Mimicking Election Monitoring

A Challenge to the Liberal International Order by Contesting Democracy Promotion?

By

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Abstract

Since the 2000s, several regional organizations, such as the CIS and UNASUR, started to practice parallel election monitoring and are often accused of being reluctant to take a critical stance on elections. Given the prior existence of established LIO-related international election monitoring institutions like the OSCE and OAS, the question arises why parallel election monitoring structures were established and what impact they may have on the practice of international election observation and the Liberal International Order (LIO). This thesis argues that parallel election monitoring is a form of liberal mimicry, a power-political strategy of low intensity aiming to fragment and discredit existing, LIO-related norms of liberal democracy promotion. While seemingly identifying with liberal-democratic norms of election monitoring, the mimicking agent fills the norm with new meaning. Based on 8 semi-structured expert interviews with practitioners and a subsequent thematic analysis, I find that, in the case of the CIS´s parallel election monitoring, there is a focus on national legislation over international commitments, pluralism, the legitimacy of the host government, as well as the rejection of "Western" universalism and overly technical approaches. Identifying discourses of antagonization, discreditation, and competition, the findings suggest that an increasing polarization and fragmentation of the international election monitoring landscape, challenging the universalizing narratives of LIO-related democracy promotion, may be ongoing.

Key words: Parallel Election Monitoring, Liberal Mimicry, Democracy Promotion, Liberal International Order, Norm Contestation, Regional Organizations, CIS, OSCE, "Zombie" Election Monitoring

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It can be difficult to write about a topic as sensitive as international parallel election monitoring. Elections lie at the heart of democracy and the assessment by observers can be central to the credibility of democracy itself. When collecting primary data through interviews, the tension between methodological, normative, and ethical questions brings about numerous challenges and demands a high degree of critical reflection.

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List of Abbreviations

International Organizations and NGOs

AU = African Union
CEELA = Latin American Council on Electoral Experts
CIS = Commonwealth of Independent States
CIS-EMO = Commonwealth of the Independent States - Election Monitoring Organization
CIS-IPA = CIS Interparliamentary Assembly
CPA = Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
ECOWAS = Economic Community of West African States
EU = European Union
EP = European Parliament
IMF = International Monetary Fund
IIMDD = International Institute for Monitoring Democracy Development of the CIS-IPA
IRI = International Republican Institute
NATO-PA = NATO Parliamentary Assembly
NDI = National Democratic Institute
OAS = Organization of American States
ODIHR (OSCE) = Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE)
OSCE = Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PACE = Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
SCO = Shanghai Cooperation Organization
UNASUR = Union of South American Nations
UNO = United Nations Organization

Concepts and Titles

GONGO = Government-organized nongovernmental organization
LIO = Liberal International Order
MEP = Member of European Parliament
NDRO = Non-democratic regional organizations
POG = Professional observation group
SOG = Shadow election observation group

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Introduction

Today, the promotion of democracy through liberal states and international organizations is an integral part of the Liberal International Order (LIO). In this order, the idea of democracy acts as an important legitimizing principle for globally spreading liberal norms and institutions. Especially after the end of the Cold War, the process of spreading liberal institutions has often been pro-actively supported by European and US actors and international institutions, which led some authors to call the new LIO "intrusive".[1] Others have criticized democracy promotion to be narrowly "Western" and to be hypocritically selective.[2]

A central element of liberal-democratic systems of governance is the institutionalization of regular elections, which allows the selection of representatives. Therefore, one important form of democracy promotion is the practice of international election monitoring. This has been especially true since the 1990s, and now it is practiced globally by a variety of international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the European Union (EU), the European Parliament (EP), the Organization of American States (OAS), and the African Union (AU). However, in recent years, observers have detected the emergence of parallel structures of election monitoring that compete with established international institutions linked to the LIO. In the 2000s, regional organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) emerged and participated in international election observation efforts. The election observers sent by these parallel institutions are sometimes called "zombie election monitors"[3] and are blamed for acting on behalf of illiberal, authoritarian governments as part of a strategy of authoritarian survival.

Many of them claim to act just like established institutions. For instance, the CIS states that it practices election monitoring based on the same methodology as the OSCE. Nevertheless, their reports and public statements, that often diverge from OSCE reports, were blamed to be

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[1] Tanja A. Börzel and Michael Zürn, "Contestations of the Liberal International Order: From Liberal Multilateralism to Postnational Liberalism," *International Organization* 75, no.2 (2021): 282–305.
[2] Benjamin Schuetze, "´Democracy Promotion´ and Moral Authority," In: *Promoting Democracy, Reinforcing Authoritarianism: US and European Policy in Jordan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1-35.
[3]Alexander Cooley, "Authoritarianism Goes Global: Countering Democratic Norms," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 3 (2015): 55. Patrick Merloe, "Authoritarianism Goes Global: Election Monitoring vs. Disinformation," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 3 (2015): 86. Michel Casey, "The Rise of the Zombie Monitors," *The Diplomat*, April 30, 2015. https://thediplomat.com/2015/04/the-rise-of-the-zombie-monitors/ (last accessed: 05.06.2022).

autocracy-friendly and subject to political interference.[4] However, why would supposedly illiberal forces make the effort to construct parallel structures of liberal-democratic election monitoring? How do they interact with other election monitoring missions in the field? What is the role of regional organizations such as the CIS in the changing election monitoring landscape?

Moreover, emerging parallel monitoring raises the question how established European and US actors in the field of election monitoring perceive the practice. Is it seen as a threatening, illiberal challenge to the LIO and its norms of democracy promotion? If yes, how is parallel election monitoring constructed by contrasting the different practices and institutions of election observation?

This paper argues that the observed practice of international parallel monitoring is a practice of liberal mimicry,[5] intended to challenge international norms of democracy promotion related to the LIO and is perceived as such by established European and US monitoring institutions. Based on eight semi-structured interviews with election monitoring professionals, politicians, and delegation officials from the OSCE, CIS, EP, and OAS, I find that this form of liberal mimicry is perceived as a contribution to undermining the authority of established norms of liberal democracy and sows uncertainty about the meanings of liberalism, democracy, and international election observation. By appealing to the norm of pluralism, creating narratives of Western partiality and by criticizing technocratic approaches to election monitoring, parallel monitors legitimize their actions by reference to international power structures. However, they simultaneously draw on the legitimacy of the international norms of democracy promotion and, more specifically, established OSCE methodology on election monitoring. This practice does not offer a substantial alternative to the established normative and institutional framework but weakens its universality and offers alternative interpretations by reference to pluralist international norms. In comparison to domestic observer groups and NGOs, regional organizations like the CIS are especially effective in legitimizing observed elections due to their alleged independence from the host government. Therefore, regionalist structures are used to mimic liberal international institutions of democracy promotion, seemingly conforming with liberal internationalist norms of regional integration.

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[4] Mark Baker, "East: Why Do OSCE, CIS Observers Rarely Agree On Elections?," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 12, 2005. https://www.rferl.org/a/1058403.html (last accessed: 05.06.2022).
[5] As conceptualized by: Gregorio Bettiza and David Lewis, "Authoritarian Powers and Norm Contestation in the Liberal International Order: Theorizing the Power Politics of Ideas and Identity," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5, no. 4 (2020): 567.

Practitioners and delegation officials from established election monitoring institutions respond to this fragmenting strategy of contestation by constructing a binary between benign independent, and malign dependent election monitoring as well as narratives of dismissal. In contrast to a CIS interviewee who describe OSCE-ODIHR as "partners", OSCE and EP practitioners describe the relationship as "fake" and minimal, denying any kind of coordination and underlining certain moments of competition, such as the first communication of preliminary findings. Interviewed OSCE, EP and OAS election monitoring practitioners responded to the challenge of the CIS and UNASUR by dismissing their credibility, impartiality, and professionalism and by marginalizing their importance. Parallel monitors are framed as "clowns", "fake", and "non-observers". However, some interviewees warn about an increasing replacement of the OSCE by the CIS in the post-Soviet sphere.[6] These perceptions are supported by the traceable expansion in size and frequency of CIS missions in conjunction with certain countries, such as Russia and Belarus, who are increasing their inaccessibility to full-scale OSCE missions.

The first section discusses the contested concept of the Liberal International Order (LIO) and the role of democracy promotion and election monitoring in it by reviewing a variety of scholarly accounts on theory and practice of liberalism and democracy in the international sphere. The second section introduces the analytical framework of liberal mimicry as a form of contesting the LIO, discusses the role of regionalist structures in parallel observation, and reviews the existing literature on parallel election observation to embed the research in recent debates on parallel observation. Lastly, the third section will present and interpret the empirical evidence from eight semi-structured expert interviews with election monitoring professionals and delegation leaders by a laying out a thematic analysis discussing interinstitutional relationships, the construction of different models, interactions in the field, as well as the broader impact of parallel election monitoring.

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[6] UNASUR was largely dissolved in the aftermath of the Venezuelan government crisis.

The Liberal International Order, Democracy Promotion and Election Monitoring

In 2012, Judith G. Kelley argued that since the end of the Cold War "international election monitoring has become the most prominent tool in the liberal effort to promote democracy."[7] It is an integral part of liberal democratization efforts in the world and is practiced by a high number of diverse international and regional organizations, NGOs, and states. Overall, democracy promotion is a form of international intervention and is based on ideas of liberal statebuilding.

Liberal Internationalism and Democracy Promotion

To understand the role of democracy promotion and election observation, one needs to first deconstruct the underlying ideology of liberal internationalism and its associated ideas of liberal democracy. Beate Jahn sees liberal internationalism as a historical force that combines several fragmented ideological traditions.[8] However, she identifies the core elements of liberal internationalism in the work of John Locke, who developed a political program of liberalism that is based on the idea of individual political and economic rights. In his work, the purpose of government is the preservation of private property, which is the precondition for individual rights, and the guarantee for individual negative freedom. Government should act on the consent of the people, but political rights should be limited to property owners.[9] Property, therefore, is supposed to be expanded to spread the precondition of individual freedom as far as possible.

Since property could not be redistributed without breaching liberal principles, it had to be appropriated elsewhere, leading to a history of colonial exploitation and oppression. The

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[7] Judith G. Kelley, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," In *Monitoring Democracy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), 155.

[8] For instance, ideas of economic liberalism, liberal peacebuilding, representative government, and human rights are all considered liberal, while they are treated separately in most analyses. According to Jahn, liberalism embraces diversity as a core dynamic to artificially divide the dimensions of politics, economics, and norms. By splitting the social sciences and the realm of politics and policies more broadly, diversity ideologically legitimizes and reproduces liberalism as a political project, justifying contradictory outcomes and crises. Beate Jahn, *Liberal Internationalism: Theory, History, Practice (*London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 173.

[9] Beate Jahn, "Liberal Internationalism: Historical Trajectory and Current Prospects," *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 50.

distinction of the domestic sphere as the domain of democracy, rule of law and liberal rights, and the international sphere as the site of power politics, expropriation, and appropriation, is central to the historically expansive dynamic of liberal internationalism. According to Jahn, the colonial heritage[10] of liberal internationalism is still reflected in today's concepts of the universal and mutually constitutive ideas of liberal democracy, human rights, and the market economy.[11] As such, the expansive international dynamic of liberal internationalism plays an important role in the ideological foundation of democracy promotion efforts,[12] such as election monitoring. The insulated political approach of liberalism[13] in International Relations is represented by approaches such as the democratic peace thesis and the democratic transition paradigm, which mostly ignore links to normative and economic dimensions of liberalism.[14] The latter is of special importance for this thesis, since it links the practice of democracy promotion with the ideological framework of liberal internationalism and, in effect, the LIO.[15]

However, what kind of democracy is to be promoted? Today, the general idea of democracy as the rule of the *demos* in contrast to the rule of individual autocrats or monarchs is a widely accepted principle of government, that is often considered to be universal.[16] In practice, theorists, practitioners, and observers often automatically link democracy to its current institutional form of *liberal* democracy. It is built on a rather minimal understanding of procedural democracy, as advocated by Joseph A. Schumpeter[17] and, to a certain extent, Robert Dahl.[18] Benjamin Schuetze calls it the "Schumpeterian-Dahlian model",[19] which forms the basis of much of today´s pragmatic process- and institutions-oriented democracy promotion

[10] According to Jahn, the current focus on democracy in liberal discourses must be understood as an form of liberal adaptation to remain legitimate, while the origins of liberal internationalism remained often anti-democratic.
[11] Beate Jahn, "Liberal Internationalism: Historical Trajectory and Current Prospects," 49.
[12] Beate Jahn, "Rethinking Democracy Promotion." *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 4 (2012): 685–705.
[13] In the domain of democracy promotion, the siloed dynamics of liberalism can be clearly seen in the case of Jordan, where actors promoting liberal economic development and democracy promoters contradicted each other, leading to partially paradox outcomes fostering autocracy while successfully promoting neoliberal economic reforms. Schuetze, "´Democracy Promotion´ and Moral Authority," In: *Promoting Democracy, Reinforcing Authoritarianism: US and European Policy in Jordan* , 1-35.
[14] Beate Jahn, *Liberal Internationalism: Theory, History, Practice*, 73-84.
[15] The political dichotomy of democracy and autocracy acts as the counter part to the economic binary of the developed and the underdeveloped. She links democracy promotion to modernization theory to underline the linear assumption of the democratic transition paradigm of an almost inevitable development towards the Western ideal of liberal democracy.
[16] In his often-cited essay, Amartya Sen claims that democracy is a universal value worth to be promoted globally due to the "intrinsic importance of political participation and freedom in human life (...), the instrumental importance of political incentives in keeping governments responsible and accountable; and (…) the constructive role of democracy in the formation of values and in the understanding of needs, rights, and duties". Amartya Kumar Sen, "Democracy as a Universal Value," *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 3 (1999): 11.
[17] Joseph A. Schumpeter, "Another Theory of Democracy," In *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1943), 269–83.
[18] Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
[19] Schuetze, "´Democracy Promotion´ and Moral Authority," In: *Promoting Democracy, Reinforcing Authoritarianism: US and European Policy in Jordan* , 7.

