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# Milícias in Rio de Janeiro: deconstructing the myth of a violent everyday peace through a feminist perspective

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*Milícias* have proliferated across Brazil, engaging in criminal activities while maintaining close connections to the Brazilian state and politicians. They seek political validation by presenting themselves as combating drug traffickers and reducing violence, positioning peace and security as fundamental to their political appeal. Therefore, examining the role of peace within these criminal organizations through the lens of peace and conflict studies provides valuable insights into how Brazilian militias work. Through an analysis of the rhetoric used by politicians, the media, and residents in areas under *milícias*' control, it becomes apparent that these criminal groups assert their role in establishing a form of "everyday peace." However, this form of peace is inherently violent, resulting in a paradoxical concept of 'violent everyday peace.' Consequently, the feminist framework's emphasis on the public/private distinction and the continuum of violence becomes crucial in addressing this paradox. By applying this feminist concept, it becomes evident that *milícias* generate a limited sense of peace in the public sphere while perpetuating violence in the private domain. Private violence, however, is often overlooked by those unaffected by *milicia* control, allowing these groups to garner political support. These findings enrich the study of criminal organizations in Brazil and the concept of everyday peace, which has not been previously explored in the context of Brazilian *milícias*.

## KEYWORDS

*milícias, everyday peace, feminism, Brazil, democracy, criminal organizations*

## 1 Introduction

"Some milicianos have nothing to do with 'gatonet', selling gas. As he earns 850 reais per month, which is the wage of a Military Police soldier or a fireman, and he has his gun, he organizes the security in his community"<sup>1</sup> (Bolsonaro, 2008, author's translation<sup>2</sup>).

1 In Brazil, 'gatonet' means an illegal installation of a TV signal by cable.

2 Original citation: "Existe miliciano que não tem nada a ver com "gatonet," com venda de gás. Como ele ganha 850 reais por mês, que é quanto ganha um soldado da PM ou do bombeiro, e tem a sua própria arma, ele organiza a segurança na sua comunidade."

Jair Bolsonaro, former president of Brazil, declared this in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies in 2008. In 2018, now a candidate for the Brazilian presidency, Bolsonaro complemented this perspective, proclaiming that where *milicianos*<sup>3</sup> act, there is no violence (Betim, 2018). The logic of a local person, a member of the state security apparatus, who decides to assure the security of 'his' community constitutes one of the features of the groups in Brazil known as *milícias*.<sup>4</sup> *Milícias* are criminal organizations, frequently composed of individuals related to the state security apparatus, that control territories in Brazil and create monopolies of goods and security through extortion. The individuals who participate in *milícias*, known as *milicianos*, propelled the idea that their presence would diminish violence, especially in the 2000s (Desmond Arias, 2013; Chaves, 2016; Araujo, 2019; Hinz and Vinuto, 2022). Since then, *milicianos* have had a profound impact on Brazilian democracy. *Milicianos* and people close to *milícias* have threatened citizens to vote for specific candidates (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008; Desmond Arias, 2014), bribed deputies (Extra, 2019), and were accused of killing well-known politicians, such as Marielle Franco<sup>5</sup> (Pierre and Martins, 2024). Beyond their direct negative impact on Brazilian democracy, some authors argue that *milicianos* and Bolsonaro share an ideological component of combating violence through militarization (Rodrigues and Del Río, 2019; Manso, 2020a).

This alleged combat of violence corresponds to what some authors call the *milícias*' "myth of primitive pacification" (Werneck, 2015, p. 434). This myth is structured around the idea that these paramilitary groups represent a communitarian form of auto-defense, opposing the perils of drug trafficking (Werneck, 2015). Creating security was fundamental to *milícias*' expansion, including their entrance into politics (Desmond Arias, 2013). In 'democratic Brazil,' leaders of such criminal organizations became even deputies (Buer, 2022). In line with the citations above, scholars even argue that Jair Bolsonaro has some connections to *milícias* (Manso, 2020a; Buer, 2022). For some, this connection is based on friendship with *milicianos* (Manso, 2020a, 2020b). Indeed, the Brazilian former president won the presidential elections in most areas under *milicianos*' control in Rio de Janeiro (Rodrigues and Del Río, 2019, p. 1).

Therefore, based on the literature, it is possible to affirm that *milícias* have close connections to politics and directly impact Brazilian democracy (Manso, 2020a; Lins and Machado, 2023). However, few studies have discussed the role of peace and security regarding the political appeal of *milícias* and its impact on local politics. Rodrigues and Del Río (2019) are exceptions as they affirm that the ideological connection between Bolsonaro and *milícias* is based on the common understanding that violence is necessary to maintain order. I argue that a narrative of creating peace and guaranteeing security stands at the core of *milícias*' political appeal. Interviews conducted in the 2000s with people living in areas under

*milícias*' control found a local perspective that those areas were at peace (Zaluar and Conceição, 2007; Cano and Ioot, 2008). As evident in Bolsonaro's statement, *milícias* allegedly exist to safeguard the security of local communities. The literature demonstrates that the presence of *milicianos* leads to a decrease in shootouts, which residents perceive as an improvement compared to other areas (Cavalcanti, 2023). Moreover, some *milícias* arose from within residents' associations, including in their 'birthplace' Rio das Pedras, which creates a perspective that they are an endemic force for peace (Zaluar and Conceição, 2007; Misse, 2011; Desmond Arias, 2014; Manso, 2020a; Pinheiro, 2022).

Thus, because of their local, political, and security components, everyday peace is an optimal conceptual tool for engaging with the *milícias* phenomenon in Brazil. This piece utilizes this concept from peace studies to interrogate whether *milícias* create a form of everyday peace as suggested in political narratives. Recently, some studies have claimed the necessity of utilizing peace studies theories to research criminal organizations in Latin America (Ferreira and Richmond, 2021; Ferreira, 2021; Buer, 2022, 2024; Ferreira and Maschietto, 2024). Notwithstanding this, *milícias* have been mainly studied from the perspective of criminology (Gomes et al., 2021; Lins and Machado, 2023). Thereby, the concept of everyday peace offers a promising approach to *milícias*. The literature that applies everyday peace to the context of Rio de Janeiro has focused on areas controlled by drug traffickers (Buer, 2022, 2024). The specificities of *milícias*, namely their claims for creating peace, contribute to the discussion about everyday peace, representing an innovation in peace and conflict studies.

As argued, peace stands at the core of *milícias*' impact on Brazilian democracy. Thus, I will start my analysis by presenting the theoretical debates on everyday peace. Then, I will introduce the debate on the *milícias* and discuss how these paramilitary groups attempted to portray themselves as everyday peace creators. I will give special attention to the 2000s because this period is when *milicianos* received more political open support (Cano and Duarte, 2012; Werneck, 2015; Hinz and Vinuto, 2022). *Milícias*' early days are crucial to comprehend how they function as their later expansion also happened due to the support received in the 2000s. To conduct this analysis, I will use data from official sources and a research center specialized in criminal groups in Rio de Janeiro to consider violence measurements in areas controlled by *milícias*. I will also utilize data from more prominent local newspapers and community-based newspapers to debate local narratives concerning the *milícias*.

