

The “Readiness” of Timor-Leste: Narratives about the Admission Procedure to ASEAN

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Paulo Castro Seixas, Nuno Canas Mendes and Nadine Lobner

Abstract

This article is based on an empirical research with an inductive approach about the admission of Timor-Leste (TL) to Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). We examined a corpus of international newspapers ($n = 48$) which forms a debate over this case on the Internet. The articles are reproduced in English and are currently the most representative form of debating the membership delay which takes place since 2011. Throughout the observation of our gathered data, we discovered one main narrative that is reproduced by several authors: The Readiness of TL to join the Southeast Asian grouping. Hence, built through three rationalities (preparedness, ambivalence, and conflict), the Narrative of Readiness reveals a common sense among the agents. Built on two constructs, scattered agents and International Online Media, we propose an eventual International Imagined Community in the making. This article raises the possibility that TL plays a test role in the identity of ASEAN, even though the delay of the TL admission to ASEAN still raises further questions.

Keywords

Timor-Leste, ASEAN, international imagined communities, online international media, agents, transnational affairs

Centro de Administração e Políticas Públicas, Instituto do Oriente, Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas da Universidade de Lisboa, Campus Universitário do Alto da Ajuda, Rua Almerindo Lessa, Lisboa

Corresponding author:

Nadine Lobner, Centro de Administração e Políticas Públicas, Instituto do Oriente, Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas da Universidade de Lisboa, Campus Universitário do Alto da Ajuda, Rua Almerindo Lessa 1300-663, Lisboa

Email: nlobner@iscsp.ulisboa.pt



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I. Introduction: Timor-Leste on the Edge of the Final Admission to ASEAN

Timor-Leste's (TL) first application to ASEAN took place in 2011. In 2018, admission was not still decided. Thus, it is fair to question why TL is still being under review for the final admission to ASEAN. Saying so, this was the initial motivation for our research.

Newspapers appeared to be the first and most simple ground to understand international perceptions regarding the membership of TL to ASEAN. Based on a netnographic approach, the aim was to search for clashes or consensus. Hence, we intended to grasp differences in such perceptions which support prevailing arguments (in favour and/or against) towards this case. Newspaper articles in English from several countries written by authors of different nationalities were considered as a good ground for questioning. Do these authors/agents play a specific role in the case of TL? Which is the interest (agency/structure) within this process? Finally, the idea was to address the problematic of the delay through this research.

The authors/agents are overall acting from different countries on the ground of online available international newspaper articles. Throughout using the term "agent" when referring to the "author," we speak of the individual who takes an active role within a concrete discourse with the result of producing a specific effect (Giddens, 1976). The concept of "agents," in sociological terms, defines the acting individual with its opinions, biased through aspects like gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, and others (thus, using his/her capacity of agency). Referring to Hindess (1988: 44), the agent can be described as "a locus of decision and action where the action is in some sense a consequence of the actor's decisions." We have to make clear that the agent(s) should be considered within an agency/structure perspective (and eventual political manipulation). We elaborated on concepts of agent/agency (Giddens, 1976). "Agency" (and its relation with "structure") debates the capacity or ability of individuals to set something into action. However, agency can only be exercised by individuals within existing social conventions and values – within or under the influence of a structure. As a consequence of the research results, we addressed the concept of imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) to explore the new ground of international online media, which is our field of research.

Surprisingly, this research revealed a consensus on a narrative of readiness in the online newspapers. This narrative presents a common perception of a remarkable progress of TL in terms of nation building, human development, democracy, and economic growth, following all the fundamental requirements of the regional grouping. Certainly, several authors refer that there are country-internal improvements pending as well, even though the focus should be set on finding a consensus on the admission of TL.

The narrative of readiness includes three rationalities: preparedness, ambivalence, and conflict. Following this, we outlined the perceptions about the membership delay as well as counterarguments of the agents. The majority of the agents spoke in favour of TL's membership, hardly anyone in favour of its opponents. Saying so, it is important to outline that Singapore is demonstrated as the greatest antagonist of TL's membership.

Several reasons and discussions for and about this assumption are presented in various newspapers, tackling objections from certain perspectives.

Finally, considering Benedict Anderson's idea of print (national) capitalism (1983) within our data analysis, we questioned the meaning of the unique narrative presented by scattered agents in the ground of international online media. As a result, we discuss the possibility of an international imagined community in the making and TL as a test for a collective identity. The validation of this proposal requires further research and highlights the relevance of TL's role in the collective identity construction of ASEAN's international regionalism.

Our article is structured in six sections. In the first section, we present the conceptual framework and open up the discussion, addressing the main result of the research. The second section focuses on the methodology that we used for our empirical research. Following, we demonstrate our findings, where after we link the narrative of readiness with the three constructs proposed for its interpretation: scattered agents, online international media, and an international imagined community in the making.

