

# A pragmatist defence of rationalism: Towards a cognitive frames-based methodology in International Relations

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## Abstract

The endeavour to explain and predict international affairs is getting harder since it is ever more widely accepted that heterogeneous and fluid actors are making international politics. Positivists of various types have dominated the discussion on knowledge creation in the discipline of International Relations (IR), but the increasing acceptance of the dynamic character of international politics has led to the support and use of constructivist, post-Western or feminist approaches. There has also been an uptick in methodological discussions on these critical, non-positivist approaches. This article contributes to these debates by offering the first steps towards a cognitive frames-based methodology for IR. With a pragmatist ontology as its foundation, the approach re-sets the focus of analysis to the rationality of the international actors. The article, offers an initial description, by relying on illustrative examples, of the creation, the reach, durability and the organisational structure of cognitive frames in the global arena.

## Keywords

cognitive frames, European Migrant Crisis, IR methodology, pragmatism, rationalities, rationality

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## Introduction

In recent years, numerous global political developments have caught many of us by surprise. Basing our assessment on what is rational, international events such as the Brexit, Trump's victory in the last US presidential election, previous 'Black Swan' events such as the Iraq War in 2003 and before that the dissolution of the Soviet Union were hard to forecast and questioned the realist worldview with its premise of rationality of action. The rules of international politics appear to be changing and the assumption that weighty decisions are made primarily from the standpoint of rationality seems to be outdated. This realisation is also increasingly present in International Relations (IR). Within it, we witness the steady decline of the realist paradigm revolving around the notion of rational actors<sup>1</sup> and see increasing sedimentation of constructivist, critical and post-Western approaches explaining what is happening in the world of international politics.<sup>2</sup> However, it is our crucial claim that the concept of rationality is still beneficial for IR if one is willing to accept that the notion does not have universal content and needs to be reconsidered as a context-bound concept. Consequently, in IR, one should not talk about rationality but rationalities. To introduce this type of perspectivism,<sup>3</sup> we bring forward a cognitive frames-based methodology with recourse to pragmatist social theory and argue for one route of such reconsideration that will help to understand the new notion of rationality. This approach is clearly non-positivistic and interpretivist. Non-positivist approaches had since the late 1950s, with the beginning of the 'second great debate' in IR, the reputation of being non-scientific.<sup>4</sup> Based on the Weberian idea of Science, Patrick Jackson concludes, however, that any type of 'systemic inquiry designed to produce factual knowledge'<sup>5</sup> should be considered science. The methodology (or better research strategy) introduced below is aimed at providing a conceptual scheme for utilising various interpretative research methods (more on the methods at the end of the article) to study the rationality and therefore the decision-making of international actors. We argue that there is no rationality *as such* to be found, and that rationality of various decisions is intelligible within the *reach*, *durability* and *organisational* structure of specific cognitive frames. The theoretical underpinnings of this approach draw heavily on Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis*<sup>6</sup> (and its various interpretations) whose potential is not yet opened up for IR. Consequently, our article makes a case for more interdisciplinarity by demonstrating the usefulness of sociological concepts in IR. It also adds to Friedrichs' and Kratochwil's call for 'a pragmatic turn in [IR]'<sup>7</sup> and strengthens it by using pragmatist philosophy to support a methodological project in IR. Besides that, even though it is not explicitly explored in this article, it can be understood as a methodological response to the call for non-Western<sup>8</sup> or global<sup>9</sup> IR theorising, as it aims at proposing a research strategy for reconstructing individual rationality-shaping cognitive frames that affect every international actor.

A general question might arise as to whether our approach is a *methodological* one rather than just conceptual. Here, we should point out that according to Hay's influential approach:

[m]ethodology relates to the choice of analytical strategy and research design which underpins substantive research. Although methodology establishes the principles which might guide the

choice of method, it should not be confused with the methods and techniques of research themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Jackson considers the tendency to ‘collapse methodology into method’ as typical of neopositivism<sup>11</sup> from which we distance ourselves. Thus, our discussion is methodological even though we do not put forth a detailed elaboration of concrete methods. We will start with a take on the debate over rationality in IR. Next, before moving to the properties and practical aspects of cognitive frames, we turn to pragmatist philosophy to uncover the ontological and epistemological assumptions that every methodological approach has to rely on even if it often does it tacitly.<sup>12</sup> After that, we briefly introduce the notion of cognitive frames in general and then outline four significant features of them that are important to understand for being able to identify and track cognitive frames in the international arena. Starting with their (1) creation, we continue with their (2) reach and (3) durability and end with their (4) organisational structure. Besides, we discuss the preferable unit of analysis and suitable analysis methods and offer, finally, a short demonstration of the usefulness of the methodology by considering the rationality of Germany’s refugee policy changes in 2015–2016.

## **Conceptions of rationality in theories of international relations**

In this section, we sketch out the main features of rationality as they are conceptualised in IR and then engage with the insights of other rationality-based frameworks that are prominently consulted in IR to show where the perspectivism proposed in this article fits in. Our project should not be understood as a new paradigm but rather as an alternative to game and rational choice theories usually deployed.

In IR rationality is, first, presumed to be about the decision-making process that is founded on certain assumptions about reality, leading to the desired outcome. Neorealists would argue that ‘bring[ing] the state back in’ would assume that states make rational decisions and that this assumption stands until proven otherwise.<sup>13</sup> These decisions are always a response to the anarchic world that requires states to help themselves, gain, balance or consolidate power.<sup>14</sup> Power can have several faces from military conflicts to joint security advancements, via economic cooperation or diplomatic means. Neoliberalists, on the other hand, would argue that states do not act on their own and that many other actors (other states, international organisation or multi-national companies) affect the decision-making and therefore the content of rational calculations. Decisions here are driven by democratisation, freeing of markets and promotion of individual liberties and can be expressed in humanitarian interventions, membership of supranational or inter-governmental organisations and alliance forging (in classic game-theoretical fashion<sup>15</sup>). Interestingly enough, when using game theory at the foundation of an analysis of rationality, we have to expect that all players know the game and whom they are playing against, they are all willing to play by its rules and understand the reward system.<sup>16</sup> What happens to rationality when somebody changes the rules or stops playing altogether? Classical Game-theoretical rational choice theory seems to be quite helpless in grasping these kinds of situations. This is why among other things, the notion of ‘bounded

rationality' emerged already a couple of generations ago in psychology and economics and has steadily moved to political science and IR.<sup>17</sup>

Second, more specific definitions such as what we find in Methodological Individualism and Rational Choice (MIRC), assumed rational actors to be intelligent and strive for efficiency in trade, maximisation of wealth and globalisation.<sup>18</sup> MIRC does not always consider the promotion of democracy, human rights and individual freedom as rationally valuable (unless they contribute to the trade efficiency of the actor) but could in principle promote membership of international political institutions that enable cooperation.<sup>19</sup> Psychological approaches in IR depart from MIRC insofar as they assume imperfect rationality based on the fluidity of identities, past beliefs and groupthink.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, cognitive psychology has shown that deviations from rationality should be considered the norm and that these are by no means random but systematic.<sup>21</sup> It also showed that prior beliefs strongly affect information processing and that individuals seek decisions consistent within their 'belief systems'.<sup>22</sup> Even more importantly, (rational) choices are strongly influenced by the framing of the problem.<sup>23</sup> This approach to rationality is very much in line with our understanding. Constructivists see further constraints to rationality in the 'modes of subjectivity' which constrains actors' behaviour 'by the expectations of others about what their proper role is'.<sup>24</sup>

When encountering irrational behaviour, we assume that actors make these decisions without adhering to guidelines for rational acting. We believe that even in such extreme cases as North Korea or Iran, this is not the case and that actions are taken based on consideration of imperfect rational choices. Furthermore, it is well-documented that thoroughly Western concepts and ideals like human rights, economic growth and the like are not necessarily considered reasonable goals in other cultural contexts. This leads to the assumption that objectivity and with that, rationality can look very different in different situations and settings. Once this has been accepted, we are again able to base our analysis on the idea of rational (or predictable) decision-making. Very robustly put: most political decisions are based on rationality, but the content of rationality differs from actor to actor, from perspective to perspective and from setting to setting. After understanding the dynamic nature of rationality, we need a tool that would enable us to understand the specific conditions that create rationality. We suggest that the behaviour and actions of all actors (individuals, states) are based on underlying cognitive frames. Therefore, a careful analysis of these frames would allow access to the rationality of such actors and help to explain and forecast their actions. The application of a cognitive frames-based methodology should provide a conceptual tool for that. However, at the foundation of every methodology lie ontological and epistemological presumptions, even if often left tacit in social/political research. For making them explicit, we turn to the pragmatist tradition in social philosophy.

## **Pragmatist view on truth and reality**

Before we start unpacking the content of pragmatism, we need to explain our choice to connect a frame-based approach with this philosophy. The first link is Erving Goffman himself, who perhaps does not explicitly state his connection with pragmatism but is inevitably associated with the Chicago school of sociology that has been

heavily influenced by George Herbert Mead and John Dewey who without a doubt are distinguished pragmatists. The other aspect that led us to pragmatism was the properties of cognitive frames that account for the existence of multiple realities which to remain relevant must be confirmed by practices over and over again.<sup>25</sup> Also, one could argue that the above-mentioned 'pragmatist turn' in IR has not yet taken hold,<sup>26</sup> although it could be useful for the discipline, making our contribution relevant to it.

