

## HOW THE WEST LOSES PUBLIC OPINION IN EUROPE'S NEIGHBORHOOD

Vedran Dzihic, Cengiz Günay,  
Valentina Gruarin, Domonkos Bobak

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For many, the fall of the Iron Curtain marked the final victory of democracy and Western liberalism over autocracy and communism. Over the past decade, however, the liberal world order has been challenged by emerging, mostly authoritarian, international actors. The rise of these autocratic regimes has coincided with a decline in Western influence in Europe's neighborhood, including the Western Balkans, Turkey, and the MENA region. Once a dominant force, the West's normative influence is now waning, counterbalanced by countries such as Russia and China, as well as regional powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, which are increasingly exerting influence through cultural, economic, and military engagement.

This Policy Analysis examines the evolving public perception of the West in the Western Balkans, Turkey, and the MENA region, identifying the myths, narratives, and political rhetoric that shape local attitudes and increasingly complicate Europe's relations with its neighbors. Public opinion in these regions about the United States and Europe varies, of course, from country to country. But one trend is clear: the West's normative power is a shadow of its former self.

Only 35% of Serbian citizens viewed EU membership favorably in 2022, with many favoring alliances with Russia. Meanwhile, in Turkey, only 14.3% of the public thinks of the United States as a friend, marking a sharp decline from previous decades. In the MENA region, a 2022 poll found that 64% of Egyptians preferred China over the United States, and recent surveys reveal a substantial rise in anti-American sentiment across the region amid the ongoing conflict in Gaza. Notably, the EU generally maintains a relatively more positive image compared to the US. After all, the EU remains a major trading partner across the region. Over the last few years, however, the EU's reputation in the Arab world has been increasingly damaged by its migration policy and its support for Israel, both of which are often seen as emblematic of Western double standards. Many in these regions increasingly favor diversified partnerships, including with actors such as China and Russia. Although Russia's invasion of Ukraine initially boosted support for the EU, rising anti-Americanism and dissatisfaction with Western positions in the Middle East conflict reflect enduring divisions. As a result, the West's ability to promote democracy and a rule-based order is severely constrained. Reversing this negative trend in public perception requires a long-lasting endeavor and should be a key priority for policymakers in both Brussels and Washington, D.C.

### KEYWORDS:

Western influence, public opinion, anti-Americanism, Western Balkan, MENA region, Turkey, authoritarianism, rule-based order



## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Für viele bedeutete der Fall des Eisernen Vorhangs den endgültigen Sieg der Demokratie und des westlichen Liberalismus über Autokratie und Kommunismus. In den letzten zehn Jahren wurde die liberale Weltordnung jedoch durch neue, meist autoritäre internationale Akteure in Frage gestellt. Der Aufstieg dieser autokratischen Regime ist einhergegangen mit einem Rückgang des westlichen Einflusses in Europas Nachbarregionen, darunter der westliche Balkan, die Türkei und die MENA-Region. Der einst dominante normative Einfluss des Westens schwindet zunehmend und wird durch Länder wie Russland und China sowie regionale Mächte wie die Türkei, Saudi-Arabien und den Iran konterkariert, die ihren Einfluss zunehmend durch kulturelles, wirtschaftliches und militärisches Engagement geltend machen.

Diese Policy Analyse beleuchtet die sich entwickelnde öffentliche Wahrnehmung des Westens in den westlichen Balkanländern, der Türkei und der MENA-Region und identifiziert die Mythen, Narrative und politische Rhetorik, die die dortigen Einstellungen prägen und die Beziehungen Europas zu seinen Nachbarn zunehmend erschweren. Die öffentliche Meinung in diesen Regionen über den Westen variiert natürlich von Land zu Land. Ein Trend ist jedoch eindeutig: Die normative Macht des Westens ist nur noch ein Schatten ihrer selbst.

Nur 35 % der serbischen Bürger:innen befürworten die EU-Mitgliedschaft im Jahr 2022, wobei viele ein Bündnis mit Russland bevorzugen. In der Türkei sehen nur 14,3 % der Bürger:innen die Vereinigten Staaten als Freund an, was einen starken Rückgang gegenüber den vergangenen Jahrzehnten darstellt. In der MENA-Region zogen laut einer Umfrage aus dem Jahr 2022 64 % der Ägypter:innen China den Vereinigten Staaten vor und jüngste Umfragen zeigen auch, dass der Anti-Amerikanismus in der gesamten Region angesichts des anhaltenden Konflikts im Gazastreifen deutlich zugenommen hat. Bemerkenswert ist jedoch, dass die EU im Vergleich zu den USA ein relativ positives Image hat. Schließlich ist die EU nach wie vor ein wichtiger Handelspartner in der Region, auch wenn ihr Einfluss zunehmend in Frage gestellt wird. In den letzten Jahren hat der Ruf der EU in der arabischen Welt durch ihre Migrationspolitik und ihre Unterstützung Israels jedoch sehr gelitten. Schließlich gelten doch beide als Sinnbild für die Doppelmoral des Westens. Viele in diesen Regionen bevorzugen zunehmend diversifizierte Partnerschaften, auch mit Akteuren wie China und Russland. Obwohl der Einmarsch Russlands in die Ukraine zunächst die Unterstützung für die EU stärkte, spiegeln der zunehmende Anti-Amerikanismus und die Unzufriedenheit mit der Haltung des Westens im Nahostkonflikt die anhaltenden Spaltungen wider. Dies hat zur Folge, dass die Fähigkeit des Westens, Demokratie und eine auf Regeln basierende Ordnung zu fördern, stark eingeschränkt ist. Die Umkehrung dieses negativen Trends in der öffentlichen Wahrnehmung erfordert ein langwieriges Unterfangen und sollte sowohl für die politischen Entscheidungsträger in Brüssel als auch in Washington, D.C., eine der wichtigsten Prioritäten sein.

### KEYWORDS:

Westlicher Einfluss, öffentliche Meinung, Anti-Amerikanismus, Westbalkan, MENA-Region, Türkei, Autoritarismus, regelbasierte Ordnung

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## AUTHORS

### **Dr. Cengiz Günay**

is Director of the Austrian Institute for International Affairs –oiip – and Lecturer at the Department of Political Sciences, the Department of Near Eastern Studies and the Department of International Development and the University of Vienna. In 2018/19 he was a visiting fellow at the Foreign Policy Institute at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University in Washington DC. He is the author of the monographies “Die Geschichte der Türkei. Von den Anfängen der Moderne bis heute”, Wien: Böhlau, UTB, and “From Islamists to Muslim Democrats?” Saarbrücken: VDB. His regional focus lies on Turkey and the MENA region.

