IdPS

Interdisciplinary Political Studies

UNIVERSITÀ
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The Securitization of Frontiers: The European Union's Migration, Refugee and Asylum Policies in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

SPECIAL ISSUE INTRODUCTION

Bordering Practices in the EU's Eastern Borderland/s
Conceptualizing Space (and Community) within and without Europe

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Abstract

Borders—and, more specifically, bordering practices—are among the most powerful signifiers shaping global, regional, national, and local dynamics. Their effects extend across political, geographical, and cognitive dimensions. To understand these dynamics, we adopt the concept of 'borderlands' to denote spaces of flux, where multiple bordering practices coexist, and borders are simultaneously produced and effaced. The European Union (EU)'s Eastern Neighbourhood serves as an exemplary case of such borderlands, with particular attention to developments in the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership, and the Russian Federation. This introductory article provides the conceptual framework for a set of multidisciplinary contributions that investigate the complex interplay between bordering practices and the transformation of borderlands in the EU's East.

Keywords: Borders; European Union; Western Balkans; Eastern Partnership; Russia.

Introduction

> The border is an evolving construction with merits and problems
> that must be constantly reweighed (Agnew, 2008, p. 176)

Bordering practices suggest that borders are not fixed; they are often subject to conflicting symbolic interpretations, historical recollections, and complex regulatory regimes. This process involves states and international organizations, but also the geography and self-representation of the actors involved at different levels (people, municipalities, state, and supranational actors). This dynamic results in controversies over the interpretation and meaning of spatiality, which involves conflicting political and social orders with geopolitical and cultural implications.

Few areas in the world have been as affected by a dense set of processes of bordering, de-bordering, and othering in both geopolitical and cognitive senses as the European Union (EU)'s Eastern neighbourhood. The enlargement of international institutions such as the EU and NATO, violent conflicts (such as the wars of Yugoslav and Soviet successions), and the establishment of partnerships and areas of regional cooperation (including the EU's Eastern

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Partnership, NATO's Partnership for Peace, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) have led to the redefinition of physical and cognitive borders and frequently to forced migration. The region has also been characterized by a sometimes fluid and spontaneous, occasionally channeled, sometimes chaotic transit of people who crossed, contested, and redefined existing borders, such as those coming from southern regions towards Europe (e.g., the Balkan route) or from Russia and the Caucasus.

Due to this dense and diverse set of bordering and de-bordering dynamics, the EU's East is an intriguing area to explore the clashes between tendencies towards hard-bordering (frequently associated with territorial conflicts and de facto border changes), de-bordering (seen in the softening of borders entailed in the creation of areas of regional integration), and othering (manifested in practices of marginalization and exclusion of outsiders—be they ethnic minorities or immigrants—in their respective national or regional contexts). This Special Issue undertakes an analysis of these dynamics across different areas of the EU's Eastern 'borderlands' (the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership, and the Russian Federation), conceived as spaces where borders—whether cognitive, physical, or political—are simultaneously produced and effaced, paying attention to both historical processes and recent developments. From this latter perspective, Russia's new assertiveness has certainly attracted significant scholarly attention (see, for example, Mungiu-Pippidi 2024).

Focusing on the 'borderlands' makes a distinctive contribution to the existing literature: first, it shines a light on an area that has been scarcely examined through this conceptual lens; second, it highlights the pluralism of practices and the multiplicity of actors involved in their activation, extending beyond traditional ones. Third, it broadens the focus from the EU's role in the area to the roles of other actors, without losing sight of the combined efforts of often opposing bordering and de-bordering practices. The multidisciplinary nature of this Special Issue, drawing from history, international relations, critical border studies, and migration studies, as well as the inherent flexibility of its methodological choices, further underscores the appropriateness of this conceptual perspective. In this regard, this contribution has three main tasks: to define the relevant concepts and propose a distinction between bordering practices and types of borders; to recall some of the main dynamics of de-bordering, re-bordering, and othering in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood; and to identify crucial questions—partially still unanswered—to which the articles in this Special Issue aim to respond.

This introductory article begins with a consideration of the heightened relevance of borders and, more specifically, of bordering practices, emphasizing their multifaceted effects in political, geographical, and cognitive terms. It then introduces the concept of 'borderlands', differentiating it from other usages of the term to describe an area of changeable spaces where multiple bordering practices are simultaneously produced and effaced. Here, the EU's East is identified as the primary site of investigation, focusing on the dense grid of actors, political experiments, and symbolic meanings that constantly reframe and dispute a consolidated understanding of borders, whether national, regional, or supranational. Finally, it outlines the research questions that the articles in this Special Issue will address.

Borders: so hard, so loose

The concept of 'border' is evocative and seemingly self-evident in its meaning. However, it is polysemic and tends to be perceived and enacted differently by various actors at different historical moments. After years of fascination with a globalized world, transnational relations, and ever less Westphalian interpretation of state demarcations, borders have now regained ground. The fact that we live in a "very bordered world" is not new (Diener & Hagen, 2012, p. 1). However, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the erection of fences

around the world, borders are back in the spotlight of politics and academia (Makarychev et al., 2024; Makarychev & Dufy, 2024; Zhurzhenko, 2024). While attention has reasonably shifted towards a 'hard' understanding borders, the study of borders cannot be limited to this specific aspect. As Makarychev and Dufy (2024, p. 217) highlight, the focus should not only be on the impact of military action on international borders in Europe, but also on the wide range of practices implemented by states and international organizations that shape people's sense of space and community *through* borders:

"Spaces and borders might be (re)constituted and (re)shuffled, apart from military atrocities, by institutional policies of EU eastward enlargement, normative and civilizational choices of candidate countries, economic and financial flows, as well as a range of biopolitical practices - from managing human migration to mitigating food insecurities in the global South."

Over the last decades, the literature has emphasized the need to problematize essentialist readings of borders as "lines in the sand", revealing the complexity of the relation between borders and territory, and highlighting the latter's nature as a "shifting medium" (Parker, Vaughan-Williams et al., 2009). Thinking about borders as "practices", we may look at how divisions between entities emerge, or are produced and maintained, from a more political, sociological and actor-oriented perspective: that is, we may endorse "a shift from *the concept of the border* to the *notion of bordering practice*" (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2012, p. 729; see also Ceccorulli, Fassi, Lucarelli, 2023). Such practices are assumed to be implemented not only by the state – "with its numerous institutions uninterruptedly being mobilized in both social spatialization and spatial socialization" (Paasi, 2021, p. 22) –, but also "performed *in interaction* with other types of non-state actors, processes and organisations" (Parker & Adler-Nissen, 2012, p. 776). Finally, it is imperative to acknowledge that bordering practices encompass not only overt actions that are unequivocally intended to 'border', but also covert activities whose unintended consequences may include the establishment and/or re-establishment of borders (ibidem).

Accordingly, several practices and several types of borders can be identified (Ilcan et al., 2022). For the sake of simplicity, we will limit ourselves to the distinction between practices of bordering, de-bordering, and othering; as for types of borders, we will distinguish between hard, soft and cognitive borders.

Bordering is the material and/or narrative practice to define a dividing line between groups/polities/states. The process of de-bordering involves the reduction of border effects with the objective of facilitating circulation across the dividing line. In contrast, the process of re-bordering entails the reactivation of specific border functions on both symbolic and material levels (Andreas and Biersteker, 2003). Finally, othering refers to practices of inclusion/exclusion coming along with the process of (de-/re-)bordering, that is "an ongoing co-shaping and co-demarcating of a socially ordered identity (a we) and a constituted outside (a them)" (Van Houtum, 2021, p. 36).

These practices of border construction/deconstruction have been mostly studied adopting a distinction between hard and soft borders, describing borders as 'closed', or 'barriers' (*hard*), or as 'open', 'porous', or 'bridges' (*soft*) (Neuwahl, 2020). The traditional concept of 'hard' borders is associated with physical territorial boundaries, while the more recent idea of 'soft' borders aims to acknowledge the complex connections in border areas and a more flexible, negotiable approach to borders. Both terms are used metaphorically to describe different ways of perceiving and implementing physical borders (Grappi & Lucarelli, 2021). However, it is important to recognize that, in reality, borders can be both hard and soft at

the same time. What really matters are the social relationships that are created and sustained by borders (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p. 279).

A more telling distinction is between material and cognitive/ideational borders. Again, the distinction between the two is less sharp than it seems, as they impact on each other; however, they can be considered analytically distinct, being the former made of barriers, fences, administrative boundaries of rights, and the latter the perceived borders of a self-identified community (Brown, 2001). Cognition of self and otherness constitutes an imaginary border which has important social and political implications, which can also lead to material aggressive behaviour, as events in Ukraine and the Middle East are currently showing (Opioła et al., 2022; Al-Hindi, 2023).

In the EU, the intersection between bordering practices and types of borders is particularly interesting, as this political entity is itself the product of multiple processes involving border dynamics, starting with the integration process. The EU has also framed its relations with its proximities, conferring a peculiar role to de-bordering and bordering dynamics. At the same time, the EU's East is itself characterized by an interplay of dynamics which reshuffle borders and their political and social bearing. This is why this Special Issue is specifically focused on this crucial 'borderland'.

From Bordering to Borderland/s: the EU and its (Eastern) Neighbourhood

Founded on the idea that fostering stronger transnational relationships among states can have a profoundly positive impact on international cooperation, the EU integration process has been driven by a vision of constructing peace and security through the transformation of traditional notions of state borders. The gradual introduction of exclusive or shared areas of EU authority, collaborative efforts in infrastructure-building, and the facilitation of transborder mobility through the single market and the Schengen Agreement have been fundamental components of the integration process. In other words, the EU has boldly reinterpreted and redefined the significance of its member states' borders, representing one of the most crucial, yet often overlooked, aspects of its post-Westphalian (Caporaso, 1996) or pre-Westphalian (Zielonka, 2013) character.

At the same time, the redefinition of borders, both internal and external, has changed the nature of the EU, its self-representation, and its practices. Enlargement has played an important role in the 'remaking' of Europe (Browning, 2005). It has been a, *de facto*, living process of complex reorganization of the physical and cognitive borders of and within Europe. The Eastern European narrative of a 'return to Europe' has been accompanied by uneasy processes of institutional and cognitive adaptation and, for parts of European societies, by revised forms of self-identification. Far from being a case of 'mere' institutional adoption of the *acquis communautaire*, enlargement has entailed a significant cognitive and ideational component, leading to a slow yet consequential redefinition of the borders of the perceived community of belonging for both old and, particularly, new members.

Enlargement has also redefined the physical, cognitive, and ideational boundaries of neighbouring communities, within a dynamic of self–other representation that has softened borders with some non-EU countries (e.g. Ukraine and Georgia)—also by means of enhanced partnerships—and has contributed to the transformation of internal debordering practices, with the gradual participation of new member states (and some non-member states) in the Schengen area. Nonetheless, "the positive 'strategic landscape' which existed immediately following eastward enlargement in May 2004" has been gradually effaced since the late 2000s by the growing "threats to European values bearing down on the EU from all sides" (Kramsch, 2011, p. 194). In this regard, the rising role of China in the global economy and the aggressive militarism of Russia may serve as illustrative examples. The very fact that the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which was promoted in 2004 to avoid drawing

dividing lines in Europe after the enlargement, paradoxically re-established such dividing lines between the EU and "regions of the world located at the limits of European territory" (Kramsch, 2011, p. 197) shows how a state of contention has gradually emerged in the "wider Europe", where competing ideas of space and community have come to clash.

In her study devoted to the EU's relations with its southern neighbours, Del Sarto (2021, p. 2) adopts the definition of "Europe's borderlands" to describe the EU's neighbourhood as an in-between region, or "an area which is not Europe but which remains closer and more connected than the areas beyond it" (Del Sarto, 2021, p. 3). Within the space of this 'broader Europe', we thus witness the emergence of "a system of concentric regions", where "a number of countries in Eastern Europe and around the southern Mediterranean are linked to the European Union through different types of institutional and trade relations, and these states vary in their status vis-à-vis Europe" (Del Sarto, 2021, p. 22). Del Sarto analyses these dynamics by identifying the EU as "an empire of sorts" (ivi, p. 22), and more specifically as a "normative empire", experiencing an "enduring territorial instability" (ivi, p. 27) due to repeated rounds of enlargement and constantly striving to stabilise its borderlands.

In border studies, borderlands are also described as areas of "active tensions between antagonistic logics" (Bossé et al., 2019, p. 10) or as "shifting sites of transition and movement, where space is contested and negotiated" (Fellner, 2024, p. 5). Along these lines, we use the concept of borderland to denote an area in which borders—whether cognitive, physical, or political—are concurrently established and dissolved.

On the one hand, as a result of re-bordering and de-bordering processes within and promoted by the EU in its neighbourhood, the area along the EU's eastern border has been subject to a remapping of political and social space in terms of identity-making, which has frequently been "grounded in two pillars — the (re)territorialization of politics and the binary conceptualization of Self-Other distinctions" (Makarychev, 2018, p. 747). Moreover, the shifting and permeable nature of the EU's eastern borderlands, which are still shaped by EU policies aiming "to integrate these areas in a highly selective, gradual, and differentiated manner into the European order" (Del Sarto, 2021, p. 27), also makes them important sites of transition and mobility.

On the other hand, the concept of 'borderlands' appears to accurately capture both the condition of contention and the concomitant permeability of the Eastern European neighbourhood, while allowing us to move beyond an exclusively EU-centred perspective. Accordingly, the emergence of the EU's eastern borderland may also be described as the result of a "crisis of political 'vision' capable of representing how the external borders of Europe should be cared of as a properly worldly space" (Kramsch, 2011, p. 196). In this context, actors other than the EU advance their own "cartographic and epistemological representation in the world" (ivi, p. 194), creating parallel—and often contested—practices of debordering, rebordering, and othering not only within or vis-à-vis Europe, but also beyond Europe. Here, the pluralism of practices and the multiplicity of actors involved in activating them beyond traditional ones constitute a crucial, yet often overlooked, area of investigation.

Remapping Eastern Borderland/s: the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and the Russian Federation

Since the 2010s, an unprecedented series of political 'crises' in the EU's Eastern borderlands has further highlighted the need for a better understanding of the nature of competing political and social orders in the broader European (and Eurasian) space, where human mobility, identity-making, and the hardening of physical borders strongly intersect. The Western Balkans (WB) can be considered the quintessence of these dynamics and emblematically embody the ever-changing character of the EU's Eastern borderlands. They

constitute a target area for further EU enlargement and are deeply involved in the accession process across its multiple dimensions (Sekulić, 2020), albeit with an unpredictable accession path. Migration flows along the Balkan Route have conferred upon the region a new and crucial geopolitical role from Brussels' perspective, turning it into a potential partner in the control and management of migrants arriving from third countries—that is, a partner in the process of the securitisation of borders and migration. For this reason, the EU and Western Balkan countries have recently engaged in enhanced cooperation initiatives, including the externalisation of borders, understood as the transfer of human and financial resources to carry out border management activities outside the EU (Bobić & Šantić, 2020). As the EU has increasingly shifted the burden of migration governance onto its Eastern neighbours, this process has gradually favoured the rise of exclusionary politics and authoritarian practices in the Western Balkans (Bieber, 2020), in some cases reactivating the 'old' territorial disputes stemming from the Yugoslav succession wars of the 1990s. Moreover, the 'Balkan route' has long been a major corridor for migrants and refugees; yet its prominence has been overshadowed by the uncomfortable fact that "several European countries which emerged from the genocidal dissolution of Yugoslavia" had "yet to be (re) admitted into the self-anointed circle of genuine and proper European-ness" (De Genova, 2017, p. 20). As Zoppi and Puleri (2022, p. 585) emphasise, this process "created room for alternative discourses to enter the debate, which were mainly revolving around a 'new' functional idea of European spatiality", thereby making the Western Balkans a crucial borderland for determining what Europe is—and what it is not.

In a similar vein, the Eastern Partnership, launched in 2009, was formed to 'upgrade' the EU's relations with most of its eastern neighbours, with the main goal to accelerate political association and deepen economic integration between the EU and its Eastern neighbours. This regional framework included six post-Soviet countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine), while, unsurprisingly, excluding the Russian Federation, also in light of its special status within the political geography of a continent spanning both Europe and Asia (Hofmann, 2020). It is therefore not surprising that the term "Eurasia"—deeply rooted in Russian intellectual traditions and recently revived in the post-Soviet political imaginary of this segment of the EU's Eastern borderlands—has been variously described as a "contact zone" or as a "geopolitical" and "civilizational project" threatening the stability of the EU (Laruelle, 2015). As Akchurina and Della Sala (2018, p. 1546) argue, the 2004 enlargement of the European Union resulted in the inclusion of members who perceived their accession to the organisation as a guarantee of protection from renewed incorporation into the Russian sphere of influence. Conversely, the Eastern Partnership, which initially lacked a clear integration perspective for its affiliated countries, gradually evolved into a platform for cooperation. Its primary objective appears to have been the division of post-Soviet Europe into Russia and "non-Russia" (Baunov, 2015). The re-bordering process enacted through the Eastern Partnership, thus, created a new borderland between the EU and Russia; paradoxically, this process also reshaped the political and social reinvention of the former Soviet space over recent decades.

For the Russian Federation, the region emerging from the ashes of the USSR has represented a sphere of vital interest for structuring its post-imperial and post-Soviet political identity, while simultaneously posing a major challenge to the reconstruction of its role as a regional power. In 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the disintegration of a contact zone characterised by high levels of human mobility and largely invisible internal borders into fifteen new independent states. The transition that followed produced increasing diversification in internal developments across the region, giving rise to new—often contested—borders and divergent economic and social dynamics (Minakov, 2019). At the same time, mirroring the perceived success of the European Union, regionalism

gradually became the foundation of a broader Russian identity-building project, with the state sponsoring cultural and economic initiatives aimed at fostering a new supranational identity (Kazharski, 2019, p. 28). Nonetheless, Russia and the European Union approached their shared borderlands in markedly different ways: on the one hand, "their respective handling of their common neighbourhood came to be tightly bound to their respective identities" (ivi, p. 7); on the other hand, Russian state identity became increasingly anchored to territory—a territory that, notably, "stretches beyond the borders of the Russian Federation" (ivi, p. 9). Linked to culturally ascriptive qualities (Fasola & Lucarelli, 2019) and to a historical self-representation as a Great Power (Moulioukova & Kanet, 2021), post-Soviet Russian identity has thus been deeply embedded in its role within the neighbourhood.

The 2008 'August War' in Georgia not only had 'frozen' Tbilisi's ambitions for deeper integration into Western institutions, but also had made clear to other post-Soviet countries that Russia's engagement in the post-Soviet space would henceforth be driven by national and ideational interests. At the same time, Russia's unilateral recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in late August 2008 rendered "Russia's allegations to be "a stabilizing, ordering or organizing force in the post-Soviet space," (Prozorov, 2010, p. 264) no longer credible, thereby opening further space for violent territorial contestation and contributing to a growing condition of instability and contention in the 'borderland' between Russia and the EU.

Russia's evolving self-identity has also been deeply shaped by its perception of others, especially 'Europe' and the EU. Historically, Europe has occupied a dual position in Russian identity formation, functioning both as a constitutive element of the Self and as a significant 'Other'. At the end of the Cold War, this ambiguity leaned more towards a liberal interpretation, emphasising normative affinity with the West while still affirming Russia's civilisational uniqueness and special interests in the post-Soviet space. From the early 2000s onwards, however, Russian elites increasingly embraced a more nationalist—and partially Eurasianist—understanding of core identity traits, including ascriptiveness, greatpowerness, and stateness (Fasola & Lucarelli, 2025). This shift profoundly altered Russia's perception of the EU, as well as its relations with the EU and with the shared neighbourhood. Elites increasingly stressed Russia's historical mission and cultural uniqueness, promoting the idea of a distinct political trajectory through 'sovereign democracy'.

This growing insistence on Russia's uniqueness fostered heightened securitisation of culture and values, rendering meaningful dialogue with the West progressively more strained, if not altogether unworkable. Over the following decade, developments in the shared neighbourhood further hardened Russian perceptions of the EU and the EU's perceptions of Russia, while nurturing alternative and often conflictual projects for regional ordering.

Only by adopting this broader perspective can we fully grasp the long-term impact of the opposing bordering practices underpinning the so-called Ukraine crisis (2014–), which severely undermined security prospects for Europe (and Eurasia) through the contested annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Eastern Ukraine (Raik, 2019). Already by 2020, this conflict—gradually built upon the Kremlin's ideological re-bordering of an "historical Russia" through the reunification of its "divided people" (Puleri & Mamaiev, 2024)—had generated a pressing, yet largely "invisible", human mobility crisis (Sasse, 2020): the forced displacement of approximately 1.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Ukraine preceded the outflow of more than six million refugees following the Russian full-scale invasion in February 2022. This massive resettlement across the European Union was subsequently accompanied by the departure of approximately 800,000 Russian citizens, who left their country for destinations across the EU's Eastern borderlands in order to

escape military conscription, deteriorating economic conditions, and political repression (Krawatzek & Sasse, 2024). Furthermore, while the de facto modification of Ukrainian borders in late September 2022—following Russia's unilateral annexation of four partially occupied regions—was sanctioned through Kremlin-sponsored referendums, the Azerbaijani offensive in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 resulted in the restoration of the *de jure* international borders of the former Soviet republic and brought an end to the existence of the breakaway entity. This event was celebrated by President Ilham Aliyev as the fulfilment of a decades-long 'Azerbaijani dream' of reclaiming the region from ethnic Armenian separatists. According to UNHCR data, approximately 115,000 refugees have since fled Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, where they now account for around 3 per cent of the total population.

Last but not least, over the past decade, the EU's own process of de-bordering appears to have slowed down, if not partially reversed. Hard borders within and among member states, as well as vis-à-vis third countries, have been reinforced. The EU's external borders have been hardened, and internal freedom of movement has been restricted—at times suspended altogether—in response to perceived threats related to terrorism, irregular migration, or the spread of viruses (Baker-Beall, 2019; Leonard & Kaunert, 2020; Ceccorulli, 2025). The rhetoric of a 'geopolitical' EU has thus increasingly been coupled with the narrative and practice of a 'protective' Europe, centred on border control. While the prospect of a new enlargement round (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia) has been framed as a geopolitical imperative necessary to safeguard Europe's core values, this outward-looking rationale has unfolded alongside a renewed inward turn, marked by the resurgence of nationalism. Although this nationalism takes different forms in Eastern and Western Europe, it displays significant similarities in its shared understanding of physical borders as sovereign prerogatives of the state and as the ultimate *limes* of rights.

The effects of complex (re-/de-)bordering and othering in the EU's Eastern Borderland/s

Practices of re-bordering, de-bordering, and othering are inherently complex phenomena which, in the context of the EU's Eastern borderlands, manifest in particularly intricate and multifaceted ways. They therefore raise a range of critical questions and call for a multidisciplinary analytical approach. By adopting a borderlands perspective, it is possible to highlight the dynamics through which this internally diverse area has moved from being a "'grey zone'", caught between opposing bordering and de-bordering practices, to a "frontline zone" (Makarychev et al., 2024, p. 2), where new dividing lines are progressively crystallizing.

This special issue addresses three core questions:

- What dynamics of re-bordering, de-bordering, and othering have emerged in the EU's Eastern borderlands? What types of bordering practices and narratives can be observed?
- What evidence exists regarding the interaction between different bordering practices (cognitive/ideational and material)? To what extent are these dynamics correlated with relations with the EU?
- How does the emergence of conflicting political and social orders in the broader European space affect human mobility, identity-making, and the hardening of physical borders—and vice versa?

To address these questions, the special issue brings together contributions that explore, from different perspectives and theoretical traditions, the relationships between borders and space, borders and identity, and borders and mobility, adopting predominantly a perspective from the region.

In their contribution, Michela Ceccorulli and Carmelo Danisi explore a largely uncharted territory within the EU: the "internalisation of borders" (Ceccorulli & Danisi, 2025) envisaged in the Protocol between Italy and Albania, a novel model of migration and asylum externalisation with far-reaching bordering implications. Their analysis examines the political and legal consequences of these shifting borders and their relation to concepts such as sovereignty, jurisdiction, territoriality and rights, highlighting the broader implications that the remapping of migration and asylum policies entails for Italy, the European Union, and the individuals affected.

Resting on the Balkans, Francesca Fortarezza's (2025) article investigates the implications of border regimes and bordering processes in migration governance for liberal political values. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted between 2020 and 2023 along the so-called Balkan route, the study employs participant observation, qualitative interviews, and document analysis to reveal the convergence of neoliberal and securitarian modes of governing migratory flows.

Marco Puleri and Nicolò Fasola (2025) then turn attention to the alternative bordering practices adopted by the Russian Federation over recent decades. Their contribution aims to reconstruct the roots of Russian political discourse on borders and national security by highlighting its polyphonic and deeply embedded nature. Adopting a long-term perspective, Puleri and Fasola analyse the political trajectories of elites emerging in Russia in the 1990s, examining how their discourses and interests shaped rebordering practices in the post-Soviet space—both at the cognitive level and through concrete policy choices—and how these, in turn, influenced state-level policymaking.

The final section of the special issue comprises two contributions reflecting on the implications of bordering practices for human mobility in the Eastern borderlands. Eugenia Pesci and Margarita Zavadskaya (2025) examine the unprecedented migration of Russian citizens triggered by the invasion of Ukraine, which has reshaped mobility patterns across Eurasia and beyond. While existing scholarship often portrays Russian emigrants as politically active, economically secure, and highly skilled global migrants—particularly in the IT sector—this article shifts attention to less privileged groups, such as those settling in Central Asia. Drawing on seventeen qualitative interviews conducted with Russian migrants in Kyrgyzstan between 2022 and 2023, the authors introduce the concept of discordant privilege to capture migrants' simultaneous experiences of relative advantage and economic and social precarity.

Finally, Nenad Miličić and Dragan Umek (2025) present a comprehensive study of Russian and other post-Soviet immigration to Belgrade, situating these flows within the specific social interactions triggered by Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. By examining socio-spatial transformations, evolving social relations, and potential long-term outcomes, the article offers valuable insights into the changing dynamics of migration and their implications for urban life and policy responses.

Overall, the SI invites further research on an ever more crucial and fluid borderland, suggesting to look at those compounded dynamics that shape borders, their nature, meaning and implications.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Italian Cooperation with Albania on Migration:
Between Externalization and Internalization of Borders

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Abstract

Tied by a shared colonial legacy, significant past immigration, and strong social and economic relations, Italy and Albania, through the protocol they established at the end of 2023, present a compelling example of a new logic and dynamic of migration externalization. Long considered taboo, the transfer of (some) rescued migrants to a non-EU state and, at least initially, the externalization of the assessment of their asylum claims, contribute to the image of the border between Albania and Italy as a fluid, intangible, and unreachable entity. Praised by many EU Member States, this new model exists within an opaque political and legal space that challenges traditional concepts of jurisdiction, territoriality, and the boundaries of human rights. The political and legal implications of these extended – yet artificial – borders, as well as the remapping of migration and asylum policies, are explored in this article, with an eye toward their potential impact on both migrants and the European Union as a whole.

Introduction

To many observers, Italy plays the role of a forerunner in the governance of migration. Recent developments in this field, such as the 2023 Italy-Albania Protocol on "Strengthening Cooperation in Migration Matters" (hereinafter the 2023 Protocol), provide a key opportunity to assess this claim. This paper aims to analyze the political and legal implications of the 2023 Protocol (Italian Parliament, 2024), which proposes an extension of Italy's borders – or, in legal terms, of its jurisdiction – onto Albanian territory through the externalized management of Italy's migration and asylum policies.

The Protocol distinguishes itself from other attempts to manage migration through cooperation with third countries, such as the United Kingdom's expulsion plan involving Rwanda (UNHCR, 2024). It has been marketed as a more "humane" model, based on cooperation with a "safe country" and a potential EU member state, and is presented, at least in principle, as not intended to bypass Italy's international and European obligations (Savino, 2023; Faggiani, 2024; Celoria, 2024). This is why the model proposed by Italy has gained increasing relevance, particularly after the Italian Government decided to use these centers as repatriation hubs for irregular migrants already in Italy. Similar to the extra-

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territorial processing of asylum claims, this expanded use of the centers seems to align with both the EU Commission's ongoing and new proposals in migration governance, including the 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum (EU Commission, 2024; Odysseus Network, 2024), the proposed Regulation on Return (EU Commission, 2025a), and efforts to establish an EU list of safe countries of origin (EU Commission, 2025b). However, upon closer inspection, some of the assumptions underlying this model may be questioned, especially given the operational challenges these centers have faced since their establishment.

This article explores the main features and underlying assumptions of the 2023 Protocol, bridging the literature on the political and legal dynamics of migration, in line with the multidisciplinary focus of the Special Issue (see Introduction by Ceccorulli, Lucarelli, & Puleri). To this end, the contribution is organized as follows. After outlining the long-standing cooperation between Italy and Albania in the area of migration (Section 2), it situates the 2023 Protocol within the literature on the external governance of migration, with particular emphasis on the relationship between externalization and border-shaping (Section 3). Sections 4, 5, and 6 examine the legal implications of the 2023 Protocol, focusing on the issue of extraterritorial jurisdiction that Italy will exercise on Albanian territory, from the perspective of the human rights protections afforded under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the potential boomerang effect of what could be described as the "internalization" of foreign borders. The article concludes with some final reflections on the broader implications of the 2023 Protocol.

The Italy-Albania relations in the field of migration

Italy and Albania share a long history of political, economic, cultural, and social relations. Italy's interest in the Adriatic Sea and the Balkans has ancient roots but gained significant momentum, particularly in the late 1930s. In an effort to consolidate political and economic ties, Italy succumbed to colonial ambitions by annexing Albania in 1939 during the fascist regime. Albania regained its independence in 1944, following the developments of the Second World War. From then until the mid-1980s, Albania was part of the Communist bloc. In the final years of the Communist era, a gradual opening towards the Western world began, with Italy emerging as a natural partner due to their historical relations.

Following the breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent economic, political, and social crises, many Albanians sought refuge in Italy during the 1990s. Initially welcoming those who arrived on its shores, Italy later adopted an increasingly restrictive approach, with repatriations becoming a prominent feature (Marchetti, 2017). The surge in arrivals led Italy to launch "Operation Pelican" in 1991, aimed at providing humanitarian aid to the Albanian population and discouraging further departures. Cooperation between the two countries resumed in the mid-1990s, with the signing of a Treaty of Friendship and Collaboration that addressed economic, social, political, and migration-related matters. In 1997, a Protocol was signed, agreeing to joint patrolling of Albanian and international waters (Castellaneta, 1997). Italy also led a multinational humanitarian mission, "Operation Alba," to address a new crisis in Albania. This military presence offered an opportunity to provide assistance and training to the country. Recognizing the potential disruptions caused by migration and the need to comply with the EU's evolving migration framework, the Turco-Napolitano Law of 1998 called for engagement with both transit and origin countries to better manage migration, with Albania being highlighted as a key example (Einaudi, 2007; Ceccorulli, 2021).

Today, relations between the two countries are stable and multifaceted, with more than a hundred agreements, pacts, memoranda, and letters covering various areas, a significant portion of which specifically address migration. Albania has been a candidate for EU accession since 2014, and in 2022, the official opening of accession negotiations took place. It is therefore no coincidence that Italy has chosen Albania for the offshoring of migration

and asylum procedures. After all, Albania had already demonstrated its willingness to assist other countries with refugee reception (ASGI, 2024a) and, of particular relevance here, had collaborated with Italy by hosting migrants during the controversial Nave Diciotti case. In that instance, Matteo Salvini, who served as Minister of the Interior from 2018 to 2019, denied the docking of rescued migrants in Lampedusa in the absence of an EU redistribution plan (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2018).

The Protocol between Italy and Albania, signed in November 2023 and ratified by the Italian President of the Republic following parliamentary authorization in February 2024, allows Italy to utilize two Albanian areas, designated as border or transit zones, to construct facilities akin to hotspots. In these facilities, a specific group of migrants who are eligible for border, asylum, and return procedures, and are brought there by Italian authorities, can be hosted (Italian Parliament, 2024). The Protocol has the potential to bring about a substantial shift in migration and asylum control policies and laws, both within Europe and beyond (ECRE, 2023; Di Leo, 2023; Broerse, 2024). It has already been criticized as a "worst practice" and "not a model for others to follow" (Carrera et al., 2023; Piccoli, 2023). International bodies and NGOs have repeatedly warned against further steps toward the externalization of border control and asylum processing, highlighting the risks of non-compliance with Italy's (and Albania's) human rights obligations, both in terms of the content of the Agreement and the implementation challenges it presents (Council of Europe, 2023; Amnesty International, 2024).

The very reasons for the criticism of the 2023 Agreement are also what make it potentially "the" model for other states to reshape the borders of migration control in Europe. However, this is not a new phenomenon. The externalization of border control and asylum processing is not recent, though it has clearly gained prominence in recent years, further solidified by the new Pact on Migration and Asylum. As a result, a growing body of literature has examined the external governance of migration, its relationship with internal efforts to manage migration and asylum, and the development of various externalization initiatives. Other scholars have also reflected on the impact of these dynamics on the EU and its member states' liberal credentials (Ceccorulli, Fassi et al., 2023; Lavenex, 2024), as well as on the affected populations, particularly those seeking international protection. In the context of the present case, the literature that addresses the relationship between externalization dynamics, borders, and bordering processes is of particular relevance. This literature challenges traditional conceptions of political organizations' relations with territory and sovereignty/jurisdiction, and their implications – issues that will be explored in the next section.

A new externalization model? Ingredients for a perfect recipe

Few dynamics have been as self-evident over the past decades as the increasing significance of migration for political organizations. The so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015 marked a turning point for the EU, highlighting a crisis of solidarity and the eventual recognition of the dysfunctionality of the existing migration and asylum system (Bauböck, 2018; Hill, 2023). This period also served as a testing ground for new and more long-term approaches to migration governance, such as the "hotspot" approach, which further consolidated the external border and renewed focus on the external dimension of migration. In this regard, the EU-Turkey Statement of 2016 stands as a notable example. Over the years, with the increasing reintroduction of internal border controls, rising instability in the regions surrounding the EU, and the growing influence of anti-immigration political parties, interest in the external governance of migration has intensified, both in academic discourse and in practical policy-making. While EU Member States have always engaged with

third countries, including on migration matters, triangulation with the EU has become unavoidable due to political, legal, and practical considerations.

As a result, scholarly attention to this phenomenon has expanded, with diverse perspectives contributing to the analysis of the many facets of the external dimension of migration (see, among others, Bialasiewicz, 2012; Moreno Lax, 2017; Rippoll-Servent, 2019; Cardwell et al., 2023). Early analyses referred to this approach as "remote control" (Zaiotti, 2016), a multi-faceted form of external governance. In the case of the EU, an important contribution was made by Boswell (2003), who identified two key paths: the externalization of domestic migration governance tools and preventive strategies aimed at altering the conditions that lead to migration outflows. Through a collective effort, Niemann and Zaun (2023) have reflected on the conceptualization of this policy area, its drivers and conditioning factors, the interdependence and interaction between various policy fields, and the influence and responses of third countries. Indeed, attention to the external dimension of migration has led to numerous critical contributions, which emphasize the detrimental effects of securitization, militarization, and dehumanization on migrants' lives, as well as the political and legal repercussions for the EU as a liberal actor. Overall, discussions around the external dimension of migration and asylum have focused on terms such as "externalization", alongside de-responsibilization, depoliticization, delegation, and outsourcing.

A related field of inquiry delves deeper into the relationship between external projection and the key dimensions of sovereignty, jurisdiction, and territoriality, as effectively captured by the focus on borders. In fact, externalization inherently involves a shifting border: de-territorialization is the most visible aspect of a movable border, but so too is the reconfiguration of the borders of rights involved in the process. The relationship between the external dimension of migration and borders has increasingly been analyzed across various disciplines, including legal studies, international relations, political philosophy, political geography, and migration and refugee studies. A recent contribution by Sebastian Cobarrubias et al. (2023) aptly reflects this diversity. Within this body of literature, where the border is critically questioned in its many forms, the relationship between the internal and external, or inside-outside, takes on special relevance (Szalai et al., 2022). It is precisely here that our analysis of the Protocol is focused.

Indeed, Italy has well-established tools for managing the external dimension of migration (see, for example, Fontana et al., 2024), which increasingly intersect with the EU's migration strategy and policies. As noted, Italy has played a key role in facilitating negotiations with Tunisia and Egypt, not to mention its role in relations with Libya. However, the Protocol stands out as the first of its kind. As previously mentioned, the agreement between Italy and Albania differs from other forms of externalization and, to some extent, cannot even be classified as externalization in the traditional sense if we consider externalization as a process that shifts responsibilities to a weaker state with no viable alternatives.

With this Protocol, Italy implements a procedure that achieves multiple objectives. First, by assuming jurisdiction over two areas in Albanian territory, it effectively "internalizes" these areas without extending the scope of its control. Second, and relatedly, this internalization creates an artificial liminal space, equating the areas under Italian jurisdiction with border zones that, however, are never physically reached, thereby presenting a false vision of geographical continuity. Crafted in this way, the border is not only reshaped but also artificially recreated, in a process that radically alters its relationship with sovereignty and territory. Most importantly, this strategy recalibrates the borders of rights, even in cases of full jurisdiction, as will be further explained in the next section.

The extraterritoriality approach overturned

Based on previous bilateral treaties and in accordance with international agreements on human rights and migration (see Preamble and Article 2), the 2023 Protocol primarily aims to address the issues of irregular migration and human trafficking. To this end, Albania grants Italy the right to construct and operate facilities in specific areas of its territory (namely Shengjin and Gjadër, as outlined in Annex No. 1) to "detain" – for the maximum detention period permitted under Italian law – no more than 3,000 people. These "people" are defined as "migrants", understood as 'citizens of third countries and stateless persons for whom it must be determined, or has been determined, whether the conditions for entry, stay, and residence in the territory of the Italian Republic exist or not' (Article 1(d)). As further specified by Article 3(2) of Italian Law No. 14/24, only migrants who have been brought aboard Italian vessels outside the territorial sea of Italy or other EU Member States – including those rescued or intercepted in distress situations at sea – are transferred to Albania (or more precisely, to Italy's facilities on Albanian territory).

The initial scope of the Protocol was quite limited; however, as noted in the Introduction, it has recently been expanded to include individuals irregularly residing in Italy. In any case, migrants deprived of their personal liberty under this agreement do not acquire any right to remain in Albania, as their entry and stay in Albanian territory are intended solely for the execution of border and return procedures (Article 4(3)).

It is worth noting that the facilities in question are established with Italian funds and managed by Italian authorities (Article 4(2) and (5)). Accordingly, it is not surprising that Italy and Albania have agreed that these facilities are subject "exclusively" to Italian jurisdiction. Similarly, the Italian personnel carrying out their duties under the Protocol are not subject to Albanian jurisdiction. As a result, migrants deprived of their liberty in these centers are subject to Italian law, including EU law-based rules governing migration and asylum (see the relevant legislation summarized in Article 4(1) of Italian Law No. 14/24; Council and Parliament of the EU, 2013, soon to be replaced by the Pact on Asylum and Migration).

From a legal perspective, this "new" approach overturns a long-standing argument made by countries that are destinations for migrants. These countries have traditionally claimed that the responsibility for actions taken towards people sent to third countries rests with the latter states. This argument has served to place individuals heading to Europe, or seeking asylum within the European Union or at its borders, outside the scope of the protection offered by the human rights treaties binding all EU Member States and Council of Europe (CoE) countries. In contrast to previous externalization attempts, and following the conclusion of the 2023 Protocol, Italy has insisted on its full responsibility for migrants deprived of their liberty in Albania. In doing so, Italy has created the visual image of an extension of its border within Albanian territory, specifically for the purpose of migration control.

Given Italy's claim of conformity with relevant international agreements and in light of the aforementioned reshaping of borders, at least two specific legal questions warrant exploration: first, whether the 2023 Protocol can be framed within the rationale of extraterritorial control under human rights treaties (discussed in the next section); and second, whether the model adopted by Italy and Albania can be considered a principled, human rights-based framework (addressed in the section after next).

Borders, sovereignty and extraterritorial jurisdiction

In an era of "dehumanizing border governance tactics" (UN, 2022, p. 24), human rights bodies have progressively established that the externalization of migration and asylum management policies does not place migrants outside the "legal space" of protection

provided by relevant treaties. This evolution was made possible because the application of human rights treaties is not solely defined in terms of sovereignty or territorial borders. While sovereignty refers to a state's full and original authority over a group of people within a specific geographic area, the key concept for determining when and where human rights treaties apply is "jurisdiction", which can be understood in terms of effective control, even in the absence of sovereignty (Vandenhole, 2019). Thus, jurisdiction may, on a case-by-case basis, extend beyond the geographical area over which a state exercises sovereignty.

For example, under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), Article 1 stipulates that states Parties must secure the rights and freedoms defined in the Convention to everyone "within their jurisdiction". The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has held that "jurisdiction" is, in principle, a "territorial" concept (Danisi, 2021a). However, exceptional circumstances may justify the application of the ECHR beyond a state's borders – i.e., extraterritorially. In simple terms, when a Party to the ECHR exercises physical or territorial control over a person or geographic area beyond its borders, it is obligated to uphold the Convention as it would within its own territory[1]. This evolution has led to the condemnation of violations suffered by migrants who were intercepted before they could even enter European borders – without any prior assessment of their individual circumstances – despite requesting asylum[2]. The pushback operations conducted by Italy in international waters within the Mediterranean Sea are perhaps the most prominent example of cases where the ECtHR found multiple human rights violations[3]. These cases exemplify the flexible nature of borders in shaping the application of human rights treaties, which is assessed on a case-by-case basis (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2014).

Concerning the 2023 Protocol, such an evolution suggests that migrants detained in Albania would, in any case, fall under Italy's jurisdiction for the application of human rights obligations. The fact that Italy has agreed with Albania to take responsibility for all operations inside and outside the facilities is irrelevant because, even without this formal recognition, the same result would have followed from the consistent application of the principles outlined so far. In fact, by implementing the 2023 Protocol, Italy would exercise both personal (over migrants) and spatial (over facilities) extraterritorial control in a defined Albanian territory, which leads to the obligation to uphold its ECHR-based obligations. In this sense, human rights protection legally defines the borders of migration control, often preceding states' intentions, strategies, or political interests. From this perspective, despite Italy's claims, the 2023 Protocol is not substantially different from other forms of cooperation with third countries, although the official position of the Italian government clearly prevents jurisdiction from becoming a contested issue between the involved states and the migrants themselves.

This evolution is also relevant for the control exercised over maritime borders, a critical issue in the context of the 2023 Protocol, given the circumstances that lead migrants to be transferred to Albania. Despite the existence of legal "black holes" in the law of the sea, there is no doubt that individuals in distress at sea should always be searched, rescued, and brought to a place of safety (Mann, 2018; Starita, 2019). This obligation is reinforced by human rights treaties, particularly in terms of the procedural protection of the right to life (Danisi, 2021b). Since the 2023 Protocol assumes that migrants will be rescued and placed on Italian vessels, once aboard, these migrants come under the control of Italian authorities,

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[1] See ECtHR (Grand Chamber), 5 May 2020, *M.N. v. Belgium*, No. 3599/18 (admissibility).
[2] For a case entailing push-back operations, see ECtHR, 2 February 2023, *Alhowais v. Hungary*, No. 59435/17.
[3] ECtHR (Grand Chamber), 23 February 2012, *Hirsi Jamaa et. al. v. Italy*, No. 27765/09.

and the obligation to protect their lives applies, irrespective of where they are found[4]. The fact that the 2023 Protocol refers to migrants located "outside Italian or EU territorial waters" does not change much from a human rights perspective, further complicating the concept of a movable border.

With regard to maritime borders, at least two significant issues emerge. First, while human rights obligations should apply to all migrants found at sea, regardless of who rescues them, the 2023 Protocol creates an unjustified distinction between migrants rescued by NGOs or private vessels and those embarked on Italian vessels. Even more problematically, despite being in similar situations, the Protocol establishes a specific treatment – i.e., their prior detention in Albania – only for migrants found outside Italian or EU territorial waters. Second, the concept of a "place of safety" must be interpreted in light of the specific needs of the rescued individuals (Danisi, 2021b). On one hand, this means that the specific conditions of migrants may require the identification of the nearest available harbor, for example, when minimizing sailing time is crucial for medical reasons. On the other hand, identifying a safe place entails an individualized assessment of each migrant's situation, which must exclude potential alternatives that might expose them to the risk of human rights violations, especially of the right to life (Art. 2 ECHR) and of the principle of non-refoulement (Art. 3 ECHR). This individualized assessment cannot be conducted on the vessel itself when specialized expertise is required – for instance, in the case of children, trafficked women, specific asylum-seeker groups (such as LGBTIQ+ individuals or those fearing gender-based persecution) – and directly contradicts the automatic detention to which these individuals would be subjected in Albania. For both of these reasons, given its geographical location relative to the expected rescue or interception outside Italian and EU territorial seas, Albania cannot be considered "the" place of safety for every migrant covered by the 2023 Protocol, contrary to Italy's prior assumption.

In short, externalization policies encounter a limit when they intersect with the human rights obligations binding a state exercising jurisdiction over migrants or facilities located in a third country. The resulting "internalization" of Albanian areas within Italy's migratory control borders explicitly places responsibility for any potential human rights violations suffered by migrants within the scope of Italy's obligations under the 2023 Protocol. Moreover, while the extraterritorial jurisdiction does not extend Italy's sovereignty over the relevant Albanian territory, Albania remains the sovereign state over the areas "lent" to Italy. It will continue to exercise its jurisdiction for human rights protection, creating a clear overlap between Italy's extended borders and Albania's sovereign borders. These legal implications, along with other issues that deserve further discussion, suggest a "boomerang effect" that may render this specific externalization attempt as ineffective as other comparable policies.

The "internalization" of borders: a boomerang effect?

Italy's decision to assume a priori responsibility for all actions carried out by Italian agents in Albania, as well as potentially by others operating within the relevant facilities, sets an important precedent. Based on the analysis conducted so far, Italy acknowledges that transferring migrants under its authority to a third country that benefits from Italian funding involves, through jurisdiction, the application of its international and EU law obligations.

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[4] Ibid. At UN level, see also Human Rights Committee, 4 November 2020, *A.S. and Others v. Italy*, UN doc. CCPR/C/130/D/3042/2017.

This approach marks a fundamental distinction from previous externalization attempts by the Italian government.

First, it is worth recalling the current cooperation with Libya, another form of migration control externalization that has sparked ongoing debates (UN, 2023; Balboni et al., 2019). Italy has consistently denied exercising jurisdiction over the treatment of migrants – including asylum seekers – in Libya, despite agreements in place and the allocation of Italian funds to combat irregular migration. However, it is an undeniable fact that Libya operates in cooperation with Italy, or even on Italy's behalf, in many instances. Although a clear distinction exists in the management of migrants in Libya under the two models, at least when migrants intercepted in international waters are transferred to the Libyan coastguard by Italian authorities, implying physical control over migrants, Italian jurisdiction cannot be denied (Moreno-Lax, 2020).

In other words, likely due to a popular perception of Albania as sharing a "common" European background and its assumed "safe" status, Italy justifies its approach by creating a legal fiction – treating migrants as if they were on Italian territory – despite the fact that this approach is, in practice, not entirely dissimilar to its "covert" cooperation with Libya. As a result, it may now be more difficult for Italy to justify its hands-off stance regarding the treatment of migrants, especially when such treatment occurs within the framework of Italian-Libyan cooperation in migration management, despite the absence of Italian personnel in Libya and the apparent lack of "internalization" of Libyan borders.

Second, treating Albanian areas as if they were part of Italian borders creates a stark contradiction in terms of admission to EU territory. On one hand, migrants are excluded from entering both Italy and Albania, except for the facilities where they would be automatically detained. On the other hand, in order to comply with its international human rights obligations (e.g., Article 3 of the ECHR), Italy is required to grant admission to such migrants at least for the purpose of assessing their individual situation when they apply for asylum. To circumvent this requirement, the 2023 Protocol introduces an additional legal fiction: it treats the Albanian detention facilities, at least for asylum seekers from a predefined list of safe countries, as entry points outside the Italian/EU legal space. While Italian judges have taken prompt action to expose this legal fiction by correctly challenging the assumption of Albania as a "safe third country"[5], the contradiction now becomes even more apparent. The artificial shaping of borders shifts continuously in line with specific political and legal interests, undermining the consistency of the migration framework.

Third, despite all the above, the 2023 Protocol treats migrants as if they were effectively located in Italy. This implies that domestic and EU law on migration and asylum, including the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and, soon, the Pact on Migration and Asylum, should be fully applied within these "new" borders. Yet, this approach contradicts what EU institutions have consistently stated: EU law has no extraterritorial effect, and the CEAS does not provide for the assessment of asylum claims outside EU borders. For instance, the 2018 EU Council Non-Paper on disembarkation options excluded the possibility that EU law could apply if disembarkation occurs outside the territorial space of EU Member States. Similarly, a preliminary assessment of the 2023 Protocol by EU authorities found that it operates outside EU law. This stance aligns with the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU)'s ruling on the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, where the CJEU confirmed that EU law was not involved, as the

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[5] On many occasions, the ECtHR reiterated that being a state party of the ECHR is not sufficient *per se* to be identified as a "safe country" for all asylum seekers. A state party of the ECHR like Italy, which wishes to send an individual in another member state of the CoE, must always verify the safeness of the country of destination *in light of* the personal circumstances of the individual to be transferred: see for instance ECtHR, Grand Chamber, 21 January 2011, *M.S.S. v. Belgium and Greece,* no. 30696/09, para. 353 and ff.

agreement was between EU Member States (not the EU itself) and Turkey (Danisi, 2017). How can these established principles be reconciled with Italy's new stance on the application of EU migration and asylum law, given that a) Albania is outside the EU borders, and b) the agreement is not an EU-Albania agreement? These questions remain unresolved for now.

Fourth, in terms of practical implementation, the 2023 Protocol does not fully exclude the possibility of migrants hosted in these facilities initiating administrative procedures before Albanian judges (see Article 10(2)). There was no alternative option. If Albania retains sovereignty over the areas where the facilities are located, its international human rights obligations remain in place. As noted earlier, under the ECHR, Albania's jurisdiction is concurrent with Italy's. Albanian judges could therefore hear complaints about the failure to take appropriate actions to protect human rights, even if Italy exercises jurisdiction. At the same time, considering Italy's obligations under the ECHR (Article 5 on the right to liberty and security), migrants hosted in Albania must still have effective access to an Italian judge to assess the legality of their detention and the conditions in which they are held. In the latter scenario, a positive decision in favor of the migrants would require Italy to transfer them to its territory, because, under the 2023 Protocol, if they are released, they would not be entitled to enter or stay in Albania. In short, if the primary purpose of the 2023 Protocol was to prevent people from reaching Italian shores and expedite the identification and expulsion process, the system may produce the opposite result, with a real risk of duplicated legal proceedings before both Italian courts and Albanian authorities.

Finally, based on the analysis conducted so far, a positive implication should not be underestimated. The "internalization" of the Albanian facilities within Italian "borders," as implied in the 2023 Protocol, provides migrants with a crucial protection under human rights law. In fact, the observance of its international obligations prevents Italy from excluding *a priori* the risk of direct or indirect refoulement – i.e., the risk that migrants could be subjected to torture, inhuman, or degrading treatment if transferred to Albania or, via Albanian authorities, to other countries without access to an effective asylum system. An individual assessment of the situation of migrants found at sea should, in fact, be conducted before transferring them to other countries, whether they are Council of Europe member states or not. From this perspective, Italian judges may find ways to delay, if not block, the implementation of the Italy-Albania cooperation[6]. The example of offshore asylum processing initiated by Australia, implemented in Nauru and Papua New Guinea, should serve as a clear warning in this respect (Foster et al., 2021), as the UN Human Rights Committee recently highlighted, pointing out the stark contrast between these policies and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Italy and all EU member states are also parties[7]. Such unintended consequences could also have implications for the next wave of EU migration and asylum policies, to which we now turn.

Conclusion

The relentless exploration of new methods, modalities, and approaches to migration and asylum governance by Italy continues to both surprise and astonish observers. From unilateral humanitarian missions to agreements with Libya, quarantine vessels for migrants, "close ports" policies, to name but a few, Italy has undoubtedly served as a laboratory for

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[6] See, for instance, the domestic proceedings leading to the important judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union (Grand Chamber), 1 August 2025, *Alace and Canpelli*, joined cases C-758/24 and C-759/24.

