Conference Report

Bonn Symposium 2024

From cooperation to confrontation?

Populism and International Cooperation in the Super Election Year 2024

Ingo Nordmann-Mohn

The Bonn Symposium 2024 took place as a series of events consisting of three online discussion rounds and a concluding evening event at the Old Town Hall of the City of Bonn. With a changing thematic focus, German and international experts discussed how the worldwide rise of populism is affecting international cooperation and impeding the joint tackling of the global challenges of our time.

The first of the three online sessions examined the rise of right-wing populism in Europe and discussed the extent to which it could jeopardise the reliability of the EU as an international partner. The second session focussed on the influence of populist movements and parties on national and international climate policies. The third session focussed on populism in India under the Modi government. Concrete options for action for Germany and Europe were discussed in all sessions.

Optimism despite populism in Europe

In the three sessions, it was generally acknowledged that populism is on the rise worldwide and that the increasing political polarisation is having a noticeable impact. Nevertheless, there was an optimistic mood in the Europe session. The panellists believed the EU would remain a reliable international partner and capable of acting. One example was the relatively unified reaction to the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine. In some EU countries, there was also a decline in populist successes in the EU elections. Interestingly, many populist movements are no longer seeking to leave the EU. Members of the 'Patriots for Europe' group in the European Parliament, for example, want to reshape the EU according to their own ideas.

A new pragmatism – Europe leaving „barbieland"

At the same time, it became clear during the discussion that Europe should take a more pragmatic approach to its foreign policy. The first reason for this is the increasing unpredictability of international partners, such as the USA under Donald Trump. Secondly, complex political constellations - both due to the fragmentation of national parliaments and internal blockades at EU level - make effective decision-making processes more difficult. Thirdly, a shift can be observed at global level: Values such as human rights and the rule of law are receding, while national interests and the identification of common interests between different states are becoming increasingly important.

This new pragmatism represents a significant change for European countries. They must recognise that not

v.l.n.r. Oliver Krauß, Dr. Thomas Bagger, Dr. Ursula Sautter, Dr. Marcus Kaplan, Eva Quadbeck and Nathanael Liminski

all international partners - especially in the Global South - appreciate Europe and its approach, which is often perceived as moralising. Europe is sometimes accused of hypocrisy and double standards. Celia Bélin from the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) in Paris put it this way: 'Europe lived in barbieland', and must now find a new, perhaps more pragmatic political stance in many cases.

sef: Executive Director Dr. Marcus Kaplan summarizes the outcomes of the Bonn Symposium 2024 online series

At the evening event, Dr Thomas Bagger, State Secretary at the Federal Foreign Office, added that values and interests are not necessarily contradictory. Germany's value-based policy also pursues strategic interests. While morality alone does not make policy, policy without a moral basis leads to cynicism, he said. However, in view of the decreasing expectation that other states share the same values, Germany must act more pragmatically and adopt a more transactional stance, including in its dealings with the USA.

India's pragmatic foreign policy

The question on which foundations international cooperation is based was also discussed in the India session. It became clear that even after the national elections, India is perceived internationally as a pragmatic but predictable partner. In India, populism in the form of Hindu nationalism is evident at the national level, while its impact on foreign policy is less pronounced. Accordingly, foreign policy did not play a central role in this year's parliamentary elections, in which Narendra Modi's ruling party, the BJP, suffered surprising losses and is now the largest party within a coalition government.

„Populists love climate change!"

In the second session, it became clear that climate policy is a rewarding topic for populists: The complexity of the topic allows them to offer supposedly simple solutions, which may seem convincing at first sight. The issue is often driven by so-called elites (such as the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] or Fridays for Future) and has a direct impact on the allocation of resources, which almost inevitably leads to injustices. In recent years, the issues of climate justice and international financing have also become increasingly relevant, with countries of the Global North being held accountable. All of these aspects offer populists an excellent target - or, as Prof Markus Lederer from the Technical University of Darmstadt put it: 'Populists love climate change.'

