

Party contestation of Foreign Policy in the New Global (dis)Order: Introduction

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Abstract: The Liberal International Order (LIO) faces challenges both from authoritarian powers and within multi-party democracies, where radical and populist parties resist liberal internationalism and societies struggle with the cultural and social influences of liberalism. Yet while the dual – internal and external – nature of the challenges to the LIO is obvious, it is still unclear if and how these two dimensions interact. This special issue aims to explore this link, with particular reference to national reactions to the Russia-Ukraine war. This introduction sets out linkages between polarizing trends in multi-party democracies and the growing contestation of international order; explains why the Russia-Ukraine war provides a lens to analyse the domestic contestation of international order; shows how domestic contestation will be shaped by combinations of national culture, party systems, and geopolitical considerations; and draws out patterns from the articles in the special issue. We find domestic contestation of the liberal order is close to ubiquitous in democracies. While on the surface Russia’s invasion galvanised the ‘global West’, a closer look reveals that this crisis has added to the burden of democracies wrestling with their own identities, and the kind of world order they want to see.

Keywords: contestation, liberal international order, foreign policy, political parties, Russia-Ukraine war

Introduction

The international system is undergoing a transformation. The Liberal International Order (LIO) faces challenges not only from authoritarian powers but also from within multi-party liberal democracies (Ikenberry 2020). Even in states deeply embedded in Western political, economic and security architectures that are at the core of the LIO, radical and populist parties push back on the main tenets of liberal institutionalism. Those on the right do so in the name of the ‘native’ ethnocultural community, and those on the left in the name of socioeconomic justice (Chrysogelos 2017). At the same time, within non-Western states as well as liminal states on the margins of the West, there are ongoing debates about how to relate to the modernising and secularising influences of liberalism (Acharya 2020; Bettiza, Bolton, and Lewis 2023).

In this context, we seek to contribute to a central academic debate in contemporary International Relations: what are the current state and future prospects of the Liberal International Order in the face of major internal and external challenges (Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021)? Central to our contribution is the hypothesis that in multi-party democracies within the West and beyond, debates about states’ relationships with this order are increasingly a field for *party political contestation* between different visions of national identity, the nature and boundaries of the political community, and the values that political systems must embody (Wagner 2020). For this reason, we expect political polarization, and contestation of states’ understanding of, and relationship with, the LIO, to be intricately connected (Greene 2023).

It is in this framework that we believe national responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine must be analysed. This is a global political event which presents every country with comparable dilemmas about how to align in relation to a US and European led campaign to punish Russia and support Ukraine. It is also an event that in its early days generated hopes that liberal democracies would close ranks, and that populist and radical parties that challenged the LIO from within would be marginalised or discredited (Ivaldi and Zankina 2023, 23-23). As such, this is a crucial case because, to the extent that contestation has persisted in the face of Russian aggression, it reveals the extent and nature of divergent visions of global order inside multi-party democracies (Truchlewski, Oana, and Moise 2023). Whilst we see party politics potentially shaping how states respond to the conflict, we also expect this global order-defining event to reshape party political contestation within states (Ivaldi and Zankina 2023).

This special issue contributes to the empirical and theoretical understanding of these dynamics by comparatively examining cases that look for influence in both directions. We explore the

impact of domestic processes (polarization, fragmentation, and politicization and parliamentarization of foreign and security policy) on national level debates and responses to the war. We also look for the ‘second image reversed’ impact of the conflict on domestic contestation and the re-assessment of national roles, including the relationship with the Liberal International Order and its values. Our goal is not to be fully comprehensive or representative of all regions, something that would be difficult to achieve within the scope of a special issue. Rather, a major strength of our approach is the comparative analysis of states in different *degrees of relationship and liminality* with both the West and the war frontier, from Western and Eastern Europe to North America and Asia.

Articles in this collection include multi-country comparisons and single country cases, centred around the following research questions: What are the arguments over how states should orientate towards the Ukraine conflict in national party-political discourse? How do these discourse and policy contestations relate to key cleavages of a political system? How do they connect to debates over relations with and understandings of the West; transnational identities or ‘natural alliances’; and wider questions of world order? And how are international actors, powers and personalities viewed and contested inside states?

Our findings are consistent with much of the literature on the party politics of foreign policy, yet also surprising in light of hopes that emerged immediately after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. While initially that seemed to be a unifying and galvanizing event for the Transatlantic community at the core of the Liberal International Order, and the foreign policy orientations of mainstream political parties and governments, we show that contestation of countries’ orientation vis-à-vis the LIO persisted, even where on surface there was broad support for Ukraine. Second, while the brunt of this contestation was carried by populist or otherwise anti-systemic parties, significant policy issues with implications for the future of the LIO were contested by non-populist parties also, showing that the ideological unity at the foundation of this order cannot be taken for granted. Finally, several articles in the collection suggest the need to track patterns of contestation in other milieux of political and social debate. In sum, we observe everywhere the war in Ukraine affecting at least some parameters of the domestic party-political contestation of states’ understanding and relationship with the LIO.

This article introduces the special issue first by providing a conceptual and analytical framework, setting out the linkages between polarizing trends in multi-party democracies and the growing contestation of international order. Second, it sets out why the Russia-Ukraine war

provides a powerful lens through which to analyse the domestic contestation of international order. Third, it shows how the patterns of domestic contestation will be shaped for each state by a unique combination of national culture, party systems, and geopolitical considerations. Finally, it draws out patterns from the articles, emphasising the near ubiquity of domestic contestation of the Liberal International Order in multi-party democracies, and highlighting some implications and directions for further research.

Conceptual and analytical framework

How are orders contested?

The perceived challenges to the Liberal International Order both at the level of the international system (the rise of autocratic great powers) and at the domestic political level (political fracturing of liberal democracies) have generated a vibrant literature (Ikenberry 2018; Börzel and Zürn 2021; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann 2020). While this literature highlights the concurrent geopolitical and ideological nature of today's global fracturing, we believe that it still provides a fragmentary picture. A more analytical understanding is needed of what kind of actors engage in contestation, why, and under what conditions.

