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International Disorder and Polarisation in Small States: The Case of Armenia

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The paper aims to answer the following question: how has the crisis in international order influenced domestic politics in small states? It uses poststructuralist discourse analysis to understand how this process plays out in Armenia, which is treated here as a data-rich case of a small country. The paper illustrates that the sense of security among small states is tied to the perception of an intelligible and relatively cohesive order in which they exist. Hence, the widely shared sense of crisis and uncertainty related to the current order has triggered substantial anxiety.

The anxiety stemming from a hostile international environment can generate contrasting coping mechanisms. In Armenia's case, the government pushes for major revaluations of how the state positions itself internationally. Meanwhile, its critics, including the political opposition, try to manage the above-mentioned anxiety by sticking to preexisting routines and narratives that used to maintain the ontological security of the Armenian polity. Stakes are high in these articulations, as the very existence of the country is claimed to be at stake. This dynamic leaves little space for deliberation or even having acceptable differences. It creates a highly polarised environment where the boundary between internal rivals and external enemies is blurred.

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Introduction

The demise of the Liberal International Order (LIO) has been one of the widely discussed topics in International Relations (IR) literature for over a decade (Cooley and Nexon 2020). With the election of Donald Trump, narratives about the inevitability of a multipolar and highly competitive world have even entered the hallways of U.S. government buildings (Rubio 2025). Today, many countries are preparing for a major shift in the distribution of global authority, as well as a rupture in the existing normative architecture of the international system (Scholz 2022).

This new era of transition has brought a wave of uncertainties for small states. The LIO under American hegemony, though often exploited by the latter, provided relative stability and unprecedented interconnectedness (Ikenberry 2018). Small states, limited in their capabilities and influence, proliferated in this system, where they found a sense of stability and agency thanks to the norm of sovereign equality. The LIO helped neutralise their threat of extinction. Territorial conquest in its classical sense became mostly obsolete or was at least widely rejected (Altman 2020). Now, Russia questioning the very existence of Ukraine and the United States officials touting the idea of further territorial expansion have made it clear that the post-1945

arrangements are under stress. Small states have to adapt to changes over which they have little influence (Maass 2020).

Here, I use Armenia's case, a democratising post-Soviet country, to demonstrate that this situation does not just create practical challenges but destabilises the very *self*[1] of small states. I show how the LIO crisis[2] creates anxiety regarding a small state's sense of its external environment, the role and intentions of other actors, and the future existence of the country. Then I show the multifinality of this anxiety in practice, where I discuss how contrasting narratives are introduced to cope with it. The 'solutions' that different identity entrepreneurs, such as the government and its critics, offer are diametrically different, have a sense of urgency, and consider deviations from the path they offer potentially catastrophic. As a result, how the self of the small state should be defined and performed in an uncertain international environment becomes a topic of hot debate, where there is no room for legitimate disagreements. Instead, antagonistic frontiers are formed, where domestic competitors are equated with foreign adversarial powers, and the very legitimacy of their existence is questioned. I consider this state of affairs polarisation, referring to relational conceptions of the term (Schedler 2023).

Overall, the paper traces the possible link between (perceived) external disorder and political polarisation by asking the following question: how has the crisis in international order influenced the domestic politics in small states? The answer is presented in two parts. The first one provides theoretical reflections on the ways the LIO crisis creates anxiety and triggers varying coping mechanisms. The second part uses Armenia's case to illustrate this process in practice. The paper ends with a note on the need to further investigate polarisation in small states from this vantage point.

International Disorder and Small State Anxieties

Ontological Security and the LIO

During the last few decades, numerous studies have been published in IR demonstrating that states need and pursue self-certainty – ontological security. Having a stable and secure sense

[1] While some studies that focus on the role of identity of states consider it distinct from the self/agency, I use these signifiers here interchangeably. The analytical value of this differentiation is not highly relevant to the purpose put forward in this paper.

[2] In this paper, I do not define what a state of crisis is in an empirical sense. Instead, I base the analysis on the assumption that a crisis is an intersubjectively shared understanding/sense of a situation.

of who they are is often as important as physical security. Most of these studies argue that states (partially) achieve ontological security by engaging in routinised practices (especially in interactions with others) and constructing autobiographical narratives, which help to bracket their fundamental anxieties (Steele 2008; Mitzen 2006; Zarakol 2017; Flockhart 2016; Rossdale 2015; Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2019; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2020).

There is a debate in the literature on which of these two factors is the primary source of ontological security (Ejdus 2018). Some studies emphasise the internal uncertainties of states and show how constructing national autobiographies is intended to bring clarity regarding their agency (Steele 2008). Others focus on the social environment: states are ontologically (in)secure due to external developments, especially their interactions with other actors (Mitzen 2006). In this paper, I follow the path of those who have selected a middle-ground approach (Zarakol 2010). I argue that the international environment challenges the sense of self-certainty of small states and the reaction to this challenge is determined by the agent-level peculiarities of smallness.

With regard to the state's international environment, routines play an important role, especially in relations with what Jennifer Mitzen (2006) calls *significant others*. States gain confidence in their identity based on interactions with other actors (Duncombe 2019; Epstein 2018; Murray 2018). It is through repeated and often ritualised modes of engagement that a sense of predictability and certainty emerges (Kinnvall 2006; Mitzen and Larson 2018).

These routinised practices in relations between the state and its other constitute a certain social order, an intelligible environment within which that state can achieve (tentative) self-certainty. This dynamic shows the importance of the international realm. Multiple studies demonstrate how the self-identification of states is mediated by understandings of this order, where certain rules are (more or less) consistently followed (Flockhart 2020; Bargués et al. 2023; Nakano 2023; Haugevik and Sending 2020). In a recent article, Ralph (2026) explains how the institutions of international society, as theorised in the English School of IR, can contribute to the pursuit of ontological security. Hom and Steele (2020) show that changes in the international environment trigger questions among states concerning the adequacy of their identity. According to them, 'Inasmuch as international agents understand themselves as populating a society or community as positioned within a system, or simply as occupying a shared time and space, their wider environment becomes a matter of ontological security' (Hom and Steele 2020, 327).

For the last several decades, the LIO has been that environment of intelligibility, and its subversion can challenge the ontological security of the actors operating in it (Adler and

Drieschova 2021; Homolar and Turner 2024; Bargués et al. 2023). Small states are not an exception. As Browning argues, the smallness of certain countries acquired a new meaning in the post-Cold War environment, which 'minimised the risk of small states becoming embroiled in a war between the great powers' (2006, p. 678). Wivel demonstrates that the LIO helped small states cope with their anxieties about survival and focus more on gaining influence in global affairs (Wivel 2025). The institutional arrangements made available under the LIO helped small states pursue various avenues for exercising leverage (Long 2017; Pan and Korolev 2021).

One needs to note that the LIO, while serving as an anchoring point of self-identification for some states, is also openly challenged by others (Mukherjee 2022). The quest for multipolarity has become a regular talking point for many revisionist powers (Flockhart and Korosteleva 2022; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2020). Nevertheless, there is a globally shared sense that the crisis in the LIO has brought more uncertainty and instability to the world (Homolar and Turner 2024). While great and small powers might have contrasting visions of the kind of order they want to have, most of them emphasise the need for shared rules (Bajpai and Laksmana 2023; Ikenberry 2018; Loh 2023). Since it is not yet clear what will emerge after the demise of the LIO, the crisis in the latter is first and foremost associated with disorder (Johnson et al. 2022; Steele 2024). It is not surprising that a 2023 survey by Ipsos, which was conducted across 30 countries, shows a shared impression that the world was becoming a more dangerous place (Bricker 2023).

Considering these factors, the sense of self of small states can be shaken once the order of certitude that enabled their actorhood is in crisis. This crisis triggers anxieties peculiar to smallness. Specifically, small nations, as Abulof (2009, 2015) argues, are susceptible to being anxious about collective extinction. Beyond the classical concern of survival (as theorised by realist works in IR), the unease about the 'mortality' of the collective self is an ontological security issue: 'Nations usually help us forget about our own mortality, but small nations – mortal nations – recall that disturbing reality back into awareness' (Abulof 2023, 258). As a result, the anxiety about finitude pushes small states to rely on narratives that make the past intelligible and the future predictable. To maintain/ restore ontological security, small states try to articulate a sense of national purpose to help the collective self 'transcend' their destiny of frailty (Abulof 2015). Here, articulating a national mission becomes a key method of dealing with the triggered anxiety by acting as a source of empowerment and, in doing so, compensating for the mentioned sense of frailty. In short, such (re)articulations are meant to

make the discussed crisis digestible by helping to comprehend what is happening with and around the self.

The international realm and the autobiography of the self are inter-related in the case of small nations. Smallness itself is a relational notion, which states continuously redefine depending on the signals they receive from the environment in which they operate. When that environment becomes anxiety-inducing, small states turn to (re)articulating their self through time in ways that help to fit certain developments in them. This process is captured by Giddens' concept of the *continuity of the self,* which can be threatened if there is an event (e.g., the LIO crisis) that does not fit into the autobiography through which the sense of continuity is constructed. Hence, the self employs various narrative strategies to fit the respective development into the story of the small state.

The next section turns to the concept of anxiety as theorised in the OS literature to demonstrate how this process unfolds. If the LIO acts as a source of ontological security, its crisis threatens the sense of self of small states. The notion of anxiety helps to understand how this identity-related threat causes varying reactions.

Conceptualising Anxiety

In a general sense, anxiety entails a state/sense of unease caused by uncertainties about the agency of an actor. The ontological security literature uses it by mostly relying on R. D. Liang and Anthony Giddens, who discuss the role of anxiety in psychological and sociological dimensions, respectively (Krickel-Choi 2022). While there is a diversity of perspectives in the field, most of the studies link anxiety with fundamental uncertainties: actors become anxious when the preexisting routines and autobiographies no longer help to validate their identity.

In this regard, it is important to make a distinction between anxiety and fear for analytical and methodological purposes. As Giddens states, anxiety is 'essentially fear which has lost its object through unconsciously formed emotive tensions that express 'internal dangers' rather than externalised threats' (1991, p. 44). In other words, anxiety is amorphous and encompasses the feeling of unease related to the unknown (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020). Unlike fear, which activates a fight or flight reaction, 'anxiety is characterised by multifinality, admitting to a range of emotions, including excitement and anticipation, and a variety of behaviours, from compulsive repetition, to acting out, to paralysis, to entrepreneurship' (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 241). In certain cases, anxious actors stick to old narratives and practices while the reality around them is changing (Mitzen 2006). In other instances, anxiety

can create an opening for new perspectives and practices (Rumelili 2015). In both situations, the purpose is to maintain or restore ontological security, but the actions taken towards that end could be diametrically different.

This conceptualisation makes studying anxiety difficult. First, there is an issue of codetermination, where anxiety is considered 'simultaneously as sources of stability and sources of change' (Flockhart 2016, 3). In addition, a strand of the OS literature, especially studies that adopt a psychoanalytic approach, argues that existential anxiety is a permanent feature of actors (Solomon 2015; Vieira 2018; Epstein 2018). From this perspective, the interchangeable use of anxiety and ontological insecurity is questioned. If anxiety is 'an indispensable part of the human condition' (Diez and Lucke 2024, 5), then one could assume that ontological security is not attainable, and the analytical value of studying it in specific situations could be questioned. To solve these issues, Gustafson and Krickel-Choi offer to differentiate between *normal* and *neurotic* anxieties, relying on R. D. Liang's research. As they state, 'normal anxiety can be managed constructively' without necessarily making the actor ontologically insecure (Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020, 886). Meanwhile, neurotic anxiety triggers ontological insecurity, resulting in 'highly pathological and debilitating conditions' for the actor (Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020, 876–77).

