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How to navigate the storm

Österreichisches Institut
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Editorial

Dear Friends, Colleagues, and Supporters,

The Austrian Institute for International Affairs - oiip is proud to publish the second issue of its Magazine REFLECTIONS. The Magazine aims to make current topics of international politics accessible and interesting to a broader readership. This year's issue addresses the rise of authoritarian populism and aggressive power politics around the globe, the retreat of democracy and liberal values, and how these developments affect international relations. However, we do not want to paint an overly bleak picture and further contribute to dystopian discourses. This is why we also asked our authors to explore trends, dynamics, and developments that promise democratic resilience. Guided by academic quality criteria and drawing on deep experience, the institute and its researchers aim to help navigate the storm and fight for democratic freedom, peace, human rights and, welfare, which are of utmost importance to all of us.
This year's issue titled "How to navigate the storm" has brought together a large set of experts from different fields including political science, international relations, economics, law, and sociology, and features two interviews with prominent interlocutors.

Enjoy reading REFLECTIONS; gain new perspectives, inspiration, and hope.
Learn more about our institute, our work and our experts on our website. Support an independent, non-partisan research institution through a membership with the oiip!

Editorial Team

Preface

by **Cengiz Günay**

Let's Unite our Forces for Democracy!

"Winter is coming" is the well-known theme of the popular fantasy series Game of Thrones and alludes to the rise of a threat from an unknown power. The story is set in a fictional world and begins at the end of a summer that has lasted for decades. Current developments in world politics show many parallels. After a long period of relative global peace and security and an era of cooperation, the feeling that winter is coming has persisted for quite some time. The gradual but persistent rise of populist authoritarian movements and leaders has challenged democracies – both young and established ones – around the globe. The V-Dem Democracy Report 2025 highlights that the wave of autocratization has been ongoing for at least 25 years and has not yet reached its peak. Autocratization includes state capture, the restructuring of the judiciary, the destruction of state institutions, direct or indirect control of the media, polarization, the sowing of discord and a narrowing of the space for political contestation. Today, autocratization affects 38 percent of the world's population. The term does not only refer to the rise of authoritarian governing practices in democratic societies, such as the U.S. since Donald Trump's return to the White House, but also to authoritarian, systems becoming even more authoritarian such as in Turkey, Serbia or Hungary. While a majority of states are undergoing autocratization, only six percent are experiencing democratization. The few examples are Poland, Brazil and Thailand. Autocratization has gone hand in hand with the personalization of power, leading to an increase in international power politics. Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine, Netanyahu's war on Gaza, Trump's claims for territorial expansion prove: winter has come. A storm is tearing through everything—shaking the foundations of the state and the liberal world system alike. Democratic institutions, human rights, international law, multilateral organizations, global governance and diplomacy, all hard-won achievements, are called into question. And yet, even as authoritarian populism, polarization, confrontation and disinformation seem to have become the new norm, there are societal developments, political dynamics and institutional structures that offer guidance and resilience in navigating these turbulent waters.

Recent protest movements in countries such as Serbia, Turkey, Georgia, Slovakia and Hungary are striking examples of the resilience of democratic opposition. Despite facing intense repression, large segments of society, especially young people, have demonstrated their determination and courage to stand up and fight for democratic values and ideals.

The Austrian Institute for International Affairs - oiip is committed to live and defend democratic, liberal values. The institute positions itself as a resort for international experts and as a place for dialogue. In this capacity we have started an exciting exchange with young pro-democracy activists across the globe. Through various focus group discussions with activists from Serbia, Turkey and Georgia, we aim to learn about their motivations and struggles, their cooperation with opposition parties and civil society, and how they want to shape the future of their countries. As one participant from Georgia emphasized, many of them feel that "this is the last fight – we win, or we leave!". They are no longer willing to be, as some put it, 'boiled like frogs' – instead, they are ready to turn up the heat and challenge the regime.

In this year's issue of REFLECTIONS our authors analyze the storm, its dimensions and its impact on the world, but they all also highlight dynamics, developments and areas that yield hope for a democratic future. REFLECTIONS No2. features 17 contributions including articles, interviews, and a new section titled Young Voices. We are proud that this issue includes a diverse set of experts from different fields and different backgrounds and has a balanced gender and age representation.

In the first article of the magazine, Zeynep Alemdar calls for new alliances to confront the storm on all levels. She suggests that international organizations should seek to reach out to civil society and social movements.

In my interview with Ruth Wodak, one of the leading experts in Critical Discourse Analysis, we explore the reasons for the rise of far-right populism around the globe. Wodak, who recently joined the oiip's advisory board, argues that democratic forces need to develop counter-narratives and become more activistic if they want to counter the storm.

Our colleagues Vedran Džihić and Ljiljana Kolarski explore the protest movements in Southeastern and Eastern Europe. Both emphasize that although the region has been swept by a wave of autocratization, it may also reveal key responses to the crises of our time – and even serve as a source of renewed liberal-democratic inspiration.

Osnat Lubrani notes in her contribution on Israel that the country has lost its moral compass. In the post-October 7 environment, many taboos have been shattered, with public statements labeling all Palestinian civilians – including infants – as legitimate targets – a rhetoric that Lubrani describes as once unthinkable. Similar to the examples of pro-democracy struggles in Serbia, Turkey, Georgia and Hungary, Lubrani finds hope in the activism of ordinary citizens in Israel.

Petra Ramsauer, in turn, explores transition in post-Assad Syria. Ramsauer, an experienced Middle East war reporter and psychologist, emphasizes that despite destruction, poverty, hunger, and anger, most Syrians still hold onto hope for justice. She asserts that how Syria deals with transitional justice will have profound implications for future transitions in other countries. If Syria fails, the entire concept of transitional justice will be seriously undermined. However, Ramsauer is hopeful that Syria has

moved closer than ever to justice – and hopefully democratization – than at any moment in time over the last 40 years.

Our colleague Judith Kohlenberger deals in her article with the undemocratic nature of borders. Drawing on French Philosopher Balibar, she advocates for the democratization of border policies, insisting that all those affected – including migrants and prospective migrants, NGOs, as well as citizens skeptical of migration – must be included in the decision-making process. She presents illustrative cases which have proven to be successful, such as Switzerland and Portugal, where migrants have been consulted in the development of border and migration policies.

Our colleague Sophie Reichelt presents the winners of the Intercultural Achievement Award of 2024. They constitute best practice examples of bottom-up initiatives that have been able to change perceptions and even policies. She highlights a project by an Israeli NGO that targets youth and aims to challenge deep-seated biases within Israeli society towards Arabs and to foster understanding through personal storytelling and dialogue.

Democracy thrives through civil society and grassroots activism and political struggle but also needs to be strengthened through training and education at the primary and secondary level. Our colleague Annika Scharnagl recommends that this entails the cultivation of skills such as critical thinking, dialogue, empathy, and media literacy.

Former Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel explores in his conversation with me how the world has changed over the last decades. Schüssel, who turns 80 this year, headed the first coalition government between the Conservative ÖVP (People's Party) and the far right FPÖ (Freedom Party) between 2000 and 2007. Referring to the critics of the era, Schüssel highlights that governments and democracy need to prove that they are efficient. He also advises politicians to be more self-confident and dare to be unpopular.

Olga Pindyuk from the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies - wiiw deals in her article with the future of Ukraine. Pindyuk points to the significant potential for the EU to scale up its support for Ukraine, but she also emphasizes that Ukraine's success is of particular importance for Europe's future: Ukraine offers a potentially big consumer market, a workforce of high-skilled and medium-skilled labourers as well as security and defence technology.

Rebecca Jovin, Chief of the UNODA Vienna Office warns in her contribution that there is an erosion of longstanding humanitarian disarmament and arms control instruments, from landmines to cluster munitions. Jovin puts forward a compelling argument that, despite the growing view that now is not the time to discuss disarmament, history has proven otherwise: it is at times of tension and crisis that disarmament and arms control have shown their value as key instruments of security.

Ralph Janik provides an analysis of the effects of Trumpian foreign policy decisions on international law and cooperation. Janik asserts that international law is more resilient than many would think. It emerged over centuries and survived far darker times in global history than today.

Emiliano Alessandri and our colleague Loïc Simonet, both deal with the effects of the storm in international politics on security. Alessandri emphasizes that crises and the risk of disengagement have always been part of the Euro-US relations. He asserts that the longstanding partnership has been the result of hard diplomatic work. Therefore, Europeans should keep a clear head and make NATO work but also start exploring new European platforms. Simonet, in turn, argues that hypermasculine and hubristic political performances have become the "new modern," warning that the United States—once seen as a protector—can just as easily become a predator. Simonet calls on Europe to remember its identity, uphold its institutions, and to showcase what it stands for.

Our colleague Thomas Eder analyzes China's strategies for navigating Trump's foreign policy. He notes that Chinese authorities are confident in their ability to stand firm. The encouraging news, according to Eder, is that China aims to avoid a security crisis with Washington and focus on the economy.

In our new section Young Voices we feature the views of young researchers at the oiip. We asked these very talented and bright people about what they deem to be important, what makes them hopeful and what they would recommend world leaders.

The themes in this magazine correspond with the research areas of the Austrian Institute for International Affairs - oiip: Security Politics, Europe's relations with the world; Democracy, Autocratization and Foreign Policy; Migration and Diaspora Policies; Multilateralism and Geopolitics.

I would like to take the opportunity and thank all authors and our great team for their support and for making REFLECTIONS happen again. My special thanks go to Petra Podesser, Annika Scharnagl and the rest of the Editorial Team. I would also like to thank Zoe Edwards and Dan Ziebarth for proofreading.

Also, many thanks to all our members, supporters, donors and cooperation partners for their continuing trust in us and our work.

If you wish to stay up to date about our latest publications and to support our mission and our research, become a member! Visit our website for membership: https://www.oiip.ac.at

Let's navigate the storm together,

Cengiz Günay
Director


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How to Stand Tall on Shifting Grounds

by **Zeynep Alemdar**

Scholars and policymakers rarely agree. Yet, by the spring of 2025, there seems to be a consensus that the international system as we know it will no longer function as we have envisioned, learned about and taught it in the Western tradition. The post-Cold War period, with its confusions about unipolarity versus multipolarity, whether the United States will remain the superpower and provider of international public goods, or whether China, Russia, and some other powers will take the lead and pay for some of the latter, is over. The moral foundations of the Western international system, which guaranteed some common standards, have now completely collapsed. International norms such as the fair treatment of prisoners of war, the protection of women and children, and the non-use of disproportionate force are now completely absent. The shared and principled understandings of desirable and acceptable forms of social behavior, that was the base of the "international society" in Hedley Bull's terms, are not exercised anymore, and their legitimacy is not only questioned by the non-Western powers but also by the main actor that used to be the leader of the Western world, the US.

Our assumptions about how nations and leaders behave are now outdated. A new (dis)order- if we are OK with defining it in duality- is emerging, and we are all trying to anticipate and prepare for it. It is a moral duty to stand tall on these shifting grounds with some integrity, as perhaps the last generation to live in relative safety within the liberal international normative order whose establishment spanned most of the 20th century.

Two major challenges affect our understanding of the world and challenge our assumptions about world order. The first challenge is the astonishing lack of morality in the conduct of contemporary international relations. There is no longer an international system in which certain international norms are established, at least on paper and in discourse. Neither the 1949 dated Geneva Convention's norms such as the fair treatment of prisoners of war, nor the 2000 dated United Nations Security Resolution 1325 that concerns protection of women and children during conflict are valid anymore.

> “It is a moral duty to stand tall on these shifting grounds with some integrity.”

While the rules of these and similar international agreements were never fully implemented, they were at least recognized and praised by statesmen and international organizations. In fact, the very foundation of the discipline of international relations, as theorized by realist scholars, recognizes the moral significance of political action. Knowing that there is a tension between the moral imperative and the requirements of “successful” political action, it still defines international relations as a-moral, not immoral. But even in the midst of this “amorality,” it recognizes the usefulness of international organizations, led by the most powerful states, in adopting and maintaining a common moral code to ensure long-term international equilibrium - because that is another source of power.

The second challenge in understanding and framing the issues is the pace of change. The timeline of the history of international relations after the Cold War contained milestones that used to be about a decade apart. September 11 and the Arab Spring were the reference points for major changes in the system. Then came Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. But the last two and half years have been marked by two other groundbreaking events: Trump’s reelection and Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad’s flight to Russia. Both events have already begun to shape the future of the international and regional order, with no easy predictions other than that systems will change. In the midst of the storm of connectivity and digitalization that has taken over, we are more likely to change the timelines of events at an unprecedented pace.

These two challenges to our logical horizons have perplexing consequences for our societies, as well as for policymakers and citizens, individually and as groups, and for the interactions between them. The first is the embodiment of the lack of morality in politicians, best reflected in the persona of Trump. The scenes of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States, who, in addition to his crimes of corruption and sexual harassment, completely disregards the principles of statecraft, such as public service and respect for office. His pride in these behaviors, and lack of any confrontation from his administration alters the way societies think about how politics and international relations are conducted. His very presence and support for him in office legitimize the system’s loss of morality and paves the way for other corrupt politicians and citizens to ease their way into a similar persona. No post-World War II realist theorist, I suspect, would have imagined that this type of politician would govern the United States in the 21st century.

The second consequence of the surrounding immoral environment and the pace of change is the shock to citizens. Despite the various violent conflicts around the world since the end of the Cold War, many citizens around the world have experienced the consequences of war only indirectly and at a slower pace. Either their economies were affected by supply chain disruptions or sanctions, or more migrants began to live in their neighborhoods. Their political needs seemed to have been met through elections, despite the low quality of democratic experience. However, confused with the loss of common normative principles, as exemplified by the personas of Trump and his imitators, and the accumulation and gradual hardening of economic conditions around the world, citizens were pushed into a space where it was now inevitable to act. During and after the super-election year of 2024, we saw eruptions of protest movements around the world, from Bangladesh to Bulgaria, from Venezuela to Gambia. Protests in Serbia and Turkey are still going on. Election fraud, economic problems ranging from inflation to poor working conditions, concerns about far-right parties, media repression, violence in Gaza, anti-gender movements and dwindling women’s rights were all protest themes. However, all the reasons for the poor economic and political conditions have already been thoroughly studied, many solutions have already been prescribed, and goals and timetables have already been set by various international organizations, including the UN, the EU, and many others during

the 2000s. The discrepancy between the international norms enshrined in many international agreements, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the Sustainable Development Goals, and their practice resulted in complete delegitimization of the norms.

What can be done to re-legitimize the norms and restore the rules?

The end of the Western system of international norms was not abrupt. Rather, the Western liberal order, which seemed to have defeated the countervailing power of the Iron Curtain, expanded its discourse. The norms of the Western liberal order were used to legitimize U.S. interventions in Iraq in 2001 and Libya in 2011, as well as the measures taken in the aftermath of the 2008 European economic crisis. The legitimization of policies that harmed certain groups through what were perceived as international norms fed the belief that the international system works only as powerful states want it to, and that the decisions of nation-states are irrelevant. Conservatives and extremists, especially in countries with authoritarian tendencies, have found the perfect reason to criticize the legitimacy of a system of transnational liberalism that advocates common social liberal norms. Years of negotiations and agreements that established international norms and ensured the acceptance of this system by nation-states have been erased from public memory. Moreover, in a world that was no longer bipolar, there was no strict need for countries to take sides, so leaders of each country interpreted the system according to their own internal dynamics and how they perceived the international system. The legitimacy of international norms thus faded.

In this new international order, how do we find ways to describe, communicate, negotiate, and act on common international humanitarian norms? If statesmen are not ashamed to pursue their own interests, and if there is no agreement on basic common principles, where do we turn?

As a desperately hopeful internationalist, I suggest looking at international organizations, which have been the creators and guardians of international norms. Studies of international organizations suggest that they are more effective when they can develop more institutional relationships with non-state actors. Creating sustainable mechanisms to improve interactions between non-state actors and international organizations would be an important step toward reimagining common norms. What happened to the global protests of last year? Do Argentinean teachers and students have access to an international cooperation mechanism that improves their well-being? What happens when anti-war activists in Israel protest the war in Gaza, do they find support from an international organization?

But these sustainable mechanisms, institutional tools to connect non-state actors to old and bureaucratically burdened institutions, must be innovative. We cannot and should not create lobby groups out of civil society actors, nor should we allow the gatekeepers that also exist in civil society to establish links with international actors in order to maintain their old ways of working. The plurality and innovativeness of the new generations of protesters should be called upon.

The literature suggests that social movements become more effective when they perceive that it is possible to gain power. The events of Seattle in 1999 and Occupy Wall Street in 2011 grew because these movements were able to connect people from different movements, workers and farmers from the South and the North in the case of Seattle, and students, environmentalists, and many others in the case of Occupy, with common interests and for common rights, and see their movement grow. The World Social Forums after Seattle and many other strikes and protests that grew out of the Occupy Wall Street gatherings demonstrate the ability of protest movements to cooperate and converge. There is also evidence that the success of international organizations is enhanced when they engage in deep partnerships and work with diverse actors. When international organizations consult with civil society regularly, create flexible mechanisms of funding, and define their goals concurrently with local actors who have better information

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Voting in the UN General Assembly.

about the problems on the ground, they may become more successful institutions. Yet, international organizations, because they typically have government mandates, stay away from the solutions that these movements offer and/or lack the agency to make policy. But in these times of transformation, when local ownership of international liberal norms is urgently needed, international organizations should find new ways to work with movements.

In lieu of a conclusion

The pace of change in the world order and the fact that our assumptions about the morality of politics have been proven wrong force us to rethink the way the world works. However, we must use the accumulated knowledge of the 20th century, during which many wars were fought and lost, and a certain international order was established through international organizations that recognized and defended basic human rights. Now that our worlds have been turned upside down, states and leaders have proven to fail the international norms, the proposal to restore some remnants of the liberal normative order involves linking disgruntled populations to international organizations. But while protest movements should find ways to de-silo themselves, escape fragmentation, and converge on common goals, international organizations should look for creative ways to meet and learn from them. While realist accounts of international relations rightly caution us against universal moral principles, we can turn to feminist international relations, which seeks to find common moral elements in human aspirations, as Ann Tickner suggested in her seminal work on feminist reformulation of Morghenthau’s realist principles back in 1988.

Zeynep Alemdar is Professor of International Relations and Director of the Foreign Policy Program at the Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM). Her research interests include international security, Turkish foreign policy, as well as Turkey’s human rights, and gender equality issues. She has published extensively and co-edited the 2023 Palgrave book Turkey’s Challenges and Transformation: Politics and Society on the Centennial of the Republic. She was an Elkana Fellow at The New Institute for the 2024/25 academic year, visiting professor at Portland State University in 2011. In 2014, she was recognized as one of the four leaders under 40 in Euro-Atlantic security and was a Next Generation Hurford Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, D.C.

Let's Confront the "Dead Cat"

Interview with **Ruth Wodak**

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Discourse analyst Ruth Wodak explores how far-right movements exploit societal insecurities through strategic language and why meaningful conversations and grassroots engagement are key to resisting their rise.

Cengiz Günay: The title of this year's issue of our magazine REFLECTIONS is How to navigate the storm. Would you agree that there is a storm, and if so, how would you define the storm?

Ruth Wodak: Well, I would certainly agree, there are many insecurities which lead to anxieties and fear. They stem from multiple storms which were not predictable. We are experiencing a massive geopolitical change and on an individual level we do not know what is going to happen, while we all thought that we knew what would happen, at least in the near future. We can describe the storm as a polycrisis. The term stems from Adam Tooze (who probably took it from Jean-Claude Juncker). It describes a massive crisis which is not the sum of the various smaller crises, but it is something qualitatively different: a multitude of insecurities and uncertainties. The polycrisis also triggers the fear of losing control. We were used to being agents, agents who could structure their lives, at least in some ways. Now many people have the feeling they have lost control over their lives. This sentiment was enhanced by the pandemic, the current wars, economic crises, political crises, corruption, the fear of being overwhelmed by migration. This also leads to a loss of trust in politics and the media.

Cengiz Günay: What are the societal effects of the polycrisis?

Ruth Wodak: There are different ways of coping with all these insecurities. Some withdraw in a Biedermeier way. They lose their interest in politics and just want to live their lives in peace. And yet, some of these crises are existential in the sense that you might lose your job, or you don't have enough money to heat your apartment or to buy your food. Others become susceptible to radical political views. People search for saviors who promise them to get back control, which was one of the slogans supporting Brexit, and they tend to believe leaders who blame arbitrary scapegoats and promise simple solutions. These phenomena - partly - explain the rise of the far right. Positive narratives are unfortunately missing. The effect is, that a growing number of liberal democratic countries are now governed by far-right parties.

Cengiz Günay: Is the far right the reason for the systemic changes or is it their consequence?

Ruth Wodak: Far right parties have been around for quite some time (for example, Jörg Haider became leader of the FPÖ in 1986). Therefore, they are not the cause of the crisis, but they instrumentalize it. In the 1980s and 1990s, they were not that popular. They had a core constituency of approximately 15%. But, they have now successfully instrumentalized the feelings of insecurity and unpredictability, especially after the fall of the Iron Curtain in

1989 and the subsequent immigration from former Communist countries.