According to pragmatist ontology, no reality exists separately from human experience. This, in turn, produces, epistemologically speaking, a wide variety of perceptions and interpretations of truth. Nevertheless, human beings are presumed to be capable of extracting knowledge from this world. It has proven challenging to combine philosophical pragmatism and IR research methodology.<sup>27</sup> This is a two-fold problem. First, the focus in IR was never put on the philosophical aspect of pragmatism but on the laymen or linguistic definition of pragmatic – 'what proves useful' – which indeed has been well embraced in IR methodology. Second, the ontological focus in IR used to be very concretely placed on the material forces of the anarchical system, which did not leave space for the philosophical ideas of pragmatism.<sup>28</sup> This, however, has changed with the general acknowledgement of constructivism – with its ontological considerations of a socially constructed reality – as an IR paradigm. By that, we do not refer to the ontological equivalence of the two paradigms, but we view it as a development that granted other ontologies access to the discipline. In fact, the ontological difference between pragmatism and constructivism is most evident in the understanding of the medium of reality construction. Constructivists view ideas as the primary constructor of world politics and the world itself. In comparison, pragmatists acknowledge the power of ideas and discourse but view them as mere (constructed) tools of experience.<sup>29</sup> This becomes clearer if we position pragmatism against two major paradigms in IR. A (post-)positivist considers the world as existing without us understanding it, whereas a constructivist views the world as a construct of our conceptions of it.<sup>30</sup> The pragmatist position tries to bridge these two elements and acknowledges that the world around us limits our experience; our understanding, on the other hand, is limited by our interpretation of the experience.<sup>31</sup> This pluralist ontological position differentiates itself from constructivist's tendency towards monism (which considers the ideational as the constitutive aspect of reality<sup>32</sup>) and considers the triumvirate of the mind (interpretation), material world and experience (creating the context for the interpretation) as equally constitutive of reality. In simpler terms, in pragmatism, we are considerably more focused on practices, while in constructivism, the latter play only a supporting role.<sup>33</sup> Based on this, we can state that according to pragmatism, reality is solely a construct of the individuals and their experiences. Furthermore, ideas and experiences vary from individual to individual, which entails the existence of multiple realities (or pluralistic universe, as William James<sup>34</sup> would have it). Ontologically speaking, things *are* not grounded on their substance but on the experience of the individual with the things. Reality, further, does not only appear different from individual to individual but can be subject to constant change.

Closely linked to the ontological issue of the constitution of reality is the epistemological notion of truth. Like reality, truth as a concept has a fluid content that is in a state of possible constant change. In fact, the most straightforward description of the pragmatist concept of truth is a linguistic one. Although we have the *term* 'truth' as a noun, at the

*conceptual* level, truth can never fulfil the role of a noun but rather the one of an adjective. There is no one truth ‘out there’ regarding whichever issue; truth is a state that can be attached to or detached from ‘things’ as they are rendered via experience. Truth will be shaped and changed according to experience, which suggests that every community with their traditions, facts and practice-based realities also possess their truth – ergo, truth is not objective but inter-subjective.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, for something to become known or true, the community has to come across it and engage with it regularly.<sup>36</sup> This is why pragmatism’s main point regarding truth is not that of relativism – anything goes – but instead, perspectivism – truth is what works for an engaging and confirming community in practice. Epistemologically speaking pragmatism says that knowledge and truth are produced in action (practices) and ‘giv[es] up on the idea that warranted knowledge is generated through either logical demonstration or the representation of the “world out there”’.<sup>37</sup> Knowing that repetition and verification of traditions are essential for constructing truth, we can also assert that if a tradition slowly loses its meaning and fades away, then a new version of truth will be shaped. In addition, something appears to be true when it can validate and verify the beliefs of people. A similar effect will be achieved when a belief will have practical consequences for the truth.<sup>38</sup> This means that if a particular belief seems more profitable to someone’s life, it catches one’s attention, and is more likely to become accepted as true by that someone.<sup>39</sup> A pragmatist would say, something is true for me, if ‘it works’ for me. Consequently, truth gets assigned to ideas when the repetitions of processes, events or facts make it true, and vice versa truth gets challenged when no verification happens.<sup>40</sup>

A consequence of this perspective is that *absolute* truth does not exist, and something can be true or known to somebody only if it is useful or has been verified and confirmed over time. This means that versions of truth can be dropped rather swiftly if they are ‘not working’. We argue that pragmatism’s denial of absolute truth, and subsequently the denial of absolutely valid rational decisions, is the crucial point for its application in IR and supports our effort to introduce into the discipline a cognitive frames–based methodology that takes exactly these aspects into account.

## What are cognitive frames?

Cognitive frames ‘are modes of interpretation that are socially constructed – an intersubjective pattern of defining and interpreting reality collectively’.<sup>41</sup> The idea finds its origin in Erving Goffman’s work *Frame Analysis*, where he argues that every actor is subject to several frames that are comprised of culture, history, certain social features or belief systems.<sup>42</sup> People who share a frame are called ‘frame subjects’. For particular ‘frame subjects’, reality can appear significantly different from that of the outsiders. Generally, the notion of cognitive frames offers a theoretical perspective on the way individuals, groups or societies organise and perceive reality, and how they act. When we are using this concept in IR, it allows us also to understand the perspectives of states and other international actors.

As in pragmatist ontology, these frames are presumed to be anchored in experiences which are defined by such factors as tradition, religion or history and strengthened or weakened via the discourse that is lead through different communication channels, social

movements and political leaders. It should be added that frame-based concepts have been extensively explored in psychology, sociology and other social sciences (examples of these are used below to explore the properties of cognitive frames). However, their application in IR remains underutilised. This being said, there have been examples of works in the last two decades which showed the usefulness and compatibility of the cognitive-frame approach with the discipline.<sup>43</sup> Missing at this point, however, is a generally applicable methodology that focuses on the role of cognitive frames in the creation of rationality and subsequently the explanation of decisions. It is to this task we now turn to with the help of Goffman.

