



Research Unit

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

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RESEARCH PROGRAMME

SEPTEMBER 2022

Motivation

The most pressing challenges of contemporary societies—for example, climate change, migration, global value chains, public health, or security—do not stop at national borders and cannot be effectively managed by individual national governments alone. Against this background, we have witnessed the emergence of a dense global governance system in which various institutions beyond the state claim political authority in their own right, partially intervening deeply in the affairs of national societies. We use the term *Global Governance* in an encompassing manner: it refers to the assemblage of regional and global institutions, be they intergovernmental or transnational as well as international or supranational. The term refers to the rule-based international political order with a strong imprint of economically and socially liberal values, as it has grown since the end of the Cold War in particular.

This international political order has come under pressure from various sides. In the spirit of the *Zeitenwende*, some observers even claim that the days of a global order based on common norms and institutions are over and that a return to unconstrained “geopolitics” is imminent. We, however, reject such binary imaginaries of world politics for two reasons. First, it portrays the post-1945 and post-1990 orders in a far too naïve way: these orders reflected power relationships, institutionalized hierarchies and inequality as well, and were thus also full of conflicts and contestations. Second, even the most outrageous actions of individual states take place in the context of extant international institutions and norms. Without functioning international institutions such as NATO and without public discourses flagging norm violations very explicitly, the Russian war on the Ukraine would have looked very differently, for example. Moreover, many extant institutions are not directly affected by the *Zeitenwende*. We therefore work based

on the assumption that the post-1990 Global Governance system remains important for understanding contemporary world politics. On the one hand it structures ongoing power struggles among and within states. On the other, it is also the object of conflicts among states as well as among societal actors.

To shed light on the prospects and transformations of effective and legitimate political institutions beyond the nation-state, the work of the Global Governance unit at the WZB is thus organized along three inter-related research themes. Two of those focus on the challenges and contestation and their effects on the global governance system; one comes from political conflicts between states of different sorts, the other from changing world views and ideologies within world society. The third theme focuses on the mode of global governance, the transformation of its institutional frames, its substance, and its functioning.

1. State-driven conflicts in and about Global Governance

Various recent events indicate limits of the rule-based governance beyond the nation-state. For example, the emergence of 'trade wars' between the United States and China place the liberal international trading order, which the World Trade Organization is supposed to administer, under increasing strain. Debates over the nature and extent of the international human rights regime have intensified as countries with widely different social structures and domestic political systems compete to shape international rules and norms. And military interventions, such as the Russian invasion of the Ukraine in particular, show that even the most fundamental principles of the Global Governance system (territorial integrity) can be ignored by Great Powers with far-reaching implications. These events also suggest that the economic and security spheres are increasingly entwined as global infrastructure initiatives, sanctions regimes, and geo-economic tools contest the primacy of purely efficiency-based logics in the allocations and exchange of global material resources.

The growing institutionalization of global governance over the previous decades is far from incompatible with resurgences of international conflict, geopolitical tensions, and great power competition. Many established international institutions are challenged to adapt to rapid shifts in power between states, normative tensions between governments of different regime types, and a resurgence of geopolitical and security conflicts.

Our work in this stream thus asks: To what extent can state-based contestations of extant international institutions be identified and meaningfully compared? To what

extent are they driven by systemic conflicts between democratic and authoritarian regimes, by competition for territory and power (geopolitics and security), or by attempts to alter the distribution of economic resources? And finally, to what extent do the resulting conflicts and alliances among states question Global Governance as such?

Tackling these questions requires the integration of often separated lines of theoretical thinking in international relations. In particular, the realist tradition of analysing geopolitics and power shifts must be more productively combined with institutionalist and constructivist insights on normative constraints, taking also the varying foreign policy preferences of democratic and authoritarian regimes more systematically into account.

2. Societal conflicts in and about Global Governance

The pressures the global governance system faces cannot be reduced to state-level conflicts alone, however. Many of the challenges that contemporary Global Governance faces emerge within and across national societies and discourses. Systematic rifts seem to occur between citizens and civil society groups who prefer open borders, universal rights, and more international authority (cosmopolitan worldviews) and those who promote national sovereignty, traditional value orientations, and communitarian worldviews. We observe that civil society actors and groups contest international institutions and their legitimacy in principle along these lines, often also fuelled by populist and authoritarian leaders. Beyond mere ideological differences, such competing worldviews often seem to rest on diverging ontological and epistemological constructions of reality that also manifests itself in strongly diverging understandings of major global issues such as climate change, human rights, or global health. This mirrors ontological and epistemological contestations on the national level as they express themselves in the denial of climate change and COVID-19, or the adherence to ‘alternative facts’ more generally.

