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Election Administration and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: A Critical Review of INEC's Electronic Innovations (1999-2023)

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Abstract

This paper examines the trajectory of electronic innovations introduced by Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) between 1999 and 2023, situating this technological journey within democratic consolidation theory and the broader literature on electoral integrity and institutional trust. Drawing on official INEC reports, legislative documents, academic literature, and election observer mission findings, the paper traces the evolution from manual voter registration in the early Fourth Republic through successive technological cycles, culminating in the deployment of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing (IReV) portal in 2023. The paper argues that INEC's technological interventions have produced a "trust paradox": while biometric accreditation technologies have materially reduced voter impersonation and multiple voting at the polling unit level, persistent failures in electronic result transmission have generated new focal points for political contestation and public disillusionment. Rather than resolving entrenched patterns of electoral manipulation, technology has displaced them—shifting their primary site from the polling unit to the collation and transmission process. This finding extends existing frameworks on fraud displacement and sociotechnical legitimacy to the Nigerian case, and carries implications for the study of electoral technology in weakly institutionalised democracies more broadly.

Keywords: Electoral Integrity; Election Administration; Election Technology; Democratic Consolidation; Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC); Institutional Trust; Nigeria

Introduction

Elections constitute the foundational mechanism through which citizens in representative democracies confer legitimacy upon government and hold leaders accountable. In such systems, the quality of the electoral process serves as a critical determinant of democratic sustenance and consolidation (Ugoh and Ukpere 2019). Since the return to civilian democratic rule in 1999, Nigeria has sustained its longest uninterrupted period of democratic governance, commonly known as the Fourth Republic, which represents a significant departure from military-dominated politics that characterised much

of the country's post-independence history (Oni, Erameh, and Oladejo 2017). However, this democratic longevity has been historically fraught with significant challenges. Nigerian elections have been widely plagued by poor organisation and allegations of rigging, fraud, violence, ballot box snatching/stuffing, multiple voting, voter intimidation, and result manipulation, which have collectively fostered an enduring deficit of public trust in the electoral process (Ideyi 2019).

Critically, this pattern did not originate in 1999. Electoral manipulation, elite efforts to control outcomes, and the deliberate weakening of electoral institutions are features of Nigeria's political landscape that predate the Fourth Republic by several decades. The military era (1966-1999) was marked by periodic and often discredited attempts at electoral transition, while even the pre-military civilian period (1960-1966) witnessed fierce regional rivalries and allegations of electoral fraud that contributed to the collapse of the First Republic. Understanding the challenges confronting INEC today requires situating them within this longer trajectory of inherited political culture and institutional weakness, rather than treating them as novel failures.

Against this backdrop, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has increasingly turned to electronic innovations as a mechanism for restoring credibility to the electoral process. Globally, the deployment of election technology is understood to serve objectives including the reduction of human error, the eradication of fraud and impersonation, the easing of result compilation, and the promotion of timely and transparent announcement of outcomes (Obiefuna-Oguejiofor 2018). This paper engages critically with a central analytical question: to what extent have digital electoral technologies mitigated or reinforced entrenched patterns of electoral manipulation in Nigeria?

The paper argues that INEC's technological journey has not constituted a linear progression towards greater electoral integrity. Instead, the evidence points to a paradoxical outcome. While certain technologies—particularly those targeting biometric voter accreditation, such as the Smart Card Reader (SCR) and the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS)—have successfully addressed specific forms of election-day fraud, the persistent and high-profile inadequacies in the electronic transmission of results have generated what this paper terms a "trust paradox." Technology introduced to build public confidence has, particularly in the context of the 2023 general election, become a principal source of public disillusionment. Crucially, however, the paper cautions against attributing electoral outcomes solely to INEC's technological performance. The 2023 elections, for instance, were shaped by a range of intersecting factors—including expanded internet access

and mobile phone penetration, the mobilising role of social media, the absence of an incumbent candidate, and the particular demographic composition of candidate support bases—that must be incorporated into any balanced assessment.

This paper employs a qualitative, document-based analysis. The research draws systematically on three categories of primary and secondary sources: official INEC publications (including election guidelines, post-election reports, and strategic planning documents); peer-reviewed academic literature on Nigerian electoral politics and democratic consolidation; and the empirical findings of credible domestic and international election observer missions including Yiaga Africa, the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the Carter Center (TCC), and the Commonwealth Observer Group. Sources were selected for their methodological credibility, institutional independence, and direct relevance to the central question of how technology has interacted with Nigeria's electoral integrity over the period under review.

The longitudinal scope, spanning 1999 to 2023, permits comparison across successive technological cycles and enables the identification of persistent structural patterns rather than cycle-specific anomalies. The analysis is consciously limited to national-level electoral contests administered by INEC; subnational elections, while analytically relevant, fall outside the scope of this study. The concept of the "trust paradox" emerged inductively from the analysis. Across successive technological interventions, a consistent pattern emerged: when transparency-oriented technologies failed—even partially—they became major sources of institutional delegitimation, despite their stated aims. This pattern, which existing literature on electoral integrity and democratic consolidation does not adequately theorise, forms the paper's central analytical contribution.

The paper proceeds as follows. It first establishes the theoretical framework situating the analysis within democratic consolidation theory and the broader literature on electoral legitimacy and institutional trust. It then provides the historical context of Nigerian electoral administration before and during the Fourth Republic. It analyses the evolution of INEC's technological interventions chronologically, from the manual era through successive technological cycles, before offering a thematic synthesis focused on the relationship between technology and democratic consolidation. The central analytical question—whether digital technologies have mitigated or reinforced entrenched patterns of manipulation—is revisited throughout and answered substantively in the conclusion.

Democratic Consolidation, Institutional Trust, and Electoral Technology

The concept of democratic consolidation provides the analytical scaffolding for this paper. Linz and Stepan's landmark formulation holds that a democracy may be considered consolidated when no significant political actors seek to achieve their objectives through non-democratic means, and when the vast majority of citizens view democratic institutions as "the only game in town" (Linz and Stepan 1996, 5). This establishes a demanding standard against which Nigeria's Fourth Republic must be assessed. Crucially, Linz and Stepan (1996) identify five interlocking arenas that must be simultaneously consolidated for democracy to be fully institutionalised—civil society, political society, the rule of law, state apparatus, and economic society. The electoral management body occupies a critical position at the intersection of political society and the rule of law: its performance directly determines whether elections function as credible mechanisms for legitimate political competition or as instruments of elite entrenchment.

This paper engages Linz and Stepan's (1996) framework not merely as a definitional baseline but as an analytical lens. In particular, it draws on their argument that consolidated democracy requires "attitudinal" consolidation—the internalisation by citizens of democratic norms and institutions as legitimate and worth defending (Linz and Stepan 1996, 6). Declining voter turnout, rising electoral cynicism, and the public perception that results can be manipulated regardless of technological safeguards all represent attitudinal indicators of incomplete or receding consolidation. In this sense, the trust paradox this paper identifies is not merely an institutional or operational problem; it is a democratic consolidation problem.

The institutional trust literature provides a complementary theoretical resource. As Norris (2011) argues, public confidence in electoral institutions is a function not simply of institutional performance but of the gap between citizens' expectations and their perception of how those expectations are met. Where expectations are calibrated to imperfect, chronic failure, disappointment is diffuse and manageable. Where institutions raise expectations explicitly—as INEC did with its public commitments regarding the IReV portal ahead of the 2023 elections—failure becomes a discrete event of betrayal, capable of generating acute and lasting damage to institutional legitimacy (Norris 2011, 83-97). This asymmetric dynamic between expectation and outcome is central to the trust paradox this paper develops and distinguishes the 2023 crisis from the chronic scepticism of earlier cycles.

The literature on electoral integrity, as synthesised by Norris, Frank, and Martínez i Coma (2014), further contextualises the Nigerian case. Their Electoral Integrity Project

framework identifies result adjudication as the dimension of electoral processes most vulnerable to manipulation in weakly institutionalised democracies, precisely because it occurs away from the direct observation of citizens and polling agents. The Nigerian experience confirms and extends this finding: successive technological innovations have progressively secured the polling unit while leaving the collation and transmission processes exposed. This paper's contribution to this literature is to show how the introduction of result-transmission technology, far from closing this vulnerability, may intensify it by creating public expectations of transparency that institutions lack the capacity or will to fulfil.

The concept of "fraud displacement," is implicit in several comparative studies of electoral technology adoption. Lehoucq (2003) observes, in his survey of electoral fraud in Latin America, that improvements in one dimension of electoral administration consistently generate adaptive responses by manipulation-oriented actors in less scrutinised dimensions. The Nigerian case—in which the SCR's success in securing accreditation was directly followed by intensified contestation over collation processes—represents a clear instance of this dynamic, and the paper makes this connection theoretically explicit.

Finally, the paper engages the emerging literature on sociotechnical systems in electoral administration. Kersting and Baldersheim (2004) and Alvarez, Hall, and Hyde (2008, 1-17) have emphasised that the credibility gains of electoral technology cannot be attributed to technical performance alone; they depend on the sociotechnical environment in which deployment occurs, including public understanding of the technology, the credibility of the deploying institution, and the political context of the specific contest. The 2015 elections, where the SCR functioned imperfectly but generated credibility gains and the 2023 elections, where BVAS functioned well but IReV's failure dominated public perception illustrate this dynamic vividly. This paper draws on these insights to argue that electoral technology's democratic value is not inherent to the device but is constituted in the relationship between the technology, the institution, and the citizenry it is intended to serve.

Legal and Institutional Framework

The legal basis for elections in Nigeria rests on the 1999 Constitution (as amended) and the Electoral Act. INEC, established in 1998, is the electoral body mandated to organise, undertake, and supervise all national elections. The institutional effectiveness of any election management body is directly linked to its independence, capacity, and the legal environment within which it operates.

A persistent structural challenge to INEC's institutional independence concerns the appointment of senior officials. The Chairman and National Commissioners are appointed by the President, subject to Senate confirmation—a process in which the ruling party has historically exercised considerable influence. This arrangement has generated an enduring perception of partisan compromise among the public and political opposition, contributing to a trust deficit that pre-dates any specific technological controversy (Fasakin 2023). Conversely, a later constitutional amendment established a dedicated INEC fund drawn directly from the Consolidated Revenue Fund, affording the Commission greater financial autonomy and partially insulating it from the funding delays that compromised electoral administration in 1999, 2003, and 2007 (Thompson et al. 2023).

The legal framework governing the use of technology has evolved substantially over the period under review:

- **Electoral Act 2010 (as amended):** This Act historically proscribed electronic voting (e-voting). This led to considerable legal debate over the use of the Smart Card Reader (SCR) in 2015 and 2019, as critics argued INEC lacked the legal authority to deploy it (Nwangwu et al. 2018). INEC, however, maintained that the SCR was merely an accreditation device, which falls under its constitutional power to set guidelines and procedures (Kassem and Osasona 2021).
- **Electoral Act 2022:** This landmark legislation legitimised the use of technology, granting INEC the mandate to provide technological devices for verification, authentication, and transmission of results. This Act overcame the previous legal vacuum and provided impetus for the widespread use of BVAS and IReV in the 2023 general election (Sibe and Kaunert 2023).

Historical Context: Electoral Administration Before the Fourth Republic

Any assessment of INEC's performance requires situating it within the longer history of electoral administration in Nigeria, where elections date back to the colonial period under the 1922 Clifford Constitution (Aiyede 2015). Electoral manipulation, institutional weakness, and elite competition for the control of political outcomes are not features that emerged with the Fourth Republic; they are characteristics deeply embedded in Nigeria's political culture, rooted in the structural conditions of the colonial period and amplified through successive constitutional arrangements and military interventions (Iyayi 2005).

Nigeria's First Republic (1963-1966) was defined, in part, by fierce electoral competition among regionally organised political parties, persistent allegations of rigging, and

a political environment in which controlling the electoral machinery was understood as a means of consolidating ethnic and regional dominance. The December 1964 federal elections and the Western Region elections of October 1965 were widely characterised by violence, fraud, and institutional breakdown. Incidents included thuggery, intimidation, ballot stuffing, and clashes that resulted in numerous deaths. These events contributed directly to the military coup of January 1966 (Ediagbonya et al. 2023). The structural tensions of that period—including the relationship between electoral outcomes and access to state resources, the use of incumbency advantages, and the weakness of independent electoral oversight, established patterns that would recur across subsequent political transitions.

During the military era (1966-1999), several attempts at supervised electoral transition were undertaken, most notably during the periods 1976-1979 and 1986-1993. The 1979 transition produced the Second Republic under the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO), which itself became a site of controversy over the alleged manipulation of results in favour of the ruling National Party of Nigeria (Odinkalu 2001). More significantly, the June 12, 1993, presidential election—widely regarded by observers as the freest and fairest in Nigerian history—was annulled by the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida, an act that precipitated a severe political crisis and powerfully demonstrated the vulnerability of electoral processes to elite political will. The annulment, and the subsequent repression of the pro-democracy movement that followed, left a profound mark on Nigeria's political consciousness, shaping public expectations of electoral governance in ways that remain relevant to the present day (Odinkalu 2001).

These historical experiences are analytically important for at least two reasons. First, they establish that the challenges INEC faces—including weak institutional independence, elite interference in electoral outcomes, and the instrumentalisation of electoral administration—are not new but reflect a long-standing political inheritance. Second, they suggest that the introduction of any single institutional or technological reform, however significant, cannot by itself overcome the deep structural incentives that make electoral manipulation a rational strategy for powerful political actors. This contextual understanding is essential to appreciating both the significance and the limits of INEC's technological innovations.