[7] See the important decisions of the Human Rights Committee: *Mona Nabhari v. Australia*, 25 October 2024, UN doc. CCPR/C/142/D3663/2019, and *M.I. et al. v. Australia*, 31 October 2024, UN doc. CCPR/C/142/D/2749/2016.

new forms of experimentation in migration governance. Indeed, its geographical position plays a key role, as does its standing within the European Union. However, when questioned about the 2023 Protocol, the European Commission distanced itself from the agreement, offering a specific territorial interpretation of EU law borders, aligning them with Italy's territorial waters, which raised significant doubts among experts and scholars alike (Carrera et al., 2023). Although the Protocol is a bilateral agreement, the impression that the EU is somehow part of Italy's plan emerges in the analysis. First, as many commentators have pointed out, Italian law aligns closely with EU law, and there is no way to exclude the latter's involvement. Second, in an attempt to address the thorny issues of search and rescue and disembarkation – areas where Italy has been at the forefront – the EU had already suggested the possibility of disembarkation in a non-EU country following search-and-rescue operations by member states' flag vessels (European Commission, 2018). Third, the EU's encouragement to establish lists of "safe countries" is also relevant here: until 2019, Italy was notable for not having such a list; today, it is one of the countries with the longest list of 'safe countries' (recently updated), a move that undoubtedly shifts the burden of asylum off-shoring (ASGI, 2024b). Most importantly, the upgraded border procedures in the Pact on Migration and Asylum, which describe a disarticulation between a person's physical and legal presence (ASGI 2024a, p. 10), have effectively rendered the concept of borders immaterial. In fact, the increasing emphasis on de-territorialization and the manipulation of the border through concepts such as the border procedure, safe countries, and even hotspots – within which the Albanian centers are now included – has been significantly propelled by EU policies in recent years. The automatic detention of individuals transferred to Albania provides yet another layer to the EU's ongoing push for deterritorialization.

While many Member States have applauded Italy's initiatives, directing their praise to the European Commission (Joint Letter, 2024), the focus must remain on the implications of the 2023 Protocol, particularly for Italy itself. The Protocol offers little in the way of tangible benefits, serving primarily as a powerful deterrent and an even more powerful electoral tool, with the ultimate and singular objective being the denial of entry to both Italian and European territory. If human rights are genuinely prioritized, the impact on migrants and asylum seekers must not be overlooked. These individuals bear the brunt of the Protocol's most concerning effects, particularly within the context of a fully securitized approach to migration, which has only been further entrenched by the inclusion of Italian centers as key national security and defense structures under Decree 124/2023 (Carrera et al., 2023).

Italy has pioneered a "new" form of externalization, blending the internalization of borders with the concept of a "movable border". However, this approach perpetuates old problems and weaknesses across all dimensions. It is to be hoped that the political, legal, and practical implications outlined here will demonstrate that this "new" approach is far from a viable option for other European states.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Re-Bordering the State *Through* Asylum Governance: Securitarian Neoliberalism Along the Balkan Route

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Abstract

The article investigates the impact of border regimes and bordering processes in asylum governance on the institutional and political boundaries of nation-states. The research was conducted between 2020 and 2024 along the so-called Balkan route of migration. It highlights how neoliberal and securitarian approaches converge in the management of two reception centres situated in critical border areas, namely the Lipa camp in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Casa Malala in Italy. I define this blend of governance as securitarian neoliberalism and discuss how this mode of governance subjects people on the move to increasingly restrictive and discriminatory policies, simultaneously diminishing states' responsibilities for the violations that arise from these policies. This approach to managing human mobility relies on diminished legal and procedural safeguards, which ultimately results in the widespread violation of migrants' rights and freedoms, a reduction in democratic scrutiny, and the erosion of the rule of law.

Keywords: Asylum governance; Balkan route; Securitisation; Neoliberalisation; Nation-states

Introduction

Since the so-called 'refugee crisis' broke out in 2015, the Western Balkans have once again taken centre stage in the EU's political discourse, drawing significant media attention and financial resources to the management of migratory movements along what has come to be known as the Balkan route. In this evolving landscape, state boundaries both within and outside the EU have been fundamentally reconfigured. This shift is characterised by the hardening of territorial borders and the rise of securitarian politics, which prioritise national security and state sovereignty. Simultaneously, the boundaries and responsibilities of public institutions have become less clear, as both state and non-state actors engage in refugee management within a neoliberal framework. Examining the management of reception centres in two key border zones along the Balkan route – the Lipa's Temporary Reception Centre (TRC), located in the Una Sana Canton, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Casa Malala, in the Italian region Friuli Venezia Giulia – the article explores the evolving role of states in asylum governance through the integration of neoliberal and securitarian approaches. Although these trends may seem contradictory — with the former emphasising liberal economic principles and a state shifting its power from direct intervention to a steering role, and the latter involving a shift in politics towards state sovereignty and illiberal political values – the study shows a complementary and mutually reinforcing relationship between them, with their convergence leading to a weakening of democratic oversight and the rule of law.

Building upon an expanding body of research on illiberal governance (Cottiero et al., 2025; Enyedi, 2024; Laruelle, 2022) and authoritarian forms of neoliberalism (Biebricher, 2020;

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Bonanno, 2020; Bruff, 2014), and engaging with studies on asylum governance—specifically the interaction between security-oriented border policies and the outsourcing and privatisation of reception services (Bhagat & Soederberg, 2019; Darling, 2016b; Novak, 2019)— I employ the term 'securitarian neoliberalism' to describe a form of governance whereby neoliberal paradigms converge with overtly illiberal politics in the management of asylum seekers and refugees. Importantly, the term securitarian is preferred over illiberal and authoritarian - despite sharing many characteristics with both – because it emphasises the specific focus on national security and emergency policies in managing refugee movements.

What distinguishes this study from existing research is its shift from a traditional top-down analysis of the impact of asylum policies on migrants to a perspective that views specific modes of governance as a diagnostic lens into the governing bodies themselves; that is, what particular ways of treating asylum seekers and refugees reveal about the functioning of formal institutions. Asylum governance offers valuable perspectives for analysing how sovereignty is distributed among power holders (Sassen, 1996) and exercised over governed populations (Agustín & Jorgensen, 2016). Specifically, the article emphasises how nation-states, especially the agencies responsible for migration and asylum governance, manage legislative, operational, and financial constraints on their sovereignty by delegating protection and reception responsibilities to non-state and third-country actors, further distancing public institutions from service recipients. Yet, through this very process, they concurrently foster a discourse centred on national interests that justify strict, coercive control over migrants. By integrating neoliberal strategies with securitarian policies, these processes redefine the boundaries of national sovereignty towards forms of illiberal governance that undermine human rights protection and accountability mechanisms.

Although not a direct comparison between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Italy's reception systems, the juxtaposition of these two cases offers insights into similar patterns unfolding in two interconnected yet distinctly different realities. On the one hand, there is a non-EU context, historically a place of emigration, lacking adequate and efficient asylum institutions and infrastructure for third-country nationals, particularly at the onset of the 'refugee crisis.' On the other hand, the province of Trieste, part of an EU member state, has a long history as a transit and destination point for asylum seekers. By juxtaposing these two cases, the article reveals the pervasiveness of securitarian neoliberalism throughout the region. It also shows how this governance mode uniquely affects power dynamics both within and between EU and non-EU institutions. Notably, European institutions significantly shaped Bosnia-Herzegovina's migration policies by leveraging Pre-Accession funding conditions—a clear example of the EU's role as a "normative empire" (Del Sarto, 2021).

The article commences by delineating the research's scope, the research problem, and the theoretical foundations that underpin the analytical framework employed to interpret the empirical data gathered between 2020 and 2024, utilising diverse research methodologies, including participant observation, qualitative interviews[1], and document analysis. Subsequently, it details the empirical analysis of the two case studies, highlighting both similarities and differences. In conclusion, the article synthesises its findings and delves into the wider implications of this study for our understanding of states' sovereignty, questioning the mechanisms through which they exercise control over refugee populations and among a plurality of non-state actors.

Shifting boundaries of sovereignty

Over the past few decades, the methodological nationalism associated with the first generations of Refugee studies has been rescaled to offer clearer insight into the complex

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[1] Interview excerpts were translated from Italian to English by the author.

system in which state and non-state, formal and informal actors collaborate, compete, and conflict over asylum management. (Ambrosini, 2021; Anderson, 2019). The rise of globalisation significantly contributed to this process, questioning the inviolability of nation-states' borders and questioning their centrality in plural and multilevel governance arenas (Pierre, 2000; Sassen, 1996).

This shift has prompted migration scholars to abandon government-centric approaches in favour of governance-focused perspectives (Geddes, 2022), better suited to highlight the multiplicity of sub-, supra-, non-, and third-state actors that intervene in asylum governance (Caponio & Ponzo, 2022; Gammeltoft-Hansen & Nyberg Sørensen, 2013; Guiraudon, 2000; Longo & Fontana, 2022; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). Specifically, the Venue-shopping approach posits that nation-states' responses to refugee movements involve the decentralisation of decision-making and implementation upwards to intergovernmental forums, downwards to local authorities, and outwards to non-state actors (Guiraudon & Lahav, 2000, p. 164).

Although it demonstrates a significant decentralisation of sovereignty, asylum management remains a fundamental domain through which governments assert authority, cultivate electoral support, and enhance geopolitical leverage. This is particularly evident in securitarian approaches that frame immigration as an existential threat to national security. By invoking a migration-security nexus and portraying migrants, including asylum seekers, as a security issue, politicians from across the spectrum have emphasised the political and economic risks associated with allowing irregularised foreigners to enter national territory. In doing so, they have brought the state's role in controlling human mobility (back) to the forefront. This has resulted in a resurgence of nationalist and sovereigntist movements, which regard "physical borders as sovereign prerogatives of the state and as the ultimate *limes* of rights" (Ceccorulli et al., 2025, in this Special Issue, p. 322).

Notably, the current Italian far-right government's election campaign heavily emphasised protecting national identity and economy from the perceived threat of immigration, often conflating refugee movements with so-called illegal or irregular immigration. The current Prime Minister, Meloni, has positioned herself as a defender of Italian culture against globalisation, advocating for stricter border controls to safeguard national security and traditional values, such as family and faith (Campisi & Sottilotta, 2022). Similarly, when transit through Bosnia-Herzegovina started increasing significantly, the President of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik of the nationalist and conservative Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), strongly refused to accommodate migrants in the Serbian entity, stating they would create "a serious pressure" on the local population and undermine their ethnic and religious identity (MONDO, 2018). Again in 2024, the President of the Service for Foreigners Affairs again defined migrants as "a real security threat", stating that "the European Union [had to] do something to help the countries along the Balkan route combat this growing violence and security threat" (ANSA, 2024).

In light of these considerations, a tension arises between the neoliberal pluralisation and hybridisation of asylum governance and a re-nationalisation of migration discourse rooted in illiberal values, such as ethno-nationalism and nation-centric sovereignty (Enyedi, 2024; Laruelle, 2022). Importantly, Laruelle's framework (2022) indicates that illiberal ideas are not external threats to neoliberal democracies, but internal products that enable their own regression. That is, liberal institutions can be (re)purposed to serve illiberal ends (Enyedi, 2024).

The following section explores how neoliberal approaches and illiberal securitarian politics coexist and reinforce each other in the management of reception facilities for asylum seekers and refugees in formally democratic countries. It offers a theoretical framework for the subsequent empirical analysis, arguing that the securitisation of asylum

is not in conflict with the neoliberal outsourcing and hybridisation of related functions. Instead, it can be understood as a specific manifestation of the potential and inherent illiberal tendencies within neoliberalism.

The state's ebb and flow

The shift from a predominantly state-centric framework to a governance-oriented model has been characterised by scholars as the neoliberalisation of asylum (Darling, 2016b; Novak, 2019). Understood as an intellectual and political project rather than a fixed economic doctrine or finished form of government (Biebricher, 2020), neoliberalism does not necessarily advocate for less government; instead, it facilitates a "transfer of operations" that creates a distinct mode of rule (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002, p. 989). This neoliberal governmentality operates through an assemblage of rationalities, strategies, and techniques that enable "governance at a distance" (Springer, 2011, p. 95). As the state maintains authority over non-citizens through the exercise of its power "by proxy" (Borelli et al., 2023, p. 2), this process not only reconfigures the delivery of services for refugees but also signifies a fundamental reorganisation of the state's institutional structure (Saad Filho, 2019) and a broader transformation of political authority (Darling, 2016b).

Neoliberalism utilises shifting narratives—rooted in race, gender, and class—to manage migration through seemingly contradictory lenses. As noted by Bhagat & Soederberg (2019) and Darling (2016a), asylum seekers are frequently framed as burdens on public finances to legitimise austerity and privatisation. Simultaneously, they are depicted as existential security threats that justify exceptional surveillance and coercive authority (Basaran, 2008). These portrayals are particularly visible regarding the young, racialised men making up a large proportion of those travelling through the Balkan route. Conversely, migrants may be cast as passive victims to justify paternalistic humanitarian intervention (Malkki, 2015). Despite their differences, these narratives converge on a singular orientalist logic (Springer, 2011): they frame the migrant as an undesirable outsider who is simultaneously "at risk and a risk, […] a subject needing to be rescued and apprehended" (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015, p. 63). This logic is also prevalent in securitarian approaches, which develop policy frameworks and operational methods on the premise that unwanted foreigners pose an existential threat to the nation's identity, integrity, and sovereignty. Notably, Joppke (2021, p. 74) observes that neoliberal distinctions between desirable and undesirable foreign nationals "may differ in degree, but not in kind" from the fake or bogus refugees conjured up by nationalist parties and far-right movements. Such a security-oriented, nation-centred approach is, in reality, closely connected to the foundations of neoliberalism. Namely, Röpke (1950), one of the founders of neoliberalism, argued that a nation has the right to restrict movement in order to safeguard its biological and spiritual patrimony, thereby subordinating free movement to racialised cultural protectionism and national identity. Consequently, particularly during periods of economic hardship, neoliberal representations of refugees can galvanise public support for restrictive immigration policies that scapegoat foreigners—specifically racialised and impoverished populations—for domestic financial instability (Bhagat & Soederberg, 2019).

Concurrently, the securitisation of asylum—the framing of refugee flows as an existential threat to the nation—legitimises a climate of political exceptionalism that can easily result in the institutionalisation of extra-ordinary and illiberal practices (Feldman, 2018; Léonard, 2010; Salter, 2008). These trends have become increasingly evident over the past decade, with EU member states frequently declaring states of emergency and reintroducing internal border controls, while normalising detention as a means to address migratory issues from a national security perspective (ASGI & BVMN, 2022; Ceccorulli, 2025).

States of emergency grant authorities the ability to operate at the margins of the rule of law, using exceptional tools to address exceptional threats. Since emergency measures usually entail streamlining operational, bureaucratic, and legal procedures, this kind of "[r]uling by zones of exception" allows the state "to place itself outside the law" (Haid, 2017, p. 295). As Cardwell and Dickson note, "operating outside established frameworks, especially in 'crisis-mode', can lead to unpredictable outcomes and 'new style of discretionary governance'" (2023, p. 3124). The disturbing events occurring in the US as this article is being written, involving brutal, discretionary, and systemic violence against racialised individuals (both foreigners and nationals) by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, known as ICE, serve as stark evidence of the normalisation of this trend and the growing use of illiberal policies aimed at non-citizens being extended to citizens too.

Neoliberal and securitarian approaches to asylum intersect in their understanding of asylum seekers and migration management, but they also similarly impact the roles and functions of policymakers and implementers. While securitarian approaches to migration have gained support from both right- and left-wing parties, nationalist politicians with authoritarian and autocratic ambitions have extensively drawn on the trope of the foreign threat, portraying themselves as the only true defenders of the nation's ethnic and territorial integrity to garner consensus among an increasingly diverse electorate (Bello, 2022). Nonetheless, the same entities behind these narratives have facilitated or even driven the outsourcing of asylum-related management to a broader and more layered range of actors beyond the official boundaries of the state – whether it concerns the physical borders of Member States, as is the case with a supranational European agency like Frontex, or institutional boundaries, as seen with ICE, a "paramilitary organization" with executive power in federal law enforcement (Buchanan, 2026).

In this context, the concept of the "security-industrial complex" (Davitti, 2019; Jones, 2017) has been employed to describe the progressive delegation of state powers in matters concerning border and immigration control to the private sector. This type of assemblage contributes to the creation of "new geography[ies] of security" (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2010, p. 3), wherein networks of economic and political elites cooperate in security management. As such, private companies and international organisations contribute significantly to shaping the boundaries of asylum governance, both in form and substance. Terms such as 'migration management' and 'transit countries' owe much of their current usage and implications to international organisations such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Concurrently, by providing technologies, personnel, and know-how for the militarisation and externalisation of asylum governance, their work has facilitated the institutionalisation and diffusion of securitarian approaches (Georgi, 2010; Lemberg-Pedersen, 2018).

The involvement of non-state migration service providers has introduced management models focused on "market competition, economic efficiency and dispersed responsibility" (Darling, 2016b, p. 231; Georgi, 2010). This markedly neoliberal approach, nonetheless, conceals a more ambivalent orientation. Although these non-state actors are taking on a more prominent role, they still operate within the framework of state interests and a nation-centric approach, demonstrating a form of governance where public-private partnerships support and even reinforce national sovereignty. As noted by Hess (2010, p. 103), while effectively embracing a neoliberal stance, migration service providers do not wish to leave migration issues to the free market, "because the free market does not care for the political consequences". Instead, they "strongly support an etatistic model of global governance" (Ibidem), and frame their role accordingly, providing "policy makers and politicians with the necessary groundwork needed to make decisions" (Ibidem) that reinforce their authority and electoral support. In accordance with these observations, Bonanno (2020) interprets the

increasing interdependence between the unchecked expansion of transnational corporations and the concurrent rise of protectionist, nationalist, and racialised ideologies promoted by far-right movements as a manifestation of "authoritarian capitalism".

Particularly since the 1990s, the growing influence of free markets and inter-, trans-, and supranational institutions in governance processes, as well as the increase in human mobility across international borders, have undermined the inviolability of national borders and sovereignty (Pierre, 2000; Pierre & Peters, 2021; Sassen, 1996, 2005). In response to these challenges, Governance scholars suggest that nation-states have restructured their institutional apparatuses to turn these constraints into opportunities. From direct providers of public services, states have transitioned towards regulation and coordination (Pierre & Peters, 2021), often referred to as "steering at a distance" (Stoker, 1998). Notably, Sassen (1996) observes that the current era of globalisation has fostered a hybrid form of authority—situated at the intersection of local, national, and global spheres—that blurs the distinction between public and private. Crucially, Sassen (2005) maintains that this denationalising process does not signal the state's decline; rather, the state acts as a primary architect in reconfiguring its own governance across these new scales. This steering role does not involve direct engagement in policy matters, thereby reducing exposure to public and judicial oversight and diminishing the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms. Instead, it focuses on the capacity to define the boundaries within which other (non-state) actors can operate, by establishing policy and legal frameworks, allocating or denying resources, and fostering partnerships with non-state, private, and informal actors. In this regard, Ferguson and Gupta contend that "the central effect of the new forms of transnational governmentality is not so much to weaken or strengthen states, but to reconfigure their capacities to spatialize their authority" (2002, p. 996).

Against this background, this study discusses how state institutions leverage the involvement of non-state actors in asylum governance to maintain indirect influence over migration management without bearing (too much) responsibility for it. In the following sections, I will show that, by delegating specific functions to non-state migration service providers, the Italian and Bosnian authorities have limited their direct and explicit involvement in the management of asylum seekers and refugees, and related violations of these people's rights, while reinforcing their political authority in increasingly illiberal ways. In this light, neoliberalism not only envisions and necessitates a role for the state, but it also contains the conditions that can lead to this role taking on authoritarian and illiberal forms (Biebricher, 2020; Bruff, 2014).

Securitarian neoliberalism along the Balkan route: from Bihać to Trieste

At the beginning of the EU 'migration crisis', between 2015 and 2016, transit through the Western Balkans was substantially unrestricted for migrants. Indeed, informal cooperation between the EU and regional authorities allowed the creation of a humanitarian corridor (Hameršak et al., 2020). It is important to emphasise that this context was undoubtedly shaped by humanitarian concerns more than security-oriented ones, but neoliberal rationales were also at work, seeking to allow the entry of a selected labour force into certain EU Member States. This arrangement nonetheless permitted asylum seekers to traverse the Balkan route without facing the obstacles they currently encounter. In 2016, the EU-Turkey agreement officially 'closed' the Balkan route (Weber, 2007), thereby shutting down the humanitarian corridor and the borders of several transit countries. Approximately 60,000 migrants remained stranded in the region (Astuti et al., 2020), exerting significant pressure on countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, which lacked the infrastructure for large-scale asylum processing, while also adding to the challenges faced by arrival hubs at

the end of the route, such as Italy, which was already managing arrivals from the Mediterranean.

To analyse how this situation has been managed, the following sections detail the interactions between key actors and processes at the Bosnian-Croatian and Slovenian-Italian borders, specifically within the Lipa and Casa Malala reception facilities. At the time this research was conducted, these two places represented "the beginning and the end of the game[2]" (Interview with an activist in Trieste, 2021) – that is, how migrants along the Balkan route refer to their attempt to cross international borders to enter the EU. Interestingly, this relation dates back to the 1990s when the wars that led to the collapse of the former Yugoslavia forced thousands of Bosnians to seek refuge in Italy and other European countries (Bona, 2016). At the time, the city of Trieste mobilised to accommodate these refugees, developing a model of reception that would have inspired, in the early 2000s, the creation of the Italian national System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR).

Governments' jacks of all trades: international organisations in Lipa

As a result of the EU-Turkey deal and related securitarian policies implemented since 2016 in South-Eastern Europe, the number of registered arrivals in Bosnia and Herzegovina surged exponentially between 2017 and 2018. At the end of 2019, just in the canton of Una Sana – centred in Bihać – there were at least 6.000 migrants, half of whom were hosted in official camps, while the rest lived in makeshift settlements and abandoned buildings (Brambilla et al., 2021). Residents initially showed empathy and solidarity, knowing what it means to leave home in search of safety (Camilli, 2019). However, Bosnian authorities' recurrent and persistent portrayal of migrants as a threat to security, coupled with their lack of coordination in managing the presence of these people, generated a sense of emergency in small communities still recovering from the trauma of the war (Hromadžić, 2020). Over the years, and with the increase in transit, intolerance towards migrants spread, and repressive and punitive approaches toward them gained increasing consent in the public and political debate.

In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic provided a pretext to further securitise the migratory phenomenon (Brambilla et al., 2021). Now seen as also a threat to public health, migrants in the Una Sana Canton were subjected to particularly restrictive policies. Authorities prevented those accommodated inside official camps from leaving these structures and persecuted those living outside them in the Una Sana canton. In August, a directive even prohibited acts of solidarity towards those living in informal settlements, under the pretext of preventing gatherings or disturbing public peace (Brambilla et al., 2021). This type of approach fostered the diffusion of anti-migrant and xenophobic mobilisations, which, in turn, incentivised the implementation of increasingly repressive measures.

The construction of Lipa's Temporary Reception Centre in March 2020 was intended to address this emergency situation (Clementi et al., 2021). The camp was largely funded by the EU through the so-called Instruments for Pre-Accession (IPA), financing mechanisms for EU candidate and potential candidate countries. The camp's management was organised through a multi-level partnership. The municipal government of Bihać, the administrative capital of the canton, was expected to prepare the land, build a fence, provide water and sanitation, and manage waste disposal. The cantonal government was tasked with relocating migrants from unofficial settlements and offering healthcare once the camp was ready. The EU and Bosnia's Ministry of Security – the state body most directly involved in

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[2] 'Game' is how migrants along the Balkan route call their attempt to cross international borders.

asylum issues – agreed that the IOM and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) would manage the facility, providing qualified personnel and logistical support.

However, in the months following the camp's inauguration, local authorities exhibited a lack of engagement and collaborative spirit; for instance, water and electricity connections were never completed. IOM staff repeatedly complained about this situation, and EU institutions vehemently urged Bosnian authorities to fulfil their duties and provide adequate reception services for migrants. Local administrations, for their part, criticised the Sarajevo government for its lack of support, justifying their own inaction by citing insufficient government funding for migration management. This political impasse led to the IOM's decision to withdraw from the facility, citing the impossibility of conducting its work without the Bosnian authorities' collaboration (Kovacevic, 2020). The camp was closed on December 23, 2020, and on that same day, a fire destroyed the facility. Hundreds of people remained with no refuge in the midst of the freezing winter. In the following weeks, authorities allowed only limited humanitarian aid and prevented migrants from leaving the site to seek refuge elsewhere. Attempts to relocate these people were repeatedly thwarted by the local authorities and communities (Brambilla et al., 2021) and by a lack of coordination from the national government in Sarajevo, which only sent the army to set up an emergency encampment where migrants ended up staying for months.

Addressing this situation, in 2021, Amnesty International submitted an opinion to the European Commission on Bosnia-Herzegovina's application for EU membership ahead of the 2021 Enlargement Package. The report stressed that:

> "both state and local authorities continue to outsource their responsibilities to the international community and civil society, who have managed, or managed jointly with other authorities, five out of eight reception centres across BiH. […] [In the meantime] Local authorities, particularly in Una-Sana Canton, doubled down on passing restrictive and discriminatory measures targeting migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees on their territory" (Amnesty International, 2021).

Within a year, the Lipa camp was finally reconstructed, primarily through EU funding. At this point, it was decided that the facility would be converted into an official reception centre directly managed by the Bosnian government. Still, the IOM maintained a key role, providing "technical support and on-the-job training to the Service for Foreigners' Affairs" (Interview with IOM)[3]. Particularly from 2021, IOM's staff have reported working "closely" with Bosnian institutions "to progressively transfer the management of TRCs to relevant authorities" (Interview with IOM). In other words, although formal responsibility for the camp passed to the Ministry of Security, the organisation not only continued to provide essential services but also to train the public officials working within the facility.

The IOM functions more like a private corporation than a humanitarian organisation (Georgi, 2010). Despite having acquired the status of a UN agency in 2016, there are no formal procedures for holding it accountable in front of the UN General Assembly (Bradley et al., 2023). Moreover, the organisation has no protection mandate (Amnesty International, 2003) and no normative authority (Betts, 2011). Instead, it operates through an accounting method inspired by business models, so-called projectization or activity-based costing. This implies that IOM is conducting "only those activities that will definitely be financed by guaranteed

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[3] Despite my repeated requests for interviews with managers or field staff, the agency declined, offering instead to answer written questions submitted via email. I will cite this material as 'interview with IOM', although their responses consisted primarily of material already available on their website and in their published documents.

project contributions from concrete donors" (Georgi, 2010, p. 63). As such, the organisation's obligations lie predominantly with the governments that finance it and to which it provides services, rather than with human rights norms. Predictably, its involvement in asylum management has thus led to several violations of the rights of migrants and asylum seekers (Amnesty International & Human Rights Watch, 2002). However, precisely due to the IOM's hybrid public-private nature, its accountability mechanisms are weak and ambivalent (Georgi, 2010), severely limiting public scrutiny of its conduct. These features of the organisation have made it especially appealing to governments and institutions looking to enforce controversial asylum policies concerning border control, detention, and return.

Considering the above, the management of Lipa exemplifies a mode of governance we can call securitarian neoliberalism, which involves the institutionalisation, through neoliberal frameworks, of illiberal forms of governance that undermine individual rights and bypass the rule of law in pursuit of purported national security and ethno-national purity. The following excerpt from the solidarity group No Name Kitchen offers a compelling account of these processes in practice.

> "Functioning according to logics of profit, the camp benefits from the expansion of people on the move who are detained there. This logic is well reflected also in the language used by IOM personnel. People on the move are indeed referred to as 'customers' and the buses that transport pushbacked people are defined as a 'shuttle bus service' […] Despite the high amount of money invested into it, however, residents at Lipa continue to lack the most fundamental services for a life with dignity. As part of the prison-industrial complex (PIX), Lipa camp exists for the economic interests of governments and private companies, but most of all for the maintenance of the racial borders of Fortress Europe. […] Further investigations remain necessary to have a more encompassing understanding of Lipa Camp's management. In regard to our current understanding, however, it remains that the several forms of violence that are perpetrated within its fences are in direct contrast to the liberal self-representation of the EU as protector of human rights and fundamental liberties. The words and lived experiences of those who are constrained there provide evidence to this claim" (No Name Kitchen, 2022).

Living conditions for migrants in Lipa have remained degrading and humiliating to this day. Testimonies collected from human rights activists report about physical and psychological abuses, forced administration of psychotropic drugs, and meagre rations of food (No Name Kitchen, 2022, 2023). In this regard, it is worth noting that the absence of effective solutions to address critical situations is not only advantageous for service-providing companies—as it maintains demand—but, according to Biebricher (2020), it is also an intrinsic feature of neoliberalism itself. Neoliberal entities frequently issue various criticisms of the state and propose reforms concerning the nature of a more neoliberal society and democracy. This is evident in the many complaints and critiques the IOM has made about Bosnian institutions. However, these entities typically lack concrete and feasible strategies to achieve a 'better' state of affairs. "This almost eschatological view of politics – Biebricher suggests – is the final link between neoliberalism and authoritarianism because neoliberal thought has backed itself into a theoretical corner and needs authoritarian means to find a way out" (2020, p. 14).

Notably, in 2022, the European Commission earmarked €500.000 for the establishment of a detention unit in Lipa. The stated objective was to accelerate return procedures for individuals deemed unsuitable for international protection. The responsibility for constructing this facility was assigned to the International Centre for Migration Policy

Development (ICMPD), a private agency specialising in migration services, whose CEO is a former prominent figure of the liberal-conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), a party known for its robust anti-immigration stance. With this project, securitarian approaches and commercial interests have, once more, taken precedence over safeguarding the rights of migrant populations. Numerous reports, in fact, detail the inhumane and degrading conditions endured by the individuals within the detention unit (Frontline Defenders, 2023; SOS Balkanroute, 2023).

Governments' stand-ins: private companies in Casa Malala

A significant number of people arriving in Trieste have passed through Bihać, following the same path that Yugoslav refugees took in the 1990s in their quest for safety. Back then, Trieste became a key hub for these transits and a primary place of integration for those seeking protection in Italy. Amid an unprecedented migratory event, the city distinguished itself by effectively managing the situation in a manner that benefited both refugees and residents. This approach was notably different from the Italian government's strategy, which had been largely unsuccessful. The government focused on creating large, isolated facilities treated as temporary emergency solutions, outsourcing their management to the third sector and private entities, and rarely achieving the necessary and promised reception standards (Bona, 2016; Bona & Marchetti, 2017). Under the initiative of the Italian Consortium of Solidarity (ICS), a non-profit organisation providing support to asylum seekers and refugees, the city pioneered a system of so-called 'spread hospitality' (in Italian, *accoglienza diffusa*) that accommodates asylum seekers and refugees in apartments distributed throughout the city rather than big and isolated facilities. This strategy promotes smoother integration for foreign nationals and offers local communities economic opportunities by hosting refugees and leasing their premises. Building on this successful experience, Trieste's model was nationalised in the early 2000s, inspiring the creation of the SPRAR (Bona, 2016).

Despite the decades-long history of solidarity with migrants, Trieste has also traditionally served as a symbol and focal point of nationalist, sovereigntist, and anti-immigrant sentiments (Pupo, 2021). The city served as the birthplace of irredentism—a movement dedicated to Italian territorial and national unity from which Fascism would later draw extensive inspiration. Notably, Trieste was the city where Mussolini proclaimed the racial laws against Jewish people in 1938. Decades later, in 2017, far-right current Prime Minister Meloni chose Trieste to attend the conference of her Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia) party, presenting herself as a defender of Italian sovereignism (Sondel-Cedarmas, 2022). It is therefore not surprising that over the last two decades, the city has been predominantly and almost continuously governed by right-wing parties with a strong anti-immigration stance.

In this context, at the first signs of arrivals from the Balkan route, the Trieste administration responded with immediate alarmism, warning citizens of an impending invasion despite the fact that transit numbers were actually low and local asylum applications were even fewer. Namely, a public official from the Court of Trieste reported that right-wing parties began disseminating alarmist rhetoric long before any genuine migratory emergency materialised. Even with the increase in arrivals via the Balkan route starting in 2018, the local reception system continued to operate relatively smoothly until 2022-2023. "The challenges we faced back then", the official said, "weren't primarily practical; instead, they were largely fuelled by speculation and political wrangling, especially from The League and other centre-right parties" (Trieste, 2022).

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic offered a further pretext for declaring a state of emergency, like in Bosnia. In May 2020, the Ministry of the Interior instructed the border

police to return irregular migrants intercepted along the border to Slovenia, without formalising their asylum requests (Astuti et al., 2022). Concurrently, public resources for the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees in Trieste were severely cut, and state-led services were progressively dismantled (Fortarezza, 2023). In the meantime, the national government in Rome declared a state of emergency to counter the pandemic and the 'closure of ports' to stop the arrival of migrants.

These political choices reflected an attitude shared by both national and local politicians and fueled by the introduction of the so-called Security Decrees in 2018. Promoted by the right-wing and sovereigntist party, The League, the decrees expedited the detention and expulsion of asylum seekers, fostering a hostile environment for foreigners and exacerbating social tensions and discrimination. The emphasis on security and depicting asylum seekers as threats also implied viewing support services for these individuals as a drain on public resources, thereby reflecting a neoliberal focus on efficiency and cost-cutting. De facto, the reform dismantled the SPRAR system (Terlizzi, 2020, p. 22) and substantially compromised the quality of state-led first reception for people who just arrived, making integration for asylum seekers and refugees even more challenging than before. Predictably, this has led to a crisis of the reception system (Centri d'Italia, 2022), then politically exploited to justify harsher anti-immigrant rhetoric and stricter asylum policies.

An important provision in the decrees was that access to the SPRAR system was restricted to those granted asylum, forcing asylum seekers to wait for application outcomes in Extraordinary Reception Centres, so-called CAS. These structures were introduced by Law 142/2015 during the long summer of migration to accommodate asylum seekers when primary and secondary reception centres are full. Initially intended as a backup solution for critical events, CAS has now become routine. According to the ministerial report on the functioning of the reception system in 2018, the first reception network comprised 13 government centres and 102 CAS, which hosted the majority of asylum seekers. CAS are typically large, isolated facilities with limited integration services, making them unsuitable for long-term stays. The overall responsibility for these facilities is with the Ministry of Interior. The Ministry of Interior's Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration sets standards for CAS facilities and services and oversees funding allocation. However, their day-to-day management is typically outsourced to private companies, cooperatives, and non-profit organisations. At the regional level, the Prefectures are responsible for implementing the system. Between 2011 and 2016, the left-wing municipal government in Trieste recognised the slow distribution of funds for CAS by the prefecture and thus committed to covering some of the costs themselves. However, when the centre-right regained control of Trieste's government, this measure was immediately revoked.

In light of this situation, the events surrounding Casa Malala are particularly significant. Casa Malala is a CAS located a few steps from the border with Slovenia and around 10 kilometres from Trieste's city centre. The building was originally a barracks of the Financial Guard. Funded by the state, Casa Malala was jointly managed by Caritas FVG and ICS from its establishment in 2016 until 2024. However, as the Security Decrees entered into force, the contraction of public funding for reception services fostered an environment conducive to the proliferation of private business (Global Detention Project, 2019). Market-oriented companies that prioritise efficiency and cost reduction over strict adherence to international standards have proven more competitive than charitable and non-profit organisations and have consequently secured the management of numerous reception facilities across the country.

In 2019, ORS Italia, a multinational company specialising in administrative detention – namely, private prisons for irregularised migrants – entered the tender competition for Casa

Malala. The ORS group manages reception and detention facilities for asylum seekers and migrants across Europe. The organisation has an Advisory Committee composed of several political figures, with the former Swiss Minister of Justice, Police, and Migration serving as its president. ICMPD's CEO is also a member of ORS. As the influence of ORS grew across Europe, several NGOs and activist networks started questioning the ethical implications of privatising asylum reception, citing concerns about profit motives, conflicts of interest, and a lack of transparency in ORS-managed centres. These criticisms have been linked to substandard living conditions and human rights violations within ORS facilities (Lethbridge, 2017). Hence, when ORS Italia submitted its bid for the Casa Malala tender, ICS and Caritas FVG promptly objected, questioning the company's lack of prior experience in the country and its questionable staffing and budgeting practices, such as a high reliance on inexperienced personnel and low-cost meal provisions for people accommodated in their centres (Liverani, 2020). Nevertheless, ORS secured first place in the 2019 tender selection process by offering a substantial 14% discount on the initial auction price (Ibidem).

This prompted ICS to file legal action against the Trieste Prefecture and the Ministry of the Interior, which eventually led to ORS's exclusion from the tender competition and to the subsequent reallocation of Casa Malala's management contract to ICS and Caritas FVG. Referring to these events, an ICS operator drew a line between ORS's economic interests and the Italian government's political aspirations, highlighting the convergence of neoliberal and securitarian modes of governance. "This seemed to be a politically motivated move, - he said - someone made the call". "Was it someone from the local administration?" I asked, and he replied:

> "No, it's more likely on a national level. This incident exemplifies a typical Italian scenario. ORS's references in Italy are notably obscure, and their political ties remain uncertain. However, they have participated in various tenders and secured the Temporary Detention Centre (CPR) of Macomer in Sardinia, as well as possibly a CAS in the same region. If you search for CPR Macomer online, for example in L'unione Sarda, you'll find numerous articles exposing their 'criminal' management. Further investigation into ORS's activities in other European countries reveals even more troubling situations: their involvement in sponsoring private prisons, for clarity" (Trieste, 2021).

Along the same line, the former director of Caritas FVG claimed that "the manner in which tender competitions [for reception facilities] are structured seems to be a legal loophole allowing questionable individuals to enter the system". In 2024, the management of Casa Malala was transferred to the Nova Facility cooperative, which had previously been responsible for the Lampedusa hotspot (Tagadà, 2021) and several CAS across the country (Merlini, 2020). This company, which originally specialised in installing gas pipes and solar panels (Bettin, 2021), won the bid with an unexpectedly low offer, undercutting the already tight baseline costs by about 18% (Consorzio Italiano di Solidarietà, 2024).

Securitarian neoliberalism: toward illiberal forms of governance

The cases of Lipa and Casa Malala elucidate how state institutions strategically adapt to international migration and the globalisation of governance processes by blurring their functions and roles with international and private non-state entities that, due to their statutes, possess elusive accountability mechanisms. Consequently, governments can uphold and continue to project their nationalist and sovereignty ambitions, rooted in an illiberal perspective that includes the restriction of rights and the coercive and discretionary

use of power, by delegating the implementation and operationalisation of the resulting policies, along with the (limited) legal responsibilities, to third-party actors that capitalise on such policies.

Securitarian neoliberalism represents a mode of governance in which the principle of the state's sovereignty coexists with the outsourcing, streamlining, and dispersal of its functions, specifically to safeguard its sovereignty and a purported national security. Neoliberalism produces "new assemblages of authority" between entities that were once exclusively public or private (Darling, 2016b, p. 231). It involves a "transfer of operations that produces a different mode of government" (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002, p. 989), that is, a "governance at a distance" (Springer, 2011, p. 95). By withdrawing from the direct management of asylum seekers and refugees, states create an opening for non-state actors to become involved in these processes, effectively taking on roles that public institutions would typically fulfil. Especially in the context of security policies and securitarian approaches, Abrahamsen and Williams note that the devolution of public functions to private and semi-private actors creates

> "new geographies of power [that] cannot [...] be reduced to a simple question of more or less state power, or a weakened domestic government. Instead, they demand an investigation of the production of new modalities of power through which the very categories of public/private and global/local are reconstituted" (2010, p. 179)

By combining securitarian and neoliberal approaches to asylum governance, states maintain their influence over asylum-seekers and refugees indirectly, exerting their control without explicit and official engagement. These processes raise fundamental questions about accountability, democratic scrutiny and the rule of law. As Gill contends, the neoliberalisation of asylum contributes to creating a system of fragmented accountability, in which "almost no one takes responsibility for the organisation as a whole" (2016, p. 33). Reliance on international organisations and private businesses, which are subjected to fewer monitoring and accountability mechanisms than public institutions, reduces the ability to scrutinise and sanction controversial behaviours (Crouch, 2011). Additionally, outsourcing government functions to non-state entities can create a system in which profits or cost reduction are prioritised over legal and procedural standards, making it harder to address violations of refugee rights (Rako, 2014; Riles, 2008). This leads to a weakening of democratic scrutiny that, as Novak argues, gears towards a "restructuring of the EU's governance architecture and the reconfiguration of member states' institutional apparatuses" (2019, p. 2). In this context, the securitisation of asylum exemplifies one of the illiberal trends this reconfiguration could adopt, with its obsessive focus on security and national preservation leading to the use of repressive and punitive measures even within formally democratic regimes, at the expense of people's safety and institutional accountability.

Overall, the research demonstrates how seemingly contradictory forces coexist and reinforce each other in asylum governance, affecting not only asylum seekers and refugees but also exposing how the institutions responsible for meeting their needs and protecting their rights undermine public and judicial oversight, while failing to provide any genuine solution to the situation. These patterns, already troubling in asylum governance, have implications that reach far beyond that specific policy area. Notably, as Sassen argues, "[i]mmigration is [...] a sort of wrench one can throw into theories about sovereignty" (Sassen, 1996, p. 67). This means that the way governments treat non-citizens can serve as a litmus test for various aspects of a society, including the (in)effectiveness of welfare systems, the underlying values and beliefs, the strength of the rule of law, and, ultimately,

the quality of its democracy. Notably, recent analyses have underlined the emergence of an "authoritarian neoliberalism" (Biebricher, 2020) or "authoritarian capitalism" in Western democracies (Bonanno, 2020, p. 20), suggesting a global drift toward authoritarian, autocratic, and illiberal forms of the existing neoliberal system. Building on these analyses, this study ultimately suggests that the spread of securitarian neoliberalism should not be seen merely as a move from democratic to authoritarian or from liberal to illiberal governance. Instead, the illiberal aspects promoted by today's global political elite are just one way in which neoliberalism's illiberal tendencies become apparent, as they are more openly embraced by those in power and, as such, more notably feared by both citizens and non-citizens.

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Transparency on the use of generative Artificial Intelligence
Grammarly for Education was used solely for language refinement to improve clarity and readability.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rebordering the 'Russian Space' in the Post-Soviet Era
From Reactive Discourses and Informal Practices to State-Led Strategy

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Abstract

This article examines the roots of the 'reterritorialisation' of Russian national interests, examining the debates about territory and borders that emerged in Russia during the 1990s and early 2000s and their long-term integration into state policy. We argue that the current ethno-nationalist trend in Russian politics reflects the perceptions and strategies of a generation of post-Soviet elites, whose ideas about Russia's territorial and humanitarian boundaries were formulated three decades ago. These ideas have since been integrated into official policies, facilitated by the political success of these institutional entrepreneurs. Employing an original methodology that includes extensive use of Russian-language sources and a prosopographic study of key post-Soviet elites, the essay sheds light on the polyphonic nature of Russian border revisionism. The Congress of Russian Communities (KRO) and its role in the context of the Ukraine war(s) will be used as an illustrative case study.

Introduction

Moscow's official discourse shows an ever-growing 'reterritorialisation' of Russian national interests. Contemporary Russian foreign and domestic policies are deeply rooted in prescriptive debates about territory, borders, and their ideal configurations to protect Russian peoples and geopolitical interests. These ideas are intertwined with the resurgence of Russian ethno-nationalism and territorial revisionism. Notably, the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and internationally recognised borders has been justified by the purported need to restore the "historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians," as articulated in President Putin's 2021 essay and reiterated in his speech on 24 February 2022, which preceded the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Putin 2021, 2022).[1] The Russian recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics on 21 February 2022, followed by the invasion and subsequent annexation of occupied territories in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, exemplifies this logic.[2]

These actions were not isolated but embedded in a broader ideological and legal framework, characterised by an insistence on, and peculiar interpretation of, territorial integrity and national unity. For instance, the 2020 constitutional amendments redefined

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[1] For an analysis of evolving Russian discourse and policies in Ukraine, see Puleri & Mamaiev (2024).

[2] For a comparative analysis of Russian narratives on Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, see Allison (2014, 2024).

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the Russian Federation as "the legal successor of the Soviet Union on its territory, as well as … outside the territory of the Russian Federation," invoking a "thousand-year history" and a civilisational mission.[3] This orientation was further institutionalised in key foreign policy documents. The 2022 *Concept of Humanitarian Policy Abroad* identifies Russian "compatriots" as bearers of national identity, regardless of their geographic location, and frames their protection as a core state responsibility.[4] Similarly, the latest edition of the *Foreign Policy Concept* sanctions "Russia's special position as a unique state-civilisation and a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power that brings together the Russian people and other peoples belonging to the cultural and civilisational community of the Russian world".[5]

Mainstream analyses often interpret these developments as top-down manipulations by Putin and his inner circle, aimed at managing geopolitical tensions and consolidating domestic power (Kolesnikov 2023). In contrast, we argue that the current reterritorialisation trend in Russian policy-making has deeper roots. It reflects the long-term influence of a broader generation of post-Soviet elites – of which Putin is only one prominent figure – who developed ideas about Russia's territorial and humanitarian borders in already three decades ago. These ideas, initially peripheral and contested, gradually entered official discourse and policy through the political success of their proponents and diffusion within Russia's informal political networks.

By articulating this argument, we make three main contributions to the academic debate. First, we contextualise Russia's foreign policy within history and its domestic debates. As Aliaksei Kazharski (2019) observed, an "examination of identity-construction processes in Russia is crucial if we also want to understand the causes of recent security challenges in Eastern Europe" (p. 7). Second, we contribute to border studies by examining how early post-Soviet elites made sense of Russia's changing boundaries and proposed their further adjustment, within the context of broader reflections on the identity and strategic challenges of a new Russia. Third, we employ a novel methodology, combining Russian and Russian-language sources with a prosopographic analysis of elite trajectories, to trace how initially marginal ideas became institutionalised. By doing so, we will integrate insights from the disciplines of International History and International Relations.

Having these goals in mind, the article proceeds as follows. First, we explain why peripheral actors matter in understanding Russian politics, including its approach to borders. Second, we outline the key themes of the 1990s–2000s debates on Russian identity, interests, and borders, thereby setting the scene for our case study. Third, we examine the case of the Congress of the Russian Communities (*Kongress Russkikh Obshchin* – KRO) – whose ideas, particularly those of Dmitry Rogozin, were gradually absorbed into official policy, contributing to the long-term reterritorialisation of Russian interests. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our findings and suggesting avenues for future research on Russia's evolving approach to post-Soviet borders.

Why should we care about Russian peripheral actors ?

Understanding the reterritorialisation of Russian politics requires moving beyond the analysis of centralised state institutions and presidential authority. While the pre-1991 Soviet period was characterised by "the overwhelming power of the Russian-centered Soviet

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[3] "Konstitutsiia Rossiiskoi Federatsii (s izmeneniiami, vnesennymi v sootvestvii s Federal'nym konstitutsionnym zakonom No. 1-FKZ ot 14.03.2020 g.)," available at: https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text/583066. For an analysis of the amendements, see Belov (2021).

[4] "Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 05.09.2022 g. no. 611 'Ob utverdzhenii Konceptsii gumanitarnoi politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii za rubezhom'," available at: http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/48280/page/1.

[5] "Kontseptsiia vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii (utverdzhena Prezidentom Rossiiskoi Federatsii V. V. Putinym 31 marta 2023 g.)," available at: https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1860586/.

state to define, shape, and to bestow identity" (Clowes 2011, p. ix), and the post-2010s have seen a re-consolidation of power around the presidency, the intervening decades were marked by ideological pluralism and institutional fluidity. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the Russian political landscape was shaped not by a monolithic state apparatus, but by a diffuse constellation of actors – political parties, movements, regional leaders, and informal networks – who actively contributed to redefining Russia's identity and ambitions, in both territorial and humanitarian terms (Kazharski 2019, pp. 34-35).

This period of institutional ambiguity and diffusion of power enabled the emergence of what Anton Steen (2003) described as the "Network State," in which informal elite networks functioned as pragmatic arenas for conflict resolution and policy experimentation. Though largely opaque and resistant to democratic oversight, these networks were crucial in coordinating and re-coalescing elite interests at a time of systemic transformation. As Henry E. Hale (2016) observed in his study on patronal politics, in post-Soviet regimes "politics is first and foremost a *struggle among extended networks of personal acquaintances*, not among formal institutions such as 'parties,' 'parliament,' 'firms,' or even 'the presidency' or 'the state'" (p. 29). In other words, power in post-Soviet Russia was exercised less through formal institutions and more through extended networks of personal relationships, with the presidency functioning as a central node for managing these competing interests (id.; see also Hale 2015; Pavlovsky 2016).

This understanding aligns with Kimberly Marten's (2015) argument that Russian foreign policy under Putin is best interpreted through the lens of informal political networks. Marten shows how foreign policy decisions are often shaped not by institutional interests or strategic doctrines, but by the personal networks of elites who use state resources to maintain their own power and distribute rents. These networks, opaque and highly personalised, extend into the foreign policy realm, where they influence decisions through informal channels rather than formal bureaucratic processes. In this light, peripheral actors—those initially outside the formal state apparatus—can gain influence not by institutional legitimacy, but by embedding themselves within these informal networks.

Similarly, Celeste Wallander (2007) introduces the concept of 'transimperialism' to describe how Russia's patrimonial authoritarianism extends into the international sphere. Rather than relying on traditional imperial control or liberal integration, Russia engages in selective, opaque, and elite-driven interactions that replicate domestic patron-client dynamics on a transnational scale. Peripheral actors, such as the KRO, are particularly relevant in this context. Their ability to articulate nationalist narratives and mobilise support for compatriots abroad made them valuable assets in the Kremlin's broader strategy of managing influence in the post-Soviet space without overt annexation – until conditions allowed for more assertive moves, such as in Crimea.

Indeed, the evolution of Russian policy in relation to the so-called 'frozen conflicts' of the post-Soviet era illustrates these dynamics.[6] In the early 1990s, decision-making was often decentralised, with regional leaders, separatist organisations, and former Soviet military officers shaping outcomes on the ground. As Andrei Kazantsev and colleagues (2020) noted:

"The super-presidential republic established in Russia under the 1993 Constitution formally established a very high centralisation of foreign policy decisions. However, in reality the policies of the Yeltsin administration were a product of both public and non-public struggles of various political forces in Moscow … The political paralysis in Moscow

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[6] Here the term 'frozen conflicts' refers to "four conflicts of an ethnic or ethnolinguistic nature that arose out of the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s", leading to "the emergence of four internationally unrecognized or 'de facto' states: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Pridnestrov'e…and Nagorno-Karabakh" (Kazantsev *et al.* 2020, p. 142).

meant that many decisions concerning regional conflicts were made not in the nation's capital, but by separatist organisations on the ground … by regional leaders … or by former officers and generals of the Soviet Army who chose which side of the conflict they would support" (p. 147).

Over time, however, the ideas and practices pioneered by these peripheral actors were absorbed into the state's geopolitical strategy, culminating in more cohesive, complex, and assertive policies after 2008. While the nature and content of Russia's claims regarding post-Soviet borders have remained relatively consistent, their form and intensity evolved (Rotaru 2022, p. 98). This is the case of the ideas, discourses and practices around 'biopolitical concerns' promoted by political movements in Russia in the 1990s, which eventually entered the mainstream political discourse and impacted on the state-led geopolitical moves. Crucially, the primary bearers of such claims have changed. In the 1990s, such narratives were advanced not by institutional elites but by conservative opposition figures concerned with humanitarian issues (Rotaru 2020, p. 92; Kazharski 2019, p. 45). Only later, since 2008 — and particularly after 2014, these narratives became key to the official state policy and the legitimisation of foreign interventions.[7] Such shift reflects the verticalisation of power under Putin and the intensification of tensions with the West, as much as the institutionalisation of previously fringe narratives proposed by peripheral actors (Kazantsev *et al*. 2020, pp. 142-147).

Most importantly, "the application of biopolitical tools," such as citizenship policies (or 'passportisation') and the support for organisations claiming humanitarian concerns about 'compatriots,' intersects with geopolitical claims "creat[ing] new terrains for inclusion and exclusion, and new practices of bordering and de-bordering whose logic might not always coincide with national jurisdictions" (Makarychev & Yatsyk 2018, p. 20). In this sense, "geo- and bio-politics are two sides of the same imperial 'coin'" in Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet area (*id*., p. 7). On the one hand, we may claim "that there is a spectrum of policies that begins with biopolitical 'concerns' about 'compatriots' and, if conditions allow, progresses along a spectrum to geopolitical moves, from incitements of separatism and irredentism to annexations" (*ibid*.). On the other, as it happened over the 2000s with the gradual involvement of representatives of the former conservative opposition concerned with the humanitarian aspects in the state apparatus, "the application of biopolitical instruments leads to the strengthening of the imperial logic in Russian foreign policy" (p. 4).[8]

Thus, the study of peripheral actors is essential to understanding the nature of Russian reterritorialisation. These actors served as incubators of ideological innovation and policy experimentation, influencing the trajectory of Russian foreign policy from the margins. Their gradual integration into the state apparatus testifies to the permeability of Russia's political system and the complex interplay between informal networks and formal institutions in shaping the country's territorial ambitions, cloaked in historical and humanitarian narratives.

