

CJIR

61 / 1 / 2026

> INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS PRAGUE

Czech Journal of
International Relations
Mezinárodní vztahy

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Editorial address: Nerudova 3, 118 50 Prague 1.

Contact the editors for subscriptions and orders.
Sales department telephone number: +420 251 108 408, email: eshop@iir.cz

Printed by Petr Dvořák – Tiskárna, Dobříš.
The journal is published three times a year. The annual subscription price is 450 CZK / € 19 or 180 CZK / 8 EUR per issue.
Published by the Institute of International Relations Prague (IIR), www.iir.cz

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Research Articles

Cross-national Salience of Marine Environmental Issues: Evidence from UN General Assembly Debates, 1993–2020

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| JAN KARLAS | Institute of Political Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Czech Republic |
| E-MAIL | jan.karlas@fsv.cuni.cz |
| ORCID | 0000-0001-9473-2875 |
| JAN MAZAČ | Institute of Political Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Czech Republic |
| E-MAIL | jan.mazac@fsv.cuni.cz |
| ORCID | 0000-0002-7313-104X |

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine an important dimension of state preferences regarding the protection of the marine environment, namely the salience of marine environmental problems. To do so, we analyse statements delivered in the annual reviews of ocean affairs and the law of the sea in the General Assembly of the United Nations in the years 1993–2020. In methodological terms, the paper employs topic modelling. The results reveal that the attitudes of states to the importance of specific environmental issues are relatively heterogeneous and the overall salience of these issues also varies significantly. The variation is primarily driven by the geographic characteristics of countries. The ratio of the given country's marine territory to its land area is positively associated with the salience of climate change, pollution, and the aggregated salience of environmental topics in the country. Also, the absolute size of the marine territory is positively associated with the salience of sustainable fisheries.

KEYWORDS

marine environment, marine policy, salience, state preferences, topic modelling, United Nations

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.32422/cjir.1871>

PUBLISHED ONLINE

29 September, 2025

INTRODUCTION

The degradation of the marine environment represents one of the most serious contemporary environmental problems. Its continuation has also stimulated shifts in the research on international cooperation in the area of marine environmental protection. Unlike the earlier scholarship, the recent literature not only deals with individual international institutions, but also addresses ocean environmental governance as a macro-system. This literature has explored the gaps that exist in ocean governance, its fragmentation, and the need for a more substantive transformation of it (BIGAGLI, 2016; MAHON & FANNING, 2019; STEPHENS, 2022). Yet, the existing scholarship has paid little attention to one crucial issue: the preferences of states. This analytical gap is substantial since state preferences significantly condition the functioning of ocean governance and its possible reforms (BLYTHE ET AL., 2021).

In order to diminish this gap, we examine in this paper the preferences of states regarding marine environmental problems. More specifically, the paper focuses on the salience of these problems, that is, on the importance that the individual states attach to these problems (THOMSON, 2011). To conduct an empirical study on cross-national variation, we analyse statements presented by state representatives in the General Assembly of the United Nations (UNGA) as a central body for the discussion and coordination of global ocean issues (CORELL, 2017; HAKAPÄÄ, 2013). Our analysis includes more than 1,000 state speeches delivered in the annual reviews of ocean affairs and the law of the sea in the UNGA in the years 1993–2020 (UNITED NATIONS, 2021). In a descriptive analysis, the paper primarily employs the methodology of topic modelling (BLEI, 2012; GRIMMER & STEWART, 2013). In order to explain the variations in salience, we conduct a regression analysis that explores the effects of several factors that represent the geographic, socio-economic, and political characteristics of countries (BÄTTIG & BERNAUER, 2009; CLULOW, 2018; FOX ET AL., 2011).

The paper offers four major findings. First, the number of actors who regard marine environmental issues as salient has gradually grown and is now quite large. Second, state views on which specific environmental issues they regard as important considerably vary. In particular, there is a notable division between states that consider sustainable fisheries as

the most important priority, and states which focus on other environmental topics, namely biodiversity, climate change, and pollution. Third, the cross-national variation in the salience of specific environmental issues is primarily driven by the geographic characteristics of countries. While the relative size of a country's marine/coastal territory compared to its land area, is positively associated with the salience of climate change, pollution, and the aggregated salience of environmental topics in the country, a similar relationship exists between the absolute size of the coastal/marine territory and the salience of sustainable fisheries. Fourth, a negative relationship exists between the salience of the majority of the analysed environmental topics and state capabilities. These findings have important implications for international cooperation on marine environmental issues, in particular in terms of the ability of countries to agree on the priorities and concrete content of their cooperation.

STATE PREFERENCES AND THE RESEARCH ON OCEAN ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

Initially, research on marine environmental cooperation concentrated on the origin and functioning of this cooperation. Some studies emphasised the role played by the interests and actions of states (DESOMBRE, 2006; VAN DEEVER, 2013). Other studies examined how the designs of international institutions influence their effectiveness (MITCHELL, 1994; SKJÆRSETH ET AL., 2006). A part of the earlier literature explored the relationship between domestic politics and the creation and development of cooperation (ÁSGEIRSDÓTTIR, 2007; DESOMBRE, 2000; SKJÆRSETH, 2000).

In a more recent period, the research on marine environmental cooperation broadened its orientation and began to more extensively analyse ocean environmental governance as a macro-system. This new literature has examined several important issues. One group of works deals with the potential limitations in the substantive focus of ocean environmental governance (BIGAGLI, 2016; CAMPBELL ET AL., 2016; HOUGHTON, 2014; MA & ZHOU, 2021; RAYFUSE & WARNER, 2008). These works point out that important regulatory or implementation gaps exist in inter-state cooperation. Simultaneously, they propose concrete changes in the authority or agenda of the contemporary marine environmental institutions. Another part of the literature explores the fragmented character of ocean environmental governance, which exists

in both a sectoral and a geographical sense (AULD ET AL., 2023; BARKIN & DESOMBRE, 2013; BLANCHARD, 2017; CLARK, 2020; MAHON & FANNING, 2019; MONDRÉ & KUHN, 2022). Most scholars highlight the need for establishing a division of labour among the numerous institutions and assuring their mutual coordination. Finally, some studies highlight that the existing governance structures are inadequate to halt the rapid deterioration of the environment (BRODIE ET AL., 2020; PYČ, 2023; STEPHENS, 2022). They argue that a profound, even paradigmatic, change in the nature of ocean governance is necessary.

In spite of this significant development, the literature on ocean environmental governance is characterised by one important limitation: the absence of a thorough analysis of state preferences. Many of the existing works completely neglect these preferences. Other works do not explore state preferences directly, but instead proceed from assumptions, most typically treating states as rational egoists in line with Hardin's classic analysis presented in his tragedy of commons (FRIEDHEIM, 1999; RAYFUSE & WARNER, 2008).

This treatment of state preferences is not satisfactory. Given that the individual countries have very different geographic, socio-economic, and political characteristics, they are likely to attribute different levels of importance to marine environmental problems, or to the specific categories of these problems. This fact has important political and analytical consequences. Above all, state preferences determine the extent to which possible changes in ocean governance can obtain the necessary political support. The ability of states to agree on the content of these reforms depends to a great extent on a convergence in their preferences. Furthermore, specific variations in state preferences influence the characteristics of the issue-linkages and package deals accompanying the international cooperation. In brief, without exploring state preferences directly, contemporary research cannot provide a complete analysis of the current state of ocean environmental governance and its possible reforms (BLYTHE ET AL., 2021).

SALIENCE OF MARINE ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

This paper analyses the salience of marine environmental issues for individual states. In political science research, salience is often defined in terms of the importance that actors attribute to different policy issues (THOMSON, 2011; WARNTJEN, 2012). This understanding of salience recognises that

individual actors typically regard some policy issues as more important than others. Defined in this way, salience captures the intensity of an actor's interest in different issues and, together with concrete (substantive) positions on specific policy issues, constitutes one of the two dimensions of state preferences regarding international policy coordination (THOMSON, 2011). At the collective level, the salience that individual actors attach to policy issues results in an issue salience convergence/divergence (GUNDERSSON, 2024).

In political science and international relations, understandings of state preferences vary. According to rationalist approaches, preferences are based on cost-benefits calculations (LAKE & POWELL, 2009). They primarily reflect the substantive and fixed interests of actors (e.g. their interest in security or economic welfare). The effects of these interests on preferences can be further modified by the other basic properties of actors (e.g. their power capabilities), and partially also by the strategic characteristics of the external environment (e.g. the distribution of resources). Preferences are essentially exogenous to the interactions that occur among actors. According to constructivism, preferences often result not only from the cost-benefit logic, but also from the normative appropriateness of possible outcomes (JOHNSTON, 2001; WENDT, 1992). As for the basic interests, constructivism does not view these interests as fixed. In addition, constructivist approaches emphasise that preferences are endogenous to the interactions of actors. That is to say, the process of mutual socialisation can also influence preferences.

In this paper, we primarily proceed from the rationalist treatment of preferences. Consequently, we assume that states, when participating in ocean governance, primarily seek to satisfy their individual interests. These interests are rather broad and may involve economic and political benefits, as well as benefits stemming from environmental protection. The accrued benefits do not always need to be material. Furthermore, we assume that the geographic, socio-economic, and political characteristics of countries mediate the relationship between their basic interests and preferences. In this way, these characteristics play a crucial role in shaping the resulting preferences. At the same time, we do not exclude the possibility that state preferences can also change in response to actors' interactions. However, this possibility lies outside of the scope of our analysis.

As for salience, a different understanding of the concept can be found in existing research in comparative politics and international relations. From one perspective, salience is primarily an attribute of individual issues and reflects their relative importance within a given society (BRAUN, HUTTER & KERSCHER, 2016; WARNTJEN, 2012, P. 169). Alternatively, it may result from the normative importance of issues, or from their prominence in social discourse. In such cases, salience aligns with deeper norms and values recognised in the given society. By contrast, in this paper, we examine salience as an aspect of actors' preferences. In this understanding, salience refers to the intensity of the actor's interest in a particular issue (regardless of its specific preferences on the given issue) (TATHAM, 2012; WARNTJEN, 2012).

DATA AND METHODS

To study the salience of environmental problems, we analyse statements made by state representatives during the annual reviews of the implementation of the UNCLOS and other developments relating to oceans affairs and the law of the sea that take place in the UNGA (UNITED NATIONS, 2021). Our exploration is delimited by the years 1993 and 2020. 1993 is the first year for which the minutes of the annual reviews are available. 2020 was the last year for which these minutes were available at the moment when our research started. To distinguish the long-term views of states from their most recent attitudes, we further divide the explored time range into two periods: 1) the longer period between 1993 and 2009, and 2) the most recent period, namely the period from 2010 to 2020.

To analyse the statements in the annual debates, we employ text analysis as an established methodology for studying policy salience. More concretely, our analysis primarily relies on topic modelling. This methodology makes it possible to identify the latent features of a text without knowing its properties in advance (BENITES-LAZARO, GIATTI & GIAROLLA, 2018; BLEI, 2012; GRIMMER & STEWART, 2013; ISOAHO, MOILANEN & TOIKKA, 2019). In this paper, we use the Latent Dirichlet Allocation technique (LDA), often referred to as the most used and well-established tool in text analysis. Our application is based on a seeded variant of the LDA, as we partly pre-determine several relevant environmental topics to be estimated by the LDA. This reflects that the marine environment is just one of the topics addressed in UNGA debates, as they also deal with other important topics (such as the

functioning of global marine institutions, resolution of marine territorial disputes, or maritime safety and security). To map the structure of state preferences, we supplement our topic modelling analysis with k-means clustering. K-means clustering represents one of the most frequently used approaches in unsupervised machine learning (WAGGONER, 2020). It identifies a number of clusters of observations by minimising within-cluster variance and maximising between-cluster variance.

Our methodological choices correspond to our above outlined theoretical assumptions. Alternative perspectives that view actors' preferences as endogenous to their mutual interaction, or that conceptualise salience as a social or discursive property, would lead to different methodological choices. From such perspectives, a discursive analysis involving deeper textual analysis would be appropriate. By contrast, our essentially individualist approach aligns well with quantitative text analysis.

One potential concern is that the word frequency may not accurately reflect the true levels of salience of the different issues for the actors, but may rather represent instrumentally or pragmatically motivated rhetoric. In response to this concern, we argue that our analysis of the content of the annual reviews reveals that the actors' attitudes are relatively consistent and substantive. We take this as an indication that the frequency of references to each issue does, in fact, reflect the salience of various thematic issues for the actors involved.

The UNGA reviews, as a specific institutional platform, are a suitable data source for our research purposes for several reasons. First of all, the UNGA serves as the central body for the coordination and discussion of ocean environmental affairs (CORELL, 2017; HAKAPÄÄ, 2013; HARRISON, 2017; OUDE ELFERINK, 2004; SINGH, 2018). Its annual review of ocean affairs not only deals with the implementation of a concrete treaty (i.e. the UNCLOS), but has a considerably wider scope. It addresses all major ocean-related issues and the overall functioning of marine environmental institutions. Thus, although the UNCLOS and its implementing agreements cover some environmental problems more extensively than others, this has not reduced the scope of the reviews in practice. Furthermore, all states can participate in these reviews, as all UN member states are allowed to engage in them actively, regardless of whether they are parties to the UNCLOS. Lastly, the

reviews have already been taking place for three decades, which makes it possible to conduct a more long-term analysis.

Moreover, the UNGA reviews can be considered a very appropriate data source in comparison to the possible alternatives. The meetings of the UN Open-Ended Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea (ICP) concentrate on single and specific topics. The meetings of state parties of the UNCLOS are primarily concerned with procedural issues associated directly with the UNCLOS. Finally, the discussions that take place in sector-specific institutions (the Convention on Biological Diversity, the International Maritime Organisation, the Food and Agricultural Organisation, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, etc.) deal only with the topics that belong to the realm of the respective institution. Hence, none of these alternative institutions represent a case that would be more suitable for a comprehensive examination of the importance that states attribute to marine environmental issues than the UNGA reviews.

Our LDA analysis consists of two basic steps. First, we code all the words that were mentioned in the UNGA discussions between 1993 and 2020, and whose frequency meets a certain minimal level, regarding their connection to possible environmental issues. This analysis allows us to identify the following four environmental topics that were frequently and systematically discussed in the annual debates: sustainable fisheries, pollution, the loss of biodiversity, and climate change. Although it would be useful to differentiate a slightly higher number of environmental topics (or, for instance, to differentiate sea-based and land-based pollution as separate topics), our content analysis does not allow us to clearly identify additional topics based on a sufficient number of frequently used key terms. In any case, the four identified topics correspond to the major categories of marine environmental problems identified in the contemporary literature (BALGOS, CICIN-SAIN & VANDERZWAAG, 2015; MAHON & FANNING, 2009).

Second, we apply a seeded LDA. The inputs of this analysis are the transcripts of the UNGA annual reviews, the selected number of searched topics, the four predefined environmental topics, and the most relevant key terms associated with the predefined environmental topics and found in the previous step (see Table A1 in the Appendix). It needs to be mentioned

that, in addition to the states, 15 state groupings actively participated in the UNGA reviews during the years 1993–2020. While most of these groupings (usually the official UN regional groups) made only a very limited number of statements, four of them belonged to the most active participants, namely the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the European Union (EU), the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS). At the same time, some of the states that are members of these four groupings participate in discussions only occasionally and focus on specific topics that have national importance for them. Taking this into account, we include all of the 15 state groupings in our analysis as additional cases alongside the states. Since our initial explorations indicated that the inclusion of the names of states and state groupings could influence the content of the estimated topics, we exclude them from the text corpus (TOLOCHKO ET AL., 2024).

The subsequent modelling process estimates the pre-determined environmental topics alongside a number of residual topics that capture other major issues discussed in the annual reviews. Essentially, it calculates the probability of an association between the individual words in the debates and an estimated topic. The resulting model indicates the extent to which specific words are associated with each topic, and the probability that a given actor is linked to a particular topic. In this way, the model provides a concrete and quantified measure of topic salience for each actor.

To examine how the salience of specific environmental issues varies across actors, we apply a *k*-means clustering. In general terms, this method is used to identify clusters that include observations that are quite similar to each other (BOBBITT, 2020; WAGGONER, 2020). Simultaneously, observations from different clusters are dissimilar. We use the probability values associated with the four estimated environmental topics as the input data for clustering the actors. Following the general rules of *k*-means clustering, we first determine the number of searched clusters for each analysed period. To do this, we use the `fviz_nbclust()` function from the *factoextra* R package and the `clusGap()` function from the *cluster* package. The application of these functions determines an optimal number of clusters for each period.

Subsequently, we apply *k*-means clustering to assign each actor to one of the clusters. More specifically, we employ the `kmeans()` function

from base R. This allows us to identify the major groups of actors based on their varying levels of interest in specific marine environmental problems. Each cluster comprises actors who are relatively similar in how salient they perceive the estimated environmental topics to be.

EXPLANATORY FACTORS

To explain cross-national variation in the salience of marine environmental issues, this paper examines several explanatory variables related to the basic geographic, socio-economic, and political characteristics of states. In our explanatory framework, one geographic factor is the absolute size of a country's marine or coastal territory. The existing literature suggests that the size of this territory influences the extent of the marine environmental challenges a country faces (FOUQUERAY & PAPIRAKIS, 2019; FOX ET AL., 2011; GALLO, VICTOR & LEVIN, 2017). Consequently, the salience attributed to the protection of the seas may increase with the size of the country's marine/coastal area. Alternatively, state attitudes in this regard may depend on the relative size of their marine or coastal territory compared to their land area. From this perspective, marine environmental problems are most salient for states whose territory is largely composed of areas directly exposed to such problems (SCHNEIDER, LEIFELD & MALANG, 2013).

Another factor that can explain the attitudes of states to sea protection is the level of socio-economic development. The existing scholarship emphasises several reasons for which the varying levels of development lead to divergent state preferences related to environmental protection. Above all, some studies argue that developed countries have a greater interest in environmental quality due to the higher level of their economic and social modernisation (CLULOW, 2018; FOUQUERAY & PAPIRAKIS, 2019). As the so-called Kuznets environmental curve suggests, once economic development reaches a certain level, the interest in environmental protection is likely to increase. Furthermore, developed states have more extensive economic resources and can, therefore, devote more resources to environmental protection (ROBERTS & PARKS, 2006). Alternatively, developed and developing countries may prioritise different environmental issues (HALE, HELD, & YOUNG, 2013).

Political factors are represented in our explanatory framework by two explanatory variables: democracy and participation in multilateral

cooperation. Existing studies outline several causal mechanisms that lead to a positive effect of democracy on governmental efforts to protect the environment. Democratic political systems create favourable conditions for environmental protection due to the electoral accountability of policy-makers and the general interest of the median voter in the provision of public goods, including environmental quality (BÄTTIG & BERNAUER, 2009; CONGLETON, 1992; LI & REUVENY, 2006; PAYNE, 1995). In addition, the respect for civil and political rights that is characteristic of democracies enables environmental organisations to grow and develop their activities (LI & REUVENY, 2006; PAYNE, 1995; SCHULTZ & CROCKETT, 1990). As for involvement in multilateral cooperation, states that participate in a high number of multilateral environmental agreements are likely to share a belief that international cooperation is an appropriate way to deal with environmental problems. It can be assumed that such states highly internalised the key norms of international environmental cooperation, in particular the norm of sustainable development and the norm of environmental multilateralism (PETTINGER, 2013; RAUSTIALA & VICTOR, 1998). Consequently, they are also more likely to assign greater importance to international efforts aimed at managing marine environmental problems.

To test the effects of these explanatory variables, we create a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models for each of the two examined periods. The salience values of individual actors for the four seeded topics, along with their aggregated sums, serve as the dependent variables in these models. Regarding the operationalisation of the independent variables, the main analysis measures the size of the marine/coastal territory using data on the size of national exclusive economic zones (EEZ) (SEA AROUND US, 2022). We calculate the ratio of marine/coastal territory to land territory as the ratio of the country's EEZ to its land area (WORLD BANK, 2022). The paper measures the level of development using GDP per capita (IBID.). To measure the level of democracy, the main analysis employs the political rights data of Freedom House (2022). Finally, the number of multilateral environmental agreements in which a country participates indicates the degree of its involvement in multilateralism (MITCHELL, 2020).

In the cases in which data is available on an annual basis, the values of the independent variables are based on their average values from all the years of the analysed period. To determine the values of the independent

variables for the state groupings, we calculate the averages of the values of all states that are members of the respective grouping. The values of some independent variables are highly positively skewed. We thus use their logs in the analysis. We also add the number of words contained in all the actors' statements in the UNGA reviews as a control variable in our regression models.

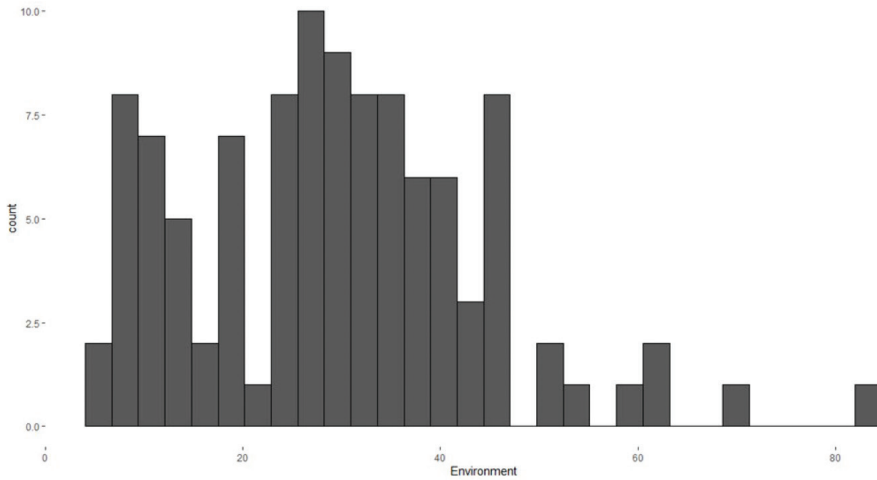
RESULTS

Salience of environmental topics, 1993–2009

Our analysis confirms that, for the 1993–2009 period, all of the four estimated seeded topics align well with the expected environmental topics, namely Biodiversity, Climate, Fisheries, and Pollution (see Table A2 in the Appendix). All, or almost all, of the key terms defined to signify these topics are among the 500 words most probably connected with the estimated topics. However, regarding Biodiversity the seeded topic does not concern only biodiversity, but mixes biodiversity with security issues. The words most probably associated with the six residual topics suggest the existence of the following residual topics for the 1993–2009 period: UNCLOS Institutions, Disputes and Security, Resources, and three other topics that have an unclear focus.

Altogether, 93 states and 13 state groupings made at least one statement in the annual debates during the 1993–2009 period. To construct a variable that captures the salience of marine environmental problems as such, we aggregate the probabilities of all four environmental topics. The sums of these probabilities (the variable Environment) vary significantly across the actors (see Graph 1). More specifically, three different groups of actors can be differentiated. For 7% of all the actors, environmental issues have a high importance, as their aggregated probabilities exceed 50%. Besides Canada, this group consists of small island states. A large group of actors (41%) assign medium salience to environmental issues, with aggregated probabilities between 30% and 50%. The number of actors characterised by low aggregated salience (below 30%) is similarly large, comprising 51% of the total.

GRAPH 1: AGGREGATED PROBABILITIES OF ENVIRONMENTAL TOPICS (1993–2009)



According to our calculations, producing four clusters is an optimal solution for analysing the respective period. Consequently, we search for four clusters of actors, using the probability values related to the four estimated environmental topics. Two of the four identified clusters, namely Clusters 1 and 4, resemble each other in two respects (Table 1 and Graph 2). First, for actors in these two clusters, more than one environmental topic is salient. In Cluster 1, Pollution is the most prominent topic (15%), but Biodiversity (8%), Climate (7%), and Fisheries (7%) are also referred to relatively frequently. In Cluster 4, the salience of Biodiversity (12%), Fisheries (9%), and Pollution (7%) is relatively balanced.

Second, each of these two clusters includes approximately one quarter of the actors. Cluster 1 comprises mostly developing countries, with a significant share of small developing island countries (the AOSIS, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, the CARICOM, Fiji, Guayana, the Maldives, Papua and New Guinea, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago). Among the larger developing countries, Nigeria and Bangladesh are associated with this cluster. It also includes two developed coastal or island states, namely Monaco and Malta. Cluster 4 is more heterogeneous since it includes considerable numbers of both developed (e.g. the EU, Japan, Norway) and developing countries (e.g. Brazil, Mexico, India, Indonesia, South Africa). At the same time, the countries associated with this cluster are, on average, relatively large countries.

Cluster 2 is characterised by a moderate salience of Climate (10%) and Pollution (10%). However, Fisheries (28%) is by far the most salient topic in this cluster. In terms of its membership, Cluster 2 is relatively small, comprising only 10% of the actors. It includes five OECD countries (Australia, Canada, Iceland, New Zealand, and the USA) and six actors representing small island states (the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Palau, the PIF, the PSIDS, and the Solomon Islands).

