The Rise of Liberal Authoritarianism and Global Transition to Polycentrism

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Abstract

The article deals with the transformation of the Western liberal democratic model and international relations amid Cold War II. Sources of liberal authoritarianism are identified, and the West's ongoing authoritarian turn is conceptualized in terms of postliberalism. The latter is scrutinized through the political West's efforts to protect liberal democracy and its values, and to establish global *Gemeinschaft* of liberal democracies through containment, deterrence, and encirclement. This process is seen as being interconnected with the intensifying conflict between liberal and sovereign internationalism over the international system. Whereas the political West asserts the rules-based order, the internally heterogeneous Global Majority seeks to establish a polycentric model based on the centrality of the UN Charter and the principles of peaceful coexistence. Hegemonism is compared with the Global Majority's emancipatory aspirations that have led to the large-scale confrontation with the political West since 2022.

Keywords: authoritarianism, Cold War II, political West, Global Majority, liberal democracy, polycentrism, postliberalism, rules-based order, sovereign internationalism, sovereign populism.

The war in Ukraine has accelerated large-scale transformation processes, contributing to the transition to postliberalism in the political West and to polycentrism globally. This article intends to contribute to the recent discussion on the metamorphoses of the liberal democratic model and the tensions between liberal and sovereign internationalism, between the political West and the Global Majority. Even though it draws upon established concepts (polycentrism), I sometimes reinterpret them (postliberalism) and formulate new ones (sovereign populism) to provide a new perspective on the phenomena in question. I attribute the transformation of liberal democracies to the extremely volatile and unpredictable external environment, relating what I see as a rise of liberal authoritarianism in the West to the emergence of new centers of powers and their emancipatory aspirations, which manifested themselves in the outbreak of Cold War II in 2022. In my line of reasoning, postliberalism and Cold War II are interconnected. Similarly, I observe parallels between sovereign internationalism as the paradigm of the Global Majority and sovereign populism, which is a socially and politically heterogeneous conglomerate of internal opponents of liberal hegemony. I believe the main dividing line in the political landscape of liberal democracies lies not between the left and the right but between the liberal center (liberal democratic mainstream) and sovereign populists from both the left and the right. Such heterogeneity corresponds with the plurality of the Global Majority, consisting of a wide array of international actors with different interests.

GLOBAL LANDSCAPE IN THE 2020S

An increasing number of authors in the West, Russia and beyond have pointed to the authoritarian, illiberal and undemocratic features

of liberal democracies. Some of them even use the concept of postliberalism to describe the phenomenon, but their understanding of the term differs. John Gray (1996) reinterprets the entire liberal tradition in an anti-essentialist way and calls it postliberalism. Among most recent publications one can mention those of Fred Dallmayr (2019) and Adrian Pabst (2019a, 2019b). The former criticizes Western modernity and liberalism as its significant part, conceptualizing postliberalism as a middle path between liberal atomism and collectivist populism. Pabst's focus is closer to mine. He analyses both the development of the liberal democratic model and the liberal international order, drawing connections between the two, and argues that the Western internal model is oligarchic while democracy and fundamental rights and freedoms are threatened by contemporary liberalism itself. In his recent work (2021), Pabst sees postliberalism as an alternative social order to capitalism and "really existing liberalism." These examples indicate that the problematic content of liberal democracy becomes increasingly felt among critical Western scholars.

Unlike the abovementioned authors, I use the term 'postliberalism' with reference to the authoritarian transformation of the liberal democratic model. Drawing upon vivid polemics about liberalism and democracy of both the past and present, I address the sources of liberal authoritarianism, connecting them with the historical development of liberal democracy, and interpret postliberalism in terms of the paradoxical endeavor to construct a "liberal *Gemeinschaft*" to counter the external challenge posed by alternative models and protect the value, moral and cultural prerequisites of the liberal system. Liberal authoritarianism is not a new phenomenon, but the scope, aim and context of its present authoritarian turn are indeed new and perhaps irreversible. That is why I conceptualize the qualitatively new developmental stage of the liberal democratic model in the era of Cold War II, regionalization, and global transition to polycentrism as postliberalism.