While such an approach could add some analytical clarity to the academic discourse on anxiety, making practical distinctions between the two kinds is challenging. In this regard, Kirke and Steele show that 'the line between 'normal' and 'neurotic' anxiety blurs, if not vanishes,' when trying to observe their manifestations in specific cases (2023, p. 915). I have come to a similar conclusion in the process of data collection and analysis.

Instead, I broadly categorised multifinality in terms of *change* and *continuity* in the discourses and practices of the state. This perspective brushes over nuances in how states manage anxiety but helps to focus on an aspect relevant to domestic politics: what if some political forces pursue change in the self*,* while others insist on continuity. In other words, I look into multifinality as a simultaneous use of diverging coping mechanisms with anxiety. It is this notion of simultaneity that receives particular attention in my attempt to demonstrate a causal mechanism linking the LIO crisis with domestic politics.

This choice brings us to the next challenge. Who exactly is the anxious actor? The IR literature borrows its theories from sources that attribute anxiety to individuals. Nevertheless, some of them make steps towards analysing anxiety as a feature of states, anthropomorphising the latter (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; Ayse Zarakol 2010). The previous section also uses such an approach. However, there are drawbacks in doing so. As Krolikowski argues, 'the

assumption of state personhood obscures important aspects of how the state, as an evolving institution, affects individuals' sense of ontological security' (2008, p. 111). Since this paper aims to show how anxiety stemming from the international disorder influences processes within the state, black boxing it is not an option here.

Instead, I address this issue with the help of Narozhna's (2020) framework of the state-society complex. Fundamentally, I view the state as a structure, and anxiety (as well as ontological security) is ultimately a feature of individuals. Nevertheless, the individual has their agency shaped by complex connections (manifested in the form of a modern state) and anxieties that are collectively shared. Individuals 'live vicariously' through the state as their collective identity (Browning et al. 2021; Ralph 2026).

Historically, the modern state has assumed the role of providing ontological security for its subjects by offering them a sense of belonging. In this process, it becomes the embodiment of collective agency, and the quest for ontological security means constructing and validating a stable sense of a collective self (Zarakol 2017). In other words, the state is a structure that facilitates the process of developing and validating a shared (but also contested) sense of identity for and by individuals. Treating the state-society complex as a composite phenomenon helps to scale up and observe dynamics where the state is treated as an actor and scale down and analyse how narratives of that actorhood are constructed and contested in society.

The perspective of the state-society complex helps to investigate the within-state contestation in the pursuit of ontological security. As Narozhna argues, 'competing identity entrepreneurs' use various platforms to advocate for their articulations of the national self (Narozhna 2020, 574). They are socially privileged actors within the state (e.g., politicians) who can exercise influence in defining the national agency. Therefore, considering the LIO crisis as an anxiety-inducing development leads to studying the manifestations of anxiety, the potentially varying coping mechanisms offered by identity entrepreneurs, and the impact of that variation on domestic politics.

In summary, anxiety is a sense that emerges when ontological security of the self is under threat. It has different effects that can be generally conceptualised as change or continuity in the mechanisms used to have ontological security. This multifinality can occur simultaneously as competing identity entrepreneurs offer their version of understanding the LIO crisis and establish ontological security. The next part provides details on how this process unfolds.

Manifestations and Effects of Anxiety in Small States

Here, I show the causal mechanism linking the LIO crisis with domestic politics in small states. The explanation is based on a back-and-forth process between the theoretical literature on ontological security and the analysis of empirical data in Armenia's case. The section starts by discussing how expressions of anxiety can be categorised. Then, it reflects on the coping mechanisms introduced to bracket that anxiety. The final part argues that the divergence of the coping mechanisms and the types of anxiety manifestations contributes to antagonism in the domestic politics of small states and, consequently, creates a more polarised environment.

To capture the practical expressions of anxiety, I use the perspective introduced by Giddens and further operationalised by Ejdus. As the latter states: 'When collective actors are concerned, anxiety outbursts are performed through a public discourse on fundamental questions' (Ejuds 2018, p. 887). He identifies four fundamental questions: 1) uncertainty of the external environment (where are we?), 2) questions about future existence or the finitude of the actor, 3) uncertainty about significant others (friends and enemies), and 4) challenges in incorporating past and current developments in the autobiography of the self. After identifying the relevant data with the help of these questions, I analyse them in conversation with Abulof's theorisation of anxiety among small nations. There is substantial potential for synthesis, as Aulof himself builds on Giddens for his analysis. As a result, I identify two primary forms of anxiety manifestations for small states: 1) loss of control over one's fate and 2) awareness of mortality.

Fundamental questions #1 and #3 are directly related to how the international realm contributes to the ontological security of the state. They arise once there is uncertainty about the order in which the state operates and the others in relation to whom its identity is constructed. In the case of small states, these questions are closely related to their sense of *frailty* (or powerlessness) among stronger powers (Abulof et al. 2021). I synthesise these two perspectives to introduce *lack of control over one's fate* as a dominant form of anxiety manifestation in small states. Once the international realm becomes unintelligible, and small states become less sure about their significant others, anxiety is expressed as a concern that others (more powerful actors) deciding their fate.[3]

Question #2 corresponds with the notion of *mortality* in the case of small states. As for question #4, it is also directly linked with the awareness of finitude. The aforementioned

[3] The next section demonstrates how the feeling that others are deciding Armenia's fate is one of the most prevalent forms of anxiety outbursts.

observations show that smallness triggers increased sensitivity about national autobiographies, which are meant to construct a sense of endurance and transcend the awareness of mortality. Hence, it is important to fit major developments, such as the crisis of the international order, into the temporal dimension of identity. If the small state struggles to contextualise the respective development within its national autobiography, it no longer feels secure about the continuity of the self.

So far, I have discussed the triggers (LIO crisis and smallness) and manifestations (sense of finitude and not feeling in control) of anxiety. Below, I turn to the coping mechanisms and how their use affects domestic politics. Specifically, I explain how identity entrepreneurs inside a small state offer diverging methods of handling anxiety (through change and continuity). I also show how they try to validate their narratives through the process of *othering*.

