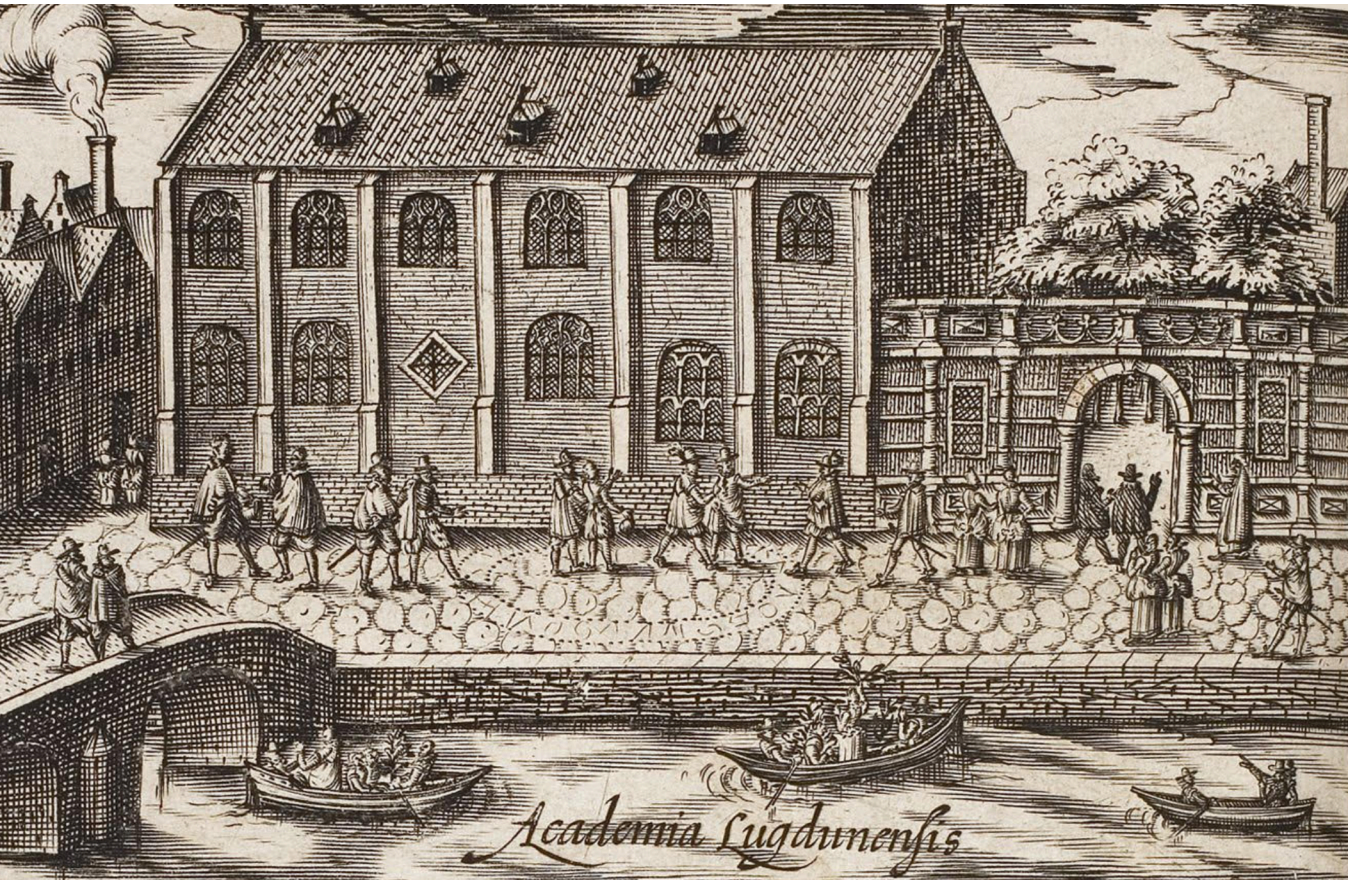
VOLUME 2, ISSUE 1



Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations

Winter 2026

FOREWORD

As the international order seems to grow increasingly complex and unsettled each day, studying this academically can offer unique outlooks on what is happening around us. With this second edition of the *Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations*, we provide a platform for such scholarship and present it to a wider audience. We build on the inaugural issue of the journal brought to life by former ISSA Vice President and Academic Chair Anton Meier, and shaped by last year's contributors, reviewers, and editors. The second edition of ISSA's student-led publication is again committed to showcasing the outstanding academic work produced by students in the MA International Relations at Leiden University. Featuring contributions from all specialisations on culture and politics, the European Union, and global conflict, order, and political economy, this journal reflects the incredible diversity and wide range of perspectives present in the Masters. Although we strive to attain the quality of established academic journals, we intend for this journal to represent innovation and creativity in both its form and contents, making student perspectives on international relations accessible beyond the classroom.

Having dedicated significant time and energy producing this issue, the three of us share the goal of further strengthening the journal and enhancing its academic standing with each edition. For now, we are incredibly proud to present the second edition of the journal and are grateful for the path previously paved for us to do so. Naturally, we would like to thank the contributors for both submitting their remarkable work and cooperating in the editing and reviewing process.

Whether you study this journal from front to back or selectively read what most captures your interest, we hope that you gain new insights about international relations and global politics through the works represented on the following pages.

Maxime Franck, Loes de Klerk, and Jetske Moes
Journal Committee
International Studies Student Association
Winter 2026

DISCLAIMER

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(UN)FORTUNATE SON

A Comparative Analysis of *The Way of the Wind* (1965) and *Foxtrot* (2018)

Key Words: *Militarised Masculinity, Zionist Ideology, Oedipal Relations, State Violence*

LENA BOŽIĆ

Culture and Politics

Abstract

This essay conducts a comparative analysis of Amos Oz's short story *The Way of the Wind* and Samuel Maoz's film *Foxtrot*, arguing that both works expose the ideological entanglement of Zionism, militarised masculinity, and filial obligation within Israeli society. Central to each narrative is the figure of the son, whose death destabilises foundational national myths of sacrifice, providence, and masculine virtue. These accidents reveal the extent to which state power depends upon both the erasure of vulnerability and the naturalisation of violence. The fathers embody an older generation of Zionist masculine ideals, stoic, duty-driven, and emotionally opaque. Their inability to understand or protect their sons exposes the fragility of patriarchal authority and its reliance on silence, repression, and spectral legacies. The spatial settings function as ideological stages upon which these performances of masculinity are enacted and ultimately undone. This paper contributes to current scholarship by bridging literary and film analysis with critical studies of masculinity, memory, and Zionist nation-building. By tracing biblical allegories and generational ruptures it demonstrates how Oz and Maoz disassemble the national hero narrative and foreground the emotional and ethical consequences of militarised existence, advancing an understanding of both works in the contexts of gender and national identity.

Cite this article: Božić, L. (2026): (Un) Fortunate Son: A Comparative Analysis of The Way of the Wind (1965) and Foxtrot (2018). *Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations, 2* (1), pp. 1-15

1. Introduction

Some stories begin not with a birth but with a foretold death. Others end before they have begun. The stories we tell ourselves, about our lives, our origin, our places in the world, can wield enormous power and uncover intricacies and power relations that fester below the surface. In *The Way of the Wind* (1965) and *Foxtrot* (2018), the fathers grieve before they mourn, the sons fall before they fight and life is choreographed. Both works orbit a single gravitational pull: the accident, at once inexplicable and predetermined, the final punctuation to a narrative whose course was set long before the first line.

This essay reads Amos Oz's short story and Samuel Maoz's film as layered meditations on the entanglement of masculinity and myth in the Israeli national imaginary. *The Way of the Wind* is a short story from Oz's seminal collection *Where the Jackals Howl*, which propelled his fame and renown both in Israel and internationally. Moreover, the collection rendered him as an author of national significance due to his complex portrayal of Israeli society and life in the kibbutz, a type of collective settlement where members share property, income, and responsibilities. *Foxtrot* is a 2017 film by writer and director Samuel Maoz, himself also an IDF veteran . Upon its release it won eight statues at the Ophir Awards, Israel's equivalent to the Oscar, as well as the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival (Moussa, 2021). It was simultaneously heavily criticised by the Israeli Minister of Culture for its representation of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) (Spiro, 2017). In each, the father-son dyad functions not only as an emotional anchor but as a theological and ideological structure: Shimshon and Michael as patriarchs of a crumbling covenant; Gideon and Jonatan as reluctant inheritors of impossible legacies. Through the slow unravelling of these relationships and the 'accidents' that cleave them, *The Way of the Wind* and *Foxtrot* reveal a society whose rituals of sacrifice are no longer sacred, only cyclical.

The centrality of the young soldier to both stories mirrors the role of the IDF in Israeli society. War has been a dominant factor in the construction of Israeli national identity since the country's inception, and militarisation seeped beyond national building and political agendas into the very notion of being Israeli (Harris, 2012). Soldiering, for individual Israelis, is a deeply personal engagement, while also being an integral part of national education, culture, and consciousness (Silberstein, 2018). Here, argues Silberstein, "the personal and the collective come together", establishing a unique relationship between the individual and the nation's "premier socializing agency", the IDF (Silberstein, 2018, p. 134). Centreing their stories around young soldiers provides Oz and Maoz a setting ripe for unpacking of the legacies of Israeli militarism, and the tensions between the individual and the state apparatus. Despite half a decade separating the publication of the works, the themes they discuss echo eerily familiar. In the following sections, the two works will first be summarised and then analysed through the motif of the accident, the role of God and faith, and the ideological and physical locations they take place in.

2. Summary of the Analysed Works

2.1 The Way of the Wind by Amos Oz

The Way of the Wind is a short story from Amos Oz's first collection, *Where the Jackals Howl*, which centres around the life of Israelis living in a kibbutz. *The Way of the Wind* follows Gideon Shenhav and his father, Shimshon Sheinbaum, during the Independence Day celebration at the kibbutz, which ultimately results in Gideon's death. The anticipation of his demise follows the reader from the first sentence of the story as Oz tells us that Gideon's "last day began with a brilliant sunrise" (Oz, 1984, p. 247). Gideon is a parachuter, and his platoon is set to execute a celebratory jump just outside of his home kibbutz. There, his father awaits, wondering if Gideon will actually participate in the jump or drop out at the last minute. Shimshon is a kind of celebrity in the kibbutz, described as "a single complex of vision and execution, [who] has known no slackness or weakness of will" (Oz, 1984, p. 251). He is a prominent member of the Labor Movement and has devoted his life to intellectualism and maintenance and development of the settlement. For him, fathering a child was a way to certify his legacy and further his name. However, Gideon turned out not to be the child Shimshon expected, his gentle and sentimental nature was at odds with the desired qualities of Shimshon's heir. As soon as Gideon expresses the desire to join the military, against the wishes of his mother, Shimshon calls in a personal favor to let his son join the paratroopers. While both the kibbutz and the parachuting platoon prepare for the jump, Shimshon encounters Zaki, his illegitimate son, who evades all of Shimshon's attempts at disciplining him and runs away with, in Shimshon's eyes, his gang of hooligans. As the jump commences, Gideon is enthralled and overwhelmed by the sight of his childhood home. Enjoying the attention of his community, he releases the spare parachute, catapulting him above the others and making him the centre of attention. A sudden breeze of wind catches Gideon's parachutes, and he gets tangled between electrical wires, protected only by the rubber soles of his boots. Everybody rushes to him, Shimshon, the kibbutz inhabitants, the army officers, but Gideon is unable to follow their advice. Shimshon's at first kind and gentle words transform into cruel and humiliating insults. Unexpectedly, Zaki climbs up a ladder in an attempt to cut Gideon loose, but before he can succeed Gideon throws himself onto the exposed wires. In the end, Shimshon is forced to acknowledge Zaki's brave and heroic feat. Stricken by the fact that Gideon's death leaves Zaki as his lone surviving heir, he collapses.

2.2 Foxtrot by Samuel Maoz

Foxtrot opens with an ambiguous shot from a car driving down a road in the middle of the desert followed by an ominous knock at the door of Michael and Dafna Feldmann. Informed that their son Jonatan has died in the line of duty, Dafne is shocked and subsequently sedated by the officers while Michael is explained the standard military procedure for such events. The first act of the film follows Michael over the first few hours after learning the news as he tries to inform his Alzheimer-suffering mother, get a hold of his

daughter, and learn more about Jonatan's death from the officer arranging the funeral. The act is kafkaesque in its depiction of the bureaucratic procedure the IDF takes the grieving family through following their son's death. While Dafna is still sedated and Michael is trying to decide the next steps, the officers return, bearing news that their son is actually alive and that a different soldier of the same name is the one who died. Outraged, Michael throws the officers out of their apartment and calls in a favour from a high-ranking friend in the military, demanding his son be returned home immediately.

The camera then cuts to Jonatan and three other soldiers manning a desolate outpost in the middle of the desert. The act opens with Jonatan asking another soldier if he knew that *Foxtrot*, the name of their outpost, is also a dance in which you end up in the same place you started from. The four pass their days smoking, listening to the radio, measuring the rate of their sleeping container sinking into the mud, and abusing the occasional bypassers. This act of the film culminates in the killing and cover up of the murder of four Palestinians by the soldiers. Appearing to be returning from a party, the Palestinians are stopped at the checkpoint. As they are being waved through to pass, one of the soldiers notices that a girl's dress is caught in the car door. She opens the door to fix it, dropping an empty beer can which the soldiers mistake for a grenade, causing Jonatan to open fire. Following their call to the local headquarters, a bulldozer is sent to bury the car with the passengers, covering up any trace. The next day, an officer comes to talk to the soldiers, dismissing the event as an accident of war when, in the middle of his talk he gets a phone call. It's Michael's friend, demanding the officer take Jonatan back immediately.

In the final act of the film, the now separated Michael and Dafna reunite for Jonatan's twentieth birthday, and we learn he died on his way back home. High on weed, the two muse over the meaning of Jonatan's last drawing, the bulldozer scooping up a car, thinking it represents their relationship. Michael opens up about his own traumas from his time in service when his decision to let his comrade lead their convoy led to him dying from a landmine. He wonders why he made that decision and echoes Jonatan's question from earlier to Dafna, asking if she knows of a dance called foxtrot which always finishes in the same place it started from. Michael's frantic dancing of foxtrot is interrupted by Dafna's hug and the film cuts to its opening scene of a car driving in the desert. In this car is Jonatan, driven home by the officer. Surprised by a camel on the road, the car swerves and tumbles downhill, resulting in Jonatan's death.

3. Analysis

The essay will explore three elements of the above-summarised works and interrogate how each works to deconstruct and lay bare the interconnection of Zionism and masculinity in Israeli society as well as the tragic consequences that it causes.

3.1 The accident

In both works the accident is a key motif around which the narrative centres, the analysis of which will allow for a deeper engagement with both the works and their grappling with the society they critique. In *The Way of the Wind* it is singular — Gideon's entanglement into electrical wires. Meanwhile *Foxtrot* contains a plurality of accidents: the clerical error reporting Jonatan dead, the death of Michael's comrade, and Jonatan's eventual car accident. An accident, by definition, is an unexpected and unintentional incident, one which happens without apparent or deliberate cause. An accident has no guilty party, nobody to blame, it is simply a consequence of randomness and chance. At first glance, the accidents in both stories are simply that: a gust of wind, an administrative misfiling, a camel on the road. However, a closer look reveals a web of decisions and circumstances that set the stage for these incidents to occur. The event of the accident in both works is a moment of rupture, one which exposes the tensions of the society the characters are embedded in.

In *The Way of the Wind* the society in question is the kibbutz. It is a utopian project, led by a strong patriarch (Shimshon), that doesn't tolerate weakness and failure. The early settlers and establishers of kibbutzim, in other words Shimshon's generation, were, according to Tamar Mayer, mostly graduates of the New Jew youth movement (Mayer, 2000). This Zionist national project aimed to create the antithesis of the "ghetto Jew" whom Zionist thinkers saw as "helpless, passive and feminine" thus needing major transformation (Mayer, 2000, p. 266). The "New Jew" was to be tall, virile, close to nature, and physically productive, in a sense, an Übermensch whose strong masculine body would help him excel and stand up to enemies (Mayer, 2000, p. 267). These characteristics can be easily identified in Shimshon and the role he plays in his community. He embodies the idea of the "New Jew", while Gideon's artistic and gentle ways can be interpreted to emulate those assigned to the "ghetto Jew". Therefore, the society in which the 'accident' of Gideon's death takes place has already paved the way for his demise as a utopian Zionist society which aims to eliminate weakness.

The society in *Foxtrot* is a militarised state in which nobody is responsible, but everyone is complicit. It is an organisation of abstraction and repetition. This is best illustrated by the clerical error which mistook one soldier for another and reported a wrong Jonatan Feldmann as dead. The routinised and mechanised way in which the soldiers report his death to Michael and Dafna and walk Michael through the standardised funeral procedure suggests that, in the eyes of the IDF military apparatus, the soldiers are not individuals but cogs in the war machine. It is important to make a digression here and emphasise that depicting soldiers as innocent cogs in the machine is not unproblematic, as *Foxtrot* in particular has been criticised for this approach, especially as it pertains to the IDF (Cam, 2018; Moussa, 2021). Nevertheless, *Foxtrot's* core logic is that of a dance which always ends in the place where it started, a path with an already predetermined endpoint. This logic reframes the 'accidents' as predetermined by the steps taken before: Michael's phone call leads to Jonatan's accident, IDF clerical error led to Michael's

phone call, and the abstraction of soldier's lives lead to the error — ultimately suggesting that the initial step in the sequence is the militarised Israeli society.

Moreover, in both *Foxtrot* and *The Way of the Wind* the 'accident' subverts the myth of the national hero. As Mayer points out, many members of the early Zionist paramilitaries, and later the army, have been elevated to the status of national heroes due to their bravery, toughness, and dedication to the nation. This was especially the case for paratrooper units, like the one Gideon is a part of (Mayer, 2000). Moreover, Samson, after whom Oz names the father, was an often-invoked figure in earlier Hebrew and Israeli literary canon, representing the ideals of the 'New Jew', specifically heroism and self-sacrifice for the nation (Harris, 2012). By questioning Shimshon's objectives and heroism, and framing Gideon's death as anything but heroic, Oz subverts and challenges the national militarised narrative. In Jonatan's case, even his life as a soldier is a subversion of this idea, as there is nothing brave or heroic in the manning of the isolated outpost he and his comrades are tasked with supervising. The complete subversion happens in the moment of their deaths as neither Jonatan nor Gideon die in the expected military manner — bravely in the field. Their deaths are empty, absurd, and ultimately, meaningless.

By framing death as the result of chance rather than intention, the works reveal how state violence can be rendered apolitical, stripped of agency, and thus insulated from accountability. The language of the accident transforms structurally produced harm into unfortunate misfortune, allowing responsibility to dissipate across wind, paperwork, or terrain. In *The Way of the Wind*, Gideon's death appears sudden and unavoidable, yet it unfolds within a social order that systematically excludes weakness and disciplines deviation from hegemonic masculinity. In *Foxtrot*, Jonatan's death is the terminal point of a bureaucratic and militarised chain of decisions that is retrospectively emptied of intent through its classification as error or fate. By denying the sons the status of heroic martyrs and denying the fathers the consolation of meaning, both works refuse the redemptive logic of national sacrifice. What remains is a portrait of violence without transcendence, one that persists precisely because it is normalised, routinised, and disavowed. The accident thus becomes the site where the myth of control collapses and the absence of heroism within the militarised society is exposed.

3.2 The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

Another important element in the two stories is the father-son relationship and the role of God and faith in it. *The Way of the Wind* is a very obvious allusion to the biblical story of the Binding of Isaac, with Shimshon representing Abraham, Gideon Isaac, and Zaki Ishmael, per Aschkenasy. As she explains, "The prolonged spectacle of Gideon's agony includes all the elements of the Genesis tale of the Akedah: We have the fanatic father, thinking less of his son's plight and more of his own image [...] We have as well the strapped son, about to become the victim of his father's uncompromising zeal; the knife; and the sacrificial fire, in the form of the sparks spewed by the electric cables" (Aschkenasy, 2001, p. 129).

Crucially, the solitary ancient tale, taking place on a hilltop, is replaced by a "noisy and grotesque" kibbutz scene, in open view and with the active participation of the community (Aschkenasy, 2001, p. 130). The content of the 'faith', she argues, has changed, religious faith has been replaced with the Zionist ideology, but the zeal and fanatic dedication have remained the same (Aschkenasy, 2001).

Building on this interpretation, Zaki can be read not just as Ishmael, the outcast son, but also as the angel coming to save Isaac/Gideon. This is a layered reading which requires a deeper examination. In Judaism, angels are messengers of God who also execute his will (Ibn Saeed et al., 2025). This would make Zaki the angel of Shimshon's god, i.e. the ideology that he worships. In this light, Shimshon's collapse at the end of the story can be read not only as his inability to deal with the events that transpired on a personal level (chosen heir dying absurdly and outcast son acting heroically) but also as a crisis of faith. If this is the angel of his god, this rude, dirty hooligan child, this "wild beast", what does that say about his god (Oz, 1984, p. 260)? Moreover, the allegorical angel fails in his mission, Zaki does not save Gideon. On the one hand this can be interpreted as a reflection of Shimshon's God, he is not a savior, and this is no longer a world where divine intervention is possible. On the other hand, Zaki's failure is a direct consequence of Gideon's rejection of salvation. He throws himself on the wires not wanting to be saved. Through suicide, an act of free will, Gideon rejects the expectation his father placed upon him, but also his father's god and the saving hand of his angel.

The idea of God/faith is introduced in *Foxtrot* through a story Jonatan shares with his comrades at the outpost. He introduces it as the last bedtime story his father told him before he enlisted. It goes as follows: When Michael's mother was a girl her father gave her an old Hebrew Bible before he was taken to Auschwitz. The Bible had been in their family for 10 generations. He instructed her to give it to her son when he became a soldier and never ever sell it. The Bible sat in Michael's mother's porcelain cabinet, and she would tell him the story of it, how one day it will be his, and then his son's. One day Michael saw a new store in the city, selling foreign books and magazines, and a porn magazine with a pinup girl on the cover caught his eye. He had no money to buy it, so, after days of obsessively thinking about her, he traded the old bible for the magazine. All of his friends at school wanted to see it, but when he got it back the pages were stuck together. Years later, Michael ordered another copy of the same magazine online. This is the copy he showed to Jonatan and told him to give it to his son when he becomes a soldier, cementing the magazine as a new family heirloom (Maoz, 2017, 00:50:32 - 00:54:03).

The audience does not know if the story is true. There are clues hinting it might be, but there are also some inconsistencies that challenge it. Nevertheless, the story can be interpreted as a troubling metaphor of Michael's generation: they traded the bible for pornography, heritage and tradition for consumerism and secular pleasure, and moral imperatives for immorality. The porn magazine, however, does not represent immorality but emptiness. It stands for a complete absence of a belief system, even an immoral one as the magazine itself means nothing and a new one can always be purchased to replace it.

Like in *The Way of the Wind*, the old God has been replaced with something new, less just and righteous. The new belief system does not bring salvation, and, in *Foxtrot*, it is an ultimately meaningless endless repetition of the same steps; the porn magazine is ruined, buy a new one, and a new one, and a new one, ad infinitum.

This story also plays a key role in Michael and Jonatan's relationship. As revealed by his sketches, Jonatan recognises that his father is burdened by a deep shame and unprocessed trauma. He interprets this as coming from exchanging the Bible but, as is revealed at the end of the film, it is actually from the accidental death of his comrade Michael feels responsible for (Maoz, 2017, 01:17:05 - 01:19:25). Michael never processed this trauma, he never talked about it, he suffered in silence. This performance of stoic masculinity resulted in his son's tragic misunderstanding of him. We are left wondering what might have happened if Michael had shared his trauma with Jonatan and if it might have somehow changed the course of events that led to his death.

Emotional detachment is also present in *The Way of the Wind.* The father and son do not understand each other, not because of the father's unprocessed trauma but his lack of acknowledgement of his son as an individual and not just an extension of himself. In both *Foxtrot* and *The Way of the Wind* the father-son relationship is marked by a tragic misrecognition. The fathers, Michael and Shimshon, are emotionally detached from their sons. Their relationship is rooted in a performative militaristic masculinity, embodied in stoicism and repression of vulnerability. Shimshon embodies the dominant aggressive characteristics of militaristic masculinity while Michael shows how its harmful consequences perpetuate generational trauma. Underneath all this lies a thread of disconnection from faith and the exchange of the biblical God for something less.

Taken together, these fractured father-son relationships and emptied belief systems do not remain confined to the private or symbolic realm but actively feed into the reproduction of the military project in lived reality. In both works, the absence or distortion of faith removes any ethical framework capable of questioning sacrifice, authority, or loss. The fathers' emotional detachment, shame, and silence are socially cultivated dispositions that align with the needs of the militarised state: sons who do not question, fathers who do not speak. In this sense, the breakdown of faith and intimacy does not weaken the military project, it strengthens it, producing subjects who are emotionally disciplined, historically unanchored, and thus more easily absorbed into cycles of service, loss, and repetition.

3.3 Place, space, and location

Finally, it is important to discuss the locations these stories take place in. With one set in a kibbutz and the other taking place between a Tel Aviv apartment and an isolated outpost, both are set in ideologically charged places. All three locations support separate, but similar performances of militarised masculinity.

The kibbutz in *The Way of the Wind* is structured around openness, visibility, and collective

surveillance. Its bare, functional architecture reflects the rationalist and utopian ethos of socialist Zionism, where productivity, physical labour, and sacrifice are valourised. Masculinity in this space is public and performative: strength must be seen, weakness exposed and corrected. Gideon's suspension above the kibbutz thus becomes spatially symbolic. He hangs literally and figuratively above the ideological ground of his community, unable to inhabit its ideals without negating his own gentleness and individuality. To 'belong' requires a descent, a fall into the very logic that deems him inadequate. His death is therefore not an interruption of the kibbutz ideal but its spatial and ideological culmination.

By contrast, Michael's Tel Aviv apartment in *Foxtrot* represents a late-modern, depoliticised masculinity rooted in control, order, and emotional containment. The apartment is enclosed, minimalist, and geometrically precise, evoking sterility rather than warmth. Here, masculinity is no longer performed through physical labour or collective sacrifice but through discipline, silence, and mastery of the domestic sphere. The military outpost completes this spatial trajectory. Reduced to pure function, it is an extension of the state's militarised logic stripped of ideological pretence. Its sinking container and malfunctioning technology undermine the myth of total control, exposing the fragility of the system it upholds. Jonatan's slow descent into the ground mirrors both the erosion of meaning and the accumulation of unspoken trauma passed down from his father. Unlike Gideon, who hangs suspended between rejection and belonging, Jonatan is gradually buried, absorbed into a system that does not require belief, only compliance.

Together, these spaces reveal how architecture participates in the reproduction of militarised masculinity and the normalisation of violence. Whether through openness or enclosure, visibility or abstraction, each environment produces subjects who internalise control while remaining powerless to resist it. The accidents that occur within these spaces thus appear random, yet they are spatially and ideologically overdetermined. In this way, both works demonstrate that violence is not only enacted through policy or weaponry but is built into the very environments that structure everyday life.

4. Conclusion

In both *The Way of the Wind* and *Foxtrot*, the Israeli state's militarised nationalism is exposed through its rituals of memory, mourning, and masculinity, and ultimately undone by the quiet resistance of individual emotion and absurdity. Both narratives centre on sons who fail to meet the expectations of heroic masculinity and fathers who grapple with that failure, reflecting broader cracks in Zionist ideals. Through fragmented timelines, symbolic imagery, and the language of repetition, Oz and Maoz critique the myth of the noble soldier and reveal the cost of state violence on the intimate scale of family and grief. Their stories resist closure, instead offering rupture where pain, absurdity, and small gestures become acts of political and emotional refusal. Across both works, the erosion of faith removes an ethical framework capable of

interrupting cycles of sacrifice. Masculinity, performed through stoicism, emotional repression, and obedience, facilitates the depoliticisation of loss, allowing grief to remain private and violence to remain unquestioned. Architecture, from the openness of the kibbutz to the sterility of the apartment and the sinking military outpost, further disciplines bodies and emotions, producing subjects who internalise control while being slowly undone by it. The public backlash against *Foxtrot* underscores the very discomfort Maoz exposes. By refusing to portray the IDF as a moral or heroic institution and instead depicting it as an apparatus of error, abstraction, and emotional estrangement, the film disrupts dominant narratives of national virtue.

This essay contributes to existing scholarship on Israeli literature and cinema by offering a sustained comparative reading of *The Way of the Wind* and *Foxtrot* that foregrounds the intersection of accidentality, masculinity, and faith as mechanisms through which militarised nationalism is both reproduced and destabilised. While prior analyses have often examined these works within their respective literary or cinematic traditions, this paper places them in dialogue to demonstrate how different mediums articulate a shared critique of state militarism and oedipal relationships. By reading accidents not as narrative devices of fate but as structurally overdetermined outcomes, the analysis reframes randomness as a political tool that obscures responsibility. Furthermore, by integrating spatial analysis with gendered and intergenerational dynamics, this essay extends discussions of militarised masculinity beyond the battlefield into domestic, communal, and bureaucratic spaces. In doing so, it highlights how everyday environments and intimate relationships function as key sites of ideological reproduction and resistance. Ultimately, this paper argues that the power of both works lies in their refusal of heroic closure, offering instead a form of narrative rupture that challenges dominant national myths and opens space for alternative modes of ethical engagement.

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Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations
2026 Winter Edition
ISSA
www.issaleiden.wordpress.com

ABU DHABI SAADIYAT ISLAND THROUGH A NATION BRANDING LENS

Key Words: *Heritage, United Arab Emirates, Cultural Diplomacy, Nation Branding, Religious Tolerance*

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Abstract

This paper explores how Abu Dhabi employs cultural heritage institutions on Saadiyat Island, specifically the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Abrahamic Family House, as instruments of nation branding through the discourse of religious tolerance. Drawing on inductive discourse analysis of official institutional texts, the study examines how interfaith, mutuality, coexistence, and inclusivity are embedded within the cultural narrative promoted by these sites. The findings reveal that these institutions frame Abu Dhabi as a centre of global dialogue and as a model of "moderate Islam," strategically aligning religious tolerance with national identity and international image management. By emphasising shared Abrahamic origins and peaceful coexistence, Abu Dhabi projects itself as a cosmopolitan and open society, distinct from neighbouring Dubai and responsive to Western perceptions of Islam. This strategy serves dual purposes: internally, it consolidates a cohesive national identity rooted in state-defined values of tolerance; externally, it enhances Abu Dhabi's soft power and global legitimacy. The paper concludes that Saadiyat Island's heritage politics represent a deliberate intertwining of cultural diplomacy, economic ambition, and identity construction, positioning Abu Dhabi as a global cultural and political partner through the language of inclusivity and peacebuilding.

Cite this article: Guerrouche, A. (2026): Abu Dhabi Saadiyat Island Through a Nation Branding Lens. *Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations*, *2*(1), pp. 12-26.

1. Introduction

In 2017, Abu Dhabi opened its highly anticipated agreement with Louvre Paris for the Louvre Abu Dhabi, a franchise of the French museum to bridge Eastern and Western history and art, as per the words of the director of France's Louvre, Mr Jean-Luc Martinez (Landauro, 2014)). The museum is part of a larger development project on Saadiyat Island, which has come to host many more museum institutions, of which recently opened Abrahamic Family House, an interfaith complex meant as a learning space about Christianity, Islam and Judaism, a physical representation of the 2019 Abu Dhabi Declaration on Human Fraternity, signed by Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb (Human Fraternity for World Peace, 2019).

