Between the Gaitanista Army of Colombia and Clan del Golfo: A Process of Recognition and Misrecognition of a Non-State Armed Group

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Between the Gaitanista Army of Colombia and Clan del Golfo: A Process of Recognition and Misrecognition of a Non-State Armed Group

How can the recognition processes of a Non-State Armed Group change and influence peace efforts in a country? In this thesis, I concentrate on detailing how three presidential administrations- Juan Manuel Santos, Iván Duque, and Gustavo Petro- characterize the Gaitanista Army of Colombia (EGC). I used critical discourse analysis to understand their discourse and describe the EGC responses and adaptations to these characterizations. In general, this analysis demonstrates that it is not a straight-line process influenced by factors such as security and community priorities and reveals the degrees of recognition/misrecognition of the group. Moreover, in this process, characterizations can be used to legitimize or delegitimize the group's claim and to influence their discourse and identity. Based on these insights, the recognition process influences the continuation of hostilities and the possibilities of peace with the non-state armed group in an internal conflict.

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ACRONYMS

AGC	Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia
AUC	Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia
BACRIM	Criminal gangs
CMH	Centro de Memoria Histórica
EGC	Gaitanista Army of Colombia (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia- Clan del Golfo)
ELN	National Liberation Army
ELP	Popular Liberation Army
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
GAO	Organized Armed Groups
GDO	Organized Crime Groups
NSAG	Non-State Armed Group

Introduction

"Clan del Golfo is the son of the paramilitary groups that were created in Urabá since Uribes's Convivir. I presented them with a collective justice subjugation plan that they did not accept because they were afraid that the relations between politics, power, and crime would be unveiled" (Gustavo Petro, 2022)[1]

The Gaitanista Army of Colombia (Ejercito Gaitanista de Colombia- Clan del Golfo-EGC), as described by International Crisis Group (2024) has become the largest, strongest, and richest Non-State Armed Group (NSAG) in the country, illustrating their growth and expansion through time from 213 municipalities to 392, and their presence in twenty-four of the thirty-two departments of the country (Ortiz, 2024). As a whole, the EGC has transformed from a Bacrim - criminal organization denomination- into a group that exercises efficient regulatory and territorial control, criminal governance, including social order of informal and illegal economies such as narcotrafficking, illegal mining, extortions, and migrant trafficking through the control of the Darien Gap. Moreover, they have created institutions, norms, and rules for communities and have begun to replace, struggle with, and complement state functions, distributing public services such as security, justice, conflict resolution, and basic needs (Arias & Prieto, 2024).

With the growth and expansion of the group, peace alternatives, under the figure of submission to justice, have been attempted. Nonetheless, these efforts have not been successful for various reasons, including differing conceptions of the group's nature and disagreements over the type of negotiations the actors should pursue. To understand how these elements have influenced the possibilities for peace with the group, particularly the recognition of the EGC, this

[1] This quote from President Gustavo Petro alluded to the paramilitary history of the group and their relationship with the Armed Forces, particularly during Álvaro Uribe's administration (2000-2008).

thesis examines how the process of recognition/misrecognition of the Gaitanista Army of Colombia by the National Government changed between 2016 and 2024.

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter concentrated on describing the problem, the objective, and the methodology, using critical discourse analysis of social media (X) and official statements from three administrations and the EGC. The second chapter focuses on the historical context of the conflict, describing lessons learned from past peace attempts and the construction and operational elements of the NSAG. The third chapter details the theoretical framework, explaining the concepts of recognition and misrecognition, legitimacy, and the classifications between criminal, political, and insurgent groups. The fourth chapter describes each national government administration's security and defense priorities, as well as the labels used to describe the EGC. The fifth chapter presents the Gaitanista Army of Colombia's self-identification and responses to the National Government's characterization. The final chapter illustrates the EGC's recognition process through elements such as ‘think’ and ‘thin’, ‘exogeneity’ and ‘endogeneity’, and political, legal, and moral recognition. Additionally, portraying the realities of this recognition through critical moments in the relationship between the NSAG and the National Government in each administration. Based on this research, the possibility of recognition as a process that could at least support the initiation and continuation of peace dialogues between the national government and armed groups with complex dynamics, such as the EGC, is presented.

Statement of the problem

Taking a step back and thinking about the historical context in which this group appears, elements such as territorial-agrarian clashes, social and political issues, as well as the cold war have been identified as precursor elements of the contemporary phase of the Colombian Internal

Conflict, and promotors of the establishment of guerrilla groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), National Liberation Army (ELN), Popular Liberation Army (ELP), in the 1960s. Within the development of these actors, three different phases have been identified: gaining control of territories during the 1970s, the buildup of forces for insurrection and seizure of power in the 1980s, and the abandonment of political spaces and the collapse of state, economic, and political elites collapsed through violent acts in the last two decades of the 20th century (Centro Nacional Memoria Histórica, 2013).

A second type of group appeared as a parallel process. Since the 1970s, local paramilitary groups have emerged to defend medium and large landowners from kidnappings and extortions emanating from guerrilla groups. The emergence and popularization of drug trafficking in the 1980s added a new important source of revenue not only for these actors but also for guerrilla groups and drug lords (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022; Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013). As well as worsening the violence against the civil population with the security support given to the drug trafficking business (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013).

Moreover, contextual factors such as increased guerrilla attacks, shifts in territorial control objectives, alliance formation among groups, and support from public forces facilitated the unification of new paramilitary groups into the Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba and Urabá in 1994. Nonetheless, amid growing popular discontent, as documented by the International Crisis Group (2024), the Constitutional Court limited the state's armed transfers, and the groups were outlawed by 1997, yet continued their actions until the peace talks began in 2002.

The Santa Fe de Ralito process (2002-2005) marked the beginning of peace negotiations between the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) and the government. In response, the

National Government passed the Peace and Justice Law in 2005 and started demobilizing forces. Despite these efforts, in 2008, after failing to fulfill this agreement—particularly regarding the integration of former members into society—a new Non-State Armed Group emerged as the Gaitanista Self-Defense Force (now known as the Gaitanista Army of Colombia), aiming to regain control of the Gulf and the northern region of the country (International Crisis Group, 2024).

These processes have generated various impacts on Colombian society. Violent actions such as homicides, enforced disappearances, kidnappings, forced recruitment, and forced displacement, among other things, have burdened the population in the country. According to the Truth Commission (2022), between 1985 and 2018, 450,664 people lost their lives in the conflict; additionally, 752,964 individuals were displaced between 1985 and 2019. These actions have created emotional and psychological scars, hindered the development of life projects, and disrupted relationships among individuals, groups, and the territory (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018, pp. 8). Moreover, it has significant consequences for the development of the country, increasing poverty, inequality, corruption, overcrowding, housing instability, and inadequate infrastructure, among others' (Santamaria cited in Ayala, Coronel and Ayala, 2023, pp.94), as well as limiting the fulfillment of basic needs of the population.

In particular, thinking about the impact of paramilitary violence, as presented in the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica report (2016, p.111), these groups are the actors in the conflict with the highest victimization of the civilian population, responsible for 47,09% of the violence between 1975 and 2015. Nonetheless, presenting a variation before and after the demobilization process in 2006, with a reduction to 41,82%. Furthermore, within this violence, the categories that the group has prioritized are selective assassinations and massacres.

Interestingly, there has been a difference in the preference for selective assassinations, which can be explained for three reasons: the expressed guideline from leaders to not pursue massacres for the political and media cost; to create an appropriate environment for the development of the negotiation process with the AUC; and finally, the change in the structure and territorial control of the groups between 2006-2014 (CNMH, 2016, p. 124)—overall, illustrating the high human toll of the violence for communities, particularly for the actions of the group. Complicating the dynamics of a possible negotiated solution with the group, while portraying the need for an alternative solution.

In an effort to end the conflict and following the group's 2008 reorganization, the government adopted various strategies, ranging from armed operations to formal and informal peace talks. Most recently, in 2022, under the "Total Peace Policy", a framework for negotiation with "illegal armed groups in the country" (Ministerio del Interior, 2022), informal and formal negotiation attempts with the EGC have been conducted. Nonetheless, one of the defining qualities and most difficult considerations to reconcile during a formal peace process has been the judicial procedure. From the government's perspective, the process should be a collective 'submission to justice' (Presidencia Colombia, 2024). From the EGC, it should be working towards a transitional justice system (Farfán, 2024), as previous attempts under the government proposal have not been successful.

The contradiction of views and conceptions becomes evident within this context. From the government's perspective, the EGC is a paramilitary and criminal organization motivated by illegal economies. While the EGC conceived itself as a political-military group representing community interests. An illustrative example of the contradictions is the difference between their self-reference and the references given by public forces: the Gaitanista Army of Colombia and

Clan del Golfo, respectively (Arias & Prieto, 2024). With this, discursive acts have become, on the one hand, an expression of each actor's interests and priorities, and, on the other, a source of clashes between them when mismatches in characterization arise.

In particular, the importance of discourse in conflict dynamics relates to its ability to 'be used to legitimize, accompany, disguise or substitute for change in political values and activity' (Hayward & O'Donnell, 2010, p. 4). As presented by Fairclough (cited in Hayward & O'Donnell, 2010), discourse comprises three levels in the social world: 'language/text, practice interaction and context' (p. 4), which is why it is a powerful tool for providing insights into increases in conflict or peace efforts. Additionally, within this discourse, action, power, and the influence of words on 'individual or group behavior and experience' (Hayward & O'Donnell, 2010, p. 4) are presented. Moreover, it is also crucial for the process of change, with the alignment of 'concepts, interactions, and context' to achieve this goal; nonetheless, this can depend on other characteristics such as the influence of the speaker and their availability to address 'individual citizen experience of social conditions and their interpretation of them' (Hayward & O'Donnell, 2010, p. 5).

Under these explanations, the group's recognition becomes crucial when peace efforts are considered as an alternative to armed action. Unlike the references or descriptions of the group presented by the National Government throughout the conflict, peace efforts require an understanding of each party's identity and an acknowledgment of their claims and roles within the community.

The difficulty in this understanding can be observed, for example, in the National government's proposal to begin informal peace talks with the EGC. While in an interview Ricardo Giraldo, legal representative of the EGC, expressed that "EGC is not a group of

criminals or mobsters and that they are not aiming to get rich, because if this were the case they would not even be organized as an army, or have a centralized command structure, they would be more federal, as some guerrillas in Colombia" (El Espectador, 2024). In this quote, two key conceptions about the groups are presented. First, there is no legitimation of the group's claim to be recognized as an armed group in the country with a political-military structure. Second, the criticisms and comparisons of the national government's treatment of guerrilla groups in the country. This last idea of comparison has also been described by the EGC in other situations, such as an analysis of the state of the negotiation between the National Government and the ELN -a guerrilla group- after a security crisis in the Catatumbo region, noting that "there is not an opportunity missed by the President to exalt his affinity for the history of the guerrillas of the second half of the twentieth century in Colombia" (Equipo de EGC, 2025).

In comparing the groups, past peace efforts undertaken with the National Government are crucial to understanding the groups' claims, particularly the Justice and Peace law (2005) with the AUC and the peace agreement with FARC (2016). The Ministry of Law and Justice defines Transitional Justice as "the means of delivering justice in contexts of political transition. When it comes to ending internal armed conflicts, transitional justice helps achieve two essential objectives simultaneously: the political resolution of the conflict and the delivery of justice (n.d.). This is achieved through various mechanisms and tools that enable the process, such as addressing human rights violations and building trust between citizens and the state.

Interestingly, although both processes were grounded in this concept, they differed in respects such as process duration, justice, sanctions, amnesty, justice applied, extradition, sentences, budget, victim recognition, and truth. In this case the most important are: first, justice, the AUC process allowed the total or partial demobilization of only armed groups, on the

contrary, with FARC, there was a inclusion of third parties and members of the public forces (Espinosa-Diaz & Ríos, 2022, p. 210) for a holistic process involving all the parties that directly or indirectly participate in the process (Melamed, 2017). Second, in the AUC process, extradition was initially dismissed but later enforced against leaders of the group; in the case of FARC, it has been discarded for members of the organization and their families. Third, as crucial for the political claim that the EGC expressed in the narrative, is the legitimation of the political status of the AUC, which was not accepted by the national government, contrary to the process with FARC, which implements the group's political participation through seats in Congress (Espinosa-Diaz & Ríos, 2022, p. 213). Finally, contextual factors such as the nature of the groups (AUC as an actor between cooperation and enemy of the state, and FARC identified as a distinct non-state armed group) and the intervention of actors such as the United States through pressure for extraditions were important in defining the differences between the processes.

Under this context, recognition becomes a crucial tool for assessing the relationship between the actors. As a concept, it is described as a social act in which another actor constitutes another as a subject with legitimate social standing within a group (Wendt, 2003, p. 511). Additionally, creating a shadow aspect to describe moments when actors' characterizations differ, under the concept of misrecognition. As presented by Clément (2014, pp.429), it is defined as a ‘mismatch between the (real or imaginary) self-image that one actor claims in social interactions and the image reflected by others'. These concepts derive from Political Theory/Social Philosophy and have been developed through International Law and International Relations, including notions of political, legal, and moral recognition, and have created possible implications for conflict and peace studies.

While the complexity of a multi-organization conflict is evident, so is the importance of perceptions within the National Government, as well as its discursive references to other Armed Groups in the conflict. In particular, the way the EGC is characterized and the recognition/misrecognition of their "legitimate political claim" influence not only the EGC's reactions but also serve as part of their own narrative to gain popular support from other actors for their "political claim."[2]

Even though the administrations have similar conceptions of group recognition, particularly emphasizing its criminal nature, the variation among the presidents is based on contextual circumstances and security and peace priorities, such as ongoing peace processes, strategies to regain control of the territories, and presidential campaign processes.

To assess these possible implications for peace efforts with the EGC, focusing on the Colombian National Government as a recognition-granter, and the Gaitanista Army of Colombia as a recognition-seeker, this project addresses the construction and change of recognition/misrecognition throughout different points in the relationship, understanding this as a process, and utilizing elements such as political, legal, and moral recognition, as well as evaluating their exogeneity and endogeneity to a certain group. Overall, allowing observations on how these diverse views have shaped the group's identity, as well as the armed actions and peace efforts among the actors.

Research question and objectives

In this context, my project focuses on understanding how the National Government's recognition/misrecognition of the Gaitanista Army of Colombia changed between 2016 and

[2] Based on their self-description as a peasant origin group, temporary in arms and representative of the community, the EGC have presented their desire to have these characteristics recognized in their political claim.

2024. This period is crucial to the assessment, as 2016 marks the beginning of peace efforts between the national government and the EGC, and 2024 marks the last complete year before the start of the research project.

Main objective: Detailed how the process of recognition/misrecognition of the Gaitanista Army of Colombia by the National Government changed between 2016 and 2024.

Specific Objectives:

1. Explain recognition/misrecognition theory, legitimacy, and classification of Non-State Armed Groups
2. Describe the historical and operational characteristics of the Gaitanista Army of Colombia and the Colombian armed conflict.
3. Detail the changes in the recognition/misrecognition process from each of the National Government administrations being analyzed.
4. Analyze the responses of the Gaitanista Army of Colombia to the recognition/misrecognition discourse of the National Government.
5. Present the recognition/misrecognition discourse of the National Government through critical moments in each administration.

Methodology

Based on the context and objectives, this project uses archival analysis of discourses (text, social media, and video) and official documents from the National Government and the EGC as primary sources. Given the country's presidential character, in particular with the increase in their normative and factual power after the 1991 Constitution (Botero Bernal & Cajas, 2021), and the centrality of the presidential figure in previous peace negotiations, this thesis focuses on the analysis of presidential statements and resolutions during three presidential

administrations. To frame these arguments, additional information from each administration's security and defense policies is presented.

In the case of the EGC, their self-characterization and responses would be derived from statements detailed in a dissertation analyzing the group's discourse and the group's official webpage. Additionally, the material will include reports and articles from NGOs and Think Tanks, such as Fundación Ideas para la Paz (FIP) and the International Crisis Group, as well as projects from Colombia's Centro de Memoria Histórica (CMH).

Data collection process and analysis of the data

As presented by Mullet (2018, pp. 122) Critical Discourse Analysis methodology can be broken down into different stages: 1) Select the discourse, 2) Locate and prepare data sources, 3) Explore the background of each text, 4) Code text and identify overarching themes, 5) Analyze the external relations in the text, 6) Analyze the internal relations in the text, and 7) Interpret the data. This section details each stage of the data collection and analysis.

Selection of discourses

To understand the traits and characterizations of the EGC across different administrations, as well as the armed group's self-definition, various types of texts were identified, including news articles, social media posts, official discourses and documents, NGO and Think Tank articles, and academic articles. From this list, in the case of the National Government social media post, specifically X post, as well as official discourses and documents were chosen. In particular, these data sources present firsthand statements from the presidency. Second, capturing evolution and change in the discourse over the period of analysis, and finally, detailing the priorities of the national government in its efforts to communicate its actions to the community.

The X post illustrates the group's day-to-day characterization, presenting the language used to describe it. Additionally, because the official web page contained only two or three administrations' statements, this provides a way to access the same primary sources for all three administrations. In particular, this type of data is crucial to the analysis for several reasons. First, the importance that social media posts have gained as a source of information for the public, with a wider audience, greater influence, and the possibility for presidents to personally express their ideas and perceptions directly. Second, the importance of the reach of these sources, which can be seen in two instances: first, the number of subscribers of each of the X accounts: @JuanManSantos (4.5 million), @IvanDuque (2.6 million), @petrogustavo (8.4 million), and @infopresidencia (2 million), as well as the presidential YouTube channel (435.000). Second, these sources tend to be used by news outlets, digital, television, and radio, to convey information about the points of view and actions of the government that reach a wider audience.

In this context, two main target audiences for the National Government are crucial to this thesis: the community and the EGC. First, these sources convey messages to the population, particularly to legitimize their actions and present a characterization of the EGC. For the second, they presented the group's points of view and decision-making process, as well as the elements of its characterization, which were later addressed in the group's self-narrative. Finally, outside of the scope of this thesis, another audience is the international community, particularly countries in the region and regional and international organizations.

Consequently, X posts from presidents in each administration between 2016, as a starting point marking the first public mention of a formal talk between the National Government and the then Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC), and 2024 were considered. Within this period, three administrations were analyzed: Juan Manuel Santos (2014-2018; 2016-2018); Iván Duque

(2018-2022); and Gustavo Petro (2022-2026; 2022-2024). Moreover, official discourses and documents were chosen after a review of social media posts to support the characterization of the group.

For the EGC, secondary sources and primary sources, such as statements posted on the official web page, were used. These sources were chosen because they illustrate the group's direct characterization and perceptions of their representation by the National Government. The first type of data was found in a dissertation that analyzes the group's discourse, which provided citations of statements made by the group between 2016 and 2018. Specifically, this data was selected because, since the change of name from the Gaitanista Self-defense of Colombia (AGC) to the Gaitanista Army of Colombia (EGC), the armed group has shut down its last official web page. Moreover, statements from 2023 to 2024 were found on the official website. Similarly, to the National Government, these statements are first directed at the community, highlighting the group's stance and position within it, possibly seeking legitimacy for their claims. Secondly, to the administration: responding to the group's arguments and references, as well as clarifying their nature and self-recognition.

Finally, these sources were written in Spanish, and I translated the data using a translation website (DeepL Translator) and later confirmed the translations. One difficult aspect of this process was the need to use specific Colombian expressions and lingo, such as the popular phrase #ElQueLaHacelaPaga in Iván Duque's crime action, as well as the notion of submission to justice. Nonetheless, I try to encompass the main ideas of these expressions in the translations.

Data Analysis

To organize the data, I created two Excel databases that described characteristics such as dates, links, document type (X post, video, or discourse), citations, and the most important

information for each source, for the national government and the EGC. Each database was divided into traits and actor types described in the coding guide.

Coding for themes

Understanding the concept of order of recognition, defined by Kaden and Günther (2021) as "social actions that serve primarily or partly as answers to sets of questions by actors involved (or desired to be involved) in a process of recognition" (pp. 91), within each statement, this set of questions would be answered. The first set refers to how the actor is viewed by the recognition granted:

- For what traits is an actor recognized?
- As what kind of actor are they recognized?

The second set of questions is based on how the actor perceives this recognition:

- For what traits does an actor want or not want to be recognized?
- As what kind of entity does an actor want or not want to be recognized?

Based on these characteristics, a coding guide was developed after the data collection, focusing on two aspects for each party (see Appendix A). Firstly, traits are defined as characteristics relating to the economic, political, social, and ideological nature of the group. Secondly, the kind of actor considered, as well as the labels described by the administration to define the group, and the self-definition of the armed group:

Table 1. Coding guide main elements.

Actor	Traits	Kind of Actor
National Government	• Submission to justice • Illegal economies	• Criminals. • Narcotraffickers. • Terrorist/narcoterrorist • Organized armed group/ illegal armed structure • paramilitaries
Gaitanista Army of Colombia (EGC)	*Positive traits*	*The kind of actor they want to recognize as*
	• Willingness to establish a peace dialogue. • Victims or martyrs of the conflict/peace processes. • group with a political-military structure	• Representative of the community. • Legitimate Armed Group and Armed Civil Resistance Movement. • Crucial actor in the conflict and for peace dialogues.
	Negative traits	*The Kind of actor they do not want to be recognized as*
	• Criminals, mafia, or narco-traffickers.	• Criminal or criminal organization.

	• Acting violently against the population. • Paramilitary or association with the Armed Forces. • Emerging to get the benefits of the illicit economies	• Paramilitary. • Narcotraffickers.

.

Data statistics

Overall, 166 discourses were analyzed. From this sample, 158 were X posts, 5 were official discourses (found on the official YouTube channels of the National Government and the presidential web page), and 3 were Laws. Moreover, in each administration, 43 discourses were from Juan Manuel Santos (2016-2018), 85 from Iván Duque (2018-2022), and 35 from Gustavo Petro (2022-2024).