The Foundation of the Fourth Republic: The Imperative for Reform (1999-2007)

The electoral landscape at the onset of Nigeria's Fourth Republic was defined by heavily manual processes that were vulnerable to widespread manipulation. The systemic failures of this era created a legitimacy crisis that made a shift towards technological solutions both necessary and politically compelling. However, early technological adoption was largely reactive and narrowly targeted, addressing specific procedural deficiencies in voter registration without confronting the broader structural conditions that enabled electoral fraud.

The 1999 General Election: A Flawed Foundation

The 1999 general election, which marked the transition from military to civilian rule, was conducted using an entirely manual system. Voter registration was carried out with pen and paper, and there was no centralised electronic database or technological mechanism to prevent fraudulent entries or multiple registrations (Unufe and Ugo 2019). Contemporary analyses and subsequent INEC reviews described the resulting voter register as outdated, with its credibility being questionable (Mgba 2017). International observer missions NDI and TCC documented the scale of the problem, noting that the official number of registered voters, 57.3 million, significantly exceeded credible demographic estimates of the eligible voting population. In one illustrative case, Kaduna State's registration figures represented over 97% of its total population based on the 1991 national census, an impossible statistic. This grossly inflated voter register became the "foundation for numerous problems" during the transitional elections and "created opportunities for fraud" on a massive scale (NDI and TCC 1999, 12).

Tentative Steps Towards Technology (2003 & 2007)

In response to the procedural and legitimacy deficits of the 1999 polls, INEC introduced basic digital tools in the 2003 general elections. The Commission deployed the Optical Mark Recognition (OMR) system, enabling manually collected voter data to be digitised into an Electronic Voters Register (EVR) for the first time. Complementing this, the Automated Fingerprints Identification System (AFIS) was used to identify and remove instances of multiple registration. While these measures represented a meaningful step towards modernising voter registration, their limitations were significant. Voter photographs remained absent from the register, data integration was incomplete, and all critical election-day processes such as accreditation, voting, counting, and collation, remained entirely manual and vulnerable to the same abuses as in 1999. The 2003 elections, despite their incremental technological improvement, were marred by widespread irregularities. Observer groups such

as the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) and the EU EOM documented extensive electoral fraud and administrative incompetence, underscoring that targeted technological investment in registration did not address the deeper structural conditions enabling electoral fraud (Ayeni and Esan 2018; Makama and Usman 2015).

The 2007 general elections introduced biometric voter registration through the deployment of Direct Data Capture Machines (DDCM), enabling INEC to capture voters' fingerprints and photographs, establishing the first electronic voters' register and signalling a decisive move towards technology-driven voter management (Nwagwu 2016, 303). The system aimed to curb multiple registration and enhance register accuracy. However, logistical challenges, such as limited machine supply, inadequate operator training, and unreliable power infrastructure, undermined its implementation. More critically, no technology was applied to election-day accreditation, voting, sorting, counting and collation of results (Makama and Usman, 2015). The elections were characterised by severe administrative irregularities, prompting the EU EOM (2007) and NDI (2008) to conclude that they fell significantly short of international standards. The extent of the dysfunction was acknowledged even by President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, who established the Justice Uwais Electoral Reform Committee in recognition of the need for systemic reform (Jude 2024). The 2007 elections thus demonstrated that, while biometric registration addressed one dimension of electoral fraud, the failure to accompany this with the transparency in election-day processes and result management deepened rather than alleviated Nigeria's crisis of electoral legitimacy, reinforcing the central paradox that technology alone cannot deliver democracy without political integrity.

The Legacy of the Manual Era: A Crisis of Legitimacy

The cumulative experience of the 1999, 2003, and 2007 elections entrenched a pronounced crisis of legitimacy for Nigeria's democratic experiment. The electoral process became widely associated with systemic manipulation, characterised by ballot stuffing, result fabrication, and politically motivated violence (Unufe and Ugo 2019). The consistent failure to deliver credible elections fuelled public mistrust, cynicism, and growing voter apathy, as citizens increasingly concluded that their participation had no meaningful bearing on electoral outcomes (Acheampong 2023). The inadequacies of the 2007 elections served as an important turning point. They demonstrated conclusively that improving the voter register—the primary focus of technological investment to that point—was insufficient. The principal vulnerability had shifted from who was included on the register to who was permitted to

vote on election day, and how those votes were subsequently counted and transmitted. This recognition created a compelling imperative for more substantive technological intervention at the polling unit level, setting the stage for the landmark reforms of the subsequent electoral cycle.

A Paradigm Shift? The Smart Card Reader, PVCs, and the 2011-2015 Electoral Cycles

The widespread condemnation of the 2007 elections generated strong momentum for comprehensive electoral reform. The appointment of Professor Attahiru Jega as INEC Chairman in 2010 ushered in a period of ambitious technological and procedural innovation aimed at restoring credibility to Nigeria's electoral process. The 2015 general election became a pivotal test for these reforms.

The Jega-Era Reforms and the Push for Technology

Assuming leadership with a clear mandate for reform, the Jega-led Commission identified the prevention of multiple voting and other forms of election-day fraud as its central challenge (Jega 2012). The initial test was the 2011 general elections, for which INEC deployed a new, comprehensive biometric voter register, compiled using DDCM technology and cleaned with an advanced AFIS that successfully identified and removed nearly one million multiple registrants. International observers, including the EU EOM and the Commonwealth Observer Group acknowledged the 2011 elections as a marked improvement over 2007, though they also noted significant procedural inconsistencies and logistical shortcomings. The elections were followed by severe post-election violence, predominantly in northern Nigeria, resulting in an estimated 800 deaths (Adesina 2012, 168). This mixed outcome—procedural improvement coupled with devastating violence—reinforced the argument that further technological intervention was necessary, specifically at the point of voter accreditation on election day.

The Introduction of the Permanent Voter Card and Smart Card Reader

In preparation for the 2015 general elections, INEC introduced two interconnected technologies: the Permanent Voter Card (PVC) and the Smart Card Reader (SCR). The PVC was a secure, chip-based card containing each voter's encrypted biometric data, including fingerprints and a facial image. The SCR was a portable handheld device designed to authenticate the PVC by reading the embedded chip and to verify the voter by matching their

live fingerprint against the biometric data stored on the card. This two-step process was intended to eliminate voter impersonation (using someone else's card) and multiple voting (as the SCR would record each accredited voter). Chairman Jega publicly stated that this technological pairing would ensure "100% authentication" of voters, effectively tackling the long-standing problem of stolen or cloned voter cards (Jega 2012).

The 2015 General Election: A Significant but Contested Achievement

The deployment of the SCR was met with fierce political resistance and legal challenges, with opponents questioning its statutory authority under section 52 of the Electoral Act, 2010 (as amended) which prohibits electronic voting (PLAC 2015). Despite the controversy, INEC remained resolute and proceeded with its use. On election day, the technology faced considerable operational challenges. High-profile authentication failures, such as the repeated inability of multiple SCR devices to accredit then-President Goodluck Jonathan, were broadcast live and highlighted the system's limitations. Reports from observer groups and INEC's own assessments confirmed widespread issues, including high rates of fingerprint authentication failure, inadequate training for ad-hoc staff on how to operate the devices, and problems with battery life in off-grid locations (Premium Times 2015).

Despite these operational challenges, the 2015 general election was widely assessed by domestic and international observers as the most credible election in Nigeria's history up to that point. The Commonwealth Observer Group concluded that the elections were "credible, peaceful, transparent and reflected the will of the people of Nigeria," notwithstanding the "organisational and technical deficiencies" (Commonwealth Observer Group 2015). The election's outcome—the first-ever defeat of an incumbent president in Nigerian electoral history—was widely interpreted as evidence of improved process integrity.

Impact on Electoral Integrity and Public Trust

The primary success of the SCR was its ability to enforce a direct and digitally recorded link between the number of accredited voters and the total number of votes cast at a polling unit. This created a digital ceiling on the number of votes that could be plausibly returned, making traditional ballot-box stuffing and the writing of fictitious results much more difficult to perpetrate without detection. This tangible improvement significantly increased public trust and confidence in the electoral process (Jega 2016).

However, the operational failures also exposed the risks of deploying sophisticated technology without commensurate investment in infrastructure, logistics, and human capital. The directive for polling officials to resort to manual accreditation in cases where the SCR failed, while a pragmatic solution to prevent disenfranchisement, created procedural inconsistencies and opened a potential loophole for manipulation (International Foundation for Electoral Systems 2015). This experience revealed that the success of electoral technology is not merely a technical matter but a sociotechnical one.

The 2015 election also illustrates that the impact of technology cannot be assessed in isolation from the broader political context. The widespread civil society buy-in, the public trust vested in the INEC leadership, and the political configuration of the contest—including the emergence of a credible opposition coalition—all amplified the effect of the technological intervention. By securing the accreditation process, the SCR inadvertently shifted the primary locus of electoral manipulation away from the polling unit and towards the manual collation process, a vulnerability that would define the challenges of the subsequent electoral cycles.

Advanced Technologies and Contested Outcomes: BVAS, IReV, and the 2019-2023 Elections.

The period following the 2015 elections saw INEC, under the leadership of Professor Mahmood Yakubu, seek to build upon the technological foundations established by his predecessor. This culminated in the deployment of the most sophisticated electoral technologies in Nigeria's electoral history for the 2023 general election. However, this era was defined by a significant and damaging gap between the promise of these technologies and their performance, producing a severe crisis of public expectation and institutional confidence.

The Post-2015 Context and the 2019 Elections

The 2019 general elections were widely anticipated to consolidate the democratic gains of 2015. Instead, they were viewed by many observers as a regression. A joint IRI/NDI observer mission report concluded that the elections "fell significantly short of standards set in 2015," which "shook citizens' confidence" (IRI/NDI 2019). The electoral cycle was marked by severe operational and logistical shortcomings, most notably a last-minute postponement of the presidential election by one week, which INEC attributed to challenges in distributing sensitive materials. This decision severely undermined public trust in the

commission's competence and preparedness. The SCR and PVC were again deployed, but their use was inconsistent; the EU EOM observed instances in which voting proceeded without the mandatory use of the SCR, and there were evident problems in the completion and public display of results forms. The failure of the executive and legislative branches to pass crucial amendments to the Electoral Act before the 2019 elections left INEC without a strengthened legal framework for its technological and procedural reforms (EU EOM 2019).

The Electoral Act 2022 and the Introduction of BVAS and IReV

The passage of the Electoral Act 2022 represented a major legislative breakthrough providing for the first time an explicit legal framework for the use of electronic devices for voter accreditation and the electronic transmission of results. Empowered by this new statute, INEC introduced two interconnected technologies for the 2023 elections: the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing (IReV) portal (Yiaga Africa 2023).

The BVAS is a multifunctional handheld device designed to serve two core purposes on election day. First, as its name implies, it performs bimodal voter accreditation by verifying a voter's identity through either fingerprint or facial recognition, thereby replacing the less versatile SCR. Second, after votes are counted and recorded on the official result sheet (Form EC 8A), the BVAS is used to capture a photograph of the sheet and upload it directly to the IReV portal from the polling unit (Itodo 2023).

The IReV is a public-facing online portal designed to receive the images of the polling unit result sheets uploaded via the BVAS. By making these raw, primary results available for public viewing in near real-time, the IReV was intended to function as a radical transparency tool, allowing citizens, political parties, and observers to independently track and verify the results as they were being collated (Itodo 2023). In the lead-up to the election, INEC Chairman Mahmood Yakubu repeatedly assured the public that this dual-technology system would guarantee "transparent accreditation and upload of polling unit results for citizens to view in real-time on Election Day" (Yakubu 2022). These public commitments substantially raised the level of public expectation surrounding the election's technological performance.

The 2023 General Election: Technology, Context, and Contested Outcomes

On election day, the performance of the new technologies was sharply differentiated. The deployment of the BVAS for voter accreditation was largely successful. Major observer organisations, including Yiaga Africa and the Commonwealth Observer Group, reported that

the device performed effectively in most polling units across the country, with its dual biometric verification capability significantly limiting the use of manual accreditation and curtailing over-voting (Commonwealth Observer Group 2023; Yiaga Africa 2023).

In sharp contrast, the electronic transmission of presidential election results to the IReV portal encountered serious technical difficulties. While results for the concurrent National Assembly elections were successfully uploaded in many cases, the presidential results largely failed to transmit in real-time from the polling units. Voters and observers across the country reported being unable to view the presidential result sheets on the portal for many hours after voting had concluded. INEC later attributed this to unforeseen "technical hitches" related to system scalability (PLAC 2023).

The failure to deliver on the publicly stated promise of real-time presidential result transmission became the defining controversy of the 2023 elections. It generated an information vacuum and fostered widespread suspicion about the integrity of the manual collation process, prompting major observer missions to deliver critical assessments. The EU EOM (2023) concluded that the lack of transparency and operational failures reduced trust in the process; the joint NDI/IRI (2023) mission characterised the election as falling short of Nigerian citizens' reasonable expectations; and Yiaga Africa (2023) titled its comprehensive report "Dashed Hopes."

