

Preface

by Cengiz Günay



What Happens Beyond the Comfort Zone?

The world as we knew it seems to be falling apart. A fundamental transformation has been unfolding globally. It takes place simultaneously at different speeds and across multiple levels, reshaping every aspect of life. The international order, the logics of politics, the forms of governance, the role of institutions, the composition of industries, the rationale of economic policy, knowledge production, the sources of information, and even the way that we communicate are in rapid flux. We find ourselves in a state of liminality; a condition that is characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty. While the structures, institutions, habits, and ideas that have long shaped our world have not disappeared, they are increasingly being disrupted, challenged, and, in some cases, replaced by new dynamics, practices, and forms of organization.

Such periods of liminality are often characterized by disorder, instability and contestation. States, companies, and other actors are competing to secure power, influence, and strategic advantage, while seeking to reposition themselves within a rapidly evolving international landscape.

Ayşe Zarakol argues in her interview for REFLECTIONS that this era of liminality may not be a short transitional phase between two ages. On the contrary, drawing on the experiences of the 17th century, she argues that we might rather be witnessing the beginning of a prolonged period of disorder. She concludes that we must prepare ourselves for an uncertain future.

A policy of ruling by strength has increasingly supplanted the principle that states, irrespective of their size, have a voice and at least formally enjoy equal status. At the same time, it is important not to romanticize the past. States and their voices were never equal. The liberal world was one dominated by the West, its ideas, rules, norms, culture, and not least economies. While it provided a framework for cooperation and stability, it also embodied an asymmetrical hierarchy.

Europe, one of the beneficiaries of the liberal, rule-based world order, has been struggling to adapt to its ongoing

transformations. Although, many mourn for the good old days, there is no way back. The old continent is no longer a defining power. Its ability to shape global developments has further diminished, while new centres of power increasingly set the pace and direction of international affairs. Europe has moved beyond its comfort zone.

And yet, beyond this comfort zone is the area where established orders dissolve, and change becomes possible.

In this third issue of REFLECTIONS, we have tried to focus not only on the negative aspects of the ongoing transformations, but rather on the potential and opportunities that emerge in a changing world. Seeing and grasping opportunities however requires the acknowledgement of one's own strengths, weaknesses, agency, and readiness to change. Zarakol highlights in this context that Europe has many good things that it needs to preserve and strengthen. And yet there is much to learn from the experiences and best practice examples of others, as some of our articles highlight.

Donald Trump's return to the White House has shaken confidence in the transatlantic alliance. Cuts to aid for Ukraine, threats toward Greenland and NATO, and tariff disputes have pushed Europeans to seek greater strategic autonomy. Yet Emiliano Alessandri argues that these tensions are more likely to reshape US-European relations than end them, creating a more pluralistic post-liberal order rooted in democratic values. He further contends that China's rise and shifting global power dynamics may ultimately reinforce the need for transatlantic cooperation, making a renewed US-Europe partnership a lasting geopolitical necessity.

Thomas Eder's contribution analyses how China may profit from its efforts to reduce dependence on external energy suppliers and maritime chokepoints during the 2026 Strait of Hormuz crisis. Eder argues that, in an increasingly uncertain world, Europe may benefit from looking beyond its traditional approaches and drawing lessons from China's long-term investments in energy security, resilience, and strategic autonomy.

Johannes Leitner and Hannes Meissner examine how major powers use trade, technology, finance, and supply chains as geopolitical tools, turning companies into both targets and instruments of economic coercion. They argue that in an era of weaponized interdependence and economic nationalism, Europe's influence increasingly depends on corporate behaviour, requiring firms to balance commercial goals with security and resilience concerns.

Johannes Späth explains that Donald Trump's electoral success and the rise of right-wing populism primarily stem from economic insecurity among the American working class rather than cultural grievances. While in previous elections voters called for material change, the Democratic Party focused too much on defending institutions while neglecting voters' everyday economic concerns, a relevant lesson for European democracies facing populist challenges today.

Marie Krpata argues in her contribution that geopolitical and economic pressures have forced Europe to move beyond its traditional economic model of open markets and rules-based globalization. She examines how the EU is adapting to strategic competition and economic coercion while also seeking to boost competitiveness, reduce dependencies, and strengthen its ability to act in an increasingly fragmented world.

Ceren Çetinkaya's article takes readers into the world of Turkish historical TV series, showing how popular culture, as a form of soft power, influences international politics by reshaping collective memory. She argues that struggles over history, identity, and regional leadership are increasingly fought not only through politics and economics, but also through media and storytelling.

Camillo Stubenberg, in turn, examines Lebanon's shift to decentralized solar energy in the wake of state failure and economic collapse. He shows how households, local networks, and global supply chains filled the gap left by a dysfunctional energy system, demonstrating that energy transitions are never a purely technical processes but also reshape everyday life, social relations, and inequality. Lebanon's experience offers important insights into how a society can adapt under conditions of profound uncertainty.

Christina Hainzl's contribution focuses on the Lebanese artist Ali Cherri's search for justice after the killing of his parents Mahmoud Naim Cherri and Nadira Hayek in an Israeli air strike on Beirut. Hainzl examines the limits of international accountability, the symbolic power of legal action, and the ways in which personal loss can become a public challenge to indifference. In doing so, he highlights the enduring importance of memory, responsibility, and human dignity in times of violence.

The capture of Nicolás Maduro in January 2026 marked a dramatic turning point in Venezuela's contemporary history, revitalizing hope for change while leaving the country's future uncertain. Sophie Reichelt, Olena Butnyk, and Emilia Webhofer examine solidarity networks that emerged in Venezuela in response to autocratization, state repression, and economic collapse. Drawing on interviews with Venezuelan scholars, journalists, and activists, they explore whether these networks can help overcome the legacy of the Maduro era, address the country's crisis, and contribute to a democratic renewal.

Ivan Vejvoda's article analyses an important turning point in Europe: the end of Viktor Orbán's sixteen-year rule in Hungary. Vejvoda traces how, under Orbán, Hungary became not only a symbol of democratic backsliding but also a focal point for illiberal and sovereigntist movements seeking to reshape Europe from within. Orbán's electoral defeat demonstrates that even entrenched illiberal and authoritarian systems remain vulnerable to democratic change. The elections in Hungary therefore represent an important signal in the broader struggle for Europe's future direction.

Vedran Džihic also highlights the role of civil society as a source of resilience and democratic renewal. He argues that freedom, solidarity, and political imagination need citizens who are willing to act, organize, and defend democratic values. In doing so, he offers a powerful reminder that democracy cannot be delegated to institutions but ultimately depends on civic engagement and the capacity to imagine a better political future.

Tsion Bergano highlights the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) as a positive example of cooperation emerging from the region. The AfCFTA aims to alter the continent's traditional role as an exporter of raw materials to Western economies by strengthening intra-African trade. Its underlying logic is to foster integrated production systems, processing, manufacturing, logistics, financing, and distribution networks that operate across national borders.

This issue also features a presentation of the newly founded oiip-Academy. The academy aims to bring the expertise and networks of our institute and researchers into executive education programs. Our modular programs combine academic insight with practical tools to help professionals navigate an increasingly complex and uncertain world. In light of the overwhelmingly positive evaluations, we have given space to some of the participants' comments and reflections.

The future is often discussed without the input of those who will shape it most directly. As young people are the agents of the future, we have asked our incredibly smart and talented younger colleagues and interns to reflect on the challenges and opportunities of an increasingly uncertain world. Their contributions are collected under the section Young Voices. These short contributions explore questions of the future of democracy, security, social justice, resilience, and international cooperation, offering fresh perspectives on how to navigate a period of profound global change.

Finally, I would like to take the opportunity and thank our authors, as well as Petra Podesser, Tara Petkov, Emilia Webhofer, Annika Scharnagl and the rest of the Editorial Team for making REFLECTIONS happen again. Our wonderful graphic designer Sabine Müller has again done a fantastic job. I would also like to thank Karla Heltriegel, Jens Wirth Salander and Wyatt Cole for English proofreading.

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Enjoy reading and exploring opportunities beyond the comfort zone!

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