balance their historical reliance on the US with deeper engagement with emerging Asian powers. This shift is driven by a perceived US retreat from the region, catalysed by its growing energy self-sufficiency following the shale revolution. By diversifying their economic partnerships yet still maintaining the US as a critical security provider, Gulf States aim to enhance their strategic autonomy and safeguard their economic and geopolitical interests. Gulf-Asia cooperation is rooted in mutual economic interests, with Asian powers reliant on Gulf hydrocarbons for economic development while Gulf States benefit from industrial partnerships. This relationship has begun to transcend trade, gradually incorporating elements of security and political cooperation. Although these ties lack the depth of Gulf-US alliances, their steady evolution signals the potential for a more multifaceted partnership in the future. This strategic recalibration ensures that Gulf States remain resilient against shifts in US policy while positioning themselves as influential players in a multipolar global order. Ultimately, Gulf States' ability to navigate this turning point will define their influence in a shifting global order, determining whether they emerge as stabilising power brokers or catalysts for intensified geopolitical competition.

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KICKING OFF A NEW ERA

HOW SAUDI ARABIA IS USING SPORTS TO UNLOCK SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC REFORM

JOANNA SAUNDERSON

ILLUSTRATION BY VITTO GINEVRI

KICKING OFF A NEW ERA: HOW SAUDI ARABIA IS USING SPORTS TO UNLOCK SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC REFORM

JOANNA SAUNDERSON

Since the launch of Vision 2030 by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) in 2016, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has emerged as a key player in global sports. Through its Public Investment Fund (PIF), the Kingdom has spent billions hosting various athletic events such as the Formula One Grand Prix, heavyweight boxing championships and the Spanish Super Cup, alongside acquiring Newcastle United Football Club, reshaping the Pro League and launching LIV Golf. These high-profile investments align with Saudi's 2030 Vision and its pursuit of extensive economic, social, and geopolitical transformation. These efforts seek to secure the longevity of Saudi's regional dominance and global influence in a post oil future. However, as sport transforms into an increasingly visible aspect of Saudi's global engagement, accusations from Western media and leaders of 'sportswashing' – a strategy to divert global attention from the nation's internal crimes and human rights violations – are rapidly accumulating.

This article examines Saudi Arabia's growing investment in sports as catalysing 'profound socio-economic change' (Widdop and Chadwick, 2023, p.150). Whilst the Saudi regime may be seeking to strengthen its reputation, this essay argues that this is not its primary motivation. Instead, MBS appears driven by two key goals: diversifying Saudi's economy beyond oil, and integrating sports into the daily lives of the population to strengthen national unity and ensure the regime's longevity. As Saudi is faced with the limitations of its oil economy, MBS is pursuing sports as an alternative avenue to expand the nation's economy. Analysing the launch of LIV Golf as a strategic reach for economic soft power, a concept coined by Carminati (2022), reveals Saudi's attempts to expand its portfolio of attractive economic assets. Furthermore, exploring MBS's domestic focus and development of the Kingdom's football leagues as a nation-building project (Koch, 2013) to establish imagined communities (Anderson, 2008) illuminates Saudi's desire to cultivate social cohesion through a shared national identity. By examining investments such as LIV Golf and the Pro League, controversial ventures that attract international talent and disrupt global sports hierarchies, this article argues that Saudi is primarily concerned with using sports to transform its economic and social landscape.

MOVING FROM OIL TO ATHLETES

Saudi Arabia remains a leading exporter of oil, which has enabled rapid economic development through the late twentieth century. Saudi has relied on oil reserves as its primary source of hard power, which refers to the state's ability to coerce behaviour through military force or economic pressure (Gallarotti and Al Filali, 2012). Saudi Arabia has leveraged this power to form strategic global partnerships and influence Middle Eastern geopolitics. In 2018, Saudi's petroleum sector contributed to roughly 87 percent of budget revenues, and 90 percent of export earnings (Delivorias and De Martini, 2023), emphasising its critical role in the economy. However, volatile oil prices within the modern market and pushes for sustainability have encouraged the Kingdom to ameliorate its economy through a diverse portfolio of assets; notably its thriving sports profile.

Through sports investments, Saudi officials envision a 'positive spillover' (Reda and Vivez, 2021) into the overall economy, boosting tourism, attracting foreign direct investment, and creating an estimated 450,000 new jobs by 2030 through event hosting (Narayanan, 2024). More broadly, the Kingdom hopes to amass economic soft power through sports ventures to maintain its economic prosperity. Soft power, as defined by Nye (2011, p.14), is a state's 'powers of attraction, persuasion, and issue framing' to 'shape basic beliefs, perceptions, and preferences'. Carminati's (2022, p.31) analysis of China's Belt and Road initiative as an economic soft power tool offers a compelling comparison to Saudi's sports investments. Both seek to expand global reach and connectivity, develop trade opportunities, attract direct foreign investment, and boost tourism. Thus, Saudi's investments echo a 'soft-economic power interaction' (Carminati, 2022, p.31), and a desire to build the nation's 'portfolio of attractive national features' (Carminati, 2022, p.20) to expand its economy.

LIV Golf exemplifies these attractive assets, developed to extend Saudi's global connectivity physically and digitally while tying the Kingdom into international sports partnerships. Launched in 2022 as a breakaway tour, LIV Golf has shaken up the world of professional golf, challenging the supremacy of the PGA Tour. Its distinctive structure, with 54 holes and teams of four, has remodelled golf into a fast-paced, dynamic and fan-based model, boosting engagement by appealing to a wider audience. The PIF has invested over 2 billion US dollars in LIV, attracting high-profile athletes such as Dustin Johnson, Phil Mickelson and Brooks Koepka (Davis, Plumley and Wilson, 2022). These signings have raised LIV's global profile, cultivating a 'pull of attraction' (Nye, 2011, p.86) to expand Saudi's presence and 'permanence' (Yom, 2023, p.4) in global markets.

Recently, there have been ongoing talks about a merger between the PGA, DP World Tour and LIV Golf. Combining each of these commercial businesses into a collectively owned entity is a notable example of how LIV is strengthening global partnerships for Saudi Arabia. Whilst the deal has not yet been finalised, it is widely speculated that it will be completed imminently (Clements, 2024), especially with Donald Trump, a keen supporter of LIV (Johnson, 2024, p.345), resuming the American presidency. The deal would bolster the league's visibility on the global stage, amplifying Saudi's presence in global sporting markets, while expanding revenues through media coverage. Saudi Arabia's use of sports to drive economic expansion is unapologetically articulated by MBS himself. Responding to an interview with Bret Baier with Fox News in 2023, he stated: 'I have 1 percent growth in GDP from sport and I am aiming for another 1.5 percent' (Fox News, 2023). MBS' assertion underscores his commitment to economic growth and his use of sports to achieve such growth, regardless of how Western media frames this investment project.

As Saudi is faced with the limitations of its oil economy, MBS is pursuing sports as an alternative avenue to expand the nation's economy.

CULTIVATING NATIONAL PRIDE

Alongside diversifying its economy, MBS's sports policy is concentrated around domestic efforts to engage its population in sports communities, drawing people into a shared national identity. Saudi's development of its football leagues is cultivating pride and allegiance amongst the population, echoing Koch's (2013) concept of nation-building.

Nation building, as articulated by Koch (2013, p.43), is a project that 'links the people to a homeland and to the state', successfully evoking feelings of support and allegiance amongst its population towards a geographic imaginary of the state. Koch (2013, p.43) describes how authoritarian regimes use sports to set this project in motion, analysing Kazakhstan's use of the Astana Cycling Team to 'simultaneously increase nationalist sentiment and international prestige'. Team Astana became a means to showcase the nation's excellence, stimulating national pride. Similarly, Saudi's investment in football, specifically the Pro League, resembles this cultivation of nationalist sentiment. Recently, the PIF has poured huge investments into the Pro League, purchasing 75 percent of the 4 largest clubs to enable a complete transformation. Recruiting elite players, such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema and Neymar, has significantly raised the league's legitimacy and following within Saudi Arabia. Eighty percent of the population are now recorded to play or follow the game (Jude Sam, 2023). Considering 63 percent of the Saudi population are under 30 years old (Reuters, 2023), football has emerged as a strategic investment to engage the nation.

Saudi's investments into the Pro League reflect attempts to 'write themselves, and their regimes, into… the national imaginaries of their citizens' (Alderman and Eggeling, 2024, p.289). Saudi's football fandoms can be described using Anderson's (2008) concept of imagined communities, an explanation of how nations are socially constructed as people come together over shared identities. Hobsbawm (1992, p.143), reflecting on football's popularisation in inter-war Europe, describes how international sport became 'primary expressions of their imagined communities'. Saudi's development of football fandoms alludes to these growing expressions, particularly as investments in the Pro League and football academies 'trickle down to the national team' (Fernandez, 2024), stimulating pride and allegiance across the population in Saudi Arabian football.

Growth in national pride is evident not only in men's football but also in the revolution happening across the women's game. A recent report by NEOM (2025), a partner of the AFC Women's Champions League, details the colossal rise of women's football in Saudi at both national and local levels. The national team has gained FIFA ranking, partnerships with brands such as Unilever's Rexona, and achieved a standardisation of resources with the men, elevating the visibility of Saudi women's sport globally. Meanwhile, grassroots initiatives such as the launch of a Girl's Schools League, involving more than 77,000 players in 2023/24 (NEOM, 2025), have boosted participation dramatically at local levels. Saudi Arabia's transformation across the women's national team and local clubs is enacting a process of nation-building. Whilst the expansion of women's sport in Saudi remains in tension with ongoing restrictions on women's freedoms, by linking women to the state, not by coercion but by participation in sports, Saudi

is evoking a sense of national pride amongst its citizens (Anderson, 2008). Furthermore, this development of sports raises genuine questions about the progress of gender reform across the nation.

WHAT ABOUT SPORTSWASHING?

While Saudi's ambitious investments have illuminated a vibrant and modernising sporting culture, it has simultaneously drawn attention to its poor human rights record. Scholars have analysed ventures such as Saudi's purchase of Newcastle United, and launch of LIV, as examples of sportswashing. Rather than drawing focus away from human rights violations, as sportswashing would imply, Saudi's sports investments have elevated its media presence, sparking global criticism (MacInnes, 2023; Roller, 2024). As the Kingdom expands its presence in global sports, its behaviour and human rights record are increasingly on the radar of audiences, investors, and athletes around the world, intensifying media criticism, hindering efforts to enhance its global reputation. Thus, this final section interrogates the sportswashing narrative which suggests that Saudi's investments have been driven by a desire to reshape its global reputation. Sportswashing is a method of 'cleaning a reputation through the investment in elite sport athletes, teams or events' (Grix, Dinsmore and Brannagan, 2023), or as Ettinger (2023, p.533) terms it, 'reputation laundering'. Whilst sportswashing is relatively new in scholarship, such practices are evident throughout history, notably in Nazi Germany's hosting of the 1936 Olympics. Saudi Arabia has been frequently accused of employing sportswashing to 'reboot their reputation and distract audiences from their horrific human rights record' (Chadwick, 2018). Following the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in a Saudi consulate in 2018, the purchase of Newcastle United and LIV Golf were widely marked by Western critics as examples of sportswashing to cleanse Saudi of this reputation (Davis and Plumley, 2024). Furthermore, many viewed these investments as diverting attention from the ongoing war in Yemen, in which Saudi has committed countless human rights violations (Boykoff, 2022). The impact of sports policy in damaging Saudi's image can be labelled as 'soft disempowerment' (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018, p.1157). This concept describes the way in which a state's pursuit of soft power may 'draw unwanted attention to potentially discrediting (in)actions' (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018, p.1157). LIV Golf has drawn this 'unwanted attention', through fierce criticism from sports communities and organisations such as Amnesty International (Burton and Naraine, 2023).

Saudi Arabia appears largely undeterred by risks of soft disempowerment, continuing with its ambitious sports investments despite rising criticism. In launching LIV Golf, a direct competitor and 'threat' (Davis, Plumley and Wilson, 2022) to the PGA, Saudi likely anticipated the controversy that would arise. However, the Kingdom remained unphased by this criticism, continuing the development of the League. Almahraj's (2023) study on the British press coverage of Saudi Arabia since the launch of Vision 2030 reveals an increase in critical news stories in The Sun and The Daily Mail between 2017-2021. Whilst this study is limited in scale, it alludes to intensified negative media attention that Saudi has received due to its high-profile sports investments. The PIF's continued investments despite criticism indicate that Saudi Arabia's primary concern is not its global reputation, but other aspects of national development. As MBS confirms later in the interview with Fox News, 'if sportswashing is going to increase my GDP by 1%, then we'll continue doing sportswashing… I don't care' (Fox News, 2023). For MBS it is all about growth and securing Saudi's position of power, at whatever short-term cost this might come to Saudi's global image.

CONCLUSION

Saudi Arabia is investing in sports policy to dramatically remodel its economic and social landscape. To some extent the Saudi regime may be motivated by enhancing its global reputation; however, this is not its primary concern, indicated by blatantly controversial investments such as LIV Golf, which Saudi developed despite the inevitable criticism that would arise. Instead, Mohammed bin Salman's investments in hosting sports events, developing leagues, and integrating sports into the daily lives of Saudi Arabians, indicate his pursuit of economic growth and social cohesion to maintain the prosperity and longevity of the regime. Saudi is diversifying its economy through its sports ventures and accumulation of soft economic power, whilst undergoing a project of 'nation building' (Koch, 2013) to promote unity and allegiance to the state. Whilst my analysis is limited in questioning how Saudi's policy is shaped by regional dynamics and sports investments by neighbouring Gulf states, focusing solely on Saudi Arabia has enabled a more nuanced discussion of internal Saudi motivations. Ultimately, as Saudi Arabia undergoes revolutionary change under the framework of Vision 2030, sports investments offer a compelling lens into the Kingdom's strategic ambitions and priorities.

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FATE OF THE GREENBACK

INTERNAL THREATS TO U.S. DOLLAR HEGEMONY

MAXWELL POHLMAN

ILLUSTRATION BY THARUN VENKAT

'[The] fundamental pillar that sustains the power of the United States, the US dollar.'
- Giovanni Villavicencio

Since the establishment of the Bretton Woods system in 1944, the United States dollar (USD) has served as the world's primary reserve currency – one widely held by central banks for the purposes of investment, trade, and to back their domestic currency. It has since underpinned the economic and political dominance of the United States (U.S.). However, in 2022, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) stated that the USD's proportion of global foreign-exchange reserves dropped below 59 percent in the last quarter of 2021, continuing a two-decade downward trend (Gazi and Randolph, 2023). Nonetheless, central banks have not shifted towards the pound, euro, or other established numéraires. Instead, of those reserves no longer held in USD, a quarter has moved into the Chinese renminbi, while the remaining three-quarters have flowed into the currencies of smaller states that have traditionally had a minimal role as reserve currencies (Gazi and Randolph, 2023).

From the last quarter of 2022 to the first of 2023, online discussion regarding this phenomenon, known as de-dollarisation, increased more than sevenfold (Thiagarajan et al., 2023, p.5). While many scholars, politicians, and media outlets focus on foreign competitors, this article argues that the greatest threats to the USD stem from within the United States itself. From the dismantling of Bretton Woods to the domestic and international economic instability caused by U.S. financial crises and internal policy failures have done more to undermine the dollar hegemony than any foreign challenge. This article examines how these self-inflicted wounds, compounded by recent aggressive economic policies, have accelerated the decline of the USD.

THE VALUE AND VULNERABILITY OF DOLLAR DOMINANCE

Scholars have argued that maintaining the USD's relevance as the world's reserve currency has been even more crucial to American success than the nation's 'military superiority' (Costigan, Cottle, and Keys, 2017, p.105). While waning prevalence of the greenback holds the clearest implications for the Federal Reserve, the fate of the dollar is inherently intertwined with that of U.S. dominance at large. Exorbitant privilege – a term coined by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the French Minister of Finance, in 1950 – denotes the luxuries of the nation issuing the world's main reserve (Münchau, 2019). This enables the U.S. to run large trade deficits by financing imports in its own currency and borrowing at lower interest rates due to a high demand for dollars (Villavicencio, 2020). More than allowing the Federal Reserve greater autonomy and flexibility in monetary policy, this privilege has facilitated the status of the U.S. as a consumer economy – one that sees a large share of its GDP from domestic consumption. For decades, the high levels of consumption seen in the U.S. have been key not just to its economic strength, but its global identity. Thus, de-dollarisation would be a crushing blow to U.S. hegemony. Massive cultural and economic restructuring would be necessary to even attempt a recovery, uprooting the way of life for 340 million Americans.

The USD's hegemony as a reserve currency and denomination of trade has historically rested on four key pillars: the Bretton Woods system (Li, 2023, p.viii), the petrodollar arrangement (Costigan, Cottle, and Keys, 2017, p. 105), American financial stability

(J.P. Morgan, 2023), and trust in the U.S. government to properly manage its currency and political conduct (Blinder, 1996, p. 129). Apart from the petrodollar – a term used to reference the traditional pricing and trading of oil in US dollars – the decay of these pillars can be primarily attributed to various U.S. policy decisions made in recent decades.

THE RISE AND FALL OF BRETTON WOODS

Blinder (1996, p.128) claims that 'dollar dominance' began in World War II, facilitated by the comparatively low political, economic, and human losses faced by the US. With most of the world in socioeconomic ruin, a new system emerged: The Bretton Woods Agreement of 1944. Aiming to rebuild stability and trust via economic interdependence, the U.S. entered the IMF (*Bretton Woods Agreements Act*, 1945, s.2). Soon, the USD was the world's reserve currency, backed by gold (*Articles of Agreement of the International Monetary Fund*, 1944, Article IV). However, in 1971, President Richard Nixon unilaterally ended the gold standard, dismantling the Bretton Woods system and allowing the USD to become a fiat currency – one that derives its value from trust and government decree, rather than intrinsic value or backing from a commodity (Costigan, Cottle, and Keys, 2017, p.109). This move caused an immediate 8.6 percent devaluation of the USD, sowed global uncertainty, precursed 1970s stagflation, and led to the volatility that still defines currency markets today (Gray, 2007, p.314; Kenton, 2024). In fact, the USD lost a third of its value during the 1970s and another 34 percent from 1985–1995. Although the USD remained dominant in the decades that followed, the end of Bretton Woods fundamentally weakened the structural integrity of the dollar's global position. A de-facto allegiance to the USD supported by the foundation of the gold standard turned to one resting on the far more volatile global positioning of the U.S. itself.

FINANCIAL CRISES AND THE EROSION OF CONFIDENCE

The 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) that originated in the U.S. had catastrophic global effects, further shaking confidence in the dollar (Kenton, 2024). Even prior to the GFC, scholars warned of the 'social costs' of financial dollarisation – when states use the dollar over their domestic currency – namely its contributions to 'financial fragility and the risk of systemic crisis' (Fernández-Arias, Levy Yeyati, and Morón, 2006, p.39). The crisis not only acted as a catalyst for the European Sovereign Debt Crisis (Lane, 2012, p.49), but also stimulated a boom in Chinese growth. While world GDP growth fell from '5.4 percent in 2007 to 2.8 percent in 2008', the GFC-prompted stimulus package allowed China to continue growing by 9.7 percent per year during 2008-10 (Fardoust, Lin, and Luo, 2012, p.2). Thus, China, the greatest economic rival to the U.S. today, was partially ushered into their ongoing success by American market and regulation failures.

While the USD remained a safe-haven currency – one expected to retain or increase in value during periods of turbulence – the crisis immediately revealed the vulnerabilities of the U.S. financial system (Habib and Stracca, 2012). The extensive use of derivatives and mortgage-backed securities, combined with lax regulatory oversight, triggered a recession that spread worldwide (Levy-Yeyati, 2021, p.29). The long-term consequence has been a growing skepticism of U.S. financial markets, leaving nations wondering if a global recession would have happened were the USD not the global reserve currency (Liu and Papa, 2022, p.2). Furthermore, the repeated cycles of financial instability have led international investors to consider diversifying their portfolios away from dollar-dominated assets. For example, the economic shock triggered by COVID-19 saw the cross-currency bases widen for many advanced and emerging market economies, correlating to increased demand for their corresponding currencies (Barajas et al., 2020, p.6). Indeed, a potentially larger GFC could lead nations towards a multipolar reserve regime, if not the creation of a new currency altogether (Zhang et al., 2019, p.18). Ultimately, it is the combination of the US's exorbitant privilege, its internal policy, and the dollar's role as the global currency that causes U.S. domestic crises to echo throughout the globe, with impacts disproportionate to the size of its economy and the goods it produces (Villavicencio, 2020). The stability of the USD and strength of U.S. markets were undermined on the world stage by the very actions of those with the most at stake.

WEAPONISATION OF THE USD

The United States has increasingly used the USD as a tool of economic warfare. By leveraging sanctions, tariffs, and credit freezes against nations such as Iran, Russia, and Venezuela, the U.S. has made clear the risks of excessive dependence on the dollar (Li, 2023, p.13). Since the USD gained hegemony in 1944, both state and non-state actors, frustrated by what they perceive as America's excessive use of sanctions, coercive economic policies, extraterritorial legal reach, and control over the global financial system, have sought alternatives to this domination (Luft and Korin, 2019, p.xiv). The issue is so significant that Ladasic (2017, p.99) suggests de-dollarisation is a symptom

The more the U.S. weaponises its currency, the greater the incentive for other nations to accelerate de-dollarisation efforts and insure themselves against potential American aggression.

of growing international discontent over the U.S. 'meddling and interfering in their affairs'. In the past few years, for example, fears of de-dollarisation re-emerged almost exclusively due to a series of sanctions, tariffs, and credit freezes following Russia's war against Ukraine (Thiagarajan et al., 2023, p.3).

While these measures enforce U.S. geopolitical interests, they have also incentivized other nations to develop alternatives such as China's Cross Border Interbank Payment System, which allows for international transactions in renminbi (Li, 2023, p.12). The more the U.S. weaponizes its currency, the greater the incentive for other nations to accelerate de-dollarisation efforts and insure themselves against potential American aggression.

RECENT ECONOMIC STATECRAFT

JP Morgan (2023) identifies two primary causes of de-dollarisation: disruptive events that weaken confidence in the USD's stability and security, and a broader decline in the U.S.'s dominance as the world's foremost economic, political, and military power. In addition to the Biden-era sanctions on Russia, continuous U.S. involvement in the Middle East, and the post-COVID-19 recession, it has become immediately clear that Donald Trump's second term poses an even more pressing threat. Battles for military and financial dominance have long been pivotal to the current hegemonic status of the US. However, these geopolitical maneuvers have had two key qualities: there was something to be gained, and importantly, they were directed at rivals, not allies.

The Trump administration's economic policies rarely maintain even one of these characteristics. As of this year, the President has imposed tariffs on the U.S.' closest allies, threatened to buy – or obtain militarily – multiple allied nations, rescinded said tariffs, and, once again, reimposed them on allies and foes alike (The White House, 2025). This does not even begin to cover the various efforts taken to destabilize the U.S. domestically. Threatening the independence of the Fed, prompting a constitutional crisis by trying to eliminate the checks and balances imposed on the executive branch, and abolishing the agency charged with protecting the financial rights of Americans (the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau) have all been examples of internal threats to American financial stability; therein, driving down external confidence in the USD (Sherman, 2025; Diaz, 2025; Gibson, 2025a).

The U.S. has doubled down on economic isolationism, increasing tariffs on key trade partners, expanding financial sanctions, undermining global institutions such as the World Bank and IMF, and even pausing contributions to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in March (Belhaj, 2025). The unpredictability of these U.S. trade policies have led many countries to reduce their reliance on the dollar, citing instability and punitive measures (Luft and Korin, 2019, p.xiv). The administration's unilateral withdrawal from international agreements like the Paris Accord has created worries that the U.S. is moving away from progress, both economically and politically. As Gibson (2025b) states, 'the United States risks more than its reputation; it risks its economy, its communities, and its future'. Thus, the deterioration of trust in U.S. economic policy has led some nations to actively seek alternatives, fearing long-term instability if they remain overly reliant on the USD.

THE LIMITED SUCCESS OF FOREIGN DE-DOLLARISATION EFFORTS – TINA

Despite aggressive moves by Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS), and other nations, the USD has not been significantly replaced by major competitors like the euro or renminbi (RMB). Instead, the dollar's lost ground has been absorbed by smaller currencies. The IMF reports that much of the decline in USD reserves went to a broad mix of smaller, regional currencies rather than a single dominant alternative (Gazi and Randolph, 2023). This suggests that improved capital mobility and an increase in bilateral trade agreements – rather than a targeted effort against the USD – are responsible for reserve diversification (Gazi and Randolph,

2023). Many nations are simply seeking greater economic autonomy rather than outright rejection of the dollar (Levy Yeyati and Sturzenegger, 2003, p.23, 28). The rise of digital and regional payment systems has facilitated this shift, allowing countries to conduct trade in their own currencies without requiring a global reserve intermediary. Moreover, the alternative major currencies each face several severe challenges they would need to overcome before being capable of serving as a reserve currency hegemon.

While meeting many of the requirements for a dominant currency, the euro's inherent dependence on multiple states and its vast fiscal and cultural interests disallows the Eurozone from having the same monetary flexibility that the U.S. enjoys. Compared to the US, which answers to both a single fiscal and monetary policy, the Eurozone responds to multiple federal governments, restraining its potential to emerge as the dominant currency. That being said, the euro is still far ahead of the renminbi. Due to the lack of transparency surrounding its capital market – which stems from opaque regulatory practices, limited data disclosure, and elements of central planning – the renminbi is difficult to convert into non-Chinese assets (Thiagarajan et al., 2023, p.17). Another problem is China's lack of credibility. Subbarao (2020, p.4) states: 'China will have to implement painful reforms to establish credibility for its exchange rate management and financial market regulation. Even then, global investors will be wary of tying their fortunes to a currency that is backed by an authoritarian regime'. While China has been attempting to promote the renminbi in international affairs, it still holds very little sway over the international economy, making up only 2.3 percent of SWIFT payments, versus the dollar's share of 43 percent and the euro's share of 32 percent (J.P. Morgan, 2023). At least currently, no foreign currency can act as an alternative to the dollar. With external competition suppressed via their own deficiencies, internal U.S. policy represents the sole tangible threat to USD hegemony.

THE WEAKENING OF THE PETRODOLLAR - A FOREIGN DE-DOLLARISATION SUCCESS?

On 13 June, 2024, the petrodollar agreement elapsed with no official renewal (Tran, 2024). While most calls for de-dollarisation have emerged following direct failures of the United States, the weakening of the petrodollar represents the greatest external threat to USD hegemony. The petrodollar system, established by Nixon following the 1973 Oil Shock, ensured that oil exports were traded primarily in USD, and has long reinforced the currency's dominance (Tran, 2024). It has often been said that 'a significant blow could be dealt' to the United States' hegemonic status if oil trading started to take place in 'currencies other than the dollar' (Costigan, Cottle, and Keys, 2017, p.105). This has been heavily influenced by the 'petroyuan,' introduced by China in 2018, with Russia, Iran, and Venezuela turning to sell their oil and gas in non-USD, as well as by Saudi Arabian efforts to explore other trade relations (Tun, 2024).

That being said, U.S. policy is still central to the petrodollar's decline. Russia, Iran, and Venezuela were incentivised by strong U.S. sanctions, while Saudi Arabia was motivated by their increasingly differing politics with America, especially following the Israeli invasion of Palestine. Moreover, America's own energy independence has weakened its geopolitical leverage over oil markets, reducing the necessity for countries to hold USD reserves (Chen, 2023). Regardless, if oil-producing nations increasingly move away from the USD, the currency could lose one of its most significant anchors in the global financial system.

CONCLUSION

While external forces like China, Russia, and Iran's economic statecraft do pose some challenges to the USD, the greatest threats come from within the United States. From Nixon's dismantling of Bretton Woods and America's own financial crises, to the weakening of the petrodollar and the overuse of economic sanctions, U.S. actions have done more to undermine the dollar than any foreign competitor. If these trends continue – especially with the continuation of aggressive economic policies – the decline of the USD as the world's reserve currency may accelerate at an unprecedented rate.

Note: Due to the recency of the events, there are few academic sources available; however, since the drafting of this article, significant tariffs coming from the U.S. have caused the USD to depreciate against major currencies (and thereafter appreciated alongside tariff pauses). Moreover, as this has been coupled with the immediate impact of tariffs – higher prices and reduced quantity supplied – it can be noticed that consumer purchasing power and choice of goods are hindered through the same policies which weaken the USD, reinforcing how the strength of the dollar and the material privileges of the American people are intertwined.

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CARROT & STICK

ECONOMIC SANCTIONS IN THE U.S.-LATIN AMERICA RELATIONSHIP

JAROSLAV VLASAK

ILLUSTRATION BY TY RAMAGE

CARROT & STICK ECONOMIC SANCTIONS IN THE U.S.-LATIN AMERICA RELATIONSHIP

JAROSLAV VLASAK

From the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, to the Good Neighbor Policy in 1933, and the Alliance for Progress in 1961, the United States and Latin America's regional relationship has evolved from being America's 'backyard' to close trade partners (Pérez, 1990, p.134; The Economist, 2019). However, Latin America's high trade dependency on the U.S. limits its sovereignty through the threat of coercive economic sanctions. The region is unable to reasonably reciprocate or sustain the effect of their sanctions, leaving them completely powerless when at odds with the U.S. The use of sanctions and tariffs has become the primary diplomatic measure through which supranational organisations and countries impose their interests (Uren, 2020). While these promise a peaceful mechanism in response to human rights violations, the U.S. has adopted them as a means to disrupt and coerce Latin American sovereignty rather than their original purpose. The result is an unequal relationship between both parties favouring the United States. The U.S.-Colombian relationship serves as a case study demonstrating both the rightful and coercive uses of U.S. sanctions as a means of diplomacy. As America transitions into Donald Trump's new presidential term, it is critical to understand the power dynamics and subjugate diplomatic order that sanctions create.

ECONOMIC SANCTIONS AND THEIR CONNECTION TO TRADE RELATIONS

First, it is important to understand the objective of economic sanctions as a means of diplomacy. Innately, coercive sanctions are problematic under the principle of non-intervention. Non-intervention traces its roots to the Montevideo Convention of 1933 on the Rights and Duties of States which established that it is inadmissible to intervene in the internal and external affairs of another state (Jamnejad and Wood, 2009, p.350). However, with the rise of supranational organisations, entities such as the United Nations Security Council can now enact economic sanctions (*Charter of the United Nations*, Article 41). These sanctions are enacted to protect human rights, constrain terrorism, deter non-constitutional changes, and more, by targeting perpetrating states (United Nations Security Council, 2023). The ability to impose sanctions only applies to events addressed by UN resolutions and not independent states acting on their own accord (Ronzitti, 2015, p.32). While economic sanctions take many forms, Farer (1985, p.405) highlights their objective of denying or conditioning a country's access to resources.

The United States has had a long history of using economic sanctions as a tool of coercion. The American sanction scheme dates back to 1917 with Woodrow Wilson's Trading with the Enemy Act which restricted trade with countries currently at war with the U.S. (Uren, 2020). Since then, the U.S. has incorporated other federal laws granting the power to enact economic sanctions, the most relevant being the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) (Casey, Rennack and Elsea, 2024, p.20). The IEEPA grants the President the ability to sanction countries and individuals on the basis that they represent 'an unusual and extraordinary threat … to the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the United States' (House of Representatives, 2023, p.149). Since 1979, IEEPA is the most frequent emergency authority cited when the President calls a National Emergency Act (Casey, Rennack and Elsea, 2025, p.20). IEEPA has been invoked against Colombia, Panama, Haiti, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela in the past (Casey, Rennack and Elsea, 2024, p.20) and, most recently against Mexico during Trump's second term (Casey, Rennack and Elsea, 2024, p.20; The White House, 2025). The call to action of each employment of IEEPA varies widely. In the case of Venezuela, the earliest sanction occurred under the Obama administration in 2015 which cited corruption and instability of the country as justification (Casey, Rennack and Elsea, 2024, p.78), while Trump's recent tariffs against Mexico are made with reference to illicit drug traffic over the border (The White House, 2025). Overall, the U.S.'s current sanction scheme allows it to enact sanctions for a wide range of reasons and at arms reach of the executive power.

By nature, economic sanctions are meant to be coercive by persuading states towards certain behaviours. Sanctions are certainly positive when meant to prevent corruption or violence; however this measure can also be used to direct state actors towards the individual interests of the imposer. This negative application can be offset through reciprocal sanctions, yet U.S. sanctions towards Latin American states disrupt their sovereignty due to high trade dependency. From the U.S Export Partner Share (Figure 1), it is clear that all Latin American States which currently sustain trade with the U.S. have a substantially smaller share than the Northern power. Even in cases such as Mexico, where the country makes up 15.73 percent of total U.S. exports, the U.S. makes up a disproportionately higher share, in this case 87.29 percent, of the Mexican State's exports (World Integrated Trade Solution, 2022). This significant difference results in the U.S. maintaining vastly greater bargaining power over Latin American countries.

