

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, multi-lateral 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 activist if they want to counter the storm.

Our colleagues Vedran Džihic 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