### **Dr. Vedran Dzihic**

is a senior researcher at the oiip and lecturer at the University of Vienna. He is also a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations, School of Advanced International Studies, John Hopkins University, Washington D.C. 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.

### **Valentina Gruarin, MA**

was an intern at the oiip from November 2022 until June 2023. She finished her master's degree in European and Global Studies in March 2022 at the University of Padova (Italy). She developed her MA thesis titled “Global North interventions in MENA region: a post-development critical analysis”. The degree committee awarded Valentina's thesis the highest grade.

### **Domonkos Bobak, MA**

was an intern at the oiip from March until June 2024. He is a graduate of MA International Relations from the University of Manchester. In September 2024, he will resume his academic studies with a complimentary MA in International Security at Sciences Po Paris. Accompanying his education, Domonkos has professional experience working for various internationally oriented organisations across Europe. As of late, he now also provides consultancy services to companies of a political, economic and financial focus. At the Institute, he will be working under the supervision of Dr. Cengiz Günay on a project concerning the succession of autocratic governments.“

## INTRODUCTION

For many scholars and members of the Western policy communities the fall of the Iron Curtain and the later disintegration of the Soviet Union seemed to signify the definite victory of democracy and Western liberalism. In 1989, Frances Fukuyama even proclaimed the “The end of history” and the beginning of a global liberal age, defined by democratic societies and (neo) liberal capitalist economy. The idea of a liberal age also entailed the claim of Western universalism and legitimized Western interventions in the name of liberal governance, human rights, democracy support and assistance. In the post-Cold War liberal world order, the United States and European democracies not only dominated world politics, but they also had a norm setting power. Employing a mix of “diplomatic levers, economic carrots and sticks, military power, democracy-related assistance, and other tools” the West sought to support democratization (Carothers and Samet-Marram 2015, 3). In many ways, democratization was seen as an approximation to Western standards, norms, values and foreign policy options. The promotion of liberalism (political and economic) was to support Western hegemony.

Over the last decade, the liberal world order has been increasingly challenged by emergent (mostly authoritarian) international actors, but also by populist, nationalist, isolationist and authoritarian voices within Western societies. The decline of Western hegemony has led to a decrease in the normative impact of Western democracies in other world regions. This has been particularly tangible in Europe's immediate neighborhood.

Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 has posed a dramatic turning point and a game changer in international politics. The war has altered the security and defense architecture of Europe. Russia's invasion has not only dramatically highlighted the prevalent risks posed by authoritarian leaders, but also the fragility of the liberal world order and the limitations of Western norm setting and of its political influence. However, while the War revived the Transatlantic Partnership and coordination between Europe and the United States, global reactions to Russia's invasion have been mixed. Many states have not followed Western policies and have not joined the ranks in the sanctions. Once considered as the EU's backyard, the Western Balkans region and the MENA region have become marketplaces of political change, where different international actors such as Russia, China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or Iran have been competing with the EU and the US over political, cultural, economic, and military influence (Carothers and Samet-Marram 2015). More recently, the Gaza war has illustrated the limitations of the West. Many in the Middle East and beyond have criticized the West of applying double standards in its diverging responses to Russia's war on Ukraine and Israel's war on Gaza.

This Policy Analysis aims at taking stock of the perception of the transatlantic partnership in the Western Balkans, Turkey and the MENA region. It analyses the myths, narratives and political discourses that have shaped public opinion on the “West”. It thereby aims to point out where and how the West loses these societies.

## AT THE HEIGHT OF THE LIBERAL ORDER

The strong bond between the US and the EU was a vital element of the liberal post-Cold War era. The West, led by the United States intervened in conflicts such as the Yugoslav Wars and built post-War peace orders. Peace and state building were a rather “Western” endeavor guided by Western norms and concepts and strongly coordinated between the US and its European allies. One can even speak of a tacit division of labor between the US and the Europeans in which the United States stood for hard power and security and Europeans made financial contributions and provided soft power instruments.

Less known perhaps is the United States’ strong advocacy for EU enlargement. The Clinton administration regarded EU enlargement as an instrument to lastingly pacify, stabilize and “Westernize” post-communist societies. NATO membership functioned in most of the cases as a first step towards EU membership. By the early 2000s all Central and Eastern European states had joined NATO, in 2004 and 2007 they joined the EU. Similarly, the US advanced NATO membership in post-war former Yugoslavia. Slovenia, Croatia, Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia gradually joined NATO turning the alliance into the major security provider in the region. Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have remained the only Western Balkans countries that are not members of the defense alliance. In Kosovo, US and NATO troops have however secured the country’s independence from Serbia and have prevented the escalation of ethnic tensions between Serbs and Albanians. Nonetheless, while NATO with its presence in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina has stabilized the region and helped prevent the resurgence of open military conflict, the liberal transformation and consolidation of democracy across the region has failed. Except for Slovenia and Croatia none of the other Western Balkan states has joined the EU. In recent years, the focus has shifted from the normative ideal of promoting peace and democracy throughout the region, to a crisis-driven, reactive, and rather transactional approach which has mainly focused on stabilization. This has also entailed a growing toleration of autocratisation across the region. Autocratization has reversed democratic achievements in countries such as Serbia. Populist authoritarian leaders in the region have been also open to Russian influence. There are growing divergencies between the USA and the EU concerning the question how to address problems and crises in the Western Balkans. While the EU has neither been able to deliver membership nor apply any other economic or political instrument, the US has increasingly shifted to open power politics.