To interrogate if *milícias*' actions can be considered a form of everyday peace I will discuss their impact in two components: 1- physical violence and 2- the media. The data analysis reveals a contradiction: while there are elements that allow the depiction of *milícias* as a source of everyday peace, their violent component is undeniable; this, in turn, creates a theoretical paradox: a violent everyday peace. Thus, I argue that feminist conceptualizations, namely the continuum of violence and the distinction between the public and private domains, are crucial to explain *milícias* violent behavior. Using feminist concepts to address *milícias* is still a developing approach in the literature. The work of Hinz and Vinuto (2022) is one of the few studies with this conceptual framework. While their work discusses how masculinities frame *milicianos*' behavior (Hinz and Vinuto, 2022), this research examines how dichotomies shape *milícias*' political appeal. Feminist scholars have questioned the boundaries between peace and violence, pointing to the existence of a continuum

3 *Milicianos* is the term used to describe those who participate in Brazilian *milícias*.

4 Because *milícias* in Brazil have a particular modus operandi, I used the term in Portuguese rather than the usual translation "militia."

5 Marielle Franco was a local deputy in the city of Rio de Janeiro who was assassinated in March, 2018. In March, 2024, Domingos Brazão and Chiquinho Brazão were considered guilty of ordering the murder. Both were connected to *milícias* (Pierre and Martins, 2024).

of violence (Cockburn, 2004). Moreover, the “violent everyday peace paradox” only occurs because of the distinction between public and private. I argue that *milícias*’ violence is eminently located at the private level, which propels their political appeal. Therefore, only by overcoming the public/private distinction can one comprehend *milícias*’ impact on Brazilian democracy.

## 2 Peace, the everyday and feminist thought

### 2.1 Peace and security

Before examining the theoretical debate on everyday peace, it is necessary to discuss the concepts of peace and security. These two terms appear intertwined in many excerpts throughout this manuscript. The media, politicians, local actors, and scholars utilize both concepts when analyzing or presenting the role of criminal organizations in Latin America, specifically in Brazil. Still, security and peace are different, and a conceptual clarification is, thus, necessary.

I must note that a third concept complicates this conceptual debate, often used in Brazil: pacification (*pacificação*). Pacification emerged in the public discourse in the 2010s when the state of Rio de Janeiro implemented the Pacifying Police Units (*Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora*, UPP). The UPP was a public security project that sought to ‘pacify’ favelas controlled by drug traffickers. The state claimed the UPP aimed to bring “peace to the communities” (Cano and Ribeiro, 2016, p. 368). One of the central police operations in this period was *Choque de Paz* (Peace Shock), which strove to ‘pacify’ Rocinha, the city’s largest favela (Manso, 2020a, p. 162). However, although the state claimed to create peace with this project, some authors have identified that the idea of ‘pacification’ represented a suppression of individual rights in these communities (Leite, 2014). This pacification was far from peaceful. Police forces continued to misbehave, using excessive force (Leite, 2014). Even though pacification appeared in the public discourses as a quasi-synonym of peace, this concept tends to be applied more specifically to UPP. Thus, although acknowledging its usage is pivotal, pacification will not have a central role in this research.

Security is a contested concept (Baldwin, 1997; Meerts, 2018; Nyman, 2023). *Security* is often defined as “a state of being free from danger or threat” (Meerts, 2018). Another controversial concept is peace (Obydenkova and Paffenholz, 2021; Söderström and Olivius, 2022; Gouveia Junior, 2023; Travouillon et al., 2023). Some works have brought peace closer to emotional aspects (Gouveia Junior, 2023), while others comprehend that the concept can be kept vaster enough to allow plural approaches (Söderström and Olivius, 2022). Instead of structuring stable definitions, others have stressed the need to consider local conceptualizations of peace (MacGinty, 2014) and security (Nyman, 2023). Following this perspective, presenting Brazilian perspectives on peace and security is relevant to this conceptual discussion.

A plurality of works has queried Brazilians about how they comprehend the idea of peace (Biaggio et al., 2004; De Souza et al., 2006; Rocha, 2012; Maschietto et al., 2022). Through a survey distributed among children from Porto Alegre, De Souza et al. (2006) found that participants connected peace to positive emotions (happiness, love, union) and the negation of violence (crimes,

robberies, physical violence). Biaggio et al. (2004), in a comparative study of how young adults and teenagers from five different countries perceive peace and violence, also found that Brazilian adults were those who gave more importance to robberies and physical violence. In a similar line, Maschietto et al. (2022) have identified that some Brazilian young people connect peace to the idea of tranquility. Buer (2024) identifies how people construct specific notions of what comprises peace in favelas, highlighting the need for social justice and ceasing police violence.

Most studies about how Brazilians frame the idea of peace identify that criminality influences how local actors understand violence and peace (Rocha, 2012). Hence, the negation of violence stands at the core of this conceptualization. Highlighting physical violence brings the concept of peace closer to security. Still, positive emotions (De Souza et al., 2006) and social justice (Buer, 2024) are ideas that take the concept of peace beyond security.

Nevertheless, the literature that dives into *milícias* lacks conceptual clarity concerning security and peace. When referring to *milícias*’ claims, some authors utilize the word “peace” (Zaluar and Conceição, 2007; Ribeiro and Oliveira, 2010), while others use “security” (Desmond Arias, 2013, 2014; Cavalcanti, 2023). Most scholars, however, utilize “peace” and “security” without discussing the two concepts. When analyzing how political scientists describe these criminal organizations, Gomes et al. (2021, p. 151) found “negative peace” as a term applied to Brazilian *milícias*. Zaluar and Conceição (2007) titled one of the most seminal works on Brazilian *milícias*: *Favelas sob o controle das Milícias no Rio de Janeiro, que paz?* (Favelas under *milícias*’ control in Rio de Janeiro, what peace?). The discourse shared at that period, and criticized by the authors, was that areas like Rio das Pedras lived in peace (Zaluar and Conceição, 2007, p. 95).

Local actors from Rio de Janeiro also convey *milícias* utilizing the word ‘peace.’ Many studies interviewed people from Rio de Janeiro, asking how they saw the *milícias*. In some, the interviewees used the word “peace” to describe the state created by *milicianos* (Zaluar and Conceição, 2007; Cano and Ioot, 2008). Some phrases elucidate this: “Rio das Pedras. It is a very strong *milícia* (...) Today, [the region] is in peace, it is pacified. Why? Because the guys took control (...). They do not profit from trafficking but from providing security” (Interviewee n° 6 in Cano and Ioot, 2008, author’s translation);<sup>6</sup> “We have a peace won by blood, do you understand?” (Rio das Pedras’ resident in Zaluar and Conceição, 2007, p. 95, author’s translation).<sup>7</sup>

As these excerpts demonstrate, peace and security appear in locals’ statements. Nonetheless, the boundary between the two concepts is not well-established. Therefore, in local discussions about *milícias*, peace is closely linked to security. Most studies about *milícias*, however, approach it through the discipline of criminology (Gomes et al., 2021), which enforces its security component. For this reason, this study will approach these criminal organizations through another

6 Original citation: “Rio das Pedras. É uma *milícia* bem forte, é como no Jardim Bangu, é uma *milícia* forte que ninguém domina aquela região ali. Hoje está na paz, está pacífico, por quê? Porque os caras tomaram conta, eles têm o ganho deles por fora, não ganham traficando, mas ganham dando segurança” (Interviewee n° 6 in Cano and Ioot, 2008).