According to Goffman, individuals regularly analyse their social reality, and therefore different experiences can make situations appear very different. A simple example that has been put forward by Goffman is the experience of a football game from two fans of the rivalling clubs.<sup>44</sup> An objective observer of the game would assume that the events during the game are apprehended the same way by any observer. However, if we were to analyse the perception of the different fan bases, we would hear descriptions of different realities. Because of their affiliation with one side, they would treat some referee decisions as an affront against their team and would suggest that the referee ignores reality. Supporters of the other team, on the other hand, would see the decision as justified and in accordance with reality.

As already mentioned, Goffman considered frame analysis mostly as a tool for analysing the interaction between people within a society, but the level of applicability can be expanded to larger bodies of people that include several hundred and up to billions. The reach of a frame is, in fact, secondary and it only matters whether the interactants share at least a minimal degree of understanding about what is considered appropriate behaviour at the current moment, according to the rules of the frame.<sup>45</sup> The secondary role of the size aspect can be well understood when looking at the role of cognitive frames in the creation process of communities. Communities appear in many different forms, shapes and sizes. They can be based on influencers such as language, history, culture, tradition, ethnicity, nationalism, primordial sense of belonging, religion, geography and political ideology or by narrower aspects such as education, regional peculiarity, class, mobility and sub-culture.

Considering now that communities can have very different roots but are similarly stable and long-lasting, it appears safe to say that the source of the community is less important. This hints towards the fact that none of them is *a priori* or equipped with absolute truth and that they are – to use Anderson's words – 'imagined'.<sup>46</sup> These *imagined* communities are connected by their kind of perception of reality and truth that is not bound to objectivity but on specific conditions. Furthermore, looking back at pragmatism, this means that there can be a vast number of realities and truths based on the individuals' experience, environment and viewpoint. A community-creating idea is, therefore, *true* as long as people believe in it and it is present in their own as well as in the collective mind and subject to collective interpretation.<sup>47</sup> The collective interpretation will eventually decide what is rational and affect the decision-making of all frame subjects. Still, how are frames created in the first place? Various aspects of their creation are the topic of our next section.

## **The creation of cognitive frames**

In the globalised twenty-first century, the attributes of cognitive frames have been changed from rather static to dynamic. This does not only affect the creation of the frames but also their maintenance and their reach. Within the frame (a) distinctive flow(s) emerge(s) that captivate(s) the attention of the frame subject and this temporal nature of the frame is strongly affected by the speed with which communication happens at the time. When considering the spatial dimension or reach of the frame, it becomes apparent that frames are – at least in the beginning – very much limited to the boundaries of the communities or the reach of the communication channel(s). However, today, these limits are much weaker, and frames have more opportunity to grow. Naturally, many cognitive frames exist simultaneously in different places and concerning different communities. However, several frames can also apply to the same community. Here, frames can move from the background to the foreground, dominate or be subordinated to overarching frame structures. Cognitive frames can be manifested through many community-creating forces such as political ideologies but also by language, history, geography or minor societal influencers such as education and residential area. Goffman describes these as belief systems or ‘cosmolog[ies]’.<sup>48</sup> The focus on history and political ideologies also alludes to the idea that momentous events can trigger the creation of frames. Good examples are the French Revolution, 9/11 attacks, but also process-like events such as the incorporation of Facebook in the broader global society.

When it comes to the framing process itself, then it mostly happens within the public and/or political discourse of the subjects. Discourse is created within and through communication sources – such as speech, news, media and in the twenty-first century primarily through social media – and constructs a public controversy or political issue which then leads to community creation.<sup>49</sup> As already mentioned, much attention has to be paid to the speed with which discourse can be lead and altered in the twenty-first century. In addition, new means of communication and transportation have entirely altered the reach of cognitive frames, which were initially more limited by geographical factors.

## **The reach of cognitive frames**

First, we need to clarify what reach describes in the context of cognitive frames. We refer to the spatial dimension of frames here, but not in any geometrical or geographical sense. Hence, we prefer to use the term ‘reach’ rather than some physical space connotations-evoking word. We propose focussing on the number of frame subjects to assess the reach of a frame. This approach to spatiality already suggests that the dimensions of a cognitive frame are not bound to geography or territory and allows us to ignore any of these aspects when trying to map cognitive frames. In the twenty-first century, it is more likely than ever that the subjects of a frame will be spread throughout the globe, making the geographical indicators for the reach of frames less useful. Based on the grasp of communication channels, it appears to be evident that cognitive frames can grow and add more individuals. The capacity of individuals or communities to perceive a new cognitive frame appears to be dependent on its compatibility with the previous societal paradigm as well as the ability of the previous institutional configuration to support the new

frame.<sup>50</sup> Surel indicates here that a new frame does not just substitute an existing one, but the change happens slowly through associations and activation of paradigm elements that already exist. The neoliberal turn in the 1980s, for example, has been quickly and fully embraced in the UK, whereas it was much more contested in France and Germany, which can be tracked down to macro-economic policies that Britain had pursued after the 1970s' oil crisis due to the loss of confidence in the Keynesian paradigm.<sup>51</sup> As for the institutional and structural pre-conditions – which appear especially important when cognitive frames promote political change – it is therefore essential that new frames have fertile ground to slowly *reform* and not *revolutionise* the mindset of the people. This sheds some light on the fact that the French Revolution of 1848 (February Revolution) spread within a year throughout Europe and started one of the most dramatic and wide-ranging political diffusion processes, whereas the French Revolution of 1789 did not have any immediate effects on the European continent.<sup>52</sup> This leads us to believe that the existing cognitive frame was not susceptible to these ideas in 1789, which changed in 1848 when the gradual advancement of liberalism in the nineteenth century and the successful downfall of the King of France did support the chances for political change.<sup>53</sup> This does not necessarily mean that a frame ceases to exist but that it can take a subordinate role.

