

## Call for Papers for Workshop on

# “Workarounds in Polarized Times: Navigating Deadlock in Global Governance”

27–29 January 2027

at Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany

Hosts: Lisbeth Zimmermann, Ben Christian, Nele Kortendiek

### Workshop Topic

Across issue areas, international cooperation is increasingly shaped by polarization, contestation, and institutional gridlock. Multilateral venues face growing challenges: geopolitical rivalry, contested norms, declining trust in expertise and international institutions, massive funding cuts, and domestic political pressures—including the rise of far-right actors that reshape international cooperation.

But the story of contemporary global governance is not only one of breakdown. In practice, international actors frequently respond to deadlock by experimenting with *workarounds*: practices that bypass, repurpose, or reconfigure constraints in order to pursue outcomes when established pathways are no longer viable. Such workarounds can take many forms—from unilateral and informal cooperation to forum shifting, creative legal interpretation, reframing of mandates and policy objectives, bureaucratic agency, or governance through private arrangements. Such workarounds may solve problems temporarily, but they might also increase inequality, weaken legitimacy, and erode international institutions over the long term.

This workshop invites papers that examine workarounds as a mode of international politics under conditions of polarization. We welcome contributions drawing on diverse theoretical perspectives, methods, and empirical domains, centered on the overarching question: When rules, institutions, or political processes become constrained or blocked, *how do actors get things done?*

### Key questions

Participants are invited to explore one or more of the following questions:

- What counts as a “workaround” in global governance, and how can the concept be theorized and operationalized?
- Which conditions—polarization, geopolitical rivalry, domestic backlash, legitimacy crises—make workarounds more likely? When do we see accommodation?
- Do workarounds produce tangible output, outcomes, or impact? How do such results differ, stay true to mandates, solve relevant problems, or remain largely symbolic?
- When do workarounds resemble illiberal positions? How and to what extent are far-right and other illiberal actors successful at shifting the standards?
- Which actors deploy workarounds, and who designs and benefits from them? Who is marginalized or excluded?
- How do workarounds reshape institutions over time? Do they produce incremental adaptation, institutional erosion, or new governance architectures?
- What are the normative implications of workaround politics? Do workarounds stabilize multilateralism under pressure—or accelerate fragmentation and institutional decay?

## Possible themes and empirical entry points

We encourage submissions on a wide range of issues, including:

- Gridlock and obstruction in multilateral arenas (UN, EU, OSCE, WTO, WHO, climate negotiations, migration governance, etc.)
- Minilateralism or “coalitions of the willing” as problem-solving strategies or geopolitical tools
- Informalization and soft law, voluntary pledges, partnerships, and public–private governance
- Forum shifting and regime complexity (moving issues across institutions, venues, or legal frameworks)
- Rule-bending and exceptionalism, legal reinterpretation, strategic ambiguity, mission creep, emergency politics, bureaucratic agency
- Sanctions and economic statecraft, alternative infrastructures, substitution strategies, and circumvention dynamics
- Discursive agency and framing, epistemic authority, self-legitimation, and decoupling

## Support

We will cover meals, accommodation, and travel expenses. For co-authored papers, we can cover the costs for only one author per paper.

## Submission

Please submit your abstract of 300-500 words by **June 1, 2026**, through this form:

<https://forms.gle/LrSdU4H2yHiMTAin7>.

We seek a variety of papers representing different institutions (both regional and global) and issue areas. We encourage PhD students, post-docs, and scholars from various regions around the world to apply. Participants are expected to attend the full workshop, starting Wednesday afternoon (Jan 27) and ending Friday afternoon (Jan 29).

We will inform participants of the results of the selection process in July 2026. Those selected are expected to submit their papers by 10 January 2027. Thank you for your interest.

Inquiries can be sent to Ben Christian: [b.christian@soz.uni-frankfurt.de](mailto:b.christian@soz.uni-frankfurt.de).

---