7 Original citation: “Nós temos uma paz, conquistada por sangue, entendeu?” (Zaluar and Conceição, 2007, p. 95).

conceptual framework. Discussing *milicias* in terms of peace opens new avenues to studying these organizations.

## 2.2 Everyday peace

Peace Studies approaches have been seldom applied to contexts in which criminal organizations, such as *milicias*, act (Ferreira and Richmond, 2021; Ferreira and Maschietto, 2024). For Ferreira and Richmond (2021), similar to peacebuilding processes, violence in Latin America requires ‘peace settlements’ due to their mortality rates (Ferreira and Richmond, 2021, p. 161). Concerning the few exceptions that involve peace approaches to such contexts, some ascribe to the idea of peace formation (Ferreira and Richmond, 2021; Buer, 2022, 2024), while others apply concepts traditionally utilized in peace research, such as symbolic violence (Ferreira and Maschietto, 2024) or Johan Galtung’s work (Ferreira, 2017, 2021). A transversal facet of these works is their consideration of structural violence (Ferreira, 2021; Ferreira and Richmond, 2021; Buer, 2022, 2024; Ferreira and Maschietto, 2024). As aforementioned, *milicias* are usually analyzed under criminology, highlighting criminality rates and physical violence (Gomes et al., 2021). Hence, the application of peace and conflict studies approaches offers this fundamental contribution to the study of *milicias* by expanding the understanding of violence to the structural level.

In this nascent literature that applies concepts from peace studies to areas controlled by criminal organizations, the idea of the everyday is frequently used. Since *milicias* have a political component (Lins and Machado, 2023), the everyday approach materializes as paramount because it widens the comprehension of what can be deemed political (Guillaume and Huysmans, 2019). The concept of everyday peace has gained notable attention in the past two decades. If, in 2009, Richmond recognized that ‘everyday’ and ‘local’ needed deeper conceptual clarifications, the evolution of this approach made these concepts more straightforward. MacGinty (2014) defines it as follows: “The everyday is regarded as the normal habitus for individuals and groups, even if what passed as ‘normal’ in a conflict-affected society would be abnormal elsewhere.”

Converging the concepts of ‘everyday’ and ‘peace,’ MacGinty (2014, p. 553) defines: “[e]veryday peace refers to the practices and norms deployed by individuals and groups in deeply divided societies to avoid and minimize conflict and awkward situations at both inter- and intragroup levels.” The fundamental idea is that “experiences of peace (...) are fundamentally located in day-to-day life” (Berents, 2015, p. 193). Thus, some believe it requires approaches, measurements, and policies dealing with local perspectives on peace (MacGinty, 2013; Firchow, 2018).

The idea of ‘everyday’ in International Relations (IR) represents an expansion of practices, peoples, and spaces considered meaningful for researchers (Guillaume and Huysmans, 2019). This perspective highlights marginalized populations who suffer from insecurity but tend to be overlooked in traditional IR approaches (Berents, 2015). This expansion occurs because the everyday arguably sheds light on ordinary people or non-elites, as it proposes that even small actions, objects, and narratives have a political aspect (Guillaume and Huysmans, 2019).

The concept has practical application in areas such as peacebuilding. In this field, where the everyday arose “as a way of

countering the rigidity of formal, top-down frameworks,” the everyday highlights the importance of local temporalities, perspectives, and subjects (Randazzo, 2016, p. 4). Using this concept to approach issues such as *milicias*, in which power relations attain an intricate character, is fruitful because some approaches to the everyday comprehend that:

*Domination is not a top-down or vertical process but a horizontally enacted process in which political decisions, violence, and coercive state practices coexist and, in many instances, become entangled with the most banal economic practices that shape and reshape dominions (Guillaume and Huysmans, 2019, p. 7).*

The literature about the everyday also discusses the complexity of this concept when applied to peace. MacGinty (2014, p. 549) acknowledges that an approach focused on the ‘everyday’ also has the potential “to maintain division and thereby prolong conflicts.” Berents (2015), looking at the Colombian case, affirms that conflicts and peace coexist in marginalized peoples’ everyday lives. In profoundly divided societies, authors sometimes limit part of their approach to everyday “coexistence and tolerance” rather than everyday peace (MacGinty, 2014, p. 549).

Substantial differences exist among authors and approaches regarding the everyday. In this piece, I will initially focus on what I call “traditional everyday” approaches, including the seminal works of MacGinty and Richmond. This traditional everyday has been the target of criticism by scholars from different theoretical backgrounds (Maschietto et al., 2022). Sabaratnam (2013), for instance, points to its Eurocentric bias. In the meantime, based on a pragmatic critique, Bargaés (2020) demonstrates how difficult it has been to create a bottom-up approach to peace in practice, as peacebuilders have shown severe pessimism.

## 2.3 Feminist peace theory

The most significant critique of the everyday peace concept in this study comes from feminist thought. From a feminist perspective, the traditional everyday peace approach reproduces binary distinctions, such as between peace and war. Binary approaches create dichotomies that do not necessarily represent reality (Cockburn, 2004). Furthermore, feminists highlight how local power dynamics are hidden in some approaches to everyday peace, where the local is romanticized (Obydenkova and Paffenholz, 2021, p. 2). I argue that from this criticism, feminist scholars propose concepts and strategies necessary to comprehend *milicias* and their political appeal. As McLeod and O’Reilly (2019) affirm, incorporating feminist critique on peace and conflict studies represents a necessary step in fulfilling the objective of decolonizing this field.

Feminist theory is crucial for comprehending *milicias* and deconstructing any perspective that *milicianos* create peace. Feminist authors shed light on the typically binary perspectives of some approaches linked to everyday peace (Berents, 2015; Chandler, 2015; McLeod and O’Reilly, 2019). In feminist approaches to peace studies and international relations in general, a central viewpoint is that “dichotomies (...) reproduce gender relations of power” (Confortini, 2006, p. 346). The dichotomies created by non-feminist approaches define which issues will be studied at the political level, usually disregarding those issues considered inferiors, which include the



private and domestic levels (Enloe, 2014). Thus, the private domain, traditionally associated with women in a patriarchal society, remains invisible to mainstream political science.

Breaking with these dichotomies, feminist approaches to peace studies proposed new conceptualizations. The idea of a “continuum of violence” elucidates this conceptual innovation and is significant in explaining *milícias*. In the work of Cockburn (2004), the concept of continuum of violence reflected the understanding that violence does not cease in post-war contexts. Even more striking, Cockburn (2004, p. 43) affirms that “it is meaningless to make a sharp distinction between peace and war, prewar and postwar.” Blurring the strict division between peace and violence contributes to comprehending a phenomenon such as *milícias*. Therefore, when *milícias* claim that they create peace because shootouts decrease, they look to only one side of this socially complex environment.

