Policy Sciences (2024) 57:145–169
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-023-09519-0

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mobilising international embeddedness to resist radical policy change and dismantling: the case of Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022)

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Accepted: 9 December 2023 / Published online: 8 January 2024

Abstract
Unpacking the 'crisis of democracy' and what is means and does to policy processes is a new and ever-growing agenda. This paper uses the case of Brazil to examine bureaucratic responses, and attempted resistance, to democratic backsliding and policy dismantling in times of autocratisation, notably under Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022). It does so by focusing on a less explored transnational lenses. It argues that the growing international embeddedness of Brazilian policies, including through policy transfer and technical cooperation initiatives mostly with other developing countries, has provided domestic sectoral bureaucracies and policy communities with additional strategic discursive and argumentative resources to mobilise, respond and try to resist policy dismantling at home.

Keywords Policy dismantling · Democratic backsliding · Bureaucratic activism · Transnationalisation · South-South cooperation · Brazil

Introduction

In recent years, many scholars in the social sciences have delve into what is described as a crisis of democracy around the world. Unlike formal coups d'état leading to authoritarian regimes, contemporary forms of *democratic backsliding*, *democratic erosion*, *de-democratisation*, *autocratisation* (to name a few of the most widely used concepts[1]) refer to gradual setbacks of democratic regime attributes under a legal façade and results in "the substantial de-facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy" (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, 1096).

[1] For a conceptual discussion on the differences between "autocratisation" and "democratic backsliding", see Lührmann and Lindberg (2019). On the concept of "democratic erosion", applied to Latin America, see Gamboa (2022). For a broader discussion on many of the terms used terms to describe the phenomenon in Brazil, see also Cardoso Jr. et al. (2022).

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As shown in the ever-growing literature on the topic, autocratic ruling elites adopt numerous strategies to (gradually) erode procedural and substantive features of existing democratic regimes and their institutions. They dismantle or de-fund their core functions, attack the credibility of their expertise, and persecute or replace career civil servants with people loyal to ruling government (Brito et al., 2022; Peters & Pierre, 2022; Yesilkagit, 2018).

Investigating this phenomenon in countries as diverse as Brazil, Hungary, India, Turkey, the United States, and beyond, policy scholarship has also illuminated the nexus between democratic backsliding and radical, often illiberal, forms of policy change. Conceptual frameworks like *policy dismantling*, *bureaucratic resilience*, and *bureaucratic resistance* appeared as particularly insightful to capture the dynamics and effects of democratic deterioration on policy processes across different policy fields and geographies (Bauer et al., 2021; Peters & Pierre, 2022; Yesilkagit, 2018). This paper engages with this literature by explicitly bringing in a transnational lens. It investigates whether and how different forms of international connections and exposure—or *international embeddedness*, as suggested by Bauer et al. (2021)—have been strategically and discursively used to resist radical policy change and dismantling at home in times of autocratisation. To do so, it takes Brazil an emblematic case study and as a site for empirical bottom-up exploration that can generate relevant insights to existing conceptualisations of radical policy change and bureaucratic responses to it during democratic backsliding (Lotta et al., 2023).

The main argument put forward in this paper is that the global circulation of a range of Brazilian policies since the early 2000s, mostly through state-led international cooperation and policy transfer initiatives, has generated complementary venues for bureaucrats and policy communities to respond, mobilise and try resisting policy dismantling at home in times of autocratisation, notably under Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022). While a systematic assessment of the effectiveness of bureaucratic resistance in blocking radical policy changes falls beyond the scope of this study, the paper shows nonetheless a process through which the international embeddedness of Brazilian policies has been discursively mobilised in policy and political bargains between increasingly autocratic ruling elites bureaucrats and larger policy networks in order attempt safeguarding existing policy and institutional frameworks, and protect them from radical change and dismantling. By doing so the paper contributes to three debates in policy-related scholarship. First, speaking to the body of work on democratic backsliding, it shows how domestic sectoral bureaucracies alongside national policy communities make use of the growing global circulation of domestic policies, and of "the international/transnational"[2] more broadly, as means to resist policy dismantling at home. By doing so, it adds to a growing field of policy studies unpacking the potential effects of international embeddedness of the state, policies, and civil servants in securing (or at least trying to secure) policies at home in times of democratic backsliding,

[2] There are important conceptual differences between the concepts of "international" and "transnational". The major difference comes from transnational scholarship efforts (within Political Science and International Relations studies as well as in other social sciences, including Anthropology and Geography) to break from the state-centric logic that has permeated much of these fields until the 1970s as to capture flows and dynamics happening beyond and across state boundaries and involving non-state actors. This paper follows this now firmly established research tradition seeking to understand multi-level, multi-actor transnational phenomena. For most of the analysis here, the term "transnational" is preferred over the "international". However, the paper also engages with conceptual frameworks developed by other scholars, including the notion of "international embeddedness", understanding that it does not compromises the overall multi-layer, multi-actor analytical approach adopted here.

or political instability more broadly. Second, speaking to the scholarship on transnational policy processes, as well as to the field of development and South-South cooperation studies, it shows the discursive use in public and non-public advocacy strategies of the international dimensions (or interfaces) of domestic policies and their potential contribution to the internationalisation of domestic policies.

Brazil an emblematic case

In a span of two decades, the South American giant swiftly pivoted from being heralded as a "rising power" and a "Southern hub" in the global circulation of social development and democratic innovation policies (Gu et al. 2016; Constantine & Shankland, 2017; Porto de Oliveira and Pal 2018) to a landscape marred by autocratisation and the systematic unravelling of policy frameworks (Lotta & Silveira, 2021; Lotta et al., 2023; Machado et al., 2023; Milhorance, 2022).

Most scholars situate Brazil's democratic erosion in a continuum initiated with the controversial impeachment against President Dilma Rousseff (Workers' Party—PT) in 2016, followed by an unpopular interim government of Michel Temer (2016–2018), and then by the electoral victory of a far-right authoritarian leader Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 for a 4-year presidential mandate (2019–2022).[3] Soon after his election, addressing a crowd of far-right leaders in the United States, Bolsonaro stated: "We have to deconstruct a lot of things. Unmake. Only then, we can start making it again" (quoted in Mendonça 2019. Our translation). And that is what he did, or at least tried to.

As eyewitnesses to the unfolding overt policy-institutional deconstruction efforts in Brazil under Bolsonaro, many in civil society and academia started to unpack radical policy change and dismantling in policy domains as diverse as social and agricultural development (Milhorance, 2022; Sabourin et al., 2020), environmental protection (Rajão et al., 2021; Inesc 2021), human and Indigenous rights (Silva do Monte & De Carvalho Hernandez, 2022). Ever-growing literature on the nexus between autocratisation and policy dismantling powerfully depicted combined forms of discursive paradigm shifts, elimination of bureaucratic structures, defunding of policies and programmes and projects, and harassment of civil servants taking place in Brazil since the mid-2010s, and chiefly under Bolsonaro.[4] These studies show not only variation in radical policy change and dismantling dynamics across different policy fields but also in social and bureaucratic response and attempted resistance to those. While undoubtedly enthusiastic about the emergence of individual and collective mobilisation to counter democratic backsliding, this recent body of scholarship provide a sober account of the unprecedented institutional unmaking in Brazil and unsuccessful attempts by civil society and civil servants to safeguard existing policies and institutions (Cardoso Jr. et al. 2022; Lotta et al., 2023).

[3] Scholars like Guedes-Neto and Peters (2021) argue, nonetheless, that some form of democratic backsliding/autocratisation was already happening during the time the Workers Party ruled the country (2003–2016), citing, for instance, federal government attempts to regulate media. This paper (alongside most scholars) rejects this proposition and applies the democratic backsliding/autocratisation conceptual framework to the governments that ruled Brazil in the aftermath of Rousseff's impeachment, namely the interim government of Temer and the government of Bolsonaro. It recognises, nonetheless, certain forms of policy dismantling started during Rousseff's mandate, with a reduction in financial and/or political resources to social policy realms (see, for instance, Sabourin et al., 2020 for a discussion on family farming policies).

[4] For a discussion on policy changes taking place already in the aftermath of Rousseff's impeachment, see Abers (2020); Cardoso Jr. et al. (2022).

Brazilian foreign policy was also object of radical policy change and dismantling during Bolsonaro, a process often characterised in public or policy debates as "the destruction of Brazilian foreign policy".[5] Among the scholarly community, certain aligned with the more established currents of Foreign Policy Analysis and expounded upon paradigmatic shifts in voting trends at the United Nations (UN) and bilateral diplomatic interactions (involving nations like the United States, China, and South American counterparts) (Casarões, 2020; Lopes et al., 2022). Others relied on transnational policy frameworks to unpack radical policy change and dismantling in specific foreign policy agendas, including international human rights stances (Silva do Monte & De Carvalho Hernandez, 2022) and international development cooperation and policy transfer initiatives (Grisa et al., 2022; Lima et al., 2022; Luiz & Milani, 2022; Waisbich et al., 2022). Besides revealing the contours of (radical) foreign policy change between 2019 and 2022, this scholarship also highlighted instances of policy resilience and continuity amidst an aggressive presidential dismantling rhetoric (Casarões, 2020; Lopes, 2020; Morais de Sá e Silva, 2021; De Sá Guimarães & De Oliveira e Silva, 2021; Lopes et al., 2022).[6] Despite their diversity in themes, approaches, and findings, this body of research converge in a characterisation of "the international" not only as a set of policy arenas where changes in foreign policy materialise but also as somewhat "the very last frontier for a populist far-right president to instantiate transformative vows" (Lopes et al., 2022, 10. Also Yesilkagit, 2018). More importantly for the purposes of the present paper is an explicit recognition, across these different studies, of the domestic-foreign nexus of radical policy change processes.

Moving this research agenda forward requires, nonetheless, more consistent efforts to "open the black box of the state", as initially suggested by Morais de Sá e Silva (2019), and closer attention to actors in policy processes, including state bureaucracies and policy and epistemic communities. This paper contributes to bridging this knowledge gap by further characterising radical policy change and dismantling, as well as the responses and attempted resistance to it, in the context of transnational policy agendas. Using Brazil as an emblematic case, it bridges the growing scholarship on bureaucratic responses to radical, and even "illiberal reforms", led by authoritarian populists in power (Yesilkagit, 2018; Bauer et al., 2021; Peters & Pierre, 2022; Guedes-Neto and Peters 2021; Lotta et al., 2023) by exploring the transnational dimensions of emerging forms of bureaucratic mobilisation under autocratisation in Brazil between 2019 and 2022.

The findings presented here draw on literature and documental review coupled with a revisiting of semi-structured and informal elite interviews with 76 civil servants and international cooperation experts in Brazil conducted between 2017 and 2023. Interview data were initially gathered in the context of a larger doctoral research project on the politics of Brazilian South-South Cooperation and further expanded during a one-year postdoctoral research project between 2022 and 2023.[7] Purposive sampling and snowballing techniques were adopted to recruit individuals knowledgeable and/or engaged in governmental-led international cooperation activities. Taking into considerations the dynamics of "study

[5] The term "destruction" has been widely employed in public debates by diplomats, experts, and commentators to refer to the nature of the radical policy changes that affected Brazilian Foreign Policy under Bolsonaro. See, for instance Estado de São Paulo (2020).

[6] The argument about continuity amid diatribes and promises of radical change is stronger in Lopes et al. (2022) to whom Bolsonaro's foreign policy is a case of "more-bark-than-bite".

[7] The doctoral research was conducted at the University of Cambridge and at the postdoctoral research at the University of Oxford [(see Waisbich 2021).

up" (Nader, 1972) a small policy community in Brazil (Mawdsley et al., 2019; Cesarino, 2019), the criterion for sampling was the individual knowledge and experience (past or present) with Brazil's development cooperation programmes in government, academia, civil society, and/or international organisations. No initial limitation on the policy sector was defined *ex-ante* and thus the interviews landscape features 35 different organisations, including 16 federal governmental organisations, five international organisations, eight research organisations, and six non-governmental organisations. It is important to note that several individuals interviewed moved between policy sectors or industries throughout their professional life.

The approach adopted for interview data analysis relied on discourse analysis through successive coding iterations (using a qualitative analysis software, NVivo) and a triangulation with other documental sources (governmental and non-governmental reports and media articles). The empirical examples that conform the case studies discussed in this paper were selected from the larger sample of policy and/or sector-specific data gathered by the author between 2017 and 2023 on Brazilian development cooperation, as mentioned above, due to the richness of information these empirical examples offered to the specific discussion of bureaucratic responses to autocratisation and policy dismantling. Considering the size of the international cooperation-related policy community and networks in Brazil and the sensitivity of the topic, in-text references to interviews only include general information about the interview date and the institutional affiliation of the informant.

The remaining of the paper is divided as follows. The first section offers a conceptual discussion on international embeddedness and bureaucratic responses to policy dismantling. This is followed by an application of this framework to the case of Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022). Through a series of short emblematic examples selected through purposive sampling, the paper shows how different forms of international embeddedness of Brazilian state, policies and civil servants worked (and have being used) to secure or slow-down domestic policy dismantling in times of autocratisation. An important part of this embeddedness, is argued, was generated by Brazilian actors (both state and non-state alike) continuous global promotion and export of country's "successful policies", in multilateral arenas and through technical (often South-South) cooperation. The final section revisits the main crosscutting findings from the empirical cases and suggests some possible implications for the study of policy dismantling as well as transnational policy processes in Brazil and beyond.

Mobilising international embeddedness to respond to radical policy change and dismantling: a conceptual framework

This section presents the conceptual framework underpinning the present study and its main argument, namely that the transnational arena can be used—and potentially work—as a deterrent to radical policy change and dismantling. It first discusses the notion of "international embeddedness" to, then, suggest its application to bureaucratic and broader policy-related social activism to counter autocratisation in Brazil, particularly between 2019 and 2022.

The transnational arena can fuel but also provide protection against current autocratisation efforts around the globe. Transnational linkages are important factors in the rise and perpetuation of contemporary autocratic leaders, in particular those identified with the far-right, including Jair Bolsonaro, Donald Trump, and Narendra Modi (see, for instance,

De Sá Guimarães & De Oliveira E Silva, 2021; Huju, 2022). At the same, the transnational arena can paradoxically also produce the exact opposite effect: to deter or limit autocratisation.

