

Team Europe Democracy (TED) Initiative



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Team Europe Democracy (TED) and CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation

The Intersection of Democracy, Peace and Security A European Approach Responding to Global Transformation

Webinar - 13th May 2026 (14:00 - 15:45 CET)

Outcome Report

Executive Summary

This webinar explored the evolving relationship between democracy, peace and security in a period marked by intensified geopolitical competition, democratic backsliding and shrinking civic space, rising military expenditure and increasing pressure on the rules-based international order. It brought together perspectives from policy, research and practice to assess whether the current “security turn” in Europe risks marginalising democracy support and peacebuilding, or whether these domains are becoming more explicitly integrated within emerging security frameworks.

A central concern running through the discussion was the growing prioritisation of defence and the implications this has for long-term investments in democratic institutions, civic space and conflict prevention. Participants noted that these shifts are not only budgetary or institutional, but also conceptual, reshaping how security is defined and which policy areas are considered central to stability.

At the same time, there was **broad agreement that democracy and security are increasingly intertwined.** Democratