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**International Conference
Dealing with Autocracies in a Fragmented World
Conference Report**

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Jonas Wolff // Jonas J. Driedger



Peace Research Institute Frankfurt
Leibniz-Institut für
Friedens- und Konfliktforschung



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PRIF Conference Report

International Conference Dealing with Autocracies in a Fragmented World

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1. AIMS OF THE CONFERENCE

With the rise of China and Russia's war against Ukraine, the question of how democracies shape their relationship with autocracies has become a highly topical issue. In academic and political debates, there is currently much talk of regime rivalry, which often gets reduced to a supposedly polarized conflict between democracies and autocracies. The reality, however, is much more complex: Relations between democracies and autocracies take on extremely different forms, not to mention all those countries whose political regimes cannot be neatly put into either box. At the same time, however, the narrative of a systemic rivalry between democratic and autocratic regimes has had a major impact on public policy debates, as the guiding theme of the agenda of US President Biden, which has also been taken up by governments in Europe and Asia.

The PRIF Annual Conference 2023 "Dealing with Autocracies in a Fragmented World" explored from an empirical and normative perspective how democracies can and should deal with autocracies in the current multipolar world. It questioned to what extent general norms such as "do no harm" or the call for coherence with democratic values matter in different forms of interaction, ranging from cooperation, coexistence to competition, disengagement and even open conflict. In addition to these practical challenges of "dealing with autocracies", scientifically, the conference aimed at identifying a middle ground, neither ascribing too much impact to regime types, nor entirely disregarding the relevance of political regime types and differences or dissolving everything into a web of purely bilateral relations with specific autocracies.

The conference therefore dealt with four overarching questions: 1) How relevant are the respective political regime types of the countries involved as well as the very distinction between democracy and autocracy? 2) What kind of empirical patterns do we observe in the relations between (Western) democracies and autocracies? 3) What are the consequences of these different forms of interaction for the autocratic regimes at hand (e.g., their stabilization, destabilization, or potential transformation)? 4) What are the consequences of these different forms of interaction (as well as the narratives and justifications that accompany them) for dynamics of conflict both between and within countries?

These questions were discussed in four panels that each had a specific focus on a mode of interaction, a specific issue area and world region: infrastructure policies with a focus on China (panel 1), energy and climate policies with a view to EU relations with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (panel 2), international democracy promotion, with a focus on EU policies towards MENA and Sub-Saharan Africa (panel 3), and international security, taking an in-depth look at Russia's war in Ukraine and its global implications (panel 4). While the foci of the panels allowed for zooming in and critically discussing issue and context-specific empirical patterns, the roundtable at the end of the conference brought together the insights from the panels and arrived at some, albeit preliminary answers to the guiding questions.

In addition to spurring academic debates, the conference also succeeded in enhancing the visibility of PRIF's new research group on "Regime Competition" and integrating it more firmly within the international academic community and discourse. All panels featured high-profile international participants as speakers, while the conference also saw strong in-person attendance from universities and think tanks across Germany. The conference was highly successful in paving the way for further cooperation between PRIF and external researchers, resulting in joint publication projects. Additionally, external speakers were encouraged to publish summaries of their contributions in the research group's series on the PRIF blog. One such blog post went online already, with several more to follow.

While the panelists were mainly academics in order to advance the topic on a scientific level, the conference also drew significant interest from practitioners, including representatives of several consulates and development cooperation organizations.

2. PANEL SUMMARIES

Panel 1 opened the conference with a focus on "dealing with China in international development and infrastructure policies", a topic that has gained prominence with the advancement of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the responding efforts by Western governments to overhaul their own offers, e.g. in the form of the EU's Global Gateway. As a result, the provision of infrastructure has become a highly competitive field, which also touches upon regime types and relations in multiple ways. China and Western funders are separated by pronounced differences in their political and economic regimes, which shape their respective offers. In contrast to China's aid and investment, Western development assistance usually comes with explicit political conditions, although these are rarely consistently applied.

In his presentation, Pascal Abb focused on the question of whether the BRI constitutes an example of "infrastructural authoritarianism" that seeks to transform recipient countries in China's own image. Based on examples drawn from major BRI markets like Pakistan and Myanmar, he concluded that the BRI is neither seeking nor able to change political regimes in recipient countries, but shaped by elements of China's domestic approach to infrastructure provision, i.e. centralization and a lack of interest in civil society outreach.