Furthermore, when divided by the codes based on the type of actor identified, the criminal label was found in 118 discourses; narcotraffickers were used in 52 discourses; terrorist/narcoterrorism in 6 discourses; organized armed group/illegal armed structure in 32 discourses; and, finally, paramilitary in 2 discourses. Likewise, among the described traits, illegal economies appear in 163 discourses focusing on drug trafficking, and submission to justice in 17 discourses.

The data analysis was divided into three parts. The first section focused on each administration. For this, their security and defense policies were used to present their priorities. Additionally, the sections were divided into the labels identified, including the two traits: illegal economies and submission to justice. The next part detailed the EGC self-descriptions, divided

into two sections: first, the kind of actor they want to be presented as, and second, the kind of actor they do not want to be portrayed as. Within these two categories, the identified traits are explained. Finally, the discussion section, in which theoretical concepts are used to explain the process and illustrate how the actors engage in a recognition process through critical moments in their relationship.

External, internal, and interpretation of the data

Firstly, my analysis presents a description of the three types of recognition: political, legal, and moral (Bartelson, 2013), as well as concepts of endogeneity/exogeneity (Toros & Sugal, 2021). Within this analysis, historical, economic, political, and social aspects would be detailed.

Moreover, I identify two/three critical moments. These moments were selected because they were moments in which actors either engaged in informal/formal dialogue or military action against each other, and presented an opportunity to observe how the parties engaged with each other:

Table 2. Critical moments.

Administration	Critical moments
Juan Manuel Santos (2016-2018).	• Announcement from the armed group and the government of the negotiation talks in September 2017. • Official law 1908 July 13, 2018, through which the investigation and prosecution of criminal organizations are strengthened, measures are adopted to bring them to justice, and other provisions are enacted.

Iván Duque (2018-2022).	• Detention of Dairo Antonio Úsuga David, alias 'Otoniel', on October 23, 2021. • Gaitanista Self-defense of Colombia (AGC) expressed willingness to engage in a peace dialogue in July 2022.
Gustavo Petro (2022-2024)	• Bilateral ceasefire with the AGC announced by the National Government through Law 2658 of 2022, December 31st, 2022. • End of ceasefire with that AGC, March 19th, 2023. • Exploratory dialogues with the EGC, July 8, 2024.

These critical moments are used in the discussion section to illustrate the parties' engagement with each other and to show how the labels and traits identified in this thesis are evident across different situations.

Evaluation and justification of methodological choices

This research process aims to understand the contextual elements surrounding discourses in the relationship between the actors, how their contextual characteristics are expressed, and how these aspects shape these characteristics. Based on this main objective, Critical Discourse Analysis, as a method, allows us to understand the relationship between discourses and real-life actions and decision-making by actors, and to examine discourse in light of power relations, history, and political economy. Additionally, to understand the contextual processes in which these discourses are embedded and their impact on the construction and descriptions used in the discourses.

Positionality

As a Native Colombian growing up in the ongoing internal conflict, I have been exposed to the changing dynamics of the conflict. Nonetheless, it was not until my academic experience and the beginning of my professional life that specific characteristics such as the impact of discourse, the changing dynamics on legitimacy, governance and control, as well as the question about peace with different types of groups began to interest me, leading me to recognition theory and critical discourse analysis to encompass the different intersections that I wanted to address in my research.

In particular, my work in humanitarian security, where I had the opportunity to continuously track the development of armed groups in their regions of operation, strengthened my interest in understanding the dynamics of recognition surrounding the EGC. Given the centrality of the Darién office to the group's organization and the group's level of control in the area, I was curious to understand the motivations, discourse, and approaches to dialogue between the state and this group. In particular, I wanted to understand further the seemingly contradictory representations of illegal motivations and violence, while acknowledging that the EGC itself reaffirmed its political legitimacy and community-based interests. It was the nature of the group that made them an interesting case study for understanding the dynamics of recognition/misrecognition in peace development, as well as for exploring new approaches to address conflict negotiation processes involving complex actors, such as the EGC. The findings from this case study from Colombia can thus hopefully inform our understanding of complex and dynamic internal armed conflicts in different parts of the world.

Nevertheless, it is also important to discuss that the intent is not to legitimize specific discourses from any part of the actors in the conflict or minimize the violence and atrocities that

populations have endured in this conflict, particularly because of the centrality of violence perpetuated by paramilitary groups, particularly against civilians, and the role of the government within the conflict. Because of this, I wanted to reiterate that the research aims to examine the recognition process, understand these discursive processes, and assess how they can affect the continuation of conflict or the possibility of peace between two actors. In particular, understanding these violent processes and the deep hurt and scars they have left in previous and contemporary generations of Colombians, and offering another alternative for possible solutions to the conflict moving forward, while recognizing the events and history of the actors' actions in the conflict.

The emergence of the EGC: a short history of the conflict and the operational understandings of the NSAG

Historical references are central to the changing nature of the recognition and misrecognition process of EGC, becoming part of the government's characterization of the group, a central argument for the EGC's identity and actions, and impacting contemporary characteristics. From the characterizations of the group as criminal organizations and paramilitaries to the group's claim as a victim of the conflict and peace process, the understandings of the main characteristics of the Colombian internal conflict dynamics, the peace attempts with the Colombian United Self-Defense (AUC), and the central characteristics of the EGC become critical to understanding the recognition process.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first details the history of conflict, emphasizing the creation of paramilitary groups. Secondly, describes the peace process with the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), finalized in 2006, and the first peace efforts with the AGC. Finally, the rearming of the group, the growth and evolution of the now-denominated Gaitanista Army of Colombia (EGC), and the organization, structure, and strategies deployed in the territories to maintain their control and seek legitimation from the community.

History of the conflict

Contemporary roots of the conflict have been discussed by academics, particularly in light of two events: the traditional bipartisan dispute between the Liberal and Conservative parties and the unequal distribution of land. First, the traditional bipartisan dispute between the Liberal and Conservative parties, particularly during the Violence Period (1948-1974) and the

subsequent National Front (Frente Nacional[3]). Clashes between the two parties marked these periods as they competed for power, resulting in violence across regions. Under this context and motivated by the unequal economic articulations of the regions and the unresolved agrarian issue, peasant groups began to emerge (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013).

Moreover, at this time, peasant groups were localized and a residual phenomenon, characterized by a left-wing movement and motivated by the political system's exclusion, particularly by the conservative party's persecutions (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022). Nonetheless, the operations of the public forces against the so-called 'independent republics.'[4]Supported the centralization of the groups, with the consolidation of FARC, into a national and international phenomenon, presenting these attacks as direct aggressions against the population (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, pp. 121-123).

Equally important, the agrarian issue, particularly the failed attempts to reform land tenure, has been identified as a second origin of conflict. As discussed by Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (2018, pp. 18-26), one of the most prominent elements of the country's land policy since the end of the colonial period has been the occupation and adjudication of wasteland, and within this, the disconnect between settlements and land titles. The government's difficulty in identifying and registering land, and the institutional weakness in applying the law,

[3] Frente Nacional: This was an agreement made by the leaders of the Conservative and Liberal parties to share power, alternating power every four years, between 1958 and 1974, initially established for twelve years and prolonged for sixteen, as a way to end the General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla administration between 1953-1957, after the coup d'etat on Lauriano Gomez. (Antonio Caballero, 2016).

[4] Concept used by Congressman Álvaro Gómez in 1961, to describe regions in the country controlled by peasant groups, particularly the Marquetalia region, and that, as described in his speech, threatened national sovereignty (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022)

have enabled landowners and economic elites to exploit these weaknesses to continue acquiring and consolidating territory.

Between 1961 and 1982, various land reform laws were created by the national government. Even though, the 1970s was highlighted by peasant fight for lands, the Land Reform Law of 1961, the 1973 Law from the administration of Misael Pastrana Borrero, and the 1975 Law of Alfonso López Michelsen (Segrelles, 2018, pp. 416-417), as the first time in which 50% of the adjudications were given to small landowners, 39% to medium, and only 11% to grand landowners (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018, pp. 30), were implemented.

To illustrate the magnitude of the issue, as explained by the Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi (IGAC) (2012, p. 61), in 1960, only 0,43% of landowners owned more than 500 hectares, and 66,67% owned less than 5 hectares. For 1984, these percentages increase to 0,42% and decrease to 62,41% correspondingly. Even when policies and reforms attempted to redistribute land, as presented in a 2023 IGAC report, they were unsuccessful, with the top 20% of rural landowners owning 89,9% of the land (IGAC, 2023).

It was this environment that fostered the formation of Self-Defense forces (Autodefensas), which later became paramilitary groups. Their insertion into the internal conflict can be traced to the interests of three main groups: economic elites defending their states; drug lords' desire to expand their operations and protect themselves from guerrilla groups' extortion, and public forces, particularly the military, in their fight against guerrilla groups. Expressions such as narcoparamilitarism and a new concentration of land with its purchase by narcotraffickers made the redistribution of land more difficult to achieve (CMH, 2013, p. 143).

Catering to the different interests of each group created a dual charter for the new paramilitary groups. On one hand, they supported the state in the fight against guerrilla groups,

and on the other, they made the state its enemy as it was now conditioned by the US to fight narco-trafficking. It also created challenges in differentiating between war and organized crime, as in some regions, paramilitary groups became the armed branch of narcotraffickers.

For the land distribution, with the economic liberation and consolidation of narco-trafficking in the country, the land issue worsened. It encouraged the expansion of livestock farming, involved large-scale land purchases, caused land scarcity, led to the fragility of peasant economies, and spurred the growth of illicit economies. (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, pp. 152). Additionally, the displacement of communities to support the expansion of commercial crops such as palm oil and illicit crops, as well as non-violent actions for land transfers from peasants, brought the issue of land grabbing to the surface (Huratado-Huratado et al., 2024, p. 137).

At this point, various contextual elements supported the consolidation and change of paramilitary groups. The demobilization of the Liberation Popular Army (Ejército Popular de Liberación, EPL), which allowed the territorial expansion of FARC, the signing of a new constitution in 1991, and the constitutional prohibition of extradition, opened the door for the dismantling of drug cartels. Additionally, the 1997 Constitutional Court ruling against Convivir.[5]Making the groups illegal altered the groups' logic (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, pp. 155, 158).

The union of various paramilitary groups, first, under the Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá (ACCU), and then as Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) in 1997

[5] Private Security and Surveillance Cooperatives (Convivir), legalized through the Law 356 of 1994. Nonetheless, this law established flexible criteria for the authorization of the formation of groups, which allowed groups that had previously been accused of proposing probable human rights violations and links to narcotraffic to be recognized and legal under this figure (CNH, 2013, pp. 158).

(Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, pp. 160), supported the evolution of the group from local counterinsurgency to a political, social, and economic project with a national scope. Actions such as participating in elections with candidate support and implementing state-like administration in control areas, including initiatives in health and education, demonstrated the group's new strategies.

Throughout this section, the various changing dynamics of internal conflict have been presented. Interestingly, the incorporation of elements such as narcotrafficking and the liberalization of the economy exacerbated the original cause of the conflict and created an environment for the emergence of paramilitary groups that would transform from a counterinsurgency to another key actor in the armed conflict. This created a need for an alternative option to armed action with the AUC, in this case, a submission to the justice process.

For the National Government discourse, the ties between paramilitary groups and narco-trafficking, and the existence of illicit economies as motivations for the groups' existence, can be traced back to these historical events. Likewise, from the EGC, the sentiment expressed in its discourse as a community representative and the shared feeling it wants to evoke in victims of the government return to these explanations of the conflict.

Peace process with paramilitary groups: the Santa Fe de Ralito process, and a failed attempt for the AGC

Given the importance of the peace process with the AUC, as referenced in the EGC's origin stories, and the failed attempts with the AGC, this section describes the negotiation process between the National Government and these actors.

With the election of Álvaro Uribe in 2002, his emphasis on the fight against guerrilla groups to recapture territory, as described in his Democratic Defense and Security Policy, and his

enthusiasm for an alternative solution with the AUC supported the start and completion of the groups' submission-to-justice process. The Santa Fe de Ralito agreement allowed for the demobilization and partial disarmament of the groups, reduced violence in the country, and made it possible, for the first time, to negotiate with a non-state group without political status.

Under this process, the Santa Fe de Ralito document was signed by the parties in December 2003, contemplating the complete demobilization of members by 2005. This goal was not achieved, ending the process a year after the expected deadline, with the demobilization of 31,671 group members (Arias & Prieto, 2024, p. 18). Even though the peace process completed these expectations, various challenges arose during the negotiations. Events such as the almost complete impunity for crimes and the lack of recognition of victims' rights generated criticism from national and international audiences and pressure to change this law (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, pp. 179), as well as the continuation of violent actions of the group throughout the process. Additionally, within the AUC, the internal conflicts of the organization, illustrated by the assassination of the group leader Carlos Castaño in 2007 (Arias & Prieto, 2024, p. 18), their unwillingness to assume the political cost of the organization, and the expansion of the paramilitary phenomenon, and finally, their reluctance to give back the resources accumulated were points of contention in the process (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, pp. 185).

Various lessons can be learned from the AUC's submission to justice that should be considered in future peace efforts. First, the importance of the 'language, treatment and dialogue' (Arias & Prieto, 2024, p. 38) to create a good environment for the negotiation, particularly the recognition of the group as an actor in the conflict (not necessarily their political claim), and the influence of this factor in the conflict dynamics. Second, the significance of the legal framework

for demobilization, particularly in increasing control of the process, as the proposed framework did not require the administration to verify the list of members, which allowed for the inclusion of narcotraffickers in the process. Third, the time period, factors such as international pressure, particularly from the United States, in the fight against drugs, national elections, and the AUC's interest in negotiating influenced the motivations of both parties. Fourth, the importance of understanding the resources that are available for the fulfillment of the agreed-upon elements, such as the reintegration of members into civil life, territorial control under the government, and how the policy would continue with the next administration (Arias & Prieto, 2024, p. 40).

Fifth, the clarity of the narrative and the structure of the incentives that made the negotiation possible. In the case of the government, their interest in regaining the legitimacy of the state, and for the AUC, their urgency not to completely allow the inclusion of narcotrafficking into the group, the pressure of the United States, and the increase in violent degradation (Arias & Prieto, 2024, p. 40). Finally, understanding that the reality of the process involved the possibility of rearmed remnant groups, worsened by the lack of security guarantees. As discussed by Arias and Prieto (2024, p. 44), various armed groups that participated in peace negotiations in the 1990s left behind remnant groups in anticipation of the peace process's possible non-fulfillment. This was also the case of various paramilitary leaders, who left remaining groups to continue their involvement in narco-trafficking.

With the rearming of the group into the Gaitanistas Self-Defense of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, AGC), now EGC, new attempts to find a negotiated solution were considered. One of the first approaches between the national government and the group began in 2013, when the AGC's willingness and eagerness to contribute to the peace efforts was expressed by alias ‘Don Mario’, a leader of the group, in a letter sent to President

Santos. At this point, the administration rejected the proposal, arguing the possible political repercussions of this negotiation and the prioritization of the FARC process (Arias & Prieto, 2024, p. 38).

A new attempt occurred in 2015. As a decisive factor, the success of the Agamenón Operation, as explained in another chapter, influenced the group's decision to enter into negotiations. The leader of the group, alias 'Otoniel', proposed a new negotiation with the government and the United States through a submission of justice (Arias & Prieto, p. 40). For the National Government, as presented by Arias and Prieto (2024, pp. 42), these attempts represented not only an opportunity to dismantle the organization but also to support the negotiation process with the FARC-EP.

In general, in the National Government's eyes, the goal for these negotiations was for the group to disarm, demobilize, and dismantle its structure. Articulating these efforts with other processes with the FARC and ELN. The group was willing to disarm and collaborate in exchange for legal benefits, including extradition. Nonetheless, it was really important for the group not to be portrayed as defeated, even though their goals were not to transform into a political organization, which would later be agreed upon with FARC; they desired that the government recognize and accept that the group had control and influence in certain regions (Arias & Prieto, 2024, p. 48).

Consequently, various lessons from these processes are crucial to highlight. First, the importance of agreeing upon achievable goals based on the reality of resources from both parties, so as not to perpetuate conditions that would allow for the rearming of possible dissident factions of the group, which would be described in the next section. Second, the administration's priorities in initiating the negotiation process and the armed group's motivations for engaging in

it. Finally, there is an understanding of discourse and perceptions that the national government and the armed group have of the process.

Correspondingly, understanding these processes, and in particular the lessons learned from past engagement between the national government and the EGC, supports the illustrations of the claims about the National Government's unfulfillment of promises, its self-characterization as a victim of the peace processes, and its arguments for a political negotiation rather than a submission of justice process. Moreover, presenting the contextual elements underlined in the group's origin narrative. Finally, it shows the risks and challenges that negotiating with the group poses for peace efforts, particularly the ties and benefits derived from illegal economies, which could motivate certain parts of the group to maintain structures that allow them to continue gaining these benefits. Additionally, the continuation of violent actions against populations through the negotiation processes, especially in the fight against other armed groups for control of territories and resources, undermines their desire to achieve peace, compromises the peace negotiation, and continues the effort to maintain these goals in the medium and long term.

Gaitanista Army of Colombia (EGC): organization, structure, and social strategies

After the description of the peace attempts with paramilitary groups, another layer of these events was the reconfiguration and rearming of the previous group. After the peace process with the AUC was completed, motivation for these rearmed included the lack of guarantees and fulfillment of agreements by the national government, a claim made by previous leaders of paramilitary groups; a way to continue their illicit businesses, such as narcotrafficking, and the control of the political and economic zones where they were previously present; and finally, the persistence of conditions in the territories that were not resolved by the national government,

including the lack of reintegration programs for medium leaders of paramilitary groups (Arias & Prieto, 2024, pp. 11-13).

In general, three time periods have been identified: the conformation period between 2006 and 2008; the dispute period between 2009 and 2014; and finally, an expansion period since 2015 (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2025, p. 125). As described by Arias and Prieto (2024, p. 18), in October 2008, the Urabeños announced a name change to the Gaitanistas Self-Defense of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, AGC). As well as making their first armed strike, starting to organize under the Mayor State figure, and drafting the group's bylaws, recreating the models created by guerrilla groups and the AUC. Since 2009, a phase of military expansion and consolidation of an international structure for cocaine trafficking has been implemented, increasing violence against the civilian population, other groups, and public forces (Arias & Prieto, 2024, pp. 19-20).

It was 2011 that became an important inflection point with international recognition of the group by the International Committee of the Red Cross as part of the non-international armed conflict, as well as the assassination of two students. In response to the group's growth and recognition, the National Government, under the Santos administration, convened a security council meeting to address the group's actions. During these meetings, an assessment of the groups was conducted, and it was decided that political negotiations would only be held with FARC and ELN. Given the consideration of Bacrims as criminal organizations, the only alternative to armed action would be submission to justice (Arias & Prieto, 2024, p. 22).

Organization of the group

In general, the group is organized by structures and substructures that have evolved. In 2018, the group was composed of five structures and twenty-five substructures. By 2023, it had

grown to 5 structures, and by 2024, to 52 substructures. In terms of geographical presence in 2024, the EGC has a presence in 348 municipalities, distributed across twenty-five of the thirty-two departments. Their complete control can be observed in the municipalities of Darién, in the department of Chocó, in Urabá, Antioquia, as well as in some regions in the departments of Córdoba and Sucré (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2025, pp. 164-168). To see the updated division of the substructures in the territory, refer to Appendix C.

Furthermore, understanding the group's hierarchical dynamics, certain events were crucial to creating a change in the structure. In particular, the detention of Alias Otoniel, the main leader of the group, created a dispute between two other leaders, Alias Chiquito Malo and Alias Siopas, resulting in the assassination of the latter and the concentration of power under Alias Chiquito Malo and Alias Gonzalito (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2025, pp. 169). Nonetheless, with the diverse armed operations against the group, such as Agemonón I, II, and III, and Operation Osiris (detention of Otoniel), Operation Cóndor (for the detention of Chiquto Malo, Siopas, and Gonzalito), and Operation Darién (general detention of members of the group), a constant rotation of leadership has been created (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2025, pp. 170).

Consequently, as presented by the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (2025, pp. 189), their specific operational strategy has supported their expansion across the territory. The group works with franchises, generating alliances with local criminal organizations/gangs that have financial autonomy. This allows them to have control over certain regions without necessarily deploying their troops. The EGC manages and coordinates diverse criminal groups, outsourcing their work, with information and armed components in the territory.

Additionally, in the territories, they have resorted to strategies such as the co-opting of social organizations to influence and increase their social legitimacy. Through this strategy, the EGC endorses organizations and finance leaders to organize the community. The main goal of these actions is to destroy prior loyalties within the community and reconstruct them to accommodate the group's interests, intimidating and threatening social leaders to compel them to cooperate. Moreover, the group imposes social norms within communities, sets prices for essential items, and engages in large-scale recruitment, offering jobs in zones where economic opportunities are scarce or nonexistent (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2025, pp. 192). Nevertheless, from the group's perspective, these actions are presented as providing for the communities (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2025, p. 197).

Overall, this chapter supports the understanding of the main dynamics of the conflict and the emergence of the EGC. Struggles between groups and the unequal distribution of land continue to pierce the contemporary state of conflict. Within this context, the emergence of narcotrafficking and changes in the political and economic landscapes supported not only the creation of the AUC but the rearming of the groups, turning them into the EGC.

Moreover, peace efforts with the groups have created a blueprint for potential new negotiations, with lessons such as the importance of fulfilling agreed-upon goals, understanding each administration's priorities, and the significance of discourse in these processes. Furthermore, the description of the organization's main characteristics provides insight into how this group seeks legitimacy from the community and highlights elements that have supported its growth and expansion, even in the face of diverse armed actions against it. Finally, all of these elements are crucial to analyzing the group's statements and creating their own labels and the specific traits they want to be recognized for.

