

# Trends in International Politics 2024

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**New global (dis)order - about  
a world that frightens us**

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"No longer normal" (Nicht mehr normal) is the title of Frankfurt sociologist Stephan Lessenich's book published in 2022. (Lessenich 2022) At the beginning of his book, Lessenich quotes Theodor W. Adorno's famous sentence from a 1969 Spiegel interview: "Professor, two weeks ago, the world still seemed to be in order...", Spiegel asked, to which Adorno gave the simple answer: "Not to me."

The normality of the last few decades after the end of the Cold War is gone. It has been replaced by the permanent

state of emergency and crisis. "Societies on the verge of a nervous breakdown", argues Lessenich, is the best way to describe our world today. Of course, even in glory days of liberal world order and

security of the 1990s and 2000s, all was not well with the world, at least not everywhere. While the West was experiencing a phase of continuous upswing and exporting democracy became the major mantra of this "end of history" era (Fukuyama), bloody wars were raging in the Balkans and genocide was taking place in Srebrenica. Almost a million people were murdered in Rwanda. And the chain of conflicts in the US American "War on Terror" since September 11 left a bloody and

disturbing signature on the world, posing a significant challenge to the rule-based world order.

All the crises we have seen racing past us in recent years caused wounds and left scratches in the liberal world order but also in so many of us on the individual level. The global economic crisis, the threat of terrorism, the so-called "migration crisis", the coronavirus pandemic, the climate crisis as a warning companion that will accompany us for the rest of our lives – the age of crisis has become the new normalcy. On

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top of it came the wars - the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the war of attrition that has been raging since February 2022 and – most recently – the

outbreak of a war in the Middle East following Hamas's terrorist attack on Israel on October 7th. The subjective feeling of individuals losing control over their own destiny has become overwhelming among large part of the world population, at least in Europe and in the Middle East. From Ukraine to the Middle East, from Taiwan and China to the United States, from the UN to the OSCE in the European context – the global outlook appears rather bleak.

In the following report the focus will be placed on three particularly relevant trends and constellations in 2024 that might be decisive for the future global order. The first one looks closer into the merge between politics of emotions and new power politics, the second into the global competition between democracies and autocracies, while the third focusses on the dilemma between war and peace in months and years ahead of us. Borrowing a phrase coined by Ivan

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Krastev to describe Europe's reeling with current crisis, these challenges describe the world's "vertigo moment" (Krastev 2024) between "no longer" of the liberal world order and "not yet" of a new emerging one.

### **Politics of emotions meeting power politics**

At latest with the unexpected outburst of horrible pictures accompanying the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the terrorist attack by Hamas on Israel and the bloody war in the Gaza Strip, all of them washing horror images onto our smartphones in real time, the connection between emotions and affects in politics and in our personal lives has become stronger than ever.

Insecurity and uncertainties on an individual level reflect the conflict-ridden world events and the larger sense of crises. The symbiosis between the negative feelings of any individual and the feelings communicated on social and traditional media has become the symbol of our time; fear, rage, anger, and revenge are the buzzwords of the new global era. 2024 will be the year where the new power (geo)politics will be enmeshed in emotions to a greater extent than before, threatening to create new

and dangerous global conflicts fueled by mutual propaganda wars and emotionally and morally underpinned claims of being on the right side of history.

The new era we live in is one of fierce power politics and geostrategic and geopolitical competition accompanied by strong affects and emotions. The West against the East, Russia against the US and the NATO, far right politicians and movements across Europe against migrants – the politics of friends and foes is back. In his latest book, "The World in Turmoil" (Welt in Aufruhr), Herfried Münkler sees the old order of powers from the 20th century being replaced by a new five-man team of global power: the USA, China, India,

Russia and the EU are the new geopolitical superpowers. (Münkler 2023) The recently frequent scenes of confrontations at the round table at the US Security Council are reminiscent of the Cold War era - Russia and the USA are once again using the almost archaic right of veto to assert their own interests. New kids on the block, like the recently emboldened BRICS group, will be even more assertive in the future and will not shy from entering open competition with the West. The consequences of this new power (geo)politics, which we partly have at display already now, is an ever deepening crisis of the world of cooperation, multilateralism, and international law, with United Nations at the core of it.

Vladimir Putin's diabolical smile, which he has repeatedly put on since the start of the war in the Middle East and the growing Western disagreement over support for Ukraine, almost seems like a symbol of this new – even cynical – world (dis)order, in which a new political Darwinism made off power-politics and emotions, mostly fears, is imposing itself as the rule for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Democracies vs. Autocracies and new pragmatic a la card arrangements**

While the power-political bipolarity of the Cold War has been replaced by a new complex multipolarity, another bipolar constellation became the dominant one – those between (Western) democracies on the one hand and (competitive) authoritarian regimes on the other. The global trend reversal – as the data shows – has long since taken place. Today, 78% of the world's population live in autocracies. (V-Dem Report 2023)

While the ideological divide between classical autocracies and democracies always stood at the core of these regime, the new cleavage runs rather between full-fledged democracies and competitive or electoral authoritarian regimes, which claim to be democratic and adopt democratic institutions but subvert them to rule in a more or less authoritarian way. In his newly published book "Popular dictatorship", Aleksandar Matovski posits that the ascendancy of electoral authoritarian regimes is not primarily rooted in their abilities to suppress, coerce, propagandize or manipulate their populations. (Matovski 2022) Instead, their success can largely be attributed to their genuine popularity among citizens facing severe political, economic, and

security crises and thus confronted with profound insecurities and uncertainties. These regimes offer the promise of decisive, forceful governance, balanced by a degree of public accountability, appealing to those in societies shaken by upheaval, dysfunction, and injustice. This approach enables new despots of our era to secure mass support and maintain power through controlled democratic processes. Electoral authoritarianism, so Matovski, is the most significant threat to global peace and democracy.

