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Emile Badarin

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ABSTRACT
This article examines international politics of recognition in the increasingly multipolar global environment, with a specific focus on recognition events in Kosovo, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Crimea, the Occupied Golan Heights, Jerusalem, Western Sahara, Luhansk and Donetsk. It reveals that the recent surge in recognition is propelled by geopolitical and geographical motivations, which undermine the normative significance of territorial integrity, non-recognition and self-determination in recognition politics. The article proposes a thesis that situates recognition within the context of geopolitics, spatial management and power dynamics that expand our understanding of the broader impacts of recognition beyond the traditional emphasis on statehood emergence and prevention. Recognition has become entangled in geopolitical contestations between influential global players seeking to normatively legitimise and normalise conquest, occupation and colonisation. In this context, geopolitical considerations have overridden the normative and legal weight of the well-institutionalised norms of territorial recognition. This underscores the gap between recognition norms and practices and demonstrates the explanatory power of geopolitics.

KEYWORDS
geography; geopolitics; normative contestations; multipolar international order; politics of recognition

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, we have witnessed a series of controversial proclamations related to the recognition of sovereignty. In February 2022, Russia officially recognised the independence of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) and Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) in the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine. The US has also made several significant proclamations related to the recognition of sovereignty. Specifically, between 2017 and 2020, the US issued three proclamations recognising Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem, as well as Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara. These seemingly disconnected proclamations conceal more profound global geopolitical contestations that surpass the particularities of each case. It is therefore crucial to situate this politics of recognition within the broader international environment to understand its dynamics and potential longstanding effects.

Since the early 2000s, numerous scholars have argued that the international order established after the Second World War is in a state of flux, reflecting changes in the distribution of global

power and influence (Acharya, 2018; Amin, 2013; Keohane, 2005; Newman & Visoka, 2021; Stuenkel, 2016). As a result, the utility of Western codes for 'non-European sovereignty', to use Antony Anghie's phrasing, has shifted and been challenged from various angles (Dodge, 2013). Despite being presented as universal and enshrined in international law, these norms are flexible and subordinate to the spatial visions and interests of dominant powers (Anghie, 2004). The current transitional international environment has exacerbated this flexibility, as this article demonstrates.

Although Russia and the US pursued opposite policies with regards to recognition, they employed similar reasoning and language. As we will see, Russia's official justification for recognising the independence of territories within Ukraine's or Georgia's borders mirrored Western arguments for Kosovo's independence. Both superpowers not only flouted norms of territorial integrity, the prohibition of territorial acquisition by force and self-determination, but also wielded their political power to lend legitimacy to such violations. These recognitions followed a series of geopolitical re-mapping in the post-Soviet space and the Middle East. While such violations are not new, their frequency and geopolitical context raise several questions. How does recognition of legally and politically contested territorial changes impact recognition practices? What are the geopolitical ramifications? How does the current international environment influence the relevance and effectiveness of recognition norms established post-1945 in the practical implementation of recognition?

Geography, demography and power are the primary components of sovereignty, and therefore the legal and political norms and practices that regulate them constitute an international system. While self-determination was the guiding principle in the geopolitical vision after the First World War (Kearns, 2009), fixed borders and the 'territorial integrity' of nation-states have shaped the post-Second World War geopolitical landscape, in which sovereignty, territoriality and self-determination have become deeply intertwined (Agnew, 2003). The post-1945 order is based on the maintenance of fixed borders and the non-recognition of territorial conquest and self-determination (Barkin & Cronin, 1994). This normative triad guides contemporary formal and legal frameworks for extending or withholding recognition of sovereignty. While the legal and political dynamics and contradictions of these norms have garnered significant attention, the broader geopolitical dimensions of recognition politics are often overlooked.

This article situates recognition at the intersection between geography and power, arguing that the politics of international recognition are primarily shaped by contingent geographical imagination and geopolitics. Geopolitics is viewed as a struggle between competing imaginations to impose meaning and order on space, with spatial borders, whether ideational or physical, defined through intersubjective recognition (Dalby, 2008; Ó Tuathail, 1996; Said, 1994). The recognition of state boundaries 'so fundamental that the behaviour associated with their settlement literally constructs a world order' (Vasquez 1993, p. 151). It is therefore not surprising that the principles that regulate sovereign borders have been heavily institutionalised (Coggins, 2014; Fabry, 2010; Griffiths, 2017). While this normative institutionalisation has not eliminated the malleability and contestation of these principles, it may have raised the threshold for such contestation.

Furthermore, this article highlights the role of geopolitics in mediating this recognition, and suggests that a nuanced understanding of the interplay between recognition, geography and power is essential for understanding the dynamics of current international relations. This article contends that recognition provides a distinctive perspective into the multifaceted nature of current international politics, including rivalries and geopolitical contestations. As such, recognition can serve as a useful place for understanding the current dynamics of the global political landscape, particularly in the light of ongoing transitions and changes in the international environment.

Critical geographers have problematised the post-1945 territorial encasement of sovereignty, which has resulted in violent attempts to realign national borders based on various factors such as ethnicity, history, language or religion (Agnew, 1994, 2003; Dalby, 2005). John Agnew convincingly shows the contingency of territorial sovereignty on overarching geopolitical framings of dominant actors. The maintenance or revision of territorial boundaries of a state depends on its position within a broader 'geopolitical framing' (Agnew, 2003, p. 7) or 'reasoning' (Kearns, 2009), which shapes the recognition or non-recognition of those boundaries. Sovereign boundaries are therefore constituted through geopolitical reasoning or framing, and recognition or non-recognition of boundaries takes place within this interpretative process. Insights from critical geography enable us to conceptualise the nexus between the material and normative dimensions of struggles over geography. In the case of the American (as well as its European allies) and Russian dispute over recognition, opposing geopolitical narratives and imaginations were situated beyond normative criteria, reflecting a contestation between competing geopolitical blocs where group/bloc solidarity overrides established recognition norms.