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[7] In his study, Rotaru (2022) highlights the reiterated use of the humanitarian and genocide arguments, together with the narrative of responsibility to protect ethnic Russians and illegitimacy of 'nazi' and 'fascist' central authorities in the former Soviet republics – which had been advanced in the 1990s by the conservative opposition referring to the cases of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria – in the Russian official discourse since 2008, during the political crises in Georgia and Ukraine.

[8] And, most importantly, such dynamics may help understand why Russian policy in the frozen conflicts of the post-Soviet space "underwent profound changes over time", since "by the 2000s, Moscow's policy had shifted from managing ethno-territorial and ethno-linguistic conflicts on Russia's periphery to geopolitical rivalry with the West" (Kazantsev *et al.* 2020, p. 144).

Russian Region-Making After the Collapse of the Soviet Union

The ideas promoted by peripheral actors such as the KRO did not emerge in an intellectual vacuum. Rather, they were embedded in a broader post-Soviet context marked by intense debate over Russia's identity, its place in the post-Cold War international order, and the meaning of sovereignty and statehood in the aftermath of empire. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, a wide range of political thinkers, policy advisors, and institutional actors engaged in competing efforts to redefine Russia's borders – both physical and symbolic. These debates provided fertile ground for the development of alternative visions of Russian space, including those advanced by nationalist and conservative actors who would later influence state policy.[9]

As Edith W. Clowes (2011) observed, "[w]ith the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 peripheries and borders, both real and symbolic, would become the keys to Russians' thinking about who they are" (pp. ix). In post-Soviet Russia, identity and geography became mutually constitutive: defining where Russia is became essential to defining who a Russian is. As Kazharski (2019, p. 81) puts it, in the case of Russia borders "have been ambiguous not only in terms of geographical space, but also in terms of populations inhabiting them" (*ibid*.). The so-called "migration of borders" (Jašina-Schäfer, 2021, p. 1), which followed the political transition from Soviet to post-Soviet times, also impacted on the emergence of "multiple, partially overlapping and partially competing, approaches to defining membership in the Russian nation" (Kazharski 2019, p. 81), making ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers residing in the former Soviet republics — other than Russia — the subject of an intense process of discursive construction (see Puleri & Mamaiev 2024). Since the early 1990s, the notion of the Russian nation as a 'people divided by borders' (or a 'divided people') started to play a crucial role in the territorial projection of Russian political identity (and ambitions) beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. Conversely, the localisation of Russians abroad helped elites reimagine the social and geographical boundaries of Russia itself. These discourses sought to "suture" Russia's fragmented national identity – territorially, socially, historically, and ethnoculturally – after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Kazharski 2019, p. 72; see also Simonsen 1996).[10]

Notably, rather than adhering to a nation-centered process of identity-building with fixed borders, Russian elites increasingly defined identity through a process of region-building. As Kazharski (2019, p. 8) noted, Russian identity was reimagined as a supranational construct spanning the post-Soviet space, positioned as a civilisational counterpart to the collective West. The regionalisation of Russia's identity can be seen as an attempt to come to terms with the disintegration of the former Russian/Soviet empire, which left behind "a peculiar dependence" – socio-economic, political, cognitive – from the "former imperial territories," which in turn limited "the extent to which the Russian Federation can be seen as a sovereign nation-state, where identity and territoriality are, in principle, congruent" (*id*., pp. 12-13). In other words, it qualified as a copying mechanism for managing the "phantom pains" (SVOP

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[9] In this section, we make wide reference to the work of the Council for Foreign and Defence Policy (*Soviet po Vneshnej i Oboronnoj Politike* – SVOP). Founded in 1992 as an independent think tank, originally it aimed at proposing ways to reform (often in a liberal sense) the foreign, security, and economic policies of post-Soviet Russia; while retaining this broad objective, throughout the decades SVOP has closely associated itself with official institutions of power, and particularly the person of Vladimir Putin. In this light, SVOP can serve as an interesting reference for two reasons. On the one hand, its early work is illustrative of the 1990s' lively political debate on Russian interests and role in the world, allowing us to grasp the 'political common sense' that existed beyond the state apparatus. On the other hand, SVOP itself could be seen as a case study of the changing relation between peripheral and central actors in Russia: originally independent from the Kremlin, it was later 'taken over' by central institutions, and transformed into an intellectual powerhouse supporting official state policy.

[10] On the concept of 'suture' in (critical) border studies, see Salter (2012).

1997, p. 12) and sense of impotence caused by the downsizing of Moscow's geopolitical subjectivity. The region constructed by Russia around itself in the 1990s and early 2000s was not merely a strategic buffer; it had "direct relevance to Russia's self-identification, to solving the problem of national subjectivity, and consequently to solving Russia's vital national interests related to the country's revival and development in the 21st century" (SVOP 1996, p. 2).

Two key concepts – 'Near Abroad' and 'Russian World' – emerged in this context and became central to Russia's regionalism and self-identification efforts. The term Near Abroad (*blizhnee zarubezh'e*), originally used in the late Soviet period to describe Eastern European socialist states, was repurposed by Russian officials such as Andrei Kozyrev, Andrei Kokoshin, and Andranik Migranyan to refer to the newly independent post-Soviet republics. Even before it entered common use, this concept revealed the peculiar understanding of post-Soviet borders advanced by the new Russian elite. As Gasan Gusejnov (2005) observed: "Originally, the expression 'Near Abroad' referred to the idea according to which 'the borders of the Russian state after the collapse of the Soviet Union could not yet be considered definitive'" (p. 15). Rooted in the cognitive legacy of Russian imperialism, this notion implied that post-Soviet territories could hardly be separated from Russia itself. It reflected a cognitive and territorial proximity: in the eyes of Russian post-Soviet elites, these states were 'abroad,' but not entirely foreign.

The concept of the Russian World (*russkii mir*) added an ethno-political and civilisational dimension. Defined by Valery Tishkov (2008) as "transnational and transcontinental community united by affiliation to a certain state [Russia] and by loyalty to its culture" (p. 222), the Russian World was imagined as a cultural and linguistic space anchored in Moscow. While Russia is not part of the Near Abroad, it enjoys a twice-special status in the Russian World: first, for the very fact of having crafted a World of its own, which "[b]y no means all states and peoples can generate" (id.); second, and relatedly, Russia's special status within the *russkii mir* is linked with being the very source of the region's cohesion via language and blood. Language, in particular, was seen as "a key cultural asset, which embodies the nation's view of the world. Its history reflects the whole history of national culture" (Osipov 2008, n/p).

The stickiness of features such as language and ethnicity makes the Russian World an ascriptive community – i.e., one whose belonging is not elective, but derives from non-negotiable, innate features.[11] Hence its borders are historically given and extend wherever people bearing such features reside, regardless of their political affiliations and individual aspirations. This view of the Russian World, and Moscow's ultimate role within it, provided the cognitive background to feelings of fear, insecurity, and anxiety manifested by Russian elites since the 1990s in the face of the changing (diminishing) status of Russian language across the post-Soviet space (e.g., Tishkov 2008; for a more recent take, see Araf'ev 2023). Moving from the Russian ideational standpoint, in fact, the shrinking of the area of Russian language would imply a withdrawal of the borders of the *russkii mir*, hence a diminishment of Russia's self-perceived status (or Russian being itself).

Both concepts of Near Abroad and Russian World, albeit with different tones, were tied to a broader imperative: the perceived necessity to maintain authority and control over these territories – i.e., the responsibility to influence their development and the right to do so coercively, if deemed appropriate. Such reasoning was underpinned by two recurrent themes in the Russian politico-strategic debate: the belief in Russia's inherent status as a great power and the idea that sovereignty is hierarchical, hence certain states are more

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[11] For an analysis of the evolution and different ideological nuances of the Russian World Concept, see Puleri & Mamaiev 2024.

sovereign than others (Fasola 2024, pp. 43-53). In this view, many post-Soviet states were seen as lacking full sovereignty and thus as legitimate targets of Russian patronage or intervention (SVOP 2007). Faced with the impossibility of restoring the Soviet Union and constrained by domestic instability, Russian elites translated these cognitive imperatives vis-à-vis the post-Soviet space into two strategic goals: first, keeping other (great) powers out and, second, promoting some degree of geopolitical and socio-economic reintegration with Russia (e.g., SVOP 1996, pp. 11-14).

The urgency of these goals was heightened by the permanence and expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) – a theme that quickly monopolised early Russian discussions on international security. In Russian eyes, "the attempt to preserve the viability of the Atlantic Alliance" was the West's main interest (SVOP 1995, p. 1), but this was categorically labelled as an "infringement of Russia's long-term interests … unacceptable" (id.). Two main reasons contributed to such an assessment. First, NATO was seen as a military alliance with an anti-Russian origin. Its continued existence could not but be associated by Moscow with the permanence of Western hostility towards Russia, hence a potential security threat. This could not be ignored: "The formation of a powerful military potential on the borders of the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] and directly on Russia's Western border (in the Kaliningrad region) – an instrument of possible political and force pressure an active opposition to the reintegration of the post-Soviet space – is not insignificant" and should be opposed (SVOP 1997, p. 14).

Second, Russian concerns grew bigger as the preservation of the Alliance soon became synonymous with its Eastward expansion, which was perceived as a flagrant attempt to 'take over' the whole of Europe, including countries falling within the Near Abroad and the Russian World. Russian analysts noted that "removing Russia as a major player from this space is objectively one of the most important components of the current US foreign policy strategy" (SVOP 2005, p. 5). Russian analysts expected Washington to back any states or actors within the region, if direct conflict between these and Russia were to break out – anticipating the theory that underpins current Russian discourse on colour revolutions and military conflicts across the post-Soviet space (e.g., German 2020). As a result, the Russians feared "that in the next five to seven years the CIS states will be finally 'dismantled' into zones of interest, each of which will be backed by a respective state/group of states" (SVOP 2005, pp. 5-6).

In response, Russian elites increasingly advocated for the partial reintegration of these regions under Moscow's leadership. Because of Western encroachment in the region, political and security concerns featured high on the list of Russian motives, as testified by frequent reflections on preventing the territories to Russia's West from turning into a "strip of alienation" (*polosa otchuzhdeniia*) (SVOP 1997, p. 13) or ensuring the existence of a "security belt" (*poias bezopasnosti*) (SVOP 2005, p. 4). While economic drivers were present, civilisational arguments were more prominent in Russian reflections. When discussing policies towards the post-Soviet neighbours, Moscow consistently emphasised ethno-cultural linkages and identifies Russian and Russian-speaking peoples abroad as a reason for and enabler of tighter relations. This should not be seen merely in instrumental terms, as the rational exploitation of a loosely defined Russian diaspora for practical political purposes; more importantly, it reflected a belief, deeply held in certain intellectual circles, in Russia's role as a civilisational centre with extraterritorial responsibilities.

In sum, the early post-Soviet approach to region-making was driven not only by strategic calculations but also by ontological anxieties. The concepts of the Near Abroad and the Russian World provided the cognitive scaffolding for Russia's evolving foreign policy, linking identity, territory, and power in ways that continue to shape its actions today.

This conceptual framework provides the necessary backdrop for understanding the political relevance of actors like the KRO in shaping the consolidation of arguments about territorial and humanitarian re-bordering. The KRO emerged in the early 1990s as a peripheral yet ideologically significant force, articulating a vision of Russia as a civilisational centre with a moral and strategic obligation to protect and reunite its dispersed compatriots. The KRO's discourses on cultural unity, historical continuity, and humanitarian responsibility were not isolated expressions of fringe nationalism; rather, they were early manifestations of a broader reterritorialisation logic that would later be adopted and institutionalised by the Russian state. By tracing the trajectory of the KRO and its leaders – particularly Dmitry Rogozin – into the mainstream of Russian politics, we show how region-making was not only a top-down project of statecraft but also a cumulative process shaped by the ideological contributions of peripheral actors. The KRO case thus exemplifies how informal and marginal voices helped reimagine the Russian space in the post-Soviet era, ultimately influencing the state's long-term strategic vision.

The Congress of Russian Communities and its impact on Moscow's regional strategies

The political trajectory of the KRO offers a compelling case study of how fringe nationalist discourses were gradually integrated into the Russian state's official strategy of reterritorialisation. Founded in 1993 as a network of organisations representing 'Russian communities' across the former Soviet republics, the KRO emerged as a vehicle for contesting the post-Soviet territorial order. From its inception, the KRO positioned itself as a 'state-patriotic movement,' distancing itself from the 'red-brown' coalition of conservative and neo-Soviet forces. Its ideological platform, as articulated in the *Manifesto of the Resurrection of Russia* (1994–1996), rejected both Bolshevism and National Socialism as "anti-Russian ideologies," instead promoting a vision of the 'Russian nation' as a historically unified entity unjustly divided by artificial borders:

"Over the centuries, absorbing large and small people [*narody*], the Russian nation [*russkaia natsiia*] united Great Russians, Little Russians, Belarusians, relatively recently formed new Russian ethnic groups, as well as representatives of the indigenous peoples of Russia who consider themselves Russian … But the borders that have divided the nation pose before the state-patriotic movement the task of reuniting the original Russian lands, the Russian nation, the task of recreating Russian statehood in its former power and beauty. WE WERE A UNITED NATION AND WE WILL RETURN TO NATIONAL UNITY. Only by overcoming the division of the Russian nation can we restore the civil dignity of millions of people, revive Russia and protect its priceless culture from destruction." (KRO 1996)

Along these lines, "the restoration of the territorial integrity of the country on the basis of the indivisibility of the Russian state" (*ibid*.) was one of the main goals of the KRO. This vision was not merely rhetorical. As Alan Ingram (2001) noted, the KRO operated less as a political party and more as a federation of cultural centres and associations across the post-Soviet space. By 1994, it had established affiliated organisations in nearly all former Soviet republics (except Turkmenistan) and actively intervened in regional crises, including Crimea (1994) and Transnistria (1995). Domestically, the KRO claimed "a special right to speak on behalf of an excluded part of the Russian nation" (*ibid*., p. 205) – those left outside the borders of the Russian Federation – and was the first political movement to adopt a *Declaration of the Rights of Compatriots* (1994), asserting Russia's responsibility to protect and support ethnic Russians abroad (Ingram 1999, p. 695).

Although the KRO failed to gain parliamentary representation throughout the 1990s, its ideological influence was significant. Ingram (2001) observed that the official government policy on compatriots abroad, adopted just months after the KRO's declaration, bore striking similarities to the latter's proposals, thus reflecting the growing competition among

the moderate line followed by official institutions and the radical discourse promoted by KRO. The state's attempt to counterbalance the KRO's radicalism through the creation of the Assembly of Russian Compatriots in 1995 ultimately failed, underscoring the resonance of the KRO's message and its ability to attract support from within the legislative branch – including figures like Konstantin Zatulin, then chair of the Duma Committee for CIS Affairs and Links with Compatriots, who "lamented the lack of official action" and supported KRO as "the only organisation providing real help" (Ingram 2001, p. 210) for Russians abroad.[12]

While the KRO's early efforts did not immediately translate into policy change, its long-term impact was facilitated by the political ascent of key figures within its network – most notably Dmitry Rogozin. A graduate of Moscow State University and senior Komsomol activist, since the early 1990s Rogozin has emerged as the KRO leader and founder. Already in 1992, Rogozin played an important role in making KRO first an interstate organization networking several centres of political activity in defence of Russian-speaking peoples all over the post-Soviet space, and then a full-fledged Russian sociopolitical movement in 1995, thanks to the alliance with Sergey Glazyev's wing of the Democratic Party of Russia.[13] After the failure in 1995 Duma elections, where the KRO list led by Glazyev, Iurii Skokov and Aleksander Lebed did not manage to reach the electoral threshold, one year later Rogozin worked on the latter's presidential campaign.[14] In late 1990s, he served as the only key leader in KRO — which, while being excluded from the major state institutions in Russia, still worked as an important networking hub for political organizations across the post-Soviet space — before creating in 2003, together with Glazyev, the electoral bloc Rodina: the newly-formed bloc received 9.02% of votes at the December 2003 Duma elections, thus entering the parliament.[15]

Although initially seen as a Kremlin-engineered project to siphon votes from the Communist Party, Rodina soon adopted a more oppositional stance, particularly after the 2004–2005 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, invoking a similar turn of events in Russia (Horvath & Lever 2024).[16] This shift prompted a state-led campaign to neutralise the movement, including a

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[12] During his political experience, Konstantin Zatulin constantly gravitated towards the KRO's network and its humanitarian concerns. After being the leader of KRO's Krasnodar branch, in 1996 he founded an autonomous and influential non-profit organization, the Institute of CIS Countries (or, Institute of Diaspora and Integration), having several branches all around the post-Soviet region and promoting the need for supporting the rights of Russian compatriots abroad.

[13] Glazyev is another peculiar figure emerging from KRO's network, who later played an important role in the state apparatus: first, as advisor of President Putin on regional economic integration (2012-2019), and then as Commissioner for Integration and Macroeconomics within the Eurasian Economic Commission (2019-2024), the executive body of the Eurasian Economic Union. The Democratic Party of Russia was a political party evolving from liberal anticommunism to moderate Russian nationalism in the early 1990s: after an internal split, the Glazyev wing took part within the KRO list in the 1995 Russian legislative election.

[14] Aleksander Lebed, the former commander of the Russian 14th army stationing in Transnistria, took part in the 1996 Russian presidential elections as the KRO's candidate. He received 14.52% of votes, ranking third at the first round after Boris Ieltsin and Gennadii Ziuganov, the leader of the Communist party of the Russian Federation. After Ieltsin's victory at the second round, he was appointed as the secretary of Security Council of the Russian Federation, and eventually broke with the KRO.

[15] As Horvath and Lever (2024, p. 3) highlight in their study, Glazyev's role was crucial "in the design of Rodina as an amalgam of leftist and nationalist forces", gathering together Sergei Baburin's People's Will, "a haven for radical nationalists" and KRO, "one of the most succesfull nationalist projects of the 1990s", as the main elements of the 2003 electoral bloc becoming the fourth largest force in the Duma.

[16] The departure of Rodina from state support was a result of the different roads undertaken by the party leaders after the 2003 elections. As Horvath and Lever (2003, p. 3) retrace: "In a bid to capitalize on the bloc's success, Glaz'ev ran against Putin in the 2004 presidential elections. Incensed at this reckless challenge to his Kremlin patrons, Rogozin appropriated Rodina's name for his own eponymous party. The damage, however, was already done [...] The result was that the Presidential Administration ceased to regard the bloc as a

ban on televised appearances and 2006's regional elections. This "preventive counterrevolution" enforced by the Kremlin (*ibid*., p. 4) culminated in the resignation of Rogozin from the leadership of Rodina; on the following day, the party congress voted for the merger of Rodina with the pro-Kremlin social-democratic party A Just Russia. The potential registration of a successor party to Rodina, Great Russia, advanced by Rogozin was refused by the electoral commission in 2007.

Paradoxically, Rogozin's marginalisation was rapidly followed by his reintegration into the state apparatus. In 2008, he was appointed by then-exiting President Vladimir Putin as the country's permanent representative to NATO. In such capacity (2008-2011), Rogozin voiced incessantly the Kremlin's criticism towards NATO enlargement and its concern with the potential membership of Ukraine and Georgia in the Alliance, as hinted at during the Bucharest Summit.[17] Already in February 2008, when talking about the Ukraine question, Rogozin spoke about the contestation of post-Soviet borders: "The question of Ukraine joining NATO is the question of saving Ukraine as one state … Why take such a risk? I cannot rule out the situation in which Ukraine would just collapse. It would be divided into two parts" (Rogozin 2009b, p. 14). Moreover, among the reasons behind the Kremlin's swift recognition of the international borders of the separatist states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia after August 2008 Russia-Georgia war, Rogozin mentioned "the direct threat to life and security of nation as a whole" – the Russian nation (Rogozin 2009b, p. 37).

During his tenure, Rogozin also revived the KRO as a registered social organisation supporting compatriots abroad and aligned it with the Kremlin's broader strategy of co-opting patriotic movements as informal power tools of the regime. Having lobbied consistently to revamp the KRO since 2006 (Kommersant 2006), in 2011 Rogozin finally achieved his goal, with 'Rodina-KRO' being officially registered by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation.[18] Rogozin, at the time described as organisation's unofficial leader, promptly clarified that "the Congress of Russian Communities has no serious political ambitions and the organisation will rather be a human rights organisation" – and yet "it would be wiser for the Russian part of the Congress to conclude a direct contract with political forces, according to which, on the one hand, the KRO would provide moral support to the parties, and they, in turn, would take on the programs and tasks that the KRO defends" (Sadovskaia 2011).

Such speculations were the result of Vladimir Putin's, the then Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, opening to formal alliances between United Russia, the ruling party since 2001, and various Russian non-governmental organizations and political platforms — which was first disclosed one week before KRO's official registration. On the occasion of the Interregional Conference of United Russia in Volgograd, on May 6, 2011, Putin launched the idea of creating an All Russia's People's Front on the eve of the upcoming legislative elections in December 2011. In his view, the new coalition would have gathered together "political forces that are close in spirit":

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potential ally. The cooling of relations left Rogozin's *spetsnaz* with little incentive to support Putin or his government".

[17] "Russia would like the Alliance to stop pursuing policies which contradicts its own interests, such as the unceasing drive for enlargement. Who is enlargement conducted against? Against which states? The new members, and the would-be member-states are of no military significance. However, they are unstable territories in volatile regions. Enlargement increases the area of responsibility for the alliance, but its capabilities, its military potential is not increased. Enlargement does not increase security. The policy is a kind of new Trotskyism" (Rogozin 2009a, p. 4).

[18] In May 2011, a revamped KRO was first officially registered as an international union of social organizations supporting compatriots abroad (RAPSI 2011a). Then, in August 2011, a new Russian social organization 'Rodina-KRO' also came to be registered by the Minister of Justice of the Russian Federation (RAPSI 2011b).

"I propose to create a 'broad popular front'. This form of unification of efforts of all political forces is used in different countries and by different political forces – both left, right, and patriotic. This is an instrument for unifying political forces that are close in spirit. This association could be called the 'All-Russia's People's Front', within the framework of which non-party candidates could get into the Duma on the list of 'United Russia'" (Suslikova 2011). Already in August, rumours about a potential entry of KRO into the new All Russia's People's Front were confirmed by the United Russia party official website (Edinaia Rossiia 2011a). One month later, on the occasion of the KRO Congress taking place in Moscow on September 21, Rogozin's endorsement of Putin ("a person with whom I am connected not only by political contacts and values, but also by bonds of human relations" – KRO-Rodina 2011) and his call for patriotic forces to integrate into the state apparatus marked a turning point in the institutionalisation of the KRO's agenda. Rogozin stated that it was "time to move to the offices where strategic decisions about the future of Russia are made" (RBK 2011), and the patriotic movement had to set the task of integrating itself into both parliamentary and executive power, thus supporting the legalization in the political sphere of other patriotic organizations: "We should also attract representatives of power to our ranks everywhere, we should form the most influential Russian lobby in the country's leadership … The situation where Russians in Russia consider themselves the opposition is intolerable" (KRO-Rodina 2011).

In early November 2011, Rodina-KRO officially addressed the United Russia party leadership "to defend together the rights and interests of the Russian people and other indigenous people of Russia" (Kommersant 2011): among the main proposals, we witness the formation of 'Slavic battalions' from among foreign volunteers, wishing to undergo military service in the Russian armed forces (*ibid*.). The significance of the dialogue with KRO was highlighted by the Deputy Secretary of the Presidium of the General Council of United Russia, Iurii Shuvalov. In the context of a roundtable emblematically titled "The Russian Question in Modern Russia: Stable Interethnic Relations as the Basis of National Unity" the two parties were said to have found common ground on "issues of unity, integrity, civilizational significance of Russia, and its path as an independent sovereign state" (Edinaia Rossiia 2011b).

This integration of KRO into the Kremlin's power network was further cemented during Putin's 2012 presidential campaign, particularly in the programmatic article 'The National Question,' which echoed the KRO's long-standing themes of civilisational unity, cultural dominance, and the state's duty to protect Russians at home and abroad:

"The Russian people are state-builders, as evidenced by the existence of Russia. Their great mission is to unite and bind together a civilisation. Language, culture and something Fedor Dostoyevsky defined as an 'all-encompassing empathy' is what unites Russian Armenians, Russian Azeris, Russian Germans, Russian Tatars and others, in a type of state civilisation where there are no ethnicities, but where 'belonging' is determined by a common culture and shared values. This kind of civilisational identity is based on preserving the dominance of Russian culture, although this culture is represented not only by ethnic Russians, but by all the holders of this identity, regardless of their ethnicity. It is a kind of cultural code which has been attacked ever more often over the past few years; hostile forces have been trying to break it, and yet, it has survived. It needs to be supported, strengthened and protected … When people start complaining that the rights of Russians are being infringed upon in Russia and particularly in historical Russian territories, this means that government agencies are failing in their direct duties: they do not defend the lives, the rights or the security of the people" (Putin 2012).

The official leader of Rodina-KRO, Aleksei Zhuravlev, and Dmitrii Rogozin welcomed Putin's article as the proof of their organisation's successful engagement with the state apparatus

(Edinaia Rossiia 2012; Rogozin 2012). The further formalization of this alliance saw Rogozin entering the ranks of both parliamentary and executive power: first, as an 'authorized representative' of the United Russia Party for the December legislative elections and then, after the party's victory, as a member of Putin's election campaign staff for the March 2012 Presidential elections (Edinaia Rossiia 2011c; Interfax 2011). Rogozin's subsequent appointment as deputy prime minister with responsibility for the military-industrial complex signalled the full absorption of the KRO's ideological legacy into the state's strategic vision.

Since then, Rodina-KRO has served a threefold role in Putin's Russia, proving essential for confronting both domestic and foreign challenges: on the one hand, it helped answer "(1) the surge of nationalist protest during the leadup to the 2011–2012 election cycle," and "(2) the participation of anti-Kremlin nationalists in the protest movement against fraud in the 2011 Duma elections;" on the other hand, it actively contributed to the adoption and implementation of the strategy to answer "(3) the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine and the need to legitimize Russia's attack on that country" (Horvath & Lever 2024, p. 3).

In fact, the KRO's influence extended beyond discourse to concrete geopolitical outcomes. In the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the local branch of the KRO — founded in 1995 under Rogozin's initiative (see KRO-Kryma) — played a pivotal role in mobilising support, coordinating with Russian political actors, and facilitating the referendum. Differently from what happened in the 1994 Crimean crisis, when – as retraced by Ingram (2001, p. 208) – KRO could not boast state support and have enough resources to actively mobilise local population, in early 2014 the organisation could actually advance both state interests and the long-term ambition of remaking the borders inherited from the Soviet collapse, now taking full advantage of its embeddedness into the Kremlin's power network. As recounted in the memoirs of Sergei Shuvainikov (2018, 2021, 2024), the leader of KRO-Crimea since 1995, the organisation intensified its activities in September 2013, in the context of an open confrontation with "the ideology of Ukrainian Nazism and manifestations of Russophobia that swept over Ukraine" and led to "the bloody Maidan and the unconstitutional coup in Kyiv in February 2014" (Shuvainikov 2021, 806).

Already on 22 September 2013, KRO-Crimea expressed concern for the action of the Ukrainian opposition "neo-nazi party Svoboda" and, despite the inaction of most Russian and pro-Russian politicians, started arranging weekly meetings and actions, together with representatives of the Russian Unity party,[19] against "Russophobe facts in Crimea and nationalist acts in Ukraine" (Shuvainikov 2024, pp. 17-18). These were followed by new gatherings in November and December, after the start of Euromaidan in Kyiv, when on the main square of Simferopol' KRO-Crimea activists "publicly burnt the flag of the European Union" (Shuvainikov 2024, p. 20). Most importantly, in early February 2014, representatives of Russian organisations in Crimea, under the leadership of the head of the Russian Unity Party, Sergei Aksenov, met the leader of the Russian party Rodina-KRO, Aleksei Zhuravlev. Shuvainikov highlights the crucial role that KRO-Crimea played in making the cooperation between Crimean and Russian politicians possible:

"I will not hide that this was partly my initiative. My deputy for the Congress of Russian Communities of Crimea, Nikolai Zakharchenko, worked for a long time for Dmitry Rogozin and knew Zhuravlev well. He managed to establish contacts with him through his old

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[19] Russian Unity (*Russkoe Edinstvo*) was a political party registered in Crimea in 2008. While being a quite irrelevant player in Crimean and the all-Ukrainian political scene until 2014, Russian Unity and his leader Sergei Aksenov played a crucial role in mobilizing both resources and population during the events preceding the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation. The party merged into the Russian party United Russia, right after the annexation of Crimea in Spring 2014.

connections, and he invited him to come to Crimea to meet with Russian organizations and agree on cooperation" (Shuvainikov 2024, p. 23).

Through its networks, the KRO further helped establish the Slavic Antifascist Front, which united local pro-Russian groups under the supervision of Russian deputies. As Shuvainikov (2024) recalls, "[i]t was the beginning of a concrete joint Crimean-Russian activity, the first stage of contacts and agreements with representatives of political power in Russia" (p. 23). Such partnership worked as the main tool of Russian influence in Crimea, eventually facilitating its swift seizure.

On 22 February, on the initiative of the then President of Ukraine Viktor Ianukovych, the Congress of People's Deputies of Southern and Eastern regions took place in Kharkiv, "to put covert pressure on the opposition, allegedly threatening a potential split of Ukraine" (*ibid.*, p. 24); Shuvainikov participated as a member of the Crimean delegation. After Ianukovych's departure from Kyiv and the seizure of government quarters by the protesters on the very same day, Shuvainikov was informed that on the following day "the party Russian Unity would organise the registration of volunteers for the Crimean people's militia on the square in front of the Supreme Council of Crimea" (*ibid.*, p. 25). On 24 February, "activists from the Congress of Russian Communities of Crimea began to prepare for the upcoming actions and to prepare wooden flagpoles so that they could be used in the event of an attack by militants, to instruct men on how to use them and what tactics to employ in a street fight" (ibid., pp. 26-27) On 26 February, the protesters gathered in front of the Supreme Soviet of Crimea and clashed pro-Kyiv factions (*ibid.*, p. 29). Fearing the potential seizure of power from pro-Kyiv activists the day after, "at night, armed people in camouflage uniforms, whom Crimeans later called 'polite people,' entered the building of the Council of Ministers of Crimea and the building of the Supreme Council of Crimea peacefully, without violence or shooting" (*ibid.*, pp. 29-30). As Shuvainikov recalls, "[t]hese were Russian special forces, soldiers who raised Russian flags over the buildings, lowering Ukrainian ones, and were supposed to ensure the safety of the work of the legitimate authorities of the Republic of Crimea" (*ibid.*, p. 30).

On 27 February, an ordinary session of the Crimean Parliament took place, and the former chair of the Crimean government, Anatolii Mogilev, came to be substituted with the leader of Russian Unity, Sergei Aksenov, whereby the members of KRO-Crimea played "a decisive role at the time of the voting for his candidacy" (*ibid.*, p. 30). What followed was the approval of the referendum on the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation: Shuvainikov is proud of having been "the first to communicate to mass media that the All-Crimean Referendum will take place on March 16, that Crimea will return to Russia" (*ibid.*, p. 31). The very same day, the Russian party Rodina-KRO leader Aleksei Zhuravlev was in Sevastopol', stressing the need for the defending the rights of the local population in the face of all-Ukrainian developments (Rodina 2014).

The day after the referendum sanctioning the willingness of Crimean voters to join the Russian Federation, a delegation of Crimean deputies, activists of Russian organisations, and journalists was invited to Moscow, where on 18 March they took part in the session of the Russian State Duma hosting the ratification of the Crimean accession. On that occasion Shuvainikov met with Rogozin in the Kremlin:

"I was pleased to meet Dmitry Rogozin, on whose initiative the Congress of Russian Communities of Crimea was created back in the mid-90s of the last century. We communicated often when he was not yet deputy chairman of the government. He gave me a friendly hug and said: 'I am glad that your dream has come true.'" (Shuvainikov 2024, p. 33).

Putin's speech celebrating the ratification of the Crimean annexation to Russia further cemented the institutionalisation of the KRO's narrative on the Russian nation as "the

largest ethnic group to be divided by borders" (*razdelennyi narod*),[20] finally advancing a clear concern for the humanitarian consequences of the Soviet collapse and the failure of the CIS as "a new form of common statehood" for former Soviet republics (Putin 2014).

The KRO's legacy continued in the Donbas, where the Russian party Rodina-KRO provided political and logistical support to local forces, helping "to instigate separatist agitation in southeast Ukraine" and "mobilizing Russian nationalist support for the two Russia-backed 'peoples republics" (Horvath and Lever 2024, p. 10). Moreover, Rogozin's role as a key figure of Russia's militarised ethno-nationalism expanded further. After serving as head of Roscosmos (2018-2022), he returned to the frontlines in Ukraine, forming the 'Tsar's Wolves' – a volunteer unit comprising senior military advisers and veterans that provided training and military-technical support to local armed formations and Russian Combat Army Reserve Units dispatched to the South of Ukraine (Krym Realii 2022). In July 2022, Rogozin was expected to move into a position in the presidential administration or to serve as the administration's envoy to Russia's potential new federal district, comprising Donets'k and Luhans'k People's Republics and the other two partially occupied regions of Ukraine, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson (Meduza 2022): eventually, in September 2023, Rogozin was appointed as the senator in the Federation Council, representing the executive authority of the Zaporizhzhia region (Kommersant 2023)— after the results of the sham referendums held in late September 2022 making the four partially occupied regions of Ukraine part of the territory of the Russian Federation.

In sum, the KRO exemplifies how peripheral actors can shape state policy through ideological persistence, strategic networking, and eventual institutional integration. In what Gleb Pavlovsky, a Kremlin veteran consultant, described as the Russian "sistema", "governance requires the temporal appropriation of the state regulator by groups of players" (Pavlovsky 2016: 14): the latter are supervised by "curators", who are "semi-official figures through whom state governance flows" (ivi, p. 12). Such an informal decision-making process, where semi-official figures play a prominent role in implementing policies autonomously, is embodied at its best by the role played by KRO-Rodina and Dmitry Rogozin in "Russian action in Ukraine", where since "early 2014, a number of Russian groups with various interests and strategies became active in the conflict in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine" (ibidem). From its early advocacy of a divided Russian nation to its role in redrawing post-Soviet borders, the KRO's trajectory illustrates the transformation of biopolitical concerns into geopolitical action – underscoring the long-term impact of nationalist movements on Russia's reterritorialisation agenda.

Conclusions

This article traced the evolution of Russia's reterritorialisation agenda from the fragmented ideological landscape of the 1990s to the assertive state-led strategies of the 2010s and beyond. By focusing on the KRO, we showed how peripheral actors – initially excluded from formal political power – played a foundational role in shaping the discourses and practices that would later underpin Russia's foreign policy. The KRO's early emphasis on the protection of compatriots, the restoration of historical unity, and the moral imperative to defend Russian culture abroad anticipated many of the narratives that now define the Kremlin's geopolitical posture.

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[20] Curiously, the image of the Russian nation as a "divided people" (*razdelennyi narod*) had been even advanced by Rogozin himself as a potential addendum to the arguments discussed by Putin in his previously mentioned 2012 article on the national question: "My entire political life, starting with the activities of the "Congress of Russian Communities" in the early 1990s, has been connected with the problems of Russian people in Russia and abroad. My scientific works and books are devoted to this issue. And believe me, I have something to say to supplement and develop Putin's article. Today, the Russian people are the largest divided people in Europe" (Rogozin 2012).

In doing so, this article made three key contributions. First, it contextualised Russia's foreign policy within the historical and domestic debates that shaped its post-Soviet identity. Second, it contributed to border studies by showing how early post-Soviet elites conceptualised and contested Russia's territorial boundaries. Third, it introduced a novel methodological approach – combining Russian and Russian-language sources with a prosopographic analysis of elite trajectories – to trace how marginal ideas became institutionalised. These contributions help illuminate the long-term processes through which Russia's current reterritorialisation agenda has taken shape.

Importantly, our analysis challenged the notion that Russia's reterritorialisation is a purely top-down project orchestrated by the presidential administration. Instead, we argued that it is the outcome of a longer-term process of ideological sedimentation, in which marginal actors like the KRO incubated and disseminated ideas that were gradually absorbed into the state apparatus. The political trajectory of Dmitry Rogozin exemplifies this dynamic: from his early activism in the KRO to his later roles in diplomacy, defence, and the annexation of Crimea, Rogozin's career illustrates the permeability of Russia's political system and the strategic utility of nationalist networks. By integrating biopolitical concerns – such as the fate of Russian-speaking populations abroad – with broader geopolitical objectives, the Russian state has constructed a flexible yet potent framework for justifying territorial revisionism.

The influence of the KRO and its network extended beyond what this article could fully explore. Figures such as Iurii Luzhkov, Viktor Alksnis, and Konstantin Zatulin – who were involved in the KRO's early development – later played key roles in institutionalising biopolitical measures within the Russian state (Laruelle 2015). In the early 2000s, Iurii Luzhkov, who served as the mayor of Moscow in 1992-2010, pioneered municipal-level programmes for compatriots abroad that were later adopted nationally. At the time of the approval of the 2002 citizenship law, Viktor Alksnis, then member of the State Duma, helped lay the legal groundwork for Russia's 'passportisation policies,' creating "a loophole for residents in the breakaway regions to become Russian citizens in a simplified procedure" and enabling Russian military interventions (Nagashima 2019, p. 190). Konstantin Zatulin, through his leadership of the Institute for the CIS Countries (also Institute of Diaspora and Integration) and his roles in the State Duma, was instrumental in shaping Russian migration and repatriation policies. These examples underscore the broader impact of originally peripheral actors in shaping the institutional and legal architecture of Russia's foreign policy.

Future research should pay closer attention to the role of such actors in the making of Russian foreign policy – coherently with the scholarly efforts of researchers, such as Marten and Wallander, among others. On the one hand, the relevance in Russian policy-making of "personal and business-related contacts inside the presidential administration" (Laruelle 2015, p. 95) may be greater than top-down ideological convictions; hence, their study may help researchers see beyond the "opacity of Russia's decision-making process" (*ibid*., p. 88). On the other, a long-term, prosopographic approach to the careers of semi-official political figures can help illuminate the ideological continuities that underpin Russia's evolving strategies in the post-Soviet space.

In other words, rather than treating Russia's current imperial turn as a sudden or purely top-down development, scholars should examine the processual nature of how plural ideas and practices concerning the Near Abroad and the Russian Space have been selectively mobilised and institutionalised over time. Emphasising continuity over rupture allows us to decentre the analysis from personalised rule and instead highlight the diversity of actors, the historical dynamics that enabled their integration into the state apparatus, and their enduring impact on the remaking and contestation of borders in the former Soviet space.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Discordant privilege
Russian migrants in Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered an unprecedented wave of emigration, reshaping mobility patterns across Eurasia. The relocation of hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens has generated an important body of empirical work on post-2022 emigration. This article examines the case of Russian migration to Kyrgyzstan through the analysis of 17 in-depth interviews conducted remotely with Russian citizens residing in Bishkek. Bringing together Bourdieusian approaches to migrant capital and the aspirations–capabilities framework with postcolonial and lifestyle migration scholarship, we develop the concept of discordant privilege to capture the coexistence of structural advantage and lived precarity in migrants' experiences. We show how simplified entry and legalization pathways, the widespread use of the Russian language in Bishkek, and Kyrgyzstan's comparatively low cost of living facilitated settlement, while limited financial resources, uneven capital convertibility, and employment disruptions generated economic strain, shaping migrants' capabilities and aspirations for further mobility. Finally, migrants' "gaze" on Kyrgyzstan as peripheral illuminates the persistence of postcolonial hierarchies and the asymmetric stratification of mobility within the post-Soviet space.

Keywords: Kyrgyzstan; Russian migrants; class; privilege; postcolonial migration

Introduction

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent announcement of a partial military mobilization in Russia triggered the largest exodus of Russian citizens since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This emigration has been described as political (Kamalov et al. 2022) and war-induced (Zavadskaya 2023). While the initial, post-February 2022 wave was composed of largely politically active professionals — journalists, academics, and activists — subsequent waves also included draft evaders, individuals fleeing economic instability, and those escaping intensifying political repression (Exodus-22 2023). This massive exodus of Russian citizens can be compared to historical emigrations following the 1917 revolution (Raeff 1990) or the USSR's dissolution (Tishkov et al. 2005), as well as to other politically motivated waves of emigration such as those from Cuba (Colomer 2000) or Iran (Michaelsen 2018).

Most existing research on post-2022 Russian emigration has concentrated on migrants settling in relatively popular destinations such as Georgia, Armenia, or countries appealing to digital nomads. Russian migrants are portrayed as young, politically engaged, highly

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educated, and economically privileged professionals. Commonly referred to as "*relokanty*", these individuals relocated primarily from Russia's major cities, especially Moscow and Saint Petersburg, and were already embedded in global labor markets and activist networks (Figari Barberis & Zanatta 2024; Ruseishvili & Ryazantsev 2024; Zavadskaya et al., 2024; Bronnikova et al. 2025). Less scholarly attention has been directed toward the experiences of Russian migrants originating from working-class backgrounds, smaller regional centres, or ethnic minorities, who remain comparatively invisible in public discourse and digital research networks (Jonutytė 2023; Baranova 2024a). Likewise, limited research addresses the experiences of Russian migrants relocating to less prestigious or less economically attractive destinations, particularly Central Asian countries and Mongolia. By focusing primarily on politically active migrants, IT specialists, and the "creative class" as a rather homogeneous group, existing scholarship has tended to ignore the substantial socio-economic disparities among them, including the structural factors shaping their migration choices and the resources they possess and are able to mobilize before, during, and after migration (De Haas 2010, 2021).

Building on critical migration scholarship on class, privilege, and aspirations–capabilities, we develop an analytical framework that foregrounds internal class differentiation among Russian migrants while situating their mobility within the postcolonial legacies and enduring hierarchies of the Eurasian space (Kluczewska 2024). Engaging with debates on privilege in migration (Robertson & Roberts 2022) and discordant lifestyle mobilities (Botterill 2017), we introduce the concept of discordant privilege to capture how Russian migrants in Kyrgyzstan may simultaneously experience structural advantages and forms of insecurity. This lens highlights how privilege and precarity are co-produced through unequal mobility regimes and postcolonial hierarchies that shape mobility outcomes.

Drawing on seventeen semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between March and December 2023 within the framework of the "Building an Anti-War Common in the Russian Migrant Community" project (Smyth et al. 2024), this article provides an insightful case for understanding the link between class, privilege, and mobility in the post-Soviet space. The case of Russian migrants in Kyrgyzstan offers a critical case for unpacking the concept of discordant privilege in the context of a contested Eurasian "borderland", where cognitive, physical, and political borders are constantly (re-)enforced and erased at the same time (Ceccorulli et al. 2025, inthis Special Issue) and where unequal power dynamics still shape economic and political relations, as well as people's mobility and citizenship rights.

Russian emigration post-February 2022

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, followed by the announcement of partial mobilization in September of the same year, triggered one of the largest waves of Russian emigration in recent history. Estimates talk about an initial outflow of between 820 and 920 thousand people (Zavadskaya 2025), and it is estimated that 650 thousand remain abroad (Krawatzek & Sasse 2024). This is widely recognized as the most substantial "brain drain" since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Kamalov et al. 2022; Korobkov et al. 2022). The initial wave, which began shortly after the invasion, consisted of politically engaged individuals including journalists, academics, activists, and members of the non-parliamentary opposition. Many of them left due to ideological opposition to the war and the Putin regime, continuing their political engagement abroad through anti-war activism and transnational mobilization (Luchenko & Shamiev 2024). Repressive measures inside Russia, including arrests, threats, and surveillance, intensified the urgency of departure. At the same time, sanctions, business disruptions, and professional uncertainty acted as additional push factors. Some relocated through corporate channels, especially in the IT

sector. This is why the term *relokant*, from the English verb "to relocate" has gained traction to describe Russian migrants in general (Figari Barberis & Zanatta 2024).

The second major wave occurred after the September 2022 announcement of a partial military mobilization, spurring a mass exodus of young men avoiding conscription. Unlike the earlier wave, this group was less politically homogeneous, including individuals motivated by fear of conscription, familial obligations, and pragmatic considerations due to sanctions. As time passed, the line between politically-motivated, mobilization-induced, and economic migration blurred even further, revealing the complexity of circumstances and motivations underpinning the decision to leave Russia (Vorobeva 2023). With regards to Russian migration to Central Asia, scholars have pointed that this has been significantly influenced by economic and social factors, rather than by political motivations (Dadabaev et al. 2025).

Despite the differences in motivations, Russian migrants are depicted as a rather homogeneous group of young, educated, highly skilled professionals belonging to the middle and upper-middle class. Most respondents in the OutRush project and the Exodus-22 survey were between 20 and 40 years old, with higher education, managerial experience, and employment in sectors such as IT, data science, and the arts (Baranova & Podolsky 2024). In Exodus-22's sample, 40 percent of respondents were IT specialists, and 42 percent reported having sufficient savings to sustain themselves for up to a year without employment (Exodus-22 2023). Overall, these studies reveal that, on average, Russian migrants are younger, better educated, and financially better-off than the average Russian citizen. For these reasons, some studies have drawn parallels between these individuals and lifestyle migrants (Ruseishvili & Ryazantsev 2024; Baranova & Podolsky 2024). Indeed, Russian migrants' spending power and remote jobs in high-paying sectors have often allowed them to live independently from local labor markets and avoid downward social mobility.

In terms of destinations, neighboring Georgia and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) members Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia were among the top choices for Russian migrants (Krawatzek & Sasse 2024). Countries such as Türkiye and Israel, alongside Serbia (see Zejnulahović et al. 2024), various EU states, and digital nomad hubs like Bali and Thailand (see Baranova & Podolsky 2023) also saw an influx of Russian citizens. Latin America, particularly Argentina and Brazil, attracted several thousands of Russian migrants due to the possibility to give birth and obtain citizenship thanks to *jus soli*, an example of transnational birth mobility (see Ruseishvili & Ryazantsev 2024; Ruseishvili 2025). After the announcement of the partial mobilization Armenia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia witnessed a sharp rise in incoming Russian migrants. Legal regimes across these countries — especially those within the EAEU — facilitated relatively easy entry for Russian citizens with just an internal passport. Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan initially welcomed Russian professionals, particularly in the tech sector (Poghosyan 2023), even though the massive arrival of Russians sparked debate regarding the use of Russian language and the legacies of Russian imperialism, especially in Kazakhstan (Darchiashvili et al. 2024). In early 2023, Kazakhstan revised its migration policy, limiting visa-free stays for EAEU nationals to 90 days within any 180-day period (Sahadeo 2024). Mongolia introduced temporary residency permits for ethnic minority Russians fleeing conscription (Lkhaajav 2022). In contrast, Georgia's stance has been more ambivalent: while its visa policy remains liberal, allowing Russian nationals to reside in the country for up to one year, widespread public opposition framed Russian arrivals as politically controversial (Chumburidze & Gavrilova 2023). Across various host countries, the arrival of Russian migrants has significantly impacted local economies and social cohesion. On the one hand, migrants' relatively high spending power and consumer practices, such as increased demand for

housing, transport, restaurants, and banking services, have contributed to GDP growth (Sahadeo 2024). On the other hand, this has caused a surge in living costs, particularly in the housing market (Darieva et al. 2025). In Tbilisi, property prices rose by 46% between early 2022 and September of the same year (Seskuria 2023). Prices' rise has further intensified tensions between residents and newcomers (Kuleshova et al. 2023; Seskuria 2023).

These general dynamics set the stage for understanding how Russian mobility has taken shape in specific receiving contexts. Kyrgyzstan offers a revealing case for analyzing the entanglement of class, privilege, and the persistence of postcolonial hierarchies in shaping mobility in Eurasia. In what follows, we turn to the specific political, economic, and social conditions shaping Russian migration to Kyrgyzstan.

Russian migration to Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan, a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), is a lower-middle-income country in Central Asia where poverty and limited employment opportunities remain persistent challenges. Since the early 2000s, these conditions have driven sustained large-scale labour emigration, primarily to the Russian Federation. Remittances play a crucial role in the national economy, accounting for nearly one-third of Kyrgyzstan's GDP and constituting a vital source of household income (Bossavie & Garrote-Sánchez 2022). Visa-free access within the EAEU, well-developed transport links, and enduring cultural and linguistic ties rooted in the Soviet period continue to facilitate migration to Russia, which remains the principal destination for Kyrgyz labor migrants despite the recent tightening of Russian migration policies. Although the number of officially registered Kyrgyz migrants in Russia declined from an estimated 750,000 in previous years to approximately 377,000 in 2025 (IOM 2025), it is still estimated that around one million Kyrgyz citizens are engaged in labor migration abroad, either temporarily or on a long-term basis, with the majority working in Russia (Prague Process 2024).

Russia plays a major economic role in Kyrgyzstan beyond migration. The economic relations between the two countries have always been strong, but they reached new heights after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia became Kyrgyzstan's second-largest investor after China, accounting for 24.2 percent of total foreign direct investment in the first half of 2024 (Osmonalieva 2024b). Kyrgyzstan's imports from Russia also saw a mild but stable increase, while Kyrgyzstan's exports to Russia jumped from 425 million USD in 2021 to a peak of 1.07 billion in 2022, before dropping to 743 million in 2023 (Putz 2025). The economic rise experienced by Kyrgyzstan in recent years has been driven by cross-border trade and currency inflows, mainly from Russia, for which Kyrgyzstan is suspected to help Russia in bypassing sanctions by re-exporting goods (Lahiri 2024). Moreover, Russia and Kyrgyzstan are actively cooperating for the creation of technology parks to attract greater Russian investment in the country. Currently, 40 joint projects in industrial cooperation and import substitution are underway, while around 700 joint ventures and 300 Russian-owned firms are already operating in the country (Osmonalieva 2024a).

Although the presence of Russian-speaking minorities and ethnic Russians in the country has been steadily declining since the early 90's, the Russian language continues to play a notable role in Kyrgyzstan's social and cultural landscape. As of 2022, ethnic Russians made up roughly 5 percent of the population, concentrated in Bishkek, the Chui region, and around the Issyk-Kul Lake (Agadjanian & Oh 2020). Russian-speaking migration to the region dates back to Tsarist colonization and was intensified during the Soviet era through resettlement programs, mass deportations, and industrial development projects (Schmidt & Sagynbekova 2008). Despite ongoing state-led efforts to promote the Kyrgyz language, Russian remains an official language and is widely used in daily communication, education, and business,

particularly in urban centers (Agadjanian & Nedoluzhko 2022). Data from 2011 and 2017 indicate that Russian-language proficiency correlates with higher earnings, particularly for men (Agadjanian & Oh 2020).

Despite its small size and lack of land border with Russia, Kyrgyzstan has seen a notable rise in arrivals of Russian citizens since the start of the full-scale invasion. There were around 446,600 entries from Russia to Kyrgyzstan in 2022 according to data from the Russian Federal Security Service, an all-time record (Kaktus Media 2023). Even though the majority of Russian nationals who entered Kyrgyzstan used it as a transit hub, by the end of 2024, 12,600 Russian citizens had obtained permanent residence, while more than 6,000 had acquired Kyrgyzstan's citizenship (Current Time 2024). Several factors facilitated this influx, including visa-free entry with an internal passport, the availability of direct flights from major Russian cities, the use of the Russian language, and Kyrgyzstan's comparatively low cost of living. Together, these conditions positioned Kyrgyzstan as a key transit and relocation hub for Russian migrants.

Kyrgyzstan's leadership has expressed an accommodative position towards the influx of Russian migrants. President Sadyr Japarov publicly affirmed that Russian migrants were free to work in the country and emphasized that Kyrgyzstan was "benefiting, not suffering" from their presence (Radio Azattyk 2022). Kyrgyz authorities made targeted efforts to attract Russian business owners and digital nomads. In 2022, the Kyrgyz government launched a Digital Nomad pilot program, allowing foreign IT professionals to reside in the country while working remotely (Kudryavtseva 2022). This status was subsequently formalized in 2025 through the legal recognition of digital nomads (The Astana Times 2025). These measures formed part of broader state initiatives aimed at promoting the domestic IT sector and attracting foreign — including Russian — investment. They were especially appealing to Russian entrepreneurs and professionals seeking a location in which to maintain business operations after losing access to Western markets due to sanctions. Kyrgyzstan's integration into international banking systems, following the suspension of Visa and Mastercard services in Russia in March 2022, further enhanced its attractiveness as a relocation destination for Russian businesses.