Recognition, legitimacy, and the intersection between a criminal, political, and insurgent group

After explaining the historical context in which these discourses are embedded and referenced, understanding theoretical elements is crucial for detailing changes in the National Government's characterizations of the EGC. Considering discourse as an illustration of reality as well as its possibility for implementing change, to foster the increase of violence or the possibilities of peace in a conflict, makes it an important field of analysis to understand the evolution of the relationship between the National Government and a Non-State Armed Group.

Further, within discourse, various elements can be reviewed, in this case, as a way to understand how the relationship between the National Government and the Gaitanista Army of Colombia changes and evolves, particularly with its first formal approaches to peace alternatives, and contradicting conceptions of the identity and classification of the group between the actors, the concepts of recognition and misrecognition are explored. This section draws on academic work in Political Theory, International Relations, and Peace and Conflict Studies to define the main characteristics of three elements: recognition theory, legitimization, and the characterization of criminal/political/insurgent groups.

Recognition theory

The study of recognition has been developed in diverse disciplines. From Political Theory/Social Philosophy, authors such as Fraser, Honneth, and Taylor (Geis, Fehl, Daase, and Kolliarakis, 2015) have reflected on issues of “identity politics” and “struggles of recognition” of social movements and minorities, drawing their work from the Hegelian idea of ‘recognition by

other individuals or by a society as a vital human need"[6] (Geis, Fehl, Daase and Kolliarakis, 2015, pp. 7). Within these author's research, themes of recognition in the 'public sphere': politics of universalism that protect individuals' autonomy and 'politics of difference' protecting their identity (Taylor cited on Thompson, 2006, pp. 10); models of recognition: Love, Respect and Esteem (Honneth cited on Thompson, 2006, pp. 11); and, the relationship between 'politics of equality' and 'politics of difference' or 'identity politics', encompassed in the ideas of redistribution and recognition (Fraser cited in Thompson, 2006, pp. 11), can be found.

These ideas represent the root explanations for the importance of recognition in individual and community relationships. Furthermore, detailing elements that would later be elevated to understand how organized groups, such as states seeking recognition from similar actors, as well as how non-state actors desire this recognition from the state. During conflict scenarios in which social, political, and economic claims are central to the struggle, recognition can influence actions and peace.

On a large scale, within International Law and International Relations, research has focused on the centrality of the state and the idea of recognition as "something that states do or have a legal claim to do" (Geis, Fehl, Daase, and Kolliarakis, 2015, pp.9). Within this conception, International Law has concentrated on the debate between declaratory and constitutive theories of recognition. The declaratory approach explains that a new state would gain legitimacy by 'reflecting the criteria stipulated in international law: territory, permanent

[6] As presented by Sembou (2003, pp. 262), Hegel's idea of recognition centers on the argument that 'only through recognition can a human being be constituted as a self'. Additionally, under this concept of recognition, ideas of freedom (determine owns will, but dependent upon the freedom of others) and difference. In the case of public life, there are 'arrangements of social and political institutions, each of which facilitates a distinctive pattern of mutual recognition among social members' (Anderson, 2011, pp. 20).

population, effective government, and the ability to enter into relations with other states' (Agné et al., 2013, p. 97). A constitutive act would mean that international recognition is produced when 'a state comes into being in international law', meaning that there is a need for international recognition of the political entity (Agné et al., 2013, p. 97). The first approach details the characteristics required for designation as a state. In contrast, the second focuses on the relational aspect of this process, namely recognition by peers and international organizations such as the United Nations.

Nonetheless, as described by Geis, Fehl, Daase, and Kolliarakis (2015), since the increased relevance of actors aside from the state in world politics and the 'constructive turn', recognition theory research in International Relations has focused on questions about identity and the influence of non-state actors. As one of the most influential authors within constructivism, Wendt (2003, pp. 511) defined recognition as 'a social act that invests difference with a particular meaning – another actor ('the Other') is constituted as a subject with a legitimate social standing in relation to the Self'. This definition highlights three crucial elements. Firstly, the social act, which means that recognition is constitutive in relation to other actors; secondly, through this act a legitimate social standing is given to the actor, in other words, recognition grants legitimization of an actor as part of a particular group, in this case non-state armed actor in a conflict; and finally, the reflection that this recognition has on their own conception and understanding as an actor in a society, meaning their own self-understanding.

Consequently, the issue of recognition has created a shadow aspect that describes moments in which one actor's perception of another does not match that actor's own characterization. Misrecognition can be defined as 'mismatch between the (real or imaginary) self-image that one actor claims in social interactions and the image reflected by others'

(Clément, 2014, p. 429). Both parts of the concept present tools to understand the influence of the discursive practices of actors promoting conflict or peace relations (Geis, Fehl, Daase, and Kolliarakis, 2015, p.13)

To assess how recognition has impacted the behaviors of actors during conflict scenarios, Geis, Fehl, Daase, and Kolliarakis (2015), understanding that 'social actors always want to be recognized as and/or for something by other (groups of) actors' (pp.10), present two sides: the recognition-seekers and the recognition-granters. In this case, non-state armed actors are presented as recognition-seekers, and states, international and regional organizations, non-state actors, and the local population can be considered recognition-granters. For example, in the study of Nigeria's conflict, detailing the labeling of four groups: Boko Haram, Niger Delta, IPOB, and Fulani militia, diverse recognition granters were identified, such as the government, traditional religious leaders, Islamic scholars, ISIS, multinational oil companies, and the international community, among others (Nwankpa, 2021, p. 55). Another research project focusing on the Lebanese arm of Hezbollah divides the recognition-grantors across domestic, regional, and international spheres: community and general public; Arab and Muslim publics in MENA; state actors; and Western states (Pfeifer, 2021).

One way to understand the impact of the recognition processes during conflict is the concepts of 'thin' and 'thick' recognition. As described by Allan and Keller (cited on Clément et al., 2021, pp. 8)Within 'thin' recognition, conflicting parties recognize each other as 'agents, as autonomous 'entities' [that have] the rights to exist and continue to exist as an autonomous agent'. 'Thick' recognition goes a step further with the understanding of each party 'in terms of essential elements composing its identity,' a characteristic needed for durable and stable peace.

Accordingly, recognizing that non-state actors seek recognition strategically, Biene and Daase (2015, pp. 224) have described the process as gradual. First, the recognition of the Non-State Actor as 'party of the conflict,' emphasizing their existence and 'corporate identity as a political force.' Second, as a participant in informal talks, acknowledging their roles as a central actor in the conflict, and even a competitor with the power to defend their interest. Third, their recognition as a participant in formal talks, exploring the possibility of the actor having a 'legitimate claim to bring to the table.' Finally, being recognized as a representative of a collective or as the sole representative of a people, acknowledging the legitimacy of their political authority and their ability to negotiate with the government to further the collective good of those people.

Moreover, drawing from International Relations, Bartelson (2013) presents three concepts of recognition. First, political recognition understands that 'actors and their status are constituted through acts of recognition, and why these actors act the way they do, establishing what counts as a relevant actor and how these actors acquire their status, in this case, in the international system by 'virtue of being recognized by other similar actors' (pp.111). Second, legal recognition describes 'on what grounds a state should be admitted as a member of the international society of states, regardless of its relative status' (pp.114). Within this explanation, actors (states) become constituted as 'bearers of rights' as a result of legal recognition. Finally, moral recognition requires a presumption of equal moral worth when discussing relationships between communities or cultures (p. 114).

Other elements of recognition that are crucial to explore are the concepts of endogeneity and exogeneity presented by Toros and Sugal (2021). Endogeneity in a group is defined as an actor identified as a member of a community. In the case of exogeneity, it refers to an actor that

is not part of the community and is trying to impose on it. Even when a duality element is present, it has complex implications for conflict analysis. Firstly, even when an actor in conflict is seen as exogenous to the community, it can still be recognized as relevant to the conflict. Secondly, this categorization may impact their political/legal/moral recognition. Then, both concepts influence 'their capacity to operate in a political context, how other actors interact with it and the actors' right to be at a negotiation table' (pp.76). This ordering capacity allows actors to 'claim certain positions in the hierarchy of actors of a conflict system' and to 'accept or refute other claims to certain positions.'

In brief, this section summarizes the main elements of recognition theory, from Political Theory/Social Philosophy to International Relations and International Law, and, finally, the new implications for the fields of peace and conflict, including concepts such as 'thick' and 'thin', 'endogeneity' and 'exogenity', and, finally, political, legal and moral recognition.

Legitimacy

Legitimacy is an essential element for the recognition of Non-State Armed Groups. Through discourses, the NSAG can express its desire to be legitimized by other actors, such as National Governments, communities, NGOs, and International Organizations. Additionally, actors' discursive practices, or recognition-granters, are identified as the first steps in the legitimation of NSAG's claims. Based on these ideas, this section will present the main approaches to assessing legitimacy, the debates surrounding it, how it has been applied to non-state armed groups, its relationship with governance, and, finally, definitions and diverse expressions of the legitimation process for these groups, through claim-making and claim-validation.

McCullough (2015) presents two approaches for assessing legitimacy. The first concentrates on defining normative standards based on Western liberal values and understands a "legitimate state as a state which features democratic elections and respect for human rights" (pp. 3). On the other hand, an empirical approach that defines legitimacy through "the perceptions and acts of consent by both the governed and the authorities in a given society" (pp. 3). In other words, derived from people's beliefs and perceptions, in which the "power or domination that is seen as legitimate by those subject to it is defined authority" (Bellina, Darbon, Eriksen, and Sending, 2009, p.8).

In the first category of assessments, and as one of the first authors to define legitimacy, Max Weber (1947) explained that an 'order which enjoys the prestige of being considered binding, or, as it may be expressed, of legitimacy' (pp.108), in which there is a transition from orientation to an order when a belief of legitimacy is involved. In this context, legitimacy can be obtained from three sources: legal-rational, traditional, and charismatic (McCullough, 2015). In relation to non-state armed actors, this vision is reflected in Schlichte and Schneckener's (2015) definition of legitimacy, "to the belief in the rightfulness of an armed group´s agenda and violent struggle" (pp. 413).

An alternative definition is offered by Beetham (cited in McCullough, 2015), situating legitimacy in three dimensions: "it must conform to established rules; the rules must be justifiable in terms of people´s beliefs; there must be evidence of consent by the subordinate" (pp. 4). In this same line, Gilley (cited in Lamb, 2014) explained that "a state is more legitimate the more that it is treated by its citizens as rightfully holding and exercising political power" (pp. 12), noting that legitimacy is also reflected in the agreement between individual beliefs and the system feature, indicated by the presence of acts of consent. Adding to this notion, Lamb (2014)

understands that legitimacy "gives a moral or normative reason to obey, support, accept, imitate, comply with, or refrain from opposing it within some bounded range of activity or experience" (pp. 15).

Based on these definitions, different debates have been launched. One has focused on the relationship between service delivery and the state's perceived legitimacy. In this context, one strand of the literature demonstrates a positive impact on popular perceptions of the state's legitimacy, based on the quality of service delivered (Mallett et al., cited in McCullough, 2015). While others, as presented by Guerrero (cited in McCullough, 2015), have explained that when an expectation is met, "satisfaction diminishes as citizens turn their attention to other services that need improvement" (pp. 12). In the case of non-state armed groups, Giustozzi (cited in Nilsen, 2009) argues that the relationship between insurgent groups and people is an exchange relationship, in which material and/or non-material benefits are given to people to increase legitimacy. Nonetheless, as explained by Bellina et al. (cited in Nilsen, 2019), there is also a need to assess whether the state has met the expectations of the civilian population and the capacity of this non-state armed group to provide these benefits (pp. 17).

Drawing from these concepts, an important dimension to analyze is the relation between the non-state armed group and actors such as the government and the community. This is considered an actor-based approach, under the process of legitimation (Duyvesteyn, 2017). As a way to analyze these relationships, Podder (2017), understanding a legitimate Armed Group as "the right wielder of power, maker and interpreter of rules or user of force and who thereby warrants support and compliance' (pp. 687), presents three levels of analysis through relational processes: the civilian population that it seeks to represent; with the state where it operates; and the international community.

Particularly, within the first level of analysis, the population and the state, the issue of governance, and, in this case, hybrid governance, comes to mind. As a whole, governance can be understood as 'of rule systems, of steering mechanisms in which authority is exercised in order to enable the governed to preserve their coherence and move towards desired goals' (Rosenau, cited in Villa, Macedo Braga, and S.V. Ferrerira, 2021, pp.38), which transforms into a formal structure for governments. Additionally, in this exercise, authority derives from recognition of the right to govern; nonetheless, there has been increased fragmentation of the state's authority.

Furthermore, the emergence of spaces of 'limited statehood' in which the state does not have a central position of authority, as other groups, in this case non-state armed groups, control the monopoly of violence and even provide services such as security and welfare, among other tasks for the organization of the population. It is in these spaces that hybrid governance can emerge, as states are unable to maintain population allegiance and alternative options emerge. These spaces can be understood as 'alternative governed space', described by Willians (cited in Villa, Macedo Braga, and S.V. Ferrerira, 2021, pp.39) and in which state and informal forms of governance by NSAG coexist. Different modes of coexistence can arise, including the state's instrumentalization of criminal groups, official corruption, undisclosed alliances, or de facto control by armed groups that perform state-like functions.

Moreover, various categories to analyze how the NSAG constructs this hybrid governance were expressed by Willians (cited in Villa, Macedo Braga, and S.V. Ferrerira, 2021, pp.40), including 'motivations and purpose, strength and scope, how they obtain funding or access to resources, organizational structure, the role of violence' and their relationship with the state. Additionally, three main categories can be used to assess the capacity of NSAGs to establish governance within a specific time frame: their group resources or material capabilities,

the expansion of their criminal economies, and the intensity of violence. Within the example assessed by the authors, the case of the BACRIM groups in Colombia was used to understand these concepts, concluding that the compliance of the population was based entirely on coercion and not shared beliefs as a way to create the legitimacy to exercise governance in the control areas (Villa, Macedo Braga, and S.V. Ferrerira, 2021, pp.44).

Based on these characterizations, other elements of the expression of legitimacy become important for understanding the relationship between the group, the state, and the community. From the Non-state Armed Group's (NSAG) perspective, the process of legitimation, as described by Hensell and Schlichte (2025) in their research on the politics of international legitimation of NSAG, is defined as the activity of 'demonstrating that a political actor and his actions are justified' (pp.19). Within this process, NSAG engages in claim-making, describing and justifying elements such as their orders, actions, and agendas, and desiring validation for these claims. Within these claims, two groups have been identified. On the one hand, claims that are Ideation-based, which allude to ideas and ideologies such as human rights, Islamism, or nationalism. On the other hand, performance-based claims describe their behaviors, such as defensive capacities, security provision, and elements of welfare (Hensell & Schlichte, 2025).

Furthermore, Hensell and Schlichte (2025) have identified certain practices for the claim-making of NSAG. First, fighting can be observed as a way to demonstrate their military power, gain visibility, and attract attention to their cause, making it imperative for agents to engage with the group, either by launching operations against them or by negotiating solutions. Second, voicing and expressing their claim through discourse, in which their cause and aims are explained, as well as the narrative of their struggle and conflict dynamics, including victimhood, denouncing their enemies, exposing failures of other groups, and underlining international

norms. Finally, mimicking the acquisition of a state-like position and perspective involves using strategies such as exercising authority over territory and administering public institutions.

Additionally, from the other actors' perspective, claim validation can be understood as ‘accepting or approving the validity of a claim to legitimacy and establishing its worthiness’ (Hensell & Schlichte, 2025, p. 21) and is related to the recognition of the Non-State Armed Group. For actors from whom the NSAG seeks validation, engaging with these groups can create an intentional or unintentional legitimation of the claim, as symbolic or declaratory actions are presented as public recognition of these claims. Three steps have been identified as validation acts of the claims. First, acknowledging that, within this action, the group is presented as a political problem. As part of the conflict, the text characterizes the group in positive terms, such as ‘liberation movements’, which not only recognize it as a political actor but also accept its legitimacy. Second, supporting, in which NSAG receives external support, from material assets such as money and arms to diplomatic backing, legitimizing their struggle. Finally, officializing, through government negotiations or gaining international organization status.

Another element of both the claim-making and claim-validation processes highlighted by Hensell and Schlichte (2025) is the public they address. Two groups have been defined. First, the broader audience encompasses domestic and international supporters of the claim, observers, passive listeners, and neutral individuals (pp. 23-24). The second group is the constituency or the specific group that validates the claim and whose legitimacy they seek, from communities to international actors.

These elements are important for analyzing the relationship between the Gaitanista Army of Colombia and the National Government. In particular, the ideas of claim-making and claim-validation present key motivations and articulations of the EGC's political claim, how

recognition shifts within the administration, and, finally, how these shape the possibilities for peace between the actors.

Criminal/Political/Insurgent group

Given the group's diverse facets, the definition of criminal/political/insurgency motivations is blurry. Firstly, it is important to consider the definition of the motivations behind organized crime; in this sense, Varese (2017) notes that the objectives of these groups are to "attempt to regulate and control the production and distribution of a given commodity or service unlawfully" (pp. 45). Secondly, there is the idea of criminal insurgency proposed by Daniel (2015), in which organized crime groups "violently occupied the space left by the state and use it for their own purposes" (pp. 101). Moreover, when the group attained higher levels of control, other methods to "increase their profits and gain some freedom to maneuver" (p. 101) were used.

Within these ideas, two characteristics have been underlined: the focus on illicit economies and the relationship with the state. To examine these two characteristics, Barnes (2017) develops the concept of criminal politics, which focuses on interactions between the organizations and the state, in which these organizations are motivated by the "accumulation of wealth and informal power and which seldom have formal political ambitions about the state itself" (pp. 973).

At the international level, and particularly under International Law, understanding non-international conflict as a 'protracted armed violence between governmental authorities and organized armed groups or between such groups within a State' (ICTY cited on Vité and Gallino, 2024, pp.932), with two criteria to differentiate this type of violence in which a there is a 'minimum level of intensity and parties involved have reached a minimum level of organization' (pp.933), the last category has been scrutinized to define and limit actors that fulfill these criteria

to be part of the conflict. Nonetheless, as explained by Vité and Gallino (2024), armed groups are organized within different models, which have promoted authors such as Rodenhäuser (cited on Vité and Gallino, 2024, pp.938) to establish a broader criteria, including groups that have "certain command structure', a capacity to comply with some basic humanitarian rules and that is 'capable of engaging in sufficiently intense armed violence with an enemy". This classification is important to the international community's acceptance of peace negotiations with a specific group.

In this context, the Gaitanista Army of Colombia falls between these definitions. Badillo and Trejos (2023) classified them as a political armed group, defined as an organization that did not start with a defined political discourse but has developed one over time. Consequently, recognizing their political facet does not diminish the importance of illegal economies. In this sense, they can be understood as an "organization that started with strictly criminal pretensions but that over time has adopted a political discourse" (pp. 344). The authors also highlight the growing interconnection between armed organizations and international markets, as well as their participation in cross-border activities, including irregular migration and contraband.

In essence, the conflicting views and characterizations of actors through statements become a crucial part of conflict dynamics and possibilities for peace. Under the recognition framework, the identity of an armed group, its projected image, and the characterization by another actor are presented through elements such as 'thin' and 'thick', 'endogeneity and exogeneity', and, finally, political, moral, and legal recognition. Within this, the group's priorities and motivations for action are illustrated, allowing for an understanding of the difficulties and contradictions in negotiation processes.

Under this umbrella, questions about the armed group's legitimacy, which raise doubts about the government's legitimacy, are addressed through claim-making and claim-validation strategies. As well as the classification of the group in a certain category, such as criminal or armed group, and its challenge to accommodate hybrid elements of groups in the country, adds another layer to the understanding of how discourse can project the reality of the situation, influence, and express justifications of actions, and be a tool for peace processes.

In particular, understanding the legitimacy of non-state armed groups through their classification as political actors and the representation of the rightfulness of their actions (Hensell & Schlichte, 2025) presents an interesting and difficult element of engagement between the state and non-state actors. In this thesis, the Colombian National Government and the EGC variously use violence and threats of violence, engagement in illicit economies, and the historical context of the armed group as grounds for de-legitimization. As demonstrated across various Presidential administrations, the lack of legitimization of the non-state group's political claim becomes the point of contention. Under these circumstances, recognition, as a social act that confers legitimate social standing on another actor within a specific group (Wendt, 2003), is presented as a discursive tool to emphasize certain elements of characterization that are important for the armed group itself to portray as part of its legitimation claims. Some of these claims may or may not be recognized by the National Government, without compromising its stance on the group's (de)legitimacy. In this way, recognition becomes dynamic, which can either support or hinder peace negotiations.

Clan del Golfo: Santos, Duque, and Petro characterization of a criminal organization

In this context, the importance of public validation and characterization of the group becomes crucial to the relationship between the actors. The narrative presented by the National Government supported actions taken against the armed group and shaped popular perceptions of it, thereby permeating the possibilities for peace. The changes in the references and descriptions of certain traits and labels to characterize the EGC throughout the administrations give insights into the interest of each government, not only on the strategies to deal with this armed group and other armed groups, but also on their stance on the internal conflict and possibilities of engaging in peace processes.

To understand how the National Government recognizes and misrecognizes the Gaitanista Army of Colombia, the chapter presents descriptions of key characteristics for each label and the traits identified in the data coding, situating them within the security priorities of each administration. Both elements illustrate specific uses of language within each label and the motivations behind the narrative.

Within the labels, one observation is crucial to bear in mind. Throughout the administration, they were not used mutually exclusively. Firstly, within the three administrations, criminals and narco-traffickers were used jointly. Secondly, even when the labels can be described as opposed, for example, criminals and an organized armed group, depending on the administration, they could be used interchangeably and describe similar characteristics. Finally, the only other option for armed action against the group is submission to justice; nevertheless, the presentation of the argument varies between the administrations.