Religion and the bridging of East and West seem to be important themes in the development of cultural institutions in Abu Dhabi. Indeed, the Island is set to open a franchise of the Guggenheim Museum and the Zayed National Museum in 2025. Abu Dhabi is on a nation branding strategy to become the cultural capital of the UAE, competing for tourism with its neighbouring Emirate Dubai while distinguishing itself by bringing in household names in the art world and opening a unique religious complex marrying three world religions. The Emirate has been on a religious focus, naming 2019 the Year of Tolerance and assigning a Minister of Tolerance and Coexistence in 2016 (UAE Tolerance - Ministry of Tolerance & Coexistence, 2022). While scholars have examined cultural diplomacy in soft power, few have examined how museums have promoted religious tolerance for nation branding. In this paper, it shall be examined why religious tolerance is promoted on Saadiyat Island. The research puzzle is thus to be studied through the research questions:

How does the discourse surrounding Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island bring forward language of religious tolerance, and how is this incorporation achieved?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Heritage

Defining cultural heritage is heavily debated within the scholarly field, as heritage can take different forms. According to the definition of UNESCO, cultural heritage refers to "artefacts, monuments, a group of buildings and sites, and museums with diverse values, including symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific and social significance" ("Definition UNESCO Cultural Heritage," 2020). Many scholars believe this definition to be heavily incomplete. Some scholars consider the definition to be closely linked to objects and historical artefacts such as McClenan, (2012, p. 278). Others, such as Husz or Bujdosó et al., argue that cultural heritage is a broader umbrella, including "values, individual behaviour patterns, moral standards, expression on creativity, arts, traditions and

community bodies/organisations" (2015, p. 2) or the general standards and values of everyday life which includes "all social practices, arts and intellectual activities, and is equal to the life-long distinguishing systems produced by individuals and/or social communities" (Husz, 2007 in Bujdosó et al., 2015, p. 308). Loulanski and Loulanski add in the importance of religion, arguing that cultural heritage includes both material or built aspects such as religious identity (Loulanski & Loulanski, 2014, p. 407). This addition of religion is of interest in this paper.

Heritage studies have been changing due to the shifting attitudes, needs and demands people convey towards it, which Loulanski and Loulanski label as being from "monuments to people, from objects to functions and from preservation to purposeful preservation, sustainable use, and development" (2014, p. 407). As the definition of heritage becomes more inclusive, it is essential to look at how heritage is presented to the public, one of the main ways in museums.

2.2 Museums

Museums have a relatively short history, believed to have started to appear in the format we know today around the 19th century, with the understanding that museums would collect objects meant to exemplify the way of life of particular social groups (Rose, 2016, p. 229).

Bennett and McClellan point to museums as serving state policy, a tool of social management, (Bennett, 1995, p. 6) which serve the agenda of the nations they belong to as sites of "cross-cultural understanding and reconciliation", "to restore a unifying vision of humanity to a shattered world", and in "national memory preservation" to represent its nation as "culturally coherent in the eyes of the developed world" on the one hand and its simultaneous forgetting of dark pages of history on the other (McClellan, 2012, pp. 279–280). This work is key in the research presented today.

McClellan describes museums as "identity machines", as he argued that the history of museums is closely linked with the concept of nation-building. Indeed, states have used museums to display common heritage, traditions, and customs around which national identity was built to "form narratives of historical becoming, a mythology of origins and a belief in their own civilisation" (2012, p. 278). The literature reflects that the museum is vital in the spreading and shaping of identity discourse, and that states have used museums to glorify histories while erasing others. This applies to the UAE, which has grown tremendously in power and wealth over the last decades and is now defining its state identity through museums (Guerrouche, 2023, p. 8).

2.3 Cultural Nationalism

Determining and protecting cultural heritage has become part of state strategies to promote cultural nationalism, which Hutchinson defines as a movement to create national communities (2013, p. 76). Cultural heritage can play a crucial role in forming and sustaining a national community, which is based

on "historical memory" (2023, p. 9). Many scholars have built on this theory, arguing that historical buildings are preserved as part of the development of national 'myths' and identity, the invention of traditions, or the provision of memory (Anderson, 2006; Hobsbawm, 2012, p. 1; Thatcher, 2018, p. 24). Billig argues that physical heritage can contribute to 'banal nationalism', norms and assumptions of everyday representations of a nation, which build a sense of shared national identity (In Anderson, 2006, p. 13). New nations must create a sense of communal identity — what Anderson calls an 'imagined community' — among their citizens. In all, a national identity based on shared heritage needs to be created for a community to feel a sense of national identity.

However, within heritage studies, the role of the state has become a matter of controversy. Thatcher argues that traditional studies have often emphasised a 'national canon' based on beauty, artistic importance and historical significance defined by art historians and architects. Critical heritage scholars, such as Smith and Thatcher, call out the power of official national or international bodies such as UNESCO, which produce an 'authorised heritage discourse' (Smith, 2006, p. 13), privileging certain forms of heritage while others are forgotten (Thatcher, 2018, p. 25). In this line of thought, Guash et al. point out that increasingly spectacular architecture is commissioned to be used in city marketing and tourism campaigns. Museums seem to be a favourite choice, and Guash et al. examine how the Guggenheim Bilbao is just one recent example. The building itself is visually striking, and images of it proliferate in all kinds of media (2005, p. 8). The museum is part of cultural nationalism and economics, part of a strategy to reinforce the host city. In short, the literature provides ample evidence of the role of cultural heritage presentation in shaping national identity, which is, in many cases, enforced by state entities.

2.4 Tourism for Small States and Cultural Economics

Cultural diplomacy has been interwoven with economic concepts through the expansion of tourism. Bujdosó et al. coin this as cultural economics, "the creation of cultural goods (book, film, music, fine and applied arts, local handicraft products), the production of raw materials and tools, and marketing and education related to the former [which] may include education-related services and culture-based tourism" (2015, p. 309). It presents a product that aims to raise awareness of national values and how past cultural heritage can strengthen identity. In many ways, the museum has always been a method of tourism, with many museums serving mainly as tourist attractions. Yet, cultural economics takes this one step further, arguing that museums can serve as a local economy of knowledge and citizen development per the state's interest (2015, p. 312). It is about the increased importance of living standards and gaining new experiences (2015, p. 309). This is the case in young, rich states now settled into political stability, relevant to the Abu Dhabi case study explored. This links with Schulze's coined term 'experience economies', which he linked to cultural diplomacy as "aiming to unite economic profit and

the conservation of values" (Schulze 1992 in Bujdosó et al., 2015, p. 306). He argues that development projects focus on "exploiting resources, completing heritage values, and generating new ones. The conservation of cultural heritage, the completion of its values, and the regional enforcement of social identity are important factors of sustainability because they are the keys to safeguarding the past and present values for future generations, hence ensuring the survival of local features of the region" (2015, p. 306).

Cultural heritage is directly linked to these concepts, exploited by states to attract tourists and to educate local populations in the desired historical narrative and image abroad. Cultural diplomacy is inherently part of heritage protection and recognition to define a national image of identity and develop economic plans to benefit from the cultural identity being produced. While McClennan touched upon the cross-cultural peacebuilding purpose of a museum, the combination of this study with the notion of nation branding is lacking. This paper aims to add to the existing literature by broadening the museum's perspective on cultural diplomacy through the framework of nation branding.

3. Theoretical Framework: Nation Branding

Simon Anholt is often credited with coining the concept of nation branding, describing it in the 1990s as "the process of designing, planning and communicating the name and the identity, to build or manage the reputation" of the nation-state (2007, p. 4). Nation brand construction has been written about previously in scholarly work under the economic umbrella. Giannopoulos Piha and Avlonitis consider it essential to build a competitive portfolio in the international arena (Giannopoulos et al., n.d.), while Oda describes nation branding as "a deliberate, collective effort to generate a viable representation that enables people at home and abroad to view a state as legitimate and credible" (2020, p. 717). Nation branding finds its roots in corporate marketing strategies. Kerr and Wiseman apply corporate marketing techniques to states to improve their reputation in international relations (2018, p. 354). Fan defines nation branding as "applying branding and marketing communications techniques to promote a nation's image" (2006, p. 6) a definition He, Wang, and Jiang concur (2020, p. 5).

Building on these scholars, nation branding in cultural heritage allows for the study of strategy in national museum exhibitions. He et al., who wrote about the role of nation branding in Chinese cultural heritage, argue that nation branding is no longer treated as a subdomain of international tourism but is "more closely related to soft-power projection and public diplomacy." Indeed, nation branding was adopted and applied in the tourism industry to make a destination more appealing to international travellers. Szondi argued that nation branding aims to identify the 'uniqueness' of the nation's people, culture, or landscape to draw on distinguishing features (2008, p. 16). Fan, who wrote about the economic benefits of nation branding cultural landscapes in China, writes that "a nation brand is the total

sum of all perceptions of a nation in the minds of international stakeholders" (2006, p. 98). Keith writes that while nation branding does not grant states carte blanche to control national identity for party politics, "the concept of identity as being both given and constantly reconstituted implies that governments can attempt to harness and highlight certain aspects of national identity to shape national image perceptions" (Dinnie, 2015). Dinnie also highlights the importance of national culture and cultural branding in the construction of a nation brand as the basis to elevate above "merely trite, superficial PR/ advertising campaigns" (Dinnie, 2015). In that regard, the nation branding lens for examining Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island is highly pertinent.

Still, works of nation branding within heritage studies are limited. Among the few, Nobre and Sousa research the link between Portugal's nation branding and cultural heritage. Few have examined the direct impact of the state's introduction of museum collections and themes in line with the nation's strategy. This paper aims to be among the few previously mentioned that focus on cultural heritage in nation branding, thereby helping to fill the gap in the existing literature that has predominantly focused on other frameworks.

4. Methodology: Discourse Analysis

To explore the discourse around the institutions on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, focusing on the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Abrahamic Family House (the two currently open), the methodology employed is inductive discourse analysis within the context of nation branding.

Discourse, in the context of this study, refers to the systematic study of language in both spoken and written language, considering the underlying structures, power relations, and socio-cultural implications (Ruiz, 2009). Discourse analysis thus examines how language constructs meaning perceptions and influences the collective understanding of a particular subject (Rose, 2016, p. 212). Nation branding, as a strategic communication process, relies heavily on discourse to shape and convey a nation's specific image or identity. Understanding this discourse is essential for comprehending the underlying intentions, values, and aspirations that a nation seeks to project onto the global stage. Therefore, a discourse analysis becomes instrumental in deciphering the intent of a nation's branding.
The discourse analysis will be performed on the official websites of the two subjects, looking at the subpages related to the collections at both institutions, catalogues and programming leaflets available. This ensures that the discourse presented is only from the official organisations and Abu Dhabi's perspective.

Unlike deductive approaches that start with predefined categories or theories, inductive analysis allows patterns and themes to emerge from the data. The inductive process begins with open coding, where text segments are labelled with descriptive codes. These codes are then organised into

categories, allowing for the identification of recurring themes and patterns within the discourse (Naeem et al., 2023). This paper will identify recurring patterns and interconnections and interpret the underlying meanings to achieve a nuanced understanding of the nation branding intent reflected in the discourse. Case selection: Louvre Abu Dhabi was opened to bring a reputable museum name to the region and to serve as a platform on which Abu Dhabi would "be a hub for all cultures and a symbol of openness, hope, tolerance and inclusivity in the Arab world" ("Louvre Abu Dhabi Brand Identity - Graphic Design," n.d.). In the opening press release, Louvre Abu Dhabi was said to "celebrate the universal creativity of mankind and invite audiences to see humanity in a new light; building understanding across cultures through stories of human creativity that transcend civilisations, geographies and times; a testing ground for new ideas in a globalised world and champions new generations of cultural leaders ("Louvre Abu Dhabi Brand Identity - Graphic Design," n.d.)." Indeed, the curators are not out to create another Louvre like in Paris, but rather a new museum melding Eastern and Western cultures and traditions (Alpysbayeva, 2020, p. 8).

The Abrahamic Family House has a more explicit origin in promoting interfaith exchanges from the 2019 Abu Dhabi Declaration on Human Fraternity, signed by Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb (Human Fraternity for World Peace, 2019), and having the three houses of prayer on one terrain. Its agenda aims to project an open and tolerant community and to strengthen relations with international partners that promote religious tolerance and multiculturalism (Keobandith, 2019).

5. Findings

Through discourse analysis of the two institutions' sites, the terms Interfaith, Mutuality, Tolerance, and Inclusivity are among the most recurring and best encompass the overall identified codes. Interfaith, the most common code, came to be through the merger of codes *Interfaith* and I*nterfaith Dialogue*. Under this code, there is a heavy emphasis on recognising monotheistic religions having a shared 'ancestor', the prophet Abraham. Both institutions highlight the common traits between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The Abrahamic Family House (AFH) encourages this discourse in its name already, placing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam under the umbrella of 'the three' monotheistic religions as a *family.* This was also vocalised clearly in the podcast 'Letters of Light' about the exposition of the Louvre Abu Dhabi on the subject,

> *We start first with a prologue of Abraham. He is the founding figure. He is the common figure for the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. (Louvre Abu Dhabi)*

The language of *mutuality* is very present as well, mainly to show the similarities between Islam and the other monotheistic religions;

> *We celebrate stories of cultural connections to build understanding across cultures and reveal we have more in common than we know. (Louvre Abu Dhabi)*

> *[The Abrahamic Family House] aimed to facilitate inter-faith dialogue and show how people from multiple faiths can work together to make the world a better place. (AFH)*

Furthermore, there is a high emphasis on the 'invitation to discover'. Both institutions explain that their goal is to serve as a platform for dialogue, sharing of *knowledge* and, most importantly, an *understanding* of the three monotheistic religions. A discourse of *coexistence* is being created.

> *This is an exhibition that will take us through a journey to discover and learn about the sacred texts of the three monotheistic religions, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam. (Louvre Abu Dhabi)*

> *Everyone is invited to learn about any of the three faiths. (AFH)*

> *[AFH] provides a safe space to explore issues and inform a deeper understanding for people from diverse faith backgrounds. (AFH)*

The discourse around codes of *Peacebuilding, Coexistence*, and *Tolerance* was ever-present on both sites. The importance of dialogue and the continuous recognition of the value of each religion is inescapable. While not explicitly referencing any conflict, both sites hold a discourse around the importance of peace in recognising our common 'humanity'.

> *Diverse in our Faiths. Common in our Humanity. Together in Peace. (AFH)*

> *The Abrahamic Family House offers a range of educational programmes on topics related to faith and interfaith dialogue, intercultural communication & cooperation and peacebuilding capacity development. (AFH)*

Moreover, the discourse emphasises the UAE's religious tolerance towards Christianity and Judaism in a majority Muslim country. The Louvre Podcast claims the role of Abu Dhabi as highly important in the

development of religion, stating that:

> *Abu Dhabi is actually in the region where monotheism was born. (Louvre Abu Dhabi)*
> *Abrahamic Family House welcomes people from all walks of life to exchange knowledge and practice faith in communities from the UAE and beyond. (AFH)*

All in all, the discourse analysis conducted on the sites of both institutions highlighted the importance of interfaith dialogue, education, and peacebuilding, as well as the role that the UAE and Abu Dhabi play in these discourse streams.[1]

6. Analysis: 'Moderate Islam' Promotion Through Religious Tolerance

The Emirate's increased investment in religious tolerance and cultural diplomacy stems from a desire to set a precedent for an open, easygoing Muslim country in the Gulf for Western audiences. Through Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi intends to become a centre for global culture, attracting local, regional and international visitors. Cultural diplomacy is an essential mechanism through which Abu Dhabi can explore its differentiation from neighbouring Emirate Dubai. Unlike Dubai, a popular tourism destination well-known for its extravagant projects, Abu Dhabi houses the country's political power. The UAE has worked to redeem its position internationally as a trustworthy partner in the Gulf. Indeed, these museums carry the extra weight of redeeming the tarnished image of Arabs in the West since 9/11. Fostering a positive view of the Arab world includes assimilating into the museums' mission the discourse of tolerant culture and the recognition of religions as a bridge between peoples. Louvre Abu Dhabi's release also openly holds a discourse on tourism development ("Louvre Abu Dhabi Brand Identity - Graphic Design," n.d.). By partnering with the Louvre, created from ancient French royal collections and constantly enriched over two centuries, the Louvre's art in Abu Dhabi conveys universality and openness to Western partnerships (McClellan, 2012, p. 281). The country's market liberalisation for tourism, as done in Dubai, has made the nation more attractive to economic investment. Thus, the discourse around these museums reflects Abu Dhabi's new global status while countering negative impressions of a regressive Islamic ideology in the region, and they play a formative role in the nation branding.

Furthermore, the Saadiyat Island language of Interfaith, Mutuality and Tolerance intersects external branding efforts with internal branding in identity construction. Museums play a role in the development of national identity, and the Abraham Family House and Louvre Abu Dhabi are no exception (Kaplan, 2006). While fostering local identity, museum programming also aims to open the

[1] (See appendix for code list).

Emiratis to values conducive to foreign investment and Abu Dhabi's assimilation into the global capitalist order (McClellan, 2012, p. 289). The state developed an outline based on seven key pillars supporting the country's approach to tolerance: 'true' Islam (per the state's framework), the UAE Constitution, the legacy and ethics of Founder Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, international conventions, archaeology and history, humanity, and shared values (UAE Tolerance - Ministry of Tolerance & Coexistence, 2022). Thus, the Emirati push toward tolerance stems from the regime's desire for a unifying selling point for its people. The discourse around the new museums seeks to balance the inward-looking demands of shaping the Emirati public and the need to meet foreign expectations. In that, the institutions on Saadiyat Island play a role in physically cementing these values for tourists and locals.

In the grander scheme of things, Abu Dhabi has been working to place itself as a capital for peacebuilding in the Gulf, competing with Qatar's mediation branding (Al-Tamimi et al., 2023). As mentioned, the UAE has been working to redeem its reputation post-9/11. The UAE's response was two-fold. They joined the U.S.-led 'war on terror' to help repair their image internationally but also embarked on a process geared toward the gradual reappropriation by the federal government of the space, symbols, moral authority, and mobilising power associated with Islam (Mazzucco & Alexander, 2023). By promoting the state's version of Islam at museums, which is based upon the rejection of Islam as the only true religion, instead of promoting the mutual origins of monotheistic religions under the patriarchal figure of Abraham as a family, other, more radical expressions of political Islam lose space in the national discourse. This discourse is important for Abu Dhabi internationally, as it enables it to participate in larger diplomatic peace missions regarding religious sensitivities in the region. They were, for example, critical in the negotiations in the recent acts of warfare by Israel against Palestinians, being recognised by Israel not as a rival Arab state but as a partner in the region, this branding facilitating the release of Gazans for medical help in the UAE ("UNSC adopts UAE-drafted Gaza aid resolution", 2023). The discourse of Saadiyat Island is thus not simply about cultural diplomacy in softening the image of Abu Dhabi to tourists, businesses, and diplomats, but also about allowing them to control a discourse on religious recognition that remains relatively unique in the Middle East.

Through analysis of the discourse on the websites of the AFH and the Louvre Abu Dhabi, it becomes clear that the religious tolerance discourse is being encouraged to support multiple internal and external diplomatic branding strategies. The discourse internally develops national 'myths' and creates a sense of communal identity. Externally, the discourse centres on Abu Dhabi's standout qualities as a 'moderate' Islamic nation and a partner to the West.

Some arguments can be made regarding the commercialisation of heritage through heritisation in these institutions. Indeed, the state's creation of this narrative can be seen as imposing a cultural narrative foreign to the people's true values. The museums are being used as peacebuilding tools rather

than as spaces to display Emirati art and culture, and nation-building memory politics make it so that these narratives, although heard by locals, might create a divide between the nation brand and the cultural memory of locals. Given the limited ability to voice grievances under the political system, it is difficult to determine whether the state's national narrative is shared with its citizens. Still, Emiratis seem willing to see the changes through for the economic and political gains to be had in commercialising their heritage.

7. Conclusion

This paper examined the discourse of religious tolerance in the cultural institutions of Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island. It analysed the benefits to the UAE's nation branding in promoting these discourses. It found that the main benefit was to promote the UAE as a 'moderate' Islamic country, rooted in its Islamic heritage but open to foreign cooperation, politically and economically. The UAE has demonstrated that Arab nations can thrive when embracing economic diversification and promoting a culture founded upon the principles of cosmopolitanism and inclusivity. The development of Saadiyat Island will be vital to sustaining and enhancing this image. The politics of heritage in Abu Dhabi thus relates to the desire for political trust on the international stage and being a strategic partner to Western powers. While this paper looked at the discourse employed around the expositions and programmes at the Abrahamic Family House and Louvre Abu Dhabi, it would be further interesting to look at the iconographying of religious tolerance through visual symbols in a further study.

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Appendix: Codes used in Discourse Analysis

document	quotation	codes
Louvre Abu Dhabi _ Letters of light podcast.pdf	Join us	Inclusivity
Louvre Abu Dhabi _ Letters of light podcast.pdf	French National Library	international
Louvre Abu Dhabi _ Letters of light podcast.pdf	Judaism, Christianity, and Islam	Interfaith
Louvre Abu Dhabi _ Letters of light podcast.pdf	the three	
Louvre Abu Dhabi _ Letters of light podcast.pdf	Holy	undisputable
Louvre Abu Dhabi _ Home.pdf	open and inclusive	Inclusivity
Louvre Abu Dhabi _ Home.pdf	to build understanding across cultures	Educating
Louvre Abu Dhabi _ Home.pdf	we have more in common than we know	mutuality
Louvre Abu Dhabi _ Home.pdf	Islamic Inspiration and Modern Design	heritage/modern
Louvre Abu Dhabi _ Home.pdf	raditional design and modern construction	heritage/modern
Abramic Family House-Education & Dialogue.pdf	interfaith dialogue	Interfaith
Abramic Family House-Education & Dialogue.pdf	peace-building capacity development	peacebuilding
Abramic Family House-Education & Dialogue.pdf	intercultural communication	intercultural
Abramic Family House-Education & Dialogue.pdf	coexistence	coexistence
Abramic Family House-Education & Dialogue.pdf	appreciation of cultural and religious diversity	intercultural, Interfaith
Abramic Family House-Education & Dialogue.pdf	interfaith exchange	Interfaith
Abramic Family House-Education & Dialogue.pdf	inter-faith dialogue	Interfaith
Abramic Family House-Education & Dialogue.pdf	Family House	Inclusivity
Abramic Family House-Education & Dialogue.pdf	leading academics	Educating
Abramic Family House-Education & Dialogue.pdf	educate	Educating
Abramic Family House-Education & Dialogue.pdf	conversations	Interfaith
Abramic Family House-Education & Dialogue.pdf	diversity	Inclusivity
Abramic Family House-Education & Dialogue.pdf	Gain invaluable insights	Educating
Abramic Family House-Education & Dialogue.pdf	fostering meaningful conversations	Interfaith
Abramic Family House-Education & Dialogue.pdf	inspire engaging discussions	Interfaith
Abramic Family House-Education & Dialogue.pdf	shared learning	Interfaith
Abramic Family House-Education & Dialogue.pdf	new perspectives	Educating
The Department of Community Development On	clerics of different faiths	Interfaith
The Department of Community Development On	informing	Educating
The Department of Community Development On	human brotherhood	Inclusivity
The Department of Community Development On	advocate of peace	peacebuilding
The Department of Community Development On	social harmony	coexistence
The Department of Community Development On	International Day for Tolerance	tolerance
The Department of Community Development On	welcomed	Inclusivity
The Department of Community Development On	integral part of the societal fabric	undisputable
The Department of Community Development On	spiritual homogeneity	Interfaith
The Department of Community Development On	explained	Educating
The Department of Community Development On	20 places of worship	Interfaith
The Department of Community Development On	multi-religious worship rooms	coexistence
The Department of Community Development On	cohesive society	coexistence
The Department of Community Development On	tolerance	tolerance
The Department of Community Development On	respect for the other	coexistence
The Department of Community Development On	human brotherhood	Inclusivity
The Department of Community Development On	religious and cultural pluralism	coexistence, Interfaith
The Department of Community Development On	Louvre Museum in Abu Dhabi is a meeting place	peacebuilding
The Department of Community Development On	cooperation	coexistence
The Department of Community Development On	freedom	tolerance
The Department of Community Development On	each religion	Interfaith
The Department of Community Development On	values of cohesion	coexistence
The Department of Community Development On	human peace	peacebuilding
The Department of Community Development On	coexistence between religions	coexistence
The Department of Community Development On	Community Development	Interfaith

The Department of Community Development On	Clerics	Interfaith
louvreabudhabi_lettersoflight_english.pdf	shared	Inclusivity
louvreabudhabi_lettersoflight_english.pdf	monumental Quran	undisputable
Learn More about Louvre Abu Dhabi.pdf	learn actively	Educating
Learn More about Louvre Abu Dhabi.pdf	make strong connections	Interfaith
Learn More about Louvre Abu Dhabi.pdf	multisensory activities	Inclusivity
Learn More about Louvre Abu Dhabi.pdf	three official languages	Inclusivity
Homepage.pdf	Diverse	international
Homepage.pdf	Common	Inclusivity
Homepage.pdf	Together in Peace.	peacebuilding
Homepage.pdf	Humanity	Inclusivity
Homepage.pdf	gathering	coexistence
Homepage.pdf	dialogue	Interfaith
Homepage.pdf	welcomes	Inclusivity
Homepage.pdf	xchange knowledg	Educating
Homepage.pdf	connect	Inclusivity
Homepage.pdf	explore	Educating
Homepage.pdf	reflect	tolerance
Homepage.pdf	robust	Educating
Homepage.pdf	around the world.	international
Homepage.pdf	from all belief	Interfaith
Homepage.pdf	understand	Educating
Homepage.pdf	beyond	international
Homepage.pdf	inform	Educating
Homepage.pdf	Everyone	Inclusivity
Homepage.pdf	learn	Educating
Homepage.pdf	any	Inclusivity
Transcript podcast Louvre abu Dhabi	the	undisputable
Transcript podcast Louvre abu Dhabi	discover and learn	Educating
Transcript podcast Louvre abu Dhabi	common figure	mutuality
Transcript podcast Louvre abu Dhabi	digest	Educating
Transcript podcast Louvre abu Dhabi	bridge	mutuality
Transcript podcast Louvre abu Dhabi	father of all	Inclusivity
Transcript podcast Louvre abu Dhabi	starting point	Inclusivity
Transcript podcast Louvre abu Dhabi	link	mutuality
Transcript podcast Louvre abu Dhabi	of course	undisputable
Transcript podcast Louvre abu Dhabi	Abu Dhabi is actually in the region wheremonotheism was bo	heritage/modern
Transcript podcast Louvre abu Dhabi	spread this new knowledge	Educating
Transcript podcast Louvre abu Dhabi	learning	Educating
Transcript podcast Louvre abu Dhabi	invitation to discover	Interfaith

Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations
2026 Winter Edition
ISSA
www.issaleiden.wordpress.com

HUMAN RIGHTS OVERSIGHT IN THE EU-TUNISIA MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

Key Words: *EU Migration Governance, Externalisation, Informalisation, Human Rights Accountability*

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Abstract

The European Union's 2023 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Tunisia marks a pivotal moment in the evolution of EU migration governance, exemplifying a broader turn towards informal, non-binding instruments that bypass traditional treaty-making procedures and democratic oversight. This paper investigates how legal-institutional strategies of externalisation, informalisation, and orchestration shape accountability for human rights within this new paradigm. While scholarly literature has extensively conceptualised these governance tools, far less attention has been paid to the institutional responses that follow their implementation. Addressing this gap, the paper analyses the institutional aftermath of the EU-Tunisia MoU, focusing on oversight efforts by the European Parliament and the European Ombudsman, and the European Commission's subsequent replies. Through a novel examination of parliamentary written questions and the findings from the Ombudsman's key inquiries, the study argues that the Commission has established a framework of performative accountability. This was achieved by substituting a public Human Rights Impact Assessment with a confidential internal 'risk-management exercise,' and by relying on ambiguous suspension mechanisms and a lack of independent oversight. The paper concludes that while the Parliament and Ombudsman highlight systemic flaws, their post-hoc interventions are institutionally constrained. Consequently, the EU's growing reliance on informal migration deals continues to erode democratic control and human rights safeguards at its external borders, a trend unlikely to reverse without significant institutional reform.

Cite this article: Wiersma, J. (2026): Human Rights Oversight in the EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding. *Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations*, *2* (1), pp. 27-43.

1. Introduction

The European Union's 2023 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Tunisia marks a significant moment in the transformation of EU migration governance. Signed in response to mounting pressure to curb irregular arrivals via the Central Mediterranean route, the MoU exemplifies the EU's increasing reliance on informal, flexible arrangements with third countries to manage migration flows (Strik & Robbesom, 2024; Pijnenburg, 2024). Unlike traditional agreements concluded under the EU's treaty-making procedures, the MoU lacks legal enforceability, bypasses parliamentary approval, and omits mechanisms for ratification, termination, or dispute resolution (Andrade & Frasca, 2024; Şeker, 2024). Its language is deliberately non-committal, signalling a preference for soft law instruments that avoid legal scrutiny while expanding the European Commission's discretion (Şeker, 2024). For this reason, the EU–Tunisia MoU has become emblematic of broader institutional shifts in migration policy, where the legal form of cooperation is increasingly decoupled from its impact on fundamental rights and from institutional accountability (Nicolosi, 2024; Müller & Slominski, 2020).

While the literature has developed conceptual tools to analyse how the EU governs migration through strategies of externalisation, informalisation, and orchestration (Nicolosi, 2024; Romano, 2024; Müller & Slominski, 2020), far less attention has been paid to how EU institutions respond once such arrangements are in place. This paper addresses that gap by analysing the institutional aftermath of the EU–Tunisia MoU, focusing in particular on the responses of the European Commission and the oversight efforts of the European Parliament and European Ombudsman. Although scholars have noted the procedural opacity surrounding informal migration deals (Vara, 2019; Şeker, 2024), the Commission's detailed replies to more than a dozen parliamentary questions, as well as the findings of the Ombudsman's strategic initiative and follow-up inquiry, SI/5/2023/MHZ and OI/2/2024/MHZ, have not yet been examined in the academic literature. This paper therefore asks:

How do legal-institutional strategies such as externalisation, orchestration, and informalisation shape the EU's accountability for human rights in the 2023 EU–Tunisia MoU?

The essay is structured as follows. It begins with a literature review that maps how scholars have approached the three central governance strategies, externalisation, informalisation, and orchestration, as overlapping tools in the EU's migration toolkit. The analysis then turns to the EU–Tunisia MoU itself, outlining its legal character and the political negotiations that led to its adoption. A final section focuses on the institutional reactions that followed the MoU's signature, including parliamentary attempts to assert oversight and the Ombudsman's criticism of the Commission's failure to conduct or publish a Human Rights Impact Assessment. The study concludes that the Commission's use of confidential

internal processes in place of transparent human rights impact assessments, combined with ambiguous suspension mechanisms and a lack of independent oversight, has created a framework in which accountability is largely performative. The European Parliament's efforts to assert control remain constrained, while the Ombudsman's recommendations highlight, rather than resolve, the systemic limits of post-hoc institutional checks. The paper therefore argues that unless these institutional shortcomings are addressed, the EU's growing reliance on informal migration instruments will continue to erode democratic oversight and human rights safeguards at its external borders.

2. Literature Review

The MoU between the European Union and Tunisia has triggered growing academic concern, particularly within the field of EU migration governance. It illustrates a wider trend in which the EU attempts to reduce irregular arrivals by negotiating flexible, often informal arrangements with third-party states. At the same time, the MoU bypasses formal legal procedures and institutions, notably the EU Parliament. Scholars view the MoU not simply as a bilateral political statement but as a case study in how the EU reconfigures its external migration governance through strategies of externalisation, informalisation, and orchestration.

This literature review explores how scholars have tackled the issue through three overlapping themes: externalisation (where migration control is relocated), informalisation (how soft instruments substitute for binding law) and orchestration (who does the work and how responsibility is diffused). While each lens captures a distinct facet of the EU's strategy, they frequently operate in tandem. I therefore treat them sequentially, but underscore their points of intersection and the persistent gap they share: weak institutional accountability.

2.1 Externalisation

Externalisation is "the process of shifting functions that are normally undertaken by a state within its own territory so that they take place, in part or in whole, outside its territory" (Refugee Law Initiative, 2022, p.114). According to Nicolosi (2024), these practices in the context of migration policies encompass a range of operational and legal strategies, such as visa restrictions, carrier sanctions, border pre-clearance, pushbacks, and offshore asylum processing. The core objective is to prevent migrants from arriving at EU borders by shifting the burden of migration control onto other actors and territories, often under conditions that avoid triggering human rights obligations (Nicolosi, 2024).

Nicolosi (2024) advances the conceptualisation of externalisation by introducing a taxonomy that categorises measures based on their function and territorial manifestation. He highlights how externalisation has evolved from unilateral measures to more complex, multilateral and bilateral

arrangements, increasingly relying on informal instruments such as Memoranda of Understanding that operate in legal grey zones.

The EU-Tunisia MoU fits this model. Nicolosi (2024) identifies it as part of the EU's broader trend of informal migration governance, where soft agreements with third countries serve to deter asylum seekers from reaching Europe. While framed as cooperative partnerships, these arrangements enable the EU to displace legal and humanitarian responsibilities onto partner states such as Tunisia, with limited avenues for legal scrutiny or redress.