In the IR realist tradition, contestation is understood in materialist and rationalist terms. The concept of 'revisionism' captures how powers seek to undermine, reform or even abolish elements of the international structure, including its institutions. Revisionism is a term with generally negative connotations of instability and belligerence (Mead 2014). But more recent perspectives see revisionism as a multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing different types of opposition to various aspects of the established system. Cooley, Nexon and Ward (2019) for example differentiate between revisionism directed at the distribution of power in the international system, and against its rules and institutions (see also Ward 2017).

On the other hand, constructivist and ideational approaches emphasize most often *norm contestation* of the international system (Wiener 2014), with challengers proposing new ideas and norms that contest the validity of existing ones. Rather than *outcomes*, norm contestation targets the *rules* of the game, aiming to redefine the ideational framework within which international deliberation and decision-making take place. Those favouring any hegemonic power arrangement will also try to justify its dominance in ideational terms, for example by presenting certain cultural or values hierarchies as natural and immutable. A contestation of the

prevailing hierarchy will by necessity also include effort to delegitimize such ideas (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021). On the other hand, new ideas will only be able to contest the established order if they are backed up by capable actors seeking to challenge the predominant powers (Philpott 2001).

International orders can be undermined both from the outside and the inside. Externally, changing geopolitical conditions and the rise of revisionist powers will oppose the hierarchies imposed by the order, the preponderance of its hegemons, the rules and norms embedded in its core institutions, and the distribution of power the order perpetuates. Internally, disgruntled groups or states who are members of an order may feel that it no longer works to their benefit and begin contesting it. We also theorize that external contestation by geopolitical rivals may create opportunities for those disgruntled *within* the system to challenge its legitimacy, while those seeking to defend the system try to use the external challenge to rally support. Meanwhile, increasing internal contestation – for example growing political polarization driven by cultural and socioeconomic fissures – signal to external challengers that the order can be undermined with the help of like-minded allies on the inside.

In sum, international orders can be contested along a variety of dimensions. We focus here on two: an external-facing one concerning the boundaries of an order; and an internal-facing one concerning the internal hierarchy of an order.

The boundaries of the order concern the foundational question for any political system: *who belongs?* For international orders the question becomes about the boundaries of the order and its geographical extent. These questions are usually closely entwined with debates about its ideological character and the values the order is expected to embody. Efforts to limit the order within its geographical core or the immediate sphere of influence of its hegemons usually reflect more limited and ‘culturalist’ understandings of its norms and values. Broader visions of an order understand the order’s ideas and values in inclusive, secular and civic terms (Jones 2021). Proponents of such orders often understand their ideas and values as universally prescriptive, a master-frame for other regions and countries to follow.

The question of the *internal hierarchy* of the order on the other hand concerns the fact that, while orders create hierarchies externally, towards their adversaries, dependencies, protectorates or colonies, they may do so internally also, usually around a hegemonic power and its immediate allies constituting the order’s *core*. This internal hierarchy may itself become subject to contestation. This may not necessarily reflect members’ wish to exit the order

altogether but perhaps to democratize it further. At the same time, contestation of an order's internal hierarchy need not emanate from peripheral members alone but also from its hegemon. As Cooley, Nexon and Ward (2019) have noted, hegemons can become revisionist when they perceive that the costs of maintaining the order are exorbitant or not equitably shared by partners – the US under Donald Trump being an obvious example in our case.

The Liberal International Order

How do we see these dynamics playing out with respect to the Liberal International Order today? Liberal internationalism is a set of orientations towards international politics and world order, offering a vision, according to Ikenberry 'of order in which sovereign states — led by liberal democracies — cooperate for mutual gain and protection within a loosely rules-based global space' (Ikenberry 2020, 13). The LIO can be taken to refer to the set of states and institutions that align with or constructively participate in production of reproduction of liberal internationalism.

The internal contestation of this order has increased over the decades since the end of the Cold War. Within Western democracies in the context of the Cold War, principally those of North America and Western Europe, liberal internationalism was core to the identity of the West, conceived primarily as a US-led alliance unified around certain forms of political organization and international cooperation, in opposition to communism and the Soviet Union. As O'Hagan put it, 'in the context of the Cold War, the West and liberalism were virtually synonymous, the West believing it represented the liberal ideals of freedom, democracy and the free market' (O'Hagan 2002, 27). Regardless of the accuracy or completeness of this conception for non-aligned states and regions (Acharya 2017), it was a relatively unifying identity for those states subscribing to it. It hardly provided for a single international political agenda, but in the context of a bipolar world order with a clearly defined Soviet-Communist rival, the West as a role shaping identity orientated around the defence of liberalism was relatively cohesive.

In the post-Cold War period however, with the formerly Western-centred order being thought of as conceivably encompassing the entire globe, the role and meaning of the 'West' as a transnational identity has been open to growing contestation. A debate emerged in the immediate post-Cold War period over the extent to which the liberal democratic values and forms of government associated with the West are universally applicable, and by extension should be promoted globally. Fukuyama best characterised the mood of the moment in arguing that the collapse of the Soviet Union may herald the End of History, by which he meant the

“universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (Fukuyama 1989, 4).

This form of liberal internationalism has long faced a realist challenge, from those who share the principled commitment to liberal democracy at home but are sceptical about attempts to project those values abroad (Mearsheimer 2018). Meanwhile, Samuel Huntington (1993) cast another shadow over the prospects for a Western modelled LIO by arguing that far from the universal spread of Western norms, the post-Cold War era would be characterised by the challenge of rising *non-Western civilizations*. He argued that attempts to expand those values would be an error, and the West ought to focus on reaffirming its own civilizational heritage.

