European Journal of International Security (2026), page 1 of 20
doi:10.1017/eis.2026.10067

EJIS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Providing ontological security through analogies and metaphors: A leader approach

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(Received 3 December 2024; revised 30 April 2026; accepted 7 May 2026)

Abstract

This article provides a leader-centred account of how ontological insecurity is managed in foreign policy. Building on Jim Marlow's work and following a Lacanian-inspired understanding of the Self as fragmented and anxiety as a permanent condition of political life, it conceptualises ontological insecurity as a key driver of leadership agency rather than a problem to be resolved. Also investigated is how analogies and metaphors work as micro-narrative mechanisms, as a key part of leaders' repertoire when triggering insecurity while projecting futures of continuity and renewal. By lending fluidity to storytelling, analogies and metaphors make unfamiliar situations intelligible to domestic and international audiences. Using interpretive narrative analysis, the illustrative case study of El Salvador's populist leader, Nayib Bukele, is then turned to. The analysis reveals how leaders rely on analogies and metaphors to amplify collective anxieties while offering reassurance, thereby stabilising political authority without eliminating insecurity. By integrating ontological (in)security scholarship with leader-centred approaches in foreign policy analysis, the article demonstrates how narrative stability reflects not ontological security being achieved but ontological insecurity becoming governable. Thus, it contributes to a more process-oriented and agency-focused understanding of leaders, narrative, and ontological insecurity in the foreign policy domain.

Keywords: analogies and metaphors; El Salvador; leaders; narrative; Nayib Bukele; ontological security/ontological insecurity

Introduction

The study of ontological security (OS) is a well-established approach in the field of international relations (IR). Its analytical value lies precisely in providing a compelling alternative to actors seeking security for tangible physical and material reasons. Within the OS framework there are two different strands of scholarship. The first builds from the work of Laing-Giddens, who highlights the need for a continuous and homogenous Self, noting how a stable Self can be achieved through biographical continuity.[1] The second approach, meanwhile, challenges these premises, building from Lacan's notions. A Lacanian approach stresses that anxiety is ever-present in social actors and thus OS is a mere fantasy that can never be achieved.[2] While elusive, however, this does not

[1]Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70; Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (Routledge, 2008); Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:4 (2016), pp. 610–27.

[2]Catarina Kinnvall and Ted Svensson, 'Exploring the populist "mind": Anxiety, fantasy, and everyday populism', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24:3 (2022), pp. 526–42; Jakub Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression: Fantasy as a factor in international politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*,

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https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

prevent social actors from still seeking and indeed offering up this illusory stable Self. Most importantly in this Lacanian interpretation, the Self is fragmented and not homogenous. This is where agency and creativity are deemed to lie,[3] as different members of the community will have varying views and interpretations of the types of promises to be advanced. The latter approach, as such, assumes that the security of being is always becoming.[4]

While most domestic groups and actors have agency in the Lacanian understanding of OS, this puts state leaders in a privileged social position – one from which they can contest, manipulate and even change previously dominant narratives in the foreign policy realm. They can become the main contesters and thus are able to offer a new fantasy of the Self (i.e., the state in foreign policy). This fantasy is relational, as it can be recognised and accepted by other members of the community (i.e., followers of the political project and international actors).[5] How this happens remains a key subject of inquiry in the study of OS and its variants, in highlighting that the always-present ontological insecurity (OIS) is the engine for the agency and creativity of social actors.[6] Thus, this article seeks to answer the following research questions: How do leaders seek to provide OS when narrating their own fantasies of the state in foreign policy? What means do they use when building and projecting new foreign policy futures for their countries by way of such narratives?

These two questions offer the possibility to rethink the role of the leader in the social articulation of stories about the Self, in this case the state, while they also focus on a granular composition of narratives as a key aspect in the search for the elusive OS of the actor to hand. Leaders have always been present in OS studies, but they are usually treated as an extension of the quest for it by the state – with the latter taken as the main agent at work so as to achieve biographical continuity.[7] In the following, conversely, I position the leader as an actor with own agency and not as a mere transmission belt for state interests, in this case as a sounding board on the provision of OS/OIS. These individuals are conceptualised as political leaders occupying positions of authority (e.g., heads of government), ones whose institutional and symbolic authority enables them to cast, locate, and project narratives with a reach that most other political and societal actors lack. This positionality affords heads of governments sufficient room to discursively shape how OS/OIS is identified, framed, narrated, and managed.

I argue that states and their societies always embody a fragmented Self and constantly seek to overcome various forms of OIS, while political leaders – enjoying a privileged position within decision-making processes – play an important role in providing remedies hereto, specifically through the invocation of analogies and metaphors. Despite being ever-present, the salience of OIS varies over time, as shaped by social, political, and historical conditions. For instance, periods of violence, institutional decay, or rapid change can weaken the capacity of existing narratives to contain anxiety, opening up space for leaders to advance alternative stories through which such heightened fears can be (narratively) managed. Political leaders do not, however, only provide and oversee a sense of OS; they also, indeed, deliberately exploit these insecurities to strengthen their own political position in offering (the illusion of) a new sense of stability.

This is especially the case with populist leaders, as individuals who have been able to carve out their own spaces in which to locate and promote their analogical and metaphorical stories; this is also a consequence of their sidelining of domestic bureaucracies and foreign policy actors alike.[8] These leaders' narrations are built to a greater extent on the use of analogies vis-à-vis past

22:1 (2019), pp. 243–68; Marina Vulović and Filip Ejdus, 'Object-cause of desire and ontological security: Evidence from Serbia's opposition to Kosovo's membership in UNESCO', *International Theory*, 16:1 (2024), pp. 122–51.

[3]Vulović and Ejdus, 'Object-cause of desire'.

[4]Catarina Kinnvall, 'Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries: The emotional appeal of populism', *Humanity and Society*, 42:4 (2018), pp. 523–43.

[5]Kinnvall, 'Ontological insecurities'.

[6]Eberle, 'Narrative, desire'.

[7]Mitzen, 'Ontological security'; Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*; Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security'.

[8]Sandra Destradi and Johannes Plagemann, 'Populism and international relations: (Un)predictability, personalisation, and the reinforcement of existing trends in world politics', *Review of International Studies*, 45:5 (2019), pp. 711–30.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

figures and historical events, namely as regarding the national and international, as well as of metaphors when confronting new (foreign policy) situations. In other words, OS/OIS is pursued simultaneously at the domestic and international levels. Sought specifically here is the provision of domestic coherence via analogies and metaphors as much as international recognition for the new Self; there are clear repercussions, as such, in both the national and foreign policy arenas.

Analogies and metaphors thus help leaders not only make policy decisions but also justify them within the scope of the narrative presented in foreign policy terms. These cognitive devices have an inherent social dimension to them: namely, in providing a degree of knowledge, making the unknown known, and helping assuage the anxiety of own being – especially as navigating new happenings.[9] These two mechanisms render the unfamiliar familiar by relying on past intuitive knowledge about current novel narrations that trigger anxiety – and, as such, need to be managed in order to regain a sense of OS. Yet, such a fantasy of wholeness regarding the Self is always driven by a constant sense of OIS. Conceptually, an analogy refers to 'an inference that if two or more events separated in time agree in one respect, then they may also agree in another',[10] while a metaphor is 'primarily a cognitive tool that people use to understand abstract concepts in terms of superficially dissimilar concepts that are relatively easier to comprehend'.[11]

This article's contribution to the scholarship is multifaceted: it offers an alternative interpretation of the role of the leader in the search for OS in foreign policy while also advancing the importance of analogies and metaphors to their articulation of new narratives of Self. These two devices are always to be found in crisis- and/or stability-driven narratives, but their presence has hitherto been taken for granted in OS studies and rarely, if at all, fleshed out. Hence, what is offered here is a granular approach to the study of leaders who are able to contest/challenge previous patterns of OS-seeking. As such, different possibilities for the Self in terms of being a more fluid and malleable actor – in this case, the state – open up.

To this end, relied on here is the work of Jim Marlow,[12] which stresses the central role politicians and thus leaders play in the manipulation of OS; this is done with a focus on national dynamics and not on the international. This detailed investigation also speaks to narrative fantasies being concretely informed by how given actors have developed and located historical analogies and metaphors as social symbols, ones that are and can become sacred for their target audience or community.[13] These analogies and metaphors fuel the (re)construction of a novel social reality seeing past, present, and future interlock; a new horizon emerges herewith in which dystopias can be avoided and, moreover, unprecedented utopias become possible.[14] While particular attention is paid in the following to the crisis-driven narratives informing populist leadership, analogies and metaphors are treated as narrative micro-mechanisms that can as much generate anxiety and OIS as they can also provide the fantasy of stability to the Self.