FIGURE 1 depicts the percentage of the country's total international trade the U.S. makes, against the percentage that country makes up of U.S. trade. All data is from 2022 with exception of Honduras which is from 2021 (World Bank).

Economic sanctions often entail reciprocity. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 was met with sanctions from the U.S. and the EU towards Russian individuals and businesses which were matched by the Russian import ban on food and products originating from the aforementioned countries (Peksen and Jong, 2021, p.895). This reciprocity represents the balance of power in foreign policy and trade relationships as both actors are capable of responding to actions from the other. However, this capacity is not inherent in all trade relationships. Peksen and Jong (2021, pp.904–905) reveals that initial senders with strong economies are less likely to encounter reciprocal sanctions and that wealthy targets are prone to enact counter-sanctions. There are disproportionate trade relations between the United States and Latin America due to the undiversified trade economies in Latin American countries such as Colombia, Mexico, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. These states are dependent on exports which results in extreme vulnerability to the threat of imposed sanctions and tariffs. Over 20 percent of their exports are directed to the U.S. compared to approximately one percent which they muster over the U.S., with the exception of Mexico (World Integrated Trade Solution, 2022). This difference in power and trade dependency turns coercive economic sanctions into limits on Latin American sovereignty as each nation can neither respond reciprocally to the threat of sanctions or endure prolonged tariffs without suffering an economic blow.

U.S. - COLOMBIA SANCTION RELATIONSHIP UNDER TRUMP

The U.S.-Colombia relationship best illustrates the coercive and limiting effects of U.S. sanctions. Since the late 20th century, Colombia and the United States have been close allies. Colombia is the U.S.'s closest security partner in Latin America, having received over 10 billion U.S. dollars in assistance from 2000 to 2018 to demobilise armed groups, regain territory, and combat narcotic production, and has had a free trade agreement in place since 2006 (Seelke, 2024, p.1; Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2011). The Latin American state has been the target of sanctions from the U.S. twice under the Clinton administration (Casey, Rennack and Elsea, 2024, p.71;

Time, 1996). The first sanction was an IEEPA targeting significant Colombian narcotic traffickers by blocking their assets and preventing transactions with them. This sanction is ongoing and has been expanded to include traffickers of other nationalities (Casey, Rennack and Elsea, 2024, p.71). The second sanction was the removal of U.S. investment guarantees in Colombia and voting against any loan request to the World Bank due to the emerging corruption charges against the then president of Colombia, Ernesto Samper (Clinton, 1996). These sanctions can be seen as positive applications as they were means of assistance in dealing with drug trafficking security concerns and with internal corruption and political instability, fulfilling the diplomatic purpose of preventing corruption, internal violence, and seeking to help the targeted country rather than solely benefit the U.S.'s interest.

While these previous sanctions seem appropriate, the same does not apply to the most recent episode of sanctions. On 26 January, Colombian President Gustavo Petro refused to receive a military plane of Colombian deportees from the U.S. as part of Trump's recent wave of deportations. The refusal was on the basis of the poor conditions of the passengers, a sentiment reflected in notes made by other heads of state such as Mexican President Claudia Shienbaum and Brazilian President Lula da Silva (Stewart and Griffin, 2025). Trump's response was to threaten to impose tariffs on Colombia starting at 25 percent and escalating to 50 percent if this refusal continued the following week (Stewart and Griffin, 2025). Petro's response in the media was to say 'You will never rule us' and reciprocate the sanctions (Petro, 2025). However, both parties reached a peaceful consensus where Colombia accepted all of Trump's terms just a few hours later (Stewart and Griffin, 2025). The discordance within the scenario shows how, under the threat of sanctions, the Colombian head of state had to withdraw and had no room for negotiation. This argument is neither commending nor condoning Colombia's refusal as such response occurred after they had already signed an agreement accepting the reception of the deportees and was a procedure that was regularly carried out even before the Trump administration retook office (Correal, 2025). This shows the overwhelming weight that economic sanctions had on the range of options of the final decision. Statistically, the U.S. makes up 27.03 percent of Colombia's trade compared to the one percent of the United States' (World Integrated Trade Solution, 2022). This disproportionality means that if the tariffs had been enacted Colombia's economy would have been overwhelmingly affected compared to the pinch that the U.S. economy would have felt.

CONCLUSION

Sanctions have positive effects in diplomatic relations yet their current application as coercion tools distorts them. As mentioned initially, economic sanctions are punitive and seek to stop internal corruption and violence in foreign countries as well as preventing organised crime. Both cases were demonstrated under the Clinton administration. The issue arises when sanctions are used to impose a country's agenda on another, as opposed to measures to prevent violence or condemn corruption. The threat of sanctions against Colombia in 2025 shows how they can be used as a way for the U.S. to antagonise foreign nations rather than function as deterrents for domestic behavior (Nicholas, 2025; The Economist, 2025). Trump's threat of tariffs against Canada and Mexico follow a similar logic; in trying to combat the dispersion of fentanyl, the U.S. coerced both countries towards its own interests rather than cooperating with them (The United States Government, 2025). The brief pause of these same tariffs further shows the primary interest of the measures in forcing both Canada and Mexico to perform specific actions in the U.S.'s line of interests (Halpert and Murphy, 2025). The use of American sanctions and tariffs has changed in recent times and now enacts the purpose of directing others toward U.S. interests rather than responding to extraordinary threats.

Sanctions and tariffs as diplomatic measures have a relevant purpose in contemporary international politics yet their promise of peaceful conflict resolution and mutual assistance is corrupted when used as means of subjugation. The final effect of using economic sanctions as coercive tools is a transition from a cooperative international system of economic and political relations to one reliant on subjugation. Even so, the importance and positive effects of trade relations with the U.S. and free trade agreements are undeniable (Griswold and Packard, 2019). Rather than a call to isolationism, the looming threat of U.S. sanctions highlights the importance of diversifying Latin American international trade partners. The unequal relationship and coercive use of sanctions serves as a tipping point towards trade diversification. As the current American presidency continues to advance, and at times take back, its use of sanctions and tariffs rather than strengthen the country's position, it is pushing away its trade partners. Coercive sanctions reinforce unequal U.S.-Latin American trade relationships and might even unravel them as countries become incentivized to diversity trade.

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MILEI'S LIBERTARIAN PHENOMENON

A NEW WAY TO DO POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA

DIKRAN BAKKALIAN & MATIAS LEA PLAZA

ILLUSTRATION BY VIK BALT

In the lead-up to the 2023 presidential election, Argentina grappled with a severe economic crisis characterised by rising inflation, heightened poverty levels, and a stagnant GDP (World Bank, 2024, pp.7–9). Simultaneously, public dissatisfaction with the political establishment intensified. The administrations of President Mauricio Macri (2015–2019) and his successor, President Alberto Fernández (2019–2023), were widely criticised for their handling of the economy (CNN en Español, 2023). Macri's government was defined by austerity measures and a significant loan from the International Monetary Fund, which many Argentines felt exacerbated economic hardships. Conversely, Fernández's tenure was marred by scandals surrounding his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the imposition of one of the world's harshest lockdowns, which further strained Argentina's ailing economy (Infobae, 2019). This widespread discontent eroded public trust in traditional political parties, creating fertile ground for alternative electoral movements to flourish (Roy, 2024). Within a context of such political disenchantment and pervasive economic uncertainty, Argentina's current President, Javier Milei, emerged as a leading anti-establishment figure, pledging to end corruption, fight the political 'caste', and return to the liberal economic principles that, according to him, had once propelled Argentina to prosperity (Grinspan, 2023a).

AN OUTSIDER IN POLITICS OR JUST 'ANOTHER STRONG MAN'?

Powerful and authoritative politicians have long dominated Argentina's political landscape, made possible in part due to Argentina's highly presidentialist political establishment (Lopez and Cuenca, 2014, pp.13–14). The executive wields significant power within this structure despite an alleged independent congress and judiciary. Through the apportionment of discretionary funding to provinces and the sanction of necessity and urgency decrees, the president may legislate, reward allies, and punish dissidents at will (Benton, 2003, p.104).

As posited by Argentine political scientist and University of Pittsburgh Professor Aníbal Pérez Liñán, 'political leaders are republicans when in opposition, but develop a monarchical vocation once they reach the presidency' (San Martín, 2016). This monarchical tendency extends beyond the executive whereby 'mayors are tribal chieftains in their municipalities, governors are feudal lords in their provinces, and the president (if they have enough budget to distribute) is the head of this pyramid' (San Martín, 2016). Echoed by María Esperanza Casullo, political scientist and professor at the National University of Río Negro, 'there is a distinct pattern between presidents who assume power during an open crisis and those who do so without such context' (San Martín, 2016). She expands by stating 'the demand for transparency and institutional quality was once a left-wing cause, later became a right-wing cause, and now, somewhat shamelessly, seems to be embraced by Kirchnerism', Kirchnerism being the left-wing populist Argentine political movement espoused by former presidents Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (San Martín, 2016). For Argentine leaders, context often justifies quasi-illegal measures: 'It's the "major surgery" Menem [President of Argentina between 1989-1999] spoke of, justified because the patient is dying' (San Martín, 2016). The rise of 'strongmen politicians' with definitive mandates to enact significant reforms following periods of crisis has become a recurrent pattern in Argentina's history.

THE IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS AND INFLUENCES OF PRESIDENT MILEI'S POLITICAL MOVEMENT

Before entering the political arena in the 2021 midterm elections, President Milei established a name for himself as a self-proclaimed 'liberal-libertarian' economist (Casa Rosada Presidencia, 2024). As the economic mismanagement of the Macri and Fernandez administrations further entrenched the country's recession, President Milei's poignant critique of the political establishment's handling of the economy began to resonate with an increasing number of voters. His ideas fell resoundingly outside Argentina's orthodox economic thinking, frequently citing scholars such as Ludwig Von Mises, Murray Rothbard, and Friedrich Hayek in advocating for a typology of liberalism previously untested in the country (Stefanoni, 2025). His seemingly farcical proposals to dollarise the economy and 'blow up the central bank' quickly became a rallying cry for a growing follower base (El Cronista, 2021). For lack of a liberal idol in Argentina's history, his policies drew many comparisons to those of Reagan and Thatcher, the latter a controversial figure in Argentina in light of her premiership during the 1982 Falklands War (Wells, 2024). He praised their vehement anti-communist ideologies and free-market policies while seeking association with other right-wing leaders worldwide, such as Trump, Bolsonaro, Bukele, Meloni and Abascal (Di Marco, 2024).

Despite being a staunch proponent of liberal-libertarian economic policy, President Milei's social stance is broadly conservative. Pledging to re-criminalise abortion, the President has also dismissed global warming as a 'lie' and continues to disregard the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable

Development as 'socialist' (Casa Rosada Presidencia, 2024). Discursively embedded in his campaign, President Milei has weaponised the notion of a 'cultural battle' as something to be relentlessly fought in the marketplace of ideas to guarantee the longevity of his reforms (Smink, 2024). This vision has been a prominent factor in shaping his movement's theoretical framework. It fuels what he portrays as a crusade of the self-described 'forces of heaven' against the political caste, endowing his rhetoric with deeply moral undertones (Smink, 2023). In President Milei's words: 'The root of Argentina's problem is not political and/or economic. It is moral' (Smink, 2024). As a result, these raw expressions of emotion helped him present as an authentic figure in juxtaposition with Argentina's perennial politicians.

PRESIDENT MILEI'S VISION: A RETURN TO ARGENTINA'S GOLDEN ERA

American economist Simon Kuznets reportedly concluded that 'there are four types of countries: developed, undeveloped, Japan, and Argentina', alluding to Argentina's baffling economic woes despite its rich history and vast mineral wealth (Rodriguez-Brizuela, 2020). President Milei's campaign prominently featured a narrative centred on restoring Argentina to its early twentieth-century golden era, frequently citing the early twentieth century as a time in which Argentina was among the world's wealthiest nations, prosperous because of its liberal economic policies and a robust agro-export model (Milei, 2023). President Milei argued that the country's decline began with the rise of protectionist policies, particularly those associated with Peronism aimed at promoting local industries, which he claimed disrupted the successful economic model of the past (Laclau, 2005). During the campaign, many of his television ads emphasised that a new Argentina cannot be made with the same people (elDiarioAR, 2023).

THE KEY ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PRESIDENT MILEI'S CAMPAIGN

Owing to his eccentricities and unorthodox political opinions, the media's portrayals of President Milei have generally been satirical. Before his rise to power, mainstream political pundits largely dismissed him as unserious and unfit for public office (La Nacion, 2023). President Milei subverted this narrative by using social media to bypass traditional outlets he saw as 'part of the establishment'. He often criticised the media, calling them *ensobrados* (corrupt) and accusing them of controlling the narrative (Santoro, 2023). As he put it, 'they [traditional media and journalists] detest social media because it took away their monopoly on the microphone' (La Nación, 2024). During the 2023 campaign, social media became his primary tool to connect with voters, as traditional media and politicians frequently voiced concerns about his platform. Despite underestimation, President Milei's unorthodox approach resonated with voters frustrated by the political establishment. As Guillermo Francos, President Milei's close adviser and current Chief of Staff, recalled after the presidential debate:

The reading of many people, including me, was that Massa [Finance Minister and government-backed candidate] had won. But when I looked at what people's views were on social media, their perception was the complete opposite. They thought Massa represented the old Argentine politics—arrogant, proud, and bullying—while Javier was the opposite: an honest, sincere guy confronting him. (Stott and Nugent, 2024)

As journalist Nicholas G. Carr posited, 'What used to matter…was the image of the candidate… it helped to have experience with government… I don't think that's as important anymore' (Harvard Political Review, 2015). Previously, the Argentine political system traditionally required comprehensive political capital for a candidate to secure electoral victory, including broad territorial presence, abundant electoral funding (Alconada, 2018, p.37), and the support of local representatives nationwide (Langan, 2019, p.45). President Milei lacked all of these, differentiating him from the well-oiled campaigns of Massa and Bullrich and reinforcing his image as a political outsider and electoral underdog. For instance, President Milei's party, La Libertad Avanza, received approximately one-third of the public campaign funds apportioned to its rivals. Moreover, according to Fitz Patrick (2023), the Bullrich campaign disbursed 1,254 million Argentine pesos (ARS), while Massa's expenditures amounted to 927 million ARS. By contrast, President Milei's campaign spent 476 million ARS.

A pivotal decision in President Milei's technocratic campaign was its early adoption of social media as its primary messaging platform, dominating online forums to wage the cultural battle and generate engagement for the then-unknown candidate (El Economista, 2023). Thus, social media platforms enabled the widespread dissemination of President Milei's message, helping him win 21 out of 24 provinces despite lacking a significant presence in most of them (Crucianelli and Ruiz, 2023). In this sense, technology served as a necessary tool to disseminate political talking points, emphasising the growing importance of popular grassroots support over the endorsement of traditional established media outlets (Grinspan, 2023b). Despite the

Despite underestimation, President Milei's unorthodox approach resonated with voters frustrated by the political establishment.

existence of social media as a leveller, it may be argued that this strategy was forced upon President Milei's campaign, considering his lack of funding and political connections elsewhere.

PRESIDENT MILEI'S ELECTORAL COALITION

Understanding the winning electorate is a necessary component of any retrospective election analysis. Accordingly, the common identity of President Milei's voters is of interest. Some might assume that a candidate with such strong ideological and theoretical foundations would primarily attract a voter well-versed in the ideas of Rothbard and Friedman – one deeply liberal-libertarian and the other broadly opposed to state intervention. Upon closer inspection however, the reality is quite different. As posited by Rey (2023),

Milei counts among his supporters millionaires and the poor, formal and informal workers, young and old, urban dwellers, and those from remote towns, all with different ideological profiles. But they share one thing: they seek a drastic political and economic change.

President Milei dominated in poverty-marked provincial areas, further supporting Rey's sentiment (Crucianelli and Ruiz, 2023). Crucianelli and Ruiz add that 'his [Milei's] victory in the country's poorest urban centres is one of the most notable phenomena…after a surprising election'. President Milei's campaign strategy relied on evocative simplifications to build a highly persuasive narrative that resonated with Argentina's electorate, who had experienced a 40 percent decline in their average wages over the past decade (World Bank, 2024, p.43)
President Milei frequently framed his discourse in binary terms, stating that there were 'good Argentines and bad Argentines (…) those who live off others and those who sustain them' and 'those who are part of the caste and those who are part of the people' (Heinisch et al., 2024). This rhetoric reinforced his outsider status in a political system with which he was unfamiliar, allowing him to secure millions of votes from Argentina's most marginalised populations who felt disenfranchised from the current system, while also gaining support from PRO voters – Propuesta Republicana, a centre-right party which governed Argentina from 2015 to 2019 – and anti-Kirchnerists, who viewed Massa as unelectable and found a greater ideological affinity with President Milei.

A TIPPING POINT FOR ARGENTINE POLITICS?

Inevitably, no two elections are the same. However, after studying the electoral process that led Milei to the presidency of Argentina, we can observe a tipping point in how political campaigns are organised, especially those of populist, outsider candidates, that may spill over to the rest of the region. President Milei's unique ability to harness social media to deploy a cost-effective campaign and present a binary narrative that sharply contrasted the old establishment resonated with a diverse and increasingly disillusioned electorate, paving the way for a momentous electoral victory. However, Argentina's economic hardships, predisposition for populism, and the primacy of the executive over other state institutions, cannot be discounted when explaining President Milei's rise to power. For these reasons, his success may not be easily replicable in other nations. Despite this, the emergent use of social media has not only transformed the campaign strategies of political actors but has also served to lower barriers of entry to politics, enabling resource-poor candidates, outsiders, and fringe political movements to launch more effective campaigns with a degree of ease. Ultimately, however, it remains to be seen whether this new means of doing politics will lead to lasting change, for the social, economic, and legislative landscape of a region that has long had a complex relationship with democracy.

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EL SALVADOR'S 180-DEGREE TURNAROUND AND NAYIB BUKELE'S RISE TO POWER

A TIPPING POINT FOR SECURITY, GOVERNANCE, AND DEMOCRATIC STABILITY?

NOÉMIE VALÉRY

ILLUSTRATION BY THARUN VENKAT

This article discusses violent threats and hateful online messages, including rape and murder. Some readers may find this content distressing.

EDITORS' NOTE: *This article addresses the evolving implications of El Salvador's pivot to mass incarceration tactics under Nayib Bukele, including the United States' deportation of alleged gang members to Salvadoran prisons. Whilst the legality of such deportations remains heavily disputed in the United States, particularly concerning habeas corpus, this article remains salient by recognising and deconstructing the implications posed by Salvadoran tactics, and how Bukele-style authoritarianism* ***may present additional ramifications*** *for global governance.*

Nayib Bukele's rise to power has been necessary yet dangerous for El Salvador. His leadership has dismantled the dominance of violent gangs, transforming previously unsafe streets into low crime areas (Reyes and Pérez, 2021, p.130). In effect, his model of governance, characterised by a radical crackdown on crime, a redefinition of democratic norms, and an experimental economic approach, has challenged traditional political paradigms. His aggressive security policies have transformed El Salvador from one of the most violent nations into one of the safest in Latin America (Paradela-López and Antón, 2025, p.1). Nevertheless, the model of hard-line authoritarianism is not without risks. The trade-offs between security and democracy, the economic implications of mass incarceration, and the concentration of power within the executive raises critical questions about the sustainability of security in El Salvador (Reyna, 2024). Bukele's accession and subsequent policies mark an unequivocal turning point both in El Salvador and internationally that many governments observe with increasing interest, as crime-ridden nations consider whether his approach is a solution, and whether force alone can govern (Parthenay, 2024, p.321). Presently, this Salvadoran security model has established itself as a functioning *mano dura* (firm hand or iron fist) process for positively revolutionising a society. However, the same cannot be said for El Salvador's governance and democratic stability, as the model has proven to gradually erode democratic checks to favour a centralised decision-making approach. This trade-off is precisely what solidifies the Bukele method as a tipping point, dangerously balanced on the narrow ledge between democracy and authoritarianism, acting only as a temporary model to rapidly subvert entrenched societal problems. Furthermore, it hardens the argument that this model is best served as an effective and efficient solution to existential security threats, rather than a sustainable model of governance.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT BEFORE BUKELE

For decades, El Salvador was emblematic of state failure in the face of gang violence, seen as a lost cause for many in the international community (Paradela-López and Antón, 2025, p.1). The country had one of the highest homicide rates in the world, fueled especially by two infamous

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local criminal organisations, MS-13 and *Barrio 18* (18th Street) (Ruiz, 2019, p.155). Traditional political parties, such as the right-wing *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (Nationalist Republican Alliance or ARENA) and the left-wing *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front or FMLN), always fell short when attempting to curb the violence, and constantly engaged in corruption scandals paired with inefficacious political action (Kurylo, 2025, p.15; Núñez, 2020, p.181; Pineda, 2021). This had disastrous implications for everyday security in Salvadoran society. Furthermore, the Salvadoran economy stagnated due to extortions, kidnappings, and assassinations, discouraging foreign investment (Seelke, 2014, p.8). Bukele's first election in 2019 represented an unprecedented rejection of this status quo. His rise was not a simple political shift but a societal reckoning, demonstrating the Salvadoran people's willingness to embrace radical solutions. This dramatic political rift provided a template for other nations to emulate, especially in Latin America. Primed for Bukele's policies, forty percent of Latin Americans justified the military in overthrowing a government if crime rates spiked, indicating a strong preference for security over democracy (Krause, 2022, p.263). Given this regional appetite for strong security measures, El Salvador's experiment with Bukele's model is being closely watched, potentially as an exportable solution (Boos, 2024, p.595).

BUKELE'S RISE TO POWER: A SHIFT TOWARDS CENTRALISED AUTHORITY

Bukele's dismantling of the traditional political landscape was unprecedented. Using a hybrid strategy of populist rhetoric and direct digital engagement, he bypassed traditional media platforms (Šipušić, 2024, p.15). His strategic use of social media allowed him to craft an image of an outsider untainted by the failures of previous administrations, positioning himself as the sole defender of the people. He effectively asserted himself as the defender of the people against corrupt elites, earning him his two consecutive presidential mandates as a populist strongman (Ruiz-Alba and Mancinas-Chávez, 2020, p.260). His *vox populi* (voice of the people) message, hailing himself as a representative of the innocent, lawful, silent majority wanting a definite end to rampant crime and its ravages in their lives, resonated deeply among Salvadorans, allowing him to secure a landslide victory (Pineda, 2024). Soon after, in 2021, his party, *Nuevas Ideas* (New Ideas), won a supermajority in the Legislative Assembly, democratically handing him control over the country's major institutions. This enabled him to clear out corruption through constitutional changes as President, replacing Supreme Court justices and the Attorney General (Manrique, 2021), without backlash or repercussions (Pineda, 2021).

A major change that compromised El Salvador's infant democratic stability was the complete removal of term limits on the presidency (Manrique, 2021). Consequently, while the majority of Salvadorans hailed this as a beneficial and necessary decision to break through decades of gridlock and ensure lasting political stability, alarm bells blared in critics' ears, as they viewed this resolution and numerous other similar ones as steps towards authoritarianism and away from democratic stability (Puig and Suárez, 2024, p.149). Considering the uncertain duration of such a monumental securitisation process, a leader who truly endeavours to benefit his people must enable the possibility to peacefully restore both democratic stability and governance once the existential threat has subsided.

THE WAR ON GANGS: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Bukele's defining policy is his war on gangs. Under a state of emergency, he suspended constitutional protections, allowing mass arrests of suspected criminals. Over 70,000 people have been incarcerated, effectively neutralizing gang operations (Ventas, 2024). Once ranked among the world's most dangerous nations, El Salvador now has one of the lowest crime rates in Latin America (Beyer Velez, 2024). These policies had been long overdue and have been instrumental in fostering security among the inhabitants of El Salvador (Warnecke-Berger, 2023, p.126). Businesses that once paid extortion fees now operate freely, tourism is booming, and foreign investment is pouring in (Reynoza, 2024). Yet the erosion of due process, reports of wrongful detentions, and inhumane prison conditions have raised human rights concerns (Amnesty International, 2022). In effect, the presumption of innocence is virtually non-existent as the accused are automatically perceived as *hostis humanis generis* (traitors to the human race), a title once reserved for the most fearsome criminals (Redacción Pares, 2024). They set a worrisome precedent that if this state of emergency becomes commonplace there is a significant risk that emergency powers will be used to suppress political opposition instead of combating crime (Andersson Costa and Ramirez Ångman, 2024, p.35).

Bukele's momentous victory became a complete paradigm shift, signalling large-scale failure in conventional governance to tackle glaring security issues. Translated internationally, voters in Latin America increasingly turned to strongman populist figures who promised drastic, immediate action over a dreary, institutional process (Andersson Costa and Ramirez Ångman, 2024, p.17). Indifference between democratic and authoritarian leadership increased from sixteen percent to 28 percent in roughly a decade, paired with a ten percent increase to 54 percentage points of support for action-driven, undemocratic regimes (Kurylo, 2025, p.2). Honduras and Ecuador, both plagued by gang-related crime, have already begun implementing harsher security measures inspired by Bukele's model (The Guardian, 2023). Yet, Bukele's success is highly context-specific. It relies on strong public support, a weakened opposition, and El Salvador's criminal networks' unique structures, leading to authoritarian excesses becoming more likely while falling short of achieving extensive security benefits such as in other nations (Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024, p.96).

Here, Bukele appears as a revival of the enlightened despot, justifying his controlling measures through security improvements, economic modernisation, and prioritising tangible results over traditional democratic processes, all to benefit the people (Diken, 2021, p.60; Cuellar, 2021). Nevertheless, as the enlightened autocrat must, he must eventually restrain his unlimited power having completed his service to the people, often easier in theory than in practice. Thus, Bukele's model truly balances on the brink of authoritarianism, serving as a perilous tipping point locally and internationally for attentive governance and lasting democratic stability.

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THE ECONOMIC COST OF MASS INCARCERATION

El Salvador now has the highest incarceration rate in the world, surpassing Rwanda and Cuba (Statista, 2024). While this crackdown has undeniably reduced crime, maintaining such a vast prison population places significant strain on public finances (Bergmann and Gude, 2021, p.55). Prisons are expensive to maintain, and large-scale incarceration removes working-age men from the workforce, potentially reducing long-term productivity, tax revenues, and consumer activity (Bergmann and Gude, 2021, p.55). Without a comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration programme, El Salvador faces the danger of producing a permanent economic underclass of unemployable former prisoners, potentially reigniting cycles of crime and instability and raising serious concerns about the sustainability of Bukele's model (Eaton, Huanqui and Larios, 2024, p.1376). Bukele demonstrates a desire to mitigate incarceration rates and its collateral economic costs by negotiating with high-profile gangs in order to establish truces (Andersson Costa and Ramirez Ångman, 2024, p.4). This has almost halved violence, as in 22 months, the homicide rate decreased by 40 percent. Locally, its impact was particularly strong in municipalities with relatively high numbers of imprisoned MS-13 gang members per 100,000 population (Amaya and Volvert, 2024, p.136). However, the incarceration's economic burden must be weighed against the potential cost of unchecked crime (Paradela-López and Antón, 2025, p.3). Mass emigration to the United States, often through illegal, dangerous pathways, and the subsequent dependency on remittances brought El Salvador's economy and society to its knees, labelling the country as a struggling nation with a unfulfilled errand to success (Rodríguez and Hagan, 2004, p.343). In 2000, remittances accounted for approximately $1.8 billion USD, representing fourteen percent of the GDP, exposing them to a concerning susceptibility to external shocks (Calderón and Castillo, 2025, p.49). In 2020, 9,701 Salvadorans working abroad returned to their homeland (Sosa, 2023, p.2). Concerning diplomacy, President Donald Trump recently struck a deal with the Salvadoran leader, agreeing to work closely together to curb illegal immigration, combat transnational gangs and deport their members to El Salvadoran prisons (Buschschlüter, 2025; Solmaz, 2025). This conveys both Bukele's reputation abroad among powerful leaders as an effective and uncompromising reformer and El Salvador's growing influence in the world. Hence, if El Salvador's economy continues to grow, the immediate costs of mass incarceration may be

absorbed. Conversely, its financial burden would become unsustainable (Méndez, 2021, p.15). Under both possibilities, El Salvador must transition to rehabilitation programs, job creation, and reintegration efforts to ensure economic resilience without compromising public safety as security stabilises. Unfortunately, Bukele shows no intention to initiate such a plan in the near future, testifying to his model's character as a tipping point locally and internationally for uncompromising security and *mano dura* governance. This defect may lead to Bukele's approach becoming a short-term solution rather than a lasting transformation.

CONCLUSION: A TIPPING POINT WITH GLOBAL CONSEQUENCES

Nayib Bukele's presidency has undeniably marked a tipping point for El Salvador and beyond, reshaping security, governance, and democratic stability. His aggressive crackdown on crime has dramatically reduced violence, restoring public safety and challenging the notion that failed states are irredeemable. This success has resonated internationally and inspired leaders in nations like Honduras and Ecuador. Nevertheless, its success remains largely context-dependent. His growing alignment with leaders such as the U.S. President Donald Trump, who collaborated with his administration on immigration policies, further underscores his global influence. His consolidation of power has redefined governance, proving that institutional safeguards can erode with widespread public approval. While dismantling corrupt elites, his administration has simultaneously weakened democratic checks and balances.

This pattern aligns with the broader global rise of strongman leadership, where efficiency and security justify centralised control. Economically, mass incarceration, while reducing crime, has removed thousands from the workforce, creating long-term fiscal challenges. Without reintegration strategies, the sustainability of his security model is uncertain. Ultimately, Bukele's rise has been a tipping point on local and global scales towards a new form of securitised governance. His approach has redefined governance and security, providing a blueprint for leaders seeking to balance order and control. However, its long-term viability hinges on whether El Salvador can sustain public safety while maintaining economic stability and democratic integrity. If successful, Bukele's model could herald a new era of governance; if not, it may serve as a cautionary tale.

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* Fraud is not victory ** Democracy, not dynasty *** Free the 5000!

MAPUTO UNRAVELING: THE CRY OF THE MOZAMBICAN NATION

RODRIGO RAMOS

ILLUSTRATION BY REBECA STERNER

Maputo, 25 October, 2024. The government declares an historic seventh consecutive Mozambique Liberation Front – *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*, FRELIMO – win in the general elections. Opposition leader Venâncio Mondlane denounces the results as fraudulent while major riots erupt across the city's streets. Protestors occupy central roads with burning barricades, loot retail stores and clash with security forces (Kaledzi and da Silva, 2024). Maputo, the bustling capital city of Mozambique, is unravelling. Since its independence in 1975, after a decade-long liberation war, Mozambique has endured political oppression, foreign intervention, and multiple civil wars. Though formally a democracy since 1993 (Freedom House, 2024), Mozambique has been governed as a de facto one-party state since its independence. Against such a backdrop, one question must be asked: how has the Mozambican nation arrived at such a precarious present situation, and what can we learn from its past?

This paper argues that Mozambique's current turbulence is both a consequence of and the solution to decades of foreign intervention and the structural deficiencies of the ruling class that heads its multi-party politics. Such a conclusion can only be achieved by critically analysing the nation's history. To this effect, this essay first evaluates the shortcomings of the Portuguese decolonisation process, specifically regarding the management of shared humanitarian and financial interests. Secondly, it analyses the significance of this decolonisation process in relation to the chaos that followed Mozambique's liberation. Finally, this paper concludes by discussing the nation's current political situation, establishing a link between past and present events and showcasing how the latter represent the beginning of a new political status quo in Mozambique.

AN UNSTRUCTURED LIBERATION

By 1974, Mozambicans had waged a decade-long war of liberation against the Portuguese colonial authorities. The war effort was mainly coordinated by FRELIMO, an organisation originally created in 1962 by educated Mozambican dissidents. Inspired by the wave of post-war liberation movements in Africa led by figures such as Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere, FRELIMO decided to put an end to Portuguese rule (Isaacman and Isaacman, 1984). Eduardo Mondlane, FRELIMO's founder and Mozambique's first doctoral graduate, had studied in the US, where the civil rights movement of the sixties influenced him intellectually (Isaacman and Isaacman, 1984, p.82).

With the conflict at a standstill, as FRELIMO fighters had gained steady control of inland rural areas but struggled to advance into the more urbanised litoral provinces, both sides became increasingly demoralised (Isaacman and Isaacman, 1984, p.106), especially the Portuguese, who had suffered numerous blows to their reputation since the early seventies (Newitt, 1995, p.537). A July 1973 *London Times* front cover depicted the Portuguese massacre of Wiriyamu, in which colonial authorities murdered 385 civilians severely damaging Portugal's international reputation (Newitt, 1995, pp.538). The dictatorial *Estado Novo* regime also faced backlash at home, with Portuguese youths, disenfranchised by the regime's ultra-traditionalism and enforcement of compulsory conscription, becoming ever louder in their dissent (Newitt, 1995, p.539).