Both Policy and International Relations scholars claim that international connections, or what Bauer et al. (2021) call *international embeddedness* of the state, policies, and civil servants, can potentially "shield against populist take-overs of government" (Bauer et al., 2021, 7. Also Yesilkagit, 2018; Lopes et al., 2022). Scholarship indicates at least two ways this "shielding" could happen: first, by tying the hands of (authoritarian) rulers and radical (illiberal) reformers thus limiting their financial, economic, and social policy options, and second, by providing domestic groups (including various parts of the state administration and policy communities) with inflow of informational resources that are useful in countering policy dismantling efforts. The analytical power of such two-pronged proposition lies on its focus on agency (by both ruling elites and domestic policy communities), rather than on the more often debated "international context structural constrains" (related, for instance, to a country's position in global hierarchies or to the multiple forms of interdependence that limit states and governments' international agency). Drawing on this proposition, in what comes next, the paper offers a more comprehensive framework to study international embeddedness as an important factors in shaping bureaucratic response—one among other potential venues—for resistance and resilience-making against radical and illiberal policy change and dismantling.

International embeddedness: from lock-in effects to the strategic use of transnationalisation

Having one's hands tied by "the international" is the first form of embeddedness identified in the literature that could potentially counter radical policy change and dismantling in times of autocratisation. While not always explicit about it, this assumption certainly speaks to what International Relations scholarship has long treated as "lock-in effects": the constraints on the policy options of current and future governments generated by countries' participation in international institutions or signing international treaties. Several instances of locking-in have been studied in the past, particularly when countries sign human rights treaties during democratisation or political transition moments, or become a member of regional and supranational institutions, like the European Union or the African Union (Dunn, 2005; Moravcsik, 2000; Zschirnt, 2018). Yet, so far, little is known about whether and how other transnational policy processes including when a country acts as a major "policy exporter" or "technical cooperation provider" contributes to locking-in States and their domestic policies and, if so, how.

The second form of international embeddedness discussed in the literature refers to resources available "beyond Nation-State borders" that can be mobilised by actors domestically, including bureaucrats. Yesilkagit (2018) is among the pioneers of the discussion on forms of bureaucratic resilience in the context of democratic backsliding due to "executive aggrandisement" (Yesilkagit, 2018, 5). In his proposed research agenda to investigate the conditions under which bureaucracies were better positioned to counter autocratisation, he suggested considering three set of variables: state autonomy, civil service systems, and bureaucratic politics. As part of the state autonomy track, he hypothesised that "states strongly connected in the international system are expected to be more autonomous vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes" and that "the bureaucracy in these states is better positioned to counter the undemocratic policy aspirations of authoritarian regimes" (Yesilkagit, 2018,

20). While both Yesilkagit (2018) and Bauer et al. (2021) have highlighted the importance of "informational resources", here I posit that other types of transnational resources and opportunities are available to domestic actors to respond and potentially challenge or resist democratic backsliding. This includes symbolic resources, such as a country's international reputation and status.

Engaging with the existing literature in this field, this paper advances and operationalises the notion of a *strategic transnationalisation* by bureaucrats and their policy networks and the *mobilisation of the international embeddedness of national policies* by these actors as a complementary strategy to respond to radical policy change and dismantling at home. International embeddedness is understood here as the extent to which policy (ideas, systems, and instruments) from any given jurisdiction circulate and feature in global policy debates and the extent to which domestic policy actors are exposed to these international debates. Exposure, or what French social movements scholars call "socialisation into the international",[8]can take on multiple forms, including participating in global policy networks and communities or serving as policy transfer agents through policy knowledge exchanges and technical cooperation.[9] As for the strategic transnational mobilisation, the paper draws on the consolidated conceptual frameworks in activism beyond borders of "jumping scales" and "the boomerang effect" (Ferguson, 2002; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Tarrow, 2001) to inform the study of actions, responses, and potentially resistance to radical policy change involving arenas, resources, and opportunities beyond borders from bureaucrats and other national policy communities in times of autocratisation.

The strategic transnationalisation by bureaucrats and policy networks

Attacks on bureaucracies and attempts to respond and resist those have been an increasingly common theme among policy scholars unpacking contemporary forms of autocratisation, including when it comes to foreign policy issues. While is true that "state bureaucracies per se are no hotbeds of active resistance towards illiberal rule" (Bauer et al., 2021, p. 6. Also Yesilkagit, 2018), there is growing evidence that certain bureaucrats and policy communities did engage in different individual and collective strategies to respond to democratic backsliding (Cardoso Jr. et al. 2022; Lotta et al., 2023). When it comes to countering or resisting strategies, the literature shows bureaucrats engaging on shirking and sabotage[10]: from disobeying orders or slowing and delaying the implementation of policies and actions, they consider to be illegal or inappropriate (Guedes-Neto and Peters 2021) to more radical (and politically/individually costly) forms of "guerrilla" and "subversive action" (Lotta et al., 2023).

Looking at the Indian case, Huju (2022) shows both adjustment and agreement, as well as discreet forms of discontent and resistance, by Indian diplomats vis-à-vis de growing "Saffronisation" of Indian foreign policy under Modi (in power since 2014). In Brazil, scholars have characterised a myriad of attacks on bureaucracies employed by power

[8] See, for example, Siméant-Germanos (2010).

[9] For discussions applied to the Brazilian case, see, for example, Esteves et al. (2016) and Waisbich et al. (2022).

[10] For an overview of the working (or loyalty), shirking, and sabotage triad in bureaucracy studies, see Brehm and Gates (1997).

holders (under the notion of "institutional harassment"), including bureaucratic bashing, persecution and harassment of bureaucrats, controlling or erasing bureaucrats from decision-making, and politicisation/politicised appointments (Lotta & Silveira, 2021; Cardoso Jr. et al. 2022).[11] At the same time, scholarship has also mapped evolving forms of individual and collective, formal and informal, public and behind the scene bureaucratic responses since the 2016 impeachment and even more so since 2019, under Bolsonaro (Lotta et al., 2023). Responses by those working on foreign policy issues have been less systematically explored in the literature, but existing studies have described bureaucratic strategies such as partnering with UN entities to secure the continuity of international projects and individuals moving to work with international and non-governmental organisations to carry on disseminating Brazil's "policy solutions" (e.g., Morais de Sá e Silva 2019; Waisbich, 2022; Lima et al., 2022). More recent anecdotal evidence also shows subversive types of collective mobilisation, such as a network of Brazilian diplomats that held secret meetings to sabotage Bolsonaro's foreign policy and ensure Brazilian credibility and long-standing partnerships with third countries (Chade, 2022).