Based on this context, the chapter is divided into three parts, each of which concentrates on one administration: Juan Manuel Santos (2016-2018), Iván Duque (2018-2022), and Gustavo Petro (2022-2024), describing the security and defense priorities and the use of each label.

Administrations

A misrecognition that opens the door for EGC as a crucial actor in the conflict: Juan Manuel Santos (2016-2018)

> As we move closer to peace and the possibility of no longer living amid war, we must be aware that it is not enough; ending the conflict with the guerrillas is not enough for all Colombians to live in peace. It is necessary, imperative, to strengthen actions against all types of crime, but above all against criminal organizations and their support networks, including those that have emerged from paramilitarism. We have already demonstrated that, no matter how dangerous and powerful these organizations, cartels, and mafias may be, the strength, force, and above all, the values of our society prevail over criminal interests. (Juan Manuel Santos, 2016).

In this section, I argue that during Juan Manuel Santos' administration, there was a misrecognition of the EGC based on its classification as a criminal and narco-trafficking organization. Nonetheless, the importance and growth of the group, particularly since the second presidential period, and the key addition that the possibility of a process to dismantle the organization would entail for the peace agreement with FARC, opened the door to the recognition of the group as a crucial actor in the conflict. This position was reinforced in the legal definition of the group as a Non-State Armed Group (GAO), later discussed in this chapter, and the usage of labels such as criminal, narcotrafficker, and the submission of justice option, which encompass the contradictions between the legal and political recognition of the group during this administration. Additionally, it highlights points of tension regarding the group's importance while delegitimizing their claim, particularly by emphasizing the national government's success in dismantling the organization.

Both Santos administrations were marked by the negotiation and completion of the peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2016. A significant event that shaped the government's strategies against other actors in the conflict. As explained by García, Silva, and Magallanes (2018), in the first Santos administration (2010-2014), a division between the importance and actions taken against criminal gangs (BACRIM) -including the EGC, then called Los Urabeños-, and groups such as FARC or the National Liberation Army (ELN), named "grupos armados al margen de la ley' (GAML), was highlighted by the national government, prioritizing the second group.

Nonetheless, the completion of the agreement, the growth of Barim and reorganization of the group filling the void left by FARC, and the dissatisfaction of government officials from diverse political parties with the results of the detention of high-value members of criminal groups brought the importance of the fight against the organization, changes in the priorities in the security agenda, and new terms to describe the criminal organizations, during Santos second administration (2014-2018).

This was expressed in the revised defense and security policy, *Everyone for a New Country* (Política de Defensa y Seguridad Todos por un nuevo País), in which organized crime is presented as one of the most crucial topics in the security agenda, highlighting the work from the Ministry of Defense to develop and update regulations to act against the evolution of crime. Additionally, it concentrates its actions on the 'fight against illegal armed groups, organized crime structures, drug trafficking, smuggling, illegal mining, extortion, terrorist attacks against critical infrastructure, migrant smuggling, human trafficking, terrorism, cybercrime, and cyberattacks' (Ministerio de Defensa, 2015, pp. 20). Finally, the focus is on ensuring that individuals and organizations involved in organized crime are prosecuted under the conspiracy-to-commit-a-crime

framework to achieve greater effectiveness in the actions taken.' (Ministerio de Defensa, 2015, pp. 21)

Second, under Permanent Directive 15/2026, these groups were reclassified as Organized Crime Groups (GDO) and Organized Armed Groups (GAO). On one hand, GDO was defined as a:

> A group of three or more people existing for a certain period of time and acting in concert to commit one or more serious crimes or offenses covered by the Palermo Convention, with a view to obtaining directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit (Ministerio de Defensa Nacional cited on Lleras, 2016).

On the other hand, GAO were defined as 'those who, under the direction of a responsible commander, exercise such control over a territory that they can carry out sustained and concerted military operations' (Ministerio de Defensa Nacional cited in Lleras, 2016). Based on these definitions, and as expressed in García, Silva, and Magallanes (2018), at this time, there were three groups classified as GAOs: the Urabeños, FARC dissidents, and Los Pelusos, for which the National Police and the Armed Forces would be able to use the necessary force to pursue them (Ministerio de Defensa Nacional cited in Lleras, 2016). The importance of the reclassification lies in the legal recognition of the group as a non-state armed group and in the difference in its characterization in the president's discourse.

Even though this was the organization's legal classification, the president's description differed. President Santos described the EGC as criminals and narcotraffickers. Within these categories, illegal economies, including drug trafficking, assassinations, and extortions, were highlighted. Based on these elements, armed actions and the detention of group members were presented as measures of success against the group's illegal actions. Success was framed as pressure on the group that, according to the National Government, at specific times enhanced their willingness to engage in unofficial and official peace dialogues, while presenting the submission

of justice as the only alternative to armed action. Consequently, making the administration open to submitting to justice, without prioritizing this option over armed actions against the group.

1. Criminal:

This is the main descriptor for the group by President Santos, illustrated in forty-three of the documents. Under this label, my argument is that President Santos uses the characterization of the EGC as a criminal organization to delegitimize the EGC's political claim through two elements. First, the detention of group members' narratives illustrates the government's power and control over the group, shows its success in its fight against criminal organizations, and frames the group's willingness to negotiate as a direct consequence of its strategy. Second, detailed descriptions of EGC participation and motivation in illegal economies, particularly assassinations, extortions, and illegal activities, served the purpose underlying their criminal nature, contrasting with the political claim of the group.

1.1. Detention of members of the group:

To detail the success of the administration's actions against the EGC, this element focused on two parts. Firstly, individual or collective actions, presented by the administration as the neutralization of members within the grand offense against crime, while extolling the work of the Colombian armed forces. One example is an X post detailing the detention of group leaders: ' Major blow to the Clan del Golfo in the #ContraElCrimen offensive. Twenty arrests in Meta and Urabá, including the leaders 'JJ' and 'Veterino'.' (Juan Manuel Santos, 2016). Secondly, the results of armed operations under the administration, such as Agamenón II and Operation Odyssey, observed in the X post from 2017: "I congratulate the @PoliciaColombia for the results of Operation Odyssey against the Clan del Golfo: 28 arrests. We are making progress in the fight #AgainstCrime." (Juan Manuel Santos, 2017).

To understand the importance of this element in the national government's narrative, it is crucial to consider the statistics on its presence and influence at this point in the country. In 2016, the Gaitanista Self-Defense of Colombia (Autodefensa Gaitanista de Colombia-AGC) had a presence in 27 departments and 279 municipalities of Colombia (Posso, Espitia, Benítez, Jiménez, and González, 2017, p. 14). In 2017, as described in Álvarez, Llorente, Cajiao, and Garzón (2017, pp. 27), approximately 1,900 members of the group were present in 107 municipalities across the country. Nonetheless, because of the group's outsourcing component, the number of members could be close to 3.500. Finally, in 2018, Posso, Cabezas, González, and Espitia (2020, pp. 17-19) estimated that between 1.500 and 2.000 members of the organization were present in 32 departments and 232 municipalities across the country.

For the government actions, the Presidential report to Congress in 2017 described that in 2016, 3.516 members of organized crime were 'neutralized', as well as 897 in 2017 (Departamento Nacional de Protección & Dirección de Seguimiento y Evolución de Políticas, 2017, pp. 77), emphasizing the biggest 'blows' to members of AGC, denominated here as Clan del Golfo, with detentions of the finance leader and coordinator of criminal actions in Pacific municipalities. Additionally, presenting the results of Agamenón's operation, with a 50% reduction in the organization. Moreover, under the MAICO (Interagency Coordination Mechanism against Organized Crime) strategy, 156 members of the group were detained between 2017 and 2019 (Fiscalía General de la Nación, 2019, pp. 81).

Accordingly, as the main strategy against criminal organizations, the Agamenón Operation was created in 2015 to target the group across five levels: control and command, structural damage, logistics, finances, and territory. With control and command, three actions were prioritized: detention of the organization's main leaders, neutralizing the criminal system, and disrupting

coordination points/damaging communication between the structures. Moreover, after two years of operations, the results showed 1,284 detentions: 1,001 by the organization and 283 by other groups associated with the EGC (National Police of Colombia, 2017).

One of the most crucial actions from these operations was the action in which Alias 'Gavilán' was killed, as expressed by Juan Manuel Santos: Alias 'Gavilán', second-in-command of the Clan del Golfo, was killed by security forces.' (2017). Moreover, emphasizing that:

> One of the priority organizations in this action by our armed forces is the so-called Clan del Golfo, perhaps the most powerful organization we are confronting, the most powerful criminal organization we have been confronting for some time now. Yesterday, in a well-planned, surgical operation carried out by an elite unit of our national army, with intelligence from the police and tactical and strategic assistance from other forces, the number two leader of the Clan del Golfo was killed, Roberto Vargas Gutiérrez, alias Gavilán; he was one of our most valuable targets. We had been after him for a long time because he had a criminal record spanning more than 30 years. (…) This is undoubtedly the most significant result achieved against this organization in the last two years. However, we have obtained very good results against this organization during Operation Agamenon, which is specifically directed against it. (Juan Manuel Santos, 2017).

This action, in particular, supported the administration's claim of success in dismantling the group. Consequently, highlighting the key role that operations like this have played in the group's willingness to negotiate, pressuring them to engage in a process of submission to justice. Santos emphasizes these arguments in his discourse on the appointment of two magistrates of the Constitutional Court:

> That is a very accurate and decisive blow against this organization, and they are feeling the pressure, so much so that, for a couple of months, since the middle of last year, they have been sending messages about their willingness to submit to justice. I have authorized various public officials to listen to these messages of submission of justice. On September 3rd, we received from the Clan del Golfo leader an express manifestation of willingness to submit to justice, he and all his men (Juan Manuel Santos, 2017).

This element also sets the stage for the argument for submitting to justice as the only alternative to continuing the armed action against the group, a point discussed later in the chapter.

1.2. <u>Assassinations/extortions/illegal mining:</u>

The second element in the criminal misrecognition of the group is the descriptions of illicit economies, in this case, assassinations, extortions, and illegal mining, which emphasize the criminal nature of the group and their motivations for continuing their actions. Additionally, this element justifies the government's strategies towards the group, particularly by denying their political claim and prioritizing the submission of justice as an alternative to armed actions against the group.

An illustration of these arguments is the link between the increase in violence against social leaders after the peace process with FARC-EP and illegal mining and narco-trafficking. Under this action, Santos highlights the motivations for criminal gangs to pursue this action as a way to continue gaining benefits from the illegal economy. These ideas can be observed in Santos's statement on the appointment of magistrates of the Constitutional Court:

> Another origin for the social leaders assassination have been the criminal gangs, focus on illegal mining, and narcotrafficking, an important number of the killings have been peasant leaders that have been promoting illegal crops substitution, which narcotrafficker do not want to see succeed, as the raw material would end, this is why they killed, within this situations we are also acting, against all criminal gangs in general, as one of the security priorities, acting jointly with the prosecutor's office and the armed forces, which are, very proudly recognize, as the best the best trained and most effective we have ever had in our history (Juan Manuel Santos, 2017).

After this example, it is crucial to assess the gravity of these actions, to examine the figure associated with them:

Table 3. Crime committed per year. Data from Defensoría del Pueblo (2023), Fiscalía General de la Nación (2019, pp. 107), and Ministry of Defense (2026).

Crimes	2016	2017	2018	2019
Social leader assassinations[7]	133	126	178	134

[7] Social leaders in Colombia, according to the T-469 of 2020 sentence of the Constitutional Court, are individuals who promote or protect human rights peacefully. Their authority comes from community recognition and encompasses issues such as protecting life and the environment, reclaiming territories, promoting political participation, and/or defending victims' rights (Ministerio de Justicia, n.d.).

Illegal mining		23 operations and 97 adjudicated individuals	48 operations and 127 adjudicated individuals	19 operations and 34 adjudicated individuals
Extortions		4888	5480	4902

Overall, these statistics, along with the portrayal of the actions as criminal behavior, supported the narrative of the group's criminal nature and the government's efforts to resolve the situation. Signaling to communities the violent nature of the group, delegitimizing their claim, and positioning the government as the winner in the fight against the group.

2. Drug trafficking/Narcotraffickers:

After the assessment of the criminal label, the characterization of narcotraffickers serves as a complement and another layer of the criminalization of the EGC by the government's discourse. Under this label, the National Government uses references to past and present issues of drug trafficking in the country, particularly the relationship between paramilitary groups and narcotrafficking, such as descriptions of the group as 'drug lords' to frame their discourse. Similar to the previous label, characteristics highlighted are the actions of the administration against drug trafficking, such as the seizure of cocaine and detention of members in charge of these operations. Under this narrative, Santos justified its strategy against the EGC. He denied their political claim as representatives of the community, particularly by comparing the group with actors such as the former FARC-EP or other guerrilla organizations, such as the National Liberation Army (ELN), which have been recognized as political actors through the peace negotiations pursued with the groups.

An example of this description can be seen in an X post from Juan Manuel Santos (2017), "Good start to the fight #AgainstCrime in 2017. The leader of the Clan del Golfo, who coordinated drug trafficking routes on the Pacific coast, has been arrested." Likewise, the president

concentrates on showing the effectiveness of the operations against these activities: "I congratulate @PoliciaColombia on the successful Lourdes operation in Antioquia, where they seized the largest cocaine shipment in history: 12 tons. So far this year, we have seized 362 tons, surpassing the amount seized in 2016. (Juan Manuel Santos, 2017). Both served to underscore the group's criminal nature and motivations, as well as the government's successful efforts to debilitate and minimize the group.

To better understand the magnitude of the actions and their results at the national level, it is important to highlight the statistics. Particularly, within this year, there were ninety-four tons of cocaine seized, half of them from the Agamenón Operation (National Police of Colombia, 2017). Additionally, in 2018, the seizure was 413,383 kilograms, increasing to 659,340 kilograms in 2022. Within these actions, and similar to the descriptions of detentions of members of the group, pressure from public forces, and the successes of the operations were used by Santos as a way to support the fulfillment of their security plan to eradicate the group, and as an explanation for the group's pursuit and willingness to negotiate. One example of this can be found in his discourse after the detection of alias Gavilan:

> No drug lord, no matter how powerful he may feel, has escaped when the Colombian armed forces have targeted him as a high-value target, not a single one, and they will continue to fall. Any enemy of these forces, any enemy of Colombian society who wants to commit crimes, will fall under their forcefulness. (Juan Manuel Santos, 2017).

Furthermore, this excerpt continues the narrative of the group's armed forces' success, their dismantling, and the group's status not as part of the community but as an enemy. Finally, serving as a justification for submission to justice is the only other alternative to the group's disintegration.

3. Submission to justice:

In general, submission to justice can be understood as an individual or a collective abandoning its activities in an organized armed group, criminal organization, or illegal group and

cooperating effectively with the administration of justice (Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, 2026). Under these definitions, and the narrative of the government focusing on the criminal and narco-trafficking nature of the group, this element is presented as the only other alternative to the continuation of armed action against the group, highlighting the illegal economic motivation as justification for this preference, and a process of 'subjection' to the legal framework created by the National Government, instead of a negotiated solution.

As presented in the previous labels, the government's pressure, based on its narrative of successful operations against the group, frames this option as the one pursued by the EGC, even though it is not a necessary step for the government at this point, which presents itself as the greater winner in the fight. Nonetheless, as discussed previously, the possibility that this submission of the justice process to support the peace agreement with the FARC-EP motivates the National Government to pursue this path.

These ideas were discussed in Santos' speech at the appointment of Constitution Court magistrates, in which the start of informal talks between the national government and the group was announced, after the willingness expressed by the leader of the EGC:

> On September 3rd, we received from the Clan del Golfo leader an express manifestation of willingness to submit to justice, he and all his men. I have asked the Ministry of Justice and the Prosecutor to evaluate this request and take all the relevant actions. It would be a justice submission, not a political negotiation. Something they have also been interested in; there is no possibility. You are not political actors; you are criminals, drug traffickers, and if you submit to justice, the law provides that you may receive certain benefits depending on the conditions under which you submit, what you surrender, and what value it has for society, for Colombians. That is when the benefits are evaluated, but I repeat, this is done through submission, not negotiation. (Juan Manuel Santos, 2017).

With this statement, Santos presents the group's pursuit of submission to justice, their clear classification as criminals and drug traffickers, and the idea that the benefit they would gain from the process would be determined by what they are willing to give up for it. Within this discourse,

ideas on the legitimation of the state's control through the EGC's pursuit of the process are also presented. This argument is crucial for understanding conflict dynamics, particularly in the Colombian case, a multi-actor conflict, to reinstate the state's legitimate power even when it is contested by groups such as the EGC.

The second characteristic is also evident in Santos X's post, which shows an increase in the group's willingness to continue the dialogue with the government. Still, the actions and submission of justice continue to be the only option:

> We welcome the Clan del Golfo's declaration to cease hostilities against the security forces; the path they must follow is submission to justice. Let it be clear that we will continue to put pressure on this organization and pursue the investigation into the crime with determination. (Juan Manuel Santos, 2017).

In this statement, the group continues its argument to solve while describing the government's prioritization of armed action.

Nonetheless, establishing a law governing the possible submission of the EGC to justice is another crucial part of the discourse. In his speech after the signing of the Law, Santos stated that this step would help end criminal activities by criminal organizations, highlighting the organizations' criminal nature, while framing this approach as the direct consequence of the pressure placed on the group by the established armed action. Additionally, it makes clear that this law does not give any 'political recognition or apply transnational justice mechanisms in any way' (Juan Manuel Santos, 2018), but would guarantee security in the country and strengthen the peace process. Specifically describing the process of talks with the EGC, mentions:

> For some time now, I personally ordered a campaign against the so-called Clan del Golfo, the Agamenon campaign, which has been carried out with the military and the national police and has had very important consequences and very positive results. This pressure has led the Clan del Golfo to initiate what this law contains: rapprochement with the government. With my authorization, the vice president and other officials, along with the prosecutor's office, have held talks with lawyers representing this organized crime group, the Clan del Golfo, for their surrender. They have told us that as soon as this law is passed,

> the process will begin. (…) I believe this is a very important step for the peace and security of the country, because, after all, this organization is perhaps the criminal organization that has been doing the most damage in recent times. (Juan Manuel Santos, 2018).

Overall, the discourse used by Juan Manuel Santos supports the prioritization of the peace agreement with the FARC-EP and describes the actions -armed and talks- as steps that would help strengthen the peace in the country. Consequently, Santos misrecognized the group as criminals and narcotraffickers, linking these labels to illegal economies in which the group engages, specifically drug trafficking, assassinations of social leaders, extortions, and illegal mining. Under these categories and characterizations, the National Government delegitimizes the group's political claim and portrays it as an enemy of the communities.

Even though this group is legally recognized as an Organized Armed Group, the label is not used in day-to-day discourse. The classification and the initiation of informal talks under the submission of justice form presented an opportunity to begin recognizing the group as a crucial part of the conflict and as an actor with whom it would be important to pursue an alternative path to armed action. Nevertheless, to legitimize the National Government's control and power over the group, statements portray the pressure as a direct consequence of the group's pursuit of this alternative, while assuring the continuation of the government's armed actions. A summary of the main contextual and characterizations of the group can be found at the end of the chapter in Table 2.

A return to complete misrecognition: the armed option of the Iván Duque administration (2018-2022)

With new administration and interests, the Security and Defense priorities during Iván Duque's administration were framed between the end of the FARC-EP as the main threat to security in the country after the peace process, not supported by this administration, and the

expansion of other armed groups and criminal groups. This expansion was possible because of the void left by FARC-EP in the territories and the administration's unwillingness to fulfill the terms of the peace agreement. Consequently, the security policy prioritized territorial control and focused on 'dealing significant blows to armed groups' (Mantilla, Cajiao, and Tobo, 2022).

Based on the context, I argue that the Duque administration relied heavily on the misrecognition of the group and, more broadly, of other non-state armed groups in the country. With his priority on regaining control of the territory through armed action, the fight against any group that contested the state's legitimacy was central to the administration's goals. In particular, for the EGC, it meant that the priority was the complete dismantling and ending of the group, with particular emphasis on actions against the group's leader, alias 'Otoniel.'

This is primarily illustrated by Duques' characterization of the groups as a criminal organization, without distinguishing them from other organized armed groups in the country. Using similar elements as the previous administration, with detention of members of the group and illicit economy motivations, as well as a new characterization of terrorist/narcoterrorist, Duque presents the group as an enemy of the community and justifies the prioritization of armed actions against criminals who need to pay for their actions, and the state as the actor that is going to make them pay for it. This is the most definitive feature of Duque's discourse: using language and expressions to elicit emotions in the audience related to violence, the group's threat to the community, and the state's position as a hero.

Specifically, to understand the Duque administration's position regarding armed groups, it is important to highlight its stance on the peace process with the FARC. As explained by Coordinación Colombia Europa Estados Unidos (2018), the then-opposition party, which would later support Iván Duque's candidature, pursued a strategy of polarization. First, focusing on the

promotion of the 'No' in the vote that would define if the population agreed with the terms of the agreement signed with FARC; and later, as part of his campaign for the presidency, which complicated the operability of the accords, reducing them to the reincorporation of ex-combatants.

Nonetheless, after the peace agreement, and the change of perception to others armed groups and criminal organizations as main threats, the administration concentrated on affecting the Organized Armed Groups (GAO) – defined as groups 'whose level of organization and hostility gives them the capacity to threaten national security and seriously affect the rights of the population in different regions of the country' (Ministerio de Defensa, 2019, pp.23), which include group such as ELN, Clan del Golfo, Los Pelusos, Los Puntilleros and residuals GAO-, as well as their illegal economies, to reduce their capacity to operate and transform them into Organized Crime Groups (GDO) (Mantilla, Cajiao, and Tobo, 2022).

