



Contested transitions and perspectives on peace—*Deutungskämpfe im Übergang*

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Received: 4 August 2025 / Revised: 26 February 2026 / Accepted: 9 March 2026 / Published online: 2 April 2026
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Abstract In times of transition, actors clash regarding the interpretations of the past, solutions to current problems, and visions for the future. This Forum examines these discursive contestations and their implications for political change (*Deutungskämpfe im Übergang*). Taking a historically-oriented peace and conflict studies perspective, it investigates how actors advocate for, negotiate, and seek to delegitimize views to drive—or resist—political change. This aims to better understand how transitions unfold and may lead to pathways of escalation or conflict transformation. Studying these processes from an interdisciplinary perspective in both historical and contemporary cases, and regarding conceptual and theoretical dimensions, the Forum advances research on contentious political changes and peace—a key issue in today’s multiple crises.

Keywords Conflict · Contestation · Change · Peace · Transition

Editorial to the ZeFKo Forum “Contested transitions and perspectives on peace—*Deutungskämpfe im Übergang*”

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Deutungskämpfe im Übergang und Perspektiven auf Frieden

Zusammenfassung In Zeiten des Übergangs stoßen Akteur*innen mit unterschiedlichen Deutungen der Vergangenheit, Lösungsansätzen für gegenwärtige Probleme und Zukunftsvisionen aufeinander. Dieses Forum widmet sich diesen diskursiven Auseinandersetzungen und ihren Auswirkungen auf politischen Wandel – kurz: den Deutungskämpfen im Übergang. Aus einer historisch-orientierten Perspektive der Friedens- und Konfliktforschung wird untersucht, wie Akteur*innen Deutungen vertreten, verhandeln oder zu delegitimieren versuchen, um politischen Wandel voranzutreiben – oder ihm entgegenzuwirken. Ziel ist es, besser zu verstehen, wie Übergänge verlaufen und welche Eskalations- oder Transformationsdynamiken sich daraus ergeben. Durch die interdisziplinäre Analyse dieser Prozesse, sowohl in historischen als auch in gegenwärtigen Fallbeispielen sowie in konzeptioneller und theoretischer Hinsicht, leistet das Forum einen Beitrag zur Forschung über umkämpften politischen Wandel und dessen Bedeutung für den Frieden – ein zentrales Thema in den gegenwärtigen multiplen Krisen.

Schlüsselwörter Konflikt · Kontestation · Wandel · Frieden · Transformation

1 Introduction

We are currently witnessing rapid change, intertwined political crises, and intense altercations about what the future ought to look like. Global politics are reconfiguring towards a multiplex world in which rising powers like China, India, and Brazil propose normative alternatives to the liberal international order (Acharya 2017). The third wave of democracy has come to an end, as populist authoritarians like Trump, Milei, and Orbán are in the process of undoing democratic institutions and traditions (Diamond 2021; Haggard and Kaufman 2021). Russia's war against Ukraine has revived Great Power politics and militarization in Europe (Methfessel 2025). Meanwhile, Israel's genocidal military campaign in Gaza¹ and broader operations in the region are re-shaping the power constellations in its wider Middle Eastern neighborhood. Yet societal pressures contribute to the turmoil as in Lebanon and Syria, where deep crises of state legitimacy persist (Maloney 2025; Chatterjee 2025). In Iran, the regime chose to violently suppress popular protests, killing thousands in January 2026. Other wars—in Burkina Faso, Sudan, Somalia, Myanmar, and Pakistan—hardly receive international attention despite their severe humanitarian consequences (Davies et al. 2025). Concurrently, Artificial Intelligence and other technologies are accelerating socio-economic and political change with potentially disruptive implications for conflict and peace worldwide (Atal et al. 2026).

In these intertwined crises, social change itself is contested and politicized. Pro-democracy, human rights, global social-justice, feminist, queer, and related

¹ Since 2023, we are observing an ongoing and widespread struggle over the meaning of genocide, which, applied to the situation in Gaza, is routinely countered with claims of antisemitism and decried as supporting Hamas terrorism (see Pfeifer 2025).

movements have made significant advances over recent decades (Chase-Dunn and Almeida 2020). Environmental and climate-justice movements have heightened awareness on ecological collapse and the unfolding climate catastrophe (Martinez-Alier et al. 2016; Sändig et al. 2025). Far from homogenous, these movements themselves debate what constitutes just and sustainable futures and how to achieve them (Sändig et al. 2020; Svensson and Wahlström 2023). Despite raising existential issues, they face growing opposition from populist and far-right “backlash movements” (Abrahamsen et al. 2020). These seek to roll back progressive achievements for minorities and to restore—an often imagined—glorious past. By denouncing “wokeness” and even disputing basic scientific facts such as climate change, they are reasserting nationalism, “traditional” values, and gendered hierarchies. Carbon autocrats and “tech bros” help fuel the backlash, deploying vast resources and algorithm-based platforms to entrench power through what has been described as neo-royalism or mafia states (Darian-Smith 2022; Goddard and Newman 2025; Gessen 2025; Baptist and Clark 2024).