The Clinton administration also strongly lobbied for Turkey’s EU membership. Turkey a NATO member since 1952 felt left behind after the EU’s decision in 1997 to initiate Eastern enlargement. The US administration saw EU membership as a tool to weaken emergent Islamist forces, strengthen pro-Western secular groups and stabilize Turkish democracy (Chicago Tribune 1999). Moreover, EU membership was seen as a guarantee to lastingly tie Turkey to the West and guarantee loyalty and predictability in Turkish foreign policy. Turkey’s membership process, however, had been flawed from the outset. Turkish membership had little support among European elites in general and even less so with conservative and right-wing groups. Many lamented that Turkey was not only too big for integration, but also too different (Diez 2004). A candidate country since

1999, negotiations began in 2005 but have been stalled ever since. Moreover, relations between Turkey, the EU and the US have worsened ever since.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has always been of high strategic, geopolitical importance to the United States. The Camp David Peace Treaty of 1979 has established the so-called Pax Americana in the region. The Pax Americana has lastingly guaranteed Israel's security at the price of cooperation with authoritarian Arab regimes. Despite constant calls for reforms and democratization, the United States has provided friendly authoritarian Arab regimes with arms and loans.

Over the last years, the United States' geopolitical priorities have gradually shifted within the region from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf. The US has increasingly relied on the conservative Gulf monarchies in containing Iran and guaranteeing Israel's security. The shift towards the Gulf became eminent with the Trump administration's aim to withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran and the Abraham Accords which have aimed to build a security alliance including Israel and the Gulf States against Iran. Although not part of the Abraham Accords, Saudi Arabia has been a key factor of the US-led anti-Iran alliance. Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia in 2017 on the first leg of his first foreign trip sealed the largest arms deal in history worth nearly 110 billion USD (CNBC, 2017).

While the Pax Americana has largely guaranteed the security of friendly nations in the MENA-region, for most of them the EU has remained the major trading partner. To further deepen economic ties and promote liberal values, the EU launched in 2005 the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). The ENP applies to Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia and until recently Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Based on the experiences of Eastern enlargement, the EU aimed at exporting its standards, norms and values through approximation to these countries, however without offering them the carrot of membership. Instead, the ENP promised in return for reforms and adaptation to European standards, integration with the European Single Market. The hope was that approximation and free trade would trigger societal and political transformation and ultimately lead to democratization.

The US' shift in focus to the Gulf monarchies has created a gap between US and EU policies towards the MENA region. The EU has mainly focused on the Mediterranean but has been rather absent in the Gulf region. At the same time, its leverage has strongly declined in North Africa, the Middle East and in Turkey. Like the United States, the EU has mainly seen the region through a security lens. Migration and its prevention have increasingly dominated EU policies. The EU and its member states have diverted their financial and political focus on border security. This has narrowed policy options and certainly reduced the EU's normative impact. International finance institutions seem to provide one of the few remaining resorts through which Europeans together with Americans can impose conditionality. This is however only limited to the implementation of neoliberal economic and financial policies and faces growing skepticism and resistance throughout the MENA region.



The war in Gaza, instability across the MENA-region, autocratisation in Turkey, Tunisia and Egypt as well as political stagnation and rising tensions in the Western Balkans point to a volatile and complex future. More than ever, public opinion has become crucial in defining the foreign policy decisions of states. Anti-American and anti-European sentiment is on the rise. While some of the authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes use anti-Western rhetoric as a populist tool, in most societies these discourses build on deep seated fears, distrust, myths and narratives.

## THE WEST IS GRADUALLY LOSING PUBLIC OPINION

Among the six Western Balkan states, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo hold a highly positive public attitude towards the US, the EU and NATO. Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia joined NATO and are EU candidate countries. They have coordinated their foreign policies with the EU and have also introduced sanctions against Russia. Kosovars, who owe their independence to the US and NATO intervention in 1999, have a very positive view of the West. However, there is a strong rift between these countries and Serbian public opinion. In Serbia, there is growing skepticism against the US. In 2009, 61% of Serbs had a negative opinion of the US while 53% had a positive opinion of Russia (B92, 2009). In 2019, 74% of Serbs defined the US as “the most destabilizing factor in the world” (Talas and Politika, 2019). In a poll conducted in 2022, immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 60% of interviewed Serbs saw the US and NATO as responsible for the war, whereas only 26% blamed Russia (European Parliament, 2022). In 2023, 40% of Serbian citizens defined the US as an enemy. This is the highest level of anti-American sentiment over the last five years, while only 16% viewed the US as an ally. Whereas the memory of the NATO bombings and the US' role in the Yugoslav wars certainly impacts negative feelings towards the United States and NATO, the recent escalation of anti-Americanism in Serbia cannot only be explained with these historical facts.

A feeling of being put off and ignored by the West combined with nationalist fervor have supported anti-Western sentiment. Yet, in the early 2000s, shortly after the bombings and fall of the Milosevic regime, EU membership had been the primary objective of the young Serbian democracy. Under the pro-European Prime Minister Djindjic support for membership was at around 70%. After his assassination in 2003 however, this support started to decline. By 2012, when Serbia became a candidate country and Aleksander Vucic was elected Prime Minister, overall support for the EU had decreased to 41% (Cavoski, 2013). Over the last 12 years, the EU's popularity has continuously declined. In a survey of 2022, only 35% of Serbs were in favor of EU membership. The survey was commissioned by the government-friendly daily Blic. The newspaper explained the low support for EU membership with the West's pressure on Serbia to introduce sanctions against Russia (Blic.RS, 2022). The EU's decreasing popularity is a result of the Vucic regime's nationalist, pro-Russian and anti-Western discourse, but also of the EU's failure to provide any hopes of accession any time soon.

Yet, an interesting and somehow contradicting trend is revealed in an opinion poll from 2020, which demonstrates a high level of pragmatism in the Serbian public. Indeed, only 33% of the

respondents were against any cooperation with the US and the EU so long as they could help bolster the economy and increase living standards (European Western Balkans, 2020). Despite strong skepticism towards Western institutions, public perception appears to not be unidimensional in favor of Russia. Most Serbs are rather in favor of balancing relations between the East and the West, both in economic and political terms.