At the same time, the increasing number of incoming Russian citizens — many of whom were men fleeing conscription — placed Kyrgyzstan in a politically sensitive position. While authorities framed the presence of Russian professionals and businesses as an economic opportunity to boost the local economy, the fact that many of them were draft evaders could be regarded as controversial by the Kremlin. This may have influenced the subsequent shift toward more restrictive entry regulations. Following an initial period of permissive entry arrangements, Kyrgyz authorities — much like their counterparts in Kazakhstan — began revising visa-free stay policies. Initially Russian citizens could stay in Kyrgyzstan without registration for 30 days and extend their stay up to six months for private purposes. After this period, many Russian migrants living in the country resorted to "visa runs," briefly exiting and re-entering Kyrgyzstan to reset their stay period. However, in September 2024, the Kyrgyz government revised its entry and visa-free stay policies, including for citizens of EAEU member states. Under the new rules, EAEU nationals are allowed to stay in the country for 90 days within a 180-day period (Ministry of Digital Development of the Kyrgyz Republic 2024). Kyrgyzstan thus tried to balance between supporting domestic economic interests and maintaining its strategic alliance with Russia. This ambivalence has been particularly evident in its treatment of Russian anti-war activists. Notably, Kyrgyzstan has been cooperating with Russian authorities in sharing personal data and, in some cases, detaining and extraditing dissidents and political activists (Rickleton 2023).

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine has reshaped mobility dynamics across Eurasia. Countries that were historically labor exporters to Russia have also become destination and

transit countries, with important implications for their economies, labor markets, societies, and relations with Russia. Within this context, scholars of both area studies and critical migration have begun to seek new approaches to understanding these new mobilities, including the adoption of postcolonial lenses (Baranova 2024b; Kluczewska 2024) and approaches sensitive to imperial legacies in the region (Amelina et al. 2025). Nevertheless, there remains an analytical gap in understanding the class dimension of such mobilities and how macro-structural factors shape Russian migrants' capabilities and aspirations, to overcome simplistic accounts of privilege *versus* precarity.

Class, capabilities, and aspirations in migration

Although international migration has often been examined in relation to unequal and unjust distributions of resources and opportunities, these discussions have largely framed such disparities as global inequalities rather than through the lens of class (Rye 2019). The significance of class in migration studies has been overshadowed by other social differentiations such as ethnicity, gender, and religion (Van Hear 2014). Nonetheless, class has a critical role in migrants' capacities to mobilize resources and navigate new socio-economic and cultural contexts, as they inhabit unstable, multilocal class positions (Erel 2010; Van Hear 2014; Barglowski 2019; Rye 2019; Weiss 2005, 2006).

Some critical migration scholars have adopted a Bourdieusian class analysis to explore the role of different forms of capital in migration (Van Hear 2014; Erel 2010; Oliver & O' Reilly 2010; Erel & Ryan 2019). According to Bourdieu (1985), social stratification results from the persistence of class hierarchies, imbalanced power structures, oppression, and the uneven distribution of resources that can be transformed into capital. Scholars distinguish between economic capital, comprising wealth and financial resources; cultural capital, which includes one's education background, knowledge, skills, and cultural competencies; and social capital, which refers to the quantity and quality of networks, relationships, and social connections. Resources may or may not become capital depending on their value and recognition in specific social contexts and on their degree of convertibility. Migrants' capital is thus context-dependent: resources accumulated in one socio-spatial setting may be valued, devalued, or rendered ambivalent when migrants cross borders (Erel 2010; Erel & Ryan 2019). This creates fragmented or mismatched capitals, as migrants' resources do not seamlessly translate into recognized value in all social fields. Gains in the field of work may coexist with losses in the fields of citizenship and family, or vice versa (Erel & Ryan 2019). Using capital as an analytical tool therefore highlights how macro-level factors can simultaneously elevate and undermine migrants' social positioning.

Building on these insights, this article also engages with de Haas's aspirations–capabilities framework (de Haas 2021), which conceptualizes migration as the outcome of the interaction between migrants' aspirations to move and their capabilities to realize these aspirations. According to de Haas (2021:17), migration aspirations are "a function of people's general life aspirations and perceived geographical opportunity structures", while capabilities are "contingent on positive ('freedom to') and negative ('freedom from') liberties". Rather than treating migration solely as a response to deprivation or opportunity, this framework highlights how mobility is shaped by differentiated access to resources and how macro-level factors affect agency in migration. We thus approach migrants' capabilities and aspirations as classed and historically situated in postcolonial hierarchies.

Postcolonial Migration and Discordant Privilege

Literature on postcolonial migration has shown how colonial legacies and neocolonial power relations between the Global North and the Global South shape the perception and valuation of mobile subjects: people moving from the Global North to the Global South often

frame themselves and are described in the media as 'expats' rather than labor migrants, since the term 'migrant' is seen as carrying negative connotations undermining middle-class personal and professional identities (Weiss 2005). Regardless of qualifications, they tend to benefit from higher labor market positions in the new context, due to perceptions of higher professionalism associated with whiteness. At the same time, individuals from the Global South face systemic devaluation of their skills when moving to the Global North (Erel 2010; Åkesson 2016; Augusto et al. 2020; Åkesson 2021; Adamson 2024). Recent scholarship has illustrated the coloniality of contemporary regimes of mobility and the highly racialized definition of migrants' skills by examining North–South migration patterns (Åkesson 2016; Hayes & Pérez-Gañan 2017; Augusto & King 2019; Åkesson 2021). The concept of reciprocal migration (Augusto et al. 2022), although meant to capture the two-way flows between former colonies and metropoles, hides asymmetrical power dynamics embedded in these exchanges. Global North migrants in former colonies enjoy unearned privileges due to their perceived higher cultural and symbolic capital, while at the same time migrants and students from former colonies working and studying in former imperial metropoles face systemic discrimination and devaluation of their skills and competencies. This reinforces the argument that migration systems remain marked by coloniality.

Within the scholarly work on postcolonial migration, an important body of literature has focused on forms of middle-class lifestyle mobilities, tackling the central topics of privilege (Benson 2014) and geographic arbitrage, defined as migrants' ability to leverage their economic and symbolic status to relocate to regions with lower living costs, thereby improving their quality of life (Hayes 2014; Hayes & Pérez-Gañán 2017). Nonetheless, some scholars have noticed that privilege and geographic arbitrage are often experienced hand in hand with increasing labor precarity and downward social mobility in migrants' home countries, as well as insecurity in destination countries due to weaker social safety nets (Botterill 2017; Robertson & Roberts 2022; Mancinelli & Molz 2024). Botterill (2017) and Mancinelli & Molz (2024) use the concept of discordance to describe the experience of simultaneous privilege and precarity experienced by white middle-class migrants in the Global South, as their mobility exposes them to new vulnerabilities related to citizenship rights, financial instability, and uncertain social protection in the new country.

Russian migration to Kyrgyzstan reflects patterns of postcolonial and middle-class lifestyle migration when compared to the inverse dynamic of Central Asian labor migration to Russia. Migrants from Central Asia, including from Kyrgyzstan, are commonly perceived by Russian society and framed by officials as low-skilled manual workers with limited education and insufficient command of the Russian language (Kuznetsova & Round 2019). They must navigate a complex socio-political landscape marked by institutional discrimination, racism, precarity, and legal exclusion (Heusala & Aitamurto 2017; Urinboyev & Polese 2018; Kuznetsova & Round 2019). They also have to deal with the costs, both formal and informal, of migration legalization and its constantly changing rules, increasing control, and punitive measures (Schenk 2018), threatened by the fear of deportation and re-entry bans (Reeves 2015). Moreover, racialized stereotypes render them simultaneously essential as low-wage laborers and undesirable as cultural outsiders. Media, politicians, and even legal frameworks reinforce their portrayal as "dangerous", "uncivilized", or "unassimilable" (Kuznetsova & Round 2019). Even when formally naturalized, they continue to face discrimination, as the citizenship they acquire is often segmented and conditional, a "subaltern citizenship" that legally incorporates racialized migrants while maintaining their marginalization and policing their loyalty to the Russian state (Bahovadinova 2024; Bahovadinova & Borisova 2025).

This asymmetry illustrates the persistence of postcolonial hierarchies in the Eurasian space in terms of mobility and citizenship rights, despite the formal absence of colonial rule

and, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, membership in the EAEU (Kuznetsova & Round 2019; Kluczewska 2024; Kluczewska & Silvan 2024). Moreover, recent analyses of Russian migration to the South Caucasus have highlighted the persistence of a certain "Moscow gaze" (Gunko 2022) and "embodied empire" carried by newcomers (Gavrilova 2022), both of which shape how Russian migrants interpret and engage with their host societies. These dynamics lead migrants to reproduce center–periphery hierarchies, maintain linguistic and cultural distance, and construct parallel expat worlds that draw on long-standing imperial imaginaries of the "Soviet South" as traditional, backward, and peripheral (Gunko 2022; Koplatadze 2019).

Therefore, borrowing from the work on discordant lifestyle mobilities elaborated by Botterill (2017) in relation to middle-class skilled migration in a world shaped by postcolonial hierarchies between the Global Nort and the Global South, the concept of discordant privilege serves as the central theoretical anchor of this paper. This concept captures the tension between Russian migrants' objective privilege in terms of citizenship rights and social status and the precarity they face due to their unequal positionings in the transnational middle class.

Data and Methods

We draw on 17 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Russian nationals who relocated to Kyrgyzstan after February 2022 and publicly expressed an anti-war stance. The interviews were conducted remotely via MS Teams between March and December 2023 as part of the *Building an Anti-War Common in the Russian Migrant Community* research project at Indiana University Bloomington (USA). Informants were recruited from the OutRush online survey panelist pool and subsequent snowballing. The interviews were carried out by trained Russian speaking researchers including one of the co-authors. Zavadskaya is a co-PI of the project and coordinated recruitment, fieldwork procedures, safety protocols, and data processing. All interview materials underwent rigorous anonymization and cleaning to ensure the secure handling of sensitive data. The project received ethics approval from Indiana University in Bloomington.

Our sample reveals a notable gender imbalance, comprising 13 men and 4 women, a result of the male-dominated migration flows induced by the announcement of the partial military mobilization in September 2022, and features an average age of approximately 37 years. Informants predominantly originate from large and mid-sized urban environments, including major metropolitan areas like Moscow and Saint Petersburg, as well as regional hubs across Siberia, Northwestern, and Southern Russia. Notably, several respondents had already experienced internal migration within Russia, typically moving from smaller cities or rural areas to larger urban centers to access better educational and professional opportunities. Most of the informants possess higher education qualifications and align with typical definitions of skilled migrants. Their professional backgrounds span a range of highly specialized sectors, including information technology, medical and psychological services, scientific research, international logistics, journalism, copywriting, and communications. Notably, several respondents underwent career transitions while still in Russia and have multiple degrees.

We analyzed interview transcripts drawing on reflective thematic analysis (Braun et al. 2018; Byrne 2022). First, we conducted an initial familiarization with the dataset and produced descriptive codes capturing migrants' accounts of departure, settlement in the new country and work situation, plans for the future, and impressions about Kyrgyzstan. Second, we clustered codes into analytic categories by identifying similar meanings across cases ("bureaucratic-linguistic ease," "economic precarity/income instability," "access to resources", "wishes for mobility futures," "Kyrgyzstan as 'good enough' destination"). Third,

we refined these categories into themes through iterative comparison across interviews. Coding was primarily inductive but informed by the article's conceptual lens, especially by the distinction between migrants' economic, social, and cultural capitals, the aspirations–capabilities framework, and by the literature on lifestyle and postcolonial migration. Four interrelated thematics dimensions emerged from respondents' accounts: (1) the macro-level conditions shaping relocation to Kyrgyzstan; (2) the conversion of capitals and their uneven valuation; (3) migrants' capabilities and aspirations to onward mobility; and (4) postcolonial hierarchies.

"Like moving to another Russian city": choosing Kyrgyzstan

Respondents cited various factors influencing their choice of Kyrgyzstan as a migration destination. Many reported constraints to international mobility, primarily due to the lack of external passports and valid visas. On the other hand, due to the membership in the EAEU, the possibility of entering Kyrgyzstan with the internal Russian passport made it an accessible destination for many of those who were not prepared for emigration:

> We found tickets only to Bishkek, and this was a great decision, because we needed a country where we could live with a Russian [internal] passport, because who the hell knows when we would be able to get an external passport. (Informant 6, age not specified, female, marketing specialist, 19.4.2023)

Another aspect highlighted by respondents was the simplicity of legal residency procedures in Kyrgyzstan when compared to other destinations. Some respondents relocated to Kyrgyzstan following unsuccessful attempts to secure legal residency in Türkiye and Kazakhstan, or following the expiration of visas or visa-free time periods:

You can't stay in Kazakhstan for a long time if you don't have a job at your place of residence, so I tried to look for some local vacancies, but I didn't find any in the allotted time, so I came [to Kyrgyzstan]. (Informant 15, age not specified, male, researcher and teacher, 27.09.2023)

The less bureaucratic registration processes in Kyrgyzstan thus positioned the country as an accessible alternative when other countries posed legal and administrative barriers. As another informant explained:

I have children from my first husband, and I do not have consent for the children to be taken out and obtain a residence permit […] In Kyrgyzstan you don't even need to obtain a residence permit, you live here simply by registration. In general, in terms of the complexity of moving to Kyrgyzstan, it's about the same as moving to another city in Russia. (Informant 9, age not specified, female, journalist, 8.10.2023)

Similarly to other cases of postcolonial migration (Åkesson 2016, 2021), linguistic ties emerged as another crucial factor, particularly for migrants with limited foreign language skills or those relocating with children. The use of Russian in Kyrgyzstan, particularly in Bishkek, reflects a historical legacy of the Soviet era, when Russian-speaking populations formed a significant demographic and cultural presence (Schmidt & Sagynbekova 2008). Unlike many other post-Soviet states, independent Kyrgyzstan institutionalized this legacy by granting Russian the status of an official language. A 30-year-old communication specialist explained the significance of language as a decisive factor for his family's move:

> Bishkek speaks Russian […] It was important when we were deciding where to go. All the children in my [child's] daycare also understand Russian, and all the adults understand Russian, and in general they communicate mainly in Russian (Informant 14, 30 yo, male, musician, 3.9.2023)

Kyrgyzstan emerged less as a destination of choice than as a *feasible* destination in a situation of emergency. The presence of direct flights, the lack of visa requirements, and the use of Russian language significantly lowered the social, bureaucratic, and emotional costs of a sudden departure, particularly for families with children and individuals with limited travel experiences and low foreign language skills. The linguistic continuity enhanced migrants' immediate ability to settle in the new environment, allowing them to navigate local institutions without the time-intensive investments required elsewhere.

A precarious middle class: strategies in the face of insecurity

As mentioned earlier, nearly all respondents fell within the category of highly skilled or skilled migrants and were representatives of Russia's middle class by occupational and educational criteria (Nikula & Chernysh 2022). Yet their positions within this class varied substantially once we considered their economic resources and the uneven convertibility of their cultural and social capitals (Erel 2010; Erel & Ryan 2019). Only a few respondents were able to draw on savings and transnational employment, while the majority were with no savings or found themselves in financial distress even before leaving Russia, or lost their jobs immediately after moving. Therefore, many respondents could be described as precarious professionals, gravitating at the margins of the middle class. Several respondents emphasized that their relocation occurred under financial strain, including debt and unemployment:

> I wasn't prepared at all financially, I had debts. They still exist; I'm paying them off as best as I can. (Informant 1, 46 yo, male, entrepreneur, 6.6.2023)

Informants were aware of their precarious economic situation and recognized the difficulties in applying their professional skills outside of Russia. Despite a degree in economics and years of work experience as a copywriter, one of the informants expressed frustration with his uncertain career future:

> All I had was $200 in savings and my salary. I didn't understand how I was going to live at all. My friends are from IT, [but] I have no technical specialty. I've been working with the Russian language my whole life, and for me, well, everything that's happening is a big blow to what I do, because where can you work with the Russian language if not in Russia? (Informant 17, 28 yo, male, copywriter, 11.6.2023)

By comparing himself to his friends in IT, the informant highlighted the different valuation of skills in migration, restricting his ability to quickly convert his cultural capital into economic capital in a new context (Erel & Ryan 2019). This in turn makes the mobilization of professional and personal networks a critical strategy for Russian migrants. For migrants arriving without savings, transnational networks of Russian-speaking professionals, often extending across former Soviet republics, played a decisive role in facilitating access to employment, housing, and for navigating everyday life in the new country. As one respondent explained, professional ties built prior to migration enabled the rapid conversion of her credentials as a medical doctor into local labor market opportunities:

> We didn't have much money. I needed to go to work. And I had already written to the doctors in Moscow, whom I knew […] I wrote them a private message, "do you know anyone here in Kyrgyzstan who could offer me a job?". I have the highest category there, I have a very good one, I have a bunch of certificates, everything to hire me. And they gave me a phone number. Well, a week later, I got a job, and this probably helped me, well, it helped us all. (Informant 13, 48 yo, female, doctor, 19.6.2023)

In this case, the mobilization of professional medical networks enabled the conversion of the doctor's institutionalized cultural capital into economic capital, as her qualifications were recognized and valorized within the medical labor market in Bishkek. However, reliance on networks also exposes the fragility of migrants' socio-economic positioning. Respondents who could not count on local connections in the labor market or that could not retain their jobs post-migration, sometimes due to sudden changes in company policies restricting the possibility for remote work, reported a faster decline in socio-economic standing, especially when savings were limited or had been already depleted by repeated moves. One respondent, a marketing specialist turned professional coach, described rapid financial deterioration after losing her job and her partner's remote work:

> This situation hurts so much because this year we changed everything completely twice, there were God knows how many moves and flights, and we had very little that was stable left, and this job was stability that we could rely on, and now it has been taken away too. (Informant 6, age not specified, female, marketing specialist, 19.4.2023)

Over time, some respondents were able to partially stabilize their situation by reorienting their careers. In the case above, the respondent eventually started her own business, providing counselling and coaching services targeted at Russian-speakers and post-Soviet markets:

> I feel like I am in demand in this area now […]. I see a point of support for myself here despite all this bullshit. My business is growing, and I even took an assistant who helps me with the routine so that I can focus more on scaling up further. (Informant 6, age not specified, female, marketing specialist, 19.4.2023)

However, even when migrants experienced income recovery or gains after relocation, earlier financial insecurity and uncertain professional futures continued to restrict their capabilities (De Haas, 2021), as illustrated by the following quote:

> We work so much because life in emigration is hard because…Well, now we both earn much more than we earned in Russia, but we also spend much more: this includes renting an apartment, it includes all these things related to children. And in order to earn enough to afford it, you really need to work a lot, and sometimes, to be honest, we don't really have any resources to conduct any social activities. (Informant 9, age not specified, female, journalist, 8.10.2023)

Maintaining economic stability after relocation thus depended on intensified labor and rising costs of social reproduction, limiting migrants' capabilities to invest in building new social networks in the host country or in longer-term strategies of settlement and mobility. Overall, these narratives show that Russian migrants' positioning as "professional" middle-

class actors, and their relative privilege in Kyrgyzstan coexists with financial insecurity that also shape migrants' subsequent aspirations and future-oriented mobility strategies.

Timelessness and future mobilities

In respondents' accounts, waiting emerged as an important category through which they interpreted their migration to Kyrgyzstan. Most respondents perceived Kyrgyzstan as a temporary transit country rather than a destination for long-term settlement:

> I feel like I'm in a constant state of timelessness, I'm here temporarily. This isn't exactly a voluntary arrival, this isn't the final destination I'd like to be at [...]. I feel like I'm going to leave. (Informant 18, age not specified, female, background in management, 8.9.2023)

Many framed their stay in the country as a necessity dictated by the urgency of the situation and by adverse economic circumstances and bureaucratic barriers in other countries. This feeling of temporariness reflected migrants' difficulty in making long-term plans: aspirations for onward mobility were repeatedly confronted with limited capabilities to realize them (de Haas 2021). Respondents highlighted barriers including restricted access to visas (especially Schengen and US visas), the uneven recognition of professional qualifications, and language requirements that demanded significant time and effort. Despite having an opportunity to join her daughter and granddaughter in the US, this respondent explained why she preferred to remain in Kyrgyzstan:

> _At least here I have a job, while there I'll just go on some kind of guest visa [...] I can't do that [...]. And I also have a very big problem with languages. (Informant 13, 48 yo, female, doctor, 19.6.2023)

For migrants whose professional skills are not readily valued elsewhere, Kyrgyzstan shifted from a transit hub to a more durable option. Conversely, those with more internationally transferable skills and knowledge of English often articulated greater flexibility and clearer aspirations for onward mobility. In this sense, destination choices were selective and classed: the scope of possible futures depended on the extent to which migrants' different capitals could be converted into opportunities for migration beyond Kyrgyzstan. Many aspired to join the cohort of those who managed to relocate to the West, reflecting the aspirations of middle-class professionals. One of the respondents summarized the tension between her aspirations and her concrete possibilities to move to European countries:

> We have nowhere to move to yet. And because of the financial situation, because of the climate, well, in general, I don't see any particular alternatives yet, that is, all the post-Soviet countries, it will be about the same, but it may be more expensive. But we want to go to Europe. (Informant 18, age not specified, female, background in management, 8.9.2023)

The sudden departure from Russia – especially from provincial towns - generated in many a sense of opportunity and even empowerment, as mobility opened life trajectories that previously seemed unimaginable:

> Well, if not Turkey, then Cyprus, okay, it has pros and cons, the "hole of Europe", well, I know, it's expensive there [...] I don't know, what about hospitable Argentina? Where you can just come and live [...] The very thought that I'm a guy from a provincial

town in Altai, and that I went to live in South America. Well, that's out of this world, that's incredible. (Informant 1, 46 yo, male, entrepreneur, 6.6.2023)

In this way, everyday life in Kyrgyzstan was frequently narrated through projected futures and possible onward routes. These mobile aspirations stem from the link between what Robertson et al. call "desiring mobility" and "making futures through mobility" (2018, p.615). Many respondents described using their time in Kyrgyzstan to 'invest' in additional skills, learning English or other European languages as strategies to expand future mobility options and secure access to more prestigious destinations:

> The goal is to invest in myself, yeah, like I said, like learning a language and getting a more international profession, and learning about the world, learning about the options that are out there. (Informant 2, 39 yo, male, IT systems analyst, 21.9.2023)

Notably, while many respondents invested in learning European languages and developing skills for international careers, they showed little interest in learning Kyrgyz or engaging with Kyrgyz society and institutions. This echoes observations from other post-Soviet settings hosting Russian migrant communities(Darieva 2025). Respondents' narratives embrace typical aspirations of a mobile, urban, cosmopolitan middle-class, such as professional growth, continued education, and international mobility.

A "humbling moment"? Discordant Privilege and Postcolonial Hierarchies

Kyrgyzstan was rarely framed as a desirable endpoint. Respondents often described it as a "good enough" place: familiar, accessible, and affordable. With approximately 2.3 million people living below the poverty line and with two-thirds of the population surviving on less than 6.85 USD per day (National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic n.d.; IMF 2023), Russian migrants found widespread poverty in Kyrgyzstan striking:

> There are many, many social problems here. These include problems with education, low pensions, and generally low living standards. (Informant 12, age not specified, male, logistics specialist, 9.6.2023)

Informants tended to compare Bishkek to Russian provincial towns, noting the excessive smog, the traffic, the chaotic construction, and the deteriorated social infrastructure. These comparisons were also framed through consumer expectations, including the perceived absence of familiar brands and lower-quality services:

> Most of the famous brands are missing. Sometimes I just catch vibes here, as if I were in [a city in Central Russia] in, like, 2005—it's so reminiscent of that. (Informant 7, 30 yo, male, PhD student in computational linguistics, 17.4.2023)

Such observations resonate with other research on Russian migrants' "Moscow gaze" (Gunko 2023) and their "embodied empire" (Gavrilova 2022). Russian migrants' evaluations of post-Soviet countries are mediated by metropolitan standards and post-imperial imaginaries, combining an imperial gaze toward the "peripheries" of Soviet/post-Soviet space with a "global city" gaze characteristic of mobile skilled professionals. Similar to what has been observed in the South Caucasus (Gunko 2023; Darieva 2025), Russian migrants in Kyrgyzstan often assessed local institutions, infrastructures, and everyday life through expectations formed in Russian urban centres, reproducing a sense of relative superiority toward the post-Soviet "edges."

At the same time, respondents were explicit in recognizing their relative economic privilege vis-à-vis most of the population, noting visible disparities between their consumption practices and local living standards:

> People are very poor, basically. The majority of the population. I probably spend 10 times more money here than the average citizen earns. And because of that, I live quite privileged even here. (Informant 14, 30 yo, male, musician, 3.9.2023)

However, this awareness of inequality did not necessarily translate into reflexive engagement with its structural causes. Explanations often individualized the causes of poverty, allowing respondents to acknowledge discomfort while simultaneously rationalizing their advantage:

> You have a high living standard and you want to live in a society where there is some kind of justice, yes? Where you don't feel like a king, and there are poor people around you looking at you […] It's clear that it's not your fault that someone can't earn money or build their life. Still, I feel it — it might be just my personal reaction. (Informant 11, 35 yo, male, game developer, small business owner, 16.4.2023)

The arrival of thousands of Russians to Central Asia has been described as a potential "humbling moment" for Russian citizens (Heusala and Eraliev 2024), destabilizing their previously unquestioned assumptions about their superior status in the Eurasian space. However, the narratives of Russian migrants in Kyrgyzstan demonstrate a persistent attempt to distinguish themselves from the local population and the country hosting them. This postcolonial and hierarchical positioning also becomes visible in respondents' discussions of citizenship.

In the context of tightening mobility restrictions for Russian passport holders, dual citizenship was often mentioned by respondents as a pragmatic strategy to manage uncertainty and expand future mobility options (Ruseishvili 2025). Between 2022 and 2023, applications for Kyrgyz citizenship from Russian nationals increased, accompanied by the emergence of private firms offering expedited services at relatively affordable prices (Najibullah 2023). Many respondents approached the possibility to obtain Kyrgyzstan's citizenship instrumentally, more as a legal resource to bypass visa restriction than a desired political membership:

> In general, I think that for me and those like me, having another citizenship besides Russian is a good option. Kyrgyz citizenship is not an ideal option, but it is better than [having] only the Russian citizenship. (Informant 1, 46 yo, male, entrepreneur, 6.6.2023)

Russian migrants tended to produce destination hierarchies in which Central Asian countries were positioned at the bottom, associated with lower living standards than Western Europe, the United Stated, the Gulf countries, or South America. The utilitarian framing of citizenship reflects an internalized postcolonial hierarchy in which Central Asian and South Caucasus states are often imagined as peripheral and less prestigious, making the possibility of obtaining their citizenship symbolically devalued relative to the 'strength' of their passports in global rankings. The contrast with Central Asian labor migrants in Russia is instructive: while they often pursue Russian citizenship as a strategy for legal stability and socio-economic security in Russia (Borisova 2020), they remain subject to suspicion and conditional incorporation even after naturalization (Bahovadinova 2024).

These asymmetries expose the hierarchies embedded within regional mobility regimes and the citizenship policies that govern them.

Conclusion

Migration triggered by crisis — be it war, political repression, or economic collapse — rarely unfolds on migrants' own terms. Even for those migrants who may appear as "privileged" mobile subjects, departures under duress often entail navigating legal uncertainty, fragmented support systems, and the risk of downward social mobility. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 produced a sudden reconfiguration of mobility across Eurasia, not only in terms of destinations and routes, but also in terms of who is on the move. Drawing on seventeen interviews with Russian migrants in Kyrgyzstan, this article has addressed two gaps in emerging scholarship on post-2022 Russian emigration: the tendency to treat *relokanty* as a relatively homogeneous cohort of political activists and privileged professionals, and the limited attention to relocations to less prestigious destinations such as Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan appeared in respondents' narratives as a feasible and often pragmatic solution in a moment of emergency. As EAEU citizens, Russian migrants moving to Kyrgyzstan could benefit from easy entry requirements and straightforward registration procedures. The widespread use of the Russian language in Bishkek and lower living costs made relocation possible and accessible even for migrants without foreign language skills, travel documents, and limited financial resources. Many respondents arrived with no savings or even pre-existing debt, experienced employment and family disruptions, and were compelled to mobilize their cultural and social capital to reorient their professional trajectories and avoid downward social mobility. The resulting picture is one of internally differentiated middle-class migration: a few migrants could rely on savings or stable remote work , while others struggled with the context-specific devaluation of their skills and the fragile conversion of their fragmented capitals into new employment opportunities.

The article also showed how the perception of place and time played an important role in shaping Russian migrants' aspirations for future mobilities. In respondents' accounts, Kyrgyzstan was widely described as a transit space, a "good enough" country that enabled temporary stability and planning, but rarely matched longer-term imaginaries of desirable mobility. Finally, the article illuminated how postcolonial hierarchies remain embedded in everyday evaluations of place. Respondents' comparisons of Bishkek to Russian provincial cities in the early 2000's resonate with an orientalizing, post-imperial metropolitan gaze towards the "periphery". These postcolonial hierarchies also surfaced in discussions of citizenship, where the possibility of obtaining Kyrgyzstan's passport was regarded instrumentally but symbolically ranked below other, more prestigious alternatives. The contrast with Central Asian labor migrants in Russia, who face systemic racialization, punitive expulsion practices, and conditional inclusion even after naturalization, underscores the stratification of citizenship rights, as well as the asymmetric reproduction of postcolonial power relations within Eurasian mobility regimes.

Bringing these strands together, the article advanced discordant privilege as an analytical lens to capture the coexistence of privilege and precarity in Russian migrants' experiences in Kyrgyzstan. This case suggests the importance of analyzing war-induced mobility not as a uniform phenomenon but as stratified trajectories shaped by class, unequal capabilities and aspirations, and privilege within the context of postcolonial hierarchies of place. Future research would benefit from comparative attention to different Russian migrant profiles (including non-metropolitan, working-class, and minoritized groups), and to how shifting geopolitical conditions reshape interactions between newcomers and local societies, as well as migrants' mobilities over time. Such an agenda can contribute to foregrounding Eurasia

as a space where privilege and precarity are co-produced through historically layered inequalities and rapidly changing mobility regimes.

List of the Informants

Informant 1, 46 yo, male, entrepreneur

Informant 2, 39 yo, male, IT systems analyst, mathematician

Informant 3, 48 yo, male, psychologist

Informant 4, 35–40 yo, male, developer (IT specialist)

Informant 5, age not specified, female, marketing specialist

Informant 6, 30 yo, male, PhD student in computational linguistics

Informant 7, 25–30 yo, male, journalist

Informant 8, age not specified, female, journalist

Informant 9, age not specified, male, student

Informant 10, 35 yo, male, game developer, small business owner

Informant 11, age not specified, male, logistics specialist

Informant 12, 48 yo, female, doctor

Informant 13, 30 yo, male, musician

Informant 14, age not specified, male, researcher and teacher

Informant 15, 38 yo, male, IT and architecture specialist

Informant 16, 28 yo, male, copywriter

Informant 17, age not specified, female, no fixed profession, background in management

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

How War Transforms Migration
The Case of Recent Russian Migration in Belgrade

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Abstract

The article examines the implications of new international migration patterns in Belgrade, a topic of utmost importance that significantly affects EU asylum and migration policies. We argue that a paradigmatic shift occurred in migratory processes over the past ten years, which the conventional human movement tracking model fails to capture. The article presents research that seeks to place and represent Russian immigrants in Belgrade in the context of the specific social interactions intensified by military aggression in Ukraine. We will try to compare the demographic composition and social backgrounds of migrants, their implications on contemporary international relations, and the potential impacts of the recent wave of migration. Our reflections on these migratory movements will offer novel perspectives on their consequences for social relations and public policies. This article aims to make new and critical contributions to the ongoing debates about contemporary migration by employing a qualitative argumentative analysis research method.

Introduction

Over the last ten years, we have witnessed a paradigmatic shift in migratory patterns, primarily driven by wars. Harbom and Walensteen in their research (2007, p. 624) identified 122 armed conflicts between 1989 and 2006. Merged with figures from Davies et al. (2023, p. 693, and 2025, p. 1224), the total number of wars waged in recent history comes to nearly 150. Previously, wars often led to civilian refugees seeking shelter in neighboring countries. Today, conflicts tend to be more dispersed, resulting in enormous numbers of refugees fleeing violence across multiple borders and continents in search of safety. Understanding these recent migration trends is crucial, as they reflect a new reality shaped by borders in which local conflicts trigger widespread migration worldwide.

In such a way, Russia's 2022 military attack on Ukraine triggered the most significant exodus from the country in three decades, and thousands of Russian citizens have migrated towards neighboring countries and Europe to escape from political oppression and the threat of military mobilization. At different times, the main destination countries were Armenia, Georgia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Israel. Within Europe, the destinations were Germany, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia (Sergeeva & Kamalov, 2024). Serbia, due to its

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30-day visa-free policy, unlimited number of entries for Russian citizens, and open skies policy for Russian aircraft, instantly became a destination country within this unexpected migratory movement (Cvijić & Nikolić, 2025, p. 8). Serbia, at the same time, plays a specific role in international relations as a borderland, torn between its aspirations for European Union membership and its intricate relationship with the Russian Federation, which we will further elaborate on in the article. It is also important to note that, as an accession country to the European Union, Serbia did not fully align its foreign policy with that of the union. As we can see from the last analysis of Serbia's alignment with the European Union's foreign policy declarations and measures in the CFSP and Serbia's accession to the European Union report (Novaković et al., 2025, p. 6), Serbia's alignment with EU declarations remained among the lowest compared to other candidate and partner countries, standing at 52 per cent. Although Serbia aligns with the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy in its declarations regarding Lebanon, Haiti, Mali, Sudan, and Venezuela, official Belgrade remains silent and unwilling to impose sanctions on Russia.

Belgrade has been a recipient of many waves of migration in the last decade. This trend of continuous migrant influx reflects broader geopolitical events and underscores the complexities of different migration movements and integration challenges. The capital of Serbia has long been a migration hub, with networks previously established across the Western Balkans due to its location at the intersection of Europe's Eastern and Western regions. Belgrade, "which rises spectacularly along the banks of the Danube and the Sava River, has been the site of wars, conquests and rapidly changing fortunes for much of its thousands-years long history" (Hirt, 2009, p. 293) has always functioned as a meeting point for different cultures and now is becoming [or: even today serves as] a central transit route for contemporary migrants seeking better living opportunities. Its hospitable spirit has always facilitated the absorption of new migrants (Spasić & Backović, 2020, p. 584). The geographical closeness to the European Union has been an essential factor in attracting migrants from nations that were once under the Soviet sphere of influence. Over the last decade, refugees from the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia have been coming along the Balkan Route (Minca & Collins, 2021, p. 2). Though for some, it is a temporary passage, for others, it is a point of longer-term residence during migration.

Although Serbia and the Russian Federation have maintained mutually respectful diplomatic relations, Belgrade has historically attracted relatively few Russian visitors and usually has had only a small number of Russian residents. According to the 2011 census of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, the number of Russian residents was 3247 (Manojlović, 2023). The situation changed dramatically with the initiation of aggressive Russian war activities in February 2022. The Russian population in Belgrade numbered a mere few thousand at its peak before the war, with a majority consisting of government-employed diplomats in administrative positions and management personnel in energy-sector companies. The outbreak of the war also brought a radical shift in regional trade and energy-driven geopolitics.

The conflict heightened the Russian Federation's and the European Union's strategic rivalry, compelling regional actors to re-evaluate their political allegiances and security programs. Serbia's nonalignment policy in imposing sanctions against the Kremlin is characteristic of its position as a geopolitical border state, where European ambitions converge with historical ties to Russia that predate the European accession process. At the same time, the influx of Russian migrants into Serbia raised concerns over population shifts and political realignments, making it a critical transit point during the conflict. The complex interaction among the EU, the Russian Federation, and regional actors reveals how evolving border dynamics related to sovereignty shape relationships under fragile geopolitical conditions in the Western Balkans.

To this new social dynamic and changed geopolitical conditions, we can also add over 1,223,771 migrants and people on the move (Janković et al., 2024, p. 123) who have passed and are still passing, in lesser numbers, through the Republic of Serbia and the City of Belgrade, taking the informal Balkan Route. These are refugees from the Near and Middle East and North Africa. They are staying for short to comparatively longer precarious durations, shedding new light on Belgrade's urban profile. Some migrants escaped wars and difficult economic conditions in their countries, while fewer people arrived on regular working visas from Asian countries affected by financial crises, in what is described as mixed migration flows (see Bobić & Šantić, 2019, p. 220).

As the introduction to the topic indicates, Belgrade hosts a complex combination of different mixed migration movements, with various actors playing distinct roles. The Russian migrations to Belgrade do not follow any preset pattern: many of them occur spontaneously, in different ways. Instead of coming as clandestine migrants seeking asylum, these individuals are entering the country as tourists (Cvijić & Nikolić, 2025, p. 14-15). They are renewing their status by going in and out of the country, meanwhile, commencing the legal procedure for their longer-term residence. Therefore, the migrants' movements are difficult to predict or statistically follow since they are not officially recognized as refugees; thus, international organizations cannot trace them. Against this backdrop, we focus on the socio-spatial implications of recent migration flows from Russia to Belgrade, specifically regarding border crossing, visa regimes, the economic environment, and socio-cultural exchange dynamics. These include deviations in Belgrade's urban development, driven by the recent influx of new residents, housing fluctuations, administrative obstacles to Russian migration, and cultural diversification due to intensified urban transformation.

This article describes recent migration flows into present-day Serbia, with a focus on its capital, Belgrade. It identifies the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine as a momentum for expanded migration out of Russia, as well as attention to Serbia's distinctive balancing act, geopolitical positioning, and its free entry for Russian citizens. Seeking further insight into this contemporary migration, the analysis proceeds with an overview of the history of Russian-Serbian relations and the previous waves of Russian migration into Belgrade, which had a profound influence on the city between the world wars. We refer to the strategic geographical positioning of Belgrade as an entry point for migration, marking the beginning of its role as a key point on the Balkans migration route over the last decade. The study proceeds to discuss changes in demography resulting from Serbia's depopulation and the recent influx of Russian migrants, as well as broader reconfigurations across the Western Balkans. For the latter part of the study, Russian migration into Serbia is analyzed, examining its current demography, migration and border controls, public policy responses, and the socio-economic effects of this recent migration flow.

The current wave of Russian migrants arriving in Belgrade is not a unique historical phenomenon. A similar case of migration occurred after the Russian Revolution of 1917, when Belgrade attracted tens of thousands of Russian émigrés who left their mark on the urban landscape, cultural life, and professional institutions. This earlier immigration not only advanced the city's modernization but also reshaped its architectural, social, and cultural dimensions, with effects that remain evident even today. Drawing on a historical parallel, we will investigate whether and in what ways the political and social transformations of cities today, driven by Russian migration in the context of the war, are similar. Demographic characteristics, legal and border regimes, socio-economic impacts, cultural practices, and political attitudes are all factors that determine the current migration wave. Migration occurring under different geopolitical and institutional conditions can still alter the socio-spatial dynamics and make Belgrade a borderland again, where cycles of compulsory and strategic migration predominate.

Finally, the article addresses the unpredictable and informal nature of Russian migration into Belgrade, thereby laying the groundwork for a deeper analysis of its socio-spatial implications and raising the research question: How has the recent influx of Russian migrants been reshaping socio-economic, geopolitical, and cultural dynamics in Belgrade?

Migration-Induced Social Change in Debordering Contexts: A Theoretical Framework

The literature on migration emphasizes that large, unexpected migration flows rarely follow a predictable course in host societies (Massey, 1999, p. 306; see also Collier, 2013). Alternatively, these migrations create a complex web of unanticipated changes across various aspects of life in host countries, especially those with liminal or borderland characteristics. We will examine the influx of Russian migrants to Belgrade as a case of armed conflict-induced migration, which, along with a flexible border regime, led to selective integration and uneven societal change. Since single migration and social change theory, as described by Van Hear (2010, p. 1535; see also Castles, 2010; Portes, 2010), cannot account for all the uncertainties addressed in the research question, we also draw on economic social capital (network) theory (Lin, 1999; Haug, 2008; Pieterse, 2003), comparative historical analysis (Albert, 1977), philosophical (Arendt, 1989) argument of sensus communis as an interpretive lens, demographic data to track change, border studies and borderscape theory (Anzaldúa, 2012; Brambilla et al., 2015; dell'Agnese & Amilhat Szary, 2015; Raeymaekers, 2019; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), cultural anthropology (Brettell, 2000; Vertovec, 2011), and (geo)politics (Bialasiewicz, 2009; Browning, 2018; Del Sarto, 2021; Zielonka, 2006; Hyndman, 2012).

Serbia is essential to this study because it points out the country's position as a geopolitical and regulatory borderland between the European Union and the Russian Federation. The borderland framework identifies topics characterized by legal frameworks that directly influence migration flows and migrants' managing strategies (Giddens, 1984). Serbia's visa-free entry policy for Russian citizens, its ambiguous alignment with EU foreign policy, and a relaxed investment framework have enabled debordering. While borders remain fixed and hard territorial boundaries (Brunet-Jailly, 2011, p. 3), convenient access to residence, self-employment, and entrepreneurship is increasingly negotiable. Such an environment promotes migratory behavior that falls outside the typical definitions of either a refugee or an economic migrant. The migration of Russians to Belgrade illustrates the relationship between a country's geopolitical positioning and individual migrant agency, resulting in highly mobile, inadequately legally established, and socially significant migration flows.

Research on urban migration shows that migrants with substantial economic and cultural capital tend to move to larger cities where they can establish social, professional, and cultural networks (Lerch et al., 2025, p. 17). This indicates that Russians in Belgrade have influenced increased housing demand and (sub)cultural expansion in the city center, which led to the creation of "social bubbles", which are separate social environments maintained through digital interaction, professional connections, and shared language, rather than isolated communities.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives situate Russian migration to Belgrade as a category of armed conflict-induced migration in a borderland state, resulting in occasional integration and varying societal impacts. The proposed theoretical framework will be used as a compass for the empirical analysis by examining prior Russian migration and comparing it with contemporary demographic traits, urban and housing effects, labor market participation, cultural integration, and political attitudes among Russian immigrants in Belgrade.

Serbian–Russian Relations in both Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

Coinciding with the end of the First World War and the distraction caused by the Russian Bolshevik Revolution, a new demographic and social upheaval occurred in the capital of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The beginning of the 1920s marked the emergence of an urban renaissance in Belgrade. Despite their war victory, Serbian society was devastated, and more than a third (31.3%) of its population died in the war period (Radivojević & Penev, 2014, p. 41).

The escape of the Russian Tsarist elite from the revolution spilled over into the financial sector, and many of those affected afterward contributed to the formation of banks and to Belgrade's economic growth. The arrival of Serbs from Austro-Hungarian territories and educated Tsarist Russians created a tangible mix of influences in the town, still evident today in the urban landscape and architecture (Prošen, 2016, p. 624), medicine, science, and the arts. Some of the most remarkable edifices in the very heart of Belgrade were conceived precisely in this period, drastically changing the city's urban landscape, which, until then, had the shape of a decadent Ottoman settlement. As Hint suggests (2009), "post-Ottoman Europeanization had powerful implications" (p. 294) for Serbia's capital.

The historical record of migration from Russia forms a substantial chapter of the history of Russia and Serbia. It illustrates the two nations' political, social, and cultural interactions over the past two centuries. Besides the period under review, migration from Russia to Serbia has existed at other times. For example, Russia aided in liberating Serbia from Ottoman rule in the 19th century. Russia's efforts in the First Serbian Uprising, 1804–1813, and the Second, 1815, were very beneficial in the relationship between Russia and Serbia. Russian officers and diplomats came to Serbia following the uprisings to modernize society and helped organize the newly independent state (Vujačić, 1996, p. 776). As discussed above, the most remarkable migration of Russians to Serbia occurred after 1917, when 60,000 Russians migrated to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, of whom around 40,000 permanently settled and integrated into Serbian society (Radojčić et al., 2022, p. 55).

The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, particularly Belgrade, became the center of the anti-Bolshevik Russian diaspora. These refugees left a strong influence on the intellectual and cultural life of interwar Serbia. Many anti-Bolshevik Russians emigrated to Serbia and maintained Russian religious and cultural traditions. Many Tsarist military officers joined the army of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (Radojčić et al., 2022, p. 57). Russian migrant priests played a crucial role in establishing Russian Orthodox parishes and other institutions, followed by many famous Russian artists, writers, and composers who emigrated to Serbia (Vesić, 2015, p.103). The interwar period saw a persistent arrival of Russian refugees, most of whom settled in Belgrade (Djordjević, 2025, p. 102). Russian migrants established various organizations, from language educational institutes to cultural foundations, playing a key role in maintaining Russian bourgeois culture in Serbia.

For example, the Russian Orthodox Church in Belgrade, in the vicinity of Tašmajdan Park (see Figure 1), and the Russian cemetery and ossuary at Novo Groblje (Cohen, 2014, p. 646), which contains many notable Russian intellectuals who escaped the Bolshevik Revolution, symbolize the presence of the interwar Russian community in Serbia. Most of the governmental buildings in the center of Belgrade were built by Russian architects (Ignjatović, 2011, p. 69). Here, we can also emphasize that the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was the last European country to recognize the Soviet Union until June 1940 (Aghayev, 2017, p. 5).

After the Second World War, "the critical phase in Yugoslav-Soviet relations was in 1948 when, following the Informbureau resolution, Yugoslavia was virtually ousted from the Eastern Alliance" (Proroković, 2020, p. 197). This event was a radical shift and a U-turn in Socialist Yugoslavia's international relations, leaning the country westwards. Even though

"Khrushchev had apologized for the exclusion of Yugoslavia from the Soviet-led bloc" (Rothermund, 2014, p. 24), the two countries never established deeper diplomatic ties, and Yugoslavia was never part of any Soviet-led international organization. In line with this, the formation of Socialist Yugoslavia under Josip Broz Tito made the future of most Russian immigrants questionable and unbearable, because of their roots and origin. They have been seen as adversaries of Yugoslavia's socialist revolution, and they had to emigrate further after the Second World War. The significance of the Russian diaspora in Serbia dropped, and its members moved to France, America, Australia, and other Western countries. Despite this, a small Russian community stayed in Belgrade.

In the context of attempts to reconstruct national identity amid internal conflict, economic issues, and altered regional borders, Serbian-Russian relations came to play an increasingly crucial role from the 1990s onward. Of particular note in this regard was the evolution of bilateral cooperation with the Russian Federation and the signing of the declaration on strategic partnership between Russia and Serbia in 2013 by Presidents Vladimir Putin and Tomislav Nikolić (Aghayev, 2017, p. 7). In this way, Russia became one of Serbia's most important partners in the energy sector. Based on a shared historical context, cultural affinities, and religious bonds, the post-disintegration phase witnessed a remarkable intensification of relations between Russia and Serbia.

After the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Serbia faced numerous political challenges and border disputes. In addition, Serbia encountered serious economic challenges. The breakdown of Yugoslavia's economy, along with the devastating impacts of the conflict, left Serbia with a weakened infrastructure, high unemployment, and severe hyperinflation (see Lyon, 1996, p. 293). In the context of the above economic problems, Serbia had to implement reforms to transform its centrally planned socialist-type economy into a free-market one. As Jovanović (2023) points out: "Because of the complexity of the process, the reconstruction and modernization of the Serbian economy required aid from outside sources, investments, and the formation of new economic alliances" (p. 232).

The Russian Federation has been a partner in this quest, investing in strategic sectors such as energy and providing Serbia with access to sell consumer goods to its large market (YTarcic, 2020, p. 5). During the post-Yugoslav period, as both nations grappled with problems and prospects, economic collaboration with Russia was imposed on the relationship. A thorough understanding of the political aspects of this relationship requires an exploration of the similarities that have brought the two states together. Then again, as Jovanović (2023) asserts: "The profound impact of Orthodox Christianity, cultural links to Slavic peoples, and common historical experiences have all led to the formation of a robust and long-lasting alliance between Serbia and Russia" (p. 233).

Russians maintained links with Serbia and continue to impact Serbia's intellectual and cultural landscape. Its emigration has therefore made a permanent imprint on Serbia's cultural heritage, contributing significantly to architecture, religion, education, and the arts. Although geographically remote and without a shared border, the historical, religious, and cultural ties between Russia and Serbia remain strong (Aghayev, 2017, p. 8).

To briefly explain the complex political and social Serbo-Russian relationship, we will retract the analogy and employ an argument that incorporates Arendt's interpretation that Kant's political philosophy relies on Kant's concept of *Sensus Communis* found in his "Critique of Judgement" (Kant, 1790/1987, p.159). Arendt's recovery of Kant's original concept wherein she emphasizes that this type of aesthetic judgment could also be perceived as a way of political thinking (judgment) should expound on the entangled relationship between Russia and Serbia relationship, which is always followed by an additional layer of details that cannot be presented in a plain, one-dimensional sense and justified with direct political interest.

Throughout history, political relations between the two countries have varied dramatically, and many authors have tried to explain this as soft power influence (Kosović, 2016) or emotionally and historically fueled influence (Meister, 2018, p. 52), revolving around conflicts over ideology and expansionist activities. We argue that this relationship is neither a game of power nor an emotional one, but an example of *Sensus Communis* judgment. The idea is that Serbian political viewpoints on Russia are driven by second-order political judgments based on a sense of shared community. The dynamic currently in place, with an ongoing transition, brings into perspective the complex relationship between political leaders and ordinary citizens, regardless of government-stated policy. Records indicate that the periods of diplomatic disconnection between Serbia and Russia, or Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, have been longer than those of friendly, stable ties. Concisely, relations between Serbia and Russia are an entangled intersection of *common sense* and *community sense (sociability)* as identified by Kant (Arendt, 1989, p. 8).

Serbia's depopulation adds another dimension to the already complex migration events in the Western Balkans related to the breakup of Yugoslavia, a pivotal moment that significantly contributed to the widespread demographic decline currently being experienced (Koyama, 2022, p. 6). On the other hand, border practices that led to recent Russian migration bring a paradox for a depopulating society. While Serbia struggles with significant brain drain (Radonjić and Bobić, 2021) of educated young citizens leaving for the EU, Russians with a similar social profile are simultaneously filling the gap.

Continued economic insecurity adds to an already critical demographic situation: Serbia's birth rate is very low, at around 1.6 children per woman, even lower than the 2.1 needed to replace the next generation. So, recent migration has been driven mainly by the country's "general economic, social, and political situation" (Lutz and Gailey, 2020, p. 16-22). An estimate indicates that more than a million qualified, ready-to-work people from Serbia have migrated over the last ten years. The correlation with reduced birth rates is supported by forecasts that over a third of Serbia's population will retire by 2050. The demographic imbalance leaves a smaller reservoir of working-age people to fill available positions in the labor market, which recent, predominantly young Russian migration may help fill.

However, the current flow of Russian migrants to Belgrade demonstrates the massive discrepancy between official government policies and what is happening on the ground. Officially, they are either tourists or temporary entrepreneurs in Belgrade. The Serbian authorities seem not to pay attention to them, with discussion on this topic confined mainly to a small selection of independent media outlets. Similarly, they are invisible in Russian official discourse, and the Kremlin is looking the other way, as recognition of this movement of young, educated people would contradict Putin's propaganda efforts (Rujević, 2025).

From this perspective, the Russian migrants in Belgrade are experiencing a strange "geopolitical limbo" that has been ignored by all the state actors of the current international relations settings. The European Union has a determinedly anti-Russian stance, and the Belgrade government is exceptionally balanced in trying not to provoke the Kremlin. Meanwhile, the Kremlin is looking the other way and does not seem very engaged in its population's mass exodus. On the other hand, Russian migrants in Belgrade are relatively well integrated, with minimal public objection or social tension. Russian migrants' businesses are developing networks, enabling them to experience a sense of normality. The Serbian residents perceive this migration not solely as a political issue, but also as a foreign addition to a broader community bonded by a common Slavic and Christian Orthodox heritage.

Figure 1. Russian Orthodox Church in Belgrade, near Tašmajdan Park.

Source: Photo credits to N. Miličić, Belgrade 2025.

Belgrade: Emerging Borderland between the EU and Russia

Different factors are at work in the growing Russian presence in Serbia, reflecting broader regional geopolitical reconfigurations. The European Union and international sanctions on the Russian Federation, raised in 2014 "after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula" (Bělín et al., 2023, p. 246), affected virtually every aspect of life, from business and finance to access to specific technologies. As such, many Russian entrepreneurs looked to Belgrade as a place where they could evade sanctions, run their businesses, and invest. As Patalakh (2018) notes, "Serbia is currently the sole state outside the post-Soviet area which enjoys a free trade zone with Russia" (p. 496). The result creates a genuine alternative for individuals whose business interests relate to the European Union market.

Serbia's relatively affordable cost of living, coupled with developing technology and business industries, has made the nation appealing to Russian entrepreneurs and tech experts. Many Russians, particularly those in information technology, have migrated to Serbia to take advantage of growing business opportunities, a favorable tax environment, and relatively low-cost housing (Schulte et al., 2024, p. 134). A notable increase in Russian investment in Belgrade's rental property market has been witnessed (Cvijić & Nikolić, 2025, p. 10). Russian students and scholars are also relocating to Belgrade, drawn by educational programs, cultural exchange, and opportunities for research collaboration in history, literature, and the social sciences.