These have often proven highly controversial abroad. Zhang Hong went into more detail on specific (dis-)advantages of the BRI. While it is often perceived as a highly strategic and coordinated effort, its sprawling scope has actually resulted in a loss of policy coherence and insufficient institutionalization. Its successes have mainly resulted from the competence of individual firms and the competitiveness of Chinese financing, but vary significantly between regions. This also leaves some space for cooperation with European efforts that can complement weaknesses of the BRI. Wrenn Lindgren described how Japan competes with the BRI across Southeast Asia. Similar to China, Japan has a geo-economic approach to development aid that has actually informed BRI practices, understanding aid as a tool to pursue national interests. In practice, Japan tries to leverage its advantages

in technical excellence while pursuing low-profile cooperation with authoritarian governments, e.g. remaining engaged in post-coup Myanmar. In her comments, Marina Rudyak pointed out that China's development approach follows the same pragmatic experimentation as other policy innovations of the reform era. Additionally, there are examples of trilateral development cooperation between China, other funders and recipients, which rarely face ideological obstacles in practice; however, current international tensions make it politically difficult to argue for such cooperation.



Conference Introduction



Panel 1 Discussion

Panel 2 shifted the focus towards “dealing with autocracies in the MENA Region in climate and energy policies”. With the Green Deal and in the course of the energy crisis caused by Russia’s war in Ukraine, the EU has accelerated a massive transition towards green energy from the MENA. While the energy transition and more generally the fight against global warming is a policy field where it might seem obvious that global cooperation across regime types is absolutely necessary, the panelists gave a very critical assessment of what is portrayed as a win-win situation by European decision-makers. The first talk by Benjamin Schütze dealt with electricity interconnection projects in and across the Southern Mediterranean.

He elaborated on how grid connections were premised on as well as reinforced different forms of violence, perpetuating existing inequalities and power asymmetries, e.g. in the form of selective connectivity or by “greening” colonial occupation. Imane Boukhatem and Irene Weipert-Fenner presented comparative findings on local perceptions of the EU’s run towards green hydrogen from Algeria and Tunisia, that - instead of energy cooperation - revealed strong feelings of instigated competition by the EU among the Southern neighbors as well as of domination and exploitation. At the same time, the analysis of the authoritarian contexts in the two North African countries also helps explain the difficulties of civil society actors to play a more active role in public debates in order to define and push for a “just transition”.

The third speaker, Yana Popkostova very much confirmed the assessment from local actors in energy-exporting countries by zooming in on the EU. Currently energy security clearly outweighs value-oriented foreign policy approaches, with very little attention being paid to developmental aspects in the export countries. As the world economy is shifting towards low-carbon products and technology, the focus on exporting green energy could even worsen the economic situation in the MENA as long as the domestic energy mix is built largely on fossil fuels. In his comment, Hannes Warnecke-Berger critically discussed how the EU tends to stabilize autocratic regimes in the MENA.

Given the aim to secure social peace in the EU by keeping energy prices low, panel participants identified little room for a more critical and nuanced EU approach towards autocracies in MENA, while simultaneously noting the potential for conflict on the local, national and even regional level in the region.

Panel 3 zoomed in on the topic of “dealing with autocracies in democracy promotion”. In doing so, the panel tackled a policy field that is, by definition, concerned with the nature and change of political regimes. As a consequence, the question of how to deal with autocracies has accompanied the practice and research of international democracy promotion from the very beginning. Yet, as the panel made clear, this old question has gained new dimensions and forms in the current context that is characterized by an increasing international role and relevance of autocratic governments as well as by the global trend of democratic backsliding or autocratization. In her presentation, Christine Hackenesch discussed three key challenges for EU democracy support that come with China’s increasing presence in Sub-Saharan Africa, namely: the competition of narratives and political models; China’s direct and indirect contributions to stabilizing authoritarian rule in the region; and Chinese activities that directly undermine the operation of EU democracy support instruments.



