R2P through a decolonial perspective: An examination of UN discourse in the cases of the Syrian Civil War and the Russian occupation of Ukraine

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Abstract

Although the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is described as a universal norm, it has long been contested by postcolonial and decolonial scholarship. Considering the Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine, the conflict provides a rare possibility to compare the use of R2P between states in the Global North and the Global South. This Master thesis consequently conducts a comparative critical discourse analysis between discourse of the UNGA and UNSC on R2P in the cases of the Syrian Civil War and the Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine. The analysis finds that the UN discourse reflects both colonial and decolonial dynamics. It has institutionalized various narratives to decolonize its approach, whilst still engaging in Eurocentric discourse. Moreover, the results indicate that the geopolitical positioning of both Ukraine and Syria have played a role in the UN's R2P approach to each case.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
ICISS	International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty
MS	Member states
NGO	Non-governmental organization
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

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Introduction

In 2005, a new means to address the issue of mass atrocities and genocide in global politics was introduced. Materialized by the UN, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was to be a universal norm all its member state(MS) were to adhere to. The norm's primary assertion held that the international community has a responsibility to protect populations from mass atrocities, such as war crimes and ethnic cleansing. The UN has since invoked R2P to stress the need for civilian protection and legitimize humanitarian intervention in a wide array of conflicts that involved mass indiscriminate atrocities, such as the Ethiopian conflict between the Tigray and the Amhara as well as the ethnic conflict in South Sudan (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2022). Despite its noble intention, the implementation of R2P has long been subject to criticism. Postcolonial and decolonial authors have been especially vocal about their reservations with the doctrine (Mallavarapu, 2015; Mahdavi, 2015). Rather than a universal norm, R2P would be an inconsistently used mechanism that would establish and maintain a colonial relationship between the Global North and the Global South. Prior to 2022, mass atrocities occurred predominantly in the Global South. With the ongoing Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine, however, an opportunity has presented itself to compare the employment of R2P between conflicts in the Global North and the Global South.

The Syrian Civil War has known a large number of civilian and non-civilian casualties, mass atrocities and widespread displacement (Bellamy, 2022). As a result, the UN has referred to R2P in multiple resolutions concerning the Syrian conflict (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2022). Despite the presence of the aforementioned issues in the Ukrainian conflict, and despite the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and Security Council (UNSC) issuing various resolutions in response to the Ukrainian conflict since its start, however, none of the resolutions have invoked R2P. To explore whether this difference

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is due to colonial dynamics as decolonial thinkers argue, I center this thesis on the following research question: How does the UN discourse surrounding R2P in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Syrian Civil War reflect colonial and decolonial dynamics?

To answer this research question, I have conducted a comparative critical discourse analysis (CDA) in which I compare the discourse between UNGA resolutions, UNSC resolutions and UNSC meeting minutes of both cases with a decolonial theoretical framework. I find that both decolonial as colonial dynamics are reflected in the discourse. The institutionalization of specific narratives that pertain to the protection of civilians and sovereignty of the state exhibit an intention of the UN to distance itself from perpetuating a colonial relationship. Nevertheless, other frames indicate the persistence of colonial biases.

In the following section I provide a brief overview of the early history of R2P. The second section comprises a literature review on the academic debate on R2P and its potentially colonial character. The third section expands on the decolonial theoretical framework. Fourth, I discuss my methodology. Fifth, I provide short case descriptions followed by the study's findings. In the following section I conduct the comparative critical discourse analysis. I then conclude with a discussion and the final conclusion of the thesis.

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A brief early history of R2P

Saddened by the mass atrocities in Rwanda and Srebrenica and, more specifically, the disparate international response to these atrocities due to the political, legal and military tensions intervention would entail, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan pled for change (Cater & Malone, 2016). Indeed, the case of Rwanda had shown the consequences of idleness; whereas Kosovo had demonstrated how tactless intervention could easily exacerbate an already – to put it lightly – harrowing and violent conflict. These failures brought forth a clear need for a framework of international humanitarian and possibly military intervention that took account of the inevitable infringements upon the subjected state sovereignty. The establishment of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) by the Canadian government was meant to help resolve this issue. In 2001, but one year later, the ICISS published their comprehensive report in which the Responsibility to Protect was first conceptualized (ICISS, 2001). Although it received pushback from some MS, the report was welcomed by many (Bellamy, 2009). At the 2005 World Summit, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) unanimously endorsed the R2P doctrine, hereby solidifying R2P as formal responsibility to be adhered to (UNGA, 2005). Paragraph 138 of the resolution deemed that *"each individual State has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity."* (UNGA, 2005, p. 30). Hence, the resolution amounted to an international agreement that each state is responsible for the protection of its own people towards mass atrocities. In accordance with paragraph 139, the international community was endowed with the responsibility to *"use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means"* (UNGA, 2005, p. 30) to protect populations from the same dangers as well. Hence, the main implication being that if a state fails to fulfil their endowed responsibilities, the international community becomes obliged to

intervene through the enforcement of the measures that have been agreed upon. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon further clarified the borders of R2P's conceptualization in 2009, when he described what came to be known as the three pillars of R2P in a dedicated report (UNGA, 2009). The three pillars are as follows: (1) states hold the primary responsibility to protect their own populations of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity as well as the incitement of any of the above; (2) the international community has the responsibility to aid any state in fulfilling the responsibility of the first pillar; and (3) the international community has the responsibility to take collective action to protect populations if a state is unwilling or fails to protect its population in accordance with the first two pillars. Collective action would have to be in line with the principles provided by the UN Charter.