The ethos and rules of *neoliberal* globalization with its imperative of free trade, economic pragmatism and global movement of people, capital, goods, and services have substantially weakened. Some authors

argue that the upcoming era will entail partial decoupling dictated by the interests and strategic considerations of the leading regional actors that will mobilize and develop their domestic resources while deepening cooperation and integration with their close partners. The increasingly autonomous centers of the international order will rely on regional structures and institutions, and develop interregional, supra-regional, and global exchanges where desirable. From this perspective, neoliberal globalization is being replaced with *regionalization* and *glocalization* (Gigin, 2022; Karaganov, 2022).

Paradoxically, in today's world is it China that pushes the idea of free trade, notwithstanding concurrent strategy aimed at securing multifaceted sovereignty through its policy of dual circulation. China and its regional partners have succeeded in establishing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the largest trade bloc in history. However, these initiatives will probably not reverse the stronger move towards the formation of semi-autonomous regional blocs. After the global financial crisis of the 2000s, the International Monetary Fund has faced a surge in trade restrictions, and partial deglobalization, which it sees as a geoeconomic fragmentation. The trend has been noted by many experts: despite certain expansion of cross-border trade, further internationalization of supply chains and a high level of interconnections among the actors all over the world, globalization has plateaued after 2008 and the global economy has found itself on the brink of fragmentation (Aiyar et al., 2023). Importantly, regionalization does not necessarily entail a substantial weakening of market mechanisms but rather a stronger control of and restriction on the economic flows between regional blocs in relation to security and political interests.

The process of fragmentation and regionalization is connected with the accelerated securitization on each side, which weakens free interaction and interchange between individual actors or groups of actors *ex definitione*. Remarkably, securitization applies to "autocracies" as much as to "democracies" (Drinhaus and Legarda, 2022; Solovyov, 2021; Zemánek, 2022). Longer-term securitization tendencies have been deepened by militarization as a consequence of the proxy war

between Russia and the political West over Ukraine. These complex processes can be put into the conceptual framework of Cold War II. The latter concept has been present in academic, media and political discourses in different forms since the 1990s but became increasingly often applied in relation to the color revolution in Ukraine in 2013-2014 and the consequent local military conflict (Cohen, 2018), as well as the Sino-U.S. rivalry (Hirsh, 2022). I combine these two perspectives, conceptualizing Cold War II as a clash between the *political West* with its liberal democratic model and rules-based international order *(liberal internationalism)*, on the one hand, and the innerly heterogeneous *Global Majority*, consisting of a variety of political regimes, socioeconomic models and cultural trajectories, on the other.[1] The common denominator of the latter group can be described as allegiance to *sovereign internationalism*.

The contradiction between the two internationalisms has been amply analyzed by Richard Sakwa (2023a). He argues that sovereign internationalism is embedded in what he calls the Charter International System whose foundations were laid by the major powers at the end of World War II in Dumbarton Oaks, Yalta, and Potsdam, and developed by the principles of peaceful coexistence in Bandung in 1955. Distinguishing the international system from international order, Sakwa shows how after the end of Cold War I the political West tended to impose its model on the international community, eventually inventing the rules-based order as a political instrument of Western hegemonism. From this point of view, the new Cold War embeds different understandings of universalism, international system, and international relations. While Cold War I was predominantly determined by the struggle between capitalism and socialism, the present conflict

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[1]   The term 'Global Majority' is analogous to 'the Rest' (Ferguson, 2011), but I consider the latter too West-centric, all the more so since 'the political West' (liberal democratic states and their closest allies adhering to the cause of rules-based international order) represents a minority in terms of both states and population. Therefore, the notion of 'Global Majority' (or 'World Majority' which appears in the Russian expert milieu (Karaganov, 2022)), depicts this constellation in a more accurate way. The term 'Global Majority' has also been used in the Western discourse since the 2000s but in a somewhat different meaning. It is a collective term for non-White ethnic groups around the world which indeed account for a majority of the population. I abstract away from the ethnic aspects when using it.

centers on the fundamental question of whether the UN-promulgated normative framework, which is of multilateral, inclusive and democratic nature and is embodied in the Charter International System, can be eventually materialized in a polycentric international order free of hegemonism and constructed as a real *pluriversum*.

