



## ESIL Interest Group on International Organizations

Call for Papers | ESIL Annual Conference 2023 | Aix-en-Provence

The ESIL Interest Group on International Organizations welcomes submissions for the interest group workshop taking place as part of the ESIL Annual Conference on **Thursday 31 August 2023, 09.30-12.30**, in Aix-en-Provence.

THEME:

### **Whataboutism, Reciprocity, Double Standards: Towards a Theory of Fairness in International Organizations**

A recurring word of the last year, ‘whataboutism’ is a *tu quoque* logical fallacy that denotes a counter argument based on avoiding a question by retorting with a counter question about the moral status of the accuser. At the kindergarten as much as at the UN General Assembly, the idea is to justify a behavior relying on a sense of fairness: ‘I did hit and push the new kid, but what about you? Is it unfair to punish me when no one is punishing others for acting the same way?’ As such, the argumentative tactic has no place among the circumstances precluding internationally wrongful acts, but it is a narrative frequently employed by actors to contextualise a breach of international law, recalling how unfair the game is.

As *fora* for global politics, debates within international organizations are replete with arguments essentially based on whataboutism. From the current invasion of Ukraine to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, from the occupation of Palestinian territories to the denial of the Chagossians right to self-determination, claims to fairness made in such fora are a recurrent counter hegemonic strategy, often intended to reveal hypocrisy and double standards. At the same time, it is frequently abused and it ends up undermining the proper functioning of the organization. Today, whataboutery is thriving within international organizations and is employed by states and other actors within the United

Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the International Criminal Court, to mention only a few. Similarly, regional international organizations, such as the African Union, the European Union, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, are often accused of double standards, or rely on whataboutism in their international relations. For instance, international organizations not functionally related with international peace and security, such as the International Labour Organization, have been accused of double standards for adopting sanctions against the Russian Federation for its aggression against Ukraine, even in the absence of clear competences. The African Union has repeatedly employed whataboutism against the International Criminal Court, to reveal a selection bias.

Whataboutism finds a justification in the importance of reciprocity as a structural feature of international law, characterized by a decentralized and horizontal system of enforcement. Reciprocity is based on the expectation that states' interdependence will sustain legal equality, because the same standard applies to all breaches of international law. Particularly within international organizations, whataboutism relies on a lack of reciprocity and the claim that the system is rigged by an hegemonic power that is not subject to the same rules that applies to all. It denotes the collapse of good faith and, in institutional contexts, it impedes the international organization to work effectively.

We invite papers around the theme of 'Whataboutism, Reciprocity, Double Standards: Towards a Theory of Fairness in International Organizations'.

Some suggested sub-themes are as follows:

- The employment of whataboutism in debates within and between international organizations and states
- The role of fairness, reciprocity, and good faith in international organizations
- Fair to who? The hypocrisy of international organizations as setting double standards
- The use and abuse of sanctions by international organizations
- Selectivity and the elasticity of competences
- How to contextualise whataboutism and double standards in international organizations within the structural and changing forces in world politics
- Ways to understand whataboutism and the role it plays in maintaining a certain world order or configuration of power

The abstracts should be between 500 and 600 words, and be submitted, alongside a short biography of 200 words maximum in the same document, to [igioesil@gmail.com](mailto:igioesil@gmail.com). The deadline for submission of

the abstract is Friday, 21 April 2023. Participants will be expected to submit an extended abstract of 3,000 words ahead of the Conference.

Given the aims and format of the panels adopted by ESIL, the Interest Group will select abstracts pursuant to the following criteria:

- Submissions by early-career scholars
- Originality and innovativeness of the work
- Relevance to the Panel theme
- Geographical and gender balance

The following information must be provided with each abstract:

- The author's name and any affiliation
- Small biography (should be included in the same document)
- The author's contact details
- Whether the author is a current ESIL member

The ESIL encourages anyone participating in its activities to become a member, as the Society relies primarily on membership contributions to ensure its sustainability.

#### Organising Committee

- Lorenzo Gasbarri (Assistant Professor, Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna)
- Laura Luisa Huici Sancho (Senior Lecturer in international law, University of Barcelona)
- Gail Lythgoe (Lecturer in International Law, University of Manchester)
- Negar Mansouri (PhD candidate, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies)
- Miša Zgonec-Rozej (Legal Officer, International Criminal Court)

The Interest Group is unable to provide funding for travel and accommodation. Selected speakers will be expected to bear the costs of their own travel and accommodation. Some [ESIL travel grants](#) and [ESIL carers' grants](#) will be available to offer partial financial support to speakers who have exhausted other potential sources of funding.

Please see the [ESIL website](#) for all relevant information about the conference.

All participants at ESIL Interest Group workshops are required to register for the Annual Conference. There will be an option to register just to attend the IG workshops; however, all participants are warmly invited to attend the entire event.

#### ESIL Young Scholar Prize (YSP)

Papers accepted for this interest group workshop will be eligible for the ESIL YSP. Candidates have to be ESIL members at the time of the submission of the abstract. More details about the prize, eligibility and procedure can be found here: <https://esil-sedi.eu/esil-ysp/>