This Forum examines how transition processes unfold and what role discursive contestations play therein—stepping back from the current multiple crises to identify mechanisms of interpretive change. From a social-constructivist and historically-oriented perspective, we assume that struggles over meaning (*Deutungskämpfe im Übergang*) are central to sparking and driving transitions and shaping their outcomes. In these contestations, political actors argue over how to interpret the past and address current issues to avert the bleak futures they are foreseeing. Whether transitions escalate into armed confrontations or open up possibilities for peace depends significantly on how these meaning contestations evolve (Weller 2024).

The contributions to this Forum explore how actors advocate for, negotiate, and challenge competing views to achieve political change. These dynamics are examined in both contemporary and historical case studies as well as in theoretical and conceptual regards. In this introduction, we highlight the key questions, main concepts, and contributions to the broader field of peace and conflict studies.

2 *Deutungskämpfe im Übergang*: Understanding political change through contestation

To study contestations over and within transition processes, we draw inspiration from historical peace and conflict research (Eichenberg 2023; Gerster et al. 2023; Goedde 2019). Conceiving political change as gradual, open, and long-term processes, our assumption is that values, norms, and institutions are constantly changing. Many shifts are incremental and go unnoticed, but faster, more substantial transitions often provoke disputes, and actors may successfully bring previously “unnoticed” developments to public attention. Subsequently, spaces of contestation open where societies (re)construct their histories, renegotiate collective identities, and define what is “normal”, which social problems are urgent, and how to tackle them (Winkler 2021; Koloma Beck and Kühn 2023). Learning from such processes in the past helps develop heuristics to understand current events, as they are unfolding.

From a peace and conflict studies perspective, we take struggles over meaning seriously, arguing that they shape transitions and their outcomes. The social and political context—characterized by hegemonic discourses, predominant epistemologies, and the institutional framework—sets the space for contention (Benford and Snow 2000). In iterative processes that play out on both material and ideational levels, actors clash, adapt, win, or lose (Kühn 2019, 2016b; Azarmandi 2023). Within these struggles, groups and entire societies can shift how they view and position themselves in relation to others. Such negotiations about how the world is constituted, how power is distributed, and what change is desirable have major transformational potential (Hahn et al. 2023): they can expose previously hidden injustices, redefine the very concept of peace, and spur institutional change towards positive peace. Yet these contestations can also escalate into radicalization, institutional breakdown, and even large-scale violence (Gonzalez-Vicente 2018).

Conceptually, we focus on the space where actors struggle over power by promoting competing visions to bring about or prevent political change. This space is not clearly bounded, neither in place nor time, so we grasp these discursive dynamics tied to transition processes in German as *Deutungskämpfe im Übergang*, a term loosely translated by our Bavarian research network as Conflicts.Meanings.Transitions.² Expanding on the network's founding idea, the Forum brings together an interdisciplinary group of peace and conflict researchers from political science, sociology, history, and cultural anthropology. Their contributions explore links between contestation, meaning-making, and political change across issues including violence, war, social movements, human rights, transitional justice, knowledge, memory, and social responsibility. In the following, we summarize the Forum's key insights in relation to peace and conflict research.

3 Contributions of this Forum

Political change is often tied to specific moments when things appear to have suddenly changed—like July 14, 1789, or 9/11. At closer look, however, clear-cut epochal shifts are difficult to identify, if they exist at all. The French Revolution, for example, produced one of the earliest declarations of human rights, but it was selective and discriminatory. Only after “democratic colonialism”³ and two world wars were some of those principles embedded in the international human-rights system, which is being violated every day since. The gradual emergence—non-linear and marked by backlashes and reversals—of such structures underscores that there is no creationist, sudden emersion (Körppen et al. 2011). Prominent international

² The research network “Bayerisches Zentrum für Friedens- und Konfliktforschung: Deutungskämpfe im Übergang” (Conflicts.Meanings.Transitions, 2022–2028) is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space (BMFTR), previously the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), see also www.conflicts-meanings-transitions.de.

³ By “democratic colonialism” we highlight that states which pride themselves as some of the oldest democracies in the world have long histories of colonial rule and thus governed large populations without granting them democratic or human rights. Despite dominant historiography, characterizing these states as democracies is misleading at best.

benchmarks—1648, 1789, 1945, 1989, and 2022—also primarily reflect a Eurocentric and realist perspective on global politics (Osiander 2001; Buzan and Lawson 2014). The very idea of epochal change therefore prompts critical questions: When can we meaningfully speak of change if everything is constantly changing? Who has the authority to define change, based on which criteria? Where do transition processes begin and lead; and when, if ever, do they end?

