



A Postliberal Global Order? Challenge(r)s to the Liberal West

Acknowledgements



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This policy report is based on a multiyear research project Holm led for the Norwegian Ministry of Defence on the World of the Right (2018-2022). This was done in parallel with writing a PhD monograph that theorized and analyzed dominant international liberalisms post-1945 vs post-1989 and their impact on global politics, shifting state ideals within international society, and counter-ideological non-Western and radical right contestation of liberal ideals and practice (defended September

2023). The project was also funded by the Danish Velux Foundation and was a joint venture between NUPI and the Danish Institute of International Studies (DIIS). The total project output includes a ca. 150 000-word PhD monograph, eight peer-reviewed publications, some 40 op-eds, multiple presentations, and three policy reports. They are all available at www.mindaholm.com.

Photo credit: NTB

Publisher: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs
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ISSN: 1894-650X

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Summary

What unites and divides critics of liberal international politics, from the populist radical right to non-Western powers? Over the past decade, there has been a dramatic upsurge in discussions within academia, media, and policy circles concerning a crisis afflicting a “post-1945 Liberal International Order”, in Western political parlance now usually dubbed “the Rules-Based Order”. Within liberal discourse the threat to this international order is presented as chiefly illiberal, non-Western, and thus external. This report questions some of the premises of those accounts, arguing that what actors such as the European populist radical right and non-Western powers like China are united in challenging is predominantly the expansive liberal internationalism of the post-Cold War era, not the post-1945 architecture as such. This critique also runs directly through the liberal West. At the same time, the liberal West has lost a significant degree of geopolitical and moral clout: the dynamic is also a conflict over who has the right – and credibility – to speak on behalf of global values and the “international community”. In parallel, we see increased calls for greater non-Western representation in global politics – and sustained challenges to the international legal order from both Western and non-Western states. Russia and China have become prominent and uniting voices in challenging Western hegemony, and liberal democracy as an ideal. What does all this entail for the future of global politics?

The report first unpacks what intensified ideological contestation in global politics entails and discusses the problem with seeing these specific dynamics through the lens of a West/non-West, democracies/autocracies binary, or through the concepts of a post-1945 Liberal International or Rules-Based Order. What are the main themes uniting an otherwise diverse crowd in a mutual critique of Western international liberalism? What is the liberal West’s own role in precipitating this crisis? In its second part, the report zooms in on the international visions of the European and US populist radical right and “New Right”, discussing what Donald Trump’s second presidency means for the mainstreaming of the Far Right, and the pushback against the dominant international liberalism of the 1990s. Who are the central actors, and what do they want for global politics? The report concludes with a discussion of the implications of this broad backlash for the liberal West.

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Contents

- Introduction 6
- The Return of History: Increased ideological contestation in global politics 8
 - The issues with a post-1945 “Liberal International Order” or “Rules-Based Order” 12
- The role of the European and US Radical and New Right within the counter-ideological
pushback..... 17
 - Transatlantic ties – Conservative Radicals or Radical Conservatives 21
 - Global order ahead..... 24
- Implications for the Liberal West: Assessments and predictions 27

Introduction

What unites and divides critics of liberal international politics, from the populist radical right to non-Western powers? Over the past decade, there has been a drastic upsurge in discussions within academia, media, and policy circles of a “post-1945 Liberal International Order” in crisis, in political parlance now usually dubbed “the Rules-Based Order”. By 2024, it is no longer a question of whether such a crisis exists: it’s a commonsensical fact. Similarly, it is a taken-for-granted assumption that actors on the diverse populist radical and New Right are against a post-1945 Liberal International Order, and that these actors find illiberal common ground with non-Western powers, most notably the governments of Russia and China. Since the “Liberal International Order” (“Rules-Based Order”) is now usually dated back to 1945 and the establishment of the United Nations, the consequences of this diagnosis are far-reaching: the very basis of post-WWII regulated international relations is seen as being under sustained threat. The threat to this international order is within liberal discourse presented as being chiefly illiberal and external.

This report puts forward a somewhat more complicating account by challenging some of these now taken-for-granted premises: the idea that what actors outside the liberal, Western core are *united* in challenging in global politics is the post-1945 international infrastructure as such. Instead, this report suggests, what has increasingly become actively challenged in the international domain are central aspects of the thick and expansive liberal internationalism of the 1990s, a liberalism that sees the internal characteristics of states as its core project, and where a narrow liberal-democratic state ideal is actively promoted through both multilateral and bilateral channels. Although a number of actors are seeking to overturn the liberal dominance of the post-Cold War era, they do not necessarily agree on what to put in its place. Nor are they challenging all aspects of this thick liberal internationalism and the post-1989 order. In contrast to actors who seek radical, revolutionary change in both domestic and global politics, these actors’ quest in relation to the international domain is ultimately one of reform of existing international institutions and diversification of multilateral politics, not radical upheaval. The political consequences are nevertheless far-reaching and significant, not least given Donald Trump’s 2024 electoral victory which further normalizes and empowers both a broad counter-ideological pushback and an already powerful international far right. In several questions, the incoming Trump administration goes further in challenging and uprooting the fundamental rules of the game. In parallel, we see greater calls for non-Western representation and ideological and geopolitical diversity in global politics. Russia and China have become prominent voices in challenging Western hegemony, and liberal democracy as an ideal. The liberal West has, in turn, lost a significant degree of moral and geopolitical clout. Challenges to the international *legal* order are coming from both Western and non-Western states. The future of global order is fundamentally in flux.

This report is organized in three sections. First, it discusses increased ideological contestation in global politics, outlining the broad trend of increased counter-ideological backlash against the liberal zeitgeist of the 1990s. What are the main themes uniting an otherwise diverse crowd in a mutual critique of Western international liberalism? What is the liberal West’s own role in precipitating this crisis? What are the analytical and political issues with seeing this backlash primarily through the lens

of authoritarianism versus democracy, or through the concepts of a post-1945 Liberal International or Rules-Based Order? Second, it discusses the role of the European populist radical right within this backlash, and its relationship to so-called postliberal, New Right and ultraconservative environments within the US and Europe. Where does the European populist radical right agree and diverge in relation to foreign policy – and what does Donald Trump’s second electoral victory mean for the far right’s impact on global politics? The report concludes with a discussion of the implications of increased ideological and geopolitical tensions for the liberal West.

The Return of History: Increased ideological contestation in global politics

In 1989, history was declared to be over and ideological conflict dead: liberal-democratic capitalism had prevailed. The dominant zeitgeist within liberal Western academic and policy circles was explicitly progressive and teleological. Economic, political, cultural, and international dimensions of liberal-democratic capitalism were largely viewed as intertwined. Adapting to one element would lead to a gradual adaptation of others. As recently as 2014, Francis Fukuyama – the author of the 1989 zeitgeist thesis – argued that there was still no viable ideological alternative to liberal democratic capitalism. Recent events with Russia, he argued, were about restoring Russia’s dignity: “[they] really [don’t] have implications outside of the areas of the former Soviet Union”.¹ Within this dominant perspective, the world was largely viewed as *post-ideological*.

By the 2020s, it had become obvious that ideological conflict was again at the centre of global politics. A broad range of actors with otherwise differing visions and objectives are finding common ground in actively challenging the liberal dominance of the post-1989 era. This new dynamic means increased *repoliticization* of fields that were attempted to be depoliticized in global politics during the 1990s – from questions of international aid, trade, finance, climate, principles of multilateral governance, and human rights norms, to more specific parameters of domestic governance and values, including the rule of law, refugee and asylum practices, the place of civil society, and women’s and LGBTQ+-rights. Repoliticization entails that questions of *what solutions are best and/or morally right* are being brought back to both the domestic and international negotiation table. It is no longer given that what was perceived as constituting a broad international consensus during the 1990s – and used as parameters of both multilateral and bilateral practices – is accepted as such now. On the contrary, much of that is increasingly dismissed as a narrow form of liberal ideology, serving marginal (predominantly Western, elite) interests. Values, norms, and governance form are thus now a significant global political battleground. Here, both the ‘West’ as a geopolitical entity and liberal internationalism as a political project have lost considerable status compared to the liberal heyday of the 1990s. The 2008 financial crisis and rampant inequality in income, wealth and power have challenged the teleological narrative underpinning the liberal-democratic zeitgeist; so have the economic success stories of less-than-liberal or illiberal non-Western actors. Liberal exceptionalism – or double standards – has in turn made it increasingly difficult for liberal, Western actors to take a moralizing position without attracting accusations of hypocrisy.² That was evident already long

1 Gero Schliess, ‘Still “The End of History”’, *DW*, 6 October, 2014. URL <https://www.dw.com/en/francis-fukuyama-im-still-right/a-17695191>.

2 I discuss and conceptualize liberal exceptionalism at length in Holm (2020b) and in the thesis, Holm (2023). I here define liberal exceptionalism as the ability to see oneself as already-always liberal, as morally ‘good’, irrespective of dissonant actions. In parallel with extensive outwards moralization towards less-than-liberal members of international society, this creates substantial backlash – often expressed through a critique of liberal hypocrisy or double standards. On this, see also Holm (2017, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020c).

before large parts of the West failed to substantively act on Gaza, but the expressed frustration and public attention to double standards have increased substantially since.³ The dynamic is thus not only a conflict over what counts as politically right and morally ‘good’; it also a conflict over who has the right, and credibility, to speak on behalf of global values, institutions, and the ‘international community’.