The example of the French Revolution also shows how crucial regional proximity was for the expansion of a cognitive frame in the nineteenth century. This aspect is still important in the twenty-first century, but especially the Internet and its ability to connect people without a physical connection have very much impacted the role that the regional proximity plays. An example of this new spatiality is the increase of radicalised Islamic terrorist attacks in Europe that have been planned and executed by individuals with only marginal ties to terrorist groups. These so-called lone wolves are not comparable to terrorists stemming from traditional terrorist cells which are regional actors and have complex organisational structures and ties to global mother organisations. Lone wolves, on the other hand, are individuals acting alone, being often European-born Muslims or European converts<sup>54</sup> who have no initial touchpoint with terrorist organisations. Besides, they are not residents of the regions where these organisations have influence, and therefore not initial subjects to the cognitive frames that lead to this behaviour. However, the new frame subjects are most likely pre-disposed with a religious connection, societal struggles or are already awed by terrorist groups that work as a source of inspiration.<sup>55</sup> Especially terrorist organisations also seem to utilise the so-called frame alignment strategies that are aimed at increasing the reach of the frame.<sup>56</sup> Here, we can see how especially radicalised social groups use an array of strategies, ranging from consciousness-raising and educational endeavours over political and social activism and even violent confrontation to win members for their cause.<sup>57</sup> In short, the reach of cognitive frames is and always was dependent on the reach of the communication channels which are carrying the discourse. In the twenty-first century, this means that frames are not bounded by any borders but can spread with the help of the Internet and by globally operating media outlets into any corner of the world. Nevertheless, regional proximity and association with the paradigm elements mentioned above are still significant aspects that lead to the expansion and spread of cognitive frames.

## The durability of cognitive frames

Several criteria need to be considered to understand the durability of cognitive frames. First, it needs to be able to continuously, not just momentarily, capture the attention of individuals. Second, it needs to prove its practical value over and over. Third, if the frame grows or additional subjects are added to its domain, it prolongs its life span. Moreover, fourth, the lifetime of the frame can artificially be prolonged when it becomes a political tool. If none of these criteria are present, the frame slowly stops to be reaffirmed and by stopping the execution of rituals, the frame will be challenged, questioned and could potentially be replaced, moved to the background or it may dissolve.<sup>58</sup>

How does a cognitive frame capture continuously the attention of individuals? According to Aaltola '[p]ublic drama in world politics – e.g. in the form of a foreign war or a terror attack'<sup>59</sup> is the most effective way to ensure the attention of the individuals. With the terror attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, the attention of the Western World was caught and did not only reassure the frame that suggests the separation of Western World from the rest of the world but also established a frame that entails the continuous threat of global terrorism. The lifetime of this frame got and still is continuously extended with terrorist attacks happening mostly in the European part of the Western World. Drawing on William Beeman's work,<sup>60</sup> Aaltola explains this ongoing engagement with the activity with the emergence of a distinctive flow inside the frame.<sup>61</sup> At this point, the frame becomes very quickly a political tool that can be used to realise political gains.<sup>62</sup> Political actors are even in the position to induce the creation of cognitive frames by opening the political discourse on an issue.<sup>63</sup> We can find an example of the political utilisation in the way the Russian government promoted a 'Great Arctic Power Frame' after the international sanctions hit Russia in 2014. Khrushcheva and Poberezhskaya observed that the Arctic found its way increasingly into the political discourse.<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, this coincided with a period of massive recession and international sanctions on the Russian economy and a general bad international reputation due to the annexation of Crimea. We can see here that the authorities of the Russian Federation utilised and to a great extent even created the 'Arctic Power' frame to distract its subjects from other political circumstances. It seemed that the frame was waiting to be activated and also disappeared very quickly when the Winter Olympics caught the attention of the frame subjects in Sochi.

When discussing Goffman's work on interaction rituals, Collins points out that these ups and downs in the workings of frames can be understood as 'finely honed interactional work'<sup>65</sup> of construction/destruction that decides whether frames last. He continues, that frames are sustained and 'made real by being acted out'<sup>66</sup> in patterns of interaction that may or may not become ritualised over time. This means that frames only survive if people act on them and if they do, it is essential for how long and whether the actions become 'interaction rituals'<sup>67</sup> that are being followed by the majority of the subjects. Thus, the life span or durability of a cognitive frame hinges on social factors and not on the individual.<sup>68</sup> This notion is also shared by Gray and his colleagues, who state that frames are being constructed through individuals interacting with each other.<sup>69</sup> Goffman also agrees that the reaffirmation happens through the interpretation of culture and verbal, nonverbal and physical responses to it.<sup>70</sup> The reaffirmation keeps the current frame

together and enables it to persist over time. If the behaviour of the individual does not correspond to the initial rituals, the frame will lose consistency and runs the danger of disintegration.<sup>71</sup> Gray and his colleagues also point out that frames can be prolonged if frame subjects observe the expansion of that frame.<sup>72</sup> A good example can be found in the continuous expansion of the European Union and the increase of identification it brought along with it. When it comes to the durability of frames, the continuous interaction between the individuals and the content of frames is imperative. Once the individuals stop carrying out frame-related rituals or the frame is no longer able to attract attention, its role becomes less and less important and could lead to its dissolution.