The value of this highly important research angle will subsequently be illustrated through the case study of El Salvador's populist president, Nayib Bukele (2019–present). The Central American country is a leading example of acute OIS. It is a context marked by decades of gang and street violence, corruption, and institutional erosion, and with enduring societal memory of external

[9]Brent J. Steele, 'Foreign policy analysis and ontological security studies', in Juliet Kaarbo and Cameron G. Thies (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis* (Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 115–33. Steele mentions the possibilities that exist as regards examining analogies and metaphors in the course of OS studies. However, he focuses only briefly on analogies; metaphors, meanwhile, are not developed when connecting the OS field with that of foreign policy analysis (FPA).

[10]Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War* (Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 6–7.

[11]Mark J. Landau, Brian P. Meier, and Lucas A. Keefer, 'A metaphor-enriched social cognition', *Psychological Bulletin*, 136:6 (2010), p. 1046.

[12]Jim Marlow, 'Governmentality, ontological security and ideational stability: Preliminary observations on the manner, ritual and logic of a particular art of government', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 7:2 (2002), pp. 241–59.

[13]Derek Bolton, 'The unbearable lightness of being? Reconfiguring the moral underpinnings and sources of ontological security', *International Theory*, 15:2 (2023), pp. 234–62.

[14]Felix Berenskötter, 'Parameters of a national biography', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:1 (2014), pp. 262–88; Felix Berenskötter, 'Anxiety, time, and agency', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 273–90.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

intervention, affecting the possibilities for developing a narrative of a stable Self over time. Bukele's leadership project explicitly addresses these insecurities by narrating the foundation anew and thus rebirth of the Salvadoran state, and therewith the provision of not only material order and security but also a new national soul – one whose nature is communicated both domestically and internationally.[15] Bukele's case is more than a case of pure populist rhetoric. It is a case in which his narration is tied to deeper claims about recognition and the repair of El Salvador's identity, that is, what El Salvador is and is becoming as well as the very being of the Salvadoran state. On this quest, El Salvador from Bukele's perspective confronts a new existential anxiety such as lacking external recognition and legitimacy as well as the possibility of external interferences. Adding to these challenges is the risk of the transnational phenomenon of gang violence and dominance coming back to El Salvador creating not only new material security problems but also risking the rapid erosion of a newly constructed state identity. In other words, for Bukele, as a central actor in matters of OS/OIS, the state needs to be reformed, transformed, and reborn in storytelling terms.

While I focus on Bukele's speeches as a story, the applicability of this argument goes beyond the Salvadoran case alone to embrace all types of leaders – namely, as the main nodes of foreign policy decision-making. Yet, an important caveat here is that populists enjoy a greater degree of latitude than 'traditional' leaders do. In fact, it is well documented that populist leaders have been able to reduce the constraints imposed by the bureaucracy; while non-populist leaders in democratic contexts tend to follow the procedural steps inscribed by the institutional system, populists personalise decision-making in the foreign policy realm.[16]

To start, I present and develop the OS/OIS framework, wherein I outline the mechanisms of analogy and metaphor from a leader-centred perspective in foreign policy. Then, the theoretical elaborations are fleshed out with some examples of speeches Bukele gave in domestic and international settings. Finally, the conclusion stresses the added value of the approach developed here and details the need to further uncover the different cognitive ways in which actors make sense of OS challenges.

Ontological security and the narration of analogies and metaphors

Ontological security and leaders

Giddens defines OS as a 'confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity'.[17] Within the field of IR, this understanding focuses on the security of being and thus how actors experience anxiety and seek continuity in the face of disruption. The OS approaches taken within IR have by and large adopted a state-centric perspective to date, with the maintenance of a continuous national subjectivity their primary concern.[18]

While leaders are often mentioned in passing in that literature, the state remains the dominant unit of analysis, with individual agency rendered secondary. In response, some studies have moved beyond a monolithic and homogenous conception of the state,[19] while others have shifted attention

[15]In the empirical analysis to come, I do not focus, however, on the democratic erosion that Bukele's chosen courses of action have led to.

[16]Destradi and Plagemann, 'Populism and international relations'.

[17]Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (University of California Press, 1984), p. 375.

[18]Derek Bolton, 'Targeting ontological security: Information warfare in the modern age', *Political Psychology*, 42:1 (2021), pp. 127–42; Karl Gustafsson and Nicholas C. Krickel-Choi, 'Returning to the roots of ontological security: Insights from the existentialist anxiety literature', *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:3 (2020), pp. 875–95; Mitzen, 'Ontological security'; Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*; Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security'; Ayşe Zarakol, 'Ontological (in)security and state denial of historical crimes: Turkey and Japan', *International Relations*, 24:1 (2010), pp. 3–23.

[19]See, for example, Hugo von Essen and August Danielson, 'A typology of ontological insecurity mechanisms: Russia's military engagement in Syria', *International Studies Review*, 25:2 (2023), p. viad016.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to individuals more broadly.[20] Yet, even these contributions rarely theorise the political leader (or head of government) as a distinct agent of OS/OIS. Recent scholarship has begun to bridge this gap by locating elites as occupying a position in between the individual and the state, particularly with the emergence of acute situations,[21] but leadership agency remains under-specified.

Narrative approaches have, nonetheless, highlighted the importance of key individuals to sustaining collective continuity. Subotić shows how elites advance powerful sub-narratives within broader meta-narratives during moments of political change.[22] Berenskötter emphasises narrative imagination in projecting horizons of possibility linking past, present, and future,[23] while Bolton demonstrates how narratives, symbols, and objects can acquire sacred meaning in anchoring collective identity.[24] Together, these contributions point to the role of individuals in reproducing dominant stories, yet they do not directly theorise or engage with the agency of heads of government – or, indeed, with ever-present OIS as a constitutive condition. Nor do they specify the narrative micro-mechanisms of analogies and metaphors through which leadership agency is performed or enacted exactly.

An early and important exception in this regard is Marlow, who highlights the role of political leaders as narrators capable of shaping collective understandings of the Self through practices serving to manage anxiety and sustain continuity. For Marlow, leaders acquire the symbolic and interpretive authority that enables them to stabilise political identity while selectively invoking crisis as a source of innovation and change.[25] Thus, leaders are key figures contributing to the social construction of the collective by responding to member–group anxieties through narrative articulation. With Marlow as its inspiration, this centring of leaders and the key roles they play is of great importance: FPA scholars have also, and often, reproduced a state-centric lens when relying on the analytical benefits of the OS approach. For example, studies of special relationships,[26] ontological dissonance,[27] and anxiety generated by Self–Other similarity[28] largely operate at the state level, with leaders remaining in the background and thus treated in a rather anecdotic way.

The above-mentioned FPA works implicitly to replicate the analytical problem of assuming the Self to be a homogeneous actor. Yet, FPA scholarship turning its attention to leadership trait analysis (LTA),[29] operational code analysis (OpCode),[30] or role theory[31] has long separated the individual out from the state here. At least, whether the individual acts in line with the state's previous or established set of actions in foreign policy is matter of empirical inquiry, with the evidence suggesting that leaders can indeed go against tradition in this domain. Thus, the current article builds from Marlow's account of leaders, at times, manipulating people's desire for OS by narrating crisis – that

[20] See, for example, Catarina Kinnvall, *Globalization and Religious Nationalism in India: The Search for Ontological Security* (Routledge, 2006); Alanna Krolikowski, 'State personhood in ontological security theories of international relations and Chinese nationalism: A sceptical view', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2:1 (2008), pp. 109–33; Maria Mälksoo, '"Memory must be defended": Beyond the politics of mnemonical security', *Security Dialogue*, 46:3 (2015), pp. 221–37.

[21] Martin Kirsch, 'What's the deal with elites? The role of political elites in identifying critical situations in ontological security theory', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 5:1 (2025), p. ksaf029.

[22] Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security'.

[23] Berenskötter, 'Anxiety, time, and agency'.

[24] Bolton, 'The unbearable lightness of being'.

[25] Marlow, 'Governmentality, ontological security'.

[26] Kai Oppermann and Mischa Hansel, 'The ontological security of special relationships: The case of Germany's relations with Israel', *European Journal of International Security*, 4:1 (2019), pp. 79–100.

[27] Amir Lupovici, 'Ontological dissonance, clashing identities, and Israel's unilateral steps towards the Palestinians', *Review of International Studies*, 38:4 (2012), pp. 809–33.

[28] May Darwich, 'The ontological (in)security of similarity: Wahhabism versus Islamism in Saudi foreign policy', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:3 (2016), pp. 469–88.