Increasingly in the decades since the end of the Cold War, the dynamics of this debate have been shaped by an internal contestation about the essence of Western identity. Hurd (2008) has astutely described the difference between two forms of secularism: *laïcité*, which involves stripping religion entirely from the public and political realm; and Judeo-Christian secularism, which identifies a Judeo-Christian tradition as the unique ground on which Western values – principally democracy and the separation of church and state – have grown. She argues that the latter version implies that non-Judeo-Christian religious traditions, and especially Islam, are not fertile ground for democracy.

Conservative critics argue that the dominance of the secular enlightenment element of the Western tradition with its emphasis on universalism and cultural pluralism have eclipsed its particular, classical and Christian (or Judeo-Christian) cultural roots. James Kurth (2003) argued for example: ‘The protagonists of the contemporary version of the Enlightenment may think that they will create a global and universal civilization, both abroad and at home, but the evidence is accumulating that they instead opened the doors to the barbarians, both without (e.g., Islamic terrorists) and within (e.g., pagan disregard for the dignity of human life).’ Or in the version of British philosopher Roger Scruton (2003): ‘If all that Western civilization offers is freedom, then it is a civilization bent on its own destruction.’

These alternative conceptions of Western values - the particular versus the universal West – prompt very different versions of Western identity and role internationally. This is not a transatlantic divide between the US and EU, but a divide *within* societies on both sides of the Atlantic.

Within the US, we see the divide between those committed to America’s role as a leader of liberal internationalism (represented most lately by the Biden administration of 2021-25), and

a Trumpian agenda shaped by a combination of ‘America First’ retrenchment and a civilizationist perspective that is drawn to world actors sharing an inclination towards strict national sovereignty in defence of cultural homogeneity and conservative values (Walt 2017). Meanwhile, in the European context Thomas Risse describes a divide between “a modern EU Europe supported by the European elites and embracing modern, democratic and humanistic values against a past of nationalism, militarism, or Communism,” and a construction of European identity as one “of white Christian peoples that sees itself as distinct civilization (in the Huntingtonian sense),” and is “less open to strangers and entails boundaries against Islam as well as Asian or African ‘cultures’” (Risse 2010, 10).

This internal contestation over the essence of Western identity and the extent of its universality prompts divergent conceptions of the role of Western states vis-à-vis the international order. A conception of Western liberalism as universal, secular and culturally or ethnically neutral prompts a foreign policy agenda to facilitate or actively promote the spread of those values to other parts of the world, or to support or defend actors who wish to adopt them. In extreme form, this has prompted in the past a notion that democracy could be promoted through military occupation.

But the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, culminating in the abandonment of Kabul in 2021, discredited all ideas of promoting democracy militarily. Meanwhile the hope that increasing economic interdependence on the basis of free market principles would foster the emergence of liberal democracy around the world has been further dented by the rising confidence and power of autocratic governments in China, Russia, Turkey and elsewhere. The economic success of China especially has cast doubt on the belief that integration into the globalized economy would also bring about democratization. Though some argue that Fukuyama may be proven right in the long run (Rutar 2024), the vision of a West progressive and prosperous enough to inspire the rest of the world and bind it to its universalizable values has lost much of its lustre.

Instead, the world appears to be, as Acharya has argued, not only multipolar but increasingly multiplex, indicating not only a distribution of power but an array of varying value systems leading to ‘a complex of crosscutting, if not competing, international orders and globalisms’ (Acharya 2017). Both outside the West and within the West we see the increasing use of civilizational categories and tropes to legitimise values and policies (both domestic and

foreign) that diverge from the liberal humanist standards claimed as universal by liberal internationalists (Katzenstein 2010; Coker 2019; Bettiza, Bolton, and Lewis 2023).¹

Within multi-party democracies of Europe and North America, the assertion of cultural particularism and rejection of multi-culturalism or secular universalism is mostly associated with the radical right, including the dominant Trumpian wing of the Republican party and populist radical right parties in Europe. Across these parties we see an ideological agenda to defend the sovereignty of nation states from globalization and globalism (including European integration), economic liberalism and social pluralism. These processes blur the borders between nation states and threaten (in their view) the culture, lifestyle and very existence the native, national community through economic interdependence and high levels of migration.

Drolet and Williams (2018) characterise a global New Right worldview as ‘opposition to the liberal universalizing/national/managerial state,’ which is reinforced by globalization, characterised as a transnational, American-led, elite liberal project. For much of the European radical right prior to February 2022, the EU and the US represented a greater threat than Putinite Russia. They saw US dominance (along with the EU) as the primary driver of neoliberalism, individualism, cosmopolitanism, and cultural homogenization that threatened the sovereignty and identity of their nations. An alternative vision of a world of culturally conservative, sovereign ethno-political units, resistant to liberalism and US hegemony, drew these political actors towards the apparently like-minded Putin regime. Some on the European radical right rejected not only liberal internationalism but the concept of a transatlantic West entirely, and bought into concepts overlapping with those of the Russian post-Communist conservative movement, including Alexander Dugin’s vision of a Eurasian civilization (Camus 2015; Bluhm and Varga 2019; Varga and Buzogány 2021; Greene 2023). Though there are many variations of radical right thinking, the one clear tendency has been to reject the idea of the West as being defined by liberalism and the identification with the fortunes of a global liberal international order.

Right-wing ethno-populism (sometimes branded by its purveyors in more respectable terms, e.g. as ‘national conservatism’) represents the most electorally significant challenge to the liberal internationalist agenda in multi-party democracies (Altinors and Chrysosgelos 2024; Jenne 2021). Its power has grown especially following economic, political and security crises, including 9/11, the 2008 financial crisis, and dramatic increases in both legal and uncontrolled migration. This rise is certainly not linear, universal or inevitable, with periods of retraction,

yet the post-pandemic period indicates that the radical right is a resilient factor in many multi-party democracies, as evidenced by the return of Donald Trump to the White House, and the growing electoral strength of populist radical right parties in several European states (Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart 2024).

A different challenge comes from the radical left, which represents *an anti-West within the West*. Parties and factions such as those associated with the Left group in the European parliament and the progressive wing of the Democratic Party reject the construction of the West as representing universal values of progress, freedom and prosperity as self-serving hypocrisy masking the West's essentially colonial, imperial and domineering characteristics. From this perspective the LIO is first and foremost a capitalist order. Its borderless free trade agenda is inherently exploitative of the global south at the international level and ordinary workers at the national level.

