



Tagungsbericht

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*Violence, Elites, And the  
Potential for Peace in Colombia  
and Latin America*

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Von Dr. Jan Boesten

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**Report: Fachtagung “Violence, Elites, And the Potential for Peace in Colombia and Latin America”, 20/21 February 2025, LAI, FU Berlin.**

### **Contribution:**

The Deutsche Stiftung Friedensforschung (hereafter DSF) supported the two-day conference with a 20 000 Euro stipend. This grant was given to hold public deliberations, consisting of an observatory of the violence in Colombia’s territory, which methodologically replicated previous seminars held on the prospects of a territorial peace in Colombia; and a second part/day reflecting on governance contentions related to violence in Colombia and Latin America (corruption, clientelism, and oligarchy as democratic deficits; the (un)rule of law in weak and unequal states; crime and conflict within and across borders and their effect on political institutions). The methodology and contributions were intentionally designed capture good transdisciplinary research practices. The first day incorporated practitioners from Colombia (lawyers, social leaders, human rights observers, political decision-makers). Particularly, inviting social leaders from the various regions in Colombia was normatively and epistemologically important, because it is impossible to understand and build scenarios of peace without looking at specific regional traits (ethnicity, social composition). The second day – more strictly academic in its approach – brought together distinguished and young scholars to discuss oligarchic modes of rule in Latin America. This timely discussion will result in a special issue to be published by the Journal Third World Quarterly (the submission process is now complete and the peer review process will run its course; see below). The completion of the special issue will not be the final output of that research project, as more presentations of the findings are planned in the context of a Latin American Studies Association Forum issue devoted to oligarchic modes of rule, presidential panels held in the context of LASA 2026 to be held in Paris, and the production of an edited volume (for which Cambridge University Press has issued interest).

The preparation of the conference was itself an important process of international and interdisciplinary collaboration. The selection of speakers was guided by both academic excellence and regional expertise, ensuring the participation of senior and junior researchers as well as social leaders and practitioners. In this way, the conference responded directly to the DSF criteria of promoting diversity, interdisciplinarity, and the inclusion of young scholars. The support of the LAI administration and the engagement of student assistants were crucial in ensuring that the event was organized in a professional and efficient manner.

### **Workshop Results/Discussions:**

The two-day workshop was held 20 and 21 February 2025 in the installations of the Institute for Latin American Studies (LAI). We managed to hold lively and profound discussions on both days, with various perspectives addressed, and significant live and virtual audience – even though circumstances were made more complicated by the last-minute strike of the Berlin public transport company (BVG) which complicated the arrival of several guests, yet flexible adjustments ensured full participation. Participants consistently highlighted the collegial and constructive atmosphere of the discussions. The feedback received underscored that the combination of academic reflection and practitioner insights was perceived as highly valuable. Several participants suggested that such dialogues should become more regular formats to bridge the gap between academia and practice.

On our first day, the Colombia day, we compared the situation in three regions of Colombia, selected according to the dominant presence of specific armed actors: the Caribbean, which has experienced several generations of paramilitary groups; Orinoquía, where the last, and now most powerful, guerrilla group, the ELN, is dominant; and Amazonia that was long a stronghold of the FARC-EP and now a territory affected by the presence of dissident Ex-FARC groups. In the South, our guests from Colombia have signalled that “the armed actors have reorganised themselves, [and] extractive activities have also grown”, which are often used by armed actors to illegally finance their coercive capacities. In Orinoquía, the ELN and dissident forces born from the former FARC-EP have started to clash and created an internal humanitarian crisis, after having a relatively peaceful coexistence that included tactical non-aggression agreement in 2022. In the Caribbean, President Petro’s Total Peace Plan faces two conceptual dilemmas that slow down the processes: 1) as heirs to paramilitarism, the two most important groups, the ACSN and the EGC, are not treated in the same model of prioritisation that can be given in similar conditions to dissidents and the ELN. 2) the concept of peace that does not encompass highly violent urban expressions that have come into the focus of armed actors in the region.

Discussions on the second day were held entirely in the context of the special issue submission. That is, contributors presented their advanced work to receive a last round of reviews from peers to finish the paper for peer review by the journal. Not only did it become clear that indeed all papers were going to finish on time for submission (1 July 2025), the individual papers as well as the discussions around evidenced that our project must make a generic contribution of understanding the state and institutions in conjunction and not as systems that operate separately from one another. That entails that the state is an arena of relations of domination – and oligarchic modes of rule, in which specific actors control large quantities of material resources and defend those politically, play a significant role in structuring those relations of domination. The special issue will evidence how much traction those findings will gain.

## Output:

The output of the 2-day workshop is significant and matches the commitments made in the application to the stipend. The contributions from each day emulated the respective focus: practitioner or academic. That is to say the first day produced a policy brief (attached and online [here](#)) that informed about the state of the peace process in the aforementioned regions in Colombia (Caribbean, Amazonia, Orinoquía). The policy brief is composed in Spanish and distributed amongst our social networks and our contact to ensure wide distribution. Furthermore, we are publishing continuous commentary on the state of our research as it pertains to the issue of violence as well as governance in Colombia. The blog of the Colombian daily, *El Espectador*, has given us a space on their web page to publish monthly, and at times even weekly, articles that narrate our research findings to the wider public in Colombia. These articles regularly receive traction and commentary from readers (all articles can be found [here](#)).