Most Russian migrants settle in Belgrade, though some online workers have settled in smaller towns and cities outside Serbia's capital. These are retirement-friendly places, and

apart from rural lifestyles, they may also offer easy access to services (Tomović, 2022). Russian-language cultural groups and internet-based social networks have been formed alongside the growth of Serbia's Russian community. Russian-language television channels and websites are gaining audiences in Serbia, reflecting the growing presence of Russian expatriates (Cvijić & Nikolić, 2025, p. 11). This fact is significant to note within the context of geopolitical competition, as Serbia's political non-alignment has sometimes complicated its relations with Russia just as much as with Western countries. The growth of Russian nationals in Serbia may complicate the country's international relations, particularly its accession to the European Union. Serbia is still not joining "EU sanctions on Russia despite Brussels's continuous requests" (Patalakh, 2018, p. 511; Novaković et al., 2025), maintaining a delicate balance.

The Russian migration has raised fears of higher property rates and house rents, which would negatively affect the local population in Belgrade (Cvijić & Nikolić, 2025, p. 23). Additionally, there are ongoing debates regarding the extent to which these migrants contribute significantly to the Serbian economy or take advantage of reduced taxation and a lower cost of living. Political uncertainty in both countries, economic pressure, and cultural closeness direct the latest Russian migration flow to Serbia. It was clear from the beginning that this migration has economically benefited specific groups, mainly real estate owners, but has also led to possible further stratification of Belgrade's local population (Vlaović, 2024). However, it is accompanied by problems of long-term integration and broader geopolitical implications for Serbia, considering its location between Russia and the West. It is expected that the migration trend will also continue in the future, and this opinion is supported by data from recent research by Cvijić and Nikolić (2025, p. 14), which shows significant growth in residence registrations.

Debordering Serbia: Remaking Legal Borders for Russian Citizens

While Serbia has been seeking membership in the European Union since 2012, its foreign policy remains only partially aligned with the European Union's standards. Serbia has deliberately tried to create a favorable legal environment for foreign investments to accelerate its accession to the European Union. Serbia's adoption of its *Law on Investment ("Sl. glasnik RS", br. 89/2015 and 95/2018)*, followed by a set of legal and economic incentives, "resulted in the liberalization of foreign investment into Serbia" (Vukmirović et al., 2021, p. 123). Such "legal harmonization rules" include streamlining bureaucratic procedures and offering incentives, such as tax cuts and grants, to make the business climate more attractive to EU companies. But in the end, these policies attracted more Chinese and Russian companies than European ones (Jovičić & Marjanović, 2024, p. 111).

Serbia's geographical position is essential to its economic strategy. Located at the intersection of the main corridors of Central and Southeast Europe, Serbia is near European Union markets but is not a member of the European Union. Its legal business setup framework is like that of the European Union. Still, it is more flexible, making it an ideal location for Chinese and Russian companies to invest in a more responsive region than the European Union's stringent regulatory system (Jovičić & Marjanović, 2024, p.113). Consequently, many multinational companies have opened offices in Serbia, motivated by reduced operational costs and a favorable business environment (Vukmirović et al., 2021, p. 129). These preconditions have certainly favored the arrival of this contemporary wave of Russian migration.

Not least, Serbia's unique diplomacy has had a distinct influence on migration patterns. The state has adopted flexible visa rules that reflect its commitment to the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement, which served as the cornerstone of the diplomacy of the old socialist Yugoslavia. In his work on this topic, Čavoški (2014) points out that the formation

of the Non-Aligned Movement "was closely interconnected with the evolution of Yugoslavia's relations with different Third World countries during the first two decades of the Cold War" (p.184). This aided cooperation with countries from the Third World, and the loose border, along with a liberal visa regime from that period, did not undergo significant changes until Serbia began its accession negotiations with the European Union. This phenomenon has created a diverse workforce, further contributing to the diversity of Serbia's labor market and the economy of Belgrade.

Many migrants who come to Serbia are motivated by the proximity to the European Union and the potential to obtain long–term work permits and other documentation, thereby gaining easier access to the visa-free Schengen Area. Migrants expect to eventually reach their destinations in the European Union and look at these countries as prospects for better life opportunities. Migrants from other third-world countries, such as Turkey, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Nepal, commonly fill labor niches in lower-paid sectors, including construction, logistics, cleaning services, and hospitality, thereby shaping Belgrade's new urban and economic profile. In seeking these opportunities, the majority of migrant workers in Serbia accept precarious working conditions, including low salaries, prolonged working hours, and shorter-term contracts.

Serbia has become a significant refuge for Russians, adding to the growing list of nations such as Kazakhstan, Georgia, Armenia, and Turkey. Data from Khan (2023) indicate that nearly 30,000 Russians were granted temporary and long-term residence permits in Serbia. The following year brought new figures and trends, according to the official data provided by the Serbian Border Police Administration at the request of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), "in the period from February 24, 2022, until December 31, 2024, there were 73,197 applications for permanent residence permits in Serbia filed by Russian immigrants" (Cvijić and Nikolić, 2025, p.13). Upon arrival, most Russian migrants transitioned to their new status by establishing businesses in Serbia, mainly in sectors directly or indirectly linked to the European Union market. Entrepreneurial activity is especially appealing because it enables them to continue their operations despite the complexity introduced by sanctions against Russia. Many other Russian citizens have not yet received their permits. Unofficial estimates of the number of Russians residing in the country are approximately 300,000, but they are prone to revision due to the extreme mobility of Russian migration (Georgijevski, 2025).

According to the Serbian Border Police Administration, the total number of registrations of Russian citizens from February 24, 2022, to December 31, 2024, amounts to 948,934, with a peak in 2024 (Cvijić & Nikolić, 2025, p. 14). The number of entries should not be interpreted as the number of individuals, since many individuals are re-entering the country; the figure clearly shows the extent of the ongoing movements. This migration changed Belgrade's demographic profile and introduced new social dynamics, which we will present later. Belgrade has emerged as the primary host for many of these Russian migrants, and according to Cvijić and Nikolić, research indicates that 83.4% of Russian citizens in Serbia currently reside in its capital (2025, p. 18). This influx constitutes a considerable increase in the population of a relatively small nation, and the trend of incoming individuals shows no signs of slowing.

The weak border, 'Visa Run system', has been implemented to simplify the process of working around Serbia's legal system for Russian migrants who demand one exit from the country monthly after their temporary tourist residency has run out to prolong their residency status until they qualify for long-term residency. This law primarily affects young Russian migrants facing economic hardship who cannot prove residency status through business registration, employment, property ownership, or children's attendance at local schools, which could otherwise serve as a legal basis for residency. Numerous migrants

travel via the Sremska Rača border crossing between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina with visa-free entry (Zejnulahović et al., 2024, p. 3). Local entrepreneurs in Belgrade have seen an opportunity and established a profitable enterprise offering taxi transport services for Russians. These services usually involve arranged round-trips to the border and back, including lunch at a nearby restaurant, making the trip easy for those balancing the tangle of their new life in Serbia. A large number of Russian migrants still use this method to extend their legal status in Serbia, as it requires little time or effort (Cvijić and Nikolić, 2025, p. 14).

Analytical elements of recent Russian migration to Belgrade

This section examines the key analytical dimensions of recent Russian migration to Belgrade, focusing on composition and broader social and urban implications.

Demographic profile

As previously stated, since 2022, a significant number of Russian citizens have elected to reside in Belgrade. The large number of migrants is between 25 and 34 years of age. The Russian migration mainly comprises trained and qualified human resources, namely skilled IT sector personnel (Zejnulahović et al., 2024, p. 1). When it comes to gender representation, Cvijić and Nikolić's survey (2025, pp. 16-17) shows that 48.5% are men, and 50.5% are women. The majority of respondents are amid the ages of 25 and 39 (55.6%), 11.7% are youth between 18 and 24, individuals between 40 and 54 years are 30,4%, while the least represented age group is 55 and older (2.2%) and most participants have a higher education (66.4%), are self-employed (42.4%) and are married (42.9%).

Urban impact

Following the rise of the real estate market and from the data released by the Republican Geodetic Institute, we can notice that Russian migrants financed about €180 million into Belgrade's housing sector in 2023 and an additional €85 million in 2024, which roughly accounts for six per cent of the total real estate market in Serbia (Lazarević, 2024). Russians arriving in Belgrade affected the social context, indicating a rise in housing demand. In the beginning, most of the money was spent on renting apartments, but later, funds were used to purchase properties. Renting properties in Belgrade has increased considerably, with some areas having seen significant price increases (Vlaović, 2024). This phenomenon hit the least well-off part of Serbian society, especially young workers and students who had paid, up to now, a reasonable price for their apartments.

The expanded demand has pushed some landlords to evict tenants who cannot keep up with rising costs, putting more pressure on Serbia's housing sector. Russian migrants are predominantly positioned in central Belgrade's urban areas, putting direct pressure on available housing (Vlaović, 2024). The social context in some neighborhoods of Belgrade has changed, leading to increased animosity between residents and new migrants (Cvijić & Nikolić, 2025, p.23). Russian migrants are increasingly turning towards modern apartments with space-efficient layouts and advanced technologies that facilitate remote work. In addition, high demands are placed on tiny, single-family apartments that balance loneliness and social engagement nicely. Real estate companies are challenged to find such housing solutions, which are rare in Belgrade's market, so they sometimes cooperate with similar companies with Russian origin management (Vlaović, 2024).

Studying those related factors is essential for understanding not only changes in housing demands but also other economic and social trends, too. Serbia's legal framework for housing and migration is comparatively liberal, and some simple requirements must be followed. All the necessary documents can be provided through ordinary contracts stamped by the nearest public notary's office. Exploring this question from social services and infrastructure development perspectives brings essential insights. The Russian migrants

pose new challenges to Belgrade's infrastructure and social services. For example, increased demand for means of transport can overburden already poorly established public transport.

Intensified healthcare demands led to new private healthcare facilities intended exclusively for Russians. The situation also encompasses dealing with linguistic barriers and a shortage of state government insurance on the part of Russian migrants, which makes it difficult for them to have quality state-supported healthcare. Conversely, private clinics quickly embraced the situation and started outsourcing Russian-speaking doctors and nurses (Georgijevski, 2022). Giant billboards advertising these services could be seen all over Belgrade.

Similarly, law offices have begun providing administrative assistance, and serving Russian immigrants have been busy drafting documents needed to start new companies to aid clients in quickly obtaining residence permits (Stefanović, 2022). While relatively expensive, this inclusion process is efficient and has created migratory patterns that lead to demographic changes in urban areas, thus profoundly changing socio-economic formations. Additionally, Russian immigrants have created virtual enclaves, cloud communities, and online communities in various spheres, providing key support systems to aid in sharing resources and communication while building bridges to individuals who share identical backgrounds in this novel context in Belgrade. However, the attempt to nurture this "social bubble" can unintentionally perpetuate segregation in urban areas by segregating communities of Russian immigrants in Belgrade from mainstream society.

Socioeconomic trends

According to the most recent statistics from the Serbian Business Registration Agency, 1,764 companies and 9,317 Russian entrepreneurs were established after February 2022 and are operating in Serbia. If we add to these figures the 296 companies and 721 entrepreneurs owned by Russian citizens who arrived before 2022, we reach a total of 12,080 (Gavrić, 2024). These data point to a shift in the business climate: while numerous Russian expats were focused on Information Technology and Information Technology-related activities in the early days, increasing numbers are now establishing companies in consultancy, handicrafts, retail, and tourism. Consequently, local Serbian residents have, to some extent, begun benefiting from the improved services offered by these recently opened Russian companies. Since these businesses are registered in Serbia, they are considered local actors, contributing to the domestic economy, which economists describe as making Serbia's economic climate more robust regarding competition. Apart from that, foreign direct investment can contribute to the dynamics of economic activity in the country, and the contribution made by the Russian expatriates has been an essential factor in boosting the GDP.

To explain the economic and employment trends of the current Russian migration in Belgrade, we will, to a great extent, draw on Zejnulahović et al.'s (2024, p.6) research on profiling Russian immigration to Serbia. Their interviewees show, on average, that Russians coming to Serbia are generally highly educated. Thus, 85.6% of their respondents indicated that they had obtained degrees at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels. In comparing results with the answers regarding their professional field, most respondents (54.6%) stated that they are Information Technology professionals, which aligns with media reports about an exodus of educated IT experts from Russia.

Many of the respondents are of working age, and more than two out of three (68.5%) were employed full-time when they left Russia. Less than a tenth (8.3%) reported their own business in Russia, whereas a substantial number (13.4%) worked freelance. Approximately 5% were unemployed before leaving Russia, ranging from a little over 10% (10.6%) in Serbia. The doubling of unemployment is a concerning trend in line with difficulties in becoming

employed and achieving a satisfactory financial status. In addition, 15.3% of the participants stated that the Russian company still employs them.

Over one-quarter of the interview participants (26.4%) indicated that they are employed by a company based in Serbia, typically founded by Russian migrants themselves. Among the tendencies that Russian migrants have in common is establishing and registering a company in Serbia. Apart from financial freedom, this assists them in managing their employment status, whether self-employed or employed in their businesses, making it relatively simple to obtain a long-term, temporary, or permanent residence permit. Finally, 23.1% of the recent Russian migrants indicated they work, usually remotely, for neither Russian nor Serbian companies (Zejnulahović et al., 2024, p.6).

As far as social inclusion is concerned, Russian migrants behave according to their demographic image. Young people generally interact with their peers through alternative musical and other artistic events organized in Belgrade. Meanwhile, migrants who came to Serbia with their families often contact the local population through their children, who attend Serbian schools. It is also notable that Russian migrants whose children are enrolled in Serbian schools are keener to learn the Serbian language. As Zejnulahović's survey also points out, young and single Russian migrants view Serbia as a temporary settling solution, primarily because their goal is usually to move forward to the EU, which they perceive as the final destination. In contrast, migrant families with children consider Belgrade a better solution to be their permanent place of residence (2024, p. 7). The rule that if the child is enrolled in a regular Serbian school, the parents automatically receive a residence permit, regardless of other conditions that should be met to acquire this right, plays a significant role in this phenomenon. The Republic of Serbia has managed in the last decade to pass many favorable regulations and harmonize its legal framework and diploma recognition with the countries of the European Union. Even during the migrant crisis of 2015, when Serbia faced a massive influx of refugees from war-torn areas in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the educational system adapted programs for refugee children, conducted many training sessions for teachers, and provided various professional courses for those teachers who work with vulnerable social groups in foreign languages. In addition, the Republic of Serbia redirected and organized many teachers of the Serbian language from its system on projects to establish the teaching of the Serbian language to children whose native language is not Serbian. This should lead to an easier inclusion of Russian children in the Serbian educational system (Tuvić, 2023).

Cultural integration

Cultural integration from the bottom up is a cornerstone in the discourse about new immigration. The socio-cultural effects of migration have recently become more noticeable in Belgrade and in contrast to the previously dominating mutual official governmental cultural exchange based on the general knowledge content personified in hosting Russian state choirs, ballet, and military ensembles that perform a traditional program adapted to the broadest audience, recent Russian migration brought alternative artistic content characteristic of Sankt Petersburg and Moscow underground scenes, enhancing in this way Belgrade's cultural diversity (Čoko, 2023). The capital of Serbia now hosts many Russian alternative music bands that organize concerts (see Figure 2) with the support of Serbian agencies and counterpart bands (Kovačević, 2024). A similar situation occurred after the Revolution (Vesić, 2015). Like back then, Russian migrants also brought various forms of artistic expression in visual fine art, organizing exhibitions, celebrations, and rituals that contribute to Belgrade's urban fabric, which has been impoverished in the last few years due to the departure of many young people from Serbia compared to a few years ago. This alternative cultural exchange provides a novel feature of a cosmopolitan environment

where new artistic forms are created, making Belgrade's art scene more attractive and dynamic. Integrating Russian migrants into Belgrade's social fabric is challenging due to the financial insecurity of both populations, and we can perceive this social inclusion as gradual.

Figure 2. Russian cultural advertising in a street of Belgrade.

Source: Photo credits to N. Miličić, Belgrade 2025

Political affairs

Despite the general disagreement with the Kremlin and the war, however, most respondents (72.8%) in Cvijić and Nikolić's survey express limited interest or are very careful in engaging more actively in political affairs (2025, p. 4). One of the explanations, among others, is the fear that many migrant families will put their safety and legal status in the country at risk. There are cases in which the Serbian authorities refused to issue residence permits to Russian migrants and their families who were politically active and who, after anti-war protests at the beginning of their stay, simply withdrew and began to prioritize their well-being (Novakov, 2024). However, their political views and opinions are relatively easy to analyze using indirect data from surveys on the topic. The clearest example of this is the March 2024 analysis of the election results, when the Russian diaspora made it very clear that they disagreed with the Kremlin's official policy (Cvijić & Nikolić, 2025, p. 9). A noteworthy proportion of the votes featured the name Alexei Navalny, who had died in a Russian jail only one month earlier as a victim of the inhumane conditions he faced as a political dissident, representing the increasing fight against authoritarianism in Russia.

In contrast, Zejnulahović et al. (2024, p. 10) found that the majority of single and younger respondents reported participating in various civic activism events and actions organized by the Russian-speaking diaspora in Serbia. The most common activities were anti-war protests, volunteering, participating in the Russian presidential election in Belgrade, signing petitions, and donating funds to opposition media in Russia. An overwhelming number of these Russian migrants (70.8%) strongly believe that the Russian government is to blame for the Ukraine crisis. The interviewees were also asked to evaluate the actions of President Vladimir Putin, the Russian military, and the Russian media. The opinions were all highly negative, with the sole positive assessment of the military; 69% disagreed. Putin received a massive 77.7% negative response rate, with the media receiving the most critical evaluation at 79.2% of individuals disapproving of its performance (Zejnulahović et al., 2024, p.11).

Alternatively, the ratings of Western institutions, such as the EU and NATO, and Western media were mixed but predominantly negative. Western media perceptions were mirrored in a 39.3% negative response, the EU received a 45.3% negative response, and NATO received a 50.5% negative response (Zejnulahović et al., 2024, p. 11). As noted earlier, the duration and violence of the war and its never-ending course impact respondents' attitudes: most respondents were frustrated with the protracted war, seeing it as a meaningless sacrifice. They also felt powerless when considering the future direction of things.

Concluding Remarks

The study showed that the recent, war-induced migration of Russians to Belgrade signals a phenomenon that transcends a temporary demographic trend. As with the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the contemporary Russian movement demonstrates a process that unfolds in a borderland context, circulating through flexible patterns of sovereignty and selective integration among migrants and within local social life. Such historical focus makes it clear that the current migration pattern within Russia can be viewed in the broader context of politically driven displacement rather than merely a response to the conflict currently being waged. Belgrade has lately seen a significant influx of Russian immigrants, mainly younger, professional IT workers. Our argumentation is that the Serbian economy has, to some extent, benefited from this, with 12,080 businesses registered since these immigrants arrived. They have also contributed through entrepreneurship and self-employment.

On the other hand, the spillover effects of the conflict in Ukraine have forced Serbia to diversify its energy sources and thus minimize its dependence on Russia. This development not only indicates a shift in its geopolitical position but also underscores the political context in which migration is taking place. Nevertheless, this change could also limit future exposure to Russian influence. The immigrants have influenced complex socio-spatial and socio-economic challenges, including issues related to social integration, public service provision, and housing access. Bringing change to the city with their cultural habits and customs, Russian migrants are enriching Belgrade's social and artistic life, even as they face a growing gap between themselves and the broader Serbian community. The blend of presence and distance encapsulates the typical tension felt by well-educated migrant groups in standing out versus staying apart. This ambivalence is reflective of the tension between visibility and social distance, which often distinguishes highly skilled migrant communities. The issue of integration remains an important theme, with some migrants building support systems within their own communities rather than fully integrating into the local community. When the political affairs are analyzed, our findings also confirm the viewpoint that these immigrants tend to hold more liberal, pro-democratic views and are predominantly opposed to the Kremlin's regime and its armed intervention in Ukraine. These findings disprove fears over the possibility of this immigrant community posing a security threat to the region or being a representative of the Kremlin's influence. Instead,

they represent an entrepreneurial community able to conceive and produce an improved Serbia, overcoming its stagnant economic and social fate.

These observations confirm the general theories of migration and do not view it merely from a demographic perspective but as a transformative process. Traditional theories on migration have long emphasized that migration is not merely the movement of persons but a process that changes the host society through changes in the labor market, housing, arts, culture, and politics. The unexpected arrival of relatively similar groups of migrants, especially those with higher education, typically produces uneven effects, benefiting some economic sectors while straining housing markets and urban infrastructure, and creating an unstable social environment. Here, the migration of Russians to Belgrade is the independent variable, and changes in urban space, housing, labor structures, cultural practices, and political attitudes are the dependent variables.

Understanding these dynamics must also include the receiving society's perception of migration. To gain a deeper understanding of Russian migrants' perceptions in Serbia and Serbia's ambiguous political position towards Russia, it is necessary to consider both strategic and political assessments. From Arendt's interpretation of sensus communis, we conclude that Serbian attitudes toward Russian migrants are primarily influenced by a shared sense of historical community. This means there are limited societal tensions in Belgrade over Russian migration, despite economic problems. The Serbian attitude towards Russian immigrants does not depend on their foreign policy positions, but on their sense of communal identity.

These thoughts help to explain the long-term implications of the current wave of migration. Based on this brief, non-exhaustive analysis, we propose that the development of the current Russian diaspora is directly related to developments in Russia. The duration of the armed conflict, the rigidity of the internal regime, the performance of the war-influenced national economy and the attitude of the international community towards Russia all have a decisive influence on the transformation of this group of temporary expatriates into a stable, integrated community that, with its own specific characteristics, could become an important part of Belgrade's social landscape and generate enduring form of societal transformation.

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Transparency on the use of generative Artificial Intelligence
Generative AI tools have been used to enhance the quality and readability of the article for language proofreading (Grammarly) and to assist with formatting the list of references (ChatGPT).

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

China's Soft and Sharp Power in Europe
Telling the 'Right Chinese Story' Through Confucius Institutes

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Abstract

This article examines the interaction between soft power and sharp power in China's global strategy, focusing on Confucius Institutes as instruments of both cultural diplomacy and political influence. While China's soft power has been extensively studied and sharp power has recently gained academic attention, the complementarity between these two forms of power remains underexplored. Through this article, we argue that China employs a strategic combination of attraction and manipulation to shape favourable narratives, suppress sensitive discussions, and advance its international agenda. This research adopts a qualitative approach, investigating the role of Confucius Institutes in Europe as a case study of this China's dual strategy. Our findings suggest that Confucius Institutes function as channels for both soft and sharp power, subtly influencing academic and public discourse while simultaneously projecting China's geopolitical interests.

Keywords: China; Soft Power; Sharp Power; Confucius Institutes; Right Chinese Story.

Introduction

According to the realist conception, states act in the international arena with the goal of acquiring power. Political power is thus seen both as an end in itself and as an indispensable tool for states to execute their strategies and satisfy their national interests.

Power is among the most debated concepts in Political Science and International Relations, with no single definition or framework achieving consensus among scholars. Two of the most recognized conceptualizations are those of Kenneth Boulding and Robert Dahl. Boulding defines power as "the ability to get what one wants," emphasizing that "power is a concept without meaning in the absence of human valuations and human decision" (Boulding, 1990, p. 15). His conception underscores that the relevance of power depends on the value attributed to it and the ability to materialize it. Similarly, Robert Dahl approaches power from a relational perspective, describing it as "a relation between people", specifically as "a mediating activity by A between A's base and B's response" (Dahl, 1957, pp. 201–203). In alignment with the perspectives of Boulding and Dahl, Nye defines power as "the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one wants" (Nye, 2021, p. 197), emphasizing that it exists to achieve a purpose. More importantly, Nye views power as non-absolute, contingent on the context in which it is exercised, and subject to the influence of 'social forces' and structure (Nye, 2021). Revisiting Robert Dahl, Nye maintains that power cannot be considered in abstract terms; in other words, it is impossible to assert that a state

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possesses power without specifying relative to what (Nye, 2021). Power, therefore, always depends on the existence of a relationship.

Traditionally, power was viewed in military terms, a conception now referred to as 'hard power'. However, in the late 20th century, Joseph Nye observed that states also employed another form of power, one that seeks to achieve objectives not through coercion and compulsion, as is typical of hard power, but through attraction and persuasion (Nye, 1990). Nye coined the term 'soft power' to describe this type of power (Nye, 1990). More recently, Walker and Ludwig introduced a term referring to a new type of power (Walker & Ludwig, 2017b). Recognising that certain states, particularly authoritarian regimes, have sought to manipulate, censor, and distort the domestic environments of other states to avoid sensitive discussions and promote a more favourable image, Walker and Ludwig distinguished this practice from soft power, introducing the term 'sharp power' (Walker & Ludwig, 2017b).

Several studies have focused on themes related to the use of soft power. Specifically concerning China, there are numerous studies on Chinese soft power. Some address broader issues (Kivimaki, 2014; Liang, 2012; Wang, 2008; Y. Zhao, 2013), while others concentrate on cultural and academic aspects (Aukia, 2014; F. Zhou & Zhou, 2016; Y. Zhou & Luk, 2016), economic and commercial aspects (Duarte et al., 2024; Sharma & Khatri, 2019; Siddique & Shafqat, 2021), and even sports-related aspects (Chaziza, 2024; Delgado, 2016; Giulianotti, 2015). Studies related to sharp power are relatively scarce, and research on China's sharp power, while limited, is not entirely absent. Notable exceptions include the works of Wu (2019), Chan and Fung (2021), Chen (2022), Ateed and Ozcan (2023), and Huang (2023). While there are studies on China's soft power and sharp power, we find that few works address the complementarity between soft power and sharp power in China's global strategy. The main exception is the work of Santos (2024). More specifically, despite existing studies on the role of Confucius Institutes (Hartig, 2020; Lahtinen, 2015; Zanardi, 2016; Y. Zhou & Luk, 2016), we identify a gap in the literature regarding the analysis of the dual function of Confucius Institutes as instruments of both soft power and sharp power for Beijing.

This article therefore aims to investigate the complementarity between soft power and sharp power in the pursuit of the national interest of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Arguing that China has used soft power and sharp power complementarily in its attempt to attract, persuade, penetrate, and manipulate other states and their societies, imposing a more favourable narrative – the "right Chinese story" – we will explore the contours of this strategy through the concrete case of Confucius Institutes in Europe. Our research will thus be guided by the following research question: How does China integrate soft power and sharp power through Confucius Institutes in Europe?

Our investigation is based on a predominantly qualitative methodology, using an exploratory approach in conjunction with the case study technique. This methodological choice is justified by the need to thoroughly explore how China utilises its soft power and sharp power strategies, with particular emphasis on Confucius Institutes in Europe. Through the exploratory method, we can identify patterns, relationships, and potential effects of Chinese strategies, addressing an area in which the existing literature is still scarce or insufficiently detailed. Additionally, the case study provides a more detailed and contextualised analysis of a specific phenomenon: Confucius Institutes as instruments of China's cultural diplomacy and political influence in Europe. In our research, we will use data collection and analysis techniques such as literature review, document analysis, and statistical analysis. Furthermore, we will rely on secondary sources such as scientific articles and reports from renowned think tanks like the Central European Institute of Asian Studies, the China in Europe Network and the Netherlands Institute of International Relations

"Clingendael", which provide a critical and detailed perspective on Chinese foreign policy and the role of Confucius Institutes.

The structure of our article is as follows: In the first section, we will present our conceptual framework, discussing the concept of power and introducing the notions of soft power and sharp power. The second section will explore the contours of Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping's leadership, before examining the use of soft power and sharp power tactics. In the third section, we will focus on China's soft power, highlighting its role in the country's strategy. The fourth section will discuss how China has employed sharp power to achieve its objectives in the international arena. Finally, the fifth section will present our case study on the Confucius Institutes in Europe. Through this case study, we will explore how China has complemented its soft power with sharp power to maximise the achievement of its objectives. The conclusion will summarise our findings.

Conceptualising Power: Soft Power and Sharp Power

This section introduces and develops the concept of power, defining it as a mean through which states pursue their objectives in the international arena. Recognising that hard power is no longer the sole form of power available to states, this discussion emphasises the significance of two additional forms: soft power and sharp power. The conceptual framework established here serves as the foundation for analysing Chinese foreign policy in later sections, with a specific focus on the case study of the Confucius Institute.

Traditionally, power is perceived as "the possession of resources that can influence outcomes" (Nye, 2008, p. 28), such as quantifiable assets like "population, territory, natural resources, eco, nomic size, military forces, and political stability" (Nye, 2007, p. 60). However, as Nye highlights, power is neither measurable nor entirely predictable (Nye, 2007). Although possessing certain resources may increase the likelihood of one state being stronger than another, it does not guarantee that the state will prevail or demonstrate greater power. Power is thus inherently contextual, meaning it depends on the context in which it is exercised (Nye, 2007, 2021). Based on this conception, Nye identifies three ways to exercise power: 1) "coerce them with threats"; 2) "induce them with payments; 3) and "attract or co-opt them" (Nye, 2008, p. 27). Thus, viewing power as a means, Nye distinguishes it between two types: hard power and soft power (Nye, 1990), later expanding this typology with the concept of smart power. While hard power is associated with coercion and the use of military (and economic) instruments, soft power relies on the attractiveness of a state.

The term 'soft power' was introduced by Nye to explain the reasoning behind the alleged decline of American power. In contrast to Paul Kennedy's thesis, Nye observed that the mere reduction of the United States' military (and economic) power did not equate to a decline in its global power (Nye, 1990). Nye thus recognized that hard power alone was no longer sufficient to safeguard the interests of states and needed to be complemented by strategies of attraction (Nye, 1990). Accordingly, Nye notes that states are sometimes able to achieve their objectives "without tangible threats or payoffs" (Nye, 2004, p. 5), instead relying on intangible and soft means.

As Nye defines it, soft power is a tool to "getting the outcomes one wants by attracting others rather than manipulating" (Nye, 2008, p. 29). The essence of soft power lies in a state's ability to charm and attract, enabling it to "obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – ad miring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it" (Nye, 2004, p. 5). In this way, soft power operates by influencing and "shape the preferences of others to want what you want" (Nye, 2008, p. 29) or by making others aspire to be like us.

According to Nye, soft power rests on three sources: culture, political values, and foreign policy (Nye, 2004). A state's power of attraction increases with the universality of its culture

and values, as well as through the adoption of policies aligned with values shared by other nations (Nye, 1990, 2004). However, Nye emphasises that 'culture' is not limited to 'popular culture'; it also encompasses commerce, education, technology, and more (Nye, 2004). Regarding political values, the same principle applies as with culture: the more universal a state's political values are, the greater its power of attraction. This means that the more people see themselves reflected in a state's adopted policies, the more likely they are to admire and follow it (Nye, 2004, 2008). Finally, foreign policy also contributes to a state's attractiveness. Participation in international institutions and the values and policies a state pursues on the international stage foster identification with that state, making others more inclined to follow its lead (Nye, 1990, 2004).

In 2017, Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig coined the term 'sharp power'. Walker and Ludwig developed this concept in response to what they viewed as the overextension of the term soft power to describe all "forms of influence that are not 'hard' in the sense of military force" (Walker & Ludwig, 2017a, p. 13). In their perspective, some states, particularly authoritarian regimes, have developed the ability to achieve their objectives without resorting to coercion, attraction, or traditional hard power techniques, instead employing methods of influence based on manipulation (Walker & Ludwig, 2017b).

As conceived by Walker and Ludwig, sharp power refers to a type of power aimed at "pierce, penetrate, or perforate the political and information environments in the targeted countries," (Walker & Ludwig, 2017b, para. 15) thereby manipulating and distorting the internal environments of democratic states. By using techniques that "threaten the integrity of institutions from media and entertainment companies to universities to professional sports enterprises" (Walker et al., 2020, p. 127), authoritarian regimes are able to infiltrate democracies and weaken them. The openness characteristic of democratic societies in these sectors – particularly in the so-called CAMP sectors (culture, academia, media, and press) – makes them both especially attractive and uniquely vulnerable to sharp power actions from third states (Walker, 2018; Walker et al., 2020).

Sharp power operations are orchestrated "manipulatively, coercively, and often covertly, and are aimed at infiltration and disinformation" (Wu, 2019, p. 134). Through these, authoritarian states undermine democratic institutions and create tensions within civil society, weakening democracies' ability to counter the policies and interests of authoritarian regimes (Walker, 2018; Walker & Ludwig, 2017a). Furthermore, they can suppress discussions on sensitive topics that might tarnish the image of these regimes (Walker et al., 2020). In doing so, they project a more favourable image of their culture and governance models, thereby strengthening their soft power (Walker, 2018; Walker & Ludwig, 2017b). Additionally, through sharp power, authoritarian regimes "delegitimize democracies and other universal human-rights regimes" (Chang & Yang, 2020, p. 315).

Despite its differences, sharp power often complements soft power. Its acts of censorship and manipulation help present authoritarian regimes in a more favourable light – or at least cast democracies in a more negative one. This serves as the starting point for our analysis of Chinese foreign policy, which we will further substantiate through the case study of the Confucius Institute in Europe.

Contextualizing Xi Jinping's Foreign Policy

In this section, we will explore the dynamics of Chinese foreign policy under the leadership of Xi Jinping. This is essential for later analysing and understanding how Xi's China has sought to utilise both soft power and sharp power as elements of its foreign policy. We will then apply this framework to our case study of the Confucius Institutes.

The transition of power from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping between 2012 and 2013 marked a significant restructuring of the foreign policy priorities and strategies of the PRC. Since Deng

Xiaoping's leadership, China's approach to the international system had been encapsulated in the strategy of 'keeping a low profile' (taoguang yanghui). This doctrine suggested that China should maintain a 'low profile' on the global stage until an opportunity arose to enhance its international position (Cai, 2022; Yan, 2014).

In 2008, following the global financial crisis that destabilised Western economies and the financial strain on the United States due to the war in Afghanistan, China was finally able to demonstrate its true capabilities. It rose to become the world's second-largest economy (Goldstein, 2020; Yan, 2014). This moment was perceived as the window of opportunity foreseen by Deng Xiaoping (Yan, 2014). In the subsequent years, still under Hu Jintao's leadership, China adopted a more assertive stance, particularly regarding territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the East China Sea (Cai, 2022; Yan, 2014). However, this adjustment did not represent a fundamental departure from the general orientation of its foreign policy, which remained defined by the 'Low Profile' motto, even with the corollary 'Peaceful Rise' added by Hu (Goldstein, 2020; Yan, 2014).

In 2012, when Xi Jinping assumed leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a new rhetoric in Chinese foreign policy began to emerge. This shift was evident in Xi's early speeches, where he deliberately moved away from references to "keeping a low profile" or "peaceful rise" (Chang-Liao, 2016). Instead, Xi adopted a more assertive posture. The pivotal moment came in October 2013, when Xi emphasised the need to "strive to create a favourable surrounding environment for China's development" (Xinhua, 2013), highlighting the importance of achieving new accomplishments. This marked a clear departure from the doctrine of 'keeping a low profile' and inaugurated the doctrine of 'striving for achievements' (Chang-Liao, 2016; Yan, 2014).

Seeking a more prominent role in global governance, China proposed in 2013 to involve itself in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and subsequently adopted a more assertive and uncompromising stance on maritime disputes in the East China Sea (Cai, 2022; Chang-Liao, 2016). Xi's determination to assert China as a dominant international actor signalled the beginning of a new era. Xi sought to restore China to what he considered its rightful place in the international system, rejecting the notion of China's 'rise' in favour of the concept of 'restoration' (Chang-Liao, 2016; Xiang, 2016).

Under the banner of the 'Chinese Dream,' Xi aims to transform China into a "a powerful, modernized socialist country that is prosperous, democratic, civilized, harmonious, and beautiful by the middle of this century" (Xinhua, 2017). This vision positions China as capable of rivalling any global power and asserting itself as a world leader in terms of national power and international influence. To this end, Xi's China proposes to establish a "new type of international relations" based on mutual respect, fairness, justice, and reciprocity (win-win cooperation), thereby promoting the creation of a "Community of Shared Future for Mankind" (Xinhua, 2017).

In this context, Beijing has sought to reconcile the pursuit of its interests, particularly security concerns, with regional and international stability (Chang-Liao, 2016; Goldstein, 2020; Xiang, 2016). A key element in this framework is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Initially conceived to connect Asia and Europe, this initiative has evolved into a global project, aiming to link the entire globe logistically and commercially (Ahmed & Lambert, 2022; Ferdinand, 2016).

To advance this initiative, China has developed partnerships and projects with other states, employing both bilateral diplomacy ('railway diplomacy') and multilateral diplomacy. It has provided financial resources to support the development of critical infrastructure for establishing trade routes, such as the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Ahmed & Lambert, 2022; Garlick, 2021; Tomé, 2023). These tools allow China to attract other states into its orbit of influence, mainly by offering a more appealing

financing model compared to the West – what can be termed the Beijing Consensus (Duarte, 2017; Harper, 2024; Kim & Kim, 2023).

More recently, in early 2023, Xi Jinping introduced new rhetoric regarding China's international posture. Reinterpreting Deng Xiaoping's 24-character maxim, Xi introduced the phrase "dare to fight," signalling that China is willing to act decisively to safeguard its interests (People's Daily, 2023).

In summary, Xi Jinping's administration has been characterised by increasing assertiveness in Chinese foreign policy. Xi has determined that China's foreign policy should no longer be reactive to the actions of other states but should focus more clearly on defending China's interests (Chang-Liao, 2016; J. Zhang, 2015). Consequently, Xi has adopted a policy that promotes stability, similar to previous doctrines, while also prioritising the pursuit of achievements that would grant China the role it believes is rightfully its own (Wei, 2020; Yan, 2014). Thus, through Xi Jinping's so-called 'Third Revolution,' Chinese foreign policy has become more assertive, demanding a more advantageous position in global governance that reflects its power and influence (Harper, 2024).

Soft Power as a Path to China's Global Influence

In this section, we explore the development and application of soft power within the framework of Chinese foreign policy. Acknowledging that soft power has become a key tool for China in projecting its power and influence globally, we will focus on analysing how Xi Jinping's leadership has utilised this tool to further his foreign policy objectives. This analysis will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of Chinese foreign policy. Subsequently, in conjunction with the following section, it will allow for a better understanding of China's combined use of attraction and manipulation strategies through the case of the Confucius Institutes.

Soft power has been a topic of debate in China since the 1990s, when Wang Huning introduced this concept to the Chinese academic sphere, defining it as "the culture that represents the power of a country" (Huning, 1993, p. 91). At that time, Wang Huning was a promising academic in the fields of Political Science and International Relations, and his desire for China to adopt this new form of power was fulfilled by the President of the PRC, Hu Jintao (Patapan & Wang, 2018; Xiao, 2017). Thus, in 2006, Hu Jintao introduced the concept of 'cultural soft power' and, in 2007, at the 17th Congress of the CCP, called for the need to "enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests" (Xinhua, 2007b).

The introduction of this concept in the Academy immediately sparked an intense debate about the framework within which soft power should be guided in Chinese foreign policy (Wuthnow, 2008). In the view of Huning and other scholars, Chinese soft power should be distinct from American soft power, a conviction that led to the development of a 'soft power with Chinese characteristics', based on the uniqueness of Chinese culture as a means of seduction and attraction for other peoples and states (Glaser & Murphy, 2009). This distinction is crucial when considering the evolution of Chinese soft power, which goes beyond Joseph Nye's conception, traditionally characterised as a power of seduction and attraction aimed at influencing the behaviour of another state. Thus, and distinctively from American soft power, Chinese soft power "covers both foreign policy and domestic policy", focusing not so much on the attractiveness of the political model and popular culture, but rather "on China's traditional culture and its economic development model, and touches upon China's national cohesion, social justice, political reform, anticorruption, moral level and so on" (Zheng & Zhang, 2012, p. 23). In this sense, Beijing's soft power is based on historical, economic, and cultural aspects, acting both externally and internally, with the

objective of spreading its culture and economic model, closely resembling public diplomacy (Michalski, 2012).

The Chinese conception of soft power thus places emphasis on the economic aspect – the foundation of which lies primarily in the attractiveness of the 'Chinese development model' in less developed countries and the financial aid provided by Beijing to these nations – as well as on cultural aspects, leading cultural diplomacy to become "the primary tools for China to develop its soft power" (Lai, 2012b, p. 13). Therefore, it is evident that China has supported and promoted the development of the cultural sector and the export of culture, drawing on authors and themes from classical Chinese thought, thereby explaining its worldview in order to counter the thesis of the 'Chinese threat' (Lai, 2012a). In fact, In fact, when Hu Jintao adopted soft power, he did so with the awareness of the added value it would bring to China's international assertion, as well as to the strengthening of the power of the CCP, but above all as a tool to combat the thesis of the 'Chinese threat', that is, the notion that China's growth and its consequent rise in the International System were far from peaceful (Glaser & Murphy, 2009; W. Zhang, 2010). Furthermore, Chinese soft power has also sought, through the adoption of a more active international stance, "to build an image of 'a responsible big nation' in the international community" (Xiao, 2017, p. 31).

> They [Chinese scholars] suggested that China could enhance its popular appeal in the world through acting as a responsible great power on the world stage; advocating a harmonious world and peaceful rise; demonstrating the virtues of the Chinese path of economic development; expanding its foreign assistance; and developing its own discourse in world affairs. (Lai, 2012a, p. 84)

In this sense, we observe that, although soft power is typically associated with the economy, popular culture, and the ability to attract and seduce through civil society, in the Chinese case the "interpretation and implementation of soft power is characterized by the involvement of state power and economic coercion" (Chan & Fung, 2021, p. 64), as well as the diffusion of its values and traditions and the limited use of civil society, which is due to the very nature of China's political and economic system, whose attractiveness is inferior to that of the United States of America (Chan & Fung, 2021; Xiao, 2017; Xuetong & Jin, 2008).

China has generally sought to base its soft power on the attractiveness of its economic and social development model, especially appealing to less developed countries, and on the transmission of a narrative grounded in the ideas of harmony, development, and balance (Lai, 2012a; S. Zhao, 2020). One of the main examples of Chinese soft power is the previously mentioned Beijing Consensus (Duarte, 2012, 2020). Another project related to Beijing's soft power is the cooperation instruments developed around China's neighbourhood, but not only, which, by relying on a narrative of respect, equality, and mutual benefit (win-win), present China as a reliable and supportive partner (Duarte, 2012, 2020; Duarte & Ferreira-Pereira, 2022). Associated with these cooperation frameworks, China has developed the BRI, a vast infrastructure investment project aimed at commercially and logistically connecting the entire globe, for which Beijing offers a wide range of financial aid (Ahmed & Lambert, 2022; Tomé, 2023).

Alongside this, Beijing has also sought to utilise its soft power through participation in international organisations, such as the World Trade Organization, and by attempting to mediate in some international conflicts, such as the Israeli-Arab Conflict or the recent war between Russia and Ukraine, adopting a responsible stance and a commitment to International Law (Cai, 2022; Duarte, 2012; Lai, 2012a; Prebilič & Jereb, 2022). Simultaneously, Beijing has sought to promote its values and ideas, conveying a sense of harmony and the 'right Chinese story', using, for this purpose, Confucius Institutes, its presence in various

international fora, and the internationalisation of its news agencies (Becard & Filho, 2019; Xiao, 2017).

Chinese soft power has thus facilitated the emergence of new opportunities for Beijing. By promoting the Chinese language, culture, and development model, China has been able to project a new image, which is corroborated, among other things, by the increase in Chinese language learners outside China and the rising number of foreign students in Chinese universities (Hagström & Nordin, 2020; Lai, 2012a). It can even be stated that soft power aligns seamlessly with Chinese tradition, particularly when considering the strategic principles of Sun Tzu and the Confucian principles of harmony and abstention from the use of force (Bell, 2009; Hagström & Nordin, 2020). In this way, Chinese soft power aims to demonstrate the Chinese worldview through the transmission of its culture, history, and philosophy, thereby explaining and legitimising its international behaviour (Bell, 2009; Lai, 2012a). However, its goal extends beyond this, seeking to convey the 'right Chinese story' to counter unfavourable narratives and transpose the principles that characterise its culture and traditions into the international order, with Confucius Institutes and the BRI playing a fundamental role (Mendes & Wang, 2023; S. Zhao, 2020).

Manipulation and Coercion: Understanding China's Use of Sharp Power

In this section, we will explore the use of sharp power in Chinese foreign policy. Acknowledging that China's soft power has not been fully effective in supporting its international assertion, we argue that Beijing has, in a complementary manner, resorted to strategies of manipulation and censorship. This framework enables us to understand the complex dynamics of Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping's leadership, which will be exemplified through the case study presented in the following section.

Despite Beijing's efforts to develop capable soft power, its initiatives have encountered several challenges. Externally, notable challenges include scepticism from Western nations and neighbouring states, controversial diplomatic efforts, and growth of its military capabilities, while internally, they encompass social and ethnic unrest, inadequate protection of personal freedoms, weak legal frameworks, corruption, and declining ethical standards (Lai, 2012b). In fact, "with the exception of Africa and Oceania, opinions about China have largely deteriorated in the past decade," showing that "China has largely failed to promote its benevolent image" (Yuan et al., 2016, p. 343).

The failure of Chinese 'charm' to seduce and convey its narrative has led to the use of a new type of tool, sharp power. Unlike the USA, China does not have a culture based on universal values, nor an attractive political model, meaning it has not been sufficiently capable of fascinating other peoples to adopt its values and customs (Ateed & Ozcan, 2023; Cristobal, 2021). Thus, Beijing adopts a new tactic, seeking not to become more attractive, but rather to appear more attractive, while simultaneously discrediting its 'enemies' (Wu, 2019). In its attempt to project a positive image and disseminate the 'right Chinese story', Beijing has, through manipulation and censorship, adopted tactics that "aim to discourage challenges to its preferred self-presentation, as well as to its positions or standing" (Walker, 2018, p. 12). Therefore, the primary objective of Chinese sharp power is "to manipulate or coerce the international community into accepting its agenda" (Wu, 2019, p. 141), particularly on issues involving Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, or other matters that are detrimental to the image China wishes to project to the world.

This capacity for influence and manipulation is most evident in the academic and media sectors, but also in the political sphere, where Beijing seeks to control local elites, influencing them to adopt policies favourable to Chinese interests. According to Singh, Chinese sharp power in the political sphere materialises in four ways: "win over the political elite by offers of investments"; "win over pliable and pro-China elites by inducements and

offers"; "create dependence and seek favourable political responses" (Singh, 2018, p. 10). The most paradigmatic case is that of New Zealand, where, through Chinese-descendant members of Parliament, Beijing may have influenced the policies adopted by this state regarding relations with China and its policy on Tibet (Feng & Carrico, 2020; Singh, 2018). Conversely, Beijing has also applied political and economic pressure on Taiwan and Hong Kong, as well as on those supporting its claims, in an attempt to isolate and combat these two issues (Chan & Fung, 2021).

In the media sector, Beijing has sought, through the expansion of its network of news agencies, to disseminate its own narrative. However, "China is not averse to manipulating local media and networks, laws and policies, and even using intimidation to further its agenda" (Singh, 2018, p. 13). Through its state-run news agency, Xinhua, China has not only promoted its narrative but also censored discussions on certain sensitive topics. As a result of investment agreements and partnerships established with various African states, China has expanded its news network across the continent, thereby ensuring the ability to "rejecting, censoring, or altering their content when Chinese interests are involved" (Walker, 2018, p. 16).

Within the United States, China, through China Radio International, has managed to circumvent laws "which prohibits foreign governments from holding a radio licence" (Singh, 2018, p. 14), thus securing a privileged mechanism for spreading its narratives within the territory of its primary adversary. Another strategy employed by Beijing has been the provision of informational content to foreign television networks to promote its narrative. One such instance occurred in 2016, when Peru's public television broadcast a Chinese documentary during the APEC meeting (Singh, 2018). Similarly, in Australia, an agreement between the ABC television network and the Shanghai Media Group led to the removal of all content critical of China from ABC's Mandarin-language channel (Walker, 2018).

In the academic sphere, Chinese sharp power has successfully censored the publication of academic works addressing divisive topics or spreading narratives contrary to Beijing's. In 2017, Cambridge University Press, under pressure from the General Administration of Press and Publication of the PRC, decided to remove "roughly three-hundred articles from a Chinese website that hosted the China Quarterly" (Walker, 2018, p. 14). That same year, Springer Nature, another reputable academic publisher, "withdrew articles on sensitive topics like Taiwan, Tibet, human rights and elite politics from its mainland site on the request of the Chinese government" (Singh, 2018, p. 14). Thus, through the administration responsible for controlling the Chinese press and under the threat of banning access to Chinese territory and population for institutions and academic publishers, the Chinese government has censored academic discussions and the dissemination of various topics sensitive to Beijing's policies.

Due to the weaknesses of its soft power and taking advantage of the openness of democratic regimes, China has utilised censorship and manipulation tools to project a narrative more favourable to its national interests while undermining democracies. In doing so, it diminishes its charm and legitimises autocracy (Singh, 2018; Walker & Ludwig, 2017b; Wu, 2019). Consequently, "Beijing is expanding its repressive practices outward and increasingly harnessing new technologies to spread its values and its vision for the world" (Walker et al., 2020, p. 125).

The Dual Nature of Confucius Institutes: Bridging Cultures and Propaganda

In this section, we will focus on the case study of our analysis. While acknowledging that the Confucius Institutes have become an integral part of China's soft power strategy, we argue that beneath their seemingly benign objectives, their primary aim is to promote Chinese interests. Thus, by exploring the role of the Confucius Institutes in Chinese

diplomacy, we seek to identify how they serve as instruments of both Chinese soft power and sharp power. To this end, we will focus on the specific case of the Confucius Institutes in Europe.

Confucius Institutes are presented by Beijing as "non-profit educational institutions jointly established by Chinese and foreign partner institutions based on principles of mutual respect, friendly consultation, equality, and mutual benefit" (Confucius Institutes, n.d.). These are created through a cooperation agreement between the Chinese International Education Foundation (CIEF), a Chinese institution, and a foreign institution, generally universities, with a commitment to "establishing a global network of partners and a community with a shared future" (Confucius Institutes, n.d.). The operation of the Institutes depends on the institutional partners, with the CIEF solely supporting the establishment of new Institutes worldwide and providing financial assistance to partner institutions to carry out the Institutes' activities (Confucius Institutes, n.d.). Their scope of action focuses on promoting and teaching Chinese language and culture, as well as facilitating linguistic and cultural exchange, thereby functioning similarly to the Alliance Française, the Goethe-Institut, and the Instituto Camões (Xinhua, 2007a).

Self-described as organisations aimed "to develop friendship with other countries and promote a world of diversity and harmony"(Xiao, 2017, p. 33), Confucius Institutes seek, through various activities and events, to convey their culture and philosophy, as well as their own narrative, in order to attract other peoples and justify their international behaviour(American Association of University Professors, 2014; Singh, 2018). Thus, having successfully spread across the globe, Confucius Institutes aim to enhance the attractiveness of Chinese culture, presenting China as an ancient civilisation willing to cooperate with all nations. They therefore serve as "the most prominent instruments of public diplomacy, as well as the most visible manifestation of China's cultural soft power agenda" (Becard & Filho, 2019, p. 6). Through these Institutes, Beijing has skilfully been able to utilize "the current global fascination with Chinese language and culture" to find "interested international partners to co finance the Confucius Institutes and thus partially fund China's 'charm offensive'" (Hartig, 2012, p. 70).

The first Confucius Institute was established in 2004 in Seoul, South Korea, and by 2009, over seventy Institutes had been set up worldwide (Lai, 2012a). In Europe, Confucius Institutes numbered forty in 2007, and as of 31 December 2022, eighteen years after the launch of the first Institute, there were 492 Confucius Institutes and 819 Confucius Classrooms across a total of 160 countries, with 1,500,000 students enrolled, 4,318,000 teaching hours delivered, and 79,000 courses offered (Chinese International Education Foundation & Confucius Institute, 2023; Xinhua, 2007a). Of these, 184 Institutes and 355 Classrooms were located in Europe, representing a 9.59% increase compared to the previous year (Chinese International Education Foundation & Confucius Institute, 2023).

Despite the growth of Confucius Institutes in Europe, this does not appear to have translated into greater receptivity or attractiveness towards the Chinese regime. A paper published in 2010 by the Clingendael Institute, based on various opinion studies drawn from three cases (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany), concluded that despite growing admiration for Chinese culture, European perceptions of China worsened from 2006 onwards due to "fear of a rising China and dissatisfaction with the slow pace of China's political reform and the human rights situation" (Hooghe, 2010, p. 27).