In terms of their foreign policy, new authoritarian regimes tend to stick to a new geopolitical and geo-economical pragmatism where almost anything goes: some states can afford to rely on the USA and NATO for security, cuddle up to Russia when it comes to energy and aggressively promote trade with China, for example. Viktor Orban, the villain of the EU, and Hungary, certainly fall into this category. His close friend in Serbia, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, who has just won election that was neither free nor fair, is also known for the strange twists and turns between Brussels, Berlin and Washington on the one hand and Moscow and Beijing on the other. Just as this geopolitical volatility is increasingly in vogue in the small European context, it has also

become a worrying new trend globally. This “a la carte world” will remain a constant reminder in the years to follow. (Krastev/Garten Ash/Leonard 2023)

Many countries have switched into a pragmatic power-politics mode: China is fully integrated into the global capitalist trade flow, but the authoritarian reins are being tightened even more internally. China will maintain and probably even strengthen its close cooperation with Russia. Chinese president Xi Jinping just recently called for “closer strategic cooperation with Russia.” (CNN, 8.2.2024) Yet, China will continue keeping the democratic West as a key trade and business partner.

Western democratic states such as the USA are also pursuing their own interests with a vengeance. If bold political moves are then made out of a geostrategic reasoning, as Biden did with the withdrawal from Afghanistan or has recently demonstrated with the veto against the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, the authoritarian opponents are quick to point their own moral finger to criticize the double standards of the West. Time and time again, the world's new despots, whether the really big ones like Putin or Xi Jinping or the somewhat smaller ones like Erdogan, Orban or Vucic, use the reference to the double standards and hypocrisy of the West

and the USA to disavow the rules-based world order and rob it of its legitimacy.

### War and peace in 2024?

War or peace, dictatorships or democracies, is the ultimate dilemma today, wrote Timothy Garton Ash recently in the British Guardian. (Garten Ash, 13.2.2023) Whichever side prevails, so Garten Ash, could be decisive for the course for years to come. 2024 will be telling. Will the West manage to keep Ukraine floating and prevent a further Russian surge on the front? Will the US citizens be able to prevent second term of Trump as a

president of the United States?

Will the war in the Middle East get out of control and spill over to the wider

region, bringing the whole globe on the brink of a World War III? There is no ultimate answer to this.

Democratic and free societies, in general, are forward-looking and positive. Autocracies are palaces of fear. Where there is fear, anger, rage and hatred are not far away. Where anger and hatred are rampant, war is imminent. The number of wars currently being fought around the world has

recently risen significantly. In 2022, 238,000 people died in conflicts worldwide, more than at any time in the last 30 years. In 2023 and most probably 2024, the figures will be even more dramatic - the death toll in the Middle East alone is already in the five-digit range (PRIO 2023) and loses of people in the war of attrition in Ukraine is skyrocketing.

What we do see today is that polycrisis, whit which the West has been confronted in the last one and a half decades (global financial crisis, migration crisis, pandemic, climate crisis,

Ukraine war/war in Gaza), has created a shock of the cumulative interaction of the different crisis. The Western societies itself, be it the EU or the US, have become deeply polarized and do face an

evident crisis of democracy and representation. The US during Trump's presidency and on the brink of possible Trump's second term in office, are probably the best case in point. What if Trump gets elected? Will we need to wave goodbye to the US as a beacon of free and democratic world?

If the global pendulum continues to swing in the direction of authoritarian and electoral autocracies and dictatorships, the current state of war

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threatens to become the new normal. Today more than ever, defeatism is out of place. Antonio Gramsci, who has already been quoted, once said: "I am a pessimist in the short term and an optimist in the long term." There is a need to develop and implement counter-ideas and counter-strategies to meet the challenges of this new frightening world. The first step needs to be taken 2024 – this year must become a wake-up year within the EU, making European democracies more robust and being ready to protect democratic and liberal values from adversaries. The last wake-up call came from the Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump. His message to European leaders, "I would not protect you, in fact I would encourage them (Russia) to do whatever the hell they want," made it clear to European leaders that Europe can't count on America to protect it. (CNN 8.2.2024)

Wars have become the new normal of today and will stay with us for a while. While stepping up its operational and military capabilities to protect themselves, European democracies need to reaffirm democratic values and ideas: Even if the criticism of Western universalism is becoming ever louder and democracy as the regime form is largely contested internally and confronted with propaganda from outside, there is a need for a clear normative horizon for navigating the complex world today rooted in universal values, human rights and democracy. As Leo Tolstoy put it in his epic novel "War and peace", "the strongest of all warriors are these two — Time and Patience". Time and patience as well as clarity and determination, both within the Western democracies as well as in their global conduct, are needed 2024 to reverse the currently rather bleak outlook for the future of the globe.



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