

**I THINK, THEREFORE I IR (?!)**  
**SWITCHING BETWEEN THE BY-THE-BOOK AND THE**  
**CREATIVE UNDERSTANDING OF THE DISCIPLINE**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores in a narrative style the contrast between the discipline of International Relations (IR) as a textbook understanding and IR as a personally filtered, misused, abused, re-invented, exploited for personal comfort, taken *ad litteram* tapestry of concepts. As a field whose main subject matters are power struggles, war, and peace<sup>1</sup>, the outburst of the war in Ukraine catalysed this comfortably abstract landscape. The thesis thus explores what it beneath the abstract by depicting snippets of conversations I had with five of my IR classmates. By drawing on the resources of narrative and autoethnographic IR and taking the everyday as conceptual backbone of this writing project, the stories stand to show the various ways of thinking and feeling about our chosen field of study. The versions of micropolitics I discovered in my classmates' stories are not necessarily something we usually approach in the academic for a, but which build a more alive, less pretentious and thus surprising IR.

There might not be something intrinsically fascinating about theory. However, what people do with it, the hypothetical worlds they are building, the ones they are demolishing and the way they engage in these processes definitely is.

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<sup>1</sup> Arlene Tickner, 'Seeing IR Differently: Notes from the Third World', *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 32, no. 2 (June 2003): 299.

## Acknowledgments

If having multiple mental breakdowns was a job, I would not need to start worrying about getting one now that I am submitting my thesis. I stopped counting how many of them were – and the truth is, I really do not like measuring reality.

However, there are many people who made a job out of managing my crises. Whenever I would reach the bottom of my resources, they would

- untangle my ‘all-over-the-place’ thinking, put me on the right track, repeat as many times as needed what I should be looking at, read my long, full of emojis emails and remind me all the time why some people choose to become professors - *professor Merlingen, thank you!*
- encourage me to turn inwards, remind me about the most beautiful types of IR thinking I would not have discovered without her, taught me how to craft a type of academic writing which suits my thinking process. *Erzsébet, your (academic) presence is a breath of fresh air!*
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- sincerely believe that anything I could ever do in my life is nothing but brilliant - even if it is not. *Iustin, I love you! Never doubt your musical genius and do not forget to bring me flowers at graduation. :)*
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To my younger #high-achieving, #bombastically-ambitious, #in-the-middle-of-any-IR-event self who wanted to #change-the-world. Hashtag-the-perfect-neoliberal-subject. Please never return there.

To my future self who might be extremely ashamed of what I wrote in this thesis when so vehemently and passionately trying to go against the grain in this discipline.

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## Introduction or what, why & how I am writing what I am writing

In this discipline, there is sometimes a hyperbolic obligation ‘to explain what our perspectives can bring to the next stage of international relations theory’<sup>2</sup>, the ‘relevance’ and ‘contribution to the field’ boxes we must tick. Crises seem to be exacerbating this need, especially when the war in Ukraine fosters an ideal environment for IR’s ‘well-rehearsed debates about which theory is best suited’<sup>3</sup> to explain the hybris of violence patronising a global arena.

A short list of products put together by CEU’s Human Rights Initiative guards the entrance of the campus:

- Canned food
- pads, diapers, wipes
- products for babies
- sleeping bags and power banks
- big bottles of water
- emergency medical supplies
- seeds

It stands there to remind us about different types of commitments which do not require

**ex-pla-na-ti-ons.**

**Na-ti-ons.**

**Nations.**

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<sup>2</sup> Linklater as quoted by Mathias Albert, David Jacobsen, Yosef Lapid (eds.), *Identities, borders, orders: Rethinking International Relations*, (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> shine choi (she/her/hers), Natália Maria Félix de Souza (she/her/hers), Amy Lind (she/her/hers), Swati Parashar (she/her/hers), Elisabeth Prügl (she/her/hers) & Marysia Zalewski (they/them/theirs), ‘Questioning war’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 24, no.2: 194.

There is a war in Ukraine. There is another one in Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Yemen, and various other types of conflicts and political instability across the globe. For many reasons - that this thesis does not exclusively focus on – **only** the situation in Ukraine touched us profoundly. As a cohort, department, university. I could not initially see any other individual obligation in this field except for providing these tiny everyday objects that create micro bastions of resistance. Which prolong life instead of explaining it. There is no higher purpose in anything else when an everyday future is ‘a gymnast on a thin thread of the horizon/performing there at the highest pitch’<sup>4</sup>. From this perspective, IR is ‘an extreme manifestation of human tragedy’<sup>5</sup>.

However, as K mentioned, *we need to continue doing the stuff we are doing* because, as B came to add, *if we cannot do anything about it now, in 20-30 years, we could contribute to at least making these wars less frequent*. K and B, together with three others, are characters of my thesis based on (a) true story(s). They are the IR people I took as conversation partners who helped me extend my obligation beyond donations and protests and frame it in this thesis. When they talked, I listened completely<sup>6</sup>, following Hemingway’s advice. What I listened to completely I filtered through the intimacy of thinking which makes us all narratable<sup>7</sup> to some extent.

IR is a field whose main subject matters are power struggles, war, and peace<sup>8</sup>, three concepts impacting different people so differently, and at the same time, one which

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<sup>4</sup> Valzhyna Mort, ‘Belarusian I’, retrieved from <https://poets.org/poem/belarusian-i>, accessed June 2, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Griffiths, Worldviews and IR theory: Conquest or coexistence?, in *International Relations Theory for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Martin Griffiths (London: Routledge, 2007): 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Hemingway, ‘Monologue to the Maestro: A High Seas Letter’, *Esquire* (October 1935), retrieved from <https://dianedrake.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Hemingway-Monologue-to-the-Maestro1.pdf>, accessed June 1.

<sup>7</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, translated from Italian to English by PA Kottman (London & New York: Routledge, 2000): 36.

<sup>8</sup> Arlene Tickner, ‘Seeing IR Differently: Notes from the Third World’, *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 32, no. 2 (June 2003): 299.

*'finds problem, contorts problem into a paradox that then begs for a particular theoretical approach, sets up three schools of thought as literature review, introduces particular framework, applies methods, predictably solves problem'*<sup>9</sup>.

This thesis brings together my conversation partners and investigates what is generated at the everyday intersection of the discipline's subject matter and its various theoretical approaches. In this regard, I am assembling its backbone around the contrast between IR as a textbook understanding and IR as a personally filtered, misused, abused, re-invented, exploited for personal comfort, taken *ad litteram* tapestry of concepts. For me, there is nothing intrinsically fascinating with theory. However, what people do with it, the hypothetical worlds they are building, the ones they are demolishing and the way they engage in these processes is the real beauty of thinking which guides my research question. I am thus inquiring how IR students draw on the discipline of International Relations as a cognitive-emotional resource and how, in turn, this resource is misused, adjusted, given up on, reproduced in their everyday interpretation of the world. With war being the conceptual nucleus of the discipline, I am placing my creative exploration into an emotionally and intellectually diverse environment in which the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine is the catalyst that instantiated a myriad of snapshots. My thesis unpacks five of them in a plurality of many others. It is therefore building on how 'IR has begun to (re)discover the lives and people of global politics' by turning to 'micropolitics', that is, to 'those features of social life that often slip through our normal schematic or binary frameworks'<sup>10</sup>. The versions of micropolitics I discovered in my classmates are an unexplored potential of those

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<sup>9</sup> Narendran Kumarakulasingam, 'Stammers between silence and speech', in *Autobiographical International Relations. I, IR*, ed. Naem Inayatullah (London and New York: Routledge, 2011): 31.