In 2020, the Central European Institute of Asian Studies, in collaboration with other entities such as the Real Instituto Elcano, published a report concluding that European perceptions of China, particularly in Northern and Western Europe, were 'predominantly negative,' particularly regarding China's military expansion, its environmental impact, and its effect on Western democracies (European Public Opinion on China, 2020). The only exception noted

was the perception of trade between Europe and China, though opinions of the BRI remained negative (European Public Opinion on China, 2020). In general, it was concluded that "even in countries where there is a generally positive attitude towards China, there is a recognition of the downsides" (European Public Opinion on China, 2020, p. 3).

Another study conducted by the China in Europe Network affirmed the existence of a "solid common ground among the general public in terms of negative (and worsening) perceptions of China" (European Public United on China, 2021).

China appears to have failed, through soft power, particularly via the Confucius Institutes, to project a positive image and attract European populations. Recognising that its soft power would never achieve the same victories that American soft power had secured for Washington, China shifted its seduction strategy, complementing it with the manipulation and censorship of sharp power (Singh, 2018; Wu, 2019). Though not entirely recent, Confucius Institutes are part of this new approach, leveraging their seemingly harmless appearance to attract foreign audiences while penetrating, undermining, and manipulating the domestic environments of other states, preventing the spread of narratives that conflict with their own and promoting the official narrative, the right Chinese story (Walker, 2018).

The lack of transparency in the agreements between Confucius Institutes and national institutions, as well as concerns about their links to the CCP and the CIEF, casts doubt on many of their activities. This has led Walker to state that these Institutes "are CCP cells on college campuses in the United States and other democracies" (Walker, 2018, p. 13).

Under the guise of soft power, aiming to attract foreign audiences through fascination with the Chinese language and culture, these institutions have taken advantage of their affiliations with reputable academic institutions and the funding they provide to censor discussions on topics likely to harm the image China seeks to project, such as those related to Tibet, Taiwan, Xinjiang, or human rights(Ateed & Ozcan, 2023; Walker, 2018). Confucius Institutes, therefore, seek "to promote China's policies and interests in manipulating views of the target population through a combination of literature, cultural events and exhibitions" (Singh, 2018, p. 13). As Ateed & Ozcan argue, "signs of coercion, deviation and manipulation in these institutions," which "often act as a cover for clandestine activities by the Chinese government" (Ateed & Ozcan, 2023, p. 390).

In 2014, an incident at the University of Minho, in Braga (Portugal), harmed the reputation of Confucius Institutes, sparking a wave of concern across Europe. During a meeting of the European Association for Chinese Studies, the Director-General of Hanban – the organisation then responsible for coordinating these Institutes – ordered the removal of several pages from the event programme. These pages contained information about one of the sponsors, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, Taiwan's counterpart to the Confucius Institute, claiming that their "contents were contrary to Chinese regulations" (European Association for Chinese Studies, 2014, para. 10).

In recent years, several European higher education institutions have severed their ties with the Confucius Institute. In Sweden, the Confucius Institute at Stockholm University, inaugurated in 2005, was closed in 2015 due to criticism of its activities. This was followed by the closure of all Confucius Institutes in the country (Ateed & Ozcan, 2023; Bentzen, 2018; European Parliament, 2022). Other institutions, such as the University of Düsseldorf in 2016, Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Université Libre de Bruxelles in 2019, and the University of Hamburg in 2020, "have decided to terminate their cooperation with Confucius Institutes because of the risks of Chinese espionage and interference" (European Parliament, 2022, para. 132).

In 2018, a report by the European Parliamentary Research Service acknowledged that the Confucius Institutes promote "official Chinese narrative on Tibet and Taiwan, which often clashes with academic research at the hosting institutions," in an attempt to "'correct' the

perception of China as a hard authoritarian state that violates human rights" (Bentzen, 2018, p. 11). The following year, in 2019, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence recognised, through another report, that the Confucius Institutes act "as promotion centres for Chinese culture abiding by the guidelines of the Ministry of Education and, ultimately, the Communist Party of China" (Hybrid Threats: Confucius Institutes, 2019, p. 49).

In 2022, through its Resolution on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation, the European Parliament expressed its concerns to Member States regarding the Confucius Institutes, stating that they "are used by China as a tool of interference within the EU" (European Parliament, 2022). Furthermore, the European Parliament recognised that the Confucius Institutes "enable the theft of scientific knowledge and the exercise of strict control over all topics related to China in the field of research and teaching" (European Parliament, 2022, para. 126), thus limiting academic freedom.

In addition, the report also revealed concerns about the lack of transparency regarding the funding of European institutions by these Institutes and the CIEF, highlighting the existence of "clauses that perpetuate Chinese propaganda or encourage support for Chinese Communist Party standpoints or political initiatives" (European Parliament, 2022, para. 127). The European Parliament, therefore, stated that the "Confucius Institutes serve as a lobbying platform for Chinese economic interests and for the Chinese intelligence service and the recruitment of agents and spies" (European Parliament, 2022, para. 132), advising caution and vigilance regarding agreements made. It also recommended swift, and adequate action whenever acts of interference are proven, to safeguard European sovereignty.

Conclusion

Through this article, we have explored the dynamics of Chinese foreign policy during Xi Jinping's leadership. To this end, we sought to explore the instruments Xi's China has relied upon to satisfy its national interest. Through this study, we confirm that, in pursuit of its interests, embodied in the 'Chinese Dream', and guided by an assertive and pragmatic foreign policy doctrine, termed 'striving for achievements', China has sought to complementarily use both soft power and sharp power tactics to achieve its interests on the international stage.

First, we identify that, at an early stage, Beijing sought to rely on a soft power strategy, aiming to seduce and attract other peoples and their governments. As we observe, this strategy predates Xi Jinping and was primarily used by his predecessors to counter the 'Chinese threat' thesis. To achieve this, China sought to leverage the attractive potential of its traditional culture, as well as its economic model, which, following the 2008 crisis, proved its effectiveness. Some of the main assets of this strategy have been the Confucius Institutes and the Beijing Consensus, now embodied in the BRI and the creation of financial mechanisms competing with the Western ones.

However, the inability of Chinese soft power to achieve the same results as American soft power led to a shift in Beijing's strategy, incorporating another tool into its foreign policy: sharp power. While soft power aims to seduce and attract, the latter seeks to penetrate, manipulate, and censor the domestic environment of target states, avoiding the discussion of sensitive topics for the Chinese regime, and simultaneously undermining democracies to make them less attractive and reduce their ability to oppose Chinese interests in the international arena.

With Xi Jinping, under a more assertive and pragmatic foreign policy, China has used soft power and sharp power complementarily. By seducing other peoples with its culture and, from there, penetrating and distorting their societies, Beijing seeks to promote a more

positive and attractive image, spreading the 'right Chinese story'. In this endeavour, the Confucius Institutes play a prominent role. Originally conceived as a soft power mechanism designed to promote Chinese culture abroad – which they succeeded in doing, despite this not translating into approval or admiration for the Chinese regime – their seemingly harmless appearance makes them one of the ideal vehicles for Chinese sharp power. Thus, China has turned to these institutes to manipulate and censor the academic environments of other countries, preventing narratives contrary to its own and the discussion of topics that may harm its image. Their ostensibly benign nature allows them to penetrate institutions, posing challenges to academic freedom and liberal-democratic values. For these reasons, the Confucius Institutes are agents of the dissemination of the 'right Chinese story', representing a serious threat to liberal democracies and the Western way of life.

In terms of political implications, this study demonstrates that European governments and institutions must remain vigilant regarding Chinese initiatives, especially those that could grant Beijing a platform to promote its interests to civil society and even within government circles. Moreover, this study also shows that China is determined to achieve its objectives on the international stage, seeking to establish itself as a superpower, which, if realised, will have implications for the International System and the Global Order.

Obviously, this study has its limitations. By focusing primarily on the European case, it may not capture dynamics that are specific to other regions. Therefore, future research should explore additional cases, potentially including comparative studies across different regions and countries.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Opposition's Populism Against Populist Power
A Comparative Study on the 2023 Presidential Elections in Turkey

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Abstract

This study examines the populist rhetoric of Turkish leaders Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu during the 2023 electoral campaign, using a mixed-method approach, in which the quantitative analysis gauges the intensity of populist language across various texts, while qualitative analysis addresses context-specific terms and nuances missed by automated methods. By integrating both methods, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how populism is constructed and deployed in Turkish political discourse, and how recurring rhetorical patterns emerge in the leaders' speeches which are characterized by different shades of populism.

Introduction

The presidential elections of May 2023 in Turkey resulted in the victory of the People's Alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*), led by incumbent president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, over the opposition coalition and its main candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) and the Nation's Alliance (*Millet İttifakı*). This outcome confirmed Erdoğan's leadership for another five-year term and represented a significant defeat for the opposition front. The aim of this article is not to provide an electoral or political assessment of this outcome. Rather, it builds on the consideration that Turkey will remain under the rule of the same right-wing authoritarian populist leadership that had already dominated politics until 2023. The presidential elections unfolded in a context shaped by multiple overlapping crises. The devastating earthquakes of February 2023, a severe economic downturn marked by inflation and currency depreciation, and an increasingly constrained media environment all influenced the dynamics of the campaign. Erdoğan relied on the advantages of incumbency, combining state resources, nationalist rhetoric, and promises of reconstruction to consolidate support. Conversely, the opposition sought to capitalize on discontent over governance failures, economic hardship, and democratic backsliding, presenting itself as a credible alternative through the broad-based Nation's Alliance. These factors rendered the campaign not only highly polarized but also a revealing test of how populist discourse functions under the pressures of hybrid authoritarianism. The relevance of populism in contemporary Turkish politics is well recognized in the literature, with some authors even identifying a distinctive "Turkish brand" of populism. This version of populism is marked by three main features: (i) the emphasis on the national will (*milli irade*) embodied by the leader, (ii) the delegitimization of political institutions, and (iii) a strongly Manichean view of social and political dynamics (Selçuk,

2016; Aytaç & Elçi, 2019). The continuation of Erdoğan's rule suggests that Turkey will face further confrontational moments and will likely remain an important case for comparative research on populism. The 2023 elections therefore provide a valuable opportunity for a detailed examination of populist discourse. Such an analysis not only enriches our understanding of the Turkish case, but also provides data that may inform broader debates on the dynamics of populism in hybrid regimes.

This article focuses specifically on the discursive strategy of the opposition candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. The central research question is: how did the opposition present its political offer and shape its rhetoric to counter the populist style of the governing coalition and its leader Erdoğan? Previous studies have shown that the CHP relied on populist or even "inverted-populist" strategies during the 2018 presidential elections and the 2019 local elections (Boyraz, 2020; Demiralp & Balta, 2021). Extending this line of inquiry, the present work investigates whether and how the 2023 opposition campaign also adopted populist language. In doing so, the article situates itself within a growing body of scholarship (Demiralp & Balta, 2021; Uğur-Çınar & Açıkgöz, 2023) that examines whether opposition actors in Turkey resort to populism, rather than attempting to position themselves as anti-populist. The analysis shows that Kılıçdaroğlu consistently employed a populist discourse, albeit with distinct characteristics compared to Erdoğan's rhetoric, which will be highlighted in the following sections.

To pursue this inquiry, the article first formulates an operational definition of populism. The academic debate on the concept is both prolific and divided, but most contributions conceptualize populism either as a thin-centered ideology or as a discursive style/rhetoric (Piccolino & Soare, 2021). In either case, the ideational approach dominates, making ideas and their communication central to the analysis of the "supply side" of populism. Through a review of the academic literature, the first section of this article will identify the features of populism that are the most relevant to conduct the research. Being the ideational approach the prevalent one in this literature, it follows that ideas and their conveyance become crucial elements of analysis of the supply side of populism. The 2023 Turkish elections provide an exceptionally rich dataset for this purpose. Both candidates ran intense campaigns, holding up to three rallies per day and producing extensive amounts of social media content. The discursive corpus compiled for this study includes more than one hundred campaign texts –mostly rally speeches, but also propaganda materials and other addresses – almost evenly divided between Erdoğan (47) and Kılıçdaroğlu (53). The analysis employs a mixed-method design. A Dictionary-based Quantitative Text Analysis (DbQTA) is used to measure the intensity of populist language – relying on a specifically constructed dictionary of Turkish populist vocabulary that incorporates both theoretical definitions and context-specific terms – and the presence and incidence of this vocabulary in the two candidates' discourses are tested using R, especially its text mining packages. The results are then refined and complemented by a Directed Qualitative Content Analysis (DQCA) of a narrower set of speeches (31 by Erdoğan and 34 by Kılıçdaroğlu). Rallies were selected for the DQCA analysis because of their homogeneity as a discursive tool, their ritualized structure, and the recurrence of catchphrases and themes. For example, Kılıçdaroğlu made a far more extensive use of propaganda videos of him speaking directly to the electorate than Erdoğan did. On the other hand, due to the unbalanced space on mainstream media, the latter accounts for a larger number of speeches in prime-time news programs on television. This methodological combination ensures both breadth and depth. DbQTA provides a reliable, time- and resource-efficient means of quantifying populist rhetoric, while DQCA captures the nuances and contextual dimensions that automated methods may overlook. Using both quantitative and qualitative approaches in tandem allows for an assessment not only of the *quantity* of populism in the candidates' discourse, but also of its

quality – which is fundamental to understand which type of populism is adopted, which themes are the most relevant, which ideational offer is provided to "the people".

This mixed quantitative-qualitative methodology is in itself part of the innovative contributions of this paper to the existing literature. DQCA is used not only to validate the vocabulary-based analysis, but also to integrate and refine its findings aims to address the methodological debate, positively arguing for the possibility to treat a complex and very much context-related matter as political discourse and populism without giving up either to the precision, reliability, and efficiency of quantitative methods or to the possibility of weighing and bringing in the peculiarities of the sociopolitical and linguistic contexts granted by qualitative methods.

The article aims to contribute to the literature in two other respects. First, it examines populist competition on the supply side between an entrenched populist-authoritarian leadership and the opposition, providing insights relevant to both the Turkish case and comparative studies of similar regimes. Turkey, widely recognized as a paradigmatic case of competitive authoritarianism under right-wing populist rule (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016; Castaldo, 2018), is particularly well-suited for such an analysis. These characteristics contributed to make Turkey the object of a number of other comparisons (Aytaç & Elçi, 2019; Kaya et al., 2020). Second, it extends the focus of Turkish populism studies beyond Erdoğan, highlighting the existence of a distinctive form of opposition populism that warrants scholarly attention in its own right.

Populism and the ideational approach

Academic interest in populism has generated a large body of research on its conceptualization, usually converging on three main approaches: i) populism as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004; Laclau, 2005; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012, 2013; Wirth et al., 2016; Mauk, 2020), ii) as a discursive style or rhetoric (Kazin, 1995; de la Torre, 2000; Panizza, 2005; Hawkins, 2009; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Aslanidis, 2015; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Norris, 2020a, 2020b), and iii) as a political strategy or form of mobilization (Weyland, 2001; Madrid, 2008; Acemoglu et al., 2011). A recent meta-analysis by Piccolino and Soare (2021) shows that, although definitions have grown in both precision and number, conceptualizations remain debated; yet, ideology- and discourse-based approaches are by far the most prevalent. One of the most influential definitions is provided by Cas Mudde (2004), who describes populism as "a thin-centered ideology that considers society separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (p. 543).[1] This builds on Freeden's (1998, p. 751) concept of "thin-centered ideologies," defined by a restricted morphology based on a small set of context-dependent core concepts, in contrast to "thick-centered" ideologies with dense structures and policy prescriptions. The flexibility of thin-centeredness and its chameleon-like nature (Taggart, 2004) explain its wide application across the political spectrum (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012), as it can absorb diverse and even contradictory beliefs (Philip & Panizza, 2011). Mudde (2004) identifies two essential components: First, the antagonism between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elites," and, secondly, the claim that politics must serve the "general will" of the people. Stanley (2008) similarly stresses these points while adding the sovereignty of the people; Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008) highlight the centrality of culture and way of life; and Taggart (2000) underlines the

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[1] Italics in original.

personalistic bond that emphasizes "the ordinariness of its constituents and the extraordinariness of their leaders" (p. 102).

The "thin-centered" nature of populism, as anticipated, implies that it prescribes neither specific policies nor stable definitions of its core elements ("the people" and "the elites"). Different populists attribute divergent meanings to these categories (Canovan, 1999, p. 3–4), which Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012, p. 151) therefore describe as "empty vessels" filled differently according to context. What makes them distinctively populist is not the content assigned to each group, but the Manichaean framing of society as a struggle between good and evil, with the moral attributes of both sides shifting across actors and settings. This analysis will show how, despite addressing the same "people", the Turkish contenders defined both "the(ir own) people" and "the elites" in very different ways. Such flexibility, which Mudde (2004) reconciles with Freeden's notion of "thinness," is considered by other scholars to be evidence of incoherence that prevents populism from being classified as an ideology. Aslanidis (2015) goes as far as to reject "thin-centeredness" as overly generic and methodologically inconsistent, arguing it cannot capture "degrees of populism" as increasingly acknowledged in quantitative studies. Similarly, Norris (2020a, p. 698) denies that populism qualifies as an ideology, given its lack of core texts and coherent policy prescriptions, a view shared by Norris and Inglehart (2019), who stress that populism never makes substantive programmatic claims. On these grounds, much of the literature instead frames populism as discourse or rhetoric. Laclau (2005, p. 33) was among the first to emphasize that what defines populism is not ideological content but the logic of articulating diverse contents. Proponents of this view do not dismiss Mudde's contribution, but argue against the "unnecessary ideological clause" (Aslanidis, 2015, p. 9), suggesting that populism is best understood as "a form of rhetoric, a persuasive language, making symbolic claims about the source of legitimate authority and where power should rightfully lie" (Norris, 2020a, p. 699). Hawkins (2009, p. 1045) similarly notes that, while ideology and discourse share overlaps, populism is better seen as "a *latent* set of ideas or a worldview that lacks significant exposition and [...] is usually low on policy specifics" (italics in original).

Despite these differences, a review of the literature shows that discourse and rhetoric are central to the study of populism across conceptual approaches. As Storz and Bernauer (2018, p. 526) note, "framing populism as an ideology, rhetoric or political communication style all has similar observational implications". Accordingly, scholars who conceptualize populism as discourse/rhetoric naturally analyze discursive material, but even those adopting ideological or strategic definitions often ground their research in discourse, both conceptually and methodologically. Pauwels (2011, p. 100), for instance, draws on Mudde's ideological approach yet acknowledges that "considering populism to be a thin centered ideology does not exclude the possibility that it features a specific style of communication as well" and therefore applies Dictionary-based QCA to party propaganda. Similarly, Jansen (2011, pp. 82–83) defines "populist mobilization" through popular mobilization and "populist rhetoric [...]: an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people", underscoring the centrality of discourse in populist practice. Further examples from diverse conceptualizations but all grounded in discursive material are reported in Table 1. The Table does not aim to provide an exhaustive review of all studies on populism, but rather to highlight a representative set of contributions that have shaped the theoretical and methodological frameworks most relevant to this research. The selected scholars were included because of the applicability of their conceptualizations to the Turkish case, and their methodological contribution in the study of populist discourse. Other studies, while valuable, were excluded for reasons of scope and to maintain consistency with the analytical categories adopted in this article.

Table 1. List of scientific articles on populism that used discursive material as data for their research[2]

Author(s)	Conceptualization of populism and reference author	Methodology	Object of the analysis
Pauwels (2011)	Thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004)	Dictionary-based quantitative content analysis	Party propaganda material
Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011)	Thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004)	Classical and computer-based quantitative content analysis	Party propaganda material
Rooduijn et al. (2014)	Thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004)	Computer-based quantitative content analysis	Party manifestos
Elçi (2019)	Thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004)	Dictionary-based quantitative content analysis	Parliamentary speeches
Vasilopoulou et al. (2013)	Ideology (Vasilopoulou et al., 2013: 389-390)	Computer-based quantitative content analysis	Parliamentary speeches of party leaders
Bernhard et al. (2015)	Ideology (March, 2012)	Computer-based quantitative content analysis	Party propaganda material and party leader's speeches
Armony (2005)	Ideological discourse (Armony, 2005: 5-6)	Computer-based quantitative content analysis	Presidential speeches
Bonikowski and Gidron (2016)	Strategy/Style (Jansen, 2011)	Dictionary-based quantitative content analysis	Presidential campaign speeches
Jagers and Walgrave (2007)	Communication style (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007: 2-3)	Human-coded content analysis	Electoral campaign TV speeches
Hawkins (2009)	Discourse (Hawkins, 2009: 1045)	Human-coded content analysis (holistic grading)	Speeches
Espinal (2015)	Discourse (Laclau, 1977)	Quantitative dictionary-based + qualitative text analysis	TV speeches
Aslanidis (2016)	Discourse (Aslanidis, 2015)	Computer-based semantic text analysis	Party manifestos, speeches, propaganda material
Storz and Bernauer (2018)	Discourse (Aslanidis, 2018)	Dictionary-based quantitative content analysis	Party manifestos
Oliver and Rahn (2016)	Discourse (Oliver and Rahn, 2016: 190-191)	Dictionary-based quantitative content analysis	Presidential campaign speeches

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[2] All the tables and figures in this article are created by the author.

Despite their context-related, conceptual and methodological differences, scholars largely converge on the essential attributes of populism. Aslanidis (2015, p. 9), echoing ideological approaches, identifies in populist discourse the "supremacy of popular sovereignty [together with] the claim that corrupt elites are defrauding "the People" of their rightful political authority". Norris (2020a, p. 699) similarly argues that it "rests on twin claims, namely that (i) the only legitimate authority flows directly from the "will of the people" [...], and by contrast (ii) the enemy of the people are the "establishment"". In the Venezuelan case, Hawkins (2009, p. 1043–1044) highlights a Manichaean vision opposing "the good [associated with the] will of the people" to "a conspiring elite that has subverted the will of the people". In the United States, Oliver and Rahn (2016, p. 190) describe populism as "a type of political rhetoric that pits a virtuous "people" against nefarious, parasitic elites who seek to undermine the rightful sovereignty of the common folk". Likewise, de la Torre (2000, p. 4), writing on Latin America, defines populism as "a rhetoric that constructs politics as the moral and ethical struggle between el pueblo [the people] and the oligarchy" (italics added). The evidence from these diverse perspectives confirms a shared view of populism's essential features: (i) people-centrism, (ii) anti-elitism, and (iii) a Manichaean understanding of political and societal dynamics.

Similarly, the study of populism in the Turkish specific context has drawn on several comparative frameworks within political science which are rooted in the discussion outlined above. A key strand of this literature frames populism primarily as a "thin-centered" ideology. However, in Turkey this conceptual framework is nuanced by additional dimensions – such as discursive religious symbolism and foreign policy populism – which serve to highlight how political actors like the AKP articulate a modern, yet culturally rooted, populist narrative (Özpek & Tanrıverdi Yaşar, 2017; Bulut & Hacıoğlu, 2021; Canveren & Kaiser, 2024). Other scholars extend this core definition by focusing on populism as a dynamic discursive strategy rather than a static set of ideas. In these analyses, it emerges a layered understanding of Turkish populism that captures the fluidity of populist rhetoric in Turkey, where the populist discourse evolves in response to internal political crises, shifts in electoral behavior, and local political dynamics – a synthesis that incorporates historical tensions such as the secularist versus Islamist divide, as well as reactions to Westernization and neoliberal reforms (Yabanci & Taleski, 2017; Taşçıoğlu, 2019; Çay & Kalkamanova, 2023; Sofos, 2025). Beyond the authors initially cited, particularly the "us–them" divide in Turkish populism has been widely studied. Scholars have documented how AKP discourse constructs moralized boundaries between a homogeneous, virtuous "people" and various internal or external "others" (Eligür, 2010; Somer, 2019). Research on polarization and identity politics in Turkey further shows how these antagonistic categories have become embedded in political communication and electoral mobilization (Yabancı, 2018; Esen & Gümüşçü, 2021; Yılmaz & Ektürk, 2021). In summary, Turkish populism is predominantly conceptualized as a thin-centered ideology and a distinctive communicative practice that frames politics in terms of a radical "people versus elite" divide, while simultaneously adapting to transformations in crisis management and institutional change, revealing how populism operates both as an adaptive ideology and as a strategic mode of communication in response to crises, thereby reflecting the unique political, cultural, and institutional dynamics of Turkey.

All of this considered, this article adopts an understanding of populism as a specific discursive or rhetorical form. This approach is the most consistent with the aim of comparing two electoral discourses and best fits the empirical material used here, which consists exclusively of the candidates' own public statements rather than party propaganda or programmatic documents. As highlighted in the literature, the discursive perspective also

accommodates the context-dependent nature of populist content. On these grounds, and following the reviewed scholarship, an operational definition of populism can be formulated as a distinctive discursive style characterized by three elements:

1) People-centrism: the populist claim for unrestricted popular sovereignty [which] is closely connected to specific understandings and valorization of the people, meant as an horizontal and homogeneous ensemble characterized by the same interests, features, moral (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Hawkins, 2009; Oliver & Rahn, 2016; Wirth et al., 2016).

2) Anti-elitism: the existence of a conspiring elite engaging in the misappropriation of the popular will, values, sovereignty, vertically distant from the people and diametrically opposed in terms of interests, features, moral (Jaegers & Walgrave, 2005; Hawkins, 2009; Aslanidis, 2016; Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Wirth et al., 2016).

3) Manichaeism: the moralistic and antagonistic understanding of the outside world as a struggle between good (the people) and evil (the elites) (de la Torre, 2000; Hawkins, 2009; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Wirth et al., 2016; Oliver & Rahn, 2016; Hawkins et al., 2019).

Methodology and data

As anticipated in the introduction, both quantitative and qualitative methodologies will be adopted in this study. There is a voluminous literature that applies quantitative techniques of text analysis to the study of populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Hawkins, 2009; Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011; March, 2012; Vasilopoulou et al., 2014; Bernhard et al., 2015; Bonikowski & Gidron, 2015; Aslanidis, 2015, 2016; Storz & Bernauer, 2018). What they have in common is the fact that they treat text as data in the form of words and process it through a large-scale analysis by means of a computer or/and by a large group of coders (Benoit et al., 2009). The increase in the number of scholars that resort to quantitative methods in this kind of studies is especially due to their validity in highlighting the various degrees of intensity with which populism is employed by the different actors in the different contexts analyzed: a characteristic that only recently has become recognized by the academic literature (Aslanidis, 2015, p. 5), and that is inherent in discourses but not in ideologies[3]. Thus, these methods have proven particularly useful in comparative studies of a single case over time or of two or multiple cases to highlight the differences in the "degrees of populism" between various political leaders, parties, actors. However, there are some shortcomings of solely conducting a purely quantitative text analysis. Beyond its high reliability, even the best designed quantitative research shows inherent limits in its capacity to reveal the multilayered, complex discursive instruments employed by populists in the public sphere (Lipinski, 2017, p. 245). Furthermore, being populism a highly context-specific phenomenon, the populist vocabularies and registers change from country to country and sometimes also from actor to actor within the same country. While the impact of these problems can be at least in part reduced by the researchers who have an in-depth knowledge of the context that allows them to take these variations in account and shape their models accordingly[4], a series of expressions, periphrases, shades of meaning will be unavoidably missed by a solely computer-based analysis. Moreover, the exact same words may be used by the different actors with completely different meanings attached to them. As this research itself will show, a different degree of populism between the two Turkish actors will emerge from the quantitative analysis, but a closer look to their speeches will

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[3] As Aslanidis argues, one can build a more or less intensively populist speech, but it makes no sense to speak about 'degrees' of socialism, Marxism or liberalism since the normative political concepts that undergird such ideologies are of a 'take it or leave it' nature.

[4] This is especially true for single-case or small-scale comparative studies, while for large-scale comparative ones it becomes utterly rare if not impossible to possess such a specific knowledge, unless a large and diverse research group is involved

complete the picture by including some wordings in it that were impossible to evaluate through the computer-based analysis. Just to make an example, the word "*çete*" (band, gang) can hardly find space in a dictionary of populism – and concretely, at least in the dictionary-based quantitative research that I consulted, it never does. However, a closer look to the Turkish context and to the speeches of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in particular will reveal that it is used by him to characterize a usurping élite acting against "the people", and thus should somehow be included in the analysis. But here comes another problem: since this expression finds place only in Kılıçdaroğlu's rhetoric, as he is the sole political leader to make use of it, it is very problematic to include it as a benchmark in a comparative analysis with (one, in this case, or more) other actors that attach to it a non-élitist and non-populist meaning (one can also talk of "gangs" in relation to issues of criminality, for example) or never make use of it.

To reduce the probability of excluding these expressions and wordings from the analysis, I integrate the quantitative method with a qualitative one, that aims at identifying those shades of meaning and expressions that couldn't be accounted by the computer-based analysis. Moreover, it will allow to better characterize the content of the textual material, adding information related to the style and content of the populist discourses to that related to the "degree" of it. Qualitative methods are however in general less accessible, as they require a deeper knowledge not only of the country(ies)-specific political scenario and its actors, but also of its language, especially in those contexts (as it is the case for Turkey) in which it is harder to find a sufficient amount of textual material and speeches directly produced or translated in one of the internationally most spoken languages. If and once these problems are overcome, the researchers are faced with the peril of subjectivity of the qualitative analysis of the text, being it possible for them to give more weight to some expressions and/or underestimating the relevance of others: a risk that is essentially eliminated in a well-structured computer-based analysis. Furthermore, qualitative analyses are always resource- and time-intensive. To overcome these two problems, I conducted the qualitative analysis on a more restricted corpus, both in quantity and in characteristics of the selected texts. Compared to the over one hundred texts extracted from electoral and TV speeches, propaganda videos, and other campaign material processed through the quantitative analysis, the qualitative analysis was carried out on a less extensive textual corpus made solely of the two leader's speeches at electoral rallies. This entails some advantages. Electoral speeches are available for both candidates in almost an equal number (while, for example, electoral videos containing speeches directed to the electorate have been mostly used by Kılıçdaroğlu , who conversely has not made an use of detailed social media posts as extensive as Erdoğan's), and moreover they are homogeneous, in the sense that, being essentially a political ritual (Kertzer, 1988), they tend to reproduce similar discursive strategies and structures regardless of who performs them. In other words, they contain recurring politically contextualized properties such as syntaxes, meanings, speech acts, style, rhetoric, conversational interactions (van Dijk, 1998, p. 23). These characteristics help overcoming the peril of subjectivity: only the recurring contents of the discourses will be analyzed, with the idea that if they are stressed on and repeated consistently by the politicians in various contexts (the different provinces where political leaders perform their rallies), they are relevant parts of the discursive patterns of each politician. If populist content is present in these recurring patterns, it will be considered in the analysis as integral part of that politician's rhetorical weaponry and not an incidental example of populist wording of a concept.

In terms of selection and creation of the corpus, the whole texts have been collected during a research period in Istanbul and Ankara during the months of the electoral campaign and the aftermaths of the vote (April to June 2023), and in the following weeks via online sources.

All the speeches and texts included in the corpus were retrieved from official and verifiable sources: the YouTube channels of the AKP and CHP, the official websites of both parties and party leaders, and their verified social media accounts. In addition, a part of the material was collected directly during the fieldwork. Only complete and publicly delivered speeches were included, while fragmentary statements, media interviews, or unofficial transcripts were excluded to ensure homogeneity and comparability across cases. This selective strategy responds to the need for reliability of sources and internal consistency of the corpus. The corpus consists of 102 texts containing discursive material, equally divided among Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu. The majority (65) is composed by the speeches the two candidates delivered at their electoral rallies: 31 by Erdoğan, 34 by Kılıçdaroğlu. The qualitative analysis is based only on these 65 texts for the reasons explained above. The following presentation of the additional texts will further clarify how non-homogeneous (albeit relevant to the conduction of the campaign) were the propaganda instruments used by the two candidates. The corpus for the quantitative analysis contains 37 more texts, complementing the 65 campaign rallies with other types of discursive material in which the leaders addressed "the(ir) people" directly, without intermediaries[5]. These texts were selected according to three criteria: (i) their relevance to the main agenda of the elections, (ii) their centrality in the dynamics of the campaign, and (iii) the consistency of their use by each candidate as a propaganda tool, so as to ensure both comparability and internal coherence of the dataset. In terms of sources, all materials were retrieved from official and verifiable channels: the YouTube pages and websites of AKP and CHP and their respective leaders, and their verified social media accounts (Twitter/X, Facebook, YouTube). An essential component of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's campaign were the short videos (3–7 minutes) shared via social media, 17 of which met the above criteria and were included in the corpus. Erdoğan, who did not rely on this format, addressed his digital audience mainly through social media posts – especially on Twitter/X, a platform highly popular for political debate in Turkey – 10 of which were selected. During the fieldwork, it emerged that the most commented and debated elements of Erdoğan's digital campaign were not short videos but rather his long-form Twitter/X posts. These posts were systematically discussed by journalists, political talk shows, analysts, and other qualified commentators on social media, gaining wide circulation and shaping public discourse. By contrast, in Kılıçdaroğlu's case it was precisely his short videos that became the most visible and debated format, as they were widely shared, commented upon, and scrutinized across traditional and digital media. This divergence illustrates the distinct communicative logics of the two candidates, and explains why the corpus includes Kılıçdaroğlu's videos on one side and Erdoğan's Twitter/X posts on the other, each reflecting the most relevant and impactful discursive material in their respective campaigns. Furthermore, differently from Kılıçdaroğlu, Erdoğan could use his institutional role to travel and participate to events such as inauguration of infrastructures, public ceremonies and festivals, special broadcasts, conferences for the presentation of governmental initiatives. 10 speeches[6] held in these events that contained electoral discourses responding to the above-listed characteristics have been selected and included, considering their homogeneity as a discursive, ritualized genre (Kertzer, 1988, van Dijk, 1998), and after evaluating their compliance to the criteria of relevance to the agenda,

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[5] Interviews and participation to TV or online programs with journalists, academicians, intellectuals have thus not been included.

[6] These are the speeches held at the special interview jointly broadcasted by Channel 7 and Ülke TV (April 26), TEKNOFEST Fair (April 29), İstanbul Security Forum (May 2-3), TV message at the nation broadcasted on TRT (May 7), Ceremony for the Appointment of 45.000 Teachers (May 8), special event at the National Library (May 11), Opening of the Barbaros Hayrettin Pasha Mosque (May 11), Youth Meeting (May 12), inauguration of the Defne State Hospital (May 21), special interview jointly broadcasted by Channel D and CNN Türk (May 26).

centrality in campaign dynamics, direct address of the people, thus ensuring internal reliability.

The quantitative analysis

The quantitative approach chosen is the Dictionary-Based Quantitative Text Analysis (DbQTA from now on), which is an increasingly popular method to analyze the populist discourse (Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011; Bonikowski & Gidron, 2015; Pauwels & Rooduijn, 2015; Oliver & Rahn, 2016; Storz & Bernauer, 2018; Elçi, 2019) due to its proven effectiveness in generating reasonably valid estimates of populist positions from political texts (Pauwels, 2011, p. 103). Through this method, I aimed to measure the frequency of populist vocabulary and the weight of the three components of populism (people-centrism, anti-elitism, Manichaeism) in the discourses of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, and properly visualize them for an easier first comparison. To this scope I used the software "R", in particular the packages "tm" and "ggplot2", to conduct the analysis. DbQTA consists in building a dictionary by allocating words to pre-defined categories, and then analyzing their frequency and distribution across the corpus through different techniques depending on the research objectives. In this study, the categories were framed as the three outlined above: (i) people-centrism, (ii) anti-elitism, and (iii) Manichaeism. Drawing on existing examples of dictionaries developed by other scholars applying this method, as well as on context-specific knowledge of Turkish politics and of this electoral campaign in particular (which I closely followed from the cities of Ankara, Mardin, Konya, Istanbul in the months preceding the vote of May 2023), I constructed a preliminary dictionary. This initial version integrated terms derived from theory and prior literature with expressions observed empirically in the campaign, and each entry was allocated to one of the three categories according to its semantic compatibility[7]. The process of dictionary construction followed three steps in order to enhance transparency and reliability. First, a list of terms was generated from the core conceptual dimensions of populism identified in the literature discussed above, serving as the theoretical baseline. Second, the list was adapted to the Turkish context by systematically screening campaign materials to identify salient and context-specific expressions that functioned as markers of populist discourse. Third, the dictionary was refined through iterative testing: ambiguous or low-frequency terms were excluded, while recurrent context-specific expressions identified in the previous step were added. Finally, the dictionary was cross-validated with the qualitative coding (as explained in detail in the dedicated section) to ensure that it captured the main populist dimensions without over- or under-representing context-bound language. Integrating the quantitative method with a qualitative one allowed me to use the latter also as a validation method: while proceeding with the qualitative analysis of the texts, I checked that the words previously measured were consistently used in a populist manner, so to avoid including false positives in the word count, and adjusted the dictionary accordingly[8]. Taken together, this procedure allowed the DbQTA to maintain both theoretical consistency and empirical sensitivity to the Turkish case. The result is shown in (Table 2). Following standard practice in the dictionary-based populism literature I analyzed, coder reliability was ensured at the

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[7] For example, words like "(national) will" and "people" have been listed under "people-centrism"; "establishment" and "oligarchy" under "anti-elitism"; "corrupt" and "honest" under "Manichaeism".

[8] For example, a word that is frequently included in other scholars' dictionaries that I consulted was "country". Reading the single text allowed me to notice that the word "country" was often used in non-populist contexts (e.g. when talking about foreign trade with other *countries*), while it carried a populist meaning when used in forms like "my country" "our country". I then modified my dictionary and repeated the quantitative analysis for that word accordingly.

level of dictionary validation rather than coder multiplicity, with semantic robustness secured through the iterative refinement process described above.

Another challenge comes from linguistics. Turkish is an agglutinative language, where "words are made up of a linear sequence of distinct morphemes, and each component of meaning is represented by its own morpheme" (https://glossary.sil.org/term/agglutinative-language). These morphemes stay untouched by the cleaning functions of the "tm" package (remove punctuation, stemming, etc.). Thus, when searching for a word (e.g. "nation" – "*millet*"), the program will not show the results for which the word is used with different logic functions (e.g. "to the nation" – "*millete*", "to our nation", "*milletimize*", etc.). I thus had to design the research pattern to include the morphemes expressing the person "me/mine" and "us/our", the grammatical cases (nominative, accusative, dative, locative, ablative, genitive), and the combinations of both, and to conduct the word search for each of them. A further challenge is represented by the fact that the Turkish language is not included in most of "R "packages, and this emerged for instance when cleaning the text from the so-called stopwords (words that are unimportant for the meaning of the text but which frequencies can alter the results of the textual analysis, such as, for example, conjugations, prepositions, pronouns). These problems had to be taken into account and overcome both by recurring to the resources available in the CRAN (Comprehensive R Archive Network) and by creating specific lists of stopwords for the purpose.

After having addressed these problems, I processed the texts through the DbQTA, obtaining the results below.

Results of the DbQTA and discussion

The figures below (Figure 1, Table 2) show the results of the quantitative analysis of the texts. The table contains the word-scores of each of the three categories, representing the frequency[9] with which the words belonging to each of them appear in the texts. The "populism score" (ps) is the sum of the word-scores of the three categories and represents the ratio of populist words in the discourses analyzed. The higher these scores are, the more frequent is the use of a populist vocabulary by the respective politician.

The stacked bar chart graphically summarizes these results. From its observation it emerges that Erdoğan's electoral discourse (ps = 0,275) implied a sensibly larger use of populist vocabulary than Kılıçdaroğlu's (ps = 0,199). Other interesting data is visible from the observation of the dimensions of each segment of the two stacks, represented in the table by the value %ps: it represents the weight of each category of populism (ws – word score) in the populist discourse (ps – populism score) of each candidate. It is immediately evident that Kılıçdaroğlu (%ps = 5%), while similar space (14% and 17% respectively) was given by both candidates to Manichean vocabulary. However, the populist discourse of Kılıçdaroğlu was characterized by a sensibly more frequent employment of an anti-elitist vocabulary (%ps = 16%) than Erdoğan's (%ps = 5%).

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[9] Each word score represents the ratio between the sum of the words of each category and the total of the words of the discourses analysed.

Figure 1. Word scores of each category of populism for the two main presidential candidates, May 2023 elections, Turkey
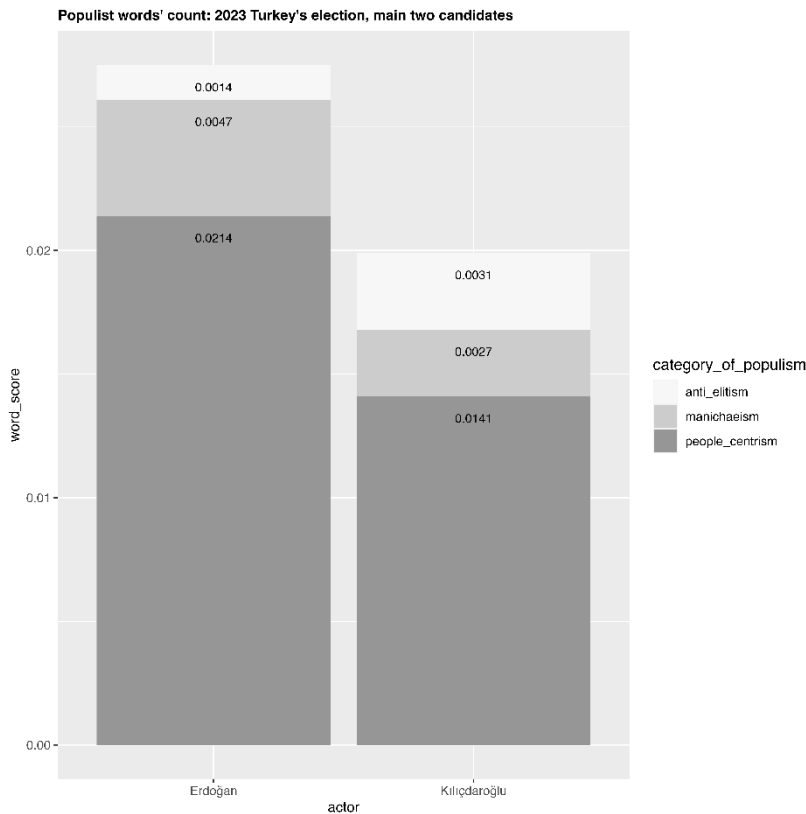

Table 2. Word scores of each category of populism for the two main presidential candidates, May 2023 elections, Turkey

	People-centrism	Anti-elitism	Manichaeism	**Populist score**
Erdoğan	0,0214	0,0014	0,0047	**0,0275**
$\%ps_{RTE}$	78%	5%	17%	
Kılıçdaroğlu	0,0141	0,0031	0,0027	**0,0199**
$\%ps_{KK}$	71%	16%	14%	

More precise indications on the style and the content of the two discourses will be obtained from the qualitative analysis. However, the DbQTA already provides us with some insights on the differences in the way the two politicians address "the(ir) people" (Table 3). As for people-centrism, Erdoğan often appeals his "(my/our) nation" (*millet*[10], *milletim*), "(my/our) country" (*ülkem/ülkemiz*), while Kılıçdaroğlu mostly employs the expressions "(my/our) brothers and sisters" and "fellow citizens". The opposition leader employs the Turkish word for "people" (*halk*) to a much greater extent than his rival. This is reflected in the formulas they use the most to salute their followers: "my dear people" (*sevgili halkım*) in the case of

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[10] The results for both the actors exclude the use of the term "*millet*" in the expression "*Millet İttifakı*" (Nations' Alliance) from the ws count.

Kılıçdaroğlu, "my beloved/sacred nation" (*aziz milletim*) for Erdoğan. Furthermore, the appeal to the "national will" (*milli irade* or *milletin iradesi*) – one of the "classic" features of people-centric language – is much more frequent in Erdoğan's discourse than in Kılıçdaroğlu's. Concerning anti-elitism, as anticipated, Erdoğan uses a narrower anti-elitist vocabulary both in quantity and variety. He mostly depicts his adversaries as "imperialists" (*emperyalist*, never used by Kılıçdaroğlu) and "foreigners" (*yabancı*[11]), or alternatively as "enemies" (*düşman*) either of the nation or the national will. Differently from his rival, Kılıçdaroğlu employs a series of substantives with a pejorative connotation like "cadre" (*kadro*) or "lobby" (*lobi*). However, most of his anti-elitist word-score is built around the use of the word "palace" (*saray*) that, as it will emerge from the qualitative analysis, is used as a metonymy to symbolize the luxury, money waste, excesses of the ruling elites that puts them distant from "the people. Finally, regarding Manichaeism, despite the similar %ps scores, there are many differences in the way the two contenders framed the Manichaen struggle between good and evil. In Kılıçdaroğlu's discourse a stronger differentiation between what is "just, right, true" (*doğru, haklı, hakiki*) and "unjust, unlawful" (*adaletsiz, haksız*) is found than in Erdoğan's, who very rarely made reference to an "unjust" or "unlawful" order. On his side, he described his adversaries with words as "traitors, betrayal" (*hain, ihanet*: expressions never used by Kılıçdaroğlu) or "liars" (*yalancı, palavracı*).

The qualitative analysis

As largely anticipated, a qualitative analysis has been conducted to validate and/or correct the results of the computer-based text processing, and in any case to integrate them and provide further insights on the type and content of the populist discourses of the two candidates, starting from the indications already obtained through the DbQTA. More in details, the methodology adopted is the so-called Directed Qualitative Content Analysis (DQCA). This is a very suitable technique to process texts starting from existing theories, as well as to validate or extend them conceptually (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). It is called "directed" because existing theories and prior research "direct" the researcher in identifying key concepts or variables as initial coding categories (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Naturally, the "existing theories" of reference are those drawn from the literature initially reviewed, and consequently the "key concepts" are i) people-centrism, ii) anti-elitism, iii) Manichaeism. Coding categories were then derived from this, from the empirical knowledge of the pre-electoral period, and from the indications provided by the DbQTA. On these bases, all the texts of the selected corpus[12] have been read and coded manually, grouping relevant sentences according to the coherence of their contents, figures, references, meanings with the theory- DbQTA- and empirical-based categories (Weber, 1990). The results of this analysis are presented below, analyzing the content of the people-centric and anti-elitist discourses of the two candidates. A specific focus on the Manichaeism will not be made since, as it consists in the portrayal of a struggle between "the good people" and "the corrupt elites" respectively, its content will emerge when analyzing the other two categories.

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[11] These two words are often used with similar implications, as it will be shown later in the text.
[12] As already specified, the corpus analyzed through DQCA is made only of the speeches of the two candidates at their electoral rallies, to allow for a more efficient and precise comparison

Table 3. Frequency of the populist words per populist category[a]

PEOPLE-CENTRISM				ANTI-ELITISM				MANICHAEISM			
Erdoğan	%ps_PPC	Kılıçdaroğlu	%ps_PPC	Erdoğan	%ps_ANT	Kılıçdaroğlu	%ps_ANT	Erdoğan	%ps_MAN	Kılıçdaroğlu	%ps_MAN
nation	0,299	brothers/sisters	0,206	imperialist*	0,017	palace	0,093	lie, liar	0,299	right*, just*	0,038
brothers/sisters	0,159	citizens	0,124	foreign*	0,012	foreign*	0,023	right*, just*	0,159	unjust*, unlawful*	0,023
citizens	0,107	nation	0,100	enemy	0,012	cadre	0,018	honest* v dishonest*	0,120	honest* v dishonest*	0,026
(my/our) country	0,120	people	0,112	tutelage	0,008	lobby	0,007	betrayal*, traitor	0,107	lie*, liar*	0,011
(national) will	0,036	motherland	0,056	cadre	0,002	enemy	0,006	clean* v dirty*	0,036	propaganda	0,011
motherland	0,033	(my/our) country	0,052	palace	0,002	regime	0,003	honest	0,033	clean* v dirty*	0,011
people	0,009	homeland	0,024	thief	0,001	bureaucrat	0,001	scandal	0,009	corruption, corrupted	0,009
comrades	0,007	oppressed	0,016	bureaucrat	0,000	mafia	0,001	unjust*, unlawful*	0,007	scandal	0,007
morals/ethics	0,005	(national) will	0,006	elite	0,000	thief	0,001	compromise	0,005	shame, shameful	0,004
homeland	0,004	tradition*	0,004	lobby	0,000	elite	0,000	arrogant	0,004	compromise	0,004
oppressed	0,001	compatriots	0,004	mafia	0,000	imperialist*	0,000	shame, shameful	0,001	arrogant	0,004
compatriots	0,000	morals/ethics	0,003	oligarch*	0,000	oligarch*	0,000	corruption, corrupted	0,000	betrayal*, traitor	0,000
referendum	0,000	referendum	0,001	regime	0,000	tutelage	0,000	propaganda	0,000	right*, just*	0,000
sovereign*	0,000	comrades	0,000								
tradition*	0,000	sovereign*	0,000								

[a] The %ps scores are the ratio between the absolute frequency of each word and the total populist score of the relative politician. The symbol * indicates that the word has been searched in its substantive, adjective, adverbial forms.

Results of the DQCA and discussion
Erdoğan

Erdoğan makes frequent use of people-centric rhetoric, especially stressing the figures identified through the DbQTA. The qualitative analysis contributes to add more precise indications on the content and style of this populist rhetoric. When Erdoğan appeals to "the people" framing it as "the nation/country/motherland" he aims to stress the characteristics of unity and homogeneity which are inherent to these expressions, and to mark the distinction between them and "the others" (the elites, the enemies of the nation = the opposition). There is an expression in particular that appears, almost identical, in nearly half (15) of the speeches analyzed (31), which groups all these elements that are traceable elsewhere in the texts in a sparser manner:

Tek millet, tek bayrak, tek vatan, tek devlet. Bir olacağız, iri olacağız, diri olacağız, kardeş olacağız, hep beraber Türkiye olacağız[13].	A single nation, a single flag, a single state. We will be one, we will be big, we will be alive, we will be brothers and sisters, all together we will be Turkey.

This expression may seem simply a highly nationalistic one. It is classifiable as populist because it is accompanied by the portrayal of a Manichean struggle between the "single nation" and its enemies that have "no nation, no flag, no *ezan*, no religion"[14] or that want to "divide our country"[15]. Furthermore, as indicated by the DbQTA, Erdoğan frequently resorts to appeals to the "national will". The content of such appeals is the most "classical" populist cliché: "they" (the opposition) are portrayed as the "enemies of democracy, the national will and the values of the nation, the enemies not only of civil politics but also of civil society"[16], "us" (Erdoğan and his people) are those who:

Milletin iradesi üzerindeki anti-demokratik prangaları milletin dualarıyla beraberce kırdık[17].	together, through the prayers of the nation, broke the anti-democratic shackles [they posed] on the national will.

The qualitative analysis confirms the DbQTA findings on Erdoğan's anti-elitist discourse, showing his recurrent framing of the opposition as aligned with "foreigners" and "imperialists." Adversaries are accused of "greeting the western imperialist powers"[18], of receiving support "from Europe to America"[19], and of seeking to "hand over our economy to moneylenders and our future to the imperialists"[20]. Frequent references are made to the USA, EU, IMF, and London as symbols of external control. In contrast, Erdoğan presents himself and "the people" as the sole bulwark against these threats, pledging "not to leave our country at the mercy of these groups"[21].

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[13] Erdoğan's speech in Tekirdağ, 08/05/2023
[14] Erdoğan's speech in Kayseri, 06/05/2023
[15] Erdoğan's speech in Mardin, 10/05/2023
[16] Erdoğan's speech in İstanbul, 12/05/2023
[17] Erdoğan's speech in Samsun, 4/05/2023
[18] Erdoğan's speech in Batman, 10/05/2023
[19] Erdoğan's speech in Edirne, 8/05/2023
[20] Erdoğan's speech in Ankara Büyük Mitingi, 30/04/2023
[21] *Ibid.*

Such claim is repeated 22 times in the 31 texts analyzed. Here is a clear example of it.

Bu CHP ne diyor: 'IMF'den borç alın da biraz rahatlayalım.'. 'Gerek yok, biz bize yeteriz.' dedik [...] Ama bunlar Londra tefecilerinden 300 milyar dolar alacağını söylüyor. Bunlar tefeci, bunlar esrar, eroin kaçakçısı. Bunlardan size yar olmaz. Ama bununla benim halkımı kandırmaya çalışıyorlar. İşte, pazar günü bunlara dersi vermeye hazır mıyız? Bizim bunlara ihtiyacımız yok![22]

What does this CHP say: 'Let's take a loan from the IMF and bring some relief.' We said: 'There is no need, we are enough to ourselves' [...] But they say they will take $300 billion from London loan sharks. These are usurers, these are marijuana, heroin smugglers. These are not good for you. But they are trying to deceive my people with this. Here, are we ready to teach them a lesson on Sunday? We don't need them!