Turkey, a NATO member since 1952 has become one of the most critical societies towards the US and NATO. Particularly, left- and right-wing nationalist groups want to see Turkey independent from the US and NATO. They highlight that Turkey's regional security interests do not anymore converge with those of its Western allies. Although, some of these critics of NATO advocate closer ties with Russia and China, there is no majority for leaving NATO. In 2022, 60% of Turks stated that Turkey should remain a member of NATO while 59.2% expressed confidence that NATO would help Turkey in case of a military attack (Aydın et al., 2022, 54/56). A survey conducted by the German Marshall Fund of the United States in 2023 also highlighted that 77% of Turkish citizens see NATO as very or somewhat important. This represents a 12-percentage-point jump from 2022 (GMF, 2023, 33). The number of people who perceive the US as a positive global force also increased after Russia's attack on Ukraine by 17% between 2021 and 2022, reaching 40% (GMF, 2023, 13).

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has also positively affected the perceptions of the EU. In 2023, 51% of Turkish citizens regarded the EU's influence in global affairs more positively. This is an increase by 16% in only one year (GMF, 2023). This is still, however, the least positive perception of the EU among NATO members. While most Turkish citizens see non-Western countries such as Azerbaijan, the Northern Republic of Cyprus, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Qatar and Pakistan as friendly states, only 26.5% see Germany, 19.2% the United Kingdom and 17.6% France as a friend. The US ranks with 14.3% of respondents regarding the country as a friend of Turkey, as the lowest Western power (Aydın et al., 2022, 44). 42.7% see the US as a threat. This is an even higher percentage of people than the 41.9% who perceived in 2023 Israel as a threat to Turkey<sup>1</sup>. In contrast, 30.5% perceive Russia and 22.1% China as a threat (Aydın et al., 2022, 45). At the same time, 45% in Turkey see China's global influence positively (GMF, 2023, 17).

Interestingly, parallel to the growing skepticism against EU-member states and the US, support for Turkey's EU-membership has increased in 2023, reaching 66% (Daily Sabah 2023). This is a rather unexpected increase from an all-time low of 44% of support for membership in 2013 (Atlantic Council 2013). This sharp increase in support for EU-membership can be explained by insecurity caused by Russia's attack on Ukraine and the economic crisis that has plagued Turkey for the last three years. Many people associate with the EU primarily better living standards and socio-economic development (IstanPol 2022). Remarkably, support for EU membership has been particularly high (75%) in the 18-24 age group which has been socialized in a time when the EU-membership process has been stalled and EU-Turkey relations have been characterized by various political tensions (European Parliament 2022). Particularly young people are negatively

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<sup>1</sup> The perceptions of Israel, but also the US' and the EU's role in the Gaza war have not been polled yet.

affected by autocratisation and the economic crisis. Particularly educated young people seek for the Western values such as individual rights and democracy. There are unverified estimates that approximately 290.000 Turks (mainly young educated) emigrated from Turkey between 2019-2022 (Köksal 2023).

Anti-American sentiment is particularly high in the MENA region. Anti-Americanism has further risen in course of Israel's war on Gaza and lately Lebanon. Like Turkey, a vast majority (78%) of Arabs perceive the US as a major threat to the security of their country. However, in contrast to Turkey, the US rank second after Israel (Arab Centre Washington DC 2023).

Most people in the Arab world are not only highly skeptical over the US' role in global politics, but also its foreign assistance, which is mostly seen as an instrument to gain more political influence (Arab Barometer 2023; EU Neighbours South 2023). Negative sentiment towards the US is particularly high in countries which are staunch allies, such as Egypt and Tunisia. A poll conducted between July and August 2022 in Egypt highlighted that a majority of 64% of Egyptians favored China over the US (58%) as an international partner, while 52% of respondents wanted to see Russia as a stronger international partner. Only 46% prioritized relations with the EU over relations with others (The Washington Institute 2022).

In Tunisia, a country which after the Arab Spring highly benefitted from US and EU democracy promotion and financial assistance, skepticism of the US has been particularly high (78%) (EU Neighbours South 2023). Positive perceptions of the EU are with 48% comparably high, but nevertheless low considering the EU's past commitments in Tunisia (Gallup Opinion Polls in Tunisia 2022). Indeed, 43% of those who had a positive view of the EU declared it was because of the EU being an important trading partner for Tunisia. Only 20% said the reason for a positive image was the EU's commitment to democratic values and 7% because it promotes peace in the world (ibid).

Worsening economic conditions in the aftermath of Russia's attack on Ukraine have also reinforced the idea the Middle East needs to diversify its partnerships. Most people in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the UAE see good relations with China as either "somewhat" or "very important". Lebanon has with 68% the highest rates of support for stronger ties with China (The Washington Institute 2022).

Compared to the US, the EU does have a rather positive image across the region. It has been seen as a positive force by an absolute majority of people in Jordan (75%), Lebanon (65%), Morocco (61%), Algeria (55%) and Palestine (53%), while only 26% of Egyptians and 8% of Syrians held a positive image of the EU (Gallup Opinion Polls in Tunisia 2022).

As expected, Israel's War on Gaza and the United States' and its European allies' positions towards the war have negatively affected public opinion. A survey conducted in Winter 2024, in the first months of the Gaza War, reveals that 76% of participants across the Arab world report that their view of the United States has become more negative since the outbreak of the war (Arab Center Washington DC 2024). 94% of participants of the same survey considered the

United States' role as bad and 82% as very bad (Arab Center Washington DC 2004). Similarly negative is the view of the position of European powers. 79% of respondents regarded France's position in the war as bad or very bad, 75% saw Germany's position as bad or very bad and 78% ranked the British position as bad and very bad (Ibid.). Opinions on the positions of China and Russia were split (Ibid.). The West's unconditional support for Israel and relative inertia towards the humanitarian consequences of the Gaza offensive, and the humanitarian casualties in the Westbank and south Lebanon have also affected various collaborations on different levels. There are for instance reports that a growing number of civil society representatives in the region have refused project funding from countries with a pro-Israeli political stance.

## ANTI-WESTERN NARRATIVES, IMAGES AND POLITICAL REPERCUSSIONS

Putting the war in Gaza aside, public opinion has not developed autonomously. In fact, in all these societies, there has been an overriding politicization of anti-Western feelings and narratives. Anti-Western narratives in the Western Balkans, Turkey and the MENA-region share the notion of being disempowered. In most of the cases, anti-Western rhetoric has helped unify diverse nationalist groups and movements, divert public attention and provide marginalized segments of societies with a feeling of empowerment. Anti-Western rhetoric however needs to be distinguished. While Anti-American sentiment is usually much stronger, anti-European sentiment is less pronounced, at least in the cases of the Western Balkans and the MENA-region. In the case of Turkey, anti-European statements have been an important populist rhetorical tool of the Erdoğan regime. President Erdoğan has repeatedly highlighted Europeans' double standards. Nevertheless, despite growing skepticism of the EU's normative superiority, the feeling of growing insecurity in the region has increased support for EU-membership.