<sup>10</sup> Ty Solomon and Brent J. Steele, 'Micro-moves in International Relations theory', *European Journal of International Relations* 23, no. 2 (2017): 270.



snippets of conversation taking place outside the academic fora that build a more alive, less pretentious and thus surprising IR.

**A different version of the discipline, which has more to do with the intimacy of lived experience and the individualised thinking process than to its by-the-book understanding.**

What I am doing is to assemble these over-the-academic-counter thoughts that are not usually paid attention to and take their rich diversity as a natural disciplinary status quo. For that, a particular ‘patient reading’ is needed ‘to make the text respond’<sup>11</sup> and engage the reader in an active process of building the imaginative in parallel with my own process of building the imaginative. This is not a work attempting to dive deeper into the theoretical minutiae purported by the numerous IR theories, but a reflection over Hulsse’s invitation to think of where my IR is coming from<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, the following pages are not a question of fidelity. I am not second-guessing **what** people are trying to communicate but discerning in the stories **how** the operation of the discipline takes place even in places where it may be hidden.

**IR can sometimes be much about the ‘what’ and less about the importance of ‘how’, with this constant pressure to explain everything so systematically that ‘nothing is left alive’<sup>13</sup>.**

The five snapshots representing the empirics of this thesis are thus a matter of possibility. They portray the personal, hypothetical, imaginative lives IR concepts and theories can take, with no imposed single interpretation. They delineate only its contours. In this case, to what extent IR students draw on IR – if they draw on it altogether – how they are doing it, why they are doing it,

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<sup>11</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Other Asias* (Malden, MA: Blackwell): 23.

<sup>12</sup> Rainer Hulsse, ‘I, the double soldier. An autobiographic case-study on the pitfalls of double citizenship’, in *Autobiographical International Relations: I, IR*, ed. Naeem Inayatullah (London and New York: Routledge, 2011): 56.

<sup>13</sup> Himadeep Muppidi, ‘On The Politics of Exile’, *Security Dialogue* 44, no. 4 (2013): 301.

for what purposes they are doing it in the wake of the war in Ukraine are framed as intellectual and emotional spaces we are coming from which tell stories. Their suggestive power is a self-reflection tool which I designed as a reminder of nuances, things that we take for granted, omit, disregard, belittle in our race for academic performance. From a disciplined discipline, when nobody sees it, an everyday understanding of IR can take an unruly turn away from what we usually preach. Crafting and dedicating more time to reflecting over our self-understanding will not reinvent the wheel in International Relations and definitely not save the world, as the majority of us used to believe. Nevertheless, it can make us settle more sincerely with ourselves, in ‘a shared, human, vulnerability, seeking out friendship and eschewing violent practices’<sup>14</sup>.

When a war breaks out people say: ‘It won’t last, it’s too stupid.’ And war is certainly too stupid, but that doesn’t prevent it from lasting.’<sup>15</sup> Or prevent people from studying it, from determining how many kilograms or tons of violence the world puts on from one day to another. War is also peopled<sup>16</sup>, and different people react differently to the same stimulus. Me, I decided to write about some of its angles. K, B, E, L, D, five other different people, thought, felt, did many other things. This thesis is about those things.

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<sup>14</sup> Catherine Lu, ‘Political friendship among peoples’. *Journal of International Political Theory* 5, no. 1: 42.

<sup>15</sup> Albert Camus, *The plague* (London: Penguin Classics, 2020): p. 2.

<sup>16</sup>Christine Sylvester, *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2013), 65.

# 1. For me, there is nothing intrinsically fascinating about theory.

## 1.1. Theoretical Framework

In 'The Sound of conversation', Sorayya Khan reflects on how graduate school 'connected the world for her' by linking indefinite contours to forms and structures<sup>17</sup>. This is the subtlety of theory which allows us to design our arguments in conversation with existing work and ideas<sup>18</sup>. The following section gives the form and structure of this thesis. In assembling it, I had in mind my research questions (*what?*), the milieu which allowed me to converse with my classmates (*where?*) and the style that enabled me to think and write about these things (*how?*). My theoretical framework is thus three-folded, with a brief overview of the concept of theories, the everyday in IR, the narrative turn in IR.

There is no such thing as an all-encompassing definition of theory in IR, especially when not even scholars can always agree on what they mean by theory<sup>19</sup>. All theoretical positions are founded upon distinct premises about ontology, epistemology, and methodology<sup>20</sup>. There is, nevertheless, a common element standing out across these heterogeneous interpretations: its ability to explain. Karl Popper views theories as 'nets cast to catch what we call *the world*'<sup>21</sup>. James Dougherty and Robert Pfaltzgraff point to their abilities to connect phenomena in a 'meaningful,

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<sup>17</sup> Sorayya Khan, 'The sound of conversation', in *Autobiographical International Relations. I, IR*, ed. Naeem Inayatullah, (London and New York: Routledge, 2011): 191.

<sup>18</sup> Meera Sabaratnam, 'IR in Dialogue ... but Can We Change the Subjects? A Typology of Decolonising Strategies for the Study of World Politics', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 39, no. 3: 781.

<sup>19</sup> Felix Berenskötter, 'Deep Theorising in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 4 (2018): 815.

<sup>20</sup> Tim Dunne, Kurki Milja, Smith Steve, *IR theories- discipline and diversity - 4 edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1959): 59.

intelligent pattern'<sup>22</sup>. There are 'problem-solving' and 'critical theories'<sup>23</sup>, normative, constitutive and theories as a lens<sup>24</sup>. In a nutshell, theories are supposed to be 'singing our world into existence'<sup>25</sup> by offering various accounts of how and why things happen, guiding 'thoughts and actions with the intent of improving our lives'<sup>26</sup>. In IR, they are easily recognisable by their 'isms' that have marked the discipline with the so-called 'Great Debates' of IR<sup>27</sup>. Some regret this theoretical proliferation and the disappearance of 'a discrete field of inquiry'<sup>28</sup>. For others, it is an opportunity to pierce through them more poignantly to discover that they are based on 'IR myths'<sup>29</sup>, on what we are so used to hearing in the discipline so frequently that we end up taking as undisputable truth. Building theories is nevertheless based on an abstraction process<sup>30</sup> usually considered a type of higher-order thinking which requires additional intellectual resources. From these perspectives, theory is not usually understood as a 'location for healing'<sup>31</sup>, and even less so in times of a war which unveils a theoretical competition most of the time disconnected from

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<sup>22</sup> James E. Dougherty and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, *Contending Theories of International Relations: A Comprehensive Survey* (New York: Longman, 1997): 4.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Cox, 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 10, no. 2 (1981). In this famous article which came to organise theory in IR, Cox regards a problem-solving theory as that which 'takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for action. The general aim of problem-solving is to make these relationships and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble' (p. 128-129). In contrast, 'critical theory allows for a normative choice in favour of a social and political order different from the prevailing order, but it limits the range of choice to alternative orders which are feasible transformations of the existing world' (p. 130).

<sup>24</sup> Tim Dunne, Lene Hansen, Colin Wight, 'The end of International Relations theory?', *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2013).

<sup>25</sup> Steve Smith S, 'Singing our world into existence: International Relations theory and September 11', *International Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (2004): 499-516.

<sup>26</sup> Felix Berensköter, 'Deep Theorising in International Relations', 817.

<sup>27</sup> Out of structural limitations, I stop at only enumerating what is usually considered as the 4 'Great Debates' of IR: Realism/Liberalism, Traditionalism/Behaviouralism, Neorealism/Neoliberalism, Rationalism/Reflectivism.