During the Cold War, the driving ideological conflict in international politics was predominantly between two opposite ideologies, and two superpowers. At the current historical juncture, there is little contestation over capitalism as such, nor a distinct, full ideological alternative to liberal-democratic capitalism presented across different group of actors.⁴ Instead, at a macro-level we see two trends partly converge: a broad coalescence around a critique of a narrow, liberal-democratic state ideal and more extensive, liberal and cosmopolitan premises of multilateral politics, and a broad push for acknowledging fairer non-Western representation in multilateral bodies and more multiplicity in ways of governance. In this critique, there are also multiple commonalities alongside partially alternative visions. Whilst not attaining the status of a full alternative ideology, we can expect to see increasing attempts at formulating shared projects within subgroups.⁵ This includes a renewed attention to communitarian international principles superseding cosmopolitan claims (particularly in relation to humanitarian interventions based on universalist principles); heavy (rhetorical) emphasis on the principles of the UN Charter, and particularly sovereign equality and non-interference in internal affairs; extensive and authoritarian use of national interests and national security concerns as overruling other interests where necessary; renewed emphasis on ideas of *civilizations* as distinct in-groups with shared culture and values and ‘civilizational diversity’ as an alternative to liberal universalism; and a strong emphasis on state sovereignty both in domestic and global affairs. Notably, there is here a high degree of ideological bricolage: fragments of specific discursive tropes and policy lines that travel well without necessarily being connected to a broader shared vision of society. One such example is how the term “gender ideology” has traversed regions and political dividing lines in recent years. As a discursive frame, it is now mobilized both by more traditional conservative religious voices, and by actors on the radical right: from Christian conservative actors, Pope Francis and the Vatican, to US President Donald Trump, former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.⁶ Yet we also see it appearing within ostensibly liberal spaces, thus speaking to the extent to which some of these discursive tropes have moved from the margins to the mainstream of political life.

3 Notably, now also explicitly problematized within certain Western policy circles, as illustrated by the Deputy Foreign Minister of Norway defining the avoiding of double standards as a the “most important contribution to a peaceful and just world order – and to our own national security”. His view has been echoed by the Foreign Minister on multiple occasions. See Andreas Motzfeldt Kravik, ‘We must avoid double standards in foreign policy’, *Al Jazeera*, 18 April, 2024. URL <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/4/18/we-must-avoid-double-standards-in-foreign-policy>. On double standards and Norwegian and Western foreign policy, see also Holm (2017, 2019a, 2019b, 2020b).

4 As Buzan and Lawson point out, whereas a central question of the 20th century was ‘Capitalism or not?’, since 1989 “the core ideological question in world politics has been: ‘What kind of capitalism best delivers stable prosperity?’” (2014, 72; see also e.g. Milanovic (2019)).

5 On sub-projects, see e.g. Adler-Nissen and Zarakol (2021); Varga and Buzogány (2021).

6 On the Vatican’s role in popularizing the term, cf. Case (2019).

Broadly, these actors meet in what can be conceptualized as a *counter-ideological pushback*: a specific form of backlash against the dominance of an ideology within a social sphere.⁷ Their counter-ideological critique of global politics is of the deep, anti-pluralist liberal internationalism that became dominant in the 1990s: of the ideals themselves, of the vested power interests embedded within them, and of their ideological and depoliticized form.⁸ The counter-ideological dynamic entails that particular positions within an ideal world view – for example on what constitutes the best form of government – become actively repoliticized. Since the dominant international liberalism of the 1990s was largely presented as universal and ahistorical rather than particular, a central part of the repoliticization dynamic entails bringing representations of the particular, local and historical back in as a counter-narrative. As part of this dynamic, the secular is also actively challenged by bringing in religion – and ‘traditional values’ – as a positive counter-story. History, religion, and particular communal bonds – such as ‘civilization’ and nativism – are thus actively used as alternative positive framings to a global liberalism seen as premised around atomized individualism and ahistorical universalism.⁹

There are two major groups of actors within this counter-ideological pushback: non-Western great powers critical of the liberal West – most notably Russia and China – and the populist radical right and ‘New Right’, from Europe, the USA, India to Brazil.¹⁰ But we see resonance also across a range of different actors, including conservative intellectual and political milieus that have actively cultivated ties with parties on the radical right. Whilst not agreeing on what to put in its place, and differing in how deep and extensive their critique of liberalism as a multifaceted political tradition is, they all implicitly or explicitly refer to a pre-1989 world order where *state sovereignty* and *non-interference* were the formal, central pillars of regulating international (inter-state) relations. Their world vision thus entails a reversal of the development of the 1990s and early 2000s, where the formal borders between the international and the national were actively modified in favour of the former.¹¹ The core message is more power to the sovereign state, and seeking to strengthen the borders between the national and the international as political, economic, and moral spheres. Sovereignty, a cornerstone of international political life, is mobilized in multiple ways: cultural sovereignty, economic sovereignty, political sovereignty, geographical (physical) sovereignty. Sovereignty here notably lies first and foremost with the state (its government), not the people, despite them ostensibly calling on the latter. Whilst many of these actors refer to a (liberal) tolerance of difference at the global level for states, they often deny that same form of tolerance to their citizens at home.¹²

7 The concept of *counter-ideology* and *counter-ideological* pushback is theorized extensively in my PhD thesis, where I also discuss how they differ from the close by negative concepts of resistance – Gramscian counter-hegemony, counter-revolution, and Foucauldian counter-conduct, see Holm (2023), Chapter 5. In relation to the populist radical right and non-Western critique of liberal anti-pluralism, I discuss it at length in Holm (2023), chapter 6. See also Holm (2020a).

8 I discuss the content of these ideals, and how they differ from the dominant liberalism of the post-1945 international legal order, extensively in the thesis; see Holm (2023, chapter 4).

9 Discussed extensively in chapter 5 and 6 of the thesis, Holm (2023), as well as Holm (2019c, 2020a, 2020c) and Tjalve and Holm (2020).

10 Classifying these actors is notoriously difficult. Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, also known as staunch neoliberals, were for example defined as part of a ‘New Right’ in the 1980s. Their ideology is worlds apart from that of the contemporary European New Right, associated particularly with the French *Nouvelle Droite*. Categorization and labelling also varies considerably between academic disciplines; in the more synthesizing attempts of International Relations (IR) literature, there is a tendency to use broad catch-all terms (Global Right, New Right) not represented in the comparative politics literature. The most agreed-upon academic catch-all term is the Far Right, which is then disaggregated into specific subgroups.

11 Discussed extensively in Holm (2023, chapter 4 and 6), as well as Holm and Sending (2018), Holm (2020a, 2020c).

12 As discussed more at length in Holm (2023), Holm (2020c).

Groups that had their rights promoted partly as part of an expansive liberal international agenda during the 1990s – particularly civil society and the LGBTQ+ community – are now increasingly dismissed and construed as external/internal threats. The rights, interests and dignity of vulnerable minorities have explicitly been subsumed under a broader resistance to an expansionist global liberalism. In addition, a strengthened and parallel role of *nativism* means that immigrants, migrants and refugees are all increasingly framed as external others – and as threats to what is presented as the native in-group and its interests and values. In the Far Right rhetoric, racial, ethnonationalist, Islamophobic and civilizational hierarchies are often implicit or explicit in this logic.¹³ But anti-immigrant rhetoric, and Far Right policies and discourses on questions such as “outsourcing asylum”, have also been widely mainstreamed and adopted by parties across the political spectrum.

It is both politically and analytically problematic to reduce this counter-ideological backlash to a simple question of a new dividing line between democracies and autocracies, and/or a parallel West/non-West binary. Counter-ideological pushback against the liberal internationalism of the 1990s also runs directly through democracies, and within the West. Reducing the broad pushback against the expansive post-1989 liberalism to a dividing line between democracies against autocracies flattens central global political dynamics. It also runs the risk of becoming yet another ideological binary which makes all issues de facto exogenous to liberal-democratic states.¹⁴ Whilst effective as a political, rhetorical strategy in the short run, the failure to acknowledge the broad discontent and the success of these narratives also *within* liberal societies risks further exacerbating deep tensions and frustrations, both domestically and internationally. There are multiple ways in which to mobilize and address this discontent politically, but externalizing its source and rationale creates further division.

The push for more diverse governance ideals – what it means to be a ‘good’ state, in economic, cultural, and political terms – has significant consequences both domestically and internationally. A report from the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) in 2023 concluded that the world had not been “more antidemocratic in 35 years”.¹⁵ The myth that capitalism needs to go hand in hand with democracy has been dispelled. The desire for more diverse governance ideals also entails that we see actors who otherwise might be classified as ‘strange bedfellows’ share a pushback against more intrusive liberal benchmarks and demands in global politics.¹⁶ One can be united in critique without being allies or having the same alternative world visions. One significant consequence is nevertheless that the *total pushback* against the dominant liberal international ideology of the post-1989 period is sustained and dense, coming from multiple corners of the global political landscape. Whilst many of the formal, institutional parameters of post-1945 politics and multilateralism remain relatively stable, we are also in a period where the direction of those institutions is in flux. On the one hand, this concerns powerful actors seeking to alter existing institutions from within in policy direction and scope, with a particular emphasis on strengthening state sovereignty and reducing intrusive liberal imprints. In parallel, but only partially overlapping, we see strengthened calls for a more just distribution of power within institutions such as the UN, the World Bank, IMF and the WTO and a desire to counter Western dominance within international trade, finance, security, aid and

13 For an excellent recent discussion of the racial and civilizational hierarchies of Donald Trump’s first presidency, see Gawthorpe (2025).