## THE CASE OF SERBIA

In Serbia, anti-Western narratives mainly build on the experiences of the falling apart of Yugoslavia. In the 1990s Serbia's President Slobodan Milosevic accused the US and NATO of having contributed to the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Milosevic's nationalist discourse painted the image of Serbia as a nation which stands alone but steadfast against Western imperialism. Milosevic even went so far as to portray himself as the leader of the "free world" and of an "independent and proud" nation besieged by the West and Western capitalist circles. The watershed moment for anti-Western and anti-American sentiment certainly was the NATO air campaign against Serbia in 1999, which led to the defeat of the Milosevic regime in Kosovo. Western support for Kosovo's independence has left a deep trauma in Serbia. Former Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica said in 2008 regarding Kosovo's declaration of independence: "it has never been clearer than today why Serbia was savagely destroyed by NATO bombs. The president of the USA, who is responsible for this violence, and his followers will be written in black letters in the history of Serbia, but also in every history of international law and the world order based on it"

(Danas, 2008). Defeat and the sentiment of being misunderstood, isolated and discriminated have continued as prevailing motifs in Serbian public and political narratives. Anti-Westernism has been founded upon the feeling of being a victim of Western anti-Serbian attitudes. The Kosovo issue hence continues enabling nationalist forces to dominate political discourse and rally different social layers and movements around the flag. The narrative of a defiant small but “proud” nation has been continued and promoted by President Aleksandar Vucic. This is exemplified by Vucic’s quote regarding Kosovo: “It is going to be hard, all big powers in the West are against us. We have international law and justice on our side” (Informer, May 2023).

Serbian nationalist rhetoric often draws on well-known historical instances. In his letter of resignation as Head of the Serbian Intelligence Services, Aleksander Vulin, a close ally and friend of the president stated that the “current pressure on Vucic and Serbia can only be compared to the Austrian-Hungarian ultimatum”. In his letter Vulin also referred to “Western values” as destroying the “traditional family and the nation”. (Danas 2023). The narrative of a morally corrupt West that targets traditional Serbian values is what has allowed for the materialization of a defensive nationalism, one that protects the orthodox Serbian national community and its values from Western liberal values, which have been depicted as rotten. In this vein, the West has been blamed for negative societal developments in Serbia. After the deadly Belgrade school shooting in May 2023, the Serbian Minister for Education, Branko Ruzic, blamed the internet, video games and “Western values” for the unprecedented massacre (Danas, 2023).

The fall of the Milosevic regime after mass protests in 2000 has been an important source for conspiracy theories among nationalists. Politicians of the ruling SNS Party (Serbian Progressive Party) have often referred to the Colored Revolutions of Ukraine and Georgia and the 2000 revolution in Serbia and depicted street protests as part of a Western plan to remove the Serbian government (Informer, November 2023). The image of a hostile West aiming to overthrow the government because it puts Serbian values and interests first, has helped portray the ruling party as the only defender of Serbia and accuse the opposition of being the long arm of the West.

The Covid-19 pandemic also successfully boosted conspiracy theories blaming the US for the “invention” or “creation” of the pandemic. They chimed in with already known but vague concepts of “threat”, “enemy”, “the Other” aimed at destroying the Serbian nation and its identity. Headlines in major media outlets in Serbia including “Bill Gates continues on Hitler’s path” or “Corona was invented to make money”, were all part of a “Chinese-Russian anti-Western propaganda”, as described by the former high ranking State Department Official in charge of the Western Balkans, Philip Riker (Vijesti, 2020).

Anti-Western narratives were an important theme in the most recent electoral campaign of the ruling SNS for general elections in December 2023. Both former Prime Minister Ana Brnabic and President Aleksandar Vucic painted the image of a defiant, proud, steadfast, and strong Serbia. “Serbia will not tailor its politics according to the wishes of the powerful of this world (in the West)” (Ana Brnabic) (Central Media 2024). The opposition was portrayed as being the long arm of the West, funded and supported by foreign countries. The scenario of Western supported street revolutions (reminder of October 2000 revolution in Serbia) was frequently mentioned by



officials of the SNS as an alleged plan of the West for the period after the elections (Informer, November 2023). Anti-Western rhetoric intensified after the EU's and OSCE's criticism on electoral manipulations in February 2024 (Danas, 2024).

In general, Serbia supports the argument that anti-Americanism and anti-Western narratives can be understood as a regime "master framework", one which has a broad and flexible appeal to the wider public as well as huge potential for being recombined and recycled in current political circumstances based on historical narratives, public sentiments and political calculations.

#### Anti-Western Beliefs and Narratives in Turkey

Similar strategies can be observed in Turkey where the AKP (Justice and Development Party) has promoted itself as the only authentic, legitimate and national political force, one that is guiding Turkey through a hostile and volatile world. Over the last 20 years, the AKP government has been able to build a pro-government business and media block which, in turn, can control both directly and indirectly public discourse. While the public broadcasting station TRT and the state-owned Anadolu News Agency have been brought in line with the government's policy needs and interests, likewise most of the privately owned Turkish media are dominated by pro-government persons and companies. 95.04% of the private media market is shared by three large media groups owned by government cronies: Demirören, Turkuvaz and Doğuş. Together they have a market share of 95,4% (Bianet, 2016).

The pro-government media promotes the image of a strong, emergent and globally important Turkey which is led and represented on the international stage by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Examples of strong Turkey-centrism include headlines such as: "Turkey's geopolitical depth is indispensable for NATO's strategies. This makes Turkey not into a Western border country but into a candidate for being the center of world politics<sup>2</sup>" (Anadolu Ajansı 2023). The headline represents how pro-government media have reversed actual power hierarchies for the consumption of domestic audiences. In media sources such as the Anadolu News Agency, Turkey's global and regional importance is usually linked to President Erdoğan and his leadership.