[29] Margaret G. Hermann, 'Assessing leadership style: Trait analysis', in Jerrold M. Post (ed.), *The Psychological Assessment of Political Leaders* (University of Michigan Press, 2003), pp. 178–212.

[30] Stephen G. Walker, 'The evolution of operational code analysis', *Political Psychology*, 11:2 (1990), pp. 403–18.

[31] Leslie E. Wehner and Cameron G. Thies, 'Leader influence in role selection choices: Fulfilling role theory's potential for foreign policy analysis', *International Studies Review*, 23:4 (2021), pp. 1424–41.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is, to innovate regarding the story of the state. However, he relies on Giddens's approach to OS (i.e., security-as-being).[32] Instead, what follows retakes the figure of the leader from Marlow but with a Lacanian-inspired assumption on OS: namely, the Self as a fragmented actor, and how OIS is rather the norm than the exception and exists as an engine for the leader's agency.[33] This means that leaders should not be treated only as external manipulators of ontological insecurity. They are also part of the same social environment and thus of the anxiety they seek to manage. Leader agency involves the duality of at times amplifying insecurity for political purposes, while their narratives also enjoy societal resonance because leaders are part of and build their stories from shared structures of anxiety, lack and desire. Thus, leaders are socially embedded in OIS while they are also able to manage and manipulate OS/OIS.

While it is difficult to do justice to all the emergent literature on OS/OIS from a Lacanian perspective, the common assumption underlying this body of works is that the security of being is always becoming, and that anxiety is an ever-present condition in the Self and thus a normal feature of its existence.[34] The Self's ontological lack takes hold in the first moment of the infant's detachment from their caregiver;[35] from then on, the actor seeks to fill that void by desiring new objects helping create moments of joy and fulfilment – albeit only ephemerally so.[36] The lack never goes away; it makes the Self always desire the new, while obtaining those objects can also be the fulcrum of the Self's fantasy of completeness.[37] These objects are part of the symbolic action of the agent for Marlow,[38] and/or they can achieve the condition of being sacred.[39]

Against this backdrop, populism is a particularly revealing phenomenon to examine here. As a leadership style, populism intensifies OIS through crisis framing, antagonism, and narrative simplification.[40] While much of the OS–populism literature still treats leaders as expressions of broader state dynamics,[41] studies by Homolar and Löfflmann,[42] Homolar and Scholz,[43] and Löfflmann foreground leaders' narrative agency.[44] They reveal how populist leaders mobilise that anxiety of being through crisis narratives enjoying affective resonance. Yet, these contributions tend to conceptualise security primarily in terms of stabilisation, leaving less space to theorise OIS as a permanent condition. How populist leaders narratively manage – rather than resolve – the latter,

[32]Marlow, 'Governmentality, ontological security'.

[33]Vulović and Ejdus, 'Object-cause of desire'.

[34]See, for example, Eberle, 'Narrative, desire'; Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, 'Returning to the roots of ontological security'; Linus Hagström, 'Great power narcissism and ontological (in)security: The narrative mediation of greatness and weakness in international politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 65:2 (2021), pp. 331–42; Catarina Kinnvall, 'Populism, ontological insecurity and Hindutva: Modi and the masculinization of Indian politics', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 283–302; Kinnvall and Svensson, 'Exploring the populist "mind"'; Marco Antonio Vieira, '(Re-)imagining the "Self" of ontological security: The case of Brazil's ambivalent postcolonial subjectivity', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 46:2 (2017), pp. 142–64; Vulović and Ejdus, 'Object-cause of desire'.

[35]Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 240–56.

[36]Eberle, 'Narrative, desire'.

[37]Eberle, 'Narrative, desire'; Vulović and Ejdus, 'Object-cause of desire'.

[38]Marlow, 'Governmentality, ontological security'.

[39]Bolton, 'The unbearable lightness of being'.

[40]Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford University Press, 2016).

[41]Christopher S. Browning, 'Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfilment', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 222–44; Zeynep Gülşah Çapan and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Turkey's ambivalent self: Ontological insecurity in "Kemalism" versus "Erdoğanism"', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 263–82; Kinnvall, 'Populism, ontological insecurity and Hindutva'; Brent J. Steele and Alexandra Homolar, 'Ontological insecurities and the politics of contemporary populism', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 214–21.

[42]Alexandra Homolar and Georg Löfflmann, 'Populism and the affective politics of humiliation narratives', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1:1 (2021), p. ksab002.

[43]Alexandra Homolar and Ronny Scholz, 'The power of Trump-speak: Populist crisis narratives and ontological security', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 344–64.

[44]Georg Löfflmann, 'Enemies of the people: Donald Trump and the security imaginary of America First', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24:3 (2022), pp. 543–60.

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namely by amplifying anxiety and constructing sacred opposition between a threatened Self (the people) and corrupt Other (the elite), is hence still to be satisfactorily explored.

From a Lacanian perspective, anxiety enables social action and narrative creativity. Because OIS is a normal existential condition, leaders can perform a dual role: amplifying collective anxieties while simultaneously offering provisional reassurance. Acting across domestic and international arenas, they hereby become central agents in the crafting of new fantasies of continuity and renewal. How this process unfolds in practice – that is, through the analogies and metaphors consciously embedded in narrative storytelling – is the focus of the analysis to follow.

Analogies and metaphors in narratives

I build here from the notion of the leader as someone able to shape collectives,[45] and thus who can craft and manipulate state narratives to that end – at times, as diverging from the prevailing one(s) in the foreign policy realm. The importance of narratives is well documented in IR.[46] Carr highlights Ricœur's essential understanding of how 'without narratives, the social world can never take form'.[47] Hagström and Gustafsson focus on the power of narratives to produce effects (i.e., 'narrative power') and define narratives as a type of discourse presenting a sequence of events in a meaningful way.[48] Narratives provide lessons for the future and related courses of action;[49] they can be understood as power when they resonate with a specific audience and are accepted as common sense. This fluid approach to narratives can help us better understand how a once-sidelined story from the past can become a powerful one in the present; a dominant story is displaced by the new competing one. In fact, the competing stories are expressions of 'internarrativity', as the challenging narrative cannot exist without its counterpart dominant until now.[50]

The study of OS/OIS cannot be thought separate from narrative analysis. Biographical continuity, the importance of myths and fantasies, the articulation of objects of desire and what is considered sacred do not exist outside the storytelling of the Self.[51] However, these scholarly accounts tend to take for granted the specific mechanisms employed here, such as analogies and metaphors. Analogies are important as they are subjective understandings of the past by a leader and a group, while metaphors supplement the story when its teller falls short of historical analogy material to communicate to their followers at the domestic and international level.

Narratives have a beatific and horrific side.[52] Both analogies and metaphors can help the storyteller to construct new utopias, making possible certain previously overlooked fantasies about what lies ahead.[53] Yet utopias exist in tandem with dystopias, as a type of dangerous path and one undesirable for the Self to take. Utopias and dystopias offer alternate desirable and dangerous stories of the future, ones told by the leader in the present by evoking a past of happiness and misery alike in illustrating a new way forwards – also by preventing catastrophes emerging.

[45] Marlow, 'Governmentality, ontological security', p. 255.

[46] See, for example, Stacie E. Goddard, *Indivisible Territory and the Politics of Legitimacy: Jerusalem and Northern Ireland* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Linus Hagström and Karl Gustafsson, 'Narrative power: How storytelling shapes East Asian international politics', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:4 (2019), pp. 387–406; Patrick T. Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy: German Reconstruction and the Invention of the West* (University of Michigan Press, 2006); Ronald R. Krebs, 'How dominant narratives rise and fall: Military conflict, politics, and the Cold War consensus', *International Organization*, 69:4 (2015), pp. 809–45; Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (Routledge, 2014).

[47] David Carr, *Time, Narrative and History* (Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 14–15.

[48] Hagström and Gustafsson, 'Narrative power', p. 390.

[49] Karl Gustafsson, 'Narratives and bilateral relations: Rethinking the "history issue" in Sino–Japanese relations' (PhD diss., Department of Political Science, Stockholm University, 2011).

[50] Hagström and Gustafsson, 'Narrative power', p. 391.

[51] See, for example, Bolton, 'The unbearable lightness of being'; Eberle, 'Narrative, desire'; Kinnvall, 'Ontological insecurities'; Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*; Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security'.

[52] Vulović and Ejdus, 'Object-cause of desire'.