Despite the standstill, Mozambique would not wait much longer for its independence. On the dawn of 25 April 1974, the Armed Forces Movement – *Movimento das Forças Armadas*, MFA – a group of young Portuguese officers dissatisfied with the political status quo, staged a coup d'état in Lisbon, which toppled the *Estado Novo* regime. The movement's primary objectives were to establish democratic governance and bring an immediate end to the colonial

wars (Mormul, 2018, pp.51–54). Despite concerns amongst influential figures in Portuguese society, led by then President António de Spínola, over the political and financial needs of Portugal (lobbying for the maintenance of a strategic influence over former colonies), the MFA, increasingly spurred on by Marxist influences and the *de facto* ruling force in 1974, advocated for immediate and unconditional decolonisation (Newitt, 1995, pp.538–540). Although, this would prove to be a fatal mistake in both Portugal and Mozambique's futures.

The MFA only maintained power for less than two years, and were soon overthrown by a moderate wing of the army. Nevertheless, this proved sufficient time to carry out its plan for Africa. Between September 1974 and November 1975, all African territories within the Portuguese Empire were granted unconditional independence agreements by the MFA. However, the fragility of these agreements would later hinder nation-building in Mozambique (Aires Oliveira, 2017, pp.11–14). The Lusaka Accord, as it was later named, gave absolute control to FRELIMO, which now completely adhered to Marxism-Leninism. Yet, it did not contain any provisions for democratic elections, nor did it address the rights of Portuguese nationals and their property in Mozambique. Motivated by the fears of the white population, a large number of the native population migrated, depriving Mozambique of its qualified workforce and most of its financial assets (Newitt, 1995, pp.540–551). This exodus effectively deprived FRELIMO of the skilled labor and economic foundation necessary to realize its vision of a one-party socialist state.

A DIVIDED NATION

Following independence, FRELIMO's foremost objective was to unite the nation under the ideals of the revolution, casting aside tribal, racial, religious and regional differences (Isaacman and Isaacman, 1984, p.112). The 1975 Mozambican Constitution subsequently incorporated clauses on both racial and gender parity, demonstrating substantial and progressive liberalism that contrasted with the regimes of other African countries. FRELIMO further strengthened gender parity in the 1981 Family Law, which established: monogamous marriage as the only legally recognised form of union, joint property, access of women to courts and paternal responsibility to children (Newitt, 1995, p.548). Such egalitarian impetus also diffused into the education and health sectors, with access to both made entirely free for Mozambicans. In only six years, the number of citizens achieving primary education increased from 70,000 to 137,600, and those achieving secondary education rose from 20,000 to 135,000 (Newitt, 1995, p.549). Furthermore, health campaigns such as the 1979 national immunisation campaign against smallpox, tetanus and measles reached 90 percent of the population and child mortality rates fell by twenty percent (Newitt, 1995, p.550).

However, the 1975 constitutional text also effectively established a one-party socialist state. As such, every dimension of Mozambican societal life was confined within the bounds of FRELIMO's party policy. Party guidelines stipulated that popular assemblies and production councils were to be established across Mozambique, for which election was dependent on FRELIMO approval (Isaacman and Isaacman, 1984, p.124). Traditional chiefs and former-colonial Portuguese elites were excluded from decision processes, with dissidents publicly shamed and further ostracised from society (Chan and Venâncio, 1998, p.7). This was particularly the case for religious authorities, to whom Marxist values were incompatible (Chan and Venâncio, 1998, p.7). Churches were stripped of their property and mosques were converted into pig farms, as the mockery of religious institutions through hyper-secularity became the regime's official policy (Chan and Venâncio, 1998, p.7).
By the early 1980s, Mozambique was exhausted by the ideological and economic demands of a centralised state-run economy. In 1984, the country had to resort to the International Monetary Fund to balance its payments, which enforced harsh Structural Adjustment Programmes, further exhausting the populace (Hanlon, 1991, p.33). FRELIMO's close ties with the USSR and the Eastern Bloc fueled the anxieties of its neighbours, particularly those from the white-dominated Southern African states (Mormul, 2018, p.54). In this context, the Mozambican National Resistance — *Resistência Nacional Moçambicana*, RENAMO — entered the regional stage. Formed in the aftermath of Mozambican independence by Rhodesian intelligence authorities, a series of anti-socialist militia groups conceived RENAMO, designed to undermine FRELIMO's rule (Chan and Venâncio, 1998, pp.3–4). Following Zimbabwean independence, RENAMO's leadership transferred to Apartheid South Africa, where it became a full-fledged opposition movement in Mozambique. Following a series of bold incursions into

Consequently, Mozambican democracy remains precarious, with its current situation resembling its post-independence configuration in a number of aspects.

Mozambique — allegedly including RENAMO's involvement in the death of Mozambican President and leader of FRELIMO Samora Machel — RENAMO launched a complete invasion of Mozambique in 1986.
RENAMO's tactics were brutal. From kidnapping to plundering, raping, and mutilation, its militias scorched rural Mozambique (Newitt, 1995, p.570). RENAMO particularly emphasised the massacre of foreigners and their families, therefore interfering with Soviet workforce aid (Newitt, 1995, p.570). Notably, the party employed the use of child soldiers; forced to kill their own families as a way of ensuring compliance, with some academics believing that up to 40 percent of RENAMO's forces were below the age of eighteen (Mormul, 2018, p.55). Despite such inhumane conduct, RENAMO enjoyed considerable popularity in Mozambique, particularly in poorer, inland areas. Perceived by peasants as liberators from an oppressive regime, the organisation capitalised on societal frustrations by incorporating religious figures and traditional chiefs into its ranks (Chan and Venâncio, 1998, pp.6–9). The Mozambican Civil War lasted fifteen gruelling years. At the war's end, 1.1 million people had been killed, and four million were displaced (Hanlon, 1991, p.41).

DEMOCRACY AT LAST?

In 1992, FRELIMO and RENAMO signed the General Peace Accords, with an updated constitution ushering in a new era of Mozambican multi-party politics. Despite this, FRELIMO has maintained its grip on power, having now won all seven post-independence elections with a majority over 50 percent (Carbone, 2005, pp.428–429). The election results, which have effectively built a de-facto one-party system, can be attributed to a combination of factors. The successive waves of privatisation brought by the International Monetary Fund have mostly benefited members of the 'FRELIMO family', as the executive positions of major companies are primarily concentrated in the hands of its cadres (Sumich, 2010, p.692). This provided the party not only with massive funding for its campaigns, but also with the allure of guaranteed future financial success to those who became members (Sumich, 2010, p.692). Furthermore, FRELIMO has demonstrated greater adaptability to changing times, making peace with traditional and religious authorities and remaining a well-oiled political machine with clear lines of succession. Despite succession resting in the hands of a select few, this has ensured the party remains competitive (Carbone, 2005, pp.430–439).

Meanwhile, RENAMO has never entirely transitioned from a military organisation to a political party (Sumich, 2010, p.694). Led by Afonso Dhlakama since the 1992 peace accords, the party has been plagued by structural inefficiencies which hinder its growth (Sumich, 2010, p.694). Despite extensive funding from the UN's Democracy Fund (UNDEF), local party branches have nonetheless found themselves severely underfunded. RENAMO's leadership has been involved in several corruption scandals, tarnishing the party's reputation and popularity (Carbone, 2005, p.431). Dhlakama's frequent purges, designed to eradicate intra-party competition, further eliminate anyone who shows organisational competence or electoral popularity, resulting in poorly staffed cadre offices and low-skilled political figures incapable of competent political action (Hanlon, 2010, pp.92–93).

Consequently, Mozambican democracy remains precarious, with its current situation resembling its post-independence configuration in a number of aspects. The general feeling in Mozambique is that if one seeks to progress professionally, FRELIMO membership is the only viable option (Sumich, 2010, p.695), reinforced by FRELIMO's profound influence in every sector of the country's political apparatus, after 50 years in power. Such dominance is particularly true for the National Elections Committee (*Comissão Nacional de Eleições*), where the party effectively controls the appointment process of the institution whose competence is to oversee elections (Freedom House, 2024). Various factors, such as ballot box stuffing — sometimes resulting in a turnout of over 100 percent — and invalidation of opposition votes,

have led international observers to denounce Mozambican elections as profoundly flawed (Hanlon, 2010, pp.93–94).

A NEW HOPE

Successive political crises such as the 2016 Tuna Bond Scandal, the 2019 Beira natural disasters, and the Islamist insurgencies in Cabo Delgado, have damaged the government's reputation (International Crisis Group, 2024). Political disenfranchisement is widespread, with a 64 percent disapproval rate regarding the current de facto one-party system (Mpani, 2024). However, high disapproval rates do not necessarily translate into electoral defeat, especially given relatively low electoral turnout rates and FRELIMO's ability to control mechanisms of the state. In this context, Venâncio Mondlane's rise is particularly significant, representing an alternative to FRELIMO, where the equal disapproval of remaining parties has historically helped to entrench FRELIMO's rule. Previously a member of RENAMO, Mondlane is one of the many dissidents stemming from the party's immobilism (Tembe and Henshall, 2024). Presenting himself as an independent candidate, and later joining the Optimist Party for the Development of Mozambique — *Partido Otimista pelo Desenvolvimento de Moçambique* — Mondlane's emergence has introduced a notable shift in the political landscape, reflecting a broader demand for political renewal and alternative leadership (Tembe and Henshall, 2024).

As the FRELIMO regime's most prominent critic, Mondlane has risen under a liberal, anti-corruption and free speech platform, a stance that, in a country scoring only 44 out of 100 on Freedom House's global freedom index (Freedom House, 2024), has garnered him substantial support. Such support is particularly robust amongst young people, who are naturally less connected to the revolutionary myths surrounding FRELIMO, and struggle with Mozambique's increasing poverty levels and economic stagnation (The Conversation, 2025). Despite such broad appeal, official results gave him only 20 percent of the votes in the October 2024 presidential election denounced by international observers as fraudulent (International Crisis Group, 2024). Five months after the electoral process was officially closed, populations in the main urban centres of Mozambique, such as Maputo and Beira, have organised strikes and mass protests, resulting in more than 300 deaths as of January 2025 (Wafula, 2025). In efforts to establish negotiations, Mondlane has promised to halt protests if the FRELIMO government consents to his three-point agenda: the unconditional release of the approximately 5,000 prisoners taken during protests, financial compensation to the families of victims, and the free medical treatment of those injured (Wafula, 2025).

Even though it is unlikely that Mondlane will hold government soon, given FRELIMO's extensive penetration into the Mozambican electoral and regulatory machine, his exertion of pressure and accountability may pave the way for a disruptive non-FRELIMO government in the broader temporal scope. Such disruption may also contribute to revitalising a RENAMO party that does not, for the first time in Mozambican history, hold the official position of opposition leadership, contributing to a healthier and more dynamic multi-party democracy (International Crisis Group, 2024). Venâncio Mondlane could be the long-awaited answer to the cry of the Mozambican nation, with his emergence creating room for new opportunities in the Mozambican political arena.

CONCLUSION

Mozambique's current socio-political context is deeply rooted in its tumultuous post-colonial history. From an unstructured decolonisation process that deprived the nation of essential assets, to a gruelling civil war, political oppression has tainted the nation's path to stability. As such, the 2024 electoral crisis and subsequent unrest resulted from Mozambique's systemic flaws. Venâncio Mondlane's emergence as a popular political figure presents a glimmer of hope for democratic renewal. His rise has provided the Mozambican political landscape with the impetus necessary for the pursuit of change. Nevertheless, Mozambique's future will ultimately depend on whether it can transcend its historical legacy. Genuine democratic reform requires the dismantling of entrenched power structures and the assurance of transparent electoral processes (Freedom House, 2024). Only by reconciling their divided past with the demands of an inclusive future will Mozambique finally be able to achieve stability.

MAPUTO UNRAVELING: THE CRY OF THE MOZAMBICAN NATION

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A SILENCED WAR

THE ROLE OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES IN PERPETUATING SUDANESE CONFLICT

LAYLA OSAMA ZAKI

ILLUSTRATION BY OLEKSANDRA ZHYHALKINA

EDITORIAL NOTE: *This article was written and completed prior to SAF's re-taking of Khartoum in March 2025, but remains academically salient amid the shift in fighting away from the capital and towards Western areas of Sudan, such as Darfur, and amid a resurgence in hostilities toward neighbouring South Sudan. External influences continue to perpetrate and inflame conflicts within the Horn of Africa, and are crucial to understanding regional geopolitics.*

On 15 April 2023, fighting erupted in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum between the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), raising fears of a third full-scale civil war. The leaders of both groups, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan 'Hemedti' Dagalo, respectively, continue to battle for control of the state and its resources, leaving Sudanese citizens stuck in the crossfire. Sudan's location in the Horn of Africa means it has abundant natural resources, including significant reserves of oil and gold, attracting the attention of various international and regional powers. Nevertheless, Sudan has historically faced numerous challenges, with its ongoing civil war being the latest. This crisis has created one of the world's most dire humanitarian situations, with its death toll estimated to have exceeded 150,000 as of May 2024 (Yibeltal and Rukanga, 2024). Now facing its deadliest famine in 40 years, over half of Sudan's pre-war population – nearly 25 million people – require humanitarian assistance and protection as they face extreme shortages of food, water, and medicine (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2024). More than eleven million Sudanese civilians have been internally displaced, and three million forced to flee into neighbouring countries (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2024).

While decades of internal power struggles have catalysed the current iteration of conflict in Sudan, continued external interference has equally hindered the success of internal resolution and reconciliation. This essay accordingly analyses the interrelation of internal and external actors in prolonging and exacerbating the Third Sudanese Civil War. The combination of enduring negative impacts of colonisation, internal power struggles, the detrimental implications of a resource war, and, most recently, the increased involvement of Gulf States in the Sudanese conflict, have collectively entrenched instability, undermined sovereign peace-building efforts, and perpetuated cycles of violence that inhibit the establishment of a unified and democratic Sudan.

COLONISATION: THE ORIGINS OF THE DIVIDE

Sudan's conflicts can be traced back to Ottoman-Egyptian rule (1820–1885) and British-Egyptian rule (1899–1956), where treatment of the predominantly Arab North and Christian South regions of Sudan differed drastically. This subsequently divided the state into two separate senses of identity and belonging. This division stemmed from deliberate colonial policies that nurtured unequal power relations and fostered a legacy of inequality and social injustice between Northern and Southern communities that persists to this day (O'Fahey, 1996, p.258; Göksoy, 2019, p.85)

Preceding Ottoman-Egyptian rule, Sudan was subject to an exploitative system that prioritised Northern economic benefit at the expense of the South. The North-South slave trade, implemented by the Ottoman-Egyptian regime in 1821, marked the beginning of systemic oppression in Sudan (O'Fahey, 1996, p.258). This not only dehumanised the people of the South but also laid the groundwork for a hegemonic power structure that created a sense of Northern superiority (Lin, 2018, p.8). This sentiment persisted through Sudan's colonial period and into its post-independence conflicts.

A SILENCED WAR: THE ROLE OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES IN PERPETUATING SUDANESE CONFLICT

LAYLA OSAMA ZAKI

The Anglo-Egyptian condominium (1899–1956) continued these policies of division, systematically neglecting the South in favor of the North (Göksoy, 2019, pp.85–86). British colonial administrators applied a 'Southern Policy' that relegated the South to a separate administrative entity, effectively excluding it from the economic, political, and social advancements occurring in the North (Lin, 2018, p.10). This separation had long-lasting consequences, fostering geographical and psychological distances between the regions. This alienation and disenfranchisement of the Southern Sudanese, originating from various colonial policies such as the incorporation of Northern elites into the colonial administration, resulted in the emergence of distinct national identities (Natsios, 2008, p.79). Colonialism thus acted as a divisive force, deepening pre-existing ethnic and religious cleavages.

Post-independence, Sudan failed to establish a unified national identity, largely due to British colonial

mismanagement (Lin, 2018, p.16). British officials did not intend for the North and South to exist as a single state, but instead sought to exploit either region, thereby ignoring the complexities of the diverse population (Lin, 2018, p.10*)*. British colonial policy, particularly the Southern Policy, deliberately isolated the South to restrict its development and contact with the North, effectively destabilising both regions and hindering any possible foundation for post-colonial national cohesion (Johnson, 2016, pp. 24–26). This short-sighted governance reflected a broader imperial logic that prioritised administrative convenience, control, and extractive interests over sustainable long-term stability, making post-colonial unity nearly impossible (Johnson, 2016, pp. 25–26). Ultimately, the residual effects of Northern domination influenced both the First (1955–1972) and Second Sudanese Civil Wars (1983–2005), with the latter causing the deaths of over two million people and leading to the eventual secession of South Sudan as a sovereign state in 2011 (Center for Preventive Action, 2024; Momodu, S., 2020). The legacy of colonial rule in Sudan illustrates the negative consequences of an imperial system that prioritised external colonial interests over local well-being. By entrenching economic and political disparities between the North and South, colonialism laid the foundation for current internal power struggles.

THE BATTLE FROM WITHIN: A DICTATOR'S INFLUENCE

Following independence from Britain, Sudan remained mired in violence and political unrest, with former President Omar al-Bashir›s dictatorship exacerbating internal power struggles and entrenching systemic instability. Bashir›s rise to power in a 1989 coup marked the beginning of his autocratic 'Inqaz' (Salvation) regime, which sought complete political control (Ingham, 2019). His immediate dissolution of Parliament, suppression of opposing political parties, and severe press censorship signified a calculated effort to dismantle democratic institutions and centralise authority (Leung and Mohd Nor, 2021, p.60). As President, Bashir played a direct role in escalating the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005) by arming Arab militias. In the Darfur War (2003–2020), he orchestrated a genocidal counterinsurgency by empowering the Janjaweed, which would later evolve into the RSF, to commit mass killings, systemic rape, and forced displacement, all to repress any questioning of his disregard for Western Sudanese interest (Collins, 2019). Even after South Sudan's secession in 2011, Bashir destabilised Southern and Western regions by backing rebel factions and engaging in economic warfare with oil-rich territories (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). These internal power dynamics laid the foundation for the military fragmentation that fuels Sudan's current instability, as factions such as the SAF and RSF now struggle for dominance (Center for Preventative Action, 2024).

Following years of war and conflict, Bashir's Inqaz regime began to crumble on 19 December 2018 when citizens 'sparked by rising prices and the lifting of subsidies on basic goods' took to the streets in protest of Bashir's decades-long focus on funding his political agendas (Hassan and Kodouda, 2019, p.89). The protests evolved into a nationwide revolution, culminating in Bashir's removal by a coup facilitated

The resort to military force in Sudan's political struggle is not an anomaly, but instead a consequence of a system that has historically treated governance as a battle betweened armed factions.

by the SAF and RSF on 11 April 2019 (Center for Preventive Action, 2024).

Far from merely stagnating Sudan's political development, Bashir's rule actively created a system of violent repression and militarised governance which directly shaped the current conflict. By dismantling state institutions in favour of personalist rule and militarised patronage networks, Bashir eliminated the possibility of stable governance, ensuring that his downfall would not lead to democratisation but to a violent struggle over the remnants of his fractured authoritarian state (Hassan and Kodouda, 2019, pp.92–93). Thus, Sudan's current instability is not just a legacy of decades of British domination and Bashir's tenure, but a predictable outcome of his deliberate governance strategy that prioritised repression and militarisation over institutional development (Hassan and Kodouda, 2019, pp. 99–102).

The RSF emerged as Sudan's most powerful paramilitary force under Bashir. Although initially serving as Bashir's personal protection unit, the RSF's growing autonomy made it a key player in Sudan's internal power struggles (Liyew, 2024, pp.5–6). Ultimately, on 11 April 2019, the RSF turned against Bashir and joined the SAF in removing him from power. This uneasy alliance between the RSF and SAF created a fragile transitional government. SAF leader Abdel Fattah al-Burhan had become the de facto head of government with RSF commander 'Hemedti' sitting alongside other military and civilian leaders, until the election of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok in August 2019 (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). However, rather than facilitating a stable transition to civilian rule, the post-Bashir era deepened military rivalries, as Burhan and Hemedti prioritised consolidating their power over a transition to democratic governance (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). The political instability that followed, including the 2021 coup against civilian Hamdok and the failed power-sharing agreement, exposed the fundamental weakness of Sudanese governance; its political order remained entirely militarised, with institutional power garnered by force rather than democratic mandate (Hassan and Kodouda, 2019, pp.101–102). It became clear that in trying to overcome systemic injustices, any hope for peace would be inextricably linked to the violence and trauma left by Bashir's Inqaz regime (Liyew, 2024, p.7).

The resort to military force in Sudan's political struggle is not an anomaly, but instead a consequence of a system that has historically treated governance as a battle between armed factions. Bashir's rule entrenched a model of governance in which political authority was directly tied to military dominance, sidelining civilian institutions and preventing the development of mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution (Ingham, 2019). In democratic societies, political competition occurs within institutional frameworks that mediate disputes, but in Sudan, no such framework existed — rather, power was determined by which faction controlled the most firepower (Ladley, 2024, pp.22–23). The December 2022 agreement mandating RSF's integration into the national military was a critical flashpoint, as it threatened Hemedti's autonomy, making violence the only viable path to preserving his influence. With no independent judiciary or civilian leadership capable of enforcing agreements, negotiations failed and unresolved tensions escalated into war (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). In this context, Sudan's descent into a renewed civil war was not simply a breakdown of political negotiations but the inevitable outcome of a system where political survival has always depended on military supremacy.

OIL, GOLD, AND A PREDATORY POLITICAL ECONOMY

International actors have exacerbated this ongoing conflict by supporting different factions to further their geopolitical interests, reducing incentives for peaceful resolution. In the early 2000s, Khartoum was

transformed by a boom in the economy as rising global oil prices increased demand for Sudanese oil, pumping billions of dollars into Bashir's pocket. Bashir's regime grew, enlarging its patronage networks and increasing the economic gap between the middle and lower classes (Patey, 2024, p.413). However, following the secession of South Sudan in 2011, Sudan lost three-quarters of its oil reserves, two-thirds of its export earnings, and half of the government's fiscal reserves, ultimately forcing the Sudanese government to remove fuel and food subsidies (Verhoeven, 2015, pp.207; Patey, 2024, p.413). The relationship between natural resources and conflict in fragile states is evident, with oil-rich developing countries long experiencing less democracy and inequitable economics. This is known as 'the Resource Curse', whereby the possession of natural resources typically does not lead to an improvement in the wider population's welfare (Suliman, 2016, pp.422–424). Oil is particularly important as it remains the most strategically important energy source in the world, with more advanced countries depending on less developed oil exporters, making the ownership of oil critical for Sudan's national interest and welfare (Suliman, 2016, pp.422–424).

Nevertheless, following South Sudan's secession, Sudan's political economy was left relatively intact as new elites and exploitative external actors capitalised on gold as an alternative to oil in their violent competition for power (Patey, 2024, p.414). Rooted in colonial-era patterns of uneven development, Sudan's economy became increasingly characterised by the concentration of wealth and state investment in urban centres, particularly in the North, while peripheral resource-rich areas remained underdeveloped and marginalised. This resulted in an inequitable political economy where government officials and foreign patrons played a crucial role in business. The further involvement of armed groups and militias made peace in Sudan transactional, incentivised by material rewards rather than political reconciliation. Foreign relations thus underpin domestic politics and power structured through global 'markets in which Sudan monetises its natural resources' (Patey, 2024, pp.414–415). The resource-driven patronage and external exploitation of Sudanese resources have not only sustained Sudan's militarised political economy but have also fueled the current conflict, as rival factions such as the SAF and RSF compete for control over lucrative gold revenues.

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES: THE GULF STATES

Powerful actors in the Gulf, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have also played a significant role in Sudanese affairs, viewing the Horn of Africa as part of their regional security neighborhood (Sharfi, 2022, pp.286). These states had fostered strong ties with Bashir, who relied on them for support during times of severe economic crisis. In exchange for grants, loans, and investments worth billions, Bashir provided military assistance to aid the two countries' campaign against the Yemeni Houthis in 2015 (Al-Anani, 2023). This mutual security relationship reinforced both countries' strategic interests, as Sudan's military backing aided the Gulf states to counter Iranian influence while Gulf financial and economic coercion ensured Sudan remained aligned with their broader regional goals (Liyew, 2024, pp.7–8). In 2019, both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates cultivated strong relationships with the SAF and RSF, using their vast financial resources to bolster military rule and prevent the establishment of a civilian government. The support ultimately laid down the grounds for the 2021 military coup against Hamdok (Liyew, 2024, pp.7–9).

Saudi Arabia's continued interference in Sudanese politics aligns with its national objectives of safeguarding its strategic interests in the Red Sea from regional and international competitors (Liyew, 2024, pp.8–9), as well as diversifying its economy via trade, especially in the agriculture, energy, and water sectors. However, while previously benefiting from Sudan's military dominance under Bashir's reign, Saudi Arabia's recent facilitation of ceasefire talks reflects a shift in priorities, as prolonged instability threatens its Red Sea trade routes and economic diversification plans (Sharfi, 2022, pp.286; Al-Anani, 2023). This shift highlights the contradictions in Saudi policy. While it has historically backed Sudanese military actors to maintain influence, it now seeks to stabilise the region to secure its strategic interests, demonstrating the complex and sometimes conflicting nature of external involvement in Sudan. Saudi Arabia's evolving role as a power within the Horn of Africa and its continued self-interested aims underscore its neglect of the citizens caught in the violent conflict exacerbated by Saudi influence (Al-Anani, 2023).

The UAE, unlike Saudi Arabia, has recently cultivated strong ties with the RSF. Having previously collaborated with Bashir, the UAE now views Hemedti as a key ally who could advance its regional interests, including the exploitation of Sudanese natural resources, despite the RSF's history of war crimes (Sharfi, 2022, pp.277; Liyew, 2024, p.9). The UAE now continuously supports the RSF financially, politically, and militarily, incentivising them to achieve their objectives. Their main objectives include eradicating any remnants of Bashir's regime, primarily due to its opposition to Islamist movements, particularly those affiliated with political Islam, such as Bashir's Inqaz regime, and protecting their interests in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa region (Liyew, 2024, p.9). Importantly, the UAE boasts a negative view towards Islamist politics like those of the RSF, thus aiming to prevent Sudan from becoming a hub for political Islam, and ensuring that any future government aligns with its broader regional strategy (Al-Anani, 2023). Additionally, removing Bashir-era networks allows the UAE to strengthen its economic and geopolitical foothold in Sudan, particularly through investments in gold, ports, and trade routes along the Red Sea (Liyew, 2024, pp.8–9).

Although both Saudi Arabia and the UAE's strategic interests in using Sudan as a bastion against the Houthis initially aligned, their policies have since diverged, reflecting evolving geopolitical priorities. Saudi Arabia now prioritises economic and trade stability, whereas the UAE continues to back the RSF financially, politically, and militarily, leveraging Sudan's instability to expand its influence over key resources like gold and strategically important ports. This division has exacerbated the Sudanese conflict by transforming it into a proxy struggle, with each faction receiving the external support that sustains their military capabilities and entrenches their resistance to compromise, thereby prolonging the conflict. By manipulating political alliances, funding armed factions, and exploiting Sudan's resources, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have deepened Sudan's suffering, delaying its path to peace and democracy. Millions of Sudanese civilians bear the true cost of their interference, left to endure the devastating consequences of a conflict not of their making.

CONCLUSION: A NATION HELD HOSTAGE BY EXTERNAL GREED

The ongoing conflict in Sudan underscores the devastating impact of both internal power struggles and relentless external interference. While Sudan's colonial past and decades of dictatorship created deep-rooted divisions, the greed-driven involvement of regional and global powers has significantly prolonged and intensified the crisis. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE have manipulated Sudan's fragile political landscape for their own economic and strategic gain, exploiting its natural resources and further destabilising the region. The humanitarian toll has been catastrophic: an estimated 150,000 people have been killed (Yibeltal and Rukanga, 2024), over eleven million Sudanese citizens have been internally displaced, with another three million fleeing to neighbouring countries, and nearly 25 million people now requiring urgent humanitarian assistance (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2024).
The crisis's repercussions are not confined to Sudanese borders. The instability has triggered mass displacements, spreading refugees across neighboring nations, while the proliferation of weapons and cross-border violence further threatens regional security (Al-Anani, 2023). Years of reliance on international financing and foreign-backed militarisation have made Sudan's politicians susceptible to manipulation, leaving the country vulnerable to exploitation. External actors, driven by greed and strategic ambitions, have seized the opportunity to entrench their influence, using Sudan's resources as leverage in their geopolitical pursuits. Ultimately, as long as foreign actors prioritise power and profit over peace, Sudan's path to stability will remain obstructed, leaving its civilians to bear the tragic cost of conflict. Only by empowering Sudanese-led peace efforts and reducing foreign exploitation can the country hope to rebuild and move toward a lasting resolution.

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UNINTENDED SANCTUARY

THE INSTITUTIONAL FAILURES BEHIND SOUTHEAST ASIA'S NEW CRIMINAL LANDSCAPE

MATHEW HUANG

PHOTOGRAPH BY DUC VAN

In recent decades, Southeast Asia has undergone profound economic and social transformations. Through ASEAN's expansion, continued regional integration, infrastructure improvements, and technological advancements, Southeast Asia has evolved from relative isolation to globalisation as command economies have shifted into liberal-oriented markets. These changes, while facilitating unprecedented economic growth, have also enabled transnational crime to take new forms. Regional connectivity has empowered illicit actors to exploit jurisdictional differences, while technological advancement has enabled criminals to test the limits of under-resourced law enforcement agencies. With the assistance of protective umbrellas, orchestrated by political elites, criminal 'safe havens' have emerged across the region. Despite the longstanding presence of transnational crime in the region, traditionally in the form of arms and narcotics smuggling, cybercrime and human trafficking are presenting new challenges. The rapid growth of cybercrime parks housing 'scam factories' along the border regions of Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar exemplifies this trend. Although these zones are officially marketed as entertainment facilities or economic development initiatives, they serve a range of underground purposes, primarily fraud operations but frequently involve human trafficking, bonded labour, and other forms of exploitation.

These developments mark not just a continuation of existing trends, but a tipping point where criminality has reached a scale and technological sophistication well beyond the capacity of existing regional responses. Transnational crime in Southeast Asia has historically been sustained by weak state structures and poor regional legal coordination, but now, in the face of rapid technological advancement leveraged against under-resourced law enforcement, the threat has multiplied in scale and significance, demanding urgent and coordinated intervention. By reviewing the strategies adopted by ASEAN, this essay highlights the limitations of current methods and greater regional cooperation among ASEAN states targeting transnational organised crime.

TRANSNATIONAL CRIME IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Presently, the transnational criminal landscape in Southeast Asia is evolving faster than ever before, characterised by rapid adaptation and escalating technological sophistication. While traditional revenue streams like narcotics, arms, wildlife, and sex trafficking persist, digital fraud and online gambling have emerged as the fastest growing and most lucrative income sources (United States Institute of Peace, 2024, p.17). Scam operations occur on an industrial scale, under the guise of legitimate industrial and science parks, such as the KK park in Myanmar's Kayin State (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024b, p.33).

These cybercriminals mostly operate along borders, where weak state presence and jurisdictional ambiguity allows criminal groups to operate with minimal interference. Areas like Laos's Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone and Myanmar's network of nearly 130 special zones near the Thai and Chinese borders (United States Institute of Peace, 2024, pp.28, 39) exemplify this pattern. Their operations primarily rely on trafficked individuals, indicating a disturbing shift in method. Victims are typically lured by false online job advertisements promising high pay. Upon arrival at their destination city, they are trafficked to a compound, have their documents confiscated, and are forced into performing online fraud. They are confined to fortified compounds to prevent escape and are subject to various abuses, including sexual exploitation, debt bondage, and physical and psychological mistreatment (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023, p.9).

A United States Institute of Peace report reveals the staggering scale of these operations: with revenues exceeding 43.8 billion U.S. dollars, approximately 40 percent of the combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, these Southeast Asia-based criminal networks are among the world's most powerful (United States Institute of Peace, 2024, p.9).

MOUNTING CHALLENGES

The growing technological sophistication of transnational criminal groups poses mounting challenges for the region's already strained law enforcement agencies. Evolving technology enables criminal groups to enhance their fraud capabilities and improve existing methods, with groups increasingly turning to cryptocurrencies, cloud computing, and generative artificial intelligence (AI) to anonymise transactions and boost operational efficiency (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024b, p.115). As AI becomes more advanced and accessible, it amplifies cybercriminals' efficiency and the scope of their activities, while lowering the barriers of entry to novice criminals. At the same time, law enforcement remains unprepared to counter these sophisticated methods. The growing 'digital divide' thus poses a critical challenge to the existing agencies,

MATHEW HUANG

which lack sufficient training and resources to combat this type of crime (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019, p.21).

ASEAN has long flagged transnational crime as a regional security threat, though current efforts have failed to deliver effective results. Since 1996, ASEAN foreign ministers have agreed on 'urgent action' against money laundering, human and drugs trafficking, and other forms of criminality (Emmers, 2008, p.8). The 1997 *Manila Declaration on the Prevention and Control of Transnational Crime* defined a basis for joint action against transnational criminal organisations (Ganapathy and Broadhurst, 2008, p.2). In 2004, ASEAN adopted the *Treaty on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters* (MLAT), which required member states to set up institutions to send and receive requests for mutual legal assistance against transnational criminal activity. These efforts indicate ASEAN's thorough securitization of transnational crime, but the actual efforts of the member states remain largely aspirational. For example, no known request related to human trafficking has been made through the MLAT system, even though that crime is widespread throughout the region (Yusran, 2018, p.270). ASEAN generally lacks concrete measures to enforce its counter-crime aspirations (Sundram, 2024, p.6), with efforts being undermined by three key barriers: uneven law enforcement, a non-interventionist stance, and elite collusion that protects rather than confronts transnational crime.