Feminist approaches can clarify a plurality of dimensions usually disregarded concerning *milícias*. Regarding gender, *milicianos* are mainly men and follow a militarized masculinity (Hinz and Vinuto, 2022). For instance, investigations do not mention a single woman who participates in *Escritório do Crime*, the leading extermination group formed by *milicianos* (Extra, 2019). In Rio das Pedras, the birthplace of *milícias* in Rio de Janeiro, gender-based violence is widespread, as different reports in the local newspaper, *A Voz de Rio das Pedras*, enumerates (Estanislau, 2014; Habib, 2014; Souza, 2015). Most studies about *milícias* have not focused on all these dimensions.

Feminist theory in peace studies can also offer other contributions to addressing *milícias*' violent everyday peace. Indeed, the focus on the everyday is a “unifying aspect of feminist approaches” in peace and conflict studies (Smith and Yoshida, 2022, p. 4). However, when feminists apply their lenses to the everyday and peace studies more broadly, they propose overcoming the binary divisions of public/private (Kappler and Lemay-Hébert, 2021; Väyrynen et al., 2021; Yadav and Horn, 2021). Maintaining a binary public/private in traditional everyday approaches hides relations of power, violence, and roles between women and men (Kappler and Lemay-Hébert, 2021). Hence, feminist scholars highlight power dynamics, demonstrating the complexity of such dynamics at the local level (McLeod and O'Reilly, 2019). Indeed, feminists criticize the traditional everyday peace “for essentializing and romanticizing the ‘local’ and neglecting power dynamics” (Obydenkova and Paffenholz, 2021, p. 2). As Berents (2015) has claimed, in contexts such as Colombia, violence also arises locally.

### 3 The state, *milícias*, and democracy

Before delving into the association of *milícias*, politics, and the concept of everyday peace, it is vital to introduce how these criminal organizations emerged and boosted their leverage in Brazil. The first *milícia*, as understood in Brazil, arose in Rio das Pedras, in Rio de Janeiro (Misse, 2011; Manso, 2020a). Initially, people from this community started to organize a local structure to deter drug trafficking and other crimes in the area (Misse, 2011). Through death squads and police officers that habited the neighborhood, businesspeople started to pay taxes to ensure the region's ‘security’ (Misse, 2011; Desmond Arias and Barnes, 2017; Manso, 2020a). They identified that their businesses could grow by creating a more secure

environment. Rio das Pedras had one of the more thriving commerce in Rio de Janeiro peripheries, including bars and nightclubs (Aguião, 2011).

However, from the initial tax paid by businesspeople, those linked to the group paid to ‘guaranteed’ Rio das Pedras’ security started to force residents to pay for this ‘service’ (Misse, 2018). Until the early 2000s, the name usually attributed to this type of group was not *milícias*. They were referred to mainly as ‘*policia mineira*’. Nevertheless, in the early 2000s, these organizations substantially altered their modus operandi. Although ‘selling security’ through extortion continued to be one of their primary sources of revenue, they increasingly entered other markets, creating monopolies in services under the areas they controlled (Misse, 2011; Chaves, 2020). Selling gas, illegal access to cable television, and transportation were some of the different ‘services’ and ‘goods’ that *milicianos* forced residents to buy. At this point, they started being called ‘*milícias*’. For some authors, this change constituted an attempt to improve *milícias* image and to gain public support (Couto and Filho, 2019; Chaves, 2020).

Some *milícias*, including the ‘pioneer’ in Rio das Pedras, also have a local characteristic. Not only did they start as an initiative of local businesspeople, but their actions were also intertwined with resident associations. In the case of Rio das Pedras, the residents’ association, called *Associação de Moradores e Amigos de Rio das Pedras* (Association of Residents and Friends of Rio das Pedras, AMARP), played a pivotal function in *milícias*' proliferation (Zaluar and Conceição, 2007; Misse, 2011; Desmond Arias, 2013, 2014). Some authors associate *milícias* expansion in the neighborhood with a constant power that AMARP has enjoyed since the 1980s (Farias, 2007). Exemplifying the relationship between the local community, AMARP, and *milicianos*, Jorge Alberto Moreth coordinated the residents’ association for years until he was arrested because he participated in the *milícias* (Mello, 2021).

Still, these economic and local attributes are not distinctive enough to define *milícias* as a novel criminal organization. The fundamental aspects distinguishing *milícias* from other criminal organizations are their symbiotic relations with the state and its security apparatus and their seeking legitimacy through a discourse of creating peace (*Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro*, 2008). Buer (2022, p. 72) calls this connection “collaborative governance.” *Milícias* emerge because of the absence of public services in issues such as security or transportation (Ferreira and Nobre, 2024).

Scholars (Zaluar and Conceição, 2007; Desmond Arias, 2014; Manso, 2020a), the media (Araújo, 2005; Extra, 2019), and even deputy commissions of inquiry (*Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro*, 2008) acknowledge that many key members of *milícias* are people linked to the state security apparatus and that this linkage was fundamental to their growth. Many *milicianos* are active or retired police officers, firefighters, and others connected to public security. In a democratic context, in which the state is responsible for guaranteeing its citizens’ protection, the existence of *milícias* creates a contradiction: it indicates the state's incapacity to maintain complete control of territories while showing that the state's police forces can gain control of territories when acting outside the umbrella of the state. Some have argued that this demonstrates that *milícias* arose due to economic predatory interests (*Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro*, 2008). Otherwise, the individuals connected to these groups

would guarantee the locals' security when working for the state without needing to receive an extra tax imposed upon residents.

*Milicianos* enjoy parsimonious and even connivant behavior by the police because of their connection with the state security apparatus (Zaluar and Conceição, 2007, p. 98). The state security forces participate actively in Rio de Janeiro's violent context. The police force has participated in most confrontations recorded in Rio de Janeiro between 2017 and 2024 (Hirata and Couto, 2022). Most of the confrontations happened in areas under drug traffickers' control (Hirata and Couto, 2022). As investigations found, *milicianos* knew when the state would intervene in the areas under their control (Extra, 2019, p. 6).

Ties with the state also occur within the democratic political landscape. Using network analysis, Couto and Filho (2019, p. 2018) concluded that those *milicianos* closely linked to political positions have a more central role in *milícias*' networks. *Milicianos* have even entered politics. For instance, Nadinho and Jerominho, later arrested because of connections with *milícias*, were elected local and national deputies, respectively. In *A República das Milícias* (The *Milícias* Republic), Bruno Manso (2020a) describes how *milicianos* developed close connections with politicians. Manso (2020a) even presents the relationship that Jair Bolsonaro and his sons had with some people linked to *milícias*, such as Adriano da Nóbrega, who coordinated a network of death squads. Investigations have found that *milicianos* receive gifts from deputies (Extra, 2019, p. 6).