## The organisational structure of cognitive frames

The existence of many realities, according to pragmatism, clearly implicates that many different frames with many different subjects must exist at the same time. This also means that there are many frames that neither do overlap nor have touchpoints of any kind and some that touch and overlap. Of course, there can also be frames that do not overlap but still have touchpoints in a geographical or cultural sense with each other. A geographical example can be found during the time of the Cold War, where the separation of the two Blocs created two distinguished frames that met at the geographical border of the demarcation line. The existence of one frame had a definite impact on the subjects of the other frame.

If many frames exist at the same time, all individuals are also simultaneously subject to several cognitive frames. This process of responding to another frame and adding a new interpretation on top of one's frame is called lamination or layering of frames.<sup>73</sup> In this case, many frames are overlapping and influencing individuals. This means, however, that some frames will dominate in certain situations and others are in the background. To explain this aspect, let us look at the frames that direct the conversation between two individuals. In the following example, a woman and a man meet at her apartment for a social meeting and eating dinner together. Here, many different cognitive frames influence the behaviour such as the 'Situational Frame' (her apartment), the 'Functional Frame' (socialising during dinner), 'Situational Frame' ('meeting for the first time') and many other 'Functional Sub-Frames' that relate to politeness like 'commenting on food' or 'telling jokes'.<sup>74</sup> The example points to the fact that cognitive frames will interact with each other, overlap and the subjects will shift between them constantly and subconsciously choose which one of those frames is the dominant one.<sup>75</sup> Translating this back to the international level, we can observe that states are acting differently depending on the situational and functional frames. The differences could depend, for instance, on whether the states are directly negotiating with a neighbour, talk in front of the UN or within another regional framework. This multi-layeredness of cognitive frames appears in a hierarchical fashion where some will have a more significant direct impact, whereas others act instead in a subordinated way or will be suppressed.<sup>76</sup>

Arguably most political decisions of Russia are related to her aspiration to re-gain *Great Power* Status. This is based on her history as a reoccurring empire (Tsarist Russia but also the USSR) and the mythological idea of Russia as an eternal great power.<sup>77</sup> Now, many subordinated 'Functional Frames' seem to support this endeavour such as the

establishment of her as a 'Great Arctic Power',<sup>78</sup> as a reliable international partner,<sup>79</sup> as a major part of the world community by hosting major international sporting events<sup>80</sup> or by returning to its imperial roots that are being enabled or disabled based on their ability to attract enough attention that would overshadow the crisis at hand.<sup>81</sup> Thus, frames having a smaller and a more extensive reach can be present next to each other, above each other, some can be active or paused, or set up in the background. Others are overarching, and some are subordinate, and their functionality and foci can change, and shift based on many circumstances. After clarifying our methodological starting point, it is time to mark research methods that we see well-suited for empirical research which puts its focus on the identification of cognitive frames. However, the discussion on the unit of analysis must come first.

## Research methods and unit of analysis

Since we are interested in analysing cognitive frames that affect the decision-making apparatus of an actor (state), we need to agree on the constitution of this apparatus. Should we as a result of this consider the whole population, only active political participants, the institutional structure, the leadership or a combination of all of these? The answer to this question varies from state to state and a general prescription is problematic.<sup>82</sup> However, a focus must be established before the analysis can start.

Given the fluid and constructed nature of cognitive frames and the prominent role human behaviour plays, we consider qualitative, interpretative and post-positivistic research methods to be best suited for tracking and analysing them. We should recall that the proposed methodology aims to provide researches with a conceptual scheme to follow in their analyses. Therefore, a multitude of methods and combinations are possible and worth considering. Similarly, whether a particular type of data is better suited for the analysis than some other is entirely dependent on the research question and the method of analysis chosen. Therefore, all standard data collection methods ranging from desk research through different types of interviews and ethnographic methods<sup>83</sup> might be well-suited. Borrowing from the insights on Practice Theory-based research, participant observation, on the one hand, and in-depth interviews, on the other, should be especially relevant for linking the practices with the mental dispositions of the individuals or community.<sup>84</sup> Due to the role of public discourse in the creation of frames and the potential role of the political discourse to control frames, discourse analysis should be spearheading any empirical analysis of cognitive frames.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, considering that experience, history and underlying paradigmatic predispositions play a role in tracking frame prepositions, we see historical approaches such as historicism<sup>86</sup> as natural tools. History plays, of course, an essential role in understanding the current international relations and placing phenomena in context. However, historicists want to specifically emphasise that past practices and discourses have to be understood in their own historical and intellectual context.<sup>87</sup> Apart from these, we view narrative analyses that aim to understand how a narrative gets created and is carried on or ethnographic methods such as participant observation and extended case studies<sup>88</sup> and phenomenological approaches as useful.

