

Interview – Maria Debre

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Maria J. Debre is a Lecturer at the Faculty for Economic and Social Sciences at the University of Potsdam, Germany. She holds a PhD in International Relations from Free University Berlin and has previously been a pre-doctoral Fellow at the Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale University and a Post-doctoral Researcher at Maastricht University. Maria specializes in the role of regime type in global governance and challenges and transformations to multilateral organizations. She is particularly interested in the effects of regional and international inter-governmental organizations on the domestic survival politics of authoritarian regimes, on consequences of regime type for the design of global governance institutions, as well as survival and death of international organizations. Maria currently works on a project that explores how democratic backsliding and informal coordination of authoritarian regimes change majorities in International Organizations (IOs) and influence liberal norms and functions carried out by IOs. Debre's work has been published in the *Review of International Organizations*, the *European Journal of International Relations*, and *Democratization*. For more info, check out her website www.mariadebre.com or follow her on Twitter (@DebreMaria).

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

When I started my graduate degree, the Arab Spring had just unfolded. I wanted to better understand why some political systems remained unfree, how dictators manage to stay in power, and when people can successfully challenge them to change the system. Fast forward a couple of years and little had changed. Libya and Syria descended into civil war, Egypt had re-erected a military dictatorship, and the Gulf States became even more repressive. The third wave of democratization was over, and authoritarian regimes seemed to be able to remain in power despite large-scale protest movements and the loss of long-term leaders. What had become apparent during this time is the regional and international dimension of domestic developments: not only did protest movements spread throughout the region, but also many regional institutions started to interfere in domestic affairs, usually on the side of the ruling elites. These developments prompted me to research the role of international institutions outside the "democratization paradigm."

Until today, my research is situated primarily at the intersection of international and domestic politics. I study how international institutions influence regime change and stability in autocratic states but also, increasingly, how they fail to prevent democratic backsliding in established democracies. I also focus more broadly on international institutions and global crises. How do institutions fare in the face of global challenges, from financial downturns to war between member states or the spread of diseases? What makes some institutions handle crises well while others decline and die? What is the role of international bureaucracies in successfully facing challenges? Why do some institutions die while others survive?

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

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In most of my research, I have dealt with the fundamental question of how variation in domestic constraints influences international relations. In this line of thinking, institutions – also international organizations – play a vital role because they represent a fundamental constraint for actors. In democracies, institutions regulate access to power, help to enforce basic freedoms and rights, and they represent fora to argue about substantive policies and political directions. International institutions are part of this package: they offer individuals the possibility to appeal to international courts when states violate their rights, they can incentivize and enforce democratic standards, and they provide normative boundaries for appropriate action.

Over time, my thinking about institutions has changed. On the one hand, I have come to realize that institutions do not necessarily have to be constraints for political actors but can instead be used to strengthen political power at the expense of citizens and their rights. Institutions are not necessarily good, but their effectiveness depends on who designs them and how they are employed.

On the other hand, I have come to think of institutions in terms of their distributional consequences. Institutions are often a means to redistribute resources towards political elites, thereby exacerbating inequalities and power asymmetries. These distributional consequences can have important domestic repercussions. Institutions are responsible for empowering autocrats by redistributing financial and ideational resources towards those in power, thereby creating a further disadvantage for societal actors to challenge the system. In this way, my thinking about institutions has changed from a more technical perspective to an inherently political one.

Your recent work *Clubs of Autocrats: Regional Organizations and Authoritarian Survival*, suggests that the collaboration of autocratic regimes through regional organizations perpetuates their survival. How does this happen, and what are the implications?

Over time, authoritarian regimes have captured regional institutions that were once the sites of post-colonial nation-building. By now, these institutions have turned into full-blown “Clubs of Autocrats,” that is, organizations with predominantly authoritarian membership. In the article, I argue that this is because membership in a Club of Autocrats can alleviate future uncertainty associated with autocratic regime survival by offering protection from domestic, regional, and international challengers. This happens in three distinct ways.

First, regional organizations (ROs) create distributional consequences for domestic politics. By pooling and redistributing material and immaterial resources, they can help boost the domestic survival strategies of autocratic incumbents vis-à-vis domestic challengers. Regional organizations can confer legitimacy to authoritarian incumbents by publicly supporting their rule, for instance, by legitimizing flawed elections as free and fair. Material resources such as favorable trade deals or regional bureaucratic positions can be used to co-opt key political, social, and business elites to prevent elite splits and intra-elite challenges. Security cooperation in the military and intelligence field can boost domestic repressive capacities to constrain oppositional actors and dissidents or even quash large-scale protests.

Second, ROs regulate appropriate behavior amongst the members of the dictators’ club, thereby preventing them from unwanted interference in domestic affairs. Autocratic clubs usually hold dear to their post-colonial origins and protect sovereignty and non-interference rights as central cooperation norms. This constraining effect of institutionalized sovereignty protection allows autocratic incumbents to exercise costly domestic survival strategies against political challengers, such as repressive tactics or election manipulation without the danger that neighboring states will interfere on the challengers’ side for political reasons.

