



# ENC ANALYSIS



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## Music, Underground Art, and the “Realpolitik” Dilemma A Vision of the Future?

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## About the author



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## Summary

Contemporary international relations are affected by rapidly developing factors that increase the uncertainty of peace and stability. The metaphor of music and underground art in the European capital allows to illuminate contradictions and challenges to the current foreign policies of the West while representing a model of world affairs where not only big powers but also smaller states and most importantly their societies are co-creators of their future. It is suggested that shared responsibility, transcending boundaries, and moving away from a Euro-centric foreign policy paradigm, based on awareness of common consequences show a way of adapting to the increasingly rapid changing nature of international relations. In this context, the goal of realization of best reform and creative potential of the societies in partner countries is seen as more important than the economic benefits from the relations.

## Introduction

This article employs a figurative style introduced through the opening aesthetic metaphor to guide analysis not without a basis. French scholar Ramel (2018) calling international relations “acoustic” refers to Walts’ (2011) interpretation of the link between international relations and art, when the latter points to the music as harmony and mobilizes it as a metaphor for a theory of international relations. Both musical performance and international relations as Walts argues rely on the cooperation between the musicians, or states, who act like members of the band or orchestra and are capable of creating either peace or war. As Ramel reminds the reader after Marks (2011), the transferring function of metaphors was used for centuries to demonstrate the work of international relations.

Art is also often known to be the first to reflect the nature of global trends, even if they are just emerging. Berlin’s boiling underground art life is a clear example of that. An early 20<sup>th</sup> century building in the Wedding district, now the Silent Green Kulturquartier, recently hosted a performance of Karen Power’s music, perhaps a fitting metaphoric illustration of the challenges and opportunities of the current stage of world affairs. This music imitating sounds of nature was played by Mosaic band in different halls. Contrary to tradition, the whole piece was played by musicians who did not share the same space and did not see most of the co-players of the ensemble. Instead, the musicians would move from one hall to another after each part of the music, without disturbing the course of the performance. Similarly, the audience freely moved from one hall to another to listen and watch performers of the same whole piece.

The performance looked like a screenshot of the contemporary world. The rooms of the Culture Center seemed to symbolize states and their borders, while showing that today it is possible and even required to run one’s own affairs in coordination and potential harmony with the affairs of others. It represented the fluidity and provisional nature of physical borders and the possibility of overcoming these borders for the sake of preserving commonality of space, livelihoods and peace. It foreshadows the necessity and possibility of common acts of creation in our world divided by borders, particularly with powerful Information Technology means of uniting, connecting and coordinating the activities of peoples and states. The performance can be seen as a vivid illustration of Walter Benjamin’s porosity of borders. The triumphant example of music played in a divided space overcoming the internal borders of this space can be taken as reflecting in art emerging trends changing the substance of international relations and foreign policy. It hints toward the impossibility of continuing to live the old ways of each focusing only on themselves without thinking of the cross-border consequences of national or local decision-making, consequences often returning as a boomerang to damage the national borders peoples and states seek to protect.

## Taking the foreign policy dilemma to the non-binary level

The current Ukraine crisis – with the invading Russian armed forces producing widespread civilian casualties in their shelling and bombing of Ukrainian cities and punitive actions - is a terrifying illustration of miscalculations in the assessment of the potential security threats and of the controversial nature of relations between the West and Russia. International relations nowadays are characterized by intense debate on the dilemma “value-based” versus “pragmatic”, “realpolitik” or “geopolitical” approaches in Western foreign policies towards the rest of the world. While there is a growing trend towards value-based policies, profoundly expressed in the recent speech of the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny’s daughter in the European Parliament<sup>1</sup>, this dilemma in practice seems unresolvable.