The major focus in the post-event production was the submission of contributions to Third World Quarterly on “The resurgence/persistence of oligarchic rule and the oligarchic state in Latin America”. The submission deadline was set for 1 July 2025 and the process is on course to be completed on time. We are submitting ten individual articles, which will be accompanied by an introductory article by Jan Boesten and Maxwell A. Cameron.

As the contributions are promising to make real additions to the scholarly discourse on oligarchic structures in Latin American states, the project is foreshadowing further activities. Jeffrey Winters (author of the standard piece, *Oligarchy*) has agreed to collaborate with us at LASA2026. In addition, Cambridge University Press has articulated interest in the project and is awaiting the publication of the special issue to produce an edited volume that will go beyond the findings of the special issue.

Beyond the already listed outputs, further dissemination activities are being planned. These include the preparation of podcasts, short video interviews with participants, and the integration of findings into teaching modules at the Freie Universität Berlin. The conference also served as a training ground for several MA and PhD students who assisted in the organization and took part in the academic discussions. Their involvement not only strengthened their academic profiles but also fostered a new generation of scholars engaged with questions of violence, peace, and governance in Latin America.

## Main Findings: Violence, Elites, and the Potential for Peace in Colombia

The research outputs generated from the Fachtagung provide a granular, evidence-based analysis of the persistent drivers of violence in Colombia. Moving beyond superficial assessments of armed conflict, these publications diagnose the deep-seated patrimonialization of state institutions and the symbiotic relationship between oligarchic elites and violent actors as the fundamental obstacles to a lasting peace. The findings, published in Colombia's foremost newspaper, *El Espectador*, and a comprehensive policy brief, translate academic and practitioner deliberations into public knowledge, fulfilling the DSF's mission of fostering impactful peace research and knowledge transfer.

### 1. The Illusion of Negotiation: Patrimonial Barriers to Peace with the ACSN

Grupo de Berlín (GIFK). 20 June 2025. "¿Por qué no avanzó la paz con las Autodefensas Conquistadoras de la Sierra Nevada?"

The failed negotiation with the Autodefensas Conquistadoras de la Sierra Nevada (ACSN) is a paradigmatic case study of how *oligarchic* interests actively subvert peace processes. The analysis finds that the negotiation was not a genuine effort at demobilization, but a strategic simulacrum engaged in by both the armed group and factions within the state apparatus. For the ACSN, the process was a tactical tool to gain political recognition, secure a ceasefire to rearm and reposition militarily, and infiltrate legal economic spheres. Crucially, the process lacked a coherent methodology and was undermined by a catastrophic breakdown of trust following a major military operation that led the group to suspend dialogue indefinitely.

The primary finding, however, points to the complicity of regional elites. The research identifies a powerful coalition of local economic and political actors who benefit from the ACSN's role in controlling territory, populations, and illicit economies in the Sierra Nevada. For these elites, a successful demobilization would disrupt the profitable, violence-based equilibrium that secures their power and privilege. Consequently, they exerted direct and indirect pressure to ensure the negotiation's failure, demonstrating that the state is not a monolithic entity but a contested space where patrimonial networks often override official policy. This case exposes a critical weakness of the "Total Peace" policy: its inability to confront the oligarchic structures that have a vested interest in perpetual violence.

### 2. Green Patrimonialism: The Co-opting of the Energy Transition in Mocoa

Grupo de Berlín (GIFK). 31 May 2025. "El agua vale más que el cobre: peligros de la transición energética injusta en Mocoa"

This analysis introduces and substantiates the concept of **"green patrimonialism,"** a process whereby the global push for a renewable energy transition creates new avenues for elite capture, dispossession, and violence. In Mocoa, the potential for large-scale copper mining (a critical mineral for electric vehicles and green technology) threatens vital water resources and biodiversity. The research finds that local and national elites, in alliance with transnational capital, are positioned to capture the economic rents from these projects, replicating the extractive patterns of the past under a new, legitimizing "green" banner.

The key finding is the mobilization of state coercion for green extraction. The state's security apparatus is often deployed to secure these projects against local opposition, with environmental defenders and community leaders systematically framed as "obstacles to development." This represents a modernized form of primitive accumulation where state force is patrimonialized to serve corporate interests, thereby generating new social grievances and conflict lines. The research concludes that an unjust energy transition risks replicating the violent dynamics of previous extractive booms, proving that a technical shift in energy sources is insufficient without a parallel transformation in governance that prevents the co-option of green agendas by entrenched oligarchic power.

