

## The United Nations System: Politics and Process

**Teacher:** Dr. Svanhildur Thorvaldsdottir, Email: thorvaldsdottir@gsi.lmu.de

**Date/time:** Thursdays, 16:00–18:00 (c.t.)

**Office hours:** I'm very flexible. Just email me at thorvaldsdottir@gsi.lmu.de.

### Seminar Description

The United Nations system comprises over 30 international bodies and agencies, which collectively engage with virtually every aspect of international relations. This course will provide an introduction to the empirical study of the United Nations system and the politics and processes that govern its operations.

Rather than studying individual organizations or issue areas, the focus of the seminar will be on investigating the political structures that underpin the system and how they fit together. Why does the UN system look the way it does? How and when are new agencies set up in the UN? How are UN agencies financed and what implications does that have for their operations? Who are the staff that work in UN organizations and how do they matter? Why does the UN sometimes fail to respond to crises effectively? These are the types of questions that will guide our analysis of the UN system's successes and failures throughout the semester.

In answering these questions, students will be exposed to a range of approaches for the study of the UN. Readings will comprise historical narratives, case studies, and both qualitative and quantitative journal articles. However, we will pay particular attention to recent quantitative study of the UN—both statistical and game-theoretic. The goal of the class is thus twofold: first, to help students understand and analyze the political dynamics that operate within the UN system, and second, to enable students to engage with a variety of scholarly work on the United Nations in pursuit of their own research topics and ideas.

No prior substantive knowledge on the UN is required for the course. The course builds on both existing knowledge of general theories of international relations and basics of statistics for political scientists. Most important, however, is that students have both an interest in and willingness to engage with different types of materials and approaches used in modern political science. This course will be held in English.

## **Course Requirements**

Everyone in this course must submit a short assignment (roughly equivalent to a 9000 character essay or a 10-20 minute presentation) to receive a grade in this course. There will be some choice of assignments due for this course. These will be discussed on the first day of class.

In addition, completing the preparatory work ahead of class is required. Most weeks, this will entail reading, but on occasion there will be a different type of assignment.

The course will usually meet on Zoom at the scheduled course time, so please make sure that you are regularly available at that time. If you have technological problems or do not have sufficient internet availability to attend class regularly, please let me know and I will work with you to enable you to participate.

Much of what you will learn will come from context, from participating in class conversation and other activities. As part of the learning experience is seeing how the different topics build on and relate to each other, regular attendance is vital.

## **Flexibility and accommodations**

I understand that your schedule this semester (as well as in any semester) can be unpredictable. I therefore expect that some of you will have to miss class on occasion, or are unable to sufficiently prepare from time to time. This is fine. All I ask is that you send me a quick email before class to let me know.

## **Background on the UN System**

As noted above, no prior knowledge on the UN system is required. However, we will not be spending class time going over fundamental aspects of the organization (such as what the difference is between the General Assembly and the Security Council, or who the permanent members of the Security Council are). Thus, for many weeks I will post an additional background reading for those of you who want some basics on that week's topic. These readings are not required and you are not required to know every detail in them; they are purely for your information and to substitute for my lecturing on them. If you ever have questions about anything I say during class, you should always feel free to ask (regardless of whether you read the background chapter or not).

## **Changes to the syllabus and course Moodle**

I reserve the right to make changes to this syllabus, depending on the needs of the class and other issues that may arise. Any changes will be announced with as much advance notice as possible.

All readings will be posted to our course Moodle and that is also where you will find links to important information about the course, as well as to our Zoom meetings. Please make sure that you sign yourself up for the Moodle course as soon as you get the information.

## Course Schedule

### 5 November 2020: Introduction and why study the UN

- Weiss, T. G. (2020). Will the un make it to 100? *PassBlue*
- Orwell, G. (1934). Shooting an elephant. In *Burmese Days*. Harper and Brothers (later Penguin Books)

### 12 November 2020: UN System basics: institutions and actors

- Watch lecture by Ronny Patz on the UN System (uploaded on Moodle)
- Mingst, K., Karns, M. P., Lyon, A., Karns, M. P., and Lyon, A. (2018). *The United Nations in the 21st Century*. Routledge, chapter 3