Considering its political ties, it is unsurprising that *milícias*' expansion and contraction are also connected to political developments. From 2006 until 2010, *milicianos* increased the areas under their domain by 177.5% (Hirata and Couto, 2022). However, their expansion stopped after a parliamentary commission about *milícias* (Hirata and Couto, 2022). The parliamentary commission also altered *milicianos*' behaviors, leading them to have a more hidden activity, avoiding the spotlights (Cano and Duarte, 2012). Only after 2018, they returned to rapidly expanding their territories. This recent expansion of *milícias* control occurred because of the economic crisis that Brazil and the state of Rio de Janeiro went through in 2015 (Pinto, 2019). The state had a smaller budget to invest in public security, allowing *milicianos* and drug traffickers to expand (Pinto, 2019; Fogo, 2024). Notably, some authors perceive the Federal Intervention in Rio de Janeiro as boosting *milícias* expansion (Hinz and Vinuto, 2022). In this case, the ideological support for a militarized combat against drug trafficking would have fostered *milicianos*' political appeal (Hinz and Vinuto, 2022). Therefore, *milícias*' expansions have connections to local political developments.

Finally, the other central characteristic of the *milícias* is their necessity, at least in their early days, to show themselves as protectors of local actors (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008; Misse, 2011; Werneck, 2015; Benmergui and Gonçalves, 2019). These groups sought to maintain a positive public perspective regarding their existence. They presented themselves as an alternative path to suppress drug traffickers and violence. As Desmond Arias and Barnes (2017, p. 353) affirm, “[*m*]ilícias generate legitimacy through their ability to deliver security and control government contracts that enable them to reinvest in the areas they control.” For Alves (in Ilha, 2021), *milícias* ideologically proposes that militarization and sharp attacks on drug traffickers can decrease violence in Brazil. On this behalf, *milícias* and Jair Bolsonaro's proposals have an ideological

convergence (Rodrigues and Del Río, 2019; Manso, 2020a; Ilha, 2021). Not surprisingly, in the last presidential election, some studies found that Bolsonaro obtained a robust victory in areas controlled by *milícias*, winning 90% of those areas in Rio de Janeiro (Lima, 2022).

Therefore, *milícias* have tight linkages with the Brazilian state and its democratic institutions. Its sources of revenue arose in domains in which the state could not fulfill some of its obligations, such as guaranteeing security, territorial planning, or public transportation (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008; Ferreira and Nobre, 2024). Moreover, legitimacy-seeking connects *milícias*, politics, and the idea of everyday peace, which in the literature is still underdeveloped. The following sections will focus on this political appeal to form a condition of everyday peace.

## 4 Materials and methods

As discussed, the literature indicates that *milícias* seek legitimacy and political support using a discourse of creating spaces of peace (Zaluar and Conceição, 2007; Cano and Ioot, 2008). This article delves into this discussion, focusing on the 2000s, a pivotal period in the emergence of these criminal organizations (Hinz and Vinuto, 2022). This emphasis in the 2000s is crucial for comprehensively answering if *milícias* can be a form of everyday peace.

To analyze physical violence, I use data from official sources and Fogo Cruzado, a university consortium that gathers information on criminal organizations to identify areas controlled by them. Furthermore, I present how the media portrays the physical violence perpetrated by *milicianos*. I draw on mass media and community-based newspaper excerpts to widen the perspectives. For the community-based newspaper, I prioritize *A Voz de Rio das Pedras*, established in 2013 in the community where the first *milícia* in Rio de Janeiro emerged. This newspaper has sections written by its journalists, but many excerpts are interviews with residents. It also has a section in which anyone can send comments to the newspaper. The comments published in this section are significant since they opened space for criticism, such as when a person affirmed that *A Voz de Rio das Pedras* was a newspaper working for the *milícia*<sup>8</sup> (Felix, 2014). Still, acknowledging that this newspaper does not encompass the totality of local perspectives, I complement the analysis by referring to studies with an ethnographic component (Aguião, 2011; Manso, 2020a).

Based on this analysis, I discuss *milícias* and everyday peace, proposing the necessity to overcome the distinction between the public and the private domains. To understand these two domains, I analyze the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry established in 2008 by the Rio de Janeiro state assembly (*Assembleia Legislativa Estadual do Rio de Janeiro, ALERJ*). The ALERJ's final report is considered a central milestone in the combat of *milícias*, used as an object of analysis by a few studies (Werneck, 2015; Couto and Filho, 2019; Pinheiro, 2022). This textual analysis allows me to identify the *milícias*' modus operandi in the private and public domains.

<sup>8</sup> The newspaper immediately refused such an accusation, affirming that the author of these allegations, Carlos Felix, was misinformed (Felix, 2014).

## 4.1 Direct/physical violence

*Milícias* did not occur merely as an imposition. They hold a political element (Lins and Machado, 2023). ALERJ's final report proves that the difference between *milícias* and drug traffickers stands in *milicianos* necessity to legitimize their actions as a lesser 'evil' (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008, p. 37). As Araujo (2019) points out, "the fear of living in fear" legitimized *milicianos*' actions. This legitimation usually came through the discourse that *milícias* guaranteed local security in the exceptionally violent context of Rio de Janeiro (Zaluar and Conceição, 2007; Araujo, 2019; Cavalcanti, 2023; Ferreira and Nobre, 2024). In Rio de Janeiro, these criminal groups claimed to liberate communities from drug trafficking (Cano and Ribeiro, 2016). Creating spaces where gun shootings became rarer than in other areas, *milicianos* also established the roots of their economic profits (Cavalcanti, 2023). Furthermore, with the spreading of discourses that highlighted the expelling of drug traffickers in the areas under *milícias*' control, more people from other peripheric regions decided to move to these places, including Rio das Pedras (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008).

Many of those people moved to areas under *milícias*' control in the expectancy of leaving behind violence and, especially, the constant shootouts and confrontations between the police and drug traffickers. Indeed, as recent data have found, areas under drug trafficking control have 3.71 times more chance of having confrontations between criminal groups or the police than in territories under *milícias* control (Hirata and Couto, 2022, p. 34). Only 31.6% of areas controlled by *milicianos* had confrontations in police incursions (Hirata and Couto, 2022, p. 35). Meanwhile, more than 70% of regions controlled by drug traffickers experienced confrontations between the police and criminals (Hirata and Couto, 2022, p. 35).

The number of murders by the police force in these areas is also meaningful. In 2019, for instance, between January and June, the police killed 813 people in the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro (Ramalho, 2019). None of these murders occurred in areas controlled by *milicianos* (Ramalho, 2019). Moreover, as cited, the police acted less violently in such territories. For some authors, this happens because of connivance with *milicianos* due to their linkage with the state security apparatus (Zaluar and Conceição, 2007; Ramalho, 2019).

As advanced in this article, *milícias* enjoyed a positive political perspective in the early 2000s. Thus, looking at criminality data in this period, one can find that some types of violence were infrequent in areas under *milícias*' control. Residents in those areas reported experiencing fewer gun shootings, fewer murders, and drug trafficking (Cano and Duarte, 2012; Zaluar, 2012; Barcellos and Zaluar, 2014). In 2007, Zaluar (2012, p. 342) indicated that 67% of residents in areas under drug traffickers' control heard frequent or always shootouts, while only 15% of interviewees from regions controlled by *milícias* reported listening to gun shootings. Assaults were also less frequently experienced by residents in areas under *milícias* control (26%) than in areas controlled by drug traffickers (47%) (Zaluar, 2012, p. 341). In 2014, a study concluded that drug traffickers were the reason behind 21.4% of violent lethality in Rio de Janeiro, while *milicianos* accounted for 8% (Dirk and Moura, 2017, p. 5). Another study using official data from 2015 corroborates these findings, affirming that 52% of murders with guns happened because of drug trafficking, and 10% occurred because of *milícias* (Minayo and Mariz, 2021, p. 5028).