WEAK LAW ENFORCEMENT

The prevalence of transnational crime in the Mekong region stems from fragmented governance and weak law enforcement. Porous borders, inconsistencies in government control, and criminal justice systems beyond the control of the central government, most notably in Myanmar, create opportunities for criminal networks to operate with minimal interference from law enforcement (Smith, 2019, p.474). Law enforcement agencies are ineffective against transnational crime, especially in Myanmar and Laos, as they remain structured to address local criminal activity rather than sophisticated cross-border operations (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019, p.21). Their abilities are limited to targeting low-level criminals, such as individual couriers and traffickers, while failing to dismantle the broader criminal networks behind them (Luong, 2020, p.97). Fragile states where governments are less able to regulate what happens on their sovereign territory give transnational criminal organisations opportunities to exploit structural weaknesses for financial gain (Shaw and Kemp, 2012, p.4).

Furthermore, investigating cyber-enabled crimes requires specialised evidence collection techniques that exceed the current technological and operational capacities of regional law enforcement authorities (Holt and Bossler, 2015, p.114). In the face of technological advancement, traditional forms of law enforcement are no longer adequate (Broadhurst, 2006, p.429). The limited efficacy of domestic authorities highlights the need for international cooperation to establish an environment hostile to illicit networks.

THE LIMITATIONS OF ASEAN

ASEAN's institutional norms impede the ability of states to effectively combat transnational criminal activities within the region. The principle of non-intervention, for example, discourages member states from interfering in each other's domestic affairs, leaving authorities unable to efficiently prosecute transnational crime. This complex relationship between jurisdiction and prosecutorial efficacy in Southeast Asia's regional security framework enables transnational criminal networks to exploit jurisdictional gaps with minimal fear of accountability. Criminal groups, as a result, have adopted a strategy of 'jurisdictional hedging' – dispersing their operations across several countries, but locating facilities near national borders, to insulate themselves from regulatory crackdowns in any single state (International Crisis Group, 2023, p.18). It is evident that criminal groups have capitalized on weak regional enforcement and the states' limited capacity to intervene beyond their borders, suggesting a link between the lack of regional cooperation in law enforcement and the increasing resilience of criminal networks.

Secondly, divergent interests between member states still persist despite formal agreement upon institutional norms. This is evident in the MLAT's uneven implementation, in which less developed states lack the resources to participate effectively, while wealthier members are unwilling to accept the burden of weaker states' limitations (Sundram, 2024, p.6).

ELITE COLLUSION

An additional feature hindering effective countermeasures is the existence of alliances between influential members of the political elite and key figures in organised crime. In Myanmar, the junta and Ethnic Armed Organisations have long been involved in transnational crime to financially support their political

It is evident that criminal groups have capitalised on weak regional enforcement and the states' limited capacity to intervene beyond their borders, suggesting a link between the lack of regional cooperation in law enforcement and the increasing resilience of criminal networks.

struggles (International Crisis Group, 2023, p.18; Graceffo, 2025). The most notable example of this arrangement is between the Karen Border Guard Force (KBF) and Yatai International Holdings Group (IHG). Under the agreement, the KBF provided land concessions and security to Yatai IHG, enabling them to establish and operate 'Yatai New City' in Shwe Kokko with de facto sovereignty (United States Institute of Peace, 2024, p.29; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024a, p.7). This area has been officially branded as a 'smart city', but is consistently exposed by international NGOs as a hub for cybercrime and human trafficking operations (International Crisis Group, 2023, p.18).

In Cambodia, signs of elite collusion are evident in the government's consistent dismissal of Chinese and broader international efforts to address the issue of transnational crime in the country. This is likely due to strong connections between influential members of the political elite and key individuals behind the country's numerous casinos and resort compounds associated with criminal rings. One instance is Ly Yong Phat, a prominent businessman and member of the Cambodian People's Party, who openly endorses the O'Smach Resort and Casino on his business website despite mounting evidence of the resort's involvement in fraud and human trafficking (United States Institute of Peace, 2024, p.32).

In Laos, political elites have also fostered a welcoming environment for transnational crime actors by promoting Special Economic Zones (SEZs), which create lucrative opportunities for illegal activities. The most notable example is the Golden Triangle SEZ (GTSEZ) in Bokeo Province on the Mekong River, opposite Thailand. Although the Laotian government holds a twenty percent stake in the GTSEZ, it is operated by the Kings Romans Group (KRG), which holds a 99-year lease, under the leadership of Chinese national Zhao Wei (International Crisis Group, 2023, p.11). The KRG and Zhao were sanctioned by the United States Treasury Department for their alleged involvement in drug, wildlife, and human trafficking, as well as money laundering and bribery facilitated through the Kings Romans Casino (United States Institute of Peace, 2024, p.35). The zone is guarded by a private security force, while Laotian authorities need special permission to enter (International Crisis Group, 2023, p.7), enabling criminal activities with minimal government interference. Several key political figures in Laos have also effectively endorsed the GTSEZ by frequently visiting the zone (United States Institute of Peace, 2024, p.36), suggesting that the Laotian government prioritises foreign investment regardless of the source or methods involved. The Laotian government has repeatedly branded SEZs as valuable assets for economic growth and development, with plans to have 25 operational SEZs by 2027 (Sims, 2017, p.681).

CURRENT STRATEGIES AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL CRIME

At the time of writing, Chinese and Thai authorities have taken coercive action against certain cybercrime compounds. In response to growing cases of trafficked victims and fraud since 2021, Chinese authorities have requested that Thai authorities arrest the Yatai New City's chairman, She Zhijiang. Their request was granted in 2022 (International Crisis Group, 2023, p.23). Thai authorities have repeatedly cut electricity, internet, and fuel supplies to Myanmar border areas hosting scam compounds and illegal online operations (Bangkok Post, 2025). These efforts have culminated in the rescue and release of hundreds of trafficked individuals from captivity (Bangkok Post, 2025), signalling a positive development in harm alleviation.

Given the crime groups' high resilience, however, the Thai and Chinese countermeasures are unlikely to result in prosecution for the illicit actors. As Roderic Broadhurst (2017, p.4) notes, criminal networks systematically

exploit jurisdictional vulnerabilities, swiftly migrating to countries with less robust law enforcement capabilities. This pattern of migration is evident in recent events. One such example is the migration of criminal operations from the Philippines to Cambodia's Sihanoukville after the Philippines tightened regulations on the casino industry in 2016 (Luo, 2023, p.422). This migration continued to Myanmar's Shwe Kokko following Cambodian government raids on Sihanoukville scam facilities (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023, p.28). This underscores the critical need for coordinated regional efforts to effectively combat transnational criminal activities, rather than isolated efforts that target a specific jurisdiction. As Kofi Annan declared, 'If crime crosses borders, so must law enforcement' (Lyzhenkov, 2018, p.50).

CONCLUSION

Southeast Asian transnational criminal organisations are now among the most lucrative illicit enterprises in the modern era. Criminal networks have grown too powerful, technologically advanced, and deeply embedded within domestic political networks to be addressed through the fragmentary approach. The growing technological sophistication of crime groups makes them more efficient than ever, critically challenging the region's strained law enforcement agencies. The current limits of domestic authorities in prosecuting criminals extraterritorially also remains a blind spot in Southeast Asia's regional security framework, allowing transnational networks to exploit jurisdictional gaps with minimal risk of accountability. These factors highlight the need for a bold and collective approach to tackle the common problem of transnational crime. Unless Southeast Asian governments recognise a future in a community of shared fate, transnational crime will likely remain entrenched and become difficult to reverse in the immediate future, cementing the region as a key hub for illicit activity.

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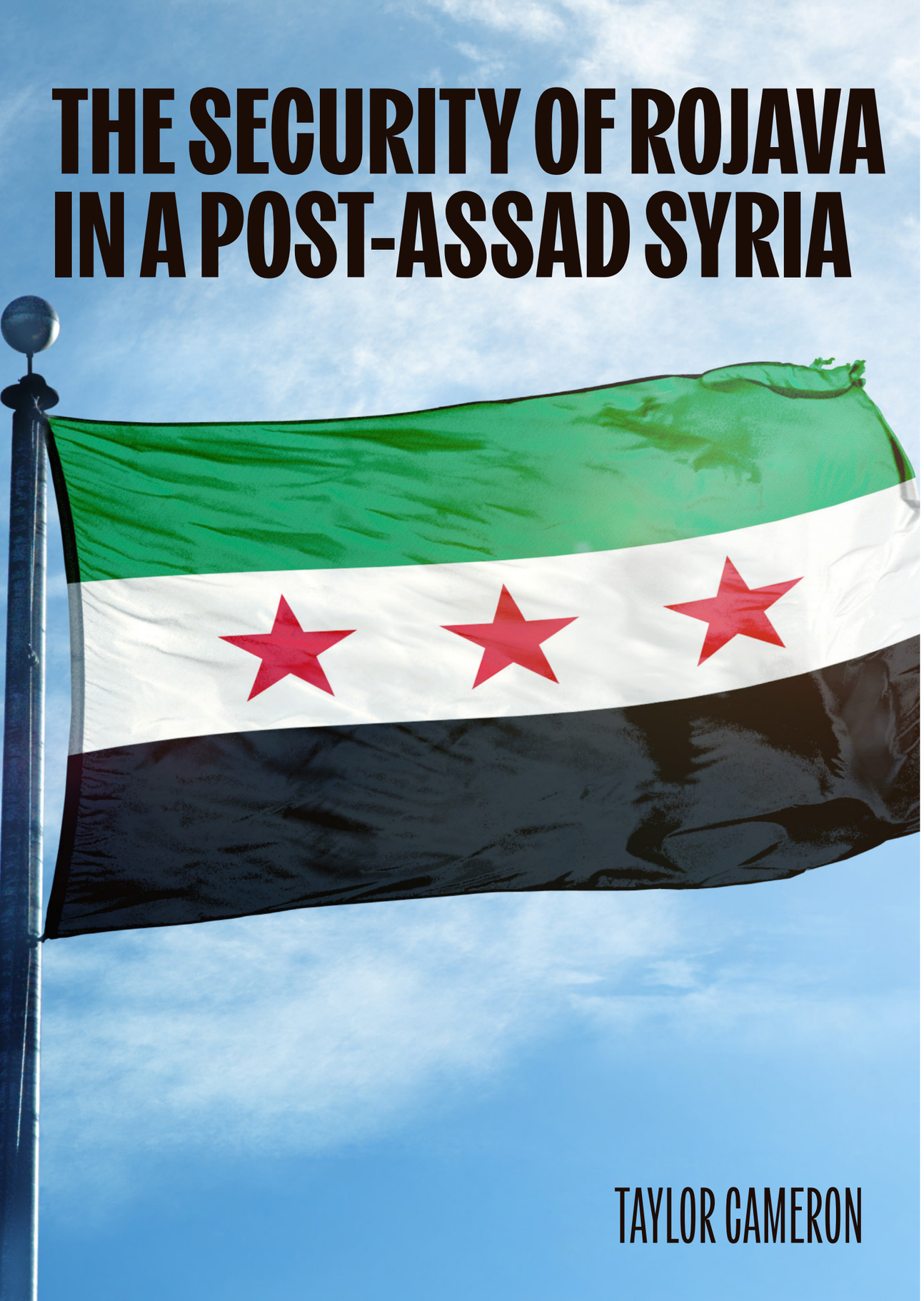
THE SECURITY OF ROJAVA IN A POST-ASSAD SYRIA



TAYLOR CAMERON

EDITORS' NOTE: *This article was written and completed prior to the signing of a re-integration agreement between the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the HTS-led provisional government in Damascus in March 2025. Whilst the agreement represents a major step forward in stabilising Syria post-Assad, the article's discussion of Rojava's precarious position remains salient in the context of both the context of Kurdish autonomy and the future of the new, centralised Syrian state.*

After 53 years of authoritarian control, the al-Assad regime of Syria was finally usurped by rebel forces at the end of 2024. The emerging nexus of power in Syria lies in the hands of Islamist and Turkish-backed organisations that threaten the stability of Rojava: an autonomous region in the North of Syria which has emerged from the intersection of movements for Kurdish autonomy and democratic confederalism. Rojava is an autonomous area made up of three administrative cantons (Cizîrê, Kobanê, and Efrîn), which were established primarily by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). The actors of the new Syrian regime have used their political leverage to undermine the viability of the region through military campaigns, driven by previous historical opposition to the Kurdish movement. However, through an emerging cooperative relationship between the regime and Rojava, there may be wider compromises to the region's autonomy. This paper explores the historical context which supported the political project of Rojava, situatuating the historic challenges and vulnerabilities that Rojava faces, and finally, expands on the role that Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS) and the Syrian National Army (SNA) play within this. By identifying and tracing the factors that contribute to undermining Rojava's security, this essay seeks to track the region's erratic development, within which the autonomy of the region hangs in the balance. Ultimately, Rojava seems to be in a more vulnerable position to continue its expression of democratic confederalism and to protect minority groups.

DIVERSITY, UNITY AND OPPRESSION OF SYRIAN KURDS

The autonomous region of Rojava was established in the early years of the Syrian Civil War (March 2011 to April 2012) following long-standing aspirations for Kurdish autonomy within Syria and neighbouring countries. The Kurds are a stateless people divided between Iraq, Iran, Türkiye and Syria — constituting a large minority within each of these nations (Küçük and Özselçuk, 2016, p.184). Kurds are the largest ethnic group globally without a defined nation-state, and share an inextricable identity which is rooted in a long ethnic history and amplified by the shared systematic disenfranchisement of their communities that are split across borders. Kurds across these nations have been continually repressed through discrimination sustained by oppressive institutions (McDowall, 2021, pp.453–476). Within Syria, the al-Assad regime systematically discriminated against Kurds through explicit policies. One such policy was the Arab Belt project of the 1970s, during which land was expropriated from thousands of Kurdish communities and over 140,000 Kurds were internally displaced (Schmidinger, 2018, p.64). Further policies from the al-Assad regime have denied Syrian citizenship to 300,000 Kurds, terminating their civil rights to own private property, be employed, marry, and participate electorally. Kurdish holidays and language have also been forcefully suppressed in favour of a single Syrian identity defined by Arab nationalism (Federici, 2015, p.82; McDowall, 2021, pp.469–470).

Syrian Kurds have been historically divided between the leadership of various parties, making a cohesive and united Kurdish defence against these oppressive structures difficult (Schmidinger, 2018, pp.5–6; Khalaf, 2016, p.25). Even when coalitions were formed to protest on a united front, the al-Assad regime reacted with violent crackdowns. One defining example is the 2004 Qamishli massacre, where a clash between Arabs and Kurds during a football game erupted into protests. Syrian security forces killed 33 Kurds, with thousands of others detained and tortured (Commins and Lesch, 2014, pp.274–275; Hoffman, 2024). However, this protest, and the further revolutionary movements that erupted during the Arab Spring, were important inflection points which helped bridge Kurdish factions into a singular front of solidarity. This has led to a more cohesive movement amongst Syrian Kurds that has manifested in the autonomous region of Rojava (Tejel, 2014, pp.222–224; Schmidinger, 2018, p.76). Developing Kurdish solidarity has been further institutionalised in the education system in Rojava. For example, during the Syrian Civil War Pan-Kurdish ideology was integrated into curricula within Northeastern Syria, such as the Kurdish language continually becoming a key part of the education system (Tejel, 2020, p.260). Steps like these have embedded a form of intergenerational socialisation of Kurdish solidarity.

A Kurdish conception of autonomy does not view the administration of the state as an adequate form of political organisation, but rather sees non-hierarchical structures and self-governance as legitimate forms

Syrian Kurds have been historically divided between the leadership of various parties, making a cohesive and united Kurdish defence against these oppressive structures difficult.

of authority – a sentiment that has underscored the social arrangement of Rojava (Knapp and Jongerden, 2014, p.107; Khalaf, 2016, p.10). Resistance not only manifests against the structure of the unitary nation-state, but patriarchy and other forms of oppression simultaneously, with the discourse on women's rights often a central concern for Kurdish organisations (Küçük and Özselçuk, 2016, pp.186–187; Schmidinger, 2018, pp.5–7). This is again highlighted in the education curricula within Rojava, where there is an explicit focus on the emancipatory role of women within Rojavan society – however, it should be noted that this is a contested topic between different Kurdish parties (Tejel, 2020, p.260). Due to this antagonistic stance towards both the al-Assad state and other Arab nationalist Syrian rebels, Rojava was regarded by the people of Syria as a 'third way' (Van Wilgenburg and Fumerton, 2022, p.1096). This contextualisation lays the groundwork for exploring the internal vulnerabilities that the region faces through factionalism and preexisting Arab-Kurd tensions.

INTERNAL VULNERABILITIES, ARAB-KURD TENSIONS AND HAY'AT TAHRIR AL-SHAM

Beginning in March 2011, the Syrian Civil War was a catalyst for rising extremist power causing violent eruptions when Islamic State (IS) militants laid siege to various Kurdish-majority areas during the early years of the war. This has led to multiple violent clashes between Rojava and the IS. A cultural watershed moment came with the Kurds' first counteroffensive success against Jihadist groups in the recapture of the Kurdish majority town, Kobanî from IS militias – largely directed by the military wing of the PYD, the leading political force within Rojava (Van Wilgenburg and Fumerton, 2022, pp.1098–1099). Further advances by PYD forces stripped power and territory from Jihadist militias, expanding the region into nearly a quarter of Syrian territory, encompassing a range of new Arab-majority areas (Van Wilgenburg and Fumerton, 2022, p.1103). Despite these victories strengthening a sense of solidarity between Kurdish communities and those of other ethnic minorities within Rojava, there are still cracks of legitimacy under the surface (Gourlay, 2020, pp.150–152). A key cause of this is the political heterogeneity of the Kurdish population placed within a context of political monopoly by the PYD. The PYD gained prevalence following the Arab Spring, attracting power through a more stable organisational structure in contrast to the variety of smaller Kurdish parties which had more fractured and volatile structures, often with less insurgent views than the PYD (Federici, 2015, p.84). This further legitimised their role as the leading political force within the region (Schmidinger, 2018, p.136). Yet their prevalence is opposed by a range of actors. From their rise, the PYD have been accused of inhibiting inclusive communication with smaller Kurdish parties, leading to underrepresentation in the administration of the cantons (Khalaf, 2016, p.24). This has led these opposition parties to accuse the PYD of erecting a new dictatorship (Schmidinger, 2018, p.136). This comes alongside concerns that the PYD have been complicit in child recruitment and abductions of non-PYD activists (Federici, 2015, p.86).

This internal fracturing became increasingly relevant through Rojava's recent history of extending into Arab-majority areas like Tel Rat and Manjib acquired from the IS, which are composed of significant Syriac and Turkmen populations as well (Khalaf, 2016, p.24). From the Arab perspective, there is often a feeling of distrust towards the leadership of Rojava (Khalaf, 2016, pp.10–15). Largely this distrust is contextualised within a history of Arab-Kurdish tensions within this area due to historical Kurdish opposition to Arab-nationalist policies alongside the previously discussed Arab Belt policies (Schmidinger, 2018, p.64). These tensions are exacerbated by the monopoly on violence held by the PYD (McDowall, 2021, p.467; Schmidinger, 2018, pp.139–140). Further, peaceful co-existence may be challenging in light of competing governing structures that exist against PYD leadership which have emerged within these Arab-majority areas (Öğür and Baykal, 2018, p.61). On the other hand, tenants within Rojava support a broad church of people, with goals to dismantle wider hierarchical and oppressive structures. The 'Social Contract of Rojava' explicitly lays out that the region is 'a confederation of Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens' (Küçük and Özselçuk, 2016; Knapp and Jongerden, 2014, p.96). The PYD also notes that ideas of democratic confederalism support the dismantling of ethnic divisions, allowing the incorporation of a variety of actors (Tejel, 2020, pp.261–262). Here, these commitments to inclusivity are central to meet Rojava's goals of democratic confederalism, which seeks to support greater stability in the region by creating a united front of various ethnic backgrounds. In this regard, Rojava has institutional tools which have supported relative stability in spite of the ongoing war.

Despite this, a deficit of local legitimacy will likely be exacerbated under the regime change led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an Islamist organisation with former Jihadist ties (Barnard and Winter, 2023, pp.397–405). Information on the relationship between leadership within Rojava and HTS is sparse, yet certain tensions can be uncovered. One tension derives from the fact that HTS was a competing organisation within Northern Syria during the Civil War, of Rojava is located primarily in the Northeast (Barnard and Winter, 2023, p.399). HTS also has long-term political objectives rooted in Arab nationalism, which may heighten established Arab-Kurd tensions in Arab-majority areas within Rojava. With their recent expansion of political power, HTS has been explicit in calling for Rojava to integrate into the Syrian state (Mills and Loft, 2024). Recent progress has been made in this regard, with the military forces of Rojava coming to a deal with the new Syrian regime, which will place the public institutions and infrastructure of Northeast Syria under the Syrian government's control (Cristou, 2025). However, this is a newly emerging relationship with significant uncertainty. This deal has also followed the reignition of conflict within the Aleppo region. For example, the capture of cities Manbij and Tal Rifaat from Rojavan forces have already resulted in over a hundred military deaths within the area (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 2025). These successes for Arab nationalists may exacerbate the wider distrust of Arab populations within Rojava, leading to internal and external vulnerability (Federici, 2015, pp.86–87). The relationship between the al-Assad regime and Rojava during the Civil War was starkly different. The earlier years saw al-Assad pull out of Kurdish-majority regions like Afrin and Kobani in a relatively peaceful manner and thereafter remain unengaged with the region (Tejel, 2020, p.259), allowing the Rojava leadership to facilitate a non-conflict zone at the cost of being perceived as collaborators of the Syrian regime by non-PYD opposition (Öğür and Baykal, 2018). This may allude to concessions or an agreement between the al-Assad regime and the PYD that may not survive the transition to a more aggressive actor. From these developments, further internal threats to the PYD and the leadership of Rojava may emerge if collaboration with the new regime is explicitly enacted which may compromise promises of confederalism expected by the cantons of Rojava.

EXTERNAL VULNERABILITIES, TÜRKIYE AND THE SYRIAN NATIONAL ARMY

The growing political leverage of Turkish forces within Syria also contributes to a more uncertain future. Türkiye is in active conflict with Kurdish groups seeking autonomy; a conflict which has to date claimed around 40,000 lives hitherto (Üstündağ, 2016, p.197). Leadership within Rojava has close developmental ties to the Kurdistan's Worker's Party (PKK) which acts within Türkiye and is deemed as a terrorist organisation by the Turkish government. Many Syrian Kurds became key figures within the PKK, disseminating similar political ideas and military training to Kurdish parties in Northeast Syria (Üstündağ, 2016, p.198; Küçük and Özselçuk 2016, pp.186–187). From this, Türkiye perceives that the success of Rojava may further legitimise Kurdish opposition within its own borders, leading to deliberate attempts to suppress the expansion and stability of Rojava (Holland-McCowan, 2017, pp.15–17; Barfi, 2016, p.6). This concern is a catalyst for the development of the Syrian National Army (SNA), which was established in 2017 by the Turkish state and has received significant funding and military training from them (McKeever, 2023, p.116). Further, Türkiye has labelled the PYD as a terrorist organisation from its affiliation with the PKK, making their antagonisms against the legitimacy of Rojava clear (Pusane, 2018).

During the Syrian Civil War, Türkiye and the SNA made many attempts to undermine Kurds within Syria. Operation Olive Branch was the successful cross-border invasion of the Kurdish-majority Afrin region by the SNA in 2018 (Gourlay, 2022, p.159). Since establishing this control, Kurds have been discriminated against through property seizures, kidnappings, torture and occasionally murder by SNA troops (McKeever, 2023, p.117). The SNA also committed widespread looting and expelled 300,000 Kurds from their homes (Gourlay, 2022, p.160). In 2019, Turkish Armed Forces alongside the SNA further advanced an incursion into the territory of Rojava again, cutting off the population's access to clean water and food and displacing hundreds of thousands of

civilians (Amnesty International, 2019). This caused Amnesty International to denounce Türkiye's 'callous disregard for civilian lives, launching unlawful deadly attacks in residential areas that have killed and injured civilians' (Amnesty International, 2019).

Now, Ahmed al-Sharaa, the interim president of the new administration and leader of the HTS, has promised to establish a more inclusive government within Syria (Gol, 2025). This raises uncertain hope for the people of Rojava; however, it is unclear whether this inclusivity is mechanised through withdrawal of the region's autonomy due to the close relations between HTS, the SNA, and Türkiye. The SNA has meanwhile continued to push into Rojavan territory. Kurdish military leader Mazloun Abdi stated that 'these attacks undermine peace efforts and pose a direct threat to the stability of Northern and Eastern Syria' (Kurdistan24, 2025). However, the emerging deal between the PYD and the new regime has promised an expansion of Kurdish rights and inclusion, such as citizenship rights, which could provide a positive future for the people of Rojava – yet it is unclear the extent to which the autonomy of the region would be compromised due to the ongoing nature of these developments. With the power over local infrastructure being handed over to the new regime, this is a looming scenario.

THE UNCERTAINTY AHEAD

There are clear vulnerabilities in Rojava's sustainability within a post-Assad Syria. First, the exacerbation of historic Arab-Kurdish tensions established within Rojava through the political transition towards the Arab-nationalist HTS alongside internal and external distrust towards the leadership of the PYD. Second, the continued military hostility of Turkish-backed organisations, such as the Syrian National Army, towards Rojava, stemming from a long history of Turkish opposition to Kurdish autonomy and the PKK. Despite the emerging deal between the leadership of Rojava and the new regime, it is unclear how the new regime will balance the tension between Rojava's desire for autonomy and its maintenance of a cordial relationship with Turkish forces. In contrast to a relatively hands-off relationship between the wartime al-Assad government and Rojava, recent assaults on Rojava alongside the compromisation of the regions autonomy and power sharing agreements may undermine hope for the continued survival of the region and its underlying legitimacy derived from its democratic confederalist ideals. Due to ongoing developments, Rojava is on a tipping point for its continued survival in a Post-Assad Syria.

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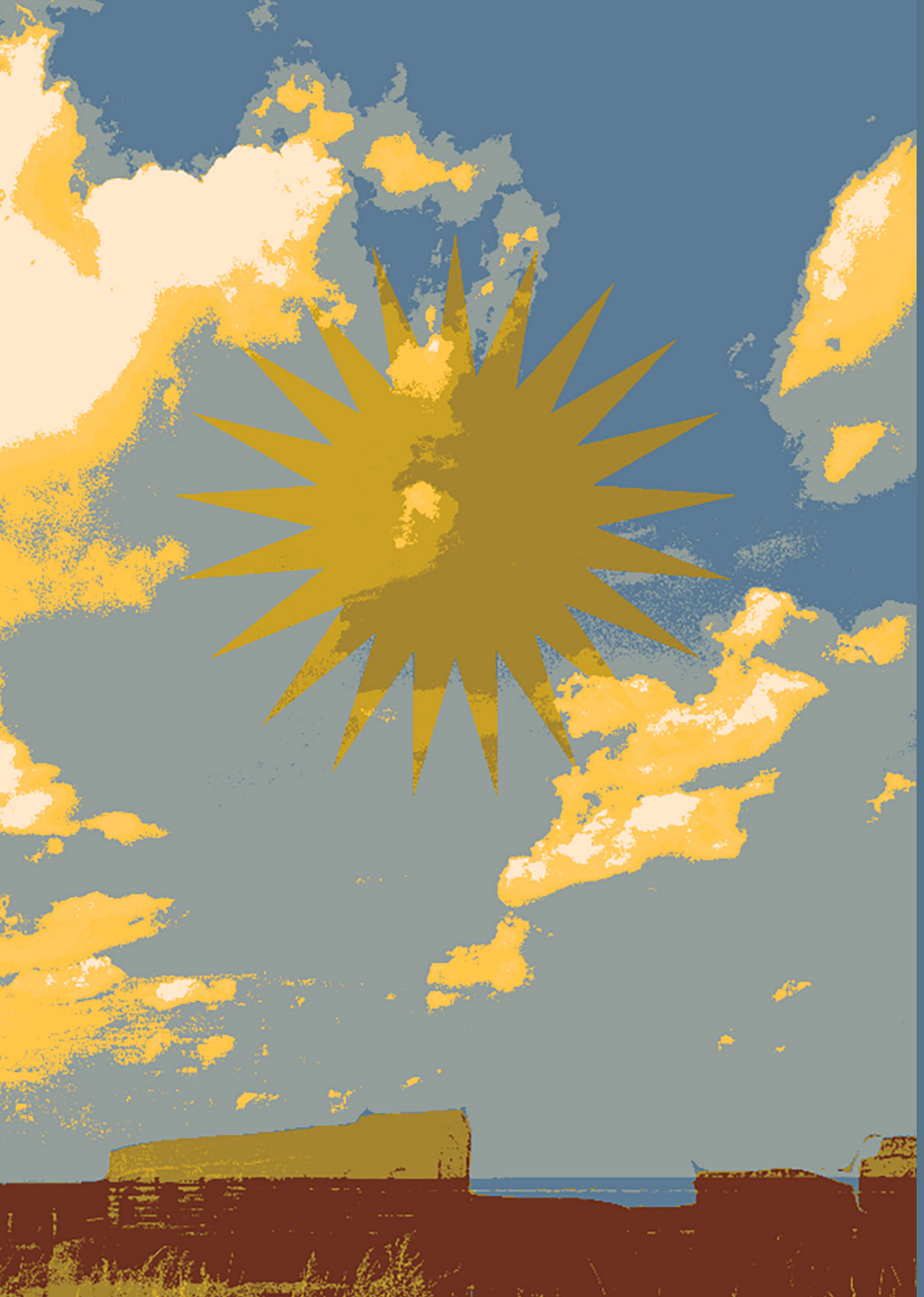

HAS THE INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT OF THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ REACHED A POINT OF NO RETURN?

AISYAH AB HALIM

ILLUSTRATION BY MAYA BEAUCHAMP

The Kurdish people have long been denied a true, sovereign homeland. The end of the First World War saw the Allied powers redraw state boundaries in West Asia through the secret Sykes-Picot agreement (Biger, 2016, p.50), a process that laid the foundations for the modern Middle East and placed large portions of the transnational Kurdish community under British control. The British administration had demarcated specific Kurdish territories under the adjacent Treaty of Sèvres ratified and signed on 10 August 1920 (Radpey, 2020, p.2). However, following Atatürk's Turkish nationalist military victories, the Allies failed to enforce the Sèvres treaty, leading to its renegotiation with Türkiye, and the rebranded Treaty of Lausanne (Radpey, 2020, p.3). The Treaty of Lausanne effectively nullified the promises of Kurdish autonomy embedded in the earlier Treaty of Sèvres, which had tentatively recognised the possibility of a Kurdish state. In contrast, Lausanne legitimised the territorial ambitions of the newly formed Turkish Republic and neighbouring states by deliberately splintering Kurdish populations across Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Türkiye, ensuring that Kurds would remain minorities in each. This fragmentation eroded Kurdish self-determination and was especially driven by Türkiye's determination to prevent any secessionist or autonomous Kurdish movements that might threaten the unity of its nation-state. Though catastrophic, this event did not extinguish the Kurdish people's fervent desire for an independent homeland.

In Iraq, decades of systemic oppression towards the Kurdish people under Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime culminated in a large-scale uprising in March 1991 (Montgomery and Hennerbichler, 2020). Sparked by Iraq's defeat in the Gulf War, the Kurdish rebellion in the north momentarily gained control of key regions. Although initially crushed, international condemnation and humanitarian concerns led to the creation of a Kurdish safe zone under United Nations Security Council Resolution 688 (O'Leary, 2002, p.19), marking a pivotal moment in the Kurds' continued struggle for autonomy. In October of the same year, the Government of Iraq (GOI) withdrew its administrative body from the Kurdish haven. This paved the way for the creation of the Kurdistan National Assembly and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), with governance of the latter split between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) (O'Leary, 2002). The establishment of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) ignited a strong aspiration within the Iraqi Kurdish community to pursue full independence, positioning the KRI as a quasi-state entity on the route to statehood. To reckon with political developments since 1991, including an attempted independence referendum in 2017, this article appraises whether the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has yet reached a politically viable point of no return in its struggle for independence. To evaluate the KRI's present position, the feasibility of independence and the circumstances interdicting it are

assessed, examining Iraqi legal barriers, international opposition and internal Kurdish political divisions.