Where Nicolosi focuses on structure, Pijnenburg (2024) exposes the consequences, particularly the severe human rights implications, that are inherent in such externalisation strategies. Her research reveals that while states like Italy (and by extension, the EU) shift migration enforcement to neighbouring countries like Libya, these practices directly result in serious human rights violations for people on the move. Pijnenburg argues that existing international and regional human rights regimes offer limited accountability mechanisms for these violations. This inadequacy stems from both procedural barriers and fosters impunity for abuses occurring within the framework of externalised migration control.

A similar account comes from Badalič (2019), written years before the MoU was signed but still highly relevant. He describes how the EU's cooperation with Tunisia already fused criminal and migration law into what he calls crimmigration: irregular movement, and even assistance to migrants, is treated as crime and policed by Tunisian forces backed by European funding and training. By outsourcing detention, push-backs, and the denial of legal aid, Brussels shifted tough enforcement to a partner with a weaker rights record while keeping itself out of harms way (Badalič, 2019).

Recent work by Laine, Moyo, and Nshimbi (2020) suggests this delegation is part of a broader pattern. Examining the Commission's 2020 blueprint for an EU-Africa partnership, they argue that the rhetoric of a balanced "twin-continent" relationship masks a persistent asymmetry: Europe defines the agenda while Africa is framed as the locus of instability, demographic pressure, and uncontrollable migration (Laine et al., 2020, p. 2). As Mbembe puts it, the "hall-mark of European anti-African migration policy" is that "brutal and corrupt African regimes are entrusted with the task of locking up potential African migrants and warehousing asylum seekers" in exchange for EU money (Mbembe 2017, quoted in Laine et al., 2020, p. 6).

2.2 Informalisation

Informalisation denotes the EU's growing reliance on non-binding instruments, MoUs, joint declarations, and political statements to steer migration policy outside the Article 218 TFEU treaty-making framework (Romano, 2024). Although the practice emerged after the Amsterdam Treaty, it accelerated following the so-called 2015 'refugee crisis', when formal readmission agreements were viewed as procedurally

cumbersome. These agreements require impact assessments, parliamentary approval, and are open to ex-ante judicial review, steps policymakers saw as ill-suited to fast-moving political pressures (Şeker 2024). Soft-law deals such as the EU–Turkey Statement, therefore, became attractive substitutes: lacking binding legal force, soft-law deals avoid those checks and are correspondingly hard to contest. Annulment actions hinge on demonstrating legal effects, preliminary references on national justiciability, and damage claims on proving a direct causal link, hurdles rarely cleared when an instrument is deliberately non-binding (Şeker 2024). Together, these procedural filters insulate the EU–Tunisia MoU from meaningful court scrutiny, a gap also underscored by Strik and Robbesom (2024).

The soft-law turn also redistributes institutional power by shifting the centre of gravity from Parliament and the Court of Justice to the Commission and Council. This allows executive actors to operate as "policy ghosts" beyond effective scrutiny (Vara, 2019, p. 22). Such "formal informality" ensures that arrangements like Mobility Partnerships appear treaty-like yet evade treaty discipline, eroding democratic oversight (Cardwell & Dickson 2023, pp. 3122–3123). Consequently, unless Court of Justice admissibility rules are reformed, these soft-law instruments will continue to enjoy a form of de facto impunity (Şeker 2024, pp. 389–391).

Adding a constitutional dimension, Reviglio (2022) says EU migration policy has drifted from a concern with legal validity to a search for legal efficiency. What now matters is how quickly and flexibly executives can act, not whether parliaments can oversee the process or rights can be enforced. Reviglo's reading of the EU–Turkey Statement (2016) and the Italy–Libya MoU (2017) shows how this efficiency mindset squeezes space for deliberation and tips the institutional balance toward the executive, sidelining legislatures and courts. The same impulse runs through the EU–Tunisia MoU, where quick operational wins overshadow the slower, more deliberative work of legal review and parliamentary debate.

2.3 Orchestration

Orchestration refers to a form of indirect governance whereby an actor, such as the EU, enlists third-party intermediaries. This is done on a voluntary, non-hierarchical basis, with the goal of implementing the actor's policy objectives. Müller and Slominski (2020, pp. 802–805) define orchestration as a strategy wherein the orchestrator provides ideational and material support to intermediaries, without issuing binding commands, to shape outcomes while evading legal responsibility. In their analysis of EU migration governance in the Central Mediterranean, Müller and Slominski demonstrate how orchestration became a strategic response to legal constraints following the European Court of Human Rights Hirsi judgement, in which the Court ruled that Italy violated the European Convention on Human Rights by intercepting migrants at sea and returning them to Libya without assessing their individual cases, exposing the migrants to the risk of ill-treatment and constituting collective expulsion. The EU

replaced direct involvement in border operations with indirect influence by supporting Libyan authorities through training, funding, and recognition. This allowed the EU to maintain de facto control over migration enforcement while distancing itself legally from human rights violations committed by intermediaries. Although Müller and Slominski do not apply their framework to the EU–Tunisia MoU, their conceptualisation is highly relevant. The EU's cooperation with Tunisia similarly relies on material assistance, political endorsement, and policy alignment, all characteristic orchestration techniques. Yet this application has not been explicitly theorised in the literature, marking a conceptual gap that this present study aims to address. The orchestration framework is thus valuable for assessing how the EU manages to influence migration governance in partner states while avoiding the legal consequences of direct action (Müller & Slominski, 2020).

3. Analysis

Although scholars have unpacked externalisation, informalisation, and orchestration in great detail, far less has been written about what happens after an informal deal is signed, especially on the question of human-rights accountability. Şeker's (2024) work on procedural barriers, and Reviglio's (2022) account of the drift from legal validity to legal efficiency, explain why courtroom challenges rarely succeed, yet they say little about how the European Union's political institutions respond when those shortcomings are flagged.

The following analysis addresses this institutional dimension by focusing on the political responses that emerge once such shortcomings are flagged. Specific attention is given to the MoU's sparse human-rights safeguards, the "Team Europe" diplomacy involving Mark Rutte and Giorgia Meloni, and the strategic timing of the 2023 signature. Furthermore, the study evaluates the Commission's replies to parliamentary inquiries alongside its recent correspondence with the European Ombudsman, an exchange currently absent from academic literature.

3.1 The Memorandum of Understanding

The EU–Tunisia MoU of 16 July 2023 is framed and formatted in ways that clearly mark it as a non-binding instrument. It is labelled a "memorandum of understanding," contains no clauses on entry into force, termination, or dispute settlement, and lacks any reference to ratification. Under the European Court of Justice's testimonial ruling on this matter, the decisive factor for distinguishing hard from soft law is whether the parties intended the agreement to be legally binding (C-233/02, France v Commission, para. 42). The absence of treaty-style mechanisms therefore signals a deliberate choice for soft law, extending the EU's existing practice of informal migration arrangements (Andrade & Frasca, 2024).

The drafting language reinforces that choice. Although the English text often uses shall, it nearly

always pairs the verb with qualifiers such as "endeavour to," "seek to," or "express the intention to," (MoU EU-Tunisia, 2023). As Şeker (2024) notes, such phrasing indicates objectives rather than enforceable duties. The only express reference to rights occurs in the migration pillar: "This approach shall be based on respect for human rights and shall include combating criminal networks of migrant smugglers and human traffickers…" (MoU EU-Tunisia, 2023, p. 3). No monitoring body, complaint route, or suspension clause gives practical effect to that statement, leaving the rights language as all but an aspiration (Şeker, 2024).

3.2 "Team Europe" Diplomacy in Tunis

On 11 June 2023 Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni travelled to Tunis under the banner of the "Team Europe spirit." The label, coined during the EU's 2020 COVID-19 response, is used for joint missions where the Commission and willing member states pool money and political weight behind a single external initiative (European Commission, 16 July 2023). The trio's appearance signalled that migration cooperation with Tunis was a joint EU-member-state project, even though the Memorandum was signed only by the Commission and financed from the EU budget. As Pijnenburg (2023) observes, such a set-up blurs accountability: national leaders can claim they brokered the deal for domestic gain, yet formal responsibility lies with Brussels. The uncertainty is reinforced by the MoU's singular reference to human rights and the absence of any monitoring mechanism, precisely the shortcomings Pijnenburg identifies in this "Team Europe deal."

Rutte's prominent role has roots in Dutch domestic politics. In early 2023 his four-party coalition was split over limits on family reunification and the strain on reception centres, especially in the northern Dutch town of Ter Apel. During a parliamentary debate on the 21st of March 2023, Rutte told MPs that, after meeting Meloni on the 8th of March, the Netherlands and Italy wanted to act as a "motor block" for new migration deals with African partners, with countries such as Tunisia. (Tweede Kamer, 63rd session, 2023). The remark aimed to show voters that he had a plan at the European level. When the coalition collapsed on the 7th of July 2023, progress on the MoU helped Rutte present himself as having taken concrete steps on migration before leaving office, before a November election that heavily centred around migration.

Meloni also faced strong pressures at home. Despite her 2022 campaign promise of a "naval blockade," arrivals kept climbing: official figures show a 73 percent jump in landings during 2023, and early-2023 numbers were 880 percent higher than the same period in 2022 (Carlo, 2023). Crucially, Tunisia had overtaken Libya as the main point of departure, accounting for most of the 212,100 crossings attempted on the central Mediterranean route that year (IOM-UNHCR Joint Overview, 2023, 2024). The strain on Lampedusa dominated Italian news and amplified calls for swift action. In parliamentary

debates Meloni argued that external deals were the only realistic way to cut departures, telling the Chamber of Deputies on the 22nd of March 2023: "We have been left alone to do this work, at times outside of national borders" (ANSA, 2023). This stance fits a longer Italian pattern: in 2019 Badalič had noted that Italy was taking the lead in forging cooperation with Tunisia to curb crossings through bilateral agreements on readmission (Badalič, 2019). Appearing in Tunis, the capital of the country now generating the largest number of crossings, alongside von der Leyen and Rutte therefore let Meloni claim that the EU was finally backing Italy's containment strategy.

3.3 The Council Compromise

Events in Brussels provide a crucial backdrop to the MoU's speed. On the 8th of June 2023, four days before the first Tunis visit, the Justice and Home Affairs Council reached a general approach on the Asylum Procedures Regulation (APR) (Council document 10443/23). For months, The Hague had argued that a mandatory border asylum and return procedure was essential to curb onward movements: under the Dutch proposal, applicants falling under certain profiles would be processed, and if rejected, removed, directly from the external frontier (Strik & Robbesom, 2024). As the Financial Times observed, the reform would give member states "more power to send failed asylum seekers to third countries deemed safe," ending "seven years of gridlocked talks" (Dubois, 2023). From an institutional vantage, the Council vote marked a step-change: for the first time, all 27 governments endorsed compulsory screening and short-term detention at the border, effectively shifting part of the asylum workload away from their interiors. As Strik & Robbesom (2024) stress, the measure serves a dual containment logic, deterring departures and accelerating returns, but it cannot function by itself; it needs third countries willing to accept people turned back from the EU perimeter.

Italy converted its pivotal vote into leverage on a different article of the APR. During the negotiations, Rome pushed to relax the safe third country definition, advocating a "territorial connection" test light enough to classify transit states such as Tunisia as safe with minimal evidence (Strik & Robbesom, 2024). The final Council text leaves broad discretion to Member States in assessing safety and the applicant's link to the country, a concession many observers in Brussels found surprising (Woollard, 2023). Strik & Robbesom argue that Italy's strategy was twofold: first, to secure legal cover for returning more asylum seekers to North Africa; second, to obtain political support and EU funding for Tunisian border policing that would limit departures in the first place. Northern governments and the Commission accepted Rome's conditions because they saw an operational bargain: the Netherlands and others gained the border procedure they wanted, while Italy gained a framework for swift returns (Strik & Robbesom, 2024). The EU-Tunisia MoU, signed barely five weeks later, operationalises the Council compromise by turning the categories agreed upon in Brussels into a practical arrangement with Tunisia. This is particularly significant as Tunisia served as the primary departure country on the

Central Mediterranean route.

3.4 European Parliament scrutiny and the Commission's Replies

Since the MoU was signed, MEPs from across the political spectrum have filed more than a dozen written questions pressing the Commission on three recurring points: (1) why the MoU contains only vague human-rights language and no monitoring clause; (2) how the Commission verifies that EU money does not enable abuses by Tunisian authorities; and (3) what legal basis under EU law permits an informal agreement to bypass parliamentary consent. A 1 August 2023 priority question asked "why did the MoU not include the EU's long-standing demands for … the release of political prisoners?" (P-002382/2023). A later inquiry on the 30th of October 2024 noted that the Ombudsman had found no stand-alone human-rights impact assessment and asked when the Commission would publish its risk analysis (E-002329/2024). In February 2025 a group of MEPs cited UN reports of "state-sponsored trafficking" and inquired what "safeguards are in place to prevent EU funds from supporting Tunisian authorities involved in human trafficking and rights abuses" (E-000583/2025).

The Commission's replies follow a consistent pattern: they restate that "respect for human rights … is at the heart" of EU partnerships and point to contractual clauses that allow suspension if violations are proven (Answer to E-002382/2023, 2 October 2023). Monitoring, it says, relies on "regular reports from implementing partners, on-the-spot verifications, and external evaluations" (Answer to E-000583/2025, 25 April 2025). When asked to publish its pre-signature risk assessment, the Commission referred to internal risk-management exercises but provided no release date (Answer to E-002329/2024, 22 April 2025). Faced with questions about push-backs and desert dumps (Answer to E-001795/2024, 12 March 2025), the commission stressed that EU funds are channelled through international organisations rather than directly to Tunisian security forces and that "dialogue" remains the main remedy.

Taken together, the questions show that Parliament is using all available written-question tools to demand transparency, yet the Commission's answers offer reassurance rather than new information. The reliance on implementing-partner reports echoes what Şeker (2024) calls a procedural shield: safeguards exist on paper, but the Commission retains full control over disclosure and contract suspension. Parliament therefore has no ex ante veto and only limited ex post leverage. Moreover, the Commission's invocation of generic clauses ("the implementation may be suspended when a violation … has been identified") places the burden of proof on Brussels itself, not on an independent monitor. This circular logic leaves the accountability gap flagged by Pijnenburg (2023) essentially intact.

While the volume of questions signals parliamentary concern, the institutional design of soft instruments leaves MEPs dependent on the Commission's willingness to share data. This underscores the broader trend identified in the literature: informalisation relocates decision-making to the executive

level and turns parliamentary scrutiny into a reactive exercise, carried out after funds are committed and without access to underlying assessments.

MEPs have also tested other tools. Invoking Article 112(2) of the Parliament's Rules of Procedure, the Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET) sought to block the Commission's 150 million budget support payment to Tunisia. The committee argued that the payment breached Article 21 of the TEU, which requires all EU external action to promote, amongst other things, human-rights protection. In the committee's view, the MoU lacked any clear conditionality or monitoring to ensure those values were upheld (European Parliament, P9_TA(2024)0175). Although the plenary later endorsed the objection on 14 March 2024, the vote had no legal effect because the Commission had already adopted and disbursed the funds, illustrating the limits of after-the-fact parliamentary control.

In parallel, the LIBE and AFET committees invited Commissioners Johansson and Várhelyi to a joint hearing and, when the invitation was declined, sent a letter demanding a breakdown of spending and evidence of a human-rights impact assessment (IPOL-COM-LIBE D(2023)27702). The Commission's written reply of 20 October 2023 (A 006120) supplied neither the requested figures nor any impact study. Strik and Robbesom (2024) argue that such persistent non-co-operation risks breaching Article 13(2) TEU, which obliges institutions to practise sincere cooperation, and confirms how little influence Parliament can exert once an informal deal has been put in place.

3.5 The European Ombudsman's strategic initiative and own-initiative inquiry

The Ombudsman's opening letter of 13 September 2023 framed the MoU as a potential repeat of earlier migration deals, such as the EU-Turkey Statement, where the lack of a prior human-rights impact assessment (HRIA) had proved controversial. As an independent watchdog, the Ombudsman investigates allegations of institutional maladministration and conducts proactive, own-initiative inquiries to resolve systemic failures, thereby providing a critical mechanism for redress within the European Union. In that letter, Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly posed three direct questions to the Commission: Had it carried out an HRIA before signing the MoU? Would it conduct periodic HRIAs during implementation? And what concrete benchmarks would trigger suspension of EU funding if abuses occurred? (European Ombudsman, 2023a).

In its correspondence of 16 February 2024, the Commission confirmed that no formal HRIA had been carried out. Instead, it referred to an internal "risk-management exercise" conducted before signature and argued that an HRIA was unnecessary because the MoU is a non-binding instrument (European Commission, 2024a). For monitoring, it cited routine tools, implementing-partner reports, on-the-spot verifications, and an independent mechanism "to be set up for Tunisia in 2024." As for suspension, it pointed only to standard contract clauses allowing funds to be halted once a violation is demonstrated, without specifying the evidentiary threshold or who would make that determination.

In her decision of 12 April 2024, the Ombudsman found the Commission's explanations too vague to show compliance with Article 21 TEU and NDICI funding (Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument) safeguards, and urged publication of the underlying risk analysis plus clear suspension criteria (European Ombudsman, 2024a). While this decision formally closed SI/5/2023/MHZ, the Ombudsman immediately opened own-initiative inquiry OI/2/2024/MHZ to examine the transparency issues left unresolved.

The own-initiative inquiry OI/2/2024/MHZ began with the Ombudsman's opening letter of 12 April 2024, which asked the Commission to disclose the full "risk-management exercise" carried out before the EU-Tunisia MoU and to explain why no public Human Rights Impact Assessment (HRIA) had been produced (European Ombudsman, 2024b). The Ombudsman underlined that an HRIA is ordinarily published, consultative and designed to establish measurable safeguards, whereas the risk exercise was internal and inaccessible. In its reply of 29 April 2025, the Commission confirmed the existence of the risk exercise but maintained it was confidential and sufficient, adding that any decision to halt funding would continue to be taken "case-by-case" (European Commission, 2025). This position was challenged in September 2024, when a leaked European External Action Service report, reported by The Guardian, described a "clear deterioration of the political climate" in Tunisia and warned that cooperation on migration was putting the EU's credibility at stake (Rankin, 2024). The leak showed that extensive human-rights concerns were already known inside EU institutions, yet remained undisclosed to the public.

The Ombudsman's decision of 21 October 2024 concluded that, although the risk exercise covered many HRIA criteria, the Commission's refusal to publish even a summary prevented meaningful scrutiny (European Ombudsman, 2024c). She issued four recommendations: release a summary of the assessment, create a public register of monitoring results, define objective suspension triggers, and require complaint mechanisms for affected individuals. The Commission did not accept these points in full. Subsequent investigations documented allegations of abuse by EU-funded Tunisian security forces and reported that the Commission was revising payment conditions only after public criticism (Townsend, 2024, 2025). Taken together, the documents demonstrate that keeping the risk exercise confidential limited ex-ante accountability, while ex-post adjustments depended on external pressure rather than pre-established safeguards.

The Commission's handling of the EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding illustrates how an informal instrument can be effectively shielded from external scrutiny. Throughout both Ombudsman procedures, it relied on two opaque practices. First, it treated the pre-signature "risk-management exercise" as an adequate substitute for a public Human Rights Impact Assessment, yet kept the document confidential, even after the Ombudsman inspected it and asked for a published summary (European Ombudsman, 2024c). Without access to the underlying analysis, Parliament, civil society

and the public cannot verify whether the MoU complies with Article 21 TEU and NDICI human-rights safeguards. Second, the Commission anchored accountability to internal, case-by-case judgements: suspension triggers remain undefined, the promised complaints mechanism lacks a timetable, and monitoring data are scattered across partner reports that are neither consolidated nor published (European Commission, 2025). These gaps make it nearly impossible to trace the causal chain between EU funding and reported abuses, an opacity amplified by the fact that many Tunisian NGOs fear reprisals and therefore limit cooperation with EU monitors. The result is a circular system in which the institution that allocates funds also decides whether the conditions for stopping them are met, leaving independent watchdogs with little more than after-the-fact admonitions once disbursements are already finalised.

4. Conclusion

This paper examined how legal-institutional strategies, externalisation, informalisation, and orchestration shape the EU's accountability for human rights in the 2023 Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia. While these strategies allow the EU to pursue migration containment through flexible, non-binding cooperation with third countries, they significantly weaken the legal and institutional mechanisms needed to uphold accountability. The MoU's design reflects a broader trend in EU migration governance: a preference for soft law instruments that bypass parliamentary oversight and judicial scrutiny, while transferring migration enforcement responsibilities to third countries with limited rights protections.

The analysis of institutional responses shows that accountability, though frequently invoked, remains largely symbolic. The Commission has declined to publish its internal risk assessment, maintains control over monitoring processes, and relies on contractual clauses that are difficult to activate in practice. While the European Parliament has submitted numerous questions and the European Ombudsman has raised serious concerns, their ability to influence the process has been limited. Informalisation has allowed the Commission to operate without meaningful checks from other institutions.

Looking ahead, the use of informal agreements in migration policy is likely to continue, especially as political pressure to reduce arrivals remains high. But if the EU wants to uphold its legal commitments and protect fundamental rights, it cannot rely solely on internal procedures and discretionary safeguards. Stronger transparency rules, independent monitoring mechanisms, and a clearer legal status for soft law agreements are needed to ensure that accountability is not an afterthought. Future research and policy reform should focus on how democratic institutions, especially the Parliament and courts, can play a more active role in shaping and reviewing these external partnerships before they are

implemented, not only once concerns have already emerged.

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Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations
2026 Winter Edition
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BEYOND HATE CRIME

The Political Ideology behind Incel Violence

Key Words: *Incel Ideology, Incel Violence, Political Ideology, Hegemonic Masculinity, Misogyny, Terrorism*

MARIE CLAESSEN

Global Conflict in the Modern Era

Abstract

Incel violence has been on the rise, with more frequent attacks being made in the name of Inceldom every year. This has led to certain experts calling out the need to classify Incel violence as terrorism. However, due to the understanding of terrorism as being politically-driven violence, others have hesitated to qualify it as such, instead categorising it as individual hate crimes. This paper therefore seeks to establish whether or not the Incel ideology that underlines Incel violence is political. By focussing on two key principles in Incel ideology, namely hegemonic masculinity and misogyny, the paper presents an analysis of different arguments for and against the political nature of Incel worldview, as presented in existing literature on Inceldom. These range from arguing that Incel violence is driven by personal grievances and revenge to it being driven by a desire to change society and punish those who dissent. Based on this discussion, this paper concludes that the ideologies that drive Incel violence are political in nature, as they advocate for social-political change and offer concrete ways of achieving them. The findings of this paper contribute not only to the literature on Inceldom, but also offer critical insights into the political nature of Incel ideology, which in turn can contribute to future discourses on whether or not Incel violence classifies as terrorism.

Cite this article: Claessen, M. (2026): Beyond Hate Crime: The Political Ideology Behind Incel Violence. *Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations, 2* (1), pp. 44-57.

1. Introduction

"This tragedy did not have to happen. I didn't want things to turn out this way, but humanity forced my hand," (Rodger, 2014, p. 1). These are the words stated in the introduction to Elliot Rodger's manifesto, published in 2014, before he killed six people in the name of Inceldom (Hoffman et al., 2020, p. 568). Inspired by his actions, two other men went on to commit similar attacks in 2018, killing 12 more for the Incel cause (Hoffman et al., 2020, p. 570).

Manifested mostly through online platforms, the Incel (Involuntary Celibate) community typically consists of men who experience loneliness and frustration at their inability to engage in romantic/sexual relations with women. Although it began as an online-space for shared chagrin, there have been increased violent discourses linked to this community, with at least sixteen attacks having been made between 2009 and 2020 (Caruso et al., 2021, p. 161; Pantucci & Ong, 2020, p. 2). This has raised questions amongst scholars about the threat of Incel ideology, with a leading concern being if Incel violence can be classified as terrorism. If yes, then it can be considered a security threat and countermeasures can be developed (Barcellona, 2022, p. 179). If not, then Incel violence can be classified merely as individual hate crimes. The issue with the latter is that Inceldom is inherently misogynistic, with violence against women equalling violence against 50% of the population. Discarding it as an individual case rather than as terrorism hence undermines the larger societal threat it could pose, which has led to scholars arguing that it should be considered as terrorism (Vink et al., 2024, p. 735; Perliger et al., 2023, p. 11). However, problems arise when it comes to the definition of terrorism. Though the term is frequently contested, various authors have agreed that terrorist involves violence/the threat of violence against civilians in an attempt to generate psychological responces for political purposes (Cottee, 2020, pp. 98-99; Cronin, 2018, p. 504; Richards, 2019, pp. 13, 16, & 19). It is particularly the last element of the definition that makes it difficult to classify Incel violence as terrorism as scholars and policymakers have disagreed on the political nature of Incel ideology (Cottee, 2020, pp. 98-100; Pantucci & Ong, 2020, pp. 2-3). In order to further the debate on whether or not Incel violence can be categorised as terrorism, it is therefore necessary to take a step back from perceptions on terrorism and instead focus on whether or not the ideologies that drive Incel violence can be considered as political. This paper hence seeks to contribute to existing discourses by examining the political extent of the ideology behind Incel violence; it will thus not delve into the debate on Incel violence being terrorism, but instead provide a more extensive understanding of the political nature of Incel ideology which can be used in future discussions on Incel violence and terrorism. To do so, this paper will examine academic literature on the Incel community and the various arguments presented by scholars both in favour and against it being political. The analysis will begin by presenting the main principles of Incel ideology, before delving into the different stances taken in the literature on their political nature.

1.1 Definitions and Scope

Drawing on Lost et al.'s (2015) and Carmines and D'Amico's (2009) analyses of political ideology, as well as on the definition of political ideology within the literature that will be explored in this paper, "political ideology" will be defined as a set of shared beliefs regarding what society should be like, including ideas on how this can be achieved (Carmines & D'Amico, 2015, pp. 205-206; Lost et al., 2009, pp. 309 & 326). The discussions presented in this paper will therefore be taking these factors into consideration when debating the political nature of Incel ideology. Moreover, although it is important to note that violence can also be psychological, the understanding of violence in this paper will be limited to physical violence, as the scope of this research focuses on violence that results in physical attacks and mass killings, such as Rodger's attack. This includes violence through killing, beating, rape, or any other forms of physical and sexual violence.

Lastly, it is important to note that the majority of existing literature focuses on U.S.-based and Europe-based Inceldom, especially in regards to heterosexual men, meaning that this paper will also be focussing on these circles. As these are specific contexts, this suggests that Incel ideology may differ across different sub-groups and regions. In addition, even within Western male circles, not all members of the Incel community share the same perspectives, especially when it comes to inciting violence. Since the debate about terrorism is linked to those who do promote violence, this paper's analysis will focus mainly on the Incel ideology underlying these claims to violence. It is thus important to take into account that the research presented in this paper does not claim to reflect the entire Incel community, nor that all Incels are violent; rather, it will specifically examine ideologies tied to violence within male, Western-based contexts. For the sake of simplicity, the term "Incel" will therefore also be used in reference to this particular group throughout the analysis, despite the term holding a broader meaning to certain communities.

2. Incel Ideology

A central understanding in Inceldom is the 80/20 rule (See: Figure 1): only the top 20% of men are able to engage in sexual/romantic relationships with 80% of available women, thus facilitating female hypergamy and leaving the other men to compete for women's attention (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2011, pp. 5-6; Zimmerman, 2024, pp. 169). This rule reveals two underlying principles that are core to Incel ideology: competition between men, which can be understood through the principle of hegemonic masculinity, and the desire for women, which is connected to misogyny. The following section will hence examine these two principles.

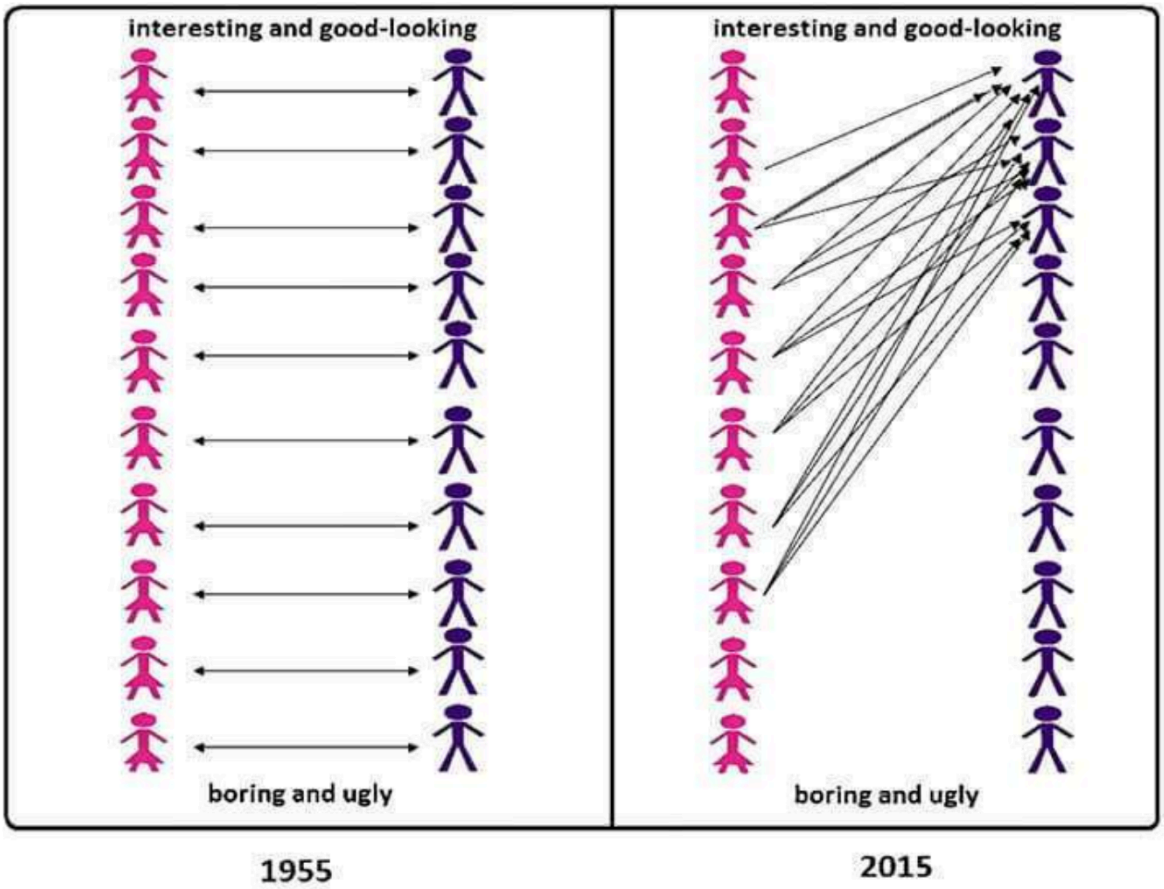

Figure 1: Hypergamy and the 80/20 Rule (Vidal, 2023)

2.1 Hegemonic Masculinity and Societal Hierarchies

According to the concept of hegemonic masculinity, there are different masculinities that exist in society, ranked within a hierarchy ranging from marginalised masculinity at the bottom to hegemonic masculinity (the ideal form of masculinity), at the top (Daly & Reed, 2022, p. 14; Zimmerman, 2024, pp. 167 & 170). Within the Incel worldview, this hierarchy is framed through the stereotypes of "Chads", "Stacies", "Normies", and Incels (See Figure 2). Chads represent the Alpha Male and thus embody hegemonic masculinity: they are strong, attractive, and can have sex with any women they desire (Daly & Reed, 2022, p. 16; Zimmerman, 2024, p. 170). Stacies are the Alpha female equivalent of Chads, who are highly attractive, very feminine, and typically choose to be with Chads (Hoffman et al., 2020, p. 567; Zimmerman, 2024, p. 170). The

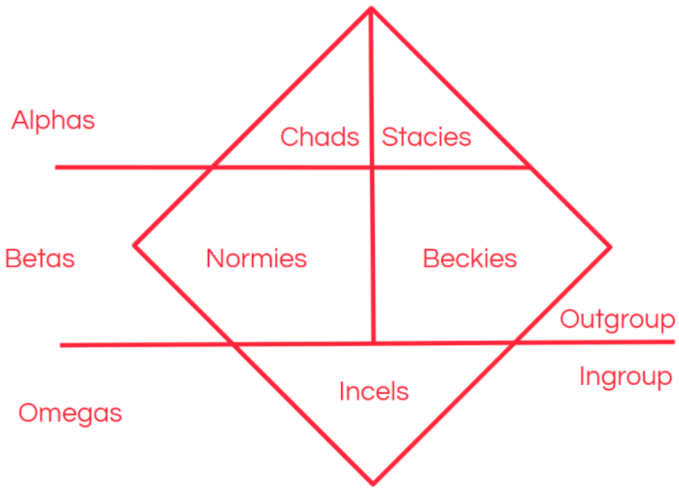

Figure 2. Incel Social Structure, diagram adapted from (Vidal, 2023)

Normies represent the Beta level: they are men who do not fall under the category of hegemonic masculinity, but are still able to be in relations with women, albeit less attractive ones ("Beckies") (Hoffman et al., 2020, p. 567; Zimmerman, 2024, p. 170). At the bottom of the hierarchy are the Incels, who remain single and therefore consider themselves marginalised (Daly & Reed, 2022, p. 28; Zimmerman, 2024, pp. 170–171).