<sup>28</sup> Adam Jones, 'Interview with Kal Holsti', *Review of International Studies* 28 (2002): 621-623.

<sup>29</sup> Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Third Edition (New York: Routledge, 2010): 2.

<sup>30</sup> Sara C. Motta, 'Pedagogies of Possibility: In, against, beyond the Imperial Patriarchal Subjectivities of Higher Education', in *Acts of Knowing: Critical Pedagogy In, Against and Beyond the University* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013): p. 213.5.

<sup>31</sup> bell hooks, 'Theory as Liberatory Practice', in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 59.

reality. February 24 seemed to have been taken by many IR scholars as a good moment for social media debates on the various degrees of being wrong about artificial IR forecasts of the war, or, on the contrary, who won the war of prediction<sup>32</sup>. In this field, we are usually misled by the fact that ideas matter, but the way in which they matter varies considerably<sup>33</sup>.

However, when taken as an ‘ensemble of stories’<sup>34</sup> about the world of international politics, IR theories delineate a life of their own where paradigms and concepts take a different meaning, are misused, or borrow cognitive and emotional elements outside of the disciplinary realm. They do not necessarily have a by-the-book understanding anymore when drawing on the alternative resources in the everyday eye, mind, and soul of their intellectual beholder. While we are mainly preoccupied with it on a daily basis, the everyday in IR is generally deemed as ‘the familiar, taken-for-granted, common sense and trivial – in short, the unnoticed’<sup>35</sup> not necessarily holding scientific weight. Nevertheless, it decentralises the meaning(s) the ‘international’ conventionally carries<sup>36</sup>, and thus epistemologically diversifies a field based on diversity of all sorts. The study of the everyday has been sparked by IR feminists who have been systematically consolidating on the personal – the political – the international axis. More specifically, this theoretical strain brings specific political agents – be them shop assistants, marginalised individuals, scholars or, like in my case, students – under the analytical lenses of the international and unveils how their quotidian

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<sup>32</sup> While I am mainly referring here to my own social media bubble of IR people, there is a number of famous articles which have been circulating since February 24. See Stephen M. Walt, <https://archive.ph/q6a5f>, Isaac Chotiner, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/why-john-mearsheimer-blames-the-us-for-the-crisis-in-ukraine>, David Remnick, <https://www.newyorker.com/podcast/politics-and-more/stephen-kotkin-dont-blame-the-west-for-russias-invasion-of-ukraine>.

<sup>33</sup> Liam Stanley, Richard Jackson, ‘Introduction: Everyday narratives in world politics’, *Politics* 36, no. 3: 224.

<sup>34</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London: Hutchinson, 1975): 448.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Hviid Jacobsen, ‘Introduction: The Everyday: An Introduction to an Introduction’, in Michael Hviid Jacobsen, ed., *Encountering the Everyday: An Introduction to the Sociologies of the Unnoticed*, 1–41 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 2.

<sup>36</sup> Annika Björkdahl, Martin Hall and Ted Svensson, ‘Everyday International Relations: Editors’ Introduction’, *Cooperation and Conflict* 54, no. 2 (2019): 124.

practices have a direct link with the international.<sup>37</sup> Despite being depicted as a residual category which does not easily lend itself to rational categorisations<sup>38</sup>, the everyday, as theoretical direction, can bridge the gap between what Wanda Vradi calls the ‘reality out there’ and the theories ‘in here’<sup>39</sup>. Similarly, the everyday is for Acuto a ‘critical layer for the spatiality of ‘ir’ (practice) and IR (theory)’<sup>40</sup> which, if patiently unpacked, can transform what is unseen, unheard of, unfelt into valuable academic material. In this way, the everyday has the potential to capture stories depicted as ‘several, probably an infinite number of various orders of realities, each with its own special and separate style of existence’<sup>41</sup>.

As a ‘field of differences’<sup>42</sup> and constant changes, IR has a specific ‘felt-fact aliveness’<sup>43</sup> hidden in stories with origins in the everyday that contribute to the way in which the international is built<sup>44</sup>. Storytelling, or the ‘social practice that renders the world more intelligible’<sup>45</sup>, helps consolidate what came to be known as IR’s narrative turn, thus ‘putting the multilayeredness of life back into science’<sup>46</sup>. Empowered in this way to be more self-reflective, the ‘discipline of the discipline’<sup>47</sup> takes a life of its own.

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<sup>37</sup> Xavier Guillaume and Jef Huysmans, ‘The concept of ‘the everyday’: Ephemeral politics and the abundance of life’, 284-285.

<sup>38</sup> Mike Featherstone, ‘The Heroic Life and Everyday Life’, *Theory, Culture, Society* 8 (1992): 160.

<sup>39</sup> Wanda Vradi, ‘Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying about Methodology and Love Writing’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 39, no. 1 (2010): 85.

<sup>40</sup> Michele Acuto, ‘Everyday International Relations: Garbage, Grand Designs, and Mundane Matters’, *International Political Sociology* 8 (2014): 346.

<sup>41</sup> Alfred Schuetz, ‘On Multiple Realities’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 5, no. 4: 533.

<sup>42</sup> Christine Sylvester as quoted by Paulo Ravecca and Elizabeth Dauphinee, ‘Narrative and the possibilities for scholarship’, *International Political Sociology* 12 (2018): 125.

<sup>43</sup> Megan Daigle, ‘Writing the Lives of Others: Storytelling and International Politics’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 45, no. 1 (2016): 27.

<sup>44</sup> Xavier Guillaume and Jef Huysmans, ‘The concept of ‘the everyday’: Ephemeral politics and the abundance of life’, 287.

<sup>45</sup> Hidemi Suganami, ‘Narrative explanation and international relations: Back to basics’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 37, no. 2 (2008): 339.

<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Dauphinee, ‘Narrative and the Possibilities for Scholarship’, 126.

<sup>47</sup> Roxanne Lynn Doty, ‘Maladies of our souls: identity and voice in the writing of academic international relations’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (2004): 380.

From a theoretical perspective, the narrative style in IR is usually associated with a postmodern interpretation of stories as constructions of lives, identities and experiences that contribute to the creation of the subjectivity of individuals themselves<sup>48</sup>. Narrative writing's pillars, description and lived experience, are sources in their own right<sup>49</sup>. As such, narrative writing is always an open invitation to pluralism and diversity, even if IR theories are there to sometimes impose the way in which reality looks like.<sup>50</sup> Being able to acknowledge contradiction and ambiguity as primordial elements of our socio-political life<sup>51</sup>, the narrative style challenges the 'fictions' of academic truth<sup>52</sup> and dismantles what Dauphinee and Ravecca label as 'fortress writing'<sup>53</sup>, the standard expression of the academic self which is impervious to vulnerability. This type of writing is a mark of autoethnography in International Relations, thus being an invitation to IR people, students and scholars alike, to bring forward the emotional dimension of the stories informing the everyday sites in IR<sup>54</sup>. I have therefore chosen autoethnography as cohesive force connecting IR theory, the everyday and storytelling. Narrating the self in this discipline is a bone of contention in an intellectual space conventionally sanitised, in which particular 'maladies' of 'the soul'<sup>55</sup> exist, where the academic self is paradoxically present through its absence<sup>56</sup>. However, it has its valuable merits which I am proceeding to explore.

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<sup>48</sup> Geoffrey Roberts, 'History, Theory and the narrative turn in IR', *Review of International Studies* 32 (2006): 710.