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Literature Review

Although R2P was a major advancement in the legitimization of international interventionism and the provision of humanitarian aid, it has also been the source of decades worth of scholarly debates. In light of this thesis, one reason for contention of its validity has been the debate surrounding R2P potentially being a colonial doctrine or not. In the following section, I provide an overview of the literature surrounding this debate.

Per those who reject the notion of R2P being a colonial doctrine, there are two key arguments to be discerned. Firstly, R2P has garnered substantial support due to the successes and missions that have resulted from its adoption in the global South. Proponents argue that these have generally facilitated a resourceful process of diplomacy and peace resolution (Bellamy, 2010). Secondly, and more conceptually fundamental, is the argument that R2P has provided the international community with a universal norm all are to adhere to (Bellamy). This means that all states, regardless of their level of development, are continuously held accountable and can concomitantly hold other failing states accountable as well. According to Pattison (2017), RP2 is consequently invaluable as a means that provides the international community to halt mass atrocities from occurring.

In contrast to this view, however, critical authors challenge the idea that this is truly a universal norm. Indeed, as critics convey, though R2P is formally a universal norm does not ensure the exercise is as evidently universal and consistently synonymous. For one, an inconsistent employment of R2P can be expected considering the widespread confusion on the nature of R2P amongst practitioners and scholars, and the consequent ambiguous discourse on the use of R2P (Gholiagha, 2015). A unanimous understanding to what R2P exactly is, remains absent. The lack of clarity and hollow legal character leave a possibility to

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protect rather than a concrete obligation which can be triggered with clear conditions (Pison Hindawi, 2016). Disagreements persist when to 'apply' R2P as a result. Even if the pillars are deemed sufficiently clear when it pertains to the application of the norm, it does not specify exactly how to exercise intervention when a state is demonstrably failing to fulfil its responsibility to protect (Thakur, 2013). This has led to incongruent expectations between conflicting parties and the sentiment that R2P has been employed incoherently. Most notably, the supposed virtue of R2P has come to reside in the shade of the increasing amount of cases in which the international community fails to act despite emerging urgency.

The argument above largely points to the institutional restraints on R2P, but also strongly affects the discourse surrounding R2P and the consequent discursive materialization of its doctrine. Among the most obvious reasons, is that the aforementioned discrepancies lead to abstractions and ambiguity when R2P is discussed. However, others find that this analysis of the R2P's obstacles lacks a critical lens. Postcolonial and decolonial authors contextualize the norm within an imperial, colonial world. These critics at times, therefore, agree with the analysis above. Yet, they add that the above does not exist within its own vacuum. Rather, there would be clear reasons for these constraints that can be deconstructed with decolonial theory. According to them, R2P is a doctrine that legitimizes colonial politics by those MS from the region referred to as the West or the Global North (Harsant, 2022; Mallavarapu, 2015; McCormack, 2010). Colonial politics is then defined as politics that systematically fosters a hegemony of a larger power over another. This perspective holds that R2P is systemically applied – be it purposely or subconsciously – to cases that can perpetuate such a global colonial hegemony by the West. The argument is not exceptionally shocking, for research has shown that the human rights framework has been utilized to legitimize colonialism and violence imposed by the Global North throughout history (Barreto, 2018).

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Multiple authors argue that the colonial characteristics are manifested in R2P-related discourse. To start, R2P and its discourse is often contextualized by its roots in liberal interventionism and humanitarianism (McCormack, 2010; Mahdavi, 2015; Mamdani, 2009). After three generations of military interventionism, McCormack and Mamdani contend that R2P is merely a discursive attempt at rebranding interventionism to adhere to contemporary social pressures without enacting considerable executive changes. Discourse of the current fourth generation interventionism largely centers on the protection of civilians, motivated by human rights, developmental needs and acknowledging that the peoples and individuals residing in conflict areas deserve moral consideration. Proponents of R2P therefore often hold these elements in high regard and contend that the need to fulfil these elements justifies intervention. Though according to the above authors, the coloniality is still apparent because the supposed virtue of securing mass protection of civilians would be used within R2P-discourse to legitimize Western enforcement of inequal global power through those interventions and through the power structures shaped by the use of said discourse itself. Various authors wrote on varying cases in the Middle East to show how the UN is, indeed, not more than the sum of its actors when it comes to R2P-discourse and implementation. According to Mahdavi & Pupparo (2015), the loudest Western UN MS have successfully used R2P as discursive tool to selectively militarize human rights interventions once more. For instance, Western MS and NATO exploited the unanimous endorsement of R2P in the Libyan conflict to engage in significant military intervention with the goal of causing regime change – which was far beyond the priorly agreed upon terms of securing protection of civilians. In contrast, US-ally Bahrain has continued to commit human rights offenses with little attention and similar use of discourse (Mahdavi). Mahdavi and Pupparo denote further how this discourse is currently used once again by the West in the case of the Syrian conflict

to legitimize military intervention, whilst refraining from emphasizing the need for diplomacy and cultivation of a Syrian movement for democracy.

This discursive shift towards developmentalism and human rights has been accompanied by a conceptual change in the use of 'sovereignty' in the discourse (Glanville, 2013; Harsant, 2022; Staunton & Glanville, 2022). In transnational politics the term 'sovereignty' has evolved from its original Westphalian definition of territorial control, to the current definition that understands sovereignty as a responsibility. R2P has become an exemplary doctrine for this conceptual change in the surrounding discourse. By maintaining R2P as an inherent obligation to any state leadership, its discourse has reinforced the idea that sovereignty is contingent on the leadership's adherence to its corresponding responsibilities, of which the protection of its civilians is most fundamental. Though this is still an abstract change, which is described by Focarelli (2008) as an *"extreme ambiguity"* (Focarelli, 2008, p. 210) which has led to even more distrust and confusion as described earlier above.