Panel 3 Discussion



Questions for Panel 3

While Hackenesch made clear that these challenges are real and require a response, she argued that an important question for the EU is how not to make things even worse, on the one hand by further fueling the competition of narratives, on the other by similarly contributing to the stabilization of autocracies in the region. Drawing on preliminary findings from the EU-funded international research project “SHAPEDEM-EU”, Michelle Pace focused on the ways in which the EU has been doing, and continues to do, democracy promotion in the Eastern and Southern neighborhood. Highlighting a lack of learning as well as competing foreign policy priorities within the EU, Pace diagnosed a repetition of malpractices that often, rather than supporting democratization, tend to make local struggles for democracy in the MENA region more difficult. According to Richard Youngs, the current challenge to (EU) democracy promotion is not so much the question of how to deal with autocracies, which is really an old challenge. Rather, the key question at the moment is how to deal with resistance to democracy support, which can be observed in both autocratic and (more or less) democratic regimes. In this regard, Youngs acknowledged important, but overall rather modest EU responses that, e.g., allow for more indirect funding of civil society organizations or offer protection to civil society actors. The main thrust of EU policies, however, is driven by other priorities and imply the cooperation with and funding of autocratic governments.

In her comment, Marianne Kneuer concluded that a more differentiated view of political regime differences was clearly needed that goes beyond simple binaries (like the democracy-autocracy distinction). This is particularly so given that current trends of democratic erosion or autocratization come with “hybridization” and quite a bit of oscillating political developments. With a view to international democracy promotion, she highlighted the fact that strategies and instruments were developed in a context of global democratization. Kneuer, thus, identified the need to reconceptualize democracy promotion, but noted that the three presentations had shown that there are strong continuities and path dependencies.

Panel 4 turned the attention to “dealing with Russia in Europe and at the global stage”. Putin’s war of aggression marks an unprecedented decline in cooperation and interdependence between Russia and the West. Tackling the crucial question of how this confrontation is likely to play out in the future, the panel brought together expert inputs on the role that regime types, regime dynamics, and regime perceptions play in the Ukrainian-Russian and Western-Russian conflict. Jonas Driedger laid out the geopolitical context of the conflict. He argued that Russia and the West were currently locked into an intense standoff. Driedger estimated that a Ukrainian victory, major domestic upheavals in Russia, or a sanction-induced end to the conflict were unlikely in the short- to mid-term.

He concluded by discussing the prospects and policy options of a long-term transformation of the conflict. Yevgeniya Gaber then discussed the conflict from the vantage point of Ukrainian foreign policy. Gaber outlined how autocratic features of Russian domestic politics connected to the Kremlin’s foreign policy goals and behavior. She warned against confining the analytical focus merely on Russia and Ukraine, stressing that Russia weaponized cultural, economic, and political ties into the EU and the broader West.

Sofia Oliynyk then surveyed how the Russian aggression affected the workings of Ukrainian society and domestic politics. Oliynyk explained how Russia’s actions caused challenges for organizing elections, decentralization, and combating corruption, but had also allowed Ukrainians to become more resilient, cohesive, and inventive in engaging these issues. Stefan Kroll discussed and organized these inputs under the framework of crises and crisis management. Leading into a vivid exchange with the audience, Kroll asked which factors determine how crises such as the inter-regime war and intra-regime shocks come about, how they are perceived, which consequences they have and how they can best be dealt with.



Panel 4 Introduction



Questions for Panel 4

3. GENERAL FINDINGS

As all academic exchanges, the conference did not identify clear-cut answers to the questions that were posed at its outset. Still, the presentations and discussions, particularly during the final roundtable with all panel discussants and chaired by Jonas Wolff, helped identify overarching patterns and more general ideas that were brought together in the concluding session. Here, we will summarize some of these findings as preliminary answers to the four guiding questions.

3.1 HOW RELEVANT ARE THE RESPECTIVE POLITICAL REGIME TYPES OF THE COUNTRIES INVOLVED AS WELL AS THE VERY DISTINCTION BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND AUTOCRACY?

Most participants argued against constructing a dichotomy that divides the world into democratic or authoritarian camps. Despite current political rhetoric and sometimes action (e.g. the US-initiated "Summit for Democracy"), sharp distinctions are, empirically, hard to sustain and also do not actually play an important role in practical policy. However, participants also agreed that political regime types – with their internal diversity and fluidity – mattered strongly. In order to understand the diverse interactions and relations that are possible or desirable with regimes of a certain type, a thorough and context-specific understanding of their function is necessary. Particularly during the roundtable, participants stressed the importance of in-depth country expertise, most often found in area studies and area-focused social science. Despite the high practical relevance of this knowledge, its institutional infrastructure often remains underfunded, as can be seen in the low number of university chairs focusing on China and Russia studies.