<sup>49</sup> Megan Daigle, 'Writing the Lives of Others: Storytelling and International Politics', 33.

<sup>50</sup> Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Dauphinee and Paulo Ravecca, 'Narrative and the Possibilities for Scholarship', *International Political Sociology* 12 (2018): 126.

<sup>52</sup> Jonata da S.C. de Oliveira, 'Narrative and Critical Imaginations in IR', *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations* 20, no.1 (2020): 136.

<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Dauphinee and Paulo Ravecca, 'Narrative and the Possibilities for Scholarship', 127.

<sup>54</sup> Amanda Russell Beattie, 'The reflexive potential of silence: Emotions, the 'everyday' and ethical international relations', *Journal of International Political Theory* 15, no. 2 (2019): 231.

<sup>55</sup> Roxanne Lynn Doty, 'Maladies of our souls: identity and voice in the writing of academic international relations'

<sup>56</sup> Roxanne Lynn Doty, 'Autoethnography – Making Human Connection', *Review of International Studies*, 36, no. 4 (2010): 1048.

## 1.2. Methodology and ethical considerations

For the last two years at CEU, I have been trying to discover how to dig in the unexplored potential of all those conversations we, IR students, have outside of classes, during parties, Covid-dinners, long walks, lunch breaks, overpriced Viennese coffees. I have started to learn how to properly listen to my peers' contributions and pay even more attention than before to the way in which 'brains learn from other brains, and how listening well is the simplest way to draw a thread, open a channel'<sup>57</sup>. Since my natural thinking process often has a narrative tempo, I would naturally wrap what I would listen to in the framework of a story where I am questioning my own identity - and we should never forget that this is what we do, tell stories.'<sup>58</sup> In this regard, as a method, 'autoethnography is both process and product.'<sup>59</sup>

Methodologically, besides storytelling which can be considered as method 'for empirical (but theoretically informed) social and political research in the field'<sup>60</sup>, I have been searching for an additional one that would allow me to finely illustrate the fluidity of thinking, its spontaneity and sincerity. The historiography of IR does not account for various forms the mundane can take, such as conversations<sup>61</sup>. However, the closest scientific, qualitative approach is via conversational interviews which facilitate the creation of a less hierarchical environment between the researcher and the interviewee(s) who are not bound by a rigid set of questions. One of their prerequisites is the existence of a specific level of familiarity between the two participants of the conversation. The

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<sup>57</sup> Matt Owen, 'The Art of Listening', *aeon*, retrieved from <https://aeon.co/essays/the-psychologist-carl-rogers-and-the-art-of-active-listening>, accessed May 31, 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Roxanne Lynn Doty, 'Maladies of Our Souls: Identity and Voice in the Writing of Academic International Relations', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (2004): 387–88.

<sup>59</sup> Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams and Arthur P. Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An overview', *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 36, no. 4 (2011): 273.

<sup>60</sup> Megan Daigle, 'Writing the Lives of Others: Storytelling and International Politics', 29.

<sup>61</sup> Oliver Kessler and Xavier Guillaume, 'Everyday practices of international relations: people in organisations', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 15, no. 1 (2012): 117.



content and sequence of the questions are mostly built in rapport to the subject's contribution<sup>62</sup>, rendering this process similar to a rather mundane conversation than to a conventional IR research atmosphere.

In this regard, I have chosen five classmates whose reactions to the outbreak of the war painted a fascinatingly contrasting picture. Interested more in recognising in writing the 'fullness and pluripotency of human experience and capabilities'<sup>63</sup> than in building a representative sample, I did not extend the number of conversations, but rather settled for analysing them in-depth. The word limit also played a role in this choice. Three of the following snapshots draw lavishly on many other conversations we had outside of the 'thesis conversation', while the other two focus on the content of one individual conversation. Four of them were face-to-face conversations, and only one took place via Zoom. In conducting these conversations, I attempted to follow the well-established principles of procedural ethics<sup>64</sup>, making sure my classmates understood what our dialogue would entail, their rights to privacy, as well as ensuring the destruction of the recordings of our discussions. I have tried to abide by the anonymity principle as much as possible and portray my classmates independently from their real names - which I replaced with random letters from the alphabet - gender, age, nationality. Nevertheless, in two of them the national element is pervasive, but this received my classmates' consent.

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<sup>62</sup> Lisa M. Given, 'Conversational Interviewing', in 'The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methods', ed. Lisa M. Given (Thousand Oaks, SAGE Publications, Inc.): 3.

<sup>63</sup> Elina Penttinen, 'Introduction' in *Joy and International Relations: a new methodology* (London: Routledge, 2021): 4.

<sup>64</sup> Marilys Guillemain and Lynn Gillam as quoted by Carolyn Ellis, 'Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research With Intimate Others', *Qualitative Inquiry* 13, no. 1 (2007): 4.

Hutchings talks of a type of normative thinking built on universal reason rather than anything else outside of its realm, consolidating on a so-called ‘invulnerable judgement’<sup>65</sup> which takes for granted a certain moral imaginary<sup>66</sup>. However, the act of ‘them talking, me listening completely’ I mentioned in the introduction involved a chosen relational ethics as an act ‘from my heart and mind’ which involves the acknowledgment of my personal bonds with my conversation partners<sup>67</sup>. In this regard, this project has been written from a place which does not bury the author<sup>68</sup>. On the contrary, the ‘I in IR’<sup>69</sup> pervasively present across the pages of this thesis stand to highlight my biases, personal and theoretical affinities which transpire to some extent in my assembled snapshots. The prefix ‘auto’ is, as Tolich highlights, a ‘misnomer’<sup>70</sup> since ‘the self is porous, leaking to the other without due ethical consideration’<sup>71</sup>

**Most importantly to touch upon in this section, this thesis tangentially mentioning the war in Ukraine does not have a Ukrainian voice.**

This dissertation, however, is not an investigation of the war itself which does not fit my own type of IR abilities. As a matter of fact, I disappointed all my non-IR friends with my claims about the impossibility of a war in Ukraine before February 24. This probably stands to show that my foreign policy skills cannot be trusted. Nevertheless, what my IR sensitivity did in this process was to hinder me from approaching the only IR Ukrainian classmate out of respect for their bleeding trauma. A certain level of familiarity is instrumental in conducting conversational

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<sup>65</sup> Kimberley Hutchings, ‘A place of greater safety? Securing judgement in international ethics’, in Beattie A and Schick K (eds), *The Vulnerable Subject: Beyond Rationalism in International Relations* (London: Springer, 2014): 26-27.

<sup>66</sup> Kimberley Hutchings, ‘A place of greater safety? Securing judgement in international ethics’: 37.

<sup>67</sup> Bergum, Slattey & Rapp as quoted by Carolyn Ellis, ‘Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research With Intimate Others’

<sup>68</sup> Sarah Naumes, ‘Is all ‘I’ in IR?’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43, no. 3 (2015): 827.

<sup>69</sup> Oded Lowenheim, ‘The I in IR: an autoethnographic account’, *Review of International Studies* 36 (2010).

<sup>70</sup> Martin Tolich, ‘A Critique of Current Practice: Ten Foundational Guidelines for Autoethnographers’, *Qualitative Health Research* 20, no. 12 (2010): 1608.

<sup>71</sup> *Idem*

interviews. Me, not being a close friend to this person, would have simply meant outsourcing lived experience for the purpose of my theoretical chimeras written from a very comfortable shelter of the neoliberal academia. Is not there already enough intrusive media content in the trauma of this people? Therefore, this is one of my ethical choices and not a form of taking sides in the conflict. In addition, irrespective of my sincere, empathetic listening, I do not consider myself yet equipped to approach this type of trauma without a solid psycho-social training.