This objective was delineated in the third pillar of the administration's Security and Defense Policy, the Política de Defensa y Seguridad PDS para la legalidad, el emprendimiento y la equidad (Security and Defense Policy for legality, entrepreneurship, and equity). This policy was based on four pillars: 1) Water, biodiversity, and environment; 2) Cooperative Security; 3) Disruption of Crime; 4) From military control to institutional control of the territory. Consequently, pillar three concentrates on affecting the OAG and Criminal organizations. (Ministerio de Defensa, 2019, p. 14). Additionally, to generate a dissolution process for the GAO, two conditions must be met: first, concentrating all armed structures within specific geographic areas; and second, ending all forms of criminal activity. (Ministerio de Defensa, 2019).

Moreover, the Defense Ministry (2019) emphasizes the administration's position on possible informal and formal peace alternatives, noting that the policy rejects the 'bilateral ceasefires' as contrary to the constitutional obligation of the authorities to permanently guarantee

the life, honor, and prosperity of Colombians. Consequently, presenting armed actions and public forces operations as the priorities for this administration, with a minimum possibility of engaging in peace talks.

Accordingly, during the administration of Iván Duque, diverse labels were used to describe the group, characterizing them as criminals, narcotraffickers, terrorists/narcoterrorists, and organized armed groups/illegal groups. Furthermore, based on the law definitions for the armed groups, the EGC was characterized as an Organized Armed Group, with other groups such as the National Liberation Army (ELN) continuing this legal recognition, while emphasizing its criminal nature, as well as echoing previous conceptions of the group with the terrorist/narcoterrorist label.

1. Criminal

Continuing the same logic as the Santos administration, Duque used a criminal label to describe the group. Nonetheless, even when it used explanations similar to those of the previous administration, including descriptions of the detention of group members and armed operations to eradicate the group, expressions such as the group paying the price for their action, the complete dismantling of the group's structure, and the prosecution of criminals, was used to align the interest of the community with the actions pursued by the administration, and signal to the group that they should be aware and fear this strategies.

1.1. Detention of members of the group:

In particular, one difference from the previous administration was its focus on actions to increase the detention of group members, particularly Alias Otoniel, the organization's main leader. Firstly, describing the element as blows to the criminal organization and their commitment to ‘prosecute the criminals’ and ‘dismantle their structures.’ Secondly, underlining the importance of operations such as #ElQueLaHaceLaPaga, Operation Agamenón, Operation Aquiles, and

Operation Osiris (the Detention of Dario Antonio Usuga, the top leader of the EGC) for the success of their goal of dismantling the organization.

Based on this context, as presented by Duque, one key message the government sought to convey to the group was that they would 'pay for their crimes and dismantle all their structures' (Ivan Duque, 2018), as well as ensure the safety of Colombians. Crimes are described in various posts, underlying particularly drug trafficking and micro trafficking, murders, selective killings and massacres, and attacks against public forces. Consequently, highlighting the detention of leaders, to affect the operations and financial capabilities of the EGC:

> This structure has been hit hard this year with the capture and death of several of its members during special operations. With all this, we reaffirm our message of zero tolerance for this behavior and that whoever commits the crime pays the price. (Ivan Duque, 2020)

Within this, underscoring the progress made by public forces in dismantling this organization. Nonetheless, the prioritization of the detention of the main leader, Alias Otoniel, was described by Duque (2021):

> We will continue to dismantle each of its lines of command, and we also reiterate that the entire force is working in a united and consolidated manner to find alias 'Otoniel', who must be brought to the authorities and who must also answer for the murders of social leaders, massacres or collective killings, drug trafficking, and, of course, conspiracy to commit a crime.

Secondly, this priority is expressed in various posts, underscoring the detainees' closeness to Otoniel. This can be presented in X post referring to diverse detainees, for example: 'Alias 'Porrón' arrived in Meta to manage this criminal group's drug trafficking business and ship drugs eastward to Venezuela and Europe, and to the United States via Urabá. This individual is one of the trusted men of the alias 'Otoniel' (Ivan Duque, 2021). Additionally, marking this action as the definitive end of the group, the ultimate measure of success, as presented in his discourse on Operation Osiris, in which alias Otoniel was captured. This operation, seven years in the making,

focused on dismantling Otoniel's security apparatus and forcing him to make mistakes that would enable his detention (Infobae, 2021). As presented by Duque:

> This blow to alias Otoniel in Operation Osiris marks the end of the Clan del Golfo. Furthermore, to all those who belong to this criminal structure, the message I am sending is clear and forceful: either you submit to justice immediately, or the full weight of the law will fall on you in the same way (Ivan Duque cited in Revista Semana, 2021).

Referring to the end of Clan del Golfo, after the detention of Otoniel, supports the argument for the legitimization of the government's actions, achieving the organization's end through armed action and offering only two options: either the continuation of public forces' operations or their submission to justice. Nevertheless, as previously presented, the group's structure and organization allow leaders from other fronts to assume the organization's central leadership, prompting an internal reorganization of the group without the definitive end portrayed by the administration.

Nonetheless, to meet these expectations of EGC's end, other operations were implemented. Firstly, Operation Agamenón II, implemented in 2017 during Juan Manuel Santos' administration, followed the same strategic guidelines as the previous phase but increased the number of public forces to target the criminal structure and its main leader, alias 'Otoniel' (Alarcón, 2018). As a way to complement this operation, in 2018, Iván Duque launched the plan El Que La Hace La Paga, to affect criminal organizations, in which it was expected to establish 582 operations against organized crime and actions such as kidnapping, extortion, and aggression, among others, in the first hundred days in office (Infobae, 2018). Duque expressed this in his post:

> Operation Agamenón 2 aims to dismantle the Gulf Clan, which has been feared for many years, and we will dismantle it with complete determination. The Agamenón 2 plan, which has been thoroughly discussed with the region's mayors in this security council, is now coordinated with two of our government's strategies: the plan el que la hace la paga, led by the national police, and the plan diamante, led by the military forces. These two strategies are yielding clear results in this region, and in the coming days, activities against the Clan del Golfo will continue to intensify. We are going to dismantle this criminal network, and its leaders will know that the security forces will be breathing down their necks. And we will continue to strengthen what I call the wall of containment and, at the same time, the

> castling strategy, with the collaboration of the authorities of the sister republic of Panama. (Ivan Duque, 2018).

Similarly, based on statistics for individual submissions, the number of members submitted to justice increased between 2020 and 2022, ranging from 5 to 156. This focus on detention was also high, Ivan Duque X post:

> From Necoclí, Antioquia, with members of our #FuerzaPública, we reaffirm the historic blows dealt to the Clan del Golfo in almost four years: more than 2,800 captured and 1,196 operations. Likewise, we have more than sixteen members ready for extradition. More than 110 leaders have been captured. We are reinforcing the Condor military and police campaign, which was launched at the end of last year and allows us to exercise territorial presence against all structures, in addition to the search blocks against the strongholds of the Clan del Golfo of 'Chiquito Malo,' 'Siopas, ' and 'Gonzalito.' (Ivan Duque, 2022).

Overall, these actions, particularly the detention of alias 'Otoniel,' supported the administration's narrative that the organization could be dismantled and underscored the EGC's criminal nature. In particular, by using threatening language against the group's members and presenting the operation's success against Otoniel as the end of the organization, the administration underscored its power over the group. It offered them another alternative to continuing armed actions against them: submission to justice.

1.2.Assassinations and extortions

Another crucial part of the criminal label is the description of illegal economies, which, similarly to Santos, was presented as part of the group's criminal organization identification and as justification for continuing armed actions against the group to stop these actions. Additionally, presenting the operations against this crime as successes from their strategy against the group. This can be observed in Duque's X's post:

> In a meeting with authorities in #Montelíbano, we set out to reduce homicide and extortion rates in 2020; expand the Civic Participation Network; break up the logistical and information structures of the 'Clan del Golfo' and the ELN; and intensify operations in the Nudo de Paramillo. (Iván Duque, 2020)

Likewise, the success of operations was presented as the direct result of the pressure put on the armed group. The president highlighted this in his X post:

> In 2019, we achieved one of the lowest homicide rates in four decades. In 2020, we reduced this crime by 11%. Under pressure from the security forces, the ELN, FARC dissidents, and drug traffickers are violent towards communities. We will continue to confront them with all the State's capacity. (Iván Duque, 2020).

Accordingly, between 2018 and 2020, homicide rates decreased from 12,573 in 2018 to 12,010 in 2020, but increased to 13,536 in 2022 (Ministerio de Defensa, 2026). Additionally, extortion events between 2018 and 2022 increased from 7,048 to 9,791 (Ministerio de Defensa, 2026). This context highlighted the importance of the fight against these actions, while also offering a distinct perspective not claimed by the government in its discourse. Nonetheless, supporting the criminal narrative and the goal of dismantling the group.

2. Drug trafficking/Narcotraffickers:

Similar to the Santos administration, the importance of this action to the narrative of EGC's criminal nature and to the group's most important illicit economy was highlighted in 32 of the documents. Overall, it was used jointly with labels such as criminals, illegal armed groups, organized armed groups, and terrorists. Nonetheless, the language of the administration, as well as the use of ideas to highlight the threat of drug trafficking to the population, were different from those of the previous administration. Within this, discourses focused on violence in the regions caused by drug trafficking and noted this element while discussing the detention of members of the group. Characteristics such as the interest of the group to control strategic corridors, the link between drug trafficking and violence in the country, and classifying these actions as the greatest threat to Colombia were used to describe this label. One instance in which these ideas are illustrated was during Duque’s presentation of Operation Osiris:

> I want to tell you that drug trafficking is the greatest threat to our country. Drug trafficking fuels illegal armed groups, but we are confronting drug trafficking with determination. Security is a democratic value and a public good, and we will continue to exercise it fully every day. (Iván, Duque, 2021)

As well as describing the group as the 'largest drug trafficking structure in the country' (Iván Duque, 2020). These ideas are illustrated in X post:

> In Colombia, we must recognize that more coca means less peace, because drug trafficking is the root of all violence and involves the ELN, Caparros, Clan del Golfo, and other criminals, who massacre and murder social leaders and intimidate communities. Drug trafficking continues to be the root cause of all forms of violence. (Iván Duque, 2020).

Interestingly, the link between drug trafficking and violence, as well as its implications for the possibility of peace in the country, is highlighted by Duque. Moreover, supporting the narrative that the threat is posed not only by the EGC (Clan del Golfo) to the community but also by other NSAGs legitimizes the actions undertaken to dismantle these organizations.

Furthermore, similar to Juan Manuel Santos, Iván Duque highlights the operations of public forces against the group, particularly seizures of cocaine and detention of members in charge of operative functions in the group related to drug trafficking. Within these operations, another essential element is the extradition of group members. As with the AUC, this element has been important to the group, serving as motivation in the previous process to engage in peace talks. It was used in various discourses, particularly after the detention of alias 'Otoniel' in 2021; the increase in these actions was used as a measure of the strategy's success and threatened the organization's members. This can be observed in Duque (2022) X post:

> With @MinjusticiaCo, we will accelerate pending extraditions of members of the Clan del Golfo. We are clear: they will be brought to justice, or they will suffer the same fate as 'Otoniel.' We will expedite the process of seizing Clan del Golfo assets; we will create networks of informants to reach microstructures in critical locations; we will increase the destruction of laboratories and drug trafficking networks belonging to that organization.

Under the administration, there was an increase in the seizure of cocaine, ranging from 413,383 in 2018 to 659,134 in 2022 (Ministerio de Defensa, 2026). While this result is in line with the strategy of the administration, it also presents an increase in drug trafficking in the country, which could indicate an increase in the results of the operation. Nonetheless, the increase in drug trafficking in the country could also indicate that the strategy pursued by the administration has not achieved its central goal of dismantling the organization to end the illicit economy.

In brief, through the characterization of the EGC as a narco-trafficking organization, the National Government uses the narrative of the historical link between drug trafficking and increasing violence in the country. Additionally, the use of extradition, as previously presented, has been crucial in negotiations between administrations and paramilitary groups, serving as a warning to group members to either submit to justice or face the possibility of extradition.

3. Terrorist/Narcoterrorism

As a distinctive descriptor for the EGC, the Iván Duque administration presents the group as a terrorist and narcoterrorist organization. As an echo of the paramilitary past, this label was used in six of Duque's documents, highlighting the threat these groups pose to Colombians' peace and security. In line with the non-differentiation of the armed groups and the security and defense policy of the administration, it was also employed to describe other armed groups such as FARC dissidents, ELN, and Los Pelusos. An example of these was presented in an X post from the president:

> The narco-terrorists who threaten the peace and security of Colombians continue to be brought down. In simultaneous operations led by our #FuerzaPública in coordination with the @FiscaliaCol, 90 alleged members of sub-structures of the 'Clan del Golfo' were captured.' (Iván Duque, 2021).

To understand the inclusion of this label, it is important to highlight its historical use and roots. Firstly, it was coined by Peruvian President Fernando Belaúnde in 1983 as a way to describe

attacks from drug traffickers against police. Moreover, evolving to encompass ‘attempts to influence government officials through intimidation and violence’ by drug traffickers (Kennedy, 2025). Most notably, it was used to describe the actions of Pablo Escobar against the Colombian government and its relation to drug trafficking. Likewise, it was also used by United States law-enforcement agencies to describe ‘terrorist groups that finance at least part of their organization's activities through drug trafficking as narcoterrorists’ (Kennedy, 2025).

In this context, for Colombia, it was used in the 1990s and 1980s in the fight between drug lords for control, and evolved particularly after 2001, with the September 11 attack in the United States, which increased military support from the United States based on the narcoterrorist threat. As was presented by the National Security Presidential Directive/NSPD-18, in which President George Jr Bush stated that ‘The United States is committed to helping Colombia in its fight against narcoterrorism through the robust assistance outline in this directive’, ‘The FARC, ELN, and AUC and other illegal armed groups, are well entrenched and continue to pose a grave and fundamental threat to the stability of Colombia, the regional and U.S. national security interest’ (George Bush, 2002, pp.2-3).

Within the military process, then-President Álvaro Uribe, leader of the political party Democratic Center (Centro Democrático), and Iván Duque’s political party, was involved in supporting and implementing this strategy. Consequently, this label echoed previous recognition and processes implemented by the National Governments against armed groups at the time. Even though at this time, paramilitary organizations were also crucial for the work of security forces. Particularly acting as auxiliary forces, in which they used terror and deflected responsibility for ‘human rights violations' away from the armed forces.’ In which actions were conducted commonly against civilians, more than guerrilla forces (Amnesty International, 2008, p. 8), this

reintroduction of the label of narcoterrorism and its generalization to every armed group presents a difference in the recognition of the EGC under Duque's administration.

4. Organized armed group/ Illegal armed structure.

Unlike the previous administration, Duque characterizes the group as an organized armed group within his discourse. Nevertheless, this label is not used to identify a different kind of group. However, as a synonym for the criminal label, it aligns with the narrative of the security and defense policy. Within these labels, elements such as detention of members, minor requirements, and homicides are cited, serving the administration's narrative of the criminality of the group. This can be observed in Duque's (2022) X post:

> #EsConHechos (It's with facts) that we continue to affect the substructures of the 'Clan del Golfo.' In the Tolima municipality of Rovira, alias 'Tolima,' a hitman for that armed group and one of the alleged perpetrators of the murder of ten people in Betania, Antioquia, in 2020, was captured.

5. Submission to justice

For the Duque administration, submitting to justice was seen as the last resort for the group after the results of the strategies and actions implemented to address it were known. In particular, the detention of the main leader, Alias 'Otoniel', presented the government with the opportunity to use this action as a way to, first, present the 'end' of the group, and secondly, 'threaten' the group, using arguments such as no impunity and 'full weight of the law will fall in the same way' are highlighted:

> I also want to make it absolutely clear that in our government, narco-terrorists are captured, extradited, or killed. And to all the structures of the 'Clan del Golfo': either you submit to the authorities, or you will suffer the same fate as alias 'Otoniel.' (Ivan Duque, 2022)

Additionally, as with the previous administration, Duque does not recognize the group's political claim. On the contrary, by underlining the criminal nature of the group, particularly their

involvement in drug trafficking, it reinforced its perception of the criminal nature of the EGC as a reason for the denial of this claim. Finally, the discourse aligns with the administration's security and defense strategy.

In general, the Duque administration prioritized armed actions against the group, as well as against all armed groups and criminal organizations, which were not differentiated by ideological claim but more by operative stance, and presented them as a measure of success for their strategy, particularly with the detention and extradition of the leader of the group, alias 'Otoniel'.

Throughout the four years of the administration, the criminal and narco-trafficker labels were used to describe the group, particularly emphasizing the role of cocaine as the main threat to peace in the country, using the historical link between violence and drug trafficking in the country. Furthermore, the use of the narcoterrorism label functioned as a reminiscent factor to previous administration descriptions of armed group threats -specifically the Álvaro Uribe administration and the AUC - and added to the recognition of the group as criminals. Finally, presenting submission to justice as the only other alternative to the continuation of armed actions against the group, even though it was not the preferred alternative of the government, and specifically after the capture of 'Otoniel,' the disintegration of the EGC. In particular, based on this review, the administration was not open to negotiating with the group, as interest in armed actions, similar to the previous administration of Álvaro Uribe with the guerrilla and paramilitary groups, and trying to regain control and legitimacy through these strategies, was prioritized. This is why, under this administration, there was a complete return to the group's misrecognition. These elements are also addressed in Table 4 at the end of the chapter.

The lowest level of misrecognition: The ECG is a crucial part of the Total Peace Initiative of Gustavo Petro (2022-2024)

Throughout his 2022 campaign and subsequent election, Gustavo Petro emphasized peace as a key element of his administration's plan, including the Total Peace program (Universidad de los Andes, n.d.). Under this framework, I argue that during the Petro administration, even though there was a continuation of the misrecognition of the EGC, with the characterization of the group as criminal, narcotrafficker, and paramilitary organization, the use of elements such as the illegal economy motivations description in a more positive light that the previous administrations, emphasizing its importance for engaging in a peace negotiation and opportunities for the jointly economic development of the territories under their control, presents a change in the recognition process of the group. Interestingly, two contradictory processes supported this change: the growth and expansion of the group, particularly under the Duque administration, and pressure from public forces through armed action, which influenced the group's willingness to subscribe to this initiative, albeit under the submission-to-justice framework.

As explained by Pastrana and Valdivieso (2023), the Total Peace plan was described in two main documents: firstly, the National Development Plan, presented as:

> The new approach, focused on human security, prioritizes dialogue as the main mechanism for understanding the causes that give rise to and perpetuate violent acts. This paves the way for new negotiations to end the armed insurgency and consolidate peaceful processes to dismantle organized crime and bring its members to justice. (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, cited in Pastrana and Valdivieso, 2023, pp. 31)

In the case of criminal organizations, it would focus on individual and collective submission to justice, building a strategy that would concentrate on actors in the criminal system that produce violence, and prioritize the ‘prohibition of illicit substances and the inputs for their processing, as well as the destruction of infrastructure for their production and the forced

eradication of industrial crops' (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, cited on Pastrana and Valdivieso, 2023, pp. 32).

Secondly, with Law 2272 of 2022 extending Law 418 of 1997 to pursue coexistence, the effectiveness of justice, and other provisions (Congreso de Colombia, 1997), the administration adopted the Total Peace policy as a state policy. Within this law, processes of negotiation, dialogue, and submission to justice are emphasized (Pastrana & Valdivieso, 2023, p. 32). On one hand, negotiations would be conducted with 'armed groups operating outside the law,' which are described as groups in which 'the leadership of a responsible commander exercises such control over a part of the territory that it allows him to carry out sustained and concerted military operations.' (Congreso de Colombia, 2022). On the other hand, submission to justice and dismantling of the groups would follow organized armed groups or organized armed structures of high-impact crime, described as:

> Criminal organizations made up of a plural number of persons, organized in a hierarchical structure and/or network, engaged in the permanent or continuous execution of punishable conduct, including those classified in the Palermo Convention, which fall within criminal patterns that include the violent subjugation of the civilian population of the rural and urban territories in which they operate, and perform functions in one or more illicit economies. (Congreso de Colombia, 2022).

Likewise, another key document for understanding the government's strategy for managing the EGC is the Security, Defense, and Civil Coexistence plan. It guarantees peace and life. The plan describes four specific objectives, with the first one: 'Provide conditions of safety and protection for life, personal integrity, and property, with special emphasis on territories disputed by criminal organizations.' (Ministerio de Defensa, 2023), addressing the strategy for dismantling illegal armed organizations, focusing on the elimination of violence against the civil population, and the 'complete exercise of the social state of law in the territories' (Ministry of Defense, 2023,

pp. 51). Furthermore, presenting the delimitation of a strategy for tackling the global drug problem, which includes:

> Dismantling of narcotrafficking infrastructure; strengthening land, sea, air, and river interdiction; the strategic pursuit of illegal finances and the fight against money laundering; and the use of sufficient and necessary methods for the eradication of illicit crops, with full respect for human rights. (Ministry of Defense, 2023, pp. 54).

Within these diverse documents, the prioritization of dialogue and submission to justice is evident, a priority reinforced in Gustavo Petro's discourse throughout his administration.

Finally, another piece that presents motivation for this engagement is the growth of the group, as presented by Arias, Prieto, and Tobo (2024, pp. 14), the EGC between 2018 and 2024 have increase its membership by a 95%, with an approximately number of members in 2018 of 3.632 -including 2.039 members in its support networks-, to 7.062 -4.563 support network- in 2024. Consequently, the group's structure increased from four blocks and twenty-two fronts in 2018 to six blocks and thirty-four structures in 2024 (Arias, Prieto, and Tobo, 2024, p. 14).

1. Criminals

Unlike the two previous administrations, Gustavo Petro, possibly signaling a shift in discourse toward a more neutral stance and in line with his Total Peace initiative, framed these as motivations for pursuing peace negotiations with the group; the label was mentioned in only eight of the thirty-four documents. It was similar to the last administration in using the detention of members of the group, descriptions of action, and illegal economies, such as threats to public officials, homicides, drug trafficking, illegal mining, and extortion.