Academic knowledge production and teaching remains focused on Europe and the US, which offer comparatively little variety in regime types, while their relations are shaped by highly institutionalized frameworks. Another important point raised in this context was the need for inter-sectoral analysis when evaluating relations with non-democratic regimes of all sorts. Particularly research on international democracy promotion should not remain restricted to studying the specific policy field that is explicitly dedicated to the promotion of democracy, but needs to cover the broad range of international cooperation that is relevant in shaping political regime dynamics in other countries. As many participants across the panels agreed, the foreign, economic, and development policies of Western governments often tend to contradict the declared aim of democracy promotion and, in terms of relevance, dwarf the mostly quite marginal activities that explicitly aim at promoting democracy. Sectoral cooperation, then, offers an important area: for instance, energy cooperation could be used to facilitate a stronger role for civil society actors to make the far-reaching energy transition process more participatory and eventually fairer.

3.2 WHAT KIND OF EMPIRICAL PATTERNS DO WE REALLY OBSERVE IN THE RELATIONS BETWEEN (WESTERN) DEMOCRACIES AND AUTOCRACIES?

Regarding the different modes of interaction, current European and US debates tend to focus on increased levels of (potential) conflict with autocracies, often focusing specifically on Russia and China. These prominent cases, however, rather point to dynamics of great power rivalry, in which the role of competing ideologies is far from clear-cut. In contrast, the analyses of EU relations with other non-democratic regimes as well as of, e.g. China's relations with Africa revealed a picture marked far more strongly by cooperation and (limited) competition - two modes of interaction that are also not mutually exclusive but tend to combine in various ways in the different issue areas discussed during the conference. Another recurrent theme concerned the processes of adaptation, innovation and learning involved in relations with countries of different regime types. When looking broadly at Western relations with the broad range of autocracies, the pattern as it emerged from the presentations at the conference is much more cooperative and much less shaped by regime differences than the current narrative of democracies that should join forces against the world's potentially dangerous autocracies would lead us to expect.

3.3 WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THESE DIFFERENT FORMS OF INTERACTION FOR THE AUTOCRATIC REGIMES AT HAND (E.G., THEIR STABILIZATION, DESTABILIZATION, OR POTENTIAL TRANSFORMATION)?

Current forms of interaction seem to strengthen rather than weaken autocracies. This, on the one hand, reflects non-intended effects of interest-driven cooperation. On the other, as the panels demonstrated, it is also increasingly shaped by the overall relative shift in economic and political power away from Western democracies as well as by the aim to cooperate with authoritarian states on critical supplies, which is also on the rise. The availability of Chinese developmental assistance that comes without political conditionalities has similarly strengthened the leeway of authoritarian recipient countries and has thus reduced the influence of Western states to shape political dynamics.

As many participants emphasized, however, reliance on cooperation with supposedly stable authoritarian regimes can quickly prove to be shortsighted. Still, the lesson from the Arab uprisings, which took many by surprise and demonstrated the importance to closely follow the frictions and tensions going on under the veil of authoritarian stability, seems to already have been forgotten. Instead, panelists pointed to cases of unconditional cooperation with autocratic leaders, which tends to have negative consequences for democracy activists within these countries, leads to a loss of credibility on the part of "the West" and may even back-fire in cases of regime change. This last point also underlines once more the importance of country-specific insights in assessing the consequences of dealing with autocracies in its manifold forms and dynamics.

3.4 WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THESE DIFFERENT FORMS OF INTERACTION (AS WELL AS THE NARRATIVES AND JUSTIFICATIONS THAT ACCOMPANY THEM) FOR DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT BOTH BETWEEN AND WITHIN COUNTRIES?