## Frame analysis applied: The changes in Germany's refugee policy in 2015

In the following, we want to demonstrate the usefulness of our methodology when analysing the actions taken by Germany during the European Migrant Crisis. Our focus at this moment will be put on the apparent shift in its policy approach to address the crisis. In terms of our proposed methodology, we should say that the dominant frame has been replaced with another one. In the following, we carefully examine both frames relying on the four categories (*creation, reach, durability* and *organisation*) brought forward above, and assess their relationship with rationality. We consult here with rationality based on realist and neo-liberalist viewpoints and compare them with the behaviour of Germany as it appears through our sketch of frame analysis. The purpose of bringing in the discussion of neoliberalism and realism is to provide a reference point for comparing these perspectives on rationality. Even though our aim here is not to conduct a fully developed empirical study, but to illustrate our arguments, we will follow our method guidelines above and use the logics of historical analysis to understand the initial frame and considering the role of discourse to understand the workings of the superseding one.

Initially, we can track an overarching *normative frame* that leads to the initial offer of support to arriving refugees.<sup>89</sup> This phenomenon was not just observable in a small group of active supporters that were waiting at the train stations but reached most of the society. The support to help the refugees has also been expressed by the media, the government and even the opposition.<sup>90</sup> It led to Merkel's famous 'We can do this' statement that is a direct response to the humanitarian tragedy that was likely to occur in Hungary without any actions by Germany.<sup>91</sup> The frame's *creation* can be tracked down to the so-called 'Willkommenskultur' (*culture of welcoming*) which finds its historical roots in events in and after the Second World War, such as Germany's collective memory of the crimes performed in the War, and the fact that many Germans were refugees themselves after the war had ended.<sup>92</sup> It is worth noting that also the global refugee regime is based on a frame that puts humanitarianism and altruistic motives at its focus and derived from the same starting point in an attempt to make sure that the cruelties of the Second World War cannot be repeated. This frame has been the *dominant* one in much of the Western World and extended its *reach* by the West's quests for Human Rights and individualism. In Germany, specifically, we can find some more historical junctures that did strengthen the frame and increased its *durability*. The cruelties of the Second World War have been mostly concealed in the direct aftermath of the War and have been only introduced into the public discourse once the following generation asked the question of collective guilt of the German people. This public debate erupted anew in the mid-1980s when a sense of collective memory, centring around the holocaust, started to affect political outcomes in the Federal Republic and has been for instance used as an argument for expanding the EU eastwards.<sup>93</sup> A debate (*Historikerstreit*) led by the intellectual elite about the shape and uniqueness of the evilness of the Nazi regime was held for years in the leading German news outlets and actively followed by many Germans. The continuous recapturing of the attention and recall of the past kept the frame in its *dominant* position. Up until this day, it is part of Germany's identity to carry the guilt and the responsibilities (remembering and preventing) deriving from it. In addition, migration waves of the last 50 years

emanating from Southern Europe but also the Muslim World<sup>94</sup> created a multi-ethnic society that has sensitised the population to accept the arrival of people with different cultural backgrounds.

Drawing from neoliberal theory, this type of acting is also highly rational. Even though the hosting of refugees is connected with high short-term costs, its long-term benefits for the entire system are undeniable.<sup>95</sup> Once the initial phase is overcome, host countries will notice a positive contribution to the productivity of the national economy (especially considering Europe's demographic problem). In Germany, a link between refugee reception and its strong economic performance in 2016 has been identified.<sup>96</sup> On the other hand, source countries will benefit from the return movements of people with more skills and more extensive networks<sup>97</sup> which will lead to more stability in the region and the global economic system. In fact, protecting refugees and preventing and resolving conflict should be considered an international public good that benefits the entire world.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, the realist rationality driven by self-interest should put a significant focus on the prevention and resolution of conflicts and the protection of refugees.<sup>99</sup> This can be best achieved if the burden of the refugee regime is indeed shared and the countries of the Global North take not only on their responsibility but actively ease the burden of the South by using their capabilities to benefit the overall system.

However, within 12 months, the policy of open border had been suspended and completely turned around. Germany, like many of its neighbouring countries, shut down the unconstrained flow of migrants and installed border controls to control the flow. It appears that the *normative frame* has lost its practical value and has taken a back seat. In the new organisational setup, a frame whose subjects consider refugees and migration a security issue has taken the *dominant position*. The *security frame* emerged in the post-Cold War world, which saw a change in the security paradigm from simple military threats to a broad definition of threats to human security.<sup>100</sup> In this new paradigm, refugees were seen as a potential threat to international and domestic stability and therefore, states grew reluctant to host them. This led to the eventual state in which the Global North viewed asylum as a problem of South from which most refugees emanated.<sup>101</sup> The frame was already active in the 1990s when the dissolution of Yugoslavia created masses of refugees to EU countries and the paths to asylum have been narrowed.<sup>102</sup> However, at least in Germany, it went in and out of the *dominant position*. This frame is very attractive for political use since avoiding the short-term costs of hosting asylum-seekers by making them stay in the region was easily politicised and allowed to increase *durability* and *reach*. With this, the discourse focused on the economic, social and terrorist threats that could originate from asylum seekers, not on their human needs. Most parts of the Western World swiftly felt comfortable in this new cognitive frame, adopted this way of thinking and viewed the flow of migrants immediately as a threat. This was not directly the case in Germany where, due to the strong presence of the *normative frame*, the crisis was viewed dominantly as a humanitarian and not a political one. In our terminology, the necessary paradigmatic foundation for the *security frame* that was noticeable in other European countries. These countries have seen the awakening and rise of mostly right-wing populist parties or rhetoric after the recession of 2010 and the resulting austerity politics.<sup>103</sup> Later