It is important to note that the radical left, as much and perhaps even more than the populist radical right, underpins the global and cross-regional nature of contestation of the international order today. While much has been written about the global right's transnational networks and avenues of influence in recent years (Bob 2012), historically it has been the left that explored avenues and provided platforms for genuinely global contestation of US-led globalization and neoliberalism since the 1990s and 2000s. As a result, precursors of today's contestation from the left inside Western liberal democracies were left-wing radical-populist regimes outside the West, chiefly in Latin America like Venezuela and Bolivia, as well some Islamic regimes that adopted the mantle of anti-colonialist 'resistance' like Iran. In many ways, contestation of the LIO from the left was 'global' well before it became 'Western' (Munck 2006).

The radical left envisages a more equal, decentred world with power and resources fairly distributed, and international institutions more democratic and representative. The social impact of this perspective in Europe and the US is augmented by the demographic growth and increasing political role of large ethnic minority communities with origins in the Global South, and the political maturation of generations of students from Western universities shaped by neo-Marxist, critical and post-colonial intellectual movements (Kimmage 2020). Those on the radical left in the US and other Western states frequently perceive the projection of Western power as inherently unjust, and international actors resisting Western hegemony as in some measure justified whatever they do (Walzer 2018). This might apply to Islamist non-state armed

groups – especially those in conflict with Israel – and in some cases anti-Western states including Iran and Russia.

In party competition, these reactions have been expressed in recent decades through the strengthening of populist parties, chiefly of the right but also on the left. Populism is not fully overlapping and synonymous with every radical critique of the LIO, but has proven to be the most effective framework for those challenges in party competition. Populist parties and leaders have long moved from the margins to the mainstream, entering office in multiple European coalitions, and more recently dominating the executives in several states, most notably the US under Trump, but also Italy, Poland and Hungary, as well as regional powers like Turkey, India and Brazil. A growing literature on populism and foreign policy shows how these actors challenge many aspects of the LIO, most notably the functioning of multilateral institutions and their de-politicized, technocratic nature (Chryssogelos et al 2023; Destradi and Plagemann 2019; Giurlando and Wajner 2023; Jenne 2021).

Radical agendas can be framed through populist politics in the appealing terms of the defence of the ‘real people’. How these authentic ‘people’ are defined of course depends on the ideological background of the political challengers. The overlaying and intertwining of multiple crises of liberal democracies and multilateralism – economic malaise, cultural alienation, representational deficits – makes it easier to express highly ideological visions of international order as responses to wholesale popular dissatisfaction. Thus, conservative, civilizational or sovereigntist critiques can be presented as defending the economic position and cultural identity of the native population against the unrepresentative social and economic agendas of liberal elites (Jenne 2021). Radical left critiques of the LIO can be expressed as the voice of myriad economically exploited or otherwise oppressed groups against the inherently unjust inequality of a neoliberal system that serves the interests of global business elites, especially of the Global North (De Cleen et al 2020).

Having said this, the ideological looseness of populism also means populist leaders may selectively and opportunistically challenge or engage with aspects of the international order while undermining others. The malleability of populism also makes it an effective method of articulation of opposition to the LIO in both liberal democracies and in hybrid and even authoritarian political systems. As we saw, in ‘mature’ liberal democracies in Europe and North America, populism allowed radical parties and forces to present themselves as the voice of marginalized ‘people’. Crucially however, populism can also emanate from parties and regimes

very much entrenched in state power, precisely because it allows them to present themselves as global underdogs against a Western-controlled international order all the while they have effectively become the new ‘elites’ at home. This was the case already with anti-American authoritarian regimes in the era of the unipolar moment such as Venezuela and Iraq (Dodson and Dorraj 2008), but is increasingly evident today in the rhetoric of leaders like Turkey’s Erdogan and even Vladimir Putin. Populism thus plays an important role as the connecting tissue of a radical/authoritarian nexus opposing liberal principles across both the West and the non-West.

The fragmentation of identities, values and worldviews at the national level has been catalysed by the hyper-fragmentation of news media and the impact of social media, eroding the ‘information commons’ (Baum, Potter, and Kalb 2019). The increasing significance of social media in shaping attitudes has also exposed open societies to new forms of external influence by hostile rivals, who can use manipulation and disinformation to exacerbate divisions and undermine stability and social cohesion. Even if the extent of the behavioural impact of disinformation is still debated, it is significant enough to be included in NATO’s perception of its ‘strategic environment’ (NATO 2022 Strategic Concept 2022, 3). Those same revolutions in global communications have also enhanced the ability of transnational identity and values communities to form and interact, and eased the international cooperation of those discontented with the prevailing order.

In sum, the internal contestation of the LIO has been taking place for some time now around the two dimensions of contestation we identified above. The boundaries and membership of the LIO have been contested in terms of how far its scope can be extended, including to non-Western regions. As a result, the ideational content of the order has been challenged between proponents of (Western) civilizational and (globalist, inclusive) civic readings, impacting both debates on how far the order’s values should be promoted as universal, and debates about multiculturalism and the compatibility of other cultures within the West. And the hierarchy of the LIO has also been under fire, by actors, on the right and left, who dislike the US geopolitical and liberal ideological preponderance. These contestations inside the West take place within and form part of broader global clashes over the future of the international order. The questions now are how these contestations influence policy responses to an event of global strategic magnitude like the war in Ukraine, and how that event has impacted these patterns of contestation.

The Russia-Ukraine war as a prism

The US and EU led response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was widely taken in its initial stages as a rejuvenation of the Transatlantic alliance with NATO at its heart, galvanising the EU, and restoring the US leadership role in defence of liberal internationalism. Whilst the Biden administration avoided direct military involvement, it rallied its allies to support Ukraine; led in financial commitments; and reaffirmed its commitment to Article Five. European allies – first and foremost Germany - promised to expand defence spending; provided unprecedented military aid to Ukraine; diversified away from Russian energy; stepped up deployments to NATO's eastern flank; and implemented tough sanctions. Long-time neutral states Sweden and Finland began their journey into NATO.