Furthermore, free trade principles, also basic to the liberal order will inevitably be affected by the attempt to bring restrictions and limitations in line with the value-based approach. Reflecting the contradictions between the two for instance in the EU policies, the sources point to the fact that “some ramifications inherent to the free trade hinder the EU’s ability to actually defend the values it puts forward” (Drieghe & Potjomkina, 2019). There is always a limit to a balance between the two – and continued US and European trade and relations with dictators of the oil rich states of the Middle East despite the nature of their regime is the best illustration of that. Besides, the oil and gas sector appeared one of the most attractive sectors for retiring European and American officials or diplomats. In the post-cold war period, a few US ambassadors to Azerbaijan stayed and joined businesses in Baku after completing their diplomatic service. Prince Andrew reportedly had business ties to Aliyev’s family<sup>2</sup>. Former chancellor Schroder’s position as chairman of the board of directors in the Russian-led Nord Stream 2 project is another example of the attractiveness of the oil and gas sector for former European officials<sup>3</sup>.

Regarding implications for one’s own country and international affairs, pragmatic or geopolitical decisions increasingly take priority over those based on values. In doing so, they start to undermine the very substance and resilience of the distinct identity of democratic states. The need to counter the hard power of autocrats stems from the West’s long-term inability to acknowledge their shared

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<sup>1</sup> Award of the Sakharov Prize 2021: Statement by Daria Navalnaya, daughter of Alexei Navalny. *European Parliament*, 15.12.2021. Retrieved from [https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/da/video/award-of-the-sakharov-prize-2021-statement-by-daria-navalnaya-daughter-of-alexei-navalny\\_1215457](https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/da/video/award-of-the-sakharov-prize-2021-statement-by-daria-navalnaya-daughter-of-alexei-navalny_1215457)

<sup>2</sup> Harper J. (2021). Azerbaijan ties add to Prince Andrew’s woes. *Emerging Europe*. Retrieved from <https://emerging-europe.com/news/azerbaijan-ties-add-to-prince-andrews-woes/>.

<sup>3</sup> Harper J. (2021). 2 Former European leaders and their post-Soviet power plays. *DW*. Retrieved from <https://www.dw.com/en/2-former-european-leaders-and-their-post-soviet-power-plays/a-56195750>.

responsibility for the outcome of pragmatic relations – recognition at least of the ambiguous impact of their relations on the politics of non-democratic states and their own failure to undertake policy measures to mitigate this impact. As I argued previously, dictators view pragmatism as weakness of the West (Alieva, 2019). They often try to manipulate and use this perceived weakness to divide the common foreign policy decisions of the EU or Euro-Atlantic allies. The democratic states themselves increasingly experience consequences of their own foreign policy decisions in distant regions, such as the inflow of refugees and migrants fleeing not only conflicts and economic hardships, but also dictatorial rule strengthened by international trade. Even more dramatic consequences of pragmatic foreign policies were grasped after 9/11, when experts stressed that “a successful counterterrorism policy must address the legitimate political grievances that Al Qaeda claims to champion- for example American support for dictatorships in the Middle East” (Lahoude, 2021). Putin hinted in favour of pragmatism by reminding Britain of 600 British companies working in Russia after the British reaction to the Russian agents poisoning the Skripals<sup>4</sup>. The high cost of such policies is also expressed in Putin’s regime buying off support of influential personalities and institutions of the West (Smaglyi, 2019).

The dilemma of binary opposition might be resolved by transferring often irreconcilable concepts to the non-binary level, where they are placed in the context of interconnected and interdependent realities and shared responsibility for political decisions and their consequences. Recognizing the malign political consequences that often flow from economic relations with dictatorships is an important first step towards their mitigation. The well-understood negative influence of oil interests on democratic development has hardly ever guided the EU policies. In Azerbaijan, for example, EU officials under influence of the energy agenda reduced or abandoned pressure for progress toward democratic standards. While energy concerns are a major driver of relations between Europe and Azerbaijan, both recognition and anticipation of the political consequences of the priority of energy interests for the country’s democratic prospects would be more likely to emerge as awareness of shared responsibility for the possible outcome of such relations. The increased number of asylum seekers from Azerbaijan in Europe after the last “crackdown on civil society” is one such consequence. In another set of consequences, revelations of corruption involving Western politicians in the Panama Papers, White Papers and Pandora Papers have clearly documented the toxic influence of autocrats on Western democracies.