DECONSTRUCTING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Western liberal tradition belongs to great achievements of Western political thought and socioeconomic development. It has undergone several stages and obtained a variety of different features; so one can speak about many liberalisms (Bell, 2014). Liberalism is an innerly heterogeneous phenomenon and individual streams can differ from each other considerably not only from a diachronic but also from a synchronic perspective. *Classical Enlightenment liberalism* (Locke, Kant, Mill) was revised by the authors of new or social liberalism (Dewey, Novgorodtsev) in the 20th century in response to the rise of socialism and the problematic social consequences of the implemented conception of a non-interventionist state and *laissez fair*. *Agonistic liberalism* of the end of the last century (Gray), in turn, rejected the natural law foundations of both classical and social liberalism, reviving Hobbesian principles of pluralism and fallibility. In contrast, some liberals, inspired by the heritage of new liberalism and conservative/socialist critics of liberalism's atomist-leaning disdain for collective commitments and shared values, merged with identity politics (Furedi, 2022). Liberalism is, nevertheless, only part of the existing liberal democratic model, for it includes the democratic tradition whose relation to liberalism has been frequently even contradictory (Zakaria, 1997). It has its historical reasons.

As an ideology of the rising bourgeoisie, liberalism embodied particularly the interests and mindset of this social stratum in a concrete historical moment. As such, it was associated with the dynamics of capitalism rather than democracy, social justice, or common prosperity, focusing on the protection of the first generation of human rights—civil and political. In this sense, liberalism could be described in terms of negative rather than positive freedom. Reflecting

the very aspirations of the modern Western middle class, this paradigm was far from universal. Liberalism succeeded in the enforcement of the freedoms and rights of individuals, creating strong barriers that protected the individual from excessive intervention of the state or collective entities of different kinds. Liberalism's union with democracy in conjunction with capitalism has brought an array of positive results, contributing significantly to the strong position, attractiveness, soft power of the Western socioeconomic as well as the political model that withstood the challenge posed by alternative patterns of modernity, above all, socialism.

In the 20th century, the Western model gradually evolved into liberal democracy, combining democratic and liberal features with certain aspirations for social rights needed to secure a basic level of social cohesion and a sufficiently stable social consensus to confront the socialist countries. The end of Cold War I led many authors to the conclusion that the Western model had proved its universal character and superiority over any alternatives (Fukuyama, 1992). The well-known "end of history" did not occur though. The structural problems and limits of the Western model became obvious already during the global financial crisis in 2008. The emerging system of alternatives was combined with the growth of economic and political power of their bearers. The multiplied crisis moments inherent in the Western model and the objective rise of the Global Majority have undermined the position of liberal democracy, uncovering the inner contradictions of the very paradigm. The competition with alternatives and the fundamental conflict between the political West and Russia, which resulted in the outbreak of Cold War II in 2022 with no way back to the *status quo ante*, made Western liberal democracies adapt to the new conditions. Intensification of inner contradictions and the need to protect the existing political regimes are seemingly resulting in a *qualitative* change of at least some liberal democracies, which have started to turn to *liberal authoritarianism*.