Therefore, official data indicates that some crimes are less experienced in areas under *milícias*' control. However, other crimes rose in those areas, such as extortion and threats (Cano and Ioot, 2008; Cano and Duarte, 2012). Some ethnographic research has found that residents avoid talking about *milícias*, demonstrating the fear these dwellers share (Ribeiro and Oliveira, 2010; Aguião, 2011; Cano and Duarte, 2012; Cano et al., 2013; Manso, 2020a). Thereby, *milícias* have not ceased violence; they have simply altered the nature of violence in these areas. Still, other studies indicate that residents in areas controlled by *milícias* have experienced less physical violence. In a city where the police kill hundreds of citizens per year and shootouts are frequent, *milícias* might arguably create a type of everyday peace.

### 4.1.1 *Milícias* in the media

The idea that the presence of *milícias* reduces physical violence is not only corroborated by statistics of lethal violence, but also in the media. Particularly in the 2000s, *milícias* have been periodically portrayed as creating everyday peace. The perspective that *milicianos* expelled drug traffickers can be found in *O Globo*<sup>9</sup> newspaper in the 2000s (Chaves, 2016). Some editions reinforced how the military police ended drug trafficking dominations in some areas (Araújo, 2005). Although *O Globo* mentioned that extortions occurred, as Chaves (2016) concluded, some reports formed a flattering picture of *milícias*.

The same positive view appears in *Extra*, another major daily newspaper in Rio de Janeiro. When Rio das Pedras' *milícia* leader Félix Tostes was assassinated in 2009, an *Extra* report called him *paizão* (Big Father) of Rio das Pedras (Werneck, 2007, p. 3). The newspaper mentioned how residents felt devastated by the assassination of someone 'so appreciated' in the community and showed a social media post in which a person said that Tostes was responsible for "a community with tranquility, without trafficking and criminality" (Werneck, 2007, p. 3, author's translation<sup>10</sup>).

The same discourse resonated in *A Voz de Rio das Pedras*, the community-based newspaper established in Rio das Pedras, an area under *milícias* control. Residents recurrently affirmed that they had not witnessed the violence created by drug traffickers in other parts of the city (Corrêa, 2013; Mineiro, 2015). One even stated that they had chosen to live in Rio das Pedras because of the tranquility and peace experienced in the area (Ahmed, 2013). In one of the reports presented in the local newspaper, Jorge Moreth, the father of Jorge Alberto Moreth, who is in jail due to connections with *milícias*, corroborated RP's peaceful characteristics (Moreth, 2013).

In the 2000s, even politicians talked positively about *milícias* (Desmond Arias, 2014; Manso, 2020a). Eduardo Paes, at the time candidate for Rio de Janeiro's governor, said that *milícias* in Rio das Pedras "brought tranquility to the population" (Paes in Couto and Filho, 2019, p. 206). Indeed, in the early 2000s, Rio das Pedras became a social order model, legitimizing other *milícias* (Lins and Machado, 2023). Cesar Maia, former Rio de Janeiro's mayor, affirmed, in the 2000s, that "*milícias* are better than drug

9 *O Globo* is one of the most significant newspapers in the city of Rio de Janeiro and in Brazil.

10 Original Text: "uma comunidade tranqüila (*sic*), sem tráfico e sem bandidagem" (Werneck, 2007, p. 3).



traffickers” (Corrêa, 2007, p. 1, authors’ translation<sup>11</sup>). He even called these groups “autodefesas comunitárias” (communitarian auto-defense), which also attests to how he perceived *milícias* as local creators of security (Bottari and Ramalho, 2007, p. 1). Despite many politicians starting to avoid these narratives, they endure, as evidenced when Jair Bolsonaro said that some people defend *milícias* because where *milicianos* get paid, there is no violence (Betim, 2018).

## 4.2 *Milícias*: a violent everyday peace?

Therefore, until 2007, *milicianos* enjoyed some support from local actors, the media, and politicians. Since 2008, this has started to change, but some of their appeal has continued (Cano and Duarte, 2012). The data analyzed indicates that residents in areas controlled by *milícias* experience fewer cases of physical violence (e.g., shootouts, police violence), while they potentially experience more structural violence (e.g., threats, access to health). The discussion needed, then, is whether areas under *milícias*’ control can be considered as experiencing everyday peace. The response depends on how we define everyday peace.

MacGinty’s (2014) definition of everyday peace focuses on practices and norms that minimize conflict. In comparison with the territories controlled by drug traffickers, confrontations with the police diminished considerably in areas controlled by *milicianos*, as the data depicted above demonstrates. Furthermore, in areas such as Rio das Pedras, *milícias* have maintained control over that territory for decades. While economic and territorial conflict among different drug trafficking factions recurrently spurs violence in other neighborhoods, these conflicts did not impact some areas under *milícias*’ control, especially in the early 2000s. MacGinty (2014) also highlights that everyday peace happens in highly divided societies. Rio de Janeiro, with rival drug trafficking factions, the police, and *milicianos* disputing territories, matches this criterion. As a local organization with strict practices and norms to minimize physical violence, the perspectives on some *milícias*, such as the one that dominates Rio das Pedras, also fulfill MacGinty’s criteria. As MacGinty (2014) and other authors (Berents, 2015) acknowledge, violence does not cease entirely in the context of everyday peace. Thus, extortion and threats, the types of violence more frequently reported in areas under *milícias*’ control, can be considered a collateral effect of the decrease in physical violence.

Werneck’s myth of primitive pacification clarifies this connection:

*The milícia is represented as a local response to the dominance of drug trafficking, and, in a distant past, it would have represented a form of self-defense and, in consequence, of pacification, that is, of management of daily life capable of purging the armed trafficker (and, therefore, “violence”) from the zone of immediate influence over daily situations (Werneck, 2015, p. 344, author’s translation).<sup>12</sup>*

11 Original Text: “As milícias são melhores que o tráfico” (Corrêa, 2007, p. 1).

12 Original text: “a milícia é representada como resposta local ao domínio do tráfico e, em um passado distante, teria representado uma forma de autodefesa e, em consequência disso, de “pacificação,” isto é, de gestão do cotidiano capaz de expurgar o traficante armado (e, portanto, a “violência”)

Therefore, the pacification myth portrayed *milícias* as a local response that expelled drug traffickers, decreasing violence and conflicts through strict control of a territory. This territorial control diminished violent conflicts as the competition between drug cartels and the police ceased. However, under MacGinty’s (2014) definition, *milícias* can still be considered a form of everyday peace, which might foster their pacifying claim.