## COP26: Could the environmental sector become a success story?

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<sup>4</sup> Soldatkin V. & Osborn A. (2019). Putin to Britain: Let’s Forget about the Skripal Poisoning. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-forum-putin-britain-idUSKCN1T71OU>

In my view, Karen Power's music and its Culture Center performance penetrated the substance of the present moment in contemporary international relations by responding to an environmental imperative to transcend physical borders. It is not an accident that in the South Caucasus as early as the late 1980s environmental movements in countries torn by ethnic conflicts took the first steps toward reconciliation and cooperation. Green activists on both sides of the borders of war-torn Azerbaijan and Armenia were both exploring the level of contamination in the Kura River, running across those states and neighbouring Georgia, and addressing other issues of common concern.

Nollkaemper (2018) analysed the duality of “shared responsibility” in cases of cooperation where problems extend across borders and create interdependencies, such as trans-boundary environmental effects or the depletion of natural resources. While accepting the importance of this concept, he warned of the risk of diffusion of shared responsibility as the number of participating states increases. Nevertheless, in most areas and sectors, states are at a stage needing greater awareness of shared responsibility and actions. There were media reports at the end of 2021 of a rapid rise in the costs of environmental disasters, with the “ten most expensive weather disasters this year having caused more than 126 billion pounds in damage - 15 billion pounds more than in 2020”<sup>5</sup>. Other reports held that the financial effect of disasters on poor countries is often incalculable.

Increasing public awareness of the shared challenges to human health, biodiversity, and the quality of air, soil and water has pushed leaders to intensify the search for their common solutions. In the context of interrelatedness and shared responsibility, environmental issues are becoming easier to identify as common and subnational rather than confined to national political assessment. Yet, as COP26 in Glasgow demonstrated, even in this subnational sector, developing a sense of common cause and shared responsibility is a seemingly overwhelming task. Among the achievements of COP26 is an adaptation to the impacts of climate change, greater support to developing countries, the agreement of 40 major coal-producing states to shift away from coal, agreement of the US and China to boost climate cooperation in the next decade including areas of methane emissions, transition to clean energy and decarbonization. No less important is the creation by 11 countries of the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance, to set an end date for national oil and gas exploration and extraction<sup>6</sup>. However, leaked documents reported by BBC revealed lobbying efforts by Saudi Arabia, China, Australia and Japan against the objectives of the UN's intergovernmental panel on Climate Change regarding the speed of reduction of the use of fossil fuels.

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<sup>5</sup> By Martin H. (2021). Flooding hits as Cambridgeshire river burst its banks and experts warn of 50 more floods across UK after heavy Christmas downpours. *MailOnline*. Retrieved from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10347211/Flooding-hits-Cambridgeshire-river-burst-banks-experts-warn-50-floods.html>.

<sup>6</sup> COP26 closes with “compromise” deal on climate, but it is not enough, says UN Chief. *UN News, Climate and Environment*. 13 November 2021. Retrieved from <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/11/1105792>.



They, along with Argentina, Norway and OPEC support carbon capture and storage (CCS), the feasibility of which is not confirmed by the report<sup>7</sup>. According to environmental and social activist Kumi Naidoo, there were 503 representatives and lobbyists of the fossil fuel industry at COP26 and it is not surprising that “we got a deal which favours the industry that creates the problem”<sup>8</sup>. The resulting agreement was characterized by UN Secretary-General Antonio Gutierrez as an important step but not enough<sup>9</sup>.

## Biden’s policy: Overcoming geographical boundaries

US President Biden’s policy is another demonstration of shifts in international politics. Until the initiative by the Polish Government in 2000 to create a Community of Democracies, democratic alliances were limited to geographical borders coinciding with common history and culture: the European Union, or NATO- European or Euro-Atlantic space. The entrance of peripheral or bordering states to the European Union has been contentious, with negotiations with Balkan and Post-Soviet Eastern Partnership marked by EU resistance to their admission. Democratic alliances across geography, such as the World Movement for Democracy or the Call for Democratic Renewal, have been functioning at the grassroots and non-governmental level, but at the official level the Polish initiative is another breakthrough reflecting the trend toward interdependence and mutual responsibility. Earlier, another Biden initiative followed a similar logic, united by common purpose and values and not tied to geography, the AUKUS security alliance of Australia, UK and US. Boris Johnson held that “three English speaking maritime democracies will strengthen their bonds and sharpen their focus in an increasingly complicated part of the world”<sup>10</sup>. While the main aim of the alliance is to counter emerging threats in the Indo-Pacific, the trend of overcoming geography in creation of alliance of democratic states is hard to deny.