It is essential to distinguish between conquest and acts of recognition. Whereas the former refers to external military subjugation and control of another territory, the latter concerns the normative and intersubjective validation of sovereignty over territory. Conquest may dismantle another state's sovereignty and redraw borders, yet it cannot 'create new principles and norms' nor challenge legal sovereignty (Krasner, 1999, p. 20). To protect territorial norms and prevent the legitimisation of illegal territorial changes, post-1945 legal institutions obligate states to refrain from recognising such outcomes as stipulated in the United Nations Charter and the Geneva Conventions. While conquest is insufficient to alter, erode or create new norms, recognition may do so. Norms are constructed through intersubjective recognition. The normative, political and legal contestations that accompany territorial adjustments and their recognition or non-recognition influence norm-making (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2019).

This article examines recognition politics in the increasingly multipolar global environment, with a specific focus on recognition events in Kosovo, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Crimea, the Occupied Golan Heights, Jerusalem, Western Sahara, Luhansk and Donetsk. It reveals that the recent surge in recognition is propelled by geopolitical and geographical motivations that undermine the normative significance of territorial integrity, non-recognition and self-determination in recognition politics. The article proposes a thesis that situates recognition within the context of geopolitics, spatial management and power dynamics that expand our understanding of recognition beyond the traditional emphasis on statehood emergence and prevention. In the current transitional geopolitical environment, recognition is used as a tool to induce geographical fragmentation (to empower or disempower particular states and movements) and establish new dependencies and liminal spaces. When powerful actors employ recognition to legitimise or invalidate specific spatial mappings within their sphere of influence, recognition surpasses the usual tension between states' rights (e.g., fixed borders and non-intervention) and liberal ideals (e.g., self-determination and human rights).

The article emphasises the gaps between the norms of recognition and political practices and underscores the significant weight of geography and politics, often framed in legal and liberal terminology. It contributes to and draws from the interdisciplinary literature on norms, recognition, geopolitics and international relations. Although the selected cases have different natures (e.g., secession and occupation/colonisation) and historical and political contexts, they all relate to fundamental issues of international politics, such as territorial integrity and sovereignty, military conquest, recognition, self-determination, geopolitics, and great power interventions. These issues can be explored across diverse contexts without compromising their specificities.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The discussion begins by offering a brief theoretical perspective into the primary norms of the international order and the practice of state recognition. The subsequent section presents an empirical analysis of the contested recognition

cases mentioned earlier to elucidate the connections between contemporary geopolitics and recognition in the post-Soviet space and the Middle East. The third section investigates how recognition and its norms have become embroiled in global geopolitical contestations. The fourth section links the dots and endeavours to comprehend the impact of geopolitical contestations on the significance of these norms in the practice of recognition.

2. CONQUEST, TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY, SELF-DETERMINATION AND INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

Territorial integrity is foreshadowed by the two central principles of the 1648 Peace of Westphalia: 'territoriality and the exclusion of external actors from domestic authority structures' (Krasner, 1999, p. 20). In *The Law of Nations*, Emerich de Vattel provides perhaps the earliest defence of states' territorial integrity. He argues that the violation of states' territories constitutes 'an act of injustice' and a prelude to 'disorder', and therefore states' borders must be precisely demarcated and respected. As he puts it, 'foreign nation[s] can claim no right in it' (de Vattel, 1760, para. 92, p. 168), and entering other states by force is a 'violation of territory … that ought to be vigorously repelled by every state' (para. 93, p. 169).

It is worth acknowledging de Vattel's (including other prominent international jurists of his time) Eurocentric and colonial rationality that considers sovereignty as an exclusive attribute of 'civilised', Christian and European nations (Anghie, 2004; Arneil, 1996). The colonial and Eurocentricity of the conceptions and practices of sovereignty continue to imbue contemporary interpretations of international law in ways that compromise non-European sovereignty. Indeed, this ambivalence continues to be played out in recognition politics.

Despite the Peace of Westphalia, states' territorial integrity was repeatedly disrupted. Nineteenth-century political and legal changes, particularly the discontinuation of dynastic legitimacy and the joint American–British support of the *uti possidetis juris*, have relatively stabilised the 'sovereignty and territorial integrity of all entities that had attained de facto independence' (Fabry, 2010, p. 50). After the First World War, the League of Nations unambiguously underlined the need 'to respect and preserve against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League' (League of Nations, 1919). Territorial integrity 'cascaded' (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) into mainstream politics the more statesmen embraced it and inscribed it in multilateral international agreements. Accordingly, it was encoded into the first wave of post-First World War agreements – such as the Covenant of the League of Nations of 1919, the Kellogg–Briand Pact of 1928, the Stimson Doctrine, and the Montevideo Convention of 1933.

De Vattel's appeal to vigorously repel violations of territorial sovereignty gained traction only after the Second World War. The UN Charter (article 2/4) (and other international organisations and agreements, e.g., the Helsinki Final Act) affirmed the inviolability of sovereign borders, and imposed a general prohibition on territorial acquisitions by force. These early stages led to the institutionalisation of territorial integrity as a universal and primary norm of the post-1945 order. The Geneva Conventions of 1949 considered occupation as a temporary situation that does not confer any sovereignty claims to the occupying power, and therefore adjustment of the physical geography (borders) or demography (population transfer) of occupied territories is prohibited (Geneva Conventions (IV), 1949; Lynk, 2019). In 1970, the UN prohibited the recognition of 'territorial acquisition resulting from the threat or use of force' (UNGA, 1970, Resolution 2625). It was also integrated into regional and international agreements and organisations. From 1976 onwards, territorial integrity was institutionalised as a self-evident legal fact, which even justified punitive measures to pre-empt its violation (Sandholtz & Stiles, 2008). Territoriality is interlinked with the liberal principle of self-determination that gives the

right for culturally and/or ethnically distinctive groups of people to govern themselves within a defined territory.