What the DbQTA could not capture are context-specific expressions that go beyond "typical" anti-elitist wording, often conveyed through figures of speech (metonymy, synecdoche) to construct a Manichaean divide: on one side, an opposition acting against the nation's good, morals, and interests; on the other, a government portrayed as the sole true representative of the people. In the 2023 campaign, Erdoğan recurrently employed this device to advance at least two narratives, the most prominent being the depiction of the opposition as allies of terrorism. Here, Kılıçdaroğlu and the Nation's Alliance were framed as taking orders from abroad and betraying the public good, while the governing bloc was presented as loyal only to God and the people. Central to this narrative is the word "Kandil" —the mountain base of the PKK in Iraq—used as a shorthand for terrorism. Although such terms cannot be detected by populism dictionaries, they are pivotal to Erdoğan's rhetoric: in the 31 speeches analyzed, he invoked this "Kandil" narrative 28 times. What follows is one of the most concise and telling examples.:

Bay bay Kemal'in akıl hocası Kandil, o Kandil ile konuşuyor, talimatı oradan alıyor. Biz talimatı, önce Allah'tan, sonra milletten alıyoruz[23].

Bay bay Kemal's [Kılıçdaroğlu's] mentor is Kandil, he speaks with Kandil and takes instructions from there. We take instructions from God first, then from the nation.

Similarly, the acronym "LGBT" does not appear in standard populism dictionaries, yet Erdoğan repeatedly used it in the 2023 campaign to stigmatize the opposition as "LGBT" and accuse it of seeking to undermine Turkey's moral values. His coalition was portrayed as the sole bulwark against this "alien" ideology and as the genuine representative of the nation's ethical foundations. This narrative appeared 19 times across the 31 speeches analyzed, one of which is presented below as a clarifying example.

Gazi Mustafa Kemal'in partisini marjinal örgütlerin, mezhep fanatiklerinin, LGBT savunucularının [...] yuvası haline dönüştürdü[24].

LGBT'ci değiliz, biz LGBT'ye karşıyız. CHP LGBT'ci. İYİ Parti LGBT'ci, HDP LGBT'ci. O masanın etrafında olanların LGBT'ye karşı olduğunu duydunuz mu? Cumhur İttifakı olarak biz LGBT'ye karşıyız. Çünkü

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[22] Erdoğan's speech in Aydın, 9/05/2023
[23] Erdoğan's speech in Pursaklar (Ankara), 12/05/2023
[24] Erdoğan's speech in Kayseri, 6/05/2023

bizim için aile kutsaldır. [...] Biz, güçlü aile güçlü millet demektir, böyle bugünlere geldik. [...] Ne yaparlarsa yapsınlar boş. Bize Allah yeter. Bize milletimizin sevgisi, desteği yeter[25].
They turned the party of Gazi Mustafa Kemal [...] into a cradle for marginal organizations, sectarian fanatics, LGBT advocates.

We are not LGBT, we are against LGBT. CHP is LGBT, IYI Parti is LGBT, HDP is LGBT. Did you ever hear that the people around that table are against LGBT? As the People's Alliance, we are against LGBT. Because for us the family is sacred. [...] To us, a strong family means a strong nation, that's how we came to these days. [...] Let them do what they want. God is enough for us. The love and support of our nation is enough for us.

Kılıçdaroğlu

The qualitative analysis confirms the results of the DbQTA, showing that much of Kılıçdaroğlu's people-centric rhetoric aims to depict a direct connection between him and "the people" by means of brotherhood ("brothers/sisters") and of empathy ("my (dear) people"). For example:

[...] Onlar yandaşları, bu kardeşiniz vatandaş için çalışacak. Vatandaşına hizmet etmeyen bir siyaset, siyaset değildir. Siyaset, vatandaşına hizmet edecek. Siyaset, halka hizmet edecek[26].
[...] They will work for their cronies, this brother of yours will work for the citizens. If politics doesn't serve the citizen then it's not politics. Politics is about serving the citizen. Politics is about serving the people.

This emphasis on the people-centered character of politics is a clear instance of populist language, as it combines people-centrism with Manichaean and anti-elitist undertones: Kılıçdaroğlu contrasts "us" (the people) with "them" (the corrupt governing elites).

Beyond vocabulary, the DbQTA could not fully capture his recurrent strategy of stressing shared sociological and economic features. Drawing on the hardships of the economic crisis, he frequently recalled his humble origins and personal traits (sobriety, honesty, modesty) to assert that he is "one of you, one of the people"[27]. In speeches and videos, this was reinforced by his self-presentation in modest settings (the kitchen of his home, handwritten notes on recycled paper[28]) and by claims like "I lived like you, I lived like one of you, I always tried to be modest"[29] or recurrent slogans such as "*Bay Bay Kemal[30]* stands for the people, works for the people, fights for the people"[31]. While claims of empathy with citizens are not inherently populist, they become so when framed against a corrupt elite detached from the people's reality. What Kılıçdaroğlu portrays is a Manichaen clash between the "modest" (*mütevazi*), "oppressed" (*ezilen*), "honest" (*dürüst*), "just" (*haklı*) people and the "luxury-life living" (*lüks hayat*), "lying" (*yalancı*), "dishonest" (*namussuz, sahtekâr*), "unjust" (*haksız*) governing elite. Such rhetoric is employed in most of the speeches analyzed (22 out of 34). What follows exemplifies the pattern around which it commonly revolves:

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[25] Erdoğan's speech in Giresun, 4/05/2023
[26] Kılıçdaroğlu's speech in Erzincan, 6/05/2023
[27] Kılıçdaroğlu's speech in Denizli, 5/05/2023
[28] These elements, that especially scholars who study populism as a political style study in-depth, will not be touched upon further in this article.

[29] Kılıçdaroğlu's speech in Sinop, 3/05/2023
[30] Kılıçdaroğlu often uses himself the pejorative nickname "*Bay bay Kemal*" that Erdoğan appeals him with, a wordplay between the Turkish word for "mister" (*bay*) and the assonant English word "bye".
[31] Kılıçdaroğlu's speech in Kayseri, 29/04/2023

Benim saraylarda oturma gibi öyle bir merakım yok. Ne sarayı Allah aşkına ya! Ben sizler gibi mütevazı yaşıyorum zaten. Bir evim var. Mutfağımı da hepiniz biliyorsunuz zaten ne kadar görkemli bir mutfağımın olduğunu. Bizim mutlu bir evimiz var, huzur içinde yaşıyoruz. Ne sarayı ya Allah aşkına! Millet açlıktan kıvranırken, mutfaklarda yangın olurken sarayda mı oturulur Allah aşkına! Sizler nasıl yaşıyorsanız inanın Bay Kemal de öyle yaşayacak, mütevazı yaşayacak[32].

I have no such interests in living in palaces. What palace, for God's sake! I already live modestly like you. I have a house. You all already know my kitchen, how wonderful it is. We have a happy house, we live in tranquility. What palace, for God's sake! While the nation is starving, while the kitchens are burning, they live in palaces. For God's sake! Believe me, Bay Kemal will live exactly as you do, he will run a modest life.

As in Erdoğan's case, these quotations show how the three components of populism – people-centrism, anti-elitism, and Manichaean framing – often appear intertwined, making it harder in qualitative analysis to separate them as neatly as in the DbQTA. The strong anti-elitist rhetoric identified quantitatively is evident in Kılıçdaroğlu's recurring use of "the palace" (*saray*) to symbolize the ruling elite's luxury, waste, and detachment from ordinary citizens. Similarly, the frequent use of "foreign/foreigner" (*yabancı*), which topped the DbQTA list, accuses the government of "working for the foreigners"[33] or highlights the elites' cosmopolitan lifestyles as further proof of their alienation from "the people". This narrative, employed 19 times in the 34 speeches analyzed with the same pattern shown in the example below, is always followed by the promise that Kılıçdaroğlu will stay away from these wastes and give everything back to the people.

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[32] Kılıçdaroğlu's speech in Muğla, 6/05/2023
[33] Kılıçdaroğlu's speech in Eskişehir, 25/04/2023

Amerika'nın en pahalı yeri Manhattan Adası'dır, orada 35 katlı gökdelenler yaptılar. Muhammed Ali Clay'in çiftliğini satın aldılar. İngiltere'de, Chelsea'de lüks villalarda oturuyorlar. Hollanda'da dünyanın paraları var bunlara ait. Bay Kemal bunların tamamını biliyo. Son kuruşuna kadar alacağım ve Türkiye'ye getireceğim. Esnafa vereceğim, çiftçiye vereceğim, emekliye vereceğim, ev kadınlarına vereceğim[34].

They had a 35-story skyscraper built in the most expensive place in America, Manhattan. They bought the farm property of Muhammad Ali Clay. They live in the luxurious villas in Chelsea, England. There is a lot of money in Holland that belongs to them. Bay Kemal knows exactly all of this. I will take [this money] back to the single penny, and bring it to Turkey. I will give it to the shop owners, to the farmers, to the pensioners, to the housewives.

As with Erdoğan, the qualitative analysis revealed terms absent from the DbQTA dictionary but central to Kılıçdaroğlu's anti-elitist rhetoric. He frequently denounces the "gang of five" (*beşli çete*)[35] and the "drug barons" (*uyuşturucu baronları*) as emblematic of entrenched clientelist ties with the government. While references to clientelism are not inherently populist, they become so when framed as a Manichaean clash between greedy elites and a uniform, deceived "people" whose interests Kılıçdaroğlu vows to defend. This narrative appeared consistently across all 34 of his speeches analyzed, one example of which is reported below.

Gene diyecekler 'Parayı nereden bulacaksın?' Hep o soruyu soruyorlar. E sen parayı beşli çetelere veriyorsun, ben vatandaşa vereceğim. Sen yandaşa veriyorsun, ben vatandaşa vereceğim. Kimin hakkı? Vatandaşın hakkı. Ayrıca beşli çetelerin, yurt dışına kaçırdıkları paranın tamamını getireceğim, tamamını. Son kuruşuna kadar getireceğim ve bu millete vereceğim [...].

They will say again, 'Where will you find the money?' They always ask that question. Eh, you give the money to the gangs of five, I will give it to the people. You give it to the cronies, I will give them to the citizens. Whose right is it? It is a right of the citizen. One thing more, I will bring back all the money that the gangs of five smuggled abroad. I will bring it back to the single penny, and give it to this nation [...].

Kul hakkı yemem, kul hakkı yedirmem. Herkes bilsin. Ben bunu söylüyorum da mesela onlar diyemiyorlar. 'Kul hakkı yemem' diyemiyor. 'Kul hakkı yedirmem' diyemiyor. Bunu sadece Bay Kemal söylüyor[36].

I don't cheat anybody of their rights, and I don't allow others to do so. Let everyone know. I say this, for example they can't. They can't say "I don't cheat anybody of their rights". They can't say "I don't allow others to do so" either. Only Bay Kemal says this.

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[34] Kılıçdaroğlu's speech in Kırıkkale, 7/05/2023
[35] With this name he refers to the owners of the holdings *Cengiz, Limak, Kalyon, Kolin*, and *Makyol*: five of the biggest companies in Turkey, accused by the opposition's leader of entertaining a deep-rooted clientelism relationship with the government.
[36] Kılıçdaroğlu's speech in Düzce, 9/05/2023

Conclusions

This article aimed at analyzing the populist discourse of the two main protagonists of the Turkish 2023 presidential race. The rhetoric/discursive approach to the study of populism was adopted, based on the relevant academic literature. The quantitative analysis conducted on the selected textual corpus indicated that Erdoğan made a wider use of a populist vocabulary compared to Kılıçdaroğlu. People-centrism was the category of populism that characterized the most both candidates' discourses (%ps: 78% and 71% respectively for Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu), but Kılıçdaroğlu's one showed a higher share of anti-elitist vocabulary (5% and 16%), while words associated with Manichaeism scored similar %ps values (17% and 14%). An interpretation of these results was possible through a qualitative analysis, that validated the results of the DbQTA: those words that the DbQTA indicated as the most characteristic of each candidate's populist discourse were found by the DQCA to be consistently part of their populist phrasings. The most relevant examples are reported above. However, the qualitative analysis further integrated the evidence highlighted by the quantitative one. First, because it was possible to identify further context-related terms and expressions: words that are commonly not included in populist dictionaries (such as "LGBT" or "gang"), and thus could not be taken into account by the DbQTA, were found to be the center of recurrent populist narratives in both candidates. Second, because it highlighted the bounds between the three categories of populism in the populist discourse/rhetoric. An expression containing a people-centric claim is not necessarily populist per se: it becomes such when it is charged with anti-elitist and Manichaean meanings.

The qualitative method thus reveals the problematic nature of attempts to measure and quantify populism, at least in comparisons of this type. When qualitatively processing Kılıçdaroğlu's speeches, one would have a hard time saying that they were "less populist" than the ones by Erdoğan (something that could be more decisively affirmed by the quantitative data), as populist concepts were expressed recurrently and with similar patterns of repetition by both candidates. While the use of a populist rhetoric by Erdoğan is not a recent phenomenon and is widely documented by the academic literature, one of the main innovative elements of this research is that it sheds light on the use of a populist discursive strategy by the opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. From the analysis conducted, it emerges that what really differentiates the two leaders is the style and content of their populisms, rather than the adoption of a populist language, which is present in both the contenders' discourses. Adopting the conceptualization formulated by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013), it can be said that the broadest difference stays in the exclusionary nature of Erdoğan's style of populism compared to the inclusionary one of Kılıçdaroğlu. Looking at the material, political, and symbolic dimensions indicated by the two authors as the benchmarks differentiating these two styles of populism, it emerges that in terms of distribution of resources (material aspect), advocation of democratic participation and political contestation (political aspect) and broadness of the boundaries with which "the people" is defined (symbolic aspect) Erdoğan's discourse presented a more marked exclusionary connotation towards specific groups/elites ("the LGBT lobby", "the terrorists of Kandil", and so on) while Kılıçdaroğlu targeted more specific and narrow groups of elites ("the palace", "the gang of five") and showed a broader, more inclusionary understanding of "the people". Other differences in content lay in the more aggressive style of Erdoğan, and in his prevalent focus on valence issues (like security, moral values, national unity), compared to the "positive campaign" (*olumlu/pozitif kampanya*) conducted by Kılıçdaroğlu with a more marked emphasis on position issues (especially on the economic and social fields). Another aspect to consider is the different political positioning of the two leaders (one in power since more than 20 years, the other leading the opposition block), that

influenced especially their anti-elitist discourses: Kılıçdaroğlu could frame his adversaries recurring to more "classical" and "universal" populist references to their dishonest, corrupted, and predatory misconduct; Erdoğan, who could not blame his adversaries for a poor and dishonest governing record[37], used much more context-related examples to frame them as elites acting against the people (e.g. the repeated references to "Kandil"). To sum up, these differences lead to think of two different styles, rather than quantities, of populism: people-elite dynamics were narrated by Erdoğan in a more exclusionary way, with an insistence on more abstract and values-oriented aspects (national ethics and genuine Turkish values to be defended, the "national will" – *milli irade* – to be embodied, the sense of security to be preserved). On the other hand, Kılıçdaroğlu presented a more inclusive version of populism in which the clash between the people and the elites was based on more concrete and material aspects: economic grievances to be addressed, misappropriated resources to be redistributed, social injustices to be vindicated. Table 4 provides a comparative overview of the key features characterizing the populist discourses of Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu.

Table 4. Comparative table of Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu's styles of populism.

Feature	Erdoğan (Exclusionary populism)	Kılıçdaroğlu (Inclusionary populism)
People-centrism	Embodied in the leader, national will (*milli irade*)	Broad definition of "the people"
Anti-elitism	Against abstract enemies (LGBT lobby, Kandil terrorists)	Against specific elites (the palace, the gang of five)
Manichaean worldview	Strongly moralized, national values	Material grievances, redistributive focus
Campaign style	Aggressive, focus on security and moral values	Conciliatory and "positive campaign", focus on social/economic issues

Despite being the sole method capable of bringing these differences to the surface, the DQCA did not refute but validated and integrated the findings of the dictionary-based analysis, that thus not only proved useful to process a larger quantity of textual data, but also contributed to direct the qualitative research(er). Especially for wider comparisons involving more countries and actors, quantitative methods remain more efficient because of the advantageous ratio between time spent/quantity of data analyzed and the good accuracy they allow for. However, with the results of this research I argue for integrated quantitative-qualitative methods to be best suited for this kind of analyses, as they allow the researcher to benefit from the advantages of both methods while producing more complete and encompassing insights and data about the phenomena analyzed.

While addressing the research questions, this paper leaves room for new answers to be explored. Even in a crowded field of studies such as that on populism, there is a wide space for new research to be carried out, inherent in the topics of this paper, that can go beyond

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[37] Apart from references to the mismanagement of the metropolitan cities that the opposition won in 2019, that were however part of a strategy of blame-shifting in which this analysis did not find any populist rhetoric consistent with the operational definition outlined above

the conclusions already available in the rich literature on the topic. Comparative studies, in particular, present a promising avenue for further exploration. As mentioned before, Turkey serves as a paradigmatic case in the context of countries led by authoritarian populist leaders, offering a valuable opportunity for scholars to conduct comparative studies that utilize Turkey as a key reference point. The evidence that Kılıçdaroğlu employed a populist discourse in this electoral campaign raises a stimulating question on the comparability of this case with others that share similar contextual characteristics. The findings also raise the question of why Kılıçdaroğlu adopted populist rhetoric. Three main explanations can be considered: (i) strategic adaptation: a deliberate choice to compete with Erdoğan on the same populist terrain, attempting to appropriate the language of "the people" against "the elites" in order to broaden his electoral appeal, while reshaping these meanings in accordance with his conciliatory campaign style and inclusive discourse; (ii) structural constraints: the result of operating within a competitive authoritarian regime, where limited access to media, state resources, and institutional channels pressures opposition actors to employ populist discourse as one of the few available means to mobilize support and gain visibility; (iii) populist contagion (Rooduijn et al., 2012): a broader phenomenon whereby mainstream or opposition actors adopt populist discourse not only as a deliberate strategy or under structural constraints, but because populism itself has become a competitively advantageous language in contemporary politics, exerting a "contagion effect" on the wider party system. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive, but rather highlight the tension between agency and structural conditions in explaining opposition populism in Turkey. In fact, as various scholars explain, the contagion process may operate through strategic repositioning in response to external pressures. While empirical studies of populist contagion yield mixed findings, Figueira (2018) argues for the existence of a "perfect storm" of populism, whereas Schwörer (2021) shows that in specific issue areas such as immigration – particularly salient in the Turkish 2023 presidential campaign – mainstream parties often adapt their narratives in response to the success of far-right populist actors. This suggests that the Turkish case can serve as a valuable reference point for comparative studies, helping to illuminate how populist contagion shapes opposition strategies across different competitive authoritarian contexts. By examining whether, in other similar political regimes that characterize as illiberal democracies or competitive authoritarianisms, opposition parties that challenge the (right-wing) populist leaderships in power adopt populist strategies to compete, and/or by comparing the populist discourses of the political actors in these regimes, new research can shed light on the evolving nature of political competition in countries that experienced a consolidated process of democratic backsliding, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in the global political landscape. This is just one example among many of the potential held by this field of investigation to unearth valuable insights that can inform both academic scholarship and the political debate itself in the years to come.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Evolution of Cyberauthoritarianism in Lebanon
The Case of the Lebanese National Cyber Security Strategy

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Abstract

This paper examines how the evolution of surveillance in Lebanon contributed to the formulation of the Lebanese National Cyber Security Strategy (LNCSS), legitimising cyberauthoritarianism. Even though the LNCSS was presented as a tool for technological advancement, it resulted in the use of cybersecurity and intelligence to repress dissent and target activism. By employing the law in context approach, this study traces the evolution of the power relations between the political élites and the oppositions in the online space and their repercussions on the physical one, focusing on how the persecution of activism and anti-governmental online content led to a redefinition of the boundaries of state's authority, both online and offline. Being activism and dissent perceived by the élites as threats to their primacy position in Lebanese politics and society and considering consociationalism as a crucial tool for the preservation of disparities among the population, the Lebanese government progressively legitimated the cyberauthoritarian discourse through *ad hoc* strategies, which eventually resulted in the LNCSS.

Keywords: Authoritarianism, Lebanon, Cybersecurity, Public policy, Cyberauthoritarianism

Introduction

In 2019 Lebanon experienced the most severe economic crisis in the history of the country. Even though the finances of the country had already been afflicted by the Syrian war, the decrease of remittances, and the arrival of Syrian refugees, since 2018 the situation was catastrophic. Furthermore, the mismanagement of the European Commission's loan exacerbated the crisis, leading to unprecedent levels of debt and currency devaluation, making it impossible for the Central Bank of Lebanon to access further loans in US dollars. Eventually, this determined a snowball effect on import and trades, as well as the Central Bank freezing citizens' accounts and pushing the country to a deliberate crisis (World Bank, 2023).

Since October 2019 rumours about the government imposing a tax on Voice Over Internet Protocol calls spread, fostering the response of the population. The long-time discontent with the clientelist politics of Lebanon, in fact, erupted in the streets, with citizens showing their mistrust towards the country's institutions and politicians (Yee & Saad, 2019). The 2019 WhatsApp protests, as they were then labelled, were unprecedented in Lebanese history, successfully paralysing the country and attracting worldwide attention on the situation. The government's violent repression of protests was condemned by international human rights associations, who denounced arbitrary arrests and the massive use of tear gas and shootings (Daher, 2021). Meanwhile, the Internet became another space

of protest, with sectarian powers intervening to limit freedom of speech and targeting all those people who were identified as potential threats to the security of the state.

The definition of Lebanon as a consociational democracy helps understanding the role played by sectarianism within the Lebanese Republic, and how the intercurrent dynamics between sectarian élites shaped the institutional management of security (Dixon, 2020; Lijphart, 1969). The power struggles among the Maronites, Sunni and Shiite élites influenced the socio-political dynamics of the country and found expression in the formation of frail governments based upon alliances which have changed during the decades. By enhancing institutional and sectarian practices, each political faction sought to exploit the legal framework to protect their interests, inevitably weakening citizens' trust in the Lebanese institutions. The existence of clientelist networks within social groups is indeed pivotal for the maintenance of power by political elites (El-Masri, 2023). Clientelism has been institutionalised into both the political and economic framework and its elimination would compromise the survival of the Lebanese Republic as a whole (Hamzeh, 2001). Therefore, any form of dissent towards the preservation of the established system has traditionally been repressed by the Government.

Authoritarianism, as a means for the safeguard of the consociational order, has historically characterised Lebanese sectarian élites, allowing them to protect and progressively institutionalise their political privileges at the expenses of the population. The sectarian concentration of power, strengthened through favouritism in appointing military and governmental roles, created an *ad hoc* institutional framework to suppress dissent against consociationalism and justify repressive measures in defence of sectarian interests. Furthermore, technological advancement has paved the way for the emergence of a new confrontational arena, i.e. the cyber space, where sectarian élites have progressively extended their authoritarian rule through the development of specific surveillance strategies. Cyberauthoritarianism is in fact today one of the most efficient strategies used by Lebanese authorities to preserve the established order. Cyberauthoritarianism, grounded in the legal cybergovernance strategies used to curb online oppositions, broadens sectarian authoritarianism by leveraging digital technologies to both reinforce control mechanisms and accelerate the suppression of dissent. Put differently, authoritarianism in the cyber space intensifies sectarian practices and further institutionalise them across social, economic, and political structures.

Drawing on the legal texts concerning digital surveillance and grey literature addressing government-enabled measures of repression, this research seeks to answer the following research question: how has cyberauthoritarianism evolved in Lebanon and in what ways has online dissent been progressively incorporated into the country's cybersecurity legislation? Through the use of the law in context approach, this study examines the Lebanese legislative production on digital surveillance in relation to the evolving dynamics of dissent between opposition groups and political élites. This research assumes that ruling actors have employed legal frameworks to safeguard their privileges and suppress online dissent by reframing it as a cybersecurity threat, a tendency likely reflected in the Lebanese National Cyber Security Strategy (LNCSS). After presenting the theoretical framework, which provides a definition of cyberauthoritarianism, and outlining the methodological approach, the article will focus on analysing the development of dissent framed as a cybersecurity threat, culminating in the examination of the LNCSS.

Gewaltmonopol and its evolution in the cyber space

When discussing authoritarianism, Hannah Arendt identified specific features, such as limited political freedoms and a strong central power that operates without constitutional accountability (Arendt, 2017). Put differently, symptoms of authoritarianism can be

observed whenever political systems exhibit limited pluralism due to a leader or a ruling elite exercising power without effective legal constraints, even when such limits are formally prescribed (Linz, 2000). Coercive measures are commonly employed in authoritarian political systems, especially to suppress oppositions and restrict political competition (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Therefore, the distinction between the legitimate and illegitimate use of force by the state becomes blurred, especially when those in power seek to secure their position.

The use and the misuse of *Gewaltmonopol*, the State's monopoly of the use of force, invite reflection on the spaces where the state exercises its power, and the boundaries within which that authority extends (Benjamin, 2014; Weber, 2004). Authoritarian regimes often extend their control over populations well beyond the physical boundaries of the state. A notable example involves exiles and dissidents who, despite living outside their countries' boundaries, remain subject to control by the authorities of their state of origin. This practice, common since the Cold War, has become a distinctive feature of several Middle Eastern regimes, such as those of Syria, Iran or Iraq, prompting international observers to question the dynamics of contention beyond national territory (Conduit, 2020).

Since the 2000s, States have extended their authority into a non-physical space: the Internet. The cyber space represents the latest evolution in the relationship between power and territoriality, where boundaries are drawn not to limit the State authority but to control citizens' activities. The Internet played a pivotal role during the Arab Revolutions of 2011, with social media rapidly becoming a tool employed by both authoritarian regimes and their opponents (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011). The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) during the Arab Revolutions, in fact, marked a crucial turning point, not only in the development of online activism that challenged censorship and restrictions on freedom of speech, but also in providing authoritarian regimes with new instruments to consolidate their power (Al-Rawi, 2014; Allagui & Kuebler, 2011; Esfandiari, 2010).

The adaptability of authoritarian regimes to ICTs has enabled them to develop specific strategies to extend their *Gewaltmonopol* in the cyber space through legal and technological information control and by challenging opponents' narratives (Abrahams & Leber, 2021; Deibert, 2015). Put differently, the expansion of digital technologies has allowed authoritarian regimes to further consolidate their power by exerting control and repression in the online space. This phenomenon, known as digital authoritarianism, is pivotal for understanding how the relationship among the State and society has evolved, as ICTs are used both to enhance repressive strategies and to spread dissent against authoritarian practices (Pearson, 2024; Dragu & Lupu, 2021). One of the main pillars of digital authoritarianism is the encouragement of self-censorship among the population, used as a tool for facilitating large-scale suppression of online dissent. This system can either collapse or intensify depending on the clarity of the boundaries that define acceptable speech: when such boundaries are absent or too weak, it can trigger the so-called cyber-speech cascade (Druzin & Gordon, 2018). The expansion of authoritarian regimes' *Gewaltmonopol* into the cyber space, then, is closely dependent on the existence of boundaries, which are established through specific legislation. However, such laws are often intentionally vague and verbose, designed to instil a climate of intimidation and fear (Druzin & Gordon, 2018; Deibert, 2010).

Furthermore, dissent and opposition movements are increasingly framed by authoritarian regimes as potential threats to their survival, making the implications of digital authoritarianism particularly evident in matters of national security. By shaping the concept of national security according to their interests and goals, authoritarian regimes

have developed *ad hoc* cyber security strategies that contribute to model the on-line space after the physical one, thereby enforcing regulations and policies to control the 'cyber borders' (Deibert, 2015). Building on the concept of digital authoritarianism, this paper considers cyberauthoritarianism as the expansion of legal boundaries in the online space under the pretext of safeguarding national security. By considering digital authoritarianism as a sociopolitical model consisting of three components, i.e. the use of digital technologies to surveil and repress; the deployment of authoritarian practices in the cyber space to influence and control narratives; and the regulation concerning digital systems (Jarrett et al., 2025), this paper puts forward the definition of cyberauthoritarianism as a strategy of cybergovernance through which governments protect their hold on power by enacting legal frameworks that target online opposition and facilitate the legal repression of dissent in both digital and physical spaces. This framework focuses on how authoritarian regimes construct legal justifications to physically target opposition and dissent originating in the cyberspace by framing them as threats to national security, thus modelling cybersecurity to pursue subjective goals. They do so by developing specific laws and regulations that enable ruling élites to physically persecute and repress activists and dissidents through the expansion of their *Gewaltmonopol* in the online space, all without accountability.

Even countries that are democracies *de jure* can present authoritarian traits that further developed in the cyber space. The case of Lebanon is, in that sense, particularly emblematic of this tendence. Since its independence, Lebanon saw the emergence of élites who strengthen their position through clientelism. Notwithstanding the alternation of Sunnis, Maronites and Shi'ites at the top levels of the State, any faction relied heavily on the presence of networks of loyalists to exercise their authority (Arnous, 2018). Furthermore, given the influence of sectarianism in the institutional development of the country, the institutional framework foresaw the implementation of a quota system with the presence of coalition governments (Salamey, 2021; Di Peri, 2009; Lijphart, 2002). The survival of governments therefore remains firmly anchored to the presence of clientelist networks embedded within the State apparatus, particularly given the quota system's reliance on the functioning of clientelism. In this context, Lebanese political élites actively sustain sectarianism, which is deeply intertwined with clientelist practices, despite publicly denouncing it as a root cause of the instability of the country. This critique, however, mirrors the discourse advanced by opposition groups and civil society actors, which the political élites seek to appropriate in an effort to maintain legitimacy and control over the narrative (Abi Yaghi & Yammine, 2020; Nagle, 2018).

Similarly to what happened during the Arab Revolutions, the use of artificial intelligence tools, on-line surveillance, and manipulation of information on social media had a direct effect on exploiting national security as a justification for the survival of authoritarian regimes (Conduit, 2024). In the Lebanese context, political élites have sought to safeguard their power position and their economic privileges by redefining the legal boundaries to their *Gewaltmonopol* in the cyber space. This has involved the introduction of a targeted legislation aimed at reframing cybersecurity, where online dissent is portrayed as a threat to national security, namely the Lebanese National Cyber Security Strategy (LNCSS). The latter builds upon prior legislation concerning the regulation of communications and digital privacy, particularly regarding economic matters. The economic sector, heavily controlled by sectarian groups, has become the primary target of oppositions forces, as it is widely perceived as the expression of the systemic corruption in the country (Deets & Abou Harb, 2024; Majed & Salman, 2019). The wave of criticism erupted in 2015 was met with massive repression by the government, while the economic crisis of 2019 further intensified the use of ICTs and social media by both protesters and political élites (Abi

Yaghi & Yammine, 2020). However, while protesters employed these tools to mobilise and disseminate their demands, political élites exploited them to monitor and suppress dissent through targeted surveillance and physical repression.

Methodology

In order to retrace the development of cyberauthoritarianism in Lebanon and its effects in society, this study employed law in context to identify the relation between power relations and cybersecurity tools in regard to their effects on civil society, activists and minorities. Law in context, in fact, revealed to be particularly efficient in analysing the social dimension of the law and its effects, also paying attention to the relationship between informal rules and norms existing within a community (Hart, 1961; Twining, 1997). Arising from the field of socio-legal studies, law in context allows for the understanding of the origin and the evolution of laws and legal frameworks, taking into account how historically institutions and political discourses are intertwined, providing fertile ground for the exercise of power by the ruling élites (Twining, 2000, 2007, 2009).

Specifically, law in context facilitates the analysis of primary sources, namely legal texts, in relation to secondary sources, hence fostering an interdisciplinary approach to the study of legislative development. The case study of Lebanon was therefore constructed as it follows. As primary sources, two laws were considered, i.e. Law no. 140/1999 and Law no. 81/2018, as well as the LNCSS, a strategy, and thus an infra-legal instrument developed by the Government, which is here treated as a norm since it legitimised provisions that had been applied even prior to its formal enactment to serve the shared interests of sectarian leaders (Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007). In legal terms, a strategy can be considered as a norm when it influences decision-making without parliamentary discussion, formalising practices that were already occurring and granting them institutional legitimacy. Primary sources were interpreted in light of both historical events and secondary sources, which in this case study are represented by reports, indicators, and information concerning the respect of human and digital rights in Lebanon, with a specific focus on repression mechanisms employed by the government. In particular, secondary sources included grey literature produced by international organisations advocating for human and digital rights (including Muhal - Observatory for Freedom of Expression, Electronic Frontier Foundation - EFF, Global Voices Advocacy - AdVox), independent media platforms such as Open Democracy, and international and Lebanese NGOs (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, Social Media Exchange - SMEX). In this regard, the law in context approach helps shed light on how historical events and political decisions influence legislative development, eventually focusing on the LNCSS as both the outcome of the legislative evolution in the field of cybersecurity and the tool for the exercise of cyberauthoritarianism. More specifically, the analysis has been divided into the following sections: the historical examination of Lebanese power relations, with a focus on the relationship between consociationalism and authoritarianism; the analysis of the evolution of the legal framework on cyber security; the examination of the use of cyber surveillance up to 2019; and the in-depth analysis of the LNCSS.

Authoritarianism and consociationalism

Consociationalism has traditionally been employed to classify all those countries characterised by divided societies, where the institutional framework and the political composition of the state are designed to promote peace amid ongoing conflict among different social groups (Lijphart, 1977). This classification highlights the existence of social divisions among society, which must be maintained in order to ensure the establishment of a form of political segregation aimed at preventing conflict through the rule of an élite

(Dixon, 2020). According to this perspective, a power-sharing system based on proportional representation is regarded as the essence of consociationalism as the only viable means of ensuring democracy in divided societies. Therefore, the need to prevent or resolve conflicts is used to justify the establishment of an institutional framework that, in the case of Lebanon, guarantees the reproduction of sectarian dynamics in accordance with the law enforced by sectarian authoritarian élites (Dixon, 2020). In this sense, authoritarianism and consociationalism are two sides of the same coin, as the former is the conflict management tool of the latter.

The Lebanese constitution's *de facto* protection of sectarianism allowed sectarian élites to repress dissent through authoritarian means while escaping accountability, thereby reshaping consociational discourse in ways that served their needs. Proportional representation is fundamental in enabling sectarian élites to sustain their clientelist network and to safeguard their control over the economy of the country through a "sectarian authoritarian form of power-sharing" (Dixon, 2020, p. 124). Furthermore, the Constitution defines Lebanon as an Arab country, thereby aiming at establishing a common identity in the declared intent to overcome sectarianism in the aftermath of the civil war (1975–1990) (Salamey, 2021). However, the constitutional revision that followed the Ta'if Agreement was no other than a cosmetic operation, since political parties continued to forge alliances based on confessional affiliations, keeping sectarianism alive to fulfil their political goals (Mazzola, 2023; Halawi, 2020). Inevitably, alliances impacted on the appointment of ministries and, consequently, on the so-called service ministries, namely the most funded ones, which inevitably underwent the influence of sectarian and clientelist dynamics (Mahmalat & Zoughaib, 2022; Toubia et al., 2019). Although this aspect may seem marginal, it proves to be crucial when the government allocates funds, choosing to invest in certain activities over others. This mechanism inevitably ensures that, through consociationalism, resources remain in the hands of sectarian élites, securing not only wealth but also significant political influence.

The growing social and political instability that had gripped the country since the Cedar Revolution worsened in the aftermath of Arab Revolutions and the Syrian war. Maintaining sectarianism alive was pivotal for the survival of the consociational system, with the ruling political parties exploiting the institutional framework of the country to secure and reinforce their position of power (El-Masri, 2023; Di Peri, 2014). The issue at stake, then, implied the necessity of safeguarding economy by keeping it firmly in the hands of élites. Indeed, this phenomenon was closely connected to the intensification of clientelist practices within the government, which contributed significantly to the mismanagement of Lebanon. Popular dissatisfaction with political corruption grew steadily, peaking with the garbage crisis of 2015, which triggered the emergence of the *You Stink!* protests and the following violent clashes in Beirut (Yee & Saad, 2019). The garbage crisis marked a point of no return in the State-society relations. Over time, the situation deteriorated further, as deepening socioeconomic disparities and fiscal deficits were exacerbated by sectarian forces manipulating economic structures through an allied entrepreneurial bourgeoisie. The collapse of the tourism sector following the onset of the Syrian civil war further compounded Lebanon's economic decline. Additionally, the governmental paralysis of 2014 revealed what Kraidy (2016, p. 21) defined as the "decapitated body politic", a condition made manifest through the State's inability to respond effectively to the garbage crisis and the popular mobilization it provoked (Harvie & Saleh, 2008; Di Peri & Costantini, 2023).

The need to preserve elitist economic privileges, as the cornerstone for the survival of the consociational order, profoundly shaped the entrenchment of sectarian authoritarianism in Lebanon. Since the independence of the country, sectarianism has

been sustained by authoritarian practices that have prevented the formation of democratic institutions and effective popular participation in the management of Lebanese economic resources. In this sense, conflicts among sectarian élites functioned to counter the emergence of a cross-class revolutionary movement through structural violence and coercion (Mazzola, 2023; Halawi, 2020). Authoritarianism, legitimised by the Lebanese institutional framework set up by sectarian élites, thus became the tool for maintaining class interests and economic power (Salloukh et al., 2015). The grassroot and non-sectarian nature of the 2015 protests highlighted widespread public discontent with Lebanon's political and economic situation, while concurrently questioning the legitimacy of the government's exercise of *Gewaltmonopol*, which framed political dissent as a threat to the survival of the consociational order (Daher, 2021). The protests denounced that the very political forces dependent on sectarianism and systemic corruption for their survival might attempt to exploit the anti-establishment discourse to manipulate the outcome of administrative and political elections (Mazzucotelli, 2020). These suspicions were later substantiated with Hezbollah launching an anti-corruption campaign, whose goal was to lift the restrictions imposed by the Lebanese Central Bank on their satellite activities and affiliated networks rather than to promote a successful systemic reform (Salloukh, 2020). Since 2015, civil rights have increasingly become under threat, with activists and journalist being targeted by security forces and government supporters, and the Parliament exploiting social unrest to prolong its mandate until 2018 (Vértes et al., 2021).

Furthermore, early signs of the impending economic crisis had already emerged, with unemployment rates escalating quickly and the Central Bank imposing restrictions on access to credit for depositors. Physical and on-line spaces for dissent increasingly came under the control of the government and its supporters, marked by the intensification of repressive measures (Daher, 2021). The 2019 protests highlighted how consociationalism was *de facto* sustained by sectarian authoritarianism, as proved by the governmental attempts to reframe the discourse on sectarianism as the root cause of Lebanon's instability, while simultaneously relying heavily on repression against those who publicly denounced sectarian corruption.

The evolution of the legal framework on online security and the development of online surveillance

The Lebanese security apparatus was developed by the sectarian élites in response to the need to maintain stability in the aftermath of the civil war. Before the Ta'if agreement, there was no specific reference to security policies in the Lebanese institutional framework, with the exception of exceptional circumstances due to external threats to territorial integrity. The authority over security policy was vested in the President of the Republic, while, according to the Legislative Decree no. 102/1983, the Supreme Defence Council (SDC) was the body responsible for planning defence and security policies in cases of extraordinary circumstances or war. Legislative Decree no. 101/1984 further developed the institutional security architecture by granting the Council of Ministers the authority to supervise and implement security policies, thus making the SDC and the Government the primary source of security decision-making (Tlais, 2013).

The Ta'if agreement reorganised the security framework of the country by establishing agencies under the authority of the Ministries of Defence and Interior, whose management was distributed among sectarian leaders in order to reinforce consociationalism. By granting the Government the duty of formulating security policies, while assigning the President of the Republic with the role of Commander in Chief of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), whose interventions were, however, subjected to governmental control, the Ta'if agreement effectively placed the development of a national security strategy entirely

in the hands of the executive power and, *de facto*, in those of sectarian interests. The LAF, commanded by Maronites and Druze, were entrusted with the task of ensuring military surveillance which, however, was not limited to strictly military threats but also extended to domestic surveillance. All other agencies operated under the authority of the Ministry of Interior. While some of them had existed before 1991, as in the case of the General Directorate for General Security (GDGS) and the Directorate of State Security, the establishment of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) marked a significant turning point in strengthening sectarian control over the Lebanese population. This becomes particularly clear when considering that the ISF were commanded by Sunnis, the DGSG was a collective consociational leadership body which, by 1988, also included Shiites, and the Directorate of State Security was commanded by the Greek Orthodox (Tlais, 2013; Collelo, 1989).

Eventually, the LAF and the ISF became the two main pillars sustaining the security apparatus which, however, by the end of the 1990s, still lacked a proper strategy for monitoring telecommunications and cyber activities, which extended not only to politicians or community leaders, but also to common citizens. The Government's capacity of developing *ad hoc* conditions to extend its legitimate control on public affairs can in fact be traced back to the enforcement of two laws: Law no. 140/1999 and Law no. 81/2018. Given that the legal panorama of Lebanon lacked a specific regulation concerning ICTs until the enforcement of the LNCSS, these two laws provided the initial framework for the development of a national cyber security strategy that, up to that moment, was lacking.

Law no. 140/1999[1] established the right to secrecy of communications subject to exceptions in the context of explicitly issued judicial inquiries. Articles 2 and 3 delineated the limits of the judicial authorisation, restricting interception measures to cases of emergency or individuals explicitly suspected of criminal activities. The methods of interception, as well as the type of communication tools targeted, must be clearly defined, with the duration of the imposed measures not exceeding two months (L. 140/1999, Art. 2-3). However, exceptions were allowed in case the Ministries of Defence and Interior, upon receiving prior written authorisation from the Prime Minister, required an interception for very specific felonies, such as crimes against the State, terrorism, organised crime and State security. (L. 140/1999, Art. 9). Any unauthorised interception was subjected to prosecution under the penal code (L. 140/1999, Art. 17).

Moreover, Law no. 81/2018 was conceived to provide a legal framework for electronic transactions and data protection. It regulated electronic signatures, the protection of individual privacy, commercial activities, and e-commerce transactions[2]. According to the law, ICTs must not infringe upon individual freedom, especially in terms of personal identity, individual rights and privacy (L. 81/2018). While all public communications must comply with national security laws and to the Constitution, in situations involving national threats or criminal activities, the law permitted searches and seizures of personal data, financial, economic or managerial files (L. 81/2018).

The strategic importance of the ICT sector became evident with the establishment of the Lebanon Cyber Crime Bureau in 2006 by the ISF. Not formally conceived as an official branch of the Security Forces or as an agency under the authority of the Ministry of Interior, the Bureau came into force as an unofficial interrogatory body operating outside Lebanese legislative framework managed by the ISF. Its mandate and operations were not grounded into statutory law, thereby bypassing the provisions of Law no. 140/1999 and

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[1] Full text of the law 140/1999: http://www.legallaw.ul.edu.lb/Law.aspx?lawId=198664, last accessed 21 July 2025.

[2] Full text of the law 81/2018: https://alp.unescwa.org/legislations/law-81-2018-electronic-transactions-and-personal-data, last accessed 21 July 2025.

exploiting the legal vacuum regarding the data protection in electronic communication (Frangieh, 2013; Abi Ghanem, 2017). The Bureau, then, functioned as a *de facto* authority with exclusive jurisdiction over social media surveillance, despite lacking formal governmental or ministerial authorisation. Consequently, its actions fell outside both institutional accountability and democratic oversight.

Furthermore, the IT industry became strongly intertwined with politics as well. The diffusion of smartphones at end of the 2000s, in fact, determined a significant increase in attention to ICTs, particularly in software development. The ICT sector grew exponentially over the last decade, with Lebanon emerging as a regional technology exporter (Ben Hassen, 2018). The establishment of the National ICT Strategy Coordination Unit in 2010, under the supervision of the office of the Prime Minister, was in fact symptomatic of the importance the government attributed to technology, even though the latter admitted to insufficiently funding academic research on the topic (Gaillard, 2010). As a result, the ICT sector developed largely through venture capital and private financial support, which in turn deepened the government's dependence on the private sector. The relationship between the public and private sectors, in fact, has long been a crucial issue for the Lebanese governments, especially since the private sector constitutes approximately 70% of the national income[3]. Put differently, when it comes to cyber security, public institutions heavily rely on the support of private entities. According to the 2017 report of the Investment Development Authority of Lebanon (IDAL), IT companies and related activities reached around 800 units (IDAL, 2017). The ICT industry appear to be particularly remunerative due to its operational model, which aligns with the traditional business model of the country based on entrepreneurial bourgeoisie composed of networks of family-run enterprises (Ahmed & Julian, 2012).

The collusion between political élites and private companies on online surveillance became particularly evident with the eruption of the Dark Caracal scandal in 2018. The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), an international non-profit digital rights group, and Lookout[4], a US-based cybersecurity company, exposed one of the biggest cyber espionage campaigns in recent years, whose origin was traced back to the GDGS building in Beirut in 2012 (Lookout & EFF, 2018). Dark Caracal was a malware tool designed to access smartphones and laptops, stealing personal data from a broad range of targets, including military personnel, journalists, and civil society activists, in more than 20 countries. Despite international human rights groups and associations, such as Amnesty International, accusations of State-led cyber surveillance targeting Lebanese activists within and outside the boundaries of the country, the Lebanese government and the GDGS denied any involvement in the Dark Caracal scandal (Lookout & EFF, 2018; SMEX, 2018a, 2018b).

Cyber surveillance and physical repression up to the 2019 protests

According to human and digital rights groups like Social Media Exchange (SMEX) and Global Voices Advocacy (AdVox), the Lebanese government has repeatedly exploited online surveillance to target activists and civil rights defendants since 2015. The *You Stink!* protests marked a new era in Lebanese history due to the strength of civil society in challenging the power system dominated by sectarian élites. Unlike the past, there was widespread consensus on the identification of sectarian networks, and not political parties, as the root cause of the country's mismanagement (Assi, 2021; Daher, 2021; Abi

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[3] https://www.presidency.gov.lb/English/LebaneseSystem/Pages/OverviewOfTheLebaneseSystem.aspx, last accessed 26 November 2025.
[4] https://www.eff.org/it, last accessed 26 November 2025.

Yaghi & Yammine, 2020). Furthermore, the diffusion of smartphones and portable ICT devices provided opposition groups with faster and more effective means of communication. At the same time, these technologies were exploited by the Cyber Crime Bureau to enforce surveillance over the population. This issue was closely scrutinized by SMEX and AdVox, who uncovered evidence of collusion between the ISF, the Bureau, the Lebanese Army, and the surveillance company Hacking Team in monitoring activists' communications and targeting Lebanese citizens by exploiting a bug in the Angry Birds game application (AdVox, 2015a). In other words, since 2015, opposition groups, activists, and minorities have been subjected to continuous surveillance, with the Cyber Crime Bureau conducting interrogation and making arrests without official orders by the government or the Ministry of Interior (AdVox, 2015a, 2015b). The Muhal Observatory for the Freedom of Expression reported 86 cases in 2015 alone, including interrogations, arrests, detentions, and seizures of material, with the average number of cases remaining steady through 2020 (Muhal, 2024).

The trend of the exploitation of the lack of a legislation on digital rights as the legal justification for the exercise of violence by the State intensified throughout the following years, resulting in the progressive erosion of human rights and freedom both within and outside the online space. Lebanese élites promoted counter-narratives aimed at silencing the *You Stink!* movement and delegitimising protesters' demands, as civil society organisations had been considered a threat to the stability of the sectarian power system since 2005 (Clark & Salloukh, 2013). The massive physical violence used by Security Forces to suppress the 2015 movement was followed by an increase of online surveillance measures and mobile devices remote control (Assi, 2021; Geha, 2019; Amnesty International, 2015). Social networks came under systematic control due to their pivotal role in enabling opposition movements and civil society organisations to regroup and actively participate to the 2016 municipal elections (Assi, 2021; Geha, 2019). Meanwhile, blocks of internet contents and apps paved the way for the progressive crackdown on freedom of speech, which became evident since 2017.

Under the guise of security matters, in 2017 the Minister of Telecommunications Jamal Jarrah initiated procedures for imposing biometric registration for the purchase of prepaid sim cards without proper regulations for the safeguard of personal data (SMEX, 2017a). This decision raised concerns as it followed the introduction of biometric residence permits for non-Lebanese residents in Lebanon, suggesting a clear government attempt to control both the population and the freedom of speech by restricting access to communication tools. Furthermore, attacks against activist and minorities increased, as proven by the blocking of the dating app Grindr, the cancelation of the Beirut pride, unauthorised access to WhatsApp profiles, and the arrests and interrogations conducted by the ISF (Chamas, 2023; Abdel Khalek, 2020). Amnesty International reported that the ISF forced detained activists into signing false confessions and illegal pledges to be cleared of charges, while arresting anyone who shared material online, including satirical content, criticising the ruling élite (Amnesty International, 2018a). A particularly illustrative example of this phenomenon was the arrests of Youssef Abdallah in 2018, a minor who used a meme of President Michel Aoun as his WhatsApp profile picture. He was held in detention for 38 hours without access to a lawyer, and his parents were barred from attending the interrogation (Amnesty International, 2018a; Muhal, 2018). Other notable illegal detentions included Ghassan Abdallah, general director of the Palestinian Human Rights Organisation, and Hadi Damien, spokesperson of the Beirut Pride, as well as 62 reported arrests of artists, activists and journalists in 2018 (Amnesty International, 2018b, 2018c; Human Rights Watch, 2018a, 2018b).

The protests of 2019 marked a further escalation in the State's use of violence due to a shift in the spatial dynamic of the conflict between civil society and political élites. The critique of the political-economic system, in fact, brought together several issues, such as human rights, gender inequality, unemployment and labour conditions, shedding light on the crisis of political legitimacy that sectarianism was experiencing (Sharp, 2023; Open Democracy, 2019). When the 2019 protests broke out, images of the violence perpetrated by the Lebanese Security Forces went viral, with social media serving as the primary communication channels and hashtags acting as powerful collective calls for mobilisation (Abi Yaghi & Yammine, 2020; Amnesty International, 2019a, 2019b). Online monitoring and physical violence became strongly intertwined, with the former enabling the actions of the Cyber Crime Bureau, and the latter serving both to control public spaces and facilitate on-site monitoring of mobile devices by the ISF (Daher, 2021; AdVox, 2020; Freedom House, 2020). Lebanese authorities turned to the legislation against defamation to justify the arrest of civil society members, while the Bureau continued to operate without any official mandate from the government, targeting Facebook and Twitter content related to the country's economic situation, deemed a threat to institutional security (Freedom House, 2020). The final stage of the evolving power relation between civil society and political élites was the drafting of the first national strategy for cyber security, which was supposed to fill the normative gap on the topic. Indeed, the exploitation of the concept of security by the Lebanese government led to the creation of a legal framework that both legitimised online surveillance and strengthened the capacity of law enforcement and police activities to prevent and prosecute cybercrimes.

The Lebanese National Cyber Security Strategy: Power-discourses through cyber security

The Lebanese National Cyber Security Strategy[5] (LNCSS) was developed in 2019 under the cabinet of Saad Hariri. Although the LNCSS was launched on 14 December 2022, many of the measures outlined in the strategy had already been in force long before 2019. Put differently, the LNCSS served to provide legal legitimacy for certain repressive practices already in use within the Lebanese cyberspace. The LNCSS was conceived as a policy document intended to establish a legal framework for the creation of the National Cyber Security Information System Agency (NCISA), an agency attached to the General Secretary of the Higher Council of Defence, tasked with coordinating efforts with Law Enforcement Agencies (LEA), the ISF, the Cyber Crime Bureau, and various Ministries. The strategy document consists of a Preamble written by former Prime Minister Hariri, two programmatic parts, and the Conclusions paragraph.

The first part of LNCSS is dedicated to the definition of the core pillars of the Lebanese national strategy, focusing on the country's relevant actors and the threats that would most likely affect the stability of the State. These threats are identified as "malicious cyber activities [that] are designed to compromise the confidentiality, the integrity, and the availability of Networks, IT Systems, and Information" (LNCSS, 2019, p. 13). They are classified as crimes, threats, or attacks according to the use of ICT devices, the scope of the activity, and the actors involved. Accordingly, the LNCSS categorises a range of cyber-related offenses based on their specific characteristics. Both cyber-dependent and cyber-enabled crimes, for instance, imply the use of ICT devices to perpetrate the felony, while they differ in purpose. The former typically pursue financial gain; the latter encompasses a broader range of violations, from propaganda to espionage. Indeed, terrorist threats

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[5] Full text of the LNCSS: http://www.pcm.gov.lb/Library/Files/LRF/tamim/Strategie_Liban_Cyber_EN_V20_Lg.pdf, last accessed 26 November 2025.

represent the broadest category, with hacktivist threats as a subcategory. The list also includes State and State-sponsored threats as well as insider threats (LNCSS, 2019, pp. 13-14).

Furthermore, the LNCSS identifies the Government, Businesses and Organisations, and Individuals, namely citizens, consumers, and employees, as the main actors responsible for "securing the national cyber space" (LNCSS, 2019, p. 19). Notwithstanding the State retaining primary responsibility, the protection of national interests, namely the economy and cyber and non-cyber critical infrastructures, must be a multidimensional effort. This requires: the government to actively cooperate with key Ministries, LEA, and the regulatory bodies of the banking sector; organisations and businesses to safeguard the personal data they hold; and individuals to take responsibility for protecting their personal hardware (LNCSS, 2019, pp. 19-20).