The language of pro-government media chimes in with the government's so-called "Türkiye Century" campaign that conveys the message of awakening, advancement, success and military strength. This also includes the promotion of Turkey's growing pro-government military industry. The government's message addresses ingrained beliefs and narratives not only shared by the AKP's conservative constituencies, but also by large parts of Turkish society, building on Turkish nationalism of various manifestations. Besides ethnic Turkish nationalism and Islamist Turkish nationalism, there are also secular-Republican, leftist and anti-imperialist manifestations of Turkish nationalism. Despite differences in political orientation, however many believe that Turkey is destined, due to its location and nature to a leading role, but constantly discriminated against by the West

This perception builds on the experiences of the decaying Ottoman Empire, with many Turkish citizens believing the West has aimed to maximize its power by weakening and dividing Turkey

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2 Translated from Turkish.

along ethnic and religious lines. The so-called “Sèvres Syndrome” refers to the Treaty of Sèvres which was signed after the First World War. The Sèvres Treaty sealed the end of the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire and divided the remaining parts of Ottoman territory into various zones of influence. Western Turkey was left to Greece, in Eastern Anatolia an Armenian state was to be built, while the treaty also provided for a referendum on Kurdish independence in southeastern Anatolia.

The treaty was never realized as the war of liberation under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk created new realities and led to the Lausanne Treaty (1922). Nevertheless, the “Sèvres Syndrome” can be seen as one of the reasons for a “siege paranoia” (Guida 2008) which has compromised the perception of reality of many Turkish intellectuals and “influences their ontological understanding of politics and world affairs” (Guida 2008, 37). This has, on the one hand, resulted in a societal undercurrent of loneliness, as found in proverbs such as “the Turk has no other friend but the Turk”, and an overestimation of Turkey’s geopolitical importance in the world on the other.

The rejection of Turkey’s potential accession to the EU by large parts of the European public, as well as a growing gap in the perception of international developments such as the war in Syria, the Palestinian issue and, not least, the fact many Turkish citizens feel discriminated against due to visa restrictions, have fueled the belief that a Western dominated unipolar world is not in Turkey’s favor. President Erdoğan and his government meanwhile have added a “Muslim flavor” to this sentiment. Anti-Western rhetoric has emphasized Turkey’s Islamic identity and neglected the country’s secular character and pro-Western orientation. The regime’s rhetoric has presented Turkey and its president as the representative and spokesperson of marginalized, disempowered and discriminated against Muslims in the world. President Erdoğan and his ruling AKP have rhetorically constructed a global umma that transcends national borders and makes issues such as the Palestinian problem a domestic one.

Particularly conservative and Islamist constituencies have been more prone to believing that Turkey has a natural leadership role in the Muslim world. This claim has been built on the legacy of the Ottoman Empire in support of stronger involvement in the Middle East. In recent years, this has also supported a new national role for Turkey as the voice of marginalized Muslims in the world, with the main addressees being Europe and the United States. In his victory speech in 2011 Tayyip Erdoğan alluded to his own aspirations to be the voice of Muslims and the Middle East in the West by saying: “Believe me, Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul, Beirut won as much as Izmir, Damascus won as much as Ankara, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem won as much as Diyarbakir.” (BBC 2011).

The claim of being the voice of marginalized Muslims in an unjust order has entailed anti-Americanism as a populist tool. In that regard the rhetoric against the old Kemalist establishment on the domestic level has been transferred to the international stage and used against the international old establishment, the West.

Anti-Americanism used to be a characteristic of anti-imperialist leftist groups and was until the early 2000s less common among conservative and Islamist constituencies. Identity politics, President Bush's war on Iraq and Washington's unconditional support for Israel, however, has fueled anti-Americanism among both conservatives and Islamists.

Indeed, the human suffering of Palestinians has further confirmed the notion of discrimination against Muslims in the world, fueling accusations of double standards and hypocrisy, alongside moral outrage. Statements of Western leaders regarding Russia's war on Ukraine have also been contrasted with ones made regarding Israel's war against Hamas.

Growing divergencies between Turkey's security needs and NATO partners' priorities in Turkey's immediate neighborhood have further supported anti-American sentiment and discourses. US support for Kurdish YPG fighters in Northern Syria as a counter force to the so-called Islamic State, led to outrage in Turkey and supported the idea that Turkey cannot trust its allies.

President Erdoğan has propagated Turkey's independence from Western domination. He also repeatedly criticized Western overrepresentation in international organizations such as the UN, asking for Turkey - as a leading Muslim country - to have a more prominent role. Referring to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, Erdoğan has recurrently used the slogan: "The world is bigger than five" (Anadolu Ajansı 2019). Anti-Western criticism does not distinguish between the EU, its member states and the United States.

Distrust in the West has also supported a certain openness for alternative international powers such as Russia and China. Meanwhile, many Turks believe that a multi-polar world order in which Turkey can balance out different actors is more beneficial for Turkey's own security and economic interests. Such beliefs and narratives have been in competition with liberal cosmopolitan approaches and perspectives that have considered close relations with the EU as a chance for democratization and societal and economic change. Liberal discourses peaked in the early 2000s when EU membership seemed to be a tangible perspective and liberal discourses were globally dominant. In recent years, however, they have been under attack and in retreat.

## BELIEFS AND NARRATIVES IN THE MENA REGION – THE CASES OF EGYPT AND TUNISIA

Although anti-Americanism is omnipresent in Arab public discourses, most Arab regimes are still close allies of the US. Interestingly, anti-American sentiment has been soaring with high US political and security involvement, with Egypt and Tunisia being good examples.

Anti-Americanism has mainly been tied to a critical view of Israel. Arab nationalism and Islamism have been the dominant political movements throughout the region. Both, nationalists and Islamists have seen Israel ever since its founding as an outpost of Western imperialism in the Middle East. Arab nationalist propaganda across the region has consequently depicted Israel as a state of injustice which colonises Palestinian land. Israel's US backed military dominance in the region and security practices in occupied Palestinian territories are themes that have united

leftists, liberals, seculars, Islamists and conservatives.

Anti-Israel and pro-Palestinian propaganda have also been useful tools for authoritarian regimes in the region to redirect pent-up social anger and frustration.

