



THEME 02

A time of Westlessness

WEST

LIBERALISM

EUROPE

We're living in a time of "Westlessness". Within the Western world, oppositions have become so great that our idea of "the West" is not clear anymore. But history shows that we've been here before. If the current period of Westlessness creates space for a new liberal project, we may be in the process of building a better world.

Our observations

- [Westlessness](#) is the title of this year's annual report of the Munich Security Conference (Münchener Sicherheitskonferenz). New power relations are making the world less Western, but Westlessness also refers to the West itself becoming less Western, according to the report. Great oppositions within the Western world raise the question what we mean when we speak of "the West".
- In recent years, "[illiberal politics](#)" have arisen as an ideological alternative to the liberal idea of individual rights. Illiberalism advocates a closed cultural community with stronger borders. Examples are President Putin and the Chinese state model, but illiberal politics are in fact also a specifically Western phenomenon (as exemplified by the American President Trump, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and governing Polish party PiS).
- Russian philosopher Aleksandr Dugin describes the universalist thinking of Western man (such as the idea of universal human rights, which should apply to everyone, everywhere equally) as "metaphysical racism". Dugin considers universal ideas to be attempts to impose a certain way of thinking on the rest of the world.
- Fundamental tensions between Western countries, a manifestation of Westlessness, are increasingly resulting in international conflict. While the U.S. and the EU clash more and more frequently, the EU itself lacks a unified stance towards the U.S., China, Russia and Turkey.

Connecting the dots

In recent decades, “the West” came to have a certain meaning; a culture in which individual human rights are paramount. But what we understand to be the West has changed with time. The Western world has also always known different forms (e.g. differing democratic systems, forms of capitalism). Our time of oppositions (“Westlessness”) raises the question whether the meaning of “the West” can change again. What comes after Westlessness?

The illiberal camp within the West represents more than populism; it’s also a movement with an alternative understanding of “the West”. To characters such as Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán, the West is defined by cultural, ethnic or religious criteria. Contrary to the idea of the liberal West as a beacon of individual human rights, they see the West as a “closed” (white, Christian) community. This is the source of the illiberal criticism of immigration. In addition, the extremist version of illiberalism is taking shape as the far-right terrorism that wants to protect “the West” from its “enemy” (and [kills more](#) than extremist Islamic terrorists do). At the same time, there are moderate variants of illiberalism that are increasingly well-represented in Western democracies. It should be clear that within the West, criticism of liberal ideas goes back centuries. Liberalism is a school of thought in which freedom of the individual is the highest good. It arose in 18th century Britain, where more and more groups were

liberating themselves from the grip of the state and crown. From then on, liberal ideals, from which stems the idea of the West as an open liberal world, have often been criticized in the West itself. Especially German and French intellectuals, as well as international political movements, tried to debunk liberal ideas in the 20th century. Present-day alt-right figures are again rebelling against the idea of the West as an (open) liberal world and speak of “post-liberalism”. What’s unique about our time, is that non-Western voices opposing liberal ideas now also have a lot of influence, which further heightens the contrasts within the West (e.g. Russian influence in Europe).

And yet, our “time of Westlessness” may lead to a better world. Illiberalism, with its alternative understanding of the West, is rooted in the failure of political, economic and social systems. Think of growing inequality, weak social mobility and corruption. This means that the liberal project with new “inspiration”, such as the battle against inequality and climate change (which Europe is already headed for), may breathe new life into the idea of the liberal West. A new “liberal coalition”, for example, between Europe and the United States is a possibility, a coalition to more actively protect liberal values in the rest of the world, a project which has barely gotten underway since the failed American wars in the Middle East.

Implications

- **The Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz report also identifies Westlessness beyond the Western borders. International cooperation between Western countries is becoming increasingly difficult (e.g. between the U.S. and Europe with respect to Russia or China; between Europe and France regarding Turkey). Before a new coalition is established, we will remain in this period of Westlessness.**
- **Since the Iraq war, the protection of Western values has become a controversial theme in the rest of the world. It is, however, likely to gain more momentum in the coming years, possibly because of a new American government.**