This perceived marginalisation stems from the belief that Incels lack the attractive attributes that Chads have, resulting in them being single and unable to have sex. This is a significant source of vexation for Incels because it undermines their masculinity. As explained by Kimmel, "the pursuit of [sexual] conquests is more about guys proving something to other guys than it is about the women involved," (Kimmel, 2008, p. 192, as cited in O'Donnel & Shor, 2022, p. 346). The necessity of having sex is therefore that one can establish themselves within the masculine hierarchy: sex becomes a marker of manhood, and being rejected becomes an insult to one's masculinity (DeCook & Kelly, 2023, p. 22; O'Donell & Shor, 2022, p. 346). Since Incels are unable to be in relationships due to their attributes, they cannot 'prove their masculinity through sexual conquest,' (O'Donnell & Shor, 2022, p. 346). This thus seals their fate as a marginalised community in the masculine hierarchy.

Furthermore, the inability to engage in sexual relations can be understood through the concept of bio-determinism, which is also referred to as "Taking the Black-pill" within Incel ideology. According to the Black-pill ideology, which is inspired by the Matrix's Red-pills, Incels are able to see the truth of how society functions; it is based on masculine hierarchies and the 80/20 rule (Hoffman et al., 2020, pp. 567–568; Radicalisation Awareness Network [RAN], 2021, pp. 5–6). However, unlike the Red-pill that merely reveals the truth of society, the Black-pill takes it a step further by revealing that Incels are helpless to change their position in society due to their genetics (Hoffman et al., 2020, pp. 567–568; RAN, 2021, pp. 5–6). This is because their genetics make them too unattractive to get women, and without women to have sex with, they will never rise in the masculine hierarchy. The notion of masculinity therefore plays a leading role in Incel ideology, shaping insecurities and constructing an image of society that is based on hierarchies of the male status and sexual prowess.

2.2 Misogyny: Blaming Women

On account of sex being a marker of masculinity, Incels blame women for their marginalised masculinity as they are the ones denying them of sex. Their reasoning for this traces back to the 1970s' sexual revolution during which women gained more freedoms, including the ability to have several partners (Zimmerman, 2024, p. 169). This enhanced the Sexual Market Value (SMV) of women whilst decreasing that of men, resulting in women having better choices to pick men who have desirable characteristics (Chads), and creating an unequal distribution of women for men (the 80/20 rule) (Zimmerman, 2024, pp. 172–173). Incels therefore accuse women of establishing an oppressive feminine gynarchy that

favours hegemonic masculinities and leaves unattractive men with nothing (Zimmerman, 2024, p. 166).

A consequence of this is that misogyny becomes a central feature of the Incel community, as shown through its misogynistic language, anti-feminist ideologies, and promotion of violence towards women (Barcellona, 2022, p. 174; Caruso et al., 2021, p. 157; O'Donnell & Shor, 2022, pp. 337-338; Zimmerman, 2024, p. 167). For instance women are referred to as "foid" (female humanoid organism), with Incels using the pronoun "it" to allude to women instead of "her/she" (Barcellona, 2022, p. 174). Moreover, women are severely objectified by Incels, and are seen as owing men both sexual and emotional services (Vink et al., 2024, pp. 733-734). If they are unable to provide these, then violence, such as beatings and rape, are often seen as justifiable responses within Incel circles (Kelly et al., 2022, p. 171). Therefore, although misogyny stems from hegemonic masculinities, it has become a key principle of Inceldom on its own, as Incels resent women for their marginalisation and in turn allude to misogynistic slurs and violence.

3. Analysis

The previous section established two principles in Inceldom, namely masculinity and misogyny. Nevertheless, the question remains how these concepts lead to violence, and whether or not they are political. There are mixed opinions within the literature on this. Some authors argue that Incel violence is driven by personal grievances and revenge stemming from marginalisation, and is therefore not political. However, others state that Incel violence is a call for socio-political change to overcome their marginalisation. The rest of this paper will thus delve into the different arguments presented by authors, and analyse the extent to which Incel ideologies behind violence are political.

3.1 Personal Grievances versus Socio-political Change

The perceived marginalisation resulting from the Black-pill mentality and its nihilistic nature has been linked to high levels of frustration and depression within Incel circles. In their studies on Incels, both Hoffman et al. and Daly and Reed found that many participants were depressed and held suicidal thoughts, with some of them sharing that depression was a common trait within Inceldom. (Dally & Reed, 2022, pp. 28–29; Hoffman, 2020, p. 568). However, as found by Dally and Reed, therapy was often not helpful because the Black-pill ideology meant that regardless of the self-improvement that therapy could provide them with, Incels could not change their predicament (Dally & Reed, 2022, pp. 28–29). It is therefore not surprising that terms such as LDAR"("Lay Down and Rot") and "Rope" (suicide) are frequently mentioned in Incel communities (Zimmerman, 2024, pp. 171–172).

In some cases, this helplessness has been found to cause violence. For instance, Zimmerman discusses how physical violence becomes an "acceptable [method] to seek relief," (Zimmerman, 2024,

p. 174) when nothing else works. Similarly, both Zimmerman's and DiMuccio and Knowles' research have suggested that Incels use violence as a means to achieve masculinity, since they are unable to do so via sexual relations (DiMuccio & Knowles, 2020, p. 26; Zimmerman, 2024, p. 174). This implies that Incel violence stems from feelings of insecurity and depression, and has resulted in certain scholars claiming that Incel ideology is driven by personal grievances rather than by political motives. Two studies that support this are Caruso et al. who attribute Incel violence to psychological discomfort, and Perliger et al. who state that due to the deterministic nature of Inceldom, Incels are more likely to focus on their own helplessness than on future-oriented political reforms (Caruso et al., 2021, p. 161; Perliger et al., 2020, p. 25). Nonetheless, prior to his attack, Rodger released a manifesto, which offers an alternative perspective: in his manifesto, he presents his sexual marginalisation as being an injustice, rather than as being an individual grievance (Kelly et al., 2022, p. 168). His manifesto suggests that Incel helplessness can also be understood through the concept of victimisation and injustice.

Incels lament that they are at the bottom of the hierarchy due to their non-Alpha genes. However, both O'Donnell and Shor, and Zimmerman, have revealed that Incels also look down on Chads, viewing them as primitive, brute, and psychologically as well as morally inferior to Incels (O'Donnell & Shor, 2022, p. 38; Zimmerman, 2024, p. 171). Therefore, despite implementing hegemonic masculinity into their worldviews, Incel ideology also provides a counter-narrative in which hegemonic masculinity is criticised and Incel masculinity is superior. Through this, Incels are therefore not merely helpless for being at the bottom of the hierarchy, they are also victims: they face grave injustices as they ought to be at the top of the hierarchy.

Consequentially, since they cannot change their unjust position in the hierarchy (Black-pill ideology), the only way to overcome their predicament is therefore to change society itself, which can be achieved through violence (Kelly et al., 2022, pp. 173-174; Zimmerman, 2024, p. 172). Numerous authors have found in their research that violence was seen as a means to overthrow the oppressors, implement changes to society's culture and politics, and establish an alternative patriarchal system that liberates Incels from marginalisation (Daly & Reed, 2022, p. 17; Kelly et al., 2022, p. 176; Zimmerman, 2024, pp. 168 & 171). This is further supported by findings from O'Donnell and Shor, who found that a recurring justification for violence within Incel circles included desires for political change, with one user stating that he would 'continue to make [his] voice heard until radical changes are made in our hostile, gynocentric society,' (O'Donnell & Shor, 2022, pp. 344–345). The emphasis on promoting socio-political changes has therefore spurred various authors to argue that Incel ideology encouraging violence is indeed political, and not merely an expression of personal grievance. This is also supported by Rodger's manifesto, as well as other manifestos and online statements about Incel rebellions, that were published prior to violent acts by Incels (Pantucci & Ong, 2020, pp. 2–3).

An interesting question to follow with is why Perliger et al. failed to pick up on the desire for

political reform, and the answer to this can be found in their participant sample. Their findings suggested that Incels were less inclined to be violent, which contradicts the research by Kelly et al. and O'Donnell and Shor, who found that violence is central to Incel discourse (Kelly et al., 2022, p. 171; O'Donnell & Shor, 2022, p. 338; Perliger et al., 2023, p. 24). These conflicting findings do not mean that either researchers are wrong, but rather reflect that the Incel community is broad with a wide range of opinions. It is thus possible that the data used by Perliger et al. did not come from the more radicalised circles of Inceldom, as appears to be the case for Kelly et al. and O'Donnell & Shor's research, which is why the emphasis was on personal grievance rather than on political reform. Caruso et al.'s study provides a deeper insight on this. Their work discusses how Incel violence stems from psychological discomforts that, when shared within the community, becomes radicalised through shared ideology (Caruso et al., 2021, pp. 160-161). This is further supported by Hoffman et al., who comment on how personal grievances become framed within discourses of the Incel "us" versus the "other" out-group. As a result, these discourses transform grievances into calls for social change (Hoffman et al., 2020, p. 568). What this implies is that although it may begin as personal grievances, Incel ideology becomes a political call for action through radicalisation within online communities, where Incel principles are continuously shared and promoted. Therefore, Perliger et al.'s conclusion that helplessness plays a bigger role than political reform still holds, albeit, not within the more radicalised circles of Inceldom.

To summarise this section, the literature holds two understandings of Incel ideology: it stems from psychological discomfort, or it represents resistance to oppressive structures, resulting in violence to promote change. From the stance of the former, authors have argued that Incels are not political, but rather depressed. However, the evidence supporting this is based on Incels before they turned violent. In the case of the latter, where research was more focussed on Incels promoting violence, authors have argued that Incel ideologies are political, as they advocate for social change. Several conclusions can be drawn from this, with the first being that it is not possible to generalise Incel ideology; it may be political in certain cases, but not in others. This appears to be based on the level of radicalisation where Incel ideology for non-violent Incels (low level of radicalisation) is experienced as psychological discomfort, and where Incel ideology for violent Incels (high levels of radicalisation) is experienced as social injustices. Incel ideologies therefore turn from personal grievances to political ideologies when communities instrumentalise grievances into calls for social change. As a result, the second conclusion can be made that in the case of Incels supporting violence, Incel ideologies can be considered as political, as they are beliefs shared within a community that promote socio-political changes, with violence being a means to achieve this.

3.2 Revenge versus Punishment

Another argument made in regards to Incel violence is that it stems from revenge. Incel violence is usually targeted towards those 'identified as being responsible for/complicit in [Incel] victimisation,' (Zimmerman, 2024, p. 174). Due to this, authors like Barcellona and Pantucci and Ong have argued that Incel discourses are about personal revenge against women, rather than about advocating for political change (Barcellona, 2022, pp. 176 & 179; Pantucci & Ong, 2020, pp. 2-3). Considering how women are blamed for oppressing Incels, it is reasonable to conclude that part of the violence is indeed driven by revenge.

Nevertheless, Manne's *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* on misogynistic violence offers an alternative perspective. Manne argues that misogyny is not about simply hating women: it is about controlling women who do not behave according to gendered norms and values (Manne, 2017, pp. 19-20). Since these are produced by patriarchal structures, Manne defines misogyny as 'the system that polices and enforces [the patriarchy's] governing norms and expectations,' (Manne, 2017, p. 20). Seeing misogyny as a means to subdue women into following societal norms, she thus concludes that misogyny is a political phenomenon (Manne, 2017, p. 21).

Applying this framework to Incel ideology, the argument can be made that Incel misogyny is not just a result of hatred against women, but also an attempt to control them. As previously established, the inability to engage in sexual relations is a key source of frustration within Incel communities, with many Incels blaming women for their sexual marginalisation. What is important to note is that this frustration is not merely a result of being rejected by women, but also of being denied what Incels consider to be a basic right for men. As highlighted in existing research, many Incels consider sex a 'basic human right' (Perliger et al., 2023, p. 5) and a 'basic need' for men, equal to food and shelter (Sluthate, 2015, as cited in Kelly et al., 2022, p. 169). Some Incels have even gone as far as to argue that when women refuse to have sex with them, it "constitutes a *reverse rape*" with such offences being "as harmful as real rapes," (Hoffman et al., 2020, p. 573). Incels are therefore not merely depressed because they cannot have sex, they are angered that their right to it is denied, and blame this on women and the gynarchy for destroying the traditional gender norms that granted them this right (Kelly et al., 2022, pp. 171-172; Vink et al., 2024, pp. 726, 733-736). Moreover, the previous section also discussed how Incels attributed their inability to have sex on their "bad" genetics. However, if women had not overthrown gender norms and instead fulfilled their duties of providing sex to men, "inferior" Incel genes would not be an issue. Kelly et al., hence discuss how violence against women is deemed a "justified response to disobedience," (Kelly et al., 2022, p. 171) for failing to provide sex and for failing to "fulfill their feminine role," (Truecels, 2018, as cited in Kelly et al., 2022, p. 171). Incel violence against women is therefore not just about exacting revenge, but about punishing women for opposing gender roles and the patriarchy. Alluding to Manne's definition, this indicates that Incel misogyny is indeed highly political.

A counterargument to this conclusion could be that it does not account for Incel violence directed towards men, as Chads and Normies have also been targeted by attacks (DeCook & Kelly, 2023, p. 15; O'Donnell & Shor, 2022, p. 346; Zimmerman, 2024, p. 170). Nonetheless, Manne's approach can still be applied to these cases. This is because Chads and Normies are accused of upholding and exploiting oppressive hierarchies, making them as complicit as women, and hence also deserving of punishment (DeCook & Kelly, 2023, p. 15; Vink, 2024, p. 734; Zimmerman, 2024, p. 170). Although the violence against men may not be misogynistic, it still reflects a desire to punish those who maintain societal structures that are antagonistic to the Incels' vision of the patriarchy. Framed in this manner, Incels are driven to violence by a need to punish those who deviate from acceptable social structures. This may begin as revenge rooted in anger towards dissenters, but since the goal of the violence is to generate obedience, it morphs into a stance on how people should behave in society.

What can be concluded from this is that Incel violence, especially towards women, can be seen as a form of punishment to maintain societal structures and norms. As this is an effort to uphold and establish a specific societal system (the patriarchy), which also reflects a stance on what society should be and how it can be achieved, the case can thus be made that the ideology driving this violence (misogyny) is political.

3.3 Extent of Political Reforms

Thus far, this paper has established that Incel ideology can be interpreted as political because it advocates for social change, whether by fighting for a new order or by punishing those who dissent. However, various scholars still have their doubts, stating that although Incels may seek change, their visions are not concrete enough, nor feasible enough, to be considered "political" (DeCook & Kelly, 2023, p. 11; Hoffman et al., 2020, p. 568; Kelly et al., 2022, p. 176; O'Donnell & Shor, 2022, p. 346; Pantucci & Ong, 2020, pp. 2-3). Cottee makes a particularly sceptical statement in this regard, mentioning that Inceldom is not political because there is no proper 'position on economics, governance, crime and punishment,' (Cottee, 2020, p. 98). The final section of this paper will therefore explore if this is the case.

As aforementioned, punishment is an important feature of Incel ideology for controlling those who deviate from gender norms. Incels have therefore suggested policies to achieve this, including setting up concentration camps for women, and legalising rape, beatings, and torture of women (DeCook & Kelly, 2023, p. 11; Kelly et al., 2022, pp. 173 & 176). These can be interpreted as Incel positions on crime and punishment, with the main crimes being resistance to the patriarchy. Furthermore, this Incel desire to restore the patriarchy can also be interpreted as a stance on governance, since Incels believe that society should be run in accordance with gendered norms. For this, there also appear to be concrete suggestions for how to achieve it. For example, Incels have proposed reversing advances towards gender equality, such as removing women's suffragette and preventing women from studying

(DeCook & Kelly, 2023, p. 11; O'Donnell & Shor, 2022, pp. 345-346). By doing so, women's "escape-routes" from their responsibilities are restricted, forcing them to remain at home and set up families with local men (O'Donnell & Shor, 2022, p. 345). Other stances on governance include calls for the creation of "Black-pill" parties to infiltrate governments (O'Donnell & Shor, 2022, p. 345), and for more extreme members, like Rodger, that society should be governed by 'one divine ruler [with] complete control over every aspect of society,' backed by a 'highly trained army,' (Rodger, 2014, p. 136). Incels hence appear to believe in patriarchal-authoritarianism as the preferred mode of governance, with capital punishment as crime-management for those who resist.

Additionally, when it comes to economics, there is little mentioned in Incel circles beyond the fact that the ideal man should be rich (Daly & Reed, 2022, p. 16; Vink et al., 2024, p. 732). However, taking the definition of economics literally as the distribution of goods and services, there is much to be found on the topic. As aforesaid, the concept of SMV plays an important role in the 80/20 rule that underlies Incel ideology. Since the sexual revolution altered the SMV of men and women, Incels have veered towards Sexual Marxism: men become the consumers, and women the commodities for sexual and emotional services (Vink et al., 2024, p. 734; Zimmerman, 2024, pp. 168, 172-173). Incels have therefore also suggested policy changes that include legalised prostitution, the distribution of government-sponsored girlfriends/brides, and forced monogamy as means to give equal access to women (DeCook & Kelly, 2023, p. 11; Kelly et al., 2022, p. 176; Perliger et al., 2023, p. 6).

This section hence illustrates how the Incel vision can be described as patriarchal, authoritarian, and Marxist, with many concrete policies and laws being suggested to sustain this. Although many of these are unfeasible, this does not make them less political, since, "aims need not be rational in order to be political," (O'Donnell & Shor, 2022, p. 346). It can thus be concluded that contrary to Cottee's argument, the Incel ideology does have positions on economics, governance, and punishment, hence emphasising its political nature.

4. Conclusion

Overall, this paper has analysed the ideologies that underline Incel violence, and presented a reflection of how existing literature has interpreted their political nature. Although the case was made that Incel violence is driven by non-political motivations such as personal grievances and revenge, a more extensive examination of the key principles of Incel ideology (hegemonic masculinity and misogyny) revealed that when Incel ideology turned into violence, it was driven by a desire for socio-political change. This was because violence was seen as a way to overthrow the oppressive system that marginalised Incels, and because it could be used to punish and control those who resisted the Incel worldview. Moreover, the Incel vision of what society should be changed into was supported by reforms

and policies concerning crime management, governance, and economics, as a way to establish and maintain the ideal Incel society. In accordance with the previously established definition of political ideology as a 'set of shared beliefs regarding what society should be like, including ideas on how this can be achieved' (see: Introduction), it can therefore be concluded that Incel ideology is political, specifically when encouraging violence.

The implications of these findings could be beneficial for future debates on whether or not Incel violence can be conceptualised as terrorism as they offer insights into the political dimensions behind Incel attacks. Additionally, this paper's findings have also revealed that Incel ideology often begins as personal grievances or revenge but becomes political and violent through radicalisation. It would therefore also be interesting for future research to explore when the boundary between personal motivations/mental health is crossed into more violent political motivations, and what factors play a role in this progression. By doing so, it could become possible to better understand the distinction between Incel violence as individual hate crimes or as political terrorism, as well as to develop appropriate countermeasures against radicalisation and Incel violence.

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Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations
2026 Winter Edition
ISSA
www.issaleiden.wordpress.com

IN SEARCH OF NATO'S THEORY OF VICTORY

A Historical Analysis from the Post-Cold War Period to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Key Words: *Theory of victory, NATO, Deterrence*

ANTON MEIER

Global Conflict in the Modern Era

Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of NATO's theory of victory from the end of the Cold War to 2025. A theory of victory describes how and why a strategy will achieve its objectives in war, linking military means to political ends. Through a qualitative historical analysis of NATO's Strategic Concepts, Summit Declarations, and supporting documents, this paper traces the Alliance's shifting assumptions and strategic priorities. After 1991, NATO's 'theory of victory' shifted away from Cold War-era deterrence by punishment toward crisis management and cooperative security, reflecting the belief that conflict prevention and stabilisation would ensure peace. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and especially after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO began to re-emphasise deterrence by denial, conventional readiness, and collective defence. The study finds that NATO's current approach seeks to deny Russia any prospect of military or political gain through a credible, united, and resilient alliance. However, it concludes that this theory remains incomplete because it lacks a coherent conception of how deterrence translates into sustainable political victory. NATO's strategy thus risks remaining reactive and focused on preventing a war that has already started, rather than defining how to compel de-escalation or shape a favourable peace with Russia.

Cite this article: Meier, A. (2026): In Search of NATO'S Theory of Victory: A Historical Analysis From the Post-Cold War Period to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. *Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations, 2*(1), pp. 58-72.

1. Introduction

As of 2025, NATO is still grappling with the consequences of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24th of February 2022. While there was a harsh realisation that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) needs to return to prioritising territorial defence and increasing military readiness, there is much less consensus on what this exactly entails in terms of doctrine. Since its founding in 1949, NATO has been concerned with the protection of its population and territory. Both have been threatened by a wide range of adversaries which are using ever-developing strategies, tactics, and technologies. Consequently, NATO's strategy has undergone various changes from 1949 to the present day. At the core of all strategies lies a theory of victory, that is, "a causal story about how to defeat an adversary" (Heim et al., 2024). While often only implicit in strategic documents, these theories serve as the conceptual backbone which links military capabilities and political aims, shaping both deterrence posture and operational conduct. Over the past seven decades, NATO's theory of victory has evolved significantly, driven by shifting threat perceptions, evolving political priorities, technological advancements, and normative constraints. But why are theories of victory such a crucial issue? Because they determine how strategies are constructed. With tensions between NATO and Russia at their highest since the Cold War, it is imperative to understand both NATO's and Russia's theories of victory in order to adapt strategies as necessary. Therefore, this paper examines the intellectual and doctrinal trajectory of NATO's theory of victory, asking the research question:

How has NATO's theory of victory developed from the 1990s to 2025?

It traces the shifting assumptions and institutional priorities that have shaped NATO's approach to deterrence and defence by conducting a content analysis of key strategic documents. The primary focus is on the Strategic Concepts, but also the Summit Declarations and secondary sources are analysed. The first part provides an overview of the theoretical foundations of the theory of victory concept and NATO's theory of victory from 1949 to the 1990s. In the second section, NATO's theory of victory will be traced using publicly available data. The final section discusses the findings and concludes this paper.

A central finding is that NATO's theory of victory shifted away from the notion that a war between two nuclear states is winnable. Instead, NATO relies on a deterrence by denial strategy. From the collapse of the Soviet Union until the full Russian invasion of Ukraine, a heavy focus was on crisis management, as this was assumed to prevent instability. After 2022, a return to more traditional deterrence by denial and conventional defence can be observed. However, it remains unclear how credible and sustainable this posture is, especially given that NATO doctrine still lacks a deterrence-by-punishment pillar.

2. Key Concepts

Before discussing NATO's theory of victory, it is crucial to define what victory, strategy, and a theory of victory are, as well as their similarities and differences. Victory seems like a self-explanatory concept. However, it is not (Bartholomees, 2010; Landmeter, 2018; Martel, 2011a). Various notions need to be illuminated. Victory itself is not an objective fact, but a political assessment. Bartholomees argues that "victory is someone's opinion," or in other words, a subjective evaluation dependent on context, perspective, and level of analysis (2010). Consequently, victory and defeat are not dichotomous. Rather, they are opposite ends of a scale of success (defeat, lose, not win, tie, not lose, win, victory) (Bartholomees, 2010). Bartholomees proposes two axes for analysing theories of victory: achievement (how much success is attained) and decisiveness (how well it resolves the underlying political issue) (2010). These axes help clarify that not all victories are total, nor are all defeats absolute. Furthermore, three levels of victory complicate the concept of victory (Landmeter, 2018). Martel proposed three levels of victory: tactical, strategic, and grand strategic (Martel, 2011a). Tactical victory means victory on the battlefield. The strategic level is about winning the war, that is, reaching a new stable equilibrium between the warring parties. The grand strategic level, which others might consider to be political, describes victories that transform international relations. Landmeter highlights: "Defeating an opponent militarily is not identical to achieving the object of war, the reason for which the war was fought" (2018, p. 138). Tactical success may have little strategic meaning if it does not change political calculations, and one actor may claim strategic victory while suffering tactical losses, or vice versa. In line with Landmeter, Martel therefore defines strategic victory as: "accomplishing the short-term and long-term national, regional, and global goals for which the war was fought" (Martel, 2011b).

A theory of victory is fundamentally a conceptual framework about how and why the actions of one belligerent will affect the behaviour of another belligerent and bring about the desired end state (Roberts, 2020b). Heim et al. define theories of victory as the "causal story about how to defeat an adversary"(Heim et al., 2024, p. 1). Cohen similarly illustrates the concept as a "storyline explaining why we think things will turn out the way we wish" (2022). These definitions reflect the view that perception is as important for achieving the desired political outcome as pure battlefield success. A good strategy must plausibly link actions and outcomes, to then instruct someone on what to do and how to do it (Roberts, 2020b). A theory of victory differs from a strategy in that it focuses on the logic of how the alignment of ends, ways, and means will actually achieve a political goal, such as compelling the adversary to stop fighting. Or in other words, it spells out how to bring an enemy to a 'culminating point', where they choose not to risk the costs of further conflict (von Clausewitz, 2008). Consequently, a theory of victory is the internal logic of a strategy that connects the ends-ways-means model. It must account for how tactical actions will influence political decision-making at the highest level. Strategies may outline methods and allocate resources, but without a coherent theory of victory, they are "nothing

more than a loose collection of initiatives and misplaced hope" (Roberts, 2020b, p. 28). Ultimately, a theory of victory is a crucial intellectual prerequisite for effective strategic planning.

2.1 Caveats

NATO has not set a definition of victory in its NATO term database. However, defeat is defined: "To diminish the effectiveness of an enemy or adversary to the extent that they are unable or unwilling to resist or achieve their intent" (NATO, 2026). Consequently, victory can be defined as a situation in which a party achieves its intent. As the analysis will show, the lack of an explicit definition of victory might inhibit discussions on how to achieve it.

In all the definitions of victory discussed above, one further aspect of victory is implicit: its adversarial nature. Victory and defeat are the products of war.[1] However, that leads to various questions. If victory can be the product of war, and war requires an enemy, can there be victory without an enemy? And if there is no enemy, but the aim is simply peace and stability, do efforts to achieve this outcome turn into regular policy? As this research shows, NATO lacked a concrete enemy from the dissolution of the Soviet Union until at least the War on Terror, if not until the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This leads to the question of whether NATO's theory of victory can be traced in the first place. Here, it is argued that while there can only be victory if a war is fought against a concrete adversary, the existence of theories of victory is unaffected by the lack of a specific adversary. Even if efforts to achieve peace and stability are considered policy aims rather than strictly military strategy due to the absence of a clearly identified enemy, this does not negate the underlying logic of a theory of victory, which explains why certain behaviours will bring about the desired end state. Furthermore, it is crucial to identify the flaws in NATO's theory of victory, such as vague goal-setting, to adequately understand its development and to offer policy advice.

3. Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative historical analysis to trace the evolution of NATO's theory of victory from the early post–Cold War period until 2025. Given that theories of victory are rarely articulated explicitly, this study focuses on identifying implicit causal logics embedded in strategy and official strategic discourse. The central methodological challenge is therefore interpretive: reconstructing how NATO has understood the relationship between military means and political outcomes.

The primary empirical material consists of NATO's unclassified strategic documents, most importantly the Strategic Concepts (1991, 1999, 2010, and 2022), complemented by Summit

[1] Discussions on what is 'war' in the first place have filled plenty of books and would be far beyond the scope of this inquiry. For the purpose of this paper, war can be understood as the resolution of a political conflict through military force. A good overview is given by Lawrence Freedman in 'Defining War' (2012)

Declarations, key doctrinal texts (such as AJP-01), and publicly available policy guidance. These documents are treated as authoritative expressions of Alliance-wide consensus and as strategic signalling tools directed at both internal and external audiences. Their unclassified nature makes them particularly relevant for assessing NATO's declared assumptions, priorities, and strategic self-understanding. Secondary literature from strategic studies and security policy scholarship is used to contextualise the findings where necessary.

After a historical contextualisation, the analysis examines changes and continuities across three broad periods. For each period, a structured, focused analysis is conducted that identifies the perceived threat environment, the mechanisms NATO expects to use to achieve strategic success, and the desired political end state. Particular attention is paid to shifts in language concerning key concepts such as 'victory'. In addition, an analysis of Russian military thought is incorporated to enable a comparative assessment of NATO's theory of victory vis-à-vis that of its principal adversary. Overall, this methodological approach allows for a systematic reconstruction of NATO's evolving theory of victory, highlighting not only what the Alliance seeks to deter or defend against, but how it believes to shape political outcomes through military posture, alliance cohesion, and strategic signalling.

4. Historical Background: NATO's Theory of Victory 1949-1991

To analyse NATO's contemporary theory of victory, it is necessary to understand its origins. In NATO's formative years in 1949, strategic doctrine was grounded in conventional pre-nuclear conceptions of total war, seeking the comprehensive defeat of the Soviet Union. Key documents, including DC 6/1 and the corresponding 'Strategic Guidance' (MC 14), envisaged an initial defensive phase followed by a transition to offensive operations and strategic nuclear strikes against Soviet military and industrial targets (Heuser, 1998). To illustrate, the MC 14 defined as the aim for a war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact: "achieving the earliest defeat of the USSR and the attainment of allied war objectives, which later will have to be decided by the governments of the North Atlantic Treaty nations" (NATO, 1949, p. 9). Victory was framed in absolutist Clausewitzian terms, assuming a rational approach to warfighting even in the nuclear age.

The adoption of MC 48 in 1954 signalled a doctrinal transition toward deterrence based on the threat of 'massive retaliation' (Heuser, 1998; NATO, 1954). The greater reliance on nuclear weapons can be partly explained as an alternative to expensive conventional rearmament. Furthermore, this strategy assumed that the Soviet Union would initiate a war against NATO with a nuclear attack. Therefore, it argued that the only feasible option was an immediate, overwhelming nuclear counterattack against the enemy's forces, especially their delivery systems. Although victory remained a nominal objective, it was no longer operationally defined. Instead, the strategic aim became to deter war altogether through the

credible threat of massive retaliation. The conceptual shift marked a crucial retreat from earlier ambitions to manage and terminate war in favour of deterrence. This is most clearly illustrated in a shift of language. As highlighted above, MC 14 seeks 'defeat' of the enemy, while MC 48, faced with the possibility of existential nuclear war, seeks to prevent any aggression through deterrence.

The shift to MC 14/2 in 1957 marked NATO's adoption of 'differentiated response,' a doctrine designed to expand strategic options and prevent automatic escalation to full-scale nuclear war (NATO, 1957). This reorientation reflected growing scepticism about the utility of massive retaliation and acknowledged the need for proportionality and controlled escalation. Under this posture, 'victory' gave way to "the capability to bring [a war] to a successful conclusion" and the preservation of NATO territory (NATO, 1957, p. 3). The elimination of the term 'victory' from strategic documents underlined a doctrinal realism shaped by the risks of mutual annihilation and the recognition that a more offensive strategy would not find public or political support. An interesting point of the MC 14/2 is that it predicted the possibility of a 'hybrid war' situation in which covert soviet forces would take actions against a NATO member. Also in such a situation, NATO would seek a 'favourable conclusion,' and not 'victory.'