A full analytical assessment of the 2023 elections, however, requires a broader contextual lens. Public expectations and their subsequent frustration were shaped not only by INEC's technological performance but by a range of intersecting social and political factors. The elections took place against a backdrop of significantly expanded internet access and mobile phone penetration across Nigeria, which both amplified public monitoring of the electoral process and heightened the visibility of its shortcomings. Social media platforms played a substantial role in the mobilisation of political discourse, enabling the rapid circulation of claims and counterclaims about INEC's conduct in near real-time. The absence of an incumbent presidential candidate created a genuinely open contest and heightened the political stakes for all parties. The character of the electoral competition, in which one major candidate drew disproportionate support from youth, urban, and middle-class voters who had invested significant hope in the promise of a new political dispensation, meant that disillusionment with the process was especially acute among a politically engaged and digitally connected demographic. These contextual factors substantially shaped the intensity of public reaction to INEC's shortcomings and must be incorporated into any balanced evaluation of the election's outcome.

The failure of the IReV portal for the presidential election became a central element in the legal petitions filed by opposition candidates challenging the declared results (Cinjel and Bur 2024). Additionally, voter turnout for the presidential election fell to a historic low of 26.72%—the lowest recorded in the history of Nigeria's Fourth Republic (Dataphyte 2025). Since the failure of the IReV portal predominantly impacted the presidential election results, it raised doubts about whether it was merely a technical malfunction or a sign of institutional unpreparedness, and many perceived it as a deliberate attempt to compromise the electoral process.

An Analytical Synthesis: Electronic Innovations and the Trajectory of Democratic Consolidation

Before examining the thematic findings in detail, the table below summarises the evolution of INEC's key electronic innovations and their observed impact on electoral integrity across the period under review. This overview provides an empirical anchor for the analysis that follows.

The 25-year journey of electronic innovations within Nigeria's electoral system reveals a complex and often contradictory relationship between technological deployment and democratic consolidation (Table 1). The Nigerian experience is not a straightforward story of technological progress yielding enhanced electoral integrity; it is, rather, a case study in how technology interacts with political context, institutional capacity, and public expectations in ways that produce uneven and sometimes counterproductive outcomes. The analysis reveals a trust paradox, wherein technologies designed to promote transparency have, at critical moments, become focal points of opacity and suspicion, thereby complicating rather than straightforwardly advancing the path to a consolidated democracy.

Table 1: Evolution of INEC's Key Electronic Innovations and Their Impact on Electoral Integrity (1999 - 2023)

Electoral Cycle	Key Technology Deployed	Primary Function	Observed Successes	Observed Failures & Challenges	Observer Assessment of Trust
1999	Manual Register	Manual Voter Listing	Facilitated transition to civilian rule.	Bloated, unreliable register; no safeguards against fraud. Official registration figures exceeded plausible demographic estimates.	Very Low
2003-2007	OMR / DDCM / AFIS	Electronic Voter Registration	Creation of a digital voter database; removal of some multiple registrants.	Registration still cumbersome; no election-day technology; 2007 election widely condemned as falling short of international standards.	Critically Low
2011	Biometric Voter Register	Voter Registration	First election with a comprehensive biometric register; improved register integrity.	No election-day accreditation technology; significant post-election violence following the announcement of results.	Marginal Improvement
2015-2019	PVC / SCR	Voter Accreditation & Verification	Substantial reduction in voter impersonation and over-voting; 2015 election hailed as most credible to date.	SCR technical glitches (fingerprint authentication failures, battery); inconsistent application; 2019 election marked by logistical failures and regression.	Significant Increase (2015), then Decline (2019)
2023	BVAS / IReV Portal	Bimodal Voter Accreditation & Electronic Result Transmission	High reported success rate of BVAS in accreditation; further curtailment of over-voting.	Failure of IReV to transmit presidential results in real-time as publicly promised; historic low voter turnout (26.72%).	Severe Erosion

Source: Compiled by the author from official INEC publications, domestic and international election observer mission reports (EU EOM, NDI, IRI, Yiaga Africa, Commonwealth Observer Group), and peer-reviewed academic literature cited in this paper. Net trust assessments reflect the aggregate findings of observer mission reports and are not derived from primary survey data.

The Trust Paradox: Technology as a Double-Edged Instrument

The central analytical question of this paper—whether digital technologies have mitigated or reinforced entrenched patterns of electoral manipulation—does not admit a simple answer. The evidence suggests that the relationship is one of displacement rather than resolution. Biometric accreditation technologies have materially reduced specific forms of polling-unit fraud, most notably voter impersonation and multiple voting. However, by securing one dimension of the process, they have shifted the primary site of manipulation towards result collation and transmission, where institutional accountability has proven more difficult to enforce.

As the theoretical framework established, the reputational and institutional risks of deploying advanced electoral technology are asymmetric: credible performance yields incremental trust gains, while failure—particularly failure perceived as selective—can generate disproportionately severe and lasting damage to public confidence (Norris 2011). The embrace of the IReV portal in 2023 fundamentally altered the social contract between INEC and the Nigerian citizenry—it raised public expectations for transparency to an unprecedented level. In prior eras characterised by largely manual processes, public frustration with electoral opacity, while genuine, was diffuse and chronic. However, the explicit promise of real-time transparency via the IReV portal in the 2023 elections created a new and higher standard of accountability. The IReV portal was not just a technical tool; it symbolised a commitment to a new era of "citizen-led verification," where any Nigerian with an internet connection could act as an auditor of the process from the ground up.

When that promise was not fulfilled for the presidential election, the resulting backlash and loss of confidence was of a qualitatively different character—perceived not merely as a procedural deficiency but as a betrayal of a specific, publicly articulated commitment. This dynamic is precisely the pattern that the institutional trust literature would predict (Norris 2011,83-97): the higher the expectation raised by technology, the more destabilising its non-fulfilment.

This paradox also confirms the fraud displacement pattern observed across comparative contexts (Lehoucq 2003): each successive technological intervention that secured one dimension of the electoral process created incentives for manipulation-oriented actors to intensify attention to less scrutinised dimensions. The SCR secured accreditation; collation became contested. IReV promised to secure collation; its failure—or the perception thereof—concentrated suspicion precisely where transparency had been promised. Technology has not resolved the problem; it has, at each cycle, relocated it.

Impact on Electoral Integrity: A Disaggregated Assessment.

A nuanced assessment of INEC's electronic innovations requires a disaggregation of their impact on different forms of electoral malpractice. The evidence strongly supports that biometric accreditation technologies have been demonstrably effective against a specific subset of electoral frauds. Both the SCR and the BVAS have demonstrably reduced voter impersonation and multiple voting at the polling unit level (Ayeni and Aweh 2023, 25-42). By creating a digital record of each accredited voter and linking the total number of votes cast to this record, these devices have substantially curtailed over-voting—the practice of inserting unaccredited ballots into the ballot box—which was endemic in the manual era.

However, these technologies have had limited impact on other forms of electoral malpractice. Vote-buying, which typically occurs near the polling unit but outside the formal accreditation procedure, remains largely beyond the reach of biometric verification (Mgba, 2017; Ogunbela and Abdulrasheed 2024). Similarly, voter intimidation and targeted violence to suppress turnout in opposition strongholds are not amenable to technological solutions and continue to be reported in successive electoral cycles (Asangausung et al., 2025). Most critically, the 2023 experience demonstrated that even an effectively functioning accreditation system can be rendered inadequate if the subsequent processes of result collation and transmission are insufficiently transparent. Technology has not eliminated electoral fraud; it has, rather, displaced the primary locus of manipulation from the polling unit to the collation centres and the digital pathways connecting them—a finding consistent with the fraud displacement literature.

Electoral Violence and Technology

The relationship between electoral technology adoption and the incidence of electoral violence in Nigeria is neither linear nor straightforward. Proponents of electronic voting systems argue that digitising key processes reduces violence by eliminating the physical objects—ballot boxes, result sheets—that have historically served as flashpoints for conflict (Abdullahi and Tunwase 2022, 123–134; Obiefuna and Osuagwu 2023). While there is some empirical support for this claim, the Nigerian experience suggests a considerably more complex dynamic.

The 2011 elections, despite using a new biometric register, witnessed the most severe post-election violence in the Fourth Republic's history (Bekoe 2011). In contrast, the 2015 elections, which deployed the contentious SCR under conditions of high political polarisation, were remarkably peaceful, culminating in a historic concession by the incumbent (Orji 2015). The 2019 and 2023 elections saw a return to significant, if more

localised, patterns of violence—including the intimidation of voters and INEC officials, and targeted attacks on polling and collation centres (IRI/NDI 2019; Yiaga Africa 2023). This pattern suggests that while technology may alter the tactics and targets of electoral violence—for instance, shifting the focus from ballot box snatching to the intimidation of the BVAS operator—it does not address the root causes that generate violence in the first place. The highly competitive, high-stakes, "do-or-die" nature of Nigerian electoral politics means that when one avenue for manipulation is closed by technology, politically motivated actors frequently identify or create alternative ones.

Voter Turnout, Disillusionment Effect, and Democratic Consolidation

A significant and analytically important trend across the Fourth Republic has been the persistent decline in voter turnout, reaching a historic low of 26.72 % in the 2023 presidential election (Dataphyte 2025). This trajectory reflects a complex interaction between long-standing public mistrust of electoral institutions, the mobilising effects of specific electoral contests, and the more immediate disillusionment generated by unmet technological expectations.

The 2023 election is particularly instructive in this regard. The pre-election period was characterised by a notable surge in youth engagement and voter registration activity, driven in substantial part by the promise of BVAS and IReV to ensure that votes would be accurately recorded and publicly verifiable (Yiaga Africa 2023). This mobilisation reflected a genuine, if cautious, expression of public faith in the potential of technology to constrain manipulation. The subsequent failure of IReV to deliver real-time presidential results had a pronounced disillusionment effect, particularly among first-time and younger voters who had invested most heavily in the promise of technological accountability. This disillusionment, however, was not generated by INEC's technological performance alone. As noted above, the character of the electoral contest—the specific candidate alignments, the role of social media in amplifying both expectations and grievances, and the broader political stakes—all contributed to the intensity of the public response. Disentangling the relative weight of these factors is analytically challenging but important for drawing appropriate lessons from the 2023 experience.

From the perspective of democratic consolidation theory, the declining trend in voter participation is a matter of significant concern. As Linz and Stepan (1996) established, democratic consolidation requires not only the holding of regular elections but the cultivation of durable public confidence in the integrity of electoral processes and the meaningfulness of political participation. The declining turnout figures, combined with the acute

disillusionment generated by the 2023 IReV failure, suggest that Nigeria remains some distance from the attitudinal consolidation Linz and Stepan identify as essential. INEC's technological interventions have at their best, contributed incrementally to this objective. At their worst—as the 2023 IReV controversy represents a significant case in point—they have deepened the very cynicism they were designed to overcome.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the 25-year trajectory of electronic innovations within Nigeria's electoral system, situating INEC's technological journey within the broader historical context of electoral administration in Nigeria, including the military period and its enduring institutional legacy. The central analytical question—whether digital electoral technologies have mitigated or reinforced entrenched patterns of electoral manipulation—admits a nuanced answer that cuts across both positions.

The evidence demonstrates that biometric accreditation technologies, from the SCR to the BVAS, have made a tangible and positive contribution to the integrity of specific dimensions of the electoral process, most notably by reducing voter impersonation and over-voting at the polling unit level. These are genuine institutional achievements. But the persistent inability to ensure transparent and reliable electronic result transmission—exposed most acutely by the failure of the IReV portal for presidential elections in 2023, has produced the trust paradox at the centre of this paper's argument: technology designed to build confidence has instead become a source of deepened public disillusionment, precisely because it raised expectations that the institution lacked the capacity or independence to fulfil. Technology has displaced rather than resolved the problem of electoral manipulation, shifting its primary site from the polling unit to the collation and transmission processes.

Three contributions to the comparative literature follow from the Nigerian case. First, the evidence extends the fraud displacement dynamic that Lehoucq (2003) identified in Latin American electoral systems, but with an additional dimension that his framework did not anticipate. In Nigeria, each successive technological intervention has not merely redirected manipulation to less scrutinised stages of the electoral process; it has simultaneously generated a public transparency expectation whose non-fulfilment inflicts reputational damage on the deploying institution that exceeds whatever integrity gains the technology achieved. The trust paradox is thus not simply fraud displacement; it is fraud displacement compounded by expectation betrayal.

Second, the findings press against a limitation in Linz and Stepan's (1996) democratic consolidation framework. Their account of attitudinal consolidation—the internalisation by citizens of democratic institutions as legitimate—assumes that institutional performance and public confidence move broadly in the same direction. The Nigerian case demonstrates that, in weakly institutionalised democracies, they can move in opposite directions: INEC's accreditation processes measurably improved between 2015 and 2023, yet public confidence in the electoral process deteriorated, and voter turnout fell to a historic low. Electoral technology, deployed under conditions of institutional fragility, introduces a consolidation risk that the original framework does not theorise: the asymmetric relationship between technological promise and institutional capacity, in which partial success can be more politically destabilising than consistent, predictable failure.

Third, the paper contributes to the sociotechnical literature on electoral administration by specifying the conditions under which technology yields credibility gains rather than losses. The contrast between 2015, when imperfect SCR performance nonetheless generated widespread public confidence, and 2023, when technically superior BVAS accreditation was overshadowed by the IReV transmission failure, illustrates that the democratic value of electoral technology is constituted not in the device itself but in the relationship between the technology, the deploying institution's credibility, and the expectations of the citizenry. Where that relationship is characterised by high promises and uneven delivery, the technology becomes a liability rather than an asset to democratic consolidation.

The Nigerian experience carries a broader warning for weakly institutionalised democracies adopting electoral technologies. The analytical temptation is to treat technological failure as a problem of implementation—solvable through better devices, more training, or stronger legal mandates. The evidence assembled in this paper suggests otherwise. The trust paradox is structural, not operational. It arises from the mismatch between what transparency technologies promise and what the political and institutional environment permits them to deliver. Until that mismatch is confronted on its own terms—rather than treated as a technical deficiency awaiting a technical fix—electoral technology in contexts like Nigeria's will continue to relocate the problem of manipulation rather than resolve it, and deepen the very democratic deficits it was introduced to repair.

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Framing the Global South Through Film: Postcolonial Representation of Indonesia in Riders of Destiny

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Abstract

This study examines Riders of Destiny (2019), a German documentary portraying pacoa jara, the child-jockey horse-racing tradition in Sumbawa, Indonesia. While the film highlights risk such as injury and disrupted education, it frames the practice almost exclusively as child exploitation, offering a narrow view that overlooks its historical, cultural, and economic significance. Using a postcolonial framework grounded in Orientalism and representational politics, this study analyses the film's content, narrative framing, and production context to explore how Western documentaries construct knowledge about the Global South. The findings show that the documentary's selective interviews, aesthetic choices, and Western festival circulation reinforce a humanitarian narrative that positions Germany as a moral authority while marginalising local perspectives. Rather than denying concerns about child welfare, the study argues that understanding pacoa jara requires attention to community-based meanings that cannot be reduced to a universal Western standard.

Keywords: Colonial Gaze; Cultural Framing; Documentary Film; Global South; Indonesia; Orientalism; Postcolonial Representation

Introduction

The late twentieth century saw the rise of decolonisation across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, yet the legacies of colonialism continue to shape global cultural and political relations in subtle and enduring ways (Mishra and Hodge 2005). These legacies extend beyond economics and governance, influencing the cultural frameworks through which societies interpret and represent one another (Young 2012). Film is one of the most influential mediums through which such representations circulate, often reproducing unequal power dynamics between the West and the Global South.

Scholars argue that cinema frequently relies on a colonial gaze, portraying non-Western cultures as exotic, primitive, or morally deficient (Columpar 2002; Ponzanesi and Waller 2012). Such portrayals enact an Orientalist vision, as theorised by Said and other post-colonial scholars, in which Western discourse constructs simplified images of the "Other," reinforcing Western authority while diminishing local knowledge (Weaver-Hightower and Hulme 2014). These representational practices are particularly visible in documentaries, where claims of objectivity can mask interpretive biases.

This article examines *Riders of Destiny* (2019), a German documentary directed by Michael Niermann and produced by Seventyone Films, a Cologne-based production company. The film follows Sila, a seven-year-old child jockey from Sumbawa, Indonesia, and documents aspects of *pacoa jara*, the region's traditional horse-racing practice. The production was carried out entirely by a German creative team, including producer Frederic Bohse and cinematographer Jakob Preuss (Niermann 2019). Based on publicly available production information, there is no indication that Indonesian collaborators, co-producers, cultural advisors, or Sumbawan community representatives participated in the film's production process.

After completion, the film circulated primarily through international documentary festivals—such as the German TV Award (2019), the Thessaloniki Documentary Festival (2019), the Peloponnisos International Documentary Film Festival (2019), and the EQUUS International Film Festival (2021)—with no recorded screenings in Indonesia. Its distribution exclusively in European and North American cultural venues indicates that the film was oriented towards international rather than Indonesian audiences. The film's portrayal of Sumbawan culture raises broader questions about Western documentary methods and the ways they construct meaning about non-Western societies. The limited inclusion of local voices—such as community elders, cultural leaders, and practitioners—creates an imbalance in interpretive authority, positioning the filmmakers as arbiters of cultural meaning while sidelining Sumbawa's own perspectives. This is significant because *pacoa jara* holds deep social, economic, and symbolic meaning that extends far beyond the film's narrow focus on danger and exploitation.

In response, this article analyses *Riders of Destiny* through a postcolonial framework, focusing on representation, Othering, and power. The aim is to examine how the film constructs cultural meaning, how it shapes global perceptions of Indonesia, and how its narrative choices contribute to broader patterns of Western interpretation over local knowledge. By foregrounding context and cultural specificity, this study highlights the

importance of understanding non-Western traditions through the perspectives of the communities to which they belong.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study examines *Riders of Destiny,* a documentary film, through a postcolonial lens. The analysis is grounded in Edward Said's concept of Orientalism (1977, 2014), which explains how Western discourse produces simplified and hierarchical images of non-Western cultures, positioning them as backward, vulnerable, or in need of external guidance (Loomba 2005). To connect these ideas specifically to film, the study draws on postcolonial media theory, particularly Shohat and Stam's (1994) critique of the colonial gaze, which highlights how Western visual media often frames the Global South through exoticism, victimhood, or moral judgement. Berghahn's (2021) concept of exoticism in European cinema further illuminates how non-Western practices are aestheticised or simplified to fit Western expectations, often prioritising emotional appeal over cultural accuracy. These frameworks collectively provide the analytical tools needed to examine how the documentary constructs cultural meaning, authority, and otherness.

Methodologically, this study applies an integrated framework adapted from Maria Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis's content–concept–context analysis, modified to align with established postcolonial film scholarship. Content analysis (form) examines visible film elements—camera angles, colour grading, editing, music, and scene composition—to explore how visual techniques shape emotional responses and moral interpretations (Pramaggiore and Wallis 2008; Brylla 2018). Conceptual analysis considers themes, narrative framing, and representational strategies (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2008; Fedorov, 2023), identifying how the film constructs child jockeying and *pacoa jara* through discourses of risk, exploitation, and humanitarian concern. Contextual analysis examines production background, German authorship, and international festival circulation (Pramaggiore and Wallis 2008; Portegies 2010), situating the documentary within broader Western humanitarian and media structures that often shape how non-Western cultures are interpreted globally.

By integrating these analytical layers, this study approaches *Riders of Destiny* as a postcolonial media text—one that constructs meaning not only through what is shown on screen but also through strategic omissions, narrative emphasis, and representational choices. This unified framework enables a comprehensive examination of how the film participates in wider patterns of Western representation of the Global South and how such portrayals

may overshadow locally grounded understandings of *pacoa jara* and Sumbawan cultural identity.

The Plot of *Riders of Destiny* (2019)

Riders of Destiny is a film by German director Michael Niermann, produced by Seventyone Films and released in 2019. The story follows a young horse rider on Sumbawa Island, a region in Indonesia that faces significant poverty (Niermann 2019). In Sumbawa, limited resources and few economic opportunities make being a horse rider one of the best hopes for families to improve their livelihoods. The central character, Sila, a seven-year-old boy, shares his experiences at home, in school, and at the racetrack. The film highlights the tension between preserving tradition and addressing economic needs.

The plot is structured in three parts: the opening, the middle, and the conclusion. The first part introduces Sila and Romi Perbawa, a photographer documenting the children's horse races in Sumbawa. This section showcases the contrasting views between Sila, who enjoys his role as a horse rider, and Romi, who has a different perspective on the tradition of horse racing. As the story progresses, Sila's parents are introduced, discussing the family's economic situation, Sila's education, and his role as a horse rider. The conclusion contrasts the opinions of Sila's parents and Romi about child horse racing, illuminating the differing perspectives on tradition and Sila's future.

Postcolonial Analysis of Riders of Destiny

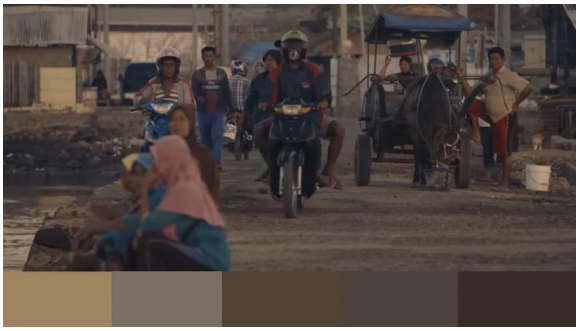
Content Analysis

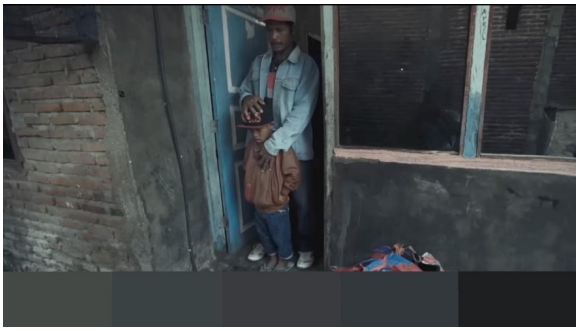
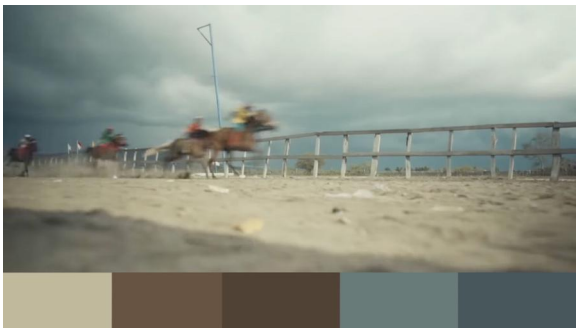
From its opening moments, *Riders of Destiny* takes a clear stance against the tradition of child horse racing (*pacoa jara*) in Sumbawa. This stance is conveyed through visual language that foregrounds two central issues: child exploitation and poverty. The film is defined by cool colour grading, with blues and greys dominating the palette. In visual storytelling, cool colours are often used to create a calm, soothing atmosphere typically associated with nature. In this film, however, the colouring does more than set the mood — it takes on a character of its own and helps shape the emotional arcs of both main and supporting characters. Many films and photographic works use colour in this way to deepen characterisation and storytelling (Paksi 2021). In Riders of Destiny, dark green, brown, and grey tones reinforce the sombre reality faced by the child riders, who are caught between poverty and their profession. These colours not only exist alongside one another but also blend to produce darker tones.

In the opening scenes, *Riders of Destiny* introduces a palette dominated by dark greens and greys, particularly in moments when Sila prepares to ride. While green often conveys balance, its combination with grey can generate unease, tension, or emotional distance (Kovsh and Dziuba 2022). This tonal mixture appears repeatedly throughout the film, including scenes of Sila leading his horse or walking alongside his father, creating a subdued atmosphere that encourages viewers to read these everyday activities as weighted or emotionally charged. Brown is also applied consistently, especially in depictions of Bima's landscape and modes of transportation. Although typically associated with natural or rural settings, brown can take on negative associations when used in contexts that suggest deterioration or hardship (Kim et al. 2014). In this documentary, the colour scheme contributes to a restrained visual tone that guides the viewer's emotional orientation without explicitly defining the cultural meaning of *pacoa jara*.

To demonstrate how visual aesthetics contribute to ideological framing, Table 1 systematises the dominant colour palettes used in key scenes. The table is not included merely for descriptive illustration; rather, it provides visual evidence supporting the argument that recurring desaturated tones construct an atmosphere of hardship and emotional restraint that shapes viewers' moral interpretation of *pacoa jara*.

Table 1. Dominant colour grading in *Riders of Destiny*

	The first scene of the film featuring Sila preparing to ride is dominated by pale grey (#aebcb0), pale olive green (#92a792), dark olive green (#2e332c), charcoal grey (#282c2f), and greenish-black (#171c1d). These hues evoke a sense of intimidation and fear.
	In the scene depicting the atmosphere of Bima City, Sumbawa, the use of traditional horse-drawn carriages and motorcycles as transportation reflects the city's local character. The colour palette, including cream brown (#9F8260), greyish brown (#796F64), mahogany brown (#504235), dark olive brown (#4C423C), and dark brownish-black (#382C26), is used to

	emphasise the city's "traditional" feel, subtly suggesting associations with underdevelopment and poverty.
	In another scene showing Sila leading a horse, the dominant colours—greenish grey (#6E7471), dark grey (#383636), dark brownish-black (#3C3133), brownish-black (#2D292D), and charcoal black (#19181C) — create a sombre, oppressive atmosphere. Through this subdued colour scheme, the filmmaker highlights Sila as the focal subject, drawing the audience's attention to the weight of his journey.
	The scene featuring Sila with his father uses a colour palette dominated by stone green (#444946), carbon green (#3B4243), charcoal blue (#393B3F), dark greyish-black (#33383C), and charcoal black (#1D1F21). This palette imparts a dark and isolating mood, evoking sensations of solitude and emptiness.
	In the film's closing scene, where Sila is racing his horse, the dominant colours are khaki (#C0B99C), greyish brown (#675442), walnut brown (#504235), greenish grey (#697B79), and bluish grey (#47575C). These colours evoke an overall sense of melancholy and hopelessness.

Source: Author

The film's heavy use of muted browns, greys, and desaturated greens constructs an atmosphere of hardship and decline. These colours evoke a mood of exhaustion and stagnation, shaping the viewer's emotional experience of Sumbawa as a bleak and impoverished landscape. Such aesthetic choices contribute directly to the film's ideological message: by visually coding the environment as dark and hopeless, the documentary

reinforces the postcolonial trope of the Global South as a space defined by suffering and lack. This representation obscures the cultural richness and communal dimensions of *pacoa jara*, reducing the tradition to a symbol of poverty rather than acknowledging its social, economic, and symbolic significance. Through its colour palette, the film therefore participates in a broader pattern of Western media framing non-Western communities as culturally deficient and in need of external moral judgement.

Beyond the nuanced application of colour grading, the filmmaker's intention to depict poverty and child exploitation is discernible through the strategic use of camera angles in portraying the film's subjects. The significance of camera angles lies in their ability to construct power dynamics between characters. Camera angles serve as one of the film's most deliberate visual tools in shaping how viewers interpret Sila's position within *pacoa jara*. As scholars note, the height and orientation of the camera can subtly communicate relational dynamics, signalling neutrality, authority, or vulnerability (Savardi et al. 2023; Hanmakyugh 2020). In *Riders of Destiny*, interviewees are generally framed at eye level, establishing a sense of balance and direct engagement. Sila, however, is consistently filmed from a high angle. This choice does not merely depict his physical smallness; it structurally limits his screen presence and directs the audience towards a reading of him as constrained and overshadowed. Paired with his brief on-screen participation and single interview, the high-angle framing operates as a visual shorthand for limited agency, guiding the viewer's emotional response even before any explicit commentary is offered (Lannom, 2020).

Table 2 maps the contrastive camera positioning used for Sila and Romi. By identifying these recurring visual patterns, the table substantiates the claim that high-angle framing limits Sila's representational agency while eye-level framing stabilises Romi's interpretive authority. It therefore strengthens the broader argument regarding visual hierarchy and power in the film's construction of meaning.

Beyond their technical function, these visual choices feed into a broader postcolonial dynamic in which Indonesian subjects are positioned within a hierarchy of representational power. By repeatedly framing Sila from above while presenting Romi in stable, eye-level compositions, the documentary creates a visual asymmetry that privileges the outsider's perspective. This pattern reflects what postcolonial theorists describe as a "hierarchy of seeing," where Western or Western-aligned figures become the default interpreters of non-Western realities (Shohat and Stam, 1994). In this framing structure, Sila's vulnerability is not merely aesthetic but serves to elevate Romi's critique as morally authoritative. This reinforces a familiar representational trend in Western documentary practice: local agency is diminished,

cultural traditions are evaluated through imported ethical frameworks, and meaning is filtered through external judgement (Berghahn 2021, 232).

Table 2. Camera angle in *Riders of Destiny*

	In the opening scene of the film featuring Sila's interview, the camera angle used is a high angle, where the camera is positioned above the subject, diverging from eye-level with the audience's gaze. This angle is used exclusively in Sila's interview, subtly suggesting his perceived lack of agency or confinement within his circumstances.
	Conversely, in scenes depicting Romi, another subject in the film, an eye-level perspective is adopted. This places the subject on an equal visual plane with the audience, implying that Romi is viewed as more empowered or authoritative. Furthermore, Romi aligns with the filmmaker's stance, as he regards the traditional practice of horse-racing as an infringement on children's rights. The choice to depict Romi with an eye-level angle thus not only elevates his perspective but reinforces his alignment with the filmmaker's critique, suggesting a shared judgement towards the practice of child jockeying.

Source: Author

Concept Analysis

Documentary films commonly adopt one of six modes—observational, expository, poetic, participatory, performative, or reflexive—each shaping how meaning is constructed for audiences (Nichols 1991). *Riders of Destiny* aligns with the expository mode, using interviews and commentary to advance a particular interpretation of *pacoa jara*. While the expository approach is designed to present logical argumentation, it can also simplify complex cultural issues when the filmmaker's perspective becomes dominant (Nichols 1991). In this film, the tradition of child horse racing is framed primarily through the lens of child

rights violations, with limited exploration of its cultural, historical, or social significance within Sumbawa.

The selection of interview subjects further reinforces this framing. One of the most prominent voices is Romi Perbawa, a photographer who has long documented child jockeys but is not from Sumbawa. As an outsider, Romi discusses *pacoa jara* primarily in terms of risk, injury, and children's educational loss. While such concerns are valid, his account lacks contextual grounding in local cosmology, kinship obligations, or the economic role of the tradition—perspectives that could have been provided by cultural leaders or community elders. The absence of these voices results in a narrative that narrows the issue to exploitation, leaving little room for the complexity of community practices or local agency. Instead, the film relies heavily on interviews with Sila's parents, who discuss their financial circumstances, yet the editing frames these responses in ways that foreground poverty rather than cultural meaning.

The interview method in expository documentaries necessarily involves some degree of directorial shaping, as filmmakers guide conversation through targeted questions and selective editing (Rosenthal and Eckhardt 2016). Although such guidance is normal, it can also influence which interpretations appear most authoritative. In *Riders of Destiny*, this influence becomes visible in how interviewees' responses collectively emphasise socioeconomic hardship and lack of choice, aligning with the film's overarching narrative. For example, Romi's comments focus on educational deprivation and injury, while Sila's parents highlight the income gained from jockeying. Both sets of interviews ultimately support the film's framing of *pacoa jara* as inherently exploitative—an interpretation shaped as much by the filmmaker's questions as by the subjects' lived experiences.

While this framing resonates with broader postcolonial critiques of how Western or Western-aligned perspectives can dominate representations of the Global South, a stronger analysis requires grounding such claims in close textual evidence rather than generalised assumptions. By attending to how specific interview excerpts and editing choices guide interpretation, it becomes clearer how the documentary constructs authority, shapes moral judgement, and privileges certain viewpoints over others without reducing the issue to a simple West-versus-local dichotomy.

Context Analysis

Given *Riders of Destiny*'' thematic focus on tradition and culture, the filmmakers might be expected to demonstrate an informed understanding of the local context of *pacoa jara*

before offering critique. The film's portrayal of the tradition as a practice rooted solely in Sumbawa's poverty and child exploitation risks oversimplification. Historically, *pacoa jara* emerged during the Kingdom of Bima era, initially serving as an elite amusement and a form of royal self-defence training before gradually extending to wider public participation (Isnaini and Hasbi, 2020). Today, it has evolved into a cultural symbol that reinforces social, economic, and political bonds within the community (Wahyuni, Irruba'i, and Maulany, 2023). The races coincide with the rice planting season and hold considerable social value in Sumbawa, allowing local villages to showcase their best jockeys and horses and thereby strengthening collective identity and cultural continuity (Wahyuni, Irruba'i, and Maulany, 2023). From a local cosmological perspective, this timing marks a moment of communal renewal and reciprocal exchange between humans, land, and livestock — an aspect the film does not explore.

Children aged six to twelve play vital roles in this system, not merely as labourers but as participants in a family economy where horsemanship is transmitted through kin-based apprenticeship. Their skills—balance, emotional discipline, and horse handling—are acquired within familial training structures that integrate work, play, and cultural pride (Maulana, Sugiyanto, and Riyadi 2021). Success in racing enhances family honour and strengthens social networks, while the increased value of successful horses contributes materially to household income. These dynamics highlight how *pacoa jara* is embedded in moral and economic logics that differ from individualised Western frameworks, offering insight into why families continue the tradition despite its risks.

Safety issues remain significant. Injuries, inadequate protective gear, and uneven regulation pose real concerns for child welfare (Maulana, Sugiyanto, and Riyadi 2021). However, local stakeholders—including horse owners, trainers, and village elders—have increasingly called for protective reforms, demonstrating that internal debates about child welfare already exist within the community. These nuances show that *pacoa jara* operates at the intersection of cultural meaning, economic necessity, and evolving local ethics—not simply as a manifestation of poverty, as the film suggests.

Riders of Destiny, however, narrows its critique by foregrounding scenes of injury and hardship while omitting voices from cultural leaders, elders, or practitioners who could contextualise the practice within Sumbawan cosmology and family-economy realities. The film relies heavily on Romi Perbawa, an outsider, as the key interpreter of child welfare issues, which directs the viewer towards an external moral framework rather than local

understandings of agency, honour, or reciprocity. Its festival circulation in Europe and the United States further amplifies this externally framed narrative.

Postcolonial Interpretation of Indonesia in *Riders of Destiny*

At first glance, *Riders of Destiny* appears to function as a conventional human-rights documentary, foregrounding an underreported issue—child jockeys in Sumbawa—to attract international attention. However, when examined from a postcolonial cultural perspective, the film's framing of *pacoa jara* reveals a series of representational choices that simplify the practice and obscure its deeper cultural significance. The documentary adopts a child-rights lens that aligns closely with Western liberal norms, but does so without engaging Sumbawan cosmology, family economy, or the internal debates within the community about safety and reform. This absence creates an interpretive imbalance that makes local culture appear inherently incompatible with modern child-protection standards, despite the more complex realities documented in anthropological and historical literature (Isnaini and Hasbi 2020; Wahyuni, Irruba'i, and Maulany 2023).

Rather than assuming that Germany, as the filmmaker's national context, is intentionally imposing ideological dominance, it is more productive to analyse how *specific elements of the film* shape viewer perception. The documentary selectively foregrounds scenes of injury, fear, and economic hardship, while excluding local voices—such as cultural leaders, horse owners, or elders—who could situate *pacoa jara* within its social and cosmological setting. For example, the film shows Sila preparing to race in dim, desaturated tones, supported by interview material that emphasises financial strain. Yet it omits the communal aspects of the tradition, the agricultural timing of the races, or the social honour tied to the skills of young jockeys (Wahyuni, Irruba'i, and Maulany 2023). These omissions do not necessarily indicate intent to distort, but they do shape the narrative towards a single moral conclusion.

From a postcolonial perspective, this selective representation reflects what might be described as a hierarchy of seeing, in which Western-aligned figures or frameworks are positioned as the primary interpreters of non-Western practices. The reliance on Romi Perbawa—an outsider to Sumbawa—as the key commentator reinforces this hierarchy. His critique of the races, framed through the language of child exploitation, becomes the film's dominant interpretive voice, while local understandings of skill, honour, cosmology, and economic reciprocity remain unrepresented. As Berghahn (2021) notes in her work on

exoticism, such portrayals often simplify culturally complex practices into spectacles of suffering that invite external moral judgment.

The film's international circulation further amplifies this framing. Screenings at festivals in Germany, Greece, the United States, and other Western cultural spaces—without screenings in Indonesia—mean that the documentary primarily informs *external* perceptions of Sumbawan culture. This is significant not because it indicates deliberate ideological domination, but because global documentary festivals often privilege narratives that align with universalist human-rights discourse. In such spaces, depictions of non-Western childhoods as endangered or exploited carry particular emotional and political weight. As a result, *Riders of Destiny* participates in a broader pattern in which Western media construct moral authority through the representation of vulnerable non-Western subjects.

Furthermore, the production context reinforces this dynamic. *Riders of Destiny* appears to be the first documentary project produced by Seventyone Films. Based on publicly available information, no prior documentary or ethnographic productions by the company could be identified. This limited documentary profile suggests relatively little publicly documented experience with culturally embedded research or cross-cultural representation. In turn, the film's interpretive framework is shaped largely by external perspectives rather than sustained collaboration with Sumbawan cultural actors.

Understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond binary claims about Western dominance. The film's influence emerges not from overt political intent but from how its selective storytelling interacts with global media structures that privilege certain narratives over others. A more culturally grounded representation—one that includes local perspectives, contextualises risks alongside cultural value, and engages with internal debates in Sumbawa—would allow the documentary to contribute to meaningful dialogue rather than reinforcing simplified perceptions. By examining *Riders of Destiny* through both film analysis and local cultural scholarship, we can see how documentary practice shapes global interpretations of non-Western traditions—and why the inclusion of alternative Sumbawan voices is essential for a more balanced understanding.

Conclusion

This study shows that *Riders of Destiny* constructs a narrow representation of *pacoa jara* by emphasising scenes of risk, hardship, and poverty while excluding the cultural, historical, and social contexts through which the tradition is understood locally. Rather than intentionally distorting Sumbawan culture, the film reflects broader patterns in Western documentary practice in which external perspectives gain interpretive authority and local voices are marginalised. Through its visual choices, narrative framing, and circulation within Western film festivals, the documentary aligns with familiar postcolonial dynamics of representation, where the Global South is viewed primarily through humanitarian or moral-critical lenses.

These findings suggest that the film's power lies not in deliberate ideological imposition but in how its selective storytelling interacts with global media structures that privilege universalist child-rights narratives over culturally situated explanations. A more balanced representation—one that incorporates Sumbawan perspectives, contextualises risks, and acknowledges the cultural significance of *pacoa jara*—would offer a fuller understanding of the tradition and challenge reductive portrayals of non-Western practices. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its focus on a single documentary and its reliance on textual analysis rather than audience reception data, filmmaker interviews, or direct perspectives from members of the Sumbawan community. Future research could address these limitations through comparative studies of Western documentaries about Indonesian cultural traditions and investigations into local responses to *Riders of Destiny*. More broadly, the analysis highlight the ethical responsibilities of documentary filmmakers when representing cultures not their own, underscoring the importance of engaging with local knowledge, diverse community perspectives, and collaborative approaches to cultural representation.

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Bilateral Disputes and Hold-Up Problems in EU Enlargement: A Case Study of North Macedonia and Bulgaria

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Abstract

This research note asks whether the European Union's (EU) unanimity requirement in enlargement decision-making creates a "hold-up problem" for candidate states facing bilateral disputes with a Member State. To test this, the study applies a novel political hold-up framework to a single case: Bulgaria's veto of North Macedonia's EU accession bid. It draws on two sources of evidence — statements and actions by political elites in North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and the EU, and qualitative and quantitative survey data on public opinion in North Macedonia. The findings largely confirm the hypothesis: unanimity does incentivize Member States to extract bilateral concessions from candidates. However, the evidence also shows that the accession process's many intermediary decision points are themselves a key driver of the hold-up problem, pointing to a refined hypothesis that combines unanimity with multiple decision points.

