A year of high-stakes elections amid momentous international transformations promises a thrilling play. Domestic political processes have long been inextricably intertwined with foreign policy ones; after all this is what globalization was called upon—to erase borders. Now, however, the question is what plays a bigger role—the internal dynamics in major countries that impacts world affairs or vice versa. It can be either way. One thing is certain, though: international relations theory is now helpless without sociological perspective. There’s no chance to predict the state of the “grand chessboard” without understanding public sentiments in each square.

The resilience of national systems is becoming critical amid global instability. It depends on the authorities’ ability to win the public’s recognition of their right to govern, that is, secure their legitimacy. Historically, this happened in different ways: by force, estate hierarchy, dynastic tradition, and finally elections, which gradually involved more and more people. By the end of the 20th century, the liberal democratic system with competitive elections had become the norm, displacing Soviet-type “popular democracy” from the
political arena. Dictatorships of different
degrees of rigidity, which did not
surprise anyone in the last century, have
turned into an indecent anachronism.
Creating, or at a minimum imitating,
democratic institutions has become a
proper thing to do.

One can hardly say that this time
is over: democratic rights gained by
the masses cannot be taken away. But
is democracy still the most efficient
political form of government to ensure
prosperity and stability? Countries
that have neither aspired democratic
changes nor introduced any pluralism—
China and the Gulf monarchies—are
now considered most promising and
influential states. A series of military
coups in Africa does not cause a
noticeable increase in public tensions.
The obvious reason is disappointment
in the institutions of democracy that
have failed to make things better.

In countries that adhere to formal
democratic procedures but rely on
authoritarian power to maintain
governability, elections often turn into
a sophisticated operation to consolidate
the status quo. Undisguised falsification
is impossible as everything is too
transparent, and voters, even the least
advantaged, have all communication
tools to use. So, the authorities have
to find ways to interest and captivate
people while keeping the line. Naturally,
citizens are more concerned about
what affects them directly, but foreign
policy issues come in handy here: regimes hurry to capitalize on external
achievements, using the “moment of
success” as the basis for legitimacy.

The situation is even more
complicated in countries with an
established democratic tradition. The
multiparty system still exists, so there
should be no problems with legitimacy
after all. Really? Classical parties are
experiencing a voter confidence crisis,
and their opponents calling for change
are frighteningly extravagant and often
completely lack governing experience.
Until recently, Donald Trump was the
embodiment of such non-systemic
forces, but now the fiery Argentine
Javier Miley has outdone him.

In this situation, democratic
elections assume an additional
implication. The establishment presents
each voting as a battle for democracy,
by which it means the victory of the
forces that do not alter the course
but ensure continuity. Accordingly,
their rivals are presented as a threat
to democracy, even if they rely on
the majority. Modern liberalism is
generally distrustful of the majority as
the emphasis is placed on protecting the
rights of the individual and minority.

In holding elections, different state
systems have one thing in common—
they are highly manipulative in the legal,
administrative, and media spheres. All
these elements are necessary to feel
confident. The reason is quite clear: amid
increasing international unpredictability,
the stakes are high and internal shocks
become all the more dangerous. Hence
the desire to secure oneself as much as
possible. True, this is a far cry from the
original democratic ideals, but after all
they have always been a tool, not an end
in themselves.