Cengiz Günay: A distinctive feature of far-right parties is their strategic usage of language. As one of the vanguards of critical discourse analysis you have done many studies. What is critical discourse analysis?

Ruth Wodak: Critical discourse studies challenge spoken, written and visual texts and discourses. We question who said what, why, what happened before, what happens after, with which effect? We challenge the essentialization and naturalization of discourse, the claim that "there is no alternative" (i.e., Margaret Thatcher, the "TINA-Argument").

Cengiz Günay: What is the discourse of the far right?

Ruth Wodak: Their discourse highlights alleged dystopian threats and creates scenarios of danger. This strategy is something Trump uses continuously. People felt understood and acknowledged by it. They were experiencing terrible times, and Trump's dystopian discourse is acknowledging their misery. On the other hand, such parties and their leaders present a way out of the misery, thus they create hope. Trump and others present themselves as saviors. They promise to save Europe, Austria, the United States or Turkey, and so forth. The notion of a "messiah" is not new. Indeed, already Hitler suggested that he was sent by God to save Germany.

Cengiz Günay: So, they suggest an absolute truth, that there is just one truth?

Ruth Wodak: One truth. And this truth is disseminated in an extraordinarily clever way. They appeal to emotions and to the "common sense" of the people. Far right movements have created an entire parallel world of discourse. They use their own newspapers, TV stations, YouTube channels, telegram messengers and TikTok. They present stories, comics, rap songs, and short videos which elaborate alleged world conspiracies and blame so-called globalists who are accused of manipulating the world. This discursive world can also be quite entertaining. Once you become part of this discursive parallel world, you don't believe anything that comes from outside of this world. This makes communication and dialogue so difficult. Anything you say, all facts which you list, will be immediately turned down as "fake news".

Cengiz Günay: They offer a spectacle.

Ruth Wodak: It's very much a spectacle, we call it politicotainment. With the culture war they claim to be waging and the symbolic politics they advocate, they appeal to many emotions: For example, resentment, greed, fear, pride. Finally, people think, "you are allowed to be politically incorrect". They say something "what you always wanted to say".

Cengiz Günay: What I observe is that Trump and other right-wing populists present themselves as victims and at the same time, they act as villains. I really have difficulties of bringing that together.

Ruth Wodak: We call it the "strategy of victim-perpetrator reversal." It is very powerful. Instead of being the perpetrator you perform as a victim, and you distract people from what you're doing. Victimization often goes together with what I call the "dead cat strategy". This is a well-known rhetorical strategy: to change the topic, distract people and create a new discourse. When confronted with an uncomfortable topic, you – metaphorically – drop a dead cat on the table, and everybody starts talking about that dead cat. When asked about difficult topics such as unemployment, the budget deficit and

> "I think we need an explanation why change happens, and politicians must find a more positive narrative which compensates for the fear of change."

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so forth, you drop "a dead cat", and people forget the important topics, they rather start talking about the dead cat.

Cengiz Günay: How to confront the dead cat? It's a very human thing to get distracted and talk about it.

Ruth Wodak: The media fall into this trap all the time. I remember, for example, when the conservative and far right government of ÖVP and FPÖ passed a law which increased legal working hours. The trade unions were opposed to it and started organizing strikes. What did the government do? They suddenly started talking about a headscarf ban in primary schools, and kindergartens. Of course, there were almost no girls at that age wearing headscarves. It did not matter. The media immediately jumped on it. Instead of discussing a political measure that affects many more people, the media highlighted the alleged problem of headscarves in primary schools - a problem that didn't even exist.

Cengiz Günay: My observation would be that the far-right discourse is more and more permeating other political spheres. Are we generally moving more to the right?

Ruth Wodak: I wouldn't say that societies in general are moving to the right. But I agree that certain issues and the related rhetoric have become normalized and that the conservative parties are shifting to the right on issues such as migration or asylum policies, not so much when it comes to EU policies. Jan-Werner Müller once wrote that no far-right party can come into power if they're not supported by the conservatives. And that seems to be plausible. We have learnt this from history. Currently, if you take Austria for example, who supported the far right to get into government? The Industrial Association - the big businesses. They were convinced that it was better for them to build a coalition with the far right than with left-wing parties. The left has recently been demonized enormously among conservatives. Obviously, the fear of taxing the rich is bigger than the fear of hollowing out human rights, the rule of law and liberal democracy.

Some mainstream parties frequently endorse a strategy of overtaking the far right. Indeed, also the Social Democrats thought that stricter migration policies would help them win back voters from the FPÖ. Of course, this strategy did not work. The Social Democrats could never win back the voters they had lost to the far right and the conservatives could not hold them either.

Cengiz Günay: What is the long-term effect on democracy? Polarization is in nature destructive—it is against compromise, the essence of democracy. Is democracy resilient enough to withstand these developments?

Ruth Wodak: Liberal democracies are quite resilient, not everywhere but certainly in some countries. I believe that people must understand that their institutions and the rule of law must be protected and defended. This is what Trump is currently disregarding in the U.S. This is dangerous for the US democracy. But we also observe a few success stories such as Poland: we will see whether the change in Poland will work in the long run. We also observe protest movements in Turkey and Serbia. So, you know, there are also positive news. They are less talked about because media loves conflicts and scandals, and bad news sell well.

Cengiz Günay: What can we do?

Ruth Wodak: We need to confront such parties, their disinformation and disruptive strategies and say: "I reject your discourse. I'm rather going to talk about what really matters".

Cengiz Günay: How do we do that?

Ruth Wodak: One way of doing that is, confronting them with facts. Of course, very often that doesn't really help, but might be an entry point where you start a conversation. Check whether a dialog is possible, and then, what happens in the conversation. First, you ask people what they think, and then you listen to them. You don't teach them. You shouldn't tell them that what they're saying is wrong. The moralistic position certainly doesn't help. You show empathy and then you put your own opinion and facts on the table, and then start a discussion. That can help. I've already had such conversations. It is not possible in situations where there is a big audience. It is only possible in smaller settings. I call it "Grätzel-Politik" - Neighbourhood Policy. In these small and informal settings, people tend to tell you about their grievances; why they can't buy bread, what they are struggling with and why they're angry. And they're very angry! And you can tell them that you're also angry. You can share that you are also struggling with rising prices and that you worry about the future. This might help building a positive relationship which opens the door to other issues. It is not easy, and it takes time, but you attempt starting a conversation. Politicians should risk entering into such settings and conversations.

Cengiz Günay: It's probably also an important acknowledgement of people's agency, right?

Ruth Wodak: It is a strong signal that they and their woes and problems matter. It was interesting to see how happy and grateful people are when you talk to them. And you know what, when I came back home after such encounters, I was also very happy.

Cengiz Günay: Should we become more activist?

Ruth Wodak: Yes, indeed. Many of my friends have become activist, making small steps to counter the anger and the feelings of not being listened to. Actually, I believe that people with quasi permanent jobs shouldn't be frightened at all to attempt such "Grätzel-Politik". Nothing can really happen.

Cengiz Günay: And yet they are those who are the most scared, often.

Ruth Wodak: And that's terrible. It is part of the politics of fear. What are people afraid of in a rich country like Austria? And yet, the fear of losing out is enormous. Because people are constantly told that they are under existential threat. Elderly people tend to be more frightened. They have more difficulties in coping with change. I think we need an explanation why change happens, and politicians must find a more positive narrative which compensates for the fear of change.

Cengiz Günay: A narrative that frames change as something positive. Barack Obama did that somehow, right?

Ruth Wodak: Obama was fantastic in this regard. "Yes we can!" was a positive message for necessary change. It was a brilliant slogan. Such slogans are currently missing. If you look at the posters of mainstream parties, they are empty and superficial, they do not send out a realistic positive message. The posters of the far right on the contrary, appeal to resentment.

Cengiz Günay: If we do something, there is hope, right?

Ruth Wodak: We need to be aware of how certain crisis and issues are being instrumentalized. And alternative narratives, positive narratives must be created and launched.

Cengiz Günay: Can we do that as ordinary citizens? We probably need politicians for that as well, right?

Ruth Wodak: Yes, of course, we need politicians, but as ordinary citizens, we can also attempt to enter conversations in our everyday lives. And in that way, everybody is also political.

> "I believe that people with quasi permanent jobs shouldn't be frightened at all to attempt such 'Grätzel-Politik'. Nothing can really happen."

Ruth Wodak is an Austrian linguist and emerita Distinguished Professor of Discourse Studies at Lancaster University. She is renowned for her work in Critical Discourse Analysis, focusing on political communication, nationalism, right-wing populism, and antisemitism. Wodak has published extensively, including influential books such as The Politics of Fear and Discourse and Discrimination. Her interdisciplinary approach combines linguistics, sociology, and political science. She has received numerous honors, including the Wittgenstein Award and several honorary doctorates.

The Light That Still Shines

The European East as a Factory of Learning for a Common and Democratic Europe

by **Vedran Džihić**

If there is one dominant paradigm that has shaped modern Europe, it is the East-West Divide. Ever since the Enlightenment, Western Europe has defined itself in opposition to the East – towards Poland, Russia, the Balkans – always imagining and constructing itself as the civilized, modern, enlightened Europe of the West in contrast to the barbarian, premodern, bloody and filled with hatred East. The deep divide between the East and the West during the Cold War, symbolised by the Iron Curtain, emboldened the imaginaries of the East in Western Europe, leaving Eastern Europe and the Balkans almost outside of European self-understanding.

When the age of ideologies, as the time of the Cold war and the deep division between the East and the West was described, came to an end, many experts and observers expected the "defeated" East and its communist ideology to be quickly replaced by the dominant liberal-democratic and capitalist order of the West. The "end of history" was seen as a transformation of the West into the model for the East. It meant the dominance of the liberal democratic model.

Eastern European countries of the former Soviet bloc quickly embarked on a road towards the EU and the Western European land of milk and honey, while the countries of the Former Yugoslavia sank into the horror of wars of the 1990s, leaving a bloody scar on the new European self-understanding of a united and peaceful continent. The wars in Yugoslavia and the resurgence of nationalism, back then seen as an anomaly in the pinky picture of the rest of Eastern Europe and the era of democratic transition, were not recognised as the harbinger of a new era obsessed with (national and ethnic) identity. Clearly, from the perspective of the Balkans and the places of horrific war crimes, including the genocide in Srebrenica, the phrase

> An important inspiration for Western liberal-democratic societies and nations comes from citizens of countries in Eastern and Southeastern European that Western Europeans would expect the least – from Serbia, Hungary, Slovakia or Georgia."

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of "the end of history" appeared as a disillusion or merely a mockery.

In a lecture held in 1995 at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna US-American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, surprised the audience in Austria, which had just joined the EU and was profiting enormously from the opening towards the East, with a message that the convergence of East and West would not be the force shaping the future, but rather the notion of identity. Geertz saw the future contours of a world obsessed with identity, in which "a stream of obscure divisions and strange instabilities" would prevail.

In one of the most provocative and lucid books written in the last few years on Europe by Ivan Krastev together with Stephen Holmes, "The Light that failed", Krastev and Holmes refer to the notion of the expected convergence between the East and the West. They argue that the previous communist and social East had entered an era of imitation binding itself to the Western notion - or even illusion - that liberal institutions, norms and values would almost naturally prevail and erase all the differences between the East and the West, both in terms of norms, values and ideologies and living standard, salaries, and the way of (neoliberal) life.

Krastav and Holmes wrote their book in the middle of Donald Trump's first term in office, in an era of crisis for the EU following Brexit and in midst of the rise of competitive and reactionary authoritarianism in Eastern Europe, exemplified by Orban's Hungary, Vučić's Serbia, Erdoğan's Turkey, and Kaczynski's Poland. The light of liberalism had failed or at least become thinner, as confirmed by the rise of Eastern European and Balkan small or big autocrats and despots, Krastev and Holmes argued. New nationalism bound to the narrative of past glory of proud nations in the East, became the ideological backbone of a new type

> “Poland, the Baltic states and nations resisting the Russian revisionist grab for power.”

of authoritarian governance deeply engaged in clientelism, corruption and fraud. The bigger the material gains of new authoritarian elites and their coopted business circles, the bigger the need to make “our nation great again”.

The surge of autocratisation was fueled with resentments against the West and Western European norms and values, exemplified in the Brussels-bashing and harsh criticism of the liberal “deep state”. This authoritarian wave coincided with the rise of anti-liberal and anti-EU far rights parties and movements in “old” Western Europe. From Le Pen’s Front National to Austria’s Freedom Party, Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party in the Netherlands, Giorgia Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia, and most recently the AfD in Germany, a new far right, nationalist and authoritarian international has emerged. The European East, most prominently Viktor Orban with his FIDESZ and the recipe for the authoritarian reconstruction of state and society, became a role model for many, including Donald Trump and his second presidency. If we add Putin’s brutal aggression on Ukraine to this new global power equation, which brought back not only war but also brutal revisionism and imperialism to Europe, we certainly face a new world order full of conflicts, unpredictability, and injustice. And we face a world where we in Europe have to find answers to two urgent questions: Do we want to save the Western liberal-democratic model and how do we intend to do so? And what is our vision of the European continent and the EU, which recently resembles a rather shaken liberal-democratic island amidst an ever-spreading authoritarian sea?

> “We have begun debating how to confront the authoritarian and revisionist powers – with determination, unity, investments in security and most importantly a new thinking about how to protect our liberal-democratic way of life.”

While looking for the answers we should not omit a closer look at Ukraine. Now that Trump has sent shockwaves throughout Europe by aligning more closely with Kremlin’s positions and portraying Ukrainian president Zelensky as a dictator and aggressor, the EU and its remaining democratic allies in the West have – at least – started a new debate about European defense and security capabilities. More importantly, we have begun debating how to confront the authoritarian and revisionist powers – with determination, unity, investments in security and most importantly a new thinking about how to protect our liberal-democratic way of life.

In this new debate, important answers and liberal-democratic inspirations come from the European East. Poland, the Baltic states and nations resisting the Russian revisionist grab for power, like Moldova, teach us how to stand strong while mobilising and advocating for a strong, defence-ready and yet liberal-democratic response to the threat posed by Russia. Poland as one of the most important cases of a successful resistance and fight against a competitive authoritarian regime, as it was during the years of PiS rule, still has a long way to go to make the country resilient against authoritarian challenges. Despite internal struggles and ahead of crucial presidential elections on 18 May, Poland has established itself as a key European player that will significantly shape the future of the EU and Europe.

An important inspiration for Western liberal-democratic societies and nations comes from citizens of countries in Eastern and Southeastern European that Western Europeans would expect the least – from Serbia, Hungary, Slovakia or Georgia. Protests and contentious movements against authoritarian regimes in these countries, still met with repression like in Serbia and even most brutal violence like in Georgia, teach us how to stand up for what belongs to the core of the promise of liberal-democratic societies – for freedom, liberty, rule of law, fundamental rights and human dignity. It is particularly striking that students and

young people, who lead the protests in Serbia, a country that in the 1990s throughout the Milošević regime and wars exemplified the worst, have for months following a collapse of a roof of the railway station in Novi Sad in November 2024, stood up to confront an authoritarian regime (led by Serbian president Vučić) with perseverance, creativity, new innovative democratic forms of deliberation in public assemblies, and most importantly with enthusiasm and hope. Serbian students do not wave EU-flags like their young colleagues on the streets of Tbilisi, but they do fight for European values and norms. They literally carry a light of their fight to European capitals, to Strasbourg and Brussels, by biking from Belgrade to Brussels, as they did in April, or running an ultra-marathon to Brussels, as they did mid-May 2025.

How this new positive and inspiring outbreak of protests – from Serbia to Georgia, as well as in Hungary and Slovakia, and also in Turkey following the imprisonment of Istanbul mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu – might lead to political change or even regime change, remains to be seen. There is no place for naivety, yet there is room for hope. What we can certainly argue is that the European East and its citizens – whether in the countries that joined the EU in 2004, in the Balkans, Moldova or Georgia or further southeast in Turkey, have joined the West in a common search for answers to the most pressing challenges of our times. In resisting Russian aggression and new revisionism and imperialism, in creating counternarratives to nationalism and chauvinism, in offering creative responses to common democratic problems, and lastly in refusing to give in into authoritarianism, the East has become a new factory of learning and inspiration for common and democratic Europe and beyond. Is it in today's new fight against global revisionist, nationalist and authoritarian powers and ideologies that East and West in Europe would finally come together? Paradoxically, and despite some of the toughest times for liberal democracy worldwide and Europe's role as a beacon of freedom and human rights, the European East teaches us that the light still shines.

> “Despite some of the toughest times for liberal democracy worldwide and Europe's role as a beacon of freedom and human rights, the European East teaches us that the light still shines.”

Vedran Džihić is a Senior Researcher at the oiip and lecturer at the University of Vienna and University of Applied Arts in Vienna. He is also co-director of the Center of Advanced Studies Southeastern Europe (CAS SEE) at the University in Rijeka as well as member of BiEPAG (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group). His field of research are related to democracy and transition processes, European integration, civil society and protest movements, foreign policy, conflict research, and nationalism. His regional focus lies on Eastern and Southeastern Europe and the USA. He has published numerous books, articles and analyses on these questions and is regularly contributing to national and international media.

Civil Society in Serbia:
A Force for Change or a Target for Suppression?

by **Ljiljana Kolarski**

Protest in Novi Sad.

On November 1st, 2024, the roof of the Novi Sad train station collapsed. Sixteen people died. Within hours, shock turned into grief—then rage. Citizens demanded answers, accountability, and justice. Instead, they got police sirens, search warrants, and the ransacking of NGO offices. What began as a national tragedy quickly escalated into a political turning point. In the days following the disaster, several prominent civil society organizations—particularly those involved in election monitoring and anti-corruption—found themselves raided by the police. The government claimed it was investigating alleged misuse of USAID funds. But no violations were found. For many, the message was clear: don't investigate the system—because the system will investigate you. This chilling episode marked the latest chapter in the increasingly hostile relationship between the Serbian state and its civil society sector. Once celebrated as engines of reform and democratization, independent NGOs have become scapegoats in the government's strategy to consolidate power.

A turning point in 2012

The decisive shift came in 2012, when the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) rose to power. While publicly pro-European, the party under Aleksandar Vučić swiftly adopted authoritarian methods at home. Civic organizations that had contributed meaningfully to Serbia's democratic transformation were sidelined and slandered. Public consultations became performative. NGOs were demonized as "foreign mercenaries" or "agents of Western powers," echoing accusations often repeated by Vučić himself. "They receive millions from abroad to attack Serbia and work against our interests," he declared in a 2024 televised speech. Alongside the rhetorical assault came a structural one. The state

> "In Serbia today, defending human rights or fighting corruption has become a risky endeavor. It can get you raided, followed, or discredited on national television."

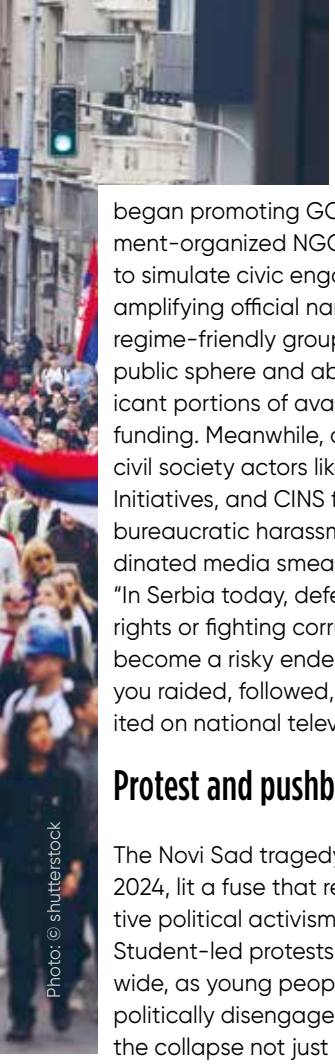
Photo: © shutterstock

began promoting GONGOs—government-organized NGOs—which served to simulate civic engagement while amplifying official narratives. These regime-friendly groups flooded the public sphere and absorbed significant portions of available public funding. Meanwhile, authentic civil society actors like CRTA, Civic Initiatives, and CINS faced defunding, bureaucratic harassment, and coordinated media smear campaigns. "In Serbia today, defending human rights or fighting corruption has become a risky endeavor. It can get you raided, followed, or discredited on national television".

