

Call for Papers, EWIS 2023, Amsterdam, 12-14 July 2023

## **Workshop: Are We Doomed to Distrust Each Other? New Perspectives on Trust in International Conflicts**

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Distrust is common in an international system without a central authority that could enforce rules and norms. This appears to particularly true in light of recent global political developments – the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, a deadlocked UN Security Council, the lack of progress in international climate policy and in reducing global inequality. It seems that we are doomed to distrust and fear each other in international politics just like *realists* from Hobbes to Mearsheimer pictured it. However, to us, this conclusion appears too simple and also too pessimistic.

The prevalence of distrust raises the question how to overcome it. How to build a modicum of trust under the condition of anarchy is a central theme in the literature of International Relations (IR). But traditionally, IR scholars have seen trust and conflict as opposites. Trust is the precondition for cooperation which is necessary to manage or overcome conflict. Vice versa, conflicts tend to undermine or destroy trust. This framing left IR with a version of the chicken-and-egg-problem: trust and cooperation are understood to be mutually reinforcing but nobody really knows how to “get the ball rolling”<sup>1</sup> and start a trustful and collaborative relationship.

A new literature has recently begun to challenge the established perspective that trust and conflict are each other’s opposites. Taking a more dynamic and relational approach, its protagonists argue that the juxtaposition of *either* trust *or* conflict points to a false dilemma. Rather, and this is the thesis this EWIS Workshop wants to explore, trust and conflict are in a complex relationship with each other: we need trust in order to deal with conflict, but it is also precisely in conflicts that trust emerges as a form of ‘unsecured security’ – that is, as the “expectation of no harm in contexts where betrayal is always a possibility”<sup>2</sup>. Accordingly, it is not only cooperation that is an exciting object of study for trust researchers, but also conflict: understood as a process whose course is influenced by trust and distrust and which, as it unfolds, in turn either creates, sustains, or destroys trust.

This new approach to trust in IR allows to go beyond the study of the seemingly exclusively beneficial effects of trust and how trust can be built in the abstract. Instead, we can ask and investigate empirically questions such as:

- Under what conditions can conflicts create or at least sustain trust and when do they destroy it?
- How does trust develop in conflicts? What are the mechanisms and practices giving rise to trust?
- How do trust and distrust interact in conflict processes?
- Are there different forms of conflict, some of them more beneficial for trust than others?
- How do different trust dynamics affect the escalation, prolongation, freezing or resolution of conflicts?

To systematically discuss the complex relationship between trust and conflict in IR, this EWIS Workshop will bring together some of the leading scholars as well as new voices in the debate on trust in international politics; they will elaborate the relationship between conflict and trust in light of their respective theories and empirical expertise and situate this within the broader debate on trust in IR.

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<sup>1</sup> Rathbun, Brian C. *Trust in International Cooperation: International Security Institutions, Domestic Politics, and American Multilateralism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p.26.

<sup>2</sup> Wheeler, Nicholas J. *Trusting Enemies: Interpersonal Relationships in International Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, p.2.