<sup>7</sup> Rowlatt J. & Gerken T. (2021). COP26: Document leak reveals nations lobbying to change key climate report. *BBC News*. 21 October 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-58982445>.

<sup>8</sup> Friedman B. (2021). Huge Fossil Fuel Contingent at COP26 says disappointed environmental activist. *Capetalk*. Retrieved from <https://www.capetalk.co.za/articles/432618/huge-fossil-fuel-contingent-at-cop26-says-disappointed-environmental-activist>.

<sup>9</sup> Secretary General’s Statement on the conclusion of the UN Climate Change Conference COP26, Glasgow. *United Nations*. United Kingdom. 13 November 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2021-11-13/secretary-generals-statement-the-conclusion-of-the-un-climate-change-conference-cop26>.

<sup>10</sup> Madhani A & Lemire J. (2021). Biden announces security alliance that would help equip Australia with nuclear powered subs. *Portland Press Herald*. Retrieved from <https://www.pressherald.com/2021/09/15/biden-announces-security-alliance-that-would-help-equip-australia-with-nuclear-powered-subs/>.

In the Democracy Summit, by embracing states whose leaders show commitment to democratic values and vision, the US leader sent a message that values matter and power is not only about economy. It is also about capacity to respect human dignity and rights. The summit also reflected the concept of leadership based on the values of freedom. It embodied a move towards shared responsibility through cooperation beyond standard geographic frontiers. A key outcomes distinguishing the summit from previous initiatives was the adoption of an anti-corruption strategy based on the insight that contemporary authoritarianism has been globally using corrosive capital, enabled in part by a consortium of non-democratic financial, legal and political networks operating within the democracies<sup>11</sup>. Experts stress that the US should acknowledge the impact of the private sector on democracy and bring companies and investors directly into the summit<sup>12</sup>. This focus characterises the specificity of the momentum – greater awareness of the complexity of intertwined nature of political, economic, ethical and security relations in the Information Technology era, reinforced by a stronger connection between domestic and foreign institutions.

## German politics: Is leadership that provides domestic resilience sufficient today?

The music concert where both performers and audience freely moved from one room to another could be read as a further metaphor for the increasing connection of domestic affairs and foreign policy, with societies and leaders in one act of co-creation. This defines a new type of leadership in the era of Information Technology and social networks, particularly strengthened during the COVID pandemic. The decline of individual authority of leadership noted by the experts in Germany as related to the diversification of the political spectrum through a greater number of parties is also the result of some decline of individual personality based leadership as opposed to a group or network leadership, when in the conditions of virtual reality individual leadership is easily challenged. Most of the Arab spring revolutions did not have an individual charismatic leader but proceeded through groups in social networks. Similarly, recent resistance movements in Belarus or Kazakhstan did not feature strong charismatic leaders. Merkel was respected as a crisis manager – from the financial crisis to the euro-crisis to the refugee policy crisis to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis<sup>13</sup>.

However, the current conditions that combine active Russian and Chinese promotion and support of “sharp power” (Walker, 2018) with the unfolding

<sup>11</sup> Fauriol G. (2021). Can the Summit Process Tackle the Threat of Corrosive Democracy? Experts React: the 2021 Summit for Democracy. CSIS. Retrieved from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/experts-react-2021-summit-democracy#Fauriol>.

<sup>12</sup> Flacks M. (2021). Moving from Buy-in to Action. Experts React: the 2021 Summit for Democracy. CSIS. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/experts-react-2021-summit-democracy>.