Underpinning these different responses lays the centrality of bureaucratic individual and collective agency in which bureaucrats show greater loyalty to state policies than to the incumbent government. In the case of Brazil, such loyalty draws on a trajectory of "institutional activism" since the early 2000s. Unlike more classic social movement activism, institutional activism is the "collective action in the defence of contentious causes conducted within the boundaries of state institutions" (Abers, 2020, 331).[12] In practice, institutional activism can take on different forms: from elected officials coming from political or social minorities, to activists occupying governmental positions, and bureaucrats acting based on values or to defend contentious causes within public administrations, to name a few.[13] In the past decades, this loyalty to certain policies has also acquired stronger connections to "the international", as several civil servants and their networks have acted as policy knowledge transfer agents, or "policy ambassadors" (Porto de Oliveira 2017), in the diffusion of a number of Brazilian policies abroad.

Recognising such agency neither means bureaucrats should—or necessarily do—act as "gatekeepers of democracy" (Guedes-Neto and Peters, 2021, p. 221. Also Yesilkagit, 2018), nor that bureaucrats and wider national policy communities will or have necessarily succeeded in countering radical policy change and dismantling. Indeed, both in Brazil under Bolsonaro as well as elsewhere, bureaucrats have rarely managed to prevent setbacks in public policies. Comprehensive studies on the Brazilian case (such as Cardoso Jr. et al., 2022 or Lotta et al., 2023) provide compelling accounts of numerous policies that were indeed dismantled or reconfigured despite bureaucratic and societal efforts to safeguard existing frameworks. While suggesting the importance of bureaucratic activism, these accounts strongly emphasise the many institutional and organisational constraints that

[11] Lotta and Silveira (2021), for instance, frame it as different forms of oppression, which they then categorise as (i) physical oppression, (ii) oppression on procedural, administrative routines, (ii) moral and social oppression, as well as (iv) tactics of erasing or muting the bureaucrats' voice.

[12] It is important to mention that study of institutional activism is strongly related to the one of state-society relations in policymaking in Brazil. This broader field includes studies on classic forms of social movement activism, institutionalised participatory institutions, and many other socio-state interfaces and arrangements that have shaped public policies and practices since Brazil's re-democratisation in the late 1980s (see, for example, Lavalle et al. 2019).

[13] For a more in-depth discussion on types of bureaucratic and institutional activism, as well as of their repertoires, see Silveira (2022).

limited most of the bureaucracy's action. The domains of environmental protection and indigenous rights provide telling illustrations of the extent and effects of such unmaking (Machado et al., 2023; Rapozo, 2021).

With that in mind, and by studying bureaucratic responses and instances of attempted resistance as a process (rather than an outcome) in the context transnational mobilisation by bureaucrats and wider policy communities, this paper sheds light on how loyalty to certain policies, policy ideas, and policy instruments manifests in the contexts of internationalised public policies. It points, moreover, to a possible rather than necessary source of policy and democratic resilience in times of autocratisation. The next section offers an empirical discussion of how these dynamics manifested in Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro.

International embeddedness through policy transfer and international cooperation: the case of Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022)

The following empirical discussion of the Brazilian case unfolds as follows. First, it characterises international embeddedness of policies in the case of Brazil by briefly presenting the profile and trajectory of Brazilian international cooperation, and in particular South-South technical development cooperation, and its linkages to the transfer of "Brazil-grown policy solutions" notably to other developing countries. This is followed by a discussion on the changes and continuities in this field in times of autocratisation, particularly under Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022). It then moves to the analysis of a selected set of bureaucratic responses to policy dismantling and democratic backsliding that relied on, or discursively mobilised, Brazil's role and status as a "policy exporter" or a "development cooperation champion".

Before moving forward, however, some conceptual-analytical clarifications are needed. The notions of *international cooperation* and *policy transfer* are mobilised here as broad umbrella-terms encompassing a range of exchanges and initiatives between Brazil and partner countries, encompassing technical cooperation as well as different forms of policy and knowledge dialogue and exchange (Faria, 2012; Grisa et al., 2022; Waisbich et al., 2022). Truly, much of what constitutes Brazil's portfolio of international cooperation since the early 2000s falls under what the country defines as its *international technical cooperation*, which take places between the Brazilian government and other developing countries under what is commonly referred to as South-South cooperation (SSC). Yet the global circulation of Brazilian policy knowledge—and hence the international embeddedness of "Brazil-grown" policies, as discussed here—is not exclusively driven by official initiatives or state institutions and bureaucrats. As a matter of fact, a range of actors and individuals (including experts, representatives of non-governmental organisations, and international civil servants) acting alongside but also at the margins of official governmental initiatives also participate in the diffusion and thus internationalisation of Brazilian policy knowledge (Morais de Sá e Silva 2017; Porto de Oliveira 2017; Luiz & Milani, 2022; Lima et al., 2022; Waisbich, 2022). Such engagement of both state and non-state actors in the global diffusion of Brazilian policy knowledge through actively participating in multilateral specialised fora and in development cooperation projects is key to the understanding of the emerging forms of transnational mobilisation to respond to radical policy change and dismantling from within state bureaucracies as well as from actors belonging to non-state policy and epistemic communities in the last years discussed here.

Rise, fall and change in Brazil's trajectory as a "policy exporter"

It is well established in academic and policy circles that Brazil's "rise" as an economic and political power since the early 2000s also led to the country's acting as a "policy exporter" (Faria 2012; Milani & Lopes, 2014; Waisbich et al., 2022) and much of the transfer of "Brazilian solutions" was channelled through South-South cooperation. As an "emerging donor"—or rather a "Southern provider" —, Brazil had an explicit emphasis on policy transfer through what the country defined as *capacity development-geared international technical cooperation* (ABC 2013). Cooperation activities included policy and technical exchanges in the form of study visits, seminars, policy advice, secondment of civil servants to short and long-term missions in third countries, pilots and demonstrations on the ground, technology transfer, among other exchange modalities. Brazil's major partners have been countries in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, notably Portuguese-speaking ones. Yet, exchanges extended well beyond these geographies, encompassing Asian partners such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nepal, as well as partners in the developed world. In the words of one expert:

> *"South-South cooperation made us so visible in international fora, both for political and technical reasons, that we now have demands from 'the North'. Northern countries now want to know us, have hands-on exchanges with us. This is very rare thing to happen to countries in the Global South."* (Our translation).[14]

In the last two decades, the Brazilian government has also multiplied its partnerships with entities in the UN Development System. Partnerships with the UN allowed the country to circumvent existing legal and financial obstacles to implementing development initiatives abroad, but also to expand its outreach and legitimacy as a "rising power" in the field of international development (Milani, 2018; Suyama et al., 2016; Waisbich & Haug, 2022). UN agencies also made use of Brazil's expertise and resources to reposition themselves in the new global configurations of power and expertise (Esteves & Assunção, 2014; Lima & Santana, 2020; Milhorance & Soule-Kohndou, 2017). Through these partnerships, both UN entities and the Brazilian policy actors participated in iterative processes of "certification of Brazilian programs and technologies" (Milhorance, 2014, p. 86) and of global diffusion of policies, programmes (as well as policy ideas and instruments) as "best practices" to other countries. Far from purely technical matters, screening, certification, and standardisation by international organisations are central to the politics of global policy transfer.[15] They also have, as argued here, an impact of domestic policy politics.