NATO's doctrine in the final phase of the Cold War continued to emphasise conflict de-escalation over traditional military victory. The 1967 "Report on the Future Tasks of the Alliance" introduced the concepts of deterrence and détente, setting the framework for a cooperative approach to security issues after 1991. In parallel, the Provisional Political Guidelines (1969) and the General Political Guidelines (1986) reframed nuclear weapons as instruments of political signalling rather than warfighting tools (Heuser, 1998). The purpose of nuclear weapons was not the defeat of the enemy, but to show the resolve to escalate further if an attack is not stopped. These documents emphasised the use of limited nuclear strikes to restore deterrence and initiate crisis de-escalation, rather than to defeat the adversary militarily. This institutionalisation of limited aims reflected a broader consensus that victory in a nuclear conflict was both strategically untenable and ethically indefensible.

5. NATO's Theory of Victory 1991-2025

Above, it was established that a theory of victory is a conceptual framework that explains how and why a strategy will achieve its objectives in war. It is the set of underlying assumptions, causal logics, and core propositions that link (military) means to the desired (political) outcome. The following analysis presents the development of NATO's theory of victory from the 1990s to 2025.

5.1 Cooperative Security & Neighbourhood Crisis Management (1990s-2000s)

In 1991, the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact collapsed, marking the beginning of the post-Cold War period. Consequently, the first two unclassified strategic concepts were published in 1991 and 1999

(NATO, 1991, 1999). Each was complemented by a military document, which are still classified (MC 400 and MC 400/2). Therefore, it is essential to note that the analysis is not entirely comprehensive. However, given that the strategic concepts were intentionally published unclassified, they should be interpreted as significant signalling tools.

Both the 1991 and 1999 strategic concepts continue the transition from deterrence-based Cold War doctrine toward a strong emphasis on cooperative security and crisis management. To that end, it is stated that: "the Alliance does not consider itself to be any country's adversary" (NATO, 1999). This is arguably the biggest shift from the pre-1991 doctrine, which clearly identified the Soviet Union as the primary adversary. While maintaining collective defence as its fundamental purpose, NATO sought to improve security for Europe as a whole through cooperation, explicitly also with former adversaries. The 1999 Strategic Concept must be considered in the temporal and political context of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, which destabilised NATO's neighbourhood tremendously. This led to the establishment of the Kosovo Force, whose deployment is still ongoing as of 2025.

While both Strategic Concepts take the stance that the probability for a conventional attack on allied territory is low, they outline that the Alliance will "stop an aggressor's advance as far forward as possible, to maintain or restore the territorial integrity of Allied nations and to terminate war rapidly by making an aggressor reconsider his decision, cease his attack and withdraw" (NATO, 1991, para. 35, 1999, para. 41). The same wording is used both in 1991 and 1999. The central role of conventional forces in the prevention of a "quick or easy victory, or territorial gains", and consequently deterrence by denial, is highlighted (NATO, 1991, para. 38). NATO agrees to reduce conventional forces from 'forward defence' towards a 'forward presence,' and to rely less on nuclear weapons for a 'flexible response' doctrine. Besides conventional capabilities, political solidarity is emphasised as a guarantee that military aggression against the Alliance can never be perceived as an option with any chance of success. In terms of nuclear deterrence, NATO intends to reduce sub-strategic nuclear weapons such as nuclear artillery and ground-launched short-range nuclear missiles. The role of the remaining nuclear weapons is identified as preserving peace, preventing coercion, and ensuring uncertainty in the minds of possible aggressors.

5.2 Active Engagement, Modern Defence (2000s-2010s)

In the absence of an obvious adversary during this period, NATO defines its goal as: "to ensure that the Alliance remains an unparalleled community of freedom, peace, security and shared values" (NATO, 2010, para. 3). Doctrinally, the time from 2000 to 2010 represents probably the least development regarding a theory of victory. The 2010 Strategic Concept presents an implicit theory of victory by highlighting that security is best ensured through credible deterrence (via collective defence), crisis containment (via crisis management), and international engagement (via cooperative security). With

the lack of a large-scale conventional military threat to NATO territory, the alliance focused on expeditionary forces and the ability to conduct a number of smaller-scale operations (NATO, 2006). While it might seem foolish in hindsight, this was sensible in the context of the International Security Assistance Force, as the reaction to the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States required considerable attention and resources.

NATO's deterrence posture in that decade relies on an "appropriate mix" of nuclear and conventional capabilities, supported by robust, mobile, and deployable forces capable of defending Allied territory and contributing to expeditionary operations (NATO, 2010, para. 7). The assumption remains that a credible, flexible force deters aggression without inviting escalation. Force posture is not substantially addressed in the Strategic Concept. However, it is highlighted that the disparity with the Russian stockpiles of short-range nuclear weapons needs to be considered.

As a lesson from Afghanistan and the Balkans, NATO commits to preventing and managing crises through a comprehensive approach that integrates civil-military operations. The alliance recognises that preventing conflict is preferable, but when necessary, NATO will intervene to contain violence and support post-conflict stabilisation in missions abroad. Success comes not from battlefield dominance, but from shaping political outcomes. A last pillar is international engagement. This includes NATO-Russia cooperation and the open-door policy for all democratic European countries. These two policies are the most impactful in regard to future relations with Russia.

5.3 The Return of Deterrence? (2010s-2020s)

Between 2011 and 2021, NATO's theory of victory evolved in response to a deteriorating security landscape, especially following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. During this period, NATO significantly transitioned back from expeditionary stabilisation efforts to renewed territorial defence and deterrence. Besides the 2010 Strategic Concept, key summits in Wales (2014), Warsaw (2016b), and Brussels (2018), as well as the Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (2020) and the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept (2021), framed NATO's evolving strategic vision (Covington, 2023).

The Wales Summit reoriented NATO from expeditionary warfare to territorial defence, reaffirming collective defence as the Alliance's core mission and launching the 'Readiness Action Plan' (NATO, 2014). This plan included various assurance and adaptation measures, such as the establishment of air-policing and maritime patrols, the enhancement of the 'NATO Response Force' in size and readiness, and the creation of two multinational divisional headquarters in 2016 (NATO, 2016a). At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO expanded its deterrence strategy by deploying multinational battlegroups in Eastern Europe, advancing cyber defence, and increasing missile defence. The declaration framed Russia's aggression as a direct threat to the rules-based international order and

reinforced NATO's tripwire posture to prevent fait accompli scenarios. Similar to the 2010 Strategic Concept, there is no direct mention of victory in any shape or form.

The 2020 DDA further specifies the evolving posture of the 2014 declaration and reflects that deterrence and defence can no longer be achieved through a crisis management approach (Covington, 2023). This can be considered a significant departure from previous strategies. Furthermore, it kicked off various new planning processes and changes in the force posture, which are important but directly related to the theory of victory.

While Russia is heavily criticised, the Alliance reiterates its interest in dialogue. Assumingly, also for that reason, military strategy is not explicitly highlighted in the political documents. It is just stated that NATO's deterrence and defence is "based on an appropriate mix of nuclear, conventional and missile defence capabilities", without further specifications (NATO, 2016b, para. 3). In sum, the intention is a credible defence rather than warfighting dominance, anchoring victory in deterrence by denial and alliance solidarity with an increased forward presence, readiness, capabilities, and structures.

5.4 The Turning Point (2022-2025)

For the first time since the Cold War, Russia is identified as the principal adversary in the 2022 Strategic Concept as a consequence of the full Russian invasion of Ukraine in February that year. The Strategic Concept states unusually directly: "The Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area" (NATO, 2022b, para. 8). Yet, NATO's general objective remains broad: "to protect our one billion citizens, defend our territory and safeguard our freedom and democracy"(NATO, 2022b, p. 1). The 2022 Strategic Concept defines NATO's strategy towards Russia as fundamentally defensive, focusing on deterrence, resilience, and sustained political unity.

NATO highlights that it has strengthened its deterrence and defence posture since 2014. This includes maintaining a substantial forward presence, bolstering readiness and rapid-reinforcement capabilities, as well as conventional, nuclear, missile, cyber, and space capabilities. Three core tasks are identified: deterrence & defence, crisis prevention & management, and cooperative security. A central pillar of NATO's strategy is the 360-degree approach to security, addressing threats from all directions and across all domains. NATO commits to protecting every inch of Allied territory and supporting vulnerable partners like Ukraine and Georgia, whose security is directly tied to that of the Alliance. Crisis prevention, hybrid threat defence, and technological superiority are also emphasised, reflecting the evolving nature of conflict. NATO's strategy heavily involves enhancing civil and military resilience, countering disinformation, securing critical infrastructure, and preparing for grey-zone tactics such as cyberattacks and energy coercion.

Politically, NATO underscores Allied unity and the indivisibility of security to deny Russia any opportunity to exploit divisions. Overall, NATO's strategy is to deter aggression, contain instability, and support the sovereignty of partner nations through a credible, integrated defence posture and sustained political solidarity within the Alliance. In a 2025 commentary, Angus Lapsley (then NATO ASG for Defence Policy and Planning) and Adm. Pierre Vandier (then NATO SACT) offer the probably most concise summary of NATO's contemporary theory of victory by NATO officials:

> *NATO does not seek to mimic or match the way Russia fights. The Alliance's assumptions are based on the conviction that deterrence—putting enough doubt into the adversary's mind regarding whether it would prevail when attempting to threaten, coerce, or attack NATO—is the best and most cost-effective strategic approach when faced with a resolute, capable, and nuclear-armed adversary. (Lapsley & Vandier, 2025)*

NATO's theory of victory against Russia remains one of deterrence by denial. It is built on the assumption that a credible, cohesive, and resilient alliance can deny Russia any potential strategic gains from aggression, thereby compelling it to reconsider its behaviour. Consequently, three ways of achieving deterrence are identified in the AJP-01 (Allied Joint Doctrine): denial-of-benefits, imposition-of-costs, and encouragement-of-restraint (NATO, 2022a). NATO does not focus on victory over Russia, but on preventing the spread of Russian aggression on NATO territory. This is not pursued through total defeat, but through resistance that makes coercion and subversion ineffective. NATO aims to communicate resolve to Russia by maintaining an advanced, forward-deployed military posture and signalling readiness to defend all Allies. Simultaneously, NATO seeks to undermine Russia's non-military tools of influence (such as energy dependence, cyber operations, and disinformation) by boosting national resilience and civil preparedness across member states. This is supposed to neutralise hybrid threats and reinforce societal cohesion in the face of grey-zone tactics. Partner support, especially for Ukraine, plays a key role in weakening Russia's capacity to project power and destabilise the region. Ultimately, the Strategic Concept proposes the theory of victory that Russia, confronted with firm resistance, denied political and military gains, and faced with a united Alliance, will eventually choose to de-escalate and comply with international law to avoid further isolation and strategic failure.

6. Russia's Theory of Victory: Escalation Towards Political Surrender

To evaluate NATO's theory of victory, it is also necessary to understand Russia's theory of victory. The Russian theory of victory focuses on inducing political capitulation by fracturing the NATO alliance and undermining Western political will. This strategy, deeply rooted in coercive logic and escalation

management, proceeds through three distinct phases: the creation of a fait accompli, the deployment of aggressive sanctuarisation to forestall retaliation, and the orchestration of strategic paralysis to precipitate NATO's collapse.

The first phase involves a rapid and localised incursion into a perceived weak point on NATO's periphery, most plausibly in the Baltic region. As Hoffmann argues, this action would not aim to secure large territories or annihilate opposing forces but rather to establish a strategically significant occupation that presents the alliance with an immediate dilemma: counterattack and risk escalation, or concede territory (Hoffmann, 2025). The objective here is to engineer a fait accompli under conditions of ambiguity and speed, leveraging the Russian military's capabilities in hybrid warfare, tactical drone warfare, and rapid mobilisation. This approach capitalises on NATO's limited forward presence and consensus-driven decision-making, limiting its ability to respond swiftly and decisively. This challenge is well recognised within NATO (2022a).

Once a limited territorial gain is achieved, Russia transitions to the second phase of aggressive sanctuarisation. Moscow will attempt to deter NATO's counteroffensive by establishing escalation dominance through the threat of (nuclear) escalation — a strategy it has continuously conducted in Ukraine (Arceneaux, 2023). This is not mere rhetoric and could be accompanied by demonstrative conventional strikes on European civilian infrastructure or nuclear 'warning shots' into NATO's rear areas. Such actions are designed to raise the perceived costs of resistance without necessarily crossing thresholds that would provoke an all-out nuclear exchange. The success of this phase hinges on Russia's calculation that NATO's political leadership, particularly in Western Europe and the United States, will prioritise risk avoidance over alliance solidarity.

The third and culminating phase of Russia's strategy seeks to induce strategic paralysis within NATO. According to Roberts, Russia's theory of victory is predicated on exploiting political discrepancies within the alliance (Roberts, 2020a). The idea is that under the psychological weight of potential nuclear escalation and with no clear consensus on proportional response, NATO's decision-making process will become immobilised. Russia anticipates that this paralysis will lead to selective disengagement, as key states hesitate or outright refuse to escalate the conflict. The perception of NATO's collective defence clause as unreliable is the strategic endgame. Even in the absence of a formal withdrawal, the effective collapse of alliance unity achieves Russia's core objective: the political surrender of NATO, marked by its unwillingness to restore the status quo ante or defend its peripheral members.In sum, Russia's theory of victory is a deliberate, staged effort to secure political objectives through calibrated military aggression and escalation dominance. By creating a localised crisis, deterring a response through nuclear threats, and fragmenting alliance cohesion, Russia aims not to win battles but to achieve its political objectives.

7. Discussion & Conclusion

The analysis of NATO's evolving strategy reveals significant shifts: from its origins in warfighting to an emphasis on crisis management and cooperative security, and currently back to a focus on defence. However, the underlying theory of victory did develop differently. During the Cold War, NATO's theory of victory initially still assumed that victory over the aggressor was possible. During the Cold War, this assessment, along with deterrence by punishment, shifted to emphasise the need to avoid nuclear war. Instead, NATO adopted a model in which peace and stability are maintained not by defeating adversaries in war, but by managing crises before they escalate and by promoting international cooperation. However, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 initiated a slow return to the realisation that warfighting is a necessary capability to conduct deterrence by denial.

Military strategy is closely tied to political perceptions. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO explicitly stopped considering Russia as an adversary. It adopted a defensive posture, where the notion of 'victory' is implicitly defined as maintaining the status quo: preserving peace, territorial integrity, and political order within the alliance. The theory of victory thus focuses on preventing war rather than winning it, that is, one of deterrence. While this aligns with NATO's fundamentally defensive nature, it also exposes conceptual and practical weaknesses. By contrast, Russia has developed a proactive theory of victory against NATO centred on three interlinked elements: fait accompli operations, hybrid warfare, and nuclear brinkmanship. Russia seeks to achieve limited but significant political objectives by presenting NATO with rapid, ambiguous aggression, for example, a land grab in the Baltic, combined with the threat of escalation, including nuclear signalling or conventional deep strikes, to inhibit Allied responses. The ultimate aim is to achieve strategic paralysis: to fracture NATO's political cohesion and force de facto capitulation. This serves both to inhibit an effective counterattack and as a goal in itself: to restore Russia's sphere of influence.

NATO's counterstrategy, as currently articulated, consists of three pillars: military capability build-up, internal political coherence, and external partnerships. These efforts are logical responses to the Russian threat. Victory is defined as peace and prosperity without losing one inch of territory. The theory of victory is that Russia will not dare to attack if there is no chance for success. NATO aims to deny Russia a quick military win (through capability), reduce its ability to exploit divisions (through coherence), and undermine its regional influence (through partnerships). In theory, this framework counters Russia's theory of victory at each stage. However, two core issues undermine this strategy.

First, it remains questionable whether the current theory of victory is rigorously applied as a strategy and whether this deterrence-by-denial strategy is then implemented operationally. While there has been a shift in doctrine and actions have been taken to increase, for example, troop readiness and size, it is not clear whether NATO is actually able to defend every inch of NATO territory and prevent a fait accompli. The Alliance's current forward presence in Eastern Europe lacks the robustness needed to

credibly deter a rapid occupation scenario. For frontline states like the Baltic states, "defence in depth" is not a viable option due to geographical constraints and the speed of potential Russian action, especially under the psychological shadow of Russian nuclear threats (Milevski, 2024). Avenues for improvement could include further strengthening border defences, as the Baltic and Poland are already doing, and making conventional counterforce attacks with missiles part of a deterrence-by-punishment strategy.

Second, and probably even more important than NATO's military credibility, is whether NATO's theory of victory is internally valid. In theory, it might work to convince an adversary that no attempt to attack NATO would prevail. However, in practice, this strategy lacks political sustainability. As Rumer pointed out: "An open-ended stalemate is not a convincing theory of victory" (2024). Deterrence by denial without a positive, future-oriented vision for resolution locks NATO into a reactive stance. It prepares for war, but not for how to end it on favourable terms. Without a compelling theory of victory that addresses war termination and political outcomes, NATO risks repeating the conceptual errors that have plagued Western campaigns since the Cold War. It also leaves open the possibility that, over time, deterrence fatigue and political divergence among Allies will erode the very cohesion it relies upon.

In sum, while NATO's current strategic framework is not fundamentally flawed, it is incomplete. To remain credible and effective, the Alliance must articulate a more proactive theory of victory, one that goes beyond deterrence and crisis management to envision what victory, that is, political success, vis-à-vis Russia would actually look like. Without spelling out what victory is and which underlying theory of victory will be used to achieve it, NATO's strategy will remain unsustainable. This would not imply offensive warfighting, but rather a coherent strategy for how to compel Russia to cease aggression, de-escalate tensions, and accept a rules-based security order in Europe.

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Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations
2026 Winter Edition
ISSA
www.issaleiden.wordpress.com

STILL NOT ONE OF US

The PVV's Migration Discourse on Ukrainian Refugees, 2022-2025

Key Words: *Migration, Discourse, Securitisation, PVV, Populism, Dutch Politics*

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Global Conflict in the Modern Era

Abstract

This article examines how and why the Dutch right-wing populist party, the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV), adapted its migration discourse between 2022 and 2025 in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the resulting refugee flows. Drawing on securitisation and populism scholarship, it traces rhetorical shifts in party communications. The study shows a discursive shift away from overt cultural threat narratives, typical of the 2015 refugee surge, toward more pragmatic frames emphasizing economic strain and institutional overload. Frames such as Capacity Strain and Welfare Nativism present Ukrainian refugees as burdens to the housing market, welfare state, and public services. Simultaneously, a Selective Solidarity frame portrays Ukrainian women and children as legitimate refugees while contrasting them with asylum seekers from Muslim-majority countries. The analysis highlights how intersectional identity markers shape refugee legitimacy in populist discourse. By recalibrating its message, the PVV preserves its core anti-immigration stance in a politically advantageous and electorally palatable form. This case illustrates the flexibility of securitizing narratives and contributes to broader understandings of how right-wing populists adjust exclusionary rhetoric in response to shifting political contexts and refugee group characteristics.

Cite this article: Verkleij, D.(2026): Still Not One of Us: The PVV's Migration Discourse on Ukrainian Refugees, 2022-2025. *Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations, 2*(1), pp. 73-91.

1. Introduction

"The Netherlands is full, no one can fit in anymore. But our hearts bleed, the Ukrainian women and children are real refugees," tweeted Geert Wilders in March 2022 as images of Ukrainians fleeing war filled Dutch newspapers and social media (Wilders, 2022a). In the same breath, he added that the country must make room for them "by throwing asylum profiteers and fake refugees like 'safe-landers' and Syrians out of our country" (Wilders, 2022a). This striking statement encapsulates a paradox confronting the right-wing populist Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV): a sudden compassion for one group of refugees, coupled with continued hostility towards others[1].

In the weeks after Russia's invasion, the Netherlands received tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees, unsettling familiar asylum politics (Rijksoverheid 2025). In contrast to the hesitant reception of Muslim refugees during the so-called European migrant crisis of the previous decade, Ukrainian refugees were met with significantly greater solidarity in the Netherlands and across Europe (Kentmen-Cin, 2025; Meuzelaar, 2024; Herat, 2023). The PVV, known for its strident anti-immigration and anti-Islam stance, now faced refugees who did not fit its usual narrative of the threatening Muslim "other", forcing a rhetorical recalibration. It is in this context that this article poses the following research question:

How and why has the PVV's migration discourse evolved from 2022 to 2025 in response to Russia's war on Ukraine?

Accordingly, the study employs Critical Frame Analysis (CFA) to examine PVV speech acts during the three-year war period from February 24, 2022, and February 24, 2025. This qualitative method is chosen for its capacity to systematically analyse the discursive constructions of threats, power dynamics, and exclusionary practices (Entman 1993; Verloo 2005). This paper is guided by securitisation theory to analyse the move from politicisation to existential threat (Buzan et al., 1998; Huysmans, 2006).

This paper contributes, both theoretically and empirically, to the development of a more comprehensive understanding of securitisation processes and populism studies. It reveals whether populist migration narratives are fixed or flexibly recalibrated across refugee identities and context. This is an underexamined question, as most scholarship centres on the 2015 refugee influx, which predominantly included refugees from Muslim-majority countries. Specifically, it identifies three recurrent frames that repackage threats in practical, resource-based terms. Further, this research is particularly relevant for contemporary Dutch politics, given the PVV's recent role as a governing party. Following this, the paper consists of five parts. First, a brief literature review is presented. Thereafter, the methodological framework is delineated and justified. Then, the empirical findings are presented in two

[1] For the sake of clarity, this article refers to the PVV as a right-wing populist party. It acknowledges the debate over its precise classification and recognises that some may argue it is more radical than the term 'right-wing' implies. Chapter 2 provides further details on this topic.

parts. Finally, the conclusion synthesises the results.

2. Literature Review

One of the most influential theoretical frameworks for understanding how migration is framed as a security issue is the Securitisation Theory developed by the Copenhagen School. Pioneered by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde in the 1990s, it challenged the Cold War tendency to treat security as primarily military (Buzan et al., 1998; Walt, 1991, p.212; Hammerstadt, 2014, pp. 266-268). In the post-Cold War context, this approach marked a constructivist turn, emphasizing that threats are not objective realities but rather constructed through social and political processes. The Copenhagen School also broadened security to include economic, political, environmental, and societal dimensions (Hammerstadt 2014, 266). The latter is especially relevant for migration because it centres on the perceived preservation of identity in terms of language, culture, religion, and nationality (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 19).

Securitisation describes a process in which a securitizing actor frames an issue as an existential threat to a referent object, such as the state, national identity, or the economy, and seeks legitimacy for extraordinary measures (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 26; Huysmans, 2006; Hammerstadt, 2014, p. 267). The core interaction is between the securitizing actor presenting a threat (the referent subject) and the collective targeted by their securitizing move (the referent object). Later scholarship emphasises that securitisation is not only a one-directional, elite "speech act", but a dynamic, context-dependent interaction shaped by audiences and institutional settings (Rychnovska, 2014, pp. 12-13; Stritzel, 2007). At the same time, critics argue that classic Copenhagen formulations can be Western-centric (Wilkinson, 2007). They presume liberal-public styles of language, authority, and "audience acceptance." Even in a Western European country like the Netherlands, this reminds us to treat "speech acts" as culturally and institutionally situated.

Building on this foundation, the migration-security nexus is a prime arena to observe securitisation in practice. Migration is often depicted as threatening social cohesion, economic stability, and national identity (Van der Woude, 2020; Donnelly, 2017; Hammerstadt 2014). It commonly works through "politics of belonging," where defining who does not belong helps consolidate the in-group "us," often in racialised ways toward non-European or Muslim groups (Huysmans, 2006, p. 63; Ibrahim, 2005). Against this backdrop, populism provides a political style that activates and channels these security frames.

Populism is widely treated as an ideational style that critiques the (political) elites in the name of the will of the people, typically with anti-pluralist claims to exclusive representation (Müller, 2016, pp. 2-34; Mudde, 2019, pp. 27-29; Buijssen, 2024, pp. 17–21). Right-wing populism, anchored in nativism, is a form of identity politics that portrays "the native people" as a homogeneous community endangered by

outsiders, with immigration cast as a primary threat (Béland, 2020, pp. 164–165; Buijssen, 2024, pp. 22–27). Here populism and securitisation intersect. The PVV exemplifies the (radical) right-wing populist type: strongly exclusionary, anti-immigration, Eurosceptic, and anti-Islam, consistently prioritizing natives over immigrants (Nijhuis et al., 2023, pp. 320–322; Van der Woude, 2020, pp. 240–242; Kaya and Tecmen, 2019, pp. 55–57). It reads foreign policy through domestic lenses of economic self-interest and identity protection. Its perspective on the Ukrainian refugee situation exemplifies this logic, framing the issue as a domestic security challenge (Nijhuis et al., 2023, pp. 319-322).

To situate the PVV's response to Ukrainians, it is vital to recall its broader patterns toward earlier refugee groups. Studies consistently identify Islamophobic tropes in PVV migration discourse, portraying Islam as incompatible with Dutch culture and Western values (Kaya and Tecmen, 2019; Van der Woude, 2020; Lucassen and Lucassen, 2015; Witteveen, 2017; Hamid, 2019). This framing peaked during the 2015 European migrant episode. PVV discourse during this period is well documented. Predominantly male refugees from Syria and other Muslim-majority countries were depicted through xenophobic tropes as terrorists, dangerous invaders, rapists, or economic parasites (Hammeleers, 2019, pp. 815-816; Jaskulowski, 2019, p. 711; Jackson Sow, 2022, pp. 703-707). The PVV amplified this, pledging in manifestos to "de-Islamise" the Netherlands and linking Muslim asylum seekers to crime and radicalism, reinforcing an "us-versus-them" paradigm (Tasch, 2017; PVV, 2021; PVV, 2023; Kaya and Tecmen, 2019, p. 55). Cultural identity is continuously presented as a referent object under siege, exemplifying societal securitisation consistent with Copenhagen School principles. However, the largely white, Christian, European profile of Ukrainian refugees disrupts this Islam-oriented threat template. Scholarship notes a double standard: Ukrainians are cast as "deserving" and "like us," while Muslim refugees are dehumanised (Jackson Sow, 2022; Herat, 2023). A Dutch study briefly indicates that the PVV recast Ukrainians as burdens on public resources, not as identity threats (Nijhuis et al., 2023, p. 319). Nonetheless, systematic analysis of the party's response to the 2022 Ukrainian displacement remains limited — an empirical gap this study addresses.

3. Methodology

The PVV was chosen as the critical case for this study due to its distinctively personalist and polarizing profile within Dutch politics. Given its centralised leadership, Wilders' X (previously Twitter) account functions as the party's primary, unfiltered channel, with an audience exceeding 1.6 million followers. The study period from February 2022 to February 2025 captures the PVV's pivotal transformation from opposition to governing party, as their electoral triumph in November 2023 (37/150 seats) made it the largest faction. They gained influential portfolios, including asylum and migration, amid intensified national debates about migration (Slomp, 2023). Meanwhile, Russia's war produced sustained

displacement; over 120,000 Ukrainians sought refuge in the Netherlands (Rijksoverheid, 2025). To ensure analytical clarity, depth, and manageability the research focuses specifically on Ukrainian refugees. However, it acknowledges the PVV's implicit contrasts with refugees from Muslim-majority countries where relevant to illustrate specific framing dynamics.

To analyse the PVV's framing of Ukrainian refugees, the study compiles a corpus of public texts where PVV actors articulate positions: dozens of X posts, several parliamentary interventions, news articles, and official party documents such as election manifestos. These multiple channels ensure a comprehensive capture of the party's discourse. Moreover, only texts explicitly mentioning Ukrainian refugees within the set timeframe are included. The analysis is conducted using the original Dutch sources. Any in-text quoted excerpts are translated into English to ensure clarity for non-Dutch readers.

Subsequently, this study applies Mieke Verloo's (2005) Critical Frame analysis (CFA), adapted to the Ukrainian refugee context. Herein, framing theory serves as the analytical bridge between securitisation and discourse, viewing framing as an interpretive lens that highlights certain aspects of reality to shape meaning (Entman 1993, 52). Within the dataset, frames act as coherent narratives assigning meaning to the refugee issue (Verloo 2005, pp. 19-20). Given the exploratory nature of this case, no predefined coding scheme is used. Frames are allowed to emerge inductively. Following Verloo, this study uses four analytical dimensions to guide the process: diagnosis of the problem, proposed remedies, roles, and voice (Entman, 1993, pp. 52-53; Verloo, 2005, pp. 25-26). These dimensions ensure that the analysis identifies how the PVV defines the problem, attributes blame to actors, and legitimises specific solutions. Besides, intersectional aspects such as race, religion, and gender are emphasised to capture how social identity markers intersect in the discourse. In practice, the coding process proceeds iteratively: texts are read closely, coded manually, and refined into overarching frames validated against the original sources.

Lastly, this approach has its limitations, which must be acknowledged. One inherent limitation of CFA is the inevitable issue of researcher subjectivity, which influences how frames are identified (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 73). Another limitation concerns the scope. The identified frames derive exclusively from PVV discourse, limiting broader applicability to other parties, settings, or refugee groups. Also, this approach does not incorporate audience reception. It concentrates on the actor's framing intent and does not assess how audiences or society respond. With a solid theoretical and methodological foundation in place, the empirical findings can be presented adequately.

3. PVV's Dominant Frames Unveiled

The results of the empirical CFA of the PVV's rhetoric regarding Ukrainian refugees from 2022 to 2025 reveals three dominant narrative frames consistently shaping the party's discourse. Although these

frames are distinct, they frequently overlap in the data because most sources reflect multiple frames simultaneously. Consequently, the findings are organised thematically around each frame.

To situate the analysis historically and politically, it is necessary to briefly trace the roots of right-wing populism in the Netherlands, specifically concerning the PVV. From the late twentieth century onward, post-war tolerance toward immigrants began to erode as public anxiety about integration and identity intensified (Lucassen and Lucassen, 2015, p. 76).[1] In this shifting climate, Pim Fortuyn emerged in the early 2000s as a pivotal figure who reframed Muslim immigration as a civilisational threat to Dutch liberal values (Van der Woude, 2020, pp. 238–239). He campaigned fiercely against the Left-leaning political establishment, a classic populist characteristic. His blunt rhetoric resonated widely. Though Fortuyn was assassinated days before the 2002 general election, his party briefly entered government (Lucassen and Lucassen, 2015, p. 74). His rise marked a decisive break: immigration and national identity became central political issues, and openly anti-immigration populism gained a foothold (Lucassen and Lucassen, 2015, pp. 72–78).

This shift created fertile ground for Geert Wilders to emerge as the successor to Fortuyn's populist revolt. He founded the PVV in 2006, immediately entering parliament with a hardline stance against immigration and Islam (Kaya and Tecman, 2019; Van der Woude, 2020; Witteveen, 2017). Long positioned as a major opposition force, the PVV's 2023 electoral victory marked its transformation into a governing party (Witteveen, 2017, p. 377-378). With 37 seats, it pledged for "the strictest asylum regime ever" (Rijksoverheid, 2024a). Under Minister Marjolein Faber, this agenda included accelerating

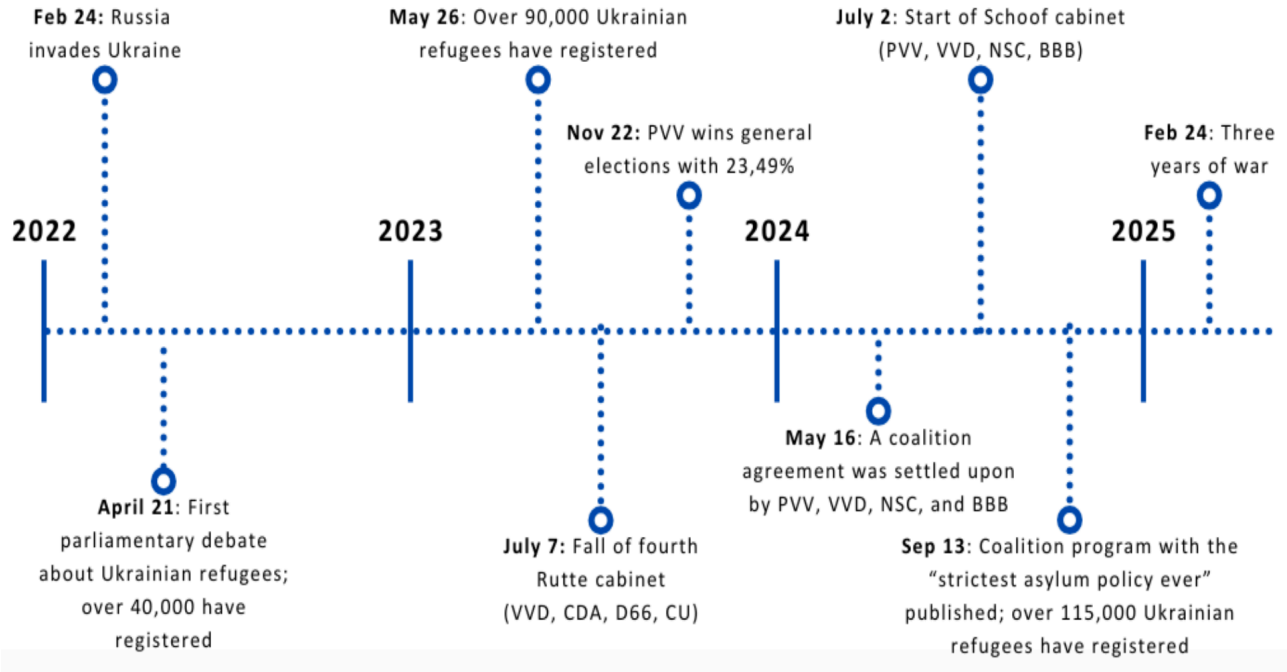

Figure 1. Timeline of the case study with political events

[1] For a more detailed account of how Dutch political and public attitudes toward immigration and multiculturalism evolved in the second half of the twentieth century, see: Lucassen and Lucassen, 2015

procedures for assessing asylum claims and tightening border controls.[1] While maintaining hardline migration rhetoric, the PVV moderated its foreign policy stance to preserve coalition stability, exemplified by its support for continued aid to Ukraine (Rijksoverheid, 2024b). This transition from outsider to governing actor contextualises the party's evolving discourse, which increasingly balances exclusionary principles with pragmatic coalition politics. Figure 1 outlines key political and external developments in the studied period, while Table 1 summarises the three dominant PVV frames, offering an initial overview before the detailed analysis.