14 A continuation but reformulation of other central ideological binaries that elevate the moral and political status of the Self: West/non-West, liberal/illiberal, civilized/uncivilized.

15 V-Dem, “The world is becoming increasingly authoritarian – but there is hope”, 2 March, 2023. URL <https://www.gu.se/en/news/the-world-is-becoming-increasingly-authoritarian-but-there-is-hope>.

16 For example, the Russian government and the former Polish government under PIS rule echoed several of the same tropes and critique, whilst being openly antagonistic towards each other and with very different visions for global politics.

development.¹⁷ Both the populist radical right and prominent non-Western groupings, such as the BRICS+, ultimately seek some form of reform and diversification of existing multilateral institutions and practices, not exit from them. The consequences are nevertheless significant.

The issues with a post-1945 “Liberal International Order” or “Rules-Based Order”

Notably, and in contrast to claims that these actors are seeking to dismantle the post-1945 *international* order, many of them – and at least rhetorically – elevate the centrality of the principles of the 1945 UN Charter, particularly with regards to sovereign equality and non-interference.¹⁸ The BRICS+ group in turn present themselves as stable supporters of international trade and finance, including of the IMF and the WTO. As the BRICS+ 2024 Kazan declaration states, “[W]e reaffirm our commitment to multilateralism and upholding the international law, including the Purposes and Principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations (UN) as its indispensable cornerstone, and the central role of the UN in the international system.”¹⁹ As to who represents the greatest challenge to the international *legal* order, the answer does not fall along a Western/non-Western fault line, as illustrated most recently by the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Russia’s insistence on the UN Charter and principles of both sovereignty and non-interference is blatantly hollow and hypocritical. But the prevalent liberal, Western discourse of presenting challenges to the “Rules-Based Order” as stemming exclusively from external, illiberal threats, most particularly Russia and China, underplays the extent to which the liberal West – particularly since the early 2000s and the Global War on Terror – has also contributed significantly to undermining the same values and institutions that they claim to both represent and defend at home and abroad. There is a persistent exceptionalism in this discourse: the liberal West’s identity and self-perception as defenders of liberal and universal values is consistently raised above their own contradictory actions.²⁰

As such, the current academic and policy trend of speaking of a “post-1945 Liberal International Order” (the academic preference) or a “Rules-Based Order” (the predominantly Western policy preference) obfuscates what the dynamics of contestation are really about. Both concepts are products of the 2000s, gaining prominence only through their declared crisis and external (non-Western, non-liberal) threats.²¹ Through their declared crisis, they also spin a historical myth, whereby the story of international society post-1945 is one of gradual and unified liberal success and expansion.²² Often including the UN, Bretton Woods, NATO, other arenas of multilateralism and international law, but usually opaque as to what specifically is threatened, (liberal) Western states also de facto get ownership of the entire post-1945 architecture. “Liberalism” also here gets reduced

17 On this, see for example two recent NUPI Reports, Sending and Karlsrud (2024) and Maglia e.t.al. (2024).

18 Discussed more extensively in Holm and Sending (2018), Holm (2023).

19 October 2024 BRICS+ Kazan declaration, URL https://cdn.brics-russia2024.ru/upload/docs/Kazan_Declaration_FINAL.pdf?1729693488349783.

20 Discussed in Holm (2017, 2019a, 2020b, 2023).

21 I discuss this in the thesis (Holm 2023); the use of the “Liberal International Order” as a conceptual prism only gained traction through the 2000s, its conceptualization penned in a 1999 article by Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry (2019). The term the “rules-based order” was first used in the same time period, and predominantly by Western states – though India has been an exception. Cf. Lieberherr (2023), Dugard (2023).

22 Most prominent in the conceptual prism of the liberal International Relations scholar G. John Ikenberry, cf. Ikenberry (2009, 2011, 2018).

to a cohesive and unitary project, despite there being different and contradictory international liberalisms at play in this period.²³ If we look at the UN Charter and what it entailed for practices of recognition and international law, it is ultimately statism as such that was privileged; through the UN Security Council, the defined great powers at the time. Of course, the world always looked different in practice than in professed ideals: the principles of sovereign equality and non-interference in internal affairs were consistently broken, not least by the two major superpowers, the USA and the USSR.²⁴ But formally, the UN Charter and its principles were premised on a liberalism of pluralism and tolerance of difference, where international society was seen as regulating relations *between*, not *within*, formally equal sovereign states. States were recognized and accepted into the UN irrespective of their “internal characteristics”.²⁵ As international legal scholar Gerry Simpson notes with reference to the post-1945 period, though human rights instruments created “an expectation that states would conform to certain human rights standards in their domestic practices”, this did “little to change the practice of universal international organizations in their admissions policies. So, while human rights law seemed to insist on adherence to certain values, the practice of international organizations remained pluralistic.”²⁶

This changed during the 1990s, when a liberal anti-pluralism gradually became dominant both in multilateral practices, bilateral conditionality policies, and (liberal) academic discourse.²⁷ The internal characteristics of the state – a specific form of ideal subject premised on liberal-democratic governance, and adherence to an extensive and increasing set of human rights norms – thus explicitly became the international community’s domain during the late 1980s and 1990s. The changes were significant: diluting the principles of sovereign equality and non-interference, a narrow form of state ideal changed how international institutions operated. Non-liberal spaces, including the post-Soviet sphere and states defined as “weak”, “failed”, or “fragile”, became political construction grounds for transforming them to resemble a narrower, liberal ideal, in parallel with an emphasis on their need to fit the formal-legal parameters of statehood.²⁸ International organizations, including the UN, became far more expansive in their reach into ‘internal affairs’, that is, domestic politics and forms of governance.²⁹ Membership requirements and aid conditionality practices of organizations including the EU and the WTO were premised on this explicitly narrow ideal; similarly, development assistance programmes and foreign policy practices of liberal states were heavily fixated on state transformation.

The dominant liberal-democratic and capitalist state ideal was centred around three core scripts: political, economic, moral. The political script advocated a particular form of liberal democracy, where ‘democracy’ was effectively rearticulated and depoliticized as being synonymous with ‘liberal democracy’ as such. The economic script extended far beyond the economic sphere alone, and orbited around the promotion of free market and free trade practices, the global expansion of capital and the “golden three” – privatization, deregulation, and liberalization. The global neoliberal

23 See Holm and Sending (2018); discussed extensively in chapter 4, Holm (2023); see also Simpson (2001).

24 See for example Dov Levin’s count of electoral interventions, Levin (2016), discussed more extensively in Holm (2023).

25 As discussed in detail in Holm and Sending (2018), Holm (2023).

26 Simpson (2001, 556). I discuss the specific shifts of the 1990s at great length in chapter 4, Holm (2023); see also Voeten (2021), Marks (2000), Holm and Sending (2018).

27 Explored and discussed at great length in Holm (2023).

28 Cf. Abrahamsen (2000), Marks (2000), Simpson (2004), Holm and Sending (2018), Holm (2023).

29 Both through the promotion of a specific state ideal – ‘good governance’ – and through the adaption most notably of the Responsibility to Protect, see e.g. Orford (2011). See also excellent discussion by Voeten (2021).

script was intimately linked to what others have described as the widespread internationalization of the state after the Cold War, with the “disaggregation of state sovereignty and the transference of its political and administrative components to supranational institutions and transgovernmental networks”.³⁰ This was promoted through conditionality practices, membership requirements and structural adjustment programmes of IOs including the EU, WTO, IMF, and the World Bank, under the broader rubric of “good governance”. Finally, there was a moral script: a narrower, shifting, and complex script tied to what it takes to be not just a “right subject” but a (morally) “good subject”. This included the expansion of rights: from gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights being increasingly “considered a litmus test for a country’s broader human rights record”, to sexual rights and LGBTQ+ rights being put on the agenda of multilateral bodies, human rights NGOs, and the aid conditionality practices of individual liberal states from the 1990 onwards, to specific broader forms of humanitarian cosmopolitan ‘do good’ principles abroad, intimately linked to social status.³¹

Ultimately, the counter-ideological dynamics in relation to global politics are centred on challenging the liberal anti-pluralism of the 1990s, whilst keeping the *formal* parameters of the post-1945 system intact. As such, speaking of a “Rules-Based Order” without specifying what this entails in relation to international law; or of a post-1945 “Liberal International Order” that incorporates both the international legal order *and* the liberalism of the 1990s, gives us a faulty diagnosis and the wrong prescription. It also absolves the liberal West of its own implication in the international *legal* order’s challenges. This was most pronounced during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the wider Global War on Terror, the 2011 Libya intervention and the recent war in Gaza, where the US and other Western states have contributed both with arms sales and indirect or direct support of Israeli policies. The decision of significant Western states to either reject or decide not to enforce the International Criminal Court’s November 2024 arrest warrants on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant was a further blow to the West’s legitimacy in relation to the international legal order. Some of the same states applauded the ICC’s 2023 arrest warrant against Russia’s President Vladimir Putin. With Netanyahu being the first Western-allied leader to be accused by the ICC of war crimes and crimes against humanity, the contrasting reactions sent a signal that significant parts of the West do not treat a Western-allied and a non-Western leader equally.³²

The conceptual prisms of a Liberal International Order or a Rules-Based Order are by no means politically neutral; nor are they analytically clear. They also risk placing adherence to international law in the background.³³ Because both concepts have been so deeply wedded to a Western perspective, where Russia and China in particular are construed as existential threats yet the liberal West is *de facto* the order’s representative and protector, their usage also reproduces ideological and geopolitical fault lines³⁴. Ultimately, as during the Cold War, both Russia and the USA have over the past years been deeply complicit in undermining the formal rules of the game, both through specific actions and their wider signalling effect. The effects of the wars in Ukraine and Gaza in undermining

30 Chryssogelos (2018, 2).

31 I discuss and theorize this extensively in the thesis (Holm 2023, chapter 3 and 4). On LGBTQ+ and sexual rights, see Slootmaeckers, Touquet, and Vermeersch (2016, 1), on EU enlargement and LGBTQ+ rights; see also e.g. Bosia (2014), Edenborg (2021), Szulc (2018).