Keywords: North Macedonia; Bulgaria; European Union; Enlargement; Hold-Up Problem; Bilateral Disputes; Signaling; Decision Points

Introduction

The European Union (EU) has historically touted enlargement as a transformative process for its candidates. However, given that decisions regarding the enlargement criteria that candidates must meet are made by the Member States via unanimity, the potential for the process to be politicized in order to further the Member States' national interests cannot be dismissed. This is especially pertinent in a case where a bilateral dispute exists between a Member State and a candidate. In such a case, actions by Member States that institutionalize bilateral disputes into the enlargement process for domestic political gain have the potential to undermine the credibility of the process (Hillion 2010; Zweers 2019). Indeed, the European Commission (2011, 24) has previously warned that "[b]lockages linked to bilateral issues can compromise the transformative power of the enlargement process." Therefore, it is necessary to determine the consequences that the EU decision-making process has on the prospects of enlargement, particularly in cases where there is a bilateral dispute between a

Member State and a candidate. Thus, the purpose of this research note is to determine whether the unanimity requirement in EU enlargement decision-making incentivizes Member States to demand concessions on bilateral issues, resulting in a potential hold-up problem for candidate states.

In order to evaluate the impact of bilateral disputes and unanimity in decision-making on the EU's enlargement process, a case study of the North Macedonia-Bulgaria bilateral dispute is conducted. This case was selected because the bilateral dispute has been effectively embedded into North Macedonia's EU negotiating framework, and its emphasis on identity-related issues may create opportunities for repeated bargaining interactions over the course of accession negotiations. As a result, it allows for an analysis of how the EU's institutional processes shape bargaining dynamics between the EU and a candidate state.

This study relies on analyzing the statements and actions of political elites from North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and the EU. More specifically, it analyzes statements directly related to the North Macedonia-Bulgaria bilateral dispute and the constitutional amendments required for North Macedonia's EU accession process. Due to the reliance on publicly available statements from political elites, one limitation of this approach is the potential for selection bias. In an attempt to bolster the robustness of the findings derived from elite discourse and actions, qualitative and quantitative survey results from 2023 and 2024 are also evaluated to gauge whether public opinion in North Macedonia is reflective of the positions taken by the state's political elites. The surveys analyzed were arranged by the International Republican Institute (IRI) as well as the Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje (IDSCS) and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in the Republic of North Macedonia (KAS). Despite supplementing elite statements with public opinion, it must be acknowledged that the potential for selection bias cannot be entirely eliminated. Nevertheless, the evidence presented here permits an evaluation of the applicability of the hold-up problem framework and facilitates the identification of the conditions under which a hold-up problem is likely to emerge.

The remainder of the research note is organized in the following manner. First, the theoretical background related to the hold-up problem is introduced. Second, the case study of the North Macedonia-Bulgaria bilateral dispute is analyzed in the context of EU enlargement. Finally, the main findings, policy implications, and potential avenues for further research conclude the analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Economic and Political Hold-Up Problems

A central concept in economics, the hold-up problem focuses on a scenario characterized by incomplete contracts and asymmetric bargaining power (Hart 1995). In a two-party bargaining scenario featuring a short-term contract, if the first party makes a relationship-specific sunk investment, then the second party can use this information as leverage to extract the surpluses from the investment *ex post* during contract renegotiations (Hart 1995; Balkenborg et al. 2012; Celik et al. 2020). This ultimately leads to economic inefficiency as the first party recognizes that a sufficient return on investment is unlikely and underinvests *ex ante* because of the incentive for the second party to exploit its increased bargaining power (Hart 1995; Balkenborg et al. 2012; Celik et al. 2020). To summarize, the three assumptions necessary to characterize a hold-up problem are incomplete contracts, relationship-specific investments, and a willingness to exploit increased bargaining power with the general outcome being an underinvestment caused by the expectation of insufficient returns.

In addition to economics, the hold-up problem has been incorporated into the literature of political economy. In contrast to the conventional concept, which focuses primarily on the economic relationship between two parties, Carnegie's (2014) political hold-up problem adaptation links economic and political interests. Focusing on international trade agreements between asymmetrically powerful states, Carnegie's (2014, 56–57) model assumes that the small state must make a relationship-specific sunk investment of an economic nature to facilitate exports to the large state. Diverging from the established economic theory, rather than seeking economic concessions, such as lower tariffs, Carnegie (2014, 57) proposes that the large state will instead use its trade policies in contract renegotiations to extract political concessions from the small state, such as access to military bases, which are viewed as more valuable to the large state. Thus, the political hold-up problem can be identified "…when one state fails to undertake an investment due to the increased ability it would provide another state to extract political concessions" (Carnegie 2014, 54). While Carnegie (2014) retains the core logic of the economic hold-up problem, the political hold-up problem broadens the concept's explanatory scope by focusing on state-level actors and adding political dimensions to the bargaining scenario.

Enlargement Hold-Up Problem

Applying the economic hold-up problem framework to EU enlargement, Wallner (2003) demonstrates its potential to reduce a candidate's gains from accession. Wallner (2003)

assumes the EU is a unitary actor and focuses on the implications of EU-specific investments made by private investors in a candidate state. In the enlargement process, Wallner (2003) posits that these relationship-specific investments made prior to accession increase the candidate's dependence on the EU. As a result, the EU's leverage *vis-à-vis* the candidate state increases, allowing it to adjust the admission conditions to its own benefit at the expense of the candidate state (Wallner 2003). Therefore, Wallner's (2003) application of the hold-up problem to EU accession negotiations suggests that disregarding the bargaining dynamics and the associated costs to a candidate state risks overstating the gains from accession.

Building on Wallner's (2003) application of the economic hold-up problem to EU enlargement, this study further adapts Carnegie's (2014) concept of the political hold-up problem to accession negotiations. In doing so, rather than maintaining the initial relationship-specific investment as economic, this study emphasizes investments of political capital by a candidate state. In this context, political capital refers to the finite "stock of influence" political actors have to pursue their agenda (Banfield 1961, 312–313). In an effort to maintain or increase their power, political actors are assumed to rationally choose an agenda at the expense of pursuing alternative objectives based on the potential returns on investment (Banfield 1961, 312–313). Thus, the "enlargement hold-up problem" can be described as a situation where a candidate state fails to invest political capital in enacting EU-related reforms due to the increased leverage that it would provide Member States to extract political concessions over the course of accession negotiations. Therefore, in this adaptation, an underinvestment refers to a strategic calculation that involves political actors in a candidate state failing to fully pursue and implement the necessary reforms in accordance with EU accession requirements. In applying this novel adaptation of a political hold-up problem to EU enlargement where a bilateral dispute between a Member State and a candidate is present, all three core assumptions are observed, namely short-term contracts, relationship-specific investments, and asymmetric bargaining power.

First, in an attempt to promote a more effective adoption of the EU *acquis communautaire* by candidate states, the accession negotiation process is broken down into clusters and chapters which require unanimity among Member States at each decision point (Lehne et al. 2025, 2). This has resulted in the creation of intermediary decision points, effectively veto points, where Member States can impose new conditions, even if they are unrelated to the formal accession criteria (Subotić and Cvetanova 2025, 2).[1] Given the need

[1] Even though the cluster methodology has reduced the number of decision points, Subotić and Cvetanova (2025, 2) estimate that there are at least forty-nine decision points in the current accession process which result

for unanimity at each decision point, the cluster approach to enlargement can be equated to a series of short-term contracts that can be renegotiated by the Member States at these intermediary points.

Second, candidate states need to have enacted and demonstrated compliance with the *acquis* prior to closing negotiations, and only upon accession do candidates receive the full benefits of membership (Teokarevic 2011, 75; İçener and Phinnemore 2014, 37; Lehne et al. 2025, 4). Furthermore, compliance with the *acquis* constitutes a largely irreversible investment as the administrative, economic, and political resources devoted to *acquis* implementation are not easily recoverable if a state decides to end its accession bid or subsequently withdraws from the EU (Spirig and Weder 2008, 89). Although many individual *acquis*-related reforms, such as improving judicial independence, could increase domestic utility independent of EU accession, the full realization of the gains associated with adopting the *acquis* in its entirety is contingent on EU membership. Therefore, while *acquis* adoption provides value without EU accession, the extent of a candidate state's return on investment is dependent on its future relationship with the EU and may ultimately be lower without eventual membership. Given these characteristics, the required adoption of the *acquis* largely resembles a relationship-specific sunk investment.

Third, given that the EU "…can set the entry conditions in a take-it-or-leave-it offer," there is an inherent power imbalance favoring Member States over candidates (Wallner 2003, 872). In accordance with the assumption that actors must be willing to exploit their bargaining power, there is a documented precedent of Member States utilizing the enlargement process to further their own national interests (Hillion 2010, 2011; Rodin 2012). Indeed, Hillion (2011, 191) has described how individual Member States have used their veto power for reasons related to their "crude domestic interests," rather than the candidate's compliance with formal criteria. As a result, the power held by Member States to progress or stall enlargement creates an inherently asymmetrical relationship favoring Member States over candidates.

After establishing that the enlargement process meets the necessary assumptions, the following case study seeks to determine whether the hold-up problem outcome is applicable and to what extent it is impacted by the need for unanimity in decision-making among Member States.

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in a combined total of 1,323 veto opportunities that a candidate must overcome (49 decision points x 27 Member States = 1,323 veto opportunities).

Case Study: North Macedonia-Bulgaria Bilateral Dispute in the Context of Enlargement

"Bilateralization" of Enlargement

In the context of North Macedonia's accession bid, the current veto by Bulgaria appears to be a recent development. In actuality, bilateral disputes between North Macedonia and Bulgaria have been a persistent feature of the relationship since the Cold War (Sfetas 2012; Vangelov 2023). At the heart of the dispute are matters related to history, language, and identity, with Bulgaria questioning the very existence of a separate Macedonian nation (Vangelov 2023; Basheska 2025, 11). In 2019, Bulgaria's National Assembly adopted a framework position which made Bulgarian support for opening North Macedonia's EU accession negotiations contingent upon North Macedonia adopting Bulgaria's official views pertaining to matters of history, language, and identity (Christidis 2019; Fouéré 2023, 9–10; Vangelov 2023, 210–212). At the December 2020 European Council meeting, this framework position "…in essence became the Bulgarian veto on the European Council's green light for the opening of accession negotiations with…North Macedonia…" (Fouéré 2023, 9). In asserting its veto power, Bulgaria acted unilaterally, much to the dismay of the other Member States. Specifically, Czechia and Slovakia were the most vocal opponents, but Bulgaria was unwilling to lift its veto (Marusic 2020; Stefanova 2024, 97; Zweers et al. 2024, 6). Progress in resolving the matter was made in 2022 when both North Macedonia and Bulgaria endorsed the "French Proposal," effectively rewarding Bulgaria with many of its desired concessions (Fouéré 2023, 10). The focal point of the proposal makes the opening of North Macedonia's accession negotiations contingent on North Macedonia amending its constitution to recognize the existence of a Bulgarian minority (Council of the European Union 2022, 2–3). It also allows Bulgaria to reassert its veto if it deems that bilateral issues are not dealt with properly by North Macedonia (Fouéré 2023, 10), and there are no guarantees that Bulgaria will not use its veto in the future in order to impose new conditions (Zweers et al. 2024, 4). Consistent with the "creeping nationalization of enlargement" (Hillion 2010; 2011, 210), the path to the "French Proposal" illustrates how Bulgaria was able to assert its position as an EU Member State and institutionalize the bilateral dispute in order to extract concessions. Furthermore, Bulgaria's behavior exemplifies how the unanimity requirement in EU decision-making incentivizes Member States to use the

enlargement process to further their own national interests at the expense of candidates, as such actions cannot be blocked by other Member States.[2]

Elite Reactions

While agreement on the "French Proposal" seemingly cleared the path to opening accession negotiations, North Macedonia has yet to fulfill its side of the bargain (as of mid-2026) to enact the necessary constitutional amendments. When assessing the statements and actions of political elites in North Macedonia in this context, the hold-up interpretation appears applicable. In the absence of guarantees against the imposition of new bilaterally-based conditions at future decision points, the political elites in North Macedonia have expressed continued concern that the execution of the "French Proposal" will not actually unblock their accession bid; ultimately, it may serve to further incentivize Bulgaria to impose additional conditions (Dimoski 2025a). Since matters closely related to national identity are at the heart of the dispute with Bulgaria, future conditions seen as infringing upon North Macedonia's national identity, such as matters related to language, have evoked vocal anxiety by political elites in North Macedonia (Vinocur 2025). Given the salience associated with matters of national identity, in the absence of a credible commitment by the EU to enlargement, Schimmelfennig (2008) concludes that there is an incentive for political elites not to comply with the conditionality when the perceived political costs outweigh the benefits from EU accession progress. As perceived future conditions may be tied to the politically sensitive issue of national identity, the Government of North Macedonia has stated it will not enact the mandated amendments unless there is a guarantee against the future imposition of new conditions related to purely bilateral issues (Basheska 2025, 12; Dimoski 2025a). Arguably as a result of the insufficient guarantees reducing the potential for political elites to benefit from EU accession progress, there is an apparent underinvestment in political capital to enact reforms.