Therefore, I am extremely grateful to my friends who trusted me that much to share their own types of trauma with me.

## 2. However, what people do with theory is.

which very often unfolds outside of the ‘mechanical task’<sup>72</sup> of the discipline. These are several snapshots of my non-mechanical.

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<sup>72</sup> Narendran Kumarakulasingam, ‘Stammers between silence and speech’, in *Autobiographical International Relations. I, IR*: 31.

## 2.1 A discipline as a promise for (a) future

Every time I would see a plane on the sky, I would always sing ‘Avion cu motor, ia-mă și pe mine-n zbor<sup>73</sup>’.

When one, two, three, four! military planes flying close to the soil crossed over our heads, I was under my childhood spell. B<sup>74</sup>, on the other hand, was shaking in a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. That was not what Wordsworth calls poetry, but trauma triggered by\_

*...the sound of the Russian planes flying over my head while I was preparing my reading on Russian peacekeeping for my International Intervention class.*

When asked about how he described the experience of the World War I to his family, poet Robert Graves replied:

**‘You cannot communicate noise.’<sup>75</sup>**

especially when Vienna is sunny. And peaceful as always. And devoid of cracks. Too peaceful and too devoid of cracks that it does not allow the noise to enter.

However, stories, says Richa Nagar, have the power to share<sup>4</sup>, the ability to communicate what it uncommunicable and the substance to absorb what is usually omitted in the communicable.

This is the uncommunicable:

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<sup>73</sup> An imprecise translation of this song which rhymes in Romanian is: ‘Plane with an engine/Take me with you on your flight’

<sup>74</sup> In order to keep their anonymity confidential, I allocated random letters to each of the five classmates I have talked to.

<sup>75</sup> Nora Lambrecht, ‘But If You Listen You Can Hear: War Experience, Modernist Noise, and the Soundscape of The Forbidden Zone’, *M/m* 2, no. 1 (Mar 8, 2017), retrieved from <https://modernismmodernity.org/articles/war-experience-modernist-noise>, accessed May 7, 2022.

*For many of my CEU friends, the conflict in Ukraine started in February 2022. For me, in September 2020. Back then, I began my classes on the exact same day when the war in my own country started. How can I study IR now when there is a war happening in my own country, but I cannot do anything about it? I can **\*definitely\* analyse**, but what else? What can I do?*

*After the class ended, I started browsing through my messages to find out that my friend's boyfriend passed away on the frontline. On the next day, I joined classes again. This is when I realised I should not approach IR as a discipline, but as a tool for understanding things.*

*Understanding is more of **a self-help tool** which we use in this field when we try to figure out what is happening while we are not the ones who make it happen.*

*I chose IR for a reason, and not because I wanted to go to that room full of flags, wear pretty clothes while shaking hands and, in the end, get lots of money. Equally, who cares about realism or liberalism or any other theory? No one, so the reason has been my will to understand. This has taken many forms.*

*War, for example. It is such a shame I will be soon graduating with a degree in International Relations, but I do not know what war is. And somehow, I have zero interest in finding its academic definition.*

Maybe, I am thinking, because it is difficult to translate war experience into war knowledge<sup>76</sup>. But B immediately continues:

***Wars are clashes of perceptions of the self, of the other, of reality. When angles do not coincide, wars happen. Probably...***

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<sup>76</sup> Christine Sylvester, 'Experiencing war: a challenge for international relations', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26 (4), pp. 669-674.

*Even if their essence is the same - people suffer, become refugees, die - wars are not the same because they are interpreted differently by different actors. CEU, for instance, sent us an email **only** about the situation in Ukraine. I was very happy to see that they were finally taking some action for someone. I was at the same time so mad because no one addressed it when a war was happening in my country. Many of my friends were telling me that they found it hard to focus, they could not do anything, they were feeling the war. At some point I was like: 'this happened to me as well, but none of my colleagues would say they cannot focus because there was a war in my country'. Geopolitics is not a given, but what you are making of it, right? I could not be next to them because I had my own trauma that I needed to process, and I was feeling guilty for that.*

***My MA in IR started with a war and is ending with a war.***

*'Good, you now have a portrayal of social constructivism with me', B said after we finished our conversation. And indeed, there are many ideational factors pointing to this theoretical direction: identity, perceptions, circular trauma leading to a social construction of meaning. Nevertheless, who cares about theories?*

What they say is not valuable because they tick the theoretical apparent, but due to what is pulsating, frozen, tearful underneath. It is fascinating to witness that some individuals build cooperation with the abstract, take its concepts as support despite their limitations, harmonise its elusiveness with an everyday concrete. B puts parts of themselves into this discipline, their existential loneliness and abandonment in front of violence, disappointment, occasional anger, and regenerative pieces of self. In return, the discipline endows B with those resources which counter, use, transform loneliness and abandonment, disappointment, occasional anger into even

stronger regenerative pieces of self. In B's words, *IR is not the root of my war. If I drop IR, the war will not stop.*

This is why B has the ability to do something which might be interpreted as an academic misuse of realism's conceptual DNA. Self-help is not a rigid, cold, ubiquitous existential state which waits for a Godot while lamenting his absence, but a resilient coping mechanism originating in and yet departing from the discipline. The university and department B studies about war in left them in a self-help state. The international organisations and their role in managing the conflict, something B wrote their bachelor's thesis on, hollowed out the foundations of cooperation and peacekeeping and put in place a self-help system. In their own mental hierarchisation of suffering, classmates turned friendship into a zero-sum game and never felt B's war. Yet, the self-help B talks about is a resilient, selfless, peaceful new concept which

*makes me realise that since I cannot change anything now, maybe in 20 years if I try my best to understand things, I can do a tiny little thing that would make these wars less intense, less frequent or at least different. Like a positive impact.*

What is out there in this discipline which transforms the *who-cares-about-these-theories*, the not-speaking-back into an alive spectacle of hope, of giving-something-back, of promise?



## 2.2. A discipline as a mirror (stage)

But before digging into the alive spectacle of hope, of giving-something-back, of promise, there are layers and layers of raw theory picturing a world which has its separate, immaterial life, on paper only. When the immaterial coincides with the physical,

*I am trying to emotionally disconnect to a certain extent. This reality is like a video game, and you are like 'this is not real, it cannot be'.*

D is a bit nervous, and these completely white walls of our Meeting Rooms on campus are nothing but comforting, I know. They remind me of Robert Rauschenberg's 'White Painting'<sup>77</sup> and Cage's statement about it:

'To Whom / No subject / No image / No taste / No object / No beauty / No message / No talent / No technique (no why) / No idea / No intention / No art / No object / No feeling / No black / No white (no and)',<sup>78</sup>

Does the physical come from the immaterial and if yes, what does it carry?

### **The expectation.**

*There is the expectation that I should be now crying, I should be doing everything I can for those people that are suffering in this situation. I was feeling guilty because I was not living up to this, and my reaction could be easily interpreted like indifference. I was afraid of being perceived like that. You do not want to be perceived as someone who does not care about the suffering of thousands, right?*

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<sup>77</sup> Robert Rauschenberg created five 'White Paintings' in 1951, trying to give the impression they were not touched by human hands: <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/98.308.A-C/>.

<sup>78</sup> Printed as addendum by Emily Genauer, 'Art and Artists: Musings on Miscellany', *New York Herald Tribune*, December 27, 1953.