32 See e.g. Tim Lister, ‘Netanyahu arrest warrant tests Western commitment to international law’, *CNN*, 4 December, 2024. URL <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/12/04/middleeast/icc-arrest-warrants-putin-netanyahu-analysis-intl/index.html>. For an excellent analysis, see Jorgensen (2024).

33 On this, see Dugard (2023).

34 As recently excellently explored by colleagues in relation to NATO discourse, see Beaumont et al. (2024).

the international legal order are significant. But that is a partly separate dynamic from the significant backlash we are seeing towards the liberal anti-pluralism of the 1990s. The unified backlash from both Western and non-Western actors is a contestation of ideology; governance form and state ideals in both domestic and global politics; the borders between international society and the sovereign state; and the distribution and form of influence and representation within the international system. It is without doubt a significant reversal of the developments of the 1990s, and comes with considerable political, economic and geopolitical consequences, but it also leaves much of the post-1945 ‘international order’ formally intact.³⁵ That is not to say that the challenges from states such as Russia and China are not highly significant. Though they both emphasise the centrality of the UN Charter and the UN System, they also seek to alter central aspects that were strengthened during the 1990s, in particular human rights norms. Russia’s repeated violations of international law make its emphasis on the UN Charter blatantly hypocritical and opportunistic. Whilst both Russia and China emphasise the centrality of the IMF and the WTO, they also actively challenge Western hegemony. But they do not target multilateralism as such: instead, they seek more influence for themselves, both through new and old channels, in parallel with seeking to alter these institutions more in line with their own interests from within.

Separating adherence to international law in general and to the 1945 UN Charter and UN system as a distinct and central issue area thus allows us to address in more specificity what it is that is currently being challenged in global politics, and by whom. An alternative option is to speak of a “post-1989 Liberal International Order” as an order premised explicitly on the liberal anti-pluralism that came to dominate global politics during the 1990s, yet which is separate from the post-1945 international infrastructure as such.³⁶ That is not without issues: After all, most of these actors within the counter-ideological backlash speak in favour of the major international organizations. Whilst pushing back against intrusive liberal demands, and seeking more national control, none of them challenge what was the most consequential result of the reforms of the 1990s: the total dominance of capitalism at a global level. Neoliberalism is being challenged by some of these actors, but by no means consistently. Protectionist policies are becoming more widespread, but not uniformly. Transactional and bilateral impulses are on the increase, but multilateralism still reigns. One can of course also speak of a more narrow regional Liberal International Order as the institutions and values formally regulating relations within the liberal West. Yet that makes it difficult to then speak of all the international organizations, including the UN, the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank, that have a far broader reach, and where the question is not exit, but reform.

Similarly, it is difficult to see what is to be gained analytically from the US favoured term “Rules-Based Order”, which in parallel to the LIO’s status in academia, only gained prominence in the 2010s. As an ideological rallying cry, it might be effective. But it is also highly imprecise when it comes to unpacking central global political dynamics, and is used differently by various actors. Germany explicitly includes the UN Charter, Australia no longer includes the UN Charter but speaks of an order dating back to 1945 and US leadership, while the US seems to increasingly use the “Rules-Based Order” *instead of* international law. This then for example enables the US to criticize China for breaking the “Rules-Based Order” in the South China Sea, despite the US not being party to the Law

35 If that order is understood as the institutions, rules, and values that govern global relations at a given time and context. In Nexon et.al.’s framing of international order (2021, 9), as “relatively stable patterns of relations and practices in world politics”.

36 See e.g. Jahn (2018) and Mearsheimer (2019), who both speak of the ‘LIO’ as a post-1989 system.

of the Sea Convention.³⁷ In all accounts, it's unclear what rules and institutions are being referred to, and who has formally agreed to these rules and how. Both Russia and China are – unsurprisingly – active in challenging the usage of a “Rules-Based Order”, highlighting how it's used arbitrarily against enemies and with unclear reference to what counts as rules.³⁸ The Rules-Based Order is thus also much easier to politicize and critique along ideological and geopolitical dividing lines – in contrast to international law the concept has no formal status or agreed upon scope and definition.

A strong and principled adherence to international law might not be in the interest of major powers who want ultimately to be exempted from any outside restrictions. But it is in the long-term interest of the rest, including Western states, despite international law's imperialist and colonial legacy.³⁹ With Gaza, the bucket is full: the West will be met with significant backlash from much of the non-West when seeking to moralize on the international legal order's behalf. Yet in parallel, Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and its blatant violations of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, international human rights law, and international humanitarian law, similarly reveals the type of discrepancy between rhetoric and actions that the Kremlin criticizes the West for.⁴⁰ For large parts of the world, principled action in relation to the formal rules of the game is both possible and strategically wise – irrespective of ideological and geopolitical allegiances.

In hindsight, the 1990s will look like an exceptional decade in the history of post-1945 global politics, one in which an extensive liberal anti-pluralism sought to redefine much of international infrastructure and domestic politics according to a highly specific liberal-democratic state ideal, and in which the formal pluralism of the post-1945 system was increasingly watered down and challenged by explicit Western dominance and non-pluralist ideological cohesion. What will come next is unclear; the world will be far less liberal, less Western-centric, more statist and sovereigntist, with less room for unchallenged democracy promotion and human rights advocacy and humanitarian interventionism; but also capitalist, multilateral (but revised), and (still) premised on extensive relations of inequality both between and within states. Most of these counter-ideological movements notably leave capitalism's direct reproduction of our social, financial, and climate crises structurally unaddressed.⁴¹ Beyond the weakened economic, geopolitical, and moral position of the liberal West, and the strengthened calls for fairer representation from the non-West, a significant factor shaping global politics will be the continued successes and mainstreaming of the populist radical right. Whilst a global phenomenon, it notably also plays a central role in undermining support for the liberal West from within.

37 For excellent discussions, see Lieberherr (2023), Dugard (2023). Though notably, the US discourse varies greatly. In a 2023 interview, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken also explicitly framed it as the post-WWII architecture, highlighting that its founding documents include the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which enshrine concepts like self-determination, sovereignty, the peaceful settlement of disputes. “These are not western constructs. They are reflections of the world's shared aspirations.” Gideon Rachman et.al. ‘Is there such a thing as a rules-based international order?’, *Financial Times*, 10 April, 2023. URL <https://www.ft.com/content/664d7fa5-d575-45da-8129-095647c8abe7>

38 A point repeated multiple times, but see e.g. The Kremlin, ‘Interview to China Media Group’, 16 October, 2023. URL <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72508>; Global Times, ‘Chinese FM clarifies position on US-claimed ‘rules-based intl order’’, 21 June, 2023. URL <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202306/1292977.shtml>.

39 For excellent discussions, see Parfitt (2019), Tzouvala (2020).

40 There is a distinct lack of critical introspection, as I discuss in relation to both Russia and the West in Holm (2019b).

41 As discussed in Holm (2023) and Holm (2020a), thus also problematizing both theoretically and analytically the increasingly popular framing of these movements as ‘counter-hegemonic’ in a Gramscian tradition.

The role of the European and US Radical and New Right within the counter-ideological pushback

With Donald Trump's electoral victory in 2016 and the UK Brexit vote the same year, the Far Right's implications for global politics were placed high up on the agenda of both academics and policy makers. Since that decisive year, the Far Right has continued to garner considerable attention: from the pivotal role of actors such as Viktor Orbán, Giorgia Meloni, and Marine Le Pen in challenging the EU's liberal identity from within; Far Right successes in Argentina, Brazil and India; to the 2024 US re-election of Donald Trump. The ties between these actors are dense and growing. Though heavily nation-centric, actors on the Far Right are also explicitly seeking to forge strong international alliances, both amongst themselves and with various postliberal and radical (national) conservative milieus.⁴² They have also successfully become a part of the political mainstream.