None of the four environmental topics attains a high or even moderate salience among the members of Cluster 3, which includes approximately one third of all the actors. It is notable that many EU member states are assigned to this cluster (Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Finland, Italy, Slovakia, Sweden, the UK). At first glance, this appears striking since EU member states are otherwise relatively highly supportive of environmental protection. Moreover, the EU as such is associated with Cluster 4. However, this result is entirely reasonable, given that EU member states individually made only a very limited number of statements during the annual reviews. Typically, they emphasised specific topics of particular national importance, while relying on the EU to provide a systematic presentation of views on marine environmental issues. Without the EU member states, the Western European and Other States Group (WEOG) and the Eastern European Group (EEG), Cluster 4 is still sizable, involving 23 actors (that is, 22% of the actors that actively participated in the annual reviews). These actors are primarily large or middle-sized developing countries (e.g. Argentina, China, Chile, Colombia, Iran, Malaysia, Philippines, Turkey).

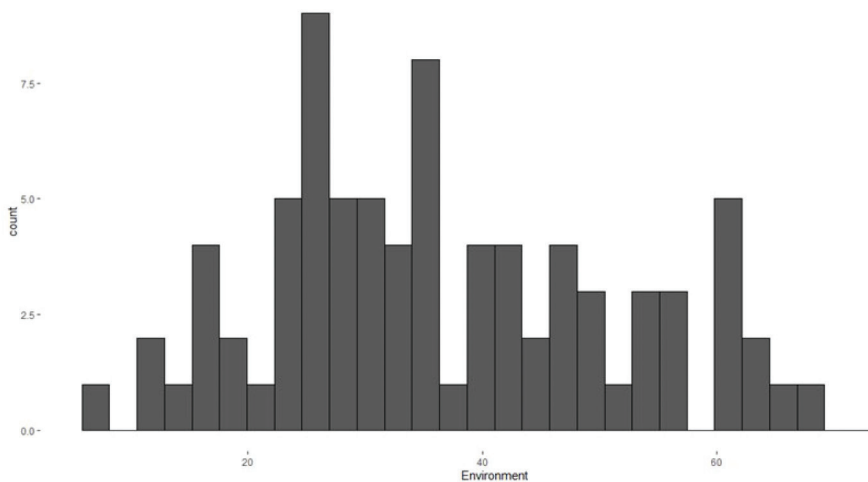
Therefore, the k-means clustering essentially suggests the presence of three specific groups of countries. The first group, a large one, includes countries that view all four, or at least three, of the environmental topics as salient. Simultaneously, the specific environmental topics achieve relatively comparable levels of salience within this group. The second group, a small one, comprises countries that consider Fisheries to be by far the most important issue, followed by Climate and Pollution. Finally, some countries do not frequently refer to any of the four environmental topics. The correlations between the probability values of the four environmental topics do not indicate the presence of a central line of contestation. Each topic shows only a moderate correlation with some of the others (see Table 2).

Salience of environmental topics, 2010–2020

In the topic model covering the second period of our investigation, i.e., the years 2010–2020, all four of the estimated seeded topics correspond to the intended environmental issues (Table A3). All, or almost all, of the terms that we selected for the purpose of estimation are among the 500 words most probably associated with the four estimated topics. The 2010–2020 model also contains the following six residual topics: Disputes and Security I. and II., BBNJ treaty, Resources, and two topics with an unclear focus (the topic of the BBNJ treaty covers specific topics related to the negotiations on the treaty, which do not always have an environmental basis).

In the 2010–2020 period, 70 states and 12 groupings participated in the annual debates. At the aggregated level, we detect a significant cross-national variation in the salience of environmental topics (Graph 3). For 19% of the actors, environmental topics represent more than 50% of the total content across all the covered topics. These actors are mostly small island developing states. For a sizable group (44%) of the actors, the share of environmental topics ranges between 30% and 50%. Finally, for 36% of all the actors the share of environmental topics is below 30%. The number of actors with high or medium levels of aggregated salience for environmental topics thus considerably increased compared to the 1993–2009 period.

GRAPH 3: AGGREGATED PROBABILITIES OF ENVIRONMENTAL TOPICS (2010–2020)



Our analysis reveals that five important clusters of actors can be recognised. A certain similarity exists between three of them, namely Clusters 2, 3, and 5 (Table 3 and Graph 4). Above all, each of these clusters is associated with a high salience of one to three environmental topics, specifically Biodiversity, Climate, and/or Pollution. In particular, Cluster 3 is characterised by a high salience of all these three topics. Countries associated with Cluster 2 often mention Biodiversity and Pollution in their statements, and, to a lesser extent, Climate. Cluster 5 is connected with a high salience of Biodiversity, followed by Climate and Pollution. These three clusters also resemble each other in terms of their size (Cluster 2 – 27% of the actors, Cluster 3 – 17%, Cluster 5 – 18%). Cluster 3 is predominantly composed of small island states. The memberships of Clusters 2 and 5 are rather heterogeneous.

Cluster 4 includes actors who view two environmental topics as salient, namely Biodiversity and Fisheries. However, they consider Fisheries significantly more salient (23%) than Biodiversity (9%). This cluster is the smallest one and comprises two OECD countries (New Zealand and the USA) and several other, mostly Latin American countries (Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Peru, Venezuela). Cluster 1 involves 22 actors that do not frequently mention environmental issues in their statements, with the partial exception of Biodiversity. Although the composition of this cluster is heterogeneous, it is notable that it involves several large developing countries (China, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Africa, Thailand, Vietnam).

Therefore, the k-means clustering for the 2010–2020 period yields results that are largely consistent with those from the previous period. Even the 2010–2020 period is characterised by the presence of three main groups of countries: 1) countries that generally pay large attention to environmental topics, 2) countries that prioritise Fisheries, and 3) countries that do not frequently refer to environmental topics. However, the cluster analysis suggests that the divide between the first two groups of countries became more substantial during the 2010–2020 period. This finding is further supported by the correlations of the probabilities of the specific environmental topics. While the probability values for Biodiversity, Climate, and Pollution show moderate correlations with each other in the post-2009 period, none of them is correlated with Fisheries (Table 2). These observations indicate the presence of a central, underlying division in the preferences of the actors.

involvement is negatively associated with the salience of marine environmental issues, but this relationship is not, or is only weakly, significant, depending on the specific dependent variable.

TABLE 4: EXPLANATORY RESULTS, 1993–2009

| | Biodiversity | Climate | Fisheries | Pollution | Environment |
|-----------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Marine territory | 0.064 (0.157) | -0.123 (0.084) | 0.575** (0.197) | -0.177 (0.147) | 0.349 (0.367) |
| Marine/land territory | 0.126 (0.353) | 0.944*** (0.190) | 0.532 (0.443) | 1.299*** (0.329) | 2.890*** (0.824) |
| Development | 0.669 (0.568) | -0.233 (0.305) | 0.283 (0.713) | -1.052* (0.530) | -0.305 (1.326) |
| Democracy | -0.873* (0.401) | 0.308 (0.215) | 0.925' (0.502) | 0.172 (0.373) | 0.512 (0.935) |
| Multilateralism | -0.006 (0.018) | -0.009 (0.009) | -0.049* (0.023) | -0.018 (0.017) | -0.085' (0.043) |
| Statements | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000*** (0.000) | -0.000 (0.000) | 0.000** (0.000) |
| Constant | 5.261 (3.674) | 6.869*** (1.976) | -3.209 (4.606) | 16.830*** (3.424) | 25.589** (8.568) |
| Observations | 106 | 106 | 106 | 106 | 106 |
| R2 | 0.010 | 0.286 | 0.310 | 0.220 | 0.275 |

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01; ****p<0.001.

The results for the second period of our investigation confirm the explanatory power of the ratio of the marine area to the land area (Table 5). This variable is positively and statistically significantly associated with Biodiversity, Climate, Pollution, and the aggregated probabilities of environmental topics. The absolute size of the marine area maintains its positive association with Fisheries. Neither the level of development nor the political variables systematically influence(s) the references to marine environmental issues in the UNGA reviews, with the exceptions of a negative effect of democracy on Pollution, a positive effect of multilateralism on Pollution, and a negative effect of multilateralism on Climate.

Therefore, the explanatory analysis of both analysed periods yields one very important finding: the division between the countries that prioritise Fisheries and the countries that pay more balanced attention to specific environmental issues, which was identified in the descriptive part of this paper, is not random. It has a deeper reasoning related to the geographic characteristics of countries. Consequently, these characteristics

also determine the distribution of the aggregated salience of marine environmental issues across countries.

TABLE 5: EXPLANATORY RESULTS, 2010–2020

| | Biodiversity | Climate | Fisheries | Pollution | Environment |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| Marine territory | -0.255 (0.180) | 0.026 (0.288) | 0.480 ^o (0.255) | -0.145 (0.135) | 0.076 (0.518) |
| Marine/land territory | 0.714* (0.305) | 2.401*** (0.489) | -0.596 (0.433) | 0.625** (0.299) | 3.202*** (0.880) |
| Development | 0.063 (0.577) | -0.316 (0.924) | 0.301 (0.818) | -0.159 (0.443) | -0.093 (1.662) |
| Democracy | -0.266 (0.377) | 0.255 (0.604) | 0.602 (0.535) | -0.475 ^o (0.283) | 0.112 (1.086) |
| Multilateralism | -0.018 (0.020) | -0.068* (0.033) | -0.017 (0.029) | 0.034* (0.015) | -0.069 (0.059) |
| Statements | -0.000 (0.000) | -0.000 (0.000) | 0.000** (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) |
| Constant | 16.880*** (4.468) | 12.940 ^o (7.156) | -3.740 (6.335) | 9.004** (3.359) | 35.278** (12.868) |
| Observations | 82 | 82 | 82 | 82 | 82 |
| R2 | 0.115 | 0.410 | 0.163 | 0.043 | 0.232 |

Note: ^op<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

As the regression models mainly demonstrate the effects of the two geographic factors, we conduct an additional regression analysis that examines possible interaction effects between these factors and the other independent variables. These interaction effects are indeed statistically significant in several cases in the 1993–2009 period (see Tables A4-5 in the Appendix, which report all the models in which both the main factor and its interaction effect were significant). There is a positive and statistically significant interaction between Marine territory and Development, and also between Marine territory and Democracy, in the case of Fisheries. This means that a larger marine territory increases the salience of Fisheries particularly in the cases of countries that are economically developed or democratic. Likewise, Development and Multilateralism increase the influence of the ratio of the marine territory and the land territory on Climate (the interaction term containing Multilateralism is not statistically significant at the 0.1 level, but comes very near to it).

For the 2010–2020 period, our analysis does not identify the presence of such interaction effects. An exception is the interaction effect between Marine territory and Development in the case of Fisheries, which is

nearly statistically significant at the 0.1 level. Finally, the additional analysis also shows that in the case of the ratio of the marine area to the land area, the interaction effects are negative in two instances. The influence of Marine/land territory on Climate in the 1993–2009 period is weaker in the cases of democratic countries. Likewise, the influence of the same variable has a weaker effect on Climate in the cases of countries that highly participate in multilateral environmental treaties in the 2010–2020 period.

Overall, the findings of the regression analysis show that the attitudes of countries to the importance of marine environmental issues are primarily determined by geographic factors. The level of economic development and the political variables played a secondary role in affecting these attitudes in the first period of our investigation, when they interacted with the effects of geographic factors regarding some of the salience dimensions. These interaction effects are essentially absent in the more recent period. This suggests that as the marine environment becomes more threatened, socio-economic and political differences among countries have an even weaker effect than they had earlier.

ROBUSTNESS CHECKS

To check the robustness of our findings, we make three additional analytical steps. First, we re-estimate the OLS models using alternative measures for the independent variables. For the size of the marine/coastal territory, we replace the size of the EEZ with a logged length of the national coastline (CIA, 2022). We also replace the EEZ/land area ratio with a ratio of the length of the coastline to the land area. We include alternative measures for democracy and participation in multilateralism: civil liberties values (FREEDOM HOUSE, 2022) and the number of international organizations in which the given country participates (PEVEHOUSE ET AL., 2020), respectively. We also replace GDP per capita with GDP to control for a possible effect of national economic capabilities (WORLD BANK, 2022).

This alternative operationalization essentially confirms the results of the previous OLS models and the importance of the geographical factors, with two partial exceptions (the results of this additional analysis are available upon request). First, the EEZ/land area ratio (or the coastline/land ratio) is not statistically significantly associated with some of the

dependent variables in several models when multilateralism is measured with the number of IOs, and when GDP replaces GDP per capita. However, both the IOs variable and GDP negatively correlate with the EEZ (coastline)/land ratio, which may explain the weakening of this predictor when the two above-mentioned variables are included in a model. Moreover, even in such models the effect of the EEZ/land area ratio is nearly statistically significant at the 0.1 level. Second, the effect of the size of the EEZ (or the length of the coastline) on Fisheries is not statistically significant in some of the control models for the 2010–2020 period. Nevertheless, even in these models this effect is nearly statistically significant at the 0.1 level.

In the second analytical step, we replicate all the OLS models from the main analysis, excluding the now specific categories of actors. More concretely, we subsequently exclude landlocked countries, countries participating in the four most active state groupings, and all state groupings from the statistical models. These steps do not substantially alter the findings of the main analysis (the results are available upon request).

Third, to control for the influence of our predefinition of the four seeded topics on the analysis of a latent policy space, we estimate a completely unsupervised topic model, i.e. a model that does not include any seeded topics. From the 10 topics identified by an unsupervised model for the 1993–2009 period, two are closely connected with environmental issues and, more concretely, with fisheries. The unsupervised model does not include topics that would correspond to climate change and pollution, and it only refers to biodiversity in connection with a topic related to the negotiations on the BBNJ treaty. However, this does not invalidate the findings of the main analysis, as the only conclusion drawn from the unsupervised model is that biodiversity, climate change, and pollution were relatively less salient in the pre-2010 UNGA discussions than fisheries and other central non-environmental topics. For the 2010–2020 period, the unsupervised model contains three topics related to the environment: Pollution, Biodiversity, and Climate; Fisheries; and Fisheries and Climate. Therefore, even the unsupervised model identifies pollution, fisheries, biodiversity, and climate change as the four main environmental topics in the post-2009 period. Yet, it is also noteworthy that one of the topics (Fisheries and Climate) puts into question the existence of a division between actors

attributing high salience to fisheries and actors emphasising climate change, which was suggested by the main analysis.

Additional OLS models that use the probability scores from the unsupervised models confirm that a significant relationship exists between sustainable fisheries and the geographical variables in the 1993–2009 period (these results are available upon request). Likewise, the analysis of the 2010–2020 period proves a positive and statistically significant relationship between the EEZ/land area ratio and the salience of climate issues (the topic Fisheries and Climate), and a positive and significant relationship between the absolute size of the marine territory and sustainable fisheries. Yet, contrary to the findings from the main analysis, the model based on the topic Pollution, Biodiversity, and Climate is not statistically significantly associated with the EEZ/land area ratio. However, this does not invalidate the finding of the main analysis as the seeded topic model reflects the content of the respective environmental topics more accurately than an unsupervised model.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis of the annual debates in the UNGA shows that a large majority of the states and coalitions devote a considerable part of their statements to ocean sustainability. During the 1993–2009 period, nearly half of the actors had an aggregated probability of 30% or higher of referring to environmental topics. This figure increased to almost two-thirds of the actors during the 2010–2020 period. This demonstrates that the number of actors who regard marine environmental issues as salient is large. This is a circumstance that is likely to have a positive effect on the potential reforms of the marine environmental cooperation.

However, our results also identify three circumstances that may hinder this cooperation. First, almost one third of the actors address environmental topics only marginally in their speeches in the annual debates. As decision-making in international institutions usually requires a consensus for the adoption of important reforms, this number is significant. The presence of such a high number of countries that pay low attention to environmental problems can constitute an important obstacle for the deepening of the marine environmental cooperation.

Second, countries have partially heterogeneous views on the prioritisation of specific environmental issues. A significant division exists between a small group of actors for whom Fisheries are by far the most salient topic and the majority actors who emphasise the other three environmental topics. Moreover, our results also show that this division is not random and stems from the different geographic circumstances of countries. The absolute size of the coastal/marine territory increases the salience of sustainable fisheries. Countries that have a large marine/coastal territory, compared to their land areas, regard climate change and pollution as particularly crucial challenges for the marine environment. Furthermore, an additional variation exists among the actors that focus on topics other than fisheries, namely the variation in how frequently they refer to Biodiversity, Climate, and Pollution.

Third, according to one of the above presented observations, the actors for whom the environmental problems are highly salient are mostly small island states. This suggests that there can potentially be a negative relationship between the interest in marine environmental protection and the size of power capabilities. Such a state of affairs would not bode well for further progress on marine environmental cooperation since a state's ability to advance particular issues depends at least in part on its capabilities. To explore this relationship more in-depth, we examine bivariate correlations between national GDP and salience (see Table 6). These correlations confirm that the salience of environmental topics other than Fisheries, as well as the aggregated salience of environmental issues, is indeed negatively associated with power capabilities. On the contrary, the salience of fisheries is weakly positively related to national capabilities.

These findings have two implications for negotiations on marine environmental cooperation. First, given that specific groups of countries tend to put an emphasis on different environmental topics, these negotiations may benefit from issue-linkages. Simultaneous discussions on further cooperation regarding multiple marine environmental problems may increase the number of countries that view an enhanced mutual cooperation as desirable. Second, although numerous countries consider biodiversity, climate, and pollution salient, these topics are, at the same time, often regarded as such by countries with low power capabilities. Given these limited capabilities, it is particularly crucial for these countries to

form effective coalitions. In addition, they must be prepared to engage in efforts to persuade more powerful states that progress on these environmental issues is necessary.

TABLE 6: CORRELATIONS OF NATIONAL GDP AND SALIENCE

| | 1993–2009 | 2010–2020 |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|
| Biodiversity | 0.078 | -0.329** |
| Climate | -0.489*** | -0.683*** |
| Fisheries | -0.120 | 0.170 |
| Pollution | -0.491*** | -0.161 |
| Environment | -0.340*** | -0.498*** |

Note: The table displays bivariate correlations between national GDP and the seeded environmental topics. The values are Pearson correlation coefficients; [†]p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

CONCLUSION

This paper made a contribution to the contemporary literature on ocean environmental governance by showing the importance of a direct analysis of state preferences. Countries attribute a varying importance to the protection of the oceans, as well as to the specific problems that damage the marine environment. To analyse the current functioning of ocean governance, as well as the feasibility of its reforms, it is necessary to examine the salience of concrete marine environmental problems for states.

Regarding future research, we suggest four particular directions. First, future studies should extend our knowledge about state preferences regarding marine environmental cooperation by focusing on institutional venues other than the UNGA. These alternative venues are, compared to the UNGA, less suitable for a comprehensive analysis such as the one conducted in this paper. Yet, they certainly represent appropriate empirical cases for studying the attitudes of countries to the salience of selected sectoral issues, as well as their substantive views on cooperation in concrete sectors of ocean protection.

Second, a deeper inquiry into the factors that influence state preferences is needed. A statistical analysis included in this paper identified a division that exists between countries with large EEZ/land area ratios and countries with large EEZs. Although a statistical analysis is suitable

for identifying and verifying such a relationship, it cannot provide a deeper explanation of it. Therefore, the causes of the cross-national variation in the prioritisation of marine environmental problems require further analysis. Ideally, such an analysis should include case studies focusing on a limited number of countries, which may provide a more direct means for studying the processes in which countries formulate their preferences regarding sea protection.

Third, the presented analysis demonstrates the relevancy of political science research and text analysis for the study of marine environmental cooperation. Up to now, several disciplines have extensively studied ocean issues, but the number of studies anchored primarily in political science remains relatively low (MONDRÉ & KUHN, 2022). Consequently, only limited research exists on the politics of ocean environmental governance (BLYTHE ET AL., 2021). By outlining important divergences that exist in the views of states, the paper shows the importance of the political side of ocean governance. Simultaneously, it illustrates the potential that text analysis and topic modelling as still rather novel approaches in the study of ocean issues have for a further exploration of these issues.

Fourth, although we assume that the salience of marine environmental issues is mainly determined by important national characteristics, we acknowledge that state positions can also be shaped by their mutual interactions. Even the UNGA annual debates analysed in this paper may lead to partial shifts in state positions. In addition, states also coordinate their positions on marine issues and cooperation using formats based on their regional proximity or other shared affinities. This mutual coordination can also partly influence state positions. Possible external influences on state preferences constitute another important area for research.

APPENDIX

The Appendix will be available online at CJIR website (cjr.iir.cz).

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NOTE

We would like to thank Michal Kolmaš and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. This work was supported by the Cooperatio Program (research area: Political Science).

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jan Karlas is an Associate Professor in International Relations and the Head of the Department of International Relations at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Prague. In his research, he concentrates on international institutions. He is an author of numerous academic publications, including articles in prominent international journals (e.g. *Cooperation and Conflict*, *Contemporary Security Policy*, *Environmental Politics*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, *West European Politics*).

Jan Mazač graduated in International Relations at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague, where he is currently continuing his doctoral studies as an internal doctoral student. His professional interests include energy security and energy and climate policy in the EU. He is also an associate researcher at the Institute of International Relations in Prague.

International Organisations Climbing on a Ladder of Public Participation – a Case Study of the World Bank Instruments

JAN DOSTÁL

Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

E-MAIL

jan.dostal@fsv.cuni.cz

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8738-581X>

ABSTRACT

Despite that a lot of attention has been paid to the legitimacy of IOs and the “transnational turn of global governance,” an in-depth analysis of access to information and public consultations as fairly new elements of public participation has not been conducted before. This article brings evidence from the World Bank (WB), its instruments of public involvement, and their practical usage in the last 10 years. The results show that in each of the “rungs” on the “ladder” of public participation, the WB designed a tool that is particularly used when a local aspect is involved. Therefore, I argue that the need for implementation of the IO policies on the ground might also drive their legitimization practices and the public participation in these instruments. Furthermore, the paper suggests that an exchange of resources between IOs and non-state actors can work both ways and their cooperation can thus be mutually beneficial.

KEYWORDS

public consultation, international organisations, World Bank, legitimacy, non-state actors, implementation

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.32422/cjir.1850>

PUBLISHED ONLINE

16 October, 2025

INTRODUCTION

The “transnational turn in global governance” (JÖNSSON & TALLBERG, 2010) has not escaped the attention of scholars, who claim that states and IOs increasingly involve various stakeholder representatives, including both non-profit actors, like NGOs, political parties and associations, labour unions or otherwise noted civil society organisations (CSOs), and for-profit companies like transnational corporations (IBID). The existing research offers numerous in-depth single case studies of the relationships between individual IOs, especially the EU and the UN, including some of its specialised agencies, like the WTO and NGOs/CSOs, and private or other external actors (CHARNOVITZ, 1996, 2000; GORNITZKA & SVERDRUP, 2013; SAURUGGER, 2010; STEFFEK ET AL., 2007; WEISS & GORDENKER, 1996). Besides that, several comparative analyses have examined the mutual connection of these players in a particular issue area, such as environmental politics (GREEN, 2010; RAUSTIALA, 1997), economic governance (O'BRIEN, 2000), human rights (HAWKINS, 2008) and development (REIMANN, 2006). A few authors have also included cases from different areas in their comparative studies of this topic: for example, Steffek et al. (2007), who focus on civil society organisations, Scholte (2011) and Alter (2014). The broader involvement of non-state actors (NSAs) in global politics has also been analysed by various authors – for example, by Willetts (2010). Moreover, the rise of the internet and social media also changed the world of relations between organisations and the public. Many IOs are also now “going digital,” setting up social media accounts, and thus bringing the process of opening up to the public to a new level. This is sometimes referred to as the rise of digital diplomacy, broadly defined as the use of social media for diplomatic purposes (BJOLA & HOLMES, 2015; BJOLA & ZAIOTTI, 2020).

The existing literature has also extensively covered the issue of the legitimacy of IOs (E.G., DELLMUTH ET AL., 2019; HURD, 2019; TALLBERG & ZÜRN, 2019), including the legitimisation strategies developed by the organisations in their attempts to overcome the “democratic deficit” of IOs. One of the ways to legitimise, i.e., to implement strategies with the intention to bridge the distance between the individual and the international level, could be the increased involvement of non-state actors. In the last 10 years, several IOs (like the World Bank, which is analysed here) have adopted or significantly updated their public information policies, accountability mechanisms, and procedures for civil society interaction in line with this expectation.

Furthermore, new digital platforms (such as social media) have emerged and IOs started to use them to communicate with the public as well. The recent literature has interpreted these attempts by IOs to strengthen their legitimacy mainly by arguing that the new strategies lead to a better correspondence with democratic norms (ECKER-EHRHARDT, 2018; GRIGORESCU, 2007, 2015; HEUPEL & ZÜRN, 2017; TALLBERG ET AL., 2014; TALLBERG & ZÜRN, 2019).