The brutality of Israel's war practices in Gaza in response to the terrorist attacks of October 7, 2023, has led to outrage and protests in many countries in the region. However, solidarity with Palestinians has not resulted in the rise of militant anti-Israel or anti-Semitic tendencies. Rather than defiance and militancy, frustration and resignation seem to dominate. The West's and before all, the United States' military, political and economic assistance for Israel has supported among many Arabs the feeling that they are second class world citizens. The West's silence towards human rights abuses and displacement of Palestinians in the occupied Westbank or the destruction of infrastructure and the killing of civilians in Gaza has not only undermined Western rhetoric on democracy and human rights, but it has lastingly harmed its reputation in the Middle East.

Hence, Western support for Israel and a relative ignorance for the misery of Palestinians has been at the heart of mistrust of the West, Western politicians and Western media. Like Turkey, many in the Arab World see a shift to a multipolar world as a chance to overcome Western hegemony and injustice in the region.

American military hegemony has also been an important factor that has promoted Russia's influence in the region. In 2014, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi paid his first visit after the removal of Mohammed Morsi to Moscow and not Washington (BBC 2014). This was a clear message to the United States that while remaining partners of the US, Egypt aims to diversify its foreign relations. This has also included the diversification of Egypt's military equipment. By 2021 and 2022, Russia had become one of Egypt's major trading partners. After Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine, economic and political relations between Russia and Egypt have not decreased but they have even further intensified (EurasiaReview 2023). Even though in March 2022 Egypt voted in favor of the UN Resolution condemning the Russian offensive against Ukraine, the Egyptian regime has been reluctant to join sanctions against the Kremlin. Indeed, in April 2023, the Washington Post reported referring to the so-called Ukraine Leaks that Egypt planned to supply 40,000 rockets to Russia (The Washington Post 2023).

In the Gaza war, Egypt has tried to mediate between Israel and Hamas. Over the last years, despite the Egyptian military's longstanding enmity towards Hamas which is a militant offspring of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian regime has developed a working partnership with Hamas in securing the border with Gaza. At the same time, the Egyptian regime has been one of the most important security partners of Israel. The regime is challenged to balance cooperation with both sides and keep pro-Palestinian public opinion under control.

In Tunisia, a country once proclaimed by the EU and the US as the only post-Arab Spring success story for democratization, anti-Western sentiment has been on the rise. Many Tunisians feel that Europeans see Tunisia as a place where they can outsource migration management. In August 2023, a group of 379 researchers from Tunisia, France and Italy accused the EU and the Tunisian government for the previously signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) regulating migration

through and from Tunisia (Le Club de Media Part, 2023). According to the deal, Tunisia would get 127 million Euro of financial aid in return for the implementation of measures to counter irregular migration to the EU. In September, President Saeid rejected the EU's financial aid and doubted the migration deal (France 24 2023). President Saeid's turn can be attributed to growing negative sentiments in the Tunisian public. These negative sentiments erupted in protests in Tunis against the MoU, calling the EU, and Italy in particular, as imperialist. Hence, criticism of Western policies towards the region have increasingly overlapped with the memories of European colonialism. This has also entailed a growing anger towards international financial institutions. Confirming a more nationalist attitude, Marouane Abassi, director of the Tunisian National Bank stated in 2022: "The financial institution has in no case imposed its dictate on Tunisia. Its only condition was that economic and social reforms are to be 100% Tunisian" (La Presse 2022). In 2022, Tunisia also approached the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (investment bank of the BRICS countries). Tunisia's rapprochement to BRICS countries, in particular China and Russia, and the criticism towards Western institutions may also be witnessed in the percentage of Tunisians who consider the Russian invasion to Ukraine justified (30%), the highest percentage in all MENA countries (Arab Centre Washington DC 2023). Russia and China are seen as a counterweight to Europe and the United States and are hoped to offer Tunisia means to decrease dependency on the West.

## CONCLUSION

The West is losing public opinion in Europe's immediate neighborhood. While most of these societies and governments tended to orient themselves towards the US and Europe, they have meanwhile not only challenged the normative superiority of the West, but they have also increasingly diversified their cultural, political and economic relations.

But there is also a growing rift within the West. Although Russia's aggression has somewhat revived transatlantic cooperation, it has remained limited to military and security cooperation, as well as sanctions coordination to counter Russian aggression. Despite initiatives such as the "Democracy Summit", the US and the EU have neither revived nor reformed democracy promotion, nor have they rebalanced cooperation in strategically important regions such as the Western Balkans, Turkey or the Middle East and North Africa.

Particularly in the Western Balkans, where Europeans and Americans have historically harmonized policies and cooperated closely, there has been a growing rift. US officials appear to have lost trust in the EU as a reliable partner in stabilizing the region through democratization, social change and political integration.

The rise of anti-Western narratives and sentiments has been particularly tangible in Serbia. It has correlated with stagnation in the EU accession process, the decline of Serbian democracy under President Vucic and a soaring popularity for Russia and China. Serbian nationalism can refuel tensions in the region. However, the fact that all Western Balkan states - except for Serbia, Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo - have joined NATO provides a security architecture that guarantees stability, but not necessarily democracy in the region. Anti-Western discourses have been also



funded and promoted by Russia which traditionally has close cultural and political ties with Serbia.

Turkey has traditionally been of high strategic importance to the United States. It was first seen as a stronghold against Communism, then against Islamism, as a bridge between the West and the East and as a loyal ally. In recent years, however, Turkey has gradually left the path of a secular democracy. Its foreign policy has been increasingly identity driven and defiant and the United States' strategic focus in the region shifted to the Gulf states. While Turkey's strategic importance to the US seems to have faded, it has become particularly important for the EU's ambition to keep migrants from its borders.

Although, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has led to a significant increase in the popularity of NATO and the EU, anti-Americanism in the public has constantly increased. The United States' position in the Gaza war has further supported anti-American sentiments. Conspiracy theories picture the United States as an omnipresent and omnipotent power that directs anything in Turkey, the region and beyond. Moreover, many in Turkey agree with the government that the Western dominated liberal World order is not to Turkey's benefit and that Turkey must keep its options open. Many observers in Turkey see a multipolar international power system as an advantage and a leverage for Turkey's regional interests and international position.