The Far Right is a broad term used within academic literature to encompass two sub-group of actors located the furthest on the right on the left-right spectrum that are hostile to liberal democracy: the extreme right, and the radical right. Whereas the extreme right "rejects the essence of democracy, that is, popular sovereignty and majority rule", the radical right "accepts the essence of democracy, but opposes fundamental elements of liberal democracy, most notably minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers".⁴³ In the 21st century, the radical right is also predominantly populist, hence the term the populist radical right.⁴⁴ There are considerable differences both between and within these two groups in how they relate to both domestic and global politics.⁴⁵ Whereas the extreme right often seek more radical and revolutionary forms of change, the populist radical right (PRR) are more pragmatic and reformist in their ambitions. As a party family, the PRR are defined by three core ideological features: nativism (the nation-state should "only consist of members of the native group"), authoritarianism (the desire for a strictly ordered society), and populism.⁴⁶ It is predominantly the PRR that we see converging on multiple talking points with non-Western great powers and other actors across the non-liberal West.

The Far Right is not a fringe part of global politics – they constitute a central part of the global political landscape. In Europe and the US, there are multiple different strands within this very broad umbrella group – from the European intellectual New Right, associated particularly with Frenchman

42 For discussions, see Orellana and Michelsen (2019), Tjalve ed. (2020), Holm and Michelsen ed. (2021), Varga and Buzogány (2021), Holm (2023), Abrahamsen et al. (2024).

43 Mudde (2019, 30-31).

44 Mudde (2019, 32); see also McDonnell and Werner (2019).

45 Whilst the two groups are distinct, and in line with the ideological bricolage discussed above, we also see elements from the more revolutionary intellectual right's world views appear amongst both conservative and populist radical right actors. One such example is the conspiracy theory of "The Great Replacement", mobilized for example by the Sweden Democrats and Viktor Orbán, cf. Ekman (2022); or ideas of ethnopluralism.

46 On nativism, Berntzen (2019, 10). On ethnonationalistic nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, cf. Mudde (2019), Cleen and Savrakakis (2017), McDonnell and Werner (2020).

Alain de Benoist and Russian Aleksandr Dugin; the distinctly separate, though partly overlapping, American paleoconservatives, with thinkers such as Pat Buchanan and Paul Gottfried; the European populist radical right as a party family, including parties like the French *Rassemblement National* and the Italian *Brothers of Italy*; and the extreme right, with actors such as *Generation Identity* and the US Alt-Right. Beyond the obvious influence of political parties, the increased political significance of the Far Right is found through multiple avenues, including think tanks, social media, publishing houses and traditional media outlets. The politics of the Far Right has also been increasingly normalized within the broader political playing field during the 2000s, narrowing the gap between what was previously seen as fringe and more extreme positions on topics such as immigration.⁴⁷

Two intellectuals on the European Far Right have received particular attention in relation to the European populist radical right: Alain de Benoist in France and Aleksandr Dugin in Russia. Some analysts go as far as claiming that these thinkers – together with the populist radical right and other illiberal actors – represent a form of cohesive international vision.⁴⁸ Yet, these thinkers are considerably more revolutionary in what they want for global politics than the European PRR. Though some of their ideas do travel to more pragmatist actors within the populist radical right, this is more ad-hoc and detached from their broader context. As such, one should be careful in concluding about what the PRR wants for global politics based on the ideology of the more radical intellectual far right. Media-driven conclusions that, for example, present Dugin as “Putin’s brain” obscure all the considerable ways in which Dugin and the Kremlin also dramatically differ; similarly in relation to the PRR in Europe, despite Dugin’s many (partly successful) attempts at forging strategic ties with them.⁴⁹ We see the same type of differences with de Benoist and the PRR as such, including Marine Le Pen’s *Rassemblement National*: it is both analytically and politically unwise to use the former’s global ideas as *representative* of the latter.

When compared, we see that the views of de Benoist and Dugin and the PRR depart on at least five themes central to global politics: the place of the sovereign nation-state; the role of multilateralism; the position of religion; neoliberal and capitalist relations; and whether pragmatic populism is acceptable as a strategy.⁵⁰ De Benoist speaks of the EU as a “foe” and of NATO as “obsolete”; Dugin of the EU needing to be dissolved, seen as being an expression of the Atlantic civilization and under the control of the USA; NATO similarly being close to death. They are explicit in wanting to dismantle the multilateralism of the post-WWII era. In contrast, none of the actors on the PRR would say that they are against multilateralism as such; in relation to the EU, the majority are now defined as “soft Eurosceptics”, wanting reform rather than exit from the EU.⁵¹ Both Dugin and de Benoist seek a form of post-nation-state regionalist Europe, where “the era of nation states is no more’, with state nationalism “surpassed by subnationalist units ... and by an Empire confederation”.⁵² This is in stark contrast to the PRR’s strong emphasis on both state sovereignty and the nation-state more broadly. In contrast to the often implicit or explicit Islamophobic rhetoric found amongst PRR parties, de Benoist has little to say on Islam and is critical of those who replace critique of immigration with Islamophobia; Dugin views Shia Islam, in particular, as an important component of his vision of

47 Discussed extensively e.g. by Cas Mudde (2019, 2017).

48 For central synthesizing takes, see Orellana and Michelsen (2019), Abrahamsen et. al. (2020).

49 For an extensive exploration of these ties, see Shekhovtsov (2017).

50 Discussed extensively in chapter 6, Holm (2023).

51 Cf. Taggart and Pirro (2021).

52 Spektorowski (2022, 88–89).

Eurasia, seeing Muslim communities as allies against the common enemy of the US. Whereas both de Benoist and Dugin are explicitly anti-capitalists, the PRR are widely scattered in their economic policies, reflecting that economic policies are not a central part of their ideological core. Whilst we can speak of the economic inequalities heightened by neoliberal globalization as an important conditioning factor in the rise of the populist radical right, it is *generally* not systematically addressed in the programmes of the parties (though also here they disagree amongst themselves, with some going far in their critique of neoliberal capitalism).⁵³

That said, the ideological borders between actors on the Far Right – and also, increasingly, certain radical and “postliberal” conservative intellectual milieus seeking to challenge liberal conservatism – are porous. Although the PRR are too pragmatic in their ambition for power to seek the form of revolutionary, radical change in global politics that European New Right actors such as Dugin and de Benoist advocate, they will pick and borrow where they see fit. This is the aspect of populism that involves the ability and willingness to adapt political goals according to new political needs, such as voter preferences or changes in geopolitical circumstances. A notable example is how several PRR parties in Europe have altered their relationship to the EU, learning from and adapting to the Brexit experience; and how Eurosceptic parties also tend to soften their position after assuming governing power. Similarly in the US, Donald Trump showed a great deal more flexibility during his first presidency than the ideological milieus around him would have wanted and expected. That flexibility also makes them more unpredictable.

The highly influential European populist radical right is generally *pragmatist* when it comes to existing key international institutions, including the EU, NATO and the UN. Rather than exit, most of these actors want some form of reform towards more national control and in line with their ideological agendas. Within the different PRR groups in the European Parliament following the 2024 elections, this is expressed as being “eurorealist” instead of anti-European (the European Conservatives and Reformists group); “sovereignty over federalism” (Patriots for Europe); and “restoring sovereignty and self-determination” (Europe of Sovereign Nations). At the same time, there is also considerable divergence *within* the populist radical right when it comes to foreign policy objectives. We see this in relationship to major questions such as the war in Ukraine, including aid and military support; Ukrainian EU and NATO membership; the war in Gaza, and the support for Israel; the desired relationship to the US, China and Russia respectively, including sanctions against Russia; on climate and energy policy; and their attitude to the EU, with the last ranging from explicitly pro-EU to strongly ambivalent or hostile. For those advocating reform of the EU, which the majority of the PRR parties do, the emphasis is on decentralization and more power to the sovereign state, strengthening the “cultural, economic and regulatory traditions of their nation states”.⁵⁴

In general, no foreign policy topic divides the European PRR more than their relationship with Russia. This was the case also long before 2022, but the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has further exacerbated deep divisions in how the parties relate to the Russian government. Whilst some, such as the German *AfD*, have extensive ties with Russian actors and the Kremlin, and advocate pro-

53 As Christian Joppke (2021, 778-9) notes, in “none of the radical right party programs, including the French, does one find a detailed socioeconomic alternative to the neoliberal hegemony”. See also Holm (2020a).

