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What kind of democracy is at stake internationally?

Let me begin with a question that has been recurring lately in my teaching: What kind of democracy is at stake in the war between Russia and Ukraine? If democracy is primarily a system for national self-determination, may we still understand the popular view that the democracy under attack in Ukraine is a concern for democrats everywhere? If, instead, the democracy at stake in Ukraine is primarily a normative ideal in global politics that can be shared at no cost among people everywhere, may we still understand the extreme seriousness – the weapons and the money – that western countries muster to stop Russia and arguably to protect democracy in this case? If neither national nor global models are perfect to understand what democracy means in this context, are there any interesting alternative conceptions?

In the classroom I have used the question to stimulate thinking, not to introduce any particular doctrine. Some students – together with scholars and politicians – do not believe that democracy is relevant at all to explain anything in Ukraine. Instead of thinking about Kremlin's fear of having a storefront of democracy in Ukraine, the conflict has been explained by the eastern expansion of NATO, by Putin's self-image as the leader of an empire with natural rights to rule over neighbouring countries, and other factors.

Today, however, my purpose is not limited to stimulate new thinking. In addition, I would like to argue for a particular interpretation of the democracy at stake in Ukraine and, more broadly, in international politics. I will not debate what explains the conflict in Ukraine, let alone international politics in general (although I believe democracy should figure more prominently in explanations of both matters). Instead, I want to discuss how we should conceive of democracy if and when we have decided to give that concept some role in the discussion of international matters.

I will question two ideas, and then introduce a third one. The democracy at stake in discussions of international politics, I will argue, is neither a political rule within nations (national democracy) nor a normative ideal to treat all humans as free and equal in global politics (global democracy). Instead, it is best conceived of as an evolving set of structures and processes that approximate, or facilitate, rule by the largest number in politics beyond individual states. In contrast to thinking of global democracy, the conception of democracy beyond the state that I favour directs attention to practices with a realistic possibility to exist in the current international system. In contrast to thinking of national democracy, the same concept of democracy directs attention, not only to domestic politics, but to global and international practices as well.

National conceptions of democracy may then be defined as designating institutions, structures and practices in the domestic politics of individual states as exhaustive of democracy. To describe the level of national democracy, we ask questions like: How far do constitutions, party systems, media structures, public education approximate or contribute to the idea of rule by the people or rule by the largest number? How far are individuals treated as free and equal in the deliberation and aggregation of preferences that political procedures transform into law? While the concrete institutions and practices of relevance to national democracy may be unlimited, the conceptual bottom line is their being limited to the domestic territory of an individual state.

Global conceptions of democracy, on the other hand, designate as exhaustive of democracy the practices and institutions needed for all human beings to treat each other as free and equal in a unified (single) political system or procedure. Suggestions of what global democracy might entail in practice, if it would come into being, include the establishment of direct elections of institutions that govern global affairs under a system of international or constitutional law, including protection of familiar democratic rights (e.g. freedom of expression, assembly, movement, etc). A range of other institutions may also be relevant to achieve global democracy, such as more participatory or deliberative institutions at national levels. The conceptual bottom line, however, is that the relevance to democracy of those institutions will be judged from how they affect and empower all humans in an aggregate observation.

The idea of national democracy has some advantages, such that it is familiar in political science and wider society. It has inspired social movements of democratisation and national self-determination. It is relevant to international politics (for example because national democracy is conducive to particular decisions on foreign policy and international alliance formation).

The problem with the national conception of democracy, however, is that it brackets how rule by the people is fostered or obstructed, not only by domestic structures, but by international matters as well. For example, it holds no resources to distinguish the greater democracy between two countries that decide on their joint border through joint deliberation, rule of law and common majoritarian procedures from the more limited democracy between two countries that address their shared border through secrecy, force, and unilateral domination (to illustrate, one may think about how the dynamics of the bilateral relationship Sweden/Denmark differs from that of Israel/Palestine). In addition to the limited descriptions of international politics that emanate from research based on a national concept of democracy, one may also notice how this concept does not easily capture the perception noted at the outset of this text, that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a threat to democrats everywhere, not only to democrats in Ukraine. From the perspective of national democracy, the democracy in Ukraine is a responsibility for the Ukrainians. If that formulation is uncomfortable, it is the national conception of democracy that produces it.