However, it was only after the Second World War that the self-determination of peoples became a foundational principle of the international system and was incorporated into the first article of the UN Charter. Moreover, at the beginning of the formal decolonisation process, self-determination was upgraded into a positive right that must be actively provided to its holders (Fabry, 2010). Fixed boundaries and self-determination generated new normative tensions and secessionist struggles in many multi-ethnic states. This contradiction was partially resolved through the distinction between internal and external self-determination. The latter was restricted to colonial situations as a positive right for independence and statehood. The former entitled peoples of the same state to autonomous self-government under the parent state's sovereignty. This distinction removed unilateral secession from the menu of available options (Griffiths, 2017; Seymour, 2020). As a result, territorial integrity and fixed international borders gained greater importance in the post-1945 order as a means of preserving state sovereignty and stability (Atzili, 2007; Fabry, 2010).

3. RECOGNITION IN THE FLUX OF GEOPOLITICS

3.1. Kosovo, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Crimea, Luhansk and Donetsk

The contemporary roots of the Balkan conflicts can be traced back to the break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, which triggered a series of sessions. In this context, the province of Kosovo attempted to secede from Serbia and declared independence in 1991, but its attempt was internationally rejected. In 2008, Kosovo unilaterally re-declared its independence, and a significant number of states recognised it this time around (Geldenhuys, 2009). The US and major European states, such as France, Germany, Italy and the UK, coordinated and 'sequenced' their recognition of Kosovo and argued that recognition 'will bring peace' (Bush, 2008). These states positioned their recognition in a geopolitical–liberal narrative in which recognition was hailed as a security measure to stabilise the geopolitical situation in the Balkans. Generally, this narrative stressed the 'uniqueness' of the situation and argued that stability and minority protection require an independent Kosovo. Other states, such as Belgium and Italy, emphasised the need to recognise the 'new reality' (i.e., *de facto* recognition) (UNSC, 2008b).

States that opposed the recognition of Kosovo provided a legal narrative against secession and in defence of Serbia's sovereignty (Krueger, 2009). They considered Kosovo's secession as a violation of the principle of territorial integrity and UNSC resolution 1244, which recommended 'substantial autonomy' for Kosovo and the protection of Serbia's 'sovereignty and territorial integrity' (UNSC, 1998, p. 2; 1999, p. 2). In particular, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and several European states (e.g., Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain) adopted a non-recognition policy. From their perspective, unilateral secession undermines international norms and rules. In a written statement to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) regarding Kosovo, China stressed the limited scope of self-determination and posited that it 'shall not undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity' of states (PRC, 2009, p. 4). China rejected the idea that Kosovo's 'special nature' outweighs principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty (UNSC, 2008b). Other states, such as India and South Africa, cautioned that such recognition would set a 'dangerous precedent'.

Of crucial significance here is the Russian reference to 'international precedents', consistency and the broader relevance of Kosovo for other separatist conflicts. The former Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, intimated that the example of Kosovo made it:

impossible, after that, to tell the Abkhazians and Ossetians (and dozens of other groups around the world) that what was good for the Kosovo Albanians was not good for them. In

international relations, you cannot have one rule for some and another rule for others. (Medvedev, 2008)

The Russian representative at the UNSC invoked the Kosovo 'precedent' to highlight the incoherence of Western defence of the territorial integrity of Georgia but not Serbia (UNSC, 2008a, p. 17).

Importantly, Kosovo's breakaway left its shadow over other secessionist struggles (Caspersen, 2015; Fabry, 2012; Griffiths, 2016). Furthermore, the fact that recognition of Kosovo was framed as a precedent provides a strong indication that recognition transcends the political and historical conditions of the particular case(s). Kosovo was not just used in geopolitical contestation between Russia and the West, but also inspired other de facto states to pursue similar legitimation strategies, which gained 'further impetus by Russia's subsequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia' (Caspersen, 2015, p. 396).

A few months later, in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian War in August 2008, recognition politics emerged as a hotly debated and contested topic after Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two regions that have asserted their right to external self-determination since the independence of Georgian in 1991 (Geldenhuys, 2009; Pavković, 2011). In 2007, the UNSC presented a federal solution to satisfy their (internal) self-determination and Georgia's territorial integrity (UNSC, 2007). This initiative proved unsatisfactory, and the two regions continued to struggle for independence, leading to several rounds of armed hostilities between them and the Georgian state.

The Russian justification followed the geopolitical–liberal formula. It represented the recognition of these provinces as a victory of liberal norms (particularly self-determination) and a 'necessary condition' for the maintenance of peace and protection of minorities (Sudakov, 2008). From Russia's perspective, the recognition was based on the 'sober understanding of the situation' of the two regions and the systematic discrimination, human suffering and wars on 'minority nations' from Tbilisi (Medvedev, 2008). It also cited the UN Charter, Helsinki Final Act and self-determination as a vehicle for constructing a normative and legal narrative (Russia's representative, cited in UNSC, 2008b).

It is insightful to contextualise the recognition of Kosovo, Abkhazia and South Ossetia within broader regional and global geopolitical perspectives. On the one hand, Western powers viewed the recognition of Kosovo as part of a geopolitical realignment aimed at stabilising the Balkans and facilitating its entry into the EU (Agnew, 2003; Geldenhuys, 2009). On the other, the BRICS countries were concerned about the flexibility of legal frameworks, and saw it as a geopolitical strategy that favours the West and imbues international law and norms in their favour. Russia, in particular, underscored the geopolitical connections between the recognition of Kosovo, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. For instance, in 2006, President Vladimir Putin questioned Western support for Kosovo's self-determination, asking, 'Why can Albanians in Kosovo have independence, but South Ossetia and Abkhazia can't?' (cited in Geldenhuys, 2009, p. 74). In addition to NATO's intervention in Serbia, a Russian ally, Russia viewed NATO's opening for Georgian and Ukrainian membership in April 2008 as another serious infringement on its interests in the post-Soviet 'sphere of influence' and a direct threat to its security (Putin, 2008).