This Forum aligns with research that conceptualizes transition as a process. Peacebuilding research, for instance, explores the challenging shift from armed conflict to civilian rule and the difficult pursuit of transitional justice (Buckley-Zistel et al. 2014). These efforts often produce fragile “no war, no peace” situations, characterized by recurring intergroup violence, persistent structural inequalities, and a high risk of renewed warfare (Mac Ginty 2006; Ricarte 2023). Similarly, comparative politics refutes the idea of linear democratic progress and instead highlights the cyclical dynamics of democratization and autocratization (Boese et al. 2021; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).

Focusing on *Deutungskämpfe im Übergang*, we view transition processes as re-interpretations of a given political situation beyond ideologies. To get to the core of what is contested and by what means, we ask: How do contestants make meaning? When do historical narratives, norms, or a regime itself become contested? How do these contestations relate to imaginaries of the future? Which pathways for change are advocated and how are they popularized? How do contestations shape and re-shape discourses, political goals, and political actors’ practices?

In their contribution, Alexander Schwarz, Florian Kühn, and Julia Eichenberg take such an understanding of transitions as open-ended, long-term, negotiated processes seriously and show how violence works as marker within them (Schwarz et al. 2024). They focus on its varied forms, arguing that violence does not simply cease with the end of war. Rather, violence is enshrined in the state monopoly of violence, capitalist structures, and the legal system—producing continuities that transcend apparent historical turning points. At the same time, violence can be contested, re-interpreted, and curtailed during transitions. It may become a point of reference; for example, when activists declare themselves “suffering for the cause”, they leverage the symbolic power of suffered violence to challenge “inherited” narratives that justify oppressive or authoritarian rule. As such, violence may go both ways, legitimizing strong-handed state monopolies of violence or, vice versa, ennobling societal actors as keepers of freedom.

Christoph Weller’s (2025) contribution aims to conceptualize these struggles over meaning, theoretically embedding this in the landscape of peace and conflict research. Studying how *Deutungskämpfe* has been applied across disciplines, he identifies three key characteristics of *Deutungskämpfe*: they concern not only interpretations of the present and past but also the underlying interpretive frameworks; they unfold within asymmetrical power relations; and their escalation potential directly connects to fundamental structures of power, order, and collective identity. Seeing their peacebuilding potential, Weller argues that such struggles should not be suppressed but guided by institutions capable of ensuring constructive outcomes through clear rules and procedures. Responding to Weller’s conceptualization, Sven Chojnacki (2025) emphasizes the role of institutional fields and their contradictory

rules in shaping what he calls field-bounded discursive struggles (*feldgebundene Deutungskämpfe*).

Swati Parashar (2026) turns to the international level for her examination of famines' global impact during different historical periods. She highlights the persistent neglect and absence of accountability for the slow violence of famines that result from war and other state (in)action. Unlike the immediate casualties of armed conflict, victims of famine mostly remain unseen, even though millions have died from starvation in Africa and Asia recently. Parashar argues that this should be understood as deliberate acts of destruction targeting lives and communities, for which perpetrators must be held accountable. Although famine is a form of slow violence (Nixon 2011), it requires the same recognition and efforts for reparative and restorative justice as genocide and war. But its meaning should also be debated in the first place: as long as famine and starvation are viewed as almost "natural" rather than deliberately waged by powerful actors, they will continue to occur without remedy (see also de Waal 2018). In its own way, Swati Parashar's article itself contributes to the *Deutungskampf* ("struggle over meaning") around famines as weapon against civilians.

Social movements are central actors in struggles for political change. As norm entrepreneurs, they challenge dominant normative frameworks and promote new societal ideals (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2020). Applying the framing perspective, social-movement scholars have therefore examined how activists diagnose problems, propose solutions, and mobilize collective action (Benford and Snow 2000; Sändig 2015). Their mobilization is significantly shaped by the political playing field, especially through the political opportunities that enable activism as well as the constraints and threats that regimes impose (McAdam and Tarrow 2019). The contestations typically unfold across multiple levels, generating dynamic interactions of protest and repression and, at times, leading to radicalization and conflict escalation (Granzow et al. 2015; Sändig and Hönke 2024). The remaining contributions in this Forum take social movements and their politics of norm contestation as empirical starting points.