Nevertheless, the participation of the public in IOs is still quite limited. The literature explains that mainly by referring to the great distance between citizens and IOs, and the high information cost connected with that (LAKE, 2007; VAUBEL, 2006). However, so far there has not been an in-depth case study at the level of individual organisations to see when the public participation mechanisms are used, despite the high information costs connected with them. We know in general terms from large-N studies (ESPECIALLY TALLBERG ET AL., 2013, 2014) what factors can influence the access of transnational actors (TNAs) to IOs, but what has been missing is attempts to connect the formal access rules with the actual demand for involvement from the side of the public and the practical usage of the public participation instruments. The main interest of this paper is therefore to answer the following questions: What can overcome these information costs? Or more generally, under which circumstances do the public and IOs work with each other most closely?

The main aim of this paper is to build an explanation for when the distance between citizens and IOs could be the lowest. The paper suggests, on the basis of the empirical evidence from the case of the World Bank, that IOs' openness to the public, especially in cases of global economic institutions, could be seen as dependent on the regional or local dimension of their activities. The more involved an IO is, the higher the need for inclusion of the public in the activities of the institution, greater transparency, more access to information, more frequent consultations, etc. should be. The information demand from the public is also expected to be highest when it comes to requesting data for individual countries, or specific projects run by the organisation. Based on this assumption, it is expected that developmental institutions designed to carry out specific projects in individual countries need to engage non-state actors at various levels. The results show that in each of the three rungs of the public participation ladder relevant to the WB – information, consultation and placation – it

designed a participation instrument that is particularly used when a local aspect is involved. Furthermore, it suggests that insufficiencies in terms of resources of the NSAs might be found especially in expert data statistics. In the case of IOs, such insufficiencies are found particularly in data about non-compliance and the impact of individual projects and policies. The implication of this analysis for the existing literature can be that the exchange of resources between IOs and non-state actors can work both ways and their cooperation can thus be mutually beneficial. Last but not least, I argue that the need for implementation of policies on the ground might also drive legitimization practices of international organisations and also the participation of these actors in the instruments.

Firstly, the paper will define the concept of public participation, introduce the theoretical background for the analysis, discuss the expectations connected to it, and suggest a general framework for the analysis. Secondly, a case study of the instruments of public participation of the World Bank, its rules and their development in the last 10 years (2012–2022 respectively) applying this framework will be done. The choice of the start year is based on the creation of the participation instruments by the World Bank (online public consultations) in that year, and the timespan of 10 years allows for providing an overview of the development of these instruments in the context of an article. The World Bank and its processes designed to provide access to information to the public, the public consultations, the accountability mechanism and other instruments will be examined in an attempt to test the main expectation of the paper on a case where most of the practices are expected to be implemented. Finally, the conclusion will summarise the limitations of the study and prospects for future research.

THE STATE OF THE ART, THE CONCEPTUALISATION

The participation of non-state actors in the decision-making processes of IOs is still very much limited. It is employed only in some areas or in regard to some issues, as not many IOs provide the same amount of space for them to influence their policies. In this regard, the work of Tallberg et al. (2013, 2014) stands out mainly in terms of its generality, being the first large-N study to explain the variance in transnational actors' (TNAs) access to IOs. The work by Grigorescu (2007, 2015) can also be mentioned in this regard, though it is more concerned with the transparency of IOs. This

paper builds on this literature, but instead of limiting non-state actors to only CSOs, NGOs, or private companies, it intends to widen the net to include the entire general public, whereas here, the term “public” denotes any actor not affiliated with the government (and is thus used interchangeably with the term “non-state actors”). It aims to show the existence of various levels of public participation in IOs.

Bonzon (2014) has offered a definition of the term public participation, which is also used here: “all institutionalized forms of interaction in the decision-making process between organs of a public institution and external actors who are formally independent of any government” (p. 23). In this article, the concept of public participation will be connected to the Policy Studies literature and its focus on local and national actors, mainly Sherry Arnstein’s “Ladder of Participation” from 1969, in which she develops eight levels (“rungs”) of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969). It should be noted, however, that neither this nor any other later typology is universally accepted (Webler, 1999). The proposed framework, the ladder of public participation, which is based on Arnstein’s (1969) ladder, will be applied to the case of IOs with the help of schemes developed by Bonzon (2014), Börzel and Risse (2005), Grigorescu (2007), Steffek et al. (2007) and Tallberg et al. (2014). It consists of four main parts (levels of public participation): from the lowest to the highest, information, consultation, placation and partnership (lower and higher rungs are considered not relevant here). I consider public participation as conceptually different from transparency (as demonstrated in the case of IOs, which was mainly studied by Grigorescu [2007]), as transparency is one of the tools for achieving participation. Transparency is necessary for public participation, but IOs can use other instruments to involve the public on different levels, as shown in the next section.

Firstly, as for informing, it may be argued that for maintaining relations with actors outside the organisation, the first key instrument is to internally agree on what information may (not) be given; a codification of access to information thus serves as the first component. The next rung on the ladder, consultation, involves granting public representatives access to the IOs’ bodies. As a form of ensuring the public’s participation in decision-making processes, NGOs and other actors are granted access to meetings of the IO’s main bodies. Furthermore, this article presents the

practice of public consultations in IOs as the other part of this rung in the participation ladder. This concept denotes meetings of the staff with various stakeholders, where any new policy development process, including proposed new policies or changes to regulations, are discussed.

As for the placation level of the ladder, the IOs may develop accountability mechanisms which include the possibility for individuals to file a complaint against a specific project run or financed by the given IO on the grounds of it impacting their livelihood. That is expected to occur especially in agencies active in the area of development or with a need for a wider implementation of their policies. Another option is providing means for directly proposing a specific policy that the IO should adopt, like through a citizen initiative, but in the case of IOs, this is probably only applicable to the EU. If the public should be really involved as equal partners, voting rights should be given to the representatives of non-state actors. That could be demonstrated only on one example, however: the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The components of the framework are summarised in Table 1 below:

TABLE 1: FORMAL PUBLIC PARTICIPATION LEVELS

| Levels | Components | Indicators/Characteristics |
|---------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Information | Procedural Codification | Rules, provisions for access to information + a specific policy's existence and completeness |
| Consultation | Access | Access of non-state actors to the meetings of IO's bodies |
| | Consultations | Codification |
| Placation | Accountability Mechanisms | The possibility for individuals to file a complaint against a specific project run or financed by the IO |
| | Citizens' Initiative | The possibility for the public to propose a policy |
| Partnership | Voting Rights | The public is granted a right to vote in the IO's main body |

Prepared by the author.

However, the practical usage of these instruments can vary, as demonstrated mainly by Vikberg (2024) – IOs provide different ranges of information to the public via different channels (websites, social media, etc.), access to IOs' meetings can also vary in terms of the accreditations granted to observers, consultations can be more frequent or less and initiatives or voting rights can be exercised differently. As for the first point, the range of the infrastructure designed for informing the public relative to the area in which the IO is active (i.e., its Member States) also has to

be taken into account when analysing this rung of the ladder. Besides official mechanisms for acquiring information, we also have to look at on-line platforms, like websites and social media, where especially the reach of activities is important for gaining an understanding of how the public and IOs interact in the current world, as their general usage by IOs tends to be more unidirectional than dialogical (ECKER-EHRHARDT, 2020). For consultations, non-state actors may access IOs' bodies to various degrees. Similarly, public consultations can be more or less frequently employed. The number of complaints against a specific project by an IO or initiatives to change a policy can also vary over time. Voting patterns of government and non-government actors can also differ, signifying the practical utilisation of the formal setting. Therefore, a different measure can be developed for the scope of using the individual levels. The components and their indicators are summarised in Table 2 below:

TABLE 2: PRACTICAL PUBLIC PARTICIPATION LEVELS

| Levels | Components | Indicators/Characteristics |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Information | Infrastructure | Offices, departments for communication with the public |
| | Range | Information on web pages and reach on social media |
| Consultation | Using Access | Accreditation of non-state actors to access IO's bodies |
| | Frequency of Consultations | Usage of the consultation procedure |
| Placation | Using Accountability Mechanisms | Number of complaint |
| | Citizens' Initiative | Number of proposed policies |
| Partnership | Voting Rights | Differences in voting in the IO's main body |

Prepared by the author.

The main focus is therefore directed at the empirical applicability of this framework and especially on answering the question of what makes the IOs actually employ these different public participation instruments and what influences their usage. To explain how high the organisations "climb on the ladder," i.e., how much they involve the public in their activities, the paper employs the theoretical background to IO legitimacy, especially the behavioural practices of legitimation. Looking at the behaviour of IOs has been a way of identifying institutional legitimation practices (GRIGORESCU, 2015; RITTBERGER & SCHROEDER, 2016; TALLBERG ET AL., 2013). It could thus indicate a possible motive for the adoption of policies, leading to higher public involvement, and suggest the reasoning behind differences amongst IOs in this regard.

Higher public participation can address the IO's need for legitimacy, and influence its relevance in the world, and its ability to propose new rules and norms and secure compliance with them (TALLBERG & ZÜRN, 2019). The legitimation practices have been identified as a potential determinant of individual legitimacy beliefs, together with individual- and organisational-level factors such as general social trust or organisational performance (BEXELL ET AL., 2022; DELLMUTH ET AL., 2022; DELLMUTH & TALLBERG, 2023; SCHMIDTKE ET AL., 2024).

The conventional theory has been mainly explaining the usage of the legitimation practices by IOs as their attempts to apply democratic norms, claiming that legitimation using democratic narratives in global governance has been on the rise (DINGWERTH ET AL., 2020), but others argue that the spread of democratic norm shapes IOs' decision making, as it also involves policies involving public access to information and NGO participation (GRIGORESCU, 2015). This assumption is also connected to the idea of stakeholder democracy in global governance, as the related arguments claim that opportunities for the involvement of non-state actors in political decision-making enhance the democratic legitimacy of its procedures (E.G., AGNÉ ET AL., 2015; BÄCKSTRAND, 2006; DINGWERTH, 2007; SCHOLTE, 2004; STEFFEK ET AL., 2007).

However, high information costs are related to the involvement of the public in the activities of IOs due to several factors, namely physical distance, differences in languages, centralisation of policies and the lack of parliamentary control (LAKE, 2007; VAUBEL, 2006). This paper builds on an explanation for when these costs might be overcome, claiming that public participation policies in particular and legitimation practices in general are introduced mostly when IOs exercise their authority over individuals. This should be the case especially when they develop projects and programmes in the member countries and also oversee their implementation, as is the case for the IOs active in development (HEUPEL ET AL., 2018). On the basis of the empirical evidence presented here, we could claim that for the World Bank in particular and the IOs focussing on development in general, the physical distance from the citizens should be the lowest, as they often realise projects in individual countries, in cases of consultations the documents and communication from them are often translated and their policies are generally more decentralised. Except for the case of the EU and its Early Warning Mechanism (EWM), parliaments' control over IOs is very much limited.

Based on the case of the WB, this paper identifies areas related to public participation in which the organisations (IOs and NSAs) require the help of each other the most. Therefore, the cooperation between these actors might be mutually beneficial, especially when they lack their own resources. As the resource-exchange theory suggests, the IOs rely on knowing whether state and societal actors comply with regime rules but often do not have capacities for that (LEVINE & WHITE, 1961). For IOs, monitoring is usually both resource-demanding and inefficient in detecting violations on the ground (DAI, 2002; TALLBERG ET AL., 2018). The analysis suggests where the insufficiencies in terms of the resources of the IOs and NSAs might be found. The specific assumptions regarding the case of the World Bank in connection to the individual ‘rungs’ of the public participation ‘ladder’ could thus be formulated as follows:

1. In terms of information, the WB should provide the most information on the activities that are the closest to NSAs, mainly the specific projects. On the other hand, a high demand from NSAs for expert statistical data collected by the WB is expected, especially in cases of local projects and individual country statistics.
2. Regarding consultation, NSAs should mostly participate in the meetings and consultations of the WB that are related, again, to a specific project, an individual country, or a policy of the WB with a large local impact.
3. As for placation, the existence of the complaints system should itself signify that the WB requires the assistance of NSAs when it comes to detecting non-compliance and collecting on-the-ground information. The more used it would be, the more relevant the aspect of implementation of local activities should be to public participation.

Therefore, in general it is assumed that the more the IO is guided by its need for implementation of activities on a local level, the more active it is on the ground, and the higher the likelihood of its openness towards non-state actors in the various instruments the IO could use.

CASE SELECTION

The application of the proposed scheme will now be demonstrated on the case of the World Bank. This IO has been chosen for the study because its membership is nearly universal, and it has the status of a specialised agency of the UN focussing on global economic relations. The WB as a multilateral economic institution has also been selected because it is a party to the Washington consensus, and a building block of the Bretton Woods system, and was one of the primary targets of the critique after the global economic crisis in 2008 (E.G. BEST, 2014; GÜVEN, 2018; MOSHIRIAN, 2011). The World Bank has also been a longstanding “lightning rod for criticisms of the international economic system” (NELSON, 2006, P. 706). Therefore, there should be a theoretical need to implement legitimation practices in the case of the World Bank following the contestation, especially after the global economic crises – based on the behavioral practices theory, institutions are supposed to implement more transparent policies. As is shown, the Bank has approved some documents regulating access to information, provides accreditation to non-state actors at its meetings, and has also established an online database of public consultations. That means that the majority of the rungs in the public participation ladder can be observed in this case, which includes the tracing of the usage of these instruments over the last 10 years (namely 2012–2022). The main aim connected with the chosen case selection is to show that even inside one IO, the usage of the various instruments differs and that this variance could be explained by the range of its local activities and the implementation of its policies on the ground. The WB is expected to represent the most likely case for the main explanation put forward here based on existing case studies (BONZON, 2014; SCHOLTE, 2019; WOODS, 2001) and thus should test the empirical applicability of the proposed framework of the public participation ladder. Of course, the WB is one of many existing IOs and thus the generalisibility of the results to the entire universe of IOs is very much limited. The aim of this article is to introduce a framework of public participation, demonstrated on the case of the WB, that can be used to analyse IOs in general and their instruments of public participation in particular. The data was collected from the World Bank Annual Reports, Access to Information Annual Reports, other WB official documents, policies, the participant lists of the AM/SM meetings (obtained through an official inquiry), the Consultation Hub (the archive of public consultations) and other sources available at

the WB website. The references to all the used World Bank documents and websites are provided in the annex. These publicly available sources were used because of data availability, but more importantly, as the interest of this paper is in openness to the public, they should provide an accurate picture of the issue.

THE WORLD BANK

Information

The World Bank (WB) will serve as the primary focus of this study. For an examination of the instruments of the ladder outlined above, mainly the formal setting, i.e., the basic policies and regulations of the Bank, will be analysed (see Annex I for the references to all the used World Bank documents and websites). The key documents in this regard are the Access to Information (AI) Policy, the AI Directives/Procedures of the Bank, the Open Access Policy, the AI Policies of other organisations in the World Bank Group, its interpretations and even the policies of specific offices, like the Integrity Vice President (INT) or the Independent Evaluation Group (IEG). In this area the WB may probably be considered as one of the IOs that set very clear limitations on releasing information; its documents could be counted as being among the few that explicitly set out their goals (BONZON, 2014). The AI Policy of the Bank, rolled out in 2010, in short, expresses that anything the Bank has in its possession is available to the public unless it falls under a list of defined exceptions (WORLD BANK GROUP, 2024). These 10 explicitly formulated categories of not declassified material contain, for example, personal information and security and safety information (AI Policy, Article 2).

This attitude brought a change from the original Information Disclosure Policy, from information being by default private to it being public, and from a “positive” to a “negative” definition (i.e., instead of listing the documents which are public, the AI Policy lists the private ones). Despite the label, this could be seen as a positive approach in terms of releasing information. Two amendments were made to the AI Policy in 2013 and 2015; the former pertains to the declassification of verbatim transcripts and statements of the Executive Directors and staff, and the latter aligns the treatment of the documents and records of the Board of Governors

with that of the Board of Directors (ALLEN, 2020). The accompanying policy document, the AI Directive/Procedure, has become a living document; it is amended regularly to allow for adjustments that do not rise to the policy level (IBID.). The Open Access Policy primarily concerns knowledge originating internally from the Bank and research funded by the Bank to which it owns the rights. In short, it stipulates that if information is disclosed according to the rules of the AI Policy, individuals are allowed to use it freely on the condition that they acknowledge the authorship of the Bank (WORLD BANK, 2012).

The formal provisions of the IO policies were also largely analysed in previous studies, regarding the provisions in general, especially (TALLBERG ET AL., 2013, 2014); regarding the case of the World Bank (HELDT, 2018), but an often-overlooked element is focussing in greater detail on the practical application of the instruments created by the policies. One of the basic instruments that the Bank offers to the public on the basis of the AI Policy is to possibility of sending an official access to information request. That ensures the right to demand that a specific document or some other piece of information be published. Furthermore, the AI Policy also ensures the right to an appeals process when a request for information has been denied. Appeals can be filed with the Access to Information Committee (AIC), which can reverse or uphold the original decision (or render the appeal moot or dismiss the case entirely) (Articles 7 and 8). If the requester is unsatisfied, second-level appeals can be taken to the AI Appeals Board (AIAB) (Article 8). I demonstrate the practical application of the AI policy by analysing the information requests submitted and appeals made to the AIC and the AIAB to show how these rules are implemented in practice. The official AI requests and appeals to the AIC and the AIAB, as taken from the Annual Reports from the last 10 years (2012–2022; the Annual Report for 2023 is not yet available; the years are fiscal years – from July of the first year to June of the next year; for example, FY 2012 is the period from July 2011 to June 2012) are summarised in Tables 3 and 4 below. There were 2 cases in 2017 and one case in 2021 which were partly reversed and partly upheld, the numbers in brackets reflect this.

TABLE 3: WB ACCESS TO INFORMATION REQUESTS

| Fiscal Year | Received new | Continued old | Responded to | Fulfilled | Denied |
|-------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|-----------|--------|
| 2012 | 767 | 116 | 509 | 94,7 % | 5,3 % |
| 2013 | 685 | 103 | 493 | 92 % | 8 % |
| 2014 | 420 | 83 | 296 | 89 % | 11 % |
| 2015 | 474 | 39 | 326 | 93 % | 7 % |
| 2016 | 547 | 31 | 366 | 95 % | 5 % |
| 2017 | 705 | 56 | 519 | 96,5 % | 3,5 % |
| 2018 | 675 | 35 | 494 | 96,5 % | 3,5 % |
| 2019 | 696 | 31 | 478 | 96 % | 4 % |
| 2020 | 589 | 32 | 449 | 98 % | 2 % |
| 2021 | 589 | 38 | 388 | 96 % | 4 % |
| 2022 | 445 | 45 | 329 | 98 % | 2 % |

Source: Access to Information Annual Reports.

TABLE 4: WB AI APPEALS

| Fiscal Year | 1st level total (AIC) | Reversed/ Moot | Dismissed/ Upheld | 2nd level total (AIAB) | Reversed | Dismissed/ Upheld |
|-------------|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------------|------------------------|----------|----------------------|
| 2012 | 10 | 2 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2013 | 6 | 0 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| 2014 | 10 | 0 | 10 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| 2015 | 5 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2016 | 6 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 2017 | 18 | 2 (4) | 16 (14) | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| 2018 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 2019 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| 2020 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| 2021 | 12 | 1 | 11 | 3 | 1 (0) | 2 (3) |
| 2022 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| 2023 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Source: Access to Information Annual Reports.

These tables show the practical application of the formal setting and the extent and range of the information given, not only the procedural safeguards for ensuring access to information. What is apparent in the data, especially in the percentages of fulfilled requests, is that the World Bank aims to maintain the appearance of a transparent institution with a multi-level framework and a high level of institutionalisation established in order to provide information. However, these numbers do

not bear relevance without some context. As such, they only include access requests made through the Bank's main AI tracking system and not those fulfilled at the Bank's country offices and public information centres. Furthermore, the fact that we can observe only a handful of cases of appeals corresponds with the number of denied cases but, on the other hand, questions the necessity of especially the second level instance appeal (the AIAB). Interestingly, we cannot observe an increased interest in the usage of the requests or appeals over time, as we would possibly expect with a wider knowledge about the instrument. There is also no significant trend in the number of cases the WB responded to or the number of appeals; some years experience more, and some less, but there seems to be no common factor behind the changes in the frequency of information requests. We could say, based on the analysis, that in general, the instrument of AI requests seems to provide a useful avenue for informing the public, which utilises this opportunity.

Nevertheless, the number of requests alone does not tell us about their nature. To show what, in fact, the public demands to know, or, more generally, what this instrument is used for, we need to look into their content. Based on the analysis of the summaries of AI requests, which include the topics of the requests, and have been published by the Bank on its website since 2014 (WORLD BANK GROUP, 2024), it can be said that most of the requests pertain to a specific project of the WB in a given country, or ask about data or knowledge that the Bank possesses. The content of the analysed summaries for the years 2014–2022 (they have been made available since April 2014) shows three main categories of inquiries for information from the public: requests for data about individual countries, requests for information regarding projects in specific countries or reports about them, and requests for information pertaining to the Bank staff, personnel and archives. This division is based on the words that occur in the request summaries: the first type of word combination contains the word “data” in connection with a specific country's name (and mostly economic indicators, like GDP, employment, etc. in a specific country and time period), and the second the word “project” or “report,” usually accompanied by a mention of a specific country. Any request related to specific people, employees of the WB or archival material not related to a specific project is put in the third category. The remaining requests that did not fit into these three groups were classified in the “other” category.

To demonstrate this, based on the codewords from the summaries of AI requests from 2014 until 2022, Table 5 contains brief statistics on the content of the requests:

TABLE 5: AI REQUESTS 2014–2022

| Year | Data about individual countries | Information regarding projects in countries or reports about them | Information pertaining to the Bank staff, personnel and archives | Other requests |
|------|---------------------------------|---|--|----------------|
| 2014 | 61 | 54 | 39 | 45 |
| 2015 | 66 | 68 | 30 | 61 |
| 2016 | 59 | 69 | 15 | 59 |
| 2017 | 61 | 71 | 16 | 60 |
| 2018 | 58 | 61 | 16 | 79 |
| 2019 | 56 | 38 | 13 | 59 |
| 2020 | 67 | 58 | 15 | 81 |
| 2021 | 59 | 56 | 13 | 71 |
| 2022 | 58 | 53 | 13 | 63 |

Source: Summaries of Access to Information Requests.

This shows that the public is most interested in the expert function of the Bank and also emphasises the local aspect of its policies. As there is a higher demand for information about local policies and expert knowledge, there is subsequently a higher need for resources in these areas. A greater demand for information means that more information is given in general. The prevalence of country-specific data in the access to information instruments analysed here thus implies that the communication of the World Bank towards the public is especially active when a local aspect is involved.

As for the range of infrastructure designed to communicate with the public, the Bank now has more than 100 offices in member countries in every region of the world, and each is equipped to answer a public inquiry about the Bank's activities or documents. In this regard, the Bank offers a wide network; on its official website, there is a list of contact information for its media relations departments for 117 individual countries (WORLD BANK GROUP, 2024). That means that the physical distance between the WB and citizens is arguably low. The transparency of the website may be ascertained by the amount of available information about the IO's organisational structure, budget and other indicators, as developed by Grigorescu (2007). The World Bank scored in this evaluation 10 points out of 15, which is a very

high score. I searched for the information used in his study to measure the transparency of the website in its current version and to assess if there was any change in this respect. I found that all the information remained available. Therefore, the public does not face any significant obstacles in terms of accessing the information on the website.

In terms of its social media presence, the World Bank belongs to the group of “early adopters” that also includes the UN and the OECD, as it created its pages on Facebook and an account on Twitter already in 2008 (ECKER-EHRHARDT, 2020). Moreover, to this date, the Bank has set up 25 Facebook pages, 6 official Instagram accounts and more than 40 official X accounts in different languages for its offices in various countries and specific initiatives run by the Bank (the numbers are from the official accounts of the Bank). The reach of its activities on these platforms can be seen in the fact that it has 2.6 million followers on its main Facebook page, 1 million on Instagram and 3.8 million on X, which means the World Bank can probably be counted among the most influential international organisations in terms of social media reach. It thus could be said that the online network of the World Bank is highly developed, and the organisation grants the public several rights when it comes to informing it. It can be thus said that in terms of communication with non-state actors, the WB aims to show an image of transparency to the public.

Consultation

Regarding the next rung, consultation, specifically the access of non-state actors, NGOs have not acquired control of or a formal participatory role in the Bank; instead, they are assigned the role of observers (WOODS, 2001). The Board of Governors’ Annual and Spring Meetings (held together with the IMF) usually allows accreditations for several types of actors besides government delegates: observers from other IGOs, civil society representatives, press and guests (from the private sector, academia, etc.). The previous literature covered this aspect of the public participation in detail (ESPECIALLY TALLBERG ET AL., 2013, 2014). However, what has been missing is a focus on the actual usage of the formal rules of access. I thus present descriptive statistics showing the numbers of participants in the meetings from 2018 until 2022, which were made publicly available or obtained by official inquiries (data for previous years were not provided).

Table 5 below summarises the official lists of participants, demonstrating how non-state actors are taking part in the Annual and Spring Meetings of the WB and the IMF.