The idea that the R2P and its discourse are selectively applied, and that sovereignty is no longer perceived as self-evident is salient amongst states that oppose its doctrine as well. Indeed, the states that reject R2P have largely suffered from negative consequences from state repression, mass atrocities, external interference and prior UN tactics and state revisionism – indicating that those who are most familiar with colonial politics of global powers are wary of the supposed moral righteousness of R2P (Claes, 2012). Pawnday & Streitfeld-Hall (2020) add the important detail that the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) can often not operate effectively due to the veto power held by its permanent members. Between the US, Russia, France, the United Kingdom and China, there is not much geopolitical space left to engage in transnational intervention without meddling with one of

these powers' hegemonies. The result is a deadlock that, because of its inherent geopolitical bias, could arguably demonstrate ongoing colonial dynamics.

Nevertheless, R2P has also been discussed as a product of a postcolonial age. Pison Hindawi (2022) – a critical scholar herself – most notably argues that her ideological peers who aim to be wary of neo-imperialism generally and structurally omit the input of the Global South in the gradual development of R2P. Although she does not use this term specifically, Pison Hindawi contends this confirmation bias has led to a scholarly neglect of the UN's attempts to curb militarization of humanitarian endeavors as well as the intensive involvement in R2P by actors of the Global South such as the African Union. In short, she defines this phenomenon as anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism.

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Theoretical Framework: Decoloniality

In this section I discuss the theory of decoloniality underlying the analysis of this thesis. Decoloniality has proclaimed a fair share of the contemporary field of critical theory. Functioning in tandem with postcolonial research, it moves beyond postcolonial questions spawned by Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) that seek to find how and why colonial remnants continue to exist today. Rather, decoloniality aims to (1) actively deconstruct colonial remnants in society today and, more particularly, (2) replace these realities by a more comprehensive interpretation of reality that includes the experiences of the colonized subalterns (Hobson, 2007; Pison Hindawi, 2022).

To do this, the idea of coloniality is foundational. Coloniality, as developed by Quijano (2007), refers to the persistence of colonial forms of power and domination in contemporary social and political structures. It therefore describes how hierarchies that have been priorly established in colonial times continue to exist and construct the reality of today. As discussed in the literature review, coloniality can manifest itself through a continued subjugating approach by the Global North towards the Global South, or through international institutions such as the UN reproducing a colonial logic in their decision-making process.

In determining how to rid discourse of coloniality – to decolonize – much of the theoretical literature focuses on the salience and consequent importance of Eurocentrism (Barkawi, 2016; Bartholomew, 2018; Sabaratnam, 2013; Uimonen, 2020). Eurocentrism signifies a *"Eurocentric predisposition to reify the West as the self-generating, proactive subject of world politics – past and present (and future?)"* (Hobson, 2007, p. 95). As such, Eurocentric narratives portray the European West as principal agent of global developments, whilst considering others as less developed and lacking in agency and capacity. Halperin

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(2018) illustrates that this phenomenon is oftentimes accompanied by a selective
mythologization of European history: a structural tendency to embellish the 'successes' of
European history without recognizing its reliance on violence, exclusion and the dualistic
economy – all of which have generally comprised the main reasons for the Global North to
view the Global South as inferior and subordinate.

Eurocentrism accordingly creates repressing and subordinating complex structures
between the Global North and Global South. According to Quijano (2007), this ongoing form
of coloniality leads to the exploitation of transnational organizations such as the UN for a
reinforcement of global inequalities and enforcement of Western norms and values.
Knowledge stemming from European research is deemed as 'genuinely' empiric and
objective truth; non-Western knowledge is considered dubious (Deb, 2015). Accordingly,
Eurocentrism has been shown to play a clear role in policymaking, the eventual execution of
policy and the ideological origin from which such policies and legislation are derived
(Keukeleire & Lecocq, 2018). It has resulted in the continuous salience of European issues on
the (global) agenda rather than non-European issues (Ahmed, 2021). Even if voices are heard
by non-European parties, these are largely expressed through European interpretations.
Moreover, deeply rooted Eurocentrism is still predominant in the scholarly environment of
journals and researchers despite the steadily growing awareness (García, 2020; Ibrahim et al.,
2023; Kubota, 2020).

To decolonize the paradigm of Western distinctiveness primarily means challenging
and transforming knowledge and power systems that underpin coloniality (Mignolo, 2009).
Decolonizing discourse, therefore, constitutes discernment, scrutiny and dismantlement of
dominant Eurocentric knowledge production and its described fallacious ideas within
discourse (Tuck & Yang, 2012). To subsequently transform the colonial dominion into a

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decolonial structure, critical authors propose to emphasize reality as contextualized by the multi-layered intertwinement of global socio-political dynamics (Castro-Gomez, 2000; Macgilchrist, 2014; Sabaratnam, 2013). In so doing, there must be a purposeful recognition of the existence and validity of non-Western epistemologies (Sabaratnam, 2017); to then include the reality and voices of parties who do not belong to the West within the discourse that is employed (Mignolo; Tuck & Yang).

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Methodology

To uncover how the employment and exercise of R2P by the UN could depend on colonial dynamics, I have conducted a comparative critical discourse analysis (CDA) in which I compare discourse of the UNGA and the UNSC surrounding R2P and its elements in the case of the Syrian Civil War and the Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine. Alongside of CDA being a broader academic movement, it is also method that studies discourse by its connection to the structures and hierarchies of its context (Catalano & Waugh, 2020). As such, CDA aims to analyze the *"hidden, opaque, and visible structures of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language"* (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 12). In contrast to discourse analysis, CDA then does not conclude with the designation of forms of discourse. Instead, it situates the discourse in a larger dimension of power structures, power abuse and the consequent injustice it births and perpetuates (Van Dijk, 1993).