In the MENA region the picture is rather similar. In almost all countries of the MENA-region anti-Americanism is on the rise. While anti-American sentiment is particularly high in countries with high US involvement, Morocco represents an exception to the trend. Like in the Western Balkans and Turkey, anti-Americanism has helped unite different political movements ranging from leftists to nationalists and Islamists, with it being built upon anti-colonial and anti-imperialist narratives. It has also strongly been impacted by the United States' unconditional support for Israel which many in the Arab World perceive as a colonial power.

The EU has likewise largely forfeited its normative impact in the region, with both the United States and the EU adopting more of a security perspective. While US strategies have strongly been driven with the aim of keeping Iran at distance and guaranteeing Israel's security, EU policies have largely focused on migration management, border security. Moreover, events unfolding in the Middle East since Hamas' October 7 attacks and Israel's military response have revealed a palpable rift in the transatlantic partnership. While the US has assumed a central role in the conflict, the EU has had difficulties in finding a consensus on the Middle East, resulting in inactivity. The war in the Middle East has again revealed the deep divisions in the EU and its inability to develop a common stance and actively mediate in conflicts.

In conclusion, the transatlantic cooperation in the Western Balkans, Turkey and the MENA region has been waning. The US and the EU now hardly coordinate and harmonize their policies towards these regions. And, when they do, as in the case of the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, it is with rather meager results. Moreover, a growing anti-American and anti-Western sentiment in many

countries has constrained the US and transatlantic policy options and will most likely turn into a burden over the next years, independently of the outcome of the US presidential elections in November 2024. Furthermore, anti-Americanism and anti-Western sentiments have become a powerful political resource at hand to many states, governments and political groups in the Western Balkans, Turkey and MENA region. Although the EU has generally been more popular in the region, it is not seen as an important or powerful actor. Its normative power in the Western Balkans has decreased, while the premise of a geopolitical Europe has not materialized, as best seen in the case of the events in Israel and Gaza since October 2023. In the past, the EU could only thrive in cooperation with the United States but, with the EU's immanent geopolitical weakness and internal divergences among member states alongside the US's rivalry with China, a new situation is possible, one with negative long-term consequences for the relevance and the interests of the transatlantic partnership in the EU's neighborhood, including serious limitations to promote democracy and the rule based liberal order.

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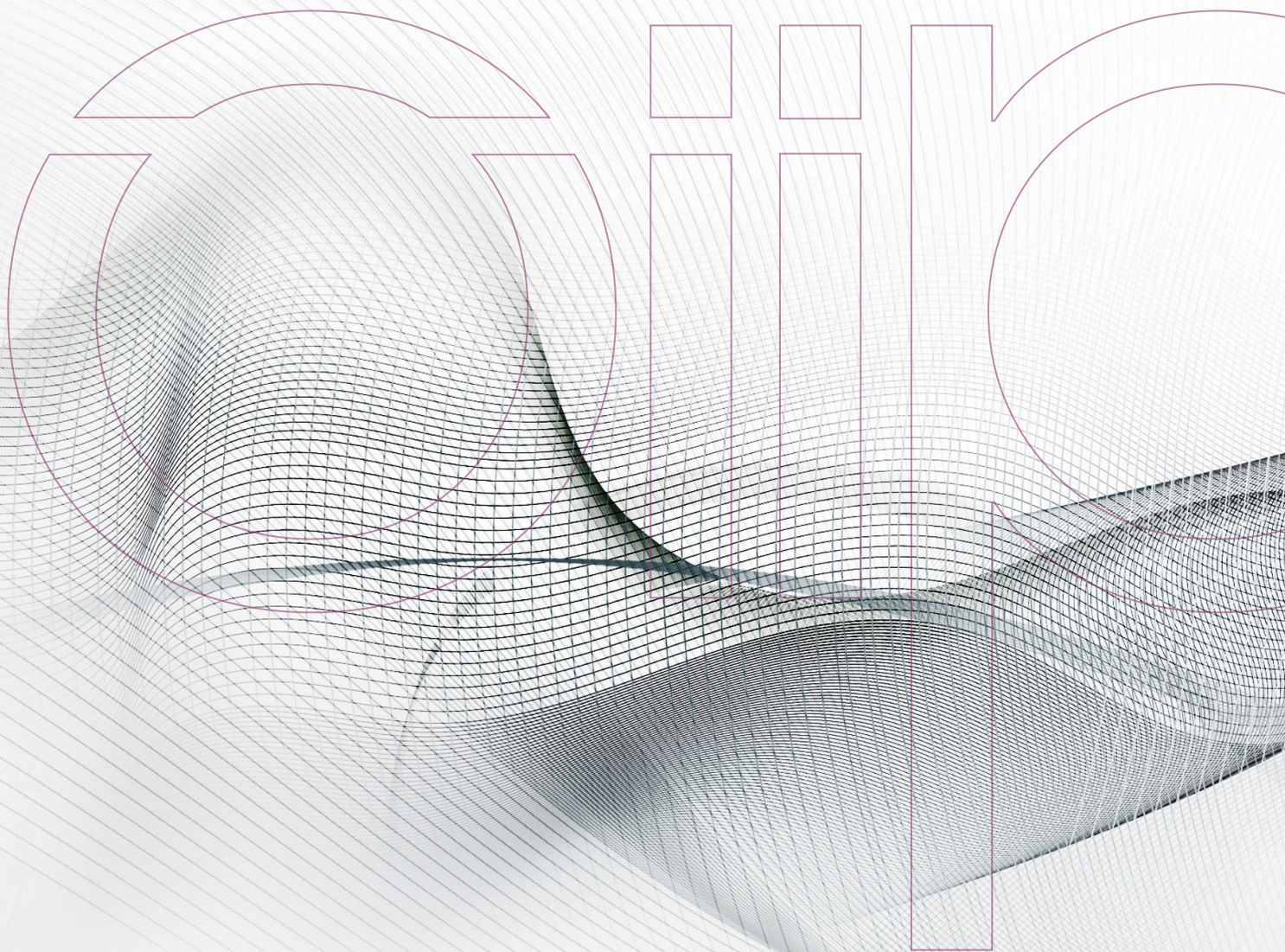
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#### IMPRESSUM:

Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik – oiip,  
Austrian Institute for International Affairs  
A-1090 Vienna, Währinger Straße 3/12,  
www.oiip.ac.at, info@oiip.ac.at

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