SECESSION ILLEGALITY: THE EXPIRATION OF ARTICLE 140 IN THE IRAQI CONSTITUTION

Foremost, the KRI faces an enormous legal obstacle to secession. Domestically, the KRI failed to gain *de jure* independence through the 2017 referendum due to its complete rejection by the Iraqi Supreme Court and the GOI (The Straits Times, 2017). Attempting to legitimise the referendum, some Iraqi Kurdish politicians argued that they were rightfully utilising Article 140 of Iraq's constitution as a point of contention for independence, as the article delineated performing a census in disputed territories according to the will of citizens (Salih, 2024, p.97). However, this argument was deemed flawed by central Iraqi leaders, who claimed that the Article had expired in 2007 (Park et al., 2017, p.3), and was therefore invalid grounds for the referendum. Despite overwhelming support for independence within the KRI and a high turnout of 72 percent (Salih, 2024, p.97), the referendum was deemed illegitimate under Iraqi law and consequently dismissed by the central government, effectively nullifying it.

Beyond its illegality, the 2017 referendum was entangled in several sub-narratives that further challenged its legitimacy. KRG leader Masoud Barzani had extended his presidential reign over the KRI for two years, generating further legal disputes with Baghdad (O'Driscoll and Baser, 2019, p.2027). Some scholars suggest that the referendum, concomitant with a major economic crisis in the KRI, was an attempt to divert attention from criticisms of President Barzani and other KRG leaders, further delegitimising the referendum as a political action (O'Driscoll and Baser, 2019, p.2025). Since sovereignty and statehood desires are embedded within the Kurdish community, the referendum was an effective tactic to redirect the people's attention from the KRG's domestic problems towards the politically unifying matter of independence.

Despite these internal factors, the Supreme Court's opposition to the motion remained the most salient outcome. Baghdad's nullification of the referendum prevented the KRI from satisfying the conditions set by the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of the State. The 1933 convention outlines the conditions for a state to be recognised *de jure* by international law. Ibrahim (2023) stated that the KRI fulfils three of four conditions. While it has a permanent population, defined territory, and the capacity to enter in relations with other states, she contends that the KRI remains inadmissible for *de jure* recognition because of the fourth requirement, which entails recognition by other states (Ibrahim, 2023, p.5). The absence of both legal recognition by the GOI and international support due to each's collective interests leaves the KRI isolated in its statehood ambitions.

INTERNATIONAL REJECTION AND ENCROACHING ON KURDISH SEPARATIST MOVEMENTS

i. The United States

State recognition applies on an international scale, and the KRI faced overwhelming external opposition for its bid for independence during the 2017 referendum. Disappointingly for the KRG, no sovereign countries except for Israel supported the KRI's secession plan (Heller, 2017). Prior to the referendum, the United States' then-Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, sent an urgent letter to President Barzani to thank the KRI's efforts in battling ISIS, and warning of the consequences if the referendum proceeded. This was an attempt to coerce the KRG to fully cooperate with the Baghdad administration in alignment with Article 140 (Salih, 2024, p.99). The U.S.'s stance likely stemmed from the perception that supporting Kurdish independence in Iraq could have emboldened separatist movements within other states with large Kurdish minority populations, such as Türkiye and Iran, posing greater risks to regional instability. This would ultimately jeopardise the US's dominant presence and interests in the region.

The complexity of the KRI-US bilateral relationship is then best examined through Palani's (2024) conceptualisation of a patron-client relationship (PCR) in which the U.S. functions as the dominant patron, and the KRI as a client dependent on political and security support. The KRI-U.S. relationship reflects Biermann's (2024) four features of a patron–client relationship: a partnership involving resource exchange, asymmetric power dependence, informal understandings of obligations, and long-term durability, which is essential to distinguish PCR from short-term cooperation. This framework helps contextualise the nature of US engagement with the KRI beyond transactional cooperation (Biermann, 2024, p.12). The flexible arrangement and informal partnership

The absence of both legal recognition by the GOI and international support due to each's collective interests leaves the KRI isolated in its statehood ambitions.

between the U.S. and KRI, Palani (2024, p.34) argues, helps explain the misalignment of expectations in President Barzani's government for the U.S. assistance. For instance, a meeting in May 2015 between President Barzani and former U.S. President Barack Obama exemplifies the KRG's miscalculation of U.S. intentions. President Barzani stated that he and President Obama will witness an independent Kurdistan within their lifetimes, while the White House later clarified the U.S.'s continued support for the KRI extends only as an autonomous region of Iraq (Palani, 2024, p.34). This portrays that, as a result of an asymmetrical relationship between both entities, despite close cooperation, particularly during joint efforts to combat ISIS, the KRG misinterpreted this strategic relationship as a pathway to diplomatic recognition.

ii. Türkiye

The rejection of an independent Kurdistan is not exclusive to the US, with regional players such as Türkiye equally objecting to the 2017 referendum due to the presence of Kurdish minorities within Turkish territory. President Tayyip Erdoğan explicitly expressed his disapproval of the referendum, calling it 'illegitimate' according to the Iraqi Constitution and international law (Karadeniz and Korsunskaya, 2017). In addition, President Erdoğan claimed that Türkiye aimed to prevent the KRG from making 'bigger mistakes', referring to the ongoing instability in Syria that Türkiye attributes frequently to Kurdish militant groups (Karadeniz and Korsunskaya, 2017). President Erdoğan's rhetoric underscores Türkiye's deep-rooted fears of Kurdish separatism, which it has historically suppressed and combated even beyond its own borders, into Syria. Thus, as the Turkish government has long viewed Kurdish nationalism as an existential threat to its sovereignty, it views any move toward Kurdish independence in Iraq as potentially catalytic of similar aspirations among Turkish or Syrian Kurds (Bacik and Caskin, 2011, p.251).

iii. Iran

Similarly, Iran rejected the 2017 referendum to uphold Iraq's territorial integrity and implied that the KRI's independence would undermine the fight against ISIS (Majidyar, 2017). Despite not being explicitly recognised by Iranian representatives, political analysts agree that Tehran's refutation of the referendum was equally due to fears of stoking Kurdish separatist sentiments within Iran and a shift of geopolitical power in the region (Cockburn, 2017). According to Cockburn (2017), the Iranians fear that an independent Kurdish state would cling to another power, such as the U.S., resulting in the formation of American military bases in the state that threaten Iran's sphere of influence (Cockburn, 2017). Similarly to Türkiye, Iran is susceptible to Kurdish separatism due to the presence of sizable Kurdish communities in Northern Iran (Rubin, 2017), particularly in Mahabad County. In 1946, this region existed as a Kurdish pseudo-state; with help from the Soviet Union, the Republic of Mahabad was formed as an independent Kurdish state across territories that now comprise Northern Iran (Tahiri, 2014, p.257). Despite the Republic's dissolution less than three months after its founding, Mahabad and the historic sentiment surrounding it remain prominent in the Iranian Kurdish community's imagination today. Tahiri (2014) highlights that the lost Republic is still commemorated yearly by Iranian Kurdish and diaspora communities, despite the Iranian government prohibiting the celebration as it is considered to be seditious (Tahiri, 2014, p.260). Hence, the KRI's independence can potentially ignite a persistent, latent sense of Kurdish nationalistic sentiment in both Türkiye and Iran, spurring both states' rejection of the 2017 KRI referendum.

KURDISH POLITICS' INTERNAL DIVISION: NEPOTISM

Turning to the internal dimension of independence, the political establishment within the KRI suffers from widespread infighting and tribalism, interdicting the formation of a viable Kurdish state. Various parties within Iraq represent several Kurdish groups, reflecting the pluralistic nature of KRI as a polity (Hama and Abdullah, 2020, p.754). However, this plurality of parties does not ensure the ruling elites' respect for democratic practices,

nor does it guarantee transparency of policies and actions to the electorate (Salih 2024, p.25). Hama and Abdullah (2020) identify the KDP and PUK as part of the administrative KRG, while the Movement for Change (Gorran), Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU), and Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG) constitute the opposition. These parties have distinct political ideologies from one another, with PUK and Gorran having liberal and social democratic values, KIG and KIU expressing Islamic identities KDP, having a tribal basis, dominated by the Barzani clan as influenced by its founder Mustafa Barzani since 1949, practicing excessive nepotism (Hama and Abdullah, 2020, p.754).

The divisive politics in the KRI are best understood by examining the practice of tribalism, which worsens political polarisation. Kurdish politics in Iraq were first pioneered by the formation of the KDP by Mustafa Barzani, a party that practices nepotism and tribalism excessively, where the sons of the Barzani family have continuously held leadership roles. This creates dissatisfaction in the party, leading to factional infighting within the KDP (Hama and Abdullah, 2020, p.758). KDP dissident Jalal Talabani's departure from the party to create the rivalling PUK resulted in similar issues of political inheritance and nepotism that Talabani had preached against, stifling the multiparty system through protracted nepotistic practices (Hama and Abdullah, 2020, p.759).

The detrimental effects of power concentration and nepotism have led to excessive factionalism within the KRI's major parties, causing political instability and preventing the formation of effective democratic institutions (Hama and Abdullah, 2020, p.761). Following the resignation of President Masoud Barzani after the unsuccessful 2017 referendum, the KRI's presidency was first suspended for eighteen months before the appointment of Nechirvan Barzani, Masoud Barzani's nephew (Hama and Abdullah, 2020, p.761). Dissatisfaction with this outcome is epitomised by Wali (2018), who retorts that 'the alternative for Barzani is another Barzani' with the continuity of the Barzani dynasty emphasising the deep-rooted problem of political tribalism within the KRI.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's struggle for independence has been consistently undermined by secession illegality, international opposition and internal political fragmentation. Despite the presence of multiple parties within the KRI, the territory's political landscape remains dominated by a handful of elite families, with tribalism overriding democratic multiparty principles in favour of dynastic rule. This not only creates factionalism and instability within the region but also damages the legitimacy of governance, particularly amid attempts to legitimise the KRI internationally. The failure to create transparent governance and to foster true political unity continues to paint the KRI in a negative light externally, fuelling disapproval of Kurdish independence. While nationalist sentiments have been used to justify political decisions within the KRI, these decisions have failed to translate into a cohesive, sustainable path toward self-determination. Therefore, the KRI has not reached a tipping point that enables it to form an independent sovereign state. Without significant political reforms, the dream of an independent Kurdish state will remain simply a dream, rather than a tangible reality.

HAS THE INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT OF THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ REACHED A POINT OF NO RETURN?

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WHEN YUGOSLAVIA FELL, SERBIAN NATIONALISM ROSE: THE KOSOVO CONFLICT

ORNELA BEQA

ILLUSTRATION BY REBECA STERNER

WHEN YUGOSLAVIA FELL, SERBIAN NATIONALISM ROSE: THE KOSOVO CONFLICT

ORNELA BEQA

Thirty years after the collapse of Yugoslavia, the abandoned, bullet-riddled buildings in the region stand as silent witnesses to the decade-long conflicts that have been endured. After the disintegration of the once unified, multi-ethnic federation, Yugoslavia turned into a battleground of competing nationalist ambitions, fuelling a decade of ethnic violence, war, and genocide (D'Souza, 1994, p.3027). The importance of national identity has always been a defining feature of the Balkans. While nationalist aspirations existed long before the twentieth century, they were largely contained under the Yugoslav federal structure, which sought to contain ethnic divisions and create a unified Yugoslav identity. However, after the collapse of Yugoslavia, nationalism—mainly Serbian nationalism—evolved into a more expansionist and militarised force, driving the Balkan wars of the nineties. This shift in Serbian nationalism reached its most extreme form during the Kosovo War in 1998, where nationalism was no longer about uniting Serbs, but about imposing Serbian control over a non-Serb population. The scars of Yugoslavia's past still linger across the Balkans as ethnic divisions persist and history continues to shape everyday life and politics.

As Kosovo's independence remains contested and nationalist rhetoric continues to shape Serbian politics, one question arises: how did the collapse of Yugoslavia trigger a transformation of Serbian nationalism, and why is Serbia still so reluctant to let go of Kosovo? This paper critically analyses the transformation of Serbian nationalism, arguing that the collapse of Yugoslavia marked a tipping point in Balkan history, as it laid the groundwork for the shift of Serbian nationalism from a unifying ideology to an expansionist, militarised force that fuelled territorial ambitions, ethnic conflicts, and that continues to shape Balkan politics.

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND ETHNIC DIVISIONS IN THE BALKANS

To understand the Balkans' lingering past, one must start with its history, which is shaped by a mosaic of diverse ethnic and religious groups (Qell, 2023). The concept of national identity has long been at the heart of the region's struggles and tensions, acting as both a unifying force and a catalyst for division. After the Ottoman rule, the Balkan states emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, desperately 'wishing for a national identity' to consolidate ethnic identity and territorial unity (Hagen, 1999, p.54).

Serbian nationalism was among the most prominent nationalist movements, particularly in the idea of expanding Serbian territory to create 'Greater Serbia' and uniting all Serbs into one state, which laid the groundwork for the ethnic conflicts and the wars that were endured in the Balkans in the nineties (Hasani, 1999). The project of 'Greater Serbia' centred on uniting territories where Serbs lived dispersed and intermixed with other Yugoslav nations, such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Croatia—in particular the regions of Krajina and Slavonia, which were inhabited by predominantly Serbs (Bogoeva, 2014). Mirkovic (1996, p.192) argues that nationalism in the Balkans has often evolved into ethnic cleansing to create their pure 'homogeneous' ethnic territories. Therefore, it is inevitable for nationalism to degenerate into exclusivism and oppression.

TITO'S YUGOSLAVIA

After the Second World War, President Josip Broz Tito came to power and unified 'Yugoslavia's historically antagonistic national groups' with the creation of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, establishing a communist regime that distanced itself from both the Soviet Union and the West (Djilas, 1996, p.116). The region was transformed into a federal state of six republics: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia; and two autonomous provinces within Serbia: Kosovo and Vojvodina. This model granted some degree of autonomy to the provinces while maintaining overall unity (Djilas, 1996).

Although Serbia was the largest republic in Yugoslavia, it did not dominate politically. At that time, Serbian nationalism was a cultural movement rather than a political one, as it was contained by President Tito and the Yugoslav People's Army. President Tito's leadership acted as a unifying force, as he strived to create a homogenous Yugoslav society and identity through the slogan 'brotherhood and unity of all nations and nationalities of Yugoslavia' (Pavković, 2001, p.136). His leadership gave the illusion that the diverse multi-ethnic state could transcend nationalism and be united; however, President Tito only managed to keep nationalism at bay and did not eradicate it. The creation of the republics reinforced the different national identities, and the historical grievances between the republics, although suppressed and silenced, were still present. The death of President Tito in 1980 marked a tipping point, as Yugoslavia lost its most crucial unifying symbol (Malešević, 2024). The illusion of stability and unity that President Tito had created died with him, and all that was left behind was a fragile federation weakened by economic crises and nationalist resurgences.

The concept of national identity has long been at the heart of the region's struggles and tensions, acting as both a unifying force and a catalyst for division.

AFTER TITO: THE RISE OF MILOSEVIC AND THE RETURN OF SERBIAN NATIONALISM

President Tito's death left a vacuum of leadership and a collapsed political order, and the once suppressed tensions and ethnic grievances began rising to the surface again (Calic, 2019). Yugoslavia's flaws lay in the fact that the questions on national identity were fundamentally antagonistic (Pesic, 1996). In this period of uncertainty, Slobodan Milosevic, originally the leader of the Serbian Communist Party, capitalised on nationalist sentiments to consolidate power and gain popular support. President Milosevic's political career took a turn in 1987, when he visited Kosovo Polje—a historically significant place for Serbian history, which is further elaborated on—and declared public support for the Serbs in Kosovo by stating, 'no one will ever dare to beat you again'. By using the Kosovo question in his speech, President Milosevic appealed to the Serbian population as the new 'protector of the nation' (Bogoeva, 2014, p.2) who would reunite all Serbs and create an ethnically and religiously homogeneous 'Greater Serbia' (Pesic, 1996, p.14). His use of exclusive radical nationalist rhetoric and authoritarian ambitions antagonised the different ethnic groups further, plunging the Balkans into a decade of bloodshed shaped by ethnic violence and genocide (D'Souza, 1994). President Milosevic's rise in power as a nationalist leader marked a turning point in Serbian politics and nationalism: it was no longer simply an ideology bringing ethnic Serbs together. Nationalism was used as a political tool by politicians and militants to justify territorial expansions, military aggression and ethnic conflict.

When analysing the wars of the nineties in the Balkans, it becomes evident that in contrast to the conflict in Kosovo, Serbian nationalism was manifested differently during the Croatian war (1991–1995) and the Bosnian war (1992–1995). During the Croatian War, Serbian nationalism was rather expansionist as the primary goal was to consolidate territories with Serbian majorities, such as Krajina and Slavonia. The Bosnian case, however, is more complex, as it has historically been a region characterised by its patchwork of ethnicities, being home to Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), Serbs, and Croats (Walasek, 2020). Serbian forces conducted the ethnic cleansing of the Bosniak population and obliterated material evidence of religion and culture, aiming to transform 'a once visible diverse cultural landscape into a contiguous mono-ethnic territory' (Walasek, 2020, p.226). These extreme acts of violence resulted in the Srebrenica massacre, where Serbian nationalism reached its most violent peak as 8,000 men and boys were executed by Serbian forces (Daalder, 1998). The Bosnian and Croatian wars illustrate how Serbian nationalists aimed to consolidate territories and redraw borders through extreme violence and force, no matter the consequences for the local population. In contrast, in Kosovo, Serbian nationalism was expressed differently as the conflict was primarily about asserting Serbian dominance, through repression and violence, over an ethnically Albanian population. This shift in the use of nationalism as a tool for repression marked a new phase in Serbian nationalism, which will further be discussed through the events of the Kosovo War.

THE KOSOVO CONFLICT

Kosovo is distinct because it is considered the defining element of the Serbian nationality and home of its national history (Pesic, 1996, p.16). Kosovo's central role in Serbian history and heritage originates from the Battle of Kosovo in the fourteenth century, when Serbian forces fought against the Ottoman Empire. Although defeated by the Ottomans, this moment is of great importance for the Serbs, as it symbolises sacrifice and heroism (Ejdus and Subotić, 2014). This historical significance makes Kosovo a symbolic element of national pride. Nevertheless, Kosovo's demographic composition poses a challenge to Serbian identity. Kosovo is home to predominantly ethnic Albanians and Muslims, with Serbian Orthodox Christians being a minority. This demography challenges the idea that Kosovo is an inherent element of Serbian identity, which fuels disagreements and tensions over Kosovo's right of sovereignty. The rise of President Milosevic, whose nationalist rhetoric was reminiscent of Serbia's past, further emphasised the importance of Serbian control over Kosovo. In 1989, President Milosevic

abolished Kosovo's right to self-rule as a province in Yugoslavia, and it was put under direct Serbian control (Calic, 2019). This marked a turning point in how nationalist policies were used at the cost of other ethnic groups and marked the beginning of the conflicts in Kosovo (Arbatov, 2000). Using nationalist rhetoric, President Milosevic attempted to mobilise the Serbs and consolidate more power. In reaction, the Kosovo Liberation Army was formed by ethnic Albanians to fight against violent Serbian forces. The conflict was further aggravated, and Serbian forces began the mass expulsion of the Kosovar Albanian population (Webber, 2009). As tensions in Kosovo escalated, over 650,000 refugees were displaced (Iwiński and Dinçer, 1999), and thousands of civilians were tortured, raped, and killed. The War came to an end with NATO's 78-day bombing campaign against the Serbian military. Under international pressure, Serbian troops left Kosovo in 1999, leaving Kosovo under UN administration. In 2008, Kosovo declared its independence, which marked a break from its history filled with oppression and bloodshed. Serbian forces sought not only to gain complete control of Kosovo's territory but also of its population (Ejdus and Subotić, 2014). Hasani (1999) also further emphasises how Serbian nationalism was characterised by the forceful removal of a non-Serb population and the destruction of their cultural identity, to create an ethnically homogenous territory. The Kosovo War clearly illustrates how nationalism was used by both politicians and the military to fuel and justify violence and hatred.

The NATO bombings, along with Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, marked the definitive end of Serbia's expansionist ambitions of the nineties. As global powers opposed the nationalist driven aggression of the Serbs, the project of 'Greater Serbia' had reached its limits. Seventeen years after Kosovo's declaration of independence, tensions remain between Kosovo and Serbia. The persisting tensions in the north of Kosovo, which is inhabited by a Serbian minority that is closely aligned with Belgrade, are hindering Kosovo's progress towards a stable future. While many Serbians remain reminiscent of the past, the Albanian population seeks to move forward to a stable and prosperous future (Tesař, 2005).

Caught between the legacies of its past and the uncertainties of the present, Kosovo's battle for sovereignty continues to reflect how nationalism influences politics in the Balkans. Serbian politicians still implement nationalist rhetoric and national sentiments reminiscent of the past to shape their discourses. Diplomatic relations between Serbia and Kosovo remain tense and hostile, as Serbia is still reluctant to recognise Kosovo's independence, and politicians use the Kosovo question, to gain political support, through the slogan 'Kosovo is Serbia' (*Kosovo je Srbija*). Additionally, contemporary Serbian nationalism is characterised by anti-Western sentiment, as Western nations are viewed as the ones that helped Kosovo gain its independence and put an end to Serbia's expansionist ambitions (Russo and Stakiç, 2016). Serbia's anti-Western sentiment has led to alignment with Russia, which supports Serbia's position and opposes Western influences in the Balkans. With Serbian politicians continuously invoking Serbia's past and nationalist sentiments, the question remains: can Serbia move towards a future based on political and economic progress rather than holding onto historical grievances?

The younger generations, who were less affected by the wars of the nineties, offer a shift away from nationalist ideologies and give pathways to create a new national identity based on cooperation and reconciliation to ensure long-term stability and prosperity for Serbia.

CONCLUSION

Yugoslavia's disintegration left a mark in the Balkans not only on generational trauma of such violent atrocities, but also on its contemporary politics. The 1990s were characterised by a transformation of nationalism from a unifying ideology to an expansionist and militarised force that fueled violence and aggression. With President Milosevic's rise in power, nationalism quickly became a political tool to exert dominance and gain political control. Although nationalism took a militarised form in the 1990s, it was expressed differently across the former-Yugoslav nations. In Croatia and Bosnia, Serbian forces sought to consolidate territories where Serbian minorities lived, in order to reunite all ethnic Serbs and create 'Greater Serbia'. In Kosovo, however, the purpose was not only to gain territorial control but to control an ethnically non-Serb population. Although the Kosovo war, which ended with international intervention, marked the end of Serbian expansionist ambitions, nationalism remains central to Serbian politics. Seventeen years after Kosovo's declaration of independence, historical grievances continue to linger in politicians' rhetoric and Kosovo's sovereignty remains contested. While history keeps finding a way back to the surface, the question arises whether the Balkan countries will be able and willing to overcome the burdens of the past and move towards a more prosperous future.

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A TIPPING POINT IN GEORGIA'S BALANCING ACT

TO WHAT EXTENT HAS GEORGIA FALLEN BACK INTO RUSSIA'S SPHERE OF INFLUENCE FOLLOWING THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR?

EVA CHOWN

ILLUSTRATION BY OLEKSANDRA ZHYHALKINA

A TIPPING POINT IN GEORGIA'S 'BALANCING ACT': TO WHAT EXTENT HAS GEORGIA FALLEN BACK INTO RUSSIA'S SPHERE OF INFLUENCE FOLLOWING THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR?

EVA CHOWN

The former Soviet state of Georgia that once sought closer ties with Europe now sits within Russia's sphere of influence, with Russo-Georgian relations becoming less ambiguous following the Kremlin's 2022 invasion into Ukraine. Georgia's turbulent political history and strategic geographic location means it has long been caught between Russia to the North and Europe to the West, resulting in foreign policy aimed at balancing these two blocs, prior to 2022 (Jones, 2023). Despite instances of the Georgian government removing itself from Russian influence, seen in the 2003 Rose Revolution where President Shevardnadze's government was overthrown due to corruption and its close ties with the Kremlin (Bellamy, 2023, p.68) and the victor of the 2012 election, Bidzina Ivanishvili, distancing himself from the Kremlin in the run-up to the election, Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream Party (GD) simultaneously vowed to normalise relations with Russia, hinting at potential realignment with Moscow (Genté, 2022). However, the turbulence of Russian actions in former Soviet states has destabilised relations in the region, requiring further academic inquiry on the domination and freedom between Tbilisi and Moscow.

This article examines the extent to which Georgia has returned to Russia's sphere of influence, implementing Sankey's (2020, pp.37–38) definition: 'a geographical area within which a great power enforces limits on the policy autonomy of weaker states in order to make those states friendly towards it, or at least neutral with respect to rival powers'. Prior to the Russo-Ukrainian War, Moscow enforced limits on Tbilisi's policy autonomy, notably through military presence, however the balancing nature of Tbilisi's foreign policy enabled a friendly rapport with Europe while resisting the Russian sphere of influence following the Rose revolution and during the first ten years of GD's governance. Even though GD's ascension to power in 2012 played a role in pulling Georgia into Russia's sphere of influence, ultimately Russia's invasion of Ukraine was the tipping point. The invasion of Ukraine heralded a moment of great change, simultaneously evoking fear towards Russia and deterring confidence in Europe, leading the GD government to pursue warmer relations with the Kremlin. This is demonstrated by tracing Georgia's relations with both Europe and Russia after the fall of the USSR. While Russia has maintained a coercive presence in Georgia, Georgia attempted to turn toward Europe over its first 20 years of independence. While the election of Georgian Dream in 2012 endangered this shift, creating ambiguity in Georgia's foreign policy position, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was the key tipping point for Georgia to turn away from Europe, and embrace Russian relations, at this moment in time.

MOSCOW'S LINGERING MILITARY INFLUENCE

While the fall of the USSR in 1991 is often said to have ended Russian dominance in Eastern Europe, the Kremlin has maintained a level of residual influence over Tbilisi, militarily and economically (Spetschinsky and Bolgova, 2014, p.114). Georgian diplomat Alexander Rondeli stated in the 1990s that he did not believe Georgia was viewed as a fully sovereign state by Russia (Civil Georgia, 2002), a perception that can be transposed across much of Russia's near abroad, through to the modern day. This is well exemplified in ceasefire negotiations surrounding the South Ossetian War which allowed the Kremlin to maintain a military foothold in Georgia. After chaos and violence erupted as a result of separatist South Ossetians when the Soviet Union was dissolved, Russia's continued role was obvious when North Ossetians demanded they intervene to stop the violence which was unfolding (Bellamy, 2023, p.59). Then Russian President Boris Yeltsin called for a ceasefire, resulting in an agreement by which Russian and Georgian forces were deployed in a two-to-one ratio in areas with the greatest separatist tension to monitor the peace. This deployment of a Russian military presence in Georgia supports Rondeli's argument of Russia being the larger benefactor in the relationship (Bellamy, 2023, p.59). Within Sankey's framework (2020, p.37), Tbilisi fell under Russia's sphere of influence in this period, as Russia was able to militarily 'enforce limits on the policy autonomy' (Sankey, 2020, p.37) constructing mechanisms of power and control while Georgia ostensibly existed independently.

More than ten years later, with Putin's invasion of Georgia in 2008, Russia's interest and dominance over Georgia became apparent again. Van Herpen (2024, p.281) highlights that despite the short duration of the war, the outbreak of violence can be attributed to simmering tensions between Russia and Georgia since 2000, illuminating ongoing tension in the relationship. Moscow continues to limit the policy autonomy of Georgia with Russian military personnel in South Ossetia and Abkhazia implementing 'borderization', capturing a few hundred yards of Georgian territory annually (Tchantouridze, 2022, p.85). Therefore Russia remains dominant militarily in Georgia, implementing their view that Georgia is not fully sovereign.

These influences have important parallels with Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Analyses of Western reactions to the 2008 Russo-Georgian war illustrate the Kremlin's increased military and political influence since

Due to the strategic advantages GD views as resulting from alignment with Russia, the invasion of Ukraine has also resulted in greater defiance of Western values.

the end of the US' and Georgia's strategic partnership, and the beginning of Western appeasement of Russia (Tchantouridze, 2022, p.85). Moscow launched cyber-attacks on Georgian media shortly after the war began, enabling the Kremlin's version of events to dominate internationally (Van Herpen, 2024, p.280). This resulted in an arms embargo on Georgia, pressure on Tbilisi to retract criticisms of Russia joining the World Trade Organisation, and the blocking of Georgia and Ukraine from joining NATO by Germany and France (Tchantouridze, 2022, p.85).

Three years later, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev stated that if the Russian war effort had failed, Georgia would have become a NATO member, demonstrating the Kremlin's motivation of limiting states' autonomy regarding rival powers, and halting NATO expansion on their borders (Van Herpen, 2024. p.286). Whatever the factual circumstances of Georgia's possible NATO membership, Moscow viewed the prospect of accession as too great a risk, facilitating an ill-judged war that would later be mirrored in Ukraine. Therefore, the combination of Russian military presence on Georgia's borders and the loss of military aid from the US meant that Tbilisi's friendly military connections with Europe and the possibility of NATO membership plummeted. A lack of military support from the West required the Georgian government to seek closer ties with the Kremlin to preempt and prevent the Russian threat.

THE ASCENSION OF GEORGIAN DREAM PARTY AND MOSCOW'S INCREASED ECONOMIC INFLUENCE

Despite the Kremlin's growing influence and the loss of Western military arrangements, the Georgian government still attempted to forge economic and political ties with Europe amid coercive pressure from Moscow. The 2008 war occurred under the United National Movement (UNM) government, led by Mikheil Saakashvili, whose anti-corruption aims at the time and peaceful transfer of power demonstrated their democratic characteristics. Saakashvili himself commented on the state of Georgia two years after the 2003 Rose Revolution which brought him to power, as a 'transformed country…characterised by the advancement of democracy and robust economic growth' (Saakashvili, 2006, p.68). With strong public support, Saakashvili wanted to remove Georgia from Russia's influence and forge closer ties with the West. To do so, he sought EU and NATO membership (Bellamy, 2023, p.69), illustrating Tbilisi's resistance towards the Kremlin and undermining suggestions that they were neutral. While these democratic and anti-Russian credentials were certainly influential, Saakashvili displayed characteristics of authoritarianism himself, and was voted out in 2012 (Huseynov, 2024). Saakashvili's dichotomy meant that when GD came to power and vowed to normalise Russo-Georgian relations, Georgia's anti-Kremlin rhetoric transformed into a neutral stance.

Although the founder of the GD, Bidzina Ivanishvili, surrendered his Russian citizenship before the election, questions about his loyalty to Russia remain. The billionaire profited from post-USSR privatisation and was formerly one of the largest shareholders of Gazprom, a Russian gas monopoly (Hosaka, 2025, p.12). Despite his visible commitment to the GD cause, a 2022 report by Transparency International revealed that Ivanishvili continues to conduct business through offshore companies and proxies in Russia (Dmitrieva, 2024; Demytrie 2025). The combination of the political context created by Saakashvili and Ivanishvili's personal links meant that GD's election represented a turning point in Russo-Georgian relations.

With stronger economic ties to Russia and a vow to maintain a 'pragmatic' (Kincha, 2022) approach towards the Kremlin, the election of GD allowed for a more 'friendly', or at least neutral, rapport to be created, bringing the government closer to Moscow's sphere of influence. Although the Kremlin's economic influence grew during this period, Ivanishvili still expressed a desire to join the EU (Shea, 2024). This preference endured Moscow's targeted sanctions on Georgian wine and agricultural exports, designed to smother this desire (Shea, 2024). Therefore, prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the GD government was still engaged in a balancing act between Europe and Russia. This is best exemplified in GD's strategic foreign policy, calling for normalised relations with Russia while reiterating plans to join the EU. Applying Sankey's (2020,

pp.37–38) framework of spheres of influence, Moscow's growing influence with GD's election did not bring Georgia back into Russia's sphere of influence because Georgia was not 'neutral with respect to rival powers'.

THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR AS THE TIPPING POINT

Despite this balanced situation, the war in Ukraine represented the tipping point in Georgia's return to the Kremlin's sphere of influence, with the GD government's rhetoric quickly shifting away from the West. Firstly, the invasion was deeply reminiscent of the 2008 war for the Georgian people (Beard, 2022). With Russian troops still stationed at Georgia's border in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and the lack of Western military aid, the Georgian government adopted a policy of self-defence by forging closer ties to Moscow. Despite the current *de jure* leader of the GD, Irakli Kobakhidze, sharing a Facebook statement saying that 'the Ukrainian people did not deserve such injustice!!! Solidarity to Ukraine' (ასეთ უსამართლობას უკრაინელი ხალხი არ იმსახურებდა!!! სოლიდარობა უკრაინას!!!) (Kincha, 2022), subsequent open signs of support for Ukraine have been scarce. Instead, a study conducted by Tblisi-based independent OC Media analysing comments made by Kobakhidze between 24 February and 27 July 2022 revealed that nine critical comments were made about Russia compared to 57 concerning West (Kincha, 2022). In this way emotive reactions have been replaced by pragmatic considerations, based on the threat Georgia faces.

In addition to provoking fear, the Ukrainian war led to Georgian distance from the West as the government felt pressured to aid Ukraine, and sanction Russia. Georgia was hesitant to sanction a major trade partner, with Georgian exports to Russia valued at US dollars 42.1 million in January 2022 alone (OEC, 2023). Thus, in the face of Western calls to sanction Russia, the GD promulgated that the 'Global War Party', aimed to create conflict with Moscow (Gavin, 2024). This 'Global War Party', according to the GD, consisted of political actors such as NATO, illustrating growing anti-Western attitudes in the Georgian government following the war.

