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From the Editors

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May we begin by wishing the EJIR Happy Birthday! The year 2020 is the silver jubilee of the journal's founding in 1995. After 25 years this journal holds as important a place as ever in the pantheon of the general International Relations (IR) literature. Our readers may expect a special jubilee issue later this year.

Our last editorial, which accompanied the June 2019 issue, announced the advent of the first complete issue consisting of articles edited by the Amsterdam editorial team that took over in January 2018. Since then we have produced three further issues including this current one for March 2020. This issue leads with an article on the lack of great power responsibility for the global environment, followed by an article on sovereign debt markets. There is then a cluster of articles on identity and populism in various contexts, before the issue returns to that grim business called war. The final article takes a new but equally serious turn, focusing on the international context of the London Grenfell Towers fire. Our authors are a truly cosmopolitan selection from all over the globe, and they both cover and broaden the field as it evolves. We hope you will agree that we are keeping up the high standards in terms of scholarly quality and intellectual openness our readership should expect and that has established the reputation of the journal during these past 25 years.

The summer and autumn of 2019 were periods of high pressure and change at the journal. In the latter half of the year we saw a significant surge in submissions relative to the year before and the first half of the year. This is good, but it demands more of our time. We also experienced the first of two changes in the editorial team. Prof Marlies Glasius, our Associate Editor for international law (also human rights, human security, transitional justice, social movements and NGOs, authoritarianism and democratisation), became our head of department here in Amsterdam as of September 2019. The resulting workload being incompatible with remaining associate editor, she stepped down at the beginning of September 2019. This meant that in the face of the surge, we were also short-handed as a team. Some authors will have waited longer for decisions than we either intended or believe corresponds to good practice, but our first concern was to maintain the *quality* of editorial work even if that meant the accumulation of a backlog until we could find a replacement colleague.

Marlies will be sorely missed, not only due to the breadth of her expertise. Her contribution to the editorial team consisted always of that sort of passionate concern for dispassionate consideration of other people's work that helped us all form and improve our own editorial skills. Marlies was also willing openly to reconsider positions and policies where practice revealed this as necessary, yet never such that pragmatism was ascendant over sound principle. As our lead editor points out, one could, if the pressure

on others demanded, assign her a manuscript on virtually any aspect of IR, and she would find her way to the 'right' decision. May we all thank her on behalf of the readership, Sage, and the Joint Management Committee responsible for the journal.

Chance had yet another surprise in store for us. Ursula Daxecker, our Associate Editor for conflict and security, was awarded a major research grant (congratulations!) and consequently expressed a desire to step down in March 2020. This was another major loss, as she also covered developing regions and quantitative methods. Ursula's insights into the work submitted to the journal were always a step up and ahead, and she demonstrated a fineness of judgement one could only envy. Above all her sense of organisation and attention to detail meant that the rest of us always had an example to live up to, and she was the driver of much persistent modernisation of our editorial policies and practices, particularly in relation to data transparency. Once again, she went for what worked but not such that pragmatism overwhelmed the sound principles behind our commitment to the journal. On behalf of the readership, Sage, and the Joint Management Committee, we owe her a great debt of thanks. Both Ursula and Marlies will continue to handle all articles assigned to them as associate editor through to a final decision, and they will meanwhile become members of the Editorial Committee.

This meant we required two replacements who we would like now to introduce to our authors, readers, and reviewers. Lee Seymour is a semi off-shore addition, having moved from the University of Amsterdam to join the *Université de Montreal* in 2015, where he was appointed Canada Research Chair in the Politics of Violence in the Department of Political Science. He was already a member of the Editorial Committee of the EJIR and has since last December been Associate Editor for conflict and security, developing regions, human rights/civil society, and qualitative methods. Our second new colleague is Luc Fransen, Associate Professor of International Relations and Political Economy at the University of Amsterdam. Luc will take over on 1 March 2020 as Associate Editor for civil society/NGOs, international norms (particularly human rights and the environment), governance and international organisation, and (international) political economy. Welcome to you both, and thank you to both Sage and the Joint Management Committee for your support for the new team composition.