As the conflict has worn on however, the solidity of these commitments has come into doubt. This is most apparent in the US, where parts of the Republican party are hostile to committing US resources to Ukraine, and Donald Trump shows ambivalence towards NATO. In the judgement of Trump's former National Security Advisor John Bolton, Trump's 'complaints about NATO or allies like Japan or South Korea shirking their responsibilities are intended not to strengthen America's alliances but to be grounds for abandoning them' (Bolton 2024).

This special issue builds on the premise that this ambivalence is not confined to the US, and beneath the surface, across societies at the heart and on the fringes of this constellation of 'like-minded' states, divisions over values and identity that have been apparent in the last 10-20 years, were not erased in February 2022.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a powerful prism through which to assess the current and potential future significance of these domestic contestations of the LIO. More than any event since the end of the Cold War, this conflict forces leaders and parties across multi-party democracies to consider their alignment in relation to great power politics, and especially their attitudes towards the EU; US-led security arrangements including NATO; and Russia and its claim to stand for a multi-polar and anti-hegemonic world order. Every governing party must take decisions as to what extent to cooperate with a US and European led sanctions regime designed to maximise the costs of the war to Russia; how to vote in UN General Assembly resolutions; how much and what kind of assistance (humanitarian, military) to offer Ukraine; and what kind of solution should be sought including the extent to which Russian demands should be accommodated. Opposition parties do not bear the responsibility of meaningful

decisions, but they cannot avoid taking a position and therefore face their own choices on how to navigate the policy and political space.

These policy decisions entail real world costs for their states and tangible impacts on their populations. Sanctioning Russian energy raised the cost of living in many countries already struggling economically (Liadze et al 2023), something populist leaders have exploited. In some cases, e.g. Germany, it entails transforming decades long energy and foreign policy assumptions rooted in cooperation with Russia. An open-ended commitment of military and civilian assistance to Ukraine requires an immense investment of already over stretched resources. Hosting refugees entails a significant social and economic burden, prompting those states accepting the bulk of the refugees to seek financial support from the EU (Nienaber 2024).

Time is a factor, with polling pointing broadly to a pattern of declining support for assisting Ukraine across a range of European states (Smith 2024). In general, public sympathy for Ukraine may have started out high at the early stages of the crisis, when the plight of Ukrainians was particularly salient and the accumulated costs relatively low. But as time passes, sympathy wanes and costs grow, increasing the chances of politicization of the crisis (Truchlewski, Oana, and Moise 2023).

However, the implications of the war for the security of multi-party democracies associated with the Liberal International Order are not uniform. For a small number of states, including the Baltic states and to a lesser extent Poland, there is a direct fear that they could be next. We might expect therefore that those states will be most solidly committed to Ukraine's defence, and their commitment to be least susceptible to domestic contestation (Haesebrouck 2024). Yet among countries not immediately threatened, we should see variation across and within states about how much cost is acceptable to support Ukraine's defence. Looking across multi-party democracies, we expect partisan contestation over this question to be shaped by a combination of geopolitical interests, political culture, and the nature of the party system and the cleavages that define it.

What shapes domestic party contestation: geopolitics; culture; party systems

Contestation of foreign policy and of an international order's limits and character may take place on different levels and by different actors. In this special issue we focus on political parties for a variety of reasons.

First, parties are an ever-growing but still relatively understudied actor in foreign policy. Despite important recent contributions analysing the party politics of foreign policy, a consistent fine-grained comparative analysis of how party competition affects foreign policy is still lacking (Hofmann and Martill 2021). Studying how multiple national party systems react and filter the contestation of common geopolitical challenges is an excellent opportunity to understand the logic of party competition and its distinct influence on foreign policy.

Secondly, party politics is a fruitful space for understanding the range of factors and dynamics that inform the internal contestation of the Liberal International Order, since the states involved are competitive party systems where debates about foreign policy happen within the confines of party political competition. Party competition is a thick social context where the logics of ideological contestation and political interest interact (Chryssogelos 2020a). We believe therefore that studying political parties can give a rich and textured picture of the different factors that inform foreign policy contestation.

Most major works of parties and foreign policy agree that parties influence foreign policy mainly through ideology (Rathbun 2004). Political parties of a certain ideology have relatively consistent positions on issues like the use of force and military missions (Wagner 2020). This holds even more for foreign policy issues that have a high salience for domestic politics, which the war in Ukraine does for many countries. We can theorize therefore that the contestation of states' foreign policy positions towards Ukraine, and by extension of their relationship with the Western-led Liberal International Order, will be significantly shaped by ideological patterns across countries.

We can perhaps gauge parties' expected positions on provision of weapons or supporting Ukraine accession to NATO from their contestation of the issue of military deployments. The relevant literature has consistently found a curvilinear structure of contestation of security policy and deployments in European liberal democracies. Extrapolating from this, we might expect support for military assistance to Ukraine to be low in the far left of the political spectrum, to increase as one moves to the centre-left and the centre, and to pick up on the centre-right before dipping again in the far right (although not as much as in the far left). Also reflecting key findings in the literature, we expect the centre-left and the centre-right to be largely supportive of Ukraine, and of the Liberal International Order more generally, although they will do so offering different justifications: more inclusive rules, rights and justice-based

for the centre-left, and more nation-centric, interest and security-based for the centre-right (Raunio and Wagner 2020; Wagner et al. 2018).