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efforts.[20] Election Monitoring and other democracy promotion efforts focus on domestic democratic institutions based on representative government[21] and support strong constitutional restrictions on popular sovereignty as witnessed in "Western" liberal constitutionalism.[22]

Liberal representative government is, however, not universally accepted as the only possible democratic model, as theoretical work on, e.g., deliberative[23] and radical democracy[24] shows. Contemporary critics of liberal democracy also criticize the "isolation of political rights from socio-economic rights,"[25] sometimes labelling liberal democracy "market democracy."[26] Moreover, scholars like Colin Crouch[27] concluded that current developments in liberal democracies lead to a state of "post-democracy." In the field of democracy promotion, the debate around local ownership showcases an important integral contradiction of trying to establish democracy by external intervention while supporting the values of domestic popular sovereignty.[28]

LIO and Election Monitoring in the post-Cold War era

Having discussed liberal internationalism and liberal democracy, it is possible to approach the question of the Liberal International Order (LIO) and how election observation as a form of democracy promotion is linked to it today. Overall, the LIO is a highly contested concept.[29] Most commonly, it is associated with a specific historical configuration of global

[20] Rather than relying on a "redemptive promise" of democracy as a tool of human emancipation and positive freedom. See, e.g., Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (1999): 2–16.

[21] In its symbiosis with liberalism, democracy has taken the form of representative government, in which trustees are elected to perform the specialized profession of government. As Bernard Manin observed, "certain institutional choices made by the founders of representative government have virtually never been questioned", while early democratic thinkers like Rousseau had strongly rejected political representation and tight constitutional limitations of the power of the people. Bernard Manin, The Principles of Representative Government. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3.

[22] The constitutional guarantee of individual rights, such as the right to property, is fundamental to liberal democracy and is often protected from the democratic decisions of majorities. Representative government is, furthermore, based on a Weberian understanding of a professionalized, "modern" state apparatus, whose bureaucratic elements are expected to act impartial and within the Westphalian setting of a state.

[23] Amy Gutmann and Dennis F Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[24] Chantal Mouffe and Paul Holdengräber, "Radical Democracy: Modern or Postmodern?," *Social Text*, no. 21 (1989): 31–45.

[25] Schuetze, "´Democracy Promotion´ and Moral Authority," In: *Promoting Democracy, Reinforcing Authoritarianism: US and European Policy in Jordan* , 7.

[26] Beate Jahn, "The Tragedy of Liberal Diplomacy: Democratization, Intervention, Statebuilding (Part I)," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 1, no. 1 (2007): 79.

[27] Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

[28] Democracy promotion actors, just like international development actors, have partly responded by including narratives of local ownership into their discourses, while critics insist that this is a mere rhetorical change.

[29] E.g., Charles L. Glaser, "A Flawed Framework: Why the Liberal International Order Concept Is Misguided." *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 51–87.

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power that assumes the hegemonic position of liberal states, often the United States, and the presence of global liberal institutions and norms. It is carried by the ideological foundation of liberal internationalism. After World War II, the LIO was based on US-leadership in the Western hemisphere and international organizations such as the United Nations, OECD, the World Bank, and the IMF. The promotion of democracy has been widely associated to the current LIO.[30] In the case of election monitoring, the norms of the LIO are held up by international institutions and NGOs such as the OAS, EU, OSCE, the Carter Center, NDI, IRI, the African Union, and the United Nations as well as a large number of smaller NGOs and states. Their election observation efforts reinforce and promote the universal political norms of the LIO on how legitimate governments are designed.

However, the LIO was, for a long time, limited in scope due to the presence of an alternative order linked to the Soviet Union. Therefore, John J. Mearsheimer concluded that the LIO during the Cold War was in fact a thick "bounded order" in a wider realist international system. Only the end of the Cold War brought about a truly global LIO, which was ideologically liberal but thin. [31] In this context, Tanja A. Börzel and Michael Zürn diagnose a paradigm shift associated with the end of the Cold War. [32] They argue that the post- World War II international order was based on liberal multilateralism and focused on intergovernmental interaction. In contrast, the post- Cold War LIO II has attributed a significant amount of authority beyond the nation state and should be described as "postnational." They argue that international institutions, such as the EU and OSCE, became more ambitious in the endeavor to shape domestic outcomes and became more "intrusive", using "carrot-and-stick" strategies. The strong, "untamed"[33] democracy promotion policies of the 1990s can be understood as an intrusive practice linked to the LIO II. Democracy´s universal promise co-legitimizes the LIO, its international institutionalization, power structure and its norm-setting capability. Even the realist Mearsheimer agrees that "the most important requirement for building a liberal international order is to spread liberal democracy far and wide."[34]

Election monitoring is one of the most direct forms of democracy promotion identifying elections as a key element of any democratic transition. As such, it is an important element of

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[30] G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).
[31] John J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security* 43 , no. 4 (2019): 7–50.
G. John Ikenberry similarly identifies the end of the Cold War as an important turning point of the globalization of the LIO. G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy*.
[32] Börzel and Zürn, "Contestations of the Liberal International Order: From Liberal Multilateralism to Postnational Liberalism," 282–305.
[33] Sarah Sunn Bush, *The Taming of Democracy Assistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
[34] Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," 31.

the democratic transition paradigm of the 1990s.[35] Different from other international interventions, election monitoring requires the formal invitation of the host government holding elections. Having received such an invitation, election monitoring institutions send long- and short-term observers to monitor political and administrative processes leading to the election day and the events on the election day itself. International missions can last between a few days to several months and may, depending on the country, involve several hundred short-term observers. Their common declared objective is to assess elections considering the standards of liberal democracy.

A significant body of literature on democracy promotion engages with the effects and effectiveness of "Western" international election monitoring missions. Election monitoring is, for instance, considered to have made cheating significantly more difficult.[36] However, this paper does not engage with these debates or the research about the effectiveness or accuracy of election monitoring as a tool for democracy promotion[37] but focuses on the differences and dynamics *between* election monitoring institutions.

In conclusion, international election monitors are actors of liberal democracy promotion, a form of international intervention that is linked to the current LIO. It is practiced by NGOs, states, and international and regional organizations. The procedural focus on elections is linked to the "Schumpeterian-Dahlian model" of democracy as liberal representative government. Election observation missions have drastically increased in number and diversity since the end of the Cold War (see Figure 1). This period coincides with the third wave of democratization[38] and discourses of liberal triumphalism.[39] This development underpins the interpretation of Börzel and Zürn[40] of the increasing role of international organizations in the post-Cold War era and the rising "intrusiveness" of liberal institutions by transgressing a former domain of exclusive national sovereignty: the process of electing political leaders.

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[35] Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm." *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002): 5–21.
[36] Susan D. Hyde showed that presence of election observers can have a direct effect on election day behavior by raising the cost of fraud. In a natural experiment in cooperation with OSCE-ODIHR at the Armenian elections of 2003, she was able to identify a significant effect on election day behavior. Susan D. Hyde, *The Pseudo-Democrat's Dilemma: Why Election Observation Became an International Norm* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 126-157.
[37] While election monitoring can take various shapes and different missions indeed show different qualities and shortcomings, it is out of the scope of this work to assess these dimensions.
[38] Samuel P. Huntington, "Democracy's Third Wave," *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 2 (1991): 12–34.
[39] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3–18.
[40] Börzel and Zürn, "Contestations of the Liberal International Order: From Liberal Multilateralism to Postnational Liberalism," 282–305.

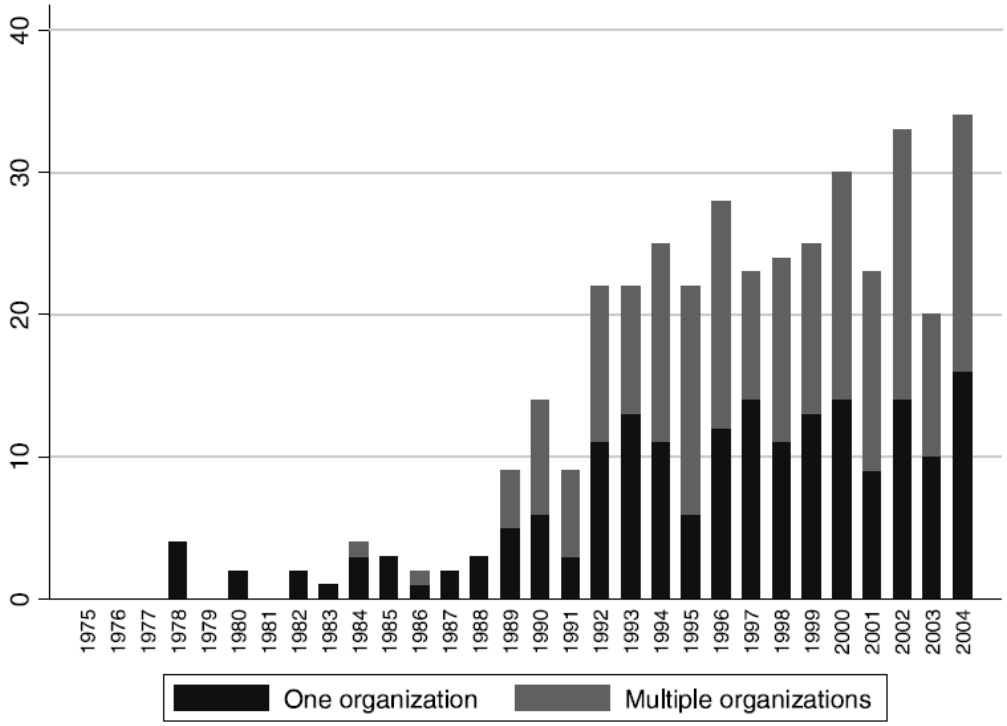

Figure 1 – Number of elections with one organization present and with multiple organizations present (1975-2004) [41]

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[41] Judith Kelley, "The More the Merrier? The Effects of Having Multiple International Election Monitoring Organizations," *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 1 (2009): 59–64.

Liberal Mimicry and Parallel Election Monitoring

What is the role of parallel election monitoring[42] in the contestation of the Liberal International Order (LIO)? How does it impact the practice and norms of democracy promotion? In this thesis, I propose that parallel election monitoring, which was increasingly popularized in the 2000s, should be understood as a form of *liberal mimicry* aimed at contesting the LIO by fragmenting the meaning of liberal-democratic norms of election observation. Few researchers have explored the motivations and perceptions of parallel monitoring as well as the practices and interactions of different missions in the field. Moreover, to my knowledge, no authors besides Gregorio Bettiza and David Lewis,[43] have explicitly linked the International Relations literature on the LIO to the field of election monitoring and analyzed parallel monitoring as a practice of contestation. Before discussing the existing literature on autocracy promotion and so-called "zombie" or "shadow" election monitoring, the conceptual groundwork on norm contestation and liberal mimicry needs to be clarified.