* * *

This editorial transition was, we felt, a good moment, given that we are half way through our tenure at the journal, to present some points on editorial practice that result from our experience so far. Let us call this editorial a mid-term assessment and commitment. This is all the more relevant given that, at the initiative of David Levi-Faur, founder of the Regulation and Governance journal and network, an 'Editors' Forum' was begun to share editorial experiences across the major journals in IR/political science and public administration/governance. We have done our best here to look at the editorial process from the point of view of the author, who, after all, provides our core content and that of all other peer-review journals. This should help both our readers and potential authors, and of course our reviewers as well, to understand what we are trying to do and to assess to what extent we succeed. We make this attempt recognising that publishing in a major IR journal is both increasingly difficult and increasingly essential for our colleagues. Given this, we believe that editors have a responsibility to specify how we make these

consequential decisions about your work, giving particular attention to the nature and scope of our discretionary power.

It is not surprising that many authors see peer review as a flawed process, especially as multiple rejections become the reality for even the best among us. Reviewers may share this view from a different angle. These perceptions may be exacerbated by people like us: editors. The growing pressure of rising submission rates creates a zone between adherence to due process and 'pure' assessment of quality on the one hand, and the constraints of acceptance ratios on the other (ours is by the way about 8%–10% of original submissions, including editorial rejections). There may also be a lack of transparency in terms of editorial policy and the practice of the review process, resulting in a lack of clarity concerning the extent and limits of editorial discretion. We are not implying of ourselves or anyone else that editors lack a clear sense of what their editorial principles and sense of quality are. However, these principles and practices often (and we would argue, rightly) vary from journal to journal.

Some editors take the view that reviewers are an electorate and that editors should limit their own role to that of translating the votes and summarising the verdict. As long as reviewers are 'tough' this is a path of least resistance when acceptance ratios are low, which is very frequently the case in any quality journal. In any event, it is most often very difficult to choose what to reject among the high-quality submissions. This choice also correctly relies on those with the most relevant expertise: the reviewers, who are, after all, chosen by the editorial team. An alternative approach for editors is to accept reviewers as an advisory panel, using reviewers' advice to develop an informed opinion about a manuscript and grant themselves considerable autonomy. These two different understandings of editorial responsibility are both appropriate choices for the editors of a quality journal, but they may well give rise to divergent outcomes. Consistency is the byword and what should be avoided is the mixing of the two approaches in any given editorial policy or practice.

Above all, transparency concerning the clear and consistent choices made by editors is a precondition to avoiding external perceptions of poor practice. When editorial discretion is not clearly defined and delimited by journal policy, editors also have more power to dress up discretion as process. There is no doubt that if authors and reviewers encounter different editorial practices at different journals or with different editors at the same journal, they will begin to ask questions. If they possess insufficient material with which to adjudicate whether a decision was made in accordance with editorial policy, personal editorial preference, or whim, it is difficult for editors to excuse the aggrieved for thinking that negative decisions involve either bias or predisposition of some kind. Intellectual pluralism and diversity within an editorial team is an antidote to this, but some journals, let us not forget, are built around a predisposition and a particular (sometimes emerging) literature, perhaps as a defence against predatory or gate-keeping behaviour elsewhere. All editors must anyway come to a view on how they interpret the boundaries of even the broadest of journal aims and scope.

It is thus the case that if, in the case of a split decision (e.g. minor revisions versus rejection), editors do not spell out in policy whether they regard reviewers as a predetermined electorate or as an advisory panel, or some specific combination of the two, the editors assume the power to pick and choose the manner in which they use their reviews from case to case. We all should be frank here: editors *do* have power, and their decisions

affect career prospects, and we as editors are *always* acutely aware of this as we are of our 'public service' quality control role for the profession and field as a whole. We include, of course, reviewers in this characterisation of what we do, because without the reviewers we could not function.

Subjectivity can never entirely disappear, but the point is to arm oneself against invoking a majority reviewers' opinion to justify one decision and then turning around to use the power of a compelling minority opinion to overturn a majority on the next, especially as this tactic may be adjacent to the editor's subconscious or other more explicit bias. To be clear once again, the problem here is not the existence of editorial discretion or different editorial approaches, but a lack of transparency regarding its nature and scope, and a possible lack of accountability of editors to a set of principles outlining their specific position on the matter. We also recognise that what we advocate here involves a great deal of work, particularly in crafting the text of decision letters.