Particular attention should be given to the populist radical right, the emerging political family of our times which in many ways is also the ‘swing voter’ in how party systems approach the war in Ukraine and, by extension, key questions about the future of the Liberal International Order. On the one hand, one should normally expect the far right to be exclusivist, nationalist, fundamentally anti-multilateralist and to resent any notion of broader solidarity towards allies and partners if the nation-state's immediate security is not directly at stake. Coupled with the radical right's illiberalism and opposition to the key values of Western-led global governance, one would normally expect it to be sceptical of assistance to Ukraine. Indeed, far right parties displayed a much-noted tendency before 2022 of warmth towards Putin's Russia as an ideal-model of sovereigntist, strong-man leadership on the basis of conservative authoritarian values (Shekhovtsov 2018).

That said, the experience of the last two years has confirmed that there is variation within and across populist radical right parties on foreign policy (Ivaldi and Zankina 2023). These variations are shaped at the national level by differences of political culture, strategic interests, and political opportunity structure, as well as significant ideological nuances within the far right family (Chryssogelos 2021). As discussed above, radical right actors may constitute their identity in a way that goes above the level of the nation-state, seeing themselves as part of a broader *civilizational identity*. This ambiguity at the heart of the European far right, defending both national sovereignty and ‘European’ or ‘Western’ civilization as a whole, has been noted early on (Schori-Liang 2007). More recently, this divide has even played out inside far-right parties divided by different lineages and traditions of right-wing politics, prompting different conceptions of the boundaries of transnational identity (Greene 2023).

The populist aspect of these parties may also point in different directions. PRR actors can portray definitions of the national interest by domestic ‘elites’ that present participation in global governance as inevitable and necessary as betraying the real interests of the people (Chryssogelos 2020b). But alternatively, depending on the national and strategic context, populist radical right leaders can position themselves as the strongest custodians of the national interest framed in more consensual terms. So whilst for some on the radical right, like Victor Orban or Marine Le Pen, hostility to a US or EU-led liberal order may have made them uncommitted opponents of Russia or supporters of Ukraine, others such as Georgia Meloni,

Boris Johnson, or the PiS government in Poland, position themselves as pillars of the anti-Russian alliance.²

Whilst the far right represents the more electorally potent challenge to liberal internationalism in multi-party democracies, the far left is also significant in several countries. For the far left also, the Russian invasion of Ukraine presents dilemmas. As mentioned above, the far left no less than the far right rejects the legitimacy of the prevailing international order, though due to its anti-capitalist logic (Chryssogelos 2017). Hostility to the projection of political power by the capitalist West prompts suspicion of the expansionist designs of NATO or the European Union, which are seen as organs of Western neo-imperialism, needless provocateurs (of Russia) and drivers of conflict (Bonansinga 2022). Opposition to the use of military force in general – shaped by the logic of the ‘spiral model’ which assumes any intervention in support of military actions is inherently escalatory and therefore counterproductive (Rathbun 2004) – prompts opposition to supply of military aid to Ukraine.

These reasonings help explain why prior to 2022 the far-left shared aspects of the far right’s ambivalence regarding Russia and Putin, and its threat to Ukraine or European security more broadly. However, the strong human rights and antimilitarist ethos of the left would also be expected to prompt a deep concern for the plight of Ukrainians under bombardment or forced to flee. Moreover, we might expect a strong reaction to Russia’s abrogation of international law which the left broadly enshrines.

What determines where right or left parties will fall on either of these questions? Most works in the literature by now accept that whilst party ideologies affect foreign policy, they rarely do in a linear fashion. Instead, parties’ foreign policy positions need to be understood within a broader context formed by the dynamics of party competition and broader material and ideational structures within which this competition takes place (Chryssogelos 2020a; Wagner 2020; Greene 2024). We note here two such structures already mentioned above: geopolitical pressures and national strategic culture.

First, the party politics of foreign policy can never be divorced from the realities of *geopolitical pressures* and immediate security challenges on a state. Geopolitical considerations form a powerful constraint on whether a state’s political class has the luxury to debate a foreign policy issue along ideological lines (Schuster and Maier 2006). With regards to Ukraine, it is to be expected that countries in Central-Eastern Europe whose security is defined primarily against Russia will have low levels of contestation of military support for Ukraine. Contestation will

not be completely absent, but its range and scope will be curtailed by the reality of geopolitical pressures. On the other hand, states with larger geopolitical leeway will allow for greater range of opinion.

Second, foreign and security policy debates usually take place within a broader discursive space formed by a state's *dominant strategic culture*. Whether a European state's security conceptions for example are broadly 'Atlanticist', 'Europeanist' or 'neutralist' influences significantly the range of acceptable alternatives and the terms of the debate for established parties (Chrysogelos 2015). But they may also offer a convenient target against which populist and anti-systemic parties will mobilize to demonstrate their distance from the 'elites'. If we pass through the sub-regions and states of Europe, we expect to find a host of complex and distinct sets of cultural factors, on top of variations in geopolitical interests. These include complex historical legacies and cultural and religious factors shaping national level attitudes towards Russia. Looking to multi-party democracies deeply embedded in the LIO but far from Europe, including Canada and Japan, we are also able to compare the patterns of considerations in states whose own direct security concerns are further removed.

Finally, we must take account of variations in *party systems* and cleavage structures. Majoritarian systems favour large and well-established parties, are relatively rigid, and create major barriers for new or marginal parties to gain representation. The large parties tend to be broad churches, encompassing more centrist and more hardline wings. Whilst generally majoritarian systems favour the centrist, liberal establishment, including their more traditional international world views, their large parties may be susceptible to internal takeover by their radical elements with radical foreign policy agendas, as in case of Republican party under Trump, or UK Labour for a time under Jeremy Corbyn. More proportional systems are more fluid, and more accessible to smaller parties, including radical and populist parties. Since in proportional systems multi-party coalitions are the norm, the support of ideologically marginal parties is often needed, giving them considerable influence (Kaarbo 2012). Also relevant is the varying locus of foreign policy making power between presidents, cabinets and parliaments.

Putting all these threads together, we formulate the following expectations:

- The broad equilibrium of contestation is determined by a state's strategic culture and the geopolitical pressures of its position relative to Russia or the boundaries of the Liberal International Order. A state relatively sheltered from immediate geopolitical threats or the pressures of the hegemon has a more open space for contestation.