The authoritarian turn of liberal democracies, however paradoxical it may seem, has deep roots. Isaiah Berlin (1969) pointed to the risk of absolutism and totalitarianism hidden in the rationalist,

Enlightenment layer of the liberal tradition. Rationalism created a paradigm in which all human beings were of the same rational nature, and the interests and goals of both individuals and society could be harmonized. This rationalist vision within the liberal framework excludes internal pluralism and gradually undermines the very liberal notion of individual autonomy and freedom. John Gray (2000) calls the ideal of a rational consensus on the best and universal model liberal orthodoxy. *Liberal orthodoxy* overlooks the conflicts of interests and values, thus denying pluralism and legitimacy of the coexistence of different socioeconomic and cultural models. From Gray's perspective, aspirations of liberal democracies to represent a universal model free of inner contradictions are false and are a relic of the European Enlightenment. In his recent article, Frank Furedi addresses illiberal and anti-democratic tendencies within contemporary liberalism which "stems from liberalism's uneasy relationship with public opinion, majoritarianism, and democracy" (Furedi, 2022, p. 20). Calling for the revival of what Gray called liberal orthodoxy, Furedi presents the "genealogy" of illiberal liberalism, which entails social engineering, value progressivism, and state paternalism resulting in that democracy and some individual rights and freedoms (notably the freedom of speech) have become a second-order value in the existing liberal democratic regimes. Gray and Furedi are examples of liberal thinkers who point to problematic features of liberalism.

Authoritarianism, therefore, may be seen as an inherent, even though not a necessary quality of liberalism, existing from the very outset. If this assertion applies to liberal philosophy, it is far from surprising that liberalism could coexist with authoritarianism in political practice as well. A combination of political authoritarianism and economic liberalism has not been an exception: one can mention Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore, Pinochet's Chile or Yeltsin's Russia. Nevertheless, authoritarian practices are not a "privilege" of non-Western regimes but have also appeared in Western liberal democracies, which is increasingly often noted by Western authors themselves (Frankenberg, 2020; Wilkinson, 2021). What I suggest here is that, unlike in the past, authoritarianism of liberal democracies is

passing to a new stage, for it does not limit itself to the enhancement of liberal principles in the "economic basis" and to the naturalization of inequalities (on the contrary, it is increasingly often moving in the opposite direction), but it concentrates on the "social superstructure." Referring to the *Böckenförde dilemma,* I conceptualize this shift as an attempt to construct a "postliberal *Gemeinschaft.*"

Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, a German legal theorist and former President of the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany, noted an essential contradiction of the modern Western political system, lying in the fact that a liberal democratic state lives by prerequisites which it cannot guarantee itself, for it is rooted and is evolving in a specific historical and cultural context (Böckenförde, 1976, p. 60). The historical alliance between liberalism, democracy and capitalism that gave birth to the flagship of Western modernity as another pattern of the Western universalist tradition is particular in essence and includes older socioeconomic patterns and traditions without which liberal democracy would have probably never emerged (Wallerstein, 2006). The Böckenförde dilemma thus addresses the complex connection between the political regime, on the one hand, and a peculiar morality, social values, and identity as the necessary conditions for sustainable existence and reproduction of liberal democracy itself, on the other. This line of reasoning is analogous to the Weberian one. Decades before Böckenförde, Max Weber analyzed the specific historical circumstances that enabled the genesis and tumultuous development of capitalism, referring to the specific Protestant ethic without which capitalist formation would hardly have developed. Similarly, liberal democracy is rooted in an amalgam of Enlightenment rationalism, Christian-originated humanism, and morality, as well as liberal constitutionalism. A deeper analysis of the prerequisites is beyond the scope of this article, but the abovementioned outline should suffice to identify the paradox of the contemporary Western model, which makes it fragile and predisposed to the crisis. The liberal democratic state needs this social and cultural context for self-reproduction. The context, however, has been changing, so the state has no other option than to intervene to enforce and protect peculiar values, identity, and morality. At this

point, it negates itself, becomes illiberal, and transforms itself into a different one. It is this transformation that I call postliberalism.