Analytical Dimension	Capacity Strain	Welfare Nativism	Selective Solidarity
Diagnosis	The Netherlands is physically full; numerical overload.	Refugees constitute an economic burden, diverting resources from struggling Dutch citizens.	The "undeserving" refugees prevent proper support for "real" refugees.
Proposed solution	Limit or halt refugee intake; remove or repatriate refugees to free up space.	Reallocate funds and resources from refugees to Dutch citizens.	Exclude or expel undeserving migrants, prioritize Ukrainians.
Attribution of roles	Government elites and EU institutions blamed for open-border policies.	Political elites blamed for economic injustice.	Political elites blamed for accommodating culturally incompatible migrants; PVV casts itself as moral defender.
Voice	PVV as protector voicing alarm for ordinary Dutch citizens burdened by overcrowding; refugees depicted as impersonal masses.	PVV as a voice for economically burdened Dutch citizens; refugees depicted as unfair competitors.	PVV as moral voice for native Dutch; Muslim refugees vilified; Ukrainians conditionally supported but voiceless.
Core rhetorical logic	"We cannot have them"; top-down critique of political elites neglecting national limits.	"We should not want them"; bottom-up prioritization of native Dutch financial welfare and fairness.	"We should selectively support refugees"; cultural and moral differentiation between deserving and undeserving refugees.

Table 1. Overview of PVV's dominant frames (2022-2025)

[1] For a more detailed account on the asylum policy and the coalition program, see: Rijksoverheid 2024a; Rijksoverheid 2024b.

3.1 Frame A: Capacity Strain

In the PVV's discourse, one of the most dominant frames casts Ukrainian refugees as a burden on Dutch space and capacity. Central to this narrative is the claim that "the Netherlands is full" and cannot accommodate more arrivals. This frame appears consistently throughout the dataset, with Wilders frequently warning about the limits of housing, infrastructure, and social services (Wilders, 2022a, 2022b, 2022l, 2022m, 2025e, 2025f). For example, six months after Russia invaded Ukraine, Wilders (2022c) stated:

> *There is a massive shortage of senior housing, 900,000 young adults are still living with their parents because of the housing shortage, yet status holders and Ukrainians are being housed en masse in luxury hotels and on cruise ships. (Mark) Rutte has gone insane.*[1]

This statement encapsulates how the Capacity Strain Frame defines the problem as the physical unsustainability of further refugee intake. As of February 2024, this rhetoric remained unchanged. Gidi Markuszower, a party speaker, argued in Parliament that asylum shelters were "bursting at the seams" and that new refugees threaten to overwhelm "everything that makes the Netherlands pleasant", from housing and welfare to public infrastructure (Markuszower, 2024a). In other words, the problem is numerical overload.

From the onset of the Ukraine war, the Capacity Strain frame included Ukrainian refugees within broader anti-immigration rhetoric. Early statements already implicitly grouped Ukrainian refugees alongside other migrants, suggesting logistical pressures irrespective of their cultural proximity (Wilders, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d). Proposed solutions consistently focused on alleviating perceived national capacity through admission caps, accelerated asylum procedures, expulsion of any migrants who exceed their stay, and active repatriation of (Ukrainian) refugees (Markuszower, 2024c; Vermeer and Wilders, 2025; Wilders, 2024a).

In this frame, blame is placed squarely on prior Dutch governments and the EU for an alleged "open-borders" policy that has exhausted national capacities. This anti-elitist rhetoric portrays former leaders as irresponsible and out of touch, particularly amid the housing shortage affecting Dutch citizens (Wilders, 2022c). For example, in its 2023 manifesto, the PVV amplified this narrative, warning of an "asylum tsunami" caused by successive Mark Rutte governments (PVV, 2023, p. 6). Within this frame, refugees are framed impersonally as "flows" or "masses," stripped of individuality and agency (Markuszower, 2024a). This language reinforces the perception of refugees as burdens on infrastructure rather than people in need. This constructed selective reality allows the PVV to link migration to domestic policy failures while legitimizing exclusionary measures under the guise of

[1] This remark is also relevant for another frame, explored in "Frame B".

restoring national control.

Conversely, the PVV prominently amplifies the voices and struggles of Dutch citizens, such as young adults facing housing shortages or seniors unable to access adequate care (Wilders, 2022d, 2022e). The party's distinct alarmist and protective tone highlights the PVV as the perceived sole advocate of ordinary Dutch people burdened by overcrowding. In sum, the Capacity Strain frame enables the PVV to justify exclusion through a rationality of logistical unsustainability. This perceived notion is one in which any considerable increase in the number of refugees, irrespective of origin, is seen as fundamentally incompatible with the prosperity of the Dutch state.

3.2 Frame B: Welfare Nativism

Building on the Capacity Strain Frame, a second prominent frame in the PVV's discourse is Welfare Nativism. Like the capacity frame, it asserts a populist "Dutch people first" logic and portrays accommodating refugees as harmful to the Netherlands. However, the two frames differ in their core focus and narrative angle, warranting separate analysis. Frame A articulates a top-down critique emphasizing physical and infrastructural limits, whereas frame B channels bottom-up grievances focusing on economic priorities and fairness.

In this frame, the arrival of refugees is framed as a direct threat to the economic security and social rights of native Dutch citizens. The core grievance is that of unfair distribution where open asylum policies undermine the welfare state and disadvantage Dutch taxpayers and vulnerable groups. Throughout the studied period, the PVV frequently insinuated that Ukrainian refugees were receiving a disproportionate share of government spending, housing, healthcare, and social services at the expense of Dutch citizens (Markuszower, 2024a; Wilders, 2022c, 2022e, 2022f, 2023a). This juxtaposition aligns with academic observations that noted the PVV instrumentalizing the Russo-Ukrainian war "through the prism of the needs of the Dutch people" (Nijhuis et al., 2023, p. 319). Thus, such rhetoric defines refugee reception as a zero-sum conflict over scarce resources: any benefits given to (Ukrainian) refugees is implicitly a loss for Dutch citizens.

To overcome this challenge, the proposed solution within this frame is essentially "Dutch money for Dutch needs". The underlying message is welfare nativism: limit the intake of Ukrainian refugees, reduce their benefits and facilities, limit expenditures on asylum and supporting Ukrainian war efforts, and prioritise the welfare of native citizens (Vondeling, 2024; Wilders, 2022e, 2023a, 2023b). Similar to the Capacity Strain Frame, this frame also attributes blame to political elites for neglecting native Dutch citizens in favor of foreigners. However, as the Welfare Nativism frame casts the issue in moral-economic terms, blame is also assigned to the refugees themselves. This indicates a deeper grievance where refugees are portrayed as unfairly privileged by the government while vulnerable Dutch citizens are left behind. The perspective of refugees is again absent or minimised. Instead, the PVV amplifies the voice

of the disgruntled Dutch citizen with zero-sum framings such as: "Not a penny to cut VAT on groceries in the Netherlands to help our own people while billions go to Ukraine" (Wilders, 2023a). Through framing like this, the Welfare Nativism frames "others" Ukrainian refugees as economic rivals. This populist dichotomy reinforces a moral-economic boundary between deserving insiders and undeserving outsiders.

Altogether, The Welfare Nativism Frame is a consistent element in PVV discourse from 2022 to 2025. It portrays Ukrainian refugees as economic burdens diverting resources from Dutch citizens. For instance, the 2023 PVV manifesto explicitly opposed financial aid to Ukraine, urging that funds be redirected to domestic needs (PVV, 2023, pp. 36–42). This framing reflects economic securitisation, presenting refugee support as a zero-sum competition for limited public resources.

3.3 Frame C: Selective Solidarity

Moving beyond economic considerations, the Selective Solidarity frame distinguishes "real" Ukrainian refugees from "undeserving" asylum seekers from Muslim-majority countries. The diagnosis centres on an allegedly unsustainable refugee burden caused by "Islamic safe-landers", "profiteers", and "foreign invaders", whose presence prevents support and "temporary and limited" space for "genuine" Ukrainian refugees (Markuszower, 2022; Wilders, 2022a, 2022g, 2022i). Immediately following the arrival of Ukrainians in early 2022, the PVV began differentiating refugee legitimacy based on intersectional identity categories (Wilders, 2022h):

> *Hi politically correct Holland, please remove those young, male testosterone bombs from safe countries (and Syria) out of our country so that we can temporarily accommodate a limited number of real refugees — Ukrainian women and children!*

This implicit threat narrative found throughout the PVV's discourse constructs a hierarchy of refugee legitimacy shaped by gender, ethnicity, and religion. At its core, Ukrainian women and children are depicted as innocent victims deserving temporary compassion, while Ukrainian men are expected to return and rebuild their country. At the bottom are Muslim men, dehumanised and vilified as "beasts" or "parasites" (Markuszower, 2022; Wilders, 2022a). By stripping these migrants of voice and humanity, the PVV frames them as illegitimate intruders. The contrast reinforces a gendered and racialised securitisation logic wherein male refugees from culturally distant backgrounds are portrayed as threats (Hameleers, 2019; Hamid, 2019; Kaya and Tecmen, 2019; Sutkute, 2019). The common thread is that neither group exercises active agency. Instead, Ukrainian suffering is instrumentalised to amplify nationalist distinctions between "deserving" and "undeserving" refugees. Overall, this logic securitises migration through selective empathy, valorizing Christian proximity while condemning Muslim

difference

Given this point, the PVV's proposed solution is clear: remove and curtail (male) asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa to make "temporary and limited" space for Ukrainian women and children fleeing war (Markuszower, 2022; Wilders, 2022a, 2022b, 2022g, 2022h). The attribution of roles and voice dimensions within the Selective Solidarity Frame merge to form a clear hierarchy among actors. Once again, the PVV positions itself as the heroic defender of both "our own people" and "real refugees". This stance is juxtaposed against what Wilders labels "politically correct Holland" (Wilders, 2022h). Elites, from Rutte's government to pro-immigration parties, are blamed for pursuing open-border policies that allegedly "destroy" the country (Markuszower, 2022; Wilders, 2022g). This anti-elitist stance persisted until the PVV's 2023 electoral victory.

Over time, the Selective Solidarity Frame shifted from overt exclusion to subtler forms of differentiation. In 2022, the PVV leveraged sympathy for Ukrainians as a rhetorical catalyst to double down on anti-Islam and anti-immigration narratives through selective compassion. As Ukrainian refugees became a long-term reality and the PVV moved toward governance in 2023, its rhetoric softened to appear more moderate and coalition-compatible. Nevertheless, beneath this pragmatic tone, the logic of selective solidarity endured: the PVV continued to advocate stricter asylum restrictions for non-European migrants while emphasizing conditional hospitality toward Ukrainians (Markuszower, 2024a, 2024b). This evolution reflects strategic recalibration rather than ideological moderation, allowing the party to maintain exclusionary themes under a more tempered guise.

4. Discursive Nuance and Omission

As the consistent interplay of the three dominant frames is accentuated, there are also more nuanced elements and notable absences in the PVV's discourse. That is, the party occasionally adopted a Humanitarian Sympathy frame in its discourse. This marginal yet revealing element emerged immediately after Russia's 2022 invasion, diagnosing the war as an unjust act of aggression and portraying Ukrainians as innocent victims (Derix, 2024; Nijhuis et al., 2023, p. 318–319; Wilders, 2022j). Despite earlier pro-Russian leanings, Wilders condemned the invasion of 2022 as a "violation of Ukrainian sovereignty" and briefly aligned with the broader European humanitarian consensus (Nijhuis et al., 2023, p. 318-319; Wilders 2022a, 2022i, 2022j, 2022k). The Humanitarian Sympathy resurfaced sporadically in expressions acknowledging Ukrainian suffering and voicing hopes for peace (Wilders 2024c, 2025b, 2025c). Within this frame, Russia is cast as the aggressor, while "the West" receives partial blame for escalating tensions by not ruling out Ukraine's NATO membership, reflecting Wilders' Eurosceptic stance. Yet this sympathy was conditional: support was frequently qualified by statements such as "we will help, but not here in the Netherlands" (Wilders, 2022i). Thus, humanitarian rhetoric

functioned primarily to soften the PVV's image when politically expedient. It never displaced the party's nativist core, which continued to define its refugee discourse between 2022 and 2025.

Equally revealing is the PVV's notable omission of the cultural and security threat frames it typically deploys against non-European migrants. During the 2015 refugee surge, Muslim refugees were depicted as threats to Dutch identity and public safety (Béland, 2020; Kaya and Tecmen, 2019; Hameleers, 2019). Between 2022 and 2025, such xenophobic framing was absent in the case of Ukrainian refugees. They were never portrayed as cultural or security risks. This absence reflects both political pragmatism and audience sensitivity. The PVV's established "enemy image" applied to refugees from Muslim-majority countries does not fit Ukrainian refugees, who are predominantly white, Christian, and European. Vilifying them would clash with widespread public sympathy and risk electoral backlash. Acknowledging this cultural proximity, the PVV avoids overt securitizing or xenophobic rhetoric, reframing the refugee issue as one of numbers and economic strain rather than cultural incompatibility. This audience-sensitive approach illustrates contingent securitisation: refugees are framed as security or cultural threats only when their racial-religious profile fits the PVV's ideological adversary image. By shifting emphasis from identity to capacity, the PVV maintains its anti-immigration stance while adapting to sympathetic public sentiment, demonstrating the tactical flexibility of populist discourse.

Furthermore, throughout its discourse on Ukrainian refugees, the PVV employs classic populist techniques to sustain an exclusionary message within a more context-sensitive framework. Central to this is the "us-versus-them" dichotomy, where "us" represents ordinary Dutch citizens and "them" includes both refugees and the elites enabling their arrival. Even sympathetic references to Ukrainians stress Dutch citizens' allegedly "losing out" to newcomers. The party's metaphorical language further bolsters this framing. Although more tempered than during previous refugee waves, refugee arrivals are described in alarmist terms such as "flows" and "asylum tsunami" (Markuszower, 2024a; PVV, 2023). Complementing this is the PVV's persistent anti-elitist stance, framing political leaders and EU institutions as betraying the native people. This dual strategy, populist victimhood and scapegoating, repackages exclusion as pragmatic concern. Found in all the frames, these rhetorical devices allow Wilders to walk a fine line: appearing compassionate while reaffirming its nativist commitment.

5. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine how and why the migration discourse of the Dutch right-wing populist party PVV evolved between 2022 and 2025 in response to Russia's war on Ukraine. Focusing on rhetorical strategies and framing, it found that the PVV balanced ideological consistency with discursive flexibility. The party shifted from overt, identity-based threat narratives, central during the 2015 refugee crisis, to more pragmatic, economically framed securitisation in the post-2022 context. In securitisation

terms, the referent object — what is presented as under threat — shifted from identity to national resources (Buzan et al., 1998). Political opportunity, public sympathy for Ukrainians, and electoral strategy drove this recalibration. While presenting itself as more moderate, the PVV continued to portray refugees as economic burdens, sustaining exclusionary hierarchies of legitimacy rooted in gender and religion. The intersectional dynamic reflects broader scholarly findings on Europe's double standards in refugee reception, where ostensibly humanitarian impulses are politicised and unevenly applied (Herat, 2023; Jackson Sow, 2022; Štefančík et al., 2023; Nijhuis et al., 2023). The rhetorical flexibility of the PVV reflects not ideological change but strategic adaptation to a sympathetic public climate. Herein, the results demonstrate how populist actors can repackage nativism within acceptable frames, emphasizing capacity and welfare strain over cultural threat. Ultimately, this study shows that populist exclusion persists through selective empathy, reaffirming the core principle that "our own people" come first.

Taken together, the findings contribute theoretically to securitisation and populism studies by highlighting the resilience and context-sensitive nature of exclusionary narratives, even when shaped by a single actor. The PVV's case illustrates who the refugees are perceived to be (their identity, origin, and the narratives surrounding them) and when the securitizing discourse unfolds (political timing and context) significantly shape how threats are framed. This paper provides empirical support for the argument that securitisation of migration is not one-size-fits-all, but is flexibly deployed. Populist actors recalibrate their rhetoric in response to shifting norms, political opportunities, and audience sensitivities. This aligns with scholarly perspectives that securitisation is not a static or purely top-down process, but one shaped by contextual factors and the anticipated audience reception (Balzacq, 2005; Rychnovska, 2014; Donnelly, 2017). The uncovered PVV's rhetorical adaptability matters not only to scholars but also to political actors and civil society to effectively recognise and counter populist strategies.

Beyond its theoretical and practical contribution, this study's insights into the PVV's shifting migration discourse also highlights several implications that invite further inquiry. To begin with, focusing on a single case constrains generalizability. Future research should compare other right-wing populist parties, such as Germany's AfD, or Hungary's Fidesz, to assess whether similar rhetorical adaptations occur. Furthermore, studies could integrate audience-oriented methods like surveys or media analysis to gauge how such narratives are received. The recent fall of the Schoof cabinet, following Wilder's dissatisfaction over proposed asylum policies, underscores the continuing volatility of Dutch migration politics with the PVV as a central actor (Bouwman, 2025). As a new coalition is looming, the PVV faces crucial choices about its exclusionary narratives, particularly given the sustained presence of over 120,000 Ukrainian refugees. Future longitudinal research beyond February 2025 is essential to track whether the PVV maintains its moderated rhetoric, reverts to harsher anti-Islam narratives, or develops new frames. Ultimately, the PVV's migration discourse from 2022 to 2025 serves as a powerful reminder

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Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations
2026 Winter Edition
ISSA
www.issaleiden.wordpress.com

THE SKY IS NOT EMPTY

Why "For All Humankind" Currently Fails The Cosmos

Key Words: *Space Governance, Outer Space Treaty, Decoloniality, Indigenous Ontologies, Cosmic Relationality*

MAARTEN VAN DER ZAAG

Global Order in Historical Perspective

Abstract

The current governance of space reveals a paradox: on the one hand, the inclusive rhetoric of governments and the Outer Space Treaty (1967), which affirms that space is for all humankind, and on the other hand, widespread exclusionary, state-centric practices. Despite multilateral claims by states in space, this essay contends that space governance fails to transcend earthly hierarchies, instead perpetuating patterns of Eurocentric state-centrism and exclusion. Major spacefaring nations unilaterally establish norms through resource-extraction frameworks such as the Artemis Accords (2020) and the military use of space, including testing debris-generating anti-satellite weapons. This might-makes-right approach presents space as a military frontier and, legally, as *terra nullius* (empty land), in contrast to the concept of space as a global commons. The exclusionary mindset and practices are criticised from an Indigenous perspective, highlighting the harm caused by modern space practices to celestial traditions and exposing colonial continuities in the location and implementation of space infrastructure. The main conclusion is that the adversarial, realist view of terrestrial geopolitics is fundamentally unsuitable for the interconnected and shared nature of the cosmic realm. This essay contributes to International Relations by emphasising the urgent need to decentre space governance through relational, non-Eurocentric ontologies, such as Indigenous cosmic custodianship and frameworks like Ubuntu, as well as humanities-based expertise to foster a sustainable, just, and shared pluriverse order rooted in collective cosmic responsibility.

Cite this article: Van der Zaag, M. (2026): The Sky Is Not Empty: Why "For All Human Kind" Currently Fails in the Cosmos. *Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations, 2* (1), pp. 92-105.

1. Introduction

With his eyes fixed on the heavens, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev shouted to his space programme chief, gripped with anxious hope or burdened with conscious guilt: "Tell me, is he alive?" (S. Khrushchev, 2000, p. 432). In 1961, the military rocket that carried Yuri Gagarin into space as the first human had a 50% success rate, and his descent back to Earth was marred by complications (Pyle, 2019). The day before, with a clearer state of mind, Khrushchev had been drafting his speech in case of success, emphasising space for "all irrespective of the social and political structures of these countries, irrespective of the skin colour, faith, and other things" (N. Khrushchev, 1961, para. 7).

Similarly, when Americans landed on the Moon, they first addressed all of mankind. Yet, right after, they planted an American flag on the lunar surface, mirroring 15th-century European colonial rituals (Redfield, 2002). The concept of space belonging to all humankind and its peaceful use is reflected in the foremost treaty governing the heavens, the 1967 Outer Space Treaty (OST). More recently, the Chinese-Russian-led mission has reemphasised inclusive incentives in their upcoming Moon missions (China National Space Administration, 2021). Furthermore, the bilateral US-led Artemis Accords (2020) highlight on their first page the benefits for all humankind to be gained from cooperating in the peaceful use of outer space.

However, space has already emerged as a battleground in recent conflicts; for example, Russia used cyberattacks against satellites during the initial hours of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Chabert, 2023). US President Donald Trump stated during his second inaugural address: "We will pursue our manifest destiny into the stars, launching American astronauts to plant the Stars and Stripes on the planet Mars" (2025, para. 71). This evokes the frontier logic of early American colonisation as a moving zone of conquest. Furthermore, the US-led Artemis Accords (2020) make room for resource extraction. Additionally, all major spacefaring nations have tested anti-satellite weapons, which have contributed to the detriment of humanity's efforts to prevent space from becoming filled with debris (Loverro, 2022).

These are just a few examples of how Jakhu and Pelton, in Space Governance: An International Study, describe the current state of space governance: "In reality, it is a handful of nations (mainly the United States, Russia, and China) negotiating their definitions of acceptable military and economic uses of space outside the well-accepted and time-tested language used in the space treaties" (2017, p. 492). Despite or perhaps because of this fragmentation, the OST (1967) remains the only significant space treaty signed and ratified by all the leading spacefaring nations.

The tension between inclusive rhetoric and exclusionary practices, with might-makes-right undertones, encapsulates the paradox of space governance. First, this essay will examine examples of how the foremost spacefaring nations unilaterally determine space practices to serve their interests. Second, it will explore the practices of leading spacefaring nations, present an Indigenous perspective on space, and, finally, reflect on state centrism in space and potential alternatives.

This essay argues that although public discourse on space encompasses all humankind, current space governance perpetuates patterns of earthly hierarchies and exclusion, as well as a Eurocentric, state-centric perspective. Mainstream International Relations theories often fail to grasp these dynamics because they rely on static terrestrial concepts of enclosed territory and sovereignty in a realm defined by physical continuity and orbital motion. By treating specific domains, such as the Moon or the crowded Near-Earth Orbit, not as a shared environmental system but as a vacuum for power projection, powerful states paradoxically generate collective risks in the name of national security. It would be wise to decentre space governance and integrate Indigenous perspectives, offering alternative visions of cosmic relationality and incorporating humanities-based expertise.

2. Space Technology

According to Christy Collis (2017), the direct orbit, as related to satellites around Earth, was established as *res communis* (shared by all, owned by none) through UN General Assembly Resolution 1962 in 1963 and further codified in the OST in 1967. This prevents it from becoming *res nullius* (unowned property), which would have been akin to an extension of states' airspace. Additionally, the OST declares space a global commons and Article 2 prohibits national appropriations. Recently, this has been challenged by SpaceX, the American company founded by Elon Musk, which, as of June 2025, has 7,855 operational satellites in Earth orbit. These satellites form part of Starlink, a satellite internet constellation operated by SpaceX, which aims to provide internet worldwide and increase the number to 42,000 (Pultarova, 2025). This development has raised complex questions about the satellites' environmental impact, light pollution, and orbital debris, as well as geopolitical concerns about unbounded surveillance, military significance, and dominance over orbital space (Booker et al., 2025). A recent geopolitical move by Starlink came when Elon Musk activated the satellite above Iran, after its government had shut off the internet, to try to instigate an uprising, just days before the United States bombed its nuclear facilities. Musk (2025) tweeted: "The beams are on." This strategic circumvention of the spirit of the OST, in which a private company mirrors the geopolitical ambitions of its parent nation, is reminiscent of the colonial charters and significant powers granted to the English or Dutch East India Company (Bulliet, 2005). The state-centric framework in International Relations can easily fail to account for the fact that commercial entities in space are increasingly functioning as insulated proxies for sovereign power.

The remarkable increase in satellites presents an even greater existential threat to the celestial future of spacefaring nations, raising concerns about the "Kessler Syndrome" or "Kessler Cascade." Proposed by scientists Kessler and Cour-Palais (1978), the cascade describes a tipping point where orbital congestion reaches a critical level, triggering a chain reaction that causes almost all objects in orbit to collide. The reality of this hypothesis was recently evidenced by the Permanent Mission of China

to the United Nations (Vienna) (2021), which, in a Note verbale, lamented that near misses with Musk's Starlink forced the China Space Station to perform emergency manoeuvres to prevent a catastrophe. The threat from space debris is not just from large objects; it also comes from the smallest ones. For example, in 2016, the window of the International Space Station was permanently damaged by what was most likely a paint flake travelling at orbital speeds of roughly 27,600 km/h, no larger than a few thousandths of a millimetre (European Space Agency, 2016).

The accumulation of space debris has significantly worsened as Russia, China, the United States, and India have tested kinetic anti-satellite weapons launched from Earth. For instance, China's 2007 test contributed to the largest single increase in Earth's extraterrestrial debris field (Deudney, 2020). These weapons tests exploit legal loopholes, as Article 5 of the OST only bans weapons of mass destruction or nuclear weapons. On the other hand, Brazil (2023) stated in a consideration document to the General Assembly that "Article 9 of OST, especially the obligation of conducting space activities, with due regard to the corresponding interests of all other States Parties to the Treaty," is incompatible with the conduct of further destructive anti-satellite weapons tests. While only a few nations seek anti-satellite capabilities, the security risks are externalised to the global community. This demonstrates that the realist logic driving these tests falsely frames the strategic environment as a zero-sum game, when it is in fact negative-sum.

Satellites are now essential for daily life, supporting global communications (including GPS, internet, and phone services), weather prediction, disaster monitoring, navigation, agriculture, environmental tracking, and scientific research (Charlton, 2024). Kelvey (2024) explains that although there is no consensus on whether the Kessler Cascade has already begun or on the potential harm it might cause, there is agreement that the science is solid. High-tech solutions, such as orbital robotics removing space debris, may alleviate the problem; however, these technologies also pose offensive capabilities against satellites (Deudney, 2020). So at the moment, there is a genuine risk that the few will cage the Earth at the expense of the many.

There should be a glimmer of hope in recent efforts to defend the planet against extraterrestrial asteroid impacts, as a common threat might unite us. The best example is the 2022 NASA DART mission, which successfully changed the course of an asteroid, a technology that could potentially be used to deflect an asteroid towards Earth (Deudney, 2020). China is set to launch a similar mission around 2026 (Li & Wang, 2022). However, as is the case with many space technologies, their potential is dual use. For asteroid redirection, one to save humanity, another to destroy it. In the 1960s, American aerospace engineers presented at conference forums and in writing ideas of using asteroids or even planetoids as kinetic projectiles that could have an explosive force greater than that of any nuclear bomb. Benefits listed included the ability to hide weapons in the vastness of deep space and cruise undetected, as well as the difficulty of stopping them and the associated plausible deniability (Deudney,

2020). The American think tank RAND, partially funded by the US government, reassessed the costs and benefits of these policies for the US Air Force in the early 2000s (Preston et al., 2002). It is no wonder, then, that the well-known astronomer Carl Sagan (1995) had already warned the world about these ideas in the mid-1990s.

With both China and the United States establishing Space Forces as primary branches of their militaries in recent years, it is tempting to see space as an inevitable future battleground for military great-power competition, as Seedhouse (2010) suggests. However, accepting this as unavoidable dismisses the complex risks and misunderstandings that have long been associated with military tensions, such as during the Cold War, when seemingly innocent events were mistaken for attacks. For instance, birds were often mistaken for missiles (Naka & Ward, 2000), and solar storms today could be mistaken for military electromagnetic pulse strikes in the digital age. The technical delicacy of space infrastructure heightens the risks. Deudney (2020) warns that we may already be on a knife-edge, as space debris disabling a military satellite could easily be misinterpreted as a first strike, triggering escalation toward total conflict. Additionally, both military and civilian activities in space face significant technical challenges with the expanding field of space debris. However, weapons testing is not the only culprit; the debris field is also littered with dead satellites and other abandoned equipment. This worsens as Earth's orbit becomes increasingly crowded, with the United States aiming to track 200,000 objects to ensure the safety of space missions (Deudney, 2020). Redfield (2002) is then right to note that technological expertise in space is simply the latest form of a core aspect of modern empire, shaping how nations perceive and project their power beyond Earth. This includes not only satellites and weaponisation but also control over resources in space.

3. Space Resources

According to Goswami and Garretson (2020), with appropriate legal oversight, increased private investment in space resources could trigger a transformation that secures humanity's future, akin to the Industrial Revolution. Matravers et al. (2023) question claims that using space resources is an "obligation to future generations," arguing that they emphasise speculative benefits over current inequalities and fail to address the colonial roots of resource extraction. They warn that the industrial-revolution analogy may lead to the repetition of historical patterns of exploitation on a cosmic level, diverting attention from Earth's pressing issues.

To some, the 16 Psyche asteroid exemplifies the economic potential of space, as it is composed mainly of valuable metals rather than rock or ice. Lindy Elkins-Tanton, the lead scientist of the NASA mission scheduled to visit the asteroid in 2029, estimated its worth at $10,000 quadrillion (Scotti, 2017). Although the mission, launched in 2023, will only study it, it provides some background for the US Space

Resource Exploration and Utilization Bill (2015). It assumes that resources beyond the horizon are subject to US "national needs," which contradicts the stated purpose of the OST: space for the benefit of all humankind. Following the precedent set by the United States in 2015, Luxembourg introduced its own legislation on space resources in 2017. As Feichtner (2019) explains, Luxembourg argued that the resources its private companies may extract do not constitute a claim of sovereignty because extraction does not involve asserting territorial control. To justify this, Luxembourg relies on an analogy with the international law of the high seas: while the sea itself cannot be owned by any state, resources such as fish are considered *res communis* and may be appropriated by private actors. This manoeuvre carefully navigates the edge of legal boundaries and might challenge the spirit of the OST, particularly the non-appropriation principle in Article 2. This national-level legal precedent, consistent with the US interpretation, helped pave the way for a broader diplomatic framework.