In 2014, Ukraine began fostering a closer relationship with the West. Russia considered Ukraine's cooperation with and potential membership in NATO as a fundamental threat to its national security. In this context, recognition was mobilised to justify and frame territorial adjustments. On 16 March 2014, the Crimean Peninsula and the city of Sevastopol declared themselves independent and joined Russia. Russia justified the annexation on four grounds: municipal acts, self-determination, historical ties between Russia and Crimea, and the precedent of Kosovo (Grant, 2015). As Rotaru and Troncotă (2017, p. 8) suggest, the 'Kosovo precedent became a recurring legitimacy claim in Russian discourse'. In addition to 'the well-known Kosovo precedent' (to cite President Putin's phrase), Russia regularly listed post-2000 Western violations

of state sovereignty (e.g., in Iraq and Libya) to highlight Western duplicity and insinuate sharp geopolitical spheres of influence (see also B92, 2016).

Following the annexation of Crimea by Russia, unrest and armed confrontation between Ukrainian forces and the pro-Russian population of Donbas, particularly in Donetsk and Luhansk, escalated. In April 2014, these regions declared independence as the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). Then, in September 2014 and February 2015, representatives from France, Germany (the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe more broadly), DPR, LPR, Russia and Ukraine signed the Minsk Agreements and reached a ceasefire. Notably, the agreements included provisions specifying Ukrainian consti-tutional reforms, which were never implemented in practice, to secure the autonomy status (i.e., internal self-determination) of the two regions. In other words, autonomy was implicitly or at least promised to be recognised. However, for Ukraine and its Western allies, this tacit rec-ognition was imagined as temporary, intended to 'freeze' the conflict and 'give Ukraine valuable time' to boost its defence capabilities, as revealed by former Chancellor of Germany Angela Mer-kel in December 2022 (Merkel, 2022).

On 22 February 2022, two days before the military invasion of Ukraine, Russia officially recognised the DPR and LPR as independent republics, which it later annexed (Putin, 2022a). This decision is consistent with Russia's recognition policies, which have been forcefully situated within Russian–Western geopolitical contestation, particularly NATO's eastward expansion, since 2008. This pattern was evident in the recognition of the DPR and LPR. The liberal and humanitarian reasoning invoked in the recognition narrative, such as self-determi-nation and minority rights, paled in comparison with the geopolitical considerations. The recog-nition of the DPR and LPR was a derivative outcome of the geopolitical conditions, particularly around the Black Sea, a strategic space for the Russian Black Sea Fleet and vital infrastructure. President Putin extensively explained this in his speeches on 22 and 24 February 2022.

From Russia's perspective, further NATO enlargement close to its southern borders would offer the West 'obvious geopolitical dividends' and seriously threaten 'the very existence of our [i.e., Russian] state and its sovereignty' (Putin, 2022b). Against this backdrop, the recognition of littoral territories of the Black Sea (the Donbas region and Abkhazia) as independent states changes the geopolitical meaning and function of these territories as new buffer zones/states or liminal spaces under direct or indirect Russian influence.

3.2. East Jerusalem, the Occupied Golan and Western Sahara

This section continues to examine geopolitical themes of recognition, albeit in different settings. Between 2017 and 2020, the US ignored international law and issued three recognitions. It recognised Israel's sovereignty over Jerusalem and the Golan Heights (or the 'Syrian Occupied Golan' as designated by the UN) and Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara.

In 1967, Israel occupied East Jerusalem (and the rest of Palestine) and the majority of the Golan Heights from Syria and embarked on a settler–colonial project there (Badarin, 2016; Sulimani & Kletter, 2022). The UNSC invoked Article II of the UN Charter and affirmed the principle of territorial integrity and the 'inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war'. It called on Israel to withdraw from these territories (UNSC, 1967). In 1980 and 1981, Israel *de jure* annexed both East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, respectively, which the UNSC unanimously condemned and declared both annexations 'null and void' and must be rescinded (UNSC, 1980, 1981).

The land that Israel occupied in 1967 was framed as part of a geopolitical formula of the so-called 'land for peace', which stipulated withdrawal from the occupied territories in exchange for the recognition of Israel by Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and (later) the Palestinian Liberation Organ-isation (PLO). This was the underlying structure of the 1978 Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt and the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference, which triggered direct and indirect

talks between Israel and Jordan, the PLO and Syria. This geopolitical vision gained broad international support. Although the US and the EU formally supported the 'land-for-peace' formula, their policies undermined it by enabling Israel to advance its settler–colonial project deeply into these territories and alter their spatial and demographic composition (Badarin, 2021a; Pappé, 2017).

This colonial reality has become highly relevant for the Donald Trump Administration and its so-called 'principled realism' or 'fact-based' foreign policy, which emphasises the recognition of 'plain facts' and 'reality' (The White House, 2017). For instance, the American decisions to formally endorse Israel's sovereignty over Jerusalem and the Golan Heights were justified as recognition of established facts on the ground. Both decisions were part of a broader US plan for peace and prosperity, commonly known as 'the deal of the century', which offered to legitimise Israeli annexation of large portions (referred to as Area C) of the West Bank (The White House, 2020a).

