BOOK REVIEW

# Inken von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas. 2025. *Exit from International Organizations: Costly Negotiation for Institutional Change*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

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In *Exit from International Organizations*, Inken von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas have produced a timely, theoretically rich, and empirically ambitious study that redefines how scholars understand state withdrawal from international institutions. Amid a decade marked by high-profile exits, this book provides the most systematic analysis to date of why states leave international organizations (IOs), what consequences follow, and how these departures shape global governance.

Far from treating exit as an aberration, von Borzyskowski and Vabulas normalize it as a recurring feature of the international arena. Their work covers a century of IO history and offers a rebuttal to the growing sense of alarmism surrounding contemporary withdrawals. While recent commentary often presents exits as signs of populist contagion or institutional unraveling, this book argues that exit can function as a strategic tool and even a catalyst for deeper international cooperation.

## 1 Theoretical and empirical contributions

At the core of this book lies a seemingly simple question: why would a state abandon an IO that it previously helped build or willingly joined? In answering it, von Borzyskowski and Vabulas challenge conventional theories that treat exit as an anomaly, reconceptualizing exit not as failure but as a negotiating strategy.

Exit, they argue, is costly for the departing state, the IO, and the remaining members. Withdrawing can damage a state's reputation, trigger retaliation, and reduce its

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influence. Yet, because of these costs, credible threats to exit can serve as effective leverage. States may invoke exit to nudge institutional reforms, extract concessions, or signal dissatisfaction with existing arrangements. Indeed, they find that in roughly two-thirds of cases, exit is driven not by rejection of multilateralism but by grievances aimed at reforming the organization.

The authors thus offer a more nuanced and strategic theory of withdrawal. They argue that exit is a heterogeneous tactic that is available to some states more than others, and is used for a variety of reasons. Smaller or more dependent states may struggle to credibly threaten withdrawal, while powerful states can use it to shift IO agendas. Contrary to the notion of a withdrawal wave, they also show that exits have not risen in relative frequency over time. Instead, they recur across decades, driven by shifting strategic and institutional considerations.

To test these claims, the authors assembled the first systematic dataset of IO exits and suspensions, spanning 1920 to 2020. They catalog over 200 instances of withdrawal and suspension, detailing the timing, reasons, and aftermath of each case. Importantly, they treat withdrawals and suspensions as analytically comparable, as both reflect breakdowns in the relationship between state and institution. The authors demonstrate that both follow similar causal logics and can be theorized together.

The data yield a number of surprising findings. For one, the authors show that exit is often not permanent. Over half of all states that withdraw eventually rejoin the same organization. For suspended members, the reentry rate is even higher—around 80%. This finding counters prevailing assumptions that withdrawal represents an irreversible break with international cooperation. Instead, exit is often a temporary maneuver, sometimes followed by institutional reforms, renegotiated terms, or leadership changes that make return possible.

The dataset also reveals that threats to exit are rarely followed through. Only about 10% of verbal exit threats are actually implemented. This further supports the authors' argument that exit is a strategic signal that is designed to influence IO decision-making.

## 2 Directions for future work

One of the book's most intriguing findings is that exit can sometimes strengthen international cooperation. This challenges a widespread fear that any prominent withdrawal will trigger a cascade of departures or institutional collapse. Instead, von Borzyskowski and Vabulas suggest that in some cases, exit can lead IOs to renew their purpose, undertake reforms, or attract additional forms of support.

The authors do not frame this as a general rule but as an empirical possibility. This finding opens up important new questions. Under what conditions does exit spark renewal rather than decay? What factors determine whether IOs respond with reform, rigidity, or retreat? How do domestic audiences interpret reentry, and how do other member states balance punishment with pragmatism?

Future research could build on these questions by examining institutional adaptation strategies in response to exit or to try to prevent it. Some organizations may become more inclusive, transparent, or flexible when faced with withdrawal threats. Others may harden their rules to deter further defections. Comparative analysis across IO types could shed light on these dynamics.

In addition, an important caveat to the analysis that the authors themselves raise is that their dataset captures only public and formalized threats of exit. Threats that are implicit or conveyed privately through diplomatic channels are not included, though these may be highly consequential. The logic, frequency, and outcomes of such behind-the-scenes threats may diverge meaningfully from public ultimatums. For example, implicit threats might be more common among powerful states seeking leverage without reputational damage, or they may enable more flexible bargaining without triggering audience costs. This omission is methodologically understandable, given the difficulty of observing private communications, but it also suggests a rich area for future research. Triangulating public and private forms of exit-related leverage could deepen our understanding of how states quietly influence IO reform.

Future work could also delve into what happens after states return to international organizations. Do they regain their previous levels of influence, or is there a reputational penalty that diminishes their standing within the institution? This question is particularly important given the book's surprising finding that a large share of states rejoin after leaving or being suspended. Understanding whether returnees face institutional distrust, reduced leadership roles, or procedural barriers could help illuminate the long-term consequences of exit.

Moreover, future research might explore how far the reputational damage of withdrawal travels both temporally and across organizational boundaries. Does a state that exits one IO find its credibility diminished in others?

Further, the credibility of publicly stated withdrawal rationales remains an open question. Are states' official explanations for exit genuine reflections of grievances, or do they mask deeper strategic motives? Disentangling rhetoric from reality would provide a more nuanced understanding of exit politics and enhance the growing literature on global institutional contestation.

Finally, another promising avenue for future research concerns how the costs of exit vary across international organizations—and how these costs may be intentionally designed. At the founding stage, states may purposefully craft IOs with higher exit barriers to "lock in" commitments and bind future governments, thus enhancing institutional durability. However, such design choices can be double-edged swords: while they deter easy withdrawal, they also constrain the flexibility of member states and may generate resentment over time. Exploring how these design trade-offs influence the architecture of IOs could shed light on important dynamics of institutional resilience and constraint. Moreover, the costliness of reentry presents a related puzzle. On one hand, making reentry difficult could serve as a deterrent to exit. On the other hand, easing reentry could promote organizational recovery by encouraging

states to rejoin once domestic or geopolitical conditions change. Understanding how IOs navigate this balance between deterrence and reintegration would deepen our knowledge of institutional continuity and adaptation in global governance.

This book will surely spark new research into IO exit and can stimulate entirely novel research agendas. In an era when multilateralism is under strain, this book offers both analytical clarity and empirical depth. It will become essential reading for anyone interested in the politics of international cooperation, institutional resilience, and the future of global order.

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