The US-led Artemis Accords (2020) provide the framework for commercial resource extraction from all celestial bodies, as outlined in Section 11, which allows for "Safety Zones that operate without harmful interference." Additionally, Section 10 addresses space resources, stating that the "utilization of space resources can benefit humankind" and that "the extraction of space resources does not inherently constitute national appropriation under Article 2 of the OST." This implies that resource extraction is not a territorial claim, as Article 2 of the OST reads "Outer space, including the Moon and other celestial bodies, is not subject to national appropriation by claim of sovereignty, by use or occupation, or by any other means." However, such an interpretation has been criticised by Chinese and Russian space experts as European interventionism and colonialism, citing historical precedents. Chinese military commentator Song Zhongping, for instance, likens the Artemis Accords' leeway for resource control to the 18th-century British enclosure movement, arguing that they facilitate colonisation and claims of sovereignty, effectively privatising the commons for the benefit of the wealthy few (Ji et al., 2020). From the Russian perspective, Roscosmos CEO Dmitry Rogozin sees a reflection of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq in the Artemis Accords. Rogozin argues that by forming a coalition of the willing in space, the United States is again acting unilaterally and bypassing stricter UN oversight to create a framework that facilitates the seizure of extraterrestrial resources (Kommersant, 2020). Irrespective of the merits of these critiques, the Artemis Accords link terrestrial economic capability to cosmic rights, thereby reproducing terrestrial hierarchies. In space, equal legal rights do not translate into equal capabilities, thereby granting wealthy nations a significant first-mover advantage within this legal framework.

The Moon Treaty of 1978 aimed to declare the Moon and other celestial bodies (including their resources) as the common heritage of all humanity, meaning no nation or private entity could claim ownership of them or their resources. It also proposed that an international regulatory framework should oversee space activities. Unfortunately, it is ineffective; only a few states have signed it, and none of

these are major spacefaring nations (Feichtner, 2019). This leads Collis (2017) to describe space in terms of resource extraction as *compromised res communis omnium*. The *omnium*, in addition to the already stated open access for everyone to utilise in *res communis*, permits the free extraction of valuable resources, unevenly benefiting states with the financial means and technological capabilities to exploit these extraterrestrial opportunities. To address the state of governmental ambiguity, Koch (2018) suggests learning from deep-sea resource policies established by the International Seabed Authority, including identifying regions of ecological exclusivity, ensuring financial redistribution to developing nations, and allowing adaptability within the governing body's structure to facilitate future-proofing. Despite these existing models for equitable governance, current leadership is primarily driven by competitive realism.

Both the Chinese-Russian-led and American-led Moon initiatives are multinational,[1] but their leaders pursue these efforts for realist reasons in space. Besides increasing its wealth, the United States' leading role in facilitating space resource extraction is influenced by the fact that China currently supplies most of the world's rare metals (Feichtner, 2019). Al-Rodhan (2018) argues that China and Russia cooperate to bolster their positions, focusing on being the first to return to the Moon to strengthen their global influence. In this context, Giri and Hiebert (2024) view the Chinese-Russian and American-led missions as the imposition of the geopolitical ambitions of their bloc leaders on the emerging space-capable countries in the Global South (Giri & Hiebert, 2024). For example, the Indian space programme shifted its focus from prioritising socioeconomic growth to aiming for prestige and national security, embracing cooperation with the United States for technological and geopolitical benefits (Stroikos, 2025). The African Union's Space Policy (2016) presents an alternative approach that emphasises Pan-African collaboration, with a focus on Earth observation, sustainability, and the peaceful utilisation of space.

4. Indigenous Perspectives and Concerns

To transcend the state-centric binaries that currently fracture space governance, we must shift our vantage point towards ontologies that perceive the cosmos holistically rather than through the lens of states. While the economic and military framework discussed relies on a frontier logic that treats space as a source of exploitation, Indigenous perspectives offer a vital counter-narrative, viewing the cosmos

[1] States that signed bilaterally on the Chinese-Russian moon mission include Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Nicaragua, Serbia, Pakistan, South Africa, Thailand, Venezuela, Kazakhstan, and Senegal.States that signed on to the US-led moon mission include Australia, Canada, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, South Korea, New Zealand, Brazil, Poland, Mexico, Israel, Romania, Bahrain, Singapore, Colombia, France, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Rwanda, the Czech Republic, Spain, Ecuador, India, Argentina, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Angola, Belgium, Greece, Uruguay, Switzerland, Sweden, Slovenia, Lithuania, Peru, Slovakia, Armenia, the Dominican Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Chile, Denmark, Panama, Austria, Thailand, Liechtenstein, Finland, Bangladesh, and Norway.

through the lens of relationality rather than possession.

Building on the legal critiques of scholars such as Collis (2017), Mi'kmaw astronomer Hilding Neilson also traces his references back to Roman legal phrases when assessing the state of space exploration, in which Western actors often employ frontier logic. He states that currently much of the space exploration is framed: "In the same way that colonisers, pioneers, and settlers viewed the early West—that it was *terra nullius* (empty land), a land of opportunity for them, and that the land was free to take" (Mann, 2021, para. 7). This aligns closely with Trump's quotes about the United States' Manifest Destiny in the stars: "The spirit of the frontier is written in our hearts [...] Our American ancestors [...] won the Wild West. [...] launched mankind into the heavens" (2025, para. 73-75).

The neglect of Indigenous communities' connection with space often starts here on Earth. Many launch sites for space access are best situated in vast, untouched areas of land, and these sites are connected to the terrestrial history of global inequality (Marino, 2023). As Redfield (2002) compares the European Space Agency port in French Guiana to the half-life of radioactive decay, he suggests that an empire does not vanish but transforms. In this case, colonial continuities are evident: the spaceport is located in a French overseas territory and former prison colony, where European extraterrestrial requirements supersede local infrastructure needs, leading to increased pollution. Redfield's *half-life of empire* framework extends beyond French Guiana, as evidenced in Australia's Arnhem Space Centre, Kazakhstan's Baikonur, and Hawaii's Mauna a Wākea, where space infrastructure mirrors colonial patterns of land dispossession and environmental destruction (Maile, 2018). This reliance on these geographies illustrates how space power is often physically rooted in the continued occupation of Indigenous land and accessible through the terrestrial infrastructure of empire, thereby binding the future of space exploration to the history of colonisation on Earth.

Another issue affecting Indigenous peoples and the growing human presence in space is the disruptive impact of satellite proliferation. In addition to light pollution from urban centres dimming the night sky, artificial satellite constellations compromise Indigenous celestial knowledge systems, which rely on an unobstructed view for cultural, spiritual, and calendrical reasons (Finnegan, 2022). Smiles (2020), a Geography professor and member of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, emphasises that his community has strong cultural ties to the stars, which shape their religious beliefs, governance, and storytelling. To address this mounting problem, astronomer Drimmel (2020) urges UNESCO to extend its focus beyond terrestrial boundaries in protecting heritage, arguing that these visible satellites zipping across the night sky distort our ancestral view of the stars.

The final issue concerning Indigenous communities discussed in this essay is the (mis)use of celestial bodies for economic or military purposes. A recent clash between economic interests and Indigenous values materialised in January 2024, when Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren formally objected to the launch of the first US commercial lunar lander, the Astrobotic *Peregrine*, which intended

to deliver human remains to the Moon, calling it a disappointment and desecration (2024, para. 2 & 14). As Harvey articulates, this objection was not an attempt to have the final say over the Moon, but a defence of 'Grandmother Moon' (2024, para. 2) viewed through a lens of kinship rather than as inert territory. Most importantly, NASA made an unheeded promise to the Navajo Nation to consult before sending human remains to the Moon, following earlier objections in the 1990s. NASA's stance was that, as merely a customer of the lander, it lacked the regulatory authority to intervene, despite being one of the private company's largest funders. This reveals a convenient blurring of responsibility in the commercialisation of space, enabling the state to sidestep its obligations by outsourcing execution to the private sector. The CEO of the space burial company Celestis, Charles Chafer, dismissed the objections by stating, "No one, and no religion, owns the moon," arguing that deferring to such beliefs would halt "humanity's space efforts" (Fisher, 2024, para. 23). This is a convenient rhetorical sleight of hand in which a private, for-profit burial service is presented as a communal space effort, thereby dismissing Indigenous perspectives as an obstacle to progress.

This incident underscores the urgency of the critiques offered by Indigenous scholars. Gamilaraay astrophysicist Noon (2024) challenges the extractive, frontier mindset underlying current space exploration of celestial bodies. She advocates for Indigenous cosmic custodianship, adopting an ethical relational approach that emphasises reciprocity, stewardship, and responsibility. In this way, Indigenous ways of knowing can provide viable frameworks for space exploration that are sustainable and just. She promotes recognising Indigenous knowledge as legitimate and vital, rather than supplementary. Similarly, Neilson (2024) advocates a relational approach, rather than viewing celestial bodies through a colonial lens; he frames them as kin deserving relational respect. Lastly, Gorman (2005) reiterates the Indigenous embedding of space among the Kokatha and Pitjantjatjara as an interconnected spiritual and ecological realm, and critiques the current cultural landscape of space for reflecting terrestrial power structures.

5. A Way Forward

The Indigenous throughline of relationality and interconnectedness resonates strongly with Global South perspectives in International Relations. Disregarding the binaries of state centrism, Indigenous frameworks such as Ubuntu, which Murithi (2007) explains as "I am because we are," and Qin's (2018) relational theory offer alternative ontologies for governance. Just as Harvey, Noon, and Neilson view celestial bodies as kin, Ubuntu's ethics of communal dignity and Qin's rejection of atomised sovereignty emphasise reciprocal ties, whether between humans, land, or the stars. By prioritising reciprocal ties, these relational worldviews directly challenge the logic of colonial extraction, where Redfield's half-life of empire exposes inequalities that are echoed across space and through time. Tickner and Querejazu

(2021) argue that Eurocentric International Relations perpetuates similar hierarchies by displacing politics from ecological interdependence. Through the lens of relationality, from Indigenous cosmic stewardship to Qin's multilateral world politics, these perspectives challenge Eurocentric frontier logic in the Artemis Accords, proposing instead what Querejazu (2016) calls a pluriverse order, a vision of governance that embraces coexisting worldviews, rooted in shared responsibility.

In opposition to the unity of relationality, Chakrabarty (2007) presents a lesson in contrast for the future of space. As he provincialises Europe's claim to a universal history, we must also provincialise space, emphasising its governance as a culturally specific endeavour. Indeed, it is a profound error to assume that the Westphalian state, a geopolitical arrangement scarcely four centuries old, is the natural authority for a universe that has unfolded over uncountable eons. By acknowledging Indigenous cosmologies and ontologies from the Global South as equal partners in shaping cosmic futures, as Gorman (2005) does, we confront this limited view of time and place. The Artemis Accords' dominant framework reflects Eurocentric state-centric worldviews, concealing their particularity beneath the rhetoric of for all humankind.

In pursuing space resources, we should avoid equating national or corporate interests with direct benefits for all humankind. The Artemis Accords represent US legal frameworks and exclude nations from the Global South from the rule-making process. Their proposed "safety zones" risk becoming colonial land grabs under the guise of governance. Mirroring this exclusion, anti-satellite weapons reflect state-centric logic, privileging national interests over the cosmic future of all. Though military realism may still persuade some in terrestrial geopolitics, its adversarial assumptions are particularly ill-suited to the shared, interdependent nature of space. Reimagining space governance demands more than critiques from within International Relations; it requires insights from the humanities. As shown by the sources in this essay, disciplines such as philosophy, history, anthropology, and ethics offer valuable insights into space and its governance. The humanities are exceptionally well-equipped to interrogate what is right for all humankind in space.

Without a shift towards relational stewardship, advocated by Indigenous voices, we risk foreclosing a shared cosmic future. Anthropology professor Denning captures with care and clarity the final verdict on this colonial trajectory: "In the best of all worlds, we could combine our ancient human legacies—access to dark and quiet skies and ancient stories about the stars—with space research that helps Earth, modern scientific robotic exploration[1] of other worlds, and a respectful stewardship of the solar system; instead of space being all about resources to extract and sell, territory to acquire and hold, and military advantage. But unfortunately, some societies are rushing in the latter direction, and I don't think humanity will be better off because of it" (Banks, 2025, para. 24).

[1] In light of concerns about human-made interference in space, it is argued that although robotic missions still leave traces of human activity, they are less disruptive than sending humans (Abney, 2022).

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Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations
2026 Winter Edition
ISSA
www.issaleiden.wordpress.com

CHINA'S DIGITAL SILK ROAD IN ETHIOPIA

Key Words: *China, Ethiopia, Digital Silk Road, ICT Infrastructure, China-Africa Relations*

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Abstract

The digital dimension of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which has become known as the Digital Silk Road, has gained prominence over the last decade. This is the result of a natural alliance between the state and the corporate sector in China's digital realm which has the goal of curbing overcapacity, enabling China's corporate global expansion, internationalizing the Renminbi, constructing a China-centred network infrastructure, and promoting a new vision of globalisation. This paper looks at how China's Digital Silk Road takes place in developing countries, taking Ethiopia as a case study. It will explore how these motivations are evident in Chinese projects in the digital sphere in Ethiopia. The essay argues that, to different extents, the operations of Chinese companies in Ethiopia includes elements which are functional to all the purposes listed above and also shows that the realisation of the Digital Silk Road is shaped by the policy objectives, economic structures, and societal and cultural elements of the host country.

Cite this article: Damiani, P. (2026): China's Digital Silk Road in Ethiopia. *Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations, 2*(1), pp. 106-123.

1. Introduction

In January 2022 the Ethiopian ambassador to China Teshome Toga Chanaka participated in a live stream on the e-commerce platform Taobao, together with Li Jiaqi, one of China's top influencers (eWTP, 2022). The event aimed at promoting Ethiopian coffee brands in the Chinese market and was a huge success. In a later interview hosted by the Center for China and Globalisation, Chanaka said that 11,000 bags of coffee were purchased in the first five seconds after the sales opened, a "miracle" realised thanks to the digitalisation of trade that would have been "unthinkable" in the past (CCG, 2022). The platform, part of Chinese Alibaba Group, gave a huge boost to one of the biggest sectors of the Ethiopian economy by providing Ethiopian coffee farmers with access to new markets and lowering barriers for conducting trade, ultimately generating new sources of revenue for Ethiopians.

The promotion of an e-commerce system in Ethiopia is only one manifestation of the impact of China's 'Digital Silk Road' (DSR). This term has come to indicate the technological turn of China's foreign economic policy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). From an economic strategy centred on more traditional infrastructural projects such as ports and railways, the growing importance of the digital component of the BRI resulted in an increasing number of projects focused on digital connectivity, with the aim of boosting the digitalisation of commerce and governance. In practice, this has translated into investments in infrastructures such as fibre optic networks as well as 5G towers, and in online platforms for finance and e-commerce (Gong and Li, 2019).

Discussions about the DSR emerged in 2015 after the joint publication by China's National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Commerce, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2015, of the action plan calling for the creation of an 'information Silk Road' (xinxi sichou zhilu) (NDRC, 2015). A year later, the State Council listed the creation of an "online Silk Road" (wangshang sichou zhilu) among the priority actions of China's Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for National Informatisation. Some of the purposes were, according to the document, "to accelerate cooperation between Chinese internet and foreign enterprises, to promote the establishment of a cross-border online platform for investment and financing, to lead in the research and formulation of norms in the information economy, and to turn China's comparative advantage in the internet industry into an advantage in the global information economy" (State Council, 2016, section 5, sub-section 9). However, the wording that is most used today, 'digital Silk Road' (shuzi sichou zhilu), has gained popularity after China's Communist Party Secretary Xi Jinping used the term during the keynote sessions of the first and second Belt and Road Forums in 2017 (Xinhua, 2017; State Council, 2019), and was also part of the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for National Informatisation in 2021 (Creemers et al., 2022).

The digital dimension has gained prominence in the overall BRI project over the last decade following the formation of a natural alliance between the state and the corporate sector. According to Shen (2018), the Chinese leadership has assigned an increasingly central position to technology

companies in the digital sphere of the BRI, with the aim of curbing overcapacity, enabling corporate China's global expansion, internationalizing the Renminbi (RMB), constructing a China-centred network infrastructure, and promoting a more 'inclusive-globalisation'. This paper looks at how China's DSR takes place in developing countries, taking Ethiopia as a case study. It will analyse how the five elements proposed by Shen materialise in Ethiopia. Ethiopia's ambition to become a tech hub in the Horn of Africa makes Ethiopia a relevant case study to show the relationship between the DSR and recipient countries goals. It argues that, to different extents, the realisation of the DSR strategy in Ethiopia includes elements which are functional to all the purposes listed by Shen.

It is important to note that so far, despite the growing role of technological companies in the BRI, the DSR is still more a slogan than an official policy initiative like the BRI. First, unlike the BRI, there is no allocated fund, no public document about what the goals of the DSR are, how they are to be achieved, or who oversees what. As a result, it is not clear what the criteria indicating DSR membership is, nor is there a necessary overlap between the BRI and the DSR, and indeed some reports regard countries which have not signed BRI MoUs as DSR participants (Triolo et al., 2020). Second, as Hong (2017) notes, digital companies being tasked with greater roles in China's economic policy is not a new trend. Rather, it has been a persistent characteristic of five-year plans since the 1990s. These two elements point to the fact that while Chinese technological companies have achieved a high status in the global economy, there is no sign that unequivocally suggests that DSR investments are driven by state policy more than the mere profit logic of the companies involved, with Chinese private companies leveraging the DSR label to gain policy support.

Although not an institutionalised new policy, the DSR is a growing trend in Chinese economic foreign policy, and as such it does have an impact on the countries involved. As it symbolises China's ambition to play a greater role in the global digital realm, the DSR has attracted much attention in recent debates. Core themes are the Chinese impact on civil rights in recipient countries or the obstacles to their development, as in the case of tools for society surveillance (van der Lugt, 2021). Other themes covered China's ability to affect the current global digital standard setting processes (Rühlig, 2021; Tugendhat and Voo, 2021; He, 2022), its competitive impact for Western governments and tech companies (Gunter & Arcesati, 2024), and its counter-hegemonic discourse to establish a China-centred model of globalisation (Vila Seoane, 2020). In the case of developing countries, another peculiar core theme of the discussion focuses on the potential of Chinese investments for developmental and technological ambitions of the recipient countries (El Kadi, 2024).

The scope of the DSR is quite loose and unclear, but its implications are nonetheless worth analysing. Far from a Beijing-centric master plan, in the remainder of this paper the DSR is meant as including any agreement involving a Chinese organisation and aimed at creating the conditions for the digitalisation of socioeconomic practices or deploying them to achieve the five goals highlighted by

Shen above. This might include financing from Chinese banks to pay for the realisation of tech projects, agreements with Chinese contractors, and other types of collaboration with Chinese companies to enhance power supply, increase network coverage, or implement platforms for digital trade and governance. All these are examples for which there is empirical evidence in Ethiopia.

2. How does the DSR materialise in Ethiopia?

Despite the BRI being officially launched in 2013 and its digital dimension acquiring popularity a few years later, these developments do not entail a fundamentally new kind of economic relationship between China and African countries. It is true that, with the BRI, Beijing stepped on the gas, expanding the geographical range and allocating specific funds. However, China-Africa cooperation falls within the long-lasting paradigm of South-South cooperation, the origins of which can be traced back to the 1955 Bandung Conference (Acharya, 2016). In the Maoist era, China-Africa relations translated into ideology-driven aid in the attempt to contain the United States and the Soviet Union in the context of the Cold War and Sino-Soviet split. By 1978, China's aid programmes covered more countries in Africa than the United States (Bräutigam, 2009, p. 42). In this context, China-Ethiopia relations were still relatively insignificant for the two countries: Ethiopia's alignment with the Soviet Union and Chinese support for anti-Ethiopian independent movements in the Horn of Africa generated tensions and stymied the development of economic ties until the end of the Cold War (Tesfaye, 2020). Only by the end of the 1990s did economic relations take off, especially after the establishment of the Joint Ethiopia-China Commission (JECC) in 1998 (Tesfaye, 2020).

Investments have surged since the 1998 agreement, and the role of the two countries in each other's economic foreign policy agenda with it. The prime example of this trend is the 2006 agreement between ZTE (Zhongxing Tongxin) — China's partially state owned company specialised in telecommunication — and Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation, marking the largest agreement in the telecommunication industry in Africa's history (Gagliardone, 2016, p. 1). In the same year, Addis Ababa was chosen to host the second edition (the first held in Africa) of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the official and multilateral coordination mechanism for economic cooperation and development between the People's Republic of China and the 53 African states that recognise the "One China" principle. One indication of the importance of the forum is that the majority of FOCAC members have signed memoranda of understanding about the BRI shortly before editions of the FOCAC. Almost half of them, including Ethiopia, joined the BRI a few days before the 2018 FOCAC (Green Finance and Development Centre, n.d.). China's engagement in Africa in the technological sphere, therefore, takes place both in a bilateral and multilateral setting. In the case of Ethiopia, moreover, the 2024 edition of the FOCAC also coincided with its entrance in the BRICS (Patrick et al. 2025).

The remainder of this paper explores the following question: how does the DSR materialise in Ethiopia? Following the abovementioned fivefold framework put forth by Hong Shen, the remainder of this section explores how each goal of China's digital foreign policy takes shape in one of Africa's most populous and fast-growing, yet still less developed economies.

2.1 Limiting Overcapacity

China's overcapacity problem has been widely debated in studies of the BRI. Nonetheless, as noted by van Staden et al. (2018), after the launch of the BRI, Western outlets focused a lot on the geostrategic implications, often neglecting the fact that the saturation of the domestic market was one key factor in the expansion of Chinese tech firms overseas (Ye, 2020). While strategic implications cannot be overlooked[1], market forces are also a major driver in the case of the DSR, and the case of Ethiopia confirms this.

The economic perspective also explains why Ethiopia's role in the DSR development in Africa is growing. Ethiopia's emerging digital ecosystem has created big opportunities for tech companies willing to invest. In 2021, half of the population owned a mobile phone with an active subscription, 3G network almost covered the entire population, and 16% of the people were on the internet, although with a significant gender gap and big rural-urban inequality (ITU, n.d.). The Ten-Year Development Plan released in 2020 by the Ethiopian Plan and Development Commission aims at allowing access to mobile and internet services to the entirety of the population by 2030 (PDC, 2020, p. 56). Factor in the current Ethiopian population of 135 million people — the second largest in Africa — which is projected to surpass 200 million in the next two decades (WHO, n.d.), and an alternative pattern emerges that is merely driven by the market.

Ethiopian policy shows this trend is in line with the country's technological ambitions. The main strategy for technological development is the *Digital Ethiopia 2025* (DE25) strategy, which has been under implementation since 2020 and is expected to end last year. The strategy highlighted several areas to address, including infrastructures for power generation and connectivity, systems for cybersecurity and digital payments, platforms for e-commerce and e-governance, and initiatives to build human capital to fully exploit the benefits of digitalisation (FDRE, 2020). At the moment, another five-year digital plan is under elaboration following in the footsteps of the DE25 (ENA, 2025), which suggests China-Ethiopia digital cooperation will deepen in the coming years.

The main area where the combination of domestic push factors and external pull factors is visible is power supply. Indeed, taking the Ethiopian strategy into account shows that just as the conceptual boundary between the BRI and the DSR is rather unclear, companies involved in the

[1] For example, see Lu Feng's criticism of Western accusations of overcapacity in an interview published in Guancha(2025), sub-section 3.2.

promotion of digital connectivity are not limited to the so-called 'big techs'. The DE25 strategy highlights the cruciality of establishing a reliable power supply infrastructure for digitalisation to succeed, a sector where the overcapacity of Chinese construction companies aligns with Ethiopian needs. Chinese constructors China Gezhouba Group and Voith Hydro Shanghai took part in the construction of the Great Ethiopia Renaissance Dam (GERD) (Global Construction Review, 2019), the largest in Africa and fifth largest in the world (Matthews & Vivoda, 2023). Although they were not the main contractors, the scope of the projects represent a great opportunity to fully deploy China's industrial capacity in the hydropower sector, whose expansion has lost steam since 2008 due to the global financial crisis, the rising costs of hydropower development, and the competition from other types of renewables (Kong, 2021).

Similarly, these other forms of renewable energy are in search of offshore markets. Although the Blue Nile creates the conditions for hydropower to dominate the renewable energy sector, and for China to serve as a prime example, Chinese companies are also involved in wind and solar energy projects. Like the GERD, these projects were signed before debates about the DSR emerged. Between 2009 and 2016, HydroChina and CGC Overseas Construction Group were tasked with building the two Adama Wind Farms, while Dongfang Electric was awarded the construction of the Aysha Wind Farm (Chen, 2016). Solar power technology also plays a role. In particular, the consortium formed by China Energy Engineering Group and North China Engineering is expected to render the engineering, procurement, and construction of the first phase of a photovoltaic park in the Oromia region (Power Technology, 2024). These are great opportunities for China's wind and solar energy companies, the majority of which face high levels of overcapacity due to government subsidies and declining profitability, particularly in the photovoltaic industry (Yu et al., 2021).

Another crucial area for Ethiopian digitalisation strategy is digital connectivity. Much debate has emerged regarding the role of Chinese companies in the field of information and telecommunication technology (ICT) in Africa. In Figure 1, data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China available from 2019 shows the percentage of industrial capacity used in the ICT sector as percentage of total capacity. During the last five years the industrial capacity of the ICT sector that was used mostly stayed below 80%.

While leading Chinese companies played a key role in enhancing Ethiopia's digital connectivity, there is no clear correlation between domestic overcapacity and a supposed market expansion in foreign markets. ZTE and Huawei, the two leading Chinese firms working to lay optic fibre and build 4G and 5G infrastructure across Ethiopia, were export-oriented from the start. Similarly, for Shenzhen-based Transsion, which together with other major players holds a dominant position in the mobile phones market share in Ethiopia (Tang et al., 2024), Africa was the company's first major region of operation, without ever expanding into the Chinese market (Minnok, 2020).

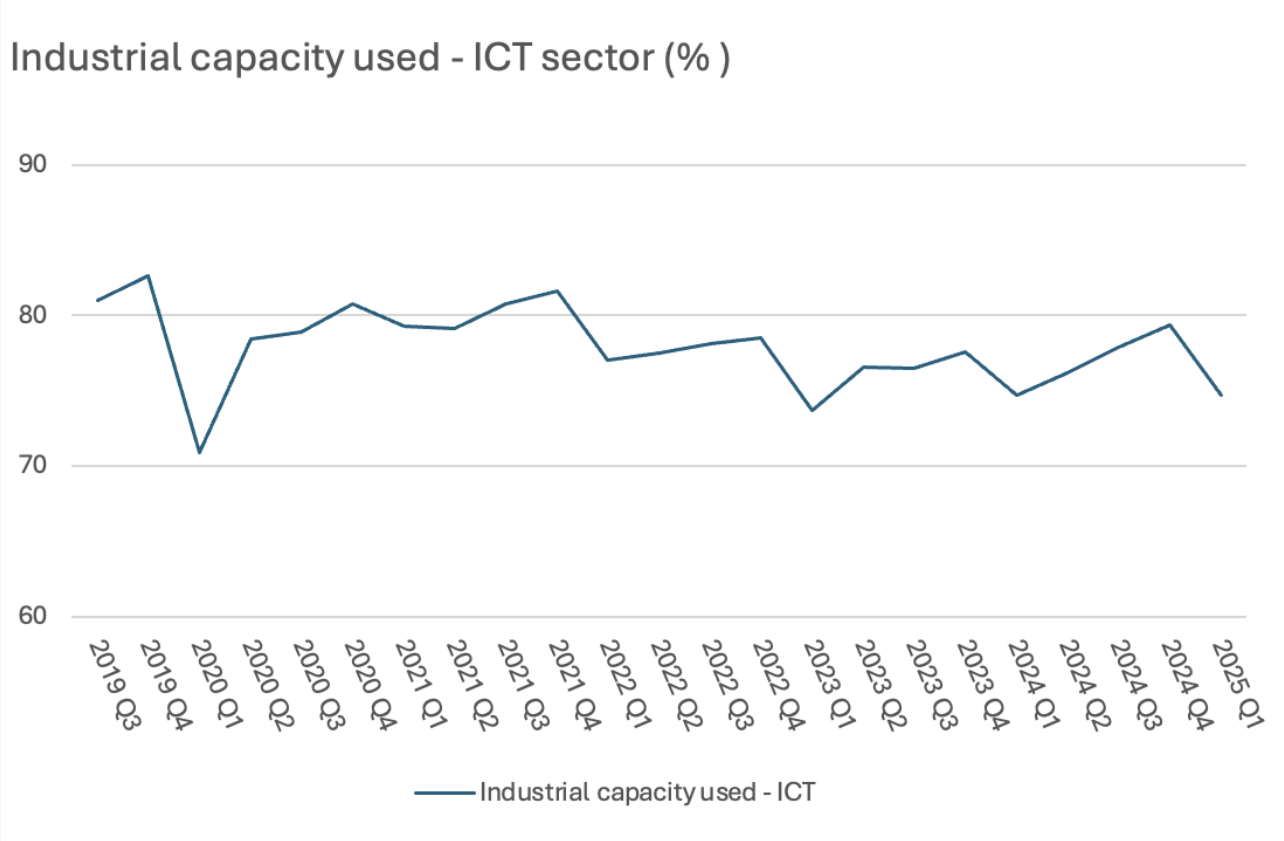

Figure 1: Industrial Capacity Used in the ICT Sector, 2019-2024, data from National Bureau of Statistics of China. Graph made by the author.

2.2 Supporting the expansion of China's corporate sector

DSR support for China's corporate sector in Ethiopia materialised in the context of the digitalisation of sectors that started developing before the advent of digital technologies. One example of this is the transport industry, which is also still in its developing stage and has a lot of untapped potential in terms of creating favourable conditions for future investments in the digital sector. In this sense, Chinese tech companies embed their products and services into infrastructural projects like roads and railways. For example, the Addis Ababa Light Rail Transport project, financed mainly by China's Exim Bank and built by China Railway Group, included the provision of a 75-kilometre 4G LTE network provided by Huawei (Huawei, n.d.; Ethiopia Railway Corporation, n.d.).

Alibaba provides another example that shows how digitalisation helps the expansion of companies. In 2019, its electronic World Trade Platform (eWTP) allowed Alibaba e-commerce network to get a foothold into Ethiopia. The platform describes itself as aiming to "facilitate the development of global trade and the digital economy through the development of global digital economy infrastructure" (eWTP, n.d.). This translates into the construction of so-called 'e-hubs', namely centres where the digitalisation of logistic and customs related practices lower the cost and time of doing business for

African companies. From the Ethiopian perspective, this gives entrepreneurs access to Alibaba's marketplace, while from Alibaba's perspective it represents an expansion of its business.

The eWTP is advertised as a tool for small and medium enterprises to overcome some of the major challenges they face to enter the global market, like export opportunities and high logistic costs. In Ethiopia and Rwanda, the only two African countries with an eWTP, the focus was on the new opportunities created for coffee farmers who can now access the Chinese market (eWTP, 2022; Alibaba Group, 2020). However, in Ethiopia, the Covid-19 pandemic acted as the "perfect storm" to create positive externalities in other sectors (Johnston, 2021, p. 68). Thanks to Ethiopia's role in African logistics, the country was the recipient of massive amounts of equipment necessary to face the pandemic and was tasked with the redistribution in the wider region (Johnston, 2021). The convenience of the eWTP combined with Ethiopia's logistic capacity made the country the favourite hub for China, although the eWTP was first established in Rwanda. Following the stimulus for the logistic sector, companies in Ethiopia started to realise the potential of this alliance and have become ambitious to expand their collaboration (Johnston, 2021).

A more specific case within China-Ethiopia relations is Huawei's collaboration with Ethio Telecom in the realm of digital money. China's experience with digital payments translated into the launch of telebirr, a mobile money service featuring money transfer, payment of utility bills, and access to loan and savings through partnership with other banks and financial institutions. In terms of number of microloans, telebirr has already surpassed traditional banks (Shahid et al., 2023, p. 67), promoting entrepreneurship and therefore creating better conditions for initiatives like the eWTP to be successful. What makes it interesting, however, is that cooperation with Huawei is not limited to the provision of digital products and services, but includes advising on business strategies and growth as well as integration of telebirr into Ethiopian national plans of digital transformation, reportedly leading to reaching 40 million users[1] by the beginning of 2024 (Huawei, 2024, pp. 90-92).