Overall, it became clear during the online sessions that populism is not a new phenomenon and does not have to be always and exclusively detrimental. Populism can be part of the democratic discourse and reflect social crises that need to be overcome. These impulses should also be used by non-populist parties to initiate positive changes and counter simplistic narratives with differentiated narratives.

Impacts of the US election on Germany and North Rhine-Westphalia

The concluding evening event of the Bonn Symposium focussed on the prospects and options for action after the super election year of 2024, with a particular focus on the results of the US election, which had taken place just a few weeks earlier. Nathanael Liminski, Minister for Europe and International Affairs and Head of the State Chancellery of North Rhine-Westphalia, explained that Donald Trump's re-election will also have far-reaching political and social consequences internationally.

Due to its strong international network, the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia is particularly affected by global developments. Most well-known companies from NRW are also active in the USA, while numerous US companies are based in NRW. One example of this is the defence industry with the NRW-based company Rheinmetall, which is cooperating with a leading US defence company in the town of Weeze to build the F-35 fighter jet.

'Against' is not a strategy – Europe's positioning vis-à-vis the USA

Eva Quadbeck, editor-in-chief of the Redaktions-Netzwerk Deutschland (RND), emphasised that the hesitant congratulations from Germany and Europe to Trump after his election victory might have been a sign of uncertainty. This restraint could make Europe vulnerable in international affairs - especially at a time when leading countries such as Germany, the UK and France are themselves struggling with political instability.

Dr Thomas Bagger emphasised the need for a clear view of Germany's priorities in German-American relations and identified security and the economy as the two central pillars. The USA remain indispensable for Germany's security - even more so today than in 2017, at the beginning of Trump's first term in office. Trade with the USA (as well as international trade) is

also essential for Germany, as the German economy is far more dependent on global trade relations than the American economy.

The biggest task is therefore not to oppose Trump decisively, but to know what Germany itself wants to achieve and how it can compensate for America's withdrawal in certain areas. Nathanael Liminski also emphasised that simply being 'against' the US under Trump is not an appropriate response for Europe, as Germany is heavily dependent on the USA in terms of security policy - for example, 70-80% of intelligence information on counter-terrorism comes from the United States.

AI and the challenges of the upcoming election campaign

Eva Quadbeck emphasised the growing importance of artificial intelligence for politics. The upcoming election campaign in Germany will be the first to be heavily influenced by AI - and it is likely to be anything but clean. Examples such as AI-generated memes and videos depicting fictional scenarios, such as a kiss between moderator Carmen Miosga and politician Robert Habeck, are spreading rapidly. In addition, Russian troll armies often produce content on social media faster than the authorities can delete it, says Quadbeck.

Against this backdrop, the question arises as to how fairness can be guaranteed in election campaigns in the face of AI, social media and targeted disinformation campaigns. Quadbeck pointed out that populists such as the AfD hardly need to become active if centrist parties weaken each other through exaggerated accusations. This political vacuum would be increasingly being filled by populist forces.

In a final round of comments, the panellists identified what they saw as the key factors to prevent populism in Germany from continuing to grow. Nathanael Liminski named good governance as a central condition. Eva Quadbeck pointed out the need for stronger social cohesion, combined with more regulation of social media. Thomas Bagger confirmed the latter point, citing 'education, education, education' as the final factor.

Discussion with Dr Thomas Bagger (State Secretary, Federal Foreign Office), Eva Quadbeck (editor-in-chief, Redaktions-Netzwerk Germany), Minister Nathanael Liminski (Head of the State Chancellery, NRW) and chair Conny Czymoch

Imprint

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Dechenstr. 2 : 53115 Bonn : Germany
Phone +49 (0)228 959 25-0 : Fax -99
sef@sef-bonn.org : 𝕏@sefbonn
www.sef-bonn.org

Editor
Davina Albrecht

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Davina Albrecht