The anxiety caused by the crisis in the international order pushes identity entrepreneurs in small states to offer different mechanisms of maintaining a stable sense of self. One of the options, in broad terms, is making changes to how the state interacts with significant others and revises its national autobiography. The small state might turn to new methods of receiving ontological security from the international realm that could include revising alliances and adversities, establishing and/or developing relations with other actors, and exploring new multilateral partnership formats. Part of this change is reconstructing the national past to have a new narrative that legitimises these changes. In contrast, other identity entrepreneurs could call for going along with already-existing routines and narratives. In this case, a different logic is dominant: sticking to what used to work is the optimal way for securing the future. Here, they offer to bracket anxiety by doubling down on their relations with significant *others* and keeping the conventional national autobiography (Narozhna 2020).

Both groups of identity entrepreneurs use *othering* when offering their solutions. Since one of the primary forms of anxiety is the sense that the state might lose or has lost control over its fate, the proposed coping mechanisms turn anxiety into fear by presenting *antagonistic others,* those who have stolen or might steal control over the state's future. This process of othering is a common practice of seeking ontological security (Huysmans 1998). The ambiguity concerning the finitude of the small state is compensated by having specific antagonistic others, who should be stopped in their attempts at causing annihilation (Herschinger 2012). It is from these others that control over the state's fate needs to be recovered to ensure its future existence.

The other commonality between the opposing groups of identity entrepreneurs is that both consider deviations from their solution catastrophic for the state. Since their coping

mechanisms stem from anxieties concerning finitude, the very existence of the small state is at stake here. As a result, they engage in a process of othering that targets the opposing camp. The looming catastrophe, stemming from the triggered sense of mortality, is associated not only with external enemies but also domestic competitors. In this process, the inside/outside of a state's agency changes in the narratives constructed by the identity entrepreneurs (see the rightmost box in Figure 1). The line between external enemies and domestic competitors fades away, as both contribute to the assumed annihilation.

[Figure 1 inserted here]

Moreover, antagonism makes the divergence between the two coping mechanisms the key factor, where the nuances presented by the identity entrepreneurs in the same 'camp' disappear, and their position is primarily performed by the contradistinction with that of the other side.[4] Here, the two camps of identity entrepreneurs no longer see each other as legitimate rivals in domestic affairs. Instead, each side equates the other with the existential enemy, making it difficult for them to have shared ground.

I consider this state of antagonism polarisation, relying on relational conceptions of the term (Schedler 2023). Its operationalisation entails looking for the following markers in the observed discourse: out-group animosity, distrust, and hostility coupled with generalised inferences about the targeted group (Iyengar et al. 2019; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2015). This denotation puts particular emphasis on the affective side of polarisation, where the latter is mainly shaped by out-group negative sentiments rather than an explicit ideological divide (Wagner 2021).

The nature of disagreement is not a matter of policy that can be resolved through further deliberation. The ambiguity of anxiety outbursts makes it difficult to engage in issue-based debates. In addition, the two camps of identity entrepreneurs operate with a sense of urgency, as it is the very sense of mortality of the small state that is triggered. This urgency exacerbates the antagonism (see Figure 1), making the elimination of the other side from the space of domestic politics the only acceptable option. Consequently, the very existence of the other camp is considered illegitimate. The next part of the paper demonstrates this process using the case of Armenia as a small state.

[4] The Laclauian concept of the logic of equivalence can be useful here for understanding how the discursive space is simplified, making the constructed antagonistic frontier the primary reference of identification (Laclau 2005).

Anxiety and Antagonism: The Case of Armenia

This part demonstrates how the LIO crisis triggers anxiety in Armenia and how the contrasting ways of coping with that anxiety contribute to building antagonistic frontiers within the state (i.e., polarisation). Here, Armenia is treated as a typical example of a small state and a data-rich case of an actor that had its ontological security tied to LIO practices. It is also a difficult case, as Armenia faces major conventional security issues, making it challenging to differentiate between anxiety and fears associated with specific threats.

Armenia is a typical small state because it carries both material and ideational/social attributes of smallness in international relations. It has a population of around 3 million people and a territory of around 30 thousand square kilometres. It also has relatively moderate economic and military capabilities ('IMF DataMapper,' n.d.; '2025 Armenia Military Strength,' n.d.). With such parameters, it fits in the category of small states/powers (Pedi and Wivel 2022). In addition, its smallness is also self-attributed and intersubjectively shared (Sarkissian 2024). To borrow Abulof's (2009) articulation, Armenia's smallness is a 'state of mind.'

Armenia is also a data-rich case. Since independence, key features of the LIO have shaped its engagement with the rest of the world. The Armenian state emerged in a volatile environment: there was a full-blown war with neighbouring Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) (Broers 2019). Its agency was often performed in the international realm through the negotiation mechanisms designed to manage this conflict. One of those mechanisms (perhaps the primary one) was an institutionalised mediation framework called the Minsk Group. It was established under the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and is co-chaired by France, Russia, and the United States (Geukjian 2014). As Broers (2021) argues, this format was the embodiment of the LIO principles. Azerbaijan's attack on NK in 2020 and subsequent developments demonstrate that the negotiation format shaped within the LIO has become ineffective, as the very order that made it possible is in crisis now (Oskanian 2021).

In addition to the aforementioned factors, Armenia is a difficult case because its current security crisis (i.e., threats posed by Azerbaijan) has created significant conventional challenges for the country. In this situation, it can be tricky to determine whether a particular situation is caused by anxiety or fears from these specific threats. To make sure the analysis avoids unsubstantiated attributions, the pool of data is limited to narratives where there are questions/concerns about the international order. In this way, I keep the focus on articulations

of anxiety (and their intertextual links) following the approach introduced by Ejdus (2018) (discussed above).

Since this study focuses on anxiety caused by the LIO crisis, the starting point of its data collection is identifying articulations of the first fundamental question (where are we?). Specifically, I trace narratives about the changing external environment where the state no longer 'feels at home' (Kinnvall 2006). Considering the possible interconnectedness of these questions, I study articulations of the other three if they are combined with the first one. For instance, anxiety about the external environment can also trigger a sense of unease concerning the mortality of the state. In addition, certainty about significant others can help to address questions about the external environment (i.e., international order) (Berenskoetter 2014).