2. Agents, Social Actions, and Agency: An International Imagined Community in the Making?

Intending to analyse the outstanding admission of Timor to ASEAN, the most available data we could find were online available newspaper articles about the subject. Having started on this avenue, we supported ourselves basically through the concepts of agents and agency/structure (Giddens, 1979; Weber, 1922) through particular social actions (newspaper articles). Furthermore, we intended to find different perceptions that may be explored through concepts like imagined communities (Anderson, 1983), acting on an international ground since we were focusing on various nationalities. Imagined communities are, so Anderson, a result of "print capitalism," which brings people into an indirect relationship with each other. The creation of geographical boundaries throughout interaction results in a national consciousness. Anderson (1983: 58) refers in his theory of (national) imagined communities mainly to the construction of nations: "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1983: 36). One of his main arguments is the idea of a cultural communion under a national setting (through media, census, maps, and museums), where each individual feels a bond to unnumbered fellow group participants – therefore, resulting in an imagined community (Anderson, 1983). This can be seen as an outcome of human interests, political manipulation, and manoeuvring by individual or collective actors (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009), thus, agency/structure in action. As we will see in the section of data discussion, the case of TL's admission procedure to ASEAN results in a *Narrative of Readiness*. This narrative is reproduced in a variety of newspaper articles from different national sources and agents, which leads to elaborate on Anderson's imagined communities and to discuss it on an international, border crossing level.

The unconscious interaction throughout the absorption of information from international newspapers (online available for the interests of a geopolitical audience) with a shared language (English) allows people (agents/civil society) to feel a sense of unity – therefore, having a connection. Newspapers have to be understood throughout their important role in the construction of imagined communities. The influence of newspapers that are crossing various borders via the Internet, reproducing numerous rationalities and perceptions in a commonly used language, may create a sense of togetherness. One particular language (English) contributes to a certain discourse to maximise the circulation of information and, eventually, to the cultural translation that requires a togetherness on an international ground.

Ben Anderson's interpretation of imagined communities can be linked to the theories of International Relations and to the constructivist approach of a "middle ground" (Schuster, 2017; Adler, 1997). It should be considered that ASEAN's regional integration is a matter of forging a regional and national identity as well as a test to the limits of socialisation and inter-subjectivity (relying on procedures of the "ASEAN Way"). Such non-confrontational (and consensus) dynamics are stressing out the power of the several players and the rationalities that are supporting, objecting, or delaying the admission of TL. Following this, the interaction between agents produces a debate on the meaning of ASEAN's doubts and uncertainties regarding the deepening of its objectives and strategies underlining the dilemma of integration (Aquino, 2017). Acharya (2005), one of the paramount academics on IR's theories, emphasises the importance of norms and identity. Therefore, norms can produce an identity; hence, the case of TL is considered as an epitome of the regional lack of coherence and belonging. Additionally, TL can be seen as a country belonging to several imagined communities (Community of Portuguese Language Countries [CPLP], South Pacific Forum [SPF], or even Commonwealth); and online international media may be understood as reflection on such overlapping identities. Constructivism provides a framework for understanding such interaction processes around the enlarged concept of international imagined communities in which identities of Southeast Asia and TL are being forged. Through the lens of media, the recognition of the commonality (or its absence), the narrative of readiness, and the fabrication of mutual interests/assumption of discontents can be clearly depicted.

3. Research Procedures

The core tool of collecting our data was "netnography" (Kozinets, 2002). We consider that newspaper articles from different countries written in English and accessible through the Internet are part of an aspiring new international ground, which must be tackled in an analytical way. Our aim was to understand the relationship between TL and ASEAN members through this international ground. To grasp meaning from this realm, netnography appeared to be the proper methodology. Furthermore, a systematic comparison of multiple sources and information was inevitable. Methodologically speaking, the research was fully conducted on the Internet throughout the collection of articles ($n = 48$ of 30 different newspapers) precisely about TL its admission to ASEAN. One of the first steps was to find articles about the specific case of "Timor-Leste's accession to

ASEAN,” while using those keywords. Various articles occurred, mainly from South East Asian newspapers (e.g. *The Diplomat*, *East Asia Forum*, *Brunei Times*, *East Timor Law and Justice Bulletin*, *Myanmar Times*, and others).

During this research, we analysed the universe of data through the following dimensions: the nationality of the authors (the agents), their narratives, and the countries of publication (considered as agency/structure) (Table 1). Concerned with “who” was saying “what,” our main questions were

- i. *Why is TL not a member of the regional grouping ASEAN yet?*
- ii. *Who are the agents and what is the relation of agency/structure within the discussion of TL’s accession to ASEAN?*

In course of that, we selected our umbrella research topic: the incomplete process of TL’s admission to ASEAN. We questioned whether there are differences among the authors/agents as a result of national approaches.

Reading article after article, we gained a deeper insight on the multiple (international) opinions about the case of TL that shows several similarities and a common sense between the agents, which resulted in just one narrative (the narrative of readiness).

As pointed out above, the focus was set on online available newspapers and their national conjunction to TL within the time frame of the country’s independence until present-day, precisely 2002–2018. Special attention was paid to those articles that emerged in the period of the country’s first official application for the ASEAN membership (2011) up till recent discussions. Forty-eight articles of sixty-seven obtained our attention and are considered as fundamental for the discussion. Some articles were invalidated by text replication and readability.

Our curiosity occurred throughout the similarities in the narratives of the agents, regardless of which country they are speaking for and from (opponents of TL/supporters of TL). Saying so, we questioned how to interpret such similarities. After specifying the dimensions, we collected our data on the Internet expecting to identify several narratives. Therefore, we analysed our data throughout a content analysis and ensuing we formulated explanations. We did a comparative content analysis with an inductive approach (Webb and Kevern, 2000), based on selected categories (justification of membership, preparations of TL, commitment to ASEAN, and more), which have been aggregated in a second level of analysis (fundamental requirements and proof of fulfilment; justification of the membership and benefits; contribution, commitment, and general consensus).

Conducting empirical research on the Internet – therefore, using the cyberspace as ethnographic field – involves a different kind of interaction with research subjects and matters compared to traditional forms of ethnography (Hine, 2000: 8–13).

In choosing the articles, we followed the main criteria:

- i. They are written in the period between independence and the present day.
- ii. Their focus is on the case of the ASEAN membership for TL.
- iii. They are publicly available.

Table 1. List of Newspapers and Authors.

Newspaper	Country of publication	Nationality of the author	No. of articles
<i>East Timor Law and Justice Bulletin</i>	Timor-Leste	Australia	4
<i>The Irrawaddy</i>	No reference	Thailand (1), Ireland (1)	2
<i>The Diplomat</i>	No reference	Australia (3), Timor-Leste (3), Malaysia (2)	8
<i>Sundaily</i>	Malaysia	Malaysia	1
<i>Investine</i>	No reference	Germany	1
<i>The Interpreter</i>	No reference	Australia	1
<i>Bangkok Post</i>	Thailand	Thailand	1
<i>The Mainichi</i>	Japan	Japan	1
<i>Reuters</i>	Philippines	Philippines	1
<i>ABS CBN News</i>	Philippines	Thailand	1
<i>Myanmar Times</i>	Myanmar	Myanmar	2
<i>Phnom Penh Post</i>	Cambodia	USA	1
<i>East Asia Forum</i>	Australia	Australia (3), Timor-Leste (1)	4
<i>Nikkei Asian Review</i>	Japan	Australia	1
<i>New Mandala</i>	Malaysia	Malaysia	1
<i>Astro Awani</i>	Malaysia	No reference	1
<i>Heinrich Boell Stiftung</i>	Germany	Timor-Leste	1
<i>Die Welt</i>	Germany	Timor-Leste	1
<i>ASEAN Briefing</i>	No reference	Australia	1
<i>ASEAN News</i>	Thailand	Thailand	2
<i>The Jakarta Post</i>	Indonesia	Indonesia (1), Malaysia (1)	2
<i>Global Risks Insight</i>	No reference	Australia	1
<i>The Brunei Times</i>	Brunei	Brunei	2
<i>Government Of Timor-Leste</i>	Timor-Leste	Timor-Leste	1
<i>Asian Studies Association of Australia</i>	Australia	Australia	1
<i>Singaporean Management University</i>	Singapore	Singapore	1
<i>Zuericher Zeitung</i>	Switzerland	Switzerland	1
<i>Cogitasia</i>	No reference	United States	1
<i>ASEAN Today</i>	No reference	Australia	1
<i>VOA News</i>	No reference	Australia	1
TOTAL			48

While conducting our research, one of the problems was that some articles were published identically in different newspapers. Also, in many cases, it was impossible to obtain information about the agent as well as the country of publication of the article, why fore we had to discard them due to the matter of insufficient sources. Our sample frame covers international online newspaper articles written in any language available about the case – even though it has to be said that the majority of articles is written in

In course of this analysis in the section of discussing the results, we reached an interpretation in which core intertwined rationalities were identified (*preparedness*, *ambivalence*, and *conflict*) as being transversal to the corpus as well as to the aggregated categories found. Even though, a *narrative of readiness* enveloped the three rationalities in a hegemonic way. Furthermore, the article questions which role this hegemonic narrative plays.

4. Findings

[illegible]

Step by step we formulated categories out of our material. Following this process, we used qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis, such as eliciting the content and frequency both of the categories (Table 2) and the aggregated categories (Table 3).

Table 2. What Do the Agents Say About the Membership of ASEAN for Timor-Leste?

Category	Most representative units of analysis	n	%
Opponents: Singapore/ Laos/Myanmar/ Cambodia	TL dependent on oil and gas revenues/education and health indicators some of the worst in the region/capacity building of Singapore in TL/careful consideration of explicit support for TL membership/concerns about economic burden for ASEAN/application 2011 reservations from Singapore/greatest opponent, believes that TL will hinder ASEAN's hopes to establish ASEAN economic community in 2015/ Myanmar believes that TL has shortcomings that make membership impossible for 2014/Financial situation of TL burden for ASEAN/little diplomatic solidarity between TL & Myanmar/Membership depends on Singapore and Myanmar/ Non-democratic ASEAN-members support opinion of Singapore/TL too far away from ASEAN community/ Concerns that TL would divide ASEAN's available development (2013)/	28	16
General requirements fulfilled	Fulfilled all requirements/infrastructure to host ASEAN summits/established diplomatic presence in all ASEAN capitals/ membership still delayed/The longer the delay, the more implausible the acceptance	19	11
Concerns about membership/ Criticism on TL government	Lack of infrastructure/develop domestic economy and invest more on its people/if TL not stable enough to handle deal with Australia about gas line it will be broke before 2020/ Overdependence on foreign aid/Lack of capacity to host major international conferences/ With no stable government less chances to obtain ASEAN membership	16	9
Preparations	When ASEAN admitted new members in 1990s, no preparations needed – no preconditions/frequent participation in ASEAN Regional Forum meetings/expanded infrastructure/high progress in converting economic growth/ internships and trainings with ASEAN secretariat/fulfilled all preparations by 2014	14	8
Functioning Democracy	Better government-internal conditions than other countries (M, C, L)/functioning democratic government/Commitment of TL to democracy key in ASEAN's evolution to a more proactive organisation/TL's progress superiority in terms of democracy compared to most ASEAN countries	11	6
Justification of membership	rare opportunity for ASEAN to reach clear consensus/growth in economy/political situation free of tension/good governance and transparency/failing to admit TL would reveal ASEAN for being incapable of solving regional problems/delay of TL membership illegitimate reasons/ ASEAN's expansion way to strengthen openness and democratisation in its member state (2016)	11	6

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Category	Most representative units of analysis	n	%
TL progress/economy	Increasing its regional and global profile/remarkable progress since independence/TL economic growth throughout its petroleum revenue/improved social services and human development/economically dependent on gas revenues which are running out (90%)/lack of basic infrastructure and shortage of skilled labour/longer term economic planning needed/agreement on greater sunshine gas field between AUST and TL necessary for further economic development/ one of the poorest countries in the world	10	6
Supporters	ASEAN membership to help the TL develop/investment opportunities in TL's oil and gas reserves/security interest: weak TL affects Indonesia's security/strong commitment of Indonesia to TL membership/support from Japanese international cooperation agency and Asian development bank/Commitment of the Philippines to assist TL in several sectors	9	5
Benefits for TL	trade, security, stability, cultural exchange/key access to funds for national development/stronger presence on the international stage/access to established forum/safeguard regional identity – ASEAN unique and dynamic regional organisation, focus on political peace, stability, economic integration/boost foreign investment, and tourism	9	5
Criticism on ASEAN	Lack of commitment to democracy and human rights/indecisive on regional issues/intra-ASEAN conflict over member countries position/mixed responses to TL membership	9	5
TL needs support from ASEAN	Economic issues/ASEAN accepted countries with similar shortcomings and less progress/only country in SEA region who doesn't belong to a regional organisation/membership delay groundless	8	4
Contribution to ASEAN	Oil and gas/sovereign wealth fund estimated to reach over 20 billion USD in the next decade/contribute beyond Asia Pacific through its own linkages and partners – TL could connect ASEAN with CPLP/experience in peace building/bridge to south pacific/opportunities for new market and destination/untapped market for SEA trade	8	4
Commitment to ASEAN	Population of TL strong commitment/Joining ASEAN broad national consensus/interests on joining since 1975 independence (before Indonesian occupation)/strong desire to enhance bilateral relations with all member states/ASEAN membership as priority foreign policy goal/accomplished all obligations/	7	4

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Category	Most representative units of analysis	n	%
Questioning consensus between TL and ASEAN	Shared geography, history/long-term profit for ASEAN (democracy, peace and nation-building)/profitable manners such as democracy for the SEA region/leaving TL behind risks development of Timorese norms that may threaten the crucial regional peace and security that has enabled ASEAN to prosper/territorial integrity/	6	3
Discrepancies with China	TL membership flashpoint between ASEAN and China (similar to Burma membership)/counterweight to Chinese dominance/if ASEAN doesn't increase ties with TL, China and India will (economic counterpart/opponent)/Indonesia support statement against Chinese and Indian force within Asia/failure to admit TL risks ASEAN centrality and relevance in the regional architecture of the Asia-Pacific	6	3

Source: Results of the research.

Note. TL = Timor-Leste.

We created tables to provide visibility and transparency about our conducted work. During this process, we embedded our findings into the framework of fundamental concepts. After the elaboration and analysis of the outlined categories, we presented a grounded discussion of three rationalities (*preparedness, ambivalence, and conflict*) within the *Narrative of Readiness*.

All sixteen sections provide a percentage of agents who occur with a similar acumen. We prepared the actual number of spokespersons/nationality to the outlined arguments in each category, as shown in Table 3. The column of the most representative units of analysis entails the arguments with the highest occurrence in all of the forty-six observed articles with a focus on the research question: *Why is TL not already a member of ASEAN*.

Referring to the data of Table 2, three dimensions for a discussion about the admission of TL have to be highlighted for the organisation of our data:

1. *Fundamental requirements and proof of fulfilment*
2. *Justification of membership and benefits for TL*
3. *Contribution, commitment, and general consensus with ASEAN*

This classification aggregates the categories (of Table 2) through which we want to demonstrate the dimensions of the narrative of readiness.

Through Table 4, our aim is to demonstrate with what frequency agents of several nationalities presented their arguments for the readiness of Timor-Leste to join ASEAN. It serves to emphasise the high diversity of voices from several nationalities who share the narrative of readiness. Besides the diversity of voices, we should question the interest of the “agents” and the role of media. The results of this research lead to question the role

Table 3. Dimensions of the Narrative of Readiness.

Dimensions of readiness	N (unities of register)	%
(1) Fundamental requirements and proof of fulfilment	31	27
(2) Justification of membership and benefits for Timor-Leste	57	49
(3) Contribution, commitment, and general consensus with ASEAN	28	24
Total	116	100

Source: Results of the research.

Table 4. Voices of the Agents.

Agents in %	AU	TL	MY	US	TH	MM	BN	JP	UK	PH	DE	SP	Total
Dimensions of readiness	41	20	13	10	7	6	4	4	3	2	2	1	113
%	36.3	17.7	11.5	8.8	6.2	5.3	3.5	3.5	2.7	1.8	1.8	0.9	100

Source: Elaboration of the authors (Country abbreviations, 2019).

of media within the political arena as a stage for certain interests, manipulation, and eventual dissonance: a complex relation of structure and agency. The case of Australia may be a good example for discussing this.