Being perceived by whom? I ask.

***By people like you, people from our department that are very strongly reacting to it.***

My imposter syndrome kicks in, something I have been working on as potential dissertation for a while. Writing a thesis tangentially connected to a yet another human catastrophe and its impact on several people who study it can be ‘potentially interesting’, ‘insightful’, ‘opportunistic’, ‘not proper IR’, but definitely not strong. Strong would be us having any idea about how to reduce this human catastrophe.

*What is happening in Ukraine has a different dimension by the extent of violence deployed in a short period of time. This is a huge war that challenges the global world order. I still believe there is a difference between potentially millions of people dying and only a few thousands. You may call it utilitarian – which I certainly do, irrespective of my efforts to hide it - but there is a difference for me in terms of feeling responsible. Or I would not call it ‘responsibility’, but rather a feeling that this is something which deserves the attention of everyone.*

‘War is sustained combat, involving organized armed forces, resulting in a minimum of 1000 battle-related fatalities within a 12-month period.’<sup>79</sup>

*War is organised violence in the international realm which has no higher authority that can prevent it from happening. There are norms present, but at the end of the day, they have no physicality. States are also immaterial, but at least they have a clearly defined authority, the executive force, there are a police and army standing.*

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<sup>79</sup> Sarkees and Wayman as cited by Anthony Lopez and Dominic Johnson, ‘The determinants of war in International Relations’, *Journal of Economic Behaviour & Organisation* 178 (2020): 984.

*I do not expect IR to help people in Ukraine with their suffering. In general, the purpose of science is not to help anyone. The people in Ukraine right now probably could not care less about IR. They talk about it every day when they discuss how Russia and Ukraine interact on the ground, the move of troops or refugees going to other countries. But there is an intrinsic value in knowledge. This may lead you to some major breakthroughs, understandings, or creativity. It is not very clear what this is leading to, but in the long run, it may help humanity. There are many useless jobs, too, but this field at least brings humanity forward in some way. These frameworks of thought give some structure to how practitioners implement policies. Take the example of realism. I am not a huge fan, but it is a pattern and structure of thinking that people learn, not only in one country, but everywhere. This gives predictability. In addition, research has a direct impact on how certain policies, for instance migration in the Schengen area, should take into account.*

*By the way others behave, there is an intersubjective understanding that makes me interact more smoothly with another person because we depict the world in a similar way. Even if I disagree with that person, I have some kind of common language. IR gives us at least a common language and common understanding about how the world works, and these may help you land a job or just understand the world better and be the star at the dinner party where you explain to your friends what is happening in Ukraine because the other person may have zero knowledge about it. If you understand each other better, you are less likely to kill each other. At least, for me, the objective is to decrease violence and prevent war.*

Does the physical come from the immaterial and if yes, what does it carry?

### **Pressure for recognition.**

In 'The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers', Michelle Murray writes that to overcome social uncertainty engendered by anarchy, states

base their forming identity in material practices, which, in turn, mirror back to the state the identity it seeks<sup>80</sup>. Alexander Wendt has been extensively researching on the states' struggle for recognition in their quest to become members of the international society<sup>81</sup>.

### **Does this come from the individuals' need to be recognised or vice-versa?**

Recognition started with a mirror, and we set up as mirrors, as imaginary orders, various types of 'physical' and 'immaterial'. Our discipline, equipped with all its conceptual tools and theoretical frameworks, becomes a mirror which offers an idealised image of the self, something Lacan calls the 'Ideal-I' or the 'Ideal ego'<sup>82</sup>. All IR norms related to *doing everything one can for the people who are suffering* create a dual relationship between the Imaginary and the Real, the self-identification with the Imaginary, and still a separation from the Imaginary fraught with anxiety, with tension, with pressure. My conversation with D reminded me of the Mirror Stage that might be quite emblematic for a field which marketizes itself as a Promised Land:

‘When you picture yourself five years from now, are you leading diplomatic negotiations, developing foreign policy, or tackling global crises? If you said yes to any of those, a Master of International Relations may be for you.’<sup>83</sup>

IR seems to be hiding the desired ‘whole identity’ in *frameworks of thought, jobs, parties* where the subject *becomes the star*, the Ideal-I, *major breakthroughs, understandings, creativity*. Their real integration takes place in the Symbolic field, the field of *common language* which makes

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<sup>80</sup> Michelle Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers* (University Press Scholarship Online: Oxford Scholarship Online, April 2019): 7.

<sup>81</sup> Alexander Wendt, ‘Why a World State is Inevitable’, *European Journal of International Relations* 9, no. 4 (December 2003): 511.

<sup>82</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1977): 1-3 and 171-175.

<sup>83</sup> The University of Western Australia, ‘Changing the World Through International Relations’, retrieved from <https://www.uwa.edu.au/seek-wisdom/seekers-space/study-area/humanities-and-social-sciences/changing-the-world-through-international-relations>, accessed April 31.

us *less likely to kill each other*. The I is never its ideal form, but rather in a state of mimicry, ‘almost the same but not quite’<sup>84</sup>. Exactly like this discipline: *bringing humanity forward* but not quite.

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<sup>84</sup> Homi Bhabha, ‘Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse’, *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis* 28 (1984): 126.

### 2.3. A discipline as courage

‘But not quite’ cannot possibly apply when

*They are chanting ‘Heroes don’t die!’, ‘Glory to Ukraine!’, ‘Russians, go and f\* yourselves!’*

E<sup>85</sup> stops for a moment.

*And ‘Death to the enemy!’*

The sky was weirdly red on that evening in Heldenplatz, and this does not happen too frequently in Vienna. It was bleeding for so many reasons.

*Going to protests was crippling to my identity. A protest is a place of very strong hate towards someone or something. I did feel as if I was the object of that strong hate. I did not want anyone around me to know I was Russian. Maybe theoretically I could choose to be someone else. But no, I cannot. With this war also came my own realisation that Russia is an endless cycle of trauma that is just carried through history, a country with – my God – a particularly bloody history.*

*But what is this war? I have not opened Foreign Affairs in a while - thank God! - but I might guess that the liberal world order is under threat right now! I think it has been sort of crashing down or something for a long time already according to Foreign Affairs.*

We laugh. There is something risible in the way in which these tenets of IR, such as orders, grandiosely inflate, taking too much space of our worldviews.

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<sup>85</sup> In order to keep their anonymity confidential, I allocated random letters to each of the five classmates I have talked to.

*For IR, war is something unsettling to these rigid divisions of the world and nations. War unsettles this global vision of how nations function, how they interact with each other. In the real world, war is so many other things. You must leave your home, become a refugee. It is the sound of airstrikes, jets, bombs going off. I do not think anyone who is now taking decisions that affect hundreds of thousands of people understands why wars happen.*

*Right when the war started, I did not process it through the disciplinary lens. The emotions were too much. Today, the concepts do not work. Mainstream IR seems to be building its own world that has nothing to do with the real world. The theories of social sciences, more broadly, and IR, more specifically, just put people in that very comfortable 'we are analysing, we are doing something' position. But do you, eventually? My frustrations with IR began much earlier than the war, especially when I started approaching other types of writing that discuss certain international issues. IR has the role of painting a very complex picture, but still for a very closed circle of people.*

*What pulled me closer to the edge was the arguments revolving around the war I would have with my family. IR put me so much further away from them because I was still on a much more advanced level of understanding than they had been. I could distinguish the sources I can trust from those that cannot be trusted. My family could not see the differences, and irrespective of how much I am trying to show them that what is happening is wrong, I am not receiving any understanding. What I also heard from them was that they wanted me to do something peaceful with my life. I am a student and I just study and then I would get a response with well, you know what I mean, right? No, no, no, no international relations, politics. I don't want you to do that. That is what generates fear for them.*

You can tell E is a future journalist by the way they craft multiple meaning-carrying words. I have read our conversation at least 50 times before (my extended) submission and in no moment have I had the impression I was in front of *Foreign Affairs* or *Foreign Policy*, those publications both of us were dreaming of publishing in during our BAs. However, I still knew I was talking to an IR person, for whom this discipline is a helper, utter irrelevance, enemy, pain, resource for self-reinvention, all at the same time. IR is full of *nation states* and *global orders*, these blocks of abstract, as E put it, that do not leave room for a healthy emotional processing. These concepts trigger pain mainly because *they paint a clear picture of the world*, when, in fact, the world is anything other than clear. There is a tension between these *fantasies of IR* gravitating out there, in some lofty universes, and the immediate ones, the inner, concrete flow of emotions and needs. The discipline's conceptual paraphernalia and the way in which E, an IR student, processes the IR event - the war - are mutually exclusive.