Already during the PT era (2003–2016), policymakers, bureaucrats, and wider policy communities purposely relied on the diffusion of Brazilian policies abroad through technical cooperation to obtain international recognition, and thus legitimacy, in domestic policy disputes. Examples range from cash transfers schemes, like *Bolsa Família,* to food security schemes, like the Food Acquisition Programme (PAA) and the National School Feeding Programme (PNAE), to name a few. For domestic policy coalitions, active "policy export" was seen as helping to secure domestic support for certain social policies at home under

[14] Interview with one member of an international organisation working on SSC (Brasília, 2019).

[15] For a critical discussion on the politics of screening, certification and standardisation in the context of SSC-related policy transfers, see Milhorance (2014), Porto de Oliveira (2017), and Waisbich and Haug (2022).

increasingly politicised settings (Milani & Lopes, 2014; Porto de Oliveira and Pal 2018; Waisbich et al., 2022).[16]

Yet, the golden years of Brazil's development cooperation did not last much. As the country became engulfed on acute political-economic turmoil, its international cooperation, and in particular South-South exchanges, became increasingly contested and difficult to sustain (Waisbich, 2020; Morais de Sá e Silva, 2021). While a relative withdraw from the agenda had been observed since the mid-2010s, as a political-economic crisis progressively took over Rousseff's government (Cesarino, 2019; Marcondes & Mawdsley, 2017; Suyama et al., 2016), this trend accelerated under the 2016–2018 Michel Temer interim government, and further radicalised between 2019 and 2022, under Bolsonaro.

Democratic backsliding and attempts to dismantle Brazil's development cooperation portfolio

While since 2016 the number of new cooperation projects and initiatives managed by the Brazilian Cooperation Agency (ABC) decreased considerably (Morais de Sá e Silva 2021), Bolsonaro and his closest allies intensified efforts to delegitimise and dismantle Brazilian development cooperation portfolio, alongside other agendas he considered "ideological" and "too aligned" with the Workers' Party.[17] Also here dismantling was pursued through different means: discursive paradigm shifts, defunding of policies, programmes and projects, and the elimination or downgrading of bureaucratic structures (including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-attached General Coordination Against Hunger—CGFOME/MRE and the General Coordination for Trilateral South-South Technical Cooperation with International Organizations at ABC). Moreover, a fear culture took over some of the most active institutions in this field, including ABC. This led bureaucrats to adopt rather discreet, under-the-radar, ways of working[18] in order to safeguard ongoing cooperation initiatives (Waisbich, 2020), but also, particularly in the case of ABC, to secure their own jobs, since most ABC staff are not permanent civil servants.[19]

Country's diplomatic activism on this agenda also shrunk. An example is the imbroglio surrounding Brazil's participation at the 2019 Second UN High-Level Conference on South-South Cooperation (BAPA + 40), in Buenos Aires, a few months after Bolsonaro's inauguration. Brazil end up sending a rather technical, low-profile, delegation that—unlike the delegations from other "South-South cooperation champions" such as India and China—played a low-key role and refrained from championing events and showcasing its role of a major actor in this field.

Despite the dismantling efforts, Brazilian development cooperation survived. Behind this "unlikely" resilience lies some features of this incipient policy field (and how it works in Brazil). Normally described as challenges to its consolidation as a full-fledged policy and political field in the country, these features have, nonetheless, served as ramparts or obstacles to more radical forms of policy dismantling. First, the decentralised nature of Brazilian international technical cooperation and its reliance on domestic knowledge and

[16] Interviews with former civil servants who worked on international cooperation initiatives related to food security (São Paulo, 2018).

[17] Interviews with FNDE staff and members of international organisations working on SSC (Brasília, 2018 and 2019).

[18] Interviews with ABC staff and members of international organisations working on SSC (Brasília, 2019).

[19] Idem.

policy actors and experts within numerous specialised state bureaucracies as well as in public universities (Morais de Sá e Silva, 2021). Second, the high dependence on international organisations, notably UN specialised agencies. Besides a special partnership with UNDP for the operationalisation of Brazilian international technical cooperation in third countries, the country collaborates with many other UN entities to share Brazilian "policy solutions" to other countries. Partners within the UN system include the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP), UNICEF and many more. These "policy transfer partnerships" (Waisbich & Haug, 2022) have taken on different institutional forms (projects, programmes, centres) over the last decade and evolved alongside Brazil's own bilateral cooperation initiatives. In different ways, partnering with the UN and "trilateralising" Brazilian development cooperation have secured a certain degree of stability policy continuity on more "politically contentious" issues since the mid-2010s (Suyama et al., 2016; Morais de Sá e Silva 2021; Waisbich, 2022), as discussed below.[20] A final feature is the large number of experts who worked in government implementing cooperation projects during the PT era, many of which under non-permanent civil servants contracts, and subsequently left state bureaucracies to work for international or non-governmental organisations. Many "exiled bureaucrats" (Waisbich, 2022) kept loyalty to these "successful policies" while working outside the Brazilian state and joined larger policy and epistemic communities with more resources and opportunities to voice concerns and try to counter the dismantling of certain policies but also the unmaking of international cooperation initiatives sharing them beyond borders since the early 2000s.

Mobilising the international embeddedness of Brazilian policies: responses from national bureaucracies and policy communities to autocratisation at home

This section shows different ways through which the growing international embeddedness of Brazilian policies was mobilised by bureaucracies and wider policy networks as an additional strategy to counter radical policy change and dismantling at home. As mentioned before, since the early 2000s, the internationalisation of Brazilian "policy solutions" was pursued by national agencies and individuals within them as a tool to achieve both foreign policy and domestic policy politics goals. Under a rapidly accelerating autocratisation setting, however, the transnationalisation of national policies came to serve another purpose: responding to radical forms of policy dismantling at home.

In order to illustrate that, this section brings a set of examples pertaining to different policy domains and shows *how* civil servants and wider policy networks have generated and used this "international embeddedness" when negotiating with (authoritarian or radical reformers) incumbents. For analytical purposes, examples were clustered in two groups to demonstrate different types of mobilisation of "the international" (namely, in internal bureaucratic negotiations and in public advocacy efforts) and thus different repertoires of resistance-making. While different in nature, both strategies converged in their discursive mobilisation of "the international", particularly of the fact Brazilian policies had been internationally recognised as "best practices" and were being transferred to other countries.

[20] Idem.