Global tensions between autocratic and democratic states are sometimes reproduced in intrastate conflicts, but not to the extent seen during the Cold War. There is evidence that ideology or systemic differences are not dominant factors in current conflicts at either level. At the same time empowered by international cooperation (see above), authoritarian regimes' increasing repression and inequalities entail serious intrastate conflict potential that requires close scrutiny. On a more positive note, the predominant pattern of cooperative economic relations between countries of different regime types is accompanied by a relatively low intensity of conflicts between the corresponding governments, at least when viewed globally and for the time-being. However, the case of Russia is an obvious and important exception here, where attempts to manage conflicts by fostering interdependence clearly failed. The intensifying US-China rivalry is also increasingly driven by hegemonic dynamics that supersede shared economic interests. Economic interdependence is, thus, far from a guarantee for peace. But that's not a good argument against interdependence either.

4. RESULTING PUBLICATIONS

- Youtube videos of three of the four panels are available at [youtube.com/live/TaSZrid7XtQ](https://www.youtube.com/live/TaSZrid7XtQ) (12 October) and [youtube.com/live/cTNemWyG1NA](https://www.youtube.com/live/cTNemWyG1NA) (13 October).
- External participants of the annual conference were invited to publish key arguments in our PRIF blog series "Regime Competition in a Fragmented World: Consequences for Peace and Conflict": <https://blog.prif.org/reihen/regime-competition/>. The first blog post has been published already: Michelle Pace and Christian Achrainger: EU Democracy Support in the Southern Neighborhood: How the EU Contradicts its own Practices. <https://blog.prif.org/2023/10/10/eu-democracy-support-in-the-southern-neighborhood-how-the-eu-contradicts-its-own-practices/>

5. SUMMARY "DEALING WITH AUTOCRACIES IN A FRAGMENTED WORLD"

The PRIF Annual Conference 2023 "Dealing with Autocracies in a Fragmented World" explored from an empirical and normative perspective how democracies can and should deal with autocracies in the current multipolar world. It questioned to what extent general norms such as "do no harm" or the orientation of foreign policy towards democratic values matter in different forms of interaction, ranging from cooperation, coexistence to competition, disengagement and even open conflict. In addition to these practical challenges of "dealing with autocracies", the conference delivered an academic assessment of how much regime types actually matter in such interactions, identifying a middle ground between the belief that they shape Cold-War-like block confrontations on the one hand and disregarding their relevance entirely on the other hand.

More specifically, the conference dealt with four overarching questions. First, it asked about the relevance of the respective political regime types of the countries involved as well as the very distinction between democracy and autocracy. Most participants argued against constructing a dichotomy that divides the world into democratic or authoritarian camps. However, participants also agreed that political regime types – with their internal diversity and fluidity – mattered strongly. In order to understand the diverse interactions and relations that are possible or desirable with regimes of a certain type, a thorough and context-specific understanding of their domestic functioning is necessary. Another important point raised in this context was the need for inter-sectoral analysis when evaluating relations with non-democratic regimes of all sorts, particularly in the field of democracy promotion.

Second, participants discussed observable empirical patterns in relations between (Western) democracies and autocracies. Current European and US debates tend to focus on increased levels of actualized or potential conflict with autocracies, often focusing specifically on Russia and China. These prominent cases are however marked by dynamics of great power rivalry, while the role of competing ideologies is far from clear-cut. In contrast, analyses of EU relations with other non-democratic regimes as well as of, e.g. China's relations with Africa revealed a picture marked far more strongly by cooperation and (limited) competition. Another recurrent theme concerned the processes of adaptation, innovation and learning involved in relations with countries of different regime types.

The third question focused on the consequences which these different forms of interaction have for autocratic regimes (e.g., their stabilization, destabilization, or potential transformation). Current forms of interaction seem to strengthen rather than weaken autocracies, which is likely a result of an overall economic power shift away from Western democracies and the increasing need to cooperate with authoritarian states on critical supplies. Uncritical cooperation with autocratic leaders leads to a loss of credibility and can backfire in cases of regime change.

The fourth and final question dealt with the consequences of these different forms of interaction (as well as the narratives and justifications that accompany them) for dynamics of conflict both between and within countries. The predominant pattern of cooperative economic relations between countries of different regime types is accompanied by a relatively low intensity of conflicts between the corresponding governments, at least when viewed globally and for the time-being (with Russia as a notable exception). In authoritarian regimes empowered by international cooperation, increasing repression and inequalities entail serious intrastate conflict potential that requires close scrutiny.