How to measure peace is another aspect recurrently discussed in the everyday peace literature (MacGinty, 2013; Firchow, 2018). Hence, MacGinty (2013) proposes that ‘everyday’ indicators, non-descriptive and prone to local actors’ perspectives about peace, could be used to measure peace. For him, allowing local actors to define peace is the best way to achieve peace in a specific context (MacGinty, 2013; Firchow, 2018). As the early 2000s declarations by local actors, media, and politicians demonstrated, the view that *milicianos* created peace emerged from many narratives. In the case of Rio das Pedras, the analysis of the community-based newspaper, *A Voz de Rio das Pedras*, indicates that local actors perceive the absence of physical violence as the primary indicator of peace. In many excerpts from this newspaper, the statement that Rio das Pedras is a peaceful community appears because there is no drug trafficking or physical violence (Corrêa, 2013; Mineiro, 2015). Therefore, following MacGinty’s proposal to make peace indicators based on local assumptions about violence, local narratives support the comprehension of peace as the absence of physical violence.

The problem emerges as the literature on *milícias* affirms that the initial viewpoint that *milicianos* safeguarded security has propelled these criminal organizations’ expansions (Zaluar and Conceição, 2007; Werneck, 2015; Manso, 2020a; Pinheiro, 2022). Since then, *milícias* have intensified their actions, extorting more residents, exponentiating a violent war with drug traffickers in areas previously under their control, and making demonstrations of their power when the police arrested *milicianos* (G1 Rio, 2023). In the 2000s, MacGinty’s definition would have been insufficient to comprehend that *milícias* did not create peace. Moreover, his local indicators proposal (MacGinty, 2013) would have given even more legitimacy to these groups.

Therefore, regarding physical violence, *milícias* could have been considered a form of everyday peace in the early 2000s. As I argue, this everyday peace is created through violence, better described as a ‘violent everyday peace.’ This description creates a paradox and stresses the challenge of defining a boundary between peace and violence in such a context.

## 5 *Milícias* and the continuum of violence

As the previous sections demonstrate, non-feminist approaches to everyday peace have an immediate problem when addressing spaces under *milícias* control: they lack theoretical lenses to explain how and why a violent everyday peace becomes a tool to gain political support. Peace is central in analyzing how *milícias* impact democracy since these criminal organizations gained political appeal, affirming that they sought to create secured spaces.

da zona de influência imediata sobre as situações cotidianas” (Werneck, 2015, p. 344).



The analysis conducted in the last two sections focused mainly on the public domain. Public narratives and data structured the discussion about everyday peace. As demonstrated, focusing only on this domain hinders the comprehensiveness of *milícias* as violent groups. The initial denial of *milícias*' violence allowed their expansion. However, the paradox of a 'violent everyday peace' represents an incomplete account of *milícias*' behaviors. Based on the literature (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008; Manso, 2020a; Cavalcanti, 2023), we can conclude that they are predatory economic actors that need violence to make a profit. Then, how can we address this violent enterprise utilizing an everyday approach? Considering *milícias* impact on democracy and the Brazilian state, understanding the actual dimension of these groups within the Peace/Violence debate is crucial. Peace stands at the core of *milícias*' political appeal.

In this section, I dissect the final report of ALERJ's<sup>13</sup> Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry, considering the role of the private domain in *milícias*' activities. Although ALERJ concluded the report 20 years ago, it is still meaningful because some authors have identified this Parliamentary Commission as a milestone concerning public positions regarding *milícias* (Cano and Duarte, 2012; Couto and Filho, 2019; Chaves, 2020; Pinheiro, 2022). Before this Commission, *milicianos* enjoyed more substantial support, as demonstrated above by newspaper reports and politicians' declarations. Many scholars agree that the social and political support that *milícias* received in the early 2000s was crucial for their later expansion (Zaluar and Conceição, 2007; Manso, 2020a; Pinheiro, 2022; Werneck, 2015). Although other researchers have previously analyzed ALERJ's final report (Couto and Filho, 2019; Chaves, 2020), the distinction between private/and public still needs further examination. As argued in this article, comprehending these two domains is pivotal to deconstructing the myth of *milícias*' everyday peace.

In ALERJ's final document, they introduced the problem of *milícias* as follows:

*The establishment of the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry was requested by Deputy MARCELO FREIXO in February 2007 due to the extreme gravity of the situation of militias in communities in the State of Rio de Janeiro, with solid evidence of the involvement of police officers, both civilian and military, firefighters and correctional officers. This dire situation required an immediate response from the government in 2008, following the kidnapping and torture of reporters from the newspaper "O DIA" in a favela in Rio de Janeiro. (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008, p. 4, author's translation).*<sup>14</sup>

13 The Legislative Assembly of the State of Rio de Janeiro.

14 Original Text: "A instauração da Comissão Parlamentar de Inquérito foi requerida pelo Deputado MARCELO FREIXO em fevereiro de 2007, em decorrência da extrema gravidade da situação das milícias em comunidades no Estado do Rio de Janeiro, com fortes indícios de envolvimento de policiais, civis e militares, bombeiros militares e agentes penitenciários. Essa situação extremamente grave exigiu do poder público, em 2008, uma resposta imediata, a partir do seqüestro e tortura dos repórteres do jornal —O DIA em uma favela do Rio de Janeiro." (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008, p. 4).

The first part of the communication is already noteworthy. The Rio de Janeiro state's Assembly recognizes the fierce seriousness of *milícias* actions with the potential connivance of police officers and other state forces. However, the "immediate response" only came after journalists from *O Dia*, one of the most widespread newspapers in Rio de Janeiro, suffered at the hands of *milicianos*. Before 2008, as shown in this manuscript, politicians expressed open support for *milícias*. Their modus operandi did not change between 2007 and 2008. It had changed a few years earlier when they expanded their economic scope. What led Rio de Janeiro's politicians to act against *milícias* was the moment when the violence they committed became public following the kidnap and murder of journalists. Later, in the Commission's final report, the Assembly declared that the case of torture created popular pressure on the state (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008, p. 34).

The Commission demonstrates how *milícias*' violence occurs at the private level in many excerpts. First, *milicianos* extorted residents to pay taxes to regularize their houses (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008, p. 150). In some areas (Oswald Cruz), residents were obligated to pay *milicianos* if they wanted to have parties in their residences (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008, p. 139). The punishments suffered by those who did not comply included torture, aggression, and murder (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008). However, some of these acts happened in spaces that were out of public view. In places such as Oswald Cruz, Del Castillo, and Engenho de Dentro, the Commission identified the locations where torture, murder, and aggression were carried out in the communities (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008, pp. 134, 136, 139). In Engenho de Dentro, for instance, *milicianos* tortured people in the residents' association (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008, p. 139). All these spaces and the proceedings used to punish residents and opposition sought to hide these practices from the public. The residents in the areas under *milícias*' domination knew how those not coping with *milícias* receive punishment. However, this violence was not visible to those outside of the community.

Ignácio Cano, a sociologist with a vast and significant work on the topic, offered the ALERJ Commission a robust argument on the nature of *milícias* and debated their "liberator myth" (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008, p. 37). Cano highlighted a crucial aspect of *milicianos*: they proclaim that they are police officers seeking to guarantee local security to foster their capacity to impose their rule (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008, pp. 37–38). Since police forces form *milícias*, residents' fear of retaliation increases considerably, as the police is in charge of addressing these complaints. ALERJ's report did not debate the distinction between public and private. However, as argued in this piece, we can identify the political benefit for *milicianos* in creating this distinction. In the public domain, *milicianos* claimed they were police forces to obtain legitimacy and confidence that they would be a lesser evil than drug traffickers. In the private domain, they utilize this condition to impose strict control over the population.