54 Treib (2021, 184).

Russia policies, others are deeply critical of the Russian government.⁵⁵ The third-largest group in the European Parliament following the 2024 elections, the *Patriots for Europe*, is the most influential in this regard. Centred around the French *Rassemblement National* and the Hungarian *Fidesz*, they denounce Russia’s military aggression but also oppose Ukrainian NATO and EU membership. There is disagreement within the group on military aid, but they agree on “keeping the channels to Moscow open”, most controversially expressed through Viktor Orbán’s “peace mission” to Moscow in July 2024. The German *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)* party, dominant within the *Europe of Sovereign Nations* group, wants an end to military assistance to Ukraine and sanctions against Russia, whereas the *European Conservatives and Reformists* group, including the Italian *Brothers of Italy* and the Polish *Law and Justice* party, wants an immediate Ukrainian accession process to NATO and the EU and full military support to Ukraine, “delivering every weapon Ukraine needs, every sanction against its enemies” and insisting that “every frozen Russian asset has to be repurposed to rebuild what Russia has destroyed”.⁵⁶ An extensive and systematic analysis of the PRR’s position on Russia within the European Parliament after 2022, including in relation to sanctions, defined 44 MEPs as “Russia-friendly”, 133 MEPs as “Russia-hostile”, and 138 as Neutral.⁵⁷

The PRR’s critique of liberal internationalism is framed in positive terms as a defence of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs; national interests ultimately superseding other claims; and particular exclusionary community bonds outweighing what is presented as atomistic individualism and ahistorical universalism. They are united in their critique of an intrusive and extensive liberal internationalism, and of an overly centralized and bureaucratic EU; and they are unanimous in their heavy emphasis on immigration as a root cause of society’s ills. Yet they also struggle with cooperating across ideological and geopolitical dividing lines, illustrated most clearly within the European Parliament. In some areas, we see a degree of convergence around revising existing international norms, particularly in relation to democracy, human rights, aid, and humanitarian objectives. Rather than rejecting dominant norms altogether, this entails altering some of the *content and framing* of a particular norm: replacing “liberal democracy” with a notion of “sovereign” or “Christian democracy”, or cosmopolitan ideas of aid with communitarian alternatives that privilege more narrow “in-groups”, for example Christian communities or diaspora groups.⁵⁸ Rather than outright rejection, we thus see dominant norms and practices being rewritten to fit their political purpose and often illiberal and ethnonationalist ideals, ‘hollowing out’ the previous meaning. In this respect, the populist radical right aligns with a number of non-Western state powers who seek to re-frame dominant norms in accordance with their own interests and values.

There is moreover a notable convergence amongst actors on the populist radical right in pushing against what is presented as “gender ideology”, “woke ideology”, and “Pride ideology”, all presented as international (liberal) threats with domestic implications. The PRR are not unanimous in this regard: there are also actors, such as the *Dutch Freedom Party (PVV)*, that advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, presenting that fight as part of a civilizational conflict between Western societies and Islam. But broadly, we see actors advocating for the defence of traditional values, in line with a

55 Cf. McDonnell and Werner (2019) on pre-2022; on post-2022, cf. Wondreys (2023). For an excellent and extensive discussion of the broader Far Right’s relationship to Russia both past and present, see Shekhovtsov (2017).

56 Latvian MEP Rihards Kols on behalf of the ECR group, URL https://ecrgroup.eu/article/kols_history_will_not_forgive_appeasement.

57 Wondreys (2023, 8).

58 I explore this at more length in Holm (2019c); as well as in a policy report, Holm and Tjalve (2020).

more orthodox Christian conservative rhetoric. The Vatican here played an early role in identifying “gender ideology” as a threat, as a response to how gender was brought into the UN agenda in the mid-1990s.⁵⁹ The salience of LGBTQ+ as a new enemy image is similarly explicitly linked to how LGBTQ+ rights were included in particularly EU conditionality policies from 1993 onwards, and US policies somewhat later.⁶⁰ Now, such rights are construed as external threats, as part of a secular, liberal agenda – in the case of e.g. the Russian government, the (liberal) West. Russia’s various legal inventions have played a role in explicitly linking LGBTQ+ to the broader counter-ideological backlash, as expressed most recently through the Russian Supreme Court banning “the LGBT movement” as “extremist”.⁶¹ Together with the Russian legislation on ‘foreign agents’, this is influencing legal initiatives elsewhere.

Beyond the specific utilization of “gender ideology” and the demonization of the LGBTQ+ community as external, internal threats, the discourse is a classical conservative iteration of the nuclear, traditional (heteronormative) family as a central pillar in society. Hence, the resonance with both Christian conservative and more radical conservative milieus. In positive terms, this is rhetorically linked to a wider emphasis of the importance of community structures and as a response to national demographic crises, where “pro-family” policies are presented as an alternative to immigration. There is nothing new in itself about Christian conservative, radical conservative and radical right actors emphasizing heteronormative “traditional family values”. Yet what is consequential is how the LGBTQ+ community – particularly transsexuals – have now been explicitly defined as a significant external Other, construed as an enemy to be fought against as part of a wider counter-ideological struggle vis-à-vis a liberal, secular elite. Together with migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, the LGBTQ+ community thus increasingly constitute one part of the coterie of external Others presented as threatening what is construed as “national” traditional culture and interests. Far Right conspiracy theories – of both the LGBTQ+ community, and refugees and migrants – are tightly interlinked to these enemy images. The consequences are significant, fundamentally challenging the basic human rights and interests of vulnerable minorities. That some of this rhetoric is now becoming mobilised also far beyond Far Right circles underscores the extent to which their policies and politics have become mainstreamed.

Transatlantic ties – Conservative Radicals or Radical Conservatives

A significant international development in recent years has been the active role of national and transnational radical conservative and “postliberal” intellectual milieus in building bridges to political parties on the Far Right, particularly in Europe and the US. Whereas the European PRR have been rather scattergun in their ideological visions and specific ambitions for global politics, the intellectual milieus are increasingly contributing to a crystallisation and consolidation of that agenda. For the European PRR, these ties are particularly strong with actors in the United States such as the annual

59 Cf. Case (2019).

60 On LGBTQ+ rights and EU and US policies, this is discussed in Holm (2023, chapter 4).

61 Human Rights Watch, ‘Russia: Supreme Court Bans “LGBT Movement” as “Extremist”’, 30 November, 2023. URL <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/30/russia-supreme-court-bans-lgbt-movement-extremist>. On the Russian conservative turn and its influence, I discuss this more extensively in Holm (2020c).

Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) welcoming notable European actors like Viktor Orbán (from *Fidesz*) and Giorgia Meloni (from *Brothers of Italy*). The strengthened transatlantic connections parallel the radicalisation of the Republican Party in recent years, which has moved decidedly in the direction of a populist radical right party.⁶² More broadly, this speaks to the mainstreaming of the PRR and PRR politics particularly in the West during the 2000s, in what is known as the “fourth wave” of the Far Right. Previously more classically conservative actors are adapting PRR rhetoric and policies, and vice versa. The CPAC conference, originally an annual US event, has, since 2017, also hosted international variants in Australia, Brazil, Hungary, Japan, Mexico, and South Korea. Since 2022 Hungary has hosted an annual European version, including MAGA Republicans and other ultraconservative US actors, and with video addresses by Donald Trump. Other notable new shared platforms include the *National Conservatism* conferences mounted since 2016 by US, Israeli, and European conservative intellectuals, with organizers including the *International Reagan Thatcher Society* and the *Edmund Burke Foundation*. The Hungarian *Danube Institute*, close to the *Fidesz* government, has for four years co-hosted an annual geopolitical summit with the US *Heritage Foundation*. These types of platforms are highly congenial to the populist radical right’s project of seeking normalization, of being “respectable radicals”, underscoring their desire to officially distance themselves from the stigmatized milieus of the extreme right (yet at times explicitly and unapologetically mimicking some of their references, as seen in relation to Islam, ethnopluralism, race, LGBTQ+, and immigration).⁶³ For many of these movements, an ambition is to blur the line between conservatism and the radical right, thus also challenging liberal conservatism.

Since Trump’s first presidency, there has been a considerable strengthening of ideological milieus seeking to give ideological and intellectual support to the eclectic MAGA (“Make American Great Again”) project. New and old institutionalised variants include the *Heritage Foundation*, *the Claremont Institute*, *the America First Policy Institute*, *the Center for Renewing America*, and *the American Movement*.⁶⁴ As in the European context, there are discernible differences between the more radical utopias of intellectuals and the pragmatism of politics. During his first term, Trump had less of an impact on US foreign policy than his critics had feared and his supporters had hoped. Yet with the incoming administration, two aspects are particularly noteworthy in comparison with the European PRR: one, that more principled and radical ideologues are directly represented, as through the vice president-elect J.D. Vance; and second, that whereas most of the European parties are tempered by their structural dependency on the EU, the Trump administration stands more freely both domestically and internationally, despite the constraints of the Congress and courts. Notably, the various ideological milieus have also expressed more radical perspectives both on domestic and international governance – as in fundamentally uprooting and transforming the administrative state (“draining the swamp”), and leaving important IOs. On several positions, the intellectual US milieus now influencing Trump are closer to the intellectual utopian and revolutionary European New Right, than to the more pragmatic European populist radical right. Yet neither are the US milieus united: there are significant economic, financial, political, and foreign policy differences between the postliberal, national conservative and radical conservative milieus currently seeking to have an impact on the incoming administration. Whilst there is broad agreement in the critique of an expansive and interventionist liberal internationalism, they differ, for example, in how they view China: ranging from seeing China as a “civilizational equal” with which the US should seek

62 On the Republican Party, see e.g. Mudde (2019).

63 On ‘respectable radicals’, see McDonnell and Werner (2020, 12).

64 For an excellent discussion, see Borg (2024).

cooperation, to more hawkish positions that advocate an “Asia first” policy. It is the latter more hawkish group that are seen as the most influential vis-à-vis the incoming administration, which also entails a highly restrained position on the question of aid and assistance to Ukraine.⁶⁵ Though Trump has positioned himself against humanitarian interventionism, he also had few issues with authorizing strikes on Syria and Iraq in his preceding term, whilst threatening North Korea with “fire and fury”. According to leaks, his threats against North Korea included considering using a nuclear weapon and then blaming it on someone else.⁶⁶ As such, it would be too simplistic to assume that Trump’s positions on humanitarian interventionism and quick peace deals translate into non-interventionism as such. In contrast to his European counterparts, he sees few – if any – international (and domestic) constraints on his power and interests. He is thus also far more radical in his relationship to global order than most other counter-ideological actors across the West and non-West. Trump’s unpredictability, coupled with the US’ declining hegemonic status, is a highly volatile mix.