- Within this framework, ideological contestation takes place but its intensity varies. We expect this contestation to follow ideological patterns, with parties expressing preferences on Russia/Ukraine and their countries' position vis-à-vis the LIO that are aligned with their general ideological outlook. We also expect ideological contestation to be less intense between mainstream parties, but more intense from the extremes of the left and right. It is there that we expect resistance to the assumptions of the LIO to prompt challenges to the mainstream position of support to Ukraine.
- In many cases we would expect this extremist contestation to intersect with populist sentiments of disgruntlement with national elites and the LIO's apparatus. These anti-establishment sentiments can be channelled through the party system, but can also be expressed in society and public opinion at large. However, again, the extent to which populist politics aligns with popular scepticism regarding support for Ukraine will depend on the specific national level conditions of prevailing strategic culture, public sentiment and opportunity structure.
- We expect the conflict to pose a challenge to left and right radical parties with records of relative warmth towards Putin, and force them to find a new publicly acceptable alignment between their ideologies and their foreign policy attitudes towards Russia. We expect that how they do this will also depend on national level variations and even party specific nuances.
- Moreover, the extent to which radical challenges to the centrist commitment to the defence of Ukraine can impact policy deliberations will depend on the extent to which the party system gives representation to radical parties.

What the contributions point to

The articles in this special issue cover a broad geographical scope, and bring to bear a range of theoretical influences and methodologies. Setting the stage, Wagner et al show comparatively the impact of the war in scattering radical left and right parties in Italy, Germany, Netherlands and Finland. For most (though not all), the era of wearing Putin's face on a t-shirt – literally or metaphorically – is over. But the anti-establishment and anti-hegemonic rejection of the US-led liberal world order remains a shaper of policy contestation. Whilst most condemned Putin's actions, many of these parties have contested whether NATO and the EU share responsibility for the war; the utility and wisdom of sanctions on Russia; military support for Ukraine; NATO expansion; and the commitment to Ukrainian victory. Party responses vary however by national

level factors including geostrategic context, national political culture, and the party system and political opportunity structure. Also significant is whether the party is constrained by being in government. Some parties have been split internally, drawing attention to the need to analyse the struggle over power, ideas, and strategy within parties as well as between them.

The German case represents perhaps the most striking illustration of the significance of the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a defining moment for a party system and a direct test of party world views and agendas. Germany's proportional electoral system has given a powerful parliamentary platform to radical left and right, whose support has grown against the backdrop of security, economic, and social challenges.

Christina Stremming's combined quantitative and qualitative analysis of German debates over military intervention reaffirms a familiar pattern, whereby centrist parties tend to be more supportive of overseas multilateral military engagements and those on the margins most resistant. But her analysis adds to this picture by highlighting the significant variation in attitudes depending on whether it is the UN or NATO that is endorsing the mission. This divide exposes domestic ideological divergence regarding the legitimacy of NATO power projection.

Patrick Mello's analysis of German party-political debates takes us into the ideological tensions shaping those variations, and how those differences have been reframed but not resolved since the Russian invasion. Whilst the public is broadly pro-Ukrainian, international pressure to supply weapons to Ukraine has strained against divergences of values and identities shaped by Germany's complex national culture regarding military force. Mello shows that ideological fracturing is happening not only across parties but within them. As a result, despite the apparent unity around the boldly proclaimed *Zeitenwende*, actual policy, for example over weapons supplies, has been faltering, disjointed and unpredictable.

Germany in the analysis of Coticchia et al is an example of a middle power – a class of states big enough in economic size and military-industrial capacity for their decisions to matter in terms of sanctions on Russia or military support to Ukraine. In their comparison of Germany, Italy and India they find the anti-hegemonic, populist impulse to resist aligning with the US and EU present in all three systems. Yet in each case populist actors have wrestled with navigating their pro-Putin legacies with the unfolding events, but refracted differently according to the state level conditions, that relate to variations of national culture and strategic interests. The Indian case is illuminating precisely because of its very different cultural, historical and geostrategic position. It is a post-colonial state, with a non-Western culture, and

the size to justify great power ambition. Yet it has a genuine multi-party democracy that has produced a populist leadership, making it an intriguing comparator. India's refusal to align with the anti-Russian camp reflects the limitations of the US and EU attempts to mobilise states in the name of international order – a challenge observed elsewhere in the global south.

Japan offers another interesting comparison as a power of comparable weight, and as a democracy with non-Western cultural roots, but one that unlike India has a strongly embedded strategic culture of alignment with the US-led order. Erik Isaksson provides an unusual insight into the domestic contestation of Japan's global orientation. Given Japan's distinct cultural identity, one might expect an antihegemonic, 'anti-globalist', and anti-American trend in Japanese politics, comparable to multi-party democracies in other regions. Yet Japan's historical legacy, strategic dependence, and wariness of China (and North Korea) strengthens the relatively broad commitment to US-leadership, including in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Nonetheless, even in Japan there is partisan variation in the interpretation of the war and attitudes towards international order, echoing in ways the contestation in Europe. We see the opposition SDP taking an ambivalent approach to attributing blame between Russia, Ukraine and NATO; the right-wing Japan Restoration Party pushing for greater Japanese defence capability and challenging the UN security Council's role in international security; and the fringe Communist party promoting an anti-militarist and even overtly anti-American agenda.

The Canadian case draws attention because it displays unusually little contestation. Canada's geographic, economic and cultural closeness to the US (reinforced by its relationship with the UK) is unique and defining for its strategic culture. In the case of the war in Ukraine and the Biden administration's response, Canada's dominant role conceptions of 'good international citizen' (more dominant on the left) and 'faithful ally' (more dominant on the right) align with a position of principled support for Ukraine. Yet, as Boucher and Massie argue, the puzzle is why this does not translate into more meaningful commitment in economic terms. Their intriguing argument is that the very lack of contestation (coupled perhaps with the comfort of geographical distance from Russia and proximity to the US) means that the Canadian government can get away with low-cost rhetorical commitments to Ukraine, and not face much domestic pressure over the issue.