Protest and pushback

The Novi Sad tragedy on November 1, 2024, lit a fuse that reignited alternative political activism across Serbia. Student-led protests erupted nationwide, as young people—many of them politically disengaged until then—saw the collapse not just as an accident but as proof of systemic negligence. It was no longer just about human rights or election monitoring—it was about basic safety, failed institutions, and impunity. In response, they organized plenums to discuss civic resistance and revive deliberative democracy. They cycled from Novi Sad to Strasbourg and ran from Novi Sad to Brussels, carrying a message of justice, accountability, and urgent reform. What began as grief transformed into a bold civic campaign that challenged state indifference with creativity, determination, and solidarity. This new momentum did not emerge in isolation—it connected seamlessly with other ongoing civic struggles. Yet, even in the face of repression, civil society proved resilient. Environmental movements like Ne Damo Jadar and Ekološki Ustanak had already shown that organized resistance could force policy changes. Their successful campaign to block lithium mining projects, including the withdrawal of agreements with Rio Tinto, marked one of the few tangible victories against entrenched interests. In Belgrade, citizens rallied against illegal construction on protected green spaces. These movements were grassroots, decentralized, and driven by communities rather than professional advocacy. Social media, street protests, and public art became tools of resistance.

As public support swelled, traditional NGOs began forging deeper alliances with citizen-led initiatives. Legal experts, environmental activists, journalists, and community organizers now collaborate through shared platforms and digital networks. In towns like Kraljevo and Vranje, EU-supported civic hubs offer free legal advice, community events, and media literacy workshops. These efforts aim to rebuild trust—especially in regions historically disconnected from national-level activism. Still, hostility remains the norm. State-aligned media continues to vilify CSOs. In one infamous 2023 tabloid headline, Informer ran: "They Take Money to Destroy Serbia: Who Really Stands Behind the Protests?" The effect of such propaganda is corrosive, sowing public doubt and polarizing communities. Yet the narrative is beginning to crack. According to recent research by CRTA, nearly half of Serbian citizens now believe that NGOs work in the public interest—a stark contrast to the skepticism of a decade ago. EU officials have taken notice. Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi stated, "A vibrant and independent civil society is essential for Serbia's democratic development." EU support has increased under the IPA III funding mechanism, but many activists remain cautious. "We hear the words, but we need stronger action. The EU cannot keep turning a blind eye," said one Belgrade-based NGO leader.

A crossroads moment

As Serbia's ruling elites consolidate power, civil society stands at a defining crossroads. Without institutional allies, many groups are turning to new strategies: hyper-local organizing, international coalitions, and solidarity-based networks. Their goal is no longer just to be heard—it is to make an impact. The path forward is steep, but Serbia's civic sector has proven it will not be silenced. "Civil society is not the enemy of the state—it is the voice that reminds society of its values and responsibilities." That line, spoken at a recent forum in Brussels, rings louder than ever in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and beyond. There are no easy answers. But the courage, adaptability, and persistence of Serbia's civic movements offer one certainty: they are not giving up. Not quietly—and not alone.

Aleksandar Vučić, President of Serbia.


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Pulling Back from the Brink – all rights: Nili Lubrani Rolnik

Israel on the Brink: Can the People Stop the Freefall?

by **Osnat Lubrani**

Israel is not just at war—it is unravelling. The events of October 7 did not create Israel's internal rupture, but they did expose and accelerate it. The country was already in crisis, fractured by deep political divides, mass protests, and assaults on democratic institutions. The Hamas attack shattered its sense of security, pushing a society already on edge into cascading breakdown across military, moral, political, and societal lines. Israel now teeters on the edge of a dangerous abyss deepened by a prolonged and punishing war. Alongside enduring challenges of defense and security, the very foundations of its democracy, cohesion, and international legitimacy are under threat.

A Nation in Breakdown

Moral compass broken

The October 7 Hamas attack was a brutal, coordinated onslaught of unprecedented scale. Massacres, sexual violence, indiscriminate killings, and the abduction of civilians—including children—shocked Israel to its core, shattering long-held assumptions about deterrence and security.

Gripped by grief and fear, the nation lost capacity for self-reflection. A single-minded focus on rescuing hostages and reasserting strength pushed aside reckoning with the consequences of Israel's response. What began as a military campaign escalated into a war of retribution, marked by mass destruction, mounting civilian deaths, and rhetoric where vengeance overtook restraint.

The October 7 attack exposed the scale of the Hamas threat, including its military buildup just across the border. In this context, Israel's military response

can be understood as a justifiable imperative. But from the outset, the war lacked a clear strategy to neutralize the threat or bring the campaign to a close, resulting in over 51,000 Palestinian deaths, a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, significant Israeli losses, and a draining of national capacity. The absence of an exit strategy has prolonged suffering and delayed much-needed reckoning.

Israel has managed to contain wider escalation from Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iran through targeted strikes. Yet expanded offensives in Syria and Lebanon, and open talk of striking Iran, risk triggering regional war. While Israel may not seek full-scale conflict, it seems inclined to sustain instability to weaken adversaries.

Since the collapse of a temporary ceasefire in March, bombardments in Gaza have resumed, all aid remains blocked, and hospitals barely function. Starvation and disease are spreading. Hundreds more civilians have died. Gaza lies in ruins. Any talk of reconstruction has been deferred indefinitely. In fact, plans are advancing for an expansion of the offensive, with the now openly stated aim of long-term occupation.

Evidence of serious violations of international humanitarian law is mounting, including indiscriminate attacks and targeting of civilians and infrastructure. One harrowing case involved 15 medics from the Red Crescent, civil defense, and a UN agency buried in a mass grave. Autopsies and eyewitness accounts suggest they were executed at close range. While investigations continue, the case adds to other corroborated war crimes—many documented by Israeli soldiers themselves.

Israel's moral compass may have been compromised long before October 7—shaped by decades of occupation and impunity. But post-October conduct has marked a new low. Senior officials have publicly branded all Palestinian civilians, even infants, as legitimate targets—language once unthinkable. Denial of aid to the point of starvation is discussed as a permissible tactic. In the West Bank, violence has surged; settler rampages and incitement continue with impunity, often enabled by state inaction or the complicity of security forces.

In May 2024, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Gallant. Legal exposure has spread to soldiers identified in footage, now at risk of prosecution abroad.

Israel's foreign policy response—rooted in denial and in accusations of anti-Israel bias often framed as antisemitism—has only deepened its isolation. Its use of Holocaust memory as a political shield has tragically backfired. The conflation of antisemitism with political critique has blurred the line between legitimate criticism of Israeli policy and actual hate speech—fueling confusion, backlash, and an alarming rise in antisemitism that puts Jewish communities at greater risk. At the same time, this strategy has chilled global discourse: many who support peace, dignity, and human rights for both peoples now hesitate to speak,fearing that any expression of concern will be misread as bias or hostility. This growing silence is not neutrality; it is a retreat from moral responsibility at a time when clarity and courage are most needed.

The erosion of values laid bare by the war in Gaza is no longer confined to the battlefield—it is turning back on itself. A state that considered itself as a just, law-abiding democracy is confronting a deeper truth: those ideals were never fully extended to Palestinians, whether citizens or subjects of occupation. The same tools of control used daily against Palestinians—surveillance, vilification, repression—are now increasingly turned on Israelis themselves—hostage families attacked, protesters branded as traitors, dissent steadily narrowed. The question is no longer whether Israel's moral compass is broken, but whether it can be restored. That restoration demands more than political change. It requires a dual reckoning: resisting the authoritarian shift consuming Israeli society—and confronting the injustices that long enabled Palestinian oppression. Only by facing both can Israeli society begin to restore its moral integrity.

Economy under strain

The moral crisis is mirrored by economic strain. Israel is financing its longest military campaign ever, diverting resources from essential services and shaking its economic foundation. GDP has shrunk. Debt is ballooning. Prices are rising. Repeated mobilizations are hollowing out the workforce. Families bear the burden of uncertainty. Class tensions are deepening, especially around military exemptions for ultra-Orthodox men. >

> “The question is no longer whether Israel's moral compass is broken, but whether it can be restored.”

Photo: © shutterstock

Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Event at the „Hostages Square" in Tel Aviv. One chair represents one hostage.

The high-tech sector remains resilient but fragile. Investor confidence is waning, capital is leaving, and professionals are departing. A new budget has cut core services—slashing teacher salaries while raising transport costs—with channeling funds to coalition-aligned groups. These choices have added strain on working families and the poor, fueling resentment that could eventually erupt.

Democracy in retreat

At the heart of Israel's turmoil lies a contested leadership and deeper democratic erosion. Prime Minister Netanyahu, long seen as a shrewd tactician, now governs through self-preservation and ideological extremism. With his corruption trial ongoing, his overriding goal appears to be staying in power to avoid prosecution.

To that end, he relies on a coalition of far-right and ultra-Orthodox parties whose agendas prioritize exemptions, settlement expansion, and budgetary favors at the expense of national unity and rule of law. Efforts to return hostages or end the war have been subordinated to coalition demands.

Netanyahu has deflected responsibility for October 7, shifting blame and removing senior officials, replacing them with loyalists. He avoids the press, limiting appearances to scripted statements. But this crisis extends beyond one man. Government actions have deepened societal divides. The opposition remains fractured. Cracks in the coalition, especially over the draft, have emerged. Yet Netanyahu preserves his grip by appeasing extreme partners, notably by blocking aid and prolonging the war.

Public protest, though still potent, is under siege. Dissent is met with hostility. Refusal to serve remains taboo. But as frustration deepens, more reservists quietly opt out—citing work or family to avoid backlash. After two years of mass mobilization, weariness is mounting. With attention fixed on war, judicial overhaul continues, deepening democratic erosion. Whether this ends in collapse or further authoritarian drift remains to be seen. What is clear is that Israel is moving toward a more religious, militarized, and divided political order.

Pulling Back from the Brink

Civil society – a lifeline

The greatest force for course correction may lie not in politics but in civil society. While political institutions falter and leadership clings to survival, the resilience of Israeli democracy still lives in its people. Civil society—anchored in solidarity and resistance—refuses to yield. Following October 7, as the state faltered, civil society mobilized rapidly. Volunteer networks provided shelter, care, and solidarity, bridging divides and restoring dignity.

Protest has endured, unbroken, since January 2023. What began as resistance to judicial overhaul has grown into a sustained movement—demanding democratic protections, accountability, and the return of hostages. The movement is not monolithic. While united in rejecting the government's path, protesters differ in priorities—some demand a hostage deal, others focus on judicial reform, still others on ending the war and occupation. What unites them is a shared rejection of current leadership and a yearning to heal Israel's divisions.

In the immediate aftermath of October 7, most Israelis believed war was inevitable, and trust in peace collapsed. Speaking about ending the occupation or pursuing a political solution became more difficult. Yet the anti-occupation, pro-peace movement continues. Groups like B'Tselem, Physicians for Human Rights, and Peace Now—many of which work closely with Palestinian partners—persist in upholding human dignity and demanding accountability, even as civic space contracts and dissent becomes riskier. Among their most powerful voices are bereaved families and hostage relatives who—despite profound trauma—insist that survival and security cannot rest on vengeance alone.

Restoring global legitimacy

Israel is facing a collapse in international legitimacy. Once regarded as a democracy defending itself, its global standing has been severely compromised. Accusations of war crimes, disregard for international law, and even genocide now shape legal proceedings and diplomacy. In May 2024, the ICC issued arrest warrants for Netanyahu and Gallant; legal exposure now extends to soldiers identified in footage.

Israel's strategy of denial is proving counterproductive. The damage is felt by ordinary Israelis; researchers face fewer invitations, travellers encounter discomfort abroad, and international partnerships are fraying. As diplomatic isolation grows, so does the urgency of reengagement with the international system—especially the United Nations. Without a change of course, Israel risks losing its place as a recognized and constructive member of the international community, slipping further into isolation and

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> "The resilience of Israeli democracy still lives in its people."

pariah status. While Israel has long criticized the UN—with some justification—it is not a monolith. It reflects the presence, engagement, or absence of its Member States. Israel owes its very statehood to UN Resolution 181. Renewed legitimacy will require not withdrawal, but sustained presence, dialogue, and contribution.

A key test lies in whether Israel establishes an independent commission of inquiry into the October 7 failures. Public support is strong, but Netanyahu has delayed, insisting on political control. Such a commission must examine both the lapses that enabled the attack and the conduct of the Gaza war. Accountability is not only a moral duty — it is essential to restoring legitimacy and rebuilding trust in domestic institutions.

Choosing peace

As of April 2025, hostages remain in captivity, Gaza burns, and democratic space is under siege, with rising police aggression and intimidation of protesters. Some fear echoes of authoritarian turns in other contexts. Yet change remains possible. Despite mounting pressure on the judiciary and moves to tighten control over the media, Israel still benefits from a vibrant public sphere, sustained by critical journalism, engaged civil society, and widespread debate. This offers real hope for urgent course correction. It is essential not only to restoring Israel's international standing, but also to reclaiming its moral and democratic bearings. The scale of Gaza's devastation, and the long-term consequences of the current path, can no longer be ignored.

Israel need only look to its own history to see the dividends of diplomacy. Fragile yet enduring agreements with its neighbors—from longstanding peace treaties to more recent normalization efforts—have brought immeasurable benefits and stability that force alone could never deliver. The core elements of a just and viable peace agreement have long been on the table, most notably in UN Security Council Resolution 1397, which affirms the vision of two states—Israel and Palestine—living side by side within secure and recognized borders.

Pulling back from the brink requires more than resistance. It demands a conscious decision to reject vengeance, fear, and the paralysis that comes from looking inward while turning away from the suffering inflicted on an entire population. Real security cannot be achieved through force alone. It will require diplomacy, renewed political engagement, and a commitment to peace. Only by confronting internal fractures and acknowledging the broader human cost of this war can Israel begin to lift itself—and the region—toward a more just and sustainable future.

Osnat Lubrani served for 26 years in senior roles with the United Nations, including as UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Ukraine (2018–2022), Fiji and nine other Pacific Island States (2013–2018), and Kosovo (2009–2013). She also held leadership roles with UNDP and UN Women. Her work has focused on transitions from conflict to peace, humanitarian crisis to recovery, and advancing sustainable development, with a strong emphasis on gender equality and human rights. She is currently affiliated with the oiip and is a member of Diplomats Without Borders and MENA2050.

Syria: Looking Back to Look Forward

How the Area Post-Assad Can Turn into a Textbook Example of Transitional Justice

by **Petra Ramsauer**

Photo: © shutterstock

Bashar al-Assad's fall in December 2024 was the end of one of the most brutal dictatorships in modern history. The Syrian society has suffered enormously under half a century of the Assad's clan's oppressive rule, with the Ba'ath party as its pillar. But the most difficult stage was definitely the brutal crack down of the revolution in 2011 against the regime. The brutal regime uprooted half of its 24 million inhabitants and took the lives of half a million people. 150.000 disappeared in the dungeons of the regime, only 20.000 of those who went missing were found alive after the regime's fall according to numbers provided by the Syrian Emergency Task Force in spring 2025.

The day after the regime's end revealed the next challenge for the devastated country; the land has essentially been pulverized, cut off from the rest of the world by sanctions enforced against Assad and his clan and cronies. UNHCR's experts are estimating that almost 90 percent of Syrians – 16,7 Million people - are relying on aid to survive, while a lack

of basic infrastructure curtails the urgent improvements of Syria's bleak humanitarian situation. Everything seems to be broken – also the ties that bind a society together. The regime created deep divisions within society, recruited Syrians to spy on one another and built an archipelago of prisons where torture and extra-judicial murder became the norm.

While in any given country, the aftermath of autocratic rule or dictatorship will lead to an intrinsic need to come to terms with the wrongdoings, oppression and criminal records of the perpetrators, the case of Syria might be unique. "Although people do care strongly for sufficient food, electricity, shelter, which is obvious given the bleak humanitarian situation, there is this dedicated need for justice, which tends to be a priority for each and everyone", said Broderick McDonald in his contribution to the Webinar, "Towards a New Syria", organized by the King's College in March 2025. He is a conflict researcher at the University of Oxford, conducted field research briefly before after Assad's fall, focusing on Syria's many armed groups. During his assignment, he witnessed the blitzkrieg led by the Islamist militant group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) from its base in the province of Idlib. „The HTS ousted Assad, and McDonald observed an immediate and urgent call for justice among the population."

The process of implementing transitional justice in post-Assad Syria appeared to offer a uniquely promising path to stability and a robust basis for an emerging democracy with trusted institutions. Indeed, in the best possible circumstances, survivors of violence, torture, and families of victims might find closure if perpetrators are faced with the consequences of their crimes, including a full disclosure of their deeds. This process can lead to democracy. But it carries risks, if not implemented with utmost care. The outcome of post-Assad Syria potentially carries importance far beyond Syrian territory; It can turn into a textbook case shaping the role of transitional justice and its implementation in other cases in the future. If Syria fails, the entire concept of transitional justice will be questioned. If Syria's new leadership succeeds, the country can become a landmark, a reference point for similar processes of democratization in other countries.

How just is transitional justice

While the concept of "Transitional justice" instills hopes not only for healing the wounds of injustice but also for setting up the foundation for solid and fair institutions it comes with a lot of obstacles. The idea behind it refers to a range of processes and mechanisms for accountability, truth-seeking and reconciliation that governments and communities pursue in the aftermath of major societal traumas, including civil war, mass atrocities, and authoritarianism. The concept is still evolving, having emerged from studies on post-authoritarian and post-communist transitions in Eastern Europe and Latin America and the role transitional justice played towards establishing a democratic system. "Since then the implemention of the concept of transitional justice, has grown rapidly, too rapidly to correct mistakes, like harmful consequences for their intended beneficiaries, including retraumatization and perceived 'justice gaps' between victims' preferred remedies and their actual outcomes", write Mara Revkin, Ala al-Rabah and Rachel Myric in a comprehensive analysis, published by the Yale Law Journal in March 2024.

Part of their paper is a study of Iraq post 2003, where the process of "De-Baatification", the outlawing of former dictator Saddam Hussein's one-party structure and the disbanding of his army led to turmoil and political extremism.

> "The process of implementing transitional justice appeared to offer a uniquely promising path to stability and a robust basis for an emerging democracy with trusted institutions."

A woman walking through a destroyed building in Aleppo, Syria.

Photo: © shutterstock

> “Everything seems to be broken in Syria – also the ties that bind a society together.”

Photo: © shutterstock

Hafez al-Assad, President of Syria 1971-2000, (Father of President Bashar al-Assad 2000-2024).

The damaging consequences of the sectarian power-sharing arrangement that the United States and the diaspora established in Iraq became a warning of the dangers that outlawing parts of a society can carry. The comparison with Iraq was often drawn in the early days and weeks of post-Assad’s Syria. There are clear risks involved in banning and delegitimizing all personnel who worked with and for the regime and the Ba’ath Party, be it within ministries, state institutions or the army.

As such, “lessons learned from Iraq” must be an integral part of Syria’s transformation. The first priority was to fill the power vacuum legally, a difficult task for the new leader Ahmed al-Sharaa, the founder of the Salafi-jihadist al-Nusra front, a designated terrorist organization by the United States. Still, he emerged as the most powerful figure in the moments after Assad and the best shot at unity. He proved his potential as a re-uniter of Syria by striking a deal to extend his government’s sovereignty to the Kurdish northeast, the last major region to resist his authority. However, prioritizing political unity, he was less successful in creating a united concept of justice and an inclusive path forward that would acknowledge the urgent need for justice after decades of brutal oppression.

Only days after Assad’s fall, al-Sharaa’s interim government set up reconciliation centers where former military personnel would receive civil ID-cards on the condition that they were not involved in war crimes and had given up their weapons. This was done in order to maintain civil peace, preventing immediate revenge, which could have spiraled out of control immediately. However, such rapid yet superficial implementation of amnesty carries risks of alienating victims.

The success of the strategy was rapidly put into question when violence broke out in March. Thousands of armed men stormed the country’s Mediterranean coast and killed more than 1,600 civilians, mostly from the Alawite religious minority. The fighting erupted after loyalists of the former regime tried to revolt against the new leaders and the new government sent in its newly trained army and loosely allied fighters to restore its hold of the territory. Some of the gunmen are rumoured to be foreign jihadists. Others appeared to be armed civilians seeking revenge, according to residents.

The fragile peace in the first weeks of the new area was quickly shattered, highlighting the enormous risks of failing to implement justice. Syria’s authorities denied that their security forces committed atrocities but acknowledged that they were investigating and holding to account anyone who had harmed civilians. The government formed two committees, one to investigate those involved in violence against civilians and the other to protect the Alawite communities on the coast from further violence.

So, while the interim government only began to tackle the task of bringing about transitional justice, the present overtook the past. Since taking control of Syria, Ahmad al-Sharaa has concentrated decision-making powers in his own hands and relied on close allies from his inner circle to help him govern. While he did not initially refer the concept of Transitional Justice, it has become central since his inauguration speech as president. The concept was also integrated in the final document of the one-day National Dialogue Conference, organized by the interim authorities on 25 February 2025. It represented progress unthinkable a few months ago. But the hasty preparations, the opaque manner in which participants were selected, the incomplete representation of the Syrian population and the short duration of the event, raised doubts.

Still, al-Sharaa managed to set up a historic meeting with families of the missing and detained, together with his foreign minister. The voices of the families, long silenced, were finally heard and acknowledged at the highest levels of government. The transitional government pledged to establish a dedicated body to address their concerns. Going forward, there will be a lot of pressure for the government to follow through with this promise.