The resulting processes of politicization and polarisation affect the societal legitimacy of global governance and may alter the stances of relevant political actors on the national, transnational, and international level. Notably, these societal cleavages are also carried into some Global Governance institutions themselves, for example where transnational coalitions systematically push back against liberal norms such as gender equality inside various bodies of the United Nations.

Our work in this stream thus asks: How are different worldviews constructed in discourses in and about global governance? Who are the contesters and what frames

and mobilization strategies do they employ? To what extent are anti-liberal forces successful in shaping the functioning and output of international institutions? Can international institutions incorporate these forces without betraying their social purpose?

Tackling these questions requires integrating insights from political sociology, communication studies, and comparative politics into extant accounts of international relations and institutions.

3. Institutional dynamics of Global Governance

The intertwined state- and society-level conflicts about the international political order will ultimately leave their mark on its institutional contours. While the international system has hitherto moved towards formal, rather central and ultimately global international organizations, four countervailing trends in the institutionalization of Global Governance can be observed recently. First, there is a growth of decidedly informal inter-state arrangements (“Coalitions of the Willing”). Second, a growing regionalization of governance beyond the nation-state can be observed. Here the European Union provides the prime example but other examples such as ASEAN and the African Union can be found around the globe. Third, we observe that authoritarian states, including powerful ones such as China or Russia, either block multilateral institutions such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) or start to build their own international institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) – a trend we label ‘counter-institutionalization’. Fourth, given the weakening of global institutions such as the United Nations, many transnational forces aim at developing networks to tackle some of the issues that lack effective intergovernmental or supranational governance, resulting in a transnationalization trend of global governance.

Such dynamics of institutional change are likely to have important repercussions on the effectiveness of global governance. On the one hand, global challenges such as climate change require more ambitious and binding cooperation efforts and it is questionable to what extent more informal and more regionalized institutions can deliver such truly global public goods. On the other hand, the Russian invasion of the Ukraine demonstrated the importance of authoritative regional institutions such as the European Union for coordinating state action (in this case, sanctions) and also reactivated once-dormant institutional mechanisms of collective security and deterrence (NATO). Regional organizations might thus gain in importance—at the expense of global IOs—in the wake of the emergence of new geopolitical blocs and growing regime-type confrontation. It seems that regional and systemically

delimited institutions such as EU and NATO, for example, work like communicating vessels: When one side gets stronger, the other side gains in importance as well. We do not know a lot about these interactions, especially regarding the possible repercussions for the stability, legitimacy, and effectiveness of these developments on the international institutional order, pointing to the need to better understand the conditions and dynamics of institutional resilience and change.

Our work in this stream thus asks: Which systemic institutional trends are discernible in the international political system? How do these trends complement or challenge extant institutions? What patterns of competition or division of labour emerge in the international institutional order? How do these institutional changes connect to ideational, economic, and power changes? Addressing these questions requires integrating insights on the emerging patterns of international and transnational conflicts into the extant theories of international regimes and institutionalized cooperation.

A joint programme

While individual research projects in the unit will have their focus mostly in one of these themes, our collective work is based on the understanding that these three research streams necessarily address and inform each other. Regular exchange that avoids theoretical blinders is thus a core characteristic of our collaborative work.

In the same spirit, the Global Governance unit also endorses methodological pluralism, a broadly acknowledged feature of our joint work. A solid empirical understanding of contemporary global governance requires a broad and complementary methodological toolkit. Three components stand out in particular. We combine expertise on qualitative, comparative, and often historical case studies (for example, to analyse individual institutions, policies, or mobilization episodes in global governance), on surveys and survey experiments (for example, to gain insights into citizen or executive views on global governance), and computational text and image analyses (for example, to extract information from public or executive discourses on global governance).

With these substantial and methodological orientations, the joint work of the Global Governance unit of the WZB Berlin Social Science Center sheds light on the functioning and prospects of collective decision making beyond national borders.

More information about us and our research is available at:

www.wzb.eu/en/research/international-politics-and-law/global-governance