Moving on then to the idea of global democracy, it has similar advantages. While global democracy is not as familiar and powerful in political theory as the idea of national democracy, it does engage and motivate activists, scholars, parliamentarians, government officials, and inter-governmental organisations. The French and American revolutions gave rise to debates on whether to form democratic governments for the whole of humanity while in 2018, to take a more recent example, The European Parliament called upon the EU's governments to support a proposal to create a Parliamentary assembly within the UN.

Still, other aspects of global democracy make the concept less usefulness in discussions of international politics. The concept of global democracy does not, and arguably cannot, guide descriptions of how democracy is obstructed or realised today in particular cases of international politics (which assumes that territorial borders exist). Instead, it suggests a normative idea for how to change, and ultimately to transcend, the international system of states into a single polity. Global democracy may still be an important project in normative thinking, while that is different from clarifying what kind of democracy is at stake, or relevant, in international politics here and now. To achieve that aim we need, not ideas about what a better future means, however important that is to guide politics, but an idea of democracy that supports an impulse in empirical research to make or critique propositions on the prevalence or absence of democracy in international politics as is. As hinted at the outset, a definition of democracy that transcends the international system also may not have the power to explain

what makes the international response to the war in Ukraine so powerful. If there wasn't any *real* democracy at stake in the conflict, but only a normative vision of where we might end up in the future, I doubt the stakes would be high enough to motivate the weapons, the money and the open borders that have been offered by the West. The motivation of such actions by reference to democracy presupposes a moral commitment to practices and institution that actually exist to some degree, not only to a commitment to a future end-goal.

When I recently completed the book *Democratism: Explaining international politics with democracy beyond the state* (2022) I did so to provide a conception of democracy that was preferable to those of both national democracy and global democracy in international theory. The aim was to elaborate a concept of *democracy beyond the state* that was realistic enough to apply for description of international politics here and now (not limited to normative analyses) and also to identify democratic deficits and credentials that emerge uniquely in the context of international politics (not limited to register phenomena in national politics). What I found was that a conventional definition of democracy in general terms, as rule by the people, or more specifically, rule by the largest number who treat each other as free and equal, is helpful to reach those aims (being realistic and applicable to politics beyond the state). Elements of rule by the largest number can be observed in political arrangements constituted also by the people of several states (ranging from political arrangements in bilateral relationships to political arrangements in the whole of the international system).

To reconcile the possibility of democracy with the defining ideas of international politics, such that international politics may be anarchic or transcending of political communities and constitutions, it is helpful to construe democracy as a process to reconcile or mitigate political disagreements, not among all humans or all members of a particular nation or any other predefined group, but among any set of people who happen to disagree among themselves, whoever they are. The trigger of democracy beyond the state, in my understanding of the term, is then not located within the right to rule of any particular people, be it a national people or a global people, but in the persistent political disagreements that, as I argue, we establish democracy to mitigate or overcome. Whether disagreements lead democratic processes to create national, global or any other political communities thus becomes an open question (not decided analytically in the definition of democracy). It is a question that depends on the formation of preferences among individuals and groups which in democratic politics should be free to move in any direction. What matters for democracy is that political decisions include the people who disagree with each other, and that they are treated as free and equal in making the outcomes or suggesting new alternatives.

The international practices that can illustrate democracy in that sense are contested, just like the empirical indicators of national democracy are contested in that field of research. Still, analysts with an interest in democracy beyond the state often include the following empirically observable items: democracy in domestic institutions (which are subsumed by the concept of democracy beyond the state); international institutions with majoritarian decision-rules and voting-power weighted by the size of the populations represented; transparency and predictability in foreign policy-making; constraints on the unilateral power of states by international law; authority of inter-governmental organisations to take effective action; openness for civil society actors to access information, to protest, and to voice their concerns over global issues in all parts of the world; absence of extreme poverty; some measure of equality in economic resources among individuals in different countries; attention to international effects of national decisions in domestic media and political forums (for a more complete discussion, see the book title noted above).