### 19 November 2020: Studying the UN as a political scientist

- Hawkins, D. G., Lake, D. A., Nielson, D. L., and Tierney, M. J. (2006). Delegation under anarchy: states, international organizations and principal agent theory. In Hawkins, D. G., Lake, D. A., Nielson, D. L., and Tierney, M. J., editors, *Delegation and Agency in International Organizations*, chapter 1, pages 3–38. Cambridge Univ Press, Cambridge.
- Barnett, M. N. and Finnemore, M. (1999). The politics, power, and pathologies of international organizations. *International organization*, 53(4):699–732.
- Vaubel, R. (1986). A public choice approach to international organization. *Public Choice*, 51(1):39–57

### 26 November 2020: UN Secretariat

- Jonah, J. O. C. and Hill, A. S. (2018). The secretariat: Independence and reform. In Weiss, T. G. and Daws, S., editors, *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*. Oxford University Press, 2 edition
- Novosad, P. and Werker, E. (2019). Who runs the international system? Nationality and leadership in the United Nations Secretariat. *The Review of International Organizations*, 14(1):1–33

### 3 December 2020: UN General Assembly

- Panke, D. (2017). The institutional design of the United Nations General Assembly: an effective equalizer? *International Relations*, 31(1):3–20
- Bailey, M. A., Strezhnev, A., and Voeten, E. (2017). Estimating Dynamic State Preferences from United Nations Voting Data. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 61(2):430–456

### 10 December 2020: UN Security Council

- Kuziemko, I. and Werker, E. (2006). How much is a seat on the seat on the Security Council worth? Foreign aid and bribery at the United Nations. *Journal of Political Economy*, 114(5):905–930
- Voeten, E. (2001). Outside options and the logic of security council action. *American Political Science Review*, 95(4):845–858

### 17 December 2020: The Security Council: Case of the Rwanda Genocide

- Kovanda, K. (2010). The czech republic on the un security council: The rwandan genocide. *Genocide Studies International*, 5(2):192–218
- Power, S. (2001). Bystanders to genocide. *The Atlantic*
- Barnett, M. N. (1997). The UN Security Council, Indifference, and Genocide in Rwanda. *Cultural Anthropology*, 12(4):551–578

### **7 January 2021:** UN Human Rights Council

- Hug, S. and Lukács, R. (2014). Preferences or blocs? Voting in the United Nations Human Rights Council. *The Review of International Organizations*, 9(1):83–106
- Terman, R. and Voeten, E. (2018). The relational politics of shame: Evidence from the universal periodic review. *The Review of International Organizations*, 13(1):1–23
- Abebe, A. M. (2009). Of shaming and bargaining: African states and the universal periodic review of the united nations human rights council. *Human Rights Law Review*, 2009(1):1–35
- Jordaan, E. (2016). The African Group on the United Nations Human Rights Council: Shifting geopolitics and the liberal international order. *African Affairs*, 115(460):490–515

### **14 January 2021:** Topic TBD

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### **21 January 2021:** UN agencies and their staff

- Johnson, T. and Urpelainen, J. (2014). International bureaucrats and the formation of intergovernmental organizations: Institutional design discretion sweetens the pot. *International Organization*, 68(01):177–209
- Kleine, M. (2013). Trading control: national fiefdoms in international organizations. *International Theory*, 5(03):321–346

### **28 January 2021:** Financing the UN System

- Graham, E. R. (2015). Money and multilateralism: how funding rules constitute IO governance. *International Theory*, 7(01):162–194
- Thorvaldsdottir, S. (2020). State influence on UN multilateral aid through bureaucratic ties. *Working Paper*

### **4 February 2021:** UN and Covid

- Fang, S. and Stone, R. W. (2012). International Organizations as Policy Advisors. *International Organization*, 66(4):537–569
- Kamradt-Scott, A. (2016). WHO's to blame? The World Health Organization and the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa. *Third World Quarterly*, 37(3):401–418
- Benvenisti, E. (2020). The WHO—Destined to Fail?: Political Cooperation and the COVID-19 Pandemic. *American Journal of International Law*, 114(4):588–597

### **11 February 2021:** UN at 75: Uncertain future?

- Watch interview with Samantha Power: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pbiiG9V8HQ&t=8s>
- Watch this conversation: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYWRfzHcVKg&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYWRfzHcVKg&feature=emb_logo)