A remarkable aspect in post-Assad's Syria is the robust, well-educated Syrian civil society that emerged during fourteen years of conflict, within and outside of Syria. "They have been working for years, rubbing shoulders with international organizations, the European judicial system and the United Nations. Many of them have had the time to join international organizations, to do a doctorate", emphasizes Nadim Houry, international lawyer and public policy expert, and executive director of the Arab Reform Initiative with the Foundation Hirondelle.

One example is Nousha Kabawat, Head of Syria's Program with the International Center for Transitional Justice. In a summary of the events after Assad's fall, she wrote in an analysis for her organization that "justice is not an event, it is a process. The path forward is in the hands of Syrians. They must lead the way. Justice, accountability, and reconciliation require the guidance of Syrian civil society and victims' groups, backed by the international community, but not the other way round. It will not be easy." Consequentially, there will be setbacks and painful reckonings. Yet, for the first time in years, there is genuine hope, not just for a different Syria, but for a better one—one built on justice, truth, and the aspirations of those who never gave up. But Nousha Kabawat stresses: "The wounds of this conflict run deep, and healing must go hand in hand with accountability. We must thus construct a system that delivers justice, while allowing people simultaneously to heal."

How a people and people can heal

But can justice ever achieve healing? – In any post-conflict society mental health plays a crucial role in its consolidation, as an integral aspect to obtain peace in a broader sense. As we know, the sole absence of fighting, the end of open hostilities does not translate into "real" peace, but accountability, and justice, rather the idea of justice being implemented is essential. Otherwise the risk of re-traumatization can lead to more cycles of violence. Transitional justice must be a part of this process, but it has to be handled with care, since it can even increase the feeling of marginalization, if it is perceived as the justice of those who won, rather than an integral process the entire society can subscribe to.

One needs, on the one hand, to acknowledge the desire to heal by justice, and, on the other hand, to be realistic about existing limits. In "Truth and Repair", Judith Herman, one of the world leading scholars in trauma-expertise, argues that post-traumatic healing is more than a "private, individual matter." For survivors, punishment for those who committed crimes, is essential, Herman argues, but it is not their first need: Survivors feel an urge for the perpetrators to "own" their wrongdoings, that "a truth" is established.

This is a difficult task. While the vast majority of crimes against Syrians during the civil war was committed by the regime, all fighting groups were responsible for violence, including the HTS. Furthermore, not all Syrians share one "truth" about who is the victim and who is the assailant. A significant part of the population sees Jihadis like al-Sharaa and his allied fighters as culprits, not as saviors. Additionally, not all Syrians were exposed to war crimes, like chemical attacks and bombings of schools and hospitals.

A vast amount of data is available. Robert Petit, head of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism Investigating Serious Crimes in Syria, points out that „we were acting quasi as a prosecutor office, collecting, analyzing evidence of war crimes. "Since, we have been preparing to make sure that as many crimes as possible will be accounted for, as soon as the regime ends." But, he was admittedly shocked by how much evidence was destroyed in the first weeks after the regime's fall. He, too, stresses the enormous importance of the Syrian civil society and calls it a tremendous resource which could and should implement the process of transitional justice.

In the past, part of the failure of such endeavors has been the impression of transitional justice as an elite-led process, implemented by standards imposed from the outside. "The most important job right now is to conserve as much evidence as possible. It is everywhere, but no one collects it properly", stresses Omar Alshogre, Director of Detainees Affairs with the Syrian Emergency Task Force, in an expert meeting. Since his release from prison, he has become an advocate for accountability. "It is still unreal that the dictator fell. I have to check the news daily," he admits: "It was the most beautiful moment for me, when prisoners could get out of prison, although it was heartbreaking to learn so many did not survive. But now, a new chapter will start: We have a lot of criminals to persecute. Now, we are closer to justice than ever before."

Petra Ramsauer studied Political Science and has been working as a war- und crisis reporter since 1998, covering the Syrian civil war. She is also a psychotherapist, focusing on trauma and war.

A Novel Perspective on Migration:

Democratizing the Border and Building Sanctuary Cities

Shelter for migrants from Central America in the United States.

by **Judith Kohlenberger**

Violence, dehumanization and death are not the exception at Europe's borders: They have become the rule. Pushbacks such as those regularly documented at the Greek and Croatian borders and along the Balkan route have become an integral part of the EU's migration regime. Almost all refugees arriving via the Central Mediterranean route, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) the deadliest migration route in the world, report severe physical and psychological violence, torture, slavery, exploitation and forced prostitution. The policy of abandonment, i.e. withholding assistance or simply ignoring people on the move when they face adverse weather conditions and the forces of nature, is the most common form of violence experienced both in the Mediterranean and along the Balkan route. This is compounded by systematic humiliation and dehumanization, such as when migrants are stripped to their underwear or chased with sheepdogs before being turned back across the border in violation of international law. Simultaneously, the externalization of EU asylum policy, for example through agreements with Libya, Tunisia or Turkey, legalizes, legitimizes and cements conditions in third countries that violate human rights and civil liberties.

It is in view of these developments that the French philosopher Étienne Balibar calls nation states' borders the 'limits of democracy', as they display, in fact, a veritable democratic gap. What happens at the border is legitimized only by one side: by those within the borders of the nation-state, who are politically represented and part of the sovereign. But the conditions for crossing that very border, the strategies of deterrence and the regulations for return that apply also affect those beyond that border who seek entry – even more so than the ones inside, as one could argue. Therefore, according to Balibar, conditions for crossing the border into Europe must be negotiated by both sides to become truly democratic.

Such co-determination would not undermine national sovereignty in the sense of a complete abolition of borders but would, as he maintains,

> “Sanctuary Cities invoke and implement universal rights to all people living there, and not just citizens.”

democratize them. in their current form, European borders can only be enforced by violence, cooperation with authoritarian regimes or comprehensive deterrence policies, which makes them essentially, anti-democratic. For individuals seeking entry, the border is far too often a legal vacuum where serious decisions are made about their fate, sometimes even about life and death, without their right to intervene or weigh in. Would it not be truly democratic if those who are subjected to (the violence of) border controls, and who suffer their consequences most severely in terms of injury or even death, also had a say in the actual configuration of the European border regime? Can Europe still afford to make decisions about its borders without the participation of those affected, who must bear the highest costs? This article discusses strategies for “democratizing borders”, such as “Sanctuary City” initiatives in the US and Europe, which can build part of the political opposition to restrictive national migration policies.

Democracy at the border

A true democratization of borders is paramount. First and foremost, this entails demilitarization, so that international law can be fully applied and enforced. Secondly, it means creating safe and legal pathways for those seeking protection, for example through humanitarian visas and resettlement programs, and liberalizing work visa regulations to make regular migration the norm. These and many other measures are well known, discussed in numerous policy papers and tested for their practicality – yet, only a fraction of them has been implemented by only a fraction of EU member states.

Thirdly, democratizing borders means that everyone affected has a say in the actual shaping of the border regime. This includes border communities, migrants and would-be migrants, businesses and employers, trade unions, NGOs and humanitarian organizations, as well as those citizens who claim to be skeptical about migration and whose ‘concerns and fears’ politicians wish to take seriously. To bring in this plethora of voices and viewpoints, institutionalized forums for dialogue can be created, so that borders and border management are no longer seen as the mere responsibility of the nation state, but of society as a whole.

Best-practice examples already exist. When Switzerland established new criteria for regularizing migrants, its government held regular consultations with migrants and people willing to migrate from top sending countries, with authorities and cantonal governments, and with NGOs. In Portugal, the government organized roundtables on migration involving humanitarian organizations, authorities and representatives of migrant organizations to work on entry and visa conditions. In Hong Kong, the government established a dialogue with NGOs to regularize irregular migrants. The government of the Canary Island similarly organized such roundtables during which civil society actors and individuals discussed reception, integration, regularization. Low-threshold naturalization and new forms of electoral participation, for example at the local level, also contribute to the democratization of borders and border regimes. Finally, Sanctuary Cities can divorce resident rights from citizen rights by offering support, services and protections to migrants and persons in need regardless of their residence title.

Sanctuary Cities in the US and Europe

One of these sanctuary cities is Los Angeles. Immediately after the election of Donald Trump as the 47th President of the United States, the ‘City of Dreams’ declared itself a Sanctuary City to prevent the mass deportations that Trump had announced during his election campaign. An ordinance was unanimously passed, prohibiting the city from using financial or human resources to enforce federal immigration laws. L.A. thus joined a dozen cities across the country that had declared themselves Sanctuary Cities in recent years, pledging to protect (undocumented) migrants. Since the 1980s, cities such as San Francisco and New York have taken a stand against restrictive immigration policies by protecting immigrants from deportation while allowing them to access basic social and health services, open bank accounts and enroll their children in city schools. Practices vary, ranging from refusing to carry out deportations to issuing city IDs to those who do not have federal documents.

In Europe, several port cities, including Barcelona, Palermo and Naples, declared themselves 'Cities of Solidarity'. They joined forces to call on the European Commission to manage refugee movements more efficiently and to provide more funding for social infrastructure to optimize reception and integration conditions across the country. Landlocked cities such as Munich and Freiburg are not officially part of the network but still implement some of the same solidarity practices.

Often, city initiatives emerge in opposition to a right-wing or center-right government at the federal level, thus becoming part of the political opposition in its local context. The German migration researcher Sabine Hess calls this 'a politics of urban disobedience', which manifests itself in the decriminalization of undocumented migrants, often driven by pressure built up from the bottom up by urban civil society. Practices can vary significantly: Some cities accept more refugees than national quotas allow, others open solidarity hospitals to migrants without health insurance and legislate measures against racism and discrimination or offer free access to legal advice and counseling so deportations can be prevented. In all of these practices, it is not the national citizenship that defines belonging, but the mere physical presence—a presence from which cities benefit in many ways. Migrants pay taxes, contribute to the city's infrastructure, its cultural life and health care services, and are an integral part of the community and social life.

The practice and policy of Sanctuary Cities must not mean, however, that federal concerns should be ignored in favor of retreating to the smaller, local level. On the contrary, Sanctuary Cities have 'both a local and a transnational dimension', as political scientist and activist Mario Neumann argues. The nation-state is simultaneously undermined and transcended by refusing to recognize the limits of democracy (and, by extension, belonging) set by the nation state through citizenship, residence status or the right to asylum. In contrast, Sanctuary Cities invoke and implement universal rights to which all people, and not just citizens within a state, are entitled.

Human rights: Only one is truly necessary

Democratizing border law and management and building sanctuary cities may be localized and geographically restricted practices, but they can help spark a debate on what borders and democracy mean in the changing world of the 21st century. While it has become a truism that most people's world today does not end at the borders of their nation-state or even their continent, this reality can only be fully lived by one half of the world's population – the ones in the Global North. Universal and indivisible human rights are still, and increasingly so, subordinated to the (narrow) borders of the demos, both territorially and politically.

As a result, human rights in the 21st century remain precarious for those who do not have citizenship rights, a fact that Hannah Arendt already pointed out in the middle of the last century. 'There is only one human right', as she maintained in an eponymous essay, and this is to belong to a community, a nation, a people—to enjoy political and national affiliation. According to Arendt, all other rights derive from it. This is precisely why statelessness, as many refugees still experience it today, is the most politically precarious state: No one, and certainly no nation state in a world organized by nation states, protects you simply because you are a human being and enjoy human rights. As long as rights are not translated into civil rights, they remain worthless.

While this has, in theory, changed with the passing of the European Convention of Human Rights in 1950 and the Geneva Refugee Convention in 1951, the precarity of those without legal residence status continues to exist. Sanctuary Cities respond to this precarity and alleviate it by offering their services regardless of legal status, thus advancing an alternative concept of belonging that is grounded in the banal material reality of migrants' presence and social, cultural and economic contributions.

Yet, the paradox that those who are most in need of human rights often have the least opportunity to claim them remains. It becomes harshly evident at the border, where those who arrive have nothing more to offer than their humanity: They have no country, no nation, no community, no passport and no political rights. That is why it is in the highly militarized, sometimes outright lawless zone of the external border that democracy today is being challenged and called upon to account for its key principles. It is at the border where modern democracies must prove that they can, indeed, live up to everything they aspire to.

Judith Kohlenberger is a Senior Researcher at the oiip and the Institute for Social Policy, Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU). She is also affiliated at the Jacques Delors Centre at Hertie School in Berlin. Her work has been published in international journals and awarded several prizes, most recently the Anas Shakfeh Prize for services to human rights, democracy and the promotion of the rule of law. She serves on the Integration Council of the City of Vienna and on the board of the Austrian Society for European Politics. At oiip, Judith works on forced migration, in particular on refugees' labor market integration in European host countries.

“The paradox is that those who are most in need of human rights often have the least opportunity to claim them.”

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Participants in the project "Using the Narrative of the Bedouin of the Negev to Change Jewish Israeli Perceptions of Arabs," organized by the Israeli NGO Desert Stars.

Photos: © Desert Stars

From the Ground Up: Civil Society Driving Transformative Change

by **Sophie Reichelt**

In an era of deepening polarization, grassroots initiatives are invaluable. By mending trust and nurturing human connection, they play a crucial role in navigating through the storm.

Every year the Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs honors such innovative civil society initiatives from Austria and around the world with the Intercultural Achievement Award. It targets projects that demonstrate a strong commitment to intercultural and interreligious dialogue across a wide range of areas, including arts and culture, youth empowerment, human rights, global citizenship education, integration, and gender equality. In other words, the initiative seeks to highlight projects that steer societies through turbulent times with courage, dialogue, and a shared vision for peace.

In October 2024, the winners of the Intercultural Achievement Award were invited to the oiip for a panel discussion titled "From the Ground Up: Civil Society's Impact on Transformative Change". The projects covered a broad spectrum tackling social division through creativity and dialogue. Projects ranged from the revival of Traditional Craftsmanship in Colombia to the project Culture for Change which aims to improve the relations between Serbian and Kosovar people through art and youth activism. Within the initiative Forced Migration: Interrupted Journeys, New Beginnings, refugees living in Estonia are empowered to share their stories through social media and school visits, while the Polish community garden project Edible Landscape fosters intercultural education bringing together students, senior citizens and people at risk of social exclusion from Poland, Iceland, Norway, Scotland and Lithuania. Austria was represented by two standout programs: More than One Perspective, which connects refugees and migrants with companies to ease labour market integration, and Dialogue of Life, a Lebanese-Austrian collaboration supporting schools in Lebanon where Christian and Muslim children learn side by side—promoting peaceful coexistence from a young age. At the panel, award recipients offered insights into what inspires their work, the obstacles they navigate within their local realities, and the strategies they've found most effective in fostering meaningful, lasting change.

Among the standout projects was the program entitled Using the Narrative of the Bedouin of the Negev to Change Jewish Israeli Perceptions about Arabs by the Israeli organization Desert Stars. The project aims to challenge deep-seated biases within Israeli society towards Arabs and to foster understanding through personal storytelling and dialogue. Targeting Jewish youth during their gap year between high school and military service, the program consists of a four-part workshop led by two Bedouin and one Jewish facilitator. Participants explore Bedouin perspectives, engage in open conversations about identity, faith, and belonging,

and confront their own assumptions in a safe, intimate space. In addition to improving mutual understanding between young Jewish Israelis and the Bedouin of the Negev, Desert Stars believes that the Bedouin of the Negev can serve as a bridge between Israeli and Palestinian communities. Arab by ethnicity and culture and sharing many social and economic challenges with Palestinians, yet Israeli citizens who often speak both Arabic and Hebrew fluently, Bedouins of the Negev are uniquely equipped to serve as a bridge between the two communities—fostering dialogue, empathy, and a vision for a shared future.

Check our website to discover the winners of the 2025 Intercultural Achievement Award!

> “By mending trust and nurturing human connection, grassroots initiatives play a crucial role in navigating through the storm.”

Representatives of innovative civil society initiatives honored with the 2024 Intercultural Achievement Award, presented by the Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs.

Photo: © BMEIA Michael Gruber

Lessons in Democracy

by **Annika Scharnagl**

No one can say with certainty how the world will look like in ten years. The ground beneath our feet—politically, environmentally, socially—feels increasingly unstable. Liberal democracy with its core values of freedom and equality, is in retreat, while illiberal leaders gain ground. Amid an overflow of mis- and disinformation, it is becoming harder to discern truth from manipulation. Young people are especially susceptible to radical messages, making it more important that society responds collectively to counter extremist and/or violent rhetoric. In these uncertain times, it is easy to feel overwhelmed, even powerless. But perhaps the most crucial response we can offer is not to retreat, but to teach. It might sound like a simple answer, but as our future lies in the next generation, they should be equipped with the right tools to navigate it.

Education has always gone beyond facts and figures; its deeper purpose is to shape how individuals understand the world and their role within it by providing them with the tools to form their own beliefs and mindset. Today, this shaping takes on a new urgency. As liberal democratic values are tested across the globe, and authoritarian narratives grow louder, we must ask ourselves: Are we preparing the next generation to uphold democracy—not as a distant ideal, but as a lived, everyday responsibility? And in a time when digital platforms shape political understanding more than textbooks, media literacy is no longer optional, but it is the foundation of democratic education.

The practice of democracy must be taught through history lessons on the erosion of democracies, but also by cultivating the skills that uphold it: critical thinking, dialogue, empathy, and an understanding of democratic institutions. But above all, young people must learn how to engage with the media landscapes that shape their realities. Media literacy is not just a technical skill; it is a democratic one. Understanding how information is created, spread, and manipulated is crucial to becoming an informed citizen.

> “Democracy builds on the belief that we all have a say and that our voices matter.”

While many of these elements can be addressed in the classroom, families, community spaces and media also play a role. Habits formed early through discussion, participation, and volunteering can carry democratic behaviour into adulthood. Yet schools and teachers face mounting challenges: underfunding, political pressure on curricula, and the constant expansion of topics they are expected to cover. The digital world, while rich with learning opportunities, also brings the spread of misinformation and polarized narratives, reaching even very young children. Many are unequipped to recognize manipulation or seek out reliable sources.

A growing distrust in political processes among young people is another concern. Some seek alternatives in movements and parties that challenge democratic norms, often providing abbreviated answers to complex problems.

A key challenge in democracy education is ensuring that it is both meaningful and balanced, empowering students without prescribing what they should believe. In this context, educational frameworks can offer helpful guidance. One influential example comes from the German-speaking world: the Beutelsbacher Consensus, developed in the 1970s as a response to debates about political neutrality in the classroom. It lays out three core principles that continue to shape civic education in German and Austrian schools today: 1) It is forbidden to overwhelm students with an opinion and thus prevent them from forming an independent judgment, clearly marking the boundary between education and political indoctrination. 2) What is discussed controversially in politics and science is also discussed in class. The teacher has a corrective role to address viewpoints that are foreign or contrary to the students’ own opinions. 3) It is important to generate an environment and situation in which students can analyze a political situation and their own attitudes towards it.

Photo: © shutterstock

Using this as a background to teaching about democracy, the following practical steps should be considered by educators to prepare the next generation across formal and informal educational settings for the navigation of an uncertain future:

1. Strengthening Democratic Thinking

- **Empower young people** to find their own voice through exploring what democracy is and could be, using open reflection and inclusive definitions.
- **Break down complex political situations,** locally and globally, and invite multiple perspectives into the conversation.
- **Bring local politicians, activists, or civic actors into schools** to encourage dialogue and democratic engagement.
- **Learn from best practices in civic education** from other countries and adapt them locally.

2. Media Literacy in a Digital World

- **Teach media literacy consistently and sustainably,** starting from an early age. This requires long-term funding and full integration into curricula.
- **Talk about the digital platforms** where young people form opinions. Teach how algorithms work, how to spot manipulation, and how to fact-check.
- **Equip educators to tackle difficult topics** such as misinformation, hate speech, or extremism through training and collaboration with peers and experts.
- **Partner with content creators and platforms** that promote constructive democratic dialogue in digital spaces.

3. Inclusion, Belonging, and Social Safety

- **Pay attention to mental health and belonging.** Feelings of loneliness, especially among boys and young men, can create openings for radical or hate-based ideologies.
- **Train teachers** on how diversity and intersectionality affect students' access to and experience of education.
- **Include all students in democratic learning** — regardless of their citizenship status. Traditional models often assume full political participation, but resilience is only possible when everyone is involved.

Such efforts are not isolated interventions, but components of a broader educational framework aimed at strengthening democratic resilience. This includes recognizing that many students in European classrooms cannot vote or participate in formal politics due to their citizenship. Yet they are part of our democratic society, and they deserve to be included in its education. Because what is democracy, if not the belief that we all have a say and that our voices matter? This belief must not only be protected, but practiced, passed down, and lived out loud. By fostering critical thinking, media literacy, and inclusive dialogue, we can help ensure that young people don't just inherit democracy, but shape and defend it. To support this mission, the oiip is currently engaged in two projects focused on extremism prevention and security politics education in Austrian schools. These efforts aim to help students critically engage with the world around them, and to play an active role in building the one they want to see.

Annika Scharnagl is a Researcher at the oiip with a research focus on terrorism, extremism and political education. She completed an Erasmus Mundus Degree in International Security, Intelligence and Strategic Studies (IMSISS) from the Universities Glasgow, Trento and Prague.

We Need Authenticity and Confidence

Interview with
Wolfgang Schüssel,
former Austrian chancellor

Photo: © oiip

> “Democracy needs to be efficient; it needs to deliver.”

Cengiz Günay with Wolgang Schüssel

The former Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel reflects on Europe's evolving role in a shifting global order, the challenges facing democracy, and why authenticity, leadership, and renewed confidence are essential to securing the future.

Cengiz Günay: It's been 25 years since you became Austrian Chancellor—how have Europe and the world changed ever since?

Wolfgang Schüssel: Yes, I started under difficult circumstances. Fourteen of the European Union member states imposed sanctions against our coalition government with the Freedom Party. At that time, the majority of member states was ruled by social democratic governments. This played a role. It had no legal bases, because it was de facto a kind of a pre-emptive strike to block and change the government. The European institutions such as the Commission were much more relaxed than these member states. Today we have many more problematic governments in Europe—not to say that our government was problematic—but considering their concerns, and now we have legal procedures to deal with it. Hence, this is a big difference. I truly believe that the Austrian example was a good lesson for the Union. The member states have learned to live with varying interpretations, different political structures, and realities. Internally we were quite under pressure, but under pressure you have to deliver, and you have to be very effective, and we were effective with our ambitious reforms program.

Globally, there have always been crises and dramatic situations. In the Cold War for instance, we had two or three times the real danger of a nuclear conflict, but these crises could be prevented. We had wars in Europe—take, for example, the Yugoslavia wars where 250,000 people were killed and 100,000 fled to countries of the European Union. Then we had the Iraq war. Crises are not new.

Today, the situation is different as we now have for the first time in decades a big power confrontation and competition between China and the United States and in Europe, Russia as a spoiler. The Global South has become more self-confident. We have moved into a multipolar world.

Cengiz Günay: And what about the European Union?

Wolfgang Schüssel: The EU is challenged on all levels: militarily, in our security, politically, and economically. But it is also an enormous opportunity for the EU to embrace European values and its way of life. Europe has something to offer. We can offer political and economic partnership, investment opportunities, and the European way of life which is based on values such as freedom, solidarity, and coherence. I believe these are important assets in today's world. The world is changing, also for us Europeans. It is a challenge, but it also provides some opportunities.

Cengiz Günay: There is also a growing feeling of insecurity among many people. Why do you think that is the case?

Wolfgang Schüssel: That's a good question, not easy to answer. There are different answers and different perceptions in different parts of the world. But in the 80 years since the end of the Cold War we see enormous developments in all areas. There have been great achievements in life expectancy, growth in wealth, the fight against poverty, education opportunities, science—not only in Europe, but globally. People now have better perspectives to determine their own lives. But many, particularly in Europe feel that this development cannot last forever.

When I was young, I was born in 1945, I had a single mother and we were very poor, but we had everything ahead of us. It was a bright future. There was only one direction: upwards. Today, with all what we have already achieved, it is not so easy to think the same for my son and daughter, or my granddaughter of 8 years. It is difficult to believe that things will develop in the same linear perspective.

And we see many tensions across the world; Gaza, Ukraine-Russian conflict, Sudan, etc. There have always been tensions, but now the risk to be drawn into a global conflict or a confrontation is bigger than ever. At least bigger than over the last 20 - 25 years. I think this is the difference. There are also so many things to deal with and there are so many negative things reported in the media, in TV, in the newspapers. There is acceleration everywhere. This causes stress not everyone can withstand. Certainly, social media and different opinion bubbles also play a role. We thought that social media and digitization will support information transparency and create de facto a more transparent and participative democratic system, but it turned out to be wrong. People with different opinions do not cooperate and communicate anymore.

Cengiz Günay: Is democracy at risk?

Wolfgang Schüssel: I think the answer is yes and no. A vast majority of people in Europe—around 80-85%—see democracy as the best political system. But at the same time, there is a growing feeling that democracies, democratic governments, are too slow, that they are too bureaucratic. I think there's a lot of disappointment. Democracy needs to be efficient; it needs to

deliver. You have to prove that democracy is a very effective system—better than other systems. But we must also fight against external threats.

Cengiz Günay: What are the external threats? And what was different back then?

Wolfgang Schüssel: The geopolitical challenges in the year 2000 when I became Chancellor were very different. Terrorism was the biggest problem. 9/11 was really a tough challenge for America, but also for European democracies. There were terror attacks everywhere: in France, Spain, Germany. Democracies had to stand up and had to fight against it. On the global level, there were geopolitical challenges, but China was much weaker back then and the Chinese government was very reform oriented. Also, Russia was very different. I remember that Vladimir Putin was very pro-European in his first years. We should not forget that he delivered a speech at the German Bundestag where he received standing ovations from all parties. He certainly had a European perspective. There was a much better understanding between global leaders. This is different today.

Cengiz Günay: Can we say that the global system was more cooperative back then?

Wolfgang Schüssel: Absolutely. Today you have a number of leaders who are less interested in solutions, but rather interested in conflicts. You could say they benefit from conflict. In my generation, we were more thinking in terms of win-win opportunities and win-win developments. Today you get the impression that we are going back to previous centuries. It's about one side winning and the other side losing—win or lose. And this creates a very conflictual and a very competitive situation, which is not good. And it's a weakness on all levels, especially the international organizations. The question is whether we can return to a spirit of cooperation?

Cengiz Günay: On Putin, with whom you had several personal encounters, how can a person change the personality?

Wolfgang Schüssel: I recently found some notes in my office which I took from a private conversation with Vladimir Putin on May 24th 2006. At that time, I was President of the European Council and in this capacity, we had a meeting in Sochi, Russia. After the normal talks and dinner, we had a private meeting where we discussed international issues. There he said something interesting: "Don't push us to the East. Europe is and will remain for us the most important partner […] Of course, I (Putin), have the duty to keep Russia together. But don't push us to the East." He also said, "I'm absolutely against military missions, military violence, also when it comes from the United States." It seems as if he had a completely different character. And I think he underwent some change. There were big demonstrations in Russia: the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, also the Bucharest summit, where the Americans tried to offer Ukraine and Georgia NATO membership, which was de facto blocked by Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy. The impression for Russia was that it is just postponed, but still on the table. But the invasion of Ukraine was an international war crime and can never be justified.

Cengiz Günay: Was Europe not geopolitical enough? Because there's now a lot of discussion that it was naive to think that one can approximate Russia through cooperation.

Wolfgang Schüssel: You cannot tell a mystery story from the end. You cannot know everything from the beginning. I think we need to remember that personalities can change, in a good or bad way. The EU has always been interested in geopolitics. We invested a lot of time, energy and money to build relations with Russia. But unfortunately, it didn't work out.

Cengiz Günay: How do you see transatlantic relations in a changing world?

Wolfgang Schüssel: Relations with America are undergoing change. America has always been a partner. When I was young, America was the country of our dreams, the land of the hope, the home of the brave. For a very long time, the relationship between the U.S. and Europe was one that can be compared to Batman and Robin, senior and junior. But, interestingly America's perspective of

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Europe has changed. With the establishment of the EU single market and the introduction of the Euro, suddenly, Europe became a real competitor. The EU single market is larger than the American domestic market. The Euro is the second most important currency in the world and in day-to-day trading it is close to the Dollar. This made us into competitors. This is one of the reasons why Trump says that the European Union was founded to exploit America—which of course is ridiculous. The interesting thing is how they see us. As an economically powerful actor. We should react prudent, we should not over-react, and we should be self-confident and self-conscious.

Cengiz Günay: You said we need to fight for democracy because there are many threats. How should we fight for democracy?

Wolfgang Schüssel: We need to defend ourselves against threats from outside and inside. Nobody will protect us. We have to do it ourselves. You know, first you have to deliver. You need to deliver what you promised. I mean democratic parties should not over-promise and under-deliver. They should rather under-promise and over-deliver. And, democracy needs drama. In German it's called Wahlkampf, the literal translation is "fight" for election. It means you have to fight for being elected. You need to be seen as fighting for something and against something or somebody. Of course, I am more in favor of fighting for something than fighting against somebody. In European political campaigns you often get the impression that it is more about image, and about the polls. As a politician you need to be respected but not always loved. I love my wife, and my wife hopefully loves me. But as a politician it should not be the goal to be loved by everybody. As a politician I need to be respected as a person. You need to be perceived as someone who can be trusted and who has been seen standing for something. I think it is also important to remember in the fight against populists that they promise everything and fight against everything. But they hardly have solutions. I think the center parties—left and right—need to better define what they are standing for. And of course, it depends also on the personality. We need personalities that are trustworthy and professional.

Cengiz Günay: But I think it has also become much more about communication and it has become tougher. I sometimes wonder if these great personalities would stand a chance if they would run today.

Wolfgang Schüssel: Charisma is not new, and rhetoric and communication are neither. We need authenticity. There should be more tolerance for rhetorical accidents in interviews, or some stumbling. We see many politicians who cannot deliver a speech without teleprompters. They are often so cautious to not say anything wrong that they actually say nothing of value.

Cengiz Günay: I think the balancing act is that you need to be authentic and at the same time not move beyond the script.

Wolfgang Schüssel: I think that we have to return to a new form of authenticity. Also, with the risk that you sometimes say something that makes some people angry, there should be some room for that. In European systems you win the majority with around 30 percent or one-third of the voters. This is why it is not always necessary to try to appeal to the remaining 70 percent. You can have a very precise and clear message for your electorate, maybe one-third will be in favor, and some others might not.

Cengiz Günay: You just wrote a book titled Zuversicht—confidence. What makes you confident in the future?

Wolfgang Schüssel: I'm an old guy, I am nearly 80 years old. When you reach this age you see the past, the present, and the future in a much more positive way. You see all the ups and downs. There will always be ups and downs. It was never a purely linear development. All in all, it's a good world, a better world than in any moment in our human history. And I think it is our duty to create the preconditions for a positive future. In German there is a saying: "A Pessimist is der einzige Mist, auf dem nichts wächst". A pessimist cannot create anything constructive. A pure optimist does not see challenges. Therefore, I think we need possibilists, persons who try to make a better future possible, and who work for that.

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Wolfgang Schüssel was born on June 7, 1945, in Vienna and is a former Austrian politician of the ÖVP. After studying law, he served as secretary of the ÖVP parliamentary group from 1968 to 1975 and then as secretary general of the Austrian Business Federation. He was a member of the National Council from 1979 to 1989 and again from 2006 to 2011. In 1989, he became Minister for Economic Affairs. In 1995, he took over the leadership of the ÖVP, became Vice Chancellor and Foreign Minister. From 2000 to 2007, he was Federal Chancellor and implemented reforms in pensions, administration, and asylum law. After retiring from active politics, he became involved in international organizations and business, including serving as a supervisory board member of the energy company RWE.

Russia's War in Ukraine: What's at Stake for Europe

by **Olga Pindyuk**

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> "Ukraine has also a lot to offer the EU such as a big consumer market, high-skilled labour and a large agri-food industry."

Russia's war in Ukraine is now in its fourth year and there appears to be no end to it in sight. US president Donald Trump's promise to "end the war in a day" quite predictably turned out to be an empty one. The US-led recent negotiations with Russia's president Putin led to the situation when Washington was forcing Ukraine to de-facto capitulate while simultaneously starting a rapprochement with Russia. The dictated 'peace' deal, offered to Ukraine, implied that not only the aggressor country would escape punishment for its crimes, but it would also be rewarded with additional territory (a part of which is currently under Kyiv's control). Trump has not only been refusing to name Russia an aggressor state or request any concessions from Putin in the ceasefire negotiations but also demanded that Ukraine signs a

so-called "minerals deal", under which it would hand over to the US control over all the country's natural resources as well as transport and energy infrastructure as a "payback" for all the previously provided aid. The sides have managed to arrive at a compromise deal to establish a joint investment fund for the reconstruction of Ukraine, which will be capitalized, in part, by revenues from future natural resource extraction. The agreement was signed on April 30 and ratified by Ukrainian parliament on May 8. Although it is more favourable to Ukraine than earlier iterations, however it doesn't offer any formal security guarantees in return and rather reflects the Trump administration's transactional approach to diplomacy. In the short run, the deal is not likely to bring any tangible financial gains as critical mineral mining projects take a significant amount of time to reach production, with average duration ranging from 7 to 20 years. Moreover, access to significant mineral resources in the occupied territories is blocked by Russia. Thus, the agreement can be seen as mostly a diplomatic gesture on the side of Ukraine in order to revive the US military support.

A drastic change in the American policy on Ukraine is not a singular development but rather an example of paradigm shifts in US foreign policy. Since Donald Trump returned to the White House, relations between Washington and Brussels have become increasingly strained as the US appear to be disengaging from Europe both economically and militarily. Trump's attempts to destroy the global trade system through the introduction of the so called "reciprocal import tariffs" are yet another element of the new US policy approach. The outcome of this array of extreme policy shifts in the largest world economy and military power could be a full re-drawing of the global world order.

For the EU the new geopolitical reality means existential challenges that need to be responded to without delay. One of the most acute crises to solve is Russia's war in Ukraine. Although Ukraine is not yet a member of the EU, Russia's war on its territory should not be seen as just a local conflict, but rather as a Europe-wide crisis. As Putin publicly stated, his goals are not limited to a control of Ukraine but rather include the re-establishing of control of the former Soviet bloc countries. The war fits well to a broader pattern of Russian pressure and assault on the Western post–World War II security order. If Putin's conditions to end the war with Ukraine are satisfied (no NATO membership, de-militarisation of the country), it would be only a matter of time before the Kremlin would be able to establish a full control of the country (e.g., via a puppet government similar to Belarus) and its sovereignty will be lost. This will have grave implications for the West, and the EU in particular:

• The West would show that it is afraid of escalation and military confrontation with autocratic regimes, and it would be discredited as a guarantor of global security and order. Autocratic regimes, on the contrary, would be strengthened globally. Ukraine's defeat would likely embolden Russia to turn its attention to other countries to attack (Georgia, Moldova) or destabilise (Baltic States, Poland). Russia might even be tempted to test the solidity of NATO's Article 5 guarantee by attacking some of the Central-East European EU members. China's attack on Taiwan would also become much more likely.

• A new round of global nuclear proliferation would be likely, as having nuclear weapons will be perceived as more reliable security guarantee than promises of help from allies. No country will ever voluntarily give up its nuclear arsenal again as Ukraine did after the Soviet Union's collapse. We can already observe the strengthening of nuclear arsenals in the nine nuclear-armed states countries (the US, Russia, the UK, France, China, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel), and Iran has come dangerously close to obtaining nuclear weapons. Poland, South Korea and Japan have expressed willingness to acquire nuclear weapons, and the list might grow.


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• If the Kremlin gains political control of Ukraine by turning it into a vassal state with a puppet government like Belarus, this will mean that the Ukrainian army, which has become one of the biggest in Europe, might be used against the EU itself. This will significantly increase security risks for Europe.

• Millions of Ukrainians would emigrate to Europe, fleeing from the kind of atrocities already seen in the occupied territories. The large influx of Ukrainian refugees into the EU in 2022 has indeed put a strain on the welfare systems of some member states, particularly in areas like housing, education, and healthcare. At the same time, integration of the refugees in the job market has been hampered by a number of challenges, including language barriers, lack of daycare options and social networks, and difficulties in recognition of education and qualifications. >


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President of the European Commission Ursula Von Der Leyen and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy after a joint press conference in Kyiv, Ukraine, on September 20, 2024.

• There could be significant damage to global food security, causing migration from vulnerable countries in the Middle East and Africa to Europe. When Ukraine lost its access to the Black Sea transport corridors in 2022, there was a big spike of global food prices as a result as the country is a major exporter of agricultural commodities globally, with countries in Middle East - North Africa (MENA) and East Asia being among the main importers of its produce. For example, in 2024, Ukraine accounted for 14% of MENA's wheat imports, 26% of sunflower seeds imports and 38% of maize imports. Any additional shocks to Ukraine's agricultural sector could again cause disruptions in the global supply of food.

So, what can the EU do to not let this outcome materialise? The answer is rather straightforward – increase its aid – both financial and military – to Ukraine. The country's economy is more than ten times smaller than Russia's and it would not be able to fight the war if the aid it receives decreases due to the US pulling out from the previous agreement to support the country's defence efforts. The goal should be for Ukraine to ultimately achieve sustainable peace, under which the country will maintain control over most if not all of its pre-war territory and will be offered unequivocal security guarantees – either a membership of NATO or an alternative similar security arrangement.

Although the EU is already the main donor of Ukraine, there should still be significant potential for the EU to scale up its aid to the country. The amount of aid that the EU and its member states have provided to Ukraine collectively pales in comparison to the amounts dedicated in response to other major crises in the recent past, such as euro area bailouts in Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain in the 2010-2012 period or the EU's energy subsidies in the period between September 2021 to January 2023. On the bilateral basis, the biggest EU economies have spent a negligible amount to support Ukraine. Germany and France, for example, in total allocated to Ukraine less than 0.5% of their annual GDPs (0.44% in Germany, 0.18% in France), while Estonia and Denmark each allocated 2.2% of annual GDP.

Another source of funding could be generated by confiscating frozen Russian Central Bank's assets. There have been numerous studies, showing that confiscating the frozen Russian assets, although legally challenging, is feasible. Furthermore, not confiscating assets is a policy choice in itself – and with policy consequences potentially just as profound as it implies impunity of countries conducting military aggression and violating the international legal order. If the aggressor state Russia is not forced to bear responsibility for its actions and compensate for all damages, Ukraine would be deprived of desperately needed resources to invest in the reconstruction of its economy. Not to mention that this would also be wrong in moral terms. The most recent estimates put the costs of the post-war reconstruction at more than USD 500 bn, which exceeds more than twice the RCB assets frozen in the EU.

When it comes to military aid, the task for the EU is more complicated in the short run as Europe lacks several types of crucial military equipment produced by the US. However, given the unreliability of the US under the new Trump administration, it's in the EU's own interest to build up a self-sufficient military industry and achieve strategic autonomy. Ramping up defence funding inside the EU as a part of the ReArm Europe plan as well as investing in the Ukrainian military-industrial complex are the steps in the right direction, which will not only strengthen European security but give a boost to the European industry. The EU-level procurement with common EU standards and joint production in multiple member states will be a crucial pre-condition for achieving the true strategic autonomy as military equipment and ammunition would need to be produced at industrial scale.

The new geopolitical reality also has its silver linings for the EU. With the US disengaging from the global economy and retreating from its position as the global power, the EU now has an opportunity to fill the gaps and become a more significant global player. The devastating effects of the reckless actions of President Trump on the US economy showed how important the rule of law, predictable policies and stable institutions are. By remaining adherent to democracy and rule of law the EU could become a more attractive investment destination compared to the US. By protecting the freedom of speech, which has been under attack in the US, the EU

> "With the US disengaging from the global economy and retreating from its position as the global power, the EU now has an opportunity to fill the gaps and become a more significant global player."

could also become a more attractive environment for scientists and benefit from a so called "brain gain".

The EU could potentially compensate for the lost US markets by deepening economic integration in the European single market and expanding economic ties with the rest of the world. Although the US' share in global imports of goods and services of around 13% is non-negligible, it is arguably not high enough to assure a country's monopolistic position. Decreasing barriers to trade with other partners could help the EU at least partially offset the negative effects of higher costs in trade with the US. Since November 2024, the EU concluded a free trade agreement with Mercosur, finalised or upgraded deals with Mexico, South Africa and Switzerland, and continued to work on a free trade agreement with Malaysia and India – these are all steps in the right direction.

Offering Ukraine EU candidate status (as well as to Moldova and Georgia) is also in the interest of the EU. Ukraine can not only offer EU businesses a potentially big consumer market as well as access to high-skilled and medium-skilled labour, but also its comparative advantages in IT, defence, green energy and agri-food sector can be of great benefit for the various aspects of the EU's security such as in the areas of military, cyber, food and energy security. The country's defence sector is likely to become one of Europe's most important defence industries in the future. As we seem to be living through the hinge of history, the EU's ability to overcome the challenges it is facing is of critical importance. If the EU drags its feet and does not rise to the challenge fast enough, Ukraine will likely suffer a devastating defeat, which will have wide-reaching repercussions for Europe and potentially for the entire international rules-based order. However, if the EU manages to mobilise and act swiftly, it could help preserve democracy and prosperity in the region and become a true global power.

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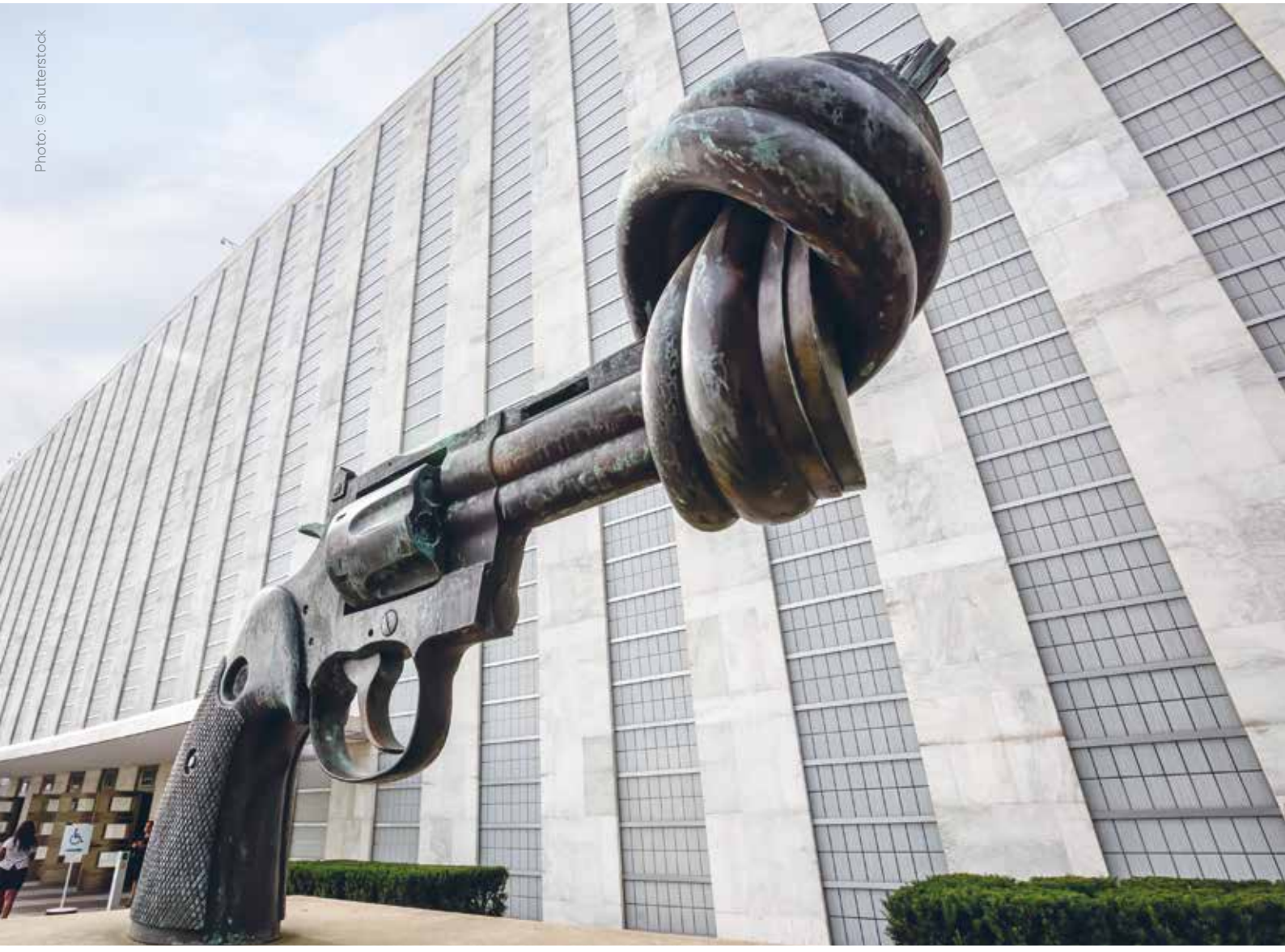
From Disarmament to Rearmament?

Navigating an Inflection Point for Multilateral Disarmament, Arms Control and Non-Proliferation

by **Rebecca Jovin**



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The Knotted Gun is a non-violence sculpture in front of the UN headquarters in NYC.

> It is *precisely* at times of tension and crisis that disarmament and arms control have shown their value as key security instruments”

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“Humanity’s future depends on investing in the machinery of peace, not the machinery of war.” It is with these words that the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, opened his message for this year’s International Day for Disarmament and Non-proliferation Awareness on 5 March 2025.

Indeed, we are witnessing an era of rising global tensions, resurging nuclear risk, and eroding norms and guardrails. International instruments and institutions, as well as other frameworks that have helped to safeguard people and planet for decades, are under threat, not least the concept of multilateralism itself. Looking globally at the landscape of multilateral disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation, the picture is a deeply worrying one.

Divisions among States are deepening rather than narrowing, fueled by new conflicts and distrust, as well as frustration over unfulfilled commitments, particularly those of the nuclear-weapon-states. Disarmament and arms control efforts are increasingly confronted with the counter-trend of re-armament. According to the latest data released by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), world military expenditure reached more than $2.7 trillion in 2024, with spending increasing across all world regions. This 9.4 percent rise compared to 2023 represents the sharpest annual growth since the end of the Cold War, with the greatest increases in spending seen in Europe and the Middle East. Current expenditure figures amount to roughly the equivalent of 334 US dollars for every person on the planet or 2.5 percent of global gross domestic product. Meanwhile, global development aid declined in 2024, reaching only an estimated $212.1 billion according to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data. This despite the expressed concern of Member States, as articulated in the General Assembly’s September 2024 Pact for the Future, about the potential impact that the global increase in military expenditures could have on investments in sustainable development and sustaining peace.

More than 79 years since the adoption of the first-ever United Nations General Assembly resolution, calling for the elimination of atomic and all other weapons of mass destruction, the nuclear risk is at one of the highest points in history. The role of nuclear weapons is seeing a resurgence in national security doctrines, at the same time as inflammatory nuclear rhetoric and threats have escalated in the context of regional conflicts. Nuclear weapons have – again – become tools of coercion. After witnessing significant reductions in nuclear arsenals from Cold War heights of more than 70,000 warheads down to approximately 12,000 today, we are facing a period of nuclear expansion and modernization. The risk of a nuclear accident based on miscommunication or miscalculation is further heightened by the rapid pace of technological advances and their intersection with nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, regional conflicts are exacerbating proliferation drivers.

At the same time, we are seeing an erosion of longstanding humanitarian disarmament and arms control instruments, from landmines to cluster ›

> “Humanity’s future depends on investing in the machinery of peace, not the machinery of war.”

munitions. History has taught us the painful lesson that the ultimate victims of such short-sighted weapons are civilians, including long after conflicts have ceased and the fighting has come to an end. In the case of landmines, civilians make up more than 80 percent of casualties, more than one third of them children. Globally, more than 100 million people are estimated to be at risk from landmines, explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices. With the urbanization of conflict, civilians also are the primary victims of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, with suffering further amplified due to the destruction of critical infrastructure from hospitals to schools to energy infrastructure.

These realities, which are impacting the very foundations and pillars of the global disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control regime, are further challenged by the lightspeed technological advances, including but not limited to areas such as artificial intelligence. While tremendous benefits stand to be gained for humanity – including global disarmament efforts – from emerging technologies, the international community is faced with the daunting challenge of simultaneously mitigating their potential harm. From cyberattacks to the use of autonomous weapons systems, from missile technology to quantum computing, technological developments are fundamentally altering the international security landscape at rapid speed, largely outpacing governance frameworks to manage risks.

The sentiment that “now is not the time to discuss disarmament” is gaining traction; yet, history suggests otherwise. It is precisely at times of tension and crisis that disarmament and arms control have shown their value as key security instruments. From the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, agreed between the United States, Soviet Union and United Kingdom only one year after the Cuban Missile Crisis, to the Conventional Armed Forces Treaty in Europe, negotiated in the final years of the Cold War, countries have turned to arms control and disarmament to reduce tensions and safeguard their national security. Multilateral approaches continue to be at the center of what has since become a complex web of legally and politically binding instruments – today, we count some 28 international treaties geared towards eliminating or regulating different weapons with the aim of safeguarding security and mitigating suffering and harm.

This suggests that, to “navigate the storm” that confronts international peace and security, it will be paramount to uphold and consolidate the international disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation architecture and to re-invest in confidence-building and transparency measures in pursuit of peaceful relations. The United Nations must play its part in facilitating and enabling such efforts and in sustaining the principles of the United Nations Charter and multilateralism. In this regard, the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) has a unique role to support norm-setting and to foster dialogue, transparency and confidence-building. Bolstering and universalizing existing instruments while advancing dialogue to address emerging challenges and governance gaps must remain at the core of the Office’s work at this moment in history. A central component of this is also the provision of impartial, objective and authoritative advice and education on disarmament issues. As former United Nations Secretary-General, the late Kofi Annan, put it, “[e]ducation is, quite simply, peace-building by another name. It is the most effective form of defense spending there is.”

The Vienna Office of UNODA, officially inaugurated in February 2012, has from its early days served as a hub for disarmament education. The goal of such education is, on the one hand, to impart knowledge on disarmament-related issues while, on the other hand, equipping different audiences with the tools to critically assess and take action for the attainment of disarmament objectives. Here again, history has valuable lessons to offer, including a recognition that advancing disarmament is not a task that rests exclusively on the shoulders of diplomats or enlightened global leaders. Looking back in time, civil society organizations, local communities and women’s groups have often been driving forces in propelling forward efforts to establish new international norms and frameworks for disarmament and arms control. The most recent

Security Council meeting on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation at UN Headquarters in New York on March 18, 2024.

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2024 Nobel Peace Prize award to Nihon Hidankyo, a Japanese group of atomic bomb survivors, for their efforts to achieve a nuclear weapons-free world and using witness testimony to demonstrate that nuclear weapons must never be used again, is but the latest example in a proud tradition of civil society activism in support of disarmament. Several international treaties such as the Anti-Personnel Landmine Convention or the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons were driven forward in large part by the engagement and advocacy of non-governmental institutions.

Grounded in the 2002 United Nations Study on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Education, disarmament education invariably is and always has been a collective undertaking of governments, United Nations and other international organizations, regional actors, civil society, academia, media, and community leaders. As such, a partnership-driven approach remains central to achieving reach and sustainability of collective efforts. This is very much the premise of UNODA's own 2022 Disarmament Education Strategy, which provides a common framework for action based on the principles of "inform, engage, educate and empower" and seeks to leverage the joint efforts of actors from across sectors and disciplines to increase access to and relevance of educational offers for diverse audiences. Too often, disarmament is seen as a niche, technical issue, or a domain in which average citizens, especially youth, have little agency. In this sense, "demystifying" disarmament as a concept and unpacking its relevance for the advancement of other agendas like climate action, sustainable development and human rights

> “[E]ducation is, quite simply, peace-building by another name. It is the most effective form of defense spending there is.”

are important starting points. So too is integrating disarmament into wider peace education and conflict resolution for young audiences. Disarmament education tools need to cater not only to current experts and diplomats involved in policy-making and norm-setting processes, but also to new generations of leaders and advocates.

UNODA's umbrella Youth4Disarmament initiative and its dedicated education and empowerment programs to reach young, global audiences from different backgrounds and sectors seek precisely to advance this aim. On the one hand, to ensure that the experiences and perspectives of young leaders are integrated into multilateral disarmament processes and negotiations. And on the other, to capacitate and promote youth to share and advance their knowledge and initiatives within their own communities with the goal of shaping more secure futures for all and promoting a culture of peace.

In my time with UNODA and in particular the more than three years I have now spent at the helm of its Vienna Office, I have had the privilege of seeing disarmament education in action. I have seen a thirst for knowledge and tools to promote disarmament that cuts across regions, disciplines and generations. With the rise in military spending, nuclear risk and armed conflict, I have witnessed a corresponding rise in demand for learning and engagement opportunities, reflected in the regular flow of visitor groups seeking briefings on disarmament issues, surging applicant rates for youth programs, and a steadily growing global usership of our online educational resources and platforms. Yet, unfortunately, sustained investment in disarmament education efforts and access to learning opportunities, especially in conflict-affected communities, remain largely elusive. Robust, multi-year investments by donor governments are the exception rather than the rule. This form of investment, however, has been essential to achieve sustainability and lasting impact, from ongoing engagement and participation of alumni in multilateral fora, to solidifying expert youth networks, to reinforcing institutional memory and innovative partnerships.

The inflection point, at which multilateral disarmament efforts now find themselves, offers an opportunity to rethink and reprioritize collective efforts. The hard-fought gains of generations past that led to the establishment of the instruments of peace and trust that have kept us all in relatively safety, that helped us navigate other storms and brought us to safe harbor throughout recent history, must be upheld and nurtured. Disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation must remain tools for security and for the preservation of human rights and international humanitarian law. Dialogue and effort to this end among States will need to take place in board rooms and negotiating fora. But it will also need to take place in classrooms and communities. It will need to take place through universalization and implementation of existing agreements and the advancement of new ones. But equally through the preservation of lessons from the past and the stories of survivors of armed violence, and the emergence of new leaders to carry forward these lessons and legacies. What is needed is a strengthening and democratizing of access to disarmament and peace education and an expansion of youth networks, underpinned by a longer-term vision and more sustainable resources, as well as the active participation of diverse stakeholders, including governments, educators, and civil society organizations. Together, these efforts can be the building blocks to turn crisis into opportunity and instruments of war into instruments of peace.

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International Law:

Less Confrontation, More Cooperation

by **Ralph Janik**

The second term of Donald Trump is shattering the fundamentals of international law. The reasons are obvious, the list of worrisome statements, plans and actions is long: The president of the still-most powerful country in the world has openly ignored the prohibition of the use of force when he stated that Ukraine started the war with Russia (not even Putin himself made such an absurd claim) while proposing that Russia should keep the territory it conquered in 2014 (Crimea and parts of Eastern Ukraine) and from 2022 onwards (some twenty percent of Ukraine) and toyed with the idea of annexing sovereign countries (Canada) or using the military to gain control over parts of their territories (Greenland, the Panama canal). He attacks international organizations by sanctioning individuals working for or with the International Criminal Court (ICC) and pulling out of or cutting funding for international organizations. He obstructs the international trade regime by blocking the appointment of the World Trade Organization's Appellate Body (the quasi-supreme court on trade law-related matters) members while ignoring its core rules, eg the Most Favoured Nation principle, with his tariffs. Last but not least, he disregards basic rules of human rights law when he declares that there could not be a trial for every migrant he wants to deport.

All of these actions deviate from rules the US itself has created. Its last annexations took place under President William McKinley in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and control over the Panama Canal was agreed on under Jimmy Carter back in 1977. No other US president has sanctioned the International Criminal Court (ICC)—Bill Clinton even signed the Rome Statute initially—and the US was at the forefront of the establishment of the WTO. When it came to deportations, both Obama and Biden upheld certain minimum due process standards. Past administrations have consistently denied recognition to territorial conquest from the 1930s and 1940s onwards; long gone seem the days of the Stimson doctrine, named after former US Secretary of State Henry Stimson, who rejected Japan's invasion of China's Manchuria region and the erection of its puppet state Manchukuo, or the Welles Declaration from 1940 (named after then-Under Secretary of State Benjamin Sumner Welles), that stated that "[t]he people of the United States are opposed to predatory activities no matter whether they are carried on by the use of force or by the threat of force. >

> "What's new is that President Trump does not even pretend to care about international law."

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> “The law is only as good as those working with it allow it to be.”

They are likewise opposed to any form of intervention on the part of one state, however powerful, in the domestic concerns of any other sovereign state, however weak.”

It goes without saying that past US administrations have not always lived up to these standards; one only needs to think of the Bush administration’s absurd legal justifications for the Iraq war, the waterboarding debate, or the American Service-Members’ Protection Act from 2002, which allows the president to order military measures to get US nationals out of custody if they are to be prosecuted by the ICC (the “Hague Invasion Act”).

What is new, however, is that the current US president does not even pretend to care about international law. One even isn’t sure whether he knows about its existence. Often enough, his administration comes up with no legal justifications at all or mere references to security or the powers of the executive accorded by the US constitution. In other words, while his predecessors often cheated, they still played the game of international law. Trump does not.

Still, the question now is not whether Trump is “destroying” international law, whether we should still “believe” in international law, whether it still matters or how it can be “saved” or even “revived”. International law cannot be erased, not by Trump, not by Putin, not by anyone else. Rules to manage cooperation and coexistence of different groups, big or small, have always been with us, from Draco to the Bible, from the Code Napoleon to the dark times of “Totalitarian Lawlessness” (Georg Schwarzenberger) before and during the Second World War—from which we are, hopefully, far away. Some are formal, some not, some written, some oral, some detailed, some general. We find them everywhere, from friendships and marriages to workplaces, from communities all the way to the international system. Even early societies had to regulate interactions with their neighbors: Jared Diamond, in his famous book on humans as the “Third Chimpanzee”, for example observed the “powerful rules about treatment of one’s fellow ‘us’” that “did not apply to ‘them’, those dimly understood, neighbouring enemies” among tribes in New Guinea. These rules were oftentimes brutal, but they were rules, nevertheless.

Not so much has changed since the early days of humanity. In essence, nation states are just another form of organized societies that need to find a way to co-exist or, possibly, cooperate with their peers. And that inevitably requires rules.

The real question, thus, is not whether but which international law exists. There is the one that enables you to send packages across borders (universal postal law) or talk to people from all over the globe in an instant (international telecommunications law). International law is not always political. Then there is the one that prohibits aggression, guarantees individual and collective rights (such as self-determination), emphasizes that treaties are binding (pacta sunt servanda) or that states have to make full reparation for the injury caused by their wrongful acts. The one that created institutions to deal with global problems, from war and peace and human rights to the protection of cultural property or pandemics.

And yet, questions of enforcement and adherence remain, questions that inevitably emerge when reading about massive human rights violations, war crimes, genocide, excessively high tariffs, environmentally harmful policies—to name just a few of the countless headlines related to Trump’s actions from the early phase of his term.

International law is not only an attempt to regulate the world as it is but also a hopeful aspiration, a project to create a world as it should be. From this perspective, we need to differentiate cooperation-related from confrontation-related rules. The former include the basics of technical cooperation, of diplomatic relations, the law of the treaties, the regulation of unfriendly acts (like declaring diplomats personae non gratae) and countermeasures (like sanctions), means to settle disputes, or institutional aspects of international organizations. These rules are mostly alive and well, explaining why one usually does not hear about them that often; by way of example, diplomats are usually not harmed and embassies

are not invaded. Even enemies understand that there is a need to respect their representatives, no one should be blamed for merely speaking, officially, on behalf of his or her government.

The latter, then, is the type of international law that is needed to deal with Great Power politics, protect basic human rights, or combat Climate Change. It includes those relevant for global cooperation, to preserve world peace or achieve the Sustainable Development goals. This is the type of international law people usually think about when lamenting its demise.

Such thoughts are nothing extraordinary, quite the contrary. During the 19th century, some even wondered whether international law was real law or rather a non-binding declaration of will that could be abrogated or deviated from whenever a ruler wished.

This led to the conclusion that law does not necessarily have to be tied to effective enforcement mechanisms but rather the question of whether a sufficient number of people believe that it should be respected. In the interwar period, E. H. Carr famously considered a treaty-based prohibition of war and the belief in the League of Nations and its collective security system as naive, if not potentially dangerous Utopianism (because it misunderstood, in his opinion, the real causes of war and how to prevent them). Or think of Thomas Franck, a Jewish émigré from Nazi Germany who would later become one of the big names of 20th century international law scholarship, who openly wondered who "killed" article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter (the prohibition of force) some 55 years ago.

In light of the above, one should avoid thinking of international law as one unified and coherent set of rules that are either irrelevant in the age of Realpolitik or the solution to all of the world's problems. We should also keep in mind that violations are the exception, not the rule; we talk about them as much as we do because they are so rare—there was no World War III after 1945 and no "Nuclear Holocaust"—and while we will never know whether and to what extent we can attribute that to international law, we do know that it was relevant in shaping a world that, in stark contrast to previous times, condemns war, at least officially. Lastly, we also need to keep in mind what law, in general, is (and what not): generally accepted obligations created by those bound by (states) or benefiting from it (human beings).

To conclude: when worrying about the impact of Trump on international law, we should ask ourselves which international law we are talking about. While the days of genuine multilateral cooperation and global governance are over, the days of international law as a common denominator are not, and never will be. Where there are peoples, nations and states, there is international law. It serves not only as a way of regulating virtually every aspect of our daily lives—some better, some worse—but also as a common language: Every practitioner, be it a diplomat, politician or academic, knows or, at least, should know what "force", "genocide", or "torture" means, and what is prohibited and what is not, as they have been defined in treaties and by courts. International law is not an end in itself but, like law in general, a tool that enables states to cooperate or define certain limits to their actions; whether they do so successfully, however, depends on political, not legal factors. The law is only as good as those working with it allow it to be.

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French President Emmanuel Macron welcomes UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer to the Élysée Palace for a summit on Ukraine and security in Europe in Paris on February 17, 2025.

A Crisis Like No Other:

America First and the Future of European Security

by **Emiliano Alessandri**

Transatlantic relations are at an inflection point. President Trump seems to see little value in the preservation of a transatlantic community of free market democracies as a core constitutive element of the US-led international order. In fact, the current US administration appears altogether unbothered by the order-sustaining responsibilities Washington has shouldered since WWII. Instead, the President has elected disruption as an operating principle as he doubles down on an America First agenda that intently resorts to power politics and mercantilist tactics to achieve supposedly "better deals" for America. In this zero-sum world that hardly distinguishes between

partners and rivals, the shape and content of a renegotiated transatlantic bargain, remains anyone's guess.

Faced with a US administration that appears largely unconcerned about Europe's fate, Europeans must take their future into their own hands lest they end up on the menu of geopolitical competition. Yet, if transatlantic divorce were to become unavoidable over the coming years, Europeans should strive to keep it as orderly a process as possible. The quest for European strategic autonomy requires working pragmatically from within the Atlantic Alliance for the time being while proactively leveraging old and new formats to Europeanize common defence in due course. There is nothing to cheer about the crisis of Atlanticism and the potential decline of NATO at a time of global authoritarian revival and great power rivalry, but Europe must prepare now for any scenario.

Transatlantic crisis in perspective

It is often forgotten that the modern history of transatlantic relations has been punctuated by recurrent crises and an ever present risk of disengagement. America entered WWII only after the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, when Nazi Germany had already occupied much of Europe. The US post-war effort to buttress European democracies with the Marshall Plan and the creation of NATO took transatlantic cooperation to unprecedented levels. But Soviet containment did not ensure complete alignment.

The 1950s saw different transatlantic sensitivities about the German question and Europeans failed to create their own defence union. Against this backdrop, President Eisenhower started raising the issue of transatlantic burden-sharing. In 1956, the Suez Canal crisis saw a first major clash with Great Britain and France over colonial privileges Washington did not support. Paris and London yielded to American power and France remained wary of transatlantic dependency ever since. French President De Gaulle later went so far as to withdraw France from the Atlantic Alliance's military structure.

In fact, Atlanticism and Europeanism became increasingly at odds from the 1960s. European governments avoided choosing between European integration and Atlantic Alliance – preferring to see the latter as the security guarantor of the former. But there were repeated calls to renegotiate the transatlantic bargain. Tensions periodically resurfaced as the European project took shape, typically but not exclusively under Republican US Presidents less inclined than their Democratic counterparts to coordinate with European capitals.

President Nixon took Europe and the world by surprise with the decision to end the convertibility of the US dollar into gold in 1971, an early sign of Washington's uneasiness with the order-sustaining role it had assumed after WWII. Secretary of State Kissinger's 1973 "Year of Europe" rang the alarm bell about the European community's rise as a trade competitor. In the 1980s, President Reagan's muscular foreign policy first led to concerns that an escalation between the two superpowers would leave Europe exposed in the middle. Later, fear arose that the US-USSR strategic dialogue would take place over Europe's head.

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union spurred the debate about NATO's raison d'être. Soon afterwards, Western triumphalism was tempered by Europe's anxiety that America's "unipolar moment" would lead to an America unbound. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq without UN backing provoked the most

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severe transatlantic crisis on record. The majority of European countries condemned Washington's initiative as a major breach of international law and a blow to the multilateral system. More broadly, Europeans resented Washington's unwillingness to coordinate with Europe after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, following which Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty—NATO's collective defence clause—was invoked for the first and only time in the Alliance's history. Anti-Americanism rose as President Bush's "global war on terror" was decried as a dangerous militaristic drift of an increasingly "rogue superpower". Meanwhile, the image of a weak, irrelevant, free-loading Europe became widespread in American conservative circles.

There has been no shortage of transatlantic tensions since the 2000s. It was during the Obama years that Washington formalized a strategic pivot to Asia that ran the risk of side-lining Europe. Before re-energizing NATO in the face of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, President Biden had disoriented Europeans with his chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Atlanticist Biden administration also confirmed the departure from free trade that had started during President Trump's first term and adopted measures that created an uneven playing field with Europe on the green agenda.

As a matter of fact, US-European relations have never been harmonious. This is due in part to political-cultural reasons as old as the American Revolution and partly to the internal diversity of the transatlantic community, a grouping of democracies broadly united by interests and values yet each going through different political cycles and pursuing specific foreign policy goals. After the Cold War, even as the rise of non-Western economies might have led to a re-appreciation of US-European ties, divergent strategic priorities have increasingly played a role, pitting an American superpower with Asian, Atlantic and hemispheric interests against a largely self-absorbed Europe. While in recent years the US has progressively focused on the contest for primacy with an ascending China, Europe has had to deal with a string of internal crises and chronic instability in its immediate neighbourhoods.

Indeed, while the Atlantic Alliance is rightly celebrated as the "most successful in history", strategic alignment has required hard diplomatic work throughout. Far from a given, solidarity between Allies has demanded constant investment in a never-ending trust building process. Dragged repeatedly into European conflicts it would have rather avoided, America has never fully trusted that without its leadership Europeans would be able to overcome their internal differences and mutual suspicions. Hence, America's post WWII and post-Cold War roles as a European power, proactively mitigating intra-European competition while building a transatlantic front against strategic rivals such as Russia and China. For their part, Europeans have initially welcomed but become increasingly ambivalent about American hegemony. Not without contradiction, they have both resented constraints placed on European autonomy and feared the growing risk of American disengagement.

The current predicament

Ongoing international developments presage the end of the transatlantic relationship as we know it. Taking first term stances to a new level, President Trump and his entourage have sent a bundle of shockwaves Europe's way in the first months of the administration. A non-exhaustive list includes: repeatedly disparaging the EU as an unfair trade competitor and an over-regulator which was "formed to screw the US"; disrupting the transatlantic economy – the largest in the world – with tariffs, or the threat thereof, in the context of a broader attempt to reset globalization and revive America's domestic manufacturing sector; advancing claims over Greenland, a territory of NATO founding member Denmark; endorsing the rise of xenophobic and illiberal parties, such as Alternative für Deutschland, which the European mainstream sees as a threat to democracy; rehabilitating Putin's Russia – the aggressor state in the Russia-Ukraine war – , while pressuring Kyiv towards a settlement, cost what it may.

More profoundly, this US administration has embraced a nationalist-populist ideology that is being used to justify both an ultraconservative project of domestic transformation and the dismantlement of the "liberal international order". While on the domestic front the aggressive and wide-raging initiatives of the US administration risk provoking an unprecedented constitutional crisis, internationally America First – with its attack on multilateralism and the departure from a democracy and human-rights oriented international strategy – has already undermined America's role as the "leader of the Free World". The current transatlantic crisis is, therefore, epoch-making in that it reflects – and at the same time accelerates – a crisis of liberalism.

With Washington eagerly supporting political leaders across the transatlantic space and beyond that share similar revisionist aims, the notion of the "liberal West", as normatively and strategically understood since President Wilson's 1917 call for a "world safe for democracy",

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> “There is nothing to cheer about the crisis of Atlanticism and the potential decline of NATO at a time of authoritarian revival and intensifying geopolitical competition, but Europe must prepare now for any scenario.”

is challenged as never before. As a result, the future of NATO as the West’s politico-military arm has also come into question. The Atlantic Alliance was never just a marriage of convenience. Rather, NATO has aspired to embody a value-based democratic security community, brought together by a sense of common destiny. President Trump’s brutally transactional approach now means that, to the current US ruling elite, NATO retains its value only if it makes business sense for Washington, with the US President expecting to collect growing fees from European allies for a type of protection that has little to do with democratic solidarity.

President Trump has asserted that he would not care about defending NATO countries that do not meet the relevant financial requirements, which he would like to significantly raise. As the US President seems to value personal loyalty more than anything else, one has to wonder whether the US military would come to the rescue of those European countries whose leaders could come in the crossfire of the White House in the months to come. Against this drastically changed backdrop, Europeans cannot escape addressing some tough questions. Can they continue relying on America for security when the US President and his entourage no longer seem bound to any normative understanding of US foreign policy and look at the European continent as a strategic sideshow at best? Can Europe realistically count on Washington in case of provocations and hostile acts by Moscow when the White House seems more attracted to the idea of a condominium of sorts between the great leaders of the world rather than to the vision of a democratic West united against authoritarian revisionism?

The future of European security

Faced with an undiminished challenge from Russia but also unprecedented pressure from across the Atlantic, Europeans feel vulnerable as never before. European leaders are correctly coming to the conclusion that this is indeed a make-or-break moment. The prospect of a detached, even antagonistic US means that Europeans have no choice but to increasingly take their destiny into their own hands. The future of European security and the preservation of what is left of the liberal international order are both at stake. >

Determination in pursuing greater self-reliance, however, does not in itself justify an abrupt transatlantic break, unless it is Washington that precipitates it. Rather, Europeans should press forward with a process of Europeanization of common defence whose scope will be determined by Europe's actual ability to generate and leverage new capabilities and whose pace can be calibrated to the effective extent of the deterioration of US-European ties. However weakened, NATO is not a relic to be jettisoned, nor necessarily a straitjacket on European strategic autonomy. Defence and deterrence assets developed in the context of the Atlantic Alliance cannot be re-created overnight and strategic wisdom suggests that Europeans concentrate on building a stronger "European pillar" within NATO over any other alternative.

Europeans can and should take decisive steps towards developing a Europe-based defence and deterrence force while still counting for as long as possible on critical US assets, starting with the nuclear deterrent, that cannot be easily replaced in the short term. Working within the Alliance provides Europeans time and space to develop strategic enablers, such as intelligence and satellite communications, that are predominantly provided by Washington at present. It also allows EU countries to closely coordinate with the United Kingdom and Canada, both of which are going through their own strategic reassessments. From a military standpoint, the European Union and the UK have no choice but to forge a strong bilateral security partnership to address any future scenario in which Europe would have to take care of its own defence. To concretely strengthen the European pillar of NATO, one highly consequential step would be for Europeans to take as much leadership as possible in operationalizing the regional plans the Alliance has recently adopted to confront the Russian threat on its Eastern flank.

Meanwhile, the European Union should focus on ensuring that the rearmament process that has already been announced leads to new tangible capabilities, especially of an operational kind, and that joint European capacities are created through joint procurement. For the time being, the EU's greatest contribution to European defence is not the creation of a European army, something that still faces resistance by individual capitals and could be hampered by Eurosceptic governments. Rather, the EU can play a crucial role in the creation of a more integrated and competitive European defence market. Only the latter may plausibly enable the production of technologically advanced military assets that can gradually bridge the long-standing transatlantic defence gap.

As a rule of thumb, resolve and tenacity in pursuing greater European security self-reliance should go hand in hand with flexibility in formats and instruments. In this light, the UK-France led "coalition of the willing" to support Ukraine is a most important pilot project as the outcome of the Russia-Ukraine conflict will shape the European security landscape for the years to come. And as the EU looks at financing tools for its "Readiness 2030" initiative, discussions about a rearmament bank open also to non-US NATO members and other stakeholders should not be dismissed as a distraction.

This is indeed the time to experiment different geometries of multilateral collaboration. Both when it comes to supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and independence in the face of combined US-Russian pressure and the end vision of common European defence, neither NATO nor the EU as such can provide all the answers at present. Rather, willing and capable countries should leverage these organizations to the maximum possible extent while also experimenting with new platforms. Only by doing this can Europeans hope that that the wide range of existing national sensitivities, individual preferences, and different budgetary capacities, do not come in the way of practical progress.

As different political cycles could result in governments with different attitudes towards European security in different countries, what EU institutions and pro-Europe national leaders should support is a "movement" towards the Europeanization of security and defence—one clear-eyed about the mission ahead but open-minded and adaptive as to the actual instruments and the specific trajectory to reach the end goal.

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How China Aims to Navigate the Trumpian Storm and Come out on Top

by **Thomas Eder**

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Faced with the second Trump administration's rapid-fire policy decisions, massive tariff hikes, and frequent reversals or exemptions in early 2025, the Chinese leadership is unlikely to fundamentally rethink its foreign policy strategy. It would only do so in case of a kinetic war, but such a development is unlikely. Both Washington and Beijing are focused on the economy, and the new US tariffs also target allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. As these countries lose trust in the US, not least because the Trump team appears to back away from confronting security challenges by strong (authoritarian) opponents, it becomes more likely that they will accommodate China. A war in the Taiwan Straits or the South China Sea would undermine this favourable trend for Beijing. In the absence of war, China will likely continue to strengthen diplomatic relations with developing countries (the 'Global South') and seek to preserve economic relations with Europe and security ties with Russia. It aims to supplant the US in global governance formats and lead reforms, to eventually surpass the US in comprehensive national power, and to sustainably establish itself as the leading great power by mid-century.

Meeting US economic pressure, China's expert community recommends domestic demand-side reforms, friendly signals to potentially receptive groups in the US, patience, and a focus on avoiding a security crisis. Chinese scholars project confidence that China can hold out, and that the US will want to make a deal. They note a preference for less confrontational policies in the US financial sector and among state governments, the boom-and-bust cycle of the US economy leading to alternating Republican and Democratic victories, and a 'game' of 'tariff intimidation' being part of negotiations under President Trump. At the same time, experts suggest further stimulus to increase China's domestic consumption and redoubled efforts towards technological autonomy and resilient supply chains. Moreover, scholars recommend strengthening relations with US allies that disagree with its trade and climate change policies, and intensifying China's treaty-making and multilateralist positioning. The main goal is to reduce China's dependencies on and vulnerabilities to the US.

Early 2025, indeed, saw China showing patience on tariffs at first. Yet, following the third US tariff hike, it began to join the US in every step of escalation, reaching tariff levels at 145% (US) and 125% (China). Thereafter, Washington indeed quickly deescalated by exempting key product categories like smartphones and computers and even stating that tariffs will soon 'come down substantially' and expressing hope for negotiations. The Trump administration appeared to react to investors selling US treasury bonds and causing a spike in 10-year treasury yields – i.e., unprecedentedly losing trust in the US as a safe haven for their assets – and a US stock market fall wiping out trillions of dollars in value.

China will also attempt to exploit opportunities to further diversify away from economic relations with the US and strengthen its position in international organisations. Washington's new tariffs on imports from most

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countries worldwide, its questioning of US commitments to allies and partners, and its decision to leave multiple international organisations and treaties are doing enormous damage to a multitude of bilateral relationships, while leaving a power vacuum in multilateral forums. Beijing is eager to fill the vacuum, improve its intended image as a ‘free trader’, and profit from increased trade and closer diplomatic relations with countries affected by the US’s new policies. The trade ministers of China, South Korea, and Japan had a trilateral meeting for the first time in five years to accelerate talks towards a trilateral free trade agreement and reaffirm their support for the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Chinese President Xi Jinping spent an entire week touring Southeast Asia for state visits to Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia, with the intention of mutual reassurance between China and its most important trade partner, i.e. Southeast Asia collectively. An EU-China summit is planned for July 2025, with China mulling concessions to revive talks on the ill-fated “Comprehensive Agreement on Investment” between the two economic giants (proposed 2013, concluded in principle 2020, European Parliament refusing approval due to Chinese sanctions against MEPs, other officials and entities 2021). Meanwhile, Beijing will stay in UN agencies and bodies the Trump administration is withdrawing from (e.g. WHO, UNRWA), as well as treaty regimes like the Paris climate agreement, and will paint itself as the more ‘responsible great power’. As Washington eliminates its US Agency for International Development, further goodwill falls into China’s lap.

China’s government has laid out a broad vision for global governance reform, which aims to convince developing countries that the US has failed them, and that the new China-led order will bring them security, prosperity, and respect. Beijing did so after declaring its ambition to lead global governance reforms in 2017. That declaration was made after China’s leadership had become convinced that the West’s power is in decline (from 2008), and that China should build on, reform and lead existing international organizations, while diversifying economic relations away from the West. In China’s 2023 summary of its vision (‘Proposal of the People’s Republic of China on the Reform and Development of Global Governance’), China implicitly alleges that the US renders the world less secure by sanctioning Russia for its illegal invasion of Ukraine, delivering weapons to the Ukrainian defenders, and allowing scared (Central) Eastern European countries to seek refuge in NATO. It accuses rich nations of rendering the world less prosperous by not living up to their responsibilities on development cooperation and climate finance, being overly protectionist, and withholding advanced technologies from developing countries. Lastly, Beijing criticizes (implicitly the US’s) alleged double standards, confrontational behaviour and pressure in the UN Human Rights Council, and interference in internal affairs on human rights issues, as expressions of a lack of respect for other countries and their ‘civilizational diversity’. It intends to end the international promotion and protection of civil and political human rights and competitive parliamentary democracy.

The Trump administration’s new policies render China’s argument that the US is harming developing countries’ prosperity more plausible, they help China’s push for influence on the global human rights agenda, but they do not make China a more attractive security actor. Many governments will be more receptive to allegations of the US being overly protectionist when its tariff policies hike rates for (almost) all countries to reach an average not seen in decades, and ignore international trade law and previous commitments. The same holds true for allegations of insufficient US development cooperation when such is almost over. China does not necessarily have to be less protectionist or more active in development cooperation to reap diplomatic benefits from the current situation. Authoritarian governments worldwide, and those trending in that direction, are already receptive to ending the international promotion of civil and political human rights. The US’s withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council still matters, though, in easing China’s path to influencing the global human rights agenda. China’s likely greater economic influence in developing countries due to US tariff policies will further aid Beijing in rallying diplomatic support for its human rights ideas, even from some democracies. China’s arguments on US security policies in Europe, though, are of limited interest to many developing countries, and may no longer apply as President Trump mulls changing course on military aid, sanctions and even alliances. More importantly, small and medium-sized (often developing) countries worldwide may wonder why they should support a vision that bars them from entering defensive alliances and using economic means to retaliate, when major powers (including such with UN Security Council veto power) are becoming ever more dangerous military predators.

European decision-makers should expect a prolonged US-China trade war and accelerate efforts to increase Europe's strategic autonomy. The Chinese leadership remains reluctant to engage the White House, convinced it can eventually "manage Washington", and focused on exploiting the US's damaged ties with other states and withdrawal from the multilateral stage. Meanwhile, the Trump administration appears generally committed to a focus on new trade barriers and de-globalization. Under these circumstances, the European side should realize its increased leverage as both China and the US rely more on the European economy, while fully expecting its own difficult trade disputes with both countries. While enhancing Europe's self-sufficiency, EU and member state leaderships should redouble efforts towards more substantial diversification of their relations with external actors. They should pursue deepened economic and diplomatic relations with both developing and industrialized nations that are not Security Council veto powers and are perhaps disappointed by or even afraid of these powers. They should set Europe apart from (some) Security Council veto powers with a credible and consistent commitment to the UN Charter and a sustained commitment to multilateralism. They should demonstrate respect for developing countries as well as small and medium-sized countries by devoting time, effort and prominence to diplomatic ties with them, and supporting international rules that take their interests into account. Lastly, European decision-makers should demonstrate that EU enlargement is possible again before the decade is over, consider defence imperatives in the enlargement debate, and thus revive both Europe's pull of attraction and deterrence of aggressors.