The US's decision on the Golan Heights followed the same rationale. It was preceded by a subtle discursive adjustment whereby the legal term 'occupation' was substituted with 'control' of territories (The White House, 2019a, p. 8) in an attempt to revert to the pre-1945 *de facto* recognition. A few days before the official proclamation, President Trump tweeted: 'After 52 years, it is time for the United States to fully recognise Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which is of critical strategic and security importance to the State of Israel and regional stability.' This non-binding statement aimed to assess international reactions before making a formal decision (Kushner, 2022). This statement, as well as the recognition of Jerusalem, generated a weak international reaction. Accordingly, on 25 March 2019, the US issued the formal proclamation:

> Today, *aggressive acts* by Iran and terrorist groups, including Hizballah, in southern Syria continue to make the Golan Heights a *potential* launching ground for attacks on Israel. Any possible future peace agreement in the region must account for Israel's need to protect itself from Syria and other regional threats. Based on these *unique circumstances*, it is therefore appropriate to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. (The White House, 2019b, emphasis added)

As in the cases discussed above, the decisions to recognise Israel's sovereignty over Jerusalem and the Golan, as well as Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, were made based on the region's geopolitical developments. In the case of Jerusalem, recognition was presented as part of a regional peace plan, a 'gift for free' to gain the trust of the Israelis (Kushner, 2022).

The decision on the Golan was situated within the contingent realities of the post-2011 Arab uprisings, framing the Golan Heights as a 'special case' where customary rules do not apply. Accordingly, the recognition of Israel's sovereignty over it was justified by the 'unique circumstances' that allegedly turned the Golan into a 'potential' security threat to Israel. The US representative to the UNSC echoed the same geopolitical logic, stating that:

> to allow the Golan Heights to be controlled by the likes of the Syrian and Iranian regimes would be to turn a blind eye to the threats emanating from a Syrian regime that engages in atrocities and from Iran and terrorist actors, including Hezbollah, seeking to use the Golan Heights as a launching ground for attacks on Israel. (Hunter, cited in UNSC, 2019, p. 4)

The US recognition of Israel's sovereignty over occupied territories, and thus the violation of Syria's territorial integrity and self-determination of the Syrian population of these territories, rested mainly on hypothetical security threats and colonial facts.

Western Sahara provides another illustrative example where geopolitics and recognition intersect. In the context of decolonisation in the 1960s, the UN recognised the Sahrawi people's

inalienable right to self-determination and placed Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony (1884–1975), on the list of Non-Self-Governing Territories. After Spain withdrew from Western Sahara in 1975, Morocco (and Mauritania until 1979) invaded and claimed sovereignty over it. Morocco considers Western Sahara an integral part of the kingdom and alludes to 'territorial integrity' as a legal basis for sovereignty claims. The ICJ, however, affirmed the absence of 'any legal tie of sovereignty' between the two sides and underlined the Sahrawis' right to self-determination (ICJ, 1975, pp. 56–57).

While the EU's and its member states established policies towards Western Sahara constitute implicit or implied recognition (Badarin, 2021b; Dawidowicz, 2013; Milano, 2006), the US went a step further and officially recognised Morocco's 'sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara territory' in December 2020. It also declared its support for the 2007 Autonomy Plan as 'the only basis' for resolving the conflict (The White House, 2020b). As a result, the US has effectively denied the Sahrawis their legal and normative right to freely choose the form of their self-determination. In his memoir, Jared Kushner, President Trump's senior advisor and son-in-law, who brokered the normalisation agreements between Israel, Bahrain, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates and Morocco in 2020 (dubbed the 'Abraham Accords'), unambiguously positioned the recognition of Western Sahara within the geopolitics of these Accords. He justified the recognition because Morocco 'already controls two-thirds' of Western Sahara, and it 'clearly served the US [security and military] interests for Morocco to control the rest' (Kushner, 2022, section 31). Crucially, recognition was used as a bargaining chip to obtain Morocco's support and involvement in the US-sponsored geopolitical arrangement to normalise Israel's relations with other Arab countries. In this context, the recognition of Western Sahara as Moroccan territory was exchanged for Morocco's official normalisation with Israel. As Kushner (2022, section 56) posited, 'If Morocco obtained US recognition of the territory, it would be much more plausible for the Arab country to reach beyond its borders and normalise relations with Israel.' Curiously, international law, self-determination, the Sahrawi people or their representatives hardly featured in the US deliberations.

As with the other cases, states that opposed American recognition provided a legal narrative. Yet, unlike the post-Soviet situations, where major global players (e.g., China and India) adopted ambiguous stances, nearly all states opposed the American decisions on Jerusalem, the Golan Heights and Western Sahara. Apart from the US, all members of the UNSC voted for a draft resolution that condemned the US's decision on Jerusalem and reaffirmed resolution 478, declaring Israel's actions in Jerusalem null and void (Kattan, 2018). On 4 November 2020, the UN Special Political and Decolonisation Committee put the Golan issue for a vote, and the overwhelming majority demanded all states 'not to recognise any of the [Israeli] legislative or administrative measures and actions' there (UNGA, 2020, p. 2). Only the US and Israel voted against it.

While the complexity of Palestine/Israel politics usually heightens the intensity of contestation and overshadows the legal and normative concerns, the Golan and Western Sahara present clear cases. (For a detailed account of international reactions to the US decision on Jerusalem, see Kattan 2018.) It is instructive, therefore, to examine some indicative responses from major international actors, including the US's close allies. While the US provided an inventory of political and hypothetical security justifications, the members of the UNSC heralded legal argumentations against the American decision on the Golan. More importantly, they accentuated the detrimental effect of the violation of sovereign judicial borders (of Syria) on the international system as a whole. The UK, for example, emphasised that the recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan contravenes the relevant UNSC resolutions (particularly Resolutions 242 and 497) and fractures international rules and consensus. It stressed 'the importance of adhering to the rules-based international system and abiding by Security Council resolutions that are designed to protect that system … irrespective of the importance of the Golan to Israel's security'

(UNSC, 2019, p. 6). France opposed the American decision and underscored its duty not to recognise illegal territorial acquisitions. As the French representative at the UNSC put it, '[t]he recognition of [the] Israeli sovereignty over the Golan runs contrary to international law, in particular, the obligation of States not to recognise an illegal situation', because it 'significantly weakens the order based on international law' and undermines 'peace and security] in the Middle East' (p. 14). Germany, too, opposed the US decision and vigorously argued that 'Security interests, as urgent as they may be, do not justify annexation' and the break of another state's territorial integrity (p. 10). Canada, the traditional ally of the US, asserted its non-recognition of the Israeli sovereignty over the Golan, adding that 'unilateral border change goes against the foundation of the rules-based international order' (Global Affairs Canada, 2019). Moreover, the EU reaffirmed its collective non-recognition of the illegal annexation of the Golan (European Council, 2019).