TABLE 6: PARTICIPATION OF NON-STATE DELEGATES IN AM/SM

| Year | CSOs in the Spring Meeting (SM) | CSOs in the Annual Meeting (AM) | Guests in SM | Guests in AM | Observers in SM | Observers in AM |
|------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 2018 | 1137 | 651 | 933 | 1307 | 1307 | 291 |
| 2019 | 1545 | 1268 | 1410 + 1992 | 61 | 1848 | 906 |
| 2020 | 188 | 1185 | 68 | 59 | 1303 + 704 | 759 |
| 2021 | 892 | 897 | 358 + 314 | 801 | 484 | 527 |
| 2022 | 708 | 1019 | 271 | 1476 | 428 | 719 |

Source: AM/SM Participants Lists.

The only significant decrease in the numbers happened because of the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic during the Spring Meeting 2020. Otherwise, there seems to be a stable interest in the WB meetings from non-state actors over the last 5 years. The World Bank distinguishes between three main categories of NSAs: civil society organisations (CSOs); guests, a category which includes mostly the private sector and parliamentarians, whereas IMF Guests are listed as a special category; and observers, which are the representatives of other international organisations. However, in practice, all the non-state actors are only granted the possibility to attend the plenary sessions of the Board of Governors or side events, such as the Civil Society Policy Forum (CSPF), without any further participatory privileges, like being able to present their position or influence the decision-making process in other ways (BONZON, 2014). Nevertheless, it could be said that there is a high degree of institutionalisation in terms of initiatives designed to involve non-state actors in a specific part of the Bank's activities and that it could be guided by its need for policy implementation on a local level, which is more clearly documented in the case of public consultations in the next section.

The practice of public consultations in the case of the World Bank follows the Consultation Guidelines, a document lastly updated in 2019, which sets out the principles guiding the process and outlines areas where it is utilised and also presents the various types and formats of the consultations. They could be conducted, for example, as public hearings,

face-to-face meetings, focus group discussions, web-based consultations, or questionnaires, or separate Advisory Groups can be formed (WORLD BANK, 2019). Typically, these consultations commence after the Management and Board approve the engagement and consultation plan and can take from 4 to 12 weeks, depending on the nature of the issue and its scope (IBID.). As in the case of accreditation in the IOs' meetings, this process is not entirely open in most cases, as a participant needs to belong to a specific group. The invitations are distributed to NGOs, private companies, academia, and/or think-tanks, depending on the type of consultation the staff is seeking (WORLD BANK GROUP, 2024). Nevertheless, sometimes the call for written comments is posted online, and the answers are supposed to be sent via email; therefore this instrument can be considered as having a quite high accessibility to the public.

The focus here is then on online consultations and their usage as an instrument of public participation, which has not received attention in previous research. The WB Consultation Hub provides statistics on the frequency and characteristics of the consultations since 2012, which is useful for determining the instrument's utilisation. In this database, we can find a total of 183 initiatives in review, out of which 110 are in English and the rest are other language variants of the same initiatives (WORLD BANK GROUP, 2024). The statistics of the numbers of meetings and their participation rates in the last 10 years (2012–2022) are summarised in Table 6 below, whereas general (open) meetings are considered to be all meetings except those with only members of government present. The numbers in brackets are those of consultations for which statistics of participation are available.

TABLE 7: WB PUBLIC CONSULTATIONS

| Year (Start date) | Number of consultations | Number of general (open) meetings | Mean participation in the meeting* |
|-------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 2012 | 11 (3) | 101 | 25.8 |
| 2013 | 3 (3) | 19 | 21.5 |
| 2014 | 15 (8) | 57 | 30.2 |
| 2015 | 24 (6) | 71 | 12 |
| 2016 | 33 (5) | 16 | 26.25 |
| 2017 | 36 (1) | 5 | 22 |
| 2018 | 13 (1) | 1 | 9 |
| 2019 | 18 (4) | 75 | 25 |
| 2020 | 7 (1) | 13 | 17.4 |
| 2021 | 6 (0) | N/A | N/A |
| 2022 | 2 (0) | N/A | N/A |

*Calculated as the average number of organisations (all types of NSAs – NGOs, CSOs, the private sector...) that took part in the public consultations in the year based on the list of participants provided on the consultations' website.

Source: Consultation Hub website.

As we can see, the participant lists are scarcely put on the website, thus rendering some general observations harder. However, it can still be noted that recently, a drop has occurred in the total number of consultations in general and that of meetings in particular. There might be various explanations that may lie behind these phenomena; some consultations are probably still running, and others were not made available on the website, but the most obvious is perhaps the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and, with that, the reduction of possibilities for in-person meetings.

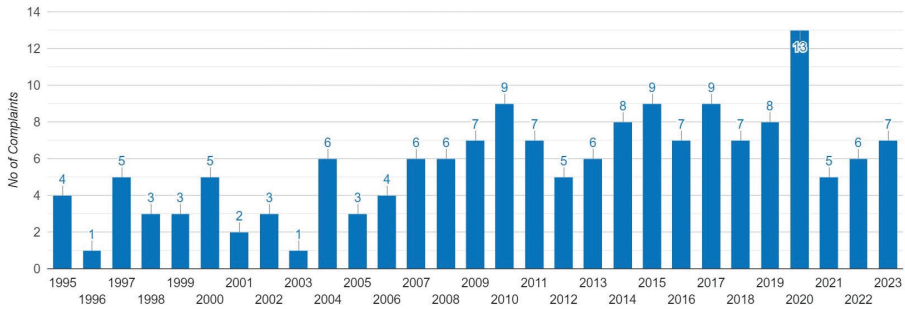
As for the content of the consultations, the most consulted issues were Country Partnership Frameworks (109¹), Policy Reviews (29) and Sector Strategies (13). The Country Partnership Frameworks include objectives and development results through which the WB intends to support member states in their efforts (e.g. efforts to end extreme poverty). As for the Policy Reviews, a major Policy Review was conducted in some years, e.g. that of the Procurement Policy in 2012, with around 50 meetings in 2 phases. Two other significant policies with a lot of public consultations were updated in 2015 and 2019 respectively, namely the WB Group Gender Strategy and the WB Group Strategy for Fragility, Conflict and Violence. Based on the descriptions of the consultations on websites, their aim was mainly to gather perspectives in individual Member States, because the WB

was interested in addressing the needs of the client countries. For example, the WB Group Gender Strategy has been consulted with representatives from all continents, with civil society, private sectors, donors, and development partners' representatives in Europe (e.g. London, Brussels), Africa (e.g. Kenya, Tunisia), Asia (e.g. Pakistan, China), and South America (Brazil) being involved in developing the strategy through consultations from mid-April to July 2015. It could thus be suggested, based on the characteristics of the issues under consideration in this process, that it is mostly policies with a local impact that are reviewed by the non-governmental actors. Arguably, only minor policies, mostly of a strategic nature, are consulted with the public; the executive, more significant decisions, such as those pertaining to the budget, are still taken by the Executive Board without it. It also should be noted that non-state actors' participation in meetings does not necessarily mean that the consultations had an impact on the outcome; to measure how much the comments made were really incorporated into the text of the specific policy would require further examination of the individual documents.

Placation

Regarding the placation “rung,” i.e. giving individuals complaint privileges, the World Bank has established the Accountability Mechanism (AM), consisting of the Inspection Panel and the Dispute Resolution Service (DRS). The former was created by the Executive Board in 1993 as an instrument for the public to file a complaint in case of non-compliance with the Bank's environmental and social policies and procedures; it was created in response to the civil society pressures and member state demands related to their concerns about the lack of accountability of the WB (PARK, 2010). In Figure 1 I include the numbers of cases received by the Panel in the form of the official figures (WORLD BANK GROUP INSPECTION PANEL, 2024), showing that with the exception of 2020, the number does not exceed 10. The DRS was established in 2020, and it implements a voluntary, independent and time-bound dispute resolution option in the context of complaints to the Panel (WORLD BANK GROUP, 2024).

FIGURE 1: THE NUMBERS OF CASES RECEIVED BY THE WB INSPECTION PANEL (FISCAL YEARS)



Some authors would claim that the Inspection Panel is especially influential for civil society in terms of changing lending at the World Bank, especially in combination with the monitoring abilities of powerful states (BUNTAINE, 2015). On the other hand, others would counter that the myriad of accountability mechanisms set up by the WB has paradoxically made it even less accountable to the outside world (HELDT, 2018). In addition to the AM, for the IFC and MIGA, the Office of the Compliance Advisor/Ombudsman (CAO) was created in 1999 with a similar purpose. Furthermore, the Grievance Redress Service (GRS) was launched in 2015 as a complementary mechanism for submitting complaints directly to the World Bank if a concern is raised that a supported project has caused or is likely to cause harm to individuals or communities (WORLD BANK, 2024). To provide some overview, since its inception, approximately 1,500 complaints have been received by the GRS, including the 383 complaints received in the fiscal year 2022 (IBID.), hence showing a much higher interest in it than in the Panel. The GRS has seen a steady increase in the number of complaints filed since its inception. The 383 complaints received in the fiscal year 2022 across more than 70 countries have marked an uptick of 28.1% compared to the fiscal year 2021 (299 complaints) (IBID.). This demonstrated that despite the criticisms of the effectiveness of these mechanisms, they remain a tool that the public can and does use, increasingly over time, to lodge dissatisfaction with the implementation of a specific project. This thus signifies the strong local element in the instruments of public participation.

However, the World Bank does not give voting rights to non-governmental actors. Therefore, it does not make sense to analyse higher rungs of the participation ladder, namely partnership, which stands in contrast to the main argument of this paper. Nevertheless, voting rights for non-state

actors in IOs are granted only to employers and workers in the ILO, but despite its tripartite structure, the organisation has not opened itself to external actors much; the social partners have even used their prerogatives to block further attempts to include external actors more as shapers of policy in fear of losing influence (BACCARO, 2015; JAKOVLESKI ET AL., 2019).

Discussion

The analysis shows that in each of the three rungs of the public participation ladder relevant to the World Bank – information, consultation and placation – it designed a tool that is particularly used when a local aspect is involved. The content of the access to information requests, the topics of the online public consultations and the usage of the accountability mechanisms all are influenced by the on-the-ground activities of the WB. Specifically, in the case of information, the NSAs/public require more information from the WB about the project details, or expert statistical data about individual countries. In the case of consultations, the most consulted policies in terms of numbers and attendance should have a connection to the monitoring activities of the WB, be related to a project, or have a strong local aspect of the policy in question. In the case of placation, the WB is the one that needs the help of the NSAs, as it needs to collect the information on non-compliance. That confirms that non-state actors are active especially in locally focussed activities of the IO because they share first-hand experience with non-compliance or because collecting on-the-ground information is their specialisation (TALLBERG ET AL., 2018). This analysis thus suggests where the insufficiencies in terms of resources of the IOs and NSAs might be found and thus brings a contribution to the existing theory stating that the exchange between them can work in both ways.

For a future relevant analysis of public participation, it might make sense to include statistics on the numbers of the related social media posts, likes and especially comments and the subsequent reactions to them, which are left out here due to spatial limitations. Researchers can also focus on the content of the posts to see which topics are the most covered. It also remains to be answered why the COVID-19 pandemic did not lead to a rise of online public consultations. Furthermore, it should also be noted that the descriptive statistics presented here do not say anything about the

impact of the consultations on the outcome. Measuring how much the comments were really incorporated into the text of the policies would require further examination of the individual documents.

We also have to consider other alternative explanations for the higher usage of public participation instruments in the World Bank besides the local aspect of the projects of the organisation. As for the conventional answer to this puzzle, which is that the public participation mechanisms were set in order for the Bank to correspond with democratic norms, there are a few possible counterarguments to this. Firstly, despite that the Western countries still hold the highest voting shares in the main executive organ, the Board of Directors and also the Board of Governors, and a significant percentage of the staff are US citizens (CLARK, 2021), the World Bank is still an organisation with a nearly universal membership. Moreover, there is no publicly available evidence confirming that the Western states would be pushing the staff to implement the public participation mechanism. Still, future research might focus on a possible link between the background of the IO's staff and the nature of the policies they put in place. In addition, online public consultations were introduced by the European Union already in the 2000s; it is seen as improbable that it set an example for the introduction of online consultations in the World Bank in 2012, not to mention that the organisations do not cooperate with each other much (IBID.). The WB could also still be counted as one of the few IOs using online public consultations, which would suggest that it is not entirely considered the “right thing to do”; the norm of using it has thus not been fully internalised.

The need for ensuring popular legitimacy could also be especially important when facing crises because when IOs lack legitimacy in society, it contributes to a democratic deficit in global governance (DAHL, 1999; ZÜRN, 2000; HELD & KOENIG-ARCHIBUGI, 2005). Therefore, it might be the case that the World Bank reacted to a visible scandal in an attempt to increase its legitimacy by opening itself to non-state actors and employing instruments of public participation. The other relevant studies (GRIGORESCU, 2007; TALLBERG ET AL., 2014) did not find significant support for this hypothesis in general, however. In particular, I also did not find any significant scandal the World Bank had been facing before its decision to use online public consultations in 2012. This argument could account for the introduction of the accountability

mechanisms, which the WB set up in response to the pressure of the demands of civil society groups, but is not convincing in terms of providing information to the public, access to meetings, or public consultations. If the argument were true, one would expect some more controversial policies to be more consulted; for example, the consulted procurement review is not as controversial as some other initiatives by the World Bank which are not consulted with non-state actors.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that even the general public can participate in the activities of IOs in various ways. It has demonstrated the different levels of public involvement through the suggested framework of a participation ladder that is applied to the specific case of the World Bank. The analysis shows that in each of the three rungs of the public participation ladder relevant to the World Bank – information, consultation and placation – it designed a tool that is particularly used when a local aspect is involved. In addition, it also suggests that insufficiencies in terms of resources of NSAs might be found especially in expert data statistics, and in the case of IOs, such insufficiencies are found in data about non-compliance and the impact of individual projects and policies. Therefore, the implication of this analysis for the existing literature might be that the exchange of resources between IOs and NSAs can work both ways and their cooperation can thus be mutually beneficial. The main argument was that the need for implementation of IO policies on the ground might also drive IOs' legitimation practices and approach towards involving non-state actors. The obvious limitation of this contribution is that a single case study cannot be considered representative of the entire reality; detailed comparative analysis should thus be conducted to validate or contradict the evidence from the World Bank case.

Can politicisation of issues play a role in this respect? Do controversies make IOs open up to NSAs (ZÜRN, 2014), or is the opening up rather driven by the regime types of some Member States, as a democratic membership should mean that the organisation has a higher public participation? This paper, in contrast, suggests that a higher need for implementation presupposes using instruments to ensure direct contact between citizens and the IO. Furthermore, it claims that specific criteria for assessing the level of

public participation can be developed and used on a greater scale based on the proposed framework; for example, the existence of institutionalised mechanisms for access to information, accountability, relations with NGOs or other non-state actors, public consultations, etc. can be used as such. This paper has further argued that formal provisions often do not tell the whole story and that an independent measure for the range of using them could contribute to our understanding of the phenomena of public participation in IOs.

It should also be noted that this does not necessarily mean that the more information is provided or the more open the organisation, the better. Total transparency would probably not be in the interest of an efficient decision-making process, and it also involves the additional costs of collecting, editing and publishing information (WOODS, 2001). The issue of the suitability of the information policies and other instruments of public participation for the goals of the organisations as such should be also taken into account. In addition, the topic of the accountability of NGOs in terms of representing the interests of the citizens could be raised in order to question their greater involvement. Moreover, the willingness of non-state actors to participate in consultations, even if they are invited, can be limited, as this analysis did not cover cases in which NSAs declined invitations to public consultations. Further research might also focus on the characteristics of the actors involved in the public consultations and their contributions, and especially on the question of whether NSAs are representative of the whole world population.

IOs also aim to adapt to the digital era and adopt new possibilities for direct communication with the public; the instruments of public participation can thus serve as a tool to achieve the goals of public diplomacy; i.e., they can help increase the IO's soft power by spreading culture and values, carefully explaining policies, and providing credible messages (NYE, 2008). Hopefully, this paper has added some ideas for consideration in these areas. In any case, the topic of public participation in IOs remains an important line for further research inquiries.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The number of public consultations that were related to this subject.
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NOTE

The research was supported by the Grant Agency of Charles University (project no. 246422). The article is supported by Charles University's grant SVV-260842 ("Conflict, cooperation and power in a changing world order"). I would like to thank Jan Karlas, Michal Parížek and the editor and two anonymous reviewers at the Czech Journal of International Relations for their helpful comments on the previous versions of the draft. I would also like to thank the participants of the ECPR Joint Sessions 2024 for their very helpful feedback.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jan Dostál is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Political Studies, the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Prague. His research interests include public participation in international organisations, online public consultations and non-state actors' involvement in the climate change regime.

An Empirical Study on the Raising of the Rainbow Flag by Diplomatic Missions

PETER ROSPUTINSKÝ

Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations, Matej Bel University
in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

E-MAIL

peter.rosputinsky@umb.sk

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7354-2519>

ABSTRACT

Many countries are displaying rainbow flags at their diplomatic missions, a practice that began in 2008 and has gained significant attention since then. This article provides a global overview of this trend based on public sources and a questionnaire survey. It explores the emergence, development, and implications of the raising of the rainbow flag by missions abroad as a visible support for LGBTI rights in bilateral diplomacy. The article categorises countries according to their stance on this issue – supportive, opposing, or neutral. Although this practice lacks explicit legal foundations in international law, including the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, it is still governed by the general duties of the sending state when it is performing diplomatic activities in the receiving state. The study reveals that the flying of the rainbow flag by diplomatic missions reflects the given state's political position on LGBTI rights and enhances our understanding of the intersection of diplomacy, human rights, and international law in this matter.

KEYWORDS

rainbow flag, raising the rainbow flag, diplomatic mission, diplomatic practice, LGBTI rights

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.32422/cjir.1933>

PUBLISHED ONLINE

12 February, 2026

INTRODUCTION

The perception of homosexuality has gradually changed in many countries over the past 35 years, and the status of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI) persons has begun to receive international attention. Countries with registered partnerships or marriages between persons of the same sex have progressively improved the status of their LGBTI inhabitants. So it has become natural for these countries to address this issue in their foreign policy and use diplomacy to advance LGBTI rights. Sweden and the USA were among the first countries to formally incorporate LGBTI rights into their foreign policy agendas (RAINER, 2022). In the British discourse on this issue, the question of responsibility for homophobic legislation in many countries from the British Empire era resonated, leading to the opinion that the UK should be a “world leader” in supporting LGBTI rights (LALOR & BROWNE, 2018). Not only countries but also international development agencies have begun to take activist stances against homophobia (BERGENFIELD & MILLER, 2014) and leading international financial institutions (RAO, 2015). However, a selective support for LGBTI rights can also be applied in a negative sense. For example, it can be used to legitimise xenophobic, racist, colonial, and nationalistic policies, or to divert attention from one’s own human rights violations, as pointed out by Puar (2017). As a result of theoretical reflection on the role of diplomacy in promoting LGBTI rights globally, the relevant body of literature is growing steadily. Scholars in the field of LGBTI diplomacy explore various diplomatic tools implemented to support LGBTI communities abroad. One of the most easily identifiable tools is the display of the rainbow flag of the LGBTI movement or its equivalents, such as the LGBTI Progress Pride flag, the Intersex-Inclusive Progress Pride flag, or the EuroPride flag (hereafter referred to as the rainbow flag), which is the focus of this article. Initially, such displays were sporadic, but since 2014, the practice of the flying of the rainbow flag by the sending state (the country that sends out the diplomatic mission) at its diplomatic missions and consular posts in the receiving state (the country hosting the mission) has expanded significantly.

The aim of this article is to identify and describe the diplomatic practice of the raising of the rainbow flag by the foreign missions of sending states, and to present the results of the author’s research in this field based on publicly available sources and the author’s own survey. Thus, the article presents an empirical study providing facts about and offering

insights into a relatively new and evolving diplomatic practice that, to date, has not been specifically or thoroughly examined in the existing scholarly literature. For example, Sanders' (2005) study, *Flying the Rainbow Flag in Asia*, does not discuss, nor does it mention the idea of the raising of the rainbow flag by diplomatic missions. Similarly, many respected works dedicated to LGBTI or so-called SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) rights, such as those by Lalor (2020) or Rainer (2022), do not address the issue of rainbow flag displays by diplomatic missions at all. Encarnación (2016) makes a brief mention of a rainbow flag flying over the US embassy in Madrid (in 2014) when writing on gay rights diplomacy. An exception in the literature on LGBTI diplomacy in this regard is the work of Conway and Edenborg (2025), which introduces the term of rainbow diplomacy, and highlights the use of rainbow flags by diplomats as visual representation of diplomatic support for LGBTQ+ rights. The article contributes to filling the gap in the scholarly literature on this aspect of contemporary developments in diplomatic relations.

The secondary objective of this article is to test the hypothesis that the diplomatic practice under scrutiny does not occur in a normative vacuum. In other words, the article will seek to answer the question of whether the raising of the rainbow flag by foreign missions falls exclusively within the unilateral decision of the sending state, or whether it is governed by the existing legal framework regulating diplomacy, as set forth in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (VCDR). Finally, the data collected within the author's survey and the findings presented in this article can serve as the basis for further analysis of the practice of the flying of the rainbow flag by diplomatic missions, whether from the perspective of international relations theory or from that of international law.

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rainbow flag by diplomatic missions, whether from the perspective of international relations theory or from that of international law.

METHODOLOGY

The tracking of the diplomatic practices of individual sending states whose foreign missions have reportedly flown the rainbow flag, has been carried out by the author since February 2017. The data was primarily collected from publicly available sources on the internet. The most frequently used sources included newspapers, official reports, and other documents from the states concerned, as well as any available channels used by states and their representatives for communication with the external environment, including social media, particularly Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter).

First, it should be explained what, for the purposes of this article, is considered to be the raising of the rainbow flag by a diplomatic mission. It refers only to a public display of the rainbow flag at the premises of a diplomatic mission, where it is visible to the receiving state and its population and clearly attributable to a specific state. A common way of displaying the rainbow flag is to place it on an embassy's flagpole separately from the national flag or other flags, or together with the national flag, in which case the rainbow flag is below it and in a smaller size. However, other display methods can also be found in practice, such as displaying the rainbow flag from a window or balcony or attaching it to an embassy's fence. All of these display methods, along with other similar uses of a rainbow flag, are included in the study. To be clear, interior placements and displays in crowds are not considered here. Finally, it must be stated that for this article, a rainbow flag is defined not only as a fabric or cloth of a specified shape, pattern, and appropriate colour, but also as any other medium with a rainbow design, such as rainbow banners or posters. Since some states also use stylised rainbow national flags, such cases were also included.

In relation to the types of foreign posts flying the rainbow flag, we note that although it is most often raised by diplomatic missions and at ambassadors' residences, it has also occasionally appeared at permanent missions to international organisations and consular posts. Given that these bodies all carry out diplomacy, whenever such a body used the

rainbow flag this way, it was included in the dataset, provided that at least one of the following conditions was met: (i) a photograph or video of the rainbow flag visibly raised or otherwise publicly displayed by the mission; (ii) an explicit statement by the state concerned, whether the sending or the receiving state, stating that the respective mission had raised the rainbow flag; (iii) an explicit statement from a trustworthy source (such as a diplomat, press agency, or newspaper) confirming that the particular mission had publicly hoisted the rainbow flag.

It should be noted that sometimes the rainbow flag is placed on the premises of a diplomatic mission without the involvement of the sending state. In such cases, the flag is most often displayed by individuals or non-governmental organisations in protest against a particular policy of the sending state, as was the case, for example, with the display of a large rainbow flag on the fence of the Hungarian embassy in The Hague by members of a Dutch podcast (NL TIMES, 2021), or the hanging of a rainbow flag from a smashed window of Morocco's embassy in Stockholm (KASRAOUI, 2024). Obviously, such situations are not taken into account in the present study.

The data collection in the author's research has been quite time-consuming, as the relevant data could not be traced in just one place or only a few places. This process required repeated visits to various websites and social network accounts used by foreign ministries, foreign missions, and their members, and the posts were in various world languages. It must be openly acknowledged that the data collected in the research is not, and likely cannot be, complete. One of the conceivable reasons is that some instances of sending states flying rainbow flags were not recorded or published.

The data collection took place from February 2017 to June 2025. As part of this, the author sought additional supplementary information by directly questioning individual states via email between October 2020 and December 2021. All United Nations (UN) member states, the Holy See, and the most well-known unrecognised states with their own diplomatic missions abroad or with foreign missions on their territories were questioned through their Foreign Ministries, other relevant ministries, permanent missions to the UN, or diplomatic missions. Given the nature of the data, which could not be fully anonymised, the research underwent

a thorough ethical review process. All participating states were informed in advance about the academic nature of the research, including the intention to publish the collected data in a scientific journal.