> **"Beijing is eager to fill the vacuum, improve its intended image as a 'free trader', and profit from increased trade and closer diplomatic relations with countries affected by the US's new policies."**

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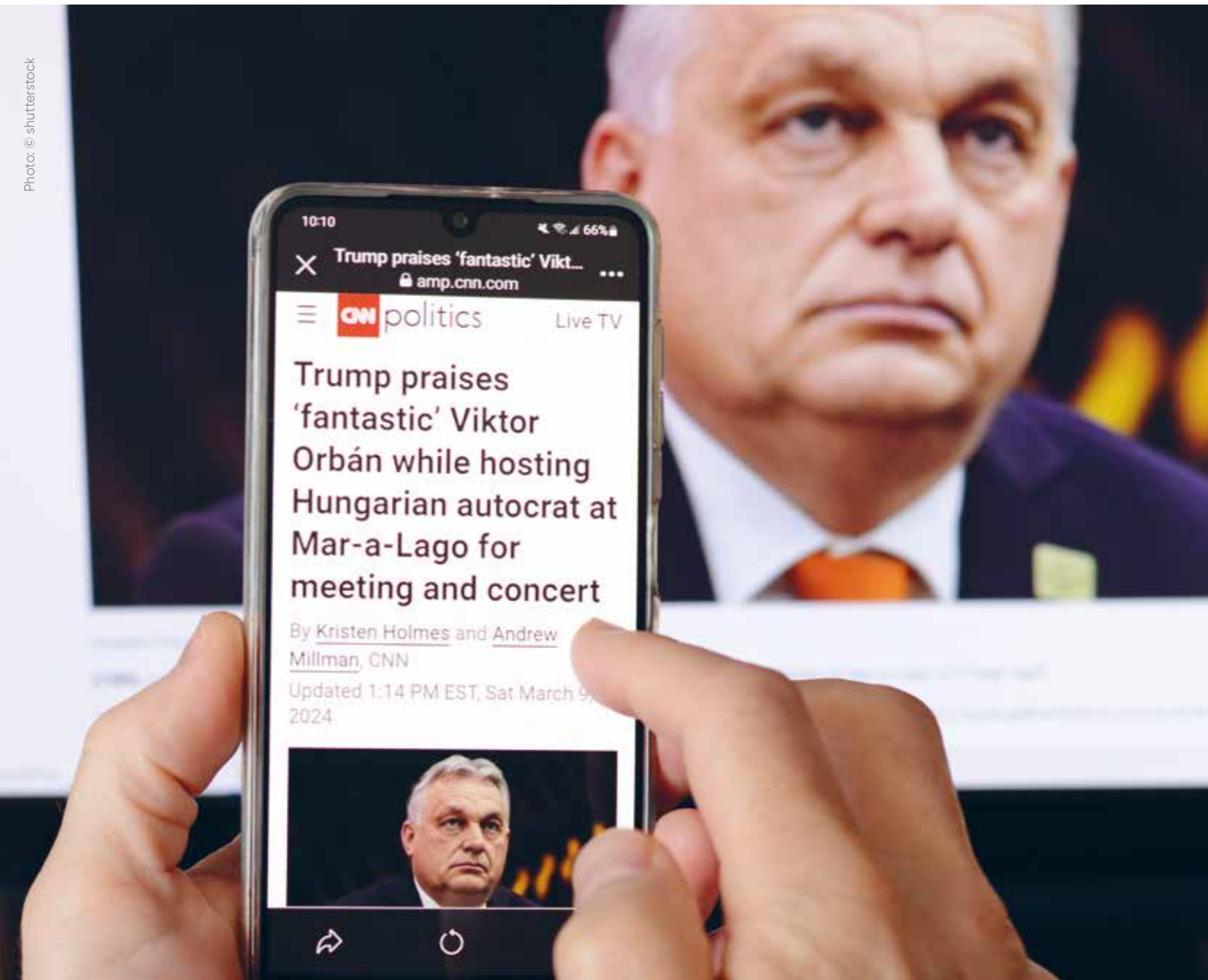
The New Age of Force
How Can Europe React without Losing its Principles?

by Loïc Simonet



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On January 26, 2025, Donald Trump posted a picture of himself on Instagram, wearing a Borsalino hat in the style of Al Capone, the American gangster and businessman who attained notoriety during the Prohibition era. Behind him, a poster that read "FAFO" for "Fuck Around and Find Out". Published in the midst of Trump's tug-of-war with his Colombian counterpart, Gustavo Petro, over the deportation of migrants expelled from the United States, the photo symbolizes a new reality: the current American administration is imposing a brutal worldview based, as that of the 19th century, on force, transaction and power, which must serve national interests above all else. "America first!"

The use of force has become a commonplace modus operandi. Far from Hemingway's "Farewell to Arms," our era is witnessing a resurgence of state violence. Geopolitical relations now resemble a food chain: predators overwhelm prey, hard power crushes soft power, and martial virtue eclipses diplomatic finesse. The return of Bismarck's "Blut und Eisen" ("Blood and Iron") policy in the 21st century exposes the flaws of our democratic systems.

The shadow of war

We thought that after two world wars, peace had become the natural state of Europe and war an exception. On February 24, 2022, as the first Russian missiles rained down on Kyiv, Kharkiv and Odesa, Europeans saw what they had refused to anticipate for years: that a country on their continent could launch its armies against a neighboring country to satisfy its imperial ambitions; that a nuclear power could brandish the threat of atomic apocalypse to achieve its ends; that a permanent member of the UN Security Council could trample on the cardinal principles of world peace and flout international law in favor of the law of force. Although 'war' is still a 'taboo' word (hence Putin's 'special military operation'), the use of military force is once again seen as a conceivable, even acceptable political practice among the tools of state power. The use of force is not 'chosen' any longer by our democracies—like in Afghanistan, in Kosovo, in Iraq in 2003, in Libya in 2011, although we made a very bad use of it—but imposed on us.

Conflict is expanding into new areas, with the militarization of space and the proliferation of cyberattacks. It is also taking on increasingly hybrid forms. The military and the non-military are intertwined. Margarita Simonian, editor-in-chief of RT (formerly Russia Today), describes her channel as an "army corps". Everything becomes 'weaponized': food supply, trade and tariffs, migration, energy flows. It is part of what Thomas Gomart, Director of the Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri), calls the "invisible wars". The tools for regulating strategic competition are disappearing one by one. As U.S. historian Mary Elise Sarotte assessed, the Cold War's tacit code of conduct, rooted in patterns of predictable behavior, does not prevail any longer. In this context, a small incident or miscalculation can trigger escalation.

Strongmen: the age of predators

I wonder whether Margot Wallström's 'feminist diplomacy' has ever materialized. What is sure is that hypermasculine and hubristic performance is the 'new modern'. Nayib Bukele of El Salvador, who calls himself the "world's coolest dictator" or the "Philosopher King", and Javier Milei of Argentina, whose contempt for the state is "infinite", were both invited to Trump's inauguration. Coined by Joe Biden a "pariah" after the assassination of the dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia made a remarkable comeback as a reformer and mediator. The personalization of power and populist politics embodied by these leaders clashes with our European conception of democracy, representation and moral values.

In his Agamemnon, Aeschylus says, "it's natural to kick the one who's down". "Bro-Politics in Action" (A. Csobánci) is weak with the powerful, and powerful with the weak. According to Edward Luce, columnist at the Financial Times, Donald Trump "believes the world is a jungle in which the larger predators eat the smaller. He has great respect for other large beasts, namely China and Russia, and a sense of carte blanche towards the smaller ones." With Ukraine, the U.S. uses its strength to subjugate the one who has one knee on the ground. That was already the meaning of the Abraham Accords, negotiated in 2020 to the detriment of the Palestinian people.

21th century 'strong men' share a revisionist approach. There is a lot in common between the MAGA / Monroe 2.0 ideology, Vladimir Putin's Soviet nostalgia, Xi Jinping's 'China Dream' and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's neo-ottomanism. Trump seems to align with Putin when he promotes a spheres-of-influence policy as practiced by his predecessors William Mc Kinley and Theodore Roosevelt, the only two he cited in his opening speech on January 20, 2025. This unholy autocratic alliance is the antithesis to the United Nations Charter.

'Bulldozer' diplomacy: I want it, I take it

Donald Trump's brutality against Ukrainian President Zelensky in the Oval Office on February 28, 2025 and Vice President JD Vance's condescension toward Europeans at the

Munich Security Conference, are unprecedented. No holds barred. 'Allies' receive no special treatment.

As we commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Yalta Conference, the Mar-a-Lago imperial doctrine sets the tone. In his inaugural address, Trump made clear that the "The United States will once again consider itself a growing nation — one that increases our wealth, expands our territory, builds our cities, raises our expectations, and carries our flag into new and beautiful horizons". The 47th President of the United States does not feel bound by any international norm and certainly not by the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, which Article 51 prohibits coercion. No agreement, even a formally ratified one, is in his eyes an obstacle to the assertion of American power. "We'll get Greenland. Yeah, 100%," Trump said to NBC's Kristen Welker on 30 March 2025, adding that there is a "good possibility that we could do it without military force" but that he wouldn't "take anything off the table." "Protector America becomes predator", Bruno Tertrais, Deputy Director of the French Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, assesses. In 1803, the United States bought Louisiana from Napoleon Bonaparte. In 1867, they bought Alaska from the Russian Empire. The good old 19th-century methods are back. Except that Greenland is not for sale.

> "Protector America becomes predator [...]"

The domino effect is underway: Russia has long eyed Norway's Svalbard archipelago, and it will be increasingly hard to oppose China's declared intent to reclaim Taiwan by force. The "Trump factor" unleashes the wildest ideas: Dutch parliamentary speaker Martin Bosma recently suggested carving up Belgium, attaching Flanders to the Netherlands and giving Wallonia to France.

'Red lines' are crossed one after the other

With tens of thousands civilian casualties and survivors condemned to anarchy and dereliction, the conflict in Gaza is an extreme example of the breakdown of the law of war, but it is not an isolated one. ICRC President Mirjana Spoljaric repeatedly points out the erosion of the respect of the Geneva Conventions. States' tolerance with regards to forbidden weapons has been growing. Germany turned a blind eye to the transfer of U.S. cluster ammunitions to Ukraine through its territory. NATO members Poland and the Baltic States announced their plan to withdraw from the Ottawa convention banning anti-personnel landmines due to the military threat from their neighbour Russia. New technologies and artificial intelligence introduce serious risks when weaponized.

We are entering "an era of rearmament" (Ursula von der Leyen). In 2024, global military spending rose by 7.4% to $2.46 trillion, the International Institute for Strategic Studies indicates in its Military Balance 2025. Russian President Vladimir Putin and other high-level Russian officials have heightened nuclear rhetoric, calling into question longstanding global norms against the use and testing of nuclear weapons. Nuclear arms control and disarmament are losing traction amid the current focus on deterrence. The issue of proliferation is coming to the forefront: Poland, South Korea and Japan are considering gaining access to nuclear weapons.

Collateral damage to multilateralism and democracy

Criticized from all sides, the UN system is powerless and obsolete. This time, the challenge comes 'from within', from the country which had been most important in setting up the postwar international institutions and had supported them throughout the decades as a hegemon. On January 15, 2025, during his hearing before the U.S. Senate, Secretary of State Marco Rubio was clear: "The postwar global order is not just obsolete; it is now a weapon being used against us."

Across the world, liberal democracy is on the defensive in the face of what Grzegorz Ekiert and Noah Dasanaike, in the Journal of Democracy, call the "dictatorial drift." According to the V-Dem Institute, based at the University of Gothenburg, autocracies outnumber democracies for the first time in 20 years. After decades of weakening borders, or even denying them, the rudder is suddenly reversed: "People want to see borders" (D. Trump). Globalisation as we have come to know it is over.

And the loser is... Europe!

Europe is the big loser in this new configuration. Because of its values, its institutions and its way of life, Europe is viewed as a common enemy by autocrats, starting with Donald Trump and his vice-president. "It is a common fault not to anticipate storms when the sea is calm", Machiavelli said: our societies have been completely unprepared psychologically for the events we are experiencing today. Over the course of just a few days in February 2025, two of the worst European fears were confirmed. First, the Trump administration is pushing ahead with its idea

of a U.S.-Russia deal to end the war in Ukraine. Second, all the signs are that Washington plans to leave Europe out of any negotiations and to its own devices when it comes to post-cease-fire security arrangements. "Europe's era is over", former Russian President and Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Dmitry Medvedev, triumphally said early 2025; "It is weak, ugly and useless."

A garden in the jungle, as High-Representative for foreign affairs Josep Borrell coined it, the EU strives to "speak the language of power" and hastily and massively boosts its defence spending. But the EU is not a military power and the massive surge in capabilities announced in the White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030 (March 2025) is quite a change in its DNA.

What can we do?

Our democracies lost the peace after 1989; they cannot lose the war to authoritarian empires. In the present circumstances, weakness, whether perceived or real, is a risk for our societies. "Les tyrans ne sont grands que parce que nous sommes à genoux devant eux " ("Tyrants are great only because we are on our knees", Alexis de Tocqueville).

The priority is to restore our ability to guarantee our security, which we have long neglected. Let us take Dmitry Sergeyevich Peskov, Vladimir Putin's spokesperson, at his word: romanticism is over, we must be pragmatic. We need to have a global vision, and perhaps a more strategic one, to grasp the complexity of this environment. We need to be ready in all areas of power: diplomatic, military, economic, cultural, educational, sporting, etc. We must identify our dependencies and overcome them. In Europe particularly, we need to think about the uniqueness of our identity, our institutions, and showcase it. This will not go without sacrifices; there will be a price to our values. However, in this multipolar world, we can find possible mediators and allies, including within the so-called 'Global South'.

We must also say no to vassalization and blackmail. We must point the finger at the unacceptable, first and foremost at violations of state sovereignty and territorial integrity and other egregious breaches of the UN Charter. Allowing the United States to move its borders against the will of neighboring countries would be contrary to the principles formulated as early as 1941 by Churchill and Roosevelt in the Atlantic Charter, on which the post-war multilateral order was built. It would validate predatory behavior such as that of Russia toward Ukraine.

War and coercion are never inevitable. As poet Friedrich Hölderlin said: "where the danger lies, also grows the saving power."

> "According to the V-Dem Institute, based at the University of Gothenburg, autocracies outnumber democracies for the first time in 20 years."

Loïc Simonet is a Research Fellow at the oiip. He started his career at the French Defence Ministry in Paris. In 2008, he was appointed Politico-Military Counsellor of the French Permanent Representation to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Vienna. In 2013, he joined the Secretariat of the OSCE as Senior External Co-operation Officer, until June 2021. In this capacity, he liaised with the European Union and NATO.

Young Voices of the oiip

The young voices of the oiip are current interns who shared their perspectives on pressing international issues, sources of hope for the future, and recommendations for world leaders.

Question: What are important international issues which seem to be overlooked at the moment?

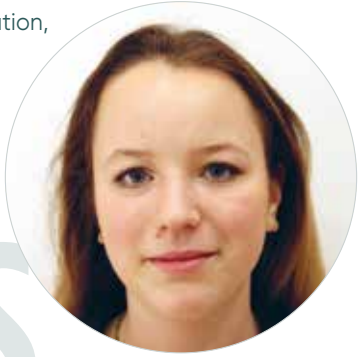
The European migration discourse continues to be heavily shaped by the image of "Fortress Europe"—a perspective that reduces displacement to a question of arrival, control, and the crossing of nation-state borders. However, by limiting public awareness of all forms of forced mobility the political and policy-focused lens is not only drastically narrowed but the (lived) realities of global mobility are systematically obscured.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are one such overlooked dimension. Although internal displacement is the most common form of forced mobility globally, it routinely falls outside the scope of international protection regimes and public attention. Those uprooted within countries such as Sudan, the DRC, or Myanmar are often left without recognition or adequate support. Even within Europe, disasters such as the Turkey earthquakes or Southern European wildfires have triggered large-scale internal displacement - yet remain marginal in migration debates.

At the same time, the assumption that migration always moves northwards persists, distorting the scale and complexity of South–South mobility. Countries like Turkey, Iran, or Uganda host some of the world's largest refugee populations yet are often reduced to footnotes in Eurocentric perspectives.

When mobility is only recognised at Europe's borders, we risk misunderstanding not only where people move but what displacement actually entails and who it most deeply affects.

Constanze List, Austria, MSc Migration, Mobility and Development (SOAS) and MA Political Science (University of Vienna)



Question: What are important international issues which seem to be overlooked at the moment?

A Russian decree ordering the expulsion of Ukrainian citizens by September 10 adds a new facet to the ongoing Russification of the occupied regions. This comes in addition to Russia ending religious freedom for members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, public use of the Ukrainian language, and any possibility of self-identification as Ukrainian. Europe has not witnessed ethnic cleansing on this scale since 1945. Meanwhile, the use of cluster munitions delivered by Iskander-M missiles in Sumy on April 13—a region not under Russian control—indicates that Russia's neo-imperial ambition to annex all parts of Ukraine remains intact. Although Russia's war in Ukraine is a military disaster, its underlying goal of weakening Western democracy is continually reinforced through the spread of fear and terror. The implications for other nations should not be underestimated: why should any country surrender its nuclear weapons again, if this is the outcome of Ukraine doing so under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum?

Benjamin Beinlich, Austria, Master's (Mag. iur.) in Law (University of Vienna)

Question: What makes you hopeful in 2025?

In 2025, I find hope in the renewed visibility and resonance of civic engagement in defence of democratic principles. What I find hopeful is not the condition of institutions, but the political will people express where institutions fall short.

The large-scale protests in Serbia illustrate this development. Led by a younger generation and directed against an increasingly illiberal government, the demonstrations articulate more than just discontent. They reveal a societal undercurrent of democratic commitment that has not disappeared but rather persisted beneath the surface. Their clarity and scale bring into focus the civic energy that emerges most vividly when democratic participation via elections is constrained or ineffective.

What gives me hope is the democratic potential these mobilisations reveal. They point to agency and political imagination that continue to exist, even where formal channels seem ineffective. This potential may not guarantee immediate change, but it preserves the very space where democratic renewal remains not only imaginable, but within reach.

Laura Füsselberger, Austria, Integrated Masters's Degree in Law (University of Vienna)

Question: What are important international issues which seem to be overlooked at the moment?

To me, violence prevention education with a gender and sexuality focus is still being neglected by institutions and schools in most countries, undermining its potential to foster equity, non-violence, diversity, and social transformation. My research has focused on understanding the role of education in preventing gender-based violence with a gender justice and sexual diversity approach. Grassroot groups in Colombia, Latin America and the world are currently advocating for pedagogies that seek to reduce violence in communities. However, institutions and schools are not taking this matter seriously, showing a disconnect between what is taught in community-based education and formal schooling sites. I believe that bridging this gap is a matter that requires more close attention.

Question: What makes you hopeful in 2025?

In times of hardship and political uncertainty, such as today, people with similar values and aspirations motivate me to carry on working toward a better future and social change. I find hope in my peers at the university and colleagues at the institute who strive to contribute to social justice, freedom, and transparency. Their unwavering passion and optimism are contagious. Amid ongoing armed conflicts and the erosion of democracies around the world, I am surrounded by people who remain committed to fighting for progress and a brighter future. These young, inspiring individuals give me hope that the future may not be so unpromising after all.

Question: What would you recommend world leaders to do?

In my view, world leaders need to be more present in the daily lives of citizens and listen to their appeals more carefully. They should pay special attention to minority groups and those affected by policies that may benefit one part of the nation but harm another. In my opinion, the biggest mistake decision-makers make today, is placing their self-interest above social well-being without realizing the adverse consequences of such actions.

Tata Beraia, Georgia, MA Programme in Public Policy (Central European University)

Given the current political situation in the US (and its global implications), in which diversity, equity, and inclusion programs are being targeted, hate speech and discrimination are promoted, and sexual and gender minorities are losing their rights, paying more attention to the role of education in preventing the continuation of violent beliefs, discourses, practices, and politics seems to be imperative nowadays. Learning from feminist, queer, and decolonial epistemologies advanced in grassroot education would be an opportunity to think about violence prevention education and consider how schools can be partners in challenging normalized violence and transforming violent sociocultural paradigms.

Manuela Novoa Villada, Colombia, graduated from the MA in Critical Gender Studies (Central European University) in 2024 >

Question: What are important international issues which seem to be overlooked at the moment?

In today's world, it seems that even diplomatic communications increasingly mimic the erratic and angry language of sensationalism that dominates social media. Charged terms like "brutal aggression" now shape global discourse and further deepen divisions. Euphemisms like "unavoidable collateral damage" downplay civilian deaths and frame these losses as accidents. We often overlook how diplomatic language itself can fuel conflict or pave the way for peace. In diplomacy, a single, carefully crafted phrase can decide the outcome of negotiations. Precise and empathetic language is a necessity—not a luxury—where every nuance can tip the scale. Take the Colombian peace process (2012-2016) as an example: by replacing divisive, dehumanizing language with terms like "victims of both sides" negotiators transformed a seemingly deadlocked conflict into a breakthrough towards peace.

The solution lies in language that is both emotionally regulated and intentional. Calm, humanizing phrases can reframe crises as shared challenges, rather than battles to be won. Official statements must replace divisive narratives like "us versus them" with hopeful ones like "building a common future." Diplomatic language must prioritize human dignity over political posturing. What once seemed like common sense is now, paradoxically, missing from the very conversations where it matters most: a reflection of the double-edged sword of diplomatic language.

Tara Petkov, Austria, Master's (Mag. iur.) in Law (Johannes Kepler University) and Bachelor's degree in Political Science (University of Vienna)

Question: What are important international issues that currently seem to be overlooked?

Since his return to the White House, U.S. President Donald Trump has repeatedly called for a return to nuclear arms control talks with Russia and China. His administration's push for smaller government and increased government efficiency—most prominently represented by the work of the Department of Government Efficiency—includes a push to reduce the United States colossal defense budget. President Trump has expressed a desire to negotiate reductions not just in the costly nuclear stockpiles, but also the defense budgets of all three countries, although these claims have been undermined by his proposal of the largest defense budget in history.

Despite these assertions of a desire for a renewed movement towards international arms control with Russia and China, President Trump's second term has given rise to increased tensions with China due to the introduction of new, extremely high tariffs. Even prior to the trade war's beginning, Xi Jinping expressed skepticism about Trump's intentions and declared that he would only participate in such arms reductions if the US did so first. The trade war is unlikely to have improved his views on the matter. With regard to Russia, although the Trump administration has drawn itself closer to the Kremlin than any American presidential administration in living history, the results of American-led negotiations to end the Russia-Ukraine War suggest that Russia will be unwilling to pursue arms reduction policies in the short term, based on its lack of willingness to offer meaningful concessions as a part of the peace process.

Altogether, other policy issues such as the administration's tariff policy are overshadowing potential opportunities for improved arms control policy under Trump's presidency. Furthermore, his trade policies with China and his declared intention to stop seeking a negotiated end to the war in Ukraine have created new obstacles to nuclear arms control. Not only is this issue overlooked, but it is currently being obscured by the Trump administration's other policies.

Zoe Edwards, USA, Master of Advanced International Studies (Diplomatic Academy of Vienna)

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