The European PRR has traditionally been deeply sceptical of the US. The radicalization of the Republican Party and the development of particularly the national conservative and postliberal milieus has softened that scepticism. Still, the European PRR is split. There are the traditionally more US-sceptical actors such as the French *Rassemblement National*, but also those highly positive towards the US like the Polish *Law and Justice Party* (PiS). Marine Le Pen was notably subdued in her reaction to Trump’s 2024 victory, fearing the effect of ‘America First’ tariff policies on French industry.⁶⁷ Steve Bannon’s highly publicized 2018 attempt at uniting the European PRR under a supergroup called “The Movement” was a massive flop. Many of the EU actors reacted strongly against an American seeking to impose unity from the outside. The US-centred ideological milieus have been far more successful in their more moderate attempt of creating broad platforms where core European PRR parties can meet with US Republicans and ultraconservative intellectuals and exchange ideas and strategies. This also leaves more room for fundamental differences in interests, as in relation to European fears over US tariffs under Trump.

The PRR actors closest to Donald Trump in Europe currently in power are the Hungarian government under *Fidesz* and its prime minister Viktor Orbán, and the Italian *Brothers of Italy* and its prime minister Giorgia Meloni. Both politicians have also figured actively in international conferences organized by so-called postliberal and national-conservative intellectual milieus, most strongly represented by US, Israeli, Hungarian, and British intellectuals. Of the two, Meloni represents the most pragmatic and ‘easy’ connection, popular and influential also amongst EU elites. She is highly critical of Russia, advocating full military assistance to Ukraine; pragmatic in Italy’s dependence on the EU; harsh on immigration, a position increasingly popular also amongst liberal EU elites; and “pro-family”, a position which also resonates with many on the European Christian Right. Orbán is, by contrast, largely ostracized in Brussels, yet he is also closest ideologically to the MAGA project, and the various ‘national conservative’ and postliberal milieus surrounding Trump. During Trump’s previous presidency, there was thus also a noticeable strengthening of the US relationship with the

65 There are at least three different camps currently seeking to be part of or to directly influence the incoming administration: postliberals, national-conservatives, and the New Right. For an excellent recent discussion see Borg (2024).

66 Rebecca Shabad, ‘Trump discussed using a nuclear weapon on North Korea in 2017 and blaming it on someone else, book says’, NBC News, 12 January, 2023. URL <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-discussed-using-nuclear-weapon-north-korea-2017-blaming-someone-rcna65120>.

67 See e.g. Victor Goury-Laffont and Anthony Lattier, “Why the French far right isn’t ecstatic at Trump’s return”, *Politico*, 7 November, 2024. URL <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-far-right-marine-le-pen-not-celebrating-donald-trump-return-yet-us-election/>.

governments in Hungary (under *Fidesz* rule) and Poland (under past *PiS* rule). Their shared ‘national conservative’ ethos was also expressed in multiple shared ideological positions, emphasizing the importance of Judeo-Christian culture and civilization; the need to protect Christians abroad; and strong support for Israel.⁶⁸ The highly influential *Heritage Foundation* has under the post-2021 leadership of Kevin Roberts developed close ties with Orbán, expressed both through meetings in the US and annual geopolitical summits held in Hungary. Of prominent European politicians welcoming Trump’s victory, Orbán was by far the most vocal. Trump in turn stated as recently as 2024 that “there’s nobody that’s better, smarter, or a better leader than Viktor Orbán. He’s fantastic... He’s a great leader.”⁶⁹ Orbán also notably visited Trump in his Mar-a-Lago home both before the elections, in July 2024, and after, in December 2024, both thus sending an unquestionable signal about their close ties. Meloni was similarly one of the visitors, though allegedly closer to Elon Musk than Donald Trump.

Though Meloni might be the most obvious and powerful EU connection for the incoming administration amongst the populist radical right, *Fidesz*’s policies will most likely continue to be the most influential in Trump’s ideological and political circles. This includes Orbán’s position on the Ukraine war, seeking an end to financial and military support and an immediate ceasefire and peace talks between Kyiv and Moscow. At the same time, whilst *Fidesz*’s deepening ties with Beijing parallels the US postliberal perspective on China, it contradicts the influential and far more hawkish position advocating for an “Asia first” policy. As Kevin Roberts, president of the *Heritage Foundation* and close to Orbán, emphasized in an interview, Hungary “must find a way to untether from China, Russia, and Iran, otherwise it risks losing the open support from American conservatives who consider those regimes our enemies”. That reservation aside, Roberts stressed that he was “a huge fan”: “Modern Hungary is not just a model for conservative statecraft, but *the* model”.⁷⁰ Though there are multiple differences of interests amongst the European PRR and the Trump administration, they will together contribute to a further normalisation and mainstreaming of Far Right alternatives to both liberal internationalism and the liberal-democratic ideal. This also includes reproducing discourses that are highly antagonistic to vulnerable minorities.

Global order ahead

The incoming Trump administration will undoubtedly contribute significantly to a further deepening of opposition to the extensive international liberalism of the 1990s, underscoring the extent to which this counter-ideological pushback runs directly through the West. That opposition has both significant domestic and international consequences, in questions far beyond issues such as trade, climate, and humanitarianism, as it ultimately concerns the status of liberal democracy as a state ideal, and the formal boundaries between international society and the sovereign nation-state. Here the US under Trump is part of a wider backlash that cuts across ideological and geopolitical divides, uniting actors across the West/non-West, South/North binaries. Whilst not agreeing on what should

68 Discussed at length in a policy report, see Tjalve and Holm (2020).

69 Martin Pengelly, “Trump ‘will not give a penny to Ukraine’ if he wins’, Hungary’s Viktor Orbán says”, *The Guardian*, 11 March, 2024. URL <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/mar/11/trump-ukraine-war-viktor-orban>.

70 Tamás Orbán, “Politicians Don’t Like Doing the Right Thing’ — Interview with Kevin Roberts”, *Hungarian Conservative*, 5 December, 2022. URL <https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/interview/politicians-dont-like-doing-the-right-thing-interview-with-kevin-roberts/>.

come next, they are united in a shared critique of, and opposition to, the anti-pluralist and expansive liberal internationalism of the post-Cold War era. Notably, Trump and the ideological milieus around him often go further than their European and non-Western reactionary “mainstream” counterparts, at times also questioning the importance and meaning of prominent international organizations including the UN and various UN bodies, the IMF, and the World Bank.⁷¹ The incoming president thus also represents a significant challenge to multilateralism as a practice and principle.

Trump’s electoral victory, and the platform that he ran on, is yet another example of how mainstreamed the Far Right have become. Whilst there are structural limits to what the PRR can accomplish within the EU, the US’s singular position affords the possibility of both more hardline and far more consequential implications for global politics. Trump’s presidency will also give further strength to the transnational enemy construction of vulnerable minorities, most noticeably the LGBTQ+ community, women’s abortion rights, migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. We will see a continued blurring of transnational and national boundaries between radical right and conservative milieus, with conservative religious positions on e.g. sexual and reproductive rights becoming more influential in both domestic and foreign policy. In parallel, we can expect to see a continued strengthening of racialised and civilizational hierarchies in global politics. Notably, the discourse on the West’s civilizational decline and the proliferation of civilizational counter-narratives run across the West/non-West divide. Whilst this is coupled with ideas of ‘civilizational diversity’, as in the Chinese discourse, these civilizational discourses also reproduce exclusionary and often nativist markers.

There are multiple and extensive differences between the actors on the radical and New Right and the positions we see articulated by groups such as BRICS+, and most notably by Russia and China as the most prominent voices in the counter-ideological pushback. Russia and China share a position highly popular amongst the otherwise heterogenous Global South, in seeking a more multipolar world with greater non-Western representation and influence in international bodies. Whilst their aspirations for breaking the dominance of the US dollar seem distant, they have been highly successful in other arenas. BRICS+, now representing over 40% of the world’s population, has gone from an informal coalition with little power, to an increasingly powerful non-Western club. With the NATO-member Turkey now wanting membership, this signals a significant geopolitical disruption. The emphasis on increased non-Western representation is nowhere to be found amongst the European populist radical right, who are more concerned with strengthening their own national interests and lessening the influence of intrusive liberal and EU demands. There is little expressed sympathy for non-Western demands; and whilst the far right also holds notable power outside Europe and the US, the decisive “in-group” is clearly Western. In parallel to the call for multipolarity and fairer (non-Western) representation, within the non-Western discourse there is also a strong pushback against the persistent mismatch between ideals and practice in liberal global politics. The emphasis on hypocrisy and double standards plays less of a role in radical right rhetoric; so too does international law and the UN Charter, though the language that they use explicitly refers to a world in which sovereignty and non-interference are central. But ultimately, these actors meet in seeking a world

71 *The Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025* for example suggested withdrawing from the World Bank and the IMF. It also suggested that all economic assistance and humanitarian aid should be done unilaterally rather than via NGOs or IOs. See *Project 2025*, page 701-702. URL https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf.

order where the “internal characteristics” of their own state is the sovereign state’s prerogative.⁷² For the human rights norms and humanitarian principles that expanded through the 1990s and early 2000s, this is particularly bad news.