Mobilising international embeddedness of policies behind doors

The first type of mobilisation of the international embeddedness of Brazilian policies observed happened *behind doors*, in internal negotiations with incoming radical reformist politicians and policymakers. The National School Feeding Programme (PNAE), a key component of Brazil's portfolio of poverty-alleviation and food security social policies. Created in 1955, the PNAE expanded since re-democratisation in the late 1980s, and notably during the 2000s under the PT rule, following a broader government-wide effort to promote the human right to food and strengthen food security in the country. The Ministry of Education-affiliated National Education Fund (FNDE) is the agency responsible for the Programme but its implementation is decentralised and relies on states and municipalities. In 2021, PNAE covered 39 million school pupils across Brazil (ÓAÊ and FINEDUCA, 2022). An important feature of Brazil's approach to school feeding is its connection to other social development programmes, like the Food Acquisition Programme (PAA). PAA is an institutional purchase scheme through which the Brazilian state buys agricultural produce from small farmers. By law, 30% of the food used in school meals in public schools must be bought from local small farming.[21] Such rule bridges both programmes and their complementing goals: improving food and nutritional security of pupils and offering a market-access for family farmers.[22]

Over the years, food security-related policy solutions like PNAE and PAA became increasingly internationalised. Both featured strongly in Brazil's "policy export" efforts at the regional and global levels, including through technical cooperation portfolio, led by ABC and the former CGFome/MRE, alongside other public agencies like FNDE but also the Ministry of Social Development (MDS) and the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA). Cooperation activities included bilateral South-South and trilateral schemes alongside UN entities like WFP and FAO, implemented mostly in Latin America and Africa. Examples range from a the Brazil-FAO International Cooperation Programme, launched in 2008, the Brazil-WFP Centre of Excellence Against Hunger, launched in 2011, as well as shorted-lived initiatives like the 2012–2016 Purchase from Africans for Africa (PAA Africa)[23] (CEAH and IPC-IG, 2013; Miranda et al., 2017; FAO, 2018; Magalhães & Buani, 2017; Dri and Molinari da Silva, 2021).[24] Throughout the years, FNDE became the main source of funding for Brazil's school feeding-related international technical cooperation initiatives. According to official data,[25] between 2015 and 2021, the Fund contributed with 19.2 million BRL (approximately 3.7 million USD) to the Brazil-WFP Centre of Excellence to implement school feeding initiatives mostly in African countries. It has also contributed with 20.2 million BRL between 2014 and 2020 to FAO, this time geared toward Latin America.

While more and more internationalised, "Brazil-grown" food security policies became target of dismantling efforts at home from the mid-2010s onwards. Dismantling efforts

[21] See Brazil's Federal Law 11.947/2009.

[22] On the concept of structured demand and its application as a tool to promote both food security and local development, see CEAH and IPC-IG (2013).

[23] Implemented by WFP and FAO in five African countries (Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique, Niger, and Senegal).

[24] Eventually both UN entities also host joint activities to disseminate the Brazilian model of "home-grown school feeding" (which connects local small-farming produce to school meals) including webinars. See, for instance, CEAH (2022).

[25] Information provided to the author by the Brazilian government through Access to Information Requests.

included successive scaling-down attempts as well as attempts to de-link school meals from local food purchase (Milhorance, 2022; Sabourin et al., 2020).[26] Under Bolsonaro, the federal government slashed school feeding-related transfers to states and municipalities and blocked Congressional attempts to adjust transfer amounts based on inflation rates (ÓAÊ and FINEDUCA, 2022; CNS, 2022). While severely weakened, PNAE was not abolished.

While there are many reasons why the complete dismantling of the Programme was never achieved (including the political cost for the Bolsonaro government to openly close the programme targetting school pupils and interests of subnational politicians to rather keep it running), in the eyes of certain policy experts in this field, the sharing of Brazil's school feeding "model" abroad and FNDE's senior leadership own participation in international cooperation initiatives might have contributed to the resilience of the Programme, or at the minimum, have provided bureaucrats and policy communities with a mobilisation resource. It did do by symbolically reinforcing the importance existing policy ideas and instruments, like the linkages with local small farming, and thus locking in (*travando* and *blindando*, in the words of one interviewee[27]) more sceptical political leaders, notably since 2016.

According to one interviewee, career civil servants familiar with the technicalities of PNAE are the ones who strategically used Brazil's international cooperation to lock-in the very dismissive incoming political establishment, notably the more radical far-right ideological figures who took leadership positions within the Fund during Bolsonaro years.[28] Career civil servants took new appointed managers to international fora, such as the Rome-based UN organisations or the school feeding networks at the African Union "for them to understand and see that Brazil is widely mentioned" in these spaces, in the words of one interviewee.[29] They also used "the positive results" of international cooperation programmes as arguments in internal policy discussions and funding negotiations. According to another interviewee, FNDE's participation in Brazil's cooperation initiatives featured strongly in technical notes drafted by career civil servants to defend the PNAE in internal negotiations.[30] Still according to them, mentioning these international connections served not only to convince new (and often sceptical) leadership of the value of sharing Brazilian experience with other countries, but also of the intrinsic value of the innovative components of the "Brazilian solution", like the institutional purchases, that were, in the words of interviewees, "so widely recognised outside the country".[31]

In the end, despite PNAE's many reverses at home, particularly between 2019–2022, and despite the low priority given by the Bolsonaro administration to Brazil's development cooperation agenda, the export of Brazil's food security policies, programmes, policy ideas and instruments was not discontinued. School feeding-related cooperation initiatives kept occurring, mostly through previously agreed-upon trilateral schemes alongside

[26] Interviews with FNDE staff and members of international organisations working on SSC (Brasília, 2018 and 2019).

[27] Interview with one member of an international organisations working on SSC (Brasília, 2019).

[28] Under Bolsonaro government, this group of people were called *Olavistas*, after Bolsonaro's intellectual guru Olavo de Carvalho.

[29] Idem.

[30] Interview with a FNDE staff (Brasília, 2018). The use of technical notes is one of the strategies identified by Lotta et al. (2023) in their mapping of bureaucratic responses to democratic backsliding and policy dismantling in Brazil.

[31] Interviews with FNDE staff and members of international organisations working on SSC (Brasília, 2018 and 2019).

international organisations, such as the Brazil-WFP Centre of Excellence and the Brazil-FAO International Cooperation Programme (Lima et al., 2022; Luiz & Milani, 2022; Waisbich et al., 2022). What is more, the Brazilian government, through FNDE, kept transferring funds to UN entities to run South-South cooperation activities. Still according to official data from FNDE, between 2019 and 2020, FAO received 8 million BRL, while WFP received 6.2 million BRL between 2019 and 2021.

As this brief account shows, in oral or written form, through meetings or technical notes, bureaucrats have used their agency—or "creative experimentation" (Abers, 2021)—to try convincing sceptical leadership of the importance of maintaining international cooperation initiatives and certain policy arrangements and instruments in the field of food security. They did so mostly by appealing to the international recognition of Brazilian policy experiences, and to the status and prestige such recognition granted to the country and to the very institutions (and individuals) in charge of implementing them.

Mobilising international embeddedness of policies in public arenas

The second type of mobilisation of the international embeddedness observed refers to public advocacy efforts by bureaucrats and policy experts to defend policies from attacks or dismantling efforts by ruling political elites. This was done through public statements (public letters and op-eds) signed by Brazilian civil servants (both former and current), as well as by policy experts not or no longer in post. In their public defence of policies under attack, these actors explicitly associate the intrinsic value of threatened policy ideas, initiatives, and instruments with their international embeddedness, appealing to their international certification as "best practices" or to existing policy transfer and development cooperation initiatives by the Brazilian government.