[53] Berenskötter, 'Parameters of a national biography'; Berenskötter, 'Anxiety, time, and agency'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Analogies and metaphors can be invoked by the protagonist to provide meaning and direction to a given narration. Listeners find a sense of familiarity in the storytelling, helping them handle uncertainty. These two devices serve, then, the purpose of supporting these actors' sense of anxiety reduction, as achieved by stretching the cultural material of the past through the present into a new narration of a particular future as fantasy. Analogies and metaphors are means to create identification with and understanding of the message being delivered. As social beings, individuals express these items in their narrations of the world. They, as shortcut decision-making heuristics, also inform courses of action as well as being used to justify a specific decision and generate popular support for it. Both are also cognitive devices to make sense of the world as we face new people, ideas, and social contexts. Yet, they also possess a social dimension in being verbalised by the actor when locating him/herself in evolving structures.[54]

Analogies in FPA scholarship encompass how the makers of foreign policy (in this case, leaders) use and refer to events from the past to make sense of present occurrences requiring their direct input. Khong provides a framework for the six functions of analogical reasoning in foreign policy.[55] First, it helps the policymaker define the nature of the situation at hand. Second, it supports assessment of what the stakes are. Third, the policymaker can herewith provide prescriptions on what should be done. Analogies also help decision makers to evaluate alternative options and possibilities in three further ways: by weighing up and predicting the chances of success; by evaluating whether a particular course of action is the morally correct one; by providing warnings about what might go wrong.

Munford stresses that analogies are appealing to decision makers as they provide shortcuts to describing a novel situation, making sense of it, and yielding a normative understanding of what the actor should decide and therefore do.[56] Analogies provide reason for adopting a given decision-making pathway; they are used by policymakers as both explanations and justifications for their choices. These two functions are embedded in Khong's framework. Munford also argues that the use of analogies is more recurrent in crisis situations and when confronting unknowns, as they provide comfort and stability to the individuals of a community and intellectual security to the decision maker themself.[57]

Thus analogies, as providing templates for decision-making and justification to/for the leader, may be key to making sense of the latter's duality in being both an amplifier of anxiety and, at the same time, a beacon of hope. This view, which applies also to metaphors, is consistent with Marlow's approach and with the understanding of storytelling as evaluative, prescriptive, and as having 'narrative power'.[58] Yet, what matters most here is the promise of a better present and future resonating with one's audience; the accompanying analogies are embedded in the leader's purposeful narration as he/she experiences the present. In other words, analogies can be used to simultaneously create a sense of crisis and offer solutions to it by referring to something similar in the past; to showcase a course of action helping reinvigorate a sense of OS in the future.

Metaphors are also used as part of such narrations of a particular past, being invoked to make sense of unknown situations and offer solutions in the present as much as to herald a brighter future, too. Flanik shows how metaphors have been treated more as discursive devices than as cognitive-inducing patterns of behaviour.[59] Metaphors do have a cognitive understanding and dimension, though, as they can be used to describe a specific novel reality when no conceptual

[54]William Flanik, 'Analogies and metaphors and foreign policy decision making', Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics (2017), available at: {https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-524}, accessed 11 March 2023; Khong, *Analogies at War*.

[55]Khong, *Analogies at War*.

[56]Andrew Mumford, 'Parallels, prescience and the past: Analogical reasoning and contemporary international politics', *International Politics*, 52:1 (2015), pp. 1–19.

[57]Khong, *Analogies at War*; Mumford, 'Parallels, prescience and the past'.

[58]Hagström and Gustafsson, 'Narrative power'.

[59]Flanik, 'Analogies and metaphors'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

apparatus is available to the storyteller to make sense of the world before them and to convey a comprehensive message to their audience(s).

Oppermann and Spencer stress that both analogies and metaphors are similar in being among the devices by which actors make sense of social reality through a process of cognitive transference of one thing to something else.[60] Metaphors are 'linguistic devices which influence and reflect the cognitive process of decision making by helping people to understand abstract events with the aid of more familiar concepts'.[61] They help decision makers frame and narrate a course of action that is stable, a policy as well as a crisis situation in a particular way, while they are also schemata serving to divulge the policymaker's own cognitive process. The key difference between analogies and metaphors, however, is that the latter draw comparisons from different realms of experience while the former generally do so from the same one.[62]

Metaphors, as analogies, thus not only help the leader to make sense of the world they are experiencing and communicating it, as such, to their audience but are also used to narrate a subjective sense of crisis and the ideal solutions to it as an intertwined duality – as much as anything, to provide their followers with the desired but previously elusive sense of OS. In this process, analogies and metaphors are also used by leaders to evoke feelings of hope as much as the dark side of a particular future, should the chosen course of action not be the one the leader is narrating and offering to the audience in the current present.

The interplay of ontological security, leaders, and analogies and metaphors

Anxiety as a permanent condition does not imply living amid a constant sense of crisis or narrative instability, constituting some sort of 'neurotic stage' in the social life.[63] In fact, periods of apparent stability are possible; these are better understood as those moments in which narratives successfully manage and contain insecurity rather than eliminate it altogether. Anxiety is still ever-present, allowing mechanisms for its handling to be devised as well as fuelling creativity among leaders during times of crisis. Analogies and metaphors play a crucial role in this process, namely by helping normalise continuity and rendering existing orders familiar and meaningful. This understanding of narrative stability provides the basis for analysing how leaders can strategically rely on analogies and metaphors to manage OIS in practice. From a Lacanian perspective, moments of heightened disruption, by contrast, amplify latent insecurities and create openings for alternative narratives to gain traction, with leaders selectively activating and manipulating those fears already present within the social milieu or among key demographics.

OS/OIS takes place in the constant production and reproduction of narratives. Herein, the leader figure and their creative capacity have the ability to innovate on and articulate new forms of storytelling, usually ones that have been sidelined by the hitherto dominant actors. In this sense, a new leader can bring together elements of the latent and less visible narrations present in the domestic context that are, in practice, contestations of the prevailing views, traditions, and stories of the state. To be able to bring forth a novel narration, the leader articulates a different story that still resonates with certain groups,[64] as all biographies of the state are contingent social phenomena and thus domestically contested.

While this new 'disruptive' narration embraces a sense of crisis that will carry on affecting the community in the future, the leader also needs to demonstrate therein their capacity to manage the situation in order to be perceived as a viable option by their target audience.[65] As much as they

[60]Kai Oppermann and Alexander Spencer, 'Thinking alike? Salience and metaphor analysis as cognitive approaches to foreign policy analysis', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 9:1 (2013), pp. 39–56.

[61]Oppermann and Spencer, 'Thinking alike?', p. 44.

[62]Stella Vosniadou and Andrew Ortony, 'Similarity and analogical reasoning: A synthesis', in Stella Vosniadou and Andrew Ortony (eds), *Similarity and Analogical Reasoning* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 7.

[63]Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, 'Returning to the roots of ontological security'.

[64]Marlow, 'Governmentality, ontological security'.

[65]Marlow, 'Governmentality, ontological security'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

narrate a sense of crisis by exploiting anxieties, they can also narrate 'good' results in the present time to start managing the concerns of the group. This is done with the purpose of reassuring the community or its subunits; political leaders are, indeed, not external entities, but themselves ontologically insecure subjects embedded within the same social setting and field of anxiety as the very people they seek to reassure.

The leader locates themself at the heart of the narration and anchors their personal contribution to a better present and future in it, also by highlighting in the course of the story told the undesirable paths existing in the 'storical' past of the Self. They do so specifically by creating equivalences between past and current events to show that they can provide solutions and assuage the anxiety of the Self. If, in the recounted fable, things used to be familiar and possibly ontologically stable, as a type of fantasy depicted in the chosen narration, then the leader can portray that past as part of a new desirable pathway to reduce the sense of crisis. At the same time, as they are a creative agent able to offer a renewed sense of OS to the individual, group, community, and/or state, then the path towards a new story of the past and future alike builds from analogies as well as metaphors.

It is in this present where crises, unknowns, and remedies are narrated; the recurrent anxiety of the Self is sought to be managed by the leader in depicting a future offering the fantasy of greater certainty. This relief is recognised by and resonates well with what these social actors and audiences imagine both their own future and that of the state in the international to be. Thus, if analogies and metaphors are more recurrent when unfamiliar situations and acute issues arise,[66] then the narration of a (populist) leader encompassing both crisis and repair should see these two key narrative devices be a core part of their overall storytelling.

Part of the agency of leaders when telling a new story lies in the fact that analogies and metaphors can be manipulated in a more fluid manner both to make sense of the present and to provide pathways forward. These two devices are also able to transcend the domestic, helping the leader to communicate their foreign policy priorities and story to peers, to institutions, and to the external public in the international. Examining them also carries certain benefits for the study of OS/OIS, as stories of the past can only resonate in the present if what has been is modified time and again in the process of analogical reasoning. The leader in question will always tend to 'cherry-pick' historical 'facts', as remembered, as they fit their decision-making schemata, as a power narrative when considering how to convey the present and future to followers.