From this reconstruction of democracy, it should be possible for anyone to observe how democracy is realized, or obstructed, in selected cases of international politics, and then to assess the consequences of having more or less democracy beyond the state in a selected space of international politics – consequences for foreign policy, peace and war, resource distribution, institutional design, and other issues.

What then are the key reasons to identify the kind of democracy at stake in international politics with the concept of democracy beyond the state outlined above?

First, compared to the alternative conceptions, it provides a more complete viewpoint of what democracy is, how it works, the consequences it has, the reasons actors have to support or oppose it, and their means to work for or against it. It is also a conception of democracy with a unique capacity to explain some intuitive political understandings of democracy, such that the democracy at stake in Ukraine is not the democracy only of the Ukrainians, but of democrats anywhere, and also a sufficiently real phenomena to motivate sacrifices outside Ukraine as well (but surely not sacrifices at the same level as the Ukrainians undertake).

Second, and perhaps with greater relevance for this conference, democracy beyond the state adds one piece to the puzzle of explaining conflict patterns and composition of international alliances. The limited research on democracy beyond the state completed so far (see above) suggests that democracy beyond the state facilitates peace among states, convergence in foreign policy, and the bandwagoning of smaller states with a stronger state. The explanation is straightforward: Countries whose constitutive individuals are able to influence each other on relatively equal terms will have less to fear from closer cooperation and mutual dependency compared to countries with little tendency to adapt to the different interests of one another.

Third, thinking of democracy beyond the state generates implications for decision-making on international security of some originality. Exploiting the pacifying and stabilising effects of democracy beyond the state, many concrete measures present themselves for further debate, including the following selection of five:

1. Decisions on participation in military operations abroad should be made in line with the principle of equal value of all people involved in the disagreement. This applies to people within the home territory, within hostile states, and within third countries that may suffer consequence of action/non-action (say in Georgia, Moldova and Finland as affected by French or US decisions to scale up, or scale down, their engagement for Ukraine). Include as many persons as possible who are able to treat others as free and equal in decision-making, and disagreements will have a greater chance to be mitigated before they grow into violence.
2. All countries influence and are influenced by other countries, and should thus take responsibility for the effects of their actions on all sides of their borders. Emphasizing the value of national sovereignty in political discussion easily conveys a contrary and dangerous message, that only the interest of a state's own citizenry should be reflected in the actions by that state. Adaptation of national policies to opinions expressed by other states need not represent a limitation in democracy, but often illustrates how democracy works beyond the state. Adaptation among countries will often be hampered by autocrats who do not accept the freedom and equality of other people to influence issues of joint disagreement.
3. The bigger your disagreement with others, the more important it is to debate it. The difference between misleading propaganda and political debate is difficult to uphold in practice, and then it does not justify closing communication channels. New technology provides opportunities to establish direct contacts between individuals across countries and to spread information effectively (bypassing governments with potential self-interests to distort it). Public debate and

dissemination of information are means for political change with an inherent tendency to treat people as free and equal.

4. When disagreements intensify to the communication breaking point, the way forward in democracy beyond the state is to prepare the ground for better communication in the future. This may include documenting events through satellite photography, coordinating information gathering between journalists, military, researchers and civil society actors, and planning cultural collaborations to spread knowledge and understanding of a war once it has become history. When disagreement is too great, talking can also be left to others. If the EU cannot talk meaningfully to people in Russia at present, it should double efforts to proceed through others, say China or South Africa.
5. Military support to sustain a country today entails a responsibility to defend the same country tomorrow, and by extension to build democratic political institutions with the people in it. Today it is about Ukraine, but in a different situation about Mali or Afghanistan. International solidarity in wartime is no guarantee of agreement in the future. Future disagreements with countries that have been maintained by foreign military power will have to be handled with respect for all people's freedom and equality. Military operations should then be decided and undertaken only upon acceptance of building democratic international institutions with people in the recipient/target country, including the economic solidarity arguably needed for democracy (cf. the Marshall plan). If the costs of building a democratic community internationally are excessive, non-military policy instruments should become more attractive.