Contestation of the Liberal International Order and Liberal Mimicry

In recent years, many authors have engaged with the complex interaction between the liberal "West" and those states which had been, in accordance with the democratic transition paradigm,[44] assumed to turn into liberal democracies in the 1990s but developed in increasingly autocratic ways. Especially China and Russia[45] were said to have turned to strategies of contestation that have possibly disruptive effects on the LIO. To approach my proposition, I will first discuss the three closely related concepts of imitation, parody, and trickstery that embed mimicry in the literature of indirect contestation, before discussing liberal mimicry itself.

[42] I deliberately do not use terms like "shadow" and "zombie" monitoring found in the literature to avoid semantically co-constructing from the start the often-found binary of Western, impartial professional election monitoring and non-Western, politically influenced unprofessional election monitoring. Parallel election monitoring is a deliberately more neutrally chosen term, which, however, still implies a binary between those who were there first (since the 1990s and earlier) and those who came later (mostly in the 2000s) and do not cooperate with the older institutions (a premise which excludes cases such as the EU). Instead of making claims about their professionality and impartiality, I focus on the construction of the field of election monitoring and the interactions and perceptions of election monitors themselves. This is why my research design explicitly aims at interviewing practitioners from parallel election observation institutions and "established" election monitoring institutions.

[43] Bettiza and Lewis, "Authoritarian Powers and Norm Contestation in the Liberal International Order: Theorizing the Power Politics of Ideas and Identity," 567.

[44] Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm." 5–21.

[45] E.g., Adler-Nissen, Rebecca, and Ayşe Zarakol. "Struggles for Recognition: The Liberal International Order and the Merger of Its Discontents." *International Organization*, 2020, 1–24.

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First, the concept of *imitation* is closely related to mimicry. As important proponents of the concept, Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes[46] identify the tension between the ”original” and those who “imitate” as the central factor in the increasing contestation of liberalism. Democratization as an asymmetric process of imitation implies an ontological hierarchy and leads to a sense of humiliation and irritation, triggering illiberal uprisings and democratic backsliding in many countries. However, imitation as an observable pattern is mostly discussed with regards to the cause, rather than the method of contestation, which does not allow for the analysis of the strategic use of seeming similarity.

Second, while the literature on imitation mostly discusses domestic contexts, other authors have more carefully considered the diverse interactions of states in their conceptual framework. When analyzing the Russian normative justifications in Georgia and Ukraine, Erna Burai considers the way the Russian discourse repeatedly refers to Western normative language to offer alternative “reality-making scripts” (in this case: Responsibility to Protect [R2P]) in a practice she calls *parody*.[47]

Third, Xymena Kurowska and Anatoly Reshetnikov[48] introduce the concept of *trickstery* when analyzing Russia´s pluralist discourse of overidentification with Western liberal norms in a state of liminality. According to them, Russia aims at creating a satire that ridicules, fragments, and brings “undecidability to the level of international society”.[49] Analyzing instances of Russian discourse of trickstery, such as the RT interview with the suspects of the Skripal affair, they conclude by asking “why bother if no one believes Russia´s trickstery?”[50] A similar question guides the research of this work. If parallel election monitoring institutions are not considered credible, which many liberal academics and practitioners insist on, then why bother setting up parallel monitoring in the first place?

Especially the latter two concepts are closely related to the practice of mimicry analyzed in this paper. However, considering that they mostly deal with polemic and satirist discourses in the context of Russia and do not explicitly link with the LIO literature, I suggest that the concept of *mimicry* is best suited to propose an explanation for this question. The term mimicry can also be found in the natural sciences and is a phenomenon in which one organism

[46] Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light That Failed: A Reckoning* (London: Penguin UK, 2019).
[47] Erna Burai, “Parody as Norm Contestation: Russian Normative Justifications in Georgia and Ukraine and Their Implications for Global Norms,” *Global Society* 30, no. 1 (2016): 67–77.
[48] Xymena Kurowska and Anatoly Reshetnikov, “Trickstery: Pluralising Stigma in International Society,” *European Journal of International Relations* 27, no. 1 (2021): 232–57.
[49] Kurowska and Reshetnikov. “Trickstery: Pluralising Stigma in International Society,” 249
[50] Kurowska and Reshetnikov. “Trickstery: Pluralising Stigma in International Society,” 249

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superficially resembles another to protect itself from predation.[51] In the social sciences, the concept of mimicry has been originally associated with the study of colonialism. Homi Bhabha describes mimicry in the following way: "Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*."[52]

Importantly, mimicry is based on ambivalence and relates, according to Bhabha, to a strategy of colonial power that "normalizes" the colonial state. It is linked to the idea of the subaltern imitating the hegemon but gives agency to the subaltern by suggesting that the subaltern fills the seemingly same with new meaning. It has the potential to disrupt structures of power by challenging the monopoly of meaning and by pluralizing the understanding of supposedly universal norms.

In the context of this work, the most promising answer to the question of the possible motives of parallel election monitoring can be found in Bettiza and Lewis´[53] conceptual work on *liberal mimicry* and the contestation of the norms of the LIO. In their power-political approach to norm contestation through Russia and China, they identify four main forms of norm contestation that authoritarian states engage in in their efforts of "ideational counterbalancing": 1) Liberal Performance, 2) Liberal Mimicry, 3) Civilizational Essentialization, and 4) Counter-norm Entrepreneurship.[54]

According to Bettiza and Lewis, liberal mimicry is a form of contestation of the LIO, which goes beyond the simple applicatory contestation but does not fundamentally question the validity of liberal norms either. While seemingly embracing liberal concepts and frameworks, mimicry contests the *meaning* of norms from within the discourse of liberalism, challenging norms with a rather low intensity. An actor who mimics is "adopting the form of liberal discourses and practices, while simultaneously giving these a non-liberal content".[55]

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[51] In biology, mimicry is a "phenomenon characterized by the superficial resemblance of two or more organisms that are not closely related taxonomically." The resemblance is meant to benefit the mimicking organism, e.g., by protection from predation, since the two organisms can easily be confused with each other. Wolfgang J.H. Wickler, "Mimicry," In *Britannica*, (2019), https://www.britannica.com/science/mimicry (last accessed: 05.06.2022).
[52] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 125–33.
[53] Bettiza and Lewis, "Authoritarian Powers and Norm Contestation in the Liberal International Order: Theorizing the Power Politics of Ideas and Identity," 559–77.
[54] The latter two forms directly question the validity of the Liberal International Order by using a predominantly integrative power political logic, e.g., by suggesting norms for a new international order or by advocating for a new model of state development. In contrast, contestation through liberal performance accepts the universalization of liberal norms and restricts itself to a fragmenting strategy through criticizing the application of liberal norms. This happens, for instance, by reference to human rights violations through liberal democratic states such as the United States in the Guantanamo Bay detention camp.
[55] Bettiza and Lewis, "Authoritarian Powers and Norm Contestation in the Liberal International Order: Theorizing the Power Politics of Ideas and Identity," 567.

Their power-political approach to liberal mimicry is distinct from the postcolonial reading of mimicry by relativizing the implied binary of the oppressor and the oppressed in the discourse of mimicry and interpreting it as a "realpolitik" strategy of "ideational counter balancing." While they mainly refer to examples such as Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the idea of "good governance" adopted by China, they also briefly link the practice of parallel election monitoring to liberal mimicry. According to them, the practice of parallel monitoring "provincializes"[56] hegemonic norms of election observation and proposes an interpretation of election monitoring as a sovereignty-enhancing partnership rather than a critical, technical exercise aiming to uncover electoral irregularities.

The Role of Regional Organizations in Parallel Election Monitoring

I propose that the preferred mode of practicing liberal mimicry in the field of election monitoring is through regional organizations. The relevant question is, why do Russia, Venezuela, China, and other states create regional organizations for this purpose? In their book on authoritarian regionalism, Anastassia Obydenkova and Alexander Libman suggest three separate benefits that non-democratic regional organizations (NDRO) provide.

First, NDROs can legitimize international cooperation between autocracies by complying with the script of liberal internationalism and its preference of regional integration best exemplified by the EU. Second, they are considered to provide direct intergovernmental leverage and are seen as a "tool to increase the power of leading states in the global arena."[57] Lastly, NDROs allow for authoritarian learning by exchange of information and the mutual acceptance of practices. In the case of election monitoring, regional organizations like the CIS and UNASUR may provide these benefits and be perceived as much more neutral actors than a mission directly associated with specific governments.[58] Obydenkova and Libman analyse the

[56] Bettiza and Lewis, "Authoritarian Powers and Norm Contestation in the Liberal International Order: Theorizing the Power Politics of Ideas and Identity," 568.

[57] Anastassia V. Obydenkova and Alexander Libman, *Authoritarian Regionalism in the World of International Organizations: Global Perspective and the Eurasian Enigma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 47.

[58] Moreover, the choice of regional organizations is often complemented by parallel monitoring carried out by NGOs, as the case of the CIS-EMO shows. In the case of CIS, Anton Shekhovtsov analyses the micro practices of interaction between the intergovernmental regionalism of CIS and the set-up of a Western-style NGO called CIS-EMO inviting cooperative Western observers on missions. Discussing links of CIS-EMO and NGOs in Poland and Belgium through which Western observers are invited to CIS-EMO missions, he shows how regionalist legitimacy is intertwined with efforts to include international observers from outside the CIS region to further increase its legitimacy. However, this thesis will focus on regional organizations since they can be, for the reasons mentioned above, considered to have a bigger impact on the LIO. Anton Shekhovtsov, "Far-Right Election Observation Monitors in the Service of the Kremlin's Foreign Policy," In *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe–Russia Relationship*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lanham: Lexington Books Lanham, 2015), 223–43.

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case of the CIS and interpret its election monitoring missions as guided by Russia´s efforts to support autocratic consolidation.[59]

In addition, a previous study suggests that election observers from regional organizations are considered particularly unbiased by the population of the host country.[60] Furthermore, the inter- and transgovernmental nature of regional organizations makes it easier to even get support by liberal democratic member states for "sovereignty-protective institutional designs" of election monitoring, as research on UNASUR shows.[61]

The Crises of Liberal Democracy and the Construction and Dismissal of the Illiberal Other

How do established liberal election monitoring practitioners and academics working on democracy promotion perceive the phenomenon of parallel election monitoring? Before answering this question, the approach of this thesis needs to be distinguished from other research on the "crisis of liberal democracy".[62]

Extensive debates have engaged with the increasing contestation of liberalism and democracy in recent years.[63] Political scientists describe developments of democratic "backsliding,"[64] a democratic "recession,"[65] the rise of illiberalism[66] and competitive

[59] Since the first election monitoring missions by the CIS were sent in 2001 and 2002, they associate the increasing activity of CIS with the simultaneous consolidation of authoritarianism in Russia under Vladimir Putin. Alexander, Libman and Anastassia V. Obydenkova, "Understanding Authoritarian Regionalism," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 4 (2018): 157

[60] Sarah Sunn Bush and Lauren Prather gather evidence from Tunisia that election observers from regional organizations (in this case: the Arab League) were perceived as particularly capable and unbiased in comparison to other international observers. Sarah Sunn Bush and Lauren Prather. "Who's There? Election Observer Identity and the Local Credibility of Elections," *International Organization* 72, no. 3 (2018): 659–92.

[61] Giovanni Agostinis and Carlos Closa found in an analysis of the role of Venezuela in UNASUR´s election accompaniment missions, that even neighboring liberal democracies are likely to submit to "sovereignty-protective institutional designs" of election monitoring if transgovernmental networks are exploited in a proficient way. Giovanni Agostinis and Carlos Closa, "Democracies' Support for Illiberal Regimes through Sovereignty-Protective Regional Institutions: The Case of UNASUR's Electoral Accompaniment Missions," *European Journal of International Relations* 28, no. 2, (2022): 417-443.

[62] Ziya Öniş, "The Age of Anxiety: The Crisis of Liberal Democracy in a Post-Hegemonic Global Order," *The International Spectator* 52, no. 3 (2017): 18–35.

[63] This trend in research is best exemplified by the bestselling book "How Democracy Dies" by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt in the aftermath of the US elections of 2016. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. (New York: Broadway Books, 2018).

[64] Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5–19.

[65] Larry Diamond, "Facing up to the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 141–55. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The Myth of Democratic Recession." *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 45–58.

[66] Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (1997): 22-43

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authoritarian or hybrid regimes.[67] A common feature of most of this literature is the focus on the domestic dimensions of democratic institutions.[68]

However, considering the inherent expansive logic of liberal internationalism discussed in the last section, one of the most important questions relates to *how* policies and politics of de-democratization are spreading in the world. Possible explanations from research on public policy suggests mechanisms of policy diffusion or pro-active policy transfers. Looking at those mechanisms points to an impact of transnational government networks and the transfer of knowledge of autocratic survival.[69] Nevertheless, this approach is unable to capture relevant asymmetric (or hierarchical and power-political) interactions between states, international organizations, and NGOs. In this context, democracy promotion can be understood as asymmetric form of international intervention that aims at impacting domestic institutions.