The first part of the LNCSS then introduces eight strategic pillars of the national strategy for cyber security, which included: 1. Defend, deter, and reinforce against internal and external threats; 2. Develop international cooperation in the field of Cyber Security; 3. Continuously enhance State capacities to support the development of information and communication technologies; 4. Promote educational capacity on the Lebanese territory; 5. Promote industrial and technical capacity; 6. Support the export and the internationalisation of cyber security companies; 7. Strengthen collaboration between the public and the private sectors; 8. Promote the role of security and intelligence services and the strengthen of mutual cooperation and coordination with the supervision of the higher authorities (LNCSS, 2019, pp. 21-34). The first part of the LNCSS concludes by outlining the main objectives of the national strategy, among which the most important can be identified in the cooperation between the government and the private sector, the development of an *ad hoc* juridical framework to deal with the emerging cyber threats, the improvement of citizens' knowledge on cyber threats, the strengthening of LEA activities, and the development of a proper strategy to counter propaganda and destabilisation (LNCSS, 2019, pp. 35-38).

The second part of LNCSS describes the NCISA and the legal framework within which it operates. The duties of the NCISA are outlined as follows: setting policies and procedures; developing plans of action; access and counter vulnerability and threats; promote awareness; and defining critical infrastructures and operators (OVI). As the entity responsible for security in the field of information, NCISA works jointly with LEA and relevant Ministries to implement *ad hoc* national-level response teams (LNCSS, 2019, pp. 40-42). The NCISA operates at the public level, ensuring that businesses, companies, and individuals have access to defence measures. The agency also participates in academic education and research, and monitors the development of information security systems. Ultimately, the most critical activity of the NCISA is protecting against cyber threats. This requires a specific legislation, the formulation of which falls under the agency itself (LNCSS, 2019, pp. 44-45).

The examination of the LNCSS reveals two intertwined patterns that have enabled the Lebanese élites to safeguard their position of power: the role of the institutional framework in strengthening sectarianism and corruption, and a redefinition of the concept of threat. By critically engaging with these two trends in light of existing knowledge about the socio-political context, it becomes possible to shed light on how the defence of economic interests is embedded in the power discourse of Lebanese élites, as well as in their exploitation of *Gewaltmonopol* to protect those interests.

The LNCSS opens with a critique of Lebanon's sectarian conflict, presenting it as the main reason the country continues to be considered internationally a corrupt nation. Sectarianism is framed by Lebanese authorities as source of instability and a cause for

social unrest, with the "multiplicity" of sectarian groups viewed as potentially exploitable for destabilising actions (LNCSS, 2019, p. 9). In contrast, corruption, as a concrete factor of public distrust towards institutions, is only briefly addressed, and primarily in opposition to digital economy and to the State-led transition to cyber progress (LNCSS, 2019, pp. 46, 9). When discussing the relationship between the institutional framework, sectarianism and corruption, the LNCSS emphasised the establishment of a cyber security sector managed jointly by the government, the private sector, and academia as pivotal for developing effective cyber security tools. To this end, the government pledges to promote public contracts with private companies and offers monetary incentives (LNCSS, 2019, par. 3.7). This explicit comment is supported by more implicit statements throughout the LNCSS, such as designating businesses and organisations as key actors for the development of a national cyber security strategy, and identifying private cyber security companies as relevant stakeholders, basically defending entrepreneurial bourgeoisie's interests (LNCSS, 2019, pp. 19, 31). It is worth noting, however, that despite the primacy given to the private sector, the State, as the overarching institutional framework, retains its role as the ultimate coordinator and overseer of the development of the LNCSS (LNCSS, 2019, p. 35).

Furthermore, the primary role of the State is emphasised not only through its coordination of cooperation among LEA, government institutions, and key ministries, but also in efforts to improve the effectiveness of LEA in prosecuting high-profile cyber-attacks (LNCSS, 2019, pp. 19, 26). Law-enforcement capabilities are presented as the institutions' primary instrument of action, especially in the implementation of technical and judicial defence mechanisms against cyber-criminal activities. This includes, among other measures, private sector-sponsored training for officials, critical stakeholders, and judges, all conducted under the supervision of State authorities (LNCSS, 2019, pp. 23, 25-26, 27-28, par. 3.8). While the independence of LEA, public officials and the banking sector is affirmed, the collaboration of "the country" with critical stakeholders is essential for the full implementation of the national strategy for cyber security (LNCSS, 2019, pp. 30-31).

The definition and acknowledgement of threats by the Lebanese institutional framework reveal varying degrees of clarity regarding what constitutes a cyber-criminal activity when perpetrated by citizens. As a matter of fact, paragraph 1.2 of the LNCSS lists propaganda as a prosecutable threat, directly associating it to cyber-enabled crimes, terrorism, and hacktivist threats, yet failing to provide any concrete examples of what such propaganda activities entail (LNCSS, 2019, pp.13-14, 37). Notwithstanding the vagueness of the concept of propaganda, the NCISA collaborates with LEA in prosecuting cyber-crimes to counter domestic activities associated with radical thinking and behaviour on the cyber space (LNCSS, 2019, p. 43). Although radical thinking is not listed in paragraph 1.2, it appears to be connected to the "hunger" of the generation raised in the 2000s, a generation that rejected the "pre-war Lebanese culture built on integrity, respect, and competence" and now seeks compensation (LNCSS, 2019, p. 9).

In the final part of the LNCSS, the presence of non-Lebanese regular and irregular migrants, workers, and job seekers in the country is framed as problematic due to their involvement with NGOs and the perceived lack of government oversight (LNCSS, 2019, p. 47). This group, in fact, is viewed as potentially vulnerable to cyber-attacks and as a "platform for potential cyber threats and other cyber criminal acts" (LNCSS, 2019, p. 47).

Ultimately, the LNCSS effectively uses propaganda as a broad category encompassing both terrorism and any discourse of dissent, thereby implicitly framing the latter as a significant threat to domestic security. As stated in the LNCSS objectives, security and defence bodies are mandated to counter propaganda and cyber incidents, including "radical thinking and behaviour related to cyber space" (LNCSS, 2022, pp. 37, 43).

Propaganda is thus associated with dissent understood as radical thinking, and legally framed as a felony. Similarly, hacktivism is criminalised, as it is defined as "the use of computer technology to promote a political agenda or a social change" (LNCSS, 2022, p. 52). These definitions are crucial because they legitimise all those violent practices of surveillance and repression enforced prior to 2019 by providing an *ad hoc* legal framework, effectively shaping domestic security policies that justify violent means of repression both online and offline.

The impact of cyberauthoritarianism from 2019 to its institutionalisation

The procedures institutionalised with the LNCSS were the result of the practices implemented since 2019, specifically targeting groups considered dangerous due to their activism or minority status. The creation of specific offences related to anti-establishment propaganda emerged in response to public criticism directed at sectarian élites, particularly from journalists, civil society organisations, and LGBTQAI+ groups. Over the years, these categories of people incurred into investigations and repression in the physical space. However, by 2019 the space for contestation and dissent had expanded into the cyber space, immediately followed by the control and repression mechanisms operated by the government.

Private telecommunication companies have become increasingly involved in controlling the access to content deemed problematic by the government (Freedom House, 2020, 2021, 2023). According to the Lebanese legislation on telecommunication, mobile companies are State-owned, despite being privately managed. This hybrid system is strategically beneficial for the State, since it allows for both consistent revenues and political oversight on telecommunications, especially considering that management contracts were often awarded on the basis of political affiliation. The cases of Alfa and Touch, the main mobile companies of the country, blocking access to Google Firebase and other Google-owned platforms since 2017 clearly illustrate this issue. The situation has worsened since 2020, with the government's complete acquisition of these companies, which are now managed by the Ministry of Telecommunications (Freedom House, 2023; SMEX, 2017b). This shift has prevented activists from putting online anti-governmental content and using the online space to raise criticism and call for rallies.

Furthermore, given the role of social networks in disseminating content about violence by Security Forces and corruption within Lebanese institutions, the Bureau intensified its monitoring of Facebook and Twitter posts. This included launching LGBTQAI+ hate campaigns online with the support of the Ministry of Telecommunications and Hezbollah supporters, as well as orchestrating online and offline harassment of minorities and activists (Freedom House, 2020, 2021). Among the most well-known examples of social media surveillance in 2020 were the cases of Saeed Abdullah and Leen Thaini, summoned by the Bureau and eventually arrested for their Facebook posts criticising President Aoun and the Ministry of Culture, respectively (Muhal, 2020a, 2020b). To this day, the Muhal Observatory for the Freedom of Expression reports dozens of ongoing cases of government critics whose opinions have been considered harmful to public morals and national security (Muhal, 2024).

After the publication of the LNCSS, groups that had already been targeted by institutions for their offline and online criticism of the corruption of the State faced further restrictions on their freedom of action and additional violations of their rights. The 2024 Israeli invasion of Lebanon further worsened the situation. Regardless of the mobile network they were using, Lebanese citizens received SMS and WhatsApp messages throughout the conflict containing threats, false information, or request for information. Inevitably, NGOs and pro-Palestine activists were specifically targeted (SMEX, 2024a). A

related development involves the suspension of mobile network access for Syrian refugees, presented as a security measure. Although closely tied to broader efforts to facilitate the deportation of Syrian nationals, the Ministry of Telecommunications has declared its intention to deploy Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technologies to identify forged identification documents and thereby prevent the issuance of SIM cards to individuals without legal residency. Serious concerns have emerged regarding the implementation of this policy, particularly its potential impact on Lebanese citizens through the collection, storage, and protection of personal data associated with OCR use. While the measure appears to align with overarching political strategies aimed at pressuring Syrian refugees to return, it lacks a clear legal foundation and is likely to further aggravate the already vulnerable conditions faced by displaced Syrians residing in Lebanon (SMEX, 2024b).

Ultimately, independent media and journalists are, as of today, the most active groups exposing the corruption of Lebanese élites. Thanks to online and offline transnational networks, they carry out extremely important work in raising awareness about their living conditions under constant threats by the state. Due to the difficulties in identifying a flaw in the legal framework concerning the abuse of cybersecurity by the Lebanese authorities, the most successful strategy for exposing the brutality of online and offline repression is appealing to the respect of freedom of speech. For instance, since 2020, the Coalition for the Freedom of Speech in Lebanon is one of the most active transnational organisations monitoring the actions of Lebanese law enforcement agencies and setting up solidarity networks. Inevitably, the work of independent media and journalists is obstructed by sectarian élites who, thanks to their presence at every critical level of the State's apparatus, attempt to undermine the credibility of investigations in every possible way. A recent example involves the corruption allegations made against the candidates for the presidency of the Central Bank of Lebanon, which paved the way for a government complaint against independent media outlets which investigate on the mismanagement of the 2019 economic crisis (Amnesty International, 2025).

Conclusions

The Lebanese case demonstrates how cyberauthoritarianism can be a powerful tool for adapting online legislation to prevent both the dismantle of a corrupted power system and the democratic advancement. The LNCSS, in fact, makes the collusion between the private sector and political élites visible by stating the public sector's dependence on the private one, implicitly acknowledging the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie's pivotal role in defending consociational stability through the enforcement of cybersurveillance.

Lebanese cyberauthoritarianism allows for a reflection on the evolving relationship between the territoriality of law and the legitimate exercise of State's violence. The analysis of the Lebanese case clearly reveals how the exploitation of *Gewaltmonopol* went far beyond physical and non-physical boundaries, enabling State institutions to establish a specific legal framework that overlaps online and offline spaces and redefines the legitimacy of State's policies. The ambiguous jurisdiction of the Cyber Crime Bureau, in fact, is the concrete example of how cyber borders can be shaped accordingly to political needs through the employment of agencies whose legitimacy is questionable. The inclusion of the Bureau among the bodies responsible for cyber security implied a formal recognition of its activities as pivotal for guaranteeing domestic security. This aspect is particularly controversial, as it legitimised a grey area of intervention due to the Bureau's lack of a clearly defined place within the State's institutional framework. The absence of regulation regarding the activities of the Bureau, together with the vagueness surrounding

the definition of cybercrime, then, has become the cornerstone of Lebanese cyberauthoritarianism.

The peculiarity of the Bureau lies in its role as the contact point between private surveillance companies, the ISF, and the government's political leadership, thus being itself the evidence of State corruption in both the physical and the non-physical space. Thanks to the LNCSS, the Bureau assumed the functions of both guarantor and watchdog of the élites' power discourse. The LNCSS, in this sense, eliminated the distinction between the State's legitimate use of force and its illegitimate use of violence by reshaping the narrative on threats to national security (Benjamin, 2014; Deibert, 2015). In order to safeguard their position of power, sectarian élites, embedded within both institutions and private companies, reframed the meaning of security in relation to any possible threat to their privilege. Coercive measures, surveillance and the creation of a legal framework that allows those in power to avoid constitutional accountability for their actions were thus functional in legally framing social change advocates as threats equivalent to terrorism.

The incorporation of online dissent into cybersecurity legislation, along with the systematic prosecution of online activism, made the LNCSS the cyberauthoritarian tool designed to legally suppress all political discourses advocating for social change and the end of corruption. Contesting the actions of sectarian élites thus became framed as a national threat. Since the protection of national interests, defined as the economic interests embedded in the élites' power discourse, is considered a collective responsibility, the government, in collaboration with private sector and academia, must lead surveillance efforts to safeguard these interests. The deliberate absence of a clear definition of domestic security serves to extend *Gewaltmonopol* to encompass any activity suspected of posing an existential threat. This effectively lowers the threshold of tolerance towards any counter discourse against the élites, thus legitimising and broadening the authority of law enforcement agencies to protect power relations. As a direct consequence, the boundaries of security between physical and online space are not existing, resulting in increased targeting of activists, civil society organisations and minorities.

Eventually, the development of the LNCSS, centred on the evolution of activism as the grassroot force capable of undermining the existence of political, economic, and reputational advantages of the élites, highlights the consociational opposition to democratic progress. The juxtaposition between the youngest generations and the Lebanese institutions established in the LNCSS is instrumental in safeguarding the interests of consociational élites. Put differently, anything unrelated to the history of Lebanon post-civil war history is framed as a threat to social peace. This instrumental reversal of the country's history, together with the portrayal of demands for human and civil rights advancement as source of instability, formed the theoretical foundation of the élite's discourse of power. Thus, the introduction of the LNCSS legalised the consociational power discourse by providing specific and efficient tools for silencing criticism against Lebanese institutions through the exploitation of the concept of security.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Securitization of Frontiers
The European Union's Migration, Refugee, and Asylum Policies in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

There is criticism among Member States and the European Union of the intentions and procedures of the EU's immigration policy, in particular the political management of external borders and support for immigrants. Against the backdrop of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to understand how the EU institutions and Member States have responded politically to immigration flows, refugees and asylum seekers. Was this period an opportunity to strengthen European integration and take measures that materialise the symbolism of European values, or were the accusations and fears of critical voices amplified? Based on a documentary analysis of the EU institutions on immigration, refugee and asylum policies in 2020 and 2021, we analyse the main issues, their agenda and decisions. The results of this research allow us to identify how the securitization of immigration, narratives and policies are used to reinforce the integration process.

Keywords: Migration; Refugees; Asylum; COVID-19; European Integration

Introduction

In the first quarter of 2020, crisis management of the COVID-19 pandemic, to contain infection chains, included the complete or partial closure of the European Union's external borders by Member States (MS), the reintroduction of internal border controls, restrictions on freedom of movement and on asylum policy (Marin, 2020).

Before measures were taken at Community level, unilateral national actions had direct consequences, such as disruption of the internal market and the Schengen Agreement. The unilateralism of national policies led to differences in the protection of immigrants, access to residence permits and healthcare, or even in the procedures for asylum applications. At the same time, despite calls to uphold the right to asylum, the application of the Dublin Regulation system was effectively suspended, as several countries failed to comply with its provisions, partly due to divergent interpretations and implementation of its criteria (European Parliament, 2022).

The European Union (EU) and its MS faced significant criticism for failing to fulfil their obligations, with cumbersome political and procedural bureaucracy leaving asylum applicants in a state of protracted uncertainty and heightened risk. This was compounded by severe insecurities within reception camps, such as those in Greece and Turkey, where conditions were characterized by overcrowding and inadequate sanitation. Despite these critiques, the EU demonstrated its capacity for legislative action during the peak of the pandemic, advancing new regulatory frameworks such as the New Pact on Migration and Asylum and reforms like the Blue Card Directive. A renewed understanding of the dynamics between MS and EU institutions across various policy fields is critically needed. This is particularly evident in migration and border management, where EU and national policies have shown a marked tendency towards securitization.

Concurrently, the experience of past crises has exposed profound fissures and a propensity for national unilateralism. Paradoxically, these same crises have often precipitated EU-level political reforms that have further centralized authority in these domains (Jones et al., 2021). This dynamic reflects a complex dialectic, wherein introspective, unilateral impulses coexist with, and at times provoke, a reinforcement of supranational governance. As Van Middelaar (2020) summarizes, crises represent "moments of truth" during which the EU has assumed greater politicization.

This article examines the political management of immigration[1], refugee[2] and asylum-seeker[3] flows by EU institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. It analyses how policy responses and public narratives were strategically deployed, not only to manage the immediate health and mobility crisis, but also to advance the broader project of European integration. Specifically, it asks: how did EU policies during the COVID-19 pandemic reinforce the ongoing trend toward the securitization of borders, and how did this dynamic shape the trajectory of European integration??

To address this question, a systematic analysis was conducted of key strategic documents and public statements issued primarily by the main EU institutions, concerning immigration, refugee, and asylum policies during 2020 and 2021—a period significantly shaped by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Once the documents were selected, they underwent content analysis (Bardin, 1977).

The article begins with the development of the concept of securitization and establishes a link between this concept in the historical process of European integration and the shaping of Community policies on immigration, refugees and asylum seekers, including the Frontex agency. After outlining the research methodology, which draws on official EU documents on immigration policy, the article presents its findings. It concludes with a reflection on these findings and their implications for the ongoing trend toward securitization within the broader context of European integration.

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[1] According to UN, "an international migrant is someone who changes his or her country of usual residence, irrespective of the reason for migration or legal status. Generally, a distinction is made between short-term or temporary migration, covering movements with a duration between three and 12 months, and long-term or permanent migration, referring to a change of country of residence for a duration of one year or more".

[2] According to UN "Refugees are persons who are outside their country of origin for reasons of feared persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order and, as a result, require international protection."

[3] According to UN: "An asylum-seeker is someone who is seeking international protection. Their request for refugee status, or complementary protection status, has yet to be processed, or they may not yet have requested asylum but they intend to do so" (https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-protect/asylum-seekers).

Securitization and Desecuritization on EU migration policies

During the process of European integration, as for the process of political, economic, and legal unification among countries, aimed at fostering cooperation, stability, and shared governance, primarily through the framework of the EU (Peterson, 2001), its institutions developed a common immigration policy involving shared institutional frameworks, cooperation among MS, and even coordination with national security services. This policy was implemented through institutional mechanisms. Notable milestones include the Schengen Agreement, the formal incorporation of migration into intergovernmental regulation as outlined in the EU Treaty, and the establishment of the Frontex agency.

Throughout history, migratory movements have been constant and have varied according to origin, characteristics, and the will, needs and possibilities of the receiving countries. As a result of these factors, a common immigration policy was also introduced in the EU, including the monitoring and control of arrivals (Zaiotti & Abdulhamid, 2021).

In the 1950s and 1960s, immigration was regarded as a necessary labour force. In subsequent decades, this perception changed and immigration became the subject of accusations, particularly due to changes in the labour market and alleged disruptions to public order. From the 1980s onwards, the public debate on immigration increasingly focused on issues of security, integration, the protection of national and cultural identity and the overburdening of the welfare states. This pressure shaped public opinion, informed the priorities articulated in political discourse, and influenced the formulation of national and EU-level policies, thereby contributing to the securitization of EU migration policy (Huysmans, 2000; Lodge, 1993).

Later, In the 1990s, while migrants were still used as a labour force in the EU, more signs of securitization did begin to emerge, such as the Schengen Information System in March 1995, in response to new migratory pressures.

The Securitization theory was developed by the so-called Copenhagen School, by scholars such as Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, Jaap de Wilde, Lene Hansen, among others. The term originates from the fact that much of the foundational work was produced during the 1990s at the Conflict and Peace Research Institute in Copenhagen. The concept of securitization is defined as the process by which specific issues are removed from the realm of normal politics in order to legitimize the use of extraordinary measures in response. Conversely, desecuritization refers to the process of reintegrating these issues back into the sphere of normal political discourse (Buzan et al., 1998). In seeking a definition of securitization, attention can also be directed to Balzacq's synthesis (2011, p. 3):

> an articulated collection of practices in which heuristic artifacts (metaphors, political instruments, repertoires of images, analogies, stereotypes, emotions, etc.) are contextually mobilized by a security actor who works to make the audience build a coherent network of implications (feelings, sensations, thoughts and intuitions) about the critical vulnerability of an object of reference that competes with the security actor's justifications for his decisions and actions by endowing the subject of reference with such an aura of unprecedented threatening complexity that a tailored policy must be immediately adopted to block its development.

In line with Balzacq, other authors such as Waever (1995) and Neal (2009) view securitization as an attempt to legitimize actions and regulations that would otherwise be unenforceable. Terms such as 'security', 'risk' and 'threat' feature prominently in the discourse surrounding securitization and are strategically employed to shape public opinion and legitimize new forms of authority. If securitization cannot be coercively

enforced, the discursive elements of political leaders, social media, think tanks, institutional representatives and others can contribute to its emergence.

Desecuritization is an inherently polysemic concept, open to multiple interpretations depending on the nature of the phenomenon subjected to desecuritizing dynamics. It may be understood as the missing supplement within securitization processes, insofar as, without moments or mechanisms of desecuritization, the proliferation of social securitization measures risks losing its significance through its normalization (Scheel, 2020).

The simultaneous operationalization of securitization and desecuritization constitutes a natural and essential feature of securitizing practices. These are not mutually exclusive categories but rather interdependent and co-constitutive modalities within the broader dynamics of security construction. This dynamic becomes evident when a particular issue is simultaneously securitized by some actors and desecuritized by others; when, across multiple levels of governance, the same phenomenon circulates through divergent securitizing and desecuritizing logics; or when the routinization of a securitized issue leads to its technical institutionalization, even as the urgency of its framing gradually recedes from the rhetorical domain of everyday discourse (Wæver, 1995; Buzan et al., 1998; Floyd 2011; C.A.S.E. Collective, 2006).

Hansen (2012) further conceptualizes desecuritization as manifesting through four modalities: transformation via stabilization, replacement, rearticulation, and silence. Stabilization, for example, occurs when emergency governance mechanisms persist despite the proclaimed resolution of a perceived threat. In such instances, desecuritization unfolds without a corresponding demobilization of the instruments of power, illustrating the paradoxical coexistence of normalized exceptionality within security practices (Wang & Jin, 2025).

Along the ongoing debate on immigration and security, the common issues concerning the free movement of people and goods and the common market have been extended to include the internal security of the EU and MS. The usual participants in these debates were joined by representatives from professional organizations (e.g., security forces) and social movements. Consequently, the intersection of issues such as immigration, security, integration, and citizenship became inevitable (Huysmans, 2000)

In the last decade, the EU sought to physically remove internal checkpoints for the asylum process and surveillance of immigrants and to progressively impede economic immigration for alleged security reasons (e.g. the 'EU-Turkey deal' signed in March 2016). However, more recently, to cope with the ongoing migratory pressure, these checkpoints have returned within European borders (Zaiotti & Abdulhamid, 2021), with the so-called 'reception and identification centres' (e.g. on Lesbos), where EU agencies (the European Asylum Support Office, Frontex, Europol, and Eurojust) collaborate with the authorities of frontline MS to identify, register, and fingerprint incoming migrants.

In migration policy debates, securitization and desecuritization involve ethical–political choices about societal organization (Scheel, 2020), a tension made visible by recent influxes of refugees. Particularly since the refugee crisis of 2015, migration has increasingly been understood as a threat to security, and thus MS have pursued an increasingly militarized policy and strengthened their security component (Leonard & Kaunert, 2023). Steps have also been taken to transform a framework supposedly anchored in fundamental rights obligations into one that undermines existing binding legal norms and moves towards a progressive codification of means and practises previously considered unlawful (Moreno-Lax, 2023).

This crisis, in 2015, arose not only from the migration flow from North Africa and the Middle East, but also from the lack of coordination in border control between states and

the rivalries generated among them. However, after this period of tension, the restoration of "normality" did not result in a clear increase in the securitization of the borders, but rather reinforced their previous state (Ceccorulli, 2020).

Parallel to these historical debates—and shaped by them—the EU has advanced the communitarization of immigration policy, promoting the coordination of measures and the institutionalization of cooperation between its institutions and MS, including national security forces. Key developments include the Schengen Agreement, the formal inclusion of migration as a subject of intergovernmental regulation in the EU Treaty, and the establishment of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex).

At the same time, recurring concepts in Community institutions, such as the 'European way of life', have contributed to a notion of cultural homogeneity that could destabilise perceptions of immigration. In the politicisation of immigration, for example, public opinion has often confused asylum applications with illegal immigration (Den Boer, 1995). Public concern about the relationship between the integration of immigrant communities, the labour market, the welfare state and cultural identity has contributed significantly to the securitization of the issue (Ireland, 1991).

Traditionally, the EU's policy options, and statements by its leaders, are less publicized and scrutinized than those of their national counterparts. Consequently, when community policies are known only to a more limited extent, among experts, specific interest groups and selected audiences, political securitization tends to be more fluid (Neal, 2009).

Regarding the creation of Frontex, the events of 11 September 2001 significantly reinforced the perceived link between terrorism, security, migration, and border control, as noted by Andrew Neal (2009). However, the rationale for establishing Frontex did not follow a typical process of securitization characterized by the urgency of an imminent threat. Instead, it reflected a more conceptual and risk-based logic. Border control remained primarily a national competence, and the agency's role was to complement inter-state mechanisms with a more supranational framework, thereby contributing to the broader process of European integration. As Neal argues, Frontex "is arguably the opposite of securitization or exceptionalism, as it aims to regulate and harmonize the border practices of individual states" (Neal, 2009, p. 347).

Other authors, however, situate Frontex within the sphere of security policy, the evolution of which aligns with broader security objectives. This is evidenced by the implementation of stricter control measures, including the information system established under the Schengen Agreement, the common list of countries whose nationals require a visa and its associated information system, and the transmission of passenger data, among other initiatives, reflecting an increasing integration of data, systems, and information technologies (Guild, 2006).

If, as Huysmans (2020) suggests, security problems precede security policy, then it is these perceived problems that drive the design and implementation of instruments, institutions, and expectations, ultimately framing immigration as a security issue. The abolition of internal borders in the EU and the free movement of people, goods and services thus represent another axis of the securitization of migration, since the weakening of internal borders corresponds to the strengthening of external borders – with nuances depending on the origin of immigrants, their qualifications and the needs of labour markets (ibid.).

The creation of a common internal space required a strong commitment from MS regarding the reception of refugees (Art. 1 of the Geneva Convention), as non-compliance by a MS with the rules on reception, cooperation, or border opening can lead to a crisis of confidence (Baubock, 2017). According to this logic and the Schengen Agreement, the removal of borders would be absolutely necessary and coordinated with the European Commission and other MS (Wollf et al., 2020).

The political management of EU asylum applications is determined by the application of the Dublin Regulation, even if, in practice, it places greater responsibility on the country of arrival. This results in an accumulation of national and supranational responsibilities, creating the risk of negative competition between states that restricts the requirements for asylum applications and the principles of resettlement, regardless of the links between refugees and their desired destination countries (Baubock, 2017).

There is also the question of solidarity in the integration of refugees, between border states and others. If solidarity with refugees is to be a cornerstone of inter-state relations, it must entail the transfer of resources to the states that host them, ensuring that these states are not penalized for their geographical location (Baubock, 2017). There are, however, fears of preferential national treatment of refugee groups based on their skin colour or religion in host states, as well as suspicions of the risk of abuse or fraud in the determination of financial transfers in host states (Gerver, 2013).

Methodology and Data

The article was written in 2023 and 2024. In the bibliographical research it incorporates diverse academic voices to reflect a range of perspectives drawn from multiple strands of literature—namely securitization theory, European integration, and immigration studies—in order to ensure analytical diversity and theoretical multidisciplinarity, thereby providing complementary insights.

This research engages with securitization by broadly adhering to the core principles of the Copenhagen School (Buzan et al., 1998). A shared ontological foundation across securitization scholarship is a non-essentialist conception of "security." According to the Copenhagen School, the primary drivers of securitization are speech acts that explicitly or implicitly invoke a particular threat. However, Buzan et al. (1998) gave limited attention to institutional developments and practical implementations, which have subsequently become focal points for later securitization scholars. While the Copenhagen School's paradigm has been criticized for its reductionist tendencies, it remains foundational in the field. According to Balzacq *et al.* (2016, p. 518): "the use of securitisation theory has been less controversial for studying issues such as global pandemics, where discursive occurrences appear to play an important role".

This study adopts a speech-act approach to securitization and posits that EU institutions can function as securitizing actors, as acknowledged by Buzan et *al.* (1998). While EU institutions may be inclined to engage in existential rhetoric, this analysis does not adhere to such a stringent threshold. It is now widely recognized that, contrary to the original formulation by the Copenhagen School, a securitizing move does not necessarily require the framing of threats as existential or the invocation of emergency or extraordinary measures (Rushton, 2019).

In line with the theoretical framework, this research conducted a systematic analysis of key strategic documents and public statements issued by the main EU institutions concerning immigration, refugee, and asylum policy during 2020 and 2021—a period marked by the significant impact of the COVID -19 pandemic. This research led to the selection of 23 documents in total, namely from the Commission (e.g. official communications, press releases and website information), the European Council (e.g. press releases and European Council conclusions) and the European Parliament (e.g. resolutions, reports and briefings). In addition, important statements by key EU leaders were also analysed.

The various official documents and statements cited, were collected from the official websites of EU institutions, and supplemented with official information from other institutions and agencies, including the United Nations (UN).

Once the documents were selected, they were subjected to content analysis (Bardin, 1977) to extract insights addressing the research question. A thematic-categorical grid was created, based on the most frequent content in the selected documents and their coding into categories (themes) as units of content coverage by meaning, according to the interpretative context of the theoretical framework. These themes, in turn, comprised several sub-themes.

The process was developed with indicators representing the registration units, enabling interpretation of the results in relation to the research questions. Throughout the study, each sub-theme was supplemented with quotations from the analysed documentation. This included both explicit expressions and others that, while not explicit, were included in a theme or sub-theme based on context, general meaning, and conveyed ideas.

This approach stems from the research strategy, which ensures an objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the communication content to identify, describe, and classify the variables required for this study. The application of objective research rules and procedures ensures the production of comparable quantitative results across different contexts, consistent with the initial aim of describing the frequency of their occurrence.

The presentation of the results allows for a critical reflection on the corresponding conclusions, as the themes align with the objectives, decisions, and principles that qualitatively shape the political choices under analysis. Essentially, the aim is to identify the persistence of these themes and to trace their evolution over time.

Re-framing Border Closure as Public Health Policy

Shortly before the escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic, in January 2020, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen presented a document entitled Promoting Our European Way of Life. This document outlined measures aimed at "strong borders, the modernisation of the EU asylum system, and cooperation with partner countries" to "achieve a new start on migration" (European Commission, 2020a). The announcement was widely interpreted as the start of a new phase in developing a more robust and cohesive common immigration policy.

With the first known cases of COVID-19 in Europe, on 4 March 2020, following a joint meeting of the ministers of the Schengen Area member countries and the Council, the EU interior ministers issued a declaration regarding the situation at the EU's external borders with Turkey. According to the declaration, the EU and its MS "remain determined to effectively protect the EU's external borders (…) will take all necessary measures in accordance with EU and international law." The EU thus affirmed its intention to reinforce its external borders to prevent "crossings by land or sea" and to combat "people smuggling." At the same time, financial and operational support for Greece was significantly increased, with up to €350 million allocated and the deployment of Frontex made available (European Commission, 2020b).

A few days later, the Commission formally acknowledged COVID-19 and its potential consequences as a public health crisis, outlining a series of restrictive measures in response. The Commission emphasized that "travel restrictions should focus on drastically reducing the influx of people at the external borders of the Union." It further recommended that the Council "work towards ensuring that the Heads of State or Government of the Schengen States […] take a coordinated decision to apply a temporary restriction on non-essential travel from third countries to the EU+ area." This measure was to be implemented at all borders for an initial period of 30 days, with exceptions only for the return of MS nationals, Schengen nationals, and long-term residents from third countries (European Commission, 2020c).

Only in May 2020 did the Commission issue a Communication on the restoration of free movement and the lifting of internal border controls, proposing that MS fully reopen their internal borders based on three criteria: epidemiological conditions, the capacity of health systems, and adequate surveillance measures. The restoration of free movement was planned to proceed in two phases: an initial aimed at "restoring free movement by partially lifting restrictions and controls at internal borders," followed by a "general lifting of restrictions and controls at internal borders" (European Commission, 2020d).

In these early stages of the pandemic, there was already a clear securitization of health (Fernández, 2024), which corroborates Balzacq et *al*. (2016) assertion that Health must be a central focus within securitization studies. According to Moreno-Lax (2023) the notion of 'crisis' also facilitated the normalization of legal and political developments that may conflict with fundamental principles and international standards.

A Hierarchy of Mobility: Differentiated Rights in a Pandemic

In response to the rapid succession of events that destabilized the MS and triggered national lockdowns, the Commission issued a guidance on 30 March 2020 regarding the restriction of non-essential travel to the EU, developed in collaboration with Frontex and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), following the activation of Articles 2, 6, and 14 of the Schengen Borders Code concerning threats to public order—specifically, diseases with pandemic potential.

This guidance prioritized the repatriation of EU citizens from third countries, the return of EU citizens and their families, the restriction of all non-essential travel by third-country nationals to the EU+ area, the provision of a minimum level of consular services for visa processing, and the management of extended stays resulting from flight cancellations. Only specific categories of third-country nationals were exceptionally permitted to retain freedom of movement and entry into the Schengen Area. These included, among others, healthcare professionals, researchers, diplomats, staff of international organizations, and individuals travelling for compelling family reasons (European Commission, 2020e).

In April 2020, the Commission issued a Communication addressing the implementation of provisions related to asylum, return, and resettlement procedures, acknowledging the significant challenges faced by MS. Regarding asylum procedures, due to the absence of explicit provisions in Directive 2013/32/EU, MS were allowed to adopt derogations in response to the pandemic. However, this flexibility increased the potential for discretionary practices, such as the relaxation of fingerprinting requirements or the acceptance of online application forms (European Commission, 2020f).

Given this increased scope, some MS temporarily closed their asylum authorities and restricted the registration of applications for international protection. This contributed to the notably low number of transfers under the Dublin Regulation, which amounted to approximately 1,000 between late February and April 2020. A further potential consequence of this approach is the liability faced by certain MS that request a transfer but fail to effectuate it to the competent MS within the prescribed time limits. Additionally, according to the Commission, the suspension of resettlement measures has hindered the ability of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to fulfil the heightened resettlement commitments for 2020 (European Commission, 2020f).

Regarding return measures, the Commission emphasized that national authorities should incorporate health protection protocols and all measures should be applied proportionately and without discrimination to third-country nationals in an irregular situation. In this context, the Commission mandated Frontex to assist MS in organizing return operations to third countries and to facilitate both voluntary and mandatory

repatriations (European Commission, 2020e). By the end of 2020, the number of return decisions issued in MS decreased by 19% (compared to 2019), but actual returns to third countries decreased by almost half (European Commission, 2021a).

In this context, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) criticized the implementation of the Dublin Regulation, arguing that the EU failed to fulfil its obligations and left asylum seekers in a state of uncertainty, exposed to potential human rights violations due to protracted, unnecessary, and costly procedures. ECRE also condemned MS for persisting with policy choices aimed at avoiding responsibility for individuals seeking international protection (ECRE, 2020a). Also, the ECDC raised concerns, about the poor conditions in reception and detention centres, namely, overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, and general insecurity, which contributed to heightened health vulnerabilities (ECDC, 2020).

Despite ongoing challenges, the number of asylum applications in the EU decreased by 33%, with approximately 390,000 applications submitted by October 2020. However, from June 2020 onwards, when transfer procedures resumed, the number of applications began to rise, although at a slower pace than in previous years (ECRE, 2020a). Irregular arrivals also declined, with 114,300 recorded between January and November 2020—particularly from Turkey—despite a notable increase along the Central Mediterranean route, where 1,754 individuals were reported dead or missing during the same year (European Commission, 2021a).

Also in December 2020, the European Parliament adopted a report on the implementation of the Dublin III Regulation (European Parliament, 2020a). The report's assessment was highly critical, characterizing the regulation and its application as a "failure." Although published in December 2020, the report primarily focused on the 2015–2016 migration crisis, highlighting the profound imbalances in asylum seeker reception and recognizing that the country of first entry criterion places disproportionate burdens on certain MS, underscoring the essential role of Frontex support.

Regarding the COVID-19 health crisis, the report notes that confinement measures significantly disrupted the functioning of the Dublin transfer system, effectively leading to its suspension. Despite directives from the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) to uphold the right to asylum, the absence of a pandemic-adapted operational plan resulted in the Dublin system not being applied during this period (European Parliament, 2020a). It is important to note that following border closures, planned transfer agreements were not upheld; for example, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Croatia, and Slovenia suspended transfers of third-country nationals (European Parliament, 2022).

Along the so-called "second wave" of the COVID-19 pandemic in November 2020, asylum procedures were once again suspended in several MS. In addition, the introduction of new security and public health measures further complicated the process, restricting access to legal assistance and undermining the quality and fairness of asylum interviews (ECRE, 2020b).

Amid numerous bilateral agreements between MS and third countries aimed at facilitating the transfer or return of asylum seekers, and ongoing resistance and divergence in the application of the Dublin Regulation, the longstanding difficulties in cooperation between national authorities became increasingly evident. This situation contributed to a rise in secondary movements and the shifting of responsibilities among MS (European Parliament, 2020b). The political management of the crisis appeared to prioritize the 'manageability' of asylum applications over more comprehensive solutions. In this context, EU agencies gained prominence in clarifying ambiguities related to the application of Dublin III and mediating apparently conflicting national interests.

The European Parliament also adopted a resolution addressing the impact of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable populations, including immigrants. The resolution highlighted the necessity of adhering to the Geneva Convention and relevant European legislation, while also emphasizing the importance of ensuring adequate sanitary conditions in reception centres (European Parliament, 2020b).

Despite the increasingly restrictive and securitized context of immigration policy, and the differentiated rights during the pandemic, the Commission acknowledged the essential role played by immigrants. Approximately 13% of the key workforce across the EU consisted of immigrants, with this figure exceeding one-third in certain sectors. Many of these workers were employed in low-skilled occupations and were predominantly non-EU nationals. In recognition, several MS adopted measures to facilitate the entry of immigrants into critical sectors such as healthcare, and some granted exemptions from public health measures such as quarantine requirements (European Commission, 2020g; European Commission, 2020h).

Ultimately, EU policies for managing contagion risks exposed fragilities in MS political cohesion and, in particular, in compliance with the measures of the Dublin Regulation. The rights of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers were often neglected, underscoring a critical disconnect between policy rhetoric—which recognized their vital front-line contributions—and policy practice.

Externalizing Risk and Internalizing Crisis

The security measures introduced to strengthen border control had severe consequences for migrants, who increasingly resorted to dangerous routes, often becoming vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers and lacking access to COVID-19 testing (Freedman, 2021). Efforts to externalise asylum processing included the establishment of detention centres in transit countries outside the EU, where refugees were forced to await processing under conditions widely criticised for practices amounting to detention and inhumane treatment (Beirens, 2020).

Meanwhile, the health and safety of detained migrants and staff in detention facilities were at considerable risk. According to the Commission, if MS were unable to provide accommodation in specialized detention centres, they could use alternative appropriate facilities, provided that the safeguards established by the Return Directive were upheld, including the implementation of social distancing, preventive and hygiene measures, as well as health screening, medical care and quarantine protocols (European Commission, 2020f).

In June 2020, when the European Parliament adopted a resolution addressing the situation within the Schengen Area following the COVID-19 outbreak, it highlighted that the reintroduction of internal border controls revealed significant deficiencies in coordination among MS. It expressed regret that several MS abruptly implemented border controls and other restrictions without adequately informing their own populations or neighbouring countries. Furthermore, the Parliament criticized MS for disregarding the Schengen acquis, emphasizing that border controls are intended to be an exceptional measure and a "last resort," to be applied only after all other alternatives have been thoroughly considered (European Parliament, 2020c).

While the Schengen Borders Code (Regulation 2016/399, Articles 2, 6, and 14) explicitly recognizes a threat to public health as a valid ground for refusing entry at external borders, this rationale does not extend to justify the reintroduction of internal border controls, which are only permitted in response to serious threats to public policy or internal security. In this context, it is important to note that the European Parliament's

interpretation of the Schengen Agreement diverges from that of the Commission, as reflected in the Commission's March guidance (European Parliament, 2020c).

In its resolution, the European Parliament reaffirmed the central importance of the Schengen Area to the European integration project and emphasized the significant impact of border closures on citizens of both MS and third countries. The Parliament, therefore, stressed the urgency of restoring a fully operational Schengen Area, advocating the progressive lifting of restrictions on free movement in tandem with the easing of pandemic-related containment measures.

In November 2020, the European Parliament adopted another resolution, addressing the impact of COVID-19 measures on democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights. In light of the renewed restrictions introduced during the "second wave" of the pandemic, the Parliament expressed concern about the potential erosion of the rule of law, the weakening of democratic rights, and the lack of "democratic accountability." It also warned against the possible instrumentalization of pandemic-related measures to alter the balance of powers, particularly through the abuse or unchecked expansion of executive authority (European Parliament, 2020d).

This resolution also acknowledged that exceptional measures—such as lockdowns, border closures, restrictions on the processing of asylum applications, declarations of states of emergency, and other restrictive actions implemented to contain the pandemic—have contributed to the erosion of the right to asylum and the undermining of the principle of free movement. It further underscored the profound impact of border closures on asylum procedures, noting that numerous MS which restricted or suspended Dublin transfers simultaneously, declared their ports unsafe for the disembarkation of migrants rescued during search and rescue operations at sea, effectively leaving them stranded indefinitely. Contrary to the ECDC's assessment, overcrowded camps at the EU's external borders continue to pose a significant risk for COVID-19 outbreaks.

In the same resolution, the European Parliament acknowledged the pandemic's role in exacerbating the stigmatization of migrants, noting a rise in discrimination as well as incidents fuelled by misinformation and hate speech targeting refugees. It also highlighted the dangers posed by "fake news" and other forms of disinformation, which have the potential to influence political decision-making processes and undermine democratic governance (European Parliament, 2020d).

Jacobs and Kabata (2024) argue that MS collectively securitized the Schengen area to manage the uncoordinated reintroduction of border controls in response to refugee inflows. This dynamic intensified anti-immigration sentiments, discursively and practically reinforcing the securitization of migration as a 'risk' and, in turn, legitimizing racist tropes and discrimination (Koinova et al., 2023). Moreover, the exceptional policy measures for contagion control, together with public immigration discourses and their underlying rationale, led Schengen States to adopt restrictive measures that exceeded the provisions of the Schengen Borders Code.

Cementing the "New Normal": Crisis as a Catalyst for Permanent Reform

Amid the ongoing pandemic crisis, which "underlined the need for reform", the Commission presented the long-awaited New Pact on Migration and Asylum on 23 September 2020. Framed as a "fresh start on migration", the Pact aimed to introduce a more coherent and efficient migration framework. Its key objectives included accelerating asylum border procedures, establishing an improved system for migration and border management, strengthening legal safeguards, and introducing a mandatory pre-entry screening mechanism for rapid status determination upon arrival (European Commission, 2021b).

The introduction of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum marked a clear departure from previous policies, such as the Dublin Regulation, as it sought to move beyond their limitations—most notably, the unequal distribution of responsibility among MS. The Pact aimed to address one of the fundamental causes of dysfunction within the EU asylum system: the disproportionate burden placed on certain MS in managing applications.

The primary objective of the New Pact was to enhance the efficiency of the EU's migration and asylum system and to make it "more resilient to migratory pressure." It sought to eliminate so-called "pull factors" and reduce secondary movements, address abuses within the system, and provide greater support to MS most affected by migration flows. Some key measures proposed in the Pact were: the replacement of the Dublin system— while retaining the criterion of first country of entry; the introduction of exceptional measures for crisis situations; the strengthening of the Eurodac Regulation and expansion of its database; the establishment of a EU Asylum Agency; the implementation of a new mandatory pre-entry screening process involving identification and data-sharing with Eurodac; and the replacement of the Asylum Procedures Directive with a directly applicable regulation aimed at harmonizing procedures across MS. Additionally, the Pact proposed replacing the Qualification Directive with a regulation to standardize protection criteria and the rights of asylum seekers, and reforming the Reception Conditions Directive (European Council, 2021a).

Despite the Commission's intentions, the New Pact faced criticism – particularly concerning the persistent disparities in asylum application acceptance rates among MS, which create a system where the outcome of an application may depend more on the country of submission than on the merits of the case (International Rescue Committee, 2023).

In a Communication issued in September 2020, the Commission outlined key challenges and policy directions for strengthening the EU's asylum framework. While acknowledging that implementation of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum remained at an early and incomplete stage, the Commission again emphasized the need to reinforce border management capacities, combat human trafficking, reduce irregular migration routes, and improve return procedures (European Commission, 2020f).

In December 2020, the EU approved its multiannual financial framework for 2021–2027, allocating increased funding for migration policy. The anticipated expenditure in this area, including border management, was €22.7 billion, compared to €13.2 billion allocated for security and defence. Strengthening this sector also involved training 10,000 border guards to be deployed by Frontex (European Council, 2020).

In contrast to the prevailing restrictive measures, a provisional agreement between the Council Presidency and the European Parliament on a regulation concerning the recruitment of highly skilled migrant workers was announced in May 2021. Specifically, this related to a draft directive establishing the conditions for the entry and residence of highly qualified third-country nationals living and working in the EU – the "Blue Card Directive" (European Council, 2021b). This directive represented further progress in the ongoing reforms of immigration and asylum policy, alongside enhanced Eurodac security measures designed to monitor unauthorised irregular movements and improve the effectiveness of return procedures. The principal objective of this immigration policy was to ensure safe, regular, and well-managed migration; to address challenges related to irregular immigration and forced relocation; and to harness the benefits of migration by creating an effective system that protects fundamental rights and attracts the skilled talent necessary for the economy.

The European Council also convened to address the situation, of migrants along various migration routes, and resolved to strengthen partnerships and cooperation with countries

of origin and transit. According to its conclusions from 24-25 June 2021, the primary objectives were to prevent loss of life and alleviate pressure on the EU's external borders. This strategy was intended to use all available instruments and incentives, implemented in close collaboration with UNHCR and IOM (European Council, 2021c). Furthermore, the Council urged the Commission, in coordination with MS, to intensify targeted actions with priority countries of origin and transit and to develop comprehensive action plans. It also called for more efficient use of existing financial resources, and reiterated its condemnation of alleged attempts by third countries to instrumentalize migrants for political purposes (European Council, 2021c).

Also in June 2021, representatives of the Council Presidency and the European Parliament announced a provisional agreement on the regulation, establishing a new EU Agency for Asylum (European Council, 2021d), although negotiations likely began before the COVID-19 pandemic. The regulation sought to strengthen the implementation of EU asylum policy by transforming the existing EASO into a fully operational agency. As of January 2022, the newly established agency assumed responsibility for enhancing the functioning of the Common European Asylum System, providing expanded operational and technical assistance to MS to promote greater convergence in the assessment of applications for international protection (European Council, 2021d).

During the period under analysis, the EU exhibited substantial advancement in consolidating its common immigration policy. Through the development of a range of programmes and policy instruments—encompassing enhanced financial mechanisms and the establishment of new agencies—building upon prior negotiations, the EU succeeded in constructing a more coherent yet predominantly restrictive framework. A notable exception to this general restrictiveness was the deliberate effort to promote the admission of highly skilled migrant workers.

Conclusion

This research examined how, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the securitization of the rights of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers has unfolded through a multi-phase process that has also influenced the trajectory of European integration. Following Fernández (2024), it can be argued that on the onset of COVID-19, certain EU institutions intensified their discourse around "health security" as part of an effort to assume a broader and more "mature" role. This shift reflects a move away from a predominantly altruistic approach to global health action, towards one more focused on strategic and security-oriented considerations.

The securitization of public health and immigration has been legitimized by the narratives and policies adopted by both MS and EU institutions, which have resonated with a receptive audience. Concurrently, the claims of Balzacq et *al.* (2016) are reaffirmed, particularly that health concerns have emerged as a significant new axis within the broader securitization framework of public policy.

The patterns observed during previous refugee crises, particularly in 2015–2016, re-emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, notably through the implementation of exceptional measures such as the unilateral suspension of the Schengen Borders Code and the Dublin Regulation. At the same time, safeguards protecting the rights of refugees were relaxed. This represented a normalisation of legal and political developments that conflict with fundamental principles and international standards – measures that, under normal circumstances, would be considered unacceptable or unenforceable. Migration flows were increasingly framed as a public security threat, especially regarding health risks, thereby justifying the adoption of extraordinary policies aimed at containing the perceived danger.

As in previous instances, the securitization of immigration poses significant risks, including the potential to deepen existing social inequalities and further stigmatise and marginalise already vulnerable groups (Elbe, 2006; Sontag, 1998).

In parallel with securitization policies that undermine existing binding legal norms, the "Blue Card Directive" - particularly targeting highly skilled workers—was introduced within the broader framework of a selective immigration policy (Dimitriadi, 2020). This development also supports the argument that processes of securitization and desecuritization occur simultaneously (Austin & Beaulieu-Brossard, 2018).

Concurrently, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum reflects a deepening of European integration in several aspects, including greater harmonization in the evaluation of applications for international protection and more coordinated approaches to the "management" of politically sensitive issues such as asylum procedures. However, this Pact appears insufficient to address longstanding institutional tensions and political disagreements. For example, it maintains the existing responsibility framework established under the Dublin Regulation—widely acknowledged, including by the European Parliament, as ineffective—thereby continuing to place a disproportionate burden on frontline states such as Italy and Greece (Freedman, 2021).

The New Pact on Migration and Asylum exemplifies the increasing supranationalisation of EU immigration governance, a trend further reinforced by the creation of a dedicated EU Asylum Agency. This development is marked by a clear shift from voluntary intergovernmental cooperation to mandatory solidarity mechanisms, top-down harmonisation of legal procedures, and significant centralisation of executive authority, particularly in crisis management.

At the same time, the Pact redefines the role of Frontex, raising it from a supportive body to a central operational actor within the EU's integrated migration framework. This transformation involves a substantial expansion of its mandate, including comprehensive border screening and external border management, strengthened competence in carrying out returns linked to asylum procedures, and a commitment to enhanced operational support for frontline MS. These changes are evident operationally through the direct deployment of personnel and management of return operations, and institutionally through a strengthened legal mandate, robust coordination and reporting mechanisms, and improved crisis preparedness.

These developments reflect a deepening of European integration through the gradual transfer of competencies in border management and security from national authorities to EU institutions. As noted in the existing literature, such Community-level policies are typically known and shaped within more limited circles—primarily among experts and specialized interest groups—thereby enabling more fluid and adaptive securitization dynamics.

Although a detailed analysis falls outside the scope of this manuscript, it is worth noting that the EU's 2024 political reforms in this area simultaneously reinforced both integration and securitization. The reform of the Pact on Migration and Asylum, for example, introduced a more robust solidarity and responsibility mechanism, upgraded Eurodac into a comprehensive asylum and migration database, established mandatory border procedures, and adopted a Common Implementation Plan to coordinate national legislation (European Commission, 2024). In parallel, the recast of the Schengen Borders Code imposed stricter conditions for the reintroduction of internal border controls—limiting them to situations involving serious public policy or security threats—and granted the EU authority to implement temporary travel restrictions during major public health crises (European Council, 2024).

The findings of this research indicate that the legislative reforms introduced in this period represent a consolidation of earlier polices. These reforms reinforce a broader trend toward the political normalization of securitization in both national and EU-level discourse and policymaking. In this context, securitization emerges not only as a security strategy but also as a mechanism facilitating further European integration. This aligns with the argument advanced by Andrione-Moylan et al. (2024), who contend that securitization tends to diminish politicization, thereby facilitating institutional and policy integration.

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Transparency on the use of generative Artificial Intelligence
InstaText was used to proofread some sections of the final version. No other generative AI tools have been used.

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