populists would also willingly connect migration with questions of security. Germany had proven to be somewhat immune to the populist movement by stigmatising every new right-wing party as heirs of National Socialism. This turned with the events around the Cologne Central Station at New Year's Eve 2015–2016 and the growing number of terrorist attacks in Europe like in Nice, Reutlingen and Berlin – that were partly committed by individuals getting into Europe seeking for protection<sup>104</sup> – which has captured the attention of the Germans. This gave the AfD (Alternative for Germany) – Germany's right-wing populist party – and the PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident) protest movement new breeding ground which they used to penetrate the public discourse with their ideas on migration. The receptivity of the German people to this type of radicalism also derives from the electoral success similar parties had in other Western European countries – most notably Austria, France and the United Kingdom – which moulded it into an acceptable opinion to have. This displays the ability of frames to increase their *reach* beyond state borders. Given these developments, the ideas were eventually picked up and propagated by the German mainstream parties.<sup>105</sup> The change in the public discourse, together with the attention that the terror attacks demand, created the paradigmatic pre-condition for the new *security frame*. In Pragmatist fashion, it appeared now more useful and moved into the *dominant position*, putting the *normative frame* into the background.

From the perspective of 'objectivist' neoliberal analyses of rationality, the arguments associated with the *security frame* can seem problematic on several fronts. While neoliberal analysts can accept that there may be problems related to unchecked inflow of migrants, the arguments associated with the security frame can appear as exaggerations of fears of societal instability and decay. The discourse constructing refugees as a security threat can be seen as obviously ripe with overstatements. For example, neoliberals might point out that the number of refugees that have arrived in Europe to this day is too small to create long-lasting negative effects on its financial security or its cultural disposition. It also does not make sense to point towards the migration policy when searching for the reason why terrorist attacks are possible in Europe. The attackers might as well come from within Europe or reach it on a different path. Furthermore, the socio-economic problems Germany and other European countries face, they might point out, are home-made and were present before the surge of refugees arriving on the continent. Nevertheless, within the analysis put forward here of the *security frame*, it does not matter whether these aspects appear irrational from a neoliberal standpoint. Within the security frame, they appear entirely rational and will dictate behaviour and political actions.

This is an important point for highlighting the correspondence of pragmatist ontology and our proposed frame-based methodology. Both perspectives allow us to appreciate that as soon as the cognitive frame and its resulting reality do not appear to 'work' (for actors embedded in contingent settings made of multiple complexly interacting frames), a new more 'useful' frame steps in. Rationality then is fluid, contingent on interactions of people and frames; not 'objectively' given. We have shown here that accurate tracking and deconstruction of frames helps us then to understand how apparently sudden changes in policies, and rational calculations, can come about.

## Conclusion

In the twenty-first century that saw the slow decline of the unilateral world order, the analysis of international politics requires the consideration of a multitude of different actors. IR as a discipline has been searching for mostly *theoretical* advancements to address this development. Above we have introduced a *methodological* approach that could help us out of this predicament. Our approach assists in identifying so-called imperfect rationality, which can help us understand and explain any decisions of international actors. Naturally, this is not something new to psychological and constructivist approaches to rationality, but we have endeavoured to bring to the prominence a methodology that allows us to systematically gain access to the foundation of the thinking of the actors in question. Consequentially, this article should be considered as the first stepping stone in establishing a cognitive frames-based methodology for IR. It delivered a brief but concise introduction to the pragmatist notions of truth and reality which lays the ontological foundation for the methodological approach. Again, our methodology must be seen as more of a research strategy that manages to streamline different methods and also other methodologies into one system. Some possible matches have been brought forward in this article, but many other combinations with interpretivist and post-positivist approaches are conceivable. Furthermore, after introducing the nature of cognitive frames, an initial description of the properties of cognitive frames in a globalised world has been brought forward. Here, their creation, their reach and durability, and organisational structure have been highlighted to allow for the navigation and identification of cognitive frames in the international arena. It has been shown that they are created through public or political discourse and rely here on their ability to garner continuous attention and provide any benefit to the frame subjects. Important is here also the acceptability and compatibility of the newly created frame with the existing paradigmatic and structural pre-conditions which allow the successful adoption of a new cognitive frame. Furthermore, the reach of a frame is solely dependent on discourse, which in the digital twenty-first century means that the frames are no longer bound by geographical or even political barriers and can stretch from the local to the global. Finally, these findings suggest that multiple cognitive frames must exist at the same time and that every individual is subject to many different frames, which are arranged following different organisational principles. They can be organised hierarchically or horizontally, some are more dominant at a time, some dilute into the background. More practically, this methodological approach has proven to be useful to explain sudden changes of directions like in the case of Germany's migration policy, but we also see great potential in its ability to overcome theoretical shortcomings.

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## Notes

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### Author biographies

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