Having distanced itself from the West, Tbilisi is more susceptible to falling back into Russia's sphere of influence. This susceptibility is evidenced by Georgia's posturing reaction to the Ukrainian invasion, leading to Putin's praise of the Georgian government's (Avdaliani, 2023). However, Georgia's desire to join the EU has persisted despite prior sanctions from Moscow (Mackintosh, Davies and Demytrie, 2024). Although the EU seems reluctant to engage with Georgian efforts to join, due to democratic backsliding and increased closeness to Russia (International Crisis Group, 2024), Georgian desires to join display the continued ambiguity of their foreign policy positions.

However, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU provided substantial aid to Ukraine, thus diverting EU aid that would otherwise be used to improve Georgia's economic concerns like unemployment (Proud, 2024). In addition, the EU's concerns with Georgia's domestic political situation hampers the chances of similar aid (International Crisis Group, 2024). Thus, the economic incentive to seek EU candidacy has since fallen and forging friendlier ties to Russia now seems more lucrative. Therefore, due to a combination of fear of Russia and lack of faith in Europe, Russia's invasion of Ukraine marked a turning point in Georgia's position of neutrality toward Russia. Paul Jones explains this phenomenon using Kuik's (2021) 'strategic hedging' theory, arguing that the GD uses strategic hedging not to please Putin but rather to place Georgia in a desirable position after the Russo-Ukrainian war ends (Jones, 2023). Jones suggests that the Russo-Ukrainian war acted as the tipping point in Georgia's balancing act, with movement into Russia's sphere of influence the strategic option militarily and economically.

ANTI-WESTERN MOVES

Due to the strategic advantages GD views as resulting from alignment with Russia, the invasion of Ukraine has also resulted in greater defiance of Western values. This is illustrated by GD's halting of Georgia's EU application until 2028, despite their continued insistence that membership will be achieved by 2030 (Mackintosh, Davies and Demytrie, 2024). Furthermore, the 2024 Transparency on Foreign Influence Act, passed by the Georgian Parliament, closely mirrors the 2012 Foreign Agents Law in Russia, and displays considerable Russian influence (Lapa and Frosini, 2024; Macharashvili, 2024). Practically, this legislation limits opposition to increased Russian dominance, requiring that NGOs and media organisations that receive 20 percent of funding from international sources register as 'organisations acting in the interest of a foreign power, (and) submit themselves to stringent audits, or face fines' (Demytrie, 2024). Despite domestic and international outcry, and a presidential veto, the law remains in force, showing the persistence of Russian influence, despite population opinion. Members of the European Parliament (MEP) have since called the law 'repressive', claiming that it 'stifles media', and stated that action must be taken to reverse the 'undemocratic legislation' (European Parliament, 2024).

The stifling of democratic values was also apparent in the October 2024 Georgian elections. After GD won by 54 percent, numerous reports of 'widespread malpractice, voter intimidation, administrative resource abuse, [and] voter buying' emerged (Hosaka, 2025, p.13). Subsequently, several protests erupted against corruption and the delay of Georgia's EU application (Demytrie, 2024). Therefore, due to the anti-democratic nature of the elections, Tbilisi is further isolated from the West, leading the GD party to seek a closer partner in Russia. In the case of the Transparency on Foreign Influence Act, however, generally the Kremlin is not viewed to have forced its implementation. Instead, it was a self-interested decision of the GD (Demytrie, 2024), who still could look for inspiration from the Russian model. While anti-democratic attitudes within Georgia are evidence of Tbilisi's shift away from Europe, they also further stimulate the trend. As these anti-democratic attitudes become more prevalent in Georgian governance, the more Georgia is distanced from Europe, producing greater susceptibility to Moscow's influence.

CONCLUSION

Following the collapse of the USSR, Moscow has consistently maintained influence over Georgian politics, which has increased following the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the ascension of GD to power in 2012, and finally the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 which acted as the 'tipping point' in Georgia's fall back into Russia's sphere of influence. However, self-defence considerations prior to the war in Ukraine saw the government forging ties with the West. Once the economic and military incentive to continue Western relations faded after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Tbilisi became more friendly towards Moscow and more neutral, even adversarial, towards the West. Therefore, it can be argued that Georgia has now returned to Russia's sphere of influence.

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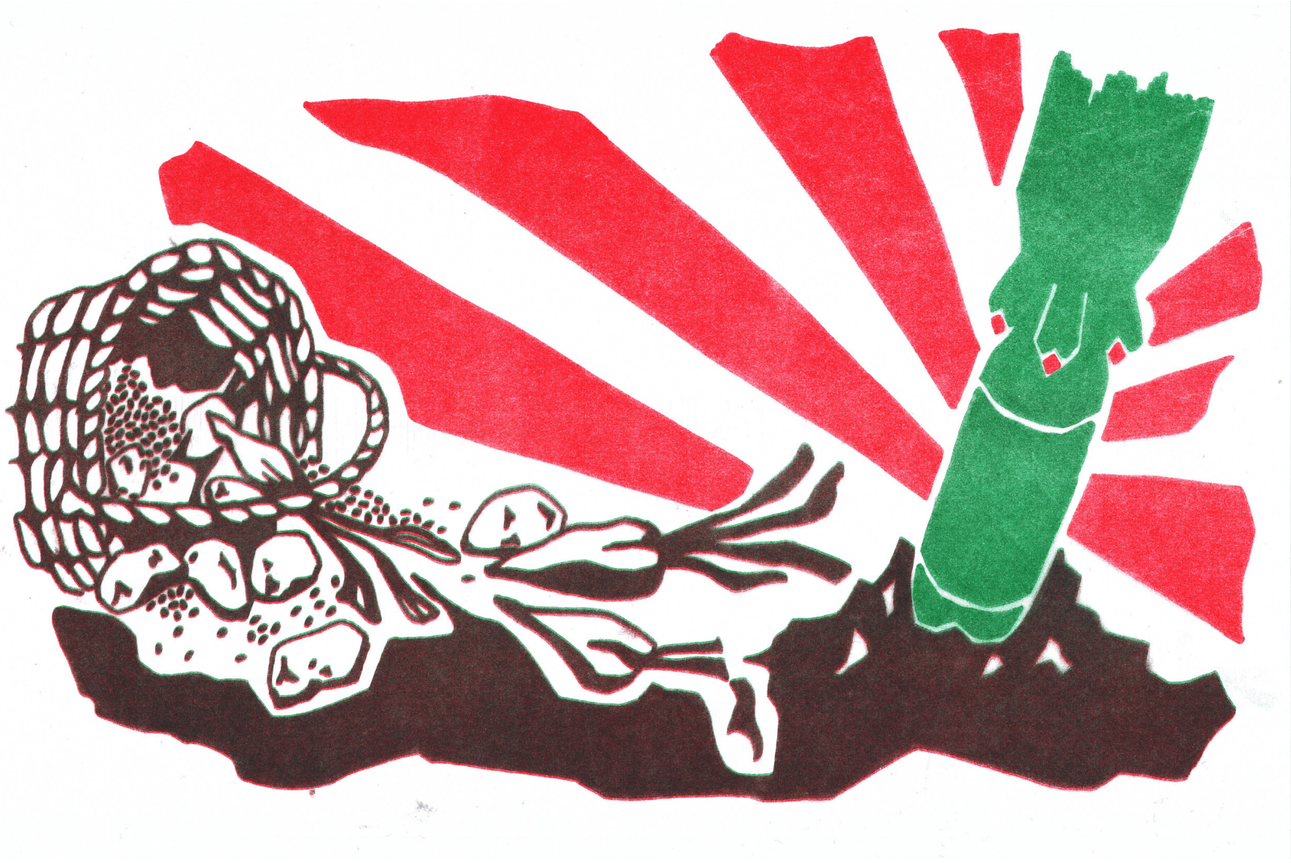

GRAIN CHAIN

RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE AND THE COLLAPSE OF GLOBAL FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

OLEKSANDRA ZHYHALKINA

ILLUSTRATION BY KATY PILLING

Russia's bombardment of Ukraine has not only killed tens of thousands of Ukrainians, but also exacerbated food insecurity worldwide, demonstrating that in modern warfare, food is as much a weapon as any missile. Ukrainians endured the weaponisation of food during the Holodomor, a man-made famine in the 1930s under Joseph Stalin, killing nearly four million. In 2024, President Vladimir Putin's blockade of Ukrainian grain exports, once again weaponises food, but now with globalisation amplifying the effects. The principle of starve one, starve all applies, affecting not only Ukrainians, but Global South populations reliant on Ukrainian exports. As a result, a multitude of states suffer compounded effects of two wars: one on their own soil, and one thousands of kilometres away. This crisis however is not isolated to Ukraine. Across modern history, starvation has silently accompanied warfare, becoming an enduring weapon. Russia's blockade of Ukrainian grain exports and the destruction of agricultural infrastructure, has not only devastated Ukraine's economy, but also triggered a global food crisis, deepening hunger and instability in vulnerable nations like Yemen and Syria.

STARVATION: A SILENT WEAPON OF MASS DESTRUCTION

The deaths associated with armed conflicts are often bloody, military, or civilian, as a result of bombings and battle. However, as Ó Gráda (2019) highlights, losses from hunger and famine have, at times, surpassed military casualties, such as during World War Two. In modern conflicts, food insecurity has become an increasingly weaponised crisis, exacerbated by the growth of global interdependence and reliance on export trade to feed citizens (Rodríguez Álvarez, 2024, p.11). Hunger and conflict form a vicious cycle of interdependence; wars disrupt agricultural production and supply chains leading to food shortages, while rising food insecurity fuels unrest and instability, prolonging conflicts (Sova and Zembilci, 2023). Nowhere is this clearer than in Yemen and Syria, where war has decimated food systems, displaced millions, and left entire populations dependent on increasingly unreliable imports for their survival.

Under Article 54 of Protocol I (*Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts,* 1977) the use of starvation as a weapon against civilian populations in International law is explicitly banned and classified as a War Crime in International Armed conflicts under Article 8.2.xxv of the *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* (2002). However, in the twenty-first century, it still remains a tactic increasingly employed in warfare, whether through deliberate blockades, the targeting of agricultural infrastructure, or the manipulation of food supplies for political leverage (Rodríguez Álvarez, 2024, pp.10–14). With an estimated 105 million people having died from war-related hunger from 1870 until 2010, 282 million people facing high levels of acute food insecurity in 2023, food has proven to be a deadly weapon of war (World Peace Foundation, 2017, in de Waal, 2017; Global Network Against Food Crises, 2024, p.6, 11). When dealing with famine and hunger related statistics, it is important to note that many of these figures are approximations and midpoints, as the chaotic nature of war, displacement, and famine often makes accurate data collection difficult. While these cases illustrate the interdependence of hunger and conflict, Ukraine's case stands apart, not only as a victim of this strategy, but also as a crucial actor in the global food system.

BROKEN BREADBASKET: UKRAINE AS A CATALYST OF THE GLOBAL HUNGER CRISIS

Since 1990, global hunger is on the rise again (World Health Organisation, 2017). In 2020 alone, 155 million people worldwide experienced acute food insecurity, with 99.1 million of them living in 23 countries where war and conflict were the primary causes (Mottaleb, Kruseman, and Snapp, 2022, p.7). Food insecurity increased to 193 million in 2021, with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) projecting that an additional eleven to nineteen million people could be pushed into chronic hunger by 2023 due to the Russian invasion's disruption of global food chains (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 2022).

Ukraine is nicknamed the 'breadbasket of Europe' for being a key supplier of grains and other agricultural products, the majority of which are shipped to North Africa and the Middle East (World Food Programme, 2025). Ukraine holds 13.4 percent of the world's barley exports, 52.2 percent of sunflower oil exports, 17.6 percent of maize exports, and 11.1 percent of wheat exports (Chepeliev, Maliszewska and Filipa, 2023, p.4). Whilst Ukraine's high share of global agricultural trade is positive for the domestic economy, Global South countries, especially in Africa and the Middle East, are highly vulnerable to food insecurity due to overreliance on Ukraine as a singular supplier.

BLOCKADES AND BATTLEFIELD: THE RUIN OF UKRAINE'S FARMLAND AND EXPORTS

GRAIN CHAIN: RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE AND THE COLLAPSE OF GLOBAL FOOD SECURITY

OLEKSANDRA ZHYHALKINA

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has not only affected Ukraine's ability to export but has also severely disrupted its agricultural production. Russian aggression has turned Ukraine's farmland into a battlefield. More than one-third of the land used for cereal production has been directly affected by the war, while a further four million hectares are unusable due to ongoing warfare. Another eight million hectares are under occupation by Russian Armed Forces, amid accusations of deliberate destruction of agricultural capabilities, such as the burning of Ukrainian grain fields (Dickinson, 2024).

Russia also aims to impede exports by blockading the Black Sea, through which 90 percent of Ukraine's exports travelled prior to the war (Bychkovska, 2024). The situation is further compounded by Russia's damage to critical transportation infrastructure in Ukraine, including the destruction of roads, railways, and key ports (European Council, 2023). With these export routes rendered unusable or severely restricted, the global supply of grains and oils has plummeted. The disruption of these trade routes has driven up food prices globally, with food and grain prices twelve to thirteen percent higher in December 2023 than December 2020, despite receding from their peak level in early 2022 (Emediegwu, 2024). These price surges have hit import-dependent countries the hardest, where households spend a large share of their income on basic food items.

NEOREALISM, POST-COLONIALISM, AND BREAKING DEPENDENCY

Theories of international relations offer analytical frameworks through which the geopolitical ramification of the Russian invasion of Ukraine can be explored. Neorealism posits that states, operating in an anarchic international system, prioritise security and survival above all else (Waltz, 1979, p.118). From this perspective, Russia's actions, ranging from military aggression to the strategic manipulation of global food supplies, can be seen as part of a broader effort to maximise its security and project power. Neorealism also suggests that states use resources to exert influence, a notion clearly reflected in Russia's dominance over African wheat imports. As Akindoyin (2024, pp.7-8) argues, this control offers Moscow significant diplomatic leverage, compelling food-dependent nations to align with its geopolitical interests.

Nevertheless, neorealism often fails to account for the historical and structural inequalities that make certain states more vulnerable than others. This gap is bridged by dependency and post-colonial theories. As Akindoyin (2024, p.1) notes, up to 80 percent of Sub-Saharan Africa's wheat imports originate from Russia and Ukraine, a stark indicator of the Global South's structural dependence on dominant food-exporting states. Such dependency, crafted through histories of colonial extraction and sustained by uneven global trade systems, reinforces vulnerability during crises. Saner, Tsai, and Yiu (2012) similarly argue that global food markets are far from neutral: they are shaped by political actors who manipulate supply chains for strategic advantage. While these theories explain the causes, understanding how to move forward requires examining possible strategies to break these patterns of dependency. The Russian invasion of Ukraine merely exposed these long-standing vulnerabilities; when supply chains collapsed, import-dependent countries were pushed further into crisis. Yemen and Syria face realities in which decades of agricultural neglect and conflict have left them reliant on volatile global grain markets. Akindoyin (2024) suggests that African nations must now prioritise food sovereignty by investing in local production systems, while Saner, Tsai, and Yiu (2012) highlight the importance of strengthening intra-African trade to mitigate external shocks. Together, neorealism, dependency theory, and postcolonial thought reveal that food, usually a symbol of sustenance, is instead manipulated to reinforce power imbalances. Food is deployed in service of state interests, yet its effects fall most heavily on those trapped in historically determined structures of inequality.

SYRIA'S DESCENT: STARVED BY ONE WAR, SUSTAINED BY ANOTHER

Syria, once the Middle East's only food self-sufficient nation, is now a stark example of the cyclical relationship between food and armed conflict. Before 2011, its wheat production was able to feed its population and export surplus grain to regional markets due to its fertile northeast region (Insecurity Insight, 2023). Similar to Ukraine, it saw its farms and irrigation networks become battlefields and turn into rubble, while its wheat output plummeted from nearly four million tons pre-war to barely a quarter of that by 2021 (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 2021, p.40). With domestic harvests in ruins, Damascus grew increasingly dependent on Russian grain imports to deter famine, effectively tying Syria's food supply to the fortunes of its great-power ally (Haid, 2023). When Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 disrupted global grain flows, these fragile lifelines were shattered. Russian wheat shipments to Syria were suddenly disrupted, sending the price of bread soaring and deepening Syria's hunger crisis, further exacerbating unrest (Adar et al., 2022).

Ukraine, the breadbasket of Europe, now faces a future where its agricultural sovereignty is threated by war, occupation, and external manipulation...

Reports emerged that Russia sought to overcome Syria's wheat shortage by funnelling stolen Ukrainian grain to Syrian ports, using food as a tool for both relief and leverage (MacDonald, 2022). Moscow could sell this looted wheat at inflated prices under opaque loan deals, indebting Damascus and tightening its geopolitical grip. Satellite images and intelligence assessments revealed that grain looted from occupied Ukrainian territories, often from storage facilities in regions such as Zaporizhzhia, was loaded onto ships and transported to Syria (Mhaoud, Laughlin, and Gagarin, 2025). This helped Russia gain leverage, and in the words of former United States Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, 'blackmail the West' to lift sanctions (Bove, 2022). It also allowed Russia to undermine global condemnation of its Black Sea blockade, demonstrating that it could still supply food to its allies, even if through illicit means, simultaneously reinforcing Syria's economic dependence on Russian-controlled grain and ensuring Damascus' continued political alliance with Moscow. A prolonged war in Ukraine or a direct escalation between Russia and NATO could further destabilise Syria, jeopardising existing ceasefires and humanitarian aid deliveries. The disruption of cross-border aid, in particular, would further worsen the humanitarian crisis, leaving millions at risk of severe food insecurity (Adar et al., 2022, p.6).

Thus, a nation that once prided itself on food independence now survives on imports from another war-ridden country, highlighting how conflict can create crippling economic dependencies and turn basic sustenance into an instrument of geopolitical power. Ukraine, the breadbasket of Europe, now faces a future where its agricultural sovereignty is threatened by war, occupation, and external manipulation, while Syria's descent into dependency is mirrored in Yemen, where war and reliance on imports have created a similarly dire humanitarian crisis.

IMPORTING HUNGER: YEMEN, THE WORLD'S MOST VULNERABLE NATION

Yemen has long been one of the most food-insecure countries in the world, due to its prolonged civil war, economic collapse, and heavy dependence on food imports. According to the World Food Programme, nearly seventeen million people in Yemen are currently food insecure, with an estimated six million at risk of famine (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, 2022). With the depreciation of the Yemeni rial and rising global food prices, food has become increasingly unaffordable for the population. These consequences are not accidental, but a result of military and political strategies. As Kadri (2021, p. 100) notes, 'the very harsh means of violence includes […] the blockade that creates a famine,' reflecting how starvation is increasingly weaponised in modern conflict. Global supply disruptions, increased prices of food and fuel, and insufficient humanitarian aid are exacerbating the crisis. Furthermore, nearly 90 percent of Yemen's wheat is imported, with 46 percent coming from Russia and Ukraine in 2021, leaving it overtly susceptible to external shocks to an already weak system (Oxfam International, 2022; World Food Programme, 2022). Yemen's dependence on imported wheat has left it particularly vulnerable, and shows dependency theory in action, where inequalities are structurally embedded due to the reliance of peripheral nations on the flow of goods, including food, from global powers. Yemen's reliance on imported wheat, shaped by decades of underinvestment in domestic agriculture, exacerbated by conflict, is symptomatic of a broader structural vulnerability within global trade regimes. This dependence is weaponised in wartime, and as Rodríguez Álvarez (2024, p.11) notes, in such cases, hunger is not an unfortunate side effect but 'a deliberate outcome of strategies that manipulate food access to serve military or political ends'.

The cost of basic commodities has skyrocketed, leaving more families without access to sufficient food (Joint SDG Fund, 2023, pp.16–22). Yemen's hunger crisis is not merely a humanitarian failure, it is directly impacted by the deeply interconnected, structurally unequal, and weaponised global food system. For Yemen, already fragile and fractured from within, dependence is especially devastating. A war it did not start has exacerbated a hunger crisis it cannot escape, exposing how the most food-insecure nations bear the heaviest costs of conflicts they cannot control.

CONCLUSION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine highlights how modern conflicts extend beyond battlefields into global security, economic stability, and survival, taking lives far from the impact zone of the missiles. The war in Ukraine has made clear that, in today's geopolitical landscape, food is not just sustenance, but a currency of power and a tool of war. However, global interdependence has made the consequences significantly more potent, with food disruption affecting not only those in the conflict zone but also millions in vulnerable states such as Yemen and Syria, where reliance on Ukrainian and Russian grain has deepened food insecurity. The war has reinforced the geopolitical significance of food supply chains, exposing the structural dependencies that leave import-dependent nations at the mercy of external actors. Moving forward, a sustainable response must prioritise long-term resilience over short-term fixes. If left unaddressed, food insecurity will not only remain a consequence of war but continue to serve as one of its most devastating weapons.

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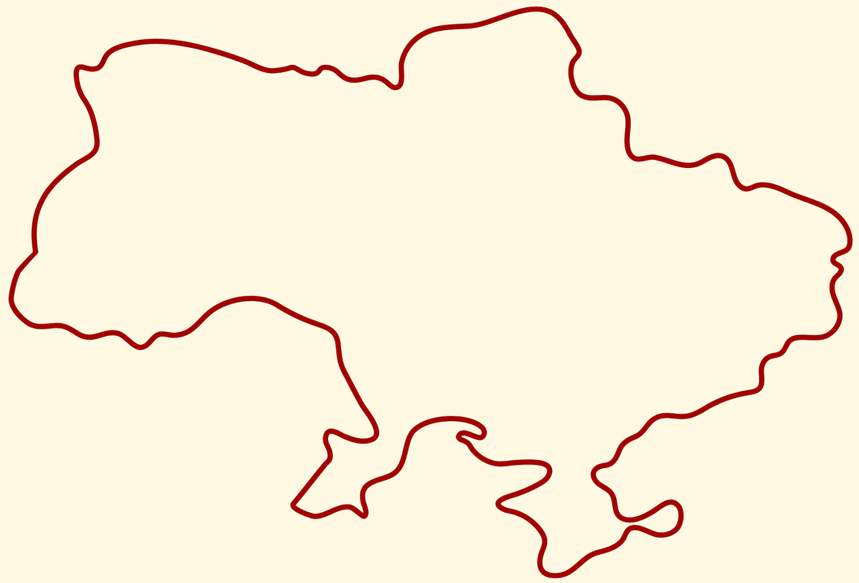

UKRAINIAN POLITICS NETWORK

STUDENT ESSAY COMPETITION

FEBRUARY 2025

‘A young, independent, dynamic nation, who knows its history and has its own vision of the future. I want to shout to the world – we are larger, more interesting, broader than the box we have been put into. We are greater than the war.’

- Oleksandr Mykhed, 2022

We are pleased to publish the 6 winning essays from the Ukrainian Politics Network’s Student Essay Competition featuring authors from the University of Edinburgh and Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. These winning essays shine a light on Ukraine as an independent nation, exploring its domestic and foreign politics in the context of the ongoing war. The mission of the Ukrainian Politics Network and this Essay Competition resonates with Leviathan’s aims to provide a platform for critical engagement with complex, contemporary political issues, and we believe in the power of amplifying such voices.

To preserve the authenticity of these essays, they have been published as submitted to the competition, with minimal editing from the Leviathan team.

STRENGTHENING SCOTLAND-UKRAINE TIES

IN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION

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ILLUSTRATION BY OLEKSANDRA ZHYHALKINA

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 marked a significant turning point in European geopolitics and international relations. Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and democratic values were violently threatened, leading to a global outpouring of solidarity. Among the many nations that have stepped forward to support Ukraine, Scotland has been particularly notable in its response. Historically, Scotland has demonstrated a deep empathy for oppressed peoples, drawing on its own history of struggle for independence.

In light of Russia's aggression, Scotland's ties with Ukraine can be further enhanced to create a robust and enduring partnership. Strengthening these ties, particularly during the ongoing conflict, offers the opportunity to foster meaningful collaborations across humanitarian, political, economic, and cultural dimensions, building a foundation for long-term bilateral cooperation.

One of Scotland's greatest strengths in supporting Ukraine lies in its ability to advocate for Ukraine's interests in international forums. By offering support to Ukraine, Scotland enhances its reputation as a compassionate and active global actor, committed to defending democratic values and sovereignty. Scotland's involvement in international affairs, particularly in crisis situations, strengthens its diplomatic leverage within the UK, the European Union, and the international community.

Beyond humanitarian aid and political support, another critical area for strengthening Scotland-Ukraine relations is through economic and trade partnerships. Ukraine is a resource-rich country with a highly skilled workforce, and as it rebuilds from the war, Scotland can position itself as a key partner in Ukraine's reconstruction.

RECONSTRUCTION AND INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

Since 2022, Russian attacks have destroyed or severely damaged over 200,000 residential buildings, thousands of kilometers of roads and bridges, hundreds of hospitals and schools, and large portions of Ukraine's energy grid (Hernandez, 2024).

The Kyiv School of Economics (2024) estimates that Ukraine's reconstruction will require at least 500 billion US dollars over the next decade. This presents both a humanitarian necessity and an opportunity for international partnerships in rebuilding a stronger, more resilient Ukraine.

Many of Ukraine's roads, bridges, and railways have been destroyed, disrupting supply chains and mobility. Scottish companies specialising in road construction, smart transport solutions, and railway modernisation could participate in rebuilding efforts. Collaboration in railway electrification projects could help modernise Ukraine's transport infrastructure and reduce reliance on fossil fuels.

With millions of Ukrainians displaced, housing reconstruction is a priority. Scotland's experience in sustainable urban planning could contribute to efficient rebuilding efforts (Scottish Government, 2020). The adoption of smart city technologies, such as energy-efficient buildings and digital urban management systems, could be an area for cooperation between Scottish and Ukrainian municipalities.

Scottish cities like Edinburgh and Glasgow have engaged in twinning initiatives with Ukrainian counterparts, helping with local governance and urban planning expertise (Glasgow City Council, 2024). Scottish universities, such as the University of Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow, could collaborate with Ukrainian institutions on training architects, engineers, and planners for reconstruction projects (Universities Scotland, 2023). Twinning programs between Scottish and Ukrainian cities could provide local governance support and help ensure that reconstruction aligns with community needs. Grassroots projects could focus on rebuilding schools, libraries, and cultural centers to restore a sense of normalcy in affected communities.

Many Ukrainian cities have suffered damage to water supply and sanitation infrastructure. Scottish engineering firms specialising in water purification and sewage system rehabilitation could contribute to rebuilding projects (Drinking Water Quality Regulator for Scotland, 2024).

Scotland's expertise in sustainable energy, transport, urban planning, and digital infrastructure positions it as an ideal partner for Ukraine's recovery. By deepening collaboration in infrastructure projects, both nations can contribute to a future that is not only rebuilt but stronger, greener, and more resilient.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND IT COOPERATION

Ukraine is a major player in the global tech industry, with a thriving IT outsourcing market and innovative tech startups. Scotland's growing tech ecosystem, including fintech and cybersecurity, offers opportunities for collaboration.

In September 2024, the UK-Ukraine Digital Trade Agreement came into force, facilitating quicker and more cost-effective digital trade between the two countries. This agreement is

particularly significant for Ukraine, as it enables continued trade amidst challenges posed by the ongoing conflict (Department for Business and Trade, Alexander, and Reynolds, 2024).

The UK-Ukraine TechBridge is an initiative designed to connect tech companies from both countries, promoting innovation and collaboration. It facilitates business-to-business and business-to-government engagements through events and provides guidance for entities interested in operating in the UK or Ukraine. The program focuses on four key areas: skills development, innovation, trade, and investment (The UK-Ukraine TechBridge, 2025).

Scotland and Ukraine could launch joint tech initiatives, such as incubators for startups, partnerships between universities for tech research, and training programs in software development and cybersecurity.

Ukraine's highly skilled IT workforce offers Scotland opportunities to expand its tech capabilities, particularly in fields like software development, fintech, and cybersecurity. Collaboration with Scotland can help Ukraine modernise its digital infrastructure and strengthen cybersecurity systems, which are critical in the face of ongoing cyber threats.

RENEWABLE ENERGY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The transition to renewable energy and sustainable development is a critical priority for both Scotland and Ukraine. Scotland has positioned itself as a leader in clean energy, particularly in wind and hydrogen power, while Ukraine, in the wake of war and energy infrastructure destruction, seeks to build a more resilient and independent energy system. Cooperation between the two nations in these areas presents opportunities for mutual benefit, strengthening energy security, reducing dependence on fossil fuels, and advancing climate goals.

Scotland is at the forefront of hydrogen energy development, with a growing sector focused on green hydrogen production using renewable sources. The country has launched major initiatives to scale up hydrogen energy, such as the Hydrogen Action Plan, which aims to position Scotland as a global hydrogen hub by 2045 (Scottish Government, 2022, p.5).

Ukraine has significant potential in hydrogen production, especially as it seeks to integrate into the European energy market (Riepkin, 2023). Given Ukraine's vast renewable energy resources, such as solar and wind power, developing hydrogen as an alternative fuel could help reduce dependency on Russian fossil fuels and boost economic recovery.

The Ukrainian Hydrogen Council has been actively working with Scottish energy experts to explore partnerships in hydrogen production, transportation, and storage. Ukraine's involvement in Hydrogen Scotland 2024, an international conference in Glasgow, demonstrated its commitment to learning from Scotland's experience and attracting investment into Ukraine's hydrogen sector. Research initiatives between Scottish and Ukrainian universities could help develop hydrogen technology suited to both nations' energy needs (Riepkin, 2023).

Scotland has provided technical expertise in renewable energy, including wind, solar, and hydropower, to assist Ukraine in diversifying its energy sources (Energy Community, 2024). For example, Scottish firms have been involved in wind farm projects in Ukraine's coastal regions and have helped train Ukrainian engineers in sustainable energy technologies.

Scotland generates over 97 percent of its electricity from renewable sources, with wind energy playing a dominant role (Scottish Government, 2021, p.1). The Seagreen Offshore Wind Farm, for example, is one of the largest offshore wind farms in Europe, providing valuable expertise in managing large-scale wind projects.

Before the war, Ukraine was rapidly expanding its wind energy capacity, particularly in the Mykolaiv and Zaporizhzhia regions. However, many wind farms have been damaged due to the war, necessitating rebuilding efforts (Cahill and Dawes, 2022).

Scottish companies specialising in wind farm construction and turbine maintenance could assist Ukraine in rebuilding its wind energy infrastructure. Scotland's expertise in offshore wind energy could help Ukraine develop projects along the Black Sea coast post-war. Partnerships with Scottish engineering firms could improve Ukraine's grid stability and storage capacity for wind-generated electricity.

Scotland's renewable energy firms can play a key role in rebuilding Ukraine's energy infrastructure by providing expertise in smart grids, battery storage, and energy efficiency measures. Public-private partnerships between Scottish energy companies and Ukrainian authorities could accelerate reconstruction efforts while ensuring a sustainable energy transition.

Scottish cities like Edinburgh and Glasgow have been implementing green city initiatives, including zero-emission transport, energy-efficient buildings, and waste management systems (BBC, 2019). As Ukrainian cities rebuild after the war, integrating energy-efficient housing, sustainable urban planning, and green public transport will be crucial for long-term recovery.

Scottish and Ukrainian cities could partner on smart city projects, sharing expertise in sustainable construction and energy-efficient technologies. Scottish firms specialising in district heating, water conservation, and green architecture could collaborate with Ukrainian urban developers to modernise cities affected by war. Scottish universities and research centers could provide training programs for Ukrainian architects and city planners on implementing sustainable urban solutions.

Scottish universities such as the University of Edinburgh and the University of Strathclyde are leaders in renewable energy research (O'Sullivan, 2024). They could collaborate with Ukrainian institutions on joint research projects related to wind, solar, and hydrogen energy.

Academic exchanges and scholarships for Ukrainian students and researchers in Scotland could help Ukraine rebuild its expertise in green technologies post-war. Joint research on climate resilience and adaptation strategies could benefit both nations as they tackle global environmental challenges.

Joint energy investment funds could encourage private-sector participation in Ukraine's energy transition. Policy collaboration could help Ukraine adopt the best practices from Scotland's renewable energy legislation, including carbon reduction targets and incentives for green energy businesses.

These projects could not only provide Ukraine with clean, renewable energy but also contribute to the country's energy independence from Russia. The collaboration could be a win-win situation, enhancing Scotland's global standing in green energy while helping Ukraine shift toward more sustainable energy sources.

CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL COOPERATION

One effective way to enhance Scotland-Ukraine ties is through cultural exchange programs. Scotland hosted Ukrainian artists, musicians, and writers, giving them a platform to share their culture with Scottish audiences (British Council, 2024). Similarly, Ukrainian cities could benefit from Scottish artistic contributions, strengthening ties through mutual appreciation of each other's cultural heritage.