Due to the relatively short period the invasion and occupation of Ukraine has been active, there are limited related resources by the UN. Nevertheless, sufficient data is available. Concretely, the data for this thesis consists of four relevant UNGA resolutions, two relevant UNCS resolutions and the minutes of four relevant UNCS meetings for each case. In the case of the Syrian conflict, all resolutions were selected due to their contents specifically referencing R2P. As for the invasion of Ukraine, UNGA resolutions have been selected on the basis of them focusing on subjects that strongly relate to R2P and could therefore be reasonably expected to include a referral to R2P. Such subjects include humanitarian aid and the necessity to protect civilians. Similarly, UNCS meetings have been selected on the basis of their agenda comprising topics with strong relations to R2P. These were, however, limited to two because as of the writing of this paper, no more than two draft resolutions of the

UNSC have been realized, none of which have passed a unanimous vote due to the exercised veto power of Russia. Lastly, of the resolutions and meeting minutes, all but one are selected from the period 2017-2022, to ensure the comparative analysis aptly compares discourses from the same period. The only deviant resolution being A/RES/68/262 (2014) due to its relation with the occupation of Crimea and consequent integral connection to the Ukrainian conflict.

To appropriately discern if the discourse on R2P has colonial or decolonial dynamics, I have first coded the data on the basis of their significant relationship with R2P. As illustrated by the three pillars and the literature review, two of the most significant elements in current R2P discourse emphasize (1) the protection of civilians, which includes the need for humanitarian assistance and (2) sovereignty. These, hence, comprise two of my main data codes. To conduct a sufficiently comprehensive analysis and not to neglect discourse specifically targeting R2P, however, I have also coded discourse specifically using the R2P-frame. Second, I have operationalized the colonial dynamics in correspondence with the theoretical framework in the previous section. Specifically, I have analyzed the data by way of examining how colonial remnants and structures of power and domination may or may not be present in the discourse, and how these may or may not perpetuate Eurocentric perspectives and reinforce global inequalities (Quijano, 2007; Tuck & Yang, 2012). To this end, I have looked for evidence of the presence and absence of dominant Eurocentric narratives in the discourse, such as a focus on the perspectives, experience and agency of European actors to the exclusion of non-European actors, ideas of European superiority and a selective mythologization of European history (Barkawi, 2016; Halperin, 2018; Hobson, 2007; Macgilchrist, 2014; Sabaratnam, 2013). This also entails an emphasis on how non-European perspectives and experiences are included or excluded from the discourse to

uncover whether decolonial discourse has emerged (Castro-Gomez, 2000; Mignolo, 2009; Pison Hindawi, 2022). Because this study is a CDA, I subsequently analyze how the above notions can impact or be impact by the broader global socio-political power structures and hierarchies. By focusing on these aspects of the discourse, I have aimed to critically evaluate the potential presence of coloniality as well as decoloniality in the discourse surrounding R2P within the UNGA and the UNCS.

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Case descriptions and findings

In the following section, I provide a brief overview of the Syrian Civil War and the Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine. Their introduction is followed by the research findings. I first present the findings of the data related to the Syrian case. Second, I discuss the findings concerning the Ukrainian case. As described in the methodology section, the findings constitute apparent narratives and frames that pertain to: (1) R2P specifically; (2) the protection of civilians; and (3) sovereignty.

Case 1: The Syrian Civil War

Since 2011, Syria has been engulfed by a visceral civil war (BBC, 2022). The initial protests that sparked the Civil War were mass protests opposing the authoritarian rule of President Bashar al-Assad and his government. Before long the government responded with a violent crackdown on the protesters. A militarized civil war, involving various armed opposition groups such as the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian National Army and the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham has since ensued (Sorenson, 2016). Over time, the war has become increasingly complex and multifaceted due to the presence of trans- and international actors as well as the occupation of Syrian territory by Da'esh, or the Islamic State (ISIS) since 2013. The UN has estimated that the conflict has resulted in over 500,000 deaths and the displacement of millions of Syrians (BBC). Since the outbreak of the conflict, the UN has consequently invoked the R2P multiple times through its different bodies.

Case 2: The Russian Invasion and Occupation of Ukraine

Eight years after the invasion and forced annexation of Crimea, which is still only considered a temporary occupation by the international community, Russia definitively escalated its aggression by invading Ukrainian territory on February 22nd, 2022 (Zinets &

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Vasovic, 2022) – one day after Russia recognized the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic as autonomous states. In less than one year, this still ongoing occupation has cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. As of January, 2023 the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2023) has verified over 7,000 of these deaths to concern civilians. From the outset of the invasion, the conflict has garnered a significant amount of political attention. Unprecedented sanctions from the transnational community have ensued, including far-reaching economic sanctions by the EU and increased efforts by NATO to strengthen the Ukrainian's defense with arms, intelligence sharing and surveillance operations (European Commission, 2022; Cerulus, 2022). Despite the large number of civilian casualties, clear evidence of mass atrocities and war crimes committed by Russian forces, and the evident designation of Russia as the aggressor, the UN has yet to invoke R2P through any resolution related to the conflict.

Findings – The Syrian Civil War

In the case of Syria, the UNSC has reaffirmed the protection of civilians to be the primary responsibility of the state (UNSC, 2017). Additional formulations are provided through the UNGA reiterating the primary responsibility of the state to *"respect and ensure the human rights of all individuals within their territory and subject to their jurisdiction"* (UNGA, 2022a). Accordingly, the resolutions that express R2P have an overall strong focus on the protection of civilians and the general state of civilian welfare as a result of the conflict (UNGA, 2019; UNGA, 2020; UNGA, 2021, UNGA, 2022a; UNSC, 2016, UNSC, 2017; UNSC, 2018). Both the UNSC as well as the UNGA repeatedly recall the obligations of all involved parties to international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Hence, the UN consistently urges for an end to all forms of violence that target or otherwise victimize civilians, such as the use of air strikes, car bombs, the enforced starvation of

civilians and the besiegement of populated areas. The responsibility of such crimes against humanity are often bluntly stated. The resolutions structurally refer to the Syrian state for their demands and requests for change, alongside the exhaustive descriptions of specific incidents and generalized forms of violence that the Syrian government is named to be responsible for.