Liberal authoritarianism can draw upon the already invented concept of *militant democracy* and embrace the dualist discourses of *open society and its enemies* (internally), and *democracies and autocracies* (externally). The concept of militant democracy was formulated by Karl Loewenstein who concluded that a democratic state was obliged to protect itself against its enemies irrespective of people's will (Loewenstein, 1937). This discourse later materialized in the institution of constitutional courts which became one of the keystones of postwar liberal democracies. Nevertheless, such theoretical considerations and practical actions have gone against the majoritarian democratic principle, preventing the majority from exercising its sovereign will. The very precondition of democratic rule is thus undermined by legal constraints and related powers of unelected groups, for instance, the judiciary (Hirschl, 2007). It is not without interest that the same Loewenstein who coined the term 'militant democracy' frequently referred to the struggle between democracies and autocracies that from his perspective represented two basic types of political regimes (Loewenstein, 1935). The same narrative would be incorporated into the hegemonic liberal democratic discourse in the 2020s, disseminated by Western elites to mobilize domestic support in their confrontation with the Global Majority.

CONSTRUCTING POSTLIBERAL *GEMEINSCHAFT*

This historical context helps us understand the present transformation of liberal democracies. Postliberalism indicates the need for the existence of *Gemeinschaft* with shared morality, values, identity, and a specific way of life (see Tönnies, 1887). Postliberalism, therefore, can be seen as an answer to the paradigm of modern liberal *Gesellschaft*. At the same time, it reflects the specific *Zeitgeist*, which is characterized by the absence of grand ideologies and the widespread awareness that the principal ideologies of Western modernity do not correspond to the realities of the 21st century. The consequent syncretism creates fertile ground for the creative remodeling of the existing concepts

and the gradual construction of a new ideological framework. The most problematic aspect of the construction of liberal democratic communities is that it is frequently carried out by authoritarian means both internally and externally.

Drawing upon case studies and analyses elaborated by the experts of the China-CEE Institute, which provide valuable insights into the development of liberal democracies in Central and Eastern Europe (see, for example, Kong, 2022; Liu, 2022; Zemánek, 2021), the most prominent characteristics of postliberalism can be described as follows: securitization; militarization; militarism; politicization of an increasing number of social spheres; weakening of the democratic (majoritarian) principles; enforcement of ideological consensus as the main vehicle for building liberal democratic community and securing social cohesion and coherence; restriction on citizens' rights and freedoms in specific areas (primarily the freedom of speech, media and research but also the right of private ownership); censorship; cancel culture; social ostracism; public defamation through media campaigns; the emergence of dissent; and last but not least radical value progressivism combined with social engineering such as green transition, multiculturalism and mass migration, gender identity, and the like (compare with Lewis, 2020). This enumeration is not full as the process has begun only recently while the results are far from being clear. It should be noted that these features were identified as a result of empirical observations and are not universally valid since the situation in individual countries varies (Pabst, 2019b). But what Western countries have in common is that, unlike the illiberal regimes of the past century, the control and repressive measures in liberal democracies cannot be traced up to an unambiguously discernible power vertical. These processes are rather of horizontal character, decentralized, dispersed, and carried out by a variety of actors, for instance, traditional state repressive apparatus, media, private businesses, and universities (Althusser, 2014; Furedi, 2022).

From postliberalism's vantage point, a substantial transformation of the political terrain is underway. The traditional left-right division is losing its relevancebecause the differences between individual parties

adhering to liberal democracy are fading away. This process has been accelerated by the decline of traditional political parties in many countries of the political West and their displacement by amorphous subjects without a solid ideological basis (Klaus, 2021). Liberal democracies have gradually emptied democratic politics, tending to form a widely homogeneous political camp whose role could be likened to technocratic management. This state of affairs is aggravated in the EU where the national legislative processes are largely dominated and overloaded by the incessant transposition and implementation of EU norms (Wilkinson, 2021). Politics is becoming increasingly alienated and formalist due to the weakening of the democratic principles centered around the notion of people's will and majoritarianism. Given that liberal democratic regimes have gradually imposed an increasing number of restrictions on the freedoms and rights of the citizens while reinforcing diffused, horizontal practices of control and repression, the exercise of people's will is limited in many fields (Pabst, 2019b). The rising undemocratic character of the Western political model corresponds with the obstruction of the democratization of international relations along the line of sovereign internationalism (Pabst, 2019a). The concept of rules-based international order is similarly oppressive in relation to democracy in international relations as liberal democracy is in relation to democracy at the level of nation-states. In both cases, the sovereign will of the subject in question (citizens, nation-state) is undermined.