After identifying these fundamental questions and mapping them in discussion with Abulof's analysis of smallness, I move to studying the coping mechanisms that flow from them. Then, I illustrate how the solutions articulated by key identity entrepreneurs create a contested discursive space. Taking these steps allows me to capture the multifinality of anxiety caused by the respective developments in the international realm.

Spatially, the data collection starts with filtering texts (statements, debates, interviews, government documents) that have signifiers 'global order,' 'global changes,' or their variations. As for whose narratives are studied, I use intertextual models 1 (official discourse) and 2 (discourse by the political opposition and the media) introduced by Lene Hansen (2006). Temporally, I study articulations produced in 2020 and after. Here, the Second Karabakh War (also known as the 44-day war), a major traumatic event for Armenia, is treated as the starting point of the analysed processes; hence, most of the collected texts were produced in the period following it (Gevorgyan and Antonyan 2024).

Then, I move to studying the intertextual links of the articulations of anxiety in the collected texts. Here, I use poststructuralist discourse analysis (PDA) to identify *predication* and *subject positioning* (Doty 1993; Hansen 2006; Dunn and Neumann 2016). In this way, I try to see what narratives are constructed to bracket uncertainty and how those narratives (re)shape the discursive space in Armenia. In other words, the PDA helps me observe the multifinality of anxiety in the selected case. The data on predication and subject positioning help to identify how the sense of crisis associated with the LIO fuels political polarisation in Armenia.

It is noteworthy that the study only investigates polarisation among different groups of the political elite as identity entrepreneurs, and broader societal sentiments are excluded from the research. Evidently, this choice creates a limitation in terms of understanding whether the

markers of polarisation observed at the level of government and opposition discourses, as well as the media affiliated with them, are also dominant public sentiments. Nevertheless, the selected scope of data provides sufficient insight into the topography of the political discourse in the selected country. The targeted entities are socio-politically positioned as the dominant identity entrepreneurs in the state-society complex that push for their articulations of the Armenian collective subjectivity (Media Ownersh. Monit. Armen. 2025). It is the government and political opposition that dominate in the efforts to handle collective anxieties.

Armenia and the LIO Crisis

The analysed data show that there is an overarching narrative of a 'changing world' shared by the government, the political opposition, as well as the popular media outlets affiliated with them. Here, the notion of change in the international realm has brought uncertainties in the perception of pre-existing security threats. The difficulty in reevaluating old concerns in a new environment shows how anxiety and specific fears are interconnected yet distinct.

For decades, Armenia has had one major external threat that it tried to neutralise or eliminate – the military attack of neighbouring Azerbaijan (The Government of the Republic of Armenia 2007, 2020). However, the existence of this threat was not necessarily seen as a crisis: several internal and external balancing mechanisms were routinely articulated as effective countermeasures against it. In the case of internal factors, the Armenian army was seen as the primary guarantor of security (Sargsyan 2017). Externally, Armenia's formal alliance system (i.e., the Armenia-Russia treaty of mutual aid and Armenia's membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)) and the international mechanisms of conflict management (i.e., the Minsk Group) were emphasised (Organ. Secur. Co-Oper. Eur., n.d.; Nagorno Karabakh's Gathering War Clouds 2017).

These external mechanisms presupposed a functioning LIO, where allies and collective security frameworks fulfil their contractual obligations, and multilateral diplomacy restrains violence. However, the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have triggered fundamental questions about the international realm. The external environment within which Armenia's conventional security concerns were managed was no longer the same. As Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated: 'My deepest belief and conviction is that the Karabakh war of 2020, the 44-day war, was, in fact, another sign that global geopolitical change awaits us; a change in the world order will take place' (2022, para. 9).

What this change looks like is not clear in the analysed articulations, and the uncertainty associated with it triggers anxiety. Change in the order is often linked with the following signifiers: 'rapid,' 'tension,' 'crumbling,' 'unpredictability,' 'clash,' 'complex,' 'shock,' and 'tectonic.' These associations are especially stressed in the narratives generated by the Armenian government. In a press conference held in 2021, the Prime Minister stated that the threat posed by Azerbaijan is also a matter of international (dis)order:

> The President of Azerbaijan declares 'we will stand wherever we want' [referring to Azerbaijani military positions inside Armenia's sovereign territory]. What does this mean? We need to understand whether this is a new world order in action, where whoever wants should stand wherever they want… Does this mean a new era of international law (*HH Varch'apet Nikol P'ashinyani Asulisě* 2021)?

This excerpt is an outburst of anxiety in the form of a question concerning the LIO: can one get away with violating its basic principles? In another speech, the Prime Minister stated:

> I will not consider it an exaggeration what I will say now. In fact, the world order, or in the vernacular, the world, is collapsing before our eyes. There is no exaggeration in this. And we have to work in consideration of this reality (Pashinyan 2022a, para. 12).

Representatives of the political opposition also raise this concern, often in an alarmist tone. For instance, a former member of the Armenian parliament posted on his social media page: 'Come to your senses, the tickets to the new world order are already on sale' (168.Am 2020, para. 10). Another opposition figure stated: 'The new world order is collapsing on Nikol's [the Prime Minister] and Armenia's head' (168. am 2025a).

Such calls for alertness have a presupposition that major developments are underway and could create unpleasant surprises for Armenia. In these narratives, Armenia neither has a say nor even full awareness of global processes. It is seen as a 'battleground' for other powers or a bargaining chip in 'geopolitical games' (1in TV 2022b; Aravot Daily 2023; *168.am* 2024; *Yerkir Media* 2024; Lurer 2024c). Smallness is a key part of these articulations. Here, Armenia's very actorhood is under question, as its faith is discussed (and even decided) by greater forces without its presence (5 TV Channel 2021; Aysor 2022; Yerevan Today 2023).