As editors, we hope that our policy is clear as enunciated on the journal's website and in our previous editorials. This editorial team is committed to due process, and in our bid to run the journal we chose for editorial discretion as the policy we would adopt and follow in practice. While we pledge always to take reviewers' advice seriously and have done so, we believe, consistently, the interpretation of this advice is up to us. We take full responsibility for our decisions, good or bad, and we do not seek to hide behind the infamous third reviewer. We have had some complaints, from both authors and from reviewers. We have also had (rather more) compliments from both, particularly after a long and difficult review process that results in a much-improved manuscript that took the author to a new level. As a colleague of ours here in Amsterdam has been known to claim, there is no such thing as an article that is worse off for a sound peer-review process. As our editorial predecessors at Sussex advised us, if you feel strong negative or positive emotions about a particular submission, give it to someone else. Both of these points have proven to be great advice, with thanks.

Our new editorial colleagues share these commitments. We believe that these principles are not simply useful for our own purposes, but should serve as a starting point for ongoing discussion about the sort of clarification that authors might expect from editorial policies in the social sciences. By this we do not mean that our fellow editors should follow our choice of editorial line, but we do advocate clarity and transparency where it is currently lacking. In short, if there was one minor and one major R&R assessment or some other 'positive' combination from the reviewers, we may well choose to reject the manuscript. That said, we will take the time to tell our authors both what the reviewers advised us to do, *and* why we made the decision that we did. The decision still hurts, we know.

In practice this translates into a number of concrete criteria. The first is the 'high bar-soft landing' principle. At the *EJIR* we reject a lot of submissions without sending them out to review. Our review processes can be taxing and multi-round affairs, and locating appropriate expertise can be difficult due to reviewer exhaustion. We therefore seek to resolve questions of topicality, fit, or demonstrable problems of quality as early as possible. Such 'editorial reject' decisions will also be made as soon as we can, so that authors can get on with their next choice of journal. Questions of topicality/fit may not be raised as grounds for rejection after the first round of reviews.

What thus should authors reflect upon in order to land a publication? We call this the ‘yellow brick road’ principle: when (above all, major) revise and resubmit decisions are issued, we will identify as clearly as possible the steps that the author must take to satisfy (our interpretation of possibly contrasting) the reviewers’ advice and ourselves. While the first decision letter cannot be seen as a guaranteed ‘pathway to publication’, it must be clear. We reserve the right to deal with eventualities, such as original reviewers who decline to take on the manuscript after the author has revised. In proposing further revisions in a second round, the editor will add major substantive points to this list only when they relate specifically either to the implementation of the first decision or the revisions made, or there is a clear case that such will advance the article in a positive way.

How much discretion do individual (associate) editors have in relation to the eventual decision? Here we invoke the ‘sovereign sub-editor’ principle. The editor to whom the manuscript is assigned may of course consult colleagues on difficult decisions or where expertise crosses boundaries, and we do, but the editor handling the article takes full responsibility until the final decision. We regard our reviewers as advisory panels and not as electorates with powers of predestination. Associate editors have the discretion to make decisions that conflict with a plurality of reviews. We accept that, as a team, where decisions directly confront unanimous reviewer recommendations (e.g. the editor chooses an R&R in the face of a unanimous reject), an associate editor should consult a colleague, typically the editor-in-chief – but this may vary depending on expertise.

Our policy also guarantees that all original manuscripts will receive a minimum of two reviews. There is no upper limit on the number of reviews required to reach a first decision, but in practice we have seldom required more than three. For revised manuscripts, the editors have the discretion to determine the number of reviewers they require in order to reach a decision – particularly in the face of reviewers who subsequently decline to look at revisions, or who for any reason cannot respond.

We hope that the principles enunciated above clarify and, as far as can be done, codify the EJIR’s current editorial and review practices. We recognise that this grants our associate editors considerable discretion in the absence of some sort of hierarchical control. We have a ‘lead’ editor-in-chief, but the role is one of co-ordination and leadership and not hierarchy or veto-empowered control. The lead editor is subject to the same rules and practices, and this remains a shared, team-based commitment. We recognise that other journals have good reason to adopt alternative practices and policies. Our principle point in this debate is about clarity and transparency, and we welcome further discussion as to how to curate the highest achievable quality of scholarship in the EJIR and elsewhere. Meanwhile we hope that we leave our authors better informed about what we are doing out there behind that apparent veil of peer review combined with editorial discretion.

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