1.1. Detention of members of the group

Within this element, the narrative concentrates on stating the operations and describing the actions as ‘a fight against drug trafficking and the security of all Colombians’ and severe blows for the group, as well as presenting a crucial element of the organization, which is the

links to smaller criminal gangs for their operations in the territories. As is illustrated in an X post: "We are dismantling the gangs led by the Clan del Golfo in Bolívar, thanks to the work of the @PoliciaColombia, which captured 25 members of this criminal group." (Presidencia Colombia, 2023). Between 2022 and 2024, the number of individuals from the groups submitted increased from 151 to 191 (Ministerio de Defensa, 2026).

Even though the language used to describe these activities and operations against the group is similar to previous administrations, as ‘Crime must be destroyed. Either it submits, or it is destroyed. The security forces have a duty to destroy it, and we have a duty to open up a legal and peaceful path to dismantling crime in the region (Presidencia Colombia, 2024). There is openness to the group's engagement with peace, though within the idea of submission to justice.

1.2. Illicit economies: assassinations, extortions, illegal mining, and migrant trafficking:

Even when descriptions of these actions were presented, the administration framed them in line with its peace efforts. They were presented as motivation for continuing activities that would lead to peace, such as bilateral ceasefires, to reduce violence in the country. This is a different stance from that of the previous administration, as the same elements are used in the narrative to justify the importance of starting and continuing a negotiation process, rather than as motivations for armed action against the group. Particularly emphasizing the importance of the illicit economies and supporting the industrialization of territories under the group's control. These ideas can be observed in an X post of the president:

> Córdoba is the department most directly affected by violence from the Gulf Clan. Homicides in Córdoba rose substantially last year. So far this year, they have fallen sharply due to the bilateral ceasefire that the organization agreed to. Reducing violence and upholding the right to peace is not only my duty as president, but also that of every public official. Almost always, when fears about peace arise, it is because there are fears that the truth will come out. (Gustavo Petro, 2023).

Additionally, Petro mentions this aspect in one discourse, calling the group to dismantle their illicit economic activities to show their willingness to negotiate with the national government:

> President @petrogustavo stated that if the Clan del Golfo wants to negotiate with the national government, it must do so without a single gram of cocaine, without extortion, and without defrauding migrants. He also highlighted the role of the new Attorney General in these negotiations: "I hope she becomes the force of justice against impunity in Colombia. This is the path to peace, to uncovering the truth." "If the Clan del Golfo and others, even though we blame them for everything, want to dismantle themselves, engage in productive activities, want their young people to go to university, want their territories, towns, and districts to progress, we will talk. However, without a single gram of cocaine, without extortion, without defrauded migrants, we will talk. (Presidencia Colombia, 2024).

Consequently, throughout the discourse, it is important to underline that even when actions are described as crimes, there is a push to open a dialogue with the group. This can be either 'condemning' the group for its actions, making it an obstacle to achieving peace, or proposing an alternative to illegal economies.

2. Drug trafficking/Narcotraffickers:

As in the two previous administrations, drug trafficking continues to be the main illicit economy highlighted in seven of his discourses. Nonetheless, presenting a different connotation, with statements underlining the link between these groups and cartels, using characterization such as drug lords and mafia structures/organizations. Additionally, interestingly, it has also been used jointly with labels such as organization, group, organized armed group, illegal group, and paramilitaries. As one of the most negative labels in Petro's statements, this characterization has also been used at times of heightened tension in the relationship, such as the end of the bilateral ceasefire and the mining strike.

He has two ways of using this characteristic. Firstly, as a fight against drug trafficking through various actions by public forces, and secondly, establishing the importance of moving

beyond these actions to open dialogue with the national government. This first characteristic can be observed in the X post by President Petro:

> #Attention | A land interdiction operation against drug trafficking was carried out, coordinated by the @PoliciaColombia,@FuerzasMilCol, SIJIN, and @FiscaliaCol, Antioquia section, was carried out, striking a blow against the Clan del Golfo in Necoclí and seizing approximately 5.6 tons of cocaine hydrochloride, valued at more than 600 billion pesos. In addition, alias 'Olman' was captured for the crime of possession, trafficking, and manufacture of narcotics. We will continue working to attack the illicit economies of organized armed groups! (Presidencia Colombia, 2024)

Within the second characteristic, an alternative is presented to the group: either continuing operations against them or starting a dialogue, linking this star to the end of illicit economies.

> To tackle drug trafficking in the Urabá subregion, specifically the Clan del Golfo, President @petrogustavo expressed his intention to engage in dialogue with this group to persuade them to abandon their illicit activities. "The ball is in the Clan's court. Will they dare or won't they? If they don't dare, we will fight, because the decision is to destroy the clan; if they dare, we will open the negotiating tables. They must dare to leave the illicit economy and illegality behind and take on this difficult challenge, which is why we are here today, to transform this territory into a prosperous region where the people who live here can develop humanly, culturally, and economically. (Presidencia de Colombia, 2024).

3. Organize armed groups/illegal groups

In line with the reduced use of the criminal label, the administration prefers to use the label of organized armed groups/illegal groups, as was shown in twenty-one of the statements. Even when it was mostly employed in the legal framework for establishing formal talks with the group, the temporary ceasefire decree, and the law establishing the Socio-Legal Dialogue Space with the EGC, unlike Santo's, it was also used in public statements, for example, in moments when armed actions were directed at the group, which could either be a reactivation or continuation of the actions. Within this label, the timing and preference for the specific category are also important factors, as the organized armed group/organized armed structures of the high-impact crime label, mostly defined in law, tend to be used when processes towards talks were underway. Consequently, the illegal group label was used more in moments of tension between the actors.

One example of this was after the bilateral ceasefire ended: ‘I have ordered the security forces to reactivate all military operations against the Clan del Golfo. The bilateral ceasefire with this illegal group is suspended. We will not allow them to continue showing fear and terror in communities.’ (Gustavo Petro, 2023).

4. Paramilitaries

One distinctive label only used by Gustavo Petro in the statements was the characterization of the group as Paramilitaries. As previously stated, this is a point of contention with the group, as it echoes its past and an image it does not want to be associated with. Within these characterizations, two elements are highlighted in the statements: the group's relationship with the previous paramilitary group (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia) and the national government, as well as the label of neo-paramilitarism, as a signal to the actions of the group as a revised version of the old paramilitary mode in the country. Moreover, the timing is important, as its use is prioritized in moments of tension between the actors, such as during the mining strike. One example can be found in Petro X's post:

> The Gulf Clan is the heir to the paramilitary structures of Urabá, which is why it was created by the state itself, but it gained autonomy through drug trafficking and illegal mining. It acts by bribing officials and terrorizing the population. These structures are also the result of a failure: the failure of the peace process with the paramilitaries. The state has not been able to exercise sovereignty in areas where armed organizations have decided to lay down their arms. The state is not only about weapons but also about democracy and social justice. (Gustavo Petro, 2023).

5. Submission to justice:

Within the idea of the submission of justice, even though this remains the preferred alternative for a negotiation process with the group, the interest in peace and the policy framework of Total Peace make this characterization different from that of the two previous administrations. In particular, it was present in only three discourses: two legal frameworks and one public

statement. For the first two uses, it is presented as part of the dialogue process and the end of the conflict with the group. Only in X post are references made as the other alternative to the continuation of the armed actions against the group.

> Now in Chocó, the Gulf Clan is occupying the territory and advancing. They are not stopping, and the security forces have orders to stop them. Chocó is not for violence, the Atrato River is not for exporting cocaine, and the rivers of Chocó in general are not to be destroyed by illegal gold mining, for which small-scale miners must be granted title." President @PetroGustavo, "The Clan del Golfo must stop extorting the population. It is growing, and we must act immediately. I do not want to see the security forces collaborating with criminals in these official investigations. That is the worst thing that could happen to us. Crime must be destroyed. Either it submits, or it is destroyed. The security forces have a duty to destroy it, and we have a duty to open up a legal and peaceful path to dismantling crime in the region (Presidencia Colombia, 2024)

Finally, it is important to note that throughout the discourse, there are references to peace and negotiations with the group, while the submission of justice is the preferred process to pursue with the EGC to achieve peace; however, this was not highlighted as in previous administrations.

As shown above, the peace policy, and in particular the total peace policy, guided Petro's discourse and recognition of the EGC. Regardless of the use of labels such as criminals, narcotraffickers, and paramilitary, as well as the illicit economies and economic motivation of the group, the reference to peace alternatives was a constant in the narrative, even during moments of tension between the National Government and the EGC, maintaining a level of misrecognition of the group, as not legitimizing their political claim, while showing the importance of the group not only for the conflict but in the peace efforts of the administration.

Comparison of the administrations

As shown in this chapter, there has been a transformation in the narratives of each administration, even when similar elements and labels are used across administrations. Contextual situations, interests, and priorities influence how these labels are used and the

justification for the actions taken to address the group's issues. The comparison of the administrations and the context that influences these statements is presented in Table 4

Table 4. Summary of context and label identified for each administration.

Themes and Context	Administrations		
	Juan Manuel Santos	**Iván Duque**	**Gustavo Petro**
Context	● Peace agreement FARC-EPP. ● Unofficial talks with EGC. ● Submission to Justice Law. ● GDO and GAO definitions.	● Increase in the threat of criminal organizations and unwillingness to fulfill the FARC-EP peace agreement terms. ● Rejection of peace alternatives, such as bilateral ceasefires. ● No ideological differentiation between the armed groups. ● Detention of top leader Alias Otoniel.	● Prioritization of peace alternatives through the Total Peace Policy. ● Definition of organized armed groups and organized armed structures of high-impact crime. ● Bilateral ceasefire and informal and formal negotiations with EGC. ● Socio-Legal Dialogue Space with the EGC.
Criminal	● Agamenón Operation. ● Detention of members of the group. ● Illegal economies: assassinations, extortion, and illegal mining.	● #ElQueLaHaceLaPaga, Operation Agamenón II, Operation Aquiles, Operation Osiris. ● Detention of members of the group. ● Illegal economies: assassinations and extortions.	● Detention of members of the group. ● Openness to the group's engagement with peace, though within the idea of submission to justice. ● Illicit economies: assassinations, extortions, illegal mining, and migrant trafficking.
Drug trafficking/Narcotrafficker	● Seizure of cocaine and detention of members of the group.	● Seizure of cocaine and detention of members of the group.	● Mafia structures, mafia organizations, and past

	● Drug lords.	● Extraditions of group members.	support for cartels and drug lords. ● Fight against drug trafficking and the importance of moving toward an open dialogue with the national government.
Terrorist/Narcoterrorism		● Historical ties to the framing and presentation of the armed groups in Colombia as Terrorist organizations under the fight against terrorism narrative. ● Ties to drug trafficking.	
Organized armed group/Illegal armed structure		● Interchangeable with criminal labels. ● Detention of members of the group, minor recruitment, drug trafficking, and homicides.	● Combine with narcotraffickers. ● Employed in the legal framework. ● Mostly used in moments where processes towards talks were made.
Paramilitaries			● Ties to the previous paramilitary past of the AUC. ● Neo-paramilitarism.

			● Prioritize use in moments of tension between the actors.
Submission to justice	● Illicit economies as motivation and denial of political claim. ● Armed operations as pressure for the EGC's willingness to negotiate. ● Only other alternative.	● The only other alternative presented was, nonetheless, prioritization of armed action. ● No recognition of their political claim.	● Presented as part of the dialogue process and the end of the conflict with the group. ● Prefer the process to be pursued with the EGC to achieve peace.

Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia (EGC): the characterization of a Non-State Armed Group

After analyzing the statements from the National Government, another side of the discourse to assess how this process of recognition/misrecognition can change over time, and its influence on possibilities for peace, is to examine how the group responds to these narratives and how they have influenced their identity. To observe the group's perspective and responses, this chapter details the characterization of the actors and traits the Gaitanista Army of Colombia seeks recognition for, as well as elements for which the group does not seek recognition.

The chapter is divided into two parts. Firstly, the definition of the actors the group wants to be recognized by, including descriptions of the characterization of representatives of the community, the legitimate Armed Group, and the Armed Civil Resistance Movement, and, finally, a crucial actor in the conflict and in peace dialogues. Second, the descriptions of actors that the group does not want to be recognized as including criminals, criminal organizations, narcotraffickers, and Paramilitaries (relationship with the Armed Forces).

Actors

Want to be recognized as:

Representative of the community

For the Gaitanista Army of Colombia (EGC), I argue that being recognized as an actor representing the community and its defender is its main aim across diverse discourses, supporting the creation of legitimacy within the community and, with it, a political claim. This specific element was highlighted in thirty-one statements. Characteristics such as representing the rights and interests of communities, community legitimacy, their constitution after the peace process failed with the AUC, which made them victims of the national government, and their peasant origins.

In this discourse, the self-recognition of the group as an organization that 'represents and defends the rights and interests of the most vulnerable population, abandoned by the state and seriously threatened by the presence of factors that destabilize peace and tranquility within our territories.' (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, 2018), is one of the central arguments to explain their nature.

Additionally, through the defender of the community label, the group has claimed that their legitimacy comes from the social leaders and communities, which have also given them 'support, affect, and information that has allowed us to survive.' (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, 2018, cited in Jiménez, pp. 65-66). Because of this, actions that would support the community are also used to enhance the argument, for example, the work that they do in regions under their control, such as paving roads, health brigades, and overall 'mitigating their needs' (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, cited in Jiménez, pp.68).

Another layer is their argument that they are victims of the government, particularly following the failure of the peace process with the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). The group references the dangerous situation that their previous members, as well as their families, face after the peace agreement, as well as presenting criticisms of actions taken by public forces against populations, and highlights their duty to make sure the community lives in a peaceful environment:

> The present situation of the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia cannot be understood without reference to the context that gave rise to them and enabled their consolidation and survival as a phenomenon of popular resistance. What should have been a political negotiation ended in strict submission to justice, which ultimately even led to the extradition of a large part of the AUC leadership because, according to the Uribe Vélez government, they continued to commit crimes from prison. Seeing that not only our own lives and those of our families were in danger, but also the security of so many regions, and after suffering firsthand all kinds of revenge and abuse, in January 2008, a group of former AUC combatants decided to take up arms again. (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, cited on Jiménez, 2018, pp.45)

Furthermore, their self-identification as an ‘organization of peasant origin that supports the public expression of social dissent.’ (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, 2018, cited in Jiménez, pp. 67). Based on these elements, the argument of state abandonment was privileged to present the need for the organization and its role as defenders of their community.

Additionally, in various discourses, the group is mischaracterized as Clan del Golfo rather than the Gaitanista Army of Colombia. This argument is accompanied by the explanation that the denomination is contrary to their nature, and even expression that ‘if the national government and the Office of the Peace Commissioner do not accept our Gaitanista identity, there will be no peace table to set up, and under no circumstances will it be a point in any eventual peace agreement to create sub-tables at which our identity as EG will be discussed, in honor of our hero Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, with whom we identify in his struggle of the people and for the people. Trust is built on respect for your adversaries' identities. We are an army that fights for the dignity and social demands of our people.’ (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, 2024).

Interestingly, these elements that make up the actor they want to embody also relate to and support their political claim. Between their emergence as a way to protect themselves and their families, explanations for the support and legitimacy given by communities, and finally, citing their peasant origins, the discourse creates a narrative that aims to portray the group as a non-state armed group, and particularly justify the need for political negotiation for the end of the conflict, instead of the submission of justice proposed by the National Government.

Legitimate Armed Group and Armed Civil Resistance Movement

In contrast to the characterization of the national government as defining the group as a criminal organization and, based on its role as a representative of the community, as a legitimate armed group and an armed civil resistance movement, another actor seeks to be perceived as a

legitimate armed group and an armed civil resistance movement. Within the discourses, the main characteristics highlighted were the group's structure as a political-military organization, its constitution as a link between victims of the conflict and peace processes, the idea that its emergence was tied only to the preexistence of guerrilla groups, and, finally, the mislabeling of the group as Clan del Golfo.

The first element is the political-military structure of the EGC; characteristics such as its central command, internal organization into blocks, and specific leadership positions are highlighted. These are detailed in a statement from the AGC:

> A political, social, and military structure jointly directed by the General Staff, which is responsible for issuing instructions in all matters to the troops, supporters, and associates. In turn, each Bloc has Regional Staff who translate the General Staff's guidelines to the realities of each region. Likewise, each front has its Military and Political Commanders for decision-making. (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, cited on Jiménez, 2018, pp. 57).

The statements present traditional conceptions of armies and refer to characteristics of non-state armed groups, which have been recognized not only by the national government but also internationally. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) defines Non-State Armed Groups as groups with the following:

> The potential to employ arms in the use of force to achieve political, ideological, or economic objectives is not within the formal military structures of States, State alliances, or intergovernmental organizations. It is not under the control of the State(s) in which they operate, have a group identity, and are subjected to a chain of command. (OCHA, 2006, pp. 14-16).

Consequently, these characteristics have been emphasized in various group statements intended to present the group as a legitimate non-state armed group. Nonetheless, as conflict dynamics evolve and the diversity of the groups involved in non-international conflict changes, there has been a push to include ‘decentralized’ armed groups as parties to the conflict (Vité & Gallindo, 2024). One example can be found in a statement of the EGC (2024):

> Our Gaitanista army has this and much more, so much so that when offensive military actions are decreed, they can continue in a sustained manner until they are counter-ordered by its Joint Chiefs of Staff, but perhaps the most important element is above its military strategies, weaponry, operational capacity, etc. It is undoubtedly the display of a military ethical statute, that is, we have references, principles, and moral values that are based not only on declarative documents, such as statutes, but also on effective training systems for the knowledge and internalization of military ethics, Gaitanista ideology, and the consecration of and respect for international humanitarian law. (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, 2024)

Within this statement, the group highlights another characteristic: respect for international humanitarian law. Throughout the discourse, they use international legal terminology, primarily to criticize or draw attention to possible violations of these laws by other actors, to discuss their duty to ensure these laws are followed within their areas of control, or to explain why they do not act in a certain way.

Moreover, another element that the group has recognized for this description is the membership of individuals who were previously part of other armed groups from failed peace processes, particularly referencing the AUC and the EPL (Liberation Popular Army – Ejército Popular de Liberación), and linking this to the important role they have in achieving peace in Colombia. This can be observed in a statement by the EGC:

> The Gaitanista Self-Defense Force is made up of Colombians who have also been victims of the conflict and violence that has plunged our country into mourning for decades. It is made up of ex-combatants from the EPL and the AUC, victims of failed peace processes, who do not want this history to repeat itself over and over again. The AGC should not be ignored, because we have much to contribute to the achievement of a country at peace and with social justice. (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, cited on Jiménez, 2018, pp. 86)

Consequently, two main criticisms have been raised regarding the group's external recognition. Firstly, the claim that the group was created as a consequence of the creation of guerrilla groups is presented in a statement by Carlos Castaño about the group, citing the structural problems in the community as part of the need for the creation of the group:

> Cannot be explained solely by the pre-existence of guerrilla groups and other armed groups." There are structural problems "that make our survival overtime possible. Only by overcoming these structural problems will we disappear from the national scene. (Castaño, 2018, cited in Jiménez, pp. 47).

Secondly, the repeated mislabeling of the group as Clan del Golfo, intended to discredit it as a legitimate non-state armed group, has, on various occasions, undermined potential peace talks, as the correct identification of the group has been cited as a key aspect of the process. The Gaitanista Army of Colombia has described these arguments in a statement, mentioning that:

> The EGC, as a POLITICAL-MILITARY ORGANIZATION OF CIVIL RESISTANCE TEMPORARILY IN ARMS, wishes to state to the public, the National Government, and the Office of the Peace Commissioner that: The language used by the National Government and the Office of the Peace Commissioner to refer to the EGC is DISPARAGING and CHALLENGING for those who are in the "trust-building" stage of establishing a peace table. Since our inception, we have called ourselves the EGC (formerly AGC). The national government, in its inflammatory lexicon, has referred to us as the Urabeños, then the Úsuga Clan, and now the 'Clan del Golfo'. Attempting to discredit us in this way is to ignore our Gaitanista identity and our highest decision-making body, which is the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with a unified command and pyramidal structure. (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, 2024)

Overall, the EGC has been creating a narrative and description of the diverse ways in which it is a legitimate non-state armed group, not only using the language of the National Government to describe the group but also drawing on how the International Community describes it. The centralized command structure, the internal organization, their claim as an armed civil resistance organization based on structural issues, as well as the characterization as an organization temporarily operating outside the law, serve their goal to be recognized as an armed group, and ultimately their possibility to be engaged in a political negotiation with the National Government.

Crucial actor in the conflict and for peace dialogues

In recognition of the group as a representative of the community and its classification as a legitimate non-state armed group, the EGC has also expressed its desire to be recognized as a crucial actor in the conflict and peace dialogues. This kind of actor was explained in seven different

discourses and included the trait of willingness to establish a peace dialogue, which was presented in fourteen discourses. Elements such as the willingness of the group to support peace, particularly after the announcement of the total peace policy, the importance of conducting a serious negotiation process that would involve them, as well as other actors, to achieve complete peace, the parallel between previous peace process and the total peace process, that according to the group have only be offer to 'subversive' groups (ELN, and FARC dissident groups EMC and Segunda Marquetalia); as well as criticism to the armed approach that the national government has taken against them, were underline.

More specifically, their support for engaging in a peace dialogue has been expressed since the first unofficial approach between the EGC and the National Government, as can be seen in a video by Alias Otoniel, in which this desire and willingness are explained:

> We want to be part of ending the conflict and achieving the total disarmament of all armed groups in the country. We have repeatedly expressed our intention to reach a dignified and voluntary solution for all our combatants, submitting ourselves to Colombian justice with guarantees that will lead to national reconciliation. Once the conditions are in place, we are prepared to suspend all the organization's illegal activities. I believe in peace for my country, and I am confident that this government can build the stable, lasting peace that all Colombians dream of, for Colombia, our motherland. (Alias Otoniel cited on Nos cogió la noche Cosmovisión, 2017)

Within this discourse, another important element is the issue of illegal economies. Noting that these were already in place before the formation of the group, while also presenting a willingness to dismantle these activities, but only when conditions are met. This element is crucial, as administrations have used illicit economies in their discourse to label the group as criminals and present submission to justice as the only alternative, based on these actions.