In terms of sovereignty, the UNSC and UNGA maintain abundant clarity on the formal recognition and legitimacy of the Syrian state. However, the sovereignty of the Syrian government over Syria is put in question through two notions. First, in connecting the sovereignty of the state with its consequent obligation to uphold R2P in the starting paragraph, the resolutions situate the formal legitimacy of the Syrian government within a moral obligation that needs to be fulfilled. *"Reaffirming its strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic (…) and demanding that the Syrian regime meet its responsibility to protect the Syrian population"* (UNGA, 2020, p. 1). Though R2P is a universal norm, the above phrase explicitly clarifies its continued relevance for the Syrian government specifically. Their sovereignty, therefore, aims to be dependent on their fulfilment of R2P rather than it being an inherent element to the state's leadership. Second, the UN uses discourse that expressly delegitimizes the current Syrian government. As exemplified by the excerpt as well, the various UN entities as well as a wide spectrum of MS representatives in UNCS meetings take little issue with describing the Syrian government as a 'regime' (UNGA, 2021; UNGA, 2022). A regime indicates a negative perception of the government. This is particularly used to refer to authoritarian orders which are in stark contrast to the democratic endeavors of the UN. Furthermore, resolutions and UNCS representatives declare on various occasions that there must be a suniteolution to the conflict (UNGA, 2019; UNSC, 2019) – though,

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exclusively in the shape of a durable, non-sectarian and inclusive political process meeting the *"legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people"* (UNGA, 2019, p. 3). Hereby juxtaposing an ideal inclusive and democratic future with their perception of the current state of Syrian governance, being one of little legitimacy and considerable levels of exclusivity on the basis of ethnicity and gender among other descriptors.

Findings – The Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine:

As previously discussed, R2P is not invoked or mentioned in any resolution pertaining to the Ukrainian conflict; neither was it mentioned in any of the UNSC's drafted resolutions that were vetoed by Russia. A similar aversion to its use is found in the meeting minutes, for within these council meetings it has only been referred to once. This exception was articulated by the Albanian council president at the time. Mr. Hoxha considers R2P a *"common responsibility"* (UNSC, 2022d, p. 11) and employs the R2P narrative to emphasize the UN's obligation to counter Russian propaganda with education to prevent an otherwise highly probable ethnic conflict in the future.

Responsibility is, however, a recurring frame. When employing this frame in their discourse, UNSC discussions and UN resolutions regarding the Russian invasion and subsequent occupation of Ukraine primarily focus on (1) who is to be held responsible for the conflict and its violence; and (2) the UN's responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. Per the first point, responsibility is ubiquitous when discussing Russia's role in the conflict. Resolutions and meeting minutes all indicate a strong assignment of blame to Russia as the aggressor (UNGA, 2021; UNGA, 2022c; UNSC, 2022c). Russia concurrently engages in similar discourse, oftentimes shifting blame to the *"Ukrainian regime"* (UNSC, 2022c, p. 15) for Nazi politics (UNSC, 2022c; UNSC, 2022d). The UNSC's

focus on the maintenance of international peace and security is a logical result of its specific agenda. Be that as it may, it is noteworthy that while the use of the 'peace and security' narrative might imply a need for the protection of civilians, it only ever does so implicitly.

Nevertheless, the protection of civilians receives frequent mentions on its own. In one of the earliest UNSC meetings since the Russian invasion the French representative emphasizes its importance as *"a top priority"* (UNSC, 2022b, p. 5). Similarly, all resolutions demand a prompt halt to all forms of violence towards civilians and civilian objects. In addition, the need for an offering of protection without discrimination on the basis of ethnicity (UNSC, 2022c) was expressed by a few MS. Accordingly, the greater risk of women and children to be subjected to exploitation has received regular emphasis.

As for sovereignty, the territorial integrity and resulting legitimate sovereignty of Ukraine is consistently emphasized throughout the meetings and resolutions (UNGA, 2014; UNSC, UNSC, 2022; UNSC, 2022a). The international recognition of the Ukrainian borders is used as motivation to deter Russia from continuing its occupation. To this end, A/RES/76/70 (UNGA, 2021) on Russia's militarization of Crimea and other nearby bordering regions for instance, reaffirms that the supposed Russian annexation of Crimea is still considered a temporary occupation. Notwithstanding this robust stance of the UN bodies, they do not clearly impede on the legitimacy of the Russian government as sovereign of the Russian state. The resolutions primarily attempt to hold Russia responsible for its actions within Ukrainian territory, but continue to respect its own sovereignty through their formal address of *the "Russian Federation"* (UNGA, 2022c, p. 2; UNSC, 2022a, p. 1). This formal barrier is evident in the UNCS meeting minutes as well, as most Western-European states refer to Russia simply as the 'Russian Federation' as well, whilst some Eastern-European representatives address Russia as a 'regime' (UNSC, 2022d).

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Analysis

This section comparatively analyzes the data through a decolonial perspective. First, I analyze the discourse used by the UNGA and the UNCS in the context of the need to protect civilians. Then, I continue with an analysis on the notion of sovereignty. I conclude with a consequent analysis of the decolonial and colonial indicators of the use and invocation of R2P in both cases.