The essence of the questions sent out within the author's survey was based on two pillars: (i) the author's assumption of the absence of an explicit authorisation by the VCDR and other sources of international law for diplomatic and other missions for the use of the rainbow flag on their premises, and (ii) the author's assumption of the considerable sensitivity of the topic, particularly for some receiving states, and the resulting lower willingness of such states to participate in the survey. Therefore, the questions were arranged in two different versions. The first (below under A) was addressed to states known to fly the rainbow flag at their missions abroad or likely to do so due to their positive stance on LGBTI rights. The second version (below under B) was sent to (i) states officially opposed to the flying of the rainbow flag on their territory; (ii) states where a sanctioning of consensual sexual relations between same-sex persons or other expressions of homosexuality had been identified; and (iii) states where the existence of an aversion to public displays of the rainbow flag could be assumed for cultural or religious reasons. This method was chosen to avoid any misinterpretation of the request to participate in the survey as a provocation. To demonstrate that the survey was not speculative or purely theoretical, the accompanying introductory text to the questions sent to the states provided examples of countries such as Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq, Russia, Tunisia, and Turkey, where rainbow flags had been flown by some diplomatic missions, which may be surprising.

THE WORDING OF THE SURVEY QUESTIONS SENT TO INDIVIDUAL STATES

A

- a) According to data available on the Internet, embassies of [*name of respondent state*] have hoisted a rainbow flag in [*name(s) of particular receiving state(s)*]. In which states have your diplomatic missions or consular posts already hoisted a rainbow flag?

or

Did your diplomatic missions in any of the receiving states fly the rainbow flag? If yes, in which states?

- b) Who is entitled to decide on behalf of *[name of respondent state]* on the hoisting of the rainbow flag by diplomatic missions or consular posts (the Government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ambassadors, heads of consular posts or someone else)?
- c) Has *[name of respondent state]* encountered any refusal or opposition to the raising of the rainbow flag by its mission to any receiving State? Which States were involved, and what reasoning was given?
- d) Have diplomatic missions of any sending States raised the rainbow flag on the territory of *[name of respondent state]*? If yes, which ones?
- e) What is the position of *[name of respondent state]* towards the hoisting of the rainbow flag by missions of other states on the territory of *[name of respondent state]*?

B

- a) Have diplomatic missions of any states raised the rainbow flag on the territory of *[name of respondent state]*? If yes, which one(s)?
- b) What is (or would be) the position of your country towards the hoisting of the rainbow flag by missions of other states on the territory of your country (for example, also with respect to Article 20 of the VCDR)?

THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE RAISING OF THE RAINBOW FLAG BY DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS

By studying publicly available information on the raising of the rainbow flag by diplomatic missions, one can divide the examined countries into three groups. The first group implements this practice and the second one opposes it. For the largest number of states, however, it is not possible to identify their actual position on this issue. Although these states, which form the third group, do not appear to fly rainbow flags at their own missions, they do not officially protest against the hoisting of rainbow flags by foreign states in their respective missions either, at least according to published information.

In the following text, we will present the origin of the idea of the hoisting of rainbow flags by diplomatic missions and the milestones in the

development of this practice. We will also describe the main twists and turns in the approach of states flying rainbow flags at their posts abroad, as well as the opinions of countries refusing to display the rainbow flags in their diplomatic relations. Subsequently, in the summary overviews and detailed appendices, we will present our findings on the practice of individual states raising the rainbow flag.

Sending States with a Positive Approach

THE UNITED KINGDOM (UK)

Based on the data collected for this article, it appears that the first instance of a rainbow flag being flown by a foreign mission occurred at the British embassy in Latvia during the Riga Pride on 31 May 2008 (UK GAY NEWS, 2008). Therefore, the UK is likely the country that holds the world primacy in public displays of the rainbow flag by diplomatic missions.

As early as December 2007, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) had adopted a special document addressing British posts abroad and outlining many practical steps to support the human rights of LGBT individuals living abroad (FCO, 2010). However, the practice of embassies flying the rainbow flag was not included in it. The idea of displaying the rainbow flag was introduced into British diplomatic practice following a request by Caroline Lucas, a Member of the European Parliament from the British Green Party, to the then Foreign Secretary, Ed Miliband, on 23 May 2008. She asked the FCO and British embassies to support rainbow marches in Eastern Europe, including by flying the rainbow flag on the day of the pride parade (UK EMBASSIES, 2008).

The first instances of flying the rainbow flag, namely those in Latvia on 31 May 2008 and in Poland on 6 June 2008, were not, according to a spokesperson for the FCO, part of an “overall” policy to promote LGBT equality but were individual decisions made by British ambassadors (GREW, 2008). In both Latvia and Poland, it was the British diplomatic response to banned gay events. The third country in which the British embassy flew the rainbow flag in 2008 was Brazil. However, in all three receiving states, this action was met with significant protests from parts of the public and some church leaders. The FCO’s reaction, according to Brady (2011), was a

secret “eGram” of unknown date published on 23 October 2011 banning the flying of the rainbow flag in British diplomatic missions. This document explicitly referenced the potentially troublesome repercussions of such actions and stated that flying flags other than national flags opened up too many difficult and divisive questions. Between 2009 and 2013, the use of the rainbow flag by British diplomatic missions was sporadic – e.g., British diplomatic missions displayed it in Hungary in 2011, in Chile in 2012, and in France in 2013.

A shift in British diplomacy arose in 2013–2014 and followed, or correlated with, the legalisation of same-sex partnerships and marriages in several countries around the world. Flying the rainbow flag in states that were improving the status of their LGBT citizens became a common practice for UK diplomatic missions, as it aimed to show solidarity with LGBT people and promote inclusivity. However, a significant turnaround occurred shortly after that, in the summer of 2015, as a result of the UK parliamentary election and the change of government. The new leadership of the FCO, headed by Philip Hammond, decided to ban the raising of the rainbow flag at British embassies (WILKINSON, 2015). In a report from March 2016, the FCO declared its policy on flag flying abroad: diplomatic missions were to fly the Union Flag, and the only other flags that they were allowed to fly were those of the constituent countries of the UK, the UK overseas territories (on significant days for them), and the European Union (only in certain countries) (PARLIAMENT.UK, 2016). Ironically, however, in early August 2016, after some changes in key staff, the new Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson lifted this ban. He left the decision on whether and when to display the rainbow flag to the discretion of British Ambassadors and High Commissioners, while stating that they should take into account local conditions (PRESS ASSOCIATION, 2016). From that point on, British diplomatic posts around the world began to fly the rainbow flag whenever it was deemed appropriate and not harmful to do so (HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY, 2019). This is most often done on 17 May to mark the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT), as well as during rainbow parades or other similar local events. UK missions have continued this practice until the present, and at least 96 of them have raised the rainbow flag. The list of countries in which we have been able to trace the displaying of the rainbow flag by British diplomatic missions can be found in Supplemental Appendix A.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA (USA)

The second state with a widespread practice of flying rainbow flags at its missions is the USA. According to Vile (^(2018, p. 11)), some U.S. embassies began displaying rainbow flags during LGBT pride week in 2014. However, our research reveals that U.S. missions had already displayed the rainbow flag on at least three occasions in 2013. The first instance occurred in Vienna on 17 May 2013 (^(OTS, 2013)). The second instance, according to a Facebook post from the U.S. Embassy in Sweden (⁽²⁰¹³⁾), took place in Stockholm, where the rainbow flag was flown at both the diplomatic mission and the official residence of the U.S. Ambassador to Sweden from 26 July to 4 August 2013. The third instance occurred when the U.S. Embassy in Bratislava, Slovakia hoisted the rainbow flag on 16 September 2013, as documented in a video on YouTube with the participation of the then-Ambassador Theodore Sedgwick (^(U.S. EMBASSY SLOVAKIA, 2013)). It is important, however, to note that we were unable to trace any instances of U.S. missions displaying the rainbow flag prior to 2013.

In the USA, as in the UK, the promotion of LGBT rights abroad has become institutionalised. This was formalised through the Presidential Memorandum (^(THE WHITE HOUSE, 2011)) issued by Obama. The memorandum directed all U.S. agencies operating abroad to ensure that U.S. diplomacy and foreign assistance promote and protect the human rights of LGBT individuals. Nevertheless, the flying of the rainbow flag was not explicitly mentioned in it. After the U.S. Supreme Court declared Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act unconstitutional in 2013 (*United States v. Windsor* 2013), and ruled in 2015 that the right to marry extends to same-sex couples (*Obergefell v. Hodges* 2015), the U.S. foreign policy accelerated its promotion of LGBTI rights abroad. The raising of the rainbow flag at U.S. embassies and other posts in foreign countries became one of the key tools for this promotion. According to the available information, the decision to fly the rainbow flag has initially rested with individual U.S. ambassadors (^(ASSOCIATED PRESS IN WARSAW, 2014)). When displayed, the rainbow flag had to be smaller than the U.S. flag and placed below it (^(FABRICIUS, 2019)). This general policy applied also to the main flagpoles at U.S. embassy buildings and ambassadorial residences. This practice continued during the first two years of President Trump's first administration. However, in May 2019, prior to the June Pride Parades, a shift occurred when the U.S. State Department

informed all U.S. embassies that they could fly the rainbow flag anywhere on the U.S. mission's ground except the official flagpole (FINNEGAN & PALMERI, 2019). Or more explicitly, requests to fly the rainbow flag on the main flagpole had to be approved by the U.S. State Department, but as reported in the media, all such requests in 2019 were denied, including those from the U.S. embassies in Brazil, Israel, Latvia, and Germany (LEDERMAN, 2019).

Following the election of President Biden in 2020, another reversal in flag policy occurred. Antony Blinken, the then U.S. Secretary of State, stated during his Senate confirmation hearing that Biden's administration would lift the Trump-era restrictions on displaying rainbow flags at U.S. embassies (LANG, 2021). This change was already implemented in 2021, and individual U.S. diplomatic missions were given the authority to decide independently whether to display the rainbow flag on the same flagpole as the U.S. flag or use other symbols to show support for LGBTI rights, depending on local conditions (GRAMER & HADAVAS, 2021). After three years, still under Biden's administration, the situation turned around again. It was due to a new law that prohibited the flying of many non-U.S. flags, including rainbow flags, over U.S. Department of State facilities (U.S. CONGRESS, 2024). This course in the U.S. practice was confirmed by Secretary of State Marco Rubio on 22 January 2025, when he introduced the "One Flag Policy" (DOORNBOS, 2025).

As explicated above, the development of the U.S. practice has been turbulent, affected by the significant reversals over the past six years, and largely driven by the domestic political rivalry between the Democratic and Republican parties and their opposing views on the use of the rainbow flag and the Black Lives Matter flag. However, despite the situation as of March 2025, and due to the extensive history of the flying of the rainbow flag by U.S. embassies until the beginning of 2025, we consider it appropriate to include the USA in the first group of states.

Given the slightly higher number of U.S. diplomatic missions worldwide compared to British foreign posts, e.g. 168 missions versus 156 in 2023, respectively (LOWY INSTITUTE GLOBAL DIPLOMACY INDEX, 2025), it is reasonable to assume that the USA has flown the rainbow flag in its missions in more countries than the UK. This assumption was confirmed by the results of our investigations. As seen in the appendices, the USA has flown the rainbow

flag in the most states, namely in at least 117. The list of states in which we have documented a display of the rainbow flag by the local U.S. embassy is in Supplemental Appendix B. A comparison with the British practice, as reported in Supplemental Appendix A, reveals that the diplomatic practices of the UK and the USA are very similar in terms of both the range of the receiving states and the composition of those states.

OTHER SENDING STATES

Regarding other sending states raising rainbow flags at their embassies, their approaches to flying the rainbow flag have not been as variable as those of the UK and the USA. In most cases, these states made the decision to display the rainbow flag after there was a clear support for LGBTI rights in their domestic policies. Rainbow flags are typically flown in countries where there is no significant opposition to equal rights for LGBTI people.

One country that implemented a shift from a declared policy of not flying the rainbow flag to the contrary was Sweden. In 2013, the Swedish government did not comply with a petition submitted by several thousand people via Facebook requesting the Swedish embassy in Moscow to raise the rainbow flag during Stockholm Pride. A spokesperson for the Swedish Foreign Ministry explained that their diplomatic practice at the time was to fly only the Swedish flag (LITTAUER, 2013). However, the Finnish and Swedish embassies raised the rainbow flag alongside their national flags in May 2013, as explicitly stated by the Embassy of Finland in Pristina (2013). In addition, records show that Sweden has displayed the rainbow flag at other diplomatic posts, as reported in Supplemental Appendix C.

The case of Italy is also worth mentioning in more detail. A parliamentary and public debate was sparked there after the Italian Embassy in Madrid raised the rainbow flag during the local rainbow parade in 2018. Two Italian senators raised concerns about it, questioning whether it was acceptable to display the rainbow flag alongside the flags of Italy and the EU, arguing that it could diminish the dignity of the Italian national flag, and seeking clarification on whether the action had been authorised (BONI, 2018). In response, Italian Deputy Foreign Minister Emanuela Del Re affirmed her respect for the rainbow flag being raised in celebration of LGBT Pride Week, noting that the event was widely celebrated in Spain.

She stated that the ambassador had acted independently without any intention of undermining the prestige of the Italian flag. Furthermore, she indicated that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had reminded the concerned Ambassador of his obligation to consult with the Ministry in cases like this, as the Ministry is responsible for determining whether there will be flag displays at diplomatic missions (REPUBBLICA, 2018). Given the limited data on the Italian practice of flying the rainbow flag at its diplomatic missions, with only three subsequent cases of it after 2018, it remains unclear what Italy's official position is. It is likely that the instances of Italian missions raising the rainbow flag are based on personal decisions made by individual ambassadors rather than an official policy of Italy. On the other hand, there is no indication of an official governmental or ministerial ban on the use of rainbow flags by Italian diplomatic missions.

Germany represents another specific example, as it has explicit regulations governing the use of the rainbow flag in its foreign policy. Germany considers it a logo-flag, and this type of flag can only be flown on federal government buildings with the state's consent. Since the rainbow flag is a globally recognised symbol of solidarity with people affected by discrimination due to their sexual identity, the Federal Minister of the Interior and Home Affairs Nancy Faeser (2022) decided to grant a general approval for the rainbow flag to be raised in compliance with certain guidelines, e.g. raising it on flagpoles, at or in front of entrance areas and courtyards, or on facades, provided that other legal regulations do not conflict with it, and raising it on specific dates, such as Christopher Street Day or another similar local holiday or anniversary.

Currently, there is a scarcity of comprehensive information on the practice of hoisting the rainbow flag at diplomatic missions and other posts in scholarly or other literature. Below, we present two summary overviews of our mapping of this diplomatic practice. Our data include several instances where two or more sending states jointly displayed a single rainbow flag, particularly when their missions were located in the same building or in close proximity to one another, or they were participating in a joint activity. In these cases, the display of the rainbow flag was attributed to all of the participating sending states. A general overview of the displays of rainbow flags by states other than the UK and the USA is provided in Supplemental Appendix C.

Based on the available information, the rainbow flag was hoisted at the diplomatic missions of at least 36 sending states. They are listed below in Table 1, and organised by continent and number of receiving states (indicated in brackets) in which we have identified at least one mission of a particular sending state that has flown the rainbow flag. The leaders in this regard are the USA, the UK, the Netherlands, and Canada, each with rainbow flag placements at its embassies in more than 50 countries.

TABLE 1: SENDING STATES RAISING THE RAINBOW FLAG AT THEIR DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS

| EUROPE | AMERICAS | ASIA | OCEANIA | AFRICA |
|--|---|-------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|
| UK (96), Netherlands (67), Denmark (44), Belgium (37), Germany (34), Ireland (28), Sweden (27), Finland (21), France (19), Austria (14), Estonia (11), Norway (10), Malta (7), Spain (7), Cyprus (5), Iceland (5), Italy (5), Switzerland (5), Czechia (5), Luxembourg (4), Portugal (2), Slovenia (2), Latvia (1) | USA (117), Canada (55), Mexico (25), Argentina (16), Chile (4), Brazil (2), Colombia (1), Uruguay (1) | Israel (10), Taiwan (1) | Australia (12), New Zealand (4) | South Africa (1) |
| 23 | 8 | 2 | 2 | 1 |

From the perspective of the receiving states, we managed to trace instances of hoistings of the rainbow flag by a sending state's mission in 139 receiving states, including the Cook Islands and Palestine – as they also have diplomatic relations with other states. All these states are listed below in Table 2.

TABLE 2: RECEIVING STATES WHERE DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS OF SENDING STATES RAISED THE RAINBOW FLAG

| EUROPE | AFRICA | AMERICAS | ASIA | OCEANIA |
|--|--|--|---|---|
| Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Holy See, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Türkiye, UK, Ukraine | Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte D'Ivoire, Dem. Rep. of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Senegal, Seychelles, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe | Argentina, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Saint Lucia, Surinam, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, USA, Venezuela | Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, Laos, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Palestine, Philippines, Paraguay, Peru, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, Viet Nam | Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Micronesia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu |
| 46 | 32 | 30 | 24 | 7 |

Sending States with a Negative Approach

SLOVAKIA AND HUNGARY

In the case of Slovakia, the official position on this issue was triggered by an incident in July 2016 where the Slovak Embassy in Hungary raised the rainbow flag during a local rainbow march without the consent of the Slovak Government or the Foreign Ministry. The then Slovak Prime Minister, Robert Fico (2016), deemed the action inappropriate and unacceptable, stating that he expected the Foreign Ministry to prevent such excesses. He justified his position by asserting that Slovakia, as a democratic state, is not bound by any ideology or religion according to its constitution and does not favour any particular group of people. Then the Slovak Foreign Ministry issued a statement (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AND EUROPEAN AFFAIRS OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC, 2016) clarifying that the rainbow motif had been displayed at the Slovak embassy in Budapest without prior consultation

with the Ministry, and that the Minister informed the Slovak ambassador that embassies cannot autonomously decide on actions with political implications. Prior to this statement, the Slovak Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčák (2016) had responded to a petition signed by more than 7,500 citizens of Slovakia condemning the embassy's use of the rainbow flag. He described the rainbow flag as a visual symbol of support for the pride event, and added that Slovak embassies would be instructed to consult with the headquarters in advance in cases of such actions, while taking into account the principles of diplomatic protocol.

Following this incident, no cases have been reported of rainbow flags being displayed on the premises of Slovak embassies. In summary, the 2016 rainbow flag display in Hungary was not an official stance of Slovakia but rather an individual action by the then Slovak Ambassador to Hungary. Since international law is not merely the result of the behaviour of diplomats, who are also obligated to respect the instructions of their sovereigns (CARTY, 2007), Slovakia is not considered a state with the diplomatic practice of flying the rainbow flag. In direct relation to the said situation, Hungarian media reported that the Hungarian Foreign Ministry took steps to avoid similar controversies by explicitly prohibiting Hungarian embassies from displaying flags other than the Hungarian flag, the EU flag, and, in some cases, the flags of Hungarian national minorities (SZABOLCS, 2016).

SPAIN

As seen in the cases of all the countries mentioned earlier, the decision-making regarding the flying of the rainbow flag by diplomatic missions primarily falls within the competence of the executive, and potentially also the legislature. An interesting case in this respect is Spain, where the issue was indirectly addressed by the Spanish Supreme Court Judgment No 564/2020 (2020) stating that:

it is not in compliance with the constitutional and legal framework, in particular with the duty of objectivity and neutrality of public authorities, for any unofficial flags to be displayed, even occasionally, outside public buildings and spaces, even when they do not replace but rather complement the official flag of Spain or other legally recognised flags.

Although the judgment referred to the unofficial flag of the Canary Islands, it appears to imply a prohibition on the flying of any unofficial flag by Spanish public authorities, including the flying of the rainbow flag at Spanish diplomatic missions. This explains why rainbow flags are no longer displayed at Spanish embassies after 2020, with the only exception being their display by the Spanish embassy in Poland in 2024. It is also likely the reason why the cultural section of the Spanish embassy in the USA displayed a handmade crocheted rainbow motif installation instead of an ordinary rainbow flag in 2021 and 2022 – Ministerio se Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea, y Cooperación (2022).

OTHER STATES

Additionally, some countries have expressed an official opposition to the flying of the rainbow flag by foreign missions. In doing so, these states acted in their capacity as receiving states. It is only logical that in their capacity as sending states, they will adopt the same stance, as evidenced by their diplomatic practice of not flying the rainbow flag at their own embassies.

In 2018, the Belarusian Interior Ministry criticised the British embassy for displaying the rainbow flag despite there being no complaints from Belarusian authorities in this regard in previous years (BBC, 2018). Media reports have indicated that in 2020, Russia sent protest notes to the embassies of Canada, the UK, and the USA in response to their displays of the rainbow flag (TASS, 2020). Similarly, a Press Statement by the Iraqi Foreign Ministry (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF IRAQ, 2020) condemned the flying of rainbow flags by the Canadian and UK embassies in Iraq, asserting that the flags were contrary to the moral principles of all divine religions, and reminded all the missions operating in Iraq that they are to respect local laws and act in accordance with diplomatic norms as well as the values prevailing in Iraqi society. Later, in a similar vein, Indonesia summoned the British ambassador to the country in response to the British Embassy's flying of the rainbow flag (REUTERS, 2022), and the Government of the United Arab Emirates condemned the U.S. embassy there for raising the rainbow flag, since the former considered it as a show of disrespect (TURCO & GACEK, 2023, p. 13). In 2023, the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, James Marape – Department of Prime Minister and National Executive Council

(2023), reminded the U.S. embassy there to respect the culture, customs, and religion of Papua New Guinea following its display of the rainbow flag. According to V-Pride (2023), a community-based organisation in Vanuatu, the Vanuatu Minister for Foreign Affairs was appalled by the raising of the rainbow flag by the British High Commission on 17 May 2023 and instructed its removal. Beyond states with official protests, there are some countries that have experienced significant public condemnations of foreign missions raising the rainbow flag. This type of opposition has been particularly notable in countries such as Poland (THE DAILY MAIL, 2009), Bahrain (AMWAJ.MEDIA, 2021) (although the rainbow flag display occurred inside the U.S. embassy), Jamaica (DIXON, 2021), Kenya (MAGIRA, 2024), and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the mayor of Sarajevo, following public complaints, informed the Swedish embassy of his condemnation of its raising of the rainbow flag (NYMAN, 2024).

According to brief reports from the media, China and Kuwait seem to be part of this group of countries, too. As reported by Chen (2023), in the spring of 2023, the Chinese Foreign Ministry notified foreign embassies and international organisations that they are not to display politicised propaganda on the exterior walls of their buildings and facilities. This measure was likely a response to the increasing number of expressions of support for Ukraine by diplomatic missions, particularly through displays of Ukrainian flags and various banners featuring the Ukrainian flag motif. However, one diplomatic source suggested that this measure is aimed at the rainbow flag rather than at Ukraine (MÜLLER, OTS & HINDRE, 2023). As regards Kuwait, in 2022, the local U.S. embassy posted a rainbow flag with a pro-LGBT message on its X account, triggering protests and leading Kuwaiti officials to condemn the posts, as they accused the embassy of violating international conventions requiring diplomats to respect the laws and regulations of the receiving state (SANDS, 2022). There is likely no doubt that if the Kuwaiti authorities condemned the posting of a picture of a rainbow flag on social media, they would equally strongly oppose its direct display at the embassy.

Similarly, Singapore has an indirectly expressed negative stance regarding the raising of the rainbow flag in diplomatic practice. Several embassies have done so in Singapore, but no protest against these actions has been documented. On the other hand, the Foreign Ministry of

Singapore reminded the U.S. Embassy that foreign missions are not to interfere in Singapore's domestic social and political matters following the U.S. Embassy's co-hosting of a webinar together with Oogachaga, a local non-profit organisation working with the local LGBTI community (ONG, 2021).

THE QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY RESULTS

This section of the article presents the results of the survey conducted through questionnaires being sent to over 200 entities maintaining bilateral diplomatic relations and provides a concise summary of the responses received to offer a better understanding of current practices in the examined area – but unfortunately, there were only 17 responses. Based on the responses received, the sending states concerned can be classified into three groups:

- those (ten) states that answered positively, affirming and explaining the practice of their diplomatic missions flying the rainbow flag;
- those (two) states that answered negatively, opposing the raising of the rainbow flag by their diplomatic missions;
- those (five) states that answered ambiguously, with no explicit position on the matter.

Sending States with a Positive Stance

The states in this group confirmed that their foreign missions raise the rainbow flag, regardless of whether they do so explicitly or implicitly, or briefly or more extensively. In most cases, they provided some enriching information that helps us to understand the diplomatic practice of the respective country and complements the quantitative data presented in this article and its supplementary appendices with deeper insights into the issue. These responses also provide valuable details about procedural, normative, and other aspects of the flying of the rainbow flag by diplomatic missions. These states are as follows:

AUSTRALIA

The Australian Deputy Head of Mission in Vienna, Emil Stojanovski (2021A, 2021B), responded that (i) he was unsure where the decision to raise the rainbow flag by the Australian embassy in Vienna was actually made, noting that such decisions are typically made by the head of mission in consultation with the headquarters, while they take into account the sensitivities around the flag protocol in the broader community in which they serve, including the importance of Australia being seen as following the appropriate flag protocol; (ii) he observed foreign missions raising rainbow flags in Canberra, assuming that they did not require approval from the Australian Government to do so, as that would be a matter for the respective foreign governments; and (iii) the rainbow flag is not an official flag but is categorised as a community flag, and Australian missions have the option to consider displaying it on a separate mobile flagpole or affix it in a dignified way to an appropriate wall as an alternative.