<sup>13</sup> The Berlin Pulse, 2021/2022. Korber Stiftung. Retrieved from <https://koerber-stiftung.de/en/projects/the-berlin-pulse/>.

dynamic of international soft power competition suggest that to preserve resilience of institutions at home states should pro-actively support soft power abroad. In Europe this is sometimes called “projecting European values across borders”. This expression, which has been used for some time, risks undermining the notion of the universality of democratic values. In promoting a shared responsibility for the consequences of relations and policy decisions, a non-Eurocentric objective of such relations and decisions should articulate and enact them in ways fit to realize the best reform potential of the societies in state-partners beyond Europe. It is obvious that in states rich with energy resources, like Russia or Azerbaijan, pragmatic considerations driven by economy do not motivate Western states to calculate, anticipate and consistently address the political consequences of giving priority to energy interests. By ignoring these consequences, European states promote the sharp power of authoritarian regimes and make themselves more vulnerable to their toxic influence. The promotion of trade with rich autocratic regimes often finds justification in “cultural relativist” approaches, suggesting that the political status quo is supported more by culture than economic relations. As evidenced by the Berlin Pulse survey, experts, unlike society itself, urge greater German participation in the security side of world affairs. “Change may not be welcome in Germany”, argues Heather Conley, “but it is coming. The transformation of international system demands it” (Conley, 2021). Yet, the major problem of Western policies in the Eastern neighbourhood and its conflicts is a lack of its presence as a normative power, rather than of a hard realpolitik security actor or mediator.

Berlin represents a uniquely open space for grassroot and underground creativity. It actively works on its archetypes by transforming its spaces, making the walls fall, expanding boundaries. Until recently- before the war in Ukraine - Germany managed to combine resilience of liberal institutions at home and “pragmatic” policies abroad. German leadership was significantly based on this capacity to sustain resilience and power of liberal institutions demonstrated during Merkel’s term. To consolidate this role, one further step will be required to build relations with the other subjects of international relations that not only benefit materially, but also conduce realizing the best reform and creative potential of their societies.

## Conclusion

Sometimes during the performance in Silent Green Kulturquartier a room stayed empty, while both the musicians and the audience moved elsewhere. These emptied spaces could remind us of the possible consequences of environmental degradation or economic depression -- depopulated cities and rural spaces as a result of migration caused by climate change, conflict or poverty. Representation at the level of underground art in free Berlin without walls and borders reflects a vision of the future, which in a certain sense seems to be just around the corner. The Futurium Museum, a cultural venue also in Berlin, illuminates the increased speed, mix and fusion of the current and future that characterises this given moment of history. The exhibitions encourage a visitor to participate and create

and expresses the idea that humans are (co)-creators of their own future. In international relations at least two factors have brought the future much closer - the COVID pandemic and the era of energy transition. On the one hand, the pandemic has strengthened that sense of boundaries under quarantine rules; on the other, “hyper compensation” in the virtual world has promoted and tremendously simplified subnational communication and easily overcome physical barriers. It is not surprising that a blogger commented on the exhibition internet advertisement “The future has already come”<sup>14</sup> Berlin with its rich underground culture, which attracts young people from all over Europe and beyond, can be a small futuristic model of world affairs where not only big powers, but also smaller states and most importantly their societies are co-creators of their future. Three phenomena I have described, shared responsibility, transcending boundaries and moving away from a Euro-centric foreign policy paradigm, based on awareness of common consequences show a way of adapting to the increasingly rapid changing nature of international relations.

Another factor which might structurally decrease the tension related to the “values” or “realpolitik” dilemma is the energy transition era, which will make democratic states less dependent on trade with dictators who control rich mineral resources. As COP26 and the lobbying activities of fossil fuel producers demonstrate, this is unlikely to be an easy road. The recent country-wide mass protests in Kazakhstan might signal the beginning an era of crushing regimes with stability based on the non-renewable energy rents shared by foreign and local elites and the suppression of people’s power.

The energy transition could also decrease territorial conflicts. Because new energy resources will be less tied to the turf, an increasing number of alternative solutions will emerge to trading with dictators or sacrificing principles for the sake of “pragmatic” policy. The future reflected in free underground art does not paint an easy picture, but allows anticipation of trends, tensions and defining moments in world affairs. We can understand the increasing impossibility of running one’s own affairs without taking into account those of others, the connections between the local and the global, the ongoing overcoming frontiers and boundaries. Most importantly, it leads to greater awareness of resulting shared responsibility for the outcome of international relations, whether they not only produce economic benefits and liberal order, but also the best reform and creative potential of societies, especially ones currently locked in “stable relations” between the West and autocratic states.

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<sup>14</sup> The comment was related to the advertisement of the new exhibition on the [website](#) in Russian

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