Whilst Canada enjoys comfortable distance, and relative harmony of political identity, post-Soviet and post-Communist states have neither. For them, in many cases, the war has exposed

and at the same time reshaped rifts over world view and identity, with patterns shaped by distinct political cultures and historical legacies.

As Crombois shows, Bulgaria has a distinct cultural legacy of pro and anti-Russian sentiment, refracted though its complex geopolitics and history, including its massive energy dependency on Russia, and the Europeanization process since EU accession. Its unstable parliament and hyper-fluid party system give voice to many perspectives, and questions over sanctions and military aid are clearly contested. But perhaps most remarkable in this case is the apparent convergence of the more centrist parties on a pro-Western shift, despite the Bulgarian public remaining the most pro-Russian in the EU. This would seem to be a recipe for continued politicization of these issues.

Looking beyond NATO and the EU's current boundaries, Burmester's analysis of Moldova shows the centrality of contested national and cultural identity in shaping domestic rifts over geopolitical orientation. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine triggering a state of emergency, pro-Russian parties have struggled to reconcile that orientation with the heightened sense of threat engendered by the war. Their response has largely been silence and evasion, or pivoting to accuse the pro-Western government of exploiting the crisis to grab power via the state of emergency or of economic mismanagement. These appear to be the responses of tactical manoeuvre rather than strategic shifts in their agenda or worldview.

Conclusion

The central finding of our special issue is that domestic contestation of the liberal international order is close to ubiquitous in multi-party democracies the world over (Canada being perhaps the only exception among the states covered here). On the surface, the Russian invasion of Ukraine galvanised and united the transatlantic community and the 'global West', and infused it with new energy and purpose. But looking closer, we see societies wrestling with their own identities, their place in the world, and the kind of world order they want to see.

The war presents acute policy challenges for all governments and parties in all world regions. Even parties that share a broad world view on international order, and equal concern that the invasion challenges its most foundational principles, can disagree about how to respond, including what military assistance to supply, what end state to pursue, and whether to seek an accommodation with Russia to end the war. Moreover, Russia's invasion of Ukraine embarrassed radical left and right actors with pro-Putin legacies. Overt expressions of

admiration for Putin's Russia were dampened by most, though not all. This seems to apply for now as much in post-Soviet Europe (e.g. Moldova) as in Western Europe.

But whilst overt association with Putin is now toxic for most, contestation remains in the form of discourses that put at least some blame for the war on NATO or the EU, or resist sanctions on Russia or arms supplies to Ukraine. In general, it seems that parties with a legacy of hostility to a US and EU-driven order are most reluctant to commit their resources to support Ukraine, and to challenge policies pursued in the name of its defence. To the extent that public commitment to supporting Ukraine is soft or waning, or thrown into question by an isolationist shift in US policy, this presents opportunities for parties sceptical of this support to exploit.

The nature of contestation varies greatly between states, shaped by several factors. These include inescapable geopolitical and strategic realities (especially proximity to Russia); distinct political culture, identities, and role conceptions; and the features of the party system and political opportunity structure. Even in the same state we see variation within the same party family, for example radical right parties in the Netherlands and Italy scattering between more and less Atlanticist responses.

This time of great flux and uncertainty is set to endure, as shifts in hard and soft power at the global level are interacting with rapid social change and uncertainty within democratic states. Indeed, the deepening polarization within multi-party democracies and associated divergences in attitudes towards international order, coupled with the increasing politicization of foreign policy, represents a significant long-term challenge to multi-party democracies in developing coherent, long-term, grand strategies. A concerning result of these dynamics is that marshalling international support for causes such as support for Ukraine is becoming ever trickier for US centrists, the EU and their likeminded allies, not least because today most of the world's major emerging, middle or regional powers outside of the West (like India) are also multi-party democracies where foreign policy is politicized.

Whilst the articles in this special issue have focussed on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a host of other issues have comparable potential to hit on deep domestic identity cleavages. These include other challenges relating to great power rivalry such as the Chinese threat to Taiwan; the future role and scope of the institutional pillars of 'the West' and its leadership of the LIO i.e. the EU and NATO; how to deal with challenges that demand deep global coordination including climate change; and how to interpret and respond to conflict in the Middle East.

This special issue is far from comprehensive geographically. The articles do not cover Latin America (the other major world region with more or less competitive party systems), as well as important regional powers like Australia, South Africa and African and Asian democracies. Yet our collection does cover a wide range of multi-party democracies with different degrees of relationship to the Western core of the LIO: some belonging to its Western ‘core’, some outside of it, and others in a position of liminality. Further research can expand to the study of multi-party systems in other regions from the ones we study here. We reiterate our belief that the dynamics we have discussed here are genuinely global and in fact contestation of the international order inside Western democracies from the right as well as the left feeds off and is in many ways influenced by geopolitical and ideological developments in other parts of the world. Future research must further explore these links.

The developments highlighted in this special issue, and the scale of these future challenges, call for a broad research programme investigating the domestic contestation of international order within multi-party democracies. This special issue is eclectic in scope, as well as in theoretical and methodological approaches. We see this as necessary, not only to address the different levels of analysis (public opinion, party contestation, national role contestation), but also to capture the nature of contestation which varies between states – being led in some cases by highly structured and robust party systems, while taking place in others in societal debates or national role contestation cutting across party lines. Further research should aspire to a more systematic exploration of the interaction of party systems, political culture and geopolitical position in shaping contestation of the global order within multi-party democracies.

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¹ Arguably such civilizational ideas were never absent from world politics even at the height of liberal globalization (see for example Jackson 2007), and one cannot dismiss the proliferation of liberal values in various parts of the world (especially Europe) in the last 30 years (Jackson and Medvedev 2024). It is hard to deny however that recent years have seen, if not always a backlash, then at the very least a stalling of liberal norm diffusion and a divergence in values, particularly in Asia and Africa.

² On the case of Meloni see Broder (2024), and on PiS see Cadier (2021).