DENMARK

The response of Birgit Sarah Kondrup-Palmqvist (2020) from the Protocol Department of the Danish Foreign Ministry, though brief, addressed all the questions raised. Accordingly, the Ministry does not have information about where the Danish embassies and consular posts have already raised the rainbow flag, and it does not maintain a list of which diplomatic missions displayed the rainbow flag in Denmark, since no statistics are kept on this matter, not even by the Ministry of Justice. Based on the available knowledge, the Ministry confirmed that Danish posts abroad have not encountered any refusal or opposition to flying the rainbow flag. The response continued that Denmark

does not have a set of rules for when and how to hoist the rainbow flag, and the national rules, which are set by the Ministry of Justice, [do] not hinder hoisting the rainbow flag, as it is considered a so-called fantasy flag – not representing a specific state. Thus, it is up to the heads of missions to decide when to hoist the rainbow flag.

FINLAND

Sinikka Malmberg (2021) from the Protocol Services of the Finnish Foreign Ministry provided a response stating that there is no survey on (i) the flying the rainbow flag by diplomatic missions in Finland or by Finnish missions abroad, or (ii) refusals of or opposition to Finnish missions displaying the rainbow flag in any receiving state. She also clarified that Finland has not taken any official stance on whether foreign missions can raise the rainbow flag on the territory of a receiving state. The decision to have a Finnish mission hoist the rainbow flag lies with the Finnish Ambassador, who may consult with the Foreign Ministry before making such a decision.

THE NETHERLANDS

Floris Serné (2021) from the Department for Multilateral Institutions and Human Rights of the Dutch Foreign Ministry stated that the flying of the rainbow flag is part of broader efforts to promote equal rights of LGBTI people and that these activities are carefully planned with consideration for the social and political sensitivity of such actions. The rainbow flag is displayed by Dutch missions in states where local LGBTI organisations indicate that this form of support would make a positive contribution to the situation of LGBTI people.

ISRAEL

The position of Israel was communicated by Dominika Dobrovičová (2021) from the Embassy of Israel to Slovakia upon consultation with the Israeli Foreign Ministry. She stated that Israel does not have a record of rainbow flags being hoisted by Israeli missions abroad or by foreign missions in Israel, or any record of negative reactions to the flying of a rainbow flag by Israeli missions in any host country. A potential decision to have an Israeli mission hoist the rainbow flag would be raised with the Foreign Ministry head office, and a potential decision to have a foreign mission fly the rainbow flag in Israel would generally be subject to the discretion of the relevant foreign mission.

LUXEMBOURG

The Foreign Ministry of Luxembourg replied through its Protocole Direction (²⁰²¹), informing us that it does not keep track of the flying of the rainbow flag by its own missions, or by foreign missions in Luxembourg. It also stated that its diplomatic missions are encouraged to hoist the rainbow flag on specific occasions and within the boundaries of what is culturally possible in the host country. With respect to the authority entitled to decide on the hoisting of the rainbow flag, Luxembourg stated that this competence lies with the Government and the Foreign Ministry. Finally, Luxembourg has no knowledge of any refusals regarding the hoisting of the rainbow flag by its missions, and it does not object to displays of the rainbow flag by missions of other states on its territory.

THE UNITED KINGDOM

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (²⁰²⁰) reported that there is no central record of rainbow flags being raised by UK missions, or information on any opposition to this practice, as they do not collect such information or maintain such a record. They also do not have any information on the flying of rainbow flags by missions stationed in the UK. They added

that the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs advises Diplomatic Missions overseas when the Foreign, Commonwealth, Development Office UK Estate will be flying the Rainbow Flag. This grants our Heads of Mission discretion to do the same providing they have sufficient flag poles to do so.

SWEDEN

Johan Schierwagen (²⁰²⁰) from the Protocol Department of the Swedish Foreign Ministry advised that the Ministry does not keep a record of where and under what circumstances the rainbow flag has been hoisted in Swedish missions abroad. Further, Sweden does not have a specific

position on the symbols foreign diplomatic missions choose to display provided that they respect Swedish law, which is the case with the rainbow flag. Additionally, there is no available information on any refusal of or opposition to a raising of the rainbow flag by a Swedish mission or a hoisting of the rainbow flag by a foreign mission in Sweden. According to the internal guidelines,

flags that represent movements, interest groups, corporations, political ideas and similar sentiments are not to be hoisted at Sweden's authorities abroad. The Swedish flag symbolises Sweden's core values, including the government's unequivocal support for human rights. However, exceptions are made in individual cases, for example with regard to the rainbow flag. Such exceptions can be approved by the Chief of Protocol or a Head of Mission locally, as appropriate.

SWITZERLAND

The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) answered in a quite detailed manner. According to Gian Andrea Badrutt (2020), the use of flags that are not national or sovereign is not specifically regulated, and therefore there is no particular provision for the flying of the rainbow flag by diplomatic missions. This lack of regulation allows for some flexibility within the framework of the VCDR for both Swiss and foreign missions. However, the legal provisions and practices of the receiving state must always be respected. Switzerland's general practice is governed by the following principles:

The heads of Swiss missions abroad are responsible for the flag decoration of their embassy. Under certain circumstances, Switzerland may support an organization or issue by flying a particular flag for a limited time (e. g. UN, Francophonie). Foreign missions in Switzerland are also independent in this matter (within the boundaries of the Vienna Conventions). Furthermore, Switzerland informed us that some foreign missions in Bern have already displayed the rainbow flag without questions being raised about it. As to whether or which Swiss missions abroad have flown the rainbow flag, the FDFA could not provide reliable information about this, as this matter falls under the responsibility of the respective heads of missions.

TAIWAN

Taiwan, as a state not generally recognised, presented its position through Frank Lin (2020) from the European Affairs Department of the Foreign Ministry. According to their response, Taiwan is a free society and

could accept raising the rainbow flag in Taiwan by diplomatic missions. Our missions overseas will not do it by [themselves], but as long as it follows the local law and depends on the necessity, they can do it [sic].

Sending States with a Negative Stance

Only two states in this group responded to the survey, namely Jamaica and Spain. They stated the following:

JAMAICA

In the view of the Protocol Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, as reported by Franz Hall (2020), if a foreign embassy raises the rainbow flag, it does so, technically speaking, on its own property and not on Jamaican soil. However, Jamaica is of the opinion that:

the only flags that should fly at Diplomatic Missions are the country flag of the sending State, a recognized international organization flag (for example, the United Nations, the European Union, and the Caribbean Community), and the Jamaican flag.

SPAIN

The Embassy of Spain in Bratislava (2021) stated briefly that in 2020, a Spanish court of justice ruled that the administration must be neutral and objective without any bias, so embassies, as representations of the Spanish administration abroad, cannot hoist any kind of flag except for the Spanish and the European ones.

Sending States with an Ambiguous Stance

The third group of responses consists of those from which no clear position on the use of the rainbow flag by missions in receiving states can be deduced. Interestingly, all these responses are from states whose diplomatic practice, according to our findings, does not include flying the rainbow flag. Some responses within this group, however, admit or imply the possibility of flying the rainbow flag in the future. The ambiguous responses are as follows:

BELIZE

Reineldo Urbina (2021) from the Embassy of Belize in Brussels responded that, according to his personal knowledge, the British High Commission in Belize raised the rainbow flag at some point. He did not provide any further details, though.

ROMANIA

Sandra Gătejeanu-Gheorghe and Daniela Mihaela Cămărăsan (2020) from the Romanian Foreign Ministry advised that it does not have any responsibilities regarding the raising of rainbow flags by foreign missions in Romania. They continued by stating that the Romanian legislation does not prohibit the hoisting of any particular flag as long as it does not pursue unlawful objectives, including, but not limited to, a threat to territorial integrity and other national security issues. Romania's missions are entitled to regularly hoist flags other than the Romanian one (e.g., the flags of the EU, NATO, the UN, and the host state). Finally, regarding the flying of flags of other states or regional/local authorities, the rules are set by the national law and the internal guidelines of the Romanian authorities. However, Romania does not have any specific legal norms or regulations regarding the hoisting of flags other than those mentioned above.

EL SALVADOR

El Salvador's position on raising the rainbow flag is very reluctant. According to information provided in 2021, no mission of any sending state has displayed the rainbow flag in El Salvador, and in the personal opinion of the corresponding ambassador, since El Salvador is a conservative country, there is no expectation that any state would do so in the near future.

This assumption did not prove to be accurate, however, as the rainbow flag was raised in El Salvador by the USA in 2022 and 2023, by Mexico in 2023 and by Chile in 2024.

SLOVAKIA

The Diplomatic Protocol of the Slovak Foreign Ministry did not mention the situation with the rainbow flag hoisted by its embassy in Budapest in 2016 in either of its two responses. According to Roman Hlobeň (2020A), the flying of any flag other than the flag of the Slovak Republic or the EU is permissible, but it must be approved by the Slovak Foreign Ministry. This step is usually coordinated with the EU Delegation and the missions of other EU members in the receiving state. However, this cannot be generalised, as religious and cultural aspects, as well as local traditions, must be considered so as to avoid offending the receiving state. As stated by Hlobeň (2020B), before flying a flag other than the national flag of the sending state, foreign missions should inform the Foreign Ministry of the receiving state about such a display, and the Ministry will simply take note of it. In Slovakia, foreign missions usually inform the Slovak Foreign Ministry in advance if they intend to fly the rainbow flag.

UKRAINE

Mykola Tochytskyi (2021), the Head of the Mission of Ukraine to the EU, began his response by informing us that foreign missions in Ukraine are usually guided by the legislation of the sending state on the use of symbols. The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry does not monitor information concerning foreign diplomatic or consular posts' hoisting of rainbow flags or intentions to do so and does not have information about any flying of the rainbow flag by Ukrainian diplomatic missions either. In addition, he emphasised that public authorities of Ukraine may use Ukrainian statutory symbols and, in accordance with certain bylaws such as presidential decrees or governmental orders, other symbols too, such as symbols of national minorities and international organisations that are used to honour the memory of certain categories of people or to commemorate certain events.

FINAL FINDINGS

Although the rainbow flag has been raised by the diplomatic missions of a clear minority of all sending states (namely 36, according to our data), it was flown in approximately two-thirds of all receiving states. In total, we documented 705 instances of the rainbow flag being raised in bilateral diplomatic practice, excluding repeated displays by a particular mission in the same country across different years and multiple occasions within a single year. In many cases, these repetitions were frequent and, for the sake of clarity, are not recorded individually in the appendices, but the resulting findings presented below, of course, take them into account. Our statistics on the rainbow flag flying in diplomatic practice and its occurrence on each continent suggest that it is indeed widespread. We can almost certainly conclude that the rainbow flag was, until recently, the third most used flag by diplomatic missions, following the flags of the sending states and the EU flag. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it probably dropped by one position due to the intensive raisings of the Ukrainian flag by dozens of diplomatic missions in many countries around the world.

Although it is a relatively new practice, the growing use of the rainbow flag raises legitimate questions about whether it is applied consistently by different states, whether there are any patterns in its use, and whether states follow any rules of diplomatic law when carrying this practice out. Some answers can be identified in the practice itself, but the opinions of the states concerned would also be helpful in this regard. Interestingly, states have shown little willingness to share their views about this. The low response rate (around 9%) is likely due to the sensitivity of the topic and the reasons behind the sending states' decisions to fly rainbow flags at their missions. Obviously, this flag is a symbol with strong cultural, religious, and moral connotations. Since it is a fantasy or community flag and not an official symbol, its use in diplomatic practice can provoke disputes. As recent developments in the USA – the country with the most extensive practice of flying this flag abroad – demonstrate, this can occur within the sending state itself when one administration permits the raising of the rainbow flag by diplomatic missions while another administration bans it.

After the pioneering period of the raising of the rainbow flag by a few states between 2008 and 2014, several trends have emerged within

this practice. First, diplomatic missions began raising rainbow flags as part of their sending states' policies, both in Western countries and in states where progress on LGBTI rights had been made. This practice extended to countries where the status of LGBTI people is not explicitly addressed in local law, but homosexual behaviour is not penalised. Finally, it was also observed in countries where homosexuality faces a societal or religious opposition that is often linked to condemnation or even criminal sanctions. Second, diplomatic missions typically raise the rainbow flag as part of a broader programme supporting LGBTI rights in the receiving state. This means that the rainbow flag is not raised as an isolated gesture; rather, it is accompanied by other activities aimed at improving the status of LGBTI individuals, as evidenced above by the practices of the UK, the USA, and the Netherlands, and illustrated, for example, by the involvement of embassies in rainbow parades and related events (SEE ROSPUTINSKÝ & ROŠTEKOVÁ, 2019). Third, diplomatic missions of like-minded states often coordinate with one another in this respect – typically through joint statements on LGBTI rights or declarations in support of local pride events, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic (2024), or Diplomatic community (2025) – or incorporate displays of the rainbow flag into their actions in response to initiatives from the receiving state's civil society (see the Netherlands' response). Fourth, the raising of the rainbow flag is time-limited, which means it does not fly as long or as often as the flag of the sending state (as explicitly confirmed by Switzerland). Fifth, the rainbow flag is displayed with less formality and emphasis on protocol than the state flag. It is commonly displayed not only on the main embassy flagpole but also in ways that would likely be considered illegal or disrespectful if it were the state flag, such as raising it from a window or placing it on the embassy's fence. This finding is clearly supported and evidenced by practices documented in numerous photographs that are referenced in the appendices. Sixth, sending states generally fully respect the host state's position if it officially announces its disapproval of or protest against the raising of the rainbow flag. It has also been documented that the sending states did not display the rainbow flag the following year in cases where a part of the host state's population expressed significant discontent with such a display the year before. However, when the expressions of opposition were marginal, the sending states continued their practice. A notable example of this is the case of the Finnish and Swedish embassies in Zambia, which flew rainbow flags from 2018 to 2021, and the Zambian Vice President

Mutale Nalumango's (2022) reaction to this that was delivered to members of parliament from the Patriotic Front in 2022, in which she asked where the Patriotic Front had been in the last four years while these embassies were flying the flags to express concern. Seventh, there is no official record of this practice in any of the states concerned, as indicated by the responses received, which suggests that, from their perspective, it is regarded as ordinary diplomatic work that does not warrant any special documentation.

On the other hand, there are some differences in the observed diplomatic practices, and it is not always entirely clear what position the particular sending state takes. This applies, firstly, to the question of who is authorised to decide on whether the rainbow flag will be raised. The decision can be made by the head of the foreign mission in the specific receiving state, but it can also be made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the government or the head of the sending state. As evidenced by the case of Spain, it cannot be ruled out that the decision to raise the rainbow flag may be influenced by, or even substantively determined by, a ruling of the relevant court of the sending state. In this regard, this is primarily a procedural issue, although central decision-making would likely ensure a more consistent practice than decisions made by individual embassies. The available data on the location of decision-making in each case is fragmented, and as a result, no influence on the meaning or impact of the given rainbow flag display can be identified based on this location. Secondly, there are different degrees of presentation regarding the flying of the rainbow flag by embassies abroad: some countries document and present this practice in great detail, while others are silent about it or only rarely mention it. Thirdly, a more significant issue is whether the use of the rainbow flag is even acceptable to the sending state, given its neutrality toward various movements, interest groups, political ideas, or segments of its own population. This aspect has a strong domestic dimension, and its solution does not depend on foreign policy considerations. States differ in their attitudes: for example, Spain, Slovakia, and, since 2025, the USA have taken a strict stance against raising flags other than official ones, while countries like the UK, Germany, and Sweden have decided to raise the rainbow flag, stating that it is not about giving any preferential treatment to anyone or anything, but rather about making a gesture of solidarity and support for human rights.

The most important context for raising the rainbow flag for both sending states and receiving states is the consideration of the cultural, religious, and social conditions in the receiving state. The responses to the questionnaires revealed that no state claimed that there is any legal basis in international law for its diplomatic missions flying the rainbow flag. On the other hand, the local law and local conditions in the receiving state may pose a barrier to this practice. As clearly outlined in Article 41 of the VCDR, there are three relevant rules that must be observed by the sending states' diplomatic missions: the duty to respect local laws, the prohibition on interfering in the internal affairs of the host country, and the ban on using the mission's premises in a manner inconsistent with the functions of the mission outlined in Article 3 of the VCDR, which include, among other things, the promotion of friendly relations and the development of cultural relations between sending states and receiving states. Even if the receiving state's law does not explicitly or implicitly prohibit the raising of the rainbow flag – which is likely the prevailing situation – it should be examined whether the act of raising the rainbow flag by a diplomatic mission interferes with other limitations under Article 41 of the VCDR. This is similar to, or the same as, the participation of embassy staff in a Pride march, hosting local LGBTI activists at the embassy, and any other type of support for minority rights in the receiving state. As for the assessment of the legal aspects of these actions, since they are not the focus of this article, we refer to the relevant literature: e.g., Behrens (2016), Denza (2016) or Oelfke (2018).

Thus, although there is no specific rule in international law that would explicitly authorise sending states to fly the rainbow flag at the premises of their diplomatic missions, and no specific rule prohibiting such use of the flag either, it cannot be claimed that this activity is without any legal regulation in international diplomatic law since the general obligations under Article 41 of the VCDR remain fully applicable.

CONCLUSION

More than 15 years have passed since the first display of the rainbow flag by a diplomatic mission. This practice dates back to 2008, when

the UK as a single sending state implemented it in three receiving states. Nowadays, this practice is much more widespread, as evidenced by the numbers of both the sending and the receiving states involved. However, the list of states with this practice shows that the vast majority of sending states – roughly five-sixths – have not yet incorporated the flying of rainbow flags by their missions into their diplomatic practice.

The raising of the rainbow flag has occurred in at least 139 receiving states, usually repeatedly. It has become a routine practice especially during certain occasions like IDAHOBIT or local rainbow pride events. At this time, rainbow flag displays receive more media attention or become the subject of political debates particularly in states where the display of the rainbow flag by an embassy is a first-time occurrence. According to available information, approximately one-third of UN members have not yet seen an embassy fly the rainbow flag. Surely, however, this depends significantly on the number of foreign missions in a given receiving state. A lower number of diplomatic missions in a state means a lower likelihood of one of them flying the rainbow flag.

Currently, embassies have no explicit entitlement to fly the rainbow flag at their premises as a symbol of support for human rights, and this practice is not even recognised in international custom. This is because (i) the current practice of states is neither consistent nor uniform, and (ii) there is a complete absence of *opinion iuris* in this matter. Both of these conclusions are clearly supported by the findings presented in this article and its appendices. While some states have embraced this activity as a gesture of promotion of LGBTI rights reflecting their domestic policies, others have resisted it due to ideological, cultural, or legal reasons. Nonetheless, the raising of the rainbow flag does not take place in a legal vacuum. This activity is subject to the obligations of sending states under Article 41(1) and (3) of the VCDR. Thus, the flying of the rainbow flag by a diplomatic mission must not violate the laws and regulations of the receiving state, nor should it interfere with the internal affairs of that state. The third limitation is the prohibition on using the premises of the mission in a manner incompatible with the mission's functions, specifically the promotion of friendly relations between the sending state and the receiving state, as well as the development of their cultural and other relations.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Naturally, English was predominant, but the posts were sometimes in other languages as well, especially Spanish, Russian, French, Italian, German, and local languages spoken in the receiving states.
- 2 The exceptions are the Prisoner of War/Missing in Action flag, the Hostage and Wrongful Detainee flag, the flag of an Indian Tribal government, an official branded flag of a U.S. agency, and the sovereign flag of another country.
- 3 For instance, in 2018, the embassies of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden jointly flew the rainbow flag at their shared cultural centre the *Felleshus* (also known as the *Pan-Nordic Building*) in Berlin, which is located near their embassies (Botschaft von Finnland in Berlin, 2018; Nordische Botschaften, 2025). Similarly, in 2019, the ambassadors of the Netherlands, Canada, Norway, and Sweden in South Sudan displayed the rainbow flag in front of the building housing their missions (Netherlands Embassy in South Sudan, 2019).
- 4 We have not been able to find a single case of the rainbow flag being hoisted by a Taiwanese mission in a state with which Taiwan has diplomatic relations. The only relevant case found in the research concerns Belgium, and this case falls under the quasi-diplomatic relations between Belgium and Taiwan.
- 5 According to the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2025), Palestine was recognised by 149 countries as of 28 February 2025. The number of diplomatic relations of Palestine is not available in official sources, but it is indisputable that Palestine conducts bilateral diplomatic relations with other states, including exchanges of embassies.
- 6 As of May 2024, the Cook Islands has diplomatic relations with 66 states (Cook Islands News, 2024).
- 7 This position was communicated to the author in a phone interview on 1 April 2021 by a Head of Mission of El Salvador in one of the European capitals, who made their participation in the research conditional on the author's explicit promise not to disclose their identity.
- 8 On the contrary, for example, British regulations explicitly permit flying the rainbow flag without prior consent from a competent public authority, though this is subject to certain size restrictions and other limitations regarding the number and location of the flags. More information is available at Gov.uk (2021).

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NOTE

Since part of the survey was conducted under the author's supervision within his course on Diplomatic and Consular Law in cooperation with his students from the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, the author sincerely thanks all of them. Without their help, many instances of rainbow flag placements would have gone unnoticed, and this article would have been less accurate in reflecting reality. The author also extends his heartfelt thanks to the two reviewers who assessed this article and provided valuable feedback, the incorporation of which has contributed to enhancing the quality of this paper.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Peter Rosputinský is an Associate Professor at the Department of International Relations and Diplomacy, the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. His contemporary research focuses on diplomatic practice and its impact on the development of diplomatic law. He is the author or co-author of several books and has published over fifty academic papers and book chapters.

Anxiety and Fantasy: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Continuity of the EU's Sanctions Policy Regarding Russia and Myanmar

LUNYKA ADELINA PERTIWI

Eberhard Karl University of Tübingen, Germany

E-MAIL

lunyka.pertiwi@gmail.com

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5343-8407>

ABSTRACT

This article employs Lacanian psychoanalysis to explain why the EU maintains its sanctions against Russia and Myanmar despite their questionable effectiveness. The framework moves beyond traditional identity, normative and interest-based explanations. By integrating existential concerns with psychoanalytic insights, this article illuminates the understudied emotional dimensions of the EU sanctions policy, offering a deeper understanding of the sanctions policy continuity through the non-conscious dimension. It explains that the EU experienced existential anxiety when its idealised discourses – “Integration and Eastern Enlargement” for Russia and the “normative economic partnership with Asia” for Myanmar – became fragmented. The hidden political enjoyment of each discourse, which provided the EU’s sense of existence, became disrupted. Concurrently, a new political enjoyment emerged through a political fantasy involving a clear identification of “Us” (the EU) and “Them” (the targeted regime). Another central aspect of the political fantasy is narratives about the sanctions. These narratives function as transgressive elements of narratives of identification. Through the sanctions implementation, the EU repeatedly tried to actualise this new political enjoyment.

KEYWORDS

existential anxiety, Myanmar, political enjoyment, political fantasy, Russia, sanctions, continuity, the EU

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.32422/cjir.1898>

PUBLISHED ONLINE

17 February, 2026

INTRODUCTION

Sanctions have become the EU's signature foreign policy instrument. They are employed more frequently than military action or humanitarian aid, and yet their effectiveness remains deeply contested. The EU has two prominent prolonged sanctions regimes; the one towards Russia and the one towards Myanmar. Russia continues its war in Ukraine despite 11 years of EU sanctions against it, while Myanmar's military junta remains entrenched in power despite three decades of restrictive measures directed towards it. The paradox is striking: sanctions are both the EU's favorite tool and one of its least effective instruments. Why, then, does the Union maintain them?

The existing literature on the EU's sanctions employs diverse analytical frameworks to explain why the EU imposes sanctions. Studies like those of Bosse (2022) and Sjursen & Rosen (2017) mainly utilise normative approaches when examining the EU's sanctions on Russia. Similarly, research on the EU's sanctions on Myanmar, such as that of Beke & Hachez (2015) and Portela & Orbie (2014), uses normative frameworks. Beyond normative explanations, many scholars have explored alternative rationales for the EU sanctions policy. Regarding the sanctions on Russia, the analytical frameworks include the EU's territorial threat perception (Hofer, 2021; Hörbelt, 2017), interest-based bargaining (Orenstein & Kelemen, 2017; Stoop, 2016), actorship recognition (Giumelli et al., 2021; Noutcheva, 2018), and psychological dimensions such as the U.S.'s emotional influence on the EU (Beauregard, 2022) and the EU's mistrust towards Russia (Natorski & Pamorska, 2017). For the sanctions on Myanmar, the relevant research emphasises the EU's identity (Xuechen, 2018; Robertua, 2014), perceptions of Myanmar's capabilities (Meissner, 2023), and economic interests (Marchi, 2014) as explanatory registers. Additionally, an extensive literature confronts the effectiveness of these sanctions regimes; its studies on Russia (Morgan et al., 2023; Portela, 2016) and Myanmar (Dösch & Sidhu, 2015; Giumelli & Ivan, 2013) offer varying explanations for the sanctions against them. Collectively, this research explains why the sanctions are imposed and how they function, but it leaves underexplored the puzzle of persistence: why the sanctions endure even when they seem to fail.