Australia has the highest frequency of aggregated categories. Regarding the discourses of Australian agents, there is a high support to TL visible. Following the high frequency of Australia’s supportive voices towards the membership application of TL, we may question who the agents are and what they represent. It is unclear whether this number represents the critical position of a strong civil society or whether it is the “diplomatic” opinion of the country’s government. Hence, there’s no certainty whether Australia’s government would prefer to negotiate the maritime boundary with a TL which isn’t a member of ASEAN.

The case of Malaysia and its eventual shared vision with Singapore may also be questioned in a similar way, regarding the number of articles supporting the admission of TL from Malaysian authors. Furthermore, as clear in Table 1, none of the agents can be pinpointed as supporter or antagonist of the membership of TL. Every agent is focusing on the official reasons for the delay of the admission to ASEAN, highlighting the accomplished preparations and requirements of TL (Timor-Leste hosts ASEAN meeting, 2016; Siapno, 2014; etc.). There is a high discussion about the refusal and delay by Singapore and Myanmar, less frequently Laos – but agents from those countries themselves did not take an active part in this debate. On the contrary – as will be discussed in the section of narratives later on – there are agents from opponent countries who argue in favour of TL (Thailand confirms its support for Timor-Leste’s Planned Membership in ASEAN, 2010). There is, as mentioned above, a “get together” of various voices, tackling the same issue from a quite similar perspective.

These results raise the question of structure/agency. If it isn’t possible to identify the national interests (in a clear way) within the data, maybe the agency of the author should

be assumed. If we reflect on the relevance of structure, we either assume a diplomatic mascaraed (realism at stake) or eventually the relevance of institutionalism, considering that these voices refer to regional interests. Furthermore, we may propose that the online international media is a ground for regional constructivism in which these agents are playing a part.

5. A Narrative of Readiness?

Throughout the presented analysis, we established an embedment into the concepts of *agents and imagined communities*. We obtained the perception of a strong persistence on supporting TL from various countries acting mainly for Southeast Asian and Australian newspapers. This message is in most cases linked to media channels of Australia, following with Japan and TL (*The Diplomat*, *East Asia Forum*, *East Timor Law and Justice Bulletin*, and *The Mainchichi*).

The absence of voices coming from the most supportive/antagonistic countries caught our interest: the shortage of statements from Indonesia (regarding the observed articles/within the representative agents) while being announced as the greatest proponent of TL in numerous articles (*East Timor Law and Justice Bulletin*, 2011; Singapore Management University, 2011; Hunt, 2016; *Bangkok Post*, 2017; *Myanmar Times*, 2017; *ASEAN Today*, 2017; *The Interpreter*, 2017; Hunt, 2018; Windraskinasih and Afriansyah, 2018). Likewise, there are no newspaper-articles with opinions/arguments against the admission stated from opponents such as Singapore or Brunei. Quite the reverse, one article written from a Singaporean agent under the agency of a Singaporean newspaper criticised the exclusion of TL throughout antagonistic arguments. Mahdev Mohan, professor of law in the Singaporean Management University with a qualification on ASEAN law, clearly refers to the readiness of TL in saying that Singapore's greatest announced fear is about "unraveling" ASEAN's plans for economic integration throughout the approval of TL (Mohan and Tsai, 2011). He counterarguments with the fact that TL was in 2009 under the top ten fastest-growing economies in the world and twenty times the size of Singapore. Big business investors such as China and India are actively pushing TL (especially China with big financial gifts for TL, such as Chinese buildings; USD60 million aid to key sectors of country's economy, etc.). Saying so, Indonesia who appears as one of the main supporters of TL would, among others, benefit in various ways of the country's membership in ASEAN (Hägerdal, 2017). Several investment opportunities would occur, such as in TL's oil and gas reserves. Among that, a weak TL could affect Indonesia's security, referring by various agents (B. Strating, J. Ramos-Horta and K. Chongkittavorn). There's also high support from the Japanese International Cooperation Agency and Asian Development Bank, as well as a strong commitment of the Philippines to assist TL in several sectors, specifically in formation and training of the leadership (*The Mainchichi*, 2017; *Reuters*, 2017; Miclat, 2013). Furthermore, various agents state that from a geopolitical perspective, the membership of TL would contribute to an ASEAN counterweight to the Chinese dominance in the Southeast Asian region (Roughneen, 2011; *VOA News*, 2011; *Jakarta Post*, *The Mainchichi*, 2017).

We propose that a collective identity is in the making by scattered agents on a new ground: the international online media. We may question whether this could be an arena for the emergence of a new international imagined community.

Through the process of our content analysis, we reached three rationalities which the narrative of readiness consists of. They contain debates about the opponents of TL's admission to ASEAN, the fulfilled requirements of TL, and their accomplished preparations. The readiness of the country to join the Southeast Asian grouping as well as the benefits of a membership for both ASEAN and TL are strongly represented.

5.1. The Three Rationalities

Throughout the analysis of our research data, we questioned in what extent the narratives are providing an answer to: "Why is not Timor-Leste already a member of ASEAN?" Despite these efforts of the past seven years since the first official application, the membership is still being delayed (Southgate, 2015; McDonald, 2017). Therefore, what are the reasons for this delay? The next section contains an elaboration of the agents' arguments, evidencing the rationalities of preparedness as well as ambivalence and conflict. It is important to highlight the multitude of agents and agencies on their frontstage (the Press) to make our focus on the explicit representation throughout the narratives understandable. This representation may include sincerity and cynicism (Goffman, 1956), but if cynicism is at stake, this can only be understood by crossing data other than the already approached one. Thus, in this article, we considered public representation as basically sincere performance in the front stage by a set of scattered agents. Therefore, we propose that the concept of International Imagined Community is in the process. We consider that there is a narrative of readiness in the making, compounding three different rationalities (preparedness, ambivalence, and Conflict) which we will further elaborate on.