Moreover, this desire to be viewed as a key actor in the conflict can be observed across diverse discourses, which focus on two distinct attributes. Firstly, there is no consideration for the group to carry out a negotiation, as well as the mislabeling of Clan del Golfo and the armed strategy

that have been prioritized by the National Government, which can be seen in a statement from the then AGC:

> We have been repetitive, and we will continue to be so. If we are not taken into account in a serious and respectful negotiation process involving all parties, the peace efforts will be incomplete and, we fear, fruitless (D). Those who want to wipe us out with the stroke of a pen are mistaken. It is a sinister mistake that will cause more bloodshed and pain (C and D). Society must not accept any more deception (C). We, the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces, are also Colombians (B), and we demand our place in the new country that is to be built. (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, 2018, cited in Jiménez, p. 85)

Secondly, an appreciation for the peace negotiation and agreement between the National Government and FARC, as well as mentioning that the legal participation of the group in politics would support reintegration and reconciliation with the acceptance of the combatants to democracy (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, 2018, cited in Jiménez, pp. 72). Additionally, criticizing the approach that the ELN has taken to the negotiations with the National Government, particularly since the Total Peace policy has been put into place by Gustavo Petro, and Petro's application of the policy, noting in particular that:

> Today, 22 years later, one of its biggest opponents is the president of the republic, Dr. Gustavo Petro Urrego, who, like his great political enemy, promoted Law 2272 of 2022, also with the slogan "TOTAL PEACE," but everyone knows that it has only been directed at subversive groups such as the ELN, EMC, FARC, and SEGUNDA MARQUETALIA. (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, 2024)

Nonetheless, the group reaffirmed their commitment to peace even when clashes occurred in regions between public forces and guerrilla groups where the group is present, finally mentioning the even when the government is not recognizing their identify (calling the group Clan del Golfo instead of EGC) they remain committed to a possible negotiation, nonetheless, when regional dialogues are put up as a proposal from the National Government, the group explain that this was not a possibility as there was not a 'federated organization but a unified force' (ECG, 2024).

In essence, within this label, the EGC seeks recognition as an important actor in the conflict and as a key group to negotiate with. Interestingly, within this label, responses to various elements used in discourse by the National Government and the media can be observed, particularly references to illicit economies, their motivation to engage in peace negotiations, armed actions against the group, and a preference for the submission of justice over political negotiations.

Overall, these three labels: representative of the community, Legitimate Armed Group, and Armed Civil Resistance Movement, and a crucial actor in the conflict and for peace dialogues, speak to the image that the group wants to project, and create legitimacy, which would in turn support their desire to gain the political recognition of these characterizations. As discussed previously, the elements described by the National Government to characterize the EGC have been at odds with these descriptions, as noted by the NSAG in their statements.

Do not want to be recognized as:

Criminals, criminal organizations, and narco-traffickers

As one of the main labels presented by the National Government to describe the group, criminals, criminal organizations, and narcotraffickers are descriptions that the EGC does not want to be associated with. This was underlined in nineteen discourses, focusing on misinformation and mislabeling of the group as criminal organizations and gangs, also affecting the views of the group from civil society, underlining that illicit economies existed before the group, and that, for example, they do not profit from businesses that traffic migrants, but try to mitigate the tragedy in the Darien area that is under their control, or in the case of illegal mining, mentioning the voluntary contribution of miners to the movement. Additionally, they describe their respect for international humanitarian law, with actions such as ‘handing over this member of the ELN, who is also a

relative of a social leader in our territory, taking into account the fact that his partner is pregnant' (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, 2024).

Specifically, as one of the main traits associated with this label, the group's participation in illicit economies and its economic motivations were presented in eleven discourses. Within this narrative, the group focused on discrediting the media and the National Government, which have framed their actions as crimes and mischaracterized them as Clan del Golfo rather than EGC. For example, while dealing with accusations of migrant trafficking, the EGC presents itself as regulating migration flow in an area under its control, as seen in a statement from the EGC:

> As the Darién area is a zone controlled by the AGC, what we try to do is to ensure that the suffering of people in transit is as minimal as possible, and that those who are responsible for transporting them, who are not and do not form part of the AGC, do not abuse the vulnerability of migrants, and that their rights are respected. As an organization, we have no responsibility for this transnational phenomenon. What the Colombian people can be sure of is that we are trying to mitigate this enormous tragedy in the Darién area. (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, 2023).

Likewise, regarding the economic-motivation narrative for the emergence of the group presented by the National Government, the EGC argues that the National Government abandoned and made false promises of peace, linking this to the label of martyrs of the conflict and to the community's representatives, and describing misleading information that the government and media have presented about the group, to convince communities about the organization's nature.

Consequently, the issue of violence against the community is also discussed by the group in its discourse. This trait was described in six discourses, and references diverse crimes that the group is accused of, particularly social leader assassinations and recruitment, claiming that they are defamation campaigns: "we have no connection with the persecution and campaign of extermination of the members of their organizations or of those claiming land in the national territory (...) The name of our organization is being used to conceal and protect those truly

responsible." (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, cited in Jiménez, 2018, pp. 62). Additionally, using elements such as the violation of human rights and international law in explanations of why the group is not carrying out certain actions:

> The EGC is not carrying out any actions that involve the indiscriminate elimination of hallucinogenic substance dealers and drug addicts, because such operations violate human rights and international humanitarian law, which we are committed to respecting. 2. Social cleansing leads to cycles of violence that can escalate and affect many more people, including innocent ones. (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, 2024).

Furthermore, justifying armed actions taken by the group in defense of communities or in self-defense against actions by other armed actors, such as the ELN and the dissident FARC group Central Mayor State (Estado Mayor Central-EMC).

Altogether, the EGC presents diverse arguments and justifications in response to the group's characterization and misrecognition as a criminal organization. Addressing issues of their participation in illegal economies and the violent actions against populations, the group leans towards the role of a defender of the community, portraying their history and emergence within the narrative of victims of the conflict and the past peace process.

Paramilitary (relationship with the Armed Forces)

Tied to the organization's history, the Paramilitary label is one the EGC does not want to be associated with. This discontent was described in nine discourses and included elements such as the group's emergence after the failure of the peace process with the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), as well as efforts to differentiate themselves from the group. Additionally, distancing themselves from the previous association of the paramilitary group with the armed forces, as well as the false media portrait of the group as a paramilitary or neo-paramilitary group.

Thinking about the first element, the beginning of the group is described in a statement by the Joint Chiefs of the Gaitanista Army of Colombia (EGC), noting that its constitution in 2008 was the result of:

> The failure of governments to comply with the legal guarantees for all armed actors who have participated in failed peace processes, the lack of clear public policies, the increase in social vulnerabilities, and the persecution and extermination to which all those who believed in the promises of peace since the assassination of Jorge Eliecer Gaitán have been subjected to date. (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, 2024).

Nonetheless, within the same statement, the EGC tries to distance itself from its paramilitary narrative, arguing that this label, as well as neo-paramilitarism, is used by 'sensationalist media outlets and non-governmental human rights organizations, subversive left, which refuse to accept the historical truth of paramilitarism and the redundant birth of neo-paramilitarism' (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, 2024).

Additionally, discussing elements of paramilitarism, such as the relationship between the groups and the national government, particularly their 'help, training, and supply of weapons' (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, 2024), while also presenting the idea that what has happened with the EGC, is that administration has launch 'the most ferocious military and law enforcement operations in the history of the fight against illegal armed groups' against them' (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, 2024), leading to what they called subversive structures, that allegedly has 'ideological, but also logistical, military, and political support.' (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, 2024), from the National Government.

This discussion is crucial because of two aspects, firstly, the use of the narrative to present themselves as a group victim of the national government's actions, allowed them to distance themselves from the previous prejudice of their paramilitary past, as well as to possibly signal to the community that they have also been affected by the National Government, trying to create this

bond, and alluding to their desire to be recognize as victims of the conflict and defenders of the community. Secondly, implying that the so-called subversive groups or guerrilla groups are in alignment with the National Government, as noted in the critics of the priority for developing a peace process with the National Liberation Army (ELN) and FARC dissent groups, such as Second Marquetalia (SM), and the Central Mayor State (EMC). Interestingly, it can be observed as a way to reverse the discourse in the historic relationship between the National Government and guerrilla groups, previously a priority in the fight against armed groups, a role that, according to the discourse, changed to the EGC.

Finally, the discourse against the description of the group as a paramilitary organization focused on addressing their emergence after the failure of the peace process with the AUC, the changing relationship with the National Government, from the alignment of the AUC with the interests and strategies of the National Government, to become the primary 'enemy' of the armed forces, based on armed actions display against them, as well as linking this to images as victims of the conflict and defenders of the community.

In essence, the analysis of the discourse of the Gaitanista Army of Colombia (EGC) has allowed the group to, firstly, self-describe and create the narrative for which they want to be recognized, considered elements of community representation, and a deep-rooted foundation story based on the failure of the national government to fulfill the peace agreement. Secondly, present a response to the discourse and misrecognition presented by the National Government, particularly referencing their definition as a criminal organization motivated by illicit economies. Additionally, their emergence as a dissident paramilitary group followed the submission of the justice agreement with the AUC.

Furthermore, another interesting insight was the importance the EGC placed on the image the group projected and on how the National Government perceives discourse. This argument can be observed in three instances. First, framing their motivation as a community struggle, particularly describing themselves as a group that the National Government has let down. Second, to distance itself from the previous paramilitary relationship with the National Government, arguing that they too have been and continue to be victims of their attacks, and to present the misrecognition and miscalling of the group as Clan del Golfo as efforts to discredit the organization for the acceptance of the community. Third, the dichotomy of praising the peace process with FARC-EP and criticizing its development with the National Liberation Army (ELN), particularly since the launch of the Total Peace Policy during Petro's administration. In this same line, noting the differentiating treatment of the group from the guerrilla group, particularly in the last organization, claiming ideological alignment of the Non-State Armed Groups with the National Government.

Overall, this chapter presents elements of the EGC discourse that are crucial to understanding their identity, needs, and wants, and the difference in these characteristics from the National Government narrative, even when the same events were described. Additionally, it underlined the importance of the National Government's discourse to the group and its incorporation into their own identity to gain legitimacy, not only for the National Government but also for community support.

Discussion: the process of recognition and misrecognition of the EGC

As has been presented, the main quality of NSAG recognition is that it is not a straight-line process, as recognition of certain elements is granted, such as the recognition of EGC as a crucial actor in the conflict, and taken away depending on contextual and prioritization of security strategies for each administration. Nonetheless, their change over time, I argue, can be observed as a process of building on the past administration's decision-making. In particular, contextual factors such as security priorities, campaign promises, and political ideological affiliations influence their actions, discourses, and even the ways they engage with diverse armed groups in the country. Consequently, actions and outcomes from previous administrations that influence these contextual events also affect the administration's recognition of the EGC. In turn, in the case of the armed group, based on the image they want to project and be recognized as, as well as their political claim, elements such as their representation of a community, distance from their paramilitary past, and their importance for the conflict, and in particular to achieve peace in the country, have truly been used to achieve their goal, and legitimize their actions and position in the country.

Within the administrations, the main characteristic is the misrecognition of the group. Nonetheless, the extent of this misrecognition varied, influenced by contextual factors, particularly the administration's stance on peace. In the Santos administration, the FARC peace process and the beginning of the group's re-establishment shaped its approach to actions and negotiations. During this period, an opportunity for an informal process signals the group's inclusion as an important actor in the conflict, thereby recognizing it. Nevertheless, statements and the categorization of the group as a criminal organization, along with the prioritization of submission to justice, generated dissatisfaction within the group.

Under the Duque administration, his goal of achieving territorial control through armed action, as specified in the security and defense policy, undermined prospects for peace, not only with the EGC but also with other armed groups. This is a period of complete misrecognition of the group, but also of its growth, as evidenced by actions such as the capture of its leader, alias Otoniel, and the misrepresentation of the group's end.

Finally, under Gustavo Petro's administration, and the country's preference for peace, the degree of recognition began to increase. The use of peace discourse under the Total Peace initiative enabled the establishment of a formal peace process. Petro's continued characterization of the EGC as an armed group, even when political negotiations and the group's claims have not been validated, and the openness to the process has supported the actual peace process with the group.

Within each administration, there is also a degree of recognition of certain elements, based on the traits and labels identified in the thesis. On the one hand, one of the elements recognized by Santos and Petro administrations, which was also presented in the narrative of the EGC, was its role as a 'crucial actor in a conflict and for peace dialogues', this was shown with the engagement of informal talks during the administrations that led to legal resolutions for the processes with the group, even though these were subject to justice processes. In particular, Gustavo Petro, because of his Total Peace initiative and the establishment of the Socio-Political Dialogue framework, went a step further without recognizing the group's political claim. On the other hand, labeling the group as a criminal organization misrecognizes it, whereas only Gustavo Petro's administration uses the label "paramilitaries" to do so. A summary of these elements is found in Appendix B.

For the EGC, one important takeaway is the impact of these narratives on the group's identity. As previously discussed, the group has characterized itself as a representative of the community, a victim of the conflict, and an important actor for achieving peace in the country. Given these characteristics, their effort to justify their actions and gain legitimacy for their political claim is evident. What is interesting is that they have adopted the language of not only the national government, contesting the arguments against the group, such as their connections to paramilitary groups, and illegal economies motivations, but also the international organizations, trying to convey in their statements the legitimacy of their group as a Non-State Armed Group.

Based on this past assessment of the administrations and the EGC statements, it is important to present how this recognition from the National government can influence conflict dynamics to foster peace with the Gaitanista Army of Colombia. Concepts such as 'thick' and 'thin' recognition, 'endogeneity' and 'exogeneity ', as well as the political, legal, and moral aspects of these relationships, present explanations of these relationships. Both of these concepts capture the nuance of the process: not following a linear path but depending on various contextual elements and priorities from the National Government and the NSAG.

As presented by Allan and Keller (cited in Clément et al., 2021, pp. 8). Two concepts that support this understanding are 'thin' and 'thick' recognition. It is interesting to note that there was not a single administration that presented a 'thick' recognition of the armed group, defined as the 'understanding of each party 'in terms of essential elements composing its identity,' but there was diverse degrees of 'thin' recognition, define as 'agents, as autonomous 'entities' [that have] the rights to exists and continue to exist as an autonomous agent.' In this case, as an agent in the conflict, it is important to engage in formal and informal discussions to contribute to its resolution.

Within these characteristics, the concepts of Endogeneity and Exogeneity presented by Toros and Sugal (2021) add another layer to the analysis of the process. Actors in the first category are defined as members of a specific community. On the contrary, actors in the second category are not part of the community and are trying to impose on it. As previously presented, even when actors are considered exogenous to a specific community, they can still be relevant to conflict. In this case, the group's classification within a specific community, such as an NSAG or an actor that could participate in a political negotiation, becomes important. In general, from the government's perspective, the classifications of the group as criminal organizations, narcotraffickers, paramilitaries, and terrorists characterize the group outside the community they desire to be part of and be recognized as. Nonetheless, the degrees of characterization presented in each administration provide insights into changes in recognition within this specific community, though the process is not linear. Finally, these concepts are expressed and influence the group's political, legal, and moral recognition, as described next, thereby providing an understanding of a specific group affiliation.

Consequently, another layer to be discussed, as presented by Bartelson (2013), is the political, legal, and moral recognition of the group. Firstly, it is key to bear in mind these concepts derived from the discipline of International Relations and focus on how states are recognized as such. In this case, the two actors involved differ in their power and nature. There are diverse degrees of political and legal recognition, but no moral recognition in any of the administrations.

In the first category of political recognition, highlights elements of the constitution of the status as an actor in the international system (Bartelson, 2013, p. 111), and in this case, as an armed group in the conflict. The recognition-seeker wants the recognition-granter to recognize it based on the characteristics it identifies with. Within each administration, there are diverse recognitions

of the group, first establishing which types of actors have access to certain types of negotiations, either political negotiations or submission to justice, each with different benefits. All administrations, to varying degrees, position the group as one that requires submission to justice, citing illegal economies as the reason, and categorizing it as a criminal organization.

For example, during the Santos administration, with the prioritization of political negotiations with FARC and the subsequent initiation of negotiations with the ELN, a dialogue with the then AGC was considered a subsequent step to support the success of these processes. In addition, the choice to pursue a submission of justice with this group, rather than political negotiation, signals the group's misrecognition. Interestingly, for the Duque administration, in line with his security priorities, the use of the same terms for all armed groups and criminal organizations, and his preference for armed actions over negotiations, present a different phase of the group's misrecognition. Finally, during Gustavo Petro's administration and his Total Peace, even when the categorization of criminal organization continues to be used in his discourse, particularly in moments of tension with the group, as well as the preference for the submission of justice as the alternative process, his peace rhetoric presented a different type of misrecognition of the group, closer to the recognition the group wanted to achieve, which has supported the continuation of the formal peace talks in his administration.

In the second category of legal recognition, which defines the grounds on which actors should be admitted to a given group (Bartelson, 2013, p. 114), each administration determines which types of actors the laws apply to. In the case of Juan Manuel Santos and Iván Duque, the actor is defined as a GAO, while Gustavo Petro refers to the group as part of the Organized Armed Structures of High-Impact Crime. Moreover, the specifications of the peaceful alternative are set out in various laws, making it clear that the state's preference is for submission to justice.

Interestingly, these processes can align with the administration's discourse, as in the Duque and Petros cases, or be at odds with the administration's statements, as in the Santos administration.

Finally, moral recognition implies different types of action. As this element calls for the recognition of an actor's equal moral worth, which, in the case of conflict, could mean the completion of a peace process, it validates the armed group's claim. It integrates the group into society; for example, after the peace agreement with FARC, the group was integrated as a political party. For the EGC, and even under the previous peace agreement with the AUC, this has not materialized, as the group's claim has not been recognized in the government's discourse and actions.

All things considered, the use of concepts such as ‘thin’ and ‘thick’, ‘endogeneity’ and ‘exogeneity’, and the political, legal, and moral recognition the group allows us to understand the various layers of the process of recognition and misrecognition.

Critical moments and the assessment of the administrations

After the definitions and general understandings of recognition, this section presents an analysis of critical moments in the relationship between each administration and the EGC, emphasizing the use of the identified labels and traits and illustrating the group's recognition or misrecognition in each moment.

For the Santos administration, situating the group in a legal sense as a GAO, while discursively referring to the group as criminal and narcotraffickers, as well as prioritizing armed actions and proudly expressing the pressure that these operations put on the group, while opening to different alternatives, but only as a submission to justice, presents a recognition of the group as part of the conflict. Nevertheless, situating the role of the group as a contributor to the violence

and illegal economies in Colombia, as well as an actor that could affect the peace agreement, but making it clear that it does not mean that they have a political claim.

Particularly, for the Santos administration, two critical moments in which this recognition can be observed, engaging with the EGC, were, firstly, in September 2017, the announcement of the start of informal talks between the National Government and the EGC. From the government's perspective, this event was presented in a speech during which two magistrates were appointed to the Constitutional Court and the Council of State. Within this speech, elements such as the pressure from armed operations that supported the group's willingness to negotiate, the reinstatement of the group's criminal nature, the denial of the group's political claim, and the submission of justice as the only other consideration for engaging with the group were highlighted. In the case of the EGC, the then leader of the group, Alias Otoniel, expressed its interest in achieving a solution for the combatants 'submitting ourselves to Colombian justice with guarantees that will lead to national reconciliation. Once the conditions are in place, we are prepared to suspend all illegal activities of the organization (Nos cogió la noche Cosmovision, 2017).

Within this discourse, two main conclusions can be drawn from the group perspective. On the one hand, the group is currently demonstrating a willingness to engage in dialogue, framing the situation differently from the National Government, and positioning itself as a crucial actor in conflict and peace dialogues. Interestingly, even when there is a disparity in the framing of the potential negotiation, the groups' willingness to engage persists.

Moreover, the second crucial moment is the establishment of the 1908 Law in 2018. This law would support the ending of criminal activity by criminal organizations, strengthen regulations to fight them effectively, and establish special procedures for the submission of justice of organized armed groups. During his speech on the signing of the law, President Santos noted that,

even as these mechanisms are being put in place, they would not confer political recognition on them or apply transitional justice mechanisms in any way. This will enable us to guarantee security and continue to strengthen the peace process.' (Presidencia de la República, 2018). Additionally, mentioning the importance of this step to guarantee the security of the country, with Clan del Golfo as the criminal organization 'that has been doing the most damage in recent times' (Presidencia de la República, 2018), reinstates the criminal nature of the organization and its vision of security, highlighting the importance of the surrender of the group.

In the case of the group, after the signing, in a statement, they underlined that 'We are currently socializing Law 1908 of 2018 within our political and military structure, and once we have completed this process, we will proceed to jointly make the necessary decisions' (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia cited in Jiménez, pp.80). Nevertheless, not directly expressing the idea that "everything is in place for the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces to be brought to justice" (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia cited in Jiménez, pp.80).

With the change of administration to Iván Duque and the prioritization of security and armed action against the group, this process did not continue. Because of this, the degree of thin recognition decreases; the administration's focus is on dismantling and the group's end through armed action, even when the alternative option, submission to justice, is presented alongside the threat of armed action in discourse. Another key element in this case is the use of the narcoterrorism label, which is an element previously used to describe the AUC and other armed actors at the time.