The processes at national and global levels evince coincident features whose common denominator can be identified as mobilization and revival of the tactics of a *united front*. Even though the concept emerged within the International Communist Movement in the 1920s to describe an alliance of heterogeneous actors against their common enemy, it became prominent in the U.S. discourse during Joe Biden's presidency (Biden, 2020). The recent reinterpretation is based on the vision of a "global democratic front" or "democracies" in opposition to "autocracies." This dualist discourse contaminates the national level. It redraws the political landscape in that the decisive dividing line goes not between the left and right but between the liberal democratic center

and 'sovereign populism.' I suggest the latter term as an internal parallel to Sakwa's 'sovereign internationalism.' Both sovereign populism and internationalism claim allegiance to the tenet of sovereignty and democracy, opposing the liberal hegemony at home and beyond. In this regard, sovereignty applies to the state in relation to other states, and to people's will as the source of state power internally. In both cases, majoritarianism is what matters. Sovereign populism has both conservative and socialist features, including a wide array of actors from both the left and right who feel repressed by the liberal center that tends to introduce authoritarian (postliberal) policies (Basile and Mazzoleni, 2022).

One can argue that the emergence of sovereign populism in opposition to liberal democracy revives the much older contradiction between liberalism with its constitutionalism and rule of law, on the one hand, and democracy, on the other. From this perspective, democracy is not reduced to institutional procedures, regular general elections and the metaphor of people's rule but seeks to exercise the "general will" without legal obstacles and frequently through the instruments of direct democracy (Mayr and Orator, 2021). Sovereign populism thus may be interpreted in terms of Rousseauism and positive liberty. Of course, it may slide into much more authoritarian and even totalitarian practices as happened many times in modern history starting from the Jacobin dictatorship, Paris Commune, and Soviet "commune" democracy, and ending with German National Socialism (Hansen, 2022; Sakwa, 1998; Talmon, 1961).

POSTLIBERALISM AND TRANSITION TO POLYCENTRISM

Postliberalism—the internal authoritarian transformation—is a reaction to the gradual power decline of the West, the emergence of alternative models and a fundamental challenge to *liberal internationalism* by the Global Majority's *sovereign internationalism* in conjunction with the need to mobilize Western societies face to face with "external enemies." From my point of view, post-liberalism embodies both the culmination and the negation of the "really existing liberalism" in the political West, creating preconditions for substantial

redrawing of the socioeconomic, political and cultural landscape of those countries in the years to come.

There is an empirically observable connection between the rise of authoritarianism in liberal democracies, on the one hand, and the external policies in individual regions, on the other. At the most general level, the leading Western hegemon is trying to mobilize the allies and strengthen the unity of the bloc. It tells on the strategy of a global democratic front against "autocracies" combined with the "CDE" (containment, deterrence, and encirclement) strategy in Eurasia, whose part is the revival of Rimland geopolitics and the discursive operations to replace Asia-Pacific with Indo-Pacific to suit the *hard* U.S. interests.[2] The hegemonic actions aimed at constructing international *Gemeinschaft*, based upon *shared* values, identity, rules and ideology, coincide with the analogous processes in individual Western countries. The global and the adopted regional policies are typical of flexibility that corresponds with the obscure nature of the rules-based order. At the same time, the U.S.'s dominant role does not exclude autonomous actions and projects on the part of minor actors. The strong unification and mobilization tendencies within the political West may be explained as a strategy of the hegemon aimed at creating conditions for yielding its responsibilities to other actors who would prove capable of securing and enforcing the collective interests instead of the U.S. itself. This would, in turn, enable Washington to focus on the main strategic challenge—China.