5.1.1. Rationalities of Preparedness. As a regional organisation, ASEAN holds mandatory requirements for participation which have to be fulfilled by the country of interest. The ASEAN charter outlines four fundamental qualifications for a membership: (1) geographical location, (2) recognition by other states, (3) agreement to be bound by charter, and (4) willingness and ability to carry out obligations (Strating, 2017a; Chin, 2018). Regarding those requirements, the majority of agents argument that TL, despite several assumptions, follows all the obligatory regulations since 2015: the country holds frequent participation as observer in ASEAN Regional Forum meetings, expanded its infrastructure, and shows a high progress in converting economic growth, which is shown in Table 3 (*The Brunei Times*, 2013; McLaughlin, 2013; *Welt*, 2007; *Timor-Leste ready to join ASEAN*, 2015; *Timor-Leste ready for full ASEAN membership*, 2016; Hananto, 2017). Furthermore, by now, the necessary infrastructure to host ASEAN summits is established, as well as the diplomatic presence in all ASEAN capitals. Additionally, to proof an unequal procedure of admitting member states in ASEAN, several agents highlight that when the grouping approved new members in the 1990s, no preparations were needed (Almuttaqi, 2015; *Astro Awani*, 2016; Hanlon, 2012; Ortuoste,

2011). Following these arguments, it is stated by the agents that compared to most ASEAN countries, TL's progress obtains superiority in terms of democracy in the Southeast Asian region. It is said that this offers rare opportunities for ASEAN to reach a clear inter-organisational consensus, growth in economy, and political transparency. Also, failing to admit TL would reveal ASEAN for being incapable of solving regional problems. Referring to this, the delay of its membership is seen as highly illegitimate (Chin, 2017; *The Interpreter*, 2017; *Myanmar Times*, 2017; Guterres, 2017; Kingsbury, 2017b; Neves and Hooi, 2017; Kingsbury, 2017a; *Bangkok Post*, 2017; Cambodia Backs Timor-Leste Asean Membership, 2016; Hooi, 2017; Sahin, 2014).

The small state is notably dependent (90 per cent of the country's income) on gas revenues which are presumably running out by 2020 (Carter, 2017). There is still a lack of basic infrastructure and shortage of skilled labour. Therefore, a longer term economic planning is needed (*ABS CBN News*, 2017; *Asian Studies Association of Australia*, 2017; Kingsbury, 2017a). Despite that, the country's economic growth throughout its petroleum revenue helped to improve social services and human development.

Arguments like TL being geographically too far away from the ASEAN community or marked by an unstable government are extensively seen as ungrounded. Referring to that, most of the antagonistic arguments are seen as illegitimate and are being contested by other countries (such as Thailand): the geographic argument is not justifiable because TL is within the Southeast Asian region; the argument based on economic development cannot be justified as well. Several countries in ASEAN are least developed than TL, concretely, Cambodia, Laos, and/or Myanmar (*Bangkok Post*, 2017; Kingsbury, 2017a).

The commitment of TL to democracy could be seen as a key in ASEAN's evolution to a more proactive organisation. As shown in Table 3, the majority of the agents (Australia, Malaysia, Thailand, and TL) talk about the benefits of the ASEAN membership for TL and the country's gigantic steps forward the last years to achieve the final admission. Accordingly, the agents demonstrate that TL is constantly increasing its regional and global profile with a remarkable progress since independence.

As mentioned before, agents state the functioning democracy of TL as a justification of the membership. Correspondingly to that, the small state offers better government-intern conditions than other countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia, or Laos with a functioning democratic constitution. Also, it is frequently argued that there is a general common sense between ASEAN and TL. Following this, the need of support from the regional organisation and critics on its exclusive attitude is widely discussed (Roughneen, 2010; *East Asia Forum*, 2011; *Welt*, 2007; *ASEAN News*, 2012).

5.1.2. Rationalities of Ambivalence. Ambivalence may be presented through five main arguments expressed in the corpus of our data: the formal historical, the geographical, development, the political, and the common sense.

A multiplicity of agents point out effort is being shown in the formation of TL's leadership throughout internships and trainings with the ASEAN secretariat. Referring to our findings, it is clear that there's an unequal procedure of admitting member states in ASEAN regarding the approval of Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos (CMVL) in the 1990s compared to the still ongoing admission process of TL. In the case of CMVL, no

preparations were needed and no demands were made for an inclusion. There are presumptions that the last expansion of ASEAN in the 1990s took place for becoming a stronger counterpart to the regional force of China (Almuttaqi, 2015; *Astro Awani*, 2016; Pereira, 2016).

To make the ambivalence of the admission process clear, it's important to mention once more that there is the existence of antagonistic arguments like TL is geographically too far away from the ASEAN community or being marked by an unstable government. Despite that, these arguments are seen, by the majority of the agents, as groundless.

Among the aversive arguments are the lack of infrastructure in TL, the necessity of investing more on its people, and the outstanding development of the domestic economy. Regarding the economic issue, some agents outline the fear of some countries (Singapore, Myanmar, etc.) that TL is politically and economically not stable enough and therefore, an overdependence on foreign aid is feared. Concurrently, several agents state that these arguments are illegitimate (*Bangkok Post*, 2017; *Myanmar Times*, 2017; Singaporean University Press, 2011; Kingsbury, 2017b; Kingsbury, 2017c).