One reason for this gap is the relative neglect of emotions in the analysis of the EU's sanctions. While most existing works on the EU's sanctions

on Russia examine strategic and normative considerations, emotional explanations of them remain rare. Beauregard's (2022) study stands out for emphasising transatlantic emotional resonance in the EU sanctions against Russia, but it largely treats European emotions, e.g. fear, as reactive to U.S. narratives evoking the trauma of the Cold War, and as underplaying the endogenous dynamics within the Union. Beauregard also adds that the EU's fear transformed into anger due to the shooting down of the MH17, thereby leading to the EU's sanctions on Russia. Consequently, even though he agrees that anxiety can resonate and become an explanatory register, his literature pays little attention to how collective anxiety shapes the EU's ongoing commitment to its sanctions policy. Meanwhile, in the literature regarding the EU's sanctions in the case of Myanmar, emotions are virtually absent from their analysis. In particular, the role of anxiety – a fundamental yet underexplored emotion – has not received sufficient attention there. Thus this article argues that existential anxiety is central to understanding why the EU maintains the sanctions despite questions of their effectiveness.

The EU faces recurring anxieties about how to reinvent itself and assert its greater global relevance in the face of external crises within the region and abroad. For example, the EU's existential anxiety has endured since Russia's Crimean annexation, which challenged European integration dynamics. Similarly, another global crisis, namely Myanmar's aggressiveness since 1996, has tested the Union's commitment to human rights promotion and its capacity to influence events beyond its immediate neighborhood. These anxieties push the Union to rely on established instruments such as sanctions as a way of managing institutional unease (NITOIU, 2025; KAUNERT & DE DAUS PEREIRA, 2023). This becomes a serious matter because the sanctions are not only instruments of coercion – they are also policy measures through which the EU expresses how it seeks its ontological existence.

Given that, this article shifts the analytical focus from imposition to persistence: from asking why the sanctions were launched to asking why they continue to persist. It inquires why the EU persists with the sanctions against Russia and Myanmar despite their limited effectiveness in resolving the crises and creating freedom for the attacked population. To address this question, this article requires the use of psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalytic approaches have already been applied to EU politics more broadly, as they offer tools for understanding the emotional dimensions of policy.

Volkan's (2017) research illustrates how collective perceptions of refugees as "others" prompted certain EU members to construct narratives portraying their nations as under threat from them. Similarly, Kinvall (2013) has illustrated how trauma and fear influenced European responses to the refugee crisis that resulted from the Arab Spring, revealing the psychological undercurrents that informed official policy positions.

Lacanian psychoanalytic theory has provided another avenue for analysis, particularly through its concepts of identity and enjoyment. Forchtner and Kølvråa (2012) and Kølvråa (2018) have utilised these frameworks to examine EU integration processes and major policy initiatives, exploring how these two factors shape European political narratives and actions. Complementing this approach, Loucas (2022) has employed the psychoanalytic concepts of dreams and desire to analyse the EU foreign policy toward Belarus, thus offering insights into the EU's normative power, which underlies its diplomatic strategies.

Furthermore, Mitzen's (2018, 2016) work illustrates how historical trauma can serve as both a catalyst and a constraint for political integration. According to her analysis, the collective trauma of World War II originally motivated European integration efforts, while the 2008 eurozone crisis, Brexit and migration issues reactivated anxiety about the potential dissolution of the European project. The EU's response to the latter involved promoting narratives about the strength and future prospects of continued European integration.

Yet, despite these advances, psychoanalysis, especially the Lacanian variety, has not yet been mobilised to explain the persistence of the EU sanctions policy by comparing its sanctions on Russia and Myanmar. Thus this article uses Lacanian psychoanalysis to do so.

This article argues that the continuity of the EU sanctions should not be understood primarily as a policy failure, but as a discursive and affective logic through which existential anxiety is managed. It shows that

the EU confronts a recurring anxiety about its existential relevance following the disruption of two idealised discourses: that of European integration, which has been challenged by Russia's aggressiveness since 2014, and that of the normative economic partnership with Asia, which has been challenged by Myanmar's actions since 1996. These disruptions fractured previously stabilised sources of political enjoyment that underpinned the EU's sense of collective existence.

In response, the EU discourse articulates distinct political fantasies in each case, through which new political enjoyment is organised. These fantasies operate through narratives of identification and transgression, accompanied by beatific and horrific imaginaries. Within these narratives, sanctions function as transgressive signifiers: their material effects on targeted populations and the EU actors interacting with them symbolically reinforce distinctions between the EU and its Others. Rather than resolving anxiety, political fantasy sustains it through the perpetual deferral of the anticipated existential fulfilment while simultaneously stabilising new narratives of identification. Sanctions implementation repeatedly actualises this newly organised political enjoyment, providing nodal points around which the discourse is reorganised and existential anxiety is managed. In this sense, sanctions continuity operates as an affective logic embedded in discourse rather than as an outcome of rational optimisation or normative compliance.

Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, this article contributes to the scholarship on EU foreign policy and sanctions by foregrounding political enjoyment as an analytical lens (ZEVNIK & MANDELBAUM, 2023; GELLWITZKI, 2025). It elucidates three interrelated discursive logics: (1) the fragmentation of the idealised discourse producing a deficit of political enjoyment and existential anxiety; (2) the organisation of new political enjoyment through a recurring political fantasy; and (3) the actualisation of this enjoyment through sanctions enforcement. Together, these logics illuminate how EU identity is not merely preserved but recalibrated amid crises through affective investments.

This article does not claim to offer a primary causal explanation for the EU sanctions continuity. Rather, it provides a complementary interpretative framework that highlights emotional and non-conscious dimensions

that are often overlooked in accounts centred on a stable identity, moral commitment, or strategic calculation.

LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY AND POLITICAL FANTASY

Lacan's concept of *parlêtre* (speaking being) emphasises that language and existence are fundamentally intertwined – a subject exists because it speaks, and it speaks because it exists. In Seminar XVII (1969–1970), Lacan posits that discourse functions as the fundamental organising principle within all human encounters, transcending mere verbal exchange (ALPARONE & LA ROSA, 2020; TOMBRAS, 2017; ALCORN, 1994; BRACHER, 1994).

Through his tripartite structural logic (the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real), Lacan developed Freud's concepts to illuminate how language brings human beings into existence within their social and symbolic world. In the imaginary process, the subject identifies with an ideal ego, which is expressed through a discourse during interactions with others within a symbolic structure (LACAN, 2014 IN MURA, 2015).

However, the Real moves beyond the imaginary and the symbolic. It becomes something that cannot be captured by discourse. Crucially, the subject may not recognise its own incompleteness, including the hidden dimensions of its discourse (such as enjoyment), which contribute to its subjective experience of its perfect existence. When external challenges confront the discourse, they disrupt the subject's hidden enjoyment (JOHNSTON, 2022; ALCORN, 1994; BRACHER, 1994), precipitating what Lacan (2014) conceptualises as existential anxiety – not anxiety about merely losing a visible object, but anxiety about confronting the lack of enjoyment (VULOVIC & EJDUS, 2024; STAVRAKAKIS, 2010).

At the collective level, a discourse unifies multiple sub-entities into a coherent collective subject (SCHRANS, 2018) by providing certainty, coordinating disparate interests, and enabling confident collective bonds. This shared idealised discourse conceals an underlying political dimension implicitly generating political enjoyment through hierarchy and power (LACAN, 1977; MARGULIES, 2011, 2014, 2023). What appears as a neutral discourse latently

functions as a means of operating collective superior or dominant positions over others and conferring prestige (EVANS, 1996).

Yet this discourse remains vulnerable when external challenges disrupt the concealed enjoyment, whereas such enjoyment makes a collective subject feel its collective existence within the social or political order. The loss of political enjoyment triggers collective anxiety. Because the discourse is always idealised, the collective subject moves toward preserving it when it is threatened (GUNDER, 2003; ALCORN, 1994; BRACHER, 1994).

The collective's struggle for ontological primacy against external challenges (RUTI, 2014) is not a mere competition but a systematic defensive response. When a collective subject experiencing this existential anxiety develops a political fantasy to mitigate it, this fantasy operates through a logic that organises a new political enjoyment, directing subjects toward concrete actions. Importantly, political fantasy functions collectively without requiring uniform narratives because what matters is that varied narratives maintain their connection to the shared idealised discourse binding the collective together (SCHRANS, 2018).

Political fantasy has become crucial in international relations and foreign policy, as it has been employed by leaders like Cameron, Obama, and Putin (EBERLE, 2019) and in events like Brexit (HALL, 2018). Jacobsen (2020) fascinatingly links idealised discourse to political fantasy through the U.S. cyber defence case: when Snowden's revelations exposed contradictions in America's idealised cyber defence discourse, the U.S. constructed a political fantasy portraying China as a major security threat while publicising anti-ISIL operations to illustrate the transparency of its practices – this exemplifies how existential anxiety related to discourse disruption necessitates political fantasy construction.

Despite these examples, existing works fail to conceptually explain how political fantasy manages existential anxiety – specifically how policy continuity and fantasy provide new nodal points for the political subject's grand discourse, which is intertwined with its existence. To solve this gap, a further explanation of political enjoyment should be included here.

Political enjoyment within an idealised discourse is fundamentally linked to power and hierarchy. The political enjoyment derived within the symbolic order represents a regulated form of satisfaction, as discourse initially functions to shield the subject from encountering the excessive intensity of another type of political enjoyment called *jouissance*, including the transgressive aspects that prop up such extreme enjoyment (PROUDFOOT, 2010). Following the discourse disruption, *jouissance* as a new political enjoyment is produced within the political fantasy through narratives of identification along with transgression narratives. Such enjoyment cannot exist without transgression, which entails the presence of a little suffering as a worthy sacrifice (HOOK, 2017; PROUDFOOT, 2010). The political fantasy organises this new political enjoyment designating a promised coherent existence. The political enjoyment is embedded within the ongoing pursuit and even within the obstacles encountered. This enjoyment encompasses purposes and directions of the struggle for collective existence (DALY, 1999; GLYNOS & STAVRAKAKIS, 2008).

At the institutional level, individual policymakers and sub-institutions become conduits for expressing a political fantasy consisting of intertwined narratives of collective identification and transgression (GLYNOS, 2011) to organise a new political enjoyment and to channel the institution toward preferred actions and policies (LACAN, 1961–1962; GUNDER, 2003; SOLOMON, 2015).

The articulation of identification within political fantasy stems from (re)constructing a collective “We” – defining who “we” are by specifying who “they” are. This process recognises comparable features shared with other subjects while attributing the obstruction of goals or ideal conditions to obstacles or aggressors. This process can include antagonising opponents and conceptualisations of how “they” have “stolen” the wholeness or ideal conditions that rightfully belong(s) to the collective “We” (the institution) – even though this process is a necessary fiction allowing the institution to sustain the imagination of the original plenitude in its idealised discourse.

Identification narratives emphasise “We” – a community united in (re)generating asymmetrical power relations and a willingness to take politically transgressive actions, including sanctions (HOOK, 2017). Sanctions involve transgressions because they impose negative consequences not

only on the targeted subjects but also on an institution's population and its cooperation with those targeted. Sanctions narratives adhere to a collective redemptive projection made to the institution's worthy community (WARDLE, 2016) and have been justified through their potentials to eliminate malevolent forces and rescue the political or social order from chaos (SMITH, 2008, CITED IN HÖRNQVIST, 2021, P. 98).

Yet here emerges a fundamental paradox: the elimination of malevolent forces can remain perpetually deferred. If such forces were eliminated too fast, the political fantasy structure sustaining the collective "We" could not be strengthened (ELMER, 1995; GELLWITZKI, 2025). The enemy must remain present because it relates to narratives of identification expressing the critical trajectory, the loss of the initial conditions, and the obstructed goals of the idealised discourse. This also creates a system where suffering is both meaningful and ultimately redemptive, as it maintains the faith in the collective sanctions. The "desired condition" operates according to a perpetual not-yet: it is always on the horizon, always about to be achieved through just one more sanction.

Moreover, to prevent the misinterpretation that the sanctions are mere acts of anger or revenge, the transgression narratives must be embedded within a clear moral framework of identification delineating specific roles (HÖRNQVIST, 2021). This moral structure strengthens the legitimacy and meanings of potentially destructive transgressions or sanctions. An institution can assume institutional roles related to the recognition of its authority and leadership, or demonstrate its protective functions in relation to the community and universal order. The identification and transgression narratives may be accompanied by beatific or horrific descriptions of what will occur if "We" (do not) overcome obstacles (MAHER, 2023). These descriptions can also reach back to the past through historical parallels – though these "parallels" are retroactively selected and reinterpreted from the perspective of the present crisis for future visions. Past, present, and future exist in mutual constitution – "We", standing at the present, anticipate the future to create the relevance of the past, or "We" construct the past to legitimate the projected future and to create a sense of urgency in responding to the current crisis and choosing sanctions as a preferred policy.

The affective power of political fantasies derives from how they continuously carry out narratives of identification and transgression, providing an institution with new enjoyment while alleviating anxiety. This enjoyment is tied to the imperative of actualisation through concrete political actions (GLYNOS, 2011). Yet because a coherent existence is always beyond reach, the political enjoyment will always be only partial. This explains why actualisation of political enjoyment is tied to repetition.

Crucially, this repetition is temporally constitutive: each iteration retroactively restructures the meaning of previous acts while anticipating future ones. The second sanction redefines what the first “really meant,” and the third redefines the previous acts. Moreover, the identification operates through “precipitation in the act” – the construction of “We” crystallises along with the dynamics of narratives and the implementation of the sanctions, and thus identity can be fundamentally unstable (ELMER, 1995; GUNDER, 2003; WARDLE, 2016).

Thus, an institution’s political fantasy structure that organises the new political enjoyment, maintains the anticipation of its complete existential fulfillment, and crystallises its identification and preferred transgression, is naturally embedded in such a perpetual deferral.

THE EU’S IDEALISED DISCOURSES AND DISRUPTIONS: RUSSIA AND MYANMAR

Given the above theoretical parts discussing the political subject’s idealised discourses in general terms, this article focuses on the EU as a specific institution whose particular discourses are disrupted by the aggressiveness of Russia and Myanmar’s respective regimes.

European integration aimed to achieve symmetrical benefits in political, security and social dimensions, and economic prosperity for the constituent member states and their populations. The sense of unity functioned as a critical substrate facilitating a shared interpretation of the process and values integration. It included the Eastern enlargement, revealing the EU integration’s attractiveness and institutional capacity to prepare states for accession (KØLVRAA, 2018).

The integration discourse positioned the EU as one regional organisation among others, but one that knew how to unify its post-conflict community. The discourse suggested that the EU's model – combining economic integration with democratic values, pooled sovereignty with respect for national identities, and market economics with social protections – represented a universal formula for stability and prosperity. The Eastern enlargement functioned as a proof of the concept, as former communist states were eager to join the EU precisely because the EU model worked for its members. This was where the idealised discourse of integration, which served as a type of symbolism, contained its own imaginary aspects of the EU itself, e.g. the EU as the future of countries in Europe (IBID.).

However, Russia's aggressive posture – namely the Crimea annexation and the military intervention in Ukraine – has confronted this superiority politically and militarily and created significant anxiety for the EU by undermining the completeness of the idealised integration discourse (GÜRKAN, 2024; NITOIU, 2025). It has challenged the very foundations of how the EU understood itself in its efforts to shape the European order.

Furthemore, the EU's idealised discourse regarding Myanmar rested on the assumption that its experience of combining economic prosperity with a healthy government and human rights protection provided a template that countries in Asia should follow. Stemming from its liberal triumph over communism, the EU's distinctive approaches in this respect linked its external economic cooperation with democratic values and human rights promotion in the post-Cold War period. This conditionality aimed to advance the application of European normative standards in Asia. In addition, through mechanisms like the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP), the EU created leverage for itself to encourage governance reforms in developing countries in Asia (DE VRIES, 2023; KØLVRAA, 2018).

Thus, this discourse both operated as a kind of symbolism and contained its own imaginary aspect, i.e. the EU as a normative exemplar whose norms have a universal applicability in efforts to achieve global peace and stability (DE VRIES, 2023; KØLVRAA, 2018).

However, Myanmar's detention of EU consul James Leander Nichols in 1996 and rejection of the EU engagement, combined with ASEAN

ASEAN maintaining its “ASEAN Way” while diminishing the EU’s importance and pursuing extensive partnerships with several East Asian countries, gradually undermined the EU-Asia engagement. Since this period, the EU has been unable to overcome its discomfort about its existential position in Asia (DU ROCHER, 2012; XUECHEN, 2018).

ANALYTICAL STRATEGY AND METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION (LEXICAL-INDICATOR-DRIVE)

This article utilises the following framework to examine the continuity of the EU sanctions through three analytical dimensions and their relationships:

Existential Anxiety (Analytical Dimension A): A collective ontological disturbance emerging when the EU’s idealised discourses are fragmented by disruptive realities, and encompassing a lack of political enjoyment.

Political Fantasy (Analytical Dimension B): Narrative structures managing existential anxiety through identification and preferred transgressions, generating new political enjoyment while legitimising sanctions.

Sanctions Continuity (Analytical Dimension C): A sustained implementation of the sanctions despite their contested effectiveness that involves continuously actualising the new political enjoyment and perpetuating goals of a coherent collective existence.

This article integrates critical narrative discourse analysis (CNDA) with Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts. CNDA itself can reveal how narratives function as cohesive forces within a grand discourse and how such a discourse can become institutionalised in narratives over time (SOUTO MANNING, 2012). However, Forchtner (2021) insists that the analytical focus on narrative components should be integrated with a specific theoretical construction to analyse how the narratives are related to a certain affect-related discourse, as CNDA remains insufficient to resolve this methodological issue.

This article employs a psychoanalytically informed critical narrative discourse analysis to examine how EU sanctions are articulated and

and sustained across different cases. The analysis does not follow a linear causal pathway but focuses on the iterative examination of three dimension: discursive fragmentation producing a deficit of political enjoyment, fantasy narratives generating a new political enjoyment, and sanctions implementation as a material enactment of political enjoyment. In the present study, the relevant texts are read iteratively through a close and intertextual reading that allows narrative patterns, affective intensities, and the fragmentation of discourses to emerge. Lexical indicators, informed by Lacanian concepts, are used as heuristic coding devices to guide the interpretative attention to narratives of such dimensions. Rather than functioning as deterministic indicators or measurements, these lexical cues serve as sensitising tools to trace how existential anxiety and political fantasy are discursively articulated. The analysis thus foregrounds the discursive and affective logics through which the sanctions continuity is rendered meaningful without claiming that there is a causal pathway or sequential process (DAS, 2011; PAVLENKO, 2008).

ANALYTICAL DIMENSION A: EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY (LACK OF POLITICAL ENJOYMENT)

Analytical focus of this dimension is a lack of political enjoyment constitutes existential anxiety. The analysis captures the initial disruption when the political subject perceives that something fundamental has been taken, damaged, or prevented from realisation. This is not an anxiety about specific losses but about threats to the subject's entire framework for understanding itself and its place in the world. The analysis is contextualised within the EU's idealised discourse in each case.

To strengthen the analysis of the lack of enjoyment, the analysis examines a set of individual statements by EU policymakers that describe the situations prior to 2014 and 1996 respectively as the baselines. These (earlier) speeches are usually saturated with idealisation and emphasise achievement, pride, progress, optimism, and satisfaction. Such language indicates that the EU initially derived political enjoyment from its idealised discourse.

Lexical Indicators:

- **Articulation of Lost Initial Conditions:** Previous states of stability, prosperity, and security destroyed; disrupted patterns, relationships, and norms. These indicators reveal what baseline the EU considers “normal” and what deviations from it constitute a crisis.
- **Specification of Obstructed Goals:** Aspirations and plans were blocked by the targets’ actions. These indicators reveal what future the EU imagined for itself and how that future has been foreclosed.
- **Articulation of Threats:** Dangers, vulnerabilities, and potential harm emanating from the targets. These go beyond immediate security concerns and encompass threats to the EU’s self-conception and role.
- **Recognition of Critical Tipping Points:** Moments crossing irreversibility thresholds and demanding exceptional responses. These signal qualitative rather than quantitative changes – moments when “everything changes.”

ANALYTICAL DIMENSION B: POLITICAL FANTASY (ORGANISATION OF POLITICAL ENJOYMENT)

The fantasy organises a new political enjoyment rather than regaining the original enjoyment. It offers an imaginary enjoyment through identifying opponents, expressing where the EU belongs, affirming primary commitments, deciding on specific promising measures, and carrying out a retroactive process. The key analytical task is identifying how fantasy narratives transform raw anxiety into a structured political affect that directs action. The analysis is contextualised within the EU’s idealised discourse in each case.

Lexical Indicators:

- **Dire, Antagonising Language:** A language portraying the targets in antagonising or non-human terms – as monsters, animals, or evil forces; using dire terms like terror, horror, or blood. This language reveals how fantasy constructs enemies as ontological threats rather than mere political opponents.
- **Protagonistic, Heroic, and Valuing Articulations:** A heroic language portraying a subject as a collective with moral responsibilities connected to values of righteousness and justice, which advocates for victims and fights aggressors or enemies.
- **Exaggerated Visions and Predictions:** Hyperbolic predictions extending beyond evidence-based analysis to either wish-fulfilment or catastrophisation. These reveal political fantasy's colonisation of the temporal imagination of the future – namely the need to make present actions appear decisive in a struggle for enormous stakes.
- **Excessive Historical Linking:** Connections to past events that seem disproportionate, forced, or tangential to current situations. When every present crisis can be linked to a success or failure of the past, or previous wars, this signals that the temporal anchoring serves to strengthen fantasy rather than analytical clarity.

ANALYTICAL DIMENSION C: SANCTIONS CONTINUITY (ACTUALISATION OF POLITICAL ENJOYMENT)

The continuity of the sanctions implementation is embedded in the actualisation and ongoing pursuit of the political enjoyment of the fantasy. The sanctions implementation is simultaneously experienced as both successful (harming targets, demonstrating one's power) and insufficient (not achieving a definitive victory). The analytical focus is also on how this paradox shows the not yet fully political enjoyment and drives the perpetual continuation and intensification of the policy. The analysis is contextualised within the EU's idealised discourse in each case.

Lexical Indicators:

- **The Positive Bias on the Outcome of the Implementation:** Language regarding the successes of the destabilisation, impairment, and isolation. The EU emphasises evidence that the sanctions are “working” while avoiding admittance of a total failure of the sanctions implementation.
- **Maintenance Language:** Maintaining pressure, staying the course; the sanctions must/will continue or cannot be discontinued. This reveals that the sanctions are inherently ongoing rather than temporary measures.
- **Compulsion Language:** The sanctions are compulsory, required, necessary, and essential. The EU presents their continuation as obligatory rather than discretionary.
- **Paradox Emphasis:** Claiming that the sanctions demonstrably have effects like making targets collapse, while arguing for their indefinite maintenance because the targets remain too threatening and dire and unwilling to enter negotiations.
- **Language of Expansion and Extension:** Calls to expand the sanctions to new sectors and/or entities, or calls for their temporal extension. The EU progressively broadens the scope of the sanctions. The language can involve progressive markers such as “further”, “next” or “additional” sanctions/restrictive measures (the EU frames each round as leading to more rounds), or comparative intensifications such as that the sanctions must become “stronger,” “broader” or “tougher” (the EU continuously raises the bar for what counts as an adequate response).

EMPIRIAL CASE STUDY I: RUSSIA

LACK OF POLITICAL ENJOYMENT FOLLOWING THE DISRUPTION OF THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION DISCOURSE

Baseline (Statements about the Pre-2014 Period): “I have been working together with the Commission and also with the Member States for the last 10 years to build a constructive relationship with Russia, while supporting our neighbours’ efforts and sovereign choices to reform, to modernise and build closer relations with the European Union” (BARROSO, 2014).

“Our relationship with our Eastern partners does not have to be an exclusive one. Our model of engagement is that of open regionalism, and not of autarchic self-entrenchment. We are not asking, not even suggesting to our partners from the Eastern Neighbourhood, to turn their backs on Russia. On the contrary, we encourage them to have good neighbourly relations, to enhance their traditional trade ties” (IBID.).

The Following Disruption:

- **Lost Initial Conditions:** “What happened in Crimea was an unprovoked and unacceptable violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity” (IBID.).
- **Obstructed Goals:** “The developments which started with the people of Ukraine expressing a clear wish to take their future into their own hands” (IBID.).

“We cannot pursue this important positive agenda when Crimea is illegally annexed” (BARROSO & VAN ROMPUY, 2014).

- **Articulation of Threats:** “The present situation directly challenges our conscience as individuals, our unity as Europeans, our policies as decision makers, and values we hold, such as peace and democracy” (BARROSO, 2014).
- **Critical Tipping Points:** “It is not only the destiny of Ukraine that is at stake. It is Europe’s destiny” (VON DER LEYEN, 2025A).

In regard to Russia, the EU’s lack of political enjoyment following the disruption of the European integration, which constituted existential anxiety, was articulated through the lost initial conditions, the articulation

of security threats, the obstructed goals, and the critical tipping point. Furthermore, this disruption foregrounds three interconnected dimensions of the loss of core enjoyment for the EU.

First, Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity – which are significant not only for Ukraine but for the EU itself – came under direct attack due to the annexation of Crimea. This threat directly undermined Ukraine's long-term goal of EU membership, transforming Ukraine into a strategically vital partner whose future was now imperiled.

Second, it undermined the territorial stability and security that the EU had established with a peaceful integration rather than military force. These achievements had underpinned the Union's successful relations with and expansion into the former communist nations throughout Central and Eastern Europe, including Ukraine, during 2004 and 2005 (PETROV, 2023). Simultaneously, it damaged the framework of the open regionalism with Russia that the EU had been developing through the enhanced cooperation and exchange with it – an approach designed to foster constructive EU-Russia relations in the twenty-first century and promote regional prosperity (SOLIOZ & STUBB, 2009).

Third, and most critically, it challenged the EU's foundational integrative values. The Union had operated on the core principles of unity, peace, and democracy, believing these values constituted the magnetic appeal that attracted countries like Ukraine toward EU membership. Russia's actions directly contested these principles, which led to the EU's future existence being uncertain – the EU's status quo was not sustainable, yet the EU could not remain silent and thus let the wrongdoings continue.

These three dimensions expose what truly sustained the EU beyond its stated integration discourse – the **core of political enjoyment of being a stable, unhindered and attractive model of regional integration** – a deeper reality that exceeds the symbolic representation of the EU as merely the future of European countries. Yet Russia's annexation of Crimea severely undermined this core enjoyment, thereby disrupting the idealised discourse of European integration.

Barroso's pre-2014 statements support this interpretation. He emphasised how the EU had devoted the previous decade to constructively

developing its relations with Russia while simultaneously assisting neighbouring countries in reforming and strengthening their ties with Europe. Significantly, Barroso stressed that the EU never pressured candidate or neighbouring countries into membership or compelled them to sever their ties with Russia. This characterisation implicitly positions countries as voluntarily seeking EU membership, as they are drawn by the Union's values and integration model as avenues to their prosperity and progress. Russia's assault on these fundamental values therefore constitutes an existential challenge to the EU's very identity and purpose.

NEW POLITICAL ENJOYMENT IN POLITICAL FANTASY: THE EU AS A MODERN ACTOR

→ **Dire, Antagonising Language:** "The Ukrainian people have already shed too much blood in this process" (BARROSO, 2014).

"Strong Russian State sponsored nationalist propaganda continues supporting the illegal actions of armed separatists" (BARROSO & VAN ROMPUY, 2014).

"There is no place for the use of force and coercion to change borders on the European continent in the 21st century" (VAN ROMPUY, 2014).

"Russia is cruel, aggressive, and a danger to us all..." (KALLAS & VON DER LEYEN, 2025).

"Every day, Russia lies about its desire for peace. Putin is taking the world for a ride" (IBID.).

"A peaceful nation was invaded, with no reason except Putin's imperial obsession" (VON DER LEYEN, 2025A).

→ **Protagonistic, Heroic, and Valuing Articulations:** "Together with other G7 leaders... we have strongly and unequivocally condemned this action" (BARROSO, 2014).

"We strongly condemn the unconstitutional referendum in Crimea; we will not recognise it, nor will we recognise the annexation" (VAN ROMPUY, 2014).

“The European Union has a special responsibility for peace and stability in Europe... We stand by Ukraine and its people. We support their right to choose their own future” (IBID.).

→ **Excessive Historical Linking:** “The page of last century’s history should be turned and not re-written. I believe in a European continent where the rule of law prevails over the rule of force, where sovereignty is shared and not limited, where the logic of cooperation replaces the logic of confrontation. We don’t need new Cold Wars. And we certainly do not want them” (BARROSO, 2014).

→ **Exaggerated Visions and Predictions:** “We are seeing that the shadow of sanctions is already having an effect on Russia’s investment climate” (VAN ROMPUY, 2014).

“We know that our sanctions are an effective tool of economic pressure. And we will keep using them until Russia comes to the negotiation table with Ukraine for a just and lasting peace” (VON DER LEYEN, 2025B).

The EU’s political fantasy, which is evident in its dire and antagonising language, protagonistic and heroic language, exaggerated visions and predictions, and historical linking, reveals the organisation of a new political enjoyment across three interconnected dimensions.

The three dimensions are as follows. First, there is the construction of an enemy of regional security: the EU depicted the effect of Crimea’s annexation using visceral imagery like “Ukrainian people hav[ing] already shed too much blood” when it characterised Russia as cruel, aggressive, and imperialist, and as lying to the world about its desire for peace, supporting illegal separatists and employing military force to destroy the peace in Ukraine and change European borders – actions framed as beyond Europe’s rational ways, and dangerous for and incompatible with Europe’s modern security order.

Second, there is the collective protagonist positioning and bonding: the EU established itself as a moral protagonist by aligning with the G7 leaders in condemning Russia’s actions in Crimea. This positioning drew heavily on Cold War narratives, invoking that era as a closed chapter that

must not be reopened. By insisting that “the page of last century’s history should be turned and not re-written,” the EU reinforced the collective imagination about the painful past to encourage its collective awareness of the potential impacts of the crisis if it did not take an action, while establishing a clear boundary between “We” (the EU and its allies) and “Them” (Russia). In addition, this identification includes the EU’s institutional commitments to protecting the European peace and stability and advocating for Ukraine’s right to self-determination.

Third, there is pressuring: the EU’s identification was reinforced through its sanctions narratives. It used the exaggerated term “shadow of sanctions” as if the sanctions had truly weakened Russia’s investment climate even before their full implementation. This was the EU’s way of predicting that the sanctions would economically damage Russia. Additionally, the EU’s narratives of the sanctions continued to show its confident visions of the sanctions effectively making Russia suffer, thereby leading it to the negotiation table in the future. Yet these narratives actually functioned as a form of wishful thinking that strengthened the EU’s identity as a protector of peace against Russian aggression, which was depicted as causing bloodshed and instability. Through these narratives, the EU seemingly wanted to ignore the deeper complexities in regard to the sanctions implementation as a response to Russia’s aggressiveness in Ukraine.

These dimensions converged to produce a transformed identity. No longer deriving its core political enjoyment from being a stable, unhindered, attractive and integrative power, the EU produced a new core political enjoyment by repositioning itself as a **modern security actor wielding non-military hard power against Russia as an aggressor**. This fantasy managed a critical tension: confronting Russia militarily would have made the EU indistinguishable from its opponent, while the sanctions offered a morally superior alternative aligned with European values. The dramatic portrayal of the pressure of the sanctions on Russia, which made them sound like a remedy for Europe, convinced the audience that this approach best preserved stability.

Crucially, the identification and sanctions narratives expose that European integration required not only an open cooperation but also the confronting of disruptive actors. The EU’s new core enjoyment of being a modern European security actor established a new nodal point for the

integration discourse. The EU positioned itself as progressively providing the security and stability necessary for European integration, no longer relying solely on the belief that the integration proceeded without any military obstacles. However, the core enjoyment of being a sanctions-wielding security actor was tied to a concrete actualisation carried out through the implemented measures to sustain this political fantasy.

ACTUALISATION OF FANTASY'S POLITICAL ENJOYMENT OF BEING A SECURITY ACTOR THROUGH THE SANCTIONS IMPLEMENTATION

→ **Paradox Emphasis:** "Russia will find itself increasingly isolated by its own actions. The European Union remains ready to reverse its decisions and reengage with Russia when it starts contributing actively" (BARROSO & VAN ROMPUY, 2014).

"Together with the United States, we can really force Putin to negotiate seriously. Every day Russia continues its war, the price must go up, and that is why we are proposing this 18th package of sanctions" (KALLAS & VON DER LEYEN, 2025).

→ **The Positive Bias of the Previous Implementation:** "We do all this because sanctions work, every sanction weakens Russia's ability to fight" (IBID.).

"Russia has lost tens of billions in oil revenues. Its economy is shrinking, and its GDP has dropped. Sanctioning the Shadow Fleet has been particularly impactful: after our last sanctions package, the 17th sanctions package, the oil exports from Russia via the Black Sea and Baltic Sea routes declined by 30% in a week" (IBID.).

→ **Expansion Logic:** "Today the European Union has agreed a package of significant additional restrictive measures... [that will] limit access to EU capital markets for Russian State-owned financial institutions, impose an embargo on trade in arms, establish an export ban for dual use goods for military end users, and curtail Russian access to sensitive technologies particularly in the field of the oil sector" (BARROSO & VAN ROMPUY, 2014).

“As the President said, the next round of EU sanctions against Russia will target Russia’s energy revenues, including the shadow fleet, its military industry and its banking sector” (KALLAS & VON DER LEYEN, 2025).

The implementation of the sanctions highlights the tension between the EU’s fantasy and the actual outcomes of its acts as a modern security actor. The EU had actualised some of the enjoyment dimensions – e.g. its collective positioning with the aim to pressure Russia. The sanctions implementation succeeded in isolating Russia, progressively making it lose billions of US dollars in oil revenues and weakening its economy and capability to fight – which exceeded the initial expectations. However, this success also created contradictions.

That duality became complex as the EU acknowledged that the relations with Russia that it built before 2014 had fundamentally changed and that Russia continued in its war. At the same time, the EU felt obligated to provide security and stability to Europe. The EU reaffirmed its pursuit of a diplomatic engagement or negotiations with Moscow in order to resolve the Ukraine crisis, thus demonstrating the unfulfilled dimension of its commitment to conflict resolution that it made as a modern security actor. This desire of the EU to complete its identity as a modern security actor also illustrated that fractures within the discourse of European integration continued to exist, and thus they were also embedded in the necessity of the continuity of the sanctions.

Concurrently, the EU expanded its sanctions regime to target Russia’s financial institutions, military technology sector, and petroleum industry, and increased the sanctions’ effects on broader aspects of Russia’s energy revenues. These escalating measures served two interconnected objectives: at the surface level the continued sanctions aimed to limit Russia’s capacity to sustain its military operations in Ukraine while at the non-surface level, they simultaneously aimed to reinforce the EU’s identity and power structure as an advanced security actor, thereby also maintaining its superior hierarchical status in the European regional security landscape.

EMPERICAL CASE STUDY II: MYANMAR

LACK OF POLITICAL ENJOYMENT FOLLOWING THE DISRUPTION OF THE DISCOURSE OF THE EU'S NORMS ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP WITH ASIA

Baseline (Statements about the Pre-1996 Period): “The [EU] ministers noted that there had been some positive developments in Myanmar. They expressed the hope that ASEAN’s policy of constructive engagement and the EU’s willingness to engage in a critical dialogue will contribute to achieving more sustainable improvements in all fields” (EU MINISTERS, 1994).

“The EU Ministers reviewed with satisfaction the positive result of development cooperation by the EU and ASEAN countries in the less developed countries of Southeast Asia. They further recognised the interest of EU and ASEAN to put forward a joint effort to promote development including the alleviation of poverty in these countries in order to facilitate their full participation in the economic growth of Southeast Asia [sic]” (IBID.).

The Following Disruption:

- **Articulation of Threats:** “The situation in countries like Myanmar/Burma is but a stark reminder of our common challenge, which is: to move from the era of codification of human rights... into an era of effective and worldwide application and protection of human rights” (FERRERO-WALDNER, 2007).
- **Critical Tipping Points:** “For Europe, Myanmar is more than a humanitarian concern. It is a test of the EU’s credibility” (SABATUCCI, 2025)

“We have read this story before. The priority now is ensuring that Europe’s economic, political and societal presence continues so that the EU remains relevant for the people of Myanmar. When I first arrived in Myanmar, Europe mattered. As I return to Europe now, the question is whether it continues to matter” (IBID.).

Regarding Myanmar, the EU's lack of political enjoyment leading to existential anxiety was articulated through its articulated threats and recognition of critical tipping points.

Superficially, Myanmar challenged the universal human rights standards enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet more fundamentally, this disruption threatened two interconnected dimensions of the EU's core political enjoyment. First, it undermined the credibility of the EU's external human rights framework, which was commonly related to universal humanitarian concerns. Unlike the UN's focus on basic rights and democracy, the EU's external approach actually encompassed broader concerns such as peace, security, sustainable development, fair trade, poverty reduction, and children's rights. This differed from the EU's narrower internal framework, which addressed social exclusion, discrimination, and gender equality – areas where member states largely complied voluntarily. So the EU had to achieve a high credibility for itself through the application of its standards in Asia. Myanmar's initial progress toward EU standards enhanced the credibility of its external framework only between 1994–1995.

Second, the EU recognised the critical tipping point of its political and economic credibility and relevance in Asia. While the EU realised that Myanmar could not immediately achieve an ideal democracy after decades of authoritarianism, the democratic progress between 1994 and 1995 would have enabled regulatory improvements and a trade liberalisation. Such progress would have benefited not only the economic development for the lower classes in Myanmar but also EU business and investment interests in Southeast Asia. As the EU expanded its economic ties across Southeast Asia, however, Myanmar's unresolved conflict complicated efforts to align ASEAN integration with EU standards, potentially hindering EU goods, services, and investment flows. Thus, establishing EU-style human rights clauses as conditions would have also reduced the competitive pressures facing the EU in Myanmar and Asia broadly.

These dimensions reveal the core political enjoyment which was lost in the disrupted idealised discourse of EU norms in the economic partnership with Asia: **the EU's progressively compromising efforts to become the dominant external political, economic, and social actor in Asia.** This core

political enjoyment concerned “pursuing recognition as an influential actor” rather than “already being one.” It compensated for the EU’s limited authority over its member states in terms of human rights enforcement, which stemmed from the EU’s reliance on attraction rather than domination during its own integration.

This political enjoyment appeared in EU statements at the 1994 EU-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, where the discussions focused on economic cooperation – in trade, investment, and industry. The statements consisted of expressions of the EU’s approval of Myanmar’s progress without mentioning the military regime’s pre-1994 aggression, which made them seem like a subtle praise of the regime’s peaceful handling of rebel groups at that time. The statements also emphasised the EU’s efforts to find a compromise between its own approach and ASEAN’s constructive engagement for the purpose of Myanmar’s further democratic changes. The EU also expected its progressive engagement with ASEAN to contribute to further democratisation and poverty eradication in Myanmar because this process helped the EU strengthen its partnerships with and positioning regarding the ASEAN countries in all fields, but particularly the social economy. Following this progress, the EU even granted Myanmar GSP status. The Union also illustrated its strategic calculation in this regard.

This political enjoyment was not directly captured in the idealised discourse and exceeded its symbolic representation of the EU as a normative exemplar in the area of global peace.

NEW POLITICAL ENJOYMENT IN POLITICAL FANTASY: THE EU AS AN ASSERTIVE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND NORMATIVE POWER IN ASIA

- **Protagonistic, Heroic, and Valuing Articulations:** “I would like to pay particular tribute today to the role of civil society actors and human rights defenders as indispensable partners of the European Union in our fight for the full respect for human rights worldwide. As of this year, the EU has even better and more flexible means at its hands to help those who dedicate their lives to help[ing] others” (FERRERO-WALDNER, 2007).

“...when our political and trading partners fall below universally accepted standards of human decency, it is right that the EU should impose political and economic sanctions” (TRUSCOTT, 1997).

- **Exaggerated Visions and Predictions:** “ASEAN’s credibility will only be damaged if Burma is offered membership” (IBID.).
- **Excessive Historical Linking:** “Today’s actions by the Tatmadaw bring back painful memories of previous decades. Democracy must prevail. We are in touch with our international partners on this most pressing issue to ensure a coordinated response” (BORRELL, 2021).

The EU’s political fantasy for overcoming its existential anxiety was articulated through protagonistic-heroic and valuing articulations and exaggerated visions, revealing the organisation of a new political enjoyment across three interconnected dimensions.

First, the EU solidified its identification on the global level as the leader in human rights defence by emphasising its inclusive, protagonistic articulation. It implicitly established itself as the primary global defender of human rights. By engaging civil society actors and human rights defenders as integral partners, the EU projected itself as a listener of grassroots voices providing direct evidence of violations, including those from Myanmar. The EU enjoyed imagining itself as “the good guy” standing on the front lines against human rights violations. Myanmar became a “stage” where the EU could play this heroic role, even though its real power in Asia, compared to that of ASEAN in Myanmar, was very limited.

Second, the EU affirmed its economic-political-normative sovereignty in Asia, a region far beyond its borders, by positioning itself against allegedly uncivilised and undemocratic political and trading partners like Myanmar. By evoking painful memories of and feeling connected to the past situations of the Myanmar junta’s aggressiveness, the EU tried to create a sense of responsibility for standing with Myanmar’s people and the prevailing democratic efforts in Myanmar. This identification was reinforced through narratives that valued the EU’s collective response, particularly its sanctioning capacity. These articulations reveal that the EU preferred

imposing sanctions over remaining silent, framing such measures not as an isolation of Myanmar's population but as a principled moral action. The EU created an emotional narrative that made them feel connected and responsible – as if their destiny was closely tied to Myanmar. But this was more of an imagination than a geopolitical reality.

Third, the EU constructed a normative-political hierarchy within its relationship with ASEAN through exaggerated visions of regional differences. The EU subtly contrasted its sanctions against Myanmar with ASEAN's decision to accept Myanmar as a member despite its clear violations. In addition, the EU positioned its moral assessment as superior to ASEAN's, arguing that this distinction stemmed not from geographical proximity but from its own sharper ethical judgment. The EU claimed a prescient awareness: should ASEAN fail to act decisively and Myanmar's conflict escalate, the EU anticipated it. This comparison positioned the EU as making a greater effort to uphold its human rights leadership and political dignity than ASEAN, thereby distinguishing its credibility from ASEAN's approach. These narratives illustrate that the EU built the fantasy about itself at the top of the moral-political pyramid in ASEAN while the EU was far away from ASEAN both geographically and culturally. The EU seemed to hardly or only pragmatically acknowledge ASEAN's vigilant and non-interventionist approach, which may actually be more effective for Myanmar and its Southeast Asian regional context.

These three dimensions converged in one new core political enjoyment: **being an assertive political, economic, and normative power in Asia** with a new nodal point for the EU's disrupted discourse of its norms in its economic partnerships with Asia. The political fantasy narratives projecting the EU's assertive power beyond its territorial borders were attempts to illustrate its relevance in Southeast Asia despite ASEAN's limited concern for relations with it.

The EU's enjoyment of its political fantasy of being an assertive political, economic, and normative power was tied to its actualisation and intensification through concrete measures.

THE SANCTIONS AS A MATERIAL ENACTMENT OF A FANTASY'S POLITICAL ENJOYMENT OF BEING AN ASSERTIVE POWER IN ASIA

- **Paradox Emphasis:** “It is to be welcomed that a number of US and European companies, including Heineken, Carlsberg and PepsiCo, have pulled out. But other companies still trade in Burma, turning a blind eye to the human rights abuses occurring all around them... This is just not acceptable. What are these European companies doing with Burmese blood on their hands?” (TRUSCOTT, 1997).
- **Maintenance Logic:** “I hope the EU maintains the pressure on the Burmese authorities so that they feel compelled to embrace democracy and liberate the Burmese people from their suffering and oppression” (IBID.).
- **Expansion Logic:** “There are other broader moral grounds for taking action against Burma... Political opponents, ethnic minorities and the wider population face daily intimidation and worse” (IBID.).

“Cultural and religious pretexts were refuted by the witnesses and, naturally, contacts were also made with the Buddhist area of the country, where it was in fact confirmed to us that Buddhism is in no way a protection against slavery” (MARIN, 1997).

“This was done irrespective of the intellectual or political repugnance any one of those of us there may have felt. In a verbal note, the Burmese government rejected our invitation [to a meeting]” (IBID.).

The implementation of the sanctions against Myanmar highlights the tension between the EU’s fantasy and the actual outcomes. These measures only partially materialised the EU’s new core political enjoyment.

Through the imposition of the sanctions, the EU actualised all aspects of its new core political enjoyment, as was illustrated by some major European corporations like Heineken and Carlsberg withdrawing from Myanmar. However, this success was also incomplete, as other European companies remained operational in the country. The EU characterised this situation as foreign businesses being complicit in the violence perpetrated by Myanmar’s government. As all the dimensions of the core

enjoyment were only partially fulfilled, the EU's overarching enjoyment of being an assertive political, economic, and normative power remained unaccomplished.

This shortfall was tied to maintaining the sanctions regime, framed as an effort to liberate Myanmar's oppressed population. Concurrently, the EU carried out an expansion of the sanctions by revoking the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) benefits, which was justified by citing slavery, forced labour, and the persecution of religious minorities. Furthermore, when Myanmar's government refused the EU invitations to diplomatic meetings, the EU had one more reason to intensify the measures.

Like the Russia case, the Myanmar case illustrates how a partial actualisation of a new political enjoyment led to a continued need for its intensification. The EU could not claim a complete success here, yet it could not admit failure either. In each case, the new political enjoyment became a new nodal point for the EU grand discourse and mitigated the EU's existential anxiety.

CONCLUSION

This article using Lacanian psychoanalysis illuminates why the EU persists with the sanctions despite their debatable effectiveness. It reveals an underlying political enjoyment embedded within its ostensibly neutral idealised discourses. This political enjoyment, providing a sense of collective existence, encountered disruptive challenges activating political fantasies. Such fantasies organise a new political enjoyment through narratives of identification and transgression (sanctions). This political enjoyment was actualised through concrete sanctions implementations, which served as tangible expressions of the perceived superiority and dominance of the EU compensating for the fundamental political enjoyment within the idealised discourses. The sanctions implementation intensified during the ongoing crises because the EU recognised that one sanctions implementation could not actualise the new political enjoyment immediately and perfectly.

This article illustrates that the EU's persistent sanctions policy on Russia and Myanmar stemmed from its existential anxiety over the challenges to its idealised discourses of "European Integration and Eastern

Enlargement” and “the EU’s norms in the economic partnership with Asia” respectively.

Based on the preliminary analysis, the core of the political enjoyment of the EU’s idealised discourse of European integration was “being an unhindered superior model of regional integration”. However, Russia’s Crimea annexation destroyed this core enjoyment by disrupting territorial stability, obstructing the open regionalism with Russia, and challenging the EU’s integrative values of unity, peace, and democracy. The EU constructed a new political enjoyment of being a modern security actor through political fantasy. The fantasy consisted of identification narratives depicting Russia as a cruel aggressor incompatible with the European order, while the EU positioned itself as a moral protagonist alongside its G7 allies by invoking Cold War narratives to establish “We versus Them” boundaries. Meanwhile, the EU’s sanctions narratives portrayed these non-military measures as its protective capabilities that fit its identification narratives. Furthermore, the sanctions implementation created a paradox: while isolating Russia economically, the EU remained willing to engage with it diplomatically, thus revealing an incomplete actualisation. It was tied to the gradual intensification of the sanctions implementation targeting Russian financial sectors, military technology, and oil industries as an attempt to fully materialise the EU’s core political enjoyment of being a superior modern security actor.

Furthermore, based on the preliminary analysis, the core of the EU’s political enjoyment of its idealised discourse of its norms in the economic partnership with Asia was its progressive efforts to be an influential political, economic, and social actor in Southeast Asia. However, this enjoyment was disrupted as Myanmar’s regression undermined the EU’s credibility in promoting its external human rights regime and obstructed its political and economic expansion in the region. Through political fantasy, the EU re-positioned itself as an assertive normative, political and economic power, claiming a leadership position in defending human rights, and its superiority over ASEAN through sanctions narratives that showed the EU’s political, economic and normative sovereignty beyond its territorial borders. The sanctions implementation partially actualised this new political enjoyment because when some European companies withdrew from Myanmar, other firms continued presence there was perceived as if

they indirectly supported the Myanmar junta's violence. The unfulfilled political enjoyment created an incompleteness that led to an increasing emphasis on the EU's efforts to intensify its measures through GSP withdrawal and expanded justifications based on issues of forced labour and slavery. All these acts were attempts to fully materialise its core political enjoyment of being an assertive political, economic, and normative power.

In both the Myanmar and the Russia case, abandoning the sanctions policy implementation entirely would be like giving up on the logic of the organisation and actualisation of a new political enjoyment. If it happened, the EU would forever end up in a state of existential absence from Europe and Asia.

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NOTE

This article is a part of the dissemination of the author's ongoing PhD dissertation on the EU's sanctions policy funded by the Landesgraduiertenförderung (LGFC) of the University of Tübingen. The author wants to thank Professor Thomas Diez, Professor Caterina Carta, and Professor Nathalie Tocci, who have been supervising the author's dissertation until now. Thank you to the anonymous reviewers and the (Chief) Editor of CJIR, who have provided their suggestions in order to enhance the academic nuance of this article. All shortcomings and mistakes in the article are the author's own.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Lunyka Adelina Pertiwi is a PhD Candidate in Political Science at Eberhard Karl University of Tübingen, Germany. She was awarded the Promotionsstipendium-Landesgraduiertenförderung (State Graduate Funding) of the University of Tübingen for her PhD project. Her research areas include the European Union, the Asia-Pacific, Russia, foreign policy making and political security issues.

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