Further, metaphors are also important when leaders lack certain 'storical' knowledge able to be communicated to their audience(s); invoking the former allows them to provide greater continuity and fluidity. However, one caveat worth noting is how some analogies and metaphors are more important than others for the community and for the target audience. Those considered important by the latter, and thus used by the leader, are ones imbued with symbolic meaning vis-à-vis group identity;[67] they help reinterpret and renew the moral order, conceptions of the sacred, for such collectives.[68]

By drawing on familiar symbolic repertoires as part of the social milieu of the nation, leaders hence diagnose OIS by naming situations as 'crises' that have threatened and undermined the illusion of a stable Self. It is here where analogies and metaphors enable the attribution of responsibility for insecurity, whether to internal others, external adversaries, institutional decay, or moral decline, thereby shaping anxiety around identifiable objects. Finally, these two storytelling devices facilitate the intuitive construction and projection of presents and futures promising restoration, rebirth, or continuity, offering the community or specific groups some provisional moments of desirable ontological closure.

The narrative of analogies and metaphors unfolds at both the domestic and international levels, while these two arenas fulfil differentiated functions in the management of ontological insecurity. For instance, leaders may seek to stabilise domestic collective anxieties by offering in storytelling

[66] Mumford, 'Parallels, prescience and the past'.
[67] Marlow, 'Governmentality, ontological security'.
[68] Bolton, 'The unbearable lightness of being'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

terms a coherent and continuous sense of Self, by identifying sources of crisis, and by projecting narratives of restoration at the national level. Likewise, the same narrative has an international dimension as it is also purposefully cast and positioned to secure recognition, legitimacy, and non-interference from external actors and audiences. In this sense, ontological security is not just internally narrated but also sustained and reaffirmed relationally as the Self always requires recognition and legitimation by others in the international social environment. Moreover, this external dimension also entails anxiety about intervention and misrecognition. Leaders seek to defend their narrative externally by using the repertoire of sovereignty and right to define their own political path as leaders may fear that their preferred narrative of Self will be delegitimised by more powerful actors, international organisations, or dominant discourses.

At this stage, it seems pertinent to connect the established framework to the case of El Salvador's populist president, Nayib Bukele. Like any other leader, populists can also articulate crisis and provide solutions to it, with them seeing the world via a subjective interpretation of the past that also conveys to their audience that a better future can be achieved in a particular way, as some sort of self-fulling prophecy. They offer followers of the project ('the people') the prospect of a brighter tomorrow if they let the individual in question play their role as saviour of the country – thus reinvigorating a sense of the desired yet elusive OS. Such security is realised through the narration of foreign policy as a Manichean space: that is, 'the people' versus 'the elites' in bilateral settings, multilateral forums, and leader-to-leader interactions. All these happen in narratives providing the yearned-for OS – as partly constructed out of invoked analogies and metaphors. The empirical analysis that follows illustrates how this dual logic of the national and international operates in practice.

Nayib Bukele's El Salvador

The domestic and international ontological insecurity of El Salvador

El Salvador presents a case of enduring OIS shaped by multiple overlapping dynamics, making it a relevant case to analyse how domestic insecurity and international misrecognition intersect in leader narratives of sovereignty and restoration. At the domestic level, decades of civil war, post-war institutional fragility, corruption, and transnational gang violence (*maras*) have undermined the continuity of the state's Self-narrative. These conditions have produced not only material insecurity but also a fragmented sense of collective identity and the achievement of a continuous Self. At the international level, the OIS of El Salvador is shaped by Cold War entanglements and asymmetric dependence on external actors. Anxiety for El Salvador under Bukele is about not only physical interference but also persistent risks of lacking external recognition and the ability to define its national Self without external tutelage.

Analytical approach and speech selection

The primary materials used here include twelve speeches addressing domestic and international audiences. These speeches were delivered: at the United Nations General Assembly (2019–23); when visiting the United States in February 2024 – namely, the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC); at the Doha Forum in 2019; and at the P4G (Partnering for Green Growth and the Global Goals 2030) in Seoul 2024. The national speeches examined are: the inaugural one from Bukele's first period as president in 2019 (the starting point for this analysis); to new graduates of the police academy; on the occasion of 200 years of independence; and to Congress.[69] I use content analysis of these documents and an interpretive approach to recreate the set of events and overall story in chronological order as well as to unpack some fragments of Bukele's chosen narrations for audiences at home and abroad.

[69]Extracts of these speeches were translated into English by the author of this article. These speeches are referenced as used in the remaining part of this paper.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The speeches illustrate how the United States is the main significant Other for El Salvador as a small Central American state, as much as the US's Conservative party; meanwhile, the UNGA, Doha Forum, and P4G are settings allowing one to speak to the international community of states and to multilateral institutions. Further, when addressing the nation, Bukele also includes foreign policy matters in his speeches. Therefore, the following examines Bukele's leadership project as a case of the management of OIS via narrative means. It unpacks specifically how analogies and metaphors are rather intuitively mobilised by the Salvadoran president to diagnose and manipulate a sense of OIS, frame anxiety, and project stories of restoration across both the domestic and international.

The story of OS/OIS of El Salvador: Bukele's speeches

Bukele's main motive is to re-establish a sense of lost order in his country. He also talks in a people-centred way; one of his most frequently used turns of phrase, indeed, is: 'No one will stand between God and the people.' His mission is to give birth to a new El Salvador by reducing corruption in the state apparatus and eradicating gang and street violence.[70] His set of beliefs (or 'operational codes') reveals Bukele's underlying view to be that of a country whose political future is marked by certainty. Moreover, he shows optimism about achieving his mission while also tending to rely on words connoting threat or punishment rather than on expressions of appeal in the international.[71] This way of addressing the latter is consistent with preventing external interference and crafting a narrative of certainty about the future destiny of the Salvadoran nation.

In his inaugural speech, Bukele locates his leadership agency and outlines a view for the future: namely, a new one for the people of El Salvador. The state was immersed in different civil wars and conflicts over the decades and had sporadic moments of joy and fulfilment in Bukele's view. After the end of the Cold War, the erosion of the state got worse, and the hegemony of violence was in the hands of the *maras*. As a glorious past has faded in the collective memory by now, Bukele relies on the evocation of sporadic moments of national unity. These are described in a very general way, while he brings up the country's violent past to justify his current policies as part of his quest to give El Salvador a new future.[72]

In this first speech as president, Bukele starts to show the potential restoration of order and achieving the fantasy of a permanent stable Self. In fact, he points out that the occasion is being held in the country's main square, where before it would have been impossible to give a speech like this and have people feel safe: 'In other periods of the past, you would not have been able to be here. But, this was my first decision as president elect…'; 'Four months ago, I was myself here in this square and I promised that we will move on from the post-war period to become a much better El Salvador…'.[73] In the same speech, he outlines the course of action to be taken in a metaphorical way and therewith the short-term difficulties to be faced in pursuit of a brighter future for everyone:

> Our country is like a sick child. Now it is up to us to look after that child. It is the responsibility of all of us to take a small amount of that bitter medicine […]. Now it is our turn to have a bit of pain. We should assume our responsibility like brothers, we will pull out that sick kid, who is our family, which it is our country; it is El Salvador.[74]

This metaphor frames the Salvadoran Self as damaged and vulnerable. It elevates material insecurity to the level of an existential threat to the state's new identity and its continuity. Bukele also

[70] Sonja Wolf, 'A populist president tests El Salvador's democracy', *Current History*, 120:823 (2021), pp. 64–70.

[71] Consuelo Thiers and Leslie E. Wehner, 'Latin American populist leaders and the international stage: Analysing their belief systems', in Catalina Lacatus, Gustav Meibauer, and Georg Löfflmann (eds), *Political Communication and Performative Leadership* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 115–20.

[72] Presidencia de la República de El Salvador, 'Palabras del Presidente Nayib Bukele en la toma de posesión' (2019), available at: {https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/discurso-toma-de-posesion/}, accessed 10 July 2025.

[73] Presidencia de la República de El Salvador, 'Palabras del Presidente Nayib Bukele en la toma de posesión'.