China noted that the Golan is an occupied territory and emphasised its opposition 'to any unilateral action or attempts to alter that fact' (UNSC, 2019, p. 11). Russia, too, interpreted the US's normative approval of the Israeli annexation of the Golan as part of a 'series of [American] unilateral steps and unlawful decisions' which indicate that the 'rules-based order … is doomed to failure and has no future'. It also condemned these violations as 'aggressive revisions of international law' (p. 8). Interestingly, in February 2022, the Russian representative at the UNSC declared that it does 'not recognise Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights that are an inalienable part of Syria' (Polyanskiy, 2022), a political retaliation against the Israeli condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This further underlines the interconnectedness of recognition politics, despite the different political contexts of Syria and Ukraine.

Unlike other conflicts in the Middle East or the post-Soviet space, Western Sahara usually receives little attention. Therefore, international responses to the US's normative validation of Morocco's sovereignty or European violations of Sahrawi rights were generally mild, except for Algeria's reaction to Spain's turnabout. A few days after the recognition, the UNSC held a meeting to discuss the issue of Western Sahara at Germany's request. However, since the discussion was conducted in a closed video conference, little information came out of it. Russia condemned the US's decision as a violation of international law, and South Africa considered it 'tantamount to recognising illegality, as such recognition is incompatible with international law' (Bogdanov, 2020; Matjila, 2020).

Ironically, the statement made by the German UN ambassador, Christoph Heusgen (2020), focused on humanitarian, migration and security concerns but failed to mention the American recognition. Generally, the EU adopted a pro-forma response, reiterating its unchanged position and support for the UN process and UNSC resolutions (Barigazzi, 2020), without criticising or opposing the American decision. Currently, the EU's policy towards Morocco and Western Sahara, as well as that of its member states, is undergoing significant realignment. For example, in March 2022, Spain made a turnaround and adopted the same expressions used in the American proclamation, affirming its support for the autonomy plan and excluding any reference to the Sahrawi people and their self-determination. In his letter to King Mohammed VI, Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez 'recognised the importance of Western Sahara for Morocco' and declared his support for the 2007 Autonomy Plan as 'the most serious, credible, and realistic' basis for resolving the conflict (Sánchez, 2022). He also used the legal term 'territorial integrity' in this context, implying recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara. This implicit recognition was couched in geopolitical concerns, particularly migration and the situation in the Spanish enclaves in Africa of Ceuta and Melilla.

The recognition of Israel's and Morocco's sovereignty over occupied/colonised territories was part of the new American 'fact-based foreign policy', which abandoned the 'land-for-peace' formula. Through this policy, the US aimed to realign the geopolitical structure of the Middle East to facilitate the normalisation of relations between Israel and Arab states. The policy attempted

to regularise the status quo of the occupied territories by dismantling the normative and legal weight of occupation and settler–colonialism and formally removing it from the agenda. Given that recognition is shaped by the contingent political rationality of existing states (Badarin, 2021b; Coggins, 2014; Fabry, 2010), long occupations and the passage of time could alter geopolitical calculations and, in turn, fracture international concerns with the original violations. The American geopolitical vision in the Middle East overshadowed the foundational norms of self-determination and fixed borders, which the US had strongly promoted in the past.

4. RECOGNITION AND TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY IN A TRANSITIONAL ORDER

Since 2001, the US's global dominance (dubbed the 'unipolar moment') has started to subside, and the influence of other global and regional powers (e.g., BRICS, Iran, Turkey) has grown rapidly (Acharya, 2018; Amin, 2013; Stuenkel, 2016). The decolonial philosopher Walter Mignolo (Mignolo, 2012) situates this change within the broader context of the ebbing era of the Western global dominance, which began with the invasion of the Americas in the 15th century. While during the last 500 years, the transition of power occurred inside the 'Western family' (as Mignolo argues), the rise of the BRICS and other regional powers created a multipolar reality in which these non-Western centres of power found themselves contained within an international order that has favoured Western interests and visions (Anghie, 2004).

Such major transitions of power have historically given rise to new institutional and normative structures that governed the resultant geopolitical order. Newman and Visoka (2021, p. 1) define the international transitional order as the 'geopolitical, normative and institutional changes that occur as key states rise and fall in relative power and influence'. As mentioned above, geopolitics involves competing spatial imaginations that impose specific meaning and order over land, which become articulated through normative recognition. Therefore, existing rules and norms of recognition begin to encounter new challenges when the international order itself is transforming. These dynamics contribute to the degeneration of the concerned norms (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2019; McKeown, 2009; Panke & Petersohn, 2012).

The available literature provides important insights into the dynamics of norm evolution and degeneration, but the effects of these dynamics on related policy practices have received less attention. The rest of this section examines how violations of territorial integrity, inadmissibility of territorial acquisition by force and self-determination affects their practical significance and weight (rather than validity) on the politics and practice of recognition.

The politics of recognition cannot be separated from the contingent geopolitical imaginations and contestations of global powers. The transitional dynamics of international politics have produced additional 'liminal' geopolitical actors and spaces and 'states within states' that remain excluded from the sovereignty-based order (Kingston & Spears, 2004; McConnell, 2017). They have also triggered violations of the basic rules of sovereignty and recognition, which have far-reaching geopolitical implications because recognising explicit violations challenges the normative and legal foundations of sovereignty.