2.3 Internationalisation of the Renminbi

Just as the DSR is expected to support BRI companies establish their presence in Ethiopia, it is functional in helping the overall BRI project pursue the internationalisation of the RMB. There are several reasons for this. From an economic perspective, more countries using the RMB to carry out international transactions translates into China having a bigger market in which it can participate without incurring in transaction costs, meeting the growing ambitions of Chinese banks. From a strategic perspective, it reduces vulnerability to external vicissitudes, like the 2008 financial crisis, which exacerbated the overcapacity problem (Taylor, 2018). Moreover, and more in the context of 'weaponised

[1] Data about the number of people using mobile phones to pay utilities bills suggests that the number of active users might be significantly lower. See Shahid et al., 2024, p. 57.

interdependence' — the relationship between increased interdependence and security in the global economic network (Farrel & Williams, 2019), Western influence over cross-border banking through the Society for World Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) and the Clearing House Interbank Payment System (CHIPS) is perceived as a threat by Chinese institutions (Nölke, 2022). The dominance of the US dollar makes the role of US-based CHIPS essential for international banking, and US and other Western institutions play a role as well within the Belgium-based SWIFT (Nölke, 2022).

In this context, China launched its alternative as early as 2015, named Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS), with the goal that "wherever there is RMB, there is CIPS service" (CIPS, n.d.). However, breaking down the network effect created by SWIFT and CHIPS dominance is very ambitious, and there does not seem to be any specific arrangement between Chinese and Ethiopian banks on this level. Rather, the role of the DSR in Ethiopia as a conduit for the internationalisation of the RMB is most clearly seen in the role of Chinese banks as major financers of DSR projects. Together with a zero-tariff policy and a currency swap agreement to conduct trade directly using the Ethiopian birr and the Chinese yuan (Huld, 2025; The Reporter, 2024), the DSR might incentivise Ethiopian financial institutions to join the service to streamline processes.

One indication that suggests an increasing popularity of CIPS in Africa is South Africa's Standard Bank's choice to join CIPS (CIPS, 2025). The system went live a few months ago (Standard Bank, 2025). The bank has fully operating branches in multiple Sub-Saharan countries, but only a representative office in Ethiopia (Standard Bank, n.d.). In any case, the road toward RMB internationalisation is still long: while the RMB's share in global payment currencies has increased, especially in 2023, it has never reached more than 5% of the total (SWIFT, 2025).

2.4 Creating a China-centred network infrastructure

As mentioned above, the political implications of the DSR cannot be completely overlooked. The connectivity goal of the DSR has also become a matter of security, especially after the 2013 Snowden revelations exposed that the US National Security Agency in cooperation with several organisations were able to tap cables for surveillance purposes (Harper, 2025). However, the overwhelming majority of data is carried by undersea cables, and while China's HMN Tech its gaining market share in submarine cables (Koshino, 2024), this will not specifically affect the DSR development in Ethiopia, which is a landlocked country and cannot host submarine cable landing stations. Ethiopia mainly relies on Djibouti to connect to the global network, where the PEACE Cable supplied by HMN Tech does not land (Submarine Cable Map, n.d.; PEACE Cable, n.d.).

Although Ethiopia-China collaboration cannot develop in the realm of undersea cables, China is playing an essential role in Ethiopia's space technologies. After having designed and developed it, China's DFH Satellite Company launched two Ethiopian observation satellites which have fulfilled their

mission (Space in Africa, 2021; Space in Africa, 2020), and a third satellite is under development in cooperation with Shanghai Engineering Microsatellite (Space in Africa, 2025). The DSR in the realm of space benefits from competition among African countries, each willing to win the African space race.

2.5 Ideological dimension

The BRI is framed within the paradigm of South-South Cooperation. Although the Chinese government managed to lift hundreds of millions of Chinese people out of poverty over the last thirty years (World Bank, n.d.), the country often still addresses less developed BRI countries on an equal level and frames its engagement as mutual support. In the context of Africa, this is complemented by historical legacies. The BRI is the latest phase of a kind of diplomacy that stretches back to the 1960s. In her work on China's rhetoric in its African policy, Julia Strauss (2009, p. 780) analyses four major episodes of China-Africa relation from the 1960s to the 2000s, highlighting a set of consistent tropes. One of the main leitmotivs is the idea that China is assisting "Africa in a spirit of co-equal friendship that emphasise China's own developmental experience, leading to eventual Africa self-reliance rather than perpetual superior-inferior tutelage and dependency" with a clear reference to Western colonisation and post-colonial attempts to foster African development. I argue that the DSR is no exception, and the rhetoric behind a lot of DSR projects resemble the wording pointed out in Strauss's work.

The eWTP is a prime example of this. On its website it is described as an initiative in support of inclusive global trade (eWTP, n.d.), hinting at the fact that the development under the current world trade system has not benefitted everybody in the same way. Vila Seoane (2020) also notes that Jack Ma — the founder of Alibaba who pioneered China's internet and e-commerce landscape — has expressed contempt with the WTO in light of excessive bureaucracy that slows down entrepreneurship and development. In Rwanda and Ethiopia this rhetoric was symbolised by coffee farmers, who do not have the financial means to access foreign markets and deploy the full potential of their companies and resources. The benefits of eWTP are praised in an English video published on the Youtube channel of Alibaba Group, therefore aimed specifically at foreign audiences, given the restrictions that apply to the website in China. In the video, the eWTP is described as a trade platform whereby "the money goes directly to the pockets of the people" (Alibaba Group, 2020). Moreover, an article published on the eWTP platform celebrating the sale of Ethiopian coffee in the Chinese market says that "Alibaba's eWTP initiative landed in Ethiopia, joined hands with the Ethiopian government to boost Ethiopian export of products, launch training programmes to create talents of the digital economy, and help the development of Ethiopia's digital economy" (eWTP, 2022). The expression 'to join hands' (xieshou 携手) is not only a trope in the broader China-Africa current relations[1], but was also present in Jiang Zemin's speech in his 1996 Africa tour, which in turn characterised the then China-Africa relation as the

[1] For example, look at Xi Jinping's keynote speech at the 2024 edition of FOCAC (Xi, 2024).

continuation of the "Mao's generation 'joining hands in building the solid foundation of Sino-African friendship and cooperation with the forefathers of the African liberation movement"(Strauss, 2009, p. 790).

3. Conclusion

This paper showed how, in each driver behind the DSR highlighted by Shen, there is empirical evidence in Ethiopia, albeit to quite different degrees. As discussed, it is difficult to identify the boundaries about what constitutes the DSR and what does not. This is further complicated by the fact that the DSR materialises differently according to the recipient country. In Ethiopia, the DSR is driven by overcapacity of Chinese companies in the field of power supply, but also by tech companies which have been export-oriented from the start. Like other African countries, but differently from more developed countries, the DSR materialisation in Ethiopia does not focus only on digital connectivity, but also, and mostly, on improving the power supply reliability upon which to digitalise the country. Finally, this analysis has not discussed many other types of factors, such as cultural and social ones, which all play a role. In Ethiopia, for example, a future challenge for the success of telebirr will be language inclusion, as there are many linguistic minorities, but only five languages available on the application (Shahid et al. 2023, p. 51).

The two DSR drivers with strong geopolitical implications are the ones less evident in Ethiopia. First, in the case of the internationalisation of the RMB, the only African bank which is a direct participant in CIPS is South Africa's Standard Bank. Other African credit institutions participating in CIPS are branches of Chinese banks. In Ethiopia there is no direct participant at all (CIPS n.d.). Secondly, as a landlocked country, Ethiopia also cannot leverage its access to submarine cable landing stations to attract foreign investments, although over the last six years there has been increasing collaboration with China in the realm of space.

The case of the DSR in Ethiopia therefore goes against narratives which see it as a well-integrated, skilfully executed, geopolitical strategy. While the Chinese government actively creates a favourable environment for tech companies to prosper and undoubtedly understands the strategic nature of technological capability, it is the development of Chinese tech companies and the overall Chinese domestic market that is the main driver behind investments in information and communication technology. Entering foreign markets is the result of increasing domestic competition among Chinese companies. This is even more the case in Ethiopia, where geographical factors and its underdeveloped financial sector make it difficult for China to leverage investments for geopolitical purposes, at least in the near future. Debt-trap narratives have created a powerful image, but while Ethiopian debt to China has mounted over the last decades, these theories have proved to be, in the words of Deborah Bräutigam (2020, p. 1), little more than a "meme". China's engagement in Ethiopia is here to stay, and its digital aspect

will be an increasingly greater source of socioeconomic opportunities for Ethiopia as it will for China.

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Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations
2026 Winter Edition
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PANIC AT THE PANDEMIC!

How the Indian Government Responded to the Migrant Crisis of 2020

Key Words: *Informal Economy,, Labour Migration,, Labour Policy & Social Security, COVID-19 Pandemic*

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Global Political Economy

Abstract

This essay examines the Indian government's response to the vulnerabilities of migrant and informal workers exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on the sustainability of subsequent policy initiatives. Using a structuralist framework, the essay portrays the informal economy as an embedded and essential component of India's broader economic system, rather than a transitional sector. This highlights the systemic exploitation of migrant workers and the dependence of formal enterprises on informal labour. The analysis employs qualitative content analysis of Annual Reports from the Ministry of Labour and Employment (2020–21 and 2023–24) to evaluate how far the government acknowledged its shortcomings during the pandemic and whether corrective measures have been effective. Key initiatives such as the eShram Portal, and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code (2020) are critically assessed in terms of implementation, efficiency, and inclusivity. Findings reveal that while these initiatives signal progress in extending social security to the unorganised workforce, they remain unsustainable. The essay further argues that the government has undervalued the role of civil society, which proved indispensable during the migrant crisis. Ultimately, it concludes that although the government is moving in a positive direction, its current approach lacks long-term sustainability and risks perpetuating systemic inequities within the informal economy.

Cite this article: Kulkarni, R. (2026): Panic at the Pandemic! How the Indian Government Responded to the Migrant Crisis of 2020. *Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations, 2*(1), pp. 124-135.

1. Introduction

The year 2020 is rightfully remembered as the year of the COVID-19 Pandemic, and the tragedy it led to, with millions of deaths worldwide. What 2020 should also be remembered for, at least for India, is the migrant crisis that it caused. In March 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave the people four hours to get their affairs in order and prepare for one of the harshest lockdowns the pandemic saw (Kumar & Choudhury, 2020). The suddenness of this announcement left millions of informal migrant workers stranded across the country, unable to get home. This consequently led to a mass exodus, exposing not only the mistreatment of migrant workers in 2020, but also underlying issues about the informal economy (also known as the 'unorganised sector' by the Indian Government) that had gone long ignored even before the pandemic. In light of these structural exposures, there exists a need to analyse the shortcomings of the Government of India (GoI), whether they have since recognised their errors, and if there have been any improvements since the pandemic. Thus, the research question this essay will tackle is:

How does the Indian Government address its shortcomings during the COVID-19 pandemic, and are the subsequent initiatives sustainable?

Here, shortcomings are understood as the failure to meet the needs of migrant workers, and failure in addressing persistent issues that are common amongst them. Key policy fields addressed are those revolving around social security and welfare, and general treatment of migrant workers in places of employment.

This essay begins by explaining the methodology for this research, which uses a structuralist approach as its theoretical framework, along with qualitative content analysis for document comparison in the analysis. Then, the literature review explains the Indian setting of the informal economy, foregrounding it in the context of academic understandings of the IE, as well as justification for using the structuralist approach. This forms the backbone of the main analysis, where document comparison is conducted of the Annual Reports from the Indian Ministry of Labour and Employment from 2020-21 and 2023-24. Lastly, the essay is concluded by answering the research question, and understanding what this means for the future of informal migrants in India.

2. Methodology

The theoretical framework of this essay is a structuralist approach to the informal economy, which this essay identifies as the one best-suited to the Indian context, which allows for examining the embedded nature of the IE in the overarching economy of India, and how government response takes this into

account. This theoretical framework is paired with a qualitative content analysis of the Annual Reports from the Indian Ministry of Labour and Employment from 2020-2021 (during the pandemic period) versus the one from 2023-2024. This allows for comparison and contrast with the extent of the Indian government's acknowledgement of its shortcomings, and its policy response to said shortcomings, by looking at their immediate reflections after the lockdown, and their reflections since then. As seen later on, this analysis allows one to sense certain themes regarding the acknowledgement of the COVID-19 impact, and its impact on the 'unorganised' sector. However, a limitation with this approach is more to do with the data than with the methodology itself. Due to the scope of this paper, analysis is limited to the broad annual government reports. Future research can build on this with added document comparison conducted on census data and government statements made during and post-pandemic to make the analysis more comprehensive.

3. Literature Review

3.1 The Migrant Crisis of 2020

Internal migrants in India account for nearly 30% of the population. A large portion of this is absorbed into the IE, which is characterised by low wages, job insecurity, and poor working conditions (Suresh et al., 2020). Despite their contribution to the Indian economy, migrant workers face heightened discrimination (Gaikwad & Nellis, 2020). Thus, the COVID-19 lockdown disproportionately impacted these already vulnerable migrant workers, leading to job loss, financial distress and inadequate government responses. The government's inadequate action can be seen in their immediate response after the lockdown announcement, forcing civil society groups to fill in the gaps they created, highlighting shortcomings in their overall approach to addressing the needs of the unorganised sector (Bahadur, 2021).

The initial government response was to create relief camps for migrant workers, which were inadequate due to poor sanitation, and insufficient basic amenities, creating overcrowded shelters that exacerbated the spread of the virus (Jesline et al., 2021). This led to many social work and civil society groups stepping in and providing essential services to these marginalised groups, and advocating for their rights (Suresh et al., 2020). Once the government did allow for the movement of migrants, errors also occurred in their transportation. They hosted special trains that allowed for migrants to travel back home, but access to them was constrained to those who could produce medical fitness certificates, and other logistical barriers to migrant workers who did not have access to such services, particularly those that required internet connectivity (Kumar & Choudhury, 2020). This highlights the unfairness of high standards for precarious migrant workers, while the urban upper-class had better access to return home in the lockdown. This hints at potential misunderstanding from the government of the precarity of

migrant and informal workers.

The government's shortcomings were also seen in poorly designed laws which only worsened when economic activity returned to normal, with Indian states amending labour laws extending working hours without fairly compensating for overtime pay (Kumar & Choudhury, 2020). Policy recommendations have been made in light of these shortcomings, including empowerment of migrants to form associations and gain political representation, creation of policies that reduce the precarity of migrant workers, etc. Due to the nature of migration itself, migrant workers do not have access to collective action, which is where social organisations usually step in and have played a large role in representing their rights, yet, this cannot be a permanent solution. Creation of migrant labour specific policy is also relevant, which means the government needs to play a greater role in protecting the interests of migrant workers, as existing laws do not adequately represent a significant portion of the population.

3.2 Defining the Informal Economy

Understanding the Indian context now gives us a foundation to understand the theoretical context. When it comes to the informal economy, many academics have found difficulty universally agreeing upon a definition, due to multidisciplinary attitude differences towards the IE. Progress was made by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 1993, where they defined it as consisting of units that generated income and employment for the people involved in it. This definition was later revised in 2015 for being inadequate, and non-inclusive, thus defining the IE as encompassing all economic activities that were not covered sufficiently by the formal economy (Dell'Anno, 2021). Despite this definition being the most useful and most inclusive, its broadness makes it difficult to use for statistical measurements, which means that most ILO reports only present estimates when discussing people involved in the IE. Thus, keeping this in mind, we will discuss the three analytical approaches to discussing the IE.

3.3 Theoretical Approaches to the Informal Economy

This literature review examines the legalist, dualist, and structuralist approaches to the informal economy by evaluating their respective merits and limitations in order to determine which framework is best suited for the analysis. Firstly, the legalist approach focuses on the role of the state and state regulations, seeing the IE as a result of excessive regulation forcing individuals to operate outside the formal economy. Hernando de Soto is seen as one of the proponents of this tradition, discussing the importance of the entrepreneurial spirit that causes people to move into the IE. It sees individuals in the IE as driven by a desire to create and operate their own businesses - entrepreneurs - who are hindered by a system that favours elites who are already established (Wilson, 2011). Thus, a logical solution presented to this dilemma is easing the process of formalisation, so these 'entrepreneurs' can reach their

potential. Although it highlights the need to simplify formalisation and bureaucracy, this approach fails to account for processes of exploitation that are important when discussing the migrant crisis, making it less relevant to the Indian context analysed in this essay.

The second tradition is the dualist approach, which views the IE as a separate entity distinct from the formal economy. It sees the IE as a consequence of low economic development, compelling people to seek alternative sources of income (Wilson, 2011). This approach sees the IE as a safety net for migrant workers who are unable to find employment in the formal sector due to lack of required skills, education, etc. Thus, this approach is partially relevant to the analysis of migrant workers in India. However, the strict separation between the formal and informal economies is an oversimplification which is not relevant to India, where the informal economy is embedded in the overarching economy. Thus, this approach has been criticised by neoliberal and neo-Marxist perspectives alike, who recognise the linkages between the two sectors rather than separating the two (Wilson, 2011).

This leads us to the third approach - the structuralist one - which views the IE and the formal economy as intrinsically dependent on each other, with the former subordinated to the latter, as informal labour helps reduce costs and increase competitiveness for formal capitalist firms (Chen, 2012). Thus, it highlights the crucial role of the IE in capitalist development. It focuses on informal wage workers employed in formal enterprises, thus analysing their exploitation through denial of formal labour rights, low wages, and precarity (Wilson, 2011). The recognition of the IE as a systemic feature rather than as a transitional phase helps explain its significance to migrant workers in India, and their essential role to the economy. Moreover, the focus on their exploitation through low wages and fewer rights also explains the vulnerability of migrant workers in India. This makes the structuralist approach the best one of the three to tackle the Indian context, recognising informal and migrant worker exploitation, analysing it as something necessary to formal enterprises. This assumption helps reveal deeper findings in government responses to the 2020 pandemic, and the adequacy of the steps taken since then.

4. Annual Report Comparison

Now that we have a strong literature foundation for the issue at hand, this section will further analyse the shortcomings of the Indian government through a qualitative content analysis of the Annual Reports by the Ministry of Labour and Employment from 2020-21 and 2023-24. The former provides immediate reflections of the government after the impact of COVID-19, and whether they saw any impact on the informal sector (or the unorganised sector). The latter shows if any 'progress' has been made regarding treatment of the unorganised sector, specifically migrant labour, through signs such as change in policy, government initiatives, accountability taken by the government, etc. The key chapter that will be explored in this section is Chapter 8 (Unorganised Worker) from both reports, where the government's

focus is on the unorganised sector, and initiatives related to it.

4.1 Chapter 8: Unorganised Worker

This chapter of both reports begins by defining the unorganised worker:

> *The term unorganised worker means a home-based worker, self-emplyed worker or wage worker in the unorganised sector and includes a worker in the organised sector who is not covered by the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 or Chapters III to VII of the Code .*

This definition is unproblematic, and in line with mainstream definitions of informal workers (Government of India, 2021, p. 78; 2024, p. 104). Through comparison findings this section is divided into three main themes as seen in both reports' chapter 8: (a) Acknowledgement of the Impact of COVID-19, (b) Government Initiatives for the Unorganised Sector, and (c) Government Initiatives for Migrant Workers.

4.1.1 Acknowledgement of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Firstly, the GoI acknowledges that there are 38 crore (380 million) workers in the unorganised sector, representing 81% of the workforce (Government of India, 2021, 2024). Moreover, the 2020-21 report acknowledges that "this number is expected to have gone up due to Covid-19 and lockdown thereon." (Government of India, 2021, p. 78). Thus, they have established a direct link between the impact of COVID-19 on the unorganised workforce, and how it has since exacerbated, leading to enlarging the current number.

Secondly, they also highlight the critical role played by the Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Act, 1996, for the provision of food and financial assistance to 30 lakh (3 million) BOC workers (Government of India, 2021; 2024). As highlighted in the literature review, the GoI faced backlash during the pandemic for their inaction and creation of inadequate relief camps with poor sanitation and amenities (Jesline, Rajkumar and George, 2021). Although the BOCW Act may have been responsible for facilitating these relief camps for BOC workers in the city, who make a significant portion of migrant workers, the GoI is painting a picture that does not account for the quality of their assistance, and instead chooses to point out that it was good they provided assistance in the first place.

Thirdly, the 2020-21 report reflects on the importance of shifting responsibilities, claiming that after learning from the experiences of COVID-19, they advocate for greater involvement from State Governments to provide benefits to construction workers. Thus, they want a decentralised approach which would have greater responsiveness to the needs of migrant workers particularly (Government of India, 2021). The GoI here is still vague about the 'learning' experiences from COVID-19, in terms of who was responsible for the mistreatment of migrant workers. However, there is some progress made in the

immediate aftermath in terms of acknowledging the negative impact on migrant workers.

4.1.2 Government initiatives introduced for the unorganised sector

This section and 4.1.3 will thus highlight specific government responses to the shortcomings revealed during COVID-19, along with understanding how impactful they have been. Firstly, the 2020-21 report introduced the Code on Social Security 2020, which is meant to improve the coverage of social security, including provisions to help unorganised workers register in a national database. They also introduce the Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-dhan (PM-SYM) in the 2020-21 report, with an update in the 2023-24 report. It was launched in 2019 and is meant to provide financial support to unorganised workers post-retirement. The 2023-24 report updated that as of December 31, 2023, over 49.74 lakhs (4.974 million) beneficiaries had been registered to this programme (Government of India, 2021; 2024). It focuses on the number of people registered as a positive outcome, with no mentions of implementation issues, positive outcomes, etc. Lastly, the 2023-24 report deviates from the former by introducing the eShram Portal, which was launched in August 2021, and is meant to be a national database for unorganised workers. It is linked to one's Aadhaar card, which is a unique identification card in India (UIDAI, n.d.). Thus, the portal would have information such as the worker's address, name, occupation, and education. As of December 31, 2023, over 29.27 crore (292.7 million) unorganised workers were registered on eShram (Government of India, 2024). This would mean that according to government figures, nearly 77% of all unorganised workers in India are registered.

This portal would address a key issue for this sector, namely social security and its portability, which the government correctly identified as a key priority in the foundational chapters. It would also provide valuable insights to policymakers on demographics and needs of migrant workers, who can inform the design of targeted policies and interventions (Rajput & Rajan, 2023). However, a structuralist perspective brings its effectiveness into question. These initiatives may attempt to address some challenges the government has identified, but it does not address key issues such as the persistence of the informal sector. A structuralist view explains that this persistence occurs due to the nature of capitalism, which requires informal migrant labour such as construction workers (Chakrabarti & Kundu, 2009). Before the structuralist framework is utilised further, the next section explores government initiatives for migrant workers.

4.1.3 Government initiatives introduced for migrant workers

Since the Code on Social Security 2020 as well as the BOCW Act are both relevant to migrant workers but also unorganised workers more broadly, this section looks more closely at initiatives specific to migrant workers. Although it was not introduced for the first time, the 2020-21 report cites the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979 as a central piece of legislation for protecting the rights and interests of inter-

state migrant workers. It also establishes certain provisions which apply to establishments employing or more workers, such as a journey allowance, medical facilities, and equal pay for equal work (Government of India, 2021). Thus, it puts the burden of implementation on the establishments, i.e. formal enterprises who employ informal labour. A structuralist perspective here would blame the government for further negligence, or deliberately being lax in its implementation, so private formal sectors can continue to exploit migrant workers.

However, an update is made in the 2023-24 report, with the introduction of the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020 (OSH Code) (Government of India, 2024). The OSH Code absorbs the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, aiming to make a more comprehensive version of it, with focus on social security and welfare benefits of migrant workers. Some of the key provisions remain in line with the Act it absorbed, however, significant additions are also made to it. Namely, it includes the provision of a toll-free helpline to assist migrant workers, as well as provision for research on issues related to migrant workers (Government of India, 2024).

4.2 Discussion

Our above findings have revealed significant progress in addressing shortcomings revealed during the pandemic, through government initiatives such as eShram, PM-SYM and the OSH Code. Yet, there is much to say about the positive outcomes they will create, while also examining them critically through a structuralist lens.

Despite the overall ambitiousness of the GoI in its initiatives such as the eShram portal and the OSH Code, it comes down to the fact that they only work if implemented correctly. A major shortcoming revealed in the government's addressing of the migrant crisis, is that they have only partially addressed the issue. Their priority as seen through the reports, was social security of the unorganised sector. Yet, when it comes to understanding why people migrate for work, or employment conditions of migrant workers, the implementation of their solutions is left up to the formal sector - who structuralists have accused of exploitation in the first place. There is some progress however, with the OSH Code's provision for research related to this - which is once again only viable if implemented well.

Moreover, when looking at the sustainability of their solutions regarding social security, there is also criticism there. eShram is an ambitious project, with administration burdens that require ensuring efficient disbursement of funds, verification of eligibility, and an ability to reach workers in remote areas of the country (Mukhtar & Gotmare, 2021). On the topic of efficiency, the creation of multiple programmes targeting the same target population, or different segments of that population, is in itself inefficient (Duggirala & Kumar, 2021). Relying on different approaches and databases would only further increase administrative costs, and so while initiatives like the PM-SYM and eShram may be a proof of the GoI taking accountability for their actions, it is ultimately not a sustainable way of doing it.

If implementation and efficiency concerns are addressed correctly, another issue yet to be addressed is awareness of these among migrant workers. This concern is already becoming a reality, through low enrollment rates and lack of awareness/understanding of the government initiatives by its target population (Duggirala & Kumar, 2021). Moreover, the fragmented approach of these programmes has led to inequitable access and different eligibility criteria, hindering the government's ability to respond more efficiently to national emergencies like COVID-19 (Duggirala & Kumar, 2021). While social security is a major concern through a structuralist lens, the government's approach is not sustainable (Chakrabarti & Kundu, 2009). The 2023-24 report addresses this issue very briefly in Chapter 7 (Labour Welfare), mentioning the need for awareness programmes for their initiatives, but they do not provide any solutions (Government of India 2024).

However, if we look closely at the migrant crisis of 2020, and who came to advocate and support migrant workers when the government fell short - it was civil society. Networks such as the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN) provided vital support through financial relief to stranded migrant workers, and acted as their safety net (Bahadur, 2021). Although a structuralist perspective would advocate for more impactful government intervention instead, one can still recognise the positive role civil society has to play in advocating for migrant workers who are unable to advocate for themselves. Despite the fact that it is not government intervention, a structuralist lens allows us to view civil society's role in facilitating context-based solutions, and allowing for better collective action (Chakrabarti & Kundu, 2009). Even though the pandemic highlighted the key role civil society played in filling gaps created by government inaction, the annual reports have highlighted that one of the experiences they have not learnt from the pandemic, is utilising this resource. Grassroots civil society groups could play an important role in organising the awareness programmes the government advocates for, if the GoI recognises its influence and relevance in helping migrant workers.

Overall, the comparison of these reports show that despite progress in the 2020-21 report, where the government reflected on the migrant crisis and proposed initiatives, the 2023-24 report merely updated these initiatives. However, these measures remain inefficient and are only sustainable if certain criteria are met. Thus, the GoI's next steps must work towards greater efficiency for better effectiveness, as well as stronger implementation plans for their ambitious projects.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has been to answer the question: How does the Indian Government address its shortcomings during the COVID-19 pandemic, and are the subsequent initiatives sustainable? Using the structuralist lens as justified in the literature review allowed for document comparison of the GoI Annual Reports, with which this essay reaches the following conclusions.

The GoI addressed their shortcomings during the COVID-19 pandemic through government initiatives such as the eShram portal, the PM-SYM, and the OSH Code which subsumes the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979. These initiatives mostly target social security, which while being an important concern for the unorganised sector, as well as of relevance to structuralists, does not address root causes of internal migrant precarity. These initiatives indicate progress in the right direction, which prioritises the safety and welfare of informal migrant workers, however, to address the second half of the research question - they are not sustainable. The GoI's fragmented approach through the creation of multiple schemes targeting the same population is inefficient, and would benefit from a more unified approach. Moreover, when it comes to treatment of migrant workers by formal enterprises, the implementation of GoI provisions are left up to the employers. Structuralists argue that these employers create exploitative conditions to their own benefit, and therefore have little incentive to change their practices. Lastly, government shortcomings also revealed a lack of importance given to civil society, who played a key role in advocating for migrant workers during the pandemic, and who still have this role to play if the GoI plays its cards right.

Due to the scope of this paper, the data used for qualitative content analysis was limited to the Annual Reports by the Indian Ministry of Labour and Employment. However, future research can build on this by triangulating policy analysis with government statements made during and post-pandemic, migrant worker testimonies, as well as civil society perspectives to enrich existing analysis. While this essay primarily focuses on the actions and reflections of the Indian Government, incorporating multiple actors' points of view could overcome the bias presented by just using government documents. .

What we have learnt from this overall is that the unorganised/informal workforce is embedded in the Indian economy, they are not a transitional phase, but a permanent feature. Progress is slow, and it might be too soon to say anything, yet despite the inefficiency and unsustainability - the GoI is headed in the right direction. However, it is important to ensure a critical outlook in order to ensure the best outcomes and policies for those who are impacted most deeply by the government's choices.

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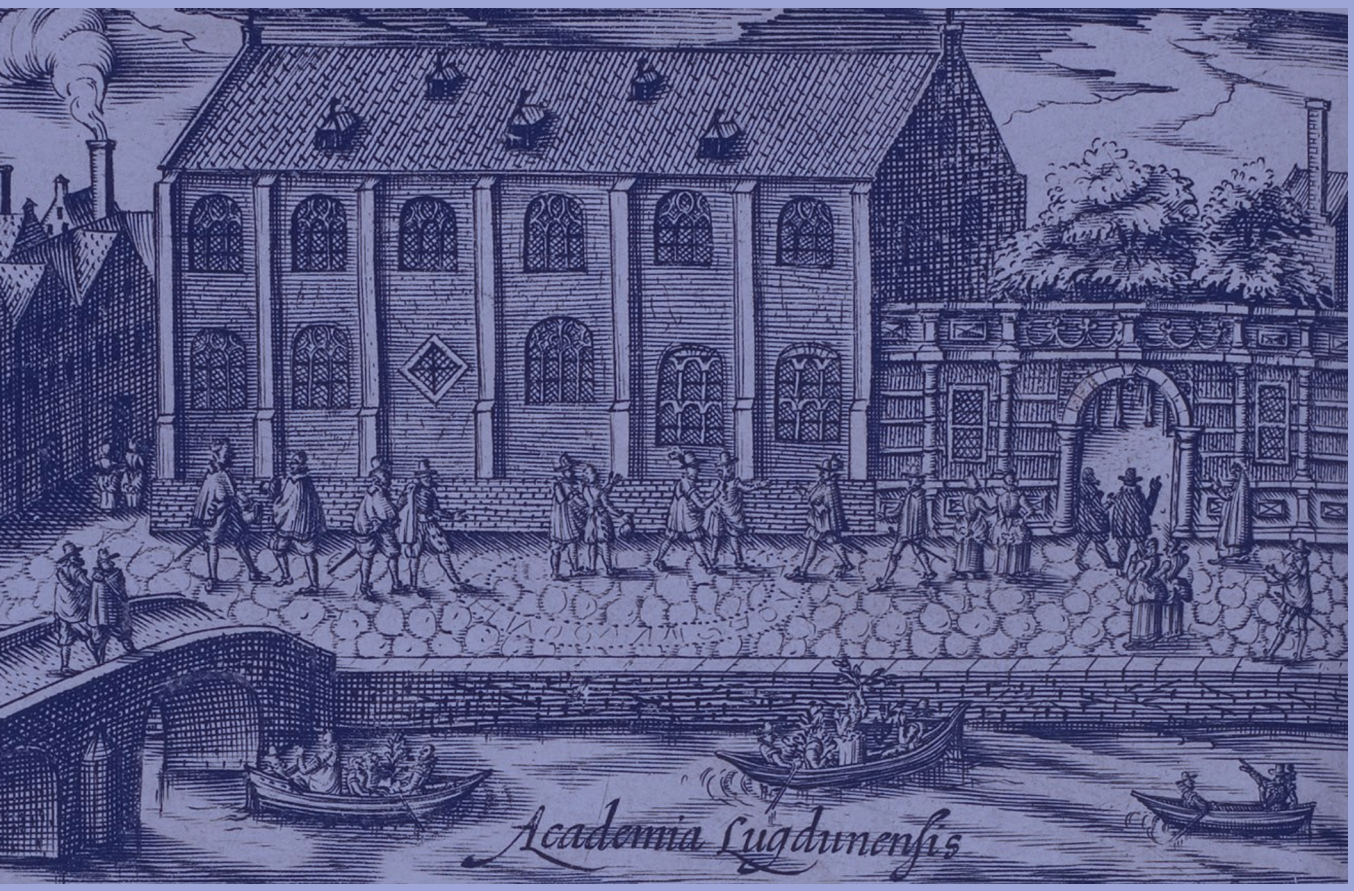

Leiden Graduate Journal of International Relations

Winter 2026

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