The protection of civilians

The protection of civilians is a clear expressed priority in both cases at hand. Across all data, there is a repeated demand for a halt of all forms of violence towards civilians, civilian objects, ethnic groups, women and children. Close to all resolutions and council meeting contents concomitantly urge for an intensification of efforts that reduce the harm and exploitation they are subjected to. One noticeable difference to this aspect, however, is the emphasis on inclusivity. In the Syrian case, the need for an inclusive political process is recurrently emphasized (UNGA, 2022a; UNGA, 2021). For Ukraine, this is a much less prevalent notion. There is only one resolution, being the 2014 resolution, which discusses inclusivity as such. It stresses *"the importance of maintaining inclusive political dialogue in Ukraine that reflects the diversity of its society and includes representation from all parts of Ukraine"* (UNGA, 2014). Though the need for a state-contained political process is much less relevant in an intrastate war than it is in a civil war, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict surely involves a constant flow of negotiations in which inclusive thinking is indispensable. Considering in both cases there is purposeful attention being given to the complex array of negative consequences of the conflicts' violence – such as gendered violence and the safety of children (UNGA, 2021; UNGA, 2022b) – and the Russian invasion has also committed

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deliberate mass assaults on civilians leading many states to believe it might be a genocide (International Court of Justice, n.d.), it is less probable that inclusivity in the case of Ukraine is merely an issue of lesser concern in the face of far greater dangers. The fact that this necessity is generally omitted could hence be indicative of a slight bias in the perceived progressive positioning of Ukraine and Russia opposed to Syria.

Taking into account their geopolitical position within the overarching order of the international community, this discrepancy can be explained more aptly. Syria is a state that is situated in the Global South. Eurocentric belief would consider Syria as underdeveloped as a result (Sabaratnam, 2013). This could prime the idea that the actors in the Syrian conflict require a more constant reminder of the necessity of inclusive thinking. Those involved with the occupation of Ukraine, however, are expected to be more aware of inclusive thinking due to their positioning in the Global North. However purposeful it might be, the incongruency is present and – per its presence and the considerable power the UN exerts – does perpetuate the salience of such Eurocentric ideas. The consequence thereof is a repression of the Syrian state and other parties affiliated with the Syrian Civil War in the global sociopolitical order. To clarify, the fact that the UN's approach to conflict resolution differs based on this specific Eurocentric bias, indicates that there is an essentialist idea that the parties of the Syrian Civil War have a lacking capacity to conform to or agree with the norms that are held in high regard by the West. At the same time, there is a similarly Eurocentric bias that respects the intelligence of those involved in the conflict of Ukraine insofar inclusivity goes. Nevertheless, aside from the disparate use of inclusivity and context-specific particularities, there is no clear difference in terms of emphases on specific targeted civilian groups.

Although the protection of civilians is a priority on the UN's agenda in both cases, the motivation behind the endeavor to protect civilians is not found to be void of colonial

dynamics. Indeed with A/RES/ES-11/2 (UNGA, 2022b) on the humanitarian consequences of the conflict, a d9069istinct sense of European exceptionality is revealed. Here, the UNGA is eager to recognize on the first page when devoting attention to the primary reasons for the call to halt the violence that the offensive and its consequences *"are on a scale that the international community has not seen in Europe in decades"* (UNGA, 2022b, p. 1). The heightened importance of the Ukrainian conflict due to its location in an otherwise tranquil Europe is reiterated by UNSC members in various meetings (UNCS, 2022b; UNCS, 2022d). To explicitly use this notion on itself as a reason for change is indicative of a Eurocentric bias.

Following the universalist paradigm of the UN, a violent conflict would be inherently immoral and objectionable due to the harm that is inherently involved. It being an exception in any region would, therefore, not make it more deserving of attention than cases in which conflict is less of an exception. Yet, the above statement is more indicative of a predisposition as described by Hobson (2007). Eurocentric thinking holds the perception of the West as a more rational, and forward-thinking environment. One in which conflict is not at home because it has transcended the uncivilized choice for war. The stance of the UN that conflict ought to be avoided because Europe is considered a region in which such violent conflict does not occur or is much less likely to occur, finds its origin in a similar bias and therefore helps maintain saliency of this bias within the order of the international political community. Furthermore, the Eurocentric nature of the discourse becomes increasingly manifest when considering it mythologizes the European history due to the neglect of European conflicts that have historically occurred and have continued to occur over the past century (Halperin, 2018). Kenyan representative Mrs. Toroitich agrees, as she observes a widespread surprise at the occurrence of a conflict this size in Europe and describes this as a

"*historical blindness*" (UNSC, 2022b, p. 14). This argument is reinforced by the blatant lack of such notions pertaining to the Syrian conflict. There is no mention in any of the analyzed resolutions of the Syrian conflict being extraordinarily deplorable due to the high levels of conflict Syria and the surrounding region has known for many years. Instead, most statements emphasize a desire to prevent a further exacerbation of the conflict from happening. Violent conflict, therefore, appears to be presumed as more naturally present in the Arabic region.

Sovereignty

The results on the discursive use of sovereignty and the frames surrounding issues of sovereignty and related elements are twofold: (1) decolonial thinking is clearly present in the formal proceedings of the UNGA and the UNSC but (2) colonial bias remains evident.