The commitment of TL to democracy could be seen as a key in ASEAN's evolution to a more proactive organisation. The majority of the agents (Australia, Myanmar, and TL) talk about the benefits of the ASEAN membership for TL and the country's effort of the last years to achieve the final admission (Salim, 2016). Accordingly, TL is constantly increasing its regional and global profile with a remarkable progress since independence.

Also, equivalent to that, a great number of agents provide arguments about the functioning democracy of TL, a justification of the membership, and a brief outline of its supporters. Furthermore, the small state offers better government-internal conditions than other countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia, or Laos with a functioning democratic government. Following our statistics, it can be outlined that Australia and Malaysia hold the highest representation in this debate. Singapore and Brunei, on the opposite, barely take actively part in this discussion. Thus, democracy and human rights may be the "black sheep in the family" (Marques et al., 1988),¹ which creates noise in the public representation. TL may not fit an ongoing trend of illiberal states in Southeast Asia, which is referred by a few agents (Kupang, 2016; *The Interpreter*, 2017). Even though it is not very graspable in the gathered data, this may raise the question of explicit frontstage and backstage representation (Goffman, 1956).

Another strongly represented indicator of the support for TL is the frequent outline of the common sense between ASEAN and TL, thus, at the same time there's the exclusive attitude of ASEAN stated. The common sense is presented through several arguments: commitment to human rights, economic growth, social progress and cultural development, regional peace and stability, active collaboration and mutual assistance, assistance on training and research facilities, collaboration for agriculture and industries, promotion of Southeast Asia (SEA) studies, and beneficial cooperation with existing international organisations. Therefore, there is the need of backing from the regional organisation but at the same time, exclusive attitude is stated and criticised (*East Timor Law and Justice Bulletin*, 2017). Talking about the exclusive character regarding this case, we will continue with a debate about the pillar of conflict, which is rooting in the narrative of readiness.

The ambivalence expressed in the corpus as well as the ambivalence between the general positive visions of the texts and the action itself (the delaying of the admission) may refer to sincerity and cynicism.

5.1.3. Rationalities of Conflict. Throughout several narratives about the discrepancies between TL and its opponents, we started to question: Is the delay of the admission a result of an (indirect) conflict between TL and some members of ASEAN? As we elaborated, in the rationalities of ambivalence there are indications of conflict which manifest why countries like Singapore, Myanmar, or Laos do have objections on the membership. Regarding Laos, we did not find enough evidence in the corpus of the data. Conflict in terms of Singapore and Myanmar is expressed, basically, through arguments as economic burden, internal development, and political clashes.

Singapore's greatest concern, as stated by a great number of agents, is underlined by economic matters, such as TL's dependency on oil and gas revenues. Furthermore, regarding antagonistic statements about the preparedness of TL for the ASEAN membership, an overdependence on foreign aid is feared (Almuttaqi, 2015; Chongkittavorn, 2015; Chin, 2017; Ramos-Horta, 2011; Strating, 2017). This is highlighted by arguments that emphasise it as an economic burden for ASEAN. Furthermore, education and health indicators – which are some of the worst in the ASEAN region – are taken as justification for rejecting the country (Hunt, 2016; ASAA, 2017).

The East Timor Law and Justice Bulletin – among others – harshly debate the concerns of Singapore and Myanmar regarding the membership for TL. According to these agencies, there is a stark contrast between the civil peace in TL compared to Myanmar. Singapore's objections can be referred, as mentioned above, to economic grounds; Myanmar's objections to political ones (Wright, 2017). Harsh criticism by the former president of TL regarding the political structures of Myanmar raised agitations (*The Irrawaddy*, 2016).

Complementary to that, various agents depict that Myanmar believes TL has several shortcomings which make a membership impossible. The financial situation of TL is seen as a burden for ASEAN from Singapore, as is stated in various articles. To our curiosity, Singapore itself doesn't confirm these arguments about this case in any newspaper article we found. The spokespersons (agents) who tackle this issue can be seen as intermediate agencies in favour of TL, acting on a middle ground. The same issue can be referred to Brunei/Myanmar. They do not take place officially in these discussions throughout public (online) media channels. In the meantime, agents of other countries/agencies refer to reasons for the exclusion of TL coming from the above-mentioned antagonist countries. Saying so, it is outlined that there is noticeably little diplomatic solidarity between TL and Myanmar, regarding the role played by the former country's president Ramos-Horta who repeatedly condemned the military-ruled government in Myanmar. Furthermore, Ramos-Horta manifested TL's commitment to the restoration of democracy. Also substantial for a better understanding of the objections is the support for Singapore's opinion by non-democratic ASEAN members (*East Timor Law and Justice Bulletin*, 2017; *Myanmar Times*, 2017; Dupont, 2017). We already

tackled this issue in the rationalities of ambivalence by referring the “black sheep effect” (Marques et al., 1988) and (un)imagined community members.

5.2. Coherence of Scattered Agents: An International Imagined Community?

Built from our results and interpretations, we propose three constructs to enhance research on this issue: (1) *Scattered Agents* as agency, (2) *Online International Media*, and (3) *International Imagined Communities*. Therefore, it is important to discuss the role of the scattered agents and the arena of online international media with a focus on the common sense between them as an international imagined community in the making. In the next section, we will target the importance of their indirect connection as social actors to make their perceptions understandable.

