

# The world's largest democracy

*Almost one billion people are currently voting in India. And yet this major democratic event is being virtually ignored by the international media.*

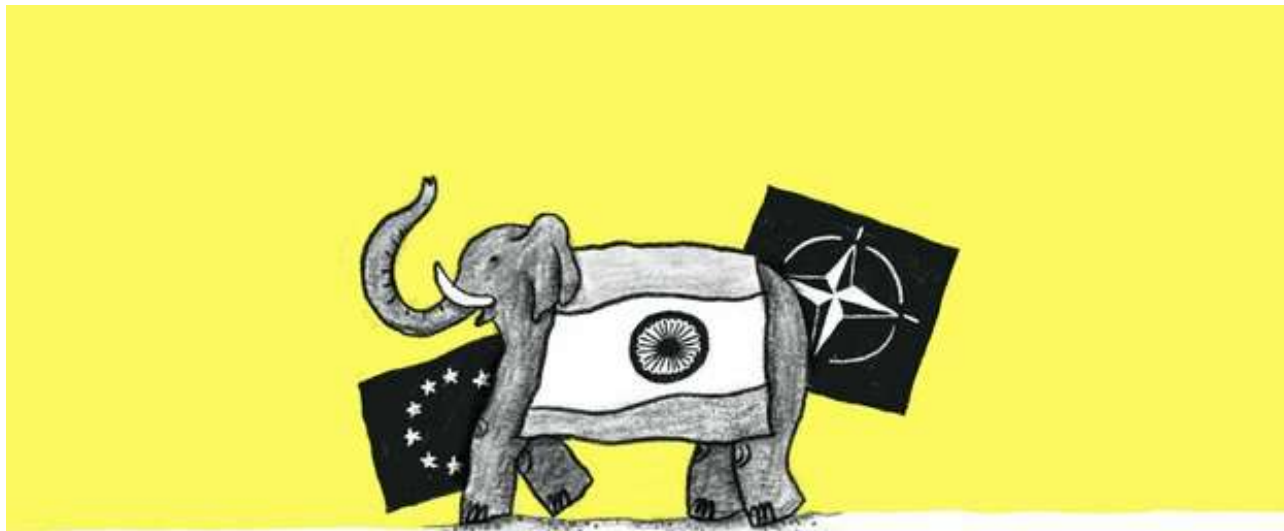


Photo: Katja Gendikova.

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Elections are being held in over 50 countries this year. Germany and Europe are mainly looking ahead to the **EU elections** in June and **the US elections in November**. The numbers of eligible voters seem enormous to us: around 160 million people vote in the USA and around 400 million in the EU. But it's not that huge. Since April 19, almost twice as many people have been voting for the new parliament and the future prime minister of the most populous country.

Almost one billion Indians entitled to vote are taking part in the largest democratic ballot in human history. A historic event, and one with consequences: Almost one in five people on the planet is Indian. Nevertheless, reports and analyses on the elections and India's future role in global politics rarely make it into German commentary columns, talk shows or onto the agendas of parliamentary committees.

What has long been a reality is lost in the media: the strategic partner is considered a gigantic sales market and IT hub, a stronghold of innovation and an indispensable player in all important global issues, from environmental protection, supply chains and pharmaceutical production to a beacon of hope against the German shortage of skilled workers. India is also increasingly becoming one of the most important voices of the Global South.

Due to the sheer size of the country, but also its economic strength and innovative spirit, the country is becoming increasingly audible in the concert of international politics and the global economy. In a few years, it is likely to have overtaken Germany to become the third largest economic power in the world - surpassed only by the USA and China. So why does the country remain largely below the radar of many German politicians, underestimated or even ignored? A country of contradictions

The answer is that Germany often finds it difficult to deal with the new giant in South Asia; the Indian partner remains a mystery to German politicians. Why does Prime Minister Narendra Modi so stubbornly refuse to condemn the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine? What does the rise of Hindu nationalism in the country mean? Is the world's largest democracy even on the way to becoming a sham democracy?

Certainly, India is unwieldy. A country of extreme contrasts, of contradictions. It remains alien to the West and is too complex for the superficial visitor to grasp. Everything is connected in India, everything is right at first glance, but the opposite is also true. Many realities exist side by side. Here is the nation that sends rockets to the moon and designs steering wheels for the driverless cars of tomorrow.

On the other hand, there is India, which harvests crops in the countryside with ox carts as it did hundreds of years ago. Those looking for wealth and opulence will find it in the Bollywood of the rich and in the record numbers of billionaires. Those who expect abject poverty will find it in the countless slums and under the bridges of the megacities. To understand India, you have to listen, get involved with the country, get to know its history, culture and spirituality. German politics often fails to do just that.