[74] Presidencia de la República de El Salvador, 'Palabras del Presidente Nayib Bukele en la toma de posesión'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cites how the corrupt elites have not only eroded state capacity but also allowed the streets to be controlled by the *maras*: 'The state failed all of us, because it left innocent people unprotected and neglected generations of children who, step by step, started to join these groups of felons.'[75] Moreover, he appeals to the political elite to join his cause as much as he questions their past actions, as helping create the country's security problems. Bukele also targets the state as the source of OIS, promising a brighter future with a reborn El Salvador without institutional and street violence: 'Through the years, the state amplified the problems of many in order to keep and increase the privileges of a few.'[76] The elite is represented as an oligarchy that uses state institutions as their own estate and the Salvadoran people as their peasants. He also mentions not only the domestic elite but also the international community so as to rein in possible external interference, because they expect Bukele to represent a specific partisan interest as has always been the case in the past: he claims, though, only to represent the true people.[77]

On the occasion of 200 years of independence, he uses analogies to justify the new government's chosen course of action and to indicate that the state is on the right track. This he does by providing a story focused on the current provision of a new order and thus of a more stable El Salvador to its people. He establishes an equivalence between Spanish colonialism and the previous dominance of a political elite as a way to show that he as a leader is now advancing a new independence for El Salvador, especially for the people vis-à-vis the elites who own the country. The latter are said to work with the support of international actors.[78] He also uses a similar tone when addressing new graduates from the police academy by using a simple analogy. He criticises those who pejoratively compare the country with Norway or Switzerland in terms of his new safety policies and fresh sense of order. He claims in response to those critics that indeed it is an honour to be compared with these two countries while he also asks the audience to look at how the country is today compared to how it used to be in the past.[79] This comparison also projects a new future of restored order as Bukele's storytelling seeks to redefine what counts as national recovery.

Analogies and metaphors are used to justify the present course of action and offer certainty about the new future being crafted under his leadership. Bukele shapes his audience's perceptions by showing them that the possibility of going back to (a sense of) chaos and a lack of security in the future is real (dystopia), as the dominant state of affairs in the country before he was elected president (the past). While the leader amplifies the sense of insecurity, he has also shown the path to follow to achieve the object of desire: order and a new state. Bukele's narrative, to this end, employs both analogies and metaphors recognised as symbolic and sacred by his domestic audience.

Bukele's international discourses show a similar rationale, while they also perform the additional function of seeking recognition and legitimacy for the new Salvadoran Self while resisting external intervention. Here, Bukele not only tackles concern on the home front but also seeks to contain international criticism and find broader support for his mission. Socialising his quest beyond El Salvador's borders becomes an integral part of the country's foreign policy. After analysing his

[75]Presidencia de la República de El Salvador, 'Palabras del Presidente Nayib Bukele en el discurso a la nación en la Asamblea Legislativa' (2021), available at: {https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/palabras-del-presidente-nayib-bukele-en-el-discurso-a-la-nacion-en-la-asamblea-legislativa/}, accessed 7 July 2025.

[76]Presidencia de la República de El Salvador, 'Palabras del Presidente Nayib Bukele en el discurso a la nación'.

[77]Presidencia de la República de El Salvador, 'Palabras del Presidente Nayib Bukele en el discurso a la nación'.

[78]Presidencia de la República de El Salvador, 'Palabras del Presidente Nayib Bukele en el discurso del Bicentenario' (2021), available at: {https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/palabras-del-presidente-nayib-bukele-en-el-discurso-del-bicentenario/}, accessed 7 July 2025.

[79]Presidencia de la República de El Salvador, 'Palabras del Presidente Nayib Bukele en acto de CXXV graduación de miembros de la PNC' (2021), available at: {https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Acto-de-graduacion-de-miembros-de-la-PNC.pdf}, accessed 7 July 2025.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

UNGA speeches[80] and those given at CPAC in 2024,[81] at the 2019 Doha Forum,[82] and at the 2021 P4G in Seoul,[83] it can be said that Bukele presents himself as narrator of the story of El Salvador's people. He speaks to not only the audience of states but also his domestic target group: these speeches would, as such, be promoted by him and his team on social media and via news outlets supportive of his government at home.

Bukele uses the international for the purpose of defending his security policies and articulates a story of hope about a new El Salvador state in the future. But also of the possibility that those listening could also replicate his policy choices, helping them manage their own sources of OIS. At the same time, he also outlines some key principles as a small state in the international in line with the well-established Latin American foreign policy tradition of autonomy from major powers. He reasserts El Salvador's sovereign right to be in charge of its own destiny and reduce the oversight of international organisations (IOs).

While Bukele offers hope and manages the sense of crisis his country has lived under for many years, he refers tacitly also to similar problems vis-à-vis other states while also constantly talking of good and bad events from the past. These speeches are not composed in their entirety of analogies and metaphors, but some key parts are designed to stress a sense of crisis, danger, and threat, as well as solutions thereto. Aspects of the invoked anxiety and its management on the international stage have domestic roots, for example in fighting criminality – but also due to the possible external expectations of IOs and larger powers and what they might ultimately mean for El Salvador. He remembers traumatic past events in the history of the nation (e.g., the Cold War and Civil War [1979–92]), ones potentially replicable in the present.

Two speeches at the UNGA of 2022 and 2023 respectively are representative of this narration style bridging analogy and metaphor. In the first, Bukele presents El Salvador's security-related achievements in claiming to have ended the endemic problem of street violence there. However, in his defence of these achievements there is also a sense of anxiety stemming from external Others questioning the methods used, with them having been heavily criticised, for example, by international human rights organisations. Part of the aspiration behind his words is to provide the fantasy of stability as an international actor via identity affirmation; regarding domestic audiences, meanwhile, this is done by invoking the autonomy principle.[84] Such anxiety also needs to be communicated to reduce external pressure and possible interference regarding who the new El Salvador is to be under Bukele. Yet, he does not openly question the UN or specific countries; instead, he narrates a story drawing on metaphors like the following one:

> Moreover, we have decided we want to be free, and it is an essential requirement that the powerful [in reference to other countries] respect our freedom […]. And it is a group of powerful

[80]UN Web TV, 'El Salvador – President addresses general debate, 74th session' (2019), available at: {https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k16/k16wppbhxj}, accessed 4 June 2024; Gobierno de El Salvador, Presidencia de la República, 'Palabras del Presidente Nayib Bukele en la 75 Asamblea General de la ONU' (2020), available at: {https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/75-Asamblea-General-de-la-ONU.pdf}, accessed 4 June 2024; Gobierno de El Salvador, Presidencia de la República, 'Palabras del Presidente Nayib Bukele en la Asamblea General de la ONU' (2021), available at: {https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/palabras-del-presidente-nayib-bukele-en-la-asamblea-general-de-la-onu/}, accessed 4 June 2024; Gobierno de El Salvador, Presidencia de la República, 'Palabras del Presidente Nayib Bukele en la Asamblea General de la ONU' (2022), available at: {https://estatements.unmeetings.org/estatements/10.0010/20220920/VjKCR9xHsJII/zMvulsqvA4cj_es.pdf}, accessed 4 June 2024; Gobierno de El Salvador, Presidencia de la República, 'Debate general del 78° período de sesiones de la Asamblea General de las Naciones Unidas. Intervención del Presidente Nayib Armando Bukele' (2023), available at: {https://estatements.unmeetings.org/estatements/10.0010/20230919150000000/pccSHhMGM1AJ/40IRL4gHMnjw_es.pdf}, accessed 4 June 2024.

[81]Nayib Bukele, 'Discurso completo CPAC 2024' (2024), available at: {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOFErQLbd8k}, accessed 9 July 2025.

[82]Presidencia de la República de El Salvador, 'Palabras del Presidente Nayib Bukele en el Foro de Doha, en Catar' (2019), available at: {https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/discurso-bukele-foro-de-doha/}, accessed 15 July 2025.

[83]Presidencia de la República de El Salvador, 'Palabras del Presidente Nayib Bukele en cumbre P4G Seúl' (2021), available at: {https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/palabras-del-presidente-nayib-bukele-en-cumbre-p4g-seul/}, accessed 19 July 2025.

[84]Gobierno de El Salvador, 'Asamblea General de la ONU' (2022).