In light of the on-going debates around the crises of liberal democracy, a conceptual counterpart to democracy promotion emerged: "autocracy promotion". Overall, autocracy promotion may be understood as an asymmetric form of international intervention by key states with the declared, deliberate objective of sustaining and promoting illiberal, non-democratic forms of governance. Many authors strictly reject the idea of autocracy promotion,[70] while others stress that the promotion of alternative models may already be intensifying.[71] Importantly, those denying the existence of autocracy promotion mostly refer to the absence of a credible counter model of governance and insist on the universal normative power of liberal democracy.[72] The notion of autocracy promotion implies the fundamental binaries of democracy/autocracy and liberalism/illiberalism.[73]

I expect that "Western" election monitoring practitioners interpret parallel election monitoring as an international practice fostering authoritarian survival. Moreover, I expect that election monitoring professionals will engage in a binary discursive construction of the

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[67] Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
[68] In this comparativist literature the international sphere consists of largely isolated units that are evaluated as separate political spheres. The implicit assumption is that it is sufficient for the assessment of democracy to analyze the domestic arena since it is the seat of sovereignty.
[69] Lee Morgenbesser, "The Menu of Autocratic Innovation," *Democratization* 27, no. 6 (2020): 1053–72.
[70] Nelli Babayan, "The Return of the Empire? Russia's Counteraction to Transatlantic Democracy Promotion in Its near Abroad," *Democratization* 22, no. 3 (2015): 438–58. Jakob Tolstrup, "Black Knights and Elections in Authoritarian Regimes: Why and How Russia Supports Authoritarian Incumbents in Post-Soviet States." *European Journal of Political Research* 54, no. 4 (2015): 673–90.
[71] Öniş, "The Age of Anxiety: The Crisis of Liberal Democracy in a Post-Hegemonic Global Order," 18–35.
[72] Daniel Deudney and G John Ikenberry, "The Myth of the Autocratic Revival: Why Liberal Democracy Will Prevail," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 1 (2009): 77–93.
[73] Moreover, the term implies a questionable homogeneity and unified agency on the side of the promoter.

international order, while simultaneously rejecting the idea of autocracy promotion as a credible substantial alternative to democracy promotion.

Narratives of "Pseudo", "Zombie" and "Shadow" Monitoring in the Existing Literature

In the literature, parallel election monitoring has been mostly neglected. Only a few authors have actively engaged with the practice and mostly in the context of broader themes. The two renowned election observation experts, Susan D. Hyde and Judith G. Kelley, call the CIS and SCO "pseudo" and "sham" monitors and underline that these missions are entirely controlled by Russia and China.[74] Others identify a rise of "zombie monitors"[75] since the mid-2000s, when the so-called "Color Revolutions" took place and impacted authoritarian survival strategies.[76]

However, most commonly, parallel election monitoring is a subcategory of a broader analysis. Patrick Merloe, for instance, associates the recent authoritarian challenge to election monitoring mostly with the anti-democratic dynamics of disinformation and subversion. He describes how local election monitoring groups are suppressed and international observing missions inhibited or refused, while parallel monitors "spin rosy but fake narratives about what are in fact manipulated election processes".[77] Referring to government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs), individual friendly politicians, and monitoring missions from the Council of Election Experts in Latin America (CEELA), the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), and others, he calls them "bogus groups" that are not credible and should be dismissed.[78]

Alexander Cooley provides a timeline of parallel monitoring and admits that they may be capable of confusing, distracting, and "sowing uncertainty" about election monitoring. He links the issue of parallel election monitoring to regional organizations such as the CIS, SCO,

[74] Susan Hyde and Judith G. Kelley, "The Limits of Election Monitoring: What Independent Observation Can (and Can't) Do," *Foreign Affairs*, June 28, 2011. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2011-06-28/limits-election-monitoring?page=show (last accessed: 05.06.2022).
[75] Christopher Walker and Alexander Cooley, "Vote of the Living Dead," *Foreign Policy*, October 31, 2013. https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/31/vote-of-the-living-dead/ (last accessed: 05.06.2022). Casey, "The Rise of the Zombie Monitors," *The Diplomat*
[76] Cooley attributes the rise of parallel election monitoring to the experiences of the color revolutions. Cooley, "Authoritarianism Goes Global: Countering Democratic Norms," 53.
[77] Merloe, "Authoritarianism Goes Global: Election Monitoring vs. Disinformation," 86
[78] Analyzing the cases of Azerbaijan, Zimbabwe, and Venezuela, he underlines the importance of disinformation and the timing of the publication of election monitoring results in order to "seize control of the narrative" before other missions do. Merloe, "Authoritarianism Goes Global: Election Monitoring vs. Disinformation," 88, 90.

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UNASUR and CEELA and labels them platforms for "zombie election monitors".[79] He discusses the emerging parallel structure of election monitoring by reference to the broader rise of counternorms challenging liberal democracy´s universalism.[80]. In the context of election monitoring, a "broad perception arose that Western democracy promoters were using NGOs as political weapons".[81] According to Cooley, "Zombie monitors try to look like democratic observers, but serve autocratic purposes by pretending that clearly flawed elections deserve clean bills of health".[82] Cooley warns about the disruptive effects of parallel monitoring, since "zombies are not meant to function as perfect substitutes for Western democratic watchdogs" but are instrumental to a "gradual redefinition of the very purpose and role of outside election observation."[83] Therefore, Cooley's interpretation that the norms of election monitoring are redefined from within the liberal discourse is compatible with the proposition of this thesis to understand parallel monitoring as liberal mimicry.

In the context of parallel election monitoring, Kelley refers to a "shadow market"[84] of election observers. Similarly, Maria J. Debre and Lee Morgenbesser label said missions as "shadow election observation groups" using a "mock compliance strategy." [85] They distinguish between "professional observation groups (POGs)" and "shadow election observation groups (SOGs)". They explain the motivation of SOGs in the following way:

> To avoid the higher costs associated with both substantive compliance and noncompliance, autocratic regimes have instead supplanted the identity of the group judging elections and displaced the normative standard being applied.[86]

Again, this description clearly resembles the idea of liberal mimicry, but the authors do not systemize the logic of the practice any further.

While aiming to answer the question "who invites whom," Kelley finds that election monitoring missions have a significantly diverging record of condemning and endorsing elections. Figure 2 suggests, based on limited data from 1975 until 2004, that organizations

[79] Cooley, "Authoritarianism Goes Global: Countering Democratic Norms," 49–63.
[80] Besides the rise of norms on counterterrorism and security in the post 9/11 era and the norms associated with the so-called "traditional values" agenda mainly promoted by Russia, Cooley identifies the appeal to "civilizational diversity" and non-interference as central emerging counternorms. Cooley, "Authoritarianism Goes Global: Countering Democratic Norms," 50-52.
[81] Cooley, "Authoritarianism Goes Global: Countering Democratic Norms," 53.
[82] Cooley, "Authoritarianism Goes Global: Countering Democratic Norms," 55.
[83] Cooley, "Authoritarianism Goes Global: Countering Democratic Norms," 56.
[84] Judith G. Kelley, "The Shadow Market," In *Monitoring Democracy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012).
[85] Maria J. Debre and Lee Morgenbesser, "Out of the Shadows: Autocratic Regimes, Election Observation and Legitimation," *Contemporary Politics* 23, no. 3 (2017): 328–47.
[86] Debre and Morgenbesser, "Out of the Shadows: Autocratic Regimes, Election Observation and Legitimation," 329

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accused of sending "zombie monitors," like the CIS or ECOWAS, were more reluctant to condemn or criticize elections, while others like NDI condemned a large share of their observed cases.[87] Until 2004, for instance, the CIS had, according to this dataset, not condemned a single election. According to Cooley, this trend of diverging assessments has continued and "the CIS observers have offered an assessment opposite to the ODIHR's in every regional election that both have observed, save one—the 2010 balloting that made Viktor Yanukovych president of Ukraine."[88]

Moreover, research on parallel election monitoring has suggested that incumbent governments fearing a negative assessment do not directly escape the norm of inviting international election observers, but rather choose the strategy of appointing a mix of low and high-quality observers to relativize possibly negative assessments.[89] Furthermore, Rick Fawn suggested to understand parallel election observation in the post-Soviet space in terms of political competition, identifying the CIS as a response to the impact of OSCE observation missions during the color revolutions.[90]

In conclusion, this thesis proposes to understand parallel election monitoring as a practice of liberal mimicry, aiming to contest the LIO and its regime of liberal democracy promotion. It can be understood as a fragmenting power-political strategy mostly pioneered by states like Russia who preferably engage regional organizations for this purpose. ´Western` researchers working on the topic mostly dismiss the phenomenon as uncredible monitoring with possibly disruptive effects. Moreover, they show that the assessment patterns of different monitoring institutions diverge significantly. Furthermore, they construct a binary interpretation of "professional" observers and "shadow", "zombie" or "bogus" monitoring groups.

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[87] Important limitations of this data are the limited time scope (1975-2004), in which organizations like the CIS barely started to operate, and the possibility that organizations may choose to mostly monitor more problematic elections (leading to a selection bias). However, the data hints at the possibly of a highly diverging degree of criticism expressed by different monitoring organizations.

[88] Cooley, "Authoritarianism Goes Global: Countering Democratic Norms," 57

[89] Ursula Daxecker and Gerald Schneider, "Electoral Observers: The Implications of Multiple Monitors for Electoral Integrity," In *Advancing Electoral Integrity*, ed. Pippa Norris, Richard W. Frank, and Ferran Martinez i Coma, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). 73-93.

[90] Rick Fawn, "Battle over the Box: International Election Observation Missions, Political Competition and Retrenchment in the Post-Soviet Space," *International Affairs* 82, no. 6 (2006): 1149

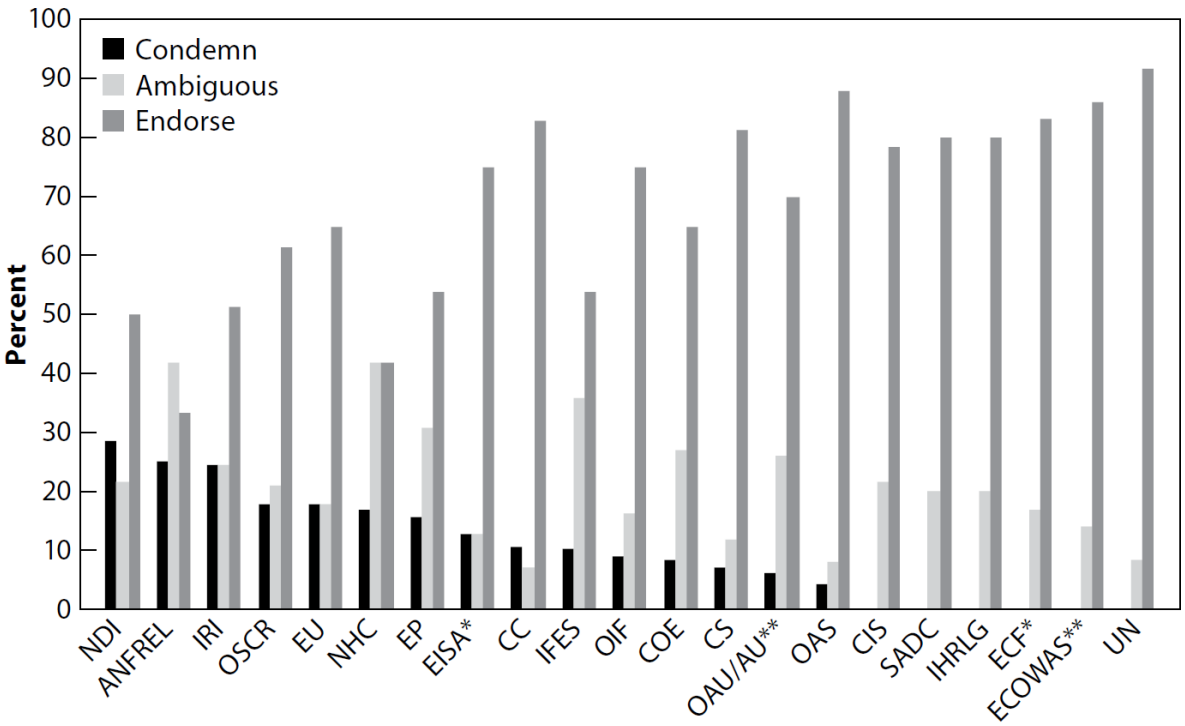

Figure 2 – The distribution of all election assessments by different monitoring groups (1975-2004)[91]

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[91] * = Based on less than 10 observation, ** = Estimations based on news reports, because official reports were not publicly available. Judith G. Kelley, "The Shadow Market," In *Monitoring Democracy*, 52.