Firstly, the findings indicate a purposeful decolonial approach by the examined UN bodies to remain wary of creating and perpetuating a colonial order. Namely, sovereignty is consistently used in the resolutions and by UNSC members when they express their explicit respect and recognition of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of both the Ukrainian as the Syrian state (UNGA, 2014; UNGA, 2022a; UNSC, 2017; UNSC, 2022a)**.** In addition, it is consistently used as the first notion in every resolution with the exact same phrasing. This demonstrates how the UN bodies are aware of the tensions of R2P and interventionism of the international community on state sovereignty and are at least averse to being perceived as being a colonial institution affecting the world through preserving a stratified world order and do not wish their policy and work to comprise overtly colonial efforts. Contrary to most other recognitions of these resolutions, though, this use of discourse is less context-specific. The fact that the phrasing remains the exact same across resolutions consequently shows it is an institutionalized formality, regardless of the intention.

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Despite this approach coloniality appears to remain present in the discourse used to frame each government. Specifically, the manner in which the UNSC and the UNGA refer to the Syrian and Russian governments in their resolutions are divergent and are indicative of a double standard – possibly stemming from Eurocentrism. Though both are acknowledged in the resolutions and meeting minutes to engage in authoritarian politics, and both are described to function partly on the basis of an ethnonationalist agenda, the Syrian government is often referred to as a 'regime' (UNGA, 2022a; UNSC, 2022e); whereas Russia is referred to as the 'Russian Federation' (UNGA, 2022c; UNSC, 2022a). This difference in framing is questionable because of the juxtaposition it poses with the consensus on both the Syrian as the Russian government having characteristics that describe a regime.

There are various potential reasonings to be considered. Firstly, as emphasized in prior sections of the analysis, the lower positioning in the international order could prime the UN to succumb to a Eurocentric bias. This would be more in line with the colonial remnants being discussed above and would consequently entail the UN being predisposed to view an authoritarian government as a regime when it concerns a government in an 'underdeveloped', 'uncivilized' region in which conflict is more prevalent (Barkawi, 2016). A second potential reason however, could concern the impact of the political status quo in Syria and Russia on the international community. For the legitimate disputes between the Syrian conflicts' domestic actors have long been exploited by global powers in the form of a proxy war (Heydemann, 2020). A proxy war between specifically the West and Russia. How the conflict develops and ultimately ends is of considerable interest to nation-states like the US and Russia as both consider the area as a potential domain for their hegemonic influence. Using discourse such as the above to delegitimize the Syrian government is therefore of positive impact to the Western colonial agenda in Syria. There is no similar need in the case of

Russia's own domestic sovereignty. Hence, there is no direct incentive to delegitimize the assumption of sovereignty by the Russian government over its own state. It is telling that in the UNSC meetings representatives of Eastern European states do choose to address the Russian government as a regime. Certainly, these MS states are known to experience Russia as an evident colonial power due to the hegemony that Russia has historically had and attempted to expand. From the perspective of Eastern-European states then, there is a consequent consideration of Russia's current aggression as an act of colonial expansion. The repeated use of frames that distance the UN from overtly impeding on a subjected state's sovereignty, therefore, does not suffice in realizing an entirely decolonial approach. Colonial perspectives remain, which determine the strategies for conflict resolution and conflict negotiations.

R2P

According to the three pillars of R2P, all states hold the primary responsibility to protect their own populations, the international community has the responsibility to aid any state in fulfilling that responsibility, and the international community has the responsibility to take action to protect a population if a state is unwilling or failing to protect its population (UNGA, 2009). Although it can be argued that Ukraine is willing to fight for state security, the resolutions and meeting minutes all express the urgent need for protection of civilians – be it in the conflict area or in territory currently occupied by Russia. Still, R2P has not been stressed in the Ukrainian case, nor was it formulated in the draft resolutions that would have been realized if Russia would not have exercised its veto power. The main difference, hence, is exemplified by the analysis of the discourse on the protection of civilians and sovereignty. Although formal measures have been institutionalized to avoid the UN from attaining an image of being a colonial entity, colonial perspectives have not been entirely eradicated.

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Despite the eagerness of Western states to discuss the acts of violence Russia is currently committing, they are hesitant to confront Russia with notions that impede on its sovereignty. On the contrary, there is no such hesitancy to address the Syrian government with disparaging terminology. Similarly, the Ukrainian conflict is seen as exceptional and as a direct consequence thereof deemed to be especially deserving of aid. The perpetual state of conflict in Syria is, however, apparently not considered as deserving of becoming a prime reason to call for its resolution.

Through the lens of Castro-Gomez (2000) and Sabaratnam (2013), the uncovered incongruencies could exhibit a lacking awareness by the UN of its position as a major actor in determining global political dynamics. These authors argue that decolonization has to encompass a thorough understanding and acknowledgement of the multi-layered intertwinement of global socio-political dynamics. The following step is to use this knowledge to alter our own conceptualization of ourselves and the other and – in this case – to implement this viewpoint within our discourse. In other words, the understanding must be present of the positioning and influence of all actors within the global order on the positioning and perception of one another. This certainly and perhaps most importantly includes the awareness of one's own role therein. Although the UN understands the issue with coloniality and the colonial tensions that have historically accompanied interventionism, the resolutions and meeting minutes exhibit either less indication of a full realization of the power inherent to their framing aside of the already institutionalized formalities, or a well-intended use of discourse that is led by a specific political agenda. The former not only because of the inconsistencies that have been observed, but also because there is a lack in explicit mentions of their position with respect to the conflict and the negative impact they could possibly exert.

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The theory describes Eurocentrism to conceptualize European actors as superior, subsequently perpetuating the idea that the Global South is inferior and lacking in agency when implemented in discourse (Hobson, 2007). The different salient ideas on agency could explain the divergent use of R2P. Eurocentric bias presupposed the Global South to lack in capacity and agency. Therefore, actors from the Global North could be more inclined to perceive a conflict in the Global South of requiring help – in this case, in the need of a humanitarian intervention. The Global North, on the other hand, is presumed to be proactive and to hold a historical legacy of much success and little conflict (Bartholomew, 2018b; Halperin, 2018; Sabaratnam). Moreover, the differences between both conflicts' geopolitical contexts cannot be omitted. Whereas Syria is situated in the Middle East with no border to Europe, Ukraine is entirely different. Western nation-states could therefore reasonably hold the idea that whilst it is more important for them that the conflict in Ukraine be resolved soon, they also understand the deterrence they pose towards any of Russia's possible ideas to exacerbate the conflict or to advance the conflict outside of the Ukrainian borders.