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> countries who not only have much more than the rest, but also believe they are owners of the few things which the remaining smaller and weaker countries have.[85]

Further, Bukele goes on to craft a narration resonating well with Global South countries' lived realities, one to which audiences both at home and abroad can relate. He compares El Salvador to a person who proudly owns a small, modest house while living alongside an extremely wealthy neighbour who inhabits a palace with beautiful gardens. The small house owner respects and admires his neighbour; the fact that the latter is wealthier does not bother him. Ultimately, he is happy in his small house. This person has decided to renew the outer and inner appearance of the house with lots of effort but is sure that it will prove worthwhile to have done so once the work is complete. He continues to describe how all is well until the wealthy house owner decides that the poor neighbour cannot renew and refurbish his own property.[86] He uses this metaphorical construction for a few further paragraphs; what it is interesting is that the message is about why Western countries and IOs should not interfere in domestic and sovereign matters. Bukele remarks:

> The wealthy neighbour does not have the authority to demand his poor neighbour go back to the past. First, one reason is that he cannot order something for a house which is not his. Second, because this poor neighbour has indeed tried to follow the commands of the wealthy and it could not have gone any worse when he did so in the past. Third, [in reference to El Salvador's freedom and autonomy] because what the poor neighbour is doing is actually working for the first time. […] I can say that freedom is something we are still fighting for in our country, El Salvador. Although on paper we are free, sovereign and independent, we will not truly be any of these things until the powerful understand we [Salvadorans] only want to be their friends, that we admire them, that we respect them and that our doors are wide open to trade, to visit us to build better relationships. But what they cannot do is to come boss us around in our own home.[87]

This house metaphor is a claim about not only sovereignty in international legal terms but how El Salvador must be seen as the rightful author of its own Self-narrative, rather than as an 'object of desire' by others and to be disciplined by more powerful actors. In this speech, Bukele defends domestic policies relating to the physical security of the Salvadoran people. However, he is also justifying the establishment of a different type of actor in the international, one cast in the present while having the future in mind. He blames powerful actors for the previous state of affairs in the country before he came to serve: namely, not only to restore the material side of things but also to redefine who the nation-state even was, is, and will be. In this regard, the traumatic past of external interference and being dependent on powerful states altered who El Salvador truly is. This had plunged the country into an excessive state of anxiety over not being able to live up to its true (and lost) identity.

At the same time, Bukele's story shows pride regarding who the country is becoming in the present and who it will be in future. In his speech, metaphors are used as a way to communicate both crisis and its remedying as a core concern regarding who the country is; this represents the dominant socio-cognitive element herein, even despite the presence of some basic elements of analogical reasoning too. By starting to show a new promising current present and projecting a future of rebirth, restored order, and moral renewal, the different analogies and metaphors offer the fantasy of provisional ontological closure, positioning Bukele's leadership as the vehicle through which continuity can be founded anew.

[85] Gobierno de El Salvador, 'Asamblea General de la ONU' (2022).
[86] Gobierno de El Salvador, 'Asamblea General de la ONU' (2022).
[87] Gobierno de El Salvador, 'Asamblea General de la ONU' (2022).

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In his 2023 speech to the UNGA, for instance, Bukele also combines both storytelling devices to communicate to domestic followers and the audience of states his dual views on crisis and its resolution. The analogies invoked refer to the Cold War and its impact on El Salvador as a dependent state within the international system; the specific metaphor cited is about cooking.[88] This analogy is designed to establish equivalence between existing external pressure regarding his chosen policy approach and previous episodes of intervention in El Salvador by great powers, as having eventually led to the eruption of armed conflict in the country. The analogy of the Cold War and Civil War eras as well as the metaphor of cooking are, then, invoked as a way to justify why the country should now follow its own autonomous and sovereign path of doing things without listening to external actors and to contain growing external demands:

> There is no one recipe or formula which works the same for everyone. Yet, there is at least one key ingredient all recipes must have or have at least the right to include. […] This is bravery. You must have the attitude, great courage and determination to do what you have to do, even when others question or criticise you. […] For many decades we have tried everything others told us was for the best for us. […] They [the US and Soviet Union] led us to fight a civil war for a reason external to our own domestic reality, because they brought the conflict between the West and the USSR to our land.[89]

The Cold War analogy functions as a warning against external actors. When El Salvador's own reality has been and is to be interpreted through the lens and interests of others, its Self is destabilised creating existential anxiety. Bukele uses this analogy to justify sovereignty as not only a political principle but also a condition to repair the OS of the Self. Bukele also goes into a historical analogy regarding the internal process of ending El Salvador's Civil War, claiming that the country did not enjoy much peace in these times and blaming again external actors for this state of affairs. In fact, he mentions how the new political elite coming into being with the agreed peace deal were ultimately responsible for the destruction of democracy in the country:

> All what happened during those years were with the support, consent and imposition of those self-defining themselves as strong defenders of human rights and democratic institutions […]. Instead of giving us medicine to heal they gave us poison. They expected us to carry on doing what others had done in the past. They expected that the same actors who ravaged and massacred us would carry on governing or at least stay involved in a system of power-sharing.[90]

In the same speech, Bukele also blames external actors for starting to question his reforms when in the past they never did so regarding the 'corrupt' political elite. But today, when his measures are for the people's benefit, then El Salvador is criticised by other states, policy experts, media outlets, and IOs. He also seeks to showcase to his own followers and other states that the future is set to be different to what they have previously known in El Salvador, as the security changes he introduced have been proven to work. He uses another analogy to create the fantasy of certainty about the future as a utopia: 'Today, El Salvador competes with Canada on which country is the safest.'[91] This simple comparison is powerful, as in the collective belief of El Salvador's domestic and external audiences alike Canada is seen as a stable, developed, and safe country.

In this 2023 UNGA speech, Bukele once again seeks to defend his domestic security policies on the global stage, and above all to highlight the key principles of autonomy and sovereignty. He stresses a zero-tolerance approach being taken to external intervention by states and IOs, further to which he calls it his mission to elevate the stature of El Salvador as a peaceful country in

[88] Gobierno de El Salvador, 'Debate general del 78° período de sesiones'.
[89] Gobierno de El Salvador, 'Debate general del 78° período de sesiones'.
[90] Gobierno de El Salvador, 'Debate general del 78° período de sesiones'.
[91] Gobierno de El Salvador, 'Debate general del 78° período de sesiones'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which corruption, crime, and gangs belong to the past. This also has an external dimension to it, in blaming others for how El Salvador even got to the point of extreme violence while telling his story in the present. How he relates gang and street violence is not only on physical terms but also identity-based. He refers, accordingly, to how the true soul of the country got lost due to the interplay of external interference and the machinations of traditional (global) political elites. He seeks to provide a sense of fulfilment and OS.[92]

There is a tacit assumption herein that his country was something different and thus peaceful way before the Cold War started. Bukele does not specify how remote this past is, but he wants the country to go back there by depicting it as informing a new future. The anxiety besetting El Salvador's journey, as described by Bukele, originates in the process of change he is overseeing; it is also present in the external pushback encountered to the methods used to that end. What Bukele seeks in his speech is the audience's legitimation and social acceptance of El Salvador as a type of international actor that has created a new future by providing a fantasy of a renewed sense of being for itself.

Bukele visited the United States in 2024 to give a speech at CPAC's invitation, with Trump also being a speaker at the conference. The Salvadoran president delivered his speech only a few days after being re-elected. Bukele faced here a more homogenous audience in terms of ideology than he had done at the UNGA and other international summits. He relayed to CPAC both a sense of crisis and ideal solutions to it, as well as how to rebuild a nation in a way the United States and conservatives can emulate. Crisis was referenced regarding the lost lifestyle of US citizens; the fantasy remedy to such an American Self was to go to the past to reclaim and rebuild own being, meaning recapturing the North American country's desired OS. In his speech, he equated the current state of the United States to that of El Salvador a few years before he came to power. The future of OS in the United States lies in replicating what he, Bukele, has done for El Salvador.[93]

During his speech, he demonises globalism. He mentions how it is a phenomenon to be buried, while also stating that in El Salvador globalism is already dead. He tells his receptive audience of ideological peers, who form the backdrop to his chosen narration, that a sense of crisis abounds, using analogies and metaphors to make sense of this state of affairs:

> If you want globalism to die here too, you must be willing to unapologetically fight against everything and everyone that stands for it […] fight for your freedoms, fight for your rights […] the next president of the United States must not only win an election, he must have the vision, the will and the courage to do whatever it takes and above all he must be able to identify the underlying forces who will conspire against him. These dark forces are already taking the country. You may not see it yet, but it is already happening. You do not see it as clearly because people are designed to see linear changes, not exponential ones. We do not always know how fast a problem can multiply and spiral out of control. The problem is much like the metaphor of the boiling frog. Once the water boils it is already too late. People fail to see these things. It is our nature just like the frog, people become complacent, and they do not realise how bad things are getting until it is too late.[94]