A first example here also relates to the food security domain, but this time focuses on a different instrument: the National Council for Food and Nutritional Security (CONSEA). First established in 1993, the Council was reinvigorated in 2003 as part of a greater priority to food and nutritional security under the Workers' Party rule. After the 2016 impeachment, CONSEA was downgraded by the interim federal administration and then extinguished in 2019 (through an Executive Decree signed by Bolsonaro in his first day in office) (Lima et al., 2022).[32]

When advocating for the return of CONSEA, experts often highlighted the Council's role in championing, monitoring, and improving official policy solutions already internationally recognised by the UN as improving food security and taking Brazil "out of the FAO's Hunger Map" in 2014. An example of this thinking can be seen in an op-ed published as a blog post at the National Health Foundation (Fiocruz) website that highlights the fact that Brazil "achieved international recognition in the area and became a reference for numerous countries" (Jaime, 2019). The same op-ed goes on by saying that among the factors emphasised by international nutrition experts contributing to Brazil's achievements in this agenda was the creation of CONSEA. Similar arguments are found in a technical note from the Federal Public Prosecution Service (MPF) sent to Congress in 2019 (MPF, 2019) and in international petitions led by civil society organisations, both against the dissolution of CONSEA. Because CONSEA was a participatory mechanism, civil society

[32] As one of the initial executive acts, the new government of Lula da Silva, in January 2023, has reinstated CONSEA.

strongly mobilised against its elimination, including beyond borders. Transnational mobilisation by Brazilian civil society actors and their international peers, like FIAN International, aimed at gathering international support to re-instate CONSEA, raising concerns about violations to the right to food in Brazil (Recine et al., 2020).

A second case of public advocacy efforts is found in the case of the Single Registry (*Cadastro Único*), a social protection targeting tool employed by the Brazilian government since the early 2000s to identify vulnerable families for cash transfers as well as services and in-kind transfers, including utility tariff discounts (World Bank, 2020). While less famous than Brazil's conditional cash transfer scheme, *Bolsa Família* (Morais de Sá e Silva, 2017; Saguin and Howlet, 2019), as a policy instrument the Registry has also called attention of social protection experts around the world and became object of international cooperation and policy transfer. The global circulation of *Cadastro Único* happened through similar policy transfer mechanisms, including technical visits of foreign delegations, international seminars, and the documentation of the "Brazilian experience" to external audiences (through technical notes, policy briefs, one-pagers, etc.) (Waisbich & Haug, 2022). Part of this knowledge dissemination was done by Brazil-based social protection experts working for Brazil-UN partnerships, such as the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth, and Social Protection.Org, and the World Without Poverty platforms (Mostafa et al., 2007; Direito et al., 2016).

In 2021, Bolsonaro decided to extinguish *Bolsa Família* and launched a new cash transfer programme (named *Auxílio Brasil*), which would also rely on a different targeting instrument. To protest these changes, individuals that held the position of directors of the Single Registry across different administrations in the past—"from FHC to Dilma" as one of authors describes it (see Bartholo, 2022) —published an op-ed in the largest newspaper in the country . Claiming a non-partisan, technical, opinion on the matter, these experts claimed Bolsonaro's actions ignored "decades of work," in their own words, on this targeting instrument. The letter went on stating the *Cadastro Único* was "one of the most widely recognised social technologies to identify vulnerable people" and that changes would "undermine the capacity to target cash transfers and threatens two decades of an internationally recognised project" (Bartholo et al., 2022).

The final example under this cluster is the public defence of Brazil's electronic vote machine. In July 2022, when Bolsonaro and his allies attempted to cast doubt on the levels of trust of the national electoral system ahead of 2022 Presidential elections, Brazilian diplomats published a letter, through their union association (*Associação dos Diplomatas Brasileiros*), defending the electronic voting system, and the Brazilian electoral system more broadly. In their public letter, these career civil servants highlighted that e-voting machines were "a reference to the world" (Oliveira, 2022):

> *"Since its implementation, in 1996, the Brazilian electronic voting system has been the object of repeated demands for international cooperation and for knowledge and technology transfer. Throughout that time, Brazilian diplomacy has always witnessed high standards of reliability that have become an international reference inseparable from the image of Brazil as one of the largest and most solid democracies in the world"* (Associação dos Diplomatas Brasileiros, 2022. Our translation).

In the case of e-voting machines, public statements explicitly framed their defence arguments around the idea of an international recognition of the Brazilian electronic system materialised in the numerous demands received from other countries to learn from the Brazilian experience. Frequent visits by foreign delegations was also an argument used by the Brazilian Electoral Court (TSE). In an official release from 2021, TSE mentioned that, until

then, "64 countries and the European Commission" visited the country to get to learn more about Brazilian electronic voting system and "bring our technology to their own country" (TSE, 2021). At that time, TSE had technical cooperation agreements with 12 countries and three international organisations.

To conclude this section, the examples discussed above show different responses by bureaucratic actors and wider policy communities that tried to discursively mobilise the international embeddedness of a set of policies and policy instruments to defend policies under attack by increasingly autocratic politicians. The main arguments put forward by bureaucrats and policy experts include, first, the international recognition and certification, mainly by UN entities, of "Brazil-grown best practices". Second, the international recognition by peers, which made Brazil a "hub" in global policy travel, sharing its policy solutions with other countries, mostly through (South-South) technical cooperation. Third, albeit less visibly mobilised, the fact that Brazil already had initiatives in place and it would be detrimental to bilateral or institutional relations to have to suspend activities. Finally, across the different policy domains and through different ways (collectively or individually, in closed doors or in public advocacy efforts), bureaucrats and policy experts not only alerted incumbents about a potential international status/reputation loss but also advanced global policy expertise-based arguments to raise the political costs of dismantling, including the idea of a "going against a UN certification." Such finding is interesting also beyond the Brazilian case, as backlash against science and evidence-based policymaking has been a widely documented autocratisation strategy across the world (Brito et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This paper argues that Brazil's recent trajectory as a "policy exporter" and a "rising power in international development" allowed for additional forms of international embeddedness that have been strategically used—at the discursive level—to respond and try shielding national policies from dismantling in times of autocratisation. It shows how the internationalisation of Brazilian "successful" policies, programmes, and the ideas and instruments that constitute them, often through state-led technical cooperation, became yet another transnational resource national actors could mobilise to counter radical policy change and dismantling in times of autocratisation. The many processes that comprise the internationalising of one's policies (from certification to the actual transfer/sharing initiatives), it is argued, allowed for domestic groups, including civil servants and national policy communities, to expand their resistance strategies.

While is widely acknowledged that during this time Brazilian bureaucrats and policy communities faced many constrains to resist and several policies were indeed dismantled, what we called here the *international embeddedness*—borrowing from Bauer et al. (2021)—of certain policies did constitute potential additional resources for mobilisation against dismantling. It is plausible to believe that in some cases such international embeddedness might have also contributed to the resilience of certain policies and initiatives. Such resilience grew less out of concrete institutional constraints (as discussed in the International Relations literature around the lock-in effect) than out of the very transnational mobilisation process. There "the international" became a symbolic-discursive tool advanced by bureaucrats and policy communities to respond and counter radical change or dismantling.