Violence in the private domain also emerges in the political sphere. The local deputy, Deco, connected to *milícias*, forced residents in the areas under their control to give him their electoral pass (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008, p. 151). Then, he threatened them with punishments, including losing their houses if they did not vote for him (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado

do Rio De Janeiro, 2008, p. 151). Furthermore, these criminal groups prohibited politicians without connections to *milicianos* from making political campaigns in areas where *milicianos* had a candidate (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008). The report also concluded that some candidates connected to *milícias* received an astonishing number of votes in the areas under their control. For instance, in Rio das Pedras, the candidate Nadinho received more than 60% of the votes in the 2004 elections (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008, pp. 95–96). As Desmond Arias (2014) has previously identified in a study in Rio das Pedras, *milicianos* connected to the residents' association had several strategies to foster their political gains. Earlier studies have found that the dynamics of *milicianos* influencing elections through coercion and violence found by ALERJ continue (Desmond Arias, 2014).

## 5.1 *Milícias* 'private' violence

The Parliamentary Final Report demonstrates how *milícias*' violence occurs mainly in the private domain. In areas controlled by these groups, the public sphere became apparently peaceful, with fewer gun shootings and murders (Cano and Duarte, 2012; Barcellos and Zaluar, 2014). However, violence does not cease. Investigations and official data corroborate this conclusion. According to Leitão and Martins (2020), death squads composed of *milicianos*, such as the *Escritório do Crime*, only began to be investigated after their connection with the assassination of Marielle de Franco. Before that, they had been accused of several murders without having the investigation completed.

A recent study concluded that neighborhoods controlled by *milícias* and drug traffickers have similar homicide rates (Lacerda, 2024). However, as mentioned previously, residents tend to affirm that they experienced lower violence in areas under *milícias* control. If violence continues, why do residents affirm that they experience less violence in areas controlled by *milícias*? And why do discourses that sustain this view, such as Bolsonaro's, persist? I argue that the persistence of such discourses happens because *milícias*' violence arises mainly at the private level. At the public level, *milicianos* create a sense of more tranquility than areas under drug traffickers' control. Data that fosters this conclusion is that in areas under *milícias*' control, the number of disappearances is as high as the number of homicides (Misse, 2018, p. 145).

*Milícias* can establish their violence at the private level due mainly to three factors: 1—their relationship with the police; 2—the nature, predominantly local, of their social and political order; and 3—their source of profit.

Because some *milicianos* come from the police, they can anticipate and avoid potential confrontations. Moreover, this connection with the state makes them seem even more unstoppable to the residents under their control. Many scholars have found that people living in those areas avoid talking about *milícias* (Aguião, 2011; Manso, 2020a). Aguião (2011), ethnographically researching RP, found that publicly, residents denied talking about *milícias*. After a few weeks of living in this context, some dwellers were confident to discuss *milícias* in private conversations with her (Aguião, 2011). The connection with the police strengthens *milicianos*' power over those in their control areas.

The local nature of *milícias*' political order becomes evident in their relationships with residents' associations. These connections

allow *milicianos* to access residents' personal information more easily. These associations also give some of the *milicianos*' sources of profit, such as registering housing, a more official character. *Milícias* social order is based on fear, menaces, and punishments. They also have moral rules that directly impact the private lives of those living in areas under their control, such as prohibiting dwellers from using drugs and even imposing sexual conduct (Ribeiro and Oliveira, 2010). Finally, *milicianos*' profit comes from products used by most people daily. Gas and cable television, for instance, are goods that most dwellers need in their houses. While traffickers have a more limited number of people who buy their illegal drugs or guns, the monopolies created by *milicianos* impact the entire community.

Desmond Arias and Barnes (2017, p. 353) pointed out that *milícias* form "peaceful communities characterized by semi-clandestine threats against opponents." In the case of Rio das Pedras's 'successful' example in the early 2000s, *milicianos* structured their control through the resident association (Aguião, 2011; Desmond Arias, 2013; Desmond Arias and Barnes, 2017; Manso, 2020a). When Desmond Arias (2013), still in the 2010s, interviewed the leader of the only NGO in the community, the interviewee said that opposing AMARP was impossible. Disappearances and punishments were the responses to any criticism of the association (Desmond Arias, 2013, p. 275). In *A Voz de Rio das Pedras*, punishments also appeared when one resident affirmed that those caught stealing in the community had a tragic end (Habib, 2015, p. 3). In phone conversations intercepted by the police, one *miliciano* said that he would cut a dweller's arms and legs because he was opposing his 'businesses' (Extra, 2019, p. 6).

## 6 Conclusion

*Milícias* have a significant impact on Brazilian democracy. *Milicianos* entered politics, threatening citizens to gain votes (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008; Desmond Arias, 2014). However, their effects on democracy go beyond their direct impact on votes. *Milícias* have an ideological component that propels their political participation and of those whose discourses align with theirs (Rodrigues and Del Río, 2019; Manso, 2020b; Ilha, 2021; Lins and Machado, 2023). Based on the pacification myth, this ideology proposes that public security should be imposed through militarization. According to this perspective, peace emerges in spaces where residents do not experience the perils of drug trafficking and shootouts. My analysis suggests that *milicianos* successfully impacted democracy because the public domain is the primary driver of politics, as it is visible to voters. The fact that *milícias*' violence occurs mainly at the private level makes it less vulnerable to political criticism. They used a public everyday peace façade, established through private everyday violence, to gain political support.

This everyday peace façade is far from 'peaceful.' *Milicianos* take political advantage of a restricted understanding of peace as the absence of confrontations with the police. As discussed, especially in the 2000s, *milicianos* constructed their political appeal by affirming that they have created zones without criminality, drug trafficking, and shootouts (Assembleia Legislativa do Estado do Rio De Janeiro, 2008; Cavalcanti, 2023). These claims elucidate another central debate for peace studies: the problem of defining peace. Some have argued that this conceptual debate still needs to be further developed by the discipline (Obydenkova and Paffenholz, 2021; Söderström and Olivius, 2022; Travouillon et al., 2023). Without a definition, peace can

become a tool to gain political support while spreading violence. *Milícias* exemplify this. In the name of security and peace, *milicianos* gained political support and impacted democracy.

*Milicianos* are not in the streets confronting the police. Their violence is mainly private. I argued that for this reason, the discourse that they create peace has persisted for so long. When approaching *milícias* through everyday peace lenses, without blurring the distinction between public and private, as feminists propose, we risk falling into the mistake of considering their behavior as more peaceful than that of drug traffickers. The experiences in the public domain can be less violent. The private domain is not.

In ALERJ' final report, José Beltrame, former state's secretary of public security, warned that in Mexico *milícias* became *narcomilícias* (*milícias* that traffics drugs). Fifteen years later, *milicianos* have substantially increased their participation in trafficking drugs and other illegal products. Their initial claim of liberating communities from drug traffickers only served their expansion. As this article discusses, comprehending the public and the private domain could have been crucial to combat *milícias* in their initial emergence. As an organization with political linkages, it is urgent to have more studies that approach these organizations through peace studies lenses.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

LG: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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