The August 2025 declaration that the Armenian government signed with the U.S. on establishing the 'Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity' (TRIPP) also triggered such reactions. For example, one of Armenia's former Presidents, who is in the opposition now, commented that TRIPP 'was an element of a geopolitical game, where Pashinyan acts as the ball' (Armenia Today 2025). On this declaration, a former member of the Armenian

parliament stated that Armenia ‘was being used as a tool’ in the geopolitical clashes between greater powers, drawing parallels with what is happening in Ukraine (CivilNet 2026).

The Armenian government and its critics share the same sense of unease concerning the international realm, where sovereignty can be violated, and the voices of small states are not heard. Consequently, another fundamental question is raised in their articulations: is there a future for Armenia? Here, the deepest anxiety of a small polity, the threat of annihilation, is triggered (Abulof 2015). This anxiety is manifested through narratives where Armenia’s statehood is perceived to be in danger. For instance, a member of the Armenian parliament proclaimed: ‘The world is changing rapidly, new challenges are emerging, and Armenia's statehood must be protected’ (CivilNet 2022). The Prime Minister himself often mentions that the very existence of the Armenian state is threatened (Lurer 2022; Pashinyan 2024b). The loss of sovereignty has become a topic of debate in the parliament (Lurer 2023). The possibility of annihilation is also discussed by different media personalities and public figures (1in TV 2022a; Factor TV 2022; Sharmazanov 2022).

The threat of annihilation has a noteworthy temporal dimension, triggering another fundamental question: how recent developments should be incorporated into the national biography. It becomes visible especially in government and opposition narratives concerning the Armenian Genocide. There is a component of ‘haunting continuity’ in the observed manifestations of anxiety (Gordon 2008; Markland 2025). The changing environment around Armenia triggers questions about whether the pre-1945 order, which allowed for a genocide against Armenians to happen, is returning. In recent years, the commemoration of the Armenian Genocide on April 24 has been accompanied by questions and concerns about historical patterns. For instance, remarks on whether the Genocide was still continuing (referencing Azerbaijan’s attacks and the depopulation of Nagorno-Karabakh) under the ignorant gaze of the international community had proliferated (News AM, 2026; ‘Ts‘eghaspanutyunĕ Sharunakvum ē’ 2024). On the other hand, the Prime Minister’s commemoration statements on Armenian Genocide Day started including a cautionary point about not becoming ‘a tool in the hands of great powers’ again to avoid threats to national existence. In an environment where international norms and conflict management mechanisms are ineffective, concerns about more genocidal events become prevalent (24TV 2024).

Overall, anxiety triggered by the LIO crisis is manifested in the form of questions/concerns about Armenia’s surrounding environment, the vulnerability of smallness in times of disorder, and the very existence of the Armenian national polity. Unlike the conventional fear of Azerbaijan’s attack, the manifestations of anxiety do not present a specific

threat that is shared across the political spectrum. What the above-mentioned loss of statehood looks like is not always clear. There is a strong sense of disorientation about the agency of this small state in an environment that no longer seems familiar. Hence, the ontological security of Armenia is threatened. The next section discusses the various effects of this anxiety and their impact on domestic politics.

No Room for Mistakes

The IR literature on anxiety shows that different mechanisms can be used to defuse the threats to ontological security. As stated above, anxiety can become a starting point for exploration (Rossdale 2015). The identity of the state is restructured by new routines and autobiographical narratives (Subotić 2016; Berenskötter 2020). On the other hand, those seeking ontological security can double down on the preexisting narratives and practices in order to develop a sense of continuity in times of rapid change (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020). The analysed data show that both strategies are used by the government and the opposition, respectively.

In the case of the former, the Armenian government calls for national self-reflection. Within the state-society complex, there is a push to redefine the collective agency of the Armenian polity. During a four-hour-long press conference held in January 2025, the Prime Minister raised this issue directly: 'The problem is the habit of not addressing our ways of perceiving the world. The world is evolving, changing… but we continue to perceive that world inaccurately as we used to do previously' (Azatutyun Radiokayan 2025b). He went on to state that Armenia's sovereignty depended on revising the old ways of thinking.

The exercise in self-reflection is presented in the framework of the 'Real Armenia' concept, which is an attempt to redefine the identity of the state. It is narrated in opposition to 'Historical Armenia.'[5] The latter, according to the government representatives, is an identity based on historical grievances, perpetual enmity, and perceptions of a homeland beyond the boundaries of the current state (Azatutyun Radiokayan 2025a). This narrative presupposes constant dependence on an outside power in order to fight against those enemies and perpetuate the respective grievances (Pashinyan 2024a).

In contrast, 'Real Armenia' puts the emphasis on the current state (within its internationally recognised boundaries) as the basis of national identity. Having 'Historical

[5] Later, the authorities abandoned the dichotomy of 'Real Armenia' vs 'Historical Armenia' to minimise accusations that they are abandoning the historical and cultural heritage of the Armenian nation. Instead, they started using other alternatives, such as 'Real Armenia vs Armenia of Our Dreams.' Nevertheless, the main idea of juxtaposing the current state against visions of augmented Armenia inspired by the national past remained consistent (Pashinyan 2025).

Armenia' as its temporal other, it represents a rift in the national autobiography as a concept of a statehood-oriented agency, which is considered more appropriate in the context of global challenges. As Prime Minister Pashinyan states:

> …our Historical motherland is just a tool in the hands of others to prevent our sovereignty, accomplishment and development of statehood, and our Historical motherland should be left alone, if we don't want to lose our Real motherland, with the understanding that the motherland is the state, namely the Republic of Armenia (Pashinyan 2024a, para. 58).

In addition to reconstructing the autobiography of the collective agency of Armenia, there is a rupture in the routinised interactions with significant others. If 'Historical Armenia' presupposes a fixed alliance with a powerful state, the concept of 'Real Armenia' stresses diversification ('Hayastanĕ diversifikats'num ē,' 2024; 'Hayastani artak'in k'aghak'akanut'yan diversifikats'ian,' 2024; 'Irakanats'num enk',' 2024). It is within the ideational framework of this concept that the Armenian government articulates the necessity for decreasing overdependence on Russia and developing ties with other actors, including the United States, the European Union, and India (First Channel News 2025; Minist. Foreign Aff. Repub. Armen. 2025; Azatutyun Radiokayan 2024).