Using a set of emblematic examples, in fields as diverse as food security, social protection, and electoral systems, the paper showed that when facing different forms of policy dismantling since the mid-2010s (first amid growing pushes for fiscal austerity and mounting political turmoil and then during the ruling of Jair Bolsonaro), current and former civil servants alongside wider national policy communities made both implicit and explicit usages of international arenas and actors. Appealing to "the international" was seen as another extra argument when negotiating with power holders why certain policies were worth being kept as well as to publicly denounce dismantling efforts and shame official authorities leading on those. Undoubtedly, Brazil's continuous engagement in (South-South) international technical exchanges, or international cooperation more broadly, were an important part of what international embeddedness meant for these policy actors and featured (in more or less explicit ways) in their argumentative efforts.

Overall, the strategic use of transnational arenas by national bureaucrats and policy communities mapped here fit a spectrum of both individual decisions and well as collective action. They go from classic (internal) intra-bureaucratic negotiations to public-facing activist strategies based on contentious politics repertoires like writing op-eds and public letters. Ultimately, these attempts at "jumping scales" and strategically transnationalising the contention was above all a strategy based on discursive politics, with more symbolic than material implications. It clearly aimed at mobilising perceived legitimacy and reputation gains (for the country, the government, for specific public agencies, and for ruling elites) coming from the very international embeddedness of certain Brazilian policies.[33]

Going back to the nexus between autocratisation, radical policy dismantling and transnational bureaucratic responses to them, it is important to reiterate that the fate of the policies and instruments under attack discussed here have unfolded in different ways. The attacks on e-voting machines generated strong social and bureaucratic mobilisation, both in domestic and transnational arenas, and triggered institutional checks-and-balances that did managed to prevent dismantling. In other cases, however, radical changes did take place and ended up reducing the scale and scope of policies (such as in the National School Feeding Programme and the Single Registry) or led to the very extinction of programmes and structures, as in the case of the National Council for Food and Nutritional Security, CONSEA.

Even if systematically assessing the outcomes of these mobilisations or discussing the conditions under which they could potentially succeed fall outside of the scope of this paper, the findings here do lay the ground for future research endeavours around the impact of transnational mobilisation in times of autocratisation in Brazil and beyond. Certainly, transnational mobilisation by policy actors cannot be taken as the main explanatory factor behind the fate of certain policies under autocratisation. Still, and despite the uncertain impact of discursive usages of Brazilian policies' international embeddedness to counter policy dismantling at home, these findings help strengthening the existing body of knowledge around transnational policy processes. From a broader policy sciences perspective,

[33] These have been widely discussed in the specialised literature as soft power and status-seeking strategies (see Faria 2012; Leite et al. 2014; Coelho and Inoue 2018; Esteves et al. 2020) pursued by the country as a foreign policy strategy. For a discussion, on particular ministries and their internationalisation strategies, see Leite et al. 2015 and Waisbich 2022 for the Social Development Ministry (MDS) or Leite 2016 for the Brazilian agricultural research company, Embrapa.

the paper concurs with claims on the growing legitimacy of international organisations in domestic policy debates as a source of authoritative knowledge. The reiterate use of "the international recognition" (or "the UN recognition") of certain Brazilian policy solutions exemplifies the importance of the international certification of "best practices" for power dynamics and negotiations taking place within countries. Simultaneously, from a perspective of Brazilian policy studies, the paper shows variegated forms of international embeddedness of domestic policies. These include more diffuse forms of embeddedness through the recognition by the UN Development System of "Brazil-grown policy solutions", or more concrete ones provided for by existing development cooperation initiatives championed by Brazil with or without UN entities. It also includes embeddedness of civil servants and policy networks, through the international linkages bureaucrats and policy experts have with policy arenas beyond borders. Equally related to the study of Brazilian policy dynamics, the unlikely use of Brazil's "policy export" as an argument against domestic policy dismantling under Bolsonaro helps further cementing development cooperation, and South-South cooperation, as a policy and political field in the country (Milani, 2018). It reinforces its role as a legitimacy or soft power-seeking tool by national actors in domestic policy battles, further grounding it in domestic politics through its usage by national bureaucracies (including diplomats and line-ministry civil servants) and by wider policy communities. In the end, the manifestations of the international embeddedness of the state, policies, and civil servants in Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) mapped here offer valuable insights for ongoing discussions on the potential sources of policy resilience in times of democratic erosion and open contribute to a much-needed conversation on transnational policy processes.

Appendix

See Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 Profile of interviewees

Type of organisation	Number of interviews conducted
Governmental organisations	46
Non-governmental organisations	8
International organisations	6
Research organisations	16

Table 2 List of organisations

Organisation name	Type of organisation
ABC—Brazilian Cooperation Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Governmental organisation
Articulação SUL—South-South Cooperation Research and Policy Centre	Research organisation
BNDES—Brazilian National Development Bank	Governmental organisation
Cebrap—Brazilian Centre for Analysis and Planning	Research organisation
CERESAN—Reference Centre on Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security, Rural Federal University of Rio de Janeiro	Research organisation
CGFome—Former General Coordination of International Action against Hunger, Government of Brazil	Governmental organisation
CGU—Office of the Comptroller General	Governmental organisation
Conectas Human Rights	Non-governmental organisation
DIEESE—Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socio-Economic Studies	Non-governmental organisation
Embrapa—Brazilian Agricultural Research Company	Governmental organisation
ENAP—National Public Administration School	Governmental organisation
ESG—Brazilian War College	Research organisation
FASE—Federation of Organs for Social and Educational Assistance	Non-governmental organisation
Federal University of Santa Catarina	Research organisation
FGV—Getulio Vargas Foundation	Research organisation
FNDE—National Fund for Educational Development, Government of Brazil	Governmental organisation
IBASE—Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analysis	Non-governmental organisation
INESC—Institute for Socioeconomic Studies	Non-governmental organisation
IPC-IG—International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth	International organisation
IPEA—Institute of Economic Applied Research	Governmental organisation
Ministry of Education, Government of Brazil	Governmental organisation
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Brazil	Governmental organisation
Ministry of Health, Government of Brazil	Governmental organisation
Ministry of Justice, Government of Brazil	Governmental organisation
Nike Consultoria	Research organisation
PUC-Rio—Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro	Non-governmental organisation
SAGI—Office of Evaluation and Information Management, Government of Brazil	Governmental organisation
SESAN—Food and Nutritional Security Secretary, Government of Brazil	Governmental organisation
Strategic Affairs Secretariat, Presidency Office, Government of Brazil	Governmental organisation
TCU—Federal Court of Accounts	Governmental organisation
United Nations Development Programme in Brazil	International organisation
United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization in Brazil	International organisation
United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund in Brazil	International organisation
University of Brasilia	Research organisation
WFP CEAH—World Food Programme Centre of Excellence Against Hunger in Brazil	International organisation

Acknowledgements The author would like to thank the research participants who agreed to collaborate with this research through formal and informal interviews. My sincere appreciation to the three anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of the paper and valuable feedback as well as to Osmany Porto de

Oliveira, Michelle Morais de Sá e Silva and Tuba Agartan, who offered their valuable inputs to a first version of this paper during the Conference on Policy Process Research (Denver, January 2023).

Funding This research received support from a series of travel and research grants and allowances between 2017 and 2023, from the Newnham College at the University of Cambridge, as well as from the John Fell Fund and the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies at the University of Oxford.

Declarations

Competing interests The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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