Michaela Zöhrer, Christian Methfessel, and Daniel Stahl analyze how universal human rights norms are mobilized and contested in transnational activism responding to mass atrocities (Zöhrer et al. 2024). Adopting a constructivist perspective, they argue that universality is not inherent to specific norms but functions as a powerful strategic claim that can enable collaboration within diverse activist networks. This is illustrated in two case studies on gender-based and sexual violence: During the Bosnian War (1992–1995), feminist groups clashed over gender-based versus ethnicity-based interpretations of mass rape, revealing tensions in how universal norms are framed. Following the Yezidi genocide in Iraq (2014), survivor-led initiatives successfully advocated for a reparation law that recognizes the genocide and provides reparations for conflict-related sexual violence, reflecting a shift in transitional justice towards survivor-centered approaches (on the role of affectedness, see also Sändig et al. 2020). By tracing these struggles over the meaning of universality, the authors shed light on the dynamics of transnational network formation and international norm evolution after violence (similarly, see Stahl 2025).

In her contribution, Christina Pauls (2024) investigates decolonial memory activism as an epistemic struggle. Drawing on evidence from the “Decolonize!” alliance, she examines initiatives such as postcolonial city tours, street-renaming campaigns, and demands for restitution of cultural artifacts. These activists, Pauls shows, challenge not only the material distribution of power but also the underlying systems of knowledge production. Their actions expose and seek to subvert the enduring racist logics of European nationalism and propose alternative models of memory that question linear, hegemonic conceptions of time in favor of multidirectional perspectives (Pauls 2025). The article demonstrates how methodological innovation can help trigger a reckoning with the past, making convenient apologist majority positions untenable or at least more costly to uphold.

Bretton J. McEvoy and Jana Hönke investigate how arms manufacturers have long evaded responsibility for their corporate conduct, and how civil-society groups seek to uncover the harms and injustices caused by these companies in order to hold them accountable (McEvoy and Hönke 2024). The authors show how maintaining privileged ties with states under the guise of “national security” enables arms producers to avoid political and legal responsibility. Taking South Africa as an example, they illustrate how Western arms manufacturers circumvented international sanctions during Apartheid. These past actions, alongside business deals in the post-Apartheid era, have fostered repressive rule, corruption, and social injustice. The authors therefore call for a rethinking of responsibility in the arms industry, advocating for reparations or, at minimum, greater transparency to enable public scrutiny.

The Forum reflects on the peace implications of these contested transition processes, highlighting the multifaceted relationship between peace, contestation, violence, and war. As peace is notoriously elusive, it is often defined in relation to other concepts, such as the absence of physical violence and the presence of social justice (Gledhill and Bright 2019; van Santen 2021). Peace can also function as a discursive label or rhetorical device that conceals violent practices, as with the “peace” prefix in UN Peacekeeping (Kühn 2016a). Neither peace, nor violence, nor contestation can be analyzed for their political value by themselves; their meaning lies in the rules of their respective contexts. Based on this, and challenging the widespread assumption that peace and violence are simple opposites, several contributions in this Forum show how various forms of violence persist within what is commonly perceived or actively framed as peace—for instance, in the state’s monopoly of violence (Schwarz et al. 2024) or through epistemic violence (Pauls 2024). At the same time, contestation can expose social injustices and catalyze institutional change, thereby creating a vision for positive peace (Weller 2025).

4 Future perspectives on struggles over meaning

The Forum aims to create a space of reflection on how political change is unfolding and to foster its conceptualization and theorization. The contributions point out the analytical benefits of conceiving transition as a non-linear, long-term process and provide tools to grasp the role of contestation within those processes. This demonstrates that contestation influences the occurrence, dynamics, and outcomes

of transitions, and that it is essential to examine the historical roots of contemporary conflicts as well as how history is interpreted and (re/de)constructed within them. At the same time, we must understand how contestation is tamed and disciplined by incumbent and emerging powerful actors and their practices of legitimation (Doddworth and Hönke 2026; Colemann and Tucker 2011). The collection does not offer definitive answers but aspires to stimulate debate and outline avenues for future research. As the current decay of democracy, the surge in armed conflict, and neglected or downplayed political crises—such as famine, environmental breakdown, and the climate catastrophe—illustrate, the closer analysis of contested transition processes and their peace implications is profoundly relevant for academia, politics, and societies worldwide.

Acknowledgements We thank the ZeFKo editors—Hendrik Hegemann, Hartwig Hummel, Hanna Pfeifer, and David Weiß—for their valuable feedback and support in compiling this Forum section. We are also grateful to the participants of the workshop “All Things Change the Same?”, held at the University of Bayreuth in June 2023, for the inspiring discussions.

Funding Research for this introduction and several articles in the Forum, as well as the workshop “All things change the same?” (University of Bayreuth, June 2023), were supported by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) within the project “Bayerisches Zentrum für Friedens- und Konfliktforschung: Deutungskämpfe im Übergang” [grant number 01UG2204A-D], see also www.conflicts-meanings-transitions.de.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Conflict of interest J. Sändig and F.P. Kühn declare that they have no competing interests.

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