When I asked them about what IR is, E did not know how to approach this question. Interactions of any type are replete with contradictions. I look at E and understand this discipline does not offer them the tools to harmonise them. IR is an epistemologically abundant field, an excellent cognitive resource providing a wide spectrum of pieces of reality. My friend thus knows what is *real* and what is *fictitious* on the international arena: a violent Russian Federation, the place they are coming from, is real, with all its putrid forms of exerting death on the Ukrainian people. In front of Europe's New Wall, E is on its righteous side because they know where to read from, how to read it, and why there is a need, in the first place, to know what is going on. At the same time, these IR-imbued intellectual abilities are alienating, divisive, themselves violent for her everyday nucleus, for her family. Understanding concepts such as states, identities, global orders, IR theories, even if they are rife with shortcomings, liberates. And still, they close some doors.



We will not be able to solve the conflicts of the international arena, to counter its expected and unexpected waves of violence until we properly investigate our everyday wars. For many of us, family members are sovereigns who biopoliticise emotions, who shift borders by flaunting their power, who compete for supremacy in an anarchical state of affairs where no one comes to intervene. Families are under the reign of what Svetlana Alexievich calls a ‘doctrine of fear’<sup>86</sup>, a paralysis of the social fabric which inhibits, separates, atomises. However, to transgress fear is an act of courage. It is to bring resources, contradictions, tensions, alienations, clashes, of both cognitive and emotional natures, accumulated in the discipline, in the everyday life, in love, in hate to the front, and make something new with them. E will become a journalist in the following two years if they are not already one. And, in their path to another professional specialisation, E uses *the IR baggage of knowledge which will stay with them forever* to do something even more important: break the cycle of historical trauma.

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<sup>86</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, *Second Hand Time* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2017): 131.

## 2.4. A discipline as productive escape

Collective trauma is what we experienced on the night of Vienna's terrorist attack. K and I were together in Reumannplatz. That was my first profound clash with the things 'that can happen only in the West', as my parents deplored on the phone. We left the library a bit earlier, already too tired by the beginning of our first November at CEU. The last thing I remember from that conversation is our contrasting visions over how much we should generally be working for achieving our #goals. K says:

*I always like to quote what one close family member says: 'Never forget that a day has 24 hours'.*

One year later, the war in Ukraine breaks out. How many hours does a day have when time seems to not have patience with its seconds?

*When the war broke out, it was so emotionally overwhelming that the only thing I wanted to do was to create safe spaces around me. I am not letting myself being completely off track, I give myself time, I try to understand my own feelings and emotions. But I think one should concentrate even harder to keep doing the stuff that that they are doing when there is a crisis out there.*

*However, I did not develop any war immunity. Let me turn to one of the big dilemmas in IR. Who is more important on the international arena: the agent or the structure? I personally consider both of equal importance since they are mutually influencing each other. So, it is not immunity to war, but certainly some kind of acceptance that I cannot influence the outcomes of the war. However, the personal responsibility of one individual – in this case, Putin - is enormous. I am not going to abandon theories. I do not feel betrayed by the discipline, because the discipline*

*is there only to explain. Academia is less about future predictions - leave them to think tanks – but more about understanding the why's and how's than future telling.*

*I think every time when there is a crisis somewhere, people are talking about the collapse of the global order. Now the global order is collapsing. Two years ago, when the global order was set to be collapsing when COVID-19 hit, I felt honoured in a way that me, as an IR student, could understand and give more elaborate answers to the impact of the pandemic on international relations. Now, a similar situation with understanding the war to some extent.*

*Having an IR background is extremely important because as IR students, we are the experts of everything. We are experts in sociology, we are experts in political science, we are experts in global political economy. Back in high school, I knew exactly I would like to enter diplomacy. 'I am 18, how can I become a diplomat?' 'Go and study IR'. I think it is one of the most inspiring disciplines in social sciences or humanities. I am personally not going to be satisfied until I can make an important impact at much higher levels of social fabric in terms of international organizations or at the nation state level. This is just because of my personal interest, not that those others were unimportant. I am really interested in politics. I have aspirations to be in a position or in a place where I can make certain decisions. I always say I will first represent European Foreign Policy and then will shape it.*

I could not count how many hours a day these endeavours should take. I do not like measuring reality, although reality is inexorably measuring us, especially as subjects of the neoliberal academia. However, I see something in the way K approaches this discipline which calms this mind of mine and its tendencies to criticise: resolution, a calm and peaceful acceptance of a conceptual status quo, and an untiring perseverance to pursue a stable, unchanged dream supported by the IR discipline. Wars have a devastating force which *belongs to history in the same*

*way death belongs to life*, K tells me, and despite of the fact that I cannot see his facial expressions due to my unstable internet connection, I feel he is emotionally invested in our discussion. However, *the individual, human beings, societies, peoples of the world can achieve more through collaboration and work towards overcoming global problems*, and this hopeful, liberal view, does not threaten to dismantle their plans, dreams and set of stable and deeply rooted values.

Theory seems to be bringing an order for K in the same way *a hierarchy exists regarding who should be entrusted with the responsibility of making peace*. It is a rather clean existential landscape, where phenomena have a name and an associated solution. Nation states are there, at the peak of responsibility, and individuals *are the core of all international politics*. The discipline is a facilitator between the vastity of an international system and the individual by offering anchors of existential stability. More importantly, IR's conceptual apparatus can bring personal fulfilment only when the individual who chooses to engage with it accepts it the way it is – limited, full of shortcomings, but an abundant resource of explanations which come with a promise: *those who are in a position to influence international politics might listen to the contributions of IR scholars*. Theory brings personal fulfilment, honour because it offers access to a type of understanding which cannot be easily decoded outside of the discipline. There is a mutual support: the discipline offers a wide range of concepts which decode information of various types, and, in exchange, it receives an individual eager to contribute to its development.

I have never approached theory in this way, and I am comforted to see how the big IR questions come to make sense of somebody's personal concerns, professional ambitions, clearly delineating what it out there to be possibly achieved, improved on, or simply left out. Theory comes to fill that hole perpetually created between one individual and a huge event which threatens to disassemble their mental and emotional integrity. It is a personalised update of the ivory tower,

with a different infrastructure. More mobile and fluid, with a door to the outside world, wide enough to catch the scream of the world, the fume of the guns, but strong enough to protect its resident from it.