Since 2008, recognition politics has been caught up in revisionist geopolitical imaginations in several cases. This pattern was detected in the competitive recognition politics explored above. While Russia and the US took opposing decisions, the rest of the BRICS countries adopted ambiguous stances on particular cases but well-defined ones on others. They condemned the recognition of Kosovo, the Golan Heights and Western Sahara, but adopted an ambivalent position on the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Crimea, and Luhansk and Donetsk. This deviation reflects their assessments of the contingent international geopolitical environment rather than a legal and normative appraisal of the principles of recognition.

China's diplomatic stances on Russia's recognition of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, and Luhansk and Donetsk are highly relevant. Although China did not openly support these decisions (Larsen, 2017; Turner, 2011), it adopted ambivalent positions. For example, in its official statement regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia, China sufficed by referring to its 'consistent and principled stance on issues of this kind' (cited in Larsen, 2017, p. 51). On 4 February 2022, just a few weeks before Russia recognised Luhansk and Donetsk, China declared its support for Russia's security concerns in Ukraine. Moreover, the two countries reaffirmed their unlimited bilateral strategic cooperation and commitment to transform 'the global governance architecture and world order' towards 'genuine multipolarity' and 'distribution of power' (China–Russia Joint Statement, 2022).

Although only a few countries recognised the annexation of Crimea, around 100 states unequivocally rejected it and voted in favour of the UN General Assembly Resolution 68/262, which affirmed Ukraine's territorial integrity (UNGA, 2014). The flipside of this calculus, however, reveals a divided international community on another situation of territorial integrity violation. A significant number of states adopted ambivalent positions: they either abstained (58 states) or were absent (24 states) at the time of the vote on such a legally verifiable violation of a primary international principle. Of particular importance here is the stance of the BRICS, which are considered staunch supporters of territorial integrity and fixed borders (Griffiths, 2014). China, India, Brazil and South Africa abstained from voting on Resolution 68/262.

In 2022, this pattern was repeated: none of the BRICS countries condemned Russia's recognition of Luhansk and Donetsk. Although abstention may not indicate support for Russia (Grant, 2015, p. 70), it nevertheless creates significant ambiguity and room for interpretation. Their abstention represents a sharp departure from their traditional stance on such matters and creates uncertainty regarding their commitment to essential legal principles. It also demonstrates a strong desire to defend the BRICS' shared geopolitical aspirations by challenging US global influence.

In the Crimean case, only half of the UN member states embraced a straightforward non-recognition policy, which is the default choice in the absence of forceful measures to redress infringement on primary norms (Fabry, 2015). Grant argues that non-recognition has successfully prevented the consolidation of 'an unlawful situation through a policy of *fait accompli*' (Grant, 2015, p. 63). However, non-recognition has limitations, particularly when situational changes fracture international consensus and legality over time (Badarin, 2021b). Non-recognition is a passive approach and can be ruptured when major actors change their positions on issues of territorial integrity and self-determination, as demonstrated by the Golan Heights and Western Sahara cases.

When recognition became a rivalrous stock, the violation or defence of its norms (territorial integrity and self-determination) was justified by incongruous geopolitical reasoning to the extent that the violators of these norms in a particular context defended it in another. On the one hand, the violators adopted a positive (liberal) spin (e.g., protection of peace, minorities and human rights) to either justify the violation of territorial integrity or deny that their decisions constituted a violation at all. On the other hand, the defenders were keen to emphasise norm-breaking and its legal and normative impacts.

For example, the US's recognition policy violated the territorial integrity of Serbia and Syria and the self-determination of the Sahrawi people but defended it in Kosovo, Georgia and Ukraine. Russia did the opposite: defended territorial integrity in Serbia and Syria and self-determination in Jerusalem and Western Sahara, but violated the territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine. Remarkably, the same actors, irrespective of their liberal or illiberal orientations, can be both violators and defenders of territorial integrity, the inadmissibility of land acquisition by force or self-determination at will. This inconsistency exposes these norms of recognition to further pressures and uncertainties.

5. THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION AND ITS NORMS

Since 1945, the principle of fixed judicial borders has acquired wide international adherence and extensive institutionalisation. Besides non-recognition, there are diplomatic, economic and even military tools to redress territorial violations. However, powerful states can outmanoeuvre these tools. Moreover, great powers' positions are of paramount significance for recognition politics, and their preferences influence the policy direction of other states (Coggins, 2014; Fabry, 2010). As the literature on norms suggests, the challenger's strength is a significant factor in the norm's life cycle and its impact on associated practices. Violations by powerful actors increase the likelihood of transforming, weakening, or discontinuing the norm (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2019; Panke & Petersohn, 2016).

The American and other influential European states' approval of Kosovo's breakaway generated ample gravity that helped trigger and inspire other recognition struggles, and the violation of Serbia's territorial integrity motivated further violations on the part of Russia (Caspersen, 2015; Fabry, 2012). Although Russia's violations received scant official support from other states, they did establish a new situation of uncertainty as other great powers (such as China) and rising states (such as Brazil, India, South Africa) refrained from taking decisive positions on the encroachment of Georgia's and Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Frequent norm violations and a lack of enforcement mechanisms to redress them constitute significant strains that contribute to the normative degeneration. The dynamics of norm degeneration are also influenced by international conditions and the norm's character. 'Highly precises' norms are 'likely to be abolished' when violations occur in an unstable and rapidly changing environment. However, norms are 'likely to become incrementally degenerated if the environment is relatively stable and if norms are imprecise' (Panke & Petersohn, 2012, p. 723). Incremental degeneration occurs when actors seek to alter the applicatory scope of norms and the violation as a 'special case', which also gradually reduces non-compliance costs and resistance from other international actors (p. 724). From this perspective, the repeated violations of territorial integrity represent the *necessary* variables in the regressive life cycle of the norm. As for the *facilitating* variables (international conditions and norm precision), territorial integrity as well as self-determination in colonial situations are precise norms and objectively verifiable. The violations of territorial integrity and self-determination (in Western Sahara and the Golan Heights) occurred in a transitional international phase imbued with tense international rivalry and contestation.