The resistance to the "French Proposal" by political elites in North Macedonia has also resulted in efforts to renegotiate its terms. In an attempt to rebalance bargaining power and create its own guarantees, the Government of North Macedonia has proposed a "delayed enforcement" of the amendments—meaning they would be passed, but not take effect until EU accession (Ivković 2024; Dimoski 2025a). Despite North Macedonia's efforts, the EU

[2] As Moravcsik and Vachudova (2003) explain via bargaining theory, the unanimity requirement in EU decision-making offers each Member State bargaining power in relation to all other Member States. Thus, even a smaller state can act as a veto player in order to extract concessions in exchange for support in decision-making procedures (Moravcsik and Vachudova 2003).

and its Member States have not welcomed the idea of renegotiating the "French Proposal" and seem unlikely to accept any similar propositions in the future (Ivković 2024; Nikolov 2025). Even though they have been unsuccessful, such proposals indicate that political elites recognize the process's bargaining power asymmetry and the political costs of intruding on matters of national identity. In short, delayed enforcement proposals are consistent with the presence of the enlargement hold-up problem and attempt to address it by lengthening the terms to effectively sideline the impact of unanimity and intermediary decision points.

Public Opinion

Not only is the behavior of political elites supportive of the appropriateness of the enlargement hold-up problem, but the general public in North Macedonia also appears to consistently share similar views regarding the required constitutional amendments. In a 2023 qualitative research study conducted by the IRI (2024, 26), when asked about the bilateral dispute with Bulgaria in the EU accession process, ethnic Macedonians tended to view Bulgaria's actions as "unacceptable" and "a form of blackmail." For example, one ethnic Macedonian respondent stated, "'Yes, and we expect more and more requests from them. [NB. From Bulgaria]. They started with a name, the constitution, then they will think of something else'" (IRI 2024, 26). Such statements made by the general public support the assertion that the expectation of future conditions being imposed on North Macedonia is not limited to the governing elites, but is shared by the broader population.

In addition to the qualitative statements made by the general public about expecting additional conditions, quantitative survey results lend further support to the applicability of the enlargement hold-up problem outcome. Given the centrality of identity issues to this dispute, consistent with elite statements, there is a noticeable concern about the status of the Macedonian language. In a survey conducted between April and May 2023, a majority (52%) of respondents are reportedly concerned that the Macedonian language is "somewhat" or "completely jeopardized" in the EU accession negotiations (IRI 2023, 79).[3] Furthermore, the same survey found that 66% of respondents believe Bulgaria to be the biggest opponent to EU accession (IRI 2023, 82). In contrast, only 7% believe all EU countries are opponents of North Macedonia's EU accession bid (IRI 2023, 82). Thus, these findings suggest that the general public expects future demands on matters related to national identity, likely due to the lack of guarantees included in the "French Proposal." In addition, consistent with

[3] For a further breakdown of the results, 22% of respondents believe that the language is "somewhat jeopardized" and 30% believe that it is "completely jeopardized" (IRI 2023, 79).

unanimity in EU decision-making allowing the demands of one Member State to potentially dominate the process, the general public does not believe all Member States are equally hostile to North Macedonia, but rather focuses on Bulgaria as the main opposition.

Along with the results suggesting the anticipation of future demands, additional data reports that there is also a lack of public support for executing the required constitutional amendments. According to a 2023 survey cooperatively conducted by the IDSCS and the KAS, only 24% of respondents voiced their support for enacting the necessary constitutional amendments (Velinovska 2023, 14). In contrast, a plurality (49%) of respondents stated that either the negotiating process should be stopped (20%) or North Macedonia should proceed by "…do[ing] nothing" (29%) (Velinovska 2023, 14). Furthermore, the 2024 survey also reflects consistent findings. Despite the share of respondents who support stopping negotiations or "to do nothing" falling to a combined 43%, it still represents a plurality (Velinovska and Sofeska 2025, 9–10).[4] Additionally, the support for enacting the constitutional amendments also decreased to 20% of respondents (Velinovska and Sofeska 2025, 9–10). These figures are largely consistent with the enlargement hold-up problem interpretation as they suggest that the anticipation of future demands may influence public sentiments against accession-related reforms in the present.

Due to North Macedonia's multiethnic demographic composition, it should be noted that variation was observed between the attitudes of the state's ethnic Albanian and Macedonian populations. While some ethnic Albanian respondents did express disapproval of Bulgaria's demands in the qualitative study, they tended to be less critical of Bulgaria's actions than their ethnic Macedonian counterparts (IRI 2024, 26). Similarly, across both years of the quantitative survey data, ethnic Albanians displayed a higher level of support for enacting the constitutional amendments (Velinovska 2023, 14–15; Velinovska and Sofeska 2025, 10). Despite these micro-level differences, this study relies on aggregate public opinion as a measure of domestic support for EU-related reforms.

While these surveys alone cannot causally link the expectation of new demands being placed on North Macedonia with the reluctance to invest political capital in enacting the EU-mandated constitutional amendments, these results do show that such inaction is not unpopular among the general population. However, given North Macedonia's long-stalled accession process, it should be acknowledged that the plurality of respondents favoring ending negotiations or retaining the status quo could also reflect enlargement fatigue, rather

[4] For a further breakdown of the results, 21% of respondents supported stopping negotiations and 22% preferred the status quo (that is, "to do nothing") (Velinovska and Sofeska 2025, 9–10).

than a strategic calculation. Nevertheless, when analyzing the qualitative and quantitative surveys together, there appears to be a shared perception that additional costly conditions are likely to be imposed in the future. Such patterns suggest that the enlargement hold-up problem is likely an appropriate concept for understanding the lack of political capital investment by North Macedonia in addressing EU accession conditions.

Incoherent Signaling

Given that the "French Proposal" does not provide concrete guarantees against the imposition of new bilaterally-based conditions at later decision points in the accession negotiations, North Macedonia's incentive to enact the necessary amendments depends on credible signaling by the EU.[5] Since the EU is not a unitary actor and enlargement decision-making is driven by unanimity among Member States, coherence among all Member States' messaging is crucial to ensuring a consistent signal is sent at the EU-level (Gebhard 2011). The EU institutions have attempted to send positive signals and build trust between the EU and North Macedonia, exemplified through statements by European Council President António Costa which declare that no new conditions will be imposed on North Macedonia (Dimoski 2025b). Various Bulgarian officials, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then-Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov, have also claimed that they would adhere to the "French Proposal" and not pursue any new conditions (Kolekevski 2023; Dimitrova and Peeva 2025). However, as a result of contradictory actions stemming from various Bulgarian domestic and European officials across the political spectrum, such coherence has not been realized in this case. For example, in the summer of 2025, all seventeen Bulgarian Members of the European Parliament representing various national parties endorsed a letter which attempted to delay a European Parliament report on accession for North Macedonia (Griera et al. 2025). In addition to the letter, an amendment supported by the Bulgarian delegation was introduced to the aforementioned report to remove references to a "Macedonian identity" and "Macedonian language" (*Kathimerini English Edition* 2025). Furthermore, despite Zhelyazkov's earlier statements against setting new conditions on North Macedonia, it was reported that the then-prime minister may have also played a role in opposing the report (Griera et al. 2025). Given that the "French Proposal" does not extend to matters of identity and language, the actions by Bulgarian officials have led some analysts to believe that Bulgaria

[5] In scenarios where incomplete contracts could lead to a hold-up problem, the use of signals can reset the balance of power and ensure adequate incentives for a party to commit to the relationship-specific investment (Khanna and Mathews 2016). Such signals are used to build trust and attempt to create a credible commitment by indicating the actions a party plans to take in an otherwise uncertain future (McAdams 2015, 123–127).

may impose additional conditions in the future, despite verbal assurances otherwise (*The New Union Post* 2025). Such contradictions exemplify how attempts to overcome the power imbalance via signaling can be undermined by incoherence between EU statements, Member State statements, and Member State actions. Thus, the continued resistance to following through on EU-mandated conditions by North Macedonia highlights that where there is incoherence, unanimity in enlargement decision-making may actually deepen the hold-up problem.

Discussion and Conclusion

In an attempt to better understand the consequences of the EU decision-making process on the prospects of enlargement in cases where bilateral disputes are present between a Member State and a candidate, the case study of North Macedonia and Bulgaria highlights three main findings. First, as a result of unanimity in decision-making equalizing bargaining power among Member States, this study lends further support to the existing theory that there is a "creeping nationalization of enlargement" where individual Member States can use their bargaining power to extract concessions from candidates with whom they have bilateral disputes (Hillion 2010; 2011, 210). Second, the shared expectation of future conditions and insufficient returns by political elites and the general public of North Macedonia, as well as the apparent underinvestment in EU-related reforms, support the applicability of the enlargement hold-up problem. Third, the unanimity required in decision-making heightens the need for coherence in signalling. Thus, incoherence between the EU and Member State positions may further intensify the enlargement hold-up problem.

More specifically, the working hypothesis that the unanimity requirement incentivizes Member States to demand concessions on bilateral issues which may result in a potential hold-up problem for candidate states is largely supported by this case study. The unanimity requirement does appear to incentivize the institutionalization of bilateral issues because of the bargaining power symmetry among Member States and asymmetry with candidate states. Additionally, as previously stated, it may also exaggerate the hold-up problem because of the need for coherence in signaling. However, the working hypothesis does not fully capture a key underlying cause of the hold-up problem, specifically the existence of multiple decision points in the enlargement process. The theoretical underpinning of the hold-up problem is reliant on short-term contracts, and, in the case of North Macedonia, both political elites and public opinion express concern that new conditions could be imposed as the accession process progresses. If there was only one

decision point where Member States could exert their influence, unilaterally or not, then there would be less apprehension towards additional conditions being imposed as there are no longer any future decision points. In other words, the short-term contract assumption would no longer be satisfied. As a result, a more correct, amended hypothesis asserts: the unanimity requirement *and multiple decision points* in EU enlargement decision-making incentivize Member States to demand concessions on bilateral issues, resulting in a potential hold-up problem for candidate states. Despite the apparent importance of unanimity and multiple decision points for the enlargement hold-up problem, this is not to suggest that the framework is applicable to all cases where a bilateral dispute between a Member State and a candidate has been internalized into EU accession negotiations. As the enlargement hold-up problem is contingent upon repeated bargaining interactions, this suggests that its explanatory scope may be limited to cases with bilateral disputes containing multiple issues or a complex single issue that requires a multistep settlement.

These findings are particularly relevant in the midst of the debate regarding potentially reforming the EU decision-making process for enlargement. In order to address delays and deadlock in the process, one prominent proposal has been to reduce the number of decisions requiring unanimity and introduce qualified majority voting (QMV) in its place (Zweers et al. 2024; Subotić and Cvetanova 2025). Importantly, based on legal feasibility, many of these proposals limit the use of QMV to the intermediary decision points (Zweers et al. 2024; Subotić and Cvetanova 2025). However, this would still leave multiple decision points requiring unanimity and—based on the amended hypothesis—may not preclude the emergence of an enlargement hold-up problem. Instead, North Macedonia's delayed enforcement proposal warrants reconsideration. Such an approach could reduce the need for major institutional reform and mitigate the risk of future bilaterally-based conditions further delaying North Macedonia's accession process.

While it is unlikely that the European Commission (2011, 24) was referencing the theoretical concept when it warned that bilateral issues should "…not *hold up* the accession process" [emphasis added], nevertheless, the statement can be applied to it. However, it must be acknowledged that the study's evidence does not permit alternative explanations to be dismissed outright, namely general enlargement fatigue, perverse incentives arising from the precedent set by the Prespa Agreement, and the hardening of domestic identity politics divorced from EU accession considerations. Even so, the analysis indicates that the enlargement hold-up problem is applicable and provides a useful framework for interpreting the observed elite actions and public sentiment. Ultimately, this case study does suggest that

the Commission's concerns are well-founded as blockages due to bilateral disputes do pose a threat to the transformative power of the EU.

Future research should focus on the effect that observing a hold-up problem may have on other (potential) candidates. As the enlargement hold-up problem may be relevant elsewhere, a future study should examine its impact on the perception of EU credibility in (potential) candidates and whether those who have outstanding bilateral disputes with one or more Member States consequently change their approach to accession negotiations.

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Book Review: "I was a North Korean Diplomat: Inside the Secret World of Pyongyang's Foreign Service" by Han Jin-myung and Nicolas Levi

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Keywords: North Korea; Authoritarian Resilience; Political Elites; Defector Testimony

I was a North Korean Diplomat: Inside the Secret World of Pyongyang's Foreign Service is a conversation between Han Jin-myung, a former Third Secretary at the North Korean Embassy in Hanoi, and Nicolas Levi, a Senior Researcher at the Polish Academy of Sciences and consultant on North Korean affairs for international organisations. Levi guides the discussion across two domains: Han's lived experiences, from his upbringing in Pyongyang's elite Mangyongdae neighbourhood to his life after defecting to South Korea, and North Korea's institutions and structures, with recurring themes of power, control, uncertainty and identity. The result is an indispensable insider account of the North Korean apparatus, albeit best read alongside more methodologically transparent scholarship.