In recent years, festivals of Ukrainian culture have been regularly organised in Scotland, particularly in cities such as Glasgow and Edinburgh (University of Edinburgh, 2024). These events include exhibitions of Ukrainian art, dance, music and film screenings. For example, the Glasgow Ukrainian Heritage Festival showcases the richness of Ukrainian tradition through music performances, folk art workshops and lectures on Ukrainian history (Community of Ukrainians in Glasgow, 2024).

Ukrainians living in Scotland actively promote cultural exchange by organising exhibitions, film screenings, concerts and other events. Ukrainian cultural centres and communities in Scotland often initiate cultural events, in particular in support of Ukrainian artists, and create opportunities for cultural dialogue between Ukraine and Scotland.

Strengthening ties with Ukraine opens up opportunities for cultural exchanges, enriching Scotland's social fabric. The inclusion of Ukrainian culture, traditions, and history can deepen mutual understanding and foster cultural diversity within Scottish communities.

The partnership with Ukraine offers Scotland the opportunity to engage in collaborative academic programs and research projects. This could involve exchanges between universities, research on post-conflict recovery, and joint studies on governance, democracy, and international relations.

Six Scottish universities have been awarded funds made available through Universities UK International's twinning initiative to support joint research with universities in Ukraine. The funding will support deeper collaborations between academia in both nations, through a series of twinning partnerships which was first created in the aftermath of Russia's invasion in 2022 (Universities Scotland, 2023). Areas of cooperation

Strengthening ties with Ukraine opens up opportunities for cultural exchanges, enriching Scotland's social fabric.

between the universities include environmental sustainability, geopolitical relations, the effects of war, medicine and culture.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be noted that the benefits of strengthened cooperation between Scotland and Ukraine are multifaceted, with both countries gaining from enhanced diplomatic influence, economic growth, security, cultural exchange, and post-war justice efforts. For Scotland, the cooperation solidifies its role as a responsible global actor while expanding trade, investment, and cultural ties. For Ukraine, Scotland offers invaluable support in defence, reconstruction, and the promotion of democratic values, contributing to the country's long-term recovery and stability.

In a broader sense, this partnership symbolises the importance of international solidarity and collaboration in times of crisis. By forging a deep and lasting relationship, Scotland and Ukraine can not only address immediate challenges but also lay the foundation for a resilient and prosperous future for both nations.

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RECENTRING THE DONBAS

FORGING A LASTING PEACE IN UKRAINE

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This essay argues that Ukraine is the victim of two imperialist projects: one Russian and one Western which, if not challenged, will obstruct the creation of a lasting peace in Ukraine. Russian colonial discourse has been well documented in scholarship (Galeotti and Bowen, 2014; Lewis, 2023; Kuteleva, 2024; Koplatadze, 2019), however, the Western colonial narrative has been less thoroughly explored. This is particularly noticeable in the erasure of the Donbas (Melnyk, 2019, p.4). Ukraine is typically homogenised as a cohesive nation state with the same political desires and impulses, a pro-Western, European country in its entirety, while those who don't fall neatly into this paradigm are dismissed as Russian backed elements (Matveeva, 2016, p.31). This erasure has significant ramifications for the peace process, if a nuanced understanding of Ukraine's domestic politics is not considered, there is little prospect for lasting peace. Instead, this essay seeks to return agency to all Ukrainians, understanding their marginalisation in both Russian and Western discourse (Isachenko, 2018; Matveeva, 2018; Matsuzato, 2017). To do this, first Russian and then Western understandings of Ukraine are discussed; before moving onto an exploration of the complex realities of Ukrainian domestic politics and Ukrainian as a contested identity. It is then argued that the Donbas revolutions are genuine popular expressions of discontent rather than merely Russian infiltration (Matveeva, 2016). Without addressing these tensions, it is unlikely that a lasting peace will ever be achieved in Ukraine.

COLONIAL DISCOURSES AND UKRAINIAN MARGINALISATION

First, this essay examines how Ukrainians have been marginalised by colonial discourses operating from both the West and Russia. Galeotti and Bowen (2023, p.383) document how Putin's identification with the Russian state is rooted within a civilisational conception of history, of which Ukraine is an integral part. Lewis (2023, p.383) expands on this analysis, emphasising the importation of *Russki Mir* (Russian World) to Putin's conception of the nation in which Ukraine is part of Russia's 'cultural civilisational space' whereby Ukrainian and Russian culture are inseparable. The distinction between Ukrainian and Russian, for the Russian state, is thus a meaningless abstraction, typically attributed to a foreign-Western construct. Kuteleva (2024, p.155) analyses how Putin utilises hyper-masculine discourses to feminise Ukraine, vulnerable to the domination of Western imperialism. This discourse legitimises Russia as an anti-imperialist anti-western hegemon, the saviour of Ukraine from corrupting Western influences (Koplatadze, 2019). Thus, there is a wide breadth of scholarship on Russia's colonial relationship with Ukraine, however, there is comparatively little that attempts to understand how the West similarly denies Ukraine of agency.

Mearsheimer's (2014) now infamous essay on how NATO expansion precipitated the Russian invasion of Crimea, reflects a 'cold war hangover' mindset in which foreign policy, by and large, is conducted between NATO and anti-western powers, with those countries who do not fit easily into this binary to be competed over. Although many politicians and academics alike dispute Mearsheimer's simplistic analysis, many are guilty of the same prejudices, recreating a simplistic binary for former soviet bloc countries; between embracing democracy and the West and retreating to the dark clutches of Russian imperialism. Mälksoo (2022) underlines how International Relations studies have invalidated Eastern European experiences where Ukraine exists as a territory acted upon, a buffer state between the West and Russia where Great Power status is fought over. Kuteleva (2024) is instructive here, demonstrating how, in a similar manner to Russia, the West seeks to rescue a feminised Ukraine from the destructive clutches of Russia. The impulse to deny Ukraine of agency as a function of colonial discourse is evident. Chatham House's 2023 report, 'How to end Russia's War on Ukraine', simplistically describes Ukraine as 'a European democracy' and Russia as a 'fascist' state (Ash et al., 2023, p.45). Ukraine is seen as a country desperate for the comfort of European salvation; it is only with Europe that freedom can be safeguarded. Thus, within the West, a competing civilisational discourse to Russia's has been replicated, one that emphasises how Ukraine belongs within the ideal of Western civilisation, simultaneously undermining Ukraine's agency. Among the European political elite, the British Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, has emphasised that the Ukrainian crisis concerned 'our freedom, our democracy and our values', while Olaf Scholz, the German Chancellor accused Putin of 'destroying our European peace order' (Geiger, 2024; Walker and Connolly, 2024). Scholz's and Starmer's articulation of the need to defend Ukraine understands it as an intrinsically European nation which belongs within the peace loving, democratic and crucially Western world order and thus must be defended at all costs. This binary, therefore, creates a false choice in which Ukraine is denied agency: it must join the West or cease to exist.

Of course, there are those within Ukraine who agree with this assessment or, at least, pragmatically use it for their own advantage. Zelenskyy himself has emulated the language

of Western civilisational discourse while the Euromaidan protests sought to emphasise Ukraine's European orientation (Melnyk, 2019; Onuch, 2014). Yulian Bachinski has emphasised Ukrainian national exceptionalism while Milan Kundera's essay 'The Tragedy of Central Europe' argues that the choice between Russia and the West was a civilisational one, claiming that western European humanitarian culture was intrinsically Ukrainian (Kiryukhin, 2015, p.4).

However, this conception of Ukraine simplifies what it means to be Ukrainian, with pro-western homogenisation obstructing true and meaningful understanding. Those Ukrainains who speak Russian or those who are uncomfortable with a European identity are dismissed as 'Kremlin-backed' or 'rashists', simply Moscow-stooges who function as Russian foreign agents within Ukraine (Melnyk, 2019, p.11; Matveeva, 2018, pp.32–33). This analysis ignores the uncomfortable reality that many within Eastern Ukraine have contested identities identifying as Russian and Ukrainian or simply just Russian and are profoundly afraid of the erasure of this identity. Marples (2015) explores the pre-war Ukrainian election results, demonstrating significant regional divisions. Oblasts in the West of the country vote overwhelmingly for pro-Western parties; in the 2004 Presidential elections, Galicia and Volhynia of Western Ukraine voted 90 percent for the West-oriented Yushchenko while, in the far east more than 90 percent voted for Yanukovych, a representative of the pro-Russian Party of Regions (PoR) (Marples, 2015, p.3). This demonstrates the identity fissures within Ukraine, particularly in the Donbas and its uncomfortable relationship with Europe.

This tension has been compounded by the actions pursued by successive Ukrainian governments which have threatened the identity of Russians and Russian speakers within Ukraine and further polarised Eastern Russian identity (Pogrebinskiy 2015, p.2). This demonstrates the difficulty of defining Russian identity within Ukraine with many supporting Ukrainian independence but not a departure from the Russian sphere of influence. A salient political identity has emerged in Ukraine with a reverence for nationalist far right guerrillas during World War two, a commitment to the Ukrainian language, and a hatred for the colonial past of Russia that has increasingly dominated the pro-western political elite in Ukraine (Pogrebinskiy, 2015, p.2). After Yanukovych's ousting, Poroshenko repealed the Kolesnichenko-Kivalov Language Law, removing the protection of the Russian language, alienating Russian speakers in Ukraine (Pogrebinskiy, 2015; Isachenko, 2014). Matveeva (2018, pp.27–28) demonstrates the sharp decline of Russian taught in schools. In 1989, 40 percent of schools taught Russian, while in 2014 only five schools and one gymnasium remained in Kyiv. Similarly, in 2000 in Luhansk 75 percent of university students spoke Russian while in 2013, they constituted only 37 percent. In a pro-western elite's attempt at constructing an anti-Russian Ukrainian nationalism, Stepan Bandera, a far-right, Nazi sympathiser who supported the ethnic cleansing of Russians, has been rehabilitated with statues built to commemorate him while he was awarded with the Hero of Ukraine award in 2010 (Matveeva, 2018, pp.27–30; Marples, 2016, p.430). Therefore, Ukrainian nationalism has increasingly been articulated as anti-Russian, alienating those in the East who spoke Russian and identified with Russian. This mistrust was further manifested in the response to separatist uprising in the East which led the Donetsk Governor to purge the police force of 70 percent of its staff who were mainly potentially subversive elements, in effect, Russians (Matsuzato, 2017, p.186). Russian speakers in Ukraine have continuously been othered and the state has done little to promote an inclusive, multi-ethnic and linguistically diverse national community.

Kudelia (2014) demonstrates how even President Yanukovych failed to promote Russian linguistic and ethnic interests during his presidency, entrenching Russian alienation within Ukraine. Yanukovych's term was characterised by corruption. A compliant Constitutional Court restored the super-presidential model, giving Yanukovych extensive powers of appointment which saw the strengthening of patronage networks. This led Yanukovych to grant almost half of state procurement contracts to those loyal to him, including Akhmetov, Firtash and his son, Oleksandr (Kudelia, 2014, pp.21–22). Consolidation of power through patronage networks produced an even more centralised system while economic decline led to a drop in Yanukovych's popularity even in the East, with 86 percent of people across Ukraine in 2013 dissatisfied with Ukraine's economic performance (Kudelia, 2014, p.26). Therefore, lack of representation for the people of the Donbas and Russian speaking minorities more generally, even under the presidency of a PoR candidate, has been a recurrent theme of Ukrainian politics. This has contributed to a sense of alienation from the Ukrainian state with Russians actively excluded and even villainised by the Ukrainian state, in its attempt to construct Ukrainian nationalism.

EUROMAIDAN

This provides the essential context to understand how the Euromaidan protests triggered separatist movements in the Donbas, contrary to how they have been portrayed in the West. People in the Donbas were not mere 'Moscow-stooges' but had genuine concerns which, having been repressed for so long, resulted in revolt (Matveeva, 2016). Isachenko (2014, p.13) demonstrates how, although the far-right presence of parties like Svoboda were a tiny minority in the Euromaidan protests, the lack of other factions' ideological cohesion led to the popularisation of far-right slogans such as 'glory to Ukraine', and 'Ukraine above everything'. Far-right articulations of Ukrainian nationalism were reminiscent of Bandera and his inevitable association with anti-Russian sentiment, stoking genuine fears of anti-Russian violence (Isachenko, 2014; Melnyk, 2019). This inevitability consolidated Russians' identity within Ukraine as the other, especially in the context of the violence of the protest.* This produced genuine concern that violence would be carried out against Russians. Additionally, many of the protestors were middle-class Ukrainians from the West (Isachenko, 2014), distancing the movement from the predominantly working-class industrial East who were dependent on Russian finance to sustain the East's metallurgy industry. 300,000 people in the Donbas were employed by Akhmetov's Systems Capital Management Group whose largest customer was the Russian state (Isachenko, 2014, p.20; Matveeva, 2018). This meant that Euromaidan, in the minds of people in the Donbas, posed an immediate threat to both their material existence and their cultural identity, this would form the pretext for revolt. The Donbas insurgency was not simply prompted by Russia but rather a grassroots reaction against the perceived threat of violence, the erasure of cultural identity and the material threat to their livelihoods.

This is not to say that the insurgency was not funded by Russia nor to deny that there were Russians moved across the border by Moscow, facts that are well documented by the academia. Insurgents like Igor Strelkov, a Russian citizen, and his involvement in the DPR (Donetsk People's Republic) have been extensively documented (Melnyk, 2019; Matveeva, 2018, p.247), while Russia funded 70 percent of the DPR's budget in 2015. However, to dismiss the Donbas insurgencies simply as 'A Russian Spring' is to deny many legitimate concerns, without acknowledging Ukraine is liable to slip back into conflict. Matveeva demonstrates how varied the local insurgents while Gubarev committed the DPR to building 'a fair and humane state' which aspired 'to a new social model based on Russian civilisational identity' with 68 percent of people in the DPR saying they would reject reunification with Ukraine (Matveeva, 2018, pp.37, 44). Indeed, the socialist language present in the DPR's declaration of Independence, authored by the Communist Boris Litvniov; and both DPR LPR (Luhansk People's Republic) ignoring Putin's request to delay referenda on independence point to the nominal independence of the Republics, at least in the initial separatist uprising. In his personal account of life in the DPR, the Ukrainian human rights activist, Stanislav Aseyev (2022), reflects on how many people he was friends with took part in the insurgency as part of the local police or the Cossack battalion, so much so that he became almost entirely isolated in his opposition to the war. This demonstrates how ordinary people from the insurgent republics were prepared to take up arms against the Ukrainian state. With the ascension of Donetsk and Luhansk to the Russian Federation in 2022, it is likely that the DPR and LPR have less ability to act independently. The Head of the DPR, Denis Pushilin, in his 2024 New Years Eve Address, praised Putin three times throughout his two-minute-long speech, citing how '2025 has been declared the year of the Defender of the Fatherland by the President of Russia' (Pushilin, 2024). Putin has deposed the communists from leadership roles and has replaced them with Putin loyalists like Pushilin (Matsuzato, 2017). Therefore, the independence of these movements have been subordinated to Russia's war effort in Ukraine. Despite their subordination, the 'Russian Spring' had genuine grassroots origins, it is unlikely that, after the war Donetsk and Luhansk can simply be reabsorbed into the Ukrainian state. If a durable and substantive peace is to be reached, then those who live in the Donbas must feel like they have a stake in the Ukrainian state. If they are marginalised, it will recreate the conditions for future animosity, division and even the resumption of civil war.

If a durable and substantive peace is to be reached, then those who live in the Donbas must feel like they have a stake in the Ukrainian state.

CONCLUSION

This essay has demonstrated how

* This violence was largely promoted by Berkut riot police, not the Euromaidan protestors themselves, yet a confusing Media storm, fuelled in some instances by Russian Media, convinced many that they were fundamentally violent (Marples, 2016; Melnyk, 2019)

colonial discourses on both sides seek to simplify the nature of Ukrainian-Russian relations which reproduces a binary course for Ukraine. Donetsk and Luhansk complicate this binary and thus are excluded from consideration. If we are to ever reach a lasting peace, we must understand the aspirations of all Ukrainians, not merely as one homogenous pro-western lump in need of saving but rather as a complex patchwork of competing identities which if not taken seriously, as events in 2014 proved, present a substantial threat to the territorial integrity of Ukraine. If the West's reason for engagement is predicated on the protection of liberal European civilisation rather than sovereignty, Ukraine will never truly be stable. When we seek to promote sovereignty, it must be granted equally, even to those within Ukraine who feel utterly alien from the West. Unless we appreciate these divided identities, we risk recreating the same conditions that produced the Civil War in Ukraine, thus presenting a significant challenge to creating a sustainable and lasting peace.

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BRITISH PEACE ENFORCEMENT IN UKRAINE

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While the war in Ukraine is continuing and causing more and more damage to the economies of European states, let alone security issues arising from Russian expansion to the West, the question of cessation of the ongoing conflict is becoming of increasing importance for the states in Europe, including the UK. Moreover, even if the Russian-Ukrainian war ends in the near future, the risk that a more brutal conflict in the coming years may break out, which might potentially be not confined within the borders of Ukraine, remains present.

Thus, the idea of deployment of some kind of peacekeeping forces in the territory of Ukraine is gaining traction. But, how could British troops help end the war in Ukraine? What is the role of the United Kingdom in the process of peacekeeping in the Russian-Ukrainian war? Is it worth deploying British soldiers on the territory of a foreign country? Is there any reason for the British peacekeeping forces in Ukraine?

Taking into consideration the importance of all these questions for people suffering from the war in Ukraine and the UK, the topic of the present essay is highly relevant.

It will be organised in the following way: firstly, an idea of peacekeeping and its goals is described with a view to properly understand the subject of this essay. Then, some possible variations of peacekeeping missions that may take place in Ukraine are reviewed, particularly in the context of the present war, to make this research closer to reality. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn as to whether it is reasonable to deploy British troops in Ukraine.

DEFINITION OF PEACEKEEPING

Although peacekeeping is commonly associated with the activities of the United Nations, there is no universal definition. In this essay, peacekeeping is understood as 'primarily a diplomatic tool used to stimulate the peaceful resolution of conflict and is not an end in itself' (Bash, 1994, p.6). Furthermore, 'Peacekeeping forces are therefore usually unarmed or only lightly armed and use the minimum of force necessary and then only exceptionally' (Caplan, 2021).

However, an array of similar terms are often used along with peacekeeping. Why then is the former one present in this essay, but not peace support, peace enforcement, peacemaking, or peacebuilding? That is important to understand before switching to the elaboration of probable schemes for any mission in Ukraine to make it effective. To that end, let us revise these terms in turn:

'The term Peace Support Operation (PSO) describes organised international assistance initiatives to support the maintenance, monitoring, and building of peace and prevention of resurgent violent conflict. There are two categories of PSOs: peacekeeping and peace enforcement' (Johnston, 2007, p.33).
'Peace enforcement refers to the use of military assets to enforce a peace against the will of the parties to a conflict when, for instance, a ceasefire has failed' (Caplan, 2021).

Peacemaking is 'An intervention in a violent conflict to attempt to negotiate a peace agreement' (Malek, 2013).

Finally, 'peacebuilding is the process of resolving conflict and establishing sustainable peace in a manner that maximizes justice, equality and harmony. It is important to note that peacebuilding extends beyond prevention of violence' (Early Childhood Peace Consortium, 2024).

In comparing these concepts and choosing the most suitable one for the present essay, it is useful to refer to the tripartite typology of Johan Galtung, in which he differentiates the terms peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding. According to him, peacemaking refers to the negotiation process between decision-making parties (Gawerc, 2006). However, as the present essay deals with British troops and ways to make a new Russian-Ukrainian war impossible, this term only partially describes the goals and affairs discussed.

Peacekeeping, on the other hand, involves third-party intervention to keep apart warring parties and maintain the absence or reduction of direct violence, which is more appropriate for the conflict discussed (Gawerc, 2006). However, it does not imply ending a conflict or ensuring that it does not happen again, only the process of containment. That is why it also only partially describes the purpose of any British armed mission in Ukraine.

The third definition, peacebuilding, 'focuses on the social, psychological, and economic environment at the grassroots level' (Gawerc, 2006). Let us also take into consideration the definition of peacebuilding provided earlier where it is implied that this term is about removing conflicting factors rather than avoiding violence. However, there is not much we can do in the Russian-Ukrainian war about the environmental and social factors, as the motives of the Russian rogue state to wage imperial war come from the desires of its political elites, namely from Vladimir Putin's plan to revive the USSR among other goals (Rubel and Hossain, 2022, p.1). Proving the inefficacy of the present

While the end of the war remains the subject of negotiations of its parties, the pressing issue is what follows a ceasefire.

conflict for the aggressor state and the inadmissibility of its continuation is the key to its cessation. In such a case, the foreign military contingents may play a great role in the containment of a new conflict and ensuring stable peace.

In addition to three terms analysed by Johan Galtung, two other terms are considered here: peace support and peace enforcement. However, the first one is the collective term that includes peacekeeping, which was denied as a possible variant previously due to its lack of focus on the probable results.
And, finally, peace enforcement remains the last and the most viable option for this research, considering the motives of the President of Russia and the goals of any mission in Ukraine. The British troops there will be truly a military asset used to enforce peace, as stated in the definition above, even if an aggressor state tries to violate it.

APPLICATION TO THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

The primary goal is to cease warfare and ensure Russia will not attack Ukraine in the future. Otherwise, the war may reignite and cause even more losses for the whole of Europe. However, this essay focuses on the prospect of British deployment in Ukraine, rather than possible consequences of continued or expanded warfare by Russia.

While the end of war remains the subject of negotiations of its parties, the pressing issue is what follows a ceasefire. Thus, the goals of any mission in Ukraine would be the cessation of such a conflict and the prevention of its renewal.

To this end, the UK even now considers some steps to take. The deployment of a military training mission in Western Ukraine is one of them. The UK has already prepared more than 50,000 Ukrainian soldiers on its own territory (Ministry of Defence, 2024). However, logistics take significant time and resources. To make the procedure more effective, training may take place in the territory of Ukraine (Grylls, 2024).

The question of engagement of the British military in Ukraine was also discussed in early 2024, with the discussion now resumed in the face of President Trump's return to the White House. However, no decision has been made yet, even if there remains an option. Thus, the Foreign Secretary of the UK David Lammy said that his country was not considering sending troops to Ukraine 'at this time' (Honeycombe-Foster and Blewett, 2024).

The idea of deployment of troops in Ukraine (Hoorman, Vincent, and Ricard, 2024) is being negotiated by other leaders of European states as well. Although it was firmly rejected by a coalition of European states headed by Germany, including the UK (Barnes and Sheridan, 2024), in February 2024 when proposed by the President of France, the discussions were revived with Donald Trump winning the US presidential elections in November 2024. This is amid fears that Europe will be left alone against Russia and that European countries have to tackle their security issues by themselves now (Hoorman, Vincent and Ricard, 2024). Thus, the President of France continues to promote these discussions despite the vibrant opposition present. However, there is no definitive result yet. Some scenarios are on the table, such as peacekeeping or a deterrence mission. Yet its size, complexity, and goals remain unclear (Irish, 2024).

IS BRITISH PARTICIPATION WORTH A CANDLE

The deployment of troops in Ukraine, even for non-combat operations, presents huge risks for European countries, the UK being no exception. Among them are:

1. ***Potential escalation:*** Deploying troops in Ukraine either on its side or as a peace enforcement contingent may provoke a broader conflict and involve NATO (Dempsey, 2024).
2. ***Military casualties:*** British troops may be killed or injured during the war. Such losses might be huge, considering that any peace enforcement operation may need around 100,000 soldiers to make any difference, as was stated by Franz-Stefan Gady, an Austrian former military planner at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (Irish, 2024).
3. ***Public opinion and election implications***: According to a YouGov report, only twenty percent of the UK population support sending troops to Ukraine. while 57 percent oppose such an

idea (YouGov, 2024, p.5). This means issues for the government making the decision to send troops to Ukraine in the next elections.

4. ***Provocations:*** What would happen if a British soldier is killed by a Russian attack? According to Professor Andrew Cottey, 'If European states did nothing, their bluff would have been called. The alternative would likely be to deploy even more forces' (Dempsey, 2024). In this scenario, there would be only two alternatives: to be viewed as weak or to become involved in direct confrontation.

On the other hand, any hesitation of Western countries, the UK included, may have some other, more severe repercussions:

1. ***The Aggressor Gains Confidence:*** Any reluctance to respond to the Russian-Ukrainian war may be viewed as a failure to protect Ukraine, despite its vital position and, thus as a carte blanche. Indeed, if NATO allies backed down rather than confront Russia, it may push President Putin to proceed with his imperialistic ambitions.
2. ***Potential Escalation (Again):*** The next target of Russia may be any country on the Eastern frontiers of NATO. If it starts a war against Baltic states, for example, then the UK may be involved according to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (*The North Atlantic Treaty*, 2023) after consultations to protect its sovereignty before it is too late. Deputy Director of the Centre for European Reform, Ian Bond says, 'Sending European troops to fight in Ukraine would be terrible; fighting Russian troops on NATO territory would be worse (Dempsey, 2024)'.

CONCLUSIONS

It was found by the current essay that it is better to speak about some kind of peace enforcement mission because, while peace enforcement focuses on using military assets to enforce peace between parties in the war, other terms, including peacebuilding, peace support, or peacemaking, deal predominantly with other subjects.

Thus, if the peace enforcement mission is named as such, it must cease the war and prevent its renewal. Yet, its form remains undecided by European countries and in the UK particularly. Moreover, even the existing discussions are classified for security reasons. Such a fact creates difficulties for the present research. Nevertheless, some probable arrangements, such as a training mission in the territory of Ukraine involving British soldiers, and several options that are only on the stage of discussion were observed. Among proposals being discussed is some form of deployment of British troops in Ukraine within a peace enforcement mission on the line of contact between Russian and Ukrainian forces. Although this scenario was once rejected by the UK in early 2024 and later in November 2024, discussions among European leaders continue after the US presidential election.

Finally, possible advantages and risks of such a mission were analysed. Though it may have significant risks, including the engagement of the UK in direct confrontation with Russia, and provocations, any hesitation with a mission discussed may lead to even more severe implications. For instance, failure to protect Ukraine despite its vital position for the security of the UK and NATO as a whole may give Putin new motivation to proceed with his imperialistic ambitions. Moreover, such a step may be viewed as a weakness of NATO and push Russia to conquer its Eastern flank. In such a case, there is indeed a reason to stop Russia in Ukraine through a peace enforcement mission rather than face Russian troops on the Eastern frontiers of the alliance, with the possibility to check if the risks observed above are a mere assumption or reality.

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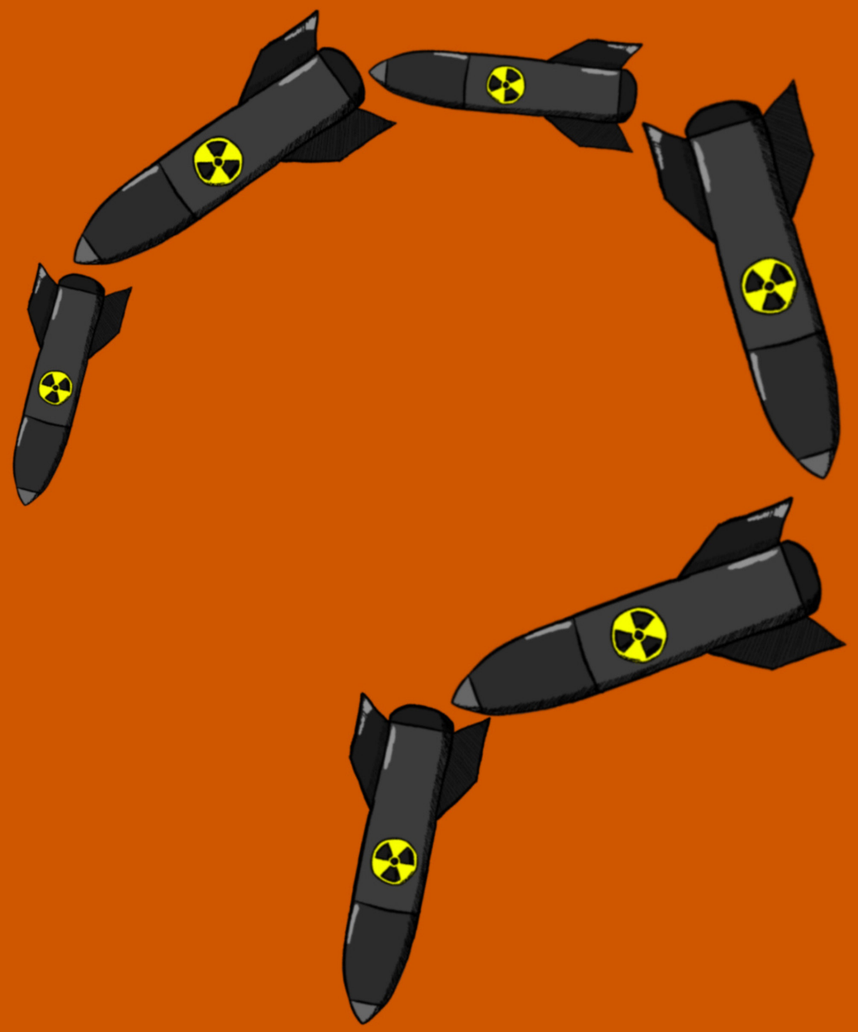

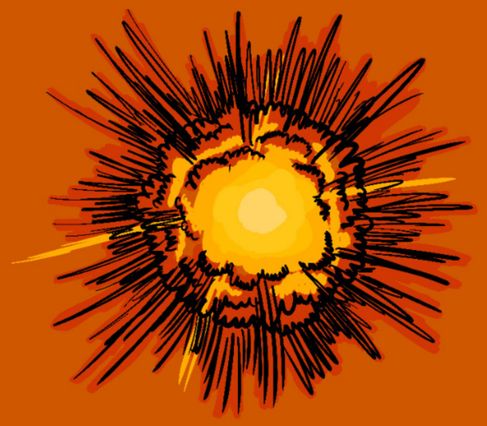

NUCLEAR SHADOWS

HOW UKRAINE'S POST-INDEPENDENCE FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY HAS BEEN SHAPED BY DISARMAMENT BY THE BUDAPEST MEMORANDUM

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ILLUSTRATION BY OLEKSANDRA ZHYHALKINA

To proliferate or not to proliferate—that is the nuclear question. Upon gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine inherited the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal but chose disarmament in pursuit of international legitimacy and security through agreements like the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and the Budapest Memorandum of 1994. These commitments aligned with Ukraine's early foreign policy emphasis on multilateral diplomacy and Euro-Atlantic integration. However, their failure to deter Russian aggression, first with Crimea's annexation in 2014 and then the full-scale invasion in 2022—has led to renewed debate on whether nuclear disarmament was a strategic mistake and whether renuclearisation is now necessary for Ukraine's security.

This essay examines how Ukraine's foreign and security policy evolved in response to the war, focusing on transitioning from reliance on multilateral security assurances to a more self-reliant defence strategy. It does so by analysing four key phases: first, post-Soviet nuclear disarmament and early security alignment, second, the balancing act between Russia and the West from 1994 to 2014, third, the security realignment following Russia's annexation of Crimea, and fourth the wartime security policy and the debate on renuclearisation after 2022. Through a comparative analysis of neorealism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism, the paper evaluates the effectiveness of Ukraine's foreign and security policies in ensuring its sovereignty and considers whether denuclearisation was the correct foreign policy choice.

POST-SOVIET NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT AND EARLY SECURITY ALIGNMENT (1991-1994)

Freshly independent from the Soviet Union, Ukraine aimed to establish itself internationally while balancing European integration and maintaining a 'good neighbour' stance with Russia (Shyrokykh, 2018, p.836). Its early foreign policy prioritised sovereignty, European integration, and stability over military deterrence, reflecting 'enthusiasm, optimism and confidence' (Kozlovska, 2006, p.10). From a constructivist perspective, this approach aligned with Ukraine's self-perception as a European democracy, supporting Wendt's assertion that 'anarchy is what states make of it' (1992, p.395).

In 1991, Ukraine inherited the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal but lacked full operational control. Economic instability and diplomatic pressure from the US and Russia pushed Ukraine toward disarmament in exchange for security assurances under the Budapest Memorandum (Umland, 2016, p.46). The Budapest Memorandum pledged support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity from Russia, the US,

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and the UK. Ukraine's foreign policy in the early 1990s focused on multilateral diplomacy, joining NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1994 and strengthening ties with the EU (Shyrokykh, 2018). The expectation was that these alliances would provide security, reducing the need for nuclear weapons.

From a neorealist perspective, maintaining nuclear weapons could have provided Ukraine with a strong deterrent against future threats. However, liberal institutionalism played a dominant role in Ukraine's decision-making as Kyiv believed that international agreements and multilateral diplomacy would ensure its security, thus shaping Ukraine's foreign and security policy in the early 1990s. This reliance on international mechanisms rather than self-help would later become a point of contention in security debates.