Symbolism has significant value in the observed narratives, demonstrating that the discussed developments are primarily about ontological security. For instance, the government calls for emphasising the notion of statehood in history textbooks (Badalyan 2024). There was also a proposal to change the national anthem by excluding the part that has implications of martyrdom (Simonyan 2024). Government representatives also try to highlight the symbolic value of these changes by proclaiming that the 'Fourth Republic' (the current one being the Third Republic after gaining independence in 1991) is being founded (Lurer 2024a).

The political opposition and actors affiliated with it do not welcome these efforts. In an environment of fundamental uncertainties, they articulate steps taken towards redefining Armenia's agency as dangerous adventurism. Former President and the leader of one of the largest opposition forces stated in a press conference:

> A skilled captain does not take his small ship out into the ocean during a storm... These people [the government] do not understand what is happening in the world and, with that lack of understanding, take steps that put the Republic of Armenia in serious danger (Yerevan Today 2025).

This allegory of a small actor behaving recklessly in an uncertain environment resonates with many of those criticising the government (ArmLur TV 2023; *CivilNet* 2022a).

A crucial part of this criticism has to do with the revision of Armenia's relations with Russia. Unlike the government representatives, the opposition taps into the legacy of these relations to present a sense of continuity: what worked back then would work now, too. Therefore, decoupling from Russia amplifies the anxiety of annihilation, as it adds to the uncertainty caused by the LIO crisis (Aysor 2023; 168.am 2023; 7or.Am 2024)

The pursuit of continuity in changing times has also elevated the role of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church, which has become more vocal about geopolitical issues during the last several years (Mother See Holy Etchmiadzin 2023). In 2023, the Conference of Bishops of the Church issued a statement on current affairs: 'In the face of the current difficult challenges, the policy adopted by the Armenian authorities is of great concern, as it creates new existential threats for our people in the context of extremely dangerous geopolitical developments' (Mother See Holy Etchmiadzin 2022, para. 5).

Considered the embodiment of Armenia's centuries-long Christian heritage, the Church has become one of the anchoring points of the resistance against the government-led changes (Armenian Second TV Channel 2022). The biggest wave of anti-government protests of the last several years was led by an Archbishop, Bagrant Galstanyan. Under the slogan 'Hay, Hayastan, Hayreniq u Astavts' [Armenian, Armenia, Homeland and God], he led a protest movement in 2024 demanding the resignation of the Prime Minister and the formation of a new government (Kucera 2024).

In a message to the international community, Galstanyan stated: 'I know that this puppet [the Prime Minister] is useful to all of you, to throw him at one wall than another, to [make him] jump from one lap to another, and so on. But our country is not and cannot be a place of geopolitical clashes' (Aysor 2024, para. 4). Such statements were accompanied by claims that Armenia's vulnerability to the disorder around the world could be mitigated if the country remained committed to its long-held identity, values, and principles (Panorama.Am 2024). The movement, like many other narratives generated by the opposition, promised to restore Armenia's sense of self by sticking to preexisting practices and narratives.

These narratives were also dominant in many of the opposition campaigns during the 2026 parliamentary elections. Calling foreign policy changes adventurism and pushing for restoring ties with Russia were among the common talking points of the three most popular opposition parties and alliances (Badalyan 2026; *CivilNet* 2026a; *Panorama.am* 2026). They criticised Pashinyan for turning the country into a geopolitical battleground in a volatile international environment (Sputnik Armenia 2026).

Both the government and its critics claim that their approach is the only path to saving the Armenian state. Axiomatically, the position of the other side becomes a doomsday scenario. This 'debate' of narratives, which aim to bracket fundamental anxieties, is not a case of an issue-oriented interaction. Since uncertainty is the primary trigger of the observed anxiety and the corresponding coping mechanisms, there is little shared ground, even when it comes to defining the problems that Armenia has. After all, it is difficult to provide a definitive description of a fundamentally uncertain situation.

Instead, political actors in Armenia try to minimise the sense of uncertainty by introducing specific antagonistic others. The missions to save Armenia seem clear if it is specified from whom they are saving it. Since the analysed narratives make connections with domestic and international processes, they also construct images of antagonistic others that operate within the state and outside of it. For example, interactions between government officials and members of the parliamentary opposition often spiral into mutual accusations of serving the interests of outside powers (168. am 2025b; Lurer 2024b; Armenian Times 2024b; Sputnik Armenia 2023). On one occasion, a member of the parliament told the Armenian Foreign Minister: 'Everyone understands that you are taking orders from Azerbaijan,' to which the Minister responded: 'You are the one taking orders from another country [Russia].'(Aravot 2024a, paras. 8, 10).

This polarising dynamic was especially visible during the latest parliamentary elections. Both the incumbent and the opposition associated the victory of the other side with annihilation. The Prime Minister and his team labelled the three most popular opposition parties and alliances 'a three-headed monster,' which would bring war and the loss of Armenia's independence once they gain power (Civil Contract 2026; Mkrtchyan 2026; Jam News 2026). The authorities claimed that the participation of those opposition forces in the elections was part of a 'hybrid warfare' launched against Armenia by external forces (i.e., Russia) (Armenian Times 2026; Lurer 2026). The other side presented a similar narrative: Pashinyan's re-election would be catastrophic for Armenia (24 News 2026; Aslanyan 2026; Armenia News 2026). According to them, the government simply took orders from Armenia's enemies, Azerbaijan and Turkey (24 News 2026; News.am 2026).

In all, the antagonistic frontiers built by each of the sides blur the line between domestic competitors and foreign adversarial powers. The subject positioning in the studied narratives demonstrates how the very legitimacy of the other side is questioned. This discursive arrangement is validated by the sense of urgency detected in the above-mentioned manifestations of anxiety. In this context, there is no room for mistakes, and those deviating

from the right path are put in the same category as the foreign actors that pose threats of annihilation.