## 2.5. A discipline as a (conceptual) prison as large as a state

An ivory tower with a strong door can protect its resident from the scream of the world and the fume of the guns. Its walls can shrink though. Slowly and claustrophobically. However, they remain wide enough to make room for a bed. A Procrustean one, eager to cut or to extend. To expand. To stretch ontological borders ‘across the wall of the world’<sup>87</sup> until it reaches the shore of accountability.

### What is the perfect size of global accountability and whom should it fit?

*As an American, when you come from a global superpower, and you look at another global superpower, you relate to their position on the world stage quite a lot. There are smaller wars going on every day that nobody pays attention to, like Saudi Arabia and Yemen, right? But when you come from this global power, everybody is going to pay attention. As somebody who is in, has worked in and studied international relations, you do not always have the option of not caring about this. Sometimes, this attention almost touches me on a personal level. Even if you want to be more insular, you cannot.*

**It fits the *larger than life* state,**

‘the bordered country

Delicate and strangely made proud

Yet thrusting perpetually under siege’<sup>88</sup>.

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<sup>87</sup> Maya Angelou, ‘On the Pulse of Morning’, available at <https://poets.org/poem/pulse-morning>.

<sup>88</sup> *Idem*

I pay close attention to L's eloquent sequence of phrases. It is not the first time I listen to them reflecting on these ideas, but it is the first time when I understand why this discipline is often writing from the standpoint of the states rather than writing about them<sup>89</sup>.

*I always say that I feel more American when I am outside of the US than I do when I am there. It is mainly because it is how people perceive me. I do feel a very strong desire to represent the nuances of my country in the best way possible. Particularly when it comes to power, many perceive the US rule as the global policeman. This is the Cold War terminology that still fits our place within different international organizations.*

The Big Macro and the compulsion to feel for it make the walls get closer and closer, bringing frustration at

*sitting on the side of International Relations, that is the people who talk. This is what we do. For better or for worse, we are the type of people who have been funnelled into a field that very much has to do with this slower form of policymaking, with this writing, this reflecting, this constant discourse, these constant dives into diplomacy. In the early days of the war, I felt totally useless. I remember I looked into nursing schools in Finland. They seemed to have a good program for Americans. 'What I am doing is so pointless, I should pick up a skill!'*

**However,**

*What I tried to tell myself is that countries function in a certain way that funnels people in certain directions. For better or for worse, we are the type of people who have been funnelled into a field that very much has to do with this slower form of policymaking, with this writing, this*

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<sup>89</sup> R.B.J Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 13.

*reflecting, this constant discourse, these constant dives into diplomacy. Everything is much slower, but no less important than the crisis stuff. The way I try to rationalise it to myself is that not all of us can be on the frontline all the time. People like us, at CEU, exist in less than 1% of people globally, who are privileged enough to take time and go think about these things. We take time to see what we can do about the world's problems, we have the space to be creative, or to contest the way things have been done before. This comes with an enormous responsibility to continue thinking.*

Some concepts travel a long way from their abstract points of departure until they find some concrete shoulders to place their weight on. Different shoulders carry differently the same conceptual weight. I look at L and try to mentally establish the size of their shoulders. They carry lots of *global superpower* and *position on the world stage*. L's shoulders seem to have been inter-generationally trained to carry the weight of *the state*.

There is a war in Ukraine. There is a war in Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Yemen, and various other types of conflicts and political instability across the globe. Government officials, foreign policy experts, and academics are frequently invited to assess all these conflicts and determine their potential impact on U.S. interests<sup>90</sup>.

The Big Macro and the compulsion to feel for it make the walls get closer and closer to an 'out there' which employs the 'insecurities (vulnerabilities) and tendencies (the need to act) as a way of being held to an account'<sup>91</sup>.

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<sup>90</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, 'Global Conflict Tracker', retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker>, accessed May 25, 2022.

<sup>91</sup> Brent J. Steele, 'The damage was permanent, there would always be scars': Vulnerability and Accountability in a Post-Rational World', in *The Vulnerable Subject: Beyond Rationalism in International Relations*, eds. Amanda Beattie and Kate Schick (London: Springer, 2014): 113.



The state does not only carry; it also frames existences: ‘*maybe if your country is not like that globally – looked at, criticized, paid attention to – you do not feel your identity comes on this citizen level and global level*’. Have you ever seen any other concept infusing people’s DNAs, turning them into *looked at, criticized, paid attention to* living glimpses? They allure people, antagonise them, or, as L put it, *indoctrinate*. In their everydayness, IR’s hyperbolic concepts, *global power* and *position on the world stage*, can blur the distinction between the individual and the state. And the state manufactures their identity.

*The world needs thinkers*, says L. Thinkers who can sincerely reflect on the places they are coming from - I add – and who afterwards check up on their friends from Ukraine while dropping donations at the entrance of the campus. Who cry over Bob the hamster that was left behind in an apartment in Kiev, implement projects with CEU’s Human Rights Initiative. Or simply want to drop school to *properly pick up a skill* somewhere else, because to be reflexive is to actively ‘turn or bend back, to take account of the self in relation to other subjects and objects’<sup>92</sup>.

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<sup>92</sup> Matthew Eagleton-Pierce, ‘Advancing a Reflexive International Relations’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 39, no. 3 (2011): 805-823.

## **–It is more alive, less pretentious and thus surprising: Conclusion**

‘Don’t worry, Mădă, this war will not reach us. NATO will protect us.’

On February 24, I happened to be in Bucharest, back home, tempted to explain to my cousin that death happens with or without NATO. Or any other international organisation thereof. I have been training this form of cynicism by studying IR for the last six years. Călin is charmed by December 1’s military parades and loves going to the open days of the Romanian Ministry of Defence, where professionals present him and his friends a lavish selection of guns and other military equipment which *protect*. The same old story bearing the name ‘militarised masculinities’<sup>93</sup>. However, six years of me studying IR represent two quarters of his lifetime, so I refrain from verbally splashing him with anything I would normally repeat like a broken radio during my classes.

Instead, I talked to my supervisor on that day. He was forced to listen to my regular criticism about this field. Again. We met online to discuss how to organise my research on the imposter syndrome in the neoliberal academia, my sixth thesis topic.

### **Why study IR when few of the things it is preaching never get to accomplish in real life what they are preaching?**

The number of thesis topics switched to seven, with this one I am now finishing exploring. Or barely starting to explore. It does not talk about NATO’s dysfunctionality, the state dynamic in this war, the role of the individual in this war, the war. And probably not even about concepts and theories pertaining to IR. This writing project is about human diversity of thinking, feeling, reacting, believing and how they create worlds in themselves. Imagine B, D, E, K, L in *that room*

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<sup>93</sup> References from the paper

*full of flags trying to harmonise what they think, feel, believe and how they react. How does an MA which started with a war and is finishing with a war **interact with the existence of this huge difference between potentially millions of people dying and only a few thousands?** I do not think anyone who is now taking decisions that affect hundreds of thousands of people understand why wars happen **with** we are the experts of everything, and I am personally not going to be satisfied until I can make an important impact at much higher levels of social fabric in terms of international organizations or at the nation state level? Some stand by the concept of global world order, some mock it. Others are even personally conflicted by the concepts. Trapped. Replicate this to the hundreds of thousands. To the millions.*

*Long story short, wars are clashes of perceptions of the self, of the other, of reality.*

*IR is the study of war, right? But the idea of the study of war is to also prevent it. If IR is going to do its job, I think it needs to expand on what it is looking at.*

**And looking at the people who are ready for the moment in which they can take on the world's problems, in their own ways, can be an additional way of expanding it.**

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