Findings: Practice and Meaning of Parallel Election Monitoring

Research Design, Methods, and Data

To answer the research questions arising from the propositions in the previous section, I conducted eight semi-structured expert interviews with practitioners in the field of international election monitoring. The method of data collection was chosen because the objective of this thesis is to capture the motivations, perceptions, and meaning-making processes of election monitoring practitioners as agents of international organizations with regards to parallel election monitoring and the interaction of different missions in the field. Therefore, it is out of the scope of this thesis to assess claims on the quality, professionality, or partiality of election monitoring missions. Its aim is to gather empirical evidence to better understand why, in the view of election monitoring practitioners, parallel election monitoring structures were established and how the differences and similarities of different election monitoring institutions are perceived, constructed, and reproduced.

Expert interviews come with particular methodological challenges relating to access, trust and rapport.[92] Due to election monitoring´s political sensitivity and its key principle of impartiality impacting practitioners, it is particularly challenging to gain access and build trust to interviewees, who are willing to freely share perceptions and impressions of other institutions. Moreover, my own positionality as a graduate student at Central European University (CEU), a generally liberally perceived university, and as an Austrian from a neutral, but "Western" country clearly impacted my research outreach and the perception of me as a researcher in numerous ways. One important arising limitation is the potentially biased access to interviewees through personal networks and institutional links. Since individual interviewees should be understood as providers of a single perspective within a wider diversity within institutions, this selection bias must be carefully considered. However, my data collection strategy aimed at diversifying different outreach strategies and institutions to include a different perceptions from the same institutions, which was particularly successful in the case of the OSCE-ODIHR (4 interviewees).[93]

[92] Robert Mikecz, "Interviewing Elites: Addressing Methodological Issues." *Qualitative Inquiry* 18, no. 6 (2012): 482–93.

[93] Importantly, access to later interviews was further facilitated by snowball-sampling during the fieldwork. This was done by a concluding question about possible references at the end of the interviews.

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The case selection is based on the theoretical questions on parallel monitoring, liberal mimicry, and the existing literature on the practice.[94] Due to the widespread debates among Western scholars of Russia being one of the main sources of contestation of the LIO in recent years,[95] the case of CIS is particularly relevant. While the exact degree of Russian influence in the CIS is unclear, its central status and importance in the organization is undisputed.[96] Therefore, it is fruitful to analyze the case of the CIS since its position as regional organization founded under the leadership of Russia, allows for links to the literature on Russia´s contestation of the LIO.

The interviews were held between April 13, 2022, and May 20, 2022, and were mostly conducted via video-calls of about one hour length. Only one interview was held in person. All interviewees worked or work for international organizations, including OSCE-ODIHR, CIS, EP, and OAS, and have significant experience in election monitoring. They work and worked in the leadership of the election monitoring institutions, as members of the core team of election monitoring missions, or as long- or short-term observers in the field. (Appendix I lists the interviewees).[97] The semi-structured interviews were conducted based on a questionnaire, which was slightly adapted throughout the fieldwork due to inductive insights from previous interviews (see Appendix III).[98] The interviews were conducted and transcribed in English (5)

[94] Originally, a comparative design was intended to compare the cases of Latin America, where UNASUR and CEELA have been subject of prior interview-based studies in the context of election monitoring, and post-communist Europe, where the CIS emerged as major election monitoring actor since the 2000s. However, since access to the field is highly challenging, I was not able to conduct interviews with parallel monitoring institutions in the Latin American context. Therefore, the analysis will mostly focus on post-communist Europe but uses the findings from the OAS interviews to contextualize and contrast.

[95] E.g., Bettiza and Lewis, "Authoritarian Powers and Norm Contestation in the Liberal International Order: Theorizing the Power Politics of Ideas and Identity," 567.

[96] Libman and Obydenkova, "Understanding Authoritarian Regionalism," 157

[97] The interviewees include 4 practitioners with affiliation to the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the OSCE. Three of them were or are part of the Leadership, while one is a reoccurring member of OSCE-ODIHR core teams in the field. For reasons of simplicity, they will be referred to as "OSCE interviewees". Other interviewees were affiliated to the OAS (one short/long term observer who also observed for EU missions, one member of the Venezuelan delegation to the OAS (parallel government), while the parallel government of Juan Guiadó expressed a positive view of the OAS, the Venezuelan government of Nicolás Maduro is highly critical of the OAS.), and the CIS Interparliamentary Assembly (one member of the Leadership). Moreover, I interviewed Viola von Cramon-Taubadel, a German Member of European Parliament (MEP) for the Greens/EFA group, who was in the core team of several EU election monitoring missions. On her request, her name is displayed explicitly while others are, in accordance with the used research consent form (see Appendix II), anonymized.

[98] They contained five main segments: 1) Background and Career Path in Election Monitoring, 2) Purpose and Criteria of Election Monitoring, 3) Relevance and Comparison of Parallel Institutions, 4) Interactions with and Perception of Parallel Election Monitoring Missions, and 5) Contestation, Impact & Legitimacy of Parallel Election Monitoring.

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and German (3).[99] In the following analysis, the individual interviewees will be referred to as P1-P8 (see Appendix I).[100]

Based on the collected data from the interviews, I conducted an inductive thematic analysis by creating codes from the transcripts that were condensed into four themes.[101] The analysis is based on a constructivist epistemology and is interested in the intersubjective meaning-making processes, perceptions, and framings of the analyzed discourse.

Interinstitutional Relationships: Partners or Competitors?

Considering the high number of international and domestic actors, Kelley describes the international regime on election monitoring as a complex regime.[102] Therefore, to understand the meaning and practice of parallel monitoring, it is crucial to analyze how practitioners perceive different election monitoring institutions and how established monitoring institutions and parallel monitoring institutions relate to each other.

First, parallel monitoring institutions are, overall, considered relevant actors by OSCE and EP interviewees. After they were asked about who the relevant actors are, all interviewees from the OSCE and EP brought up the parallel monitoring institution CIS, while two considered the SCO (P4, P7). OAS interviewees similarly referred to UNASUR as a relevant actor (P2, P3). Most referred to the size and geographical spread of institutions to determine relevance. However, most frequently (and usually initially), interviewees referred to institutions from the core group of the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers[103] as the most relevant monitoring institutions.

Second, OSCE, OAS, and EP interviewees do not perceive parallel election monitors as partners and underline non-cooperation, while the CIS interviewee identifies a "good

[99] For reasons of anonymization, I only provide the translated English version of direct quotations. I am fully responsible for any mistakes in translating the original German quotations.
[100] In a few cases (e.g., in concrete scene descriptions), reference to individual interviews is deliberately left out for reasons of anonymization.
[101] Following Michelle E. Kiger and Lara Varpio, based on a theory-led coding framework, I first created codes referring to semantic and latent meanings from the data of the interviews. Initially, 60 codes were created when coding and analyzing the transcripts of the interviews. In the following step of data reduction, I created overarching themes and reviewed them regarding the coherence, support in the data, and precision, before drafting narrative descriptions of the themes, which are laid out underneath. Besides the inductive coding, previous research, my propositions, and the discussed theories informed a small number of codes. Michelle E. Kiger and Lara Varpio. "Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data: AMEE Guide No. 131," *Medical Teacher* 42, no. 8 (2020): 846–54.
[102] Kelley, "The More the Merrier? The Effects of Having Multiple International Election Monitoring Organizations," 59–64.
[103] "Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers," *OSCE*. October 27, 2005. https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/c/215556.pdf (last accessed: 05.06.2022).

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relationship" between the institutions (P1). In the OSCE region, if they observe at all, most of the international signatory institutions of the Declaration of Principles work together to give a first evaluation of the election process in the form of a preliminary statement. This coordination of different institutions leads to the critical assessment of the CIS interviewee that these coordinated statements represent the limited "Western view" on how the elections were held (P1). All interviewees from the OSCE and EP described the relationship with other monitoring institutions as mostly complimentary partnerships and non-competing.[104] Simultaneously they excluded the SCO and CIS as non-cooperative parallel monitors from this perception.[105] In line with other interviews, one OSCE interviewee claimed that the relationship with the CIS is in fact "non-existent" (P4).

In contrast, the CIS interviewee claimed that the CIS has a "good relationship" with the mentioned institutions and viewed them as complimentary actors (P1). Moreover, the dimension of information sharing, and mutual help was underlined.[106] This divergence in perceptions confirmed my expectations that the mimicking agent aims to be a cooperative equal, appealing to liberal norms of peaceful cooperation, while simultaneously criticizing the ´Western´ positionality of supposedly universal election observation. One interviewee from OSCE-ODIHR confirmed that the CIS officials are the "drivers behind the few meetings we do have", while their missions would meet the CIS only for political and diplomatic reasons, having instructions from their headquarters (P7).[107] In contrast, the SCO is seen as less politically important, which is why one interviewee claimed that "nobody wants to waste their time on seeing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization" (P4).

Third, the mutual attribution of relevance and affirmation of partnership by different, mostly European and US institutions of election observation underlines that there is a degree of unity of the democracy promotion regime of the LIO. This is also reflected in the career paths of the interviewees, who often work or worked for several of the mentioned institutions, for

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[104] While the interviewees stressed the complimentary and cooperative character of the EP, EU, Council of Europe and OSCE, the interviewed MEP (P8) revealed certain elements of interinstitutional competition and tension in the process of finding a common European evaluation.

[105] Others also referred to the Arab League and Islamic States, while OAS-related interviewees described the UNASUR as relevant non-cooperative institution.

[106] This difference in constructing the narrative of a relationship was interpreted by OSCE interviewees as an attempt to draw on the legitimacy of OSCE by claiming to be on an equal level and "pretending" to be cooperative (P4, P7).

[107] Another OSCE interviewee (P6) underlined the initial efforts in the 2000s to mutually invite each other in good faith, which was largely disappointed by mutual accusations and lack of transparency by the CIS in the years that followed, leading to a rather distant relationship today. The continued need for meetings suggests that diplomatic pressure to cooperate with the CIS prevails and minimal collaboration is seen as necessary to remain a reputation of impartiality.

instance for missions by both the EU and the OAS (P3). One interviewee described the interinstitutional relations among those institutions with the word "cross-fertilization", and underlined the widespread exchange of staff, methods, ideas, and their good informal relationship (P5). Therefore, despite its character of a complex regime, overall, the LIO-related election monitoring institutions are perceived as highly interconnected and cooperative, in stark contrast to the CIS and SCO, who are framed as outsiders to the process. Nevertheless, due to its institutional form as regional organization, the CIS enjoys a special status and legitimacy among those parallel observers who are not cooperating with the LIO-related institutions.[108]

In conclusion, most commonly, regional parallel monitoring institutions like the CIS, SCO, and UNASUR were brought up as relevant actors by the OSCE, OAS and EP interviewees themselves, even if not as the most relevant institutions. They framed their general relationship with the parallel monitoring institutions as minimal and mostly in negative and dismissive terms, while other signatory institutions of the Declaration of Principles were considered complimentary partners. In contrast, the CIS interviewee narrated the relationship as a partnership with the institutions, which represent what he calls the "Western" view, while simultaneously criticizing their political entanglement (P1).

Are there different models? Mimicry and the Construction of Difference

To assess the main proposition of this thesis, that the emerging practice of non-cooperative parallel monitoring represents a form of liberal mimicry challenging the LIO, one needs to establish how interviewees discursively construct (parallel) election monitoring. The interviews showed that there are substantial differences in narratives of the methodological focus and purpose of election observation, while most OSCE and CIS interviewees simultaneously downplayed or denied the existence of an alternative model of election observation.

Generally, interviewees identified the main purpose of election monitoring as contributing to strengthen and preserve free and fair elections as the main component of liberal

[108] One core team member of many OSCE-ODIHR (P5) contrasted the CIS in this context with other individual and NGO-related monitors that the OSCE is not cooperating with, because "the CIS is of course something special since it is an intergovernmental organization" and gains additional domestic legitimacy by being perceived as independent from domestic actors. While most interviewees were not explicitly commenting on the institutional format of CIS, they underlined, that overall international and regional observers play a special role in election monitoring due to their perceived impartiality.

