

Self-Determination in an Era of Democratic Shifts: New Directions in the Study of Secession, Autonomy and Minority Protection

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Scholarship of secession and self-determination has expanded significantly in recent decades in Political Science and International Relations (Griffiths & Muro 2020; Grzybowski et al 2025; Kartsonaki & Pavković 2021; Sanjaume-Calvet 2020, 2021) and in cognate disciplines like Political Anthropology (Klem 2024; Reeves & Bryant 2021), Political Geography (Constantinou et al 2025; McConnell 2026) and International Law (Aalberts 2018). Yet, the study of secession and self-determination remains fragmented, and it leans strongly on a limited set of approaches and case contexts. This panel explicitly aims to initiate dialogues between perspectives, case contexts and analytical combinations that have received less attention, including research focused on the lived realities and vernacular meanings of self-determination struggles.

Self-determination movements typically operate on the intersection of domestic and international arenas. Many minority groups negotiate complex autonomy deals, yielding layered arrangements of shared rule and self-rule. They also use and create liminal spaces in the (domestic and transnational) political arena to project de facto democratic claims through institutional, performative or aesthetic repertoires (Constantinou et al 2025; Grzybowski et al 2025; Reeves & Bryant 2021).

Present global dynamics add new impetus to these debates. Self-determination politics often become embroiled in dynamics of democratic backsliding, decaying norms of international law, and the surge of democratic protest movements and their transnational solidarity networks. These developments produce new threats and new opportunities for self-determination movements. Vice versa, the extensive experience of these movements with democratic protest and public mobilization in face of state repression arguably offers insight to movements elsewhere that are newly confronted with authoritarian state responses. The repertoires of self-determination movements may thus be deployed for other political projects (and vice versa).

This panel invites conceptual contributions, comparative reflections and ethnographic (or otherwise fieldwork-based) studies that engage with the following questions.

- How do the political repertoires of self-determination movements become conjugated with other political projects and dynamics, such as democratic backsliding?
- How do we best analyse the practical (or lived) realities of legal and political institutions that were designed to facilitate autonomy or power-sharing?
- What insight do we gain from adopting a performative or aesthetic perspective on self-determination movements, to thus grapple with contentions around and beyond formal categories?
- What do people – political leaders, activists, common citizens – mean when they aspire sovereignty or self-determination?
- What insight do we gain from the mobilisation of cultural (and other societal) repertoires for self-determination struggles and the associated tussles around delineating the bounds of democratic politics and apolitical or antipolitical spaces?
- How may academic research create analytical and normative space to countenance transnational or diplomatic expressions of unrepresented (or underrepresented) peoples in an international system and an epistemic universe that are premised on firmly recognised states?

But most fundamentally, we solicit ideas about productive ways to join forces and deepen collaboration between hitherto separate strands of scholarship that share a concern (and a frustration) with the dominance of positivist approaches on these topics.