As a result, there is little shared ground between political opponents: each side considers the other an alien element that threatens Armenia's very existence. This situation is indicative of polarisation, where general negative observations are made about the out-group. The latter acts as the antagonistic other and, in doing so, creates a sense of certainty about what should be done. In this way, a sense of mission emerges (defeating the other) that helps to cope with the anxieties about Armenia's future existence.

Conclusion

The fast pace of changes in global affairs has created new challenges for small states. This paper contributes to understanding the identity-related aspects of these changes and their ramification in domestic affairs. It shows how the new uncertainties of the international realm trigger small-state sensitivities. Domestically, different actors try to bracket the newly emerged anxieties in contrasting ways. While some call for new ways of self-identification, others stress the importance of sticking to preexisting mechanisms. Both sides consider deviations from their perspectives existentially threatening. Hence, those harbouring opposing views are seen as the antagonistic others in their narratives. As a result, polarisation becomes a prevalent feature of domestic politics.

One could argue that polarisation about foreign policy issues has become a common feature of political life in many countries, be it big or small. There is a rapidly growing subfield studying foreign policy politicisation, where populist tendencies and polarising dynamics are discussed extensively (Cadier 2024; Costa 2019; Hackenesch et al. 2021, 2021; Müller and Gazsi 2023). However, what makes small states particularly vulnerable to such developments is the concern about their finitude. The anxiety about an uncertain and dangerous external environment is closely linked with the fundamental question of whether Armenia would survive as an independent state. In this situation, political opponents, who associate each other with the threat of annihilation, can hardly find a middle ground.

Evidently, Armenia's domestic polarisation cannot be fully attributed to the anxieties triggered by the LIO crisis. Nevertheless, the analysed data show a clear link between concerns about an uncertain external environment and prevalent antagonism in the political discourse. Further investigations into this issue could help to test the presented argument by observing polarisation dynamics in other small states. Besides, incorporating data beyond elite narratives

can help to explore more diverse manifestations of anxiety triggered by international disorder and their effects on domestic affairs.

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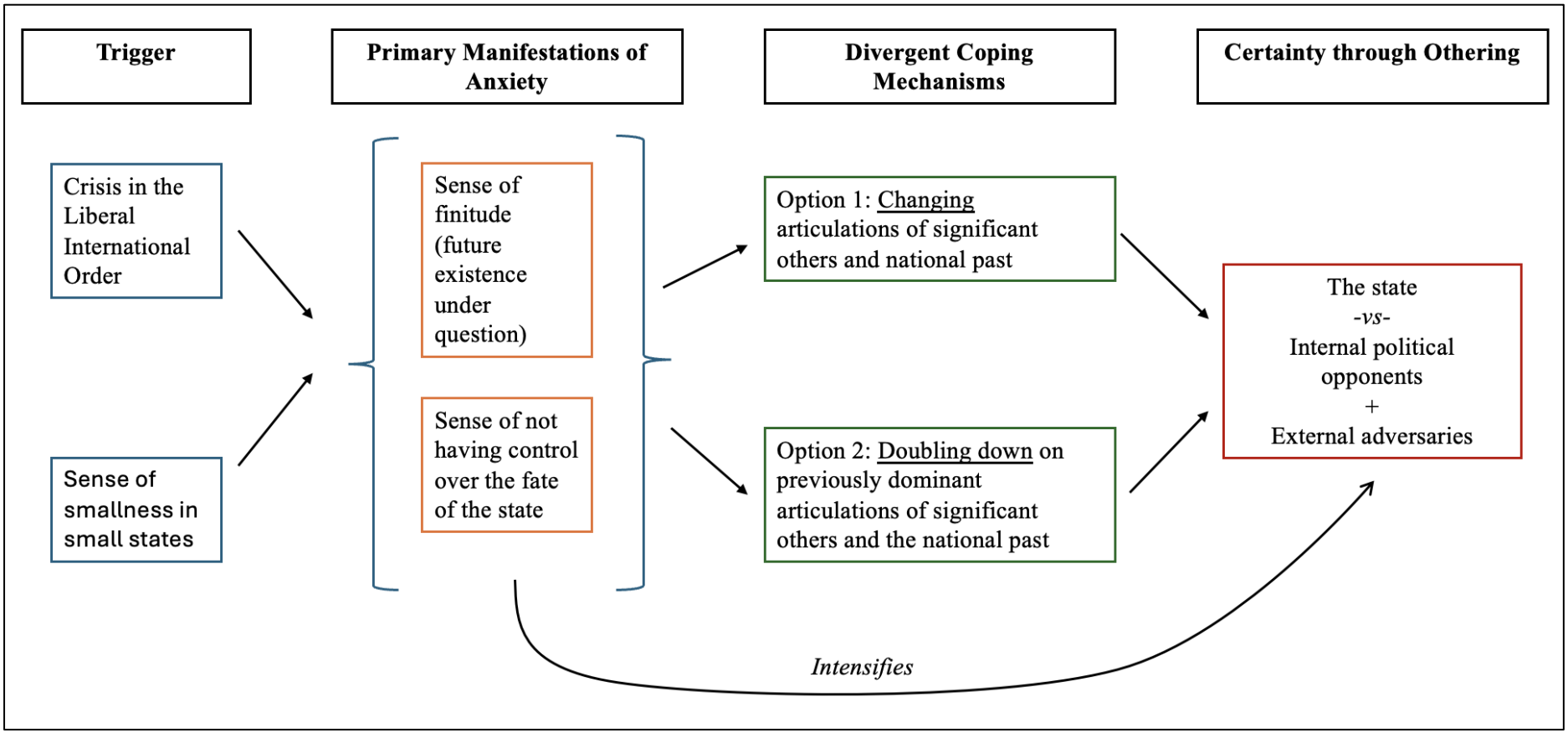


Figure 1: The process through which crisis in the LIO contributes to heightened antagonism in the domestic politics of small states.