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democracy. Notably, three OSCE interviews linked election monitoring to universal human rights (P4, P5, P6).[109] Importantly, all interviewees from OSCE, EP, and CIS indicated that one of the primary purposes of election monitoring is to provide feedback for the electoral commissions to improve future elections, having a positive long-term impact on election management.[110] Moreover, the interviewed MEP mentioned the importance of "exposing dirty deals," hinting at the prevention of election fraud (P8). This objective was also identified by one core team member of the OSCE, who claimed, however, that, while this was one of the most important goals in the 1990s, it is "less and less the case, because the times when 500 ballot papers were simply stuffed into the ballot box are over almost everywhere" (P5).

Overall, several OSCE interviewees identified an important shift of election monitoring in the late 1990s. One former member of the leadership of OSCE-ODIHR explained the post-Cold War era in the following way:

> It was a transition in a political sense, which is why election observation also had a bit more of a political dimension to it. It was more like the Western world welcoming the new members. It was more like, okay, ´you got elected and let us politically confirm that you now belong to the club of the democratically elected leaders´. (P4)

Then, in the late 1990s, election monitoring changed since the international community "needed someone to develop a methodology", which led to the development of the OSCE-ODIHR methodology in the late 1990s (P6). It was a shift that one interviewee described as a "change from a political exercise into a bit more of a technical exercise, a legalistic technical human rights monitoring exercise, which is a bit more technocratic", [111] claiming that "ODIHR is the champion of the technical approach"[112], while negatively contrasting it with the former, outdated "political approach" (P4).

Asked about the criteria for good election monitoring, all OSCE interviewees described the transparency of methods as one of the most important criteria, which is meant to hold the observers accountable.[113] Moreover, according to these interviewees, election monitoring

[109] One interviewee claimed that "election observation is definitely one of the mechanisms for human rights monitoring." (P4)
[110] They also agreed on the view that election monitoring assessments should include a segment on the implementation of previous recommendations on electoral processes.
[111] This new approach manifested itself, e.g., by the creation of public OSCE-ODIHR handbooks on election observation, laying out standards for practicing election observation. All OSCE interviewees underlined the importance of constantly updating and improving the methodology, e.g., by adding handbooks on persons with disabilities, the participation of women, or by adapting new methods for monitoring social media.
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[113] This includes the publication of election reports and handbooks for observers.

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should be based on international commitments, such as the Declaration of Principles,[114] and have an appropriately tailored mission size, geographic spread, and long-term observers in the field. In addition, most interviewees referred to the value of impartiality and emphasized the need for diverse observers, a wide range of meetings in the field, non-intervention in the electoral process and the gradual evaluation of the quality of elections.[115] Interestingly, most OSCE interviewees and one OAS interviewee particularly stressed the underlying statistical method of their institutions, randomly assigning polling stations to make statistically significant claims for the whole country, if a sufficient number of observers is present (P3, P5, P6, P7).[116]

The OSCE and OAS interviewees considered their institutions particularly well equipped due to their access to highly qualified technical experts and long-standing experience in the field. One OSCE interviewee described the "institutional knowledge and the capacity" (P4) through "400 missions in 25 years" (P6), which makes them particularly credible.[117] In this context, informal exchanges, information-sharing, and thorough preparation for the process of observation were considered important. One interviewee described that the OSCE is "like a huge family where people exchange experiences also in a very informal manner" (P4).[118]

Having discussed how election monitoring is constructed by OSCE and OAS interviewees, the question remains on whether interviewees identify a different model in the case of non-cooperating parallel monitoring institutions such as the CIS. Importantly, interviewees from both the OSCE and the CIS stressed the link between the OSCE-ODIHR´s election monitoring activities since the 1990s and the establishment of CIS election monitoring activities in the 2000s. The CIS interviewee described the establishment of the International Institute for Monitoring Democracy Development (IIMDD), which is part of the CIS Interparliamentary Assembly (CIS-IPA) since 2006 and does "almost the same thing as ODIHR", as a "response to the work of the ODIHR" (P1). Moreover, the interviewee claimed that the work in the field for the observing parliamentarians is "more or less the same" as for

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[114] "Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers."
[115] In contrast to a simplified binary evaluation of "free and fair" versus "non-democratic"
[116] The OAS/EU interviewee (P3) contrasted OAS´s statistical method with a more "qualitative method" of the EU.
[117] Most interviewees claimed that the OSCE method was an important pioneer in the field of election monitoring, inspiring several institutions, such as the EU and OAS to adapt their own methodology. One interviewee from the OSCE and one OAS-related interviewee called their own institutional method as "gold standard" (P7, P2) of election monitoring.
[118] However, most interviewees referred to certain differences between the methods and pre-monitoring processes of different cooperating institution. E.g., the EU is only monitoring outside its territory and tries to establish a memorandum of understanding with the host government, while the OSCE is relying on the commitment to the principle of reciprocity among OSCE member states.

the OSCE (P1). Similarly, all OSCE interviewees said the explanation for the methodology by CIS officials was usually that CIS would use the same, or almost the same methodology as OSCE-ODIHR.

One OSCE interviewee particularly underlined the quality of the legal framework of CIS election monitoring, subscribing to similar liberal-democratic norms like the OSCE: "The CIS convention on the democratic elections is actually a pretty good document and it's legally binding." (P4) However, according to the perception of this interviewee, they do not assess elections based on this convention, claiming that "they are not guardians of the standards which they have in their own organization – it is ridiculous" (P4). On the question why they would then set standards in the first place, the OSCE interviewee interpreted it in the following way:

> For that alternative message to be at least somewhat credible they need to create the appearances of this coming from an important source and that's where you know the CIS is basically sitting in the tracks which are set by the ODIHR (…) if ODIHR started, I don't know, wearing special hats, CIS, on the next mission, would be doing the same because it's just about appearing to be as credible as the OSCE (P4)

The other OSCE and EP interviewees shared the assessment that the CIS would not have an original methodological model but continue to claim to live up to OSCE-ODIHR standards while simultaneously not applying them.[119] Regardless of the actual degree of compliance or non-compliance with these norms on the ground, which cannot be determined in this paper, this interpretation of the events is in line with the proposition of the CIS being an actor of liberal mimicry, appealing to established liberal-democratic normative discourse of election observation, while simultaneously criticizing and changing established norms and practices.

However, does CIS fill the norm of election monitoring with new meaning, leading to a *de facto* new model of election observation? E.g., in the case of Latin America, the idea of "accompanying elections" in a minimally intervening and non-publicized way instead of "observing" elections in a public way is explicitly narrated by UNASUR and governments which are critical of OAS election observation (P2). In the European context, the interview with the CIS practitioner as well as certain OSCE and OAS interviews allow for the careful conclusion that there are indeed substantial differences in the narratives of the foundational premises of CIS election observation.

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[119] One OSCE interviewee referred to the strong underlying norm to have a methodology: "They have to pretend that they have some kind of methodology because you cannot be pretending to be a serious observer without pretending that you have a methodology" (P4).

First, in contrast to OSCE norms, the primary purpose of CIS election observation was framed by the CIS interviewee and others, as evaluating elections based on national legislation on electoral procedures (P1, P5). References to international standards and treaties are secondary or, according to two OSCE interviewees, non-existent (P4, P6). One OSCE interviewee claimed that this "turned the focus upside down", since OSCE missions give priority to "OSCE commitments, international standards, and international best practices, and only then national legislation" (P5). The interviewee from the Venezuelan delegation to the OAS linked a similar focus in the case of UNASUR to the principle of non-intervention, which gives priority to national self-determination over international treaties (P2).

Second, one of the most centrally articulated purposes of election monitoring for the CIS is the provision of legitimacy for the authorities. The CIS interviewee underlined that "the authorities need external observation to support their legitimacy" and that "our opinions, our conclusions are also support for the countries themselves" (P1). However, also the people demand such legitimacy through election monitoring, which is why overly critical evaluations by organizations like OSCE lead to a defensive attitude:

> If you're always told that you're doing that badly, you are not right, you are incorrect, your leaders are illegitimate and so forth, the reaction will be isolation. If you criticize me always, if you think that my leader, my president, is bad because he's elected for the third time or fourth time without bearing in mind our mentality, our history, OK, thank you very much I don't need to have anything to do with you. (P1)

Importantly, the reluctance to be too critical linked to the overarching importance of the provision of legitimacy for government is interpreted by OSCE and OAS observers as "pro-government" bias (P2, P5).

Third, the CIS interviewee underlined that the OSCE does not understand distinct histories and cultures in a hierarchical political context, resulting in a lack of local and regional ownership (P1).[120] The foundation of CIS was motivated by the perceived narrow understanding of election monitoring of the OSCE. The CIS interviewee explained the reasons for CIS´s involvement:

> It [CIS election monitoring] was some kind of response - that means that we saw that the opinions are not objective, and they are influenced by specific countries,

[120] Interestingly, two OSCE interviewees discussed the issue of local ownership by bringing up the important role of domestic observers (P6, P7). Domestic monitors have a more direct access to institutions, can directly file complaints and have a broader coverage. According to a member of the leadership of OSCE-ODIHR, domestic observers are central actors: "International election observation is ideally only a complement to national election observation (…) nobody knows a country as well as the country itself." (P6)

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> maybe even some mindsets, you know, that this here is good, this is bad for democracy, this is not true democracy, this is true democracy. (P1)

According to the CIS interviewee, the OSCE does not understand sufficiently the local culture, historical context, and political situation. It is "almost always clear" that the OSCE-ODIHR arrives with the predetermined intention to create negative reports on the results of their monitoring (P1), while the CIS is better equipped:

> The CIS understands their needs, understands their actual situation - and maybe we can think that we are more objective in assessing the way they develop their democracy (…) due to our experience and our knowledge and expertise of the countries. (P1)

Fourth, the CIS interviewee expressed skeptical views on the technical view on election monitoring formulated by the OSCE-ODIHR and favored a broader political evaluation focusing on the impact on the final result (P1). From the interviewee´s point of view, politicians should be prioritized in election monitoring over technical experts since they are more legitimate and have a higher degree of authority, having been elected and having gone through electoral processes themselves. The technical experts, in this case of the CIS-IMDD, should "serve the CIS-IPA and CIS executive body," claiming that they should provide them with material for the assessment without concludingly assessing themselves. While not all election monitoring institutions disagree on the primacy of parliamentarians as observers (notably, the parliamentary assemblies),[121] this is a stark contrast to the view of election monitoring as primarily a technical exercise, as framed in the OSCE interviews.[122] The CIS interviewee described the differences between OSCE and CIS:

> They [OSCE-ODIHR] see all the technical things but the main thing which we assess is whether these or that deficiencies or technical shortcomings can affect or provide impact on the results of the election. (P1)

The CIS interviewee went on to contrast the focus on "minor things" and the approach to "try to find not what is good but what is bad" by the OSCE with the "general picture" provided by the CIS. One OSCE interviewee confirmed the repeated narrative by CIS officials of assessing the "impact on the final result" as most important parameter (P6).

In conclusion, while claiming to share the institutional purpose and method of the OSCE, important differences in the narrated model of the CIS can be identified. Discourses of

[121] In the context of the EP, many interviewees agreed that, overall, parliamentarians tend to be more critical.
[122] OSCE interviewees usually criticized the sole reliance on parliamentarians to make assessments due to the small amount of time and the lack of technical expert knowledge of parliamentarians and conclude that this results in a lack of resources to comprehensively assess elections.

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local ownership, readjusting asymmetric international hierarchies, pluralism, non-interventionism, national sovereignty, and criticism of technocratic democracy promotion, link to established "Western" pluralist, liberal, and decolonial criticisms of LIO-related democracy promotion efforts.[123] This two-sided dynamic of both overidentifying with established liberal-democratic election monitoring norms, while simultaneously embracing a set of premises linking to criticisms of established election monitoring in addition to a reluctant practice of condemning electoral results, points towards the use of liberal mimicry as form of contestation by the CIS.

Practices and Interactions in the Field: Narratives of Dismissal, Minimal Exchange, and Competitive Communication

Having discussed the interinstitutional relationships and the differences in the ideational models, this section will discuss the perception of parallel election monitors in the field. Overall, the interviews show that parallel monitors are mainly isolated from established observers in the field, seen as competitors for media presence, while at the same time being dismissed as non-professional, politically motivated and partial non-observers.