Third, being a member of the club also helps to shield autocratic incumbents from the fallout of international pressure. Employing domestic survival strategies from electoral manipulation to violent repression is costly and often causes international condemnation or even (threat of) sanctions. To prevent this type of pressure, club members often try to intervene in international fora to argue against measures carrying reputational costs or sanctions. Should sanctions be enacted, after all, ROs can step in and act as “black knights” and provide goods and services to help the sanctioned regime stay in power.

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These findings have significant implications for how we think about international institutions. While regional cooperation has long been associated with the effort of states to create communities of peace, prosperity, and democracy, there is a distinct “dark side” to international cooperation. Regional organizations have played a significant role in supporting the Chinese regime’s build-up of one of the most advanced, modern machines of repression against Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, in helping aging dictators in Sub-Saharan Africa withstand coups and claim victory at the ballot box, and in protecting populist forces in Latin America while they rebuild autocratic regimes. While much of the current academic debate focuses on endogenous threats to the liberal international order due to democratic backsliding and nationalist populism, my article emphasizes the role of regional institutions in reinforcing authoritarian rule across the globe.

Will regionalism be strengthened given recent events such as supply chain issues, the Covid-19 pandemic, ongoing refugee crises, and war in Ukraine?

We know from punctuated equilibrium theory that crisis is often the moment when institutional change is possible. When everything is up in the air, a change of established orders becomes more likely. This is why institutions often remain stable across long periods but gain more authority after the disruptions of crises. In my view, this is already happening with regionalism today, given the multiplicity of crises. International organizations (IOs) are created precisely to address cross-border problems. Jean Monnet famously proclaimed, “Europe will be forged in crises and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises.”

Economics of scale plays a significant role, and regional organizations have a distinct advantage over global organizations in that they are closer to home. Regional organizations have performed particularly well during Covid-19. Regional banks have been established across the globe to better serve the specific investment needs of regions, in part as a reaction to the financial crisis of 2008. And security arrangements vary greatly between regions due to differing security environments. African organizations have developed advanced and automated mechanisms to deal with military coups and civil war amongst their members. While EU security cooperation had long been lacking due to strong NATO institutions, the Russian invasion of Ukraine seems to have invigorated both NATO and the EU. Long thought impossible, Sweden and Finland are now set to become members of NATO. Countries long considered civil powers, like Germany and Denmark, have upped their military spending and engagement. The EU Peace Facility is financing the joint purchase and delivery of lethal weapons to Ukraine – a first in Europe’s history.

However, regionalism also faces important challenges. With growing authority and affectedness, an expectation for effective and fair solutions to cross-border crises increases. Legitimacy crises might not necessarily impede the ability of regional organizations to attract enough staff and financial resources to govern and survive, but citizens do increasingly turn to right-wing parties and autocratic demagogues because they skillfully mobilize where regional organizations cannot successfully deliver or do not manage to communicate their actions in clear and easy terms. In consequence, political polarization increases, diminishing the ability of political actors and institutions to take meaningful action.

How have international institutions been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic?

During the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, nation-states fought over masks and vaccines, closed borders, and discriminated against foreign nationals. These domestic strategies have profoundly challenged multilateral cooperation. Many commentators agreed that the pandemic meant the end of US hegemony, the dawn of the Asian century, and the final nail in the coffin of the liberal international order. However, Covid has not only been bad for multilateralism. As I argue in a piece with Hylke Dijkstra in *Global Policy*, multilateral institutions have been markedly resilient throughout the crisis. A large majority of IOs managed to continue their operations, and some even gained in terms of policy scope and instruments.

Many IOs are designed precisely because many challenges are inherently global: diseases do not stop at borders, nor do financial crises or climate change. The policy responses of 75 IOs we studied in our article during the first wave between March and June 2020 show that IOs fall into three categories. Some IOs simply shut down their operations in the face of challenges; others managed to keep up “business as usual.” Most ambitiously, no less than

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18 IOs developed new tasks outside their regular policy scope or initiated new policy instruments.

And again, we also see many regional organizations being particularly adept at navigating the crisis. The European Union is a prime example. After a slow initial response, it ventured into new policy areas. The European Commission coordinated vaccine purchases, but the EU also adopted a 100 billion euro social policy for temporary unemployment schemes and agreed on an 800 billion euro recovery plan financed through innovative financial means. Other regional organizations did equally well. ROs such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Central American Integration System (SICA), the Organization of Islamic Community (OIC) or the Council of Europe (CoE) likewise started providing necessary funds to member states to increase their liquidity, negotiated with global IOs to ensure medical and food supply chains, and regulated necessary trans-border movements.

Two main reasons are responsible for these findings. First, organizations with bureaucratic capacity are better able to address crisis situations. They have skilled staff that they can reassign to work on rapid crisis response. They are also more likely to have relevant in-house expertise that can forward policy proposals and develop new strategies. And oftentimes, they also have the relevant public relations departments to communicate with the public effectively.