When compared with each other, it is clear that despite all of their differences the world they seek is less liberal, more sovereigntist, and with an emphasis on multiplicity and tolerance of difference in ways of governance. They are not as much against the “post-1945” *international* architecture, centred on the UN and formal regulation of inter-state relations, commonly seen as the backbone of the “Liberal International Order” or “Rules-Based Order” now declared to be in crisis. Instead, they position themselves against the expansion and entrenchment of the non-pluralist liberalism of the 1990s. The invocation of political, economic, cultural and geographical sovereignty becomes the protective discourse against the ideas, rules, influence and institutions that these actors do not want. Their shared critique thus entails a strengthening of the formal borders between the national and international in relation to political and economic issue areas and a strengthening of various communal bonds (civilizational, religious, cultural, nativist) at the expense of universalist aspirations. For the non-Western actors, fairer geopolitical distribution of power and access is key, along with diversity in global governance ideals. For the populist radical right, ideological diversification in line with their nativist, authoritarian, sovereigntist, and populist ideology is central. Whilst by no means all anti-Western, they are nevertheless all highly critical of the *liberal* West. The future of global order is fundamentally in flux, with ideological and geopolitical competition fully back on the agenda.

⁷² Of course, highly hypocritical in Russia’s case – not only following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, but for decades. Russian and US meddling in ‘internal affairs’ was at its height during the Cold War, but has continued since; see Levin (2016), discussed also in Holm (2023). On Russia and China’s shared rhetorical emphasis on the UN Charter and so-called liberal pluralism, see Holm and Sending (2018), Holm (2023).

Implications for the Liberal West: Assessments and predictions

- International politics, and particularly its ideological and normative fabric, will be increasingly politicized and contested in the years to come. The liberal West has not only lost considerable normative but also geopolitical, political, and economic power. Though the West still holds considerable global power, its liberal credentials are challenged by both external and internal forces – and by a failure to live up to its own ideals. Whilst global capitalism in its many forms will go largely unchallenged by the new counter-ideological pushback, the parameters of ideal governance form, and the formal borders between the national and the international, will be at the centre of global discussions. The main international organizations – including the UN, WTO, IMF, WB, EU, NATO – will face calls for wider ideological and geopolitical diversity. Beyond the incoming Trump administration, few of the actors currently in power will fundamentally challenge multilateralism as such. But we will see significant changes from within, challenging aspects of the expansive liberalism of the 1990s, and the unequal distribution of power in favour of the Global North.
- A reversal and challenge to developments of the 1990s entails an increased challenge to human rights norms within the UN; and a deep scepticism towards humanitarian intervention, including the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). The 2011 Libyan intervention and the fall of Libya's leader Muammar Gaddafi was a "point of no return" for Russia and China. Non-interventionism and non-interference in internal affairs are central within the counter-ideological pushback, emphasizing the 1945 UN Charter's principles. This will make international (liberal) democracy promotion and human rights advocacy increasingly contentious. That does not mean that all actors within this counter-ideological pushback will not themselves engage with interventions into internal affairs, whether through electoral meddling or military power – Russia is a blatant example in this regard. But so too is the incoming Trump administration, as also illustrated in the weeks before his presidency with announcements of wanting to buy Greenland, threatening with military action – and Elon Musk meddling in European domestic politics in favour of far-right parties. For both Russia and the US, this is however entirely consistent with their conduct in the decades since World War II. For the US under the new Trump administration, what is notable is the explicit shift in favour of illiberal and far-right actors *within* Europe – and the implicit, however unlikely, threat to a loyal NATO-member.
- Increased political contestation over normative and ideological questions means that states that are seen as part of the liberal, Western core must expect to have to defend their desired ideals and best practices much more explicitly in political, economic, financial, and moral terms. Practices of Western moralization and stigmatization will be increasingly met with a pushback that questions the moral status and standing of the criticizer, and/or questions the underlying value claim in itself. Gone are the days where one could assume the moral high ground without expecting significant backlash. The domain of values perceived as 'neutral' and/or universal will continue to shrink, as actors continue to actively contest both the application and definition

of central ideals within domestic and global governance. Though not a return to the binary ideological and great power competition of the Cold War, ideological alternatives to liberal-democratic governance will continue to spread and flourish.

- For the liberal West, critical introspection, self-reflection and consistent principled adherence to international law will be key to uphold the international *legal* order. If not, it will be very difficult to claim a position of principled critique without it being flatly rejected with reference to double standards and hypocrisy. This is also notably in the West's strategic interest vis-à-vis Russia, which prominently emphasizes Western hypocrisy in relation to international law yet is marred in double standards itself. For most of the world's states, this type of more principled position is both possible and strategically wise. But if international law becomes widely seen as merely an optional rhetorical tool wielded against enemies but not friends – and thus reduced to ideological and geopolitical dividing lines – the world will be far worse off. Whilst that has always been a feature of international law, notable major events over the past quarter century – from the 1999 Kosovo intervention, the 2003 Iraq war, the 2011 Libya intervention, Russia's 2014 annexation and then full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Israeli war crimes and crimes against humanity in Gaza – have heightened the stakes considerably.
- The broad counter-ideological development also constitutes a direct challenge to the practices of the EU and NATO in defining themselves reflexively as distinct liberal “communities of shared values”, and to the “West” being utilized with reference to a collective and liberal Self. On the one hand, this will be dismissed as hypocritical by outside (non-Western and Western) actors, the positioning thus causing a direct backlash. How this develops, depends in part on whether large parts of the West continue to close their eyes on Gaza. Frustration with Western complicity in undermining the very values and institutions that (liberal) Western states claim to both represent and defend is widespread and reaches far beyond the rhetoric of Beijing and Moscow. That makes it also easy for states such as Russia to manipulate in their favour.
- On the other hand, the practice of operating with a unified liberal ‘us’ in relation to NATO/EU/the West will be increasingly difficult to uphold as internal ideological divisions multiply. Insisting on a unified liberal ethos further solidifies an ideological construction that is premised on the persistent exclusion of both less-than-liberal actors and actions. Strategically, this will be particularly problematic for NATO, counting Trump's US as its most central member, flanked by Erdoğan's Turkey and Orbán's Hungary. The populist radical right is, moreover, no longer a fringe position: it is a central part of both European and US politics. Whilst they do not reject democracy as such, they are explicitly critical of central aspects of liberal democracy. They advocate nativist, exclusionary, and authoritarian policies. Consequently, it would be prudent to reflect more systematically on what this entails for, for example, NATO as a liberal democratic security community. What values can one realistically claim to represent and defend within a West, and/or alliances, that are no longer even formally (only) liberal-democratic? What does this internal ideological diversification entail for states that explicitly want a more value-based foreign policy?
- We can expect the most directly targeted groups and causes from the broad backlash to be the LGBTQ+ community, women's rights, refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, immigrants, and civil society with international links, particularly in connection to democracy promotion and human rights advocacy. In positive terms, this is spun around sovereignty, non-interference, national

interests, security, tolerance of difference, civilizational diversity, and defence of traditional and national values. Threats to these groups notably also come from within ostensibly liberal societies, underscoring the extent to which this backlash cannot be reduced to a West/non-West, democracies/autocracies binary. Whilst the most visible convergence is between radical right and (radical or ‘national’) conservative actors, this influence runs across the political spectrum, as seen most evidently in relation to immigration and refugee policies. If liberal Western states want to counter this trend, they must thus also start at home. In relation to aid and humanitarian assistance, we can expect to see a growing coalescence around discursive framings that morally and politically privilege some narrower form of communitarian in-group; be it diaspora, religious, civilizational, or regional.

- Both the concepts of “Liberal International Order” and “Rules-Based Order” are deeply embedded in narrow ideological prisms – it is also unclear what specific institutions, values, and practices they refer to. The dominant ways in which they are mobilized also tend to privilege a mythical liberal, Western perspective, whilst inadvertently de-emphasizing the specific claims of international law. As such, one should be careful in using them both politically and analytically: they risk reproducing highly specific ideological blind spots.
- Keeping the international legal order separate and distinct also allows for a more precise discussion of the other forms of coalescence around illiberal, postliberal, radical right, and authoritarian ideas and practices – both within and outside the liberal West. Whilst they do not challenge the post-1945 system as such, they constitute a highly diverse but significant force united in opposition to the liberal-democratic state ideal and extensive liberal internationalism that defined international politics in the post-Cold War era. This has significant consequences both for domestic and international politics. Yet they also leave much of the post-1989 architecture intact, seeking ultimately reform, not exit, of dominant multilateral institutions. The non-West’s quest for more influence and fairer representation will entail both geopolitical and ideological diversification of international organizations.
- Ultimately, there are big political, strategic, and ideological questions ahead for the liberal West: what is the West, who is it for, and what values can the ideologically more diverse and geopolitically more weakened West realistically claim and want to collectively represent? The hopes of the 1990s and early 2000s turned out to be rather short-lived. In a world that will be both geopolitically and ideologically far more diverse, the liberal West needs to find its footing with the rest.

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