3. Oligarchic Equilibrium: The Symbiosis of Power and Violence on the Caribbean Coast  
Grupo de Berlín (GIFK). 20 May 2025. "Equilibrios turbulentos: Oligarquía y violencia en la Costa Caribe colombiana"

The research on the Colombian Caribbean Coast reveals that violence is not a sign of state failure but a functional component of a stable, though turbulent, oligarchic equilibrium. This finding challenges conventional narratives by showing that regional elites maintain their power through a deliberate and symbiotic relationship with armed actors like the Gulf Clan and the ACSN. The pact is clear: elites provide political legitimacy, access to state contracts, and judicial impunity, while the armed groups assume the dirty work of voter intimidation, assassinating political opponents, and controlling social unrest.

The analysis further demonstrates how democratic institutions are hollowed out. Elections are not contests of ideology but managed processes for the distribution of clientelist rents, enforced by violence. The state's monopoly on force is thus not broken but selectively leased out to maintain a pre-modern form of political domination. A central finding is the role of the judicial system as a pillar of this equilibrium. Rather than upholding the rule of law, it is patrimonialized-selectively applied to punish opponents and protect allies. This judicial cynicism is a primary driver of violence, as it closes off any non-violent path to challenging the established order, forcing communities to live under a perpetual unrule of law.

4. Imperceptible Crimes: The Micro-Physics of Territorial Control in the Sierra Nevada  
Grupo de Berlín (GIFK). 8 May 2025. "Crímenes imperceptibles y paz territorial en la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta"

This publication identifies a sophisticated strategy of "imperceptible crimes" employed by armed groups and their elite sponsors to maintain territorial control while avoiding international scrutiny. Unlike the large-scale massacres of the past, contemporary violence is calibrated and low-profile: targeted assassinations, death threats, forced displacement of individual families, sexual violence, and economic sabotage. This violence is designed to be illegible to national media and international observers, allowing it to continue unabated.

The findings highlight the catastrophic failure of the Territorial Peace framework enshrined in the 2016 Peace Agreement. Programs like the PDETs (Development Programs with a Territorial Approach) are systematically undermined because they are co-opted by the very local elites who benefit from the status quo. Furthermore, the research provides evidence of the patrimonialization of the local security apparatus. Police and military units often operate

under the de facto authority of local powerbrokers, providing a veil of legitimacy for the armed groups and making the state present not as a protector but as a partisan actor in its dysfunctional form. This creates an environment where building a genuine peace is impossible without first dismantling these localized structures of coercive control.

#### 5. A Systemic Diagnosis: The Regional Policy Brief as a Synthesis

Grupo de Berlín (GIFK). May 2025. "Policy Brief: LA PERSISTENCIA DE LA VIOLENCIA EN COLOMBIA: UNA PERSPECTIVA REGIONAL"

The policy brief synthesizes the regional case studies to present a overarching finding: the persistence of violence in Colombia is not a collection of isolated conflicts but a systemic feature of a hybrid political order. This order is characterized by the fusion of formal democratic institutions with informal, violent rules enforced by oligarchic-criminal networks. The core problem is identified as the patrimonial character of state coercion itself, where security and judicial institutions are captured to serve private interests rather than the public good.

The brief moves beyond diagnosis to offer concrete recommendations for a revised peacebuilding approach, arguing that current policies focus too much on the "corpus" (foot soldiers) of armed groups and not enough on the "caput" (the political and economic heads) that finance and benefit from them. Key recommendations include:

Refocusing on the "Caput": Designing policies that directly target the intellectual authors and elite sponsors of violence.

Strengthening Judicial Independence: Creating autonomous, specialized judicial bodies with the resources and protection needed to break the cycle of impunity.

Linking International Cooperation to Accountability: Tying international investment and aid to rigorous, independent human rights and anti-corruption due diligence.

Protecting Civic Space: Recognizing that grassroots social organizations and independent media are the primary counterweight to oligarchic power and essential for documenting "imperceptible crimes."

#### Contributions to Scholarly and Public Debates

Collectively, these findings provide a empirically grounded, theoretically sophisticated contribution to understanding peace and conflict in Colombia. They shift the analytical focus from the armed groups themselves to the oligarchic power structures that sustain them. The publication of a forthcoming special issue in *Third World Quarterly* on "The resurgence/persistence of oligarchic rule and the oligarchic state in Latin America" will ensure these insights reach a global academic audience, fostering comparative analysis.

By publishing simultaneously in *El Espectador*, the project fulfills its commitment to knowledge transfer, informing political debates within Colombia itself. The research provides a sobering but necessary correction to technocratic peacebuilding models, arguing that without a direct confrontation with the patrimonialization of the state and the economic inequality it sustains, efforts to build peace will continue to be subverted from within. This

output directly supports the DSF's mission by providing not just analysis, but a clear, evidence-based framework for rethinking strategies for achieving a just and lasting peace.

Grupo de Berlín (GIFK), on behalf of the conference organisers  
20 June 2025

The publications resulting from this conference contribute directly to the DSF's mission of fostering peace research and supporting knowledge transfer. By combining academic outputs with policy briefs and media contributions, the project ensures that its findings reach both scholarly audiences and the wider public. In the longer term, the insights developed will inform political debates in Colombia and Latin America, provide empirical grounding for comparative studies on oligarchic rule, and contribute to teaching and outreach activities in Berlin and beyond