Our curiosity arose throughout the comparison of the main rationalities. It is clear that there is a crosscutting of the supportive behaviour to TL by scattered agents. This supportive behaviour we refer to as *Narrative of Readiness*. A multitude of agents and rationalities in the timeframe of 2011–2018 gathered together in a symbolic sense to build this narrative. Therefore, the support continued over space and time. However, the *common ground* (a *construct* from our findings) of the narrative of readiness between the agents should not be seen as a definite and unchangeable condition. On the contrary, it is flexible: an imagined community arises throughout the rationalities. The narrative of readiness cannot be tied to a specific nationality, nor are there links to suspicious supports in favour of TL. In course of that we are proposing a connection between this *common ground* and our constructs of scattered agents, online international media, and international imagined communities which can be conceived as a support for international regionalism. As we tried to make clear, agents from all over the world tackle the issue of TL’s admission to ASEAN with a similar approach, which is a narrative of readiness. Saying so, the *common ground* of our examined agents has to be seen in the context of shared perceptions, interpretations, and imaginations of current affairs in a public international space (the online international media expressed by available newspapers, reproduced in English). This public international space of online international media may be a context for emerging identities. The agent(s) is/are never performing in an unbiased setting, it’s always shaped by the social conventions of a group, which makes the debate of imagined communities essential (Anderson, 1983). This leads us to the capacity of the agents to make something happen. Furthermore, in association with this, our field of research – therefore, newspaper articles – brings the concept of “print capitalism” (now reformulated to online international media) into discussion. Within this, Anderson embraced that throughout printed media a common language is used to reach and influence a certain audience for the circulation of information about a specific discourse. This has to be linked with the examined multiplicity of agents who share rationalities about the case of TL, what turns them eventually into an international imagined community in the making. This (international) imagined community doesn’t have a direct/conscious link between the individuals themselves but connects them throughout their actions of support (Anderson, 1983). Social actions throughout human interests and political manipulation by individual/collective actors play a core role

within imagined communities and its common sense. In this setting, the focus is on the processes, responses, and reactions of each agent throughout a new public realm: the online international media. As Weber (1922) stated, an action is only then social when the individual is oriented by the course of the behaviour of others.

Concluding, our subject of study (TL) and our corpus of analysis (newspaper articles) reveal three rationalities bounded by a *common ground*: a Narrative of Readiness presented by scattered agents in online international media. We propose that this may be considered as an epitome of an international imagined community in the making. Thus, TL plays eventually a core role in building an ASEAN identity.

6. Conclusion

With this article we intended to discuss the available corpus of data (online newspapers articles) where the debate about the case of TL's admission to ASEAN was most representative. Our findings emphasised instead the prevalence of a *common ground*. We found arguments of preparedness, ambivalence, and conflict, through which we considered that a *common ground* for the admission of TL is prevailing. Furthermore, we designated this *common ground* as a Narrative of Readiness. This common ground presented by scattered agents in a new public space led us to propose the possibility of an international imagined community in the making. This narrative has to be seen in the context of big structures: the power of the agents who perform as individuals, speaking/acting throughout an agency. Despite the several agencies, we question whether a regional identity takes the floor: as an International Imagined Community.

The support for TL from these scattered agents is more than outstanding for its international recognition, economic expansion, and domestic development. Following these statements, there is one shared argument: through the readiness of TL, the country deserves the backing and encouragement on an international level to ensure further progress.

The case of TL might seem like a unique, specific, and regional problematic but it has to be critically questioned and discussed in an international context on a macroscale: the issue of nation-states seeking access to international communities with its multitude of inclusive/exclusive facets. Thus, this research contributed to an analysis of the narratives of international imagined communities about the case of TL in ASEAN. Regarding the impact of inside and outside regional (e.g. Indonesia, Australia) as well as global forces (China, United States), it has to be understood that the assumed "unique" issue of TL's admission is embedded in an international context and widely influenced by global actors.

Concluding, there is a Narrative of Readiness, yet, the delay is further ongoing. This problematic makes the further questioning necessary: (i) Does TL as eventual last candidate of the regional grouping play a relevant role in ASEAN's identity testing and consolidation? (ii) Is TL perceived as the "other" (black sheep effect), as a way to strengthen a shared identity of the in-group members?

Further researches are needed to contribute to a broader understanding of the importance of ASEAN's regional and global role regarding stability, economic growth, foreign relations, and regional peace. However, as already indicated, we enable a connection with the dimension of International Imagined Communities sharing the same narrative about one particular topic, which is – in this case: the readiness of TL to join ASEAN.

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Note

1. To create a stronger shared identity, an in-group member is judged in an extreme way. Thus, if this hypothesis is plausible, Timor-Leste is used (eventually as a scape goat through the delay) as a test to evaluate the strength of the identity of ASEAN itself.

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Author biographies

Paulo Castro Seixas is an associate professor at ISCSP and expert on Urban Studies, Public Policies, and Socio-Anthropology of Timor-Leste. He is the coordinator of the Portuguese CRISEA Team (H2020) and co-coordinator of the Foundation of Science and Technology, CRICITY (2018–2021).

Nuno Canas Mendes is an associate professor at ISCSP, president of the Institute of Oriente, and expert of International Relations, Portuguese Foreign Policy; China, Asia Pacific and on Contemporary International Politics.

Nadine Lobner is a research assistant of CRISEA, master student of Anthropology at the University of Lisbon, and currently working on researches about Timor-Leste within ASEAN together with the Portuguese research team.