Regardless of which of the above comprise the primary reasonings behind the disparate uses of R2P-discourse, the overall discursive impact of the different standards evidently includes the reification of colonial structures. For ultimately, the Syrian Civil War is recognized as being in need of multiple invocations of R2P, whereas the invasion of Ukraine is not. The implication being that the international community holds the legitimized obligation to intervene in Syria's current domestic affairs. Moreover, power and agency are discursively divergently attributed to the actors in both conflicts. In adopting the stance that discourse holds power, the result is that the Syrian state and its people are being disadvantaged due to the misperception of them lacking in agency when compared to a conflict in the Global North.

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Discussion

In short, the results of my analysis are as follows: (1) the UNGA and UNSC have institutionalized several ways to decolonize discourse surrounding R2P, for instance through explicitly recognizing each state's territorial integrity and through emphasizing several complex dimensions of conflict that require attention; (2) there are nonetheless various indications in the data that R2P is not applied consistently, the reasons for which can be explained by Eurocentric bias in conjunction with the geopolitical positioning of each case. In line with McCormack (2010) and Mamdani (2009), R2P appears to virtue signal a decolonial rebranding through the institutionalized discourse. The fourth generation interventionalist call for moral consideration of civilians and ascribed value of developmental aid are underlined by the constant urges for measures that aim to protect civilians. The colonial narratives and underlying biases that have nevertheless survived through this new age of interventionism persist.

Considering the size and significance of the UN, the power dynamics that result from such colonial narratives could very well perpetuate a more robust Western hegemony over the West (Harsant, 2022; Mallavarapu, 2015). The differing perceptions on the agency and state of development of each case appear to cause an accordingly different approach in the employment of R2P. This could effectively mean that different regions attain different levels of respect in policy development and negotiations related to their conflicts. In so doing, the UN creates a double standard that negatively affects the power of the Global South in transnational humanitarian politics. The results related to sovereignty exemplify this apparent phenomenon, for the discourse purposely undermines the legitimate sovereignty of Syria opposed to Russia through the incoherent use of the 'regime' frame. In accordance with the ideas of Staunton & Glanville (2022), the intentional use of framing has been shown to

challenge the legitimacy of a sovereign if they are not perceived to fulfil their responsibility to protect. However, the results problematize this axiom for the interpretation of the fulfilment of a government's R2P is at the least partly determined and scrutinized with a Eurocentric lens.

Bellamy (2010) would contend that an inconsistent 'application' would contradict the universality and continuous relevance of the R2P-doctrine. Nevertheless, the analysis showed that while R2P might be a formally universal norm that is perpetually ongoing, there are clear cases where the UN deems it necessary to express the R2P explicitly and vice versa. Concretely, the differing frames that have been presented through the analysis show how the UN ultimately applies R2P rather than consistently upholds it. A counterargument could emphasize that the protection of civilians of violence and mass atrocities has been consistently been presented as a priority on the agenda in the data of both cases. Therefore, the norm of R2P would not be used inadequately and would consistently be reinforced. This notion is partly valid. The core argument indeed finds robust grounds in the data, for the underlying norms have been thoroughly stressed. Nevertheless, this omits the relevance of R2P as an influential concept. It has emerged exactly to point the importance of the three pillars to all states when necessary. In addition, the discourse has shown sufficient evidence to continue scrutinizing the way in which R2P is used by the UN.

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Conclusion and Limitations

The use of R2P has been contested since its nascence. Although its three pillars have entrusted the international community with a universal norm that is meant to hold states accountable who fail to protect its civilians, critics have consistently argued that R2P has become a tool to maintain a colonial order between the Global North and the Global South. In this thesis I have used decolonial theory to uncover how the discourse on R2P in UNGA and UNCS resolutions as well as UNCS meetings reflects colonial or decolonial dynamics. Comparing the discourse used for the Syrian conflict with discourse on the Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine, I find that R2P-discourse is not void of colonial thinking. On the one hand, it is clear that decolonial dynamics have led to the institutionalization of narratives that aim to distance the UN from colonial politics. The UNGA and UNSC consistently express recognition of the territorial sovereignty of each state, and stresses civilian protection as a main priority. Nevertheless, this research finds that despite these advancements, discourse on the protection of civilians as well as sovereignty also indicate a different perception on the agency and legitimacy of Syria on the one hand and Ukraine and Russia on the other. Concretely, the results indicate that the UN might perceive Syria, being a state of the Global South, as lacking agency and inherently more prone to conflict. In contrast, it also finds an indication that the UN perceives Ukraine as a more proactive actor and inherently less prone to conflict due to its European location. These findings help shed light on why R2P is used repeatedly in resolutions and meetings related to Syria, but has yet to be referenced in relation to the Ukrainian conflict. It also provides insight into the impact of discourse on the order of the international community and transnational politics. The use of colonial discourse can very well impact the state of the conflict and wider perception states receive within the international community.

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Note, that this research has strictly focused on recent years and only focuses on the two cases. To find whether colonial dynamics can be found in R2P discourse more generally, future research could subject additional cases to a related research question, or could employ a quantitative analysis with a high number of conflicts that have been subjected to discussions on themes related to R2P. This would also shed light on a wider period of time, rather than the relatively short period of the subjected data in this thesis.

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