The primary goal of the book, as stated by Levi, is to add to the discourse on North Korea based on defectors' testimonies. There are four main themes that the book contributes to, although they are not explicitly arranged as such. The first is the importance of control over the elites. Han grew up in a privileged environment owing to his family's legacy. In a country where loyalty is perceived as currency for transactions with the regime, he enjoyed advantages reserved for the revolutionary elite, such as access to North Korea's top educational institutions, and ultimately a job at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). The

significance of one's lineage runs through Han's responses, although, in retrospect, he reflects that all the privileges were a "golden cage," (Han and Levi 2026, 28) enforcing mutual surveillance even on the most loyal citizens, and instilling constant uncertainty about every aspect of life.

The second theme is the functioning of the regime's diplomatic network. A former MOFA employee, Han describes the decision-making mechanisms of North Korean foreign policy, including inter-institutional competition between the MOFA and the Workers' Party of Korea. Ultimately, while stationed at the North Korean Embassy in Hanoi, he experienced diplomacy as a revenue-generating mechanism. North Korea's embassies must generate hard currency through legal and illicit operations which include real estate, vehicle resale, counterfeit dollars, and the inflated resale of sanctioned goods through the port of Nampo.

The third theme Han and Levi contribute to is the strategic logic of regime survival. Continuity and stability, according to Han, must be projected to the outside world, with nuclear weapons serving as a "life insurance policy," (Han and Levi 2026, 118) and contributing to deterrence, negotiating leverage and revenue. Drones function both as asymmetric compensation for conventional military inferiority and as protection against an attack on Pyongyang. Lastly, China appears as an economic "lung" (Han and Levi 2026, 116) for sanctions evasion, and as the biggest hurdle to reunification.

The final theme concerns the lives of North Koreans upon deciding to defect and after reaching South Korea. While Levi and Han consistently use the term "refugees," (for example, Han and Levi 2026, 101) North Koreans who reach the South are granted citizenship, not asylum (Kim and Hocking 2020, 3). Han defected in January 2015 due to a financial dispute with his ambassador, distant ties to the purged Jang Song-thaek, and the discovery of South Korean documents on an embassy computer. Narrating his personal experience, he recalls the cold reception at the South Korean Embassy in Vientiane, the issuance of a South Korean passport in place of his North Korean one, the subsequent loss of identity, and the lack of integration mechanisms for North Koreans. Reflecting broadly on his peers, he argues their defections are driven by fear of purges rather than by an ideological awakening.

The book takes the form of a semi-structured interview while allowing Han room to digress. The interview format keeps the content accessible and free of technical jargon. Although a certain chronological order is evident, the authors do not specify over what period the conversations took place or how their topics were chosen and sequenced. Levi appears as a knowledgeable guide through his questions, but the task of triangulating the

testimony against the open-source record is left to the reader. A smaller conundrum appears as Han writes under a pseudonym yet appears in several clearly identifiable photographs, a decision that may indicate partial protection rather than a genuine attempt at concealment.

The value of the book lies in its insights into North Korean institutions, contributing to the elite defector literature, such as the memoirs of Hwang Jang-yop, Jang Jin-sung, and Thae Yong-ho, and to scholarship on the regime's sanctions evasion. Han offers a close account of the ministry's internal organisation and of how its revenue strategies adapt to different host regions, from Africa to Southeast Asia to Europe. His description of a drone programme already in the 1990s, and his account of elite life after defection, extend the record further. However, the insider knowledge that lends the book its value leaves one notable gap. Given Han's work on the overseas dissemination of Juche, the book is reticent on ideological diplomacy. Han mentions ideological seminars in Pyongyang and friendship societies operating abroad but says little about what those seminars entail or how their content is adapted to different audiences.

The account's limitations are derived from the genre of the book. As a single-source testimony, every claim, from the MOFA's organisational chart to the 1990s drone development programme, rests on Han's account alone. The difficulty is that the book rarely distinguishes between what he witnessed directly, what circulated as institutional knowledge within the MOFA, and what he reconstructs after his defection. A brief framing of each set of conversations or occasional notes situating a claim against the public record would have made the content considerably more transparent. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the book's standing as a testimony as it succeeds on its own terms as a former diplomat's analysis of North Korea, drawing on personal and professional experience.

Ultimately, Han and Levi offer a rare inside reading of a highly opaque system, a valuable resource for researchers tracing the mechanics of the regime's sanctions evasion and elite control.

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Book Review: "Leaving Russia: How Putin Forced a Country's Future to Flee" by Jason Corcoran

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Leaving Russia: How Putin Forced a Country's Future to Flee

By JASON CORCORAN

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Keywords: Emigration; Elite; Diaspora; Authoritarianism; Russia

Jason Corcoran's *Leaving Russia: How Putin Forced a Country's Future to Flee* opens with an epigraph from Monetochka—the indie singer-songwriter Yelizaveta Gyrdymova, who left Russia in 2022 following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and was subsequently designated a "foreign agent" by the state. The lyric chosen, "It was in Russia, which means it was long ago," is a song about the specific texture of a lost urban life: tiled floors, first kisses, the smell of a particular street. It is nostalgia of a precise social register—educated, metropolitan, culturally literate—and its placement as the book's threshold is, whether intentional or not, diagnostic. Before a single argument has been advanced, the emotional frequency has been set, and the implied listener is already someone for whom this kind of loss is legible. Corcoran, an Irish journalist who spent fourteen years based in Moscow as a senior correspondent for Bloomberg News and Dow Jones, brings to the subject an unusual combination of professional embeddedness and personal proximity: a Russian wife, deep social ties to the capital's educated classes, and his own departure from Moscow in the wake of the invasion. What follows is part reportage, part character study, part political inventory. The result is a readable and often illuminating account, but also one whose representational limits are visible from the outset.

Although the book is framed as a study of Russia's post-2022 exodus, its social world is much narrower: metropolitan, internationally mobile, professionally networked, and largely elite.

The book is organised into three parts. Part One, "Exodus," surveys the geography and sociology of Russian emigration after 2022, with chapters dedicated to individual figures: a tech entrepreneur (Oleg Tinkov), an investment banker (Ruben Vardanyan), a filmmaker (Michael Lockshin), and a poisoner turned politician (Andrei Lugovoy), alongside population-level accounts of destinations including Serbia, Georgia, the UAE, Germany, France, and Israel. Part Two, "The Russians Left Behind," turns to those who remained: oligarchs navigating sanctions and the collapse of golden-passport schemes, the imprisoned and martyred opposition leader Alexei Navalny, Kremlin operative Kirill Dmitriev, and others stranded in a Russia they can no longer fully claim. Part Three, "Russia's New Course," examines the institutional reconstruction of Soviet-style governance—the revival of Intervision, the reconstitution of security architecture under new names—and the curious figure of foreign nationals who remain in Russia, some of whom have absorbed and now transmit Kremlin talking points. The book's central argument is best encapsulated in its cover endorsement from Bill Browder, who describes the work as "a powerful window into how Putin has devastated Russia's greatest resource: its people." Corcoran largely accepts this framing. His thesis is that the war has forced a bifurcation of the Russian elite—into those who fled and those who remained—and that this bifurcation constitutes both a moral reckoning and a structural catastrophe for Russia's future. The book also advances an implicit normative position, articulated most clearly in a phrase near the end of the first chapter: that European governments risk endorsing Putin's own logic when they treat all Russian passport-holders as suspect, and that judgment should be reserved for conduct rather than nationality.

Corcoran's method is journalistic rather than academic. He draws on hundreds of interviews conducted across Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, the Balkans, the Baltics, and the South Caucasus, supplemented by fourteen years of reportage for major financial and news outlets. This gives the book a strong documentary quality: its authority rests on access, proximity, and the accumulation of carefully reported cases rather than on conceptual intervention. In this respect, *Leaving Russia* belongs to a wider body of English-language narrative non-fiction on post-Soviet Russia, alongside Anne Applebaum's work on Soviet and post-Soviet political memory (2017, 2020), Oliver Bullough's investigations of money and kleptocracy (2022), and Masha Gessen's accounts of Putinism, dissent, and civic life under authoritarian pressure (2012,

2020). Corcoran's focus is narrower and more sociological: the post-2022 displacement of Russians whose mobility, capital, public visibility, or professional status made departure possible, consequential, and narratable. What is methodologically distinctive, if not unprecedented, is the structural decision to move between macro-level analysis—legislative changes, institutional restructuring, migration statistics—and micro-level portraiture. The chapter on Dmitriev, for instance, reads as a study in cognitive dissonance: a figure of Ukrainian heritage who has become one of the more effective instruments of Kremlin foreign policy. The chapter on Lugovoy is a different kind of portrait, examining the impunity with which agents of state terror operate in plain sight. These juxtapositions are productive; they prevent the book from becoming either a straightforward political history or a collection of human-interest profiles.

Leaving Russia makes its most significant contribution as a work of synthesis and documentation. The scholarly literature on Russian emigration—particularly the post-2022 wave—is still emerging, and academic treatments of the specific mechanisms by which the Putin regime has alienated, expelled, or imprisoned its own professional classes remain relatively sparse outside of policy-adjacent publications. Corcoran compiles into a single, readable volume a record of legal changes, travel restrictions, sanctioned oligarchs, and the strange new cartography of the Russian diaspora that would otherwise require consultation of numerous disparate sources. For researchers working on Russian foreign policy, authoritarian regime consolidation, or the political economy of emigration, the book functions as a useful primary source of documented cases and testimonies. The book will be of particular value to readers in international relations, comparative politics, and area studies, as well as to policy practitioners and journalists seeking a structured overview of the post-invasion elite exodus. It does not claim—and should not be mistaken for— a contribution to the sociology of migration more broadly, or to the political science literature on authoritarian consolidation, though it provides ample empirical material for scholars working in both fields.

The book's central limitation is also, in a sense, its organising principle. Corcoran's Russia is overwhelmingly the Russia of the visible elite: oligarchs, bankers, filmmakers, opposition leaders, entrepreneurs, and internationally recognisable cultural figures. The experiences of Tinkov, Vardanyan, Navalny, Lockshin, and others are genuinely consequential, and the author renders them with care and moral seriousness. But they are not representative of the broader population forced to negotiate the consequences of the war: teachers, engineers, musicians,

service workers, low-income families, draft-age men without exit strategies, and those who left without assets to protect or platforms from which to speak.

This matters empirically, methodologically, and politically. Empirically, non-elite Russian emigration is structured by different pressures: precarious legal status, weak institutional protection, limited mobility, dependence on unstable labour markets, and the impossibility of returning home without risking prosecution, conscription, or social ruin. Methodologically, Corcoran's own embeddedness in Moscow's professional classes is both an asset and a constraint. It gives the book access, intimacy, and authority, but it also defines whose testimony becomes available and whose remains peripheral. Politically, the focus on elite displacement risks reproducing the very hierarchy it seeks to diagnose: Russia's future appears most visible when it is embodied by those who were already visible before they left.

The problem is therefore not one of accuracy, but of scale. *Leaving Russia* gives a detailed account of elite displacement after 2022, while its title and framing invite a broader reading. The book's Russia is made up primarily of people whose departures could be documented, narrated, and recognised: business figures, cultural producers, opposition politicians, internationally mobile professionals. That emphasis gives the book much of its evidentiary strength, but it also narrows the social field through which Russian emigration becomes visible.

Social scientists might also raise legitimate methodological concerns about the book's sourcing. Corcoran is transparent about his social embeddedness in Moscow's professional classes, and this embeddedness is clearly an asset. But it also raises questions about whose testimony was available to him, and whose was not. The book reads, at its richest moments, as an extraordinarily well-sourced compilation of accounts from an educated, English-speaking, often internationally mobile stratum of Russian society. This is not a criticism of the author's reporting; it is a structural observation about the limits of any social network as an epistemic base. The question of whether it is possible to produce a credible portrait of "good Russians" —those who oppose the regime—primarily through the experiences of oligarchs and public intellectuals is one the book does not fully confront. These reservations notwithstanding, the book succeeds on its own terms. It provides a detailed, empathetic, and carefully documented account of a specific and important phenomenon: the dispersal of Russia's professional and creative elite in the wake of the full-scale invasion. A more measured characterisation might be that this is an excellent account of how the war has changed the lives of Russia's most visible

and most networked citizens—which is not a small thing but is not quite the same as an account of how it has changed Russia.

Leaving Russia is a timely, readable, and well-sourced work that will reward readers seeking to understand the human dimensions of Russia's post-2022 fracture. Corcoran writes with evident sympathy for those who have been displaced or persecuted, and with admirable scepticism toward those who have sought to straddle incompatible worlds. His legal and institutional analysis is clear and accurate, and his individual portraits are among the more nuanced available in English-language non-fiction on the subject.

It is, however, a book about the Russian elite rather than about Russians. The suffering it documents is real, but it is the suffering of those who had the most to lose and the most resources to survive losing it. The book would have benefited from a more sustained engagement with the experiences of those who left Russia not with shares to sell or networks to mobilise, but with a suitcase and a one-way ticket to a country that may not have wanted them. Those Russians—unnamed, unknown to the Kremlin-watchers and financial journalists who populate Corcoran's source base—are also Russia's future, and their story remains largely untold.

Recommended to scholars of Russian elite politics, post-Soviet studies, authoritarianism, and emigration after 2022, as well as to general readers interested in a well-reported account of Russia's post-invasion diaspora. The necessary caveat is that the book's "Russia" is overwhelmingly elite. Its title suggests a broad account of national departure, but the narrative is dominated by oligarchs, financiers, cultural producers, opposition figures, and internationally mobile professionals. The result is not a sociology of the Russian exodus after 2022, but a well-reported account of how that exodus looked from its most privileged and visible edge.

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