The rivalry between the US and Russia (as well as other BRICS countries) is evident in the discursive arguments for or against the recognition of the cases examined above. This rivalry is translated into practice, with former violations being used to justify subsequent ones. These cases of norm-breaking provide defenders and violators of normative principles with a learning stock and background knowledge that they can use to outmanoeuvre criticism and other forms of retribution, such as economic sanctions. This knowledge constitutes a pattern that is reproduced and deployed in the politics of recognition. Furthermore, indirect rivalry is evident in international groupings of Western versus non-Western states, as seen in the unclear positions (abstention) of the BRICS countries on Russian norm-breaking.

It is important to consider other dimensions, such as the frequency of violations and the identity of the violator (liberal/non-liberal), as well as their historical relation to the norm. Violations of primary norms by their initial promoters increase the significance of the challenge. Additionally, the inconsistent stances of traditional supporters of territorial integrity, such as China, India and Brazil, and the American (and to a lesser extent, European) violation of self-determination (a liberal norm) are noteworthy developments in the politics of international recognition. The fact

that primary norms have to be defended can provide an opportunity for revision, as these norms 'will always lose some salience' (McKeown, 2009, p. 11).

Precedents are significant moments in international politics that can trigger a legitimacy crisis and have critical impact on the norm's life cycle and relevance. Normative violations by powerful states can modify or create new norms when such violations receive only a 'mild or *pro forma* condemnation' or 'followed in subsequent years by similar behaviour on the part of other states' (Sandholtz, 2008, p. 109). In other words, they may constitute precedents that can be used to justify further norm-breaking. Legal scholars define precedents as past decisions that serve as models for future decisions. It is important also to observe that decision-makers deciding on new cases 'do so knowing that decision reached will itself be taken as a guide in later cases' (MacCormick & Summers, 2016, p. 2). Such decisions provide background knowledge on which actors model their actions and expectations. Although precedents have no formal power in international law, international jurists and political actors routinely engage in this modelling practice. Precedents therefore acquire an informal authority that helps interpret international norms and rules and justify new actions (Cohen, 2015; Pelc, 2014, p. 547).

In the context of recognition, the breaking of territorial integrity established political precedents, which were reflected in the discursive process accompanying each new violation. The recognition of Kosovo served as the initial background for subsequent recognition politics. While states that adopted a non-recognition policy questioned the legality of Kosovo's secession, virtually none of the states that recognised it provided legal justification. Instead, they based their decision on political and humanitarian grounds, such as maintaining peace, stability, and security. This approach was also repeated in other cases, as discussed above.

Aside from their significant power capabilities, the sharp divisions within the international environment enabled both the US and Russia to frustrate international law and consensus over recognition norms. By implication, this diminished the cost of non-compliance, leading to relatively weak third-party reactions. The international community was divided in the case of Kosovo, and while Russia's recognition of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, Luhansk and Donetsk received minimal international support, many influential states did not condemn or contest it. Furthermore, the retaliatory sanctions imposed by the EU and US against Russia after the annexation of Crimea failed to restore the status quo (Fabry, 2015). In 2022, the West imposed stringent sanctions on Russia not because of the recognition of Luhansk and Donetsk, but due to Russia's invasion of other parts of Ukraine. Overall, international disapproval of the recognition policies of Russia and the US has been largely a formality or 'pro forma' criticism, which is stringent towards the former and mild towards the latter. Although some key Western countries disapproved of the American decision, they did not condemn it, let alone call for sanctions.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Since the inception of the Euro-modern/colonial project five centuries ago, power and influence have been concentrated among Western actors. In the post-Second World War era, the US largely dominated the international scene, and its dominance further intensified after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Consequently, these actors have imposed their vision of territorial sovereignty, recognition, and associated norms and principles, while shaping international law more broadly. However, this pattern has recently begun to change as the US hegemony declines and non-Western global actors rise. This has resulted in ongoing geopolitical transformations and a redistribution of power and influence, as non-Western actors increasingly challenge Western-centrism, domination, and its structures of power.

In the context of the current global geopolitical landscape, international recognition offers a medium to realign the normative and territorial map accordingly. The discussion above

contributes to the literature by underscoring the significance and impact of geopolitics on the politics of recognition. The article situates recognition at the intersection of geography and power and argues that the politics of recognition are primarily shaped by the contingent geopolitical imaginations of the involved actors. The relationship between recognition's normative dimensions and its material geographical mapping is closely intertwined. This interconnection can be leveraged to amplify the performative power of international recognition to achieve significant geopolitical outcomes, including spatial consolidation or fragmentation, the emergence of new dependent or liminal actors, and the creation of new spaces within the international system.

Although the relationships between recognition, sovereignty and geopolitics are contingent, recognition is closely intertwined with the foundational and heavily institutionalised international norms of sovereignty. In the current transitional international system, this contingency has placed additional strain on the principal norms that govern not only recognition but also the post-1945 international order. Recognition has become embroiled in geopolitical contestations between influential global players seeking to normatively legitimise and normalise conquest, occupation and colonisation. In this context, geopolitical considerations have overridden the normative and legal weight of the well-institutionalised norms of territorial recognition. This underscores the gap between recognition norms and practices and demonstrates the explanatory power of geopolitics.

Furthermore, placing recognition within geopolitics offers a nuanced framework for understanding how geography can be politically mobilised for different purposes while echoing the same justificatory rationality. In the current geopolitical climate, the flexibility of norms and the prevalence of double standards have intensified, with recognition being leveraged as a tool for generating geographical fragmentation and new dependencies. This has ramifications not only for the norms themselves but also for their capacity to shape specific practices. Using recognition in geopolitical rivalry to impress a normative imprimatur on spatial rearrangements that violate foundational norms such as territorial integrity and self-determination reduces their weight and strength in recognition politics.

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ORCID

Emile Badarin 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7626-7068

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