It would be so important to put oneself in the other person's shoes, to speak as equals and without lecturing, and to leave the moralizing finger at home. We often succumb to Eurocentrism, which does not only go down well in India. The West always assumes that its view of the world is the authoritative one, that its assessments of democracies, legal systems and value scales are the decisive ones and that the non-Western part of the globe has to follow suit.

Shying away from moralizing

This overlooks the fact that even today less than 20 percent of people live in the "West". And the difference is growing all the time, because the West is old, while population growth and therefore young people are mainly coming from the countries of the Global South.

Epochal achievements such as enlightenment, democracy, human rights and the rule of law are European foundations of which we are rightly proud.

However, it is precisely this enlightened Europe that gave rise to racism and colonialism, and not only in India. What about the two world wars started by Germany, what about the Holocaust, Vietnam, the invasion of Iraq or Libya? Reports on India almost always have a negative connotation: Modi as a destroyer of democracy, India about to be taken over by Hindu extremists, opposition and human rights trampled underfoot.

Many Indians shy away from this moral finger pointing and the post- or neo-colonial tones that resonate. Yes, there is much to criticize: the government's too weak crackdown on fanatical Hindu extremists; attacks on religious minorities, especially Muslims; shrinking scope for civil society; violation of human rights. But there is always another point of view.

It sees India as having self-confident and independent courts, a vibrant and robust democracy, but also inclusive voices defending pluralism from the government and the ruling party's environment.

One thing is clear: anyone who does not want to take a closer look at the dimensions and multi-layered challenges of a vibrant democracy of over 1.4 billion people, who prefers to use black and white stereotypes, is not doing justice to either the political system or the complex network of religions, languages, regions and castes, known today as communities.

### Ukraine is a long way from India

This also applies to foreign policy. One example is the Russian war against Ukraine. The West is struggling to understand why India is not taking a clear stance against Russia here. As a standard-bearer of non-violence and non-alignment, India in particular would love to see an immediate end to war and violence.

However, the Russian-Ukrainian war is a long way off, the effects, particularly of the sanctions, are being felt worldwide through price increases, but India does not see why it should buy expensive oil elsewhere because of what it sees as a European-Russian conflict, thereby jeopardizing the financing of its own country's development, while at the same time some European countries are importing more Russian liquid gas than before the war.

According to the Indian interpretation, this is primarily a conflict between Russia and the West, which the parties to the conflict should resolve themselves. Although the argument that such violations of sovereignty and international law should not be allowed in order to prevent imitations is immediately obvious, especially in India with regard to China, it is also true that the West has not exact-

ly covered itself in glory in upholding the principles of international law since colonial times.

In addition, the West has always been very reluctant to support Indian security interests in the region. As Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar put it in a nutshell at the beginning of 2023: “Europe must grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems.”

Good contacts on all sides

Given India's historically close economic and military relations with Russia and a certain sentimental feeling of closeness since the time of the founding of the state by Mahatma Gandhi and the founding of the Non-Aligned Movement, as well as the loyal support of Indian interests by the USSR and Russia in the UN Security Council, the dissent regarding the positioning of NATO and the West is by no means surprising.

India's self-confidence has grown considerably in the ten years of the Modi government. The country insists - and rightly so - on being on an equal footing, also in international politics. There is no comparable nation of this size that is “good with all sides”. India has even come to a pragmatic arrangement with its Chinese neighbor. India is an unideological country that balances itself and its interests masterfully through the world of multipolarity.

This is an enormous advantage in a world that is currently becoming extremely polarized. Take the Middle East conflict, for example: unlike the majority of countries in the Global South, the Indian government immediately criticized the barbaric massacres by Hamas and the hostage-taking of Israeli citizens on 7 October 2023 and also coordinated with Western countries on several occasions at the UN: The contact between Modi and Israel's head of government Benjamin Netanyahu is close.

On the other hand, the Indian government soon demanded a return to the two-state solution, access to humanitarian aid in Gaza and the protection of civilians. The relationship between Modi and the Palestinian representatives is also close. The Indian government also maintains similarly close contacts with other parties to the conflict, such as Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy, with the USA - incidentally with Joe Biden and Donald Trump - as well as with Iran.

Theoretically the perfect mediator

Today, India is a member of various political groupings - such as the G20, BRICS, a permanent guest at the G7 and QUAD - but it stays away from mili-

tary alliances. The fact that this country still has to sit at the cat's table of the UN Security Council is a scandal and contributes to the UN's loss of significance and crisis of legitimacy.

So India as a future mediator in major political crises? The country would certainly not impose itself, especially as none of the conflicts mentioned above currently offer any prospects for talks. But India has everything it needs to connect the old West and the new South.

ESSAY BY  
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was an embassy counselor at the UN and spokesman for Joschka Fischer. In March, he published "The old West and the new South. What we should learn from India before it's too late."

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