He brings forth this metaphor of the frog in boiling water as a direct comparison to the reality facing El Salvador, one he knows everyone will grasp. He uses historical analogy to show what the dangers to the American way of life are, namely by recounting what happened in his own country in the 1960s and 1970s. He describes how in El Salvador political elites failed to recognise the problems looming until it was too late, with the country dragged into a civil war in consequence. He also mentions that a reaction to these events was too slow in coming, doing so by going back to the same metaphor and linking it with a particular historical analogy:

[92]Gobierno de El Salvador, 'Debate general del 78° período de sesiones'.
[93]Bukele, 'Discurso completo CPAC 2024'.
[94]Bukele, 'Discurso completo CPAC 2024'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> We were already the boiled frog, and it took us 50 years, two wars, 250,000 lives lost, a third of our population displaced and a near miracle to get our country back […]. As your friend I want to issue this warning, so you do not make the same mistakes we did in the 1960s and 1970s. It is not easy to pull yourself back once you are in boiling water. In fact, all the experts said it was impossible. You do not want to wait 50 years and maybe hope for a miracle to get out of hell. You can still jump out once the water boils.[95]

Beyond its populist resonance, this metaphor frames social decline as a threat to the continuity of the collective Self. The metaphor converts diffuse anxieties about crime, disorder, and globalism into an existential warning about national decline. The Salvadoran president also invokes the sick man with health issues to describe the crisis afflicting his own country, and how he fixed it:

> Some might say I am exaggerating, but we can clearly see the signs of a declining society because our own hit rock bottom decades ago. It is like one getting sick. First it is may be just a stomach-ache, or a headache or a small fever; but if you do not deal with the disease, it will only get worse and then it may be too late.[96]

Further, he mentions how the US political establishment has also neglected symptoms like the decline of the country's largest cities, as places in which crime and drugs have become part of the daily ordeal that citizens have to face. He also notes that if nothing is done, then things will get even worse five or ten years from now as happened in his own country. Violence and gangs dominated not only the streets but also Salvadoran political life according to him. He mentions that 'the "Murder Capital" of the world is a tragic title to hold. Getting rid of that was the bare minimum we had to achieve to even start thinking about rebuilding our country.'[97]

He also refers to the fact that jumping out of boiling water is almost impossible to do when seeking to reinstate a sense of order and eliminate chaos. He gives hope to his audience as he claims that the United States is not yet at the point of needing to jump out of the water, but it is certainly close. He remarks 'believe me you do not want to be there',[98] in reference to a societal situation of endemic chaos and violence. During the same speech he also connects the domestic circumstances of both El Salvador and the United States with the power and influence of global elites, in conjunction with media actors creating an impression of his policies that is distorted and far from the true reality.[99]

In these international speeches, again, it is also possible to observe the populist repertoire in citing herein the core antagonism of 'the people' versus 'the elites'. Yet, Bukele adjusts his approach when addressing CPAC. He narrates a sense of crisis not only for his country in the past but also in the present for the US. His intention is to depict what the North American country is descending into, achieved via referencing El Salvador's own historical trajectory and through the metaphor of the frog in boiling water. Narrating this crisis of the American Self to ideological peers, Bukele also offers solutions for a brighter future – like the one he is bringing back home. In all his international speeches, he questions domestic actors and external forces for having created these conditions of crisis for Salvadorans and the state. Simultaneously, he offers a pathway to salvation to his national and international audiences by depicting a future that can offer stability if only things go back to what and how they were in a remote past. A cultivated sense of crisis of own being and the provision of solutions thereto, as helping re-establish (a fantasy of) a stable sense of Self, can only be achieved in the present from a storytelling perspective: that is, because the desired future (hope to avoid a dystopia) only exists in reference to a past crafted by the narrator themself.

[95]Bukele, 'Discurso completo CPAC 2024'.
[96]Bukele, 'Discurso completo CPAC 2024'.
[97]Bukele, 'Discurso completo CPAC 2024'.
[98]Bukele, 'Discurso completo CPAC 2024'.
[99]Bukele, 'Discurso completo CPAC 2024'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Bukele case illustrates, as such, how leaders' narratives do not eliminate OIS but rather render it governable through the narratives they choose to recount. In this sense, analogies and metaphors function not only to amplify crisis and leap societal anxieties but also to stabilise political order by providing the illusion of a new Self under the condition of permanent OIS. The case study also highlights the inherently dual nature of leadership narratives, stretching and addressing domestic anxieties while simultaneously seeking international recognition, support, legitimacy, and non-interference. In this sense, OIS emerges as a resource for political authority rather than a condition to be resolved.

Conclusion

This article has brought together the ontological (in)security scholarship, a leader-centred perspective, and decision-making heuristics from FPA by foregrounding analogies and metaphors as key narrative devices. These cognitive tools possess a social dimension that allows unfamiliar situations to become intelligible to political actors and their audiences. Rather than merely describing problems, they make OIS governable by structuring anxiety and enabling actors to navigate moments of disruption encountered along the way.

Also revealed has been how the fantasy of anxiety management is enacted through storytelling. Narratives mobilise analogies and metaphors to diagnose crisis, attribute responsibility, and project futures of continuity or renewal. In this sense, narrative stability does not signal OS achieved but rather the illusion of OIS temporarily stabilised. Analogies and metaphors can acquire symbolic or sacred meaning for their target audiences, as they resonate affectively and offer provisional reassurance in the face of persistent uncertainty.

In the realm of foreign policy, leaders occupy a dual position as both amplifiers of crisis and providers of reassurance. Straddling the domestic and international, they narratively stretch the past to render the present intelligible and to imagine futures promising order, recovery, and rebirth. While the empirical analysis foregrounds the domestic dimension of OIS, it also shows its international face. OIS in the case of El Salvador is not reducible to a domestic struggle or only to the search of foreign policy legitimation. It also involves the international struggle for recognition, non-interference, and the authority to define the Self before external peers and audiences. While Bukele's populism is obvious in its discursive style, an OS/OIS approach is able to unpack the deeper meaning of such narrative. Bukele's storytelling seeks not only to mobilise popular support but above all to provide the fantasy of a stable Self. Therefore, the case of El Salvador's Bukele illustrates how such narrative practices concretely operate, with analogies and metaphors of crisis and renewal being mobilised to manage collective anxieties while legitimising exceptional political authority before domestic and international audiences alike. From this perspective, such narratives do not eliminate insecurity but instead make it politically productive, allowing leaders to mobilise fears while simultaneously positioning themselves as agents of resolution.

The article underscores, as such, the importance of placing leadership agency at the centre of OS/OIS analysis, building on early insights by Marlow[100] while extending them through a Lacanian-inspired understanding of the Self as fragmented and perpetually in a state of becoming. With OIS an ever-present condition, leaders themselves are social subjects whose authority depends on their successful negotiation of such shared anxiety by narrative means, as richly demonstrated by the Bukele case.

What remains a pending task for the scholarship, accordingly, is to examine types of leader predispositions vis-à-vis either contesting or following existing state narratives of the Self as two distinct and different levels of analysis. Approaches such as LTA and OpCode can help unpack the leader's own personal characteristics and beliefs, laying bare their mindset and fleshing out through empirical cases whether they feel or experience the same anxieties as their audiences. In tandem, the literature could explore processes of domestic contestation more thoroughly regarding

[100]Marlow, 'Governmentality, ontological security'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the ways in which leaders and the state provide and manage the fantasy of OS via foreign policy. This is to give agency to those who innovate as regards the types of stories they cast in seeking to bring together past, present and (a new) future. Future research can build on the approach offered here by further examining how leaders contest or reproduce dominant narratives of the Self, how domestic struggles shape the international performance of OIS and how analogies and metaphors function as fluid and rather intuitive narrative mechanisms aiding insecurity's management rather than ultimate resolution per se.

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank colleagues from the Future Politics Research Group at the Department of Politics, Languages and International Studies-PoLIS, University of Bath, for the insightful feedback they provided on an early version of this paper. The usual disclaimer applies.

Funding. This article and the work behind it benefitted from funding from two different sources: Significant financial support was received, first, from the Leverhulme Trust during the period 2023–24 (project code RF-2023-036). Second, from an ongoing project sponsored by EU Horizon/UKRI safety net: namely, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) under the UK government's Horizon Europe Funding Guarantee (Grant Number: EP/Z534663/1). This latter project is part of the research agenda of the EU Horizon Network 'The International Dimensions and Effects of Populism' (IDEoPOP), as funded by the EU (Project 101168714). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. IDEoPOP Project website: https://ideopop.populism-internationalrelations.com/

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Cite this article: Leslie E. Wehner, 'Providing ontological security through analogies and metaphors: A leader approach', *European Journal of International Security* (2026), pp. 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067

https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10067 Published online by Cambridge University Press