THE BALANCING ACT BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST (1994-2014)

In the mid-1990s, Ukraine's foreign policy shifted from optimism to ambiguity and indecisiveness, attempting to balance Western integration with economic and security ties to Russia (Ekman, 2023). Despite formally giving up nuclear weapons in 1994, the Budapest Memorandum continued to underpin its security strategy. Between 1994 and 2014, Ukraine's 'multi-vector' policy allowed benefits from NATO and EU relations while maintaining agreements with Moscow (Kozlovska, 2006, p.10). However, this approach left Ukraine vulnerable, as both the West and Russia sought influence (Shyrokykh, 2018).

During this time, Ukraine's relationship with the EU and NATO grew significantly. In 1997, Ukraine signed the NATO-Ukraine Charter on Distinctive Partnership, formalising its cooperation with the alliance (Kozlovska, 2006). In 2002, Ukraine officially announced its goal of NATO membership, marking a shift in its strategic orientation. By 2004, Ukraine had signed agreements allowing NATO military access to its territory, strengthening security ties (Kozlovska, 2006, p.12).

Similarly, Ukraine expanded its economic and diplomatic relations with the EU, demonstrated by the 2013 EU Association Agreement, which was ultimately rejected by President Viktor Yanukovych under Russian pressure, triggering the Euromaidan protests (Shyrokykh, 2018, p.845).

Despite its pro-Western aspirations, Ukraine remained heavily dependent on Russian energy and trade. At the same time, the lingering effects of its nuclear disarmament under the Budapest Memorandum shaped Ukraine's security outlook during this period. While Ukraine pursued closer relations with NATO, it refrained from fully aligning with Western military structures out of concern that such a move would provoke Russian retaliation. This hesitancy highlighted the limitations of Ukraine's security guarantees, as the absence of a nuclear deterrent meant Kyiv had to navigate geopolitical tensions without the leverage that nuclear weapons might have provided. Gas disputes in 2006 and 2009 exposed Ukraine's economic vulnerabilities, while domestic political divisions slowed NATO integration (Pirani, Stern and Yafimava, 2009, p.4; Kozlovska, 2006, p.15). Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 symbolised the ultimate failure of relying on security assurances. From a neorealist perspective, had Ukraine retained a nuclear deterrent, Moscow would have been far less likely to violate its sovereignty.

SECURITY REALIGNMENT AND UKRAINE'S STRATEGIC SHIFT (2014-2022)

The third stage of Ukraine's foreign policy was the tipping point as the annexation of Crimea by Russia shattered the foundations of Ukraine's post-Soviet foreign policy, marking the definitive failure of the Budapest Memorandum. No longer able to balance between East and West, Ukraine was forced to make a decisive pivot toward the West, as it strengthened its connections with NATO and the EU, especially post-Euromaidan. This transformation was influenced by two primary factors: the fragmentation of pro-Russian political forces within Ukraine and a significant shift in the nation's foreign policy narrative. The loss of Crimea and parts of the Donbas region weakened the electoral base of pro-Russian parties, diminishing their influence in Ukrainian politics (Ekman, 2023). Simultaneously, the prevailing foreign policy discourse began to frame integration with the EU and NATO as a civilisational choice, positioning Russia as a radical 'other' (White and Feklyunina, 2014, p. 155). This reorientation was further solidified by constitutional amendments in 2019, enshrining EU and NATO membership as strategic objectives for Ukraine (Articles 85, 102 and 116 *Constitution of Ukraine*, 2019). These developments underscore a critical juncture in Ukraine's foreign policy, leading to a stable and enduring pro-Western orientation post-2014.

With Russia violating Ukraine's sovereignty by annexing Crimea, the illusion of the Budapest Memorandum being a protective mechanism failed, sparking the reconsideration of Ukraine's denuclearisation. From a neorealist perspective, Russia's aggression validated the principle that states must rely on self-help rather than international security assurances. The Budapest Memorandum's failure demonstrates a core critique of liberal institutionalism: agreements without enforcement mechanisms cannot guarantee security in an anarchic system. Ukraine's diplomatic reliance on Western commitments, rather than military deterrence, left it exposed when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, underscoring neorealist concerns about the necessity of self-help strategies. Furthermore, scholars like John Mearsheimer (1993, p.51) argued that had Ukraine retained nuclear weapons, Russia may have reconsidered its military aggression, reinforcing the case for nuclear deterrence.

The annexation of Crimea not only pushed Ukraine further away from Russia but also rekindled debates over nuclear deterrence. Some policymakers argued that the relinquishment of nuclear weapons had left Ukraine vulnerable, prompting renewed discussions on renuclearisation as a potential means of securing deterrence against future Russian aggression. However, liberal institutionalists countered that renuclearisation would alienate Western allies and complicate Ukraine's path to NATO integration. Thus, while the 2014 crisis reshaped Ukraine's security outlook, it also reignited the debate over the role of nuclear weapons in Ukraine's long-term defence strategy.

WARTIME SECURITY POLICY AND THE DEBATE ON RENUCLEARISATION (2022-PRESENT)

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine was the starkest example of the importance of self-help and the risks of depending on external security guarantees in an anarchic system, underscoring the neorealist perspective of a foreign and security policy that is focused on self-help. The failure of the Budapest Memorandum to prevent Russian aggression in 2014 and 2022 has fueled debate about whether Ukraine's foreign policy decision to denuclearise in 1994 was correct, and whether Ukraine should reconsider its non-nuclear status as part of its current wartime foreign and security policy. Mearsheimer (1993, p.51) predicted that without nuclear weapons, Ukraine would be vulnerable to Russian aggression, as conventional forces and Western security assurances would be insufficient. However, scholars like Budjeryn (2016) counter that nuclear deterrence was never viable, as Ukraine lacked operational control over its arsenal and would have faced Western sanctions, making renuclearisation unrealistic.

However, Mearsheimer's argument is supported by other scholars such as Andreas Umland (2016), who argues that Ukraine's reliance on security assurances instead of nuclear deterrence has proven to be a critical mistake. Umland and von Essen (2022) have asserted that Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 weakened the NPT, as it demonstrated that signatory states could not rely on security assurances alone to guarantee their sovereignty. This aligns with offensive realist arguments, which stress that states must rely on self-help rather than external commitments in an anarchic international system.

Political voices in Ukraine have also raised the possibility of renuclearisation. In April 2021, Ukraine's Ambassador to Germany, Andriy Melnyk, stated that if Ukraine was not allowed to join NATO, it might need to reconsider its status as a non-nuclear state (German Press Agency, 2021). President Volodymyr Zelenskyy echoed this sentiment in 2022, suggesting that if Ukraine's security assurances continued to fail, it could view the Budapest Memorandum as invalid (UA Wire, 2022). While renuclearisation remains controversial, a small number of Ukrainian political parties, including Svoboda, the Radical Party of Oleh Liashko, and the National Corps, have openly supported bringing back nuclear weapons.

The debate reached new heights in October 2024, when President Zelenskyy reportedly told former US President Donald Trump that if Ukraine does not secure NATO membership, Ukraine would have no choice but to develop a nuclear deterrent (Office of the President of Ukraine, 2024). A month later, a Ukrainian government-affiliated think tank released a report stating that Ukraine could build a crude nuclear device within months if Western aid were cut (Tucker, 2024). However, Ukraine's Foreign Ministry reaffirmed its commitment to the NPT, indicating that, at least for now, Ukraine is committed to the NPT (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2024). The International Campaign

to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (2022) argues that Ukraine keeping nuclear weapons would not have prevented Russia's aggression.

CONCLUSION

Ukraine's post-independence foreign and security policy has undergone significant shifts, shaped by its decision to give up its nuclear weapons in 1994 and the subsequent reliance on international security assurances, which ultimately failed to prevent Russian aggression in 2014 and 2022. A key implication of this is that Ukraine's reliance on multilateral diplomacy rather than nuclear deterrence left it vulnerable to external threats, reinforcing the neorealist argument that states must prioritise self-help in an anarchic system. While some policymakers and scholars argue that renuclearisation could provide a stronger deterrent, there are significant geopolitical, economic, and legal obstacles that make such a move unlikely in the near future. Given these findings, Ukraine's future security strategy will likely focus on strengthening conventional military capabilities and deepening Western alliances rather than revisiting its nuclear status. Ultimately, Ukraine's experience underscores the complex trade-offs between disarmament, security assurances, and military deterrence, offering valuable insights into the broader debate on nuclear non-proliferation and international security.

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IN PURSUIT OF AGENCY

UNDERSTANDING UKRAINE'S FOREIGN POLICY POST-2014

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In a world of anarchy, power struggles, and pragmatic cynicism, no nation can attain its foreign policy goals from a position of weakness. The weak get eaten, says the law of the jungle, and, apparently, of international relations. Despite Western hopes and dreams of a liberal world order wherein matters are settled under international law and in good faith, reality proves otherwise. We still find ourselves in the same old Westphalian dystopia, where force and power ultimately define relations between nations. Thus, no state can ever sustain successful diplomacy without leverage.

As for Ukraine, it has largely been deprived of any such leverage, whether in terms of hard power or political stimuli. Trapped in an increasingly hostile environment, Ukraine has struggled to find its diplomatic stronghold, whether by seeking membership in security alliances or relying on key bilateral ties.

In this essay, I argue that one major rationale underlying Kyiv's foreign policymaking process has been a desire to achieve a position of power internationally, as opposed to being an object in other nations' interplay. A keyword to keep in mind is agency (*subiektnist*). This foreign policy driver is rather philosophical, but it derives from objective international conditions.

HISTORICAL AMBIGUITY

In 1991, Ukraine was born into a set of circumstances that I wouldn't hesitate to describe as doom. The essential prerequisite for the emergence of a modern Ukrainian nation-state was its initial disarmament. Upon giving up its entire nuclear arsenal, Ukraine's security remained hinged on the ephemeral promise of security assurances by the disarming powers, the Budapest Memorandum. However, when Russia's imperial ambitions became apparent, the West was reluctant to accept that new reality.

After Russia annexed Crimea and ignited bloodshed in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, Ukraine made an ultimate shift towards a Western-facing foreign policy, seeking integration into the EU and NATO. Conversely, hedging between Russia and the West as practiced before 2014 became an increasingly unpopular option among the people of Ukraine (Bychenko, 2016). This paradigm shift did not, however, concur with what the European and North American powers made of Ukraine's international role. Aside from a few voices calling on the US and allied powers to arm Kyiv against Russia-backed separatists back in 2014, like that of the late Senator John McCain, the governments of the West were mostly satisfied with the status quo in terms of the existing power distribution in the region. Arming Ukraine was not seen as a necessity. Nor was accepting Kyiv into NATO or giving it a viable option of NATO accession by means of granting the Membership Action Plan.[1]

The above policy was part of a longstanding tradition in Western political thinking. An extreme assessment of it would be that Ukraine was regarded as part of Russia's strategic neighbourhood. A more moderate one would have Ukraine imagined as a buffer state indispensable for European security but finding itself on its margins rather than being an integral part. Naturally, building relations with Ukraine was secondary to having a new start with post-Soviet Russia when the two states emerged. As put in a collective study on Ukrainian foreign policy produced by ETH Zurich in 1999, 'the fact that neither Western Europe nor its Eastern European neighbours were willing to support Ukraine on an anti-Russian basis was one of the vexing lessons the newly independent country had to learn' (Spillmann, Wenger and Müller, 1999).

Given this need to balance between an assertive Russia and an overcautious West, Ukraine led an unstable, visibly ambiguous foreign policy from 1991 to 2014, whereby any fluctuations resulted from political bargaining between different political groups or institutions. Essentially, Ukraine's foreign policy at the time was reflective of the infamous domestic ideological divide between pro-Russianism and the Western lean. In effect, that divide provided for a checks-and-balances system of foreign policy-making. In my view, Ukraine's hedging between Russia and the West was not so much an elaborate strategy as it was merely a constant reactive compromise.

Russia's violent response to Euromaidan and the toppling of Yanukovych made the pendulum of Ukrainian foreign policy swing one last time – towards integration with the West (Ekman, 2023). However, this new aspiration was hardly reciprocated. Different reasons may be found to explain the unwillingness, or lack of capability, on the European states' part to provide Ukraine with tangible options of joining the EU or NATO in any foreseeable future, whether those be lack of political will, institutional incompatibility, or complicated decision-making in said entities. One may rightfully suggest neither EU nor NATO accession would be rational for the West in purely realist terms, but expanding this discussion further would be a digression from the topic of this essay.

ALTERNATE POLICIES

Ukraine found itself in a dead end.

1. A world-renowned neorealist scholar Stephen M. Walt said in 2015, 'The solution to this crisis is for the United States and its allies to abandon the dangerous and unnecessary goal of endless NATO expansion and do whatever it takes to convince Russia that we want Ukraine to be a neutral buffer state in perpetuity.' (Walt, 2015)

If European and Euro-Atlantic integration were yet unattainable, and accommodating Russia was illegitimate, some alternative had to be found.

The two subsequent presidential administrations kept postulating EU and NATO accession as paramount foreign policy priorities, while the real prospect of joining either bloc never showed. Realistically speaking, it was a prayer, not a strategy.

Hence, Kyiv was desperate to find a way out into a more favourable international position. If European and Euro-Atlantic integration were yet unattainable, and accommodating Russia was illegitimate, some alternative had to be found. One that wouldn't rule out integration with the West, but would instead serve as a provisional substitute for the goals initially set. As Dudko and Pogorelova (2023, pp.271–272) put it, 'Given the relative uncertainty of Ukraine's prospects of becoming a member of NATO and the absence of an absolute consensus on Ukraine's membership among NATO member-states, we deem it necessary to form new international (primarily regional) associations. Alongside Ukraine, these would have to include other influential actors capable of contributing to international security'.

This became especially apparent under President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba. Determined to bring about change in Ukraine's foreign policy once elected, the Zelenskyy administration was eager to introduce new options for foreign alignment. One such option was the strategy of small alliances. Among those were the Lublin Triangle, the Association Trio, the Turkish-Ukrainian Quad, and the alliance between Ukraine, Poland, and the UK (Dudko and Pogorelova, 2023, p.272).
Ultimately, the strategy of small alliances proved unsuccessful in most cases. The latter two examples are indeed cooperation platforms with Ukraine's most valued partners in Europe as of 2021, in effect, Poland, Turkey, and the UK. The word 'alliance', though, does not reflect the nature of all these partnerships, as they were mere consulting platforms. Albeit a prudent course, this was insufficient for creating a network of alliances to back Ukraine's resistance to Russia's expansionism and hybrid threats.

It is important to grasp the idea behind the foregoing initiatives. To this end, let's examine another example, the Crimea Platform.

When Russia occupied and annexed Crimea in 2014, the vast majority of the world's nations condemned this as an act of aggression and didn't recognise the peninsula as Russian territory (United Nations General Assembly, 2014). However, few states, if any, seemed eager to address this issue materially ever since. Russia never expressed any interest in returning control over this territory to Ukraine and deemed its status non-negotiable. Thus, the situation seemed rather hopeless for Kyiv.
When President Zelenskyy came to power, he decided to bring about some change. In August 2021, Ukraine launched a series of summits entitled 'the Crimea Platform' (Socor, 2021). It was meant to become 'a multi-level framework for devising actions that would raise the costs of Russia's occupation and contradict Moscow's thesis about the irreversibility of its hold on the peninsula' (Socor, 2021). As of January 2025, the initiative is still afloat. Since its launch in 2021, 4 summits have been held overall, and several other events have also taken place at ministerial, parliamentary, and expert levels.

Normally, the Crimea Platform is deemed a successful initiative by Ukrainian scholars. In an article from 2022, Oleksandr Kraiev says, 'The [second] summit overall proved to be a success, and further press and expert interest has helped the platform remain in the spotlight for some time'. However, he then goes on to say, 'The Crimea Platform quickly became more of an idea than an actual instrument. Naturally, this runs contrary to the forum's original purposes and goals' (Kraiev, 2022).

Indeed, Ukraine has succeeded in drawing attention to the issue of Crimea and having 59 states attend the summits or reaffirm their recognition of Ukraine's territorial integrity (Crimea Platform, 2023) However, it would be bold to suggest that the Crimea Platform has brought Ukraine closer to reclaiming control over the peninsula materially. Any hopes for a non-military settlement of the issue remain unrealistic given the absence of support from actors, upon which Russia is utterly dependent, such as India or China. So far Ukraine has been unable to secure such support.

Therefore, this initiative serves as a substitute policy in a situation whereby it would arguably only be possible to regain control over Crimea militarily. This almost paradoxical case demonstrates Ukraine's ambition to achieve a position of power despite not having the necessary material high ground.

THE UNDERLYING IDEA

A key word to note in the speeches of Ukrainian political figures since around 2015 is agency (*subiektnist*). This is a word somewhat uncharacteristic of foreign policy discourse; it also bears an unconventional meaning.[2] Simply put, in this context agency means being a subject as opposed to being an object of international affairs. In the 1999 study I quoted earlier, a pinpoint accurate assessment of this Ukrainian idea may be found: 'The traumatic historic experience of being a mere object of world history, whenever Russia and the West came to terms on security issues on a global scale, was revived in 1992/93, when the first post-Soviet president and the nationalist elite led the country into international isolation' (Spillmann, Wenger and Müller, 1999). This feeling of having no say in matters having an impact on your fate is something that has been haunting Ukraine since 1991, when President George H.W. Bush held his infamous Chicken Kyiv Speech, and even more so since the beginning of the era of Russian aggression in 2014.

A symbol of this sentiment is 'Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine' – a principle introduced and demanded by Kyiv in the context of any negotiations on settling the Russo-Ukrainian war. Although this principle gained its special relevance in 2022, it was before Zelenskyy's presidency that it was first mentioned. As former President Poroshenko recalled in 2019, 'What bothers me the most is when Ukraine's fate is discussed without Ukraine. Because during my presidency every international meeting was based on the principle "Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine." Unfortunately, if we introduce other models now, Ukraine will turn from being a subject to being an object of international affairs' (Pidvezyanyy, 2023).

One possible inspiration behind this motto is the historical example of the 1938 Munich Agreement, which saw Adolf Hitler annex the Sudetenland by agreement with France and the UK. Czechoslovakia had no say in that decision. An ally of both Paris and London, Prague had to acquiesce to the Third Reich coming to annex all the territories inhabited by the so-called *Volksdeutsche*. In the words of Atlantic Council fellow Peter Dickinson, 'Faced with the modern-day revisionist aggression of Putin's Russia, Ukraine has been determined since 2014 to avoid the fate of the Czechoslovakians, who were famously excluded from the talks that led to the dismemberment of their country' (Dickinson, 2021).

AGENCY IN PRACTICE

This quest for agency in international affairs hasn't been confined to the rhetorical domain only. As the war dragged on, Ukraine expanded its toolkit to gain international significance. One example could be covert special operations to reduce the Kremlin's influence in the Sahel region and the Middle East. Ukraine reportedly provided support to rebel groups fighting against Russia-backed juntas and Russian mercenaries in Mali, Sudan, and, possibly, Syria (Naranjo, 2024; Lovett, Nikolaienko and Bariyo, 2024; Ignatius, 2024).

Another example is the array of military innovations introduced by the Ukrainian military-tech sector. Among those are, for instance, sea drones. Ukraine managed to destroy a large portion of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, shoot down air vessels, and make the rest of the Russian capabilities on the Black Sea largely inactive.

It's hard to deny that these acts do contribute to Ukraine's international agency. Kyiv has undeniably learnt to convert its military capabilities into means of advancing its foreign policy independently. This also means Ukraine already has some leverage over Russia which may prove useful in dealing with Moscow diplomatically further on. However, I believe that whether or not Ukraine will retain this momentum to become a self-sufficient international actor depends largely on the outcome of this war of survival against Russia. Ironically, a positive scenario can't come into being without Ukraine's international partners contributing to it.

Yet there's another obstacle that rarely, if ever, gets mentioned. One of Ukraine's novel foreign policy priorities is engaging the nations of the Global South (Bashchenko, 2024). So far, no significant success has been achieved in this regard. Michael Kugelman, director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center, says Ukraine's attempts to expand the coalition of its supporters in the Global South have been unsuccessful because of a certain bias on the latter's part (Ostiller, 2024). Ukraine's Peace Summits are regarded as 'a pro-West affair' (Ostiller, 2024). Thus, Ukraine is seen as attached to the West and, therefore, supportive of Western postcolonial policies and practices. This makes it hard for Kyiv to assert its agency in dealing with the Global South.

In turn, getting rid of this stigma would go into conflict with Ukraine being on track to join the European Union. Essentially, this process requires a candidate country to align its foreign

2. In the domain of IR academic research, the term agency usually refers to the capability of a certain entity to be an actor of international relations. The objects of study are therefore, e.g., ways and means of obtaining agency, the agent-structure problem, performances of agency, etc. In the context of this essay, agency is better understood as de facto sovereignty (See Braun, Schindler and Wille, 2019).

and security policy with that of the EU. Consequently, practicing different approaches to relations with China or India than that of Brussels would pose an obstacle to Ukraine's accession negotiations. Furthermore, joining the EU is in itself a voluntary act of partially delegating state sovereignty to a common European center, which goes contrary to the entire agency-obtaining foreign policy discourse.

CONCLUSIONS

Agency is a principle crucial to understanding Ukrainian foreign policymaking. It derives from a complex state of being excluded from decision-making processes regarding the issues of Ukrainian territorial integrity and constitutional law, regional security, and alliance configuration. Often lacking material leverage, Kyiv cannot exert pressure on its international counterparts to achieve its strategic objectives conventionally, thus having to resort to elaborating substitute policies to satisfy this call for agency in foreign affairs embedded in Ukraine's political culture. This complex serves as a tool for legitimising foreign policy in general, but lately also as a driver of numerous foreign-bound initiatives under President Zelenskyy, especially during Russia's full-scale invasion.

As the outcome of the war remains unclear for Ukraine, it is trying to assert its role in a future world order as an active subject of international affairs. The wartime reality is helping Ukraine obtain leverage, but its foreign policy resources remain limited. Likewise, it remains to be seen whether or not this pursuit of sovereign diplomacy will persist in the future, as Ukraine faces challenges related to its agency posed by its often-contradictory foreign policy goals.

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THE SECURITY OF UKRAINE IS IN THE ARMS OF THE EU

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It is vital that international relations research supports Ukraine's foreign policy decisions. Ukraine's security stability has been weakened since 2022 by the full-scale Russian invasion. This created additional challenges to be tackled in cooperation with Western partners. Ukraine must find a way to maintain strategic partnerships and strengthen its economy to provide itself with security protections. The most likely scenario for Ukraine in conditions of permanent presence in the neighborhood of Russia is to rely on foreign aid and develop its economic facilities to resist more possible attacks in the future independently. Ukraine has followed the Euro-Atlantic bloc for a long time, emphasising its value for the nation's improvement. Thus, the European Union will open up a range of economic opportunities for Ukraine that pave the way for sustaining security.

UKRAINE'S INTERESTS IN ACCESSION

Ukraine considers European integration to be of the highest significance despite it being a long term prospect. Further cooperation will help Ukraine withstand contemporary Russian incursions and pave the way for a secure future. The ability to restore the Ukrainian economy and build reformed legal institutions relies on accession to the EU. Integration of Ukraine is encouraged by common norms and goals. The war conditions have made the process which is crucial for post-conflict prosperity more complicated. The Russian invasion accelerated strategic changes in Ukraine's foreign policy. Understanding the current structure of international relations is our main concern.

The European Union has been helping Ukraine since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014 through sanctions and military support. It also has provided valuable aid for future reconstruction. For instance, the European Commission established a special financial fund of around 50 million euros in order to assist Ukraine during 2024–2027 (Government of Ukraine, 2024). Membership in the EU will achieve Ukraine's aim by increasing economic relations with Western partners. Ukraine requires extended international trade and economic growth to restore the country's stability. Additional markets and foreign investments can bring the economy out of the crisis caused by war. The single European market will allow Ukrainian enterprises to increase sales without extra costs. The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area has already raised the volume of bilateral trade; however, membership will enhance this relationship, making it independent from the policies of certain authorities. Foreign investment improves production and raises it to the technological level of other EU member-states (European Union, 2024). Fulfillment of the union's requirements leads to more transparent money distribution and anti-corruption due to its system of Euroregions (Durà et al., 2018). Direct financial assistance to projects in the most affected areas facilitates recovery from the war. All of this will raise the living standards in Ukraine to the standards of the European Union, which creates opportunities for reliable social protection. Cultural and educational exchanges are promoted between the states-members. Further integration will reveal Ukraine's potential and independence and ability to respond to complex challenges.

SECURITY DILEMMA

Russia constantly utilises the tools of hybrid war toward states of Eastern Europe like Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, interfering in the election process and distributing disinformation. This creates obstacles to the rapid and successful fulfillment of required reforms. Furthermore, almost eleven years of war and three years after the full-scale invasion, they continue to chip away at Ukrainian security. On the one hand, the EU is the best opportunity for Ukraine to extend its range of foreign trade partnerships to restore the economy and maintain military readiness without relying on security guarantees from foreign powers. On the other hand, Ukraine's desire to further develop economically using the benefits of the EU diverges from the interests of their dangerous neighbor. But joining the EU creates less risks than NATO membership which is not an option for Ukraine. Its historical enemies, like Russia, will never leave without efforts to return Ukraine to security neutrality, and its major Western partners, like the U.S. and Germany, oppose membership greatly. President Trump has even recently announced Ukrainian membership in NATO as impractical, closing this issue for a long time. The United States has leverage in the alliance due to its current leadership in the world and influences the decision relating to accepting new members despite making statements about the obsoleteness of the current world order. These days, Ukraine in NATO can lead to the escalation of the conflict on the global level between the United States and China, going beyond the regional constraints of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The perspective of NATO seems to be far from reality. However, political issues require crucial changes that may strengthen the country's stability. So the reliance on their own military capabilities will be built up through advancing the recovered economy. The turn of Ukraine towards greater cooperation with Europe should be achieved through EU membership,

which is the most appropriate for the country's interests and capabilities. Accession to the EU is a prospect in the long-term; the EU has to be ready to gradually continue the enlargement process as membership provides more complex integration leaving no room for maneuver.

BENEFITS OF ENLARGEMENT FOR THE EU

The EU is the most effective regional integration in the world, even though there have been many attempts to establish similar entities in other regions. However, Europe is going through hard times as it must choose between further stagnation and urgent changes. Russian-Ukrainian conflict exacerbated the ongoing process of Europe's decline. We can with certainty call Europe the weak part of the structure of international relations because of external vulnerability and internal turbulence. The deficit in economic competitiveness due to the equalisation program causes problems and decreases security while Europe can't spend more on its defence. There are such troubles as the absence of cheap fuel and the aging population. During the last decades, the EU has faced many serious challenges, including alterations to companies supply chains induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the need to reduce dependence on Russia has resulted in modifications to energy security practices. (Arjona and Revoltella, 2024).

There is a bipolar system in the EU that creates existential challenges. Interests of national countries may prevail over those of subnational organs. This often precludes the Union from making strategic decisions and poses obstacles to internal coordination. Thus, the EU has to strengthen its stability by further integration. History shows that the Union has found two ways of dealing with this issue. Integration should be deepened by sharing sub-nationality on a wider scope of topics and revising the decision-making structure. Another way is to enlarge the union and increase the number of members.

These two options for tackling crises are usually used in turn. The EU gradually utilised the source of stability laid down and came to an internal crisis. Overcoming this problem is the primary goal of Europe. The last serious dilemma was addressed by the Lisbon Treaty, which deepened integration in 2009 (Pavy, 2024). The current crisis of the EU will be faced by the enlargement policy or a combination of two methods. Ukraine can be the impetus to continue further integration. Institutional links on the periphery of the union will establish more resilient stability. This also relates to other Eastern European countries that strive to be part of the Union, like Georgia, Moldova, and Balkan states. These countries may constitute, together with Ukraine, the eighth wave of enlargement. Now the most important task for them is to adhere to the European approach to demonstrate the strength of the desire. They have the essential need to focus on membership in the EU. In this way, the perspective of accession fosters internal changes within the Union as the preparation for enlargement requires revising domestic structures.

OBSTACLES ON THE PATH TO ENLARGEMENT

Some troubles prolong the accession process for Eastern European countries, including Ukraine. The EU is vulnerable to external shifts as well as to domestic turbulence. Aside from that, accession may take time as it requires internal changes within the European Union. The final decision on Ukraine`s integration is postponed because of the war on the state's territory caused by Russian aggression. Contemporary membership for Ukraine will create a range of risks for the EU as the costs of additional assistance will need to be increased.

Firstly, Europe faces a leadership crisis and has limited capacity to take an active role in foreign policy. Internal difficulties have decreased the union's influence on security matters. There is domestic turbulence within some of the main member-states. Populist and far-right parties are gaining more power, exacerbating the situation in Hungary, Italy, and Slovakia (Panchenko, and Sydorenko, 2024; Kot, 2024). Germany is at a crossroads in consequence of its further elections (DW, 2025). The economic situation is not improving, with public debt in France, Italy, and Spain exceeding 100 percent of GDP. Apart from that, the military expenditures vary from country to country, with Baltic states and Poland spending more on their defence. The ability of European states to increase military expenditures is limited.

In addition, internal and external challenges occur at the same time. The problem is that long-term valuable partners of the Union, like the U.S. and China, affect the vulnerability to a great extent by modifying their trade policy. The decline of the U.S. hegemony is clear from the statements of its authorities and the new international order which is emerging. These days the world is becoming more and more protectionist and major actors like the U.S. and China demonstrate these tendencies in the economy by establishing tariffs and conducting trade wars. The United States imposed an additional ten percent tariff on all imports from China (European Integration, 2025). The issue of Taiwanese semiconductors causes extra tensions in U.S.-China relations, creating anxiety within the EU. The

Ukraine considers European integration to be of the highest significance despite it being a long term prospect.

main objective of the EU is to maintain peace, for example by decreasing dependence on the U.S. and regulating risks with China, which strives to play a main role in the future international order. The U.S. may use pressure on the EU to enforce the Union's tougher position relating to trade with China. The recent threats of the U.S. to begin a tariff war with European states can lead to closer economic ties between China and the EU (Ukrinform, 2025). However, being attached to a common strategy is more difficult for the EU as a result of the differing views within the union. Export-dependent Germany and the Netherlands are against tariffs on Chinese goods, while France and Poland advance protectionist measures (Samusenko, 2025). The divergent policies of member-states make it harder to create a common economic strategy.

Another problem is the institutional deadlock that keeps the Union far from strategic decisions. One vote is enough to break a resolution reached by the majority. The EU utilises the principle of unanimity relating to the Union's enlargement. This means that the start of accession negotiations doesn't guarantee membership without a path of obstacles. Member-states can block the accession decisions based on their interests. For instance, Hungary has imposed a veto on the decision to begin the accession negotiations with Ukraine to maintain relations with Russia. This can be repeated with regards to future membership. Apart from that, Ukrainian agricultural potential creates extra challenges for European farmers. The state's advantages in this sector becomes an obstacle to European integration. Ukrainian crops and a significant part of arable land may create greater competition for European suppliers in the common market.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE EU AND UKRAINE

The history of relations between the EU and Ukraine is characterised by years of cooperation. In 2017 the Association agreement between the two started to function completely, after a prolonged two stage process. The first stage embraced political elements and was signed in March 2014. Due to this aspect of the agreement, Ukraine became closer to the political standards necessary for integration into the European structures. The second part was dedicated to economic relations and was signed later that year (EUUA, 2023). The Association agreement provided structural reforms in Ukraine's economy and legal system. It also promoted anti-corruption measures that put the country closer to joining the EU. After the beginning of the full-scale invasion, which stirred Europe up and emphasised the need for urgent action, Ukraine and the EU have made great steps in the accession process. Enlargement policy became prioritised during the ongoing war as a part of the union's response to Russia's brutal actions. On the fifth day after the invasion, 28 February 2022, Ukraine applied to join the EU, with the European Council approving candidate status for Ukraine in June of that year (Office of the President of Ukraine, 2024). Much work had to be done during the preparation time, including reforms and improvement. On 14 December 2023, the European Council took a crucial decision to open official accession negotiations (European Pravda, 2023). This is a huge change in the nature of relations between Ukraine and the EU that brings actual membership closer than ever (European Pravada, 2023). And finally, the official beginning of the accession negotiations started on 25 June 2024 (European Council, 2024). It was a significant milestone, but we are now at the most difficult stage when all the disputed issues with other member states must be agreed upon and the final necessary reforms for accession must be implemented. There are no guarantees, but the path has been too difficult and long to ignore Ukraine›s progress in achieving EU accession.

CONCLUSION

Ukraine's accession to the European Union is the strategic option for both parties. It brings security and economic advantages to Ukraine and promotes the EU's recovery from its existential crisis. Though some obstacles exist in the path of implementation, the progress towards Ukrainian integration is obvious, based on the rapid development of bilateral relations. Despite the complicated conditions of war which became an impulse for active action and change, Ukraine has conducted a range of reforms under these circumstances ,demonstrating its commitment to European values. Significantly, Ukrainian military capabilities can be built up by strengthening the economy. Ukrainian membership in the EU will be an investment in European security and decrease the threat of Russian imperialism.

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

STAY TUNED FOR OUR AUTUMN 2025 ISSUE

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