Second, regional organizations are not mere technical institutions but are constituted by a normative self-understanding as community organizations. When members of the community are under duress, these organizations step in to provide for their own. This allows them to become legitimately engaged even in the absence of necessary authority. The EU does not have a large track record in health-related matters. Neither does the Council of Europe, nor the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. But in the first wave of the crisis, when a rapid response was required, a sense of communal responsibility and the capacity to react mattered more than formal mandates. That IOs exhibited resilience during Covid-19 shows that the future of multilateralism is not as bleak as it is often made out to be.

What are you currently working on?

The complacency and retreat of powerful democratic member states in international organizations have left a void that has enabled autocrats to advance their agendas on a global level. Some of my current work focuses particularly on increasing activism of authoritarian regimes within international organizations, how membership structures of IOs change due to democratic backsliding and breakdowns, and the consequences of these developments for global governance. As of now, international organizations seem to be weathering the storm. None have lost democratic majorities or their overall democratic identity to authoritarian coalitions — yet. But much of what we expect from authoritarian coalitions is not necessarily grand attacks on IOs in any case; after all, autocrats also profit from global governance. Rather, we are likely to see more subtle subversion strategies from within.

Autocrats are skilled at flying under the radar and using informal coalitions and influence to achieve their goals. Leaders of authoritarian regimes have rallied varying coalitions of fellow autocrats and backsliders in informal groupings like the so-called “Like-minded Group” at the United Nations Human Rights Council, the “Group of Friends in Defense of the UN Charter” at the UN General Assembly, or the EU “Visegrad Group” to pre-negotiate positions, increase bargaining power and pass resolutions.

We can already see how these autocratic coalitions are being used to challenge the protection of human rights at the United Nations Human Rights Council, to prevent critical non-governmental organizations from receiving consultative status at the United Nations, or to insulate themselves from sanctions and rule of law procedures from powerful regional courts.

Autocracies are also taking up the language of human rights and democracy to advocate for more cooperative and less “confrontational” forms of human rights protection. Essentially, they employ liberal discourse to water down the toolbox of global human rights and democracy enforcement measures IOs have at their disposal. Combined with their use of development frames and regional affiliations, authoritarian regimes have become skilled at lobbying for their interests at IOs. These developments might also be highly consequential for compliance with IO rules and procedures. Non-compliance may be a particularly attractive strategy for many autocrats who know that informal coalitions protect them from international repercussions from IOs.

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What is the most important advice you could give to other early career or young scholars?

Academia is a highly unequal, hierarchical, and competitive place of work. While the possibility of working on substantive and vital topics in a very flexible manner is very appealing, there are a lot of downsides, particularly for scholars from minority groups. Therefore, the best advice for early career scholars is to be strategic. Be aware of the structural disadvantages of academia early on. Particularly, I would advise thinking hard about four relevant points.

1) A Ph.D. will take a long time, during which you will be poorly paid, if at all. Often, Ph.D. programs are financed by scholarships, which means in many cases, you will have to pay for health insurance, unemployment, and pension funds. Even if a university employs you, you will often only work part-time, and you will have to pay for conference travel and training out of pocket, hoping for quick reimbursement. Academia also means that you will have to go where the job is, which means a lot of global mobility well into your 30s. Can you afford to forgo money and job security, all while your friends start to make good money and move up on the career ladder? Are you willing and able to start over every couple of years or take on the strain of commuting to other cities and countries? While this might seem great during your 20s, the wish to settle down and stay in place usually coincides with your first post-doc jobs, putting your personal life on the back burner.

2) Make sure you acquire transferable skills. Ph.D. students and post-docs today have much better options in the non-academic job market. Many tech companies require people who can analyze data, design research to test new products or manage projects and funding campaigns. During your Ph.D., make sure you think strategically about skills that will look good on an academic job-market CV and are also desirable in the outside world. Learn how to do coding in R or Python, understand the fundamentals of machine learning, or specialize in a specific policy field or organization that you might want to work for later on. It is much easier to decide if you want to leave or stay if you have credible and attractive outside options.

3) Academia is not only a matter of innovative research but is also a highly strategic endeavor. Make sure to find mentors and supervisors along the way who are aware of the disadvantages of academia and actively support early career researchers in their institutions and beyond. Also, reach out to other early career researchers, team up, or (if available) join a union. It helps to have people on your side who know the ins and outs of the system to get funding and positions. It also helps to share resources with fellow early career scholars who can comment on applications or manuscripts. Finally, it improves your negotiations with institutions when you know your rights and have well-prepped arguments on your side.

4) Last, make sure that you will not fall into a psychological spiral. Academia will make you feel like you can always work a bit more, read another paper, write another page, or test another assumption. You will often have to do committee work, teaching, and other administrative duties that consume your research and writing time. Do not take the bait. You will not be more likely to get the job if you sacrifice weekends, evenings, and vacations for research or, even more critically, your institution. Make sure you prioritize your own research and do not take on every task at the institution, particularly if you are a woman or a member of a minority group. The uncertainty and competitiveness of academia put a significant strain on your mental health; thus, ensuring that you have enough time with your friends and family and for yourself is crucial to staying healthy and sane.