Overall, OSCE and EP interviewees did not recognize the practice of CIS observation as actual professional election monitoring. One OSCE interviewee claimed that they "come with a predefined purpose of white washing bad elections" and that "they are fake, and everybody knows it" (P4). The same interviewee went on to dismiss CIS observers as "clowns" (P4).[124] The interviewed MEP labelled the activities of the SCO and CIS in the field as "measures to support being elected"[125] (P8), another OSCE interviewee as "political procedure" (P6). Moreover, some interviewees even suggested that the CIS may not do long-term observation in the field at all (P4, P5). One interviewee explains that "I don't remember our people [long-term observers] ever seeing anyone from the CIS." (P5), implying that the CIS report is purely politically motivated (P4).[126] Another OSCE interviewee underlined that CIS

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[123] Schuetze, "´Democracy Promotion´ and Moral Authority," In: *Promoting Democracy, Reinforcing Authoritarianism: US and European Policy in Jordan* , 1-35.
[124] While the other OSCE interviewees used much more moderate descriptions, most agreed that their actual practice cannot be described as election monitoring.
[125] In this case, the German original quotation ("wahlunterstützende Maßnahme") is slightly ambivalent. However, the proposed translation was chosen due to the clear context of discussing the intention to support incumbent leaders to stay in power through parallel election monitoring.
[126] In this context, an OSCE interviewee claimed that "once in one of the Central Asian countries they issued the report which was a total copy paste from a neighboring country" (P4).

observers are, in contrast to OSCE observers, directly guided by the electoral commission of the host government:

> They are often guided in their observation. In the sense that they often have programs provided for them, transportation provided for them from the election commission, and they allow themselves to be directed to certain polling stations. (P7)

However, accusations of being partial in the field are mutual. According to the CIS interviewee, the parliamentarians of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and the OSCE would often agree on the observation with the CIS (P1). However, the conclusions diverge since the OSCE-ODIHR dominates the assessment, providing a one-sided view due to pre-judgments of democratic deficits that are desired by certain "Western" actors.

Nevertheless, how do OSCE and CIS missions interact in the field? As laid out before, OSCE interviewees insist on the very limited nature of interactions, mostly referring to events held by the electoral commission of the host government and, most commonly, two bilateral formal meetings in the field, one of them on election day. However, those are framed as being mostly initiated by CIS and as a pure "formality" (P7). One OSCE interviewee explained it in the following way: "We're both in town [CIS and ODIHR]- let's pretend we actually tried to listen to each other. It is a fake meeting" (P4).[127] In contrast, the CIS interviewee claimed that the exchange of views in the meetings with the "partners" from OSCE-ODIHR is productive for both sides, even inspiring certain additions in the final documents on both sides (P1). The OSCE interviewees unanimously denied that observations for the evaluation are considered for the final assessment, stating that "we could not credibly have any coordination on that" (P7). Besides formal high-level meetings, the informal interaction in the field is mostly perceived to be limited (P4, P5, P6, P7).[128] However, these interactions may be more frequent on the level of short-term observers on election day.[129] In contrast to the OSCE interviewees, the CIS interviewee framed the interactions in the field in a distinct way:

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[127] In contrast to the CIS, the SCO was barely perceived present in the field and most interviewees were unable to recall any interactions with SCO staff, while they still "do the PR" of their evaluation, as one OSCE interviewee put it (P4).

[128] While observers from different Western-European election monitoring institutions regularly meet and interact informally in their free time, also exchanging views on observed matters, informal interactions with the CIS are narrated to be the absolute exception, while they supposedly do not take place at all with the SCO.

[129] Since the interviewees mostly were members of the leadership and core team, this cannot be further explored with the available data. However, for instance, the OAS/EU interviewee (P3) explained that informal interactions between short term observers of UNASUR and OAS are rather frequent and depend on individual attitudes of observers, while the leadership may have a more critical view.

> We [OSCE and CIS] have very long, also informal relations, so we know the people (…) when we have the same mission - we go to the same country - for sure we get in contact with each other on our working level. (P1)

One reoccurring pattern of interaction in the field identified by the interviewees is a competitive communication environment. One OSCE interviewee underlines the significant differences in the salience of reports depending on the host country (P4). While in Georgia and Albania, for instance, the joint press conferences of ODIHR, PACE, EP, and CPA are live streamed and extremely visible, it is a different situation in some other countries:

> In countries like Belarus, Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan, the press conference doesn't even get mentioned - it's never mentioned on TV, or it is mentioned in a way that there is a sort of a chopped up half sentence. (P4)

In the latter countries, CIS evaluation would get a much broader coverage in the media. Two OSCE interviewees also discussed the timing of preliminary statements directly after the elections (P4, P7). While there is no coordination between the institutions, one OSCE interviewee explained that: "CIS normally just waits until we set ours [press conference to communicate the preliminary findings] and then they do it an hour or two earlier" (P7).[130]

According to one interviewee[131], the communication of every institution, being just one among many diverse international observing groups in the field, is extremely important to be able to relativize critical findings. The interviewee gave an example in which four different representatives of monitoring institutions were invited to the head of state of a post-Soviet country after an election. Two of them were international pro-government representatives of NGOs, one from the CIS, and one from OSCE-ODIHR. While the two NGO representatives were overarchingly praising the quality of the elections, the CIS representative claimed that "they have seen irregularities, but they did not impact the results." The OSCE-ODIHR representative underlined that the OSCE mission observed numerous severely problematic elements that would inhibit democratic elections. When the head of state thanked the observers for their elaborations, the door opened, and media representatives and TV teams were given access. The head of state subsequently reported to the journalists that he has just met with international observers and that "all [observing groups] but one were actually quite satisfied" with the elections. This story exemplifies how discourses of pluralisms and diversity can contribute to relativizing critical findings in the context of election monitoring, as discussed in

[130] OSCE interviewees denied that this was a competition they would engage in, underlining that " ODIHR will never sacrifice the quality of its work just to be the first".
[131] For reasons of anonymization, I exceptionally refrain from referring to the specific interview.

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the literature by Daxecker and Schneider.[132] The critical evaluation becomes only one of many different "reality-making scripts,"[133] while all observers claim to engage with the same norms.

In conclusion, election monitors from the OSCE and EP dismiss parallel monitors from the CIS and SCO and claim that they do not actually engage in election observation, but support host governments. In line with the literature on "zombie monitors," some interviewed practitioners accused them of being "fake," unprofessional, politically influenced, partial observers, and even "clowns," implicitly constructing a binary between professional, impartial liberal-democratic and illiberal election monitoring. The degree of formal and informal interaction is described in diverging ways by CIS and OSCE interviewees. This points towards the double dynamic of overidentification and simultaneous competition by the mimicking actor discussed above. Importantly, a competition between parallel observers and established observers for media coverage takes different shapes in different countries but includes the timing of the statements and the question of communicating CIS and other parallel observers as pluralist, equal groups of election monitoring.

Challenging the LIO? The Intentions and Impact of Parallel Election Monitoring

Having discussed the relationships, models, and interactions in the field, the question remains how parallel election monitoring impacts democracy promotion and the LIO more broadly. Overall, many interviewees tended to downplay the effects of parallel monitoring while simultaneously identifying it as a practice intended to relativize critical evaluations and legitimize questionable elections. Parallel monitoring can be complemented by other strategies of delegitimizing election monitoring and may, consequently, result in fostering non-democratic tendencies.[134] Overall, the interviewees´ interpretations of the intentions and meanings of parallel monitoring are in line with the main proposition of liberal mimicry.

Generally, CIS parallel election monitoring is legitimized based on established criticisms of election monitoring, partly building on self-criticisms expressed by some of the

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[132] Daxecker and Schneider, "Electoral Observers: The Implications of Multiple Monitors for Electoral Integrity," In *Advancing Electoral Integrity*, 73-93.
[133] Burai, "Parody as Norm Contestation: Russian Normative Justifications in Georgia and Ukraine and Their Implications for Global Norms," 67–77.
[134] Such as direct hurdles to send an observing mission and the practice of sending individual politicians and setting up ad hoc NGOs.

OSCE and EP interviewees themselves (P1, P4, P5, P8).[135] Moreover, as discussed above, interviewees of the CIS and the OSCE suggested that dynamics of imitation and responsive intentions and strategies of authoritarian survival were the main drivers of setting up CIS election monitoring activities in the 2000s (P1, P4, P7).[136]

However, what are the effects of parallel monitoring on the LIO-related democracy promotion norms? According to the CIS interviewee, the presence of parallel monitors has a positive effect on the field of election monitoring since it increases pluralism (P1). It allows citizens to hear different views: "The truth is usually somewhere in between - between the extremes" (P1). Having various evaluations makes it so that, "you can compare them, do benchmarking, and make your own personal conclusion" (P1). According to the CIS interviewee, no evaluation is superior, but represent different perspectives: "They [CIS assessments] are not better than others but we just take into account some other factors that the Europeans do not take into account." (P1)

In contrast, all interviewees from the OSCE and EP evaluate the activities of the CIS as harmful for the practice of election observation. One OSCE interviewee interpreted the intention of CIS observation as trying to "frustrate" OSCE observers, relativizing their assessments (P7). The interviewee even interprets attempts to frame the CIS's likeness to OSCE as a strategy of influencing the OSCE by giving new meaning to norms:

> I think they do that [initiating contact and claiming to use the same methods] to present that they're more similar than different in order to contribute to the argument that we [OSCE] should also consider doing things more the way they do it. (P7)

However, even though that CIS parallel observation may cause certain "domino effects" (P7) by confusing the population about electoral observation, the interviewee considers these efforts as largely unsuccessful:

> I don´t think we've seen it in a long time that an election process might be challenged so much that the CIS´s judgement would have been the deciding factor whether or not to overturn or completely negate an election process - it is more about how the state might use it to justify not addressing our recommendations. (P7)

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[135] For instance, political entanglements and tensions between "Western" institutions as well as the "Caviar diplomacy" scandal in the Council of Europe, were repeated themes of self-criticism among OSCE and EP interviewees.

[136] The interpretation of IMDD as a "response to the work of ODIHR" underlines this.

In contrast, the interviewed MEP claimed that "in many countries, this is actually a successful strategy" since it blurs the line between critical observation and non-critical reports to an extent, that citizens might be confused (P8). The OSCE interviewees agreed that parallel election monitoring by the CIS and individual invited politicians ("invited guests") are "attempts to relativize election observation results" (P6) and are intended to be a "tool to counter" (P7) and "neutralize" (P5) or "undermine" (P7) OSCE observation. One OSCE interviewee went on to claim that it "discredits election observation" more generally, but the effects for ODIHR are "not very dramatic" since its reputation as most credible institution remains intact (P4). Overall, the interpretations given by the OSCE practitioners, and the MEP are in line with the conceptual assumptions of liberal mimicry as a fragmenting power-political strategy of low intensity, which disrupts from inside the normative discourse rather than openly challenging the norm by proposing a new norm.

Furthermore, OSCE and EP interviewees linked the work of the CIS to broader attempts of undermining the observation of elections. One OSCE interviewee underlined the simultaneous tendency to "harass and oppress" domestic observers, who are more vulnerable to governmental authority (P6). Moreover, OSCE interviewees identified an increasing tendency of inviting individual politicians and government-organized nongovernmental organization (GONGOs).[137] The interviewed MEP underlined this perception by criticizing the activities of certain individual MEPs who observe elections independently and have a "propensity to favor one's own partner parties."[138]

Several interviewees also discussed the role of Russia in shaping the contestation of election monitoring (P4, P6, P8). While most interviewees referred to Russia only in the context of other measures of obstruction, one drew a clear link to the CIS: "CIS is a puppet of Russia anyways. There is no such entity as the CIS. It's Russia." (P4) Asked about the role of Russia in the CIS, the CIS interviewee stressed the focus on "consensus" in the decision making of the CIS and that Russian influence is there, but not very visible:

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[137] One OSCE interviewee sarcastically labelled them "invited guests": "Invited guest are normally friendly parliamentarians either from friendly countries or invested parliamentarians that are friendly from other countries and election management bodies from friendly countries and then these other smaller observers that are very friendly mixing with them. And then there are programs for this whole group, from receptions all through the weekend to where they go – from start to stop they are truly treated as guests." (P7)

[138] One OSCE interviewee gave an example of such a former British parliamentarian observing the elections in Kazakhstan as an individual, publicly endorsing the election. Another OSCE interviewee explained his perception of their purpose like that: "They would come to the country, get dined and wined, supplied with all sorts of gifts, material and the immaterial, and then their task would be to show their face on TV and look very Western - it's not needed for them to have any idea about the election."