Western hegemonism is in stark contrast to Eurasian initiatives and their paradigm based upon peaceful coexistence and sovereign internationalism. Eurasia is becoming a center of global emancipation processes and an engine of alternative developmental patterns at many levels. In terms of the economy, China has succeeded in building market socialism with a solid economic foundation for the development of a new form of civilization (Lukin, 2021). In terms of politics, the scope of political regimes in Eurasian countries is wide, with some of them

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[2]   The CDE strategy is institutionalized in various organizations starting from the Quad, AUKUS, I2U2, the Partners in the Blue Pacific in Asia and Oceania, and ending with the Three Seas Initiative, Lublin Triangle, and NATO in Europe, including the attempts to establish new security alliances in the Mediterranean.

posing a serious challenge to liberal democracy. The Eurasian major powers have thereby undermined the quasi-universalism of the Western model, accentuating the legitimacy of multiple democracies (Antonov and Qin, 2021). At the same time, the combination of capitalism and political authoritarianism is another pattern that has proved its efficiency to a certain degree. In terms of culture, Japan and China managed to develop a successful and viable model of modernity that is different from the Western pattern, thus demonstrating the possibility of alternative modernization paths (Arnason, 1997). Similarly, Soviet modernity also represented a peculiar model whose long-term sustainability and the ability of self-reproduction prior to the Gorbachevian comprehensive reforms were not questioned even by some fierce critics of the Soviet regime among the exile scholars (Shlapentokh, 2001). In terms of international relations, the innovative, inclusive, and pluralist nature of the projects and initiatives carried out in the Eurasian macro-region contrasts with the exclusivity and hegemonism of the structures and institutions designed by liberal democratic actors. The Eurasian projects include the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP), Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and last but not least BRICS. Amid the intensifying conflict between Russia and the political West, the significance of Sino-Russian relations is increasing (Zemánek, 2020). Cooperation between Beijing and Moscow creates the basic condition for effective and sustainable enforcement of the interests of the Global Majority.

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Russia's military involvement in Ukraine has demonstrated that Cold War II is a matter of fact. Even though the question of when it started is open to discussion, the latest moment is the launch of the *special military operation*. The campaign has demonstrated the militarization and intensification of the longer-term confrontation between the political West and Russia as the Korean War did in the 1950s. Cold War II has created a new Iron Curtain between Europe and Russia, destroyed

the remnants of Gorbachev's "anti-Fulton" heritage, and made Moscow's pivot to the East inevitable (Lukin, 2022). Russia may be considered a peculiar Eurasian civilization (Bordachev, 2023; Savitsky, 1997), and even though its economic, political and soft power is weaker compared to that of the Soviet Union, it is one of the decisive major powers in the polycentric world. The Kremlin's strategic decision on the special military operation in February 2022 is accelerating the processes of pluralization and democratization of international relations.

The first year of the large-scale conflict in Ukraine has taught us important lessons. The war has exposed a certain weakness of Russia's conventional warfare capabilities and the concurrent potential of the Ukrainian troops boosted by Western supplies and comprehensive assistance. It has turned out that the ability to mobilize financial, military, political, human, and propaganda resources on the part of the political West should not be underestimated. At the same time, the unprecedented sanctions targeting Moscow, including the disconnection of Russia from the global financial system (SWIFT) and gradual termination of the import of Russian commodities to the European Union, have not succeeded in undermining Russia's political regime or socioeconomic foundations. On the contrary, Moscow has proven resilient enough, succeeding in finding new opportunities, political support, sympathy or at least neutrality throughout the Global Majority and also some countries of the political West, for instance, Hungary. Irrespective of the immediate results of a future settlement between Ukraine (and the West) and Russia, the conflict contributes significantly to the prospective establishment of the Global Majority's rule within the polycentric international order.

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