One critical moment when this could be observed was the completion of Operation Osiris, in which Dairo Antonio Úsuga David, alias 'Otoniel', was detained on October 23, 2021. Iván Duque, in his speech detailing the operation, emphasized both the criminal and narcotrafficker

labels, describing that ‘This is a triumph for the rule of law, and it shows that those who commit crimes will pay for them. We promised Colombia that we would capture this criminal, and we have delivered on that promise’ (Ivan Duque, 2021). Additionally, declaring the end of the group, and the only other option being submission to justice:

> ‘This blow to alias Otoniel in Operation Osiris marks the end of the Clan del Golfo. Furthermore, to all those who have belonged to this criminal structure, the message I am sending is clear and forceful: either you submit to justice immediately, or the full weight of the law will fall on you in the same way. Colombia today celebrates this blow to drug trafficking. Today, we have achieved the most important blow against this crime in this century. We will continue to confront all organized crime structures without hesitation.’ (Ivan Duque, 2021)

Nevertheless, even when the National Government presents this as a success and as the group's possible end, contextual dynamics and the organization's current development contradict the argument. Particularly, as was explained by Mantilla, Cajiao, and Tobo (2021), through the expansion process with the demobilization of FARC, even when the Agamenón II Operation slowed down the process, their robust constitution with a strong military presence, the control and regulation over populations, as well as the structure of the group, make it difficult to claim their definitive end.

Moreover, after the news of the leader's extradition to the United States in 2022, the group decided to call for an armed strike, blocking roads, establishing curfews, and committing homicides as a response to the action of the National Government (CNN, 2022). This action can be described as a display of the group's power and territorial control. Consequently, according to El Espectador (2022), even with a military deployment, the community felt the absence of government control and abandonment.

Throughout the administration, difficulty engaging in informal/formal peace talks stemmed from prioritizing armed actions. Nonetheless, with the election of Gustavo Petro in 2022 and his

total peace initiative, this possibility came back to the table. After this, the EGC expressed its willingness to engage in a peace dialogue in July 2022. However, the still in power Duque responded negatively, particularly referring to the 'Gun Plan' of the EGC against public forces, mentioning that this action was linked to the desire of the group to have a stronger position for possible future negotiation, as presented in his X post:

> To the cowards of the Clan del Golfo who want to try to gain political weight for eventual negotiations or submission to justice: you have been warned. The #FuerzaPública is effective, and we will find you wherever you are; the deaths of our heroes will not go unpunished. They think that because there are going to be negotiations, they have carte blanche to kill police officers now and believe that nothing will happen to them. These bandits are hereby notified that, just as Otoniel fell, just as La Negra fell, just as Falcon fell from Otoniel's inner circle, and 14 other bandits who are going to be extradited (Duque, 2022)

Regardless of this position, the group's engagement changed with the establishment of the new administration and its Total Peace Policy. With Gustavo Petro, the degree of thin recognition increases. Firstly, it is the administration that most often uses the label "organized armed group" and acknowledges the group's role in the conflict, particularly regarding illicit economies. Secondly, criminal and narco-trafficker labels are used; nonetheless, there are various references to the possibility of peace, even in moments of tension between the actors, such as the end of the bilateral ceasefire and the mining strike.

The National Government's willingness to engage in dialogue was presented on December 31st, 2022, when a bilateral ceasefire was announced. Law 2658 presents the terms and conditions of this temporary bilateral ceasefire, from the 1st of January to the 30th of June 2023, with the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC), and the:

> Military and police operations against members of the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC) to facilitate the establishment of a dialogue table and achieve their submission to justice and dismantling, in accordance with the procedures for the implementation of the CFBTN Agreement and the relevant protocols. (Presidencia de la República de Colombia, 2022)

Within this announcement, two elements can be highlighted. Firstly, the use of their name, as the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC), and the preference for submitting to justice.

In the case of the group, and as the first armed group to take this step, after the president's inauguration day, August 7th, 2022, they expressed their willingness to engage in dialogue, with the unilateral ceasefire decree, as an expression of goodwill. They became the first armed group to take this step.

Nevertheless, on March 19th, 2023, the ceasefire was suspended by the National Government, as presented by Gustavo Petro (2023) in his X account: 'I have ordered the security forces to reactivate all military operations against the Clan del Golfo. The bilateral ceasefire with this illegal group is suspended. We will not allow them to continue showing fear and terror in communities.' This action was provoked by an attack by the group against a police officer, referring to the organization in his statement as a 'mafia organization' (Gustavo Petro, 2023). Nevertheless, in a statement of the group addressing the situation, 'despite the false and malicious information coming from sectors that do not accept comprehensive peace,' they argue that they have adhered to the ceasefire, not only since the government enacted it, but with the unilateral decree on August 7th, 2022 (Swissinfo, 2023).

Throughout this time, Petro continued to use criminalizing rhetoric, highlighting that the group was no longer engaged in any negotiations with the National Government. Nonetheless, presenting the peace alternative as an important step for the country and centering on ending the group's participation in illicit economies to achieve this goal. Because of this and the request of the EGC, on July 8th, 2024, the National Government announced the establishment of a Socio-Dialogue Space with the Gaitanista Self-Defense of Colombia, with Law 257 of 2024, 'aimed at

verifying the willingness to transition to the rule of law and establishing the terms of submission to justice within the terms permitted by law.' (Presidencia de la República, 2024).

In a statement on peace efforts with the National Government, the EGC presented a range of ideas. Firstly, mentioning the group's goodwill and maintaining the ceasefire even after the suspension by the Petro administration. Secondly, the continuation of their willingness to engage in a dialogue with the National Government, so that 'if an agreement is reached with other armed groups, there will be no loose ends that could prevent a stable and lasting peace' (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, 2024). Thirdly, their disappointment with the reaction of political sectors and media outlets to the announcement of the start of the socio-legal dialogue, underlining that 'peace cannot be a banner used solely to serve the morbid and aberrant interests of so many politicians and their allies in the media.' (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, 2024). Finally, mentioning that:

> The only path to peace in the country is through inclusive dialogue with all armed actors. Those who suffer the ravages of war are the inhabitants of the conflict zones. On their behalf, we ask for an opportunity to have their rights to a dignified and peaceful life taken into account. (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, 2024)

Consequently, through this message, the group reiterates aspects of their willingness to negotiate, their importance to the conflict as an armed group, and their role in achieving lasting peace in the country, as part of this structure and within the idea of the Total Peace policy. Interestingly, this change and evolution can also be traced to the presentation of the new dialogues not only as a submission of justice, which continues to be part of the discourse of the National Government, but also to the openness of describing this attempt as a Social-Legal Dialogue, starting to be more flexible with the possibility of recognizing the political claim of the group.

After the study period, negotiations between Petro's administration and the EGC took place in Qatar, with three crucial developments. Firstly, in September 2025, through Law 294, the

National Government classified the Gaitanista Army of Colombia as an Organized Armed Group (GAO), based on command structure, territorial control, and its capacity to maintain and sustain military operations (Buitrago, 2026), as well as using its name in the negotiation as a way to generate trust from the EGC. Secondly, the signing of two protocols and the agreement of three Temporal Location Zones for the arrival of demobilized members from March 1st, 2026, under international supervision (Toledo-Leyva, 2025). Third, tension between the National Government and the EGC after the meeting and the agreements between Gustavo Petro and Donald Trump, referring to the intelligence support from the U.S. to detain drug traffickers in the country, including 'Chiquito Malo', a Leader of the group (AFP, 2016), which made members of the group leave the negotiation table, Nonetheless, after a meeting between the parts negotiations are set to continue.

Conclusion

Colombia is an interesting case study that offers insight into how recognition can be used in conflict resolution, particularly in cases involving non-state armed groups with complex dynamics, including motivations tied to the illicit economy, as well as the conflict's multi-actor nature. The case of the Gaitanista Army of Colombia, a group that, based on its nature and contextual circumstances, created challenges for the legitimation of its political claim while desiring to be part of official peace negotiations, presents an opportunity to illustrate how the discursive recognition of specific elements highlighted by the armed group itself can allow for the beginning and continuation of peace dialogues. This is specifically when actors have different expectations and desires around the process and outcome of negotiations. In this thesis, I have shown how the recognition of the EGC as a crucial actor in the conflict during Juan Manuel Santos' administration, the group's origins in the failure of the peace process with the AUC, and its naming during Gustavo Petro's administration are concrete examples of an ongoing recognition process and have supported the continuation of peace efforts with the group. In particular, through the ongoing peace negotiations in Qatar since 2025.

As increasingly complex dynamics have intersected with internal conflicts worldwide, findings from this case study can support approaches to initiating peace dialogues with complex non-state armed groups across diverse regions. First, in contexts in which certain non-state armed groups have become important actors in the armed conflict, due to factors such as their levels of control, growth, and participation in illicit economies, among others. Second, armed actions taken by the National Government have not generated the impact expected on dismantling NSAG and have created more violent environments for civilian populations. Third, community legitimacy is not the basis of the group’s power, despite its discursive formulation;

rather, participation in illegal economies motivates the consolidation and continuation of the group's power. For these reasons, legitimizing a political claim by the group is risky for the national government, as the level of violence and past experiences between the actors have directly affected this decision-making process and influenced views of the government's legitimacy in the country.

Overall, this analysis presents four crucial insights into the fields of conflict resolution and peacemaking: contradictions in conflict dynamics, discourse as a tool for conflict resolution, adaptation to new developments in group combinations, and finally, governance can shift from government to non-state armed groups. The recognition framework offers significant insight into the contradictions in conflict dynamics by analyzing a multi-actor internal armed conflict and its contextual characteristics, both essential elements for assessing the likelihood of continued violence and the prospects for peace. Additionally, it underscores the importance of discourse as a tool for conflict resolution, not only from the National Government's perspective but also through the armed groups' lens. Moreover, the importance of evolving group characterizations within a conflict lies in adapting to new developments and hybrid group combinations. Finally, it supports the idea that governance can shift from a state's central authority to an armed group, and the understanding that recognition of the group is a step toward initiating negotiations.

Furthermore, for the Colombian conflict, this project supports the understanding of the relationship between administrations and the Gaitanista Army of Colombia. In particular, lessons from each administration's approaches and effectiveness provide insights into continuing peace efforts with the group. Moreover, it supports the understanding of the multi-actor conflict and the importance of discourse for peace efforts in the country. Finally, it shows how similar ideas of recognition persist across different administrations, even when security priorities, contextual

events, and political affiliations differ. Nonetheless, it provides insights into factors that may influence changes in these ideas and the possibilities for engaging in peace efforts with the EGC.

Equally important are the limitations of the research: first, a methodological constraint related to access to information. For the National Government, access to statements from each administration on the official pages was unavailable, as the websites' archives were only available from 2018 to 2022. From the AGC to the EGC, the name changes necessitated updates to the website and social media accounts, the deletion of past websites, and a reduction in the amount of information available for analysis, particularly between 2018 and 2022. Additionally, the inability to interview members of the National Government and the EGC would have enriched the analysis with firsthand accounts of their perceptions. Likewise, time constraints and the program's specific timeframe for completing the project, along with lessons learned from the research, suggest that additional time could support a more in-depth analysis of the thematic elements identified in this thesis.

Even though the methodological approach allows a wide range of understanding, observations such as intentions, perceptions, interest that motivate actors to choose certain kinds of decisions can be misconstrued or not represented fully through discourses, which can create a void in the complete understanding of the phenomenon, particularly due to the difficulty of performing interviews with the actors to gain their personal perspective on the rationality behind the construction of discourses. Nonetheless, developing an understanding of these actions through critical discourse analysis offers an opportunity to continue researching how discourse practices can affect conflicts and peace efforts.

Nevertheless, when talking about the complex dynamics of conflict, analyzing discourse is only one part of the picture. In particular, some limitations of the recognition framework

include understanding the dynamics of populations directly affected by these conflicts and considering how these negotiations can materially affect their standards of living throughout the process and upon completion. While understanding the conceptions between the two actors is crucial, the community aspect and logic in these territories are also key for conflict resolution. Additionally, it is important to study how the community understands narratives from armed and state actors, though this is not a focus of the present study. Further, future research should assess how community members' everyday lives intersect with narrative and discursive claims of legitimacy by both state and non-state actors. That is, how recognition is reciprocal and achieved through interactions between multiple parties over time. These aspects are important when considering the goal of achieving a durable and comprehensive peace-building process in Colombia and other sites of protracted armed conflict.

Second, thematically, the restriction focuses only on the National Government's recognition of the group. Through research, other groups, particularly the community perspective or international actors, such as countries or international organizations, become important. Not only to understand how the process of legitimation is understood, but also for the influence of the National Government's priorities. This was not possible to incorporate because of time and methodological limitations, but it would be interesting to explore in future research.

Correspondingly, this research offers avenues for future research not only in the Colombian case but also in other conflict scenarios. One possible future study is to expand the scope to include other armed groups in the country to compare recognition and its influence on perspectives on the conflict and on possibilities for peace. Additionally, one perspective that would be valuable to explore in future studies of multi-actor conflict is how armed groups recognize one another. Likewise, another possible future research direction can focus on the

theoretical aspects of recognition, establishing possible actions within the categories of political, legal, and moral recognition. Finally, by observing the dynamics between the national government and the EGC, as well as the language used in the submission to the justice process, interesting analyses can be drawn from feminist theory, and how these processes can be understood in relation to the patriarchal and feminization of the groups in discourse.

Overall, for my personal academic and professional paths, this research has deepened my understanding not only of the complexities of the contemporary Colombian conflict but also of the interests of the administrations involved. Furthermore, understanding critical discourse analysis methods, which would support my future academic research, has become one of my main research interests. Finally, as a future aspiration for my academic career, possibly pursuing doctoral studies in international peace and conflict resolution and a career in the diplomatic service, this research has supported methodological and contextual understandings that are crucial in achieving these two goals.

APPENDIX A

CODING GUIDE

Definitions:

- Traits: characteristics relating to the economic, political, social, and ideological nature of the group.
- Kind of actor: label described by the administration to define the group.

Table 5. National Government codes.

Traits	**Definitions**
Illegal economies	Actions such as narcotrafficking, extortion, and illegal activities are goals to gain benefits for the organization.
No political claim requiring submission to justice	Based on the group's description as criminal, this was the path to peace for the three administrations.
Kind of actor	**Definitions**
Criminals (criminal gangs, criminal organizations, organized armed criminal groups, and criminal structures)	• Actions such as extortion, drug trafficking (cocaine), detention of members of the group, illegal mining, and social leader assassinations. • References to military operations against the group: Agamemnon 2. • Within this category, two of the administrations presented actions against the group with different name strategies: Juan

	Manuel Santos #ContraelCrimen (#AgainstCrime) and Iván Duque #ElQueLaHaceLaPaga (#HeWhoDoesItPaysForIt)
Narcotraffickers	• Identification of actions such as trafficking and micro trafficking of narcotics, as actions responsible for violence in the regions. ▪ Juan Manuel Santos #AgainstDrugTrafficking
Terrorist/Narcoterrorism	• Identified in the discourse of Iván Duque, and containing reference to, for example, terrorist materials and alkaloids; detention of key actors in the group; the threat to peace and security of Colombians; and extradition of members of the group.
Organized armed group/ Illegal armed structure	• Used interchangeably with criminal organization by Iván Duque, as well as jointly to describe other armed groups. • Organize armed structures involved in high-impact crime: legal definition of the group to set up the national ceasefire between the National Government and the group in 2022.
Paramilitaries	• Used by Gustavo Petro, linking the group to their paramilitary past, mafia designation, and linking to the politician's actions

Table 6. Gaitanista Army of Colombia codes.

Elements	Want to be recognized as	Do not want to be recognized as:
Traits	• Willingness to establish a peace dialogue. • Victims or martyrs of the conflict/peace processes • Defenders of the community • Political-military structure	• Criminals, mafia, or narcotraffickers • Acting violently against the population • Paramilitary or association with the Armed Forces • Emerge to get the benefits for illicit economies: exploitation of resources, migrant trafficking, and narcotrafficking (Self-motivating)
Actors	• Representative of the community • Legitimate Armed Group and Armed	• Criminals, Criminal organization

	Civil Resistance Movement • Crucial actor in the conflict and for peace dialogues	• Paramilitary (relationship with Armed Forces) • Narcotraffickers

APPENDIX B

TIMELINE AND CRUCIAL DATES

1980s: Emergence of drug trafficking as a source of revenue for actors in the conflict.

1994: Unification of paramilitary groups under the Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba and Urabá.

1997: Outlawed state arms transfer to self-defense groups (Paramilitary groups), making them unconstitutional.

2003: Signing of the Santa Fe de Ralito demobilization process.

2005: Projected date for the end of the demobilization process.

2006: Completed projected demobilization process.

2006-2008: Building period of the then AGC (now EGC).

2009-2014: Dispute period between groups within AGC.

2011: International recognition by the International Committee of the Red Cross as part of the non-international armed conflict.

2015-now: Expansion period of the EGC.

2013: Letter from the leader of the group, alias 'Don Mario', to President Santos to demonstrate the willingness of the group to contribute to the peace efforts.

2015: Alias Otoniel proposes a negotiation process with the National Government. Start of informal talks.

2010-2014: First presidency of Juan Manuel Santos.

2014-2018: Second presidency of Juan Manuel Santos.

2018-2022: Iván Duque administration.

2022-2024: Gustavo Petro administration.

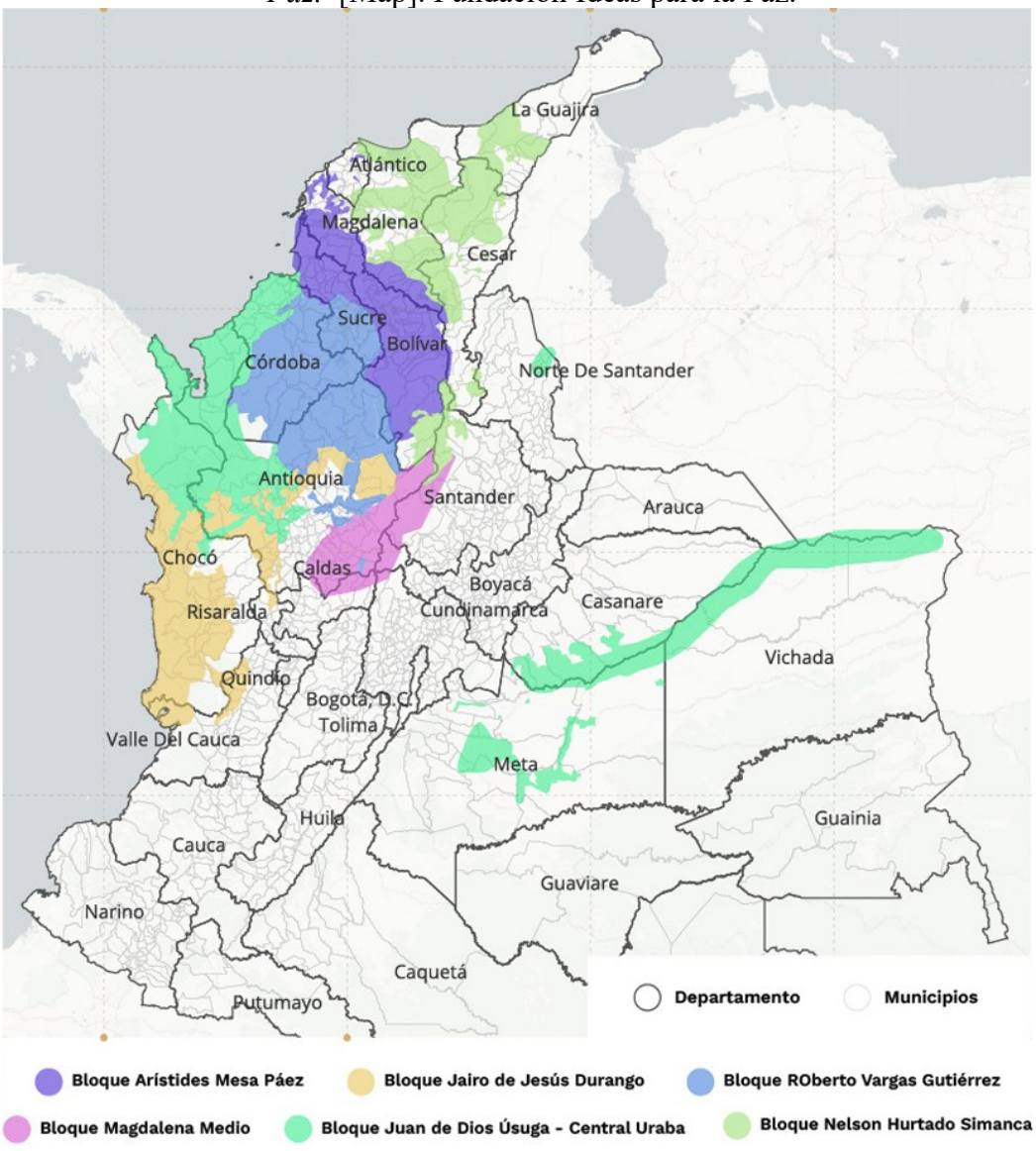
APPENDIX C
RECOGNITION TABLE

Table 7. Summary of the recognition elements presented by the EGC and the response from the National Government.

Administration	**Want to be recognized as**			**Do not want to be recognized as:**	
	Representative of the community	*Legitimate Armed Group and Armed Civil Resistance Movement*	*Crucial actor in the conflict and for peace dialogues*	*Criminals, criminal organizations, and narco-traffickers*	*Paramilitary (relationship with the Armed Forces)*
Juan Manuel Santos	No recognize	No recognize	Recognize: start of formal talks	Recognize	No recognize
Iván Duque	No recognize	No recognize	No recognize	Recognize	No recognize
Gustavo Petro	No recognize	No recognize	Recognize: official talks with the group	Recognize	Recognize

APPENDIX D

Figure 1. Influence of the EGC divided by fronts in 2026. Arias, Cajiao, López & Tobo. (2026, p.10). *Anatomía del Clan del Golfo y su negociación en Catar: la última oportunidad para la Paz.* [Map]. Fundación Ideas para la Paz.



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