> Russia plays a bigger role than maybe other countries - but it's the objective reality because Russia has the biggest contribution. Then it has the most influence in bilateral relations with all the countries that comprise the CIS. (…) obviously there is an influence but it's never prevailing, it's never shown. (P1)

Lastly, some interviewees reflected on whether the obstruction election monitoring missions by countries like Russia will lead to an increasing replacement of the OSCE by the CIS (P4, P6, P7).[139] While most other interviewees did not understand the development as increasing replacement, one OSCE interviewee expressed concerns about the future:

> I expect this to continue because the polarization is continuing. I don't think that Russia will be very willing to do welcome observers in the near future but there will be these parallel clowns - but they won't be parallel, they will be the only ones. (P4)

The CIS interviewee confirmed that the circumstances may have become more challenging, but CIS has to work under the same conditions and compensates by "remote monitoring":

> The local authorities, they need someone from outside who will support their legitimacy. If European organizations are not going to do that - ok - that will be done, maybe, by CIS. (P1)

In conclusion, parallel election monitoring by CIS and the SCO is understood by OSCE and EP interviewees as an effort to discredit, frustrate, and delegitimize other election monitoring missions. Moreover, the role of Russia in the CIS, individual "invited guests" as parallel observers, and the replacement of monitors through the CIS, were related perceptions brought up by interviewees in the context of the impact of parallel monitoring. The discrediting effect by strongly appealing to liberal- democratic and pluralist norms, but reaching different interpretations about the conclusions, confirms the proposed interpretation of parallel election monitoring as practice of liberal mimicry, fragmenting democracy promotion norms of the LIO.

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[139] Due to the limitation of the number of observers, late invitations, and Visa-problems, ODIHR missions were cancelled – for instance, in the Russian presidential elections of 2008.

Conclusion and Outlook

This paper explores the emerging practice of international parallel election monitoring by regional organizations like the CIS, UNASUR and SCO, which are often accused of being reluctant to take a critical stance on elections. To make sense of the intentions and impact of parallel monitoring, I propose the concept of liberal mimicry as a strategy of contestation of the LIO by fragmenting established norms of democracy promotion.

By interviewing practitioners from OSCE-ODIHR, EP, OAS, and CIS, I analyze the meaning-making processes and perceptions of election monitoring practitioners with regards to parallel monitoring. The conducted thematic analysis confirms the proposition of understanding parallel election monitoring as a practice of mimicry. The ´Western` election monitoring practitioners frame the relationship with the CIS as "non-existent", while the CIS interviewee underlined narratives of partnership, similarity, and pluralism. In the field, CIS and SCO observers are perceived as competitors over media coverage in the host country. Besides discourses of antagonization and discreditation, I find that CIS election monitoring narratives prioritize national legislation over international commitments, emphasize the provision of legitimacy for governments, claim to have better knowledge of CIS countries, and are critical of the technical approach of the ODIHR, stressing the "general picture" and the impact on the final results. The fragmenting impact of parallel election monitoring may increasingly relativize assessments made by other institutions.

The main challenge for future research on parallel election monitoring is access to data and to parallel monitoring practitioners. The limited access to the latter is a major limitation of this paper, which should be carefully considered when assessing its scope. The biggest quantitative dataset on election monitoring, which allows for further analyses on the observable patterns of evaluation and differences between organizations, has the major limitation that it does not go beyond 2004. If future research can overcome these data limitations, it should complement the narrative description with comparative data on election assessments by different organizations. Moreover, besides regional parallel monitoring institutions, which I mainly focused on in this paper, the rise of individual "invited guests", briefly discussed in the last section, should be addressed by future research, since their more diffuse, transnational character allows for more diverse practices and was used extensively in recent years.

Moreover, the dominant focus on senior staff in international organizations and the positionality-related selection bias in the outreach for interviewees are further important

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limitation of this paper. Future research should also investigate more thoroughly the interactions and perceptions of short-term observers in the field and aim at diversifying outreach strategies and methods. One of my interviews suggested, that discourses of antagonization may be significantly less prevalent among short-term observers, which should be investigated systematically (P3). Furthermore, by focusing on parallel monitoring institutions, the competition and ambiguous interaction among ´Western´ election monitoring institutions were largely neglected, even though one interview suggested that this may be a highly fruitful field of investigation (P8).

The increasing contestation of democracy promotion through parallel election observation may hint at difficulties of sustaining liberal democracy´s narratives of universality and links to the literature on the crises of liberal democracy. Having concluded that parallel election monitoring has a possibly disruptive effect on democracy promotion efforts, the question remains what can and cannot be done about it. Considering that the narratives of parallel election observation often draw on established criticisms of liberal democracy promotion and election observation, it may be fruitful to reassess the Western embeddedness of liberal-democratic norms and open democracy promotion up for other approaches, such as innovations proposed by radical and deliberative democratic theory.

Furthermore, the fragmenting impact on the LIO needs to be considered. While democracy promotion norms evidently relate only to a limited part of the LIO´s structure, related research on contestation embed it in a broader dynamic of fragmentation.[140] Contestation building on sovereigntist narratives of non-interference may put into question the long-term ability of international organization to sustain their legitimacy for postnational "intrusive"[141] forms of intervention in the LIO II. This may be especially true in complex regimes, like the one on election monitoring, which should be considered by researchers working on regime complexity. Democracy promotion may face gradual erosion with accelerating reputational damage from strategies of liberal mimicry and tools of authoritarian survival. However, since the mimicking actor does not propose a clear countermodel, it remains a process of contestation that is only thinkable within a world order built on the ideology of liberal internationalism, in which the norm of liberal democracy is perceived as universal and inescapable. A relevant example of direct confrontation of Western-liberal hegemonic norms

[140] Bettiza and Lewis, "Authoritarian Powers and Norm Contestation in the Liberal International Order: Theorizing the Power Politics of Ideas and Identity," 559–77.
[141] Börzel and Zürn, "Contestations of the Liberal International Order: From Liberal Multilateralism to Postnational Liberalism," 282–305.

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was the invasion of Ukraine in spring 2022. Perhaps this represents a turning point towards more open forms of contestation of the LIO and may shape future research on norm contestation.

Whether parallel election monitoring is succeeding in broadly challenging democracy promotion norms of the LIO remains to be seen. However, this thesis contributes to the field of research by showing through expert interviews with leading international election monitoring practitioners, that the process of fragmentation and polarization of election monitoring is already ongoing.

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Appendix

Appendix I – List of interviewees

	Date (2022)	**Interviewee**	**Position**
P1	Late April	Interviewee CIS	Leadership, Expert
P2	Mid-April	Interviewee OAS A	Delegation, Diplomat
P3	Late April	Interviewee OAS/EU B	Short- and Long-Term Observer, occasionally employed for missions
P4	Mid-April	Interviewee OSCE-ODIHR A	Leadership, Expert
P5	Late April	Interviewee OSCE-ODIHR B	Core Team, Expert
P6	Early May	Interviewee OSCE-ODIHR C	Leadership, Expert
P7	Mid-May	Interviewee OSCE-ODIHR D	Leadership, Expert
P8	Early May	Member of European Parliament (MEP) Viola von Cramon-Taubade	Core Team, Politician (Greens/EFA group)

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Appendix II – Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Researcher: Markus Pollak
Central European University, MA in International Relations
+4369912907002, pollak_markus@student.ceu.edu

Study: The practices and implications of international parallel election monitoring

You are invited to participate in a research project conducted by CEU graduate student Markus Pollak. This research will be executed through interviewing practitioners who work in the field of international election monitoring. Please read this disclaimer carefully and be confident that you understand its contents before deciding whether to participate in the study. If you have any questions about the project, please contact Markus Pollak (see contact information above).

Consent to participate

- ❖ I understand that the project I have been asked to participate in will be about election monitoring and democracy promotion. The interview will focus on the role, meaning and interaction of parallel international election monitoring institutions. I am informed that my contribution to the project is based on my expertise and personal experiences in the field of election monitoring.
- ❖ I understand that my participation will involve being interviewed for approximately one hour.
- ❖ I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during the interview without giving any reason.
- ❖ I am informed about the possibility of receiving a copy of the resulting MA thesis after it is evaluated by the examiners.
- ❖ I understand that unless I object the interview will be recorded and that the video/audio file will be stored securely and only listened to by the researcher signed below.
- ❖ I understand that my responses will be anonymised in the interview transcript.
- ❖ I understand that all personal data about me will be kept confidential.
- ❖ I understand that the interviewer must adhere to the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, the General Data Protection Regulation 2016/679, the local implementation provisions of the GDPR regulation (specifically in the country of the researcher's university and the countries where the interviews take place), the guidelines for standards of good research practice and principles of research ethics by Austrian Higher Education Conference, and the Central European University Ethical Research Policy.
- ❖ I agree that the research data gathered from this project may be published in a form that does not identify me.
- ❖ I agree to take part in the above research project.

I, …… (**Participant's** full name) hereby volunteer to participate.

Signed (participant) ……..……. Date……

I, Markus Pollak, certify that the details of this procedure have been fully explained and described to the participant named above.

Signed (researcher) ……..……. Date……

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Appendix III – Interview Questionnaire

	<u>Introduction</u>
Topic 1	**<u>Background</u>** **1. How did you start to get engaged in the field of election observation?** -> Possible follow-up: What motivated you to do so? **2. Overall, for which organizations did you work on election monitoring?** -> In what positions? What responsibilities did you have? -> possible follow-up questions and clarifications on biography and responsibilities.
Topic 2	**<u>Purpose and Criteria of Election Monitoring</u>** **3. How would you describe the purpose and objectives of election observation missions?** **4. What are the criteria you use to evaluate election monitoring?** → Possible follow-up: Have these criteria changed? If so, how? → Possible follow-up: Election monitoring missions are sometimes criticized. In your experience, which elements of election monitoring are most often challenged, if at all? Which of these criticisms do you think are most valid? Why? Why not? **5. In your view, what are the strengths of *[institution]*[142] in achieving the mentioned purpose? What would the institution argue the strengths are?** **How would you describe as the most important shortcomings at *[institution]* in achieving the mentioned purpose?**

[142] Depending on the interviewee´s own institutional affiliation, [institution] was replaced by CIS, OSCE-ODIHR, OAS, or EU.

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Topic 3	**<u>Relevance and Comparison of Parallel Institutions</u>** **6. In your experience in the field, did you encounter other election monitoring institutions/missions? Which ones?** → Possible follow-up: Did those experiences influence your work in the field/ actions at *[institution]*? -> Follow Up: Have you encountered monitors sent by *[parallel institution]*[143]? **7. In your opinion, what are the most relevant other institutions/missions in the field of election monitoring?** -> Possible Follow Up: What makes them relevant? Are they established in a comparable way? What are some key differences/similarities? **8. How do you compare the work of *[institution]* to the *[parallel institution]*?** -> Do they use a comparable methodology? Is it a different model of election monitoring? How (concrete examples)?
Topic 4	**<u>Interactions with and Perception of Parallel Election Monitoring Missions</u>** **9. Overall, how would you describe the overall relationship between *[institution]* and other election monitoring institutions/missions such as *[parallel institution]*?** -> Possible Follow up: Do you perceive them as complementary or competing? **10. When you think of your last election observation field experiences: Could you walk me through the how you interacted with election monitors from other institutions/missions on the ground?** → possible follow up: What were those interactions like? Were they frequent/not so frequent? Impactful or not? -> Possible Follow Ups: Meetings? Formal/informal interaction **11. Do/did you coordinate with *[parallel institution]* in the process of evaluating the elections?**

[143] Depending on the interviewee´s institutional affiliation, [parallel institution] was replaced by other institutions operating in the same region. Mostly, this referred to institutions that are known to potentially criticize each other´s work. If, e.g., a respondent from the OSCE did not yet mention the CIS (or vice versa), this question was used to guide the interview towards the direction of potentially conflicting parallel institutions.

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	→ If yes, possible follow-up: Can you tell me more about that? how did it work? **12. Do/did you coordinate with *[parallel institution]* in the communication of the results of the mission?**
Topic 5	**<u>Contestation, Impact & Legitimacy of Parallel Election Monitoring</u>** **13. Considering that different election monitoring institutions/missions often claim to do the same thing: Why would you say is parallel election monitoring practiced? Why did *[CIS/UNASUR/SCO]* start to get engaged?** **14. In your view, what is the impact of having multiple monitoring institutions on the field of election observation and democracy promotion more broadly? How does the presence of *[CIS/UNASUR/SCO]* impact it?**
	Those were all the questions I prepared for our interview. Is there anything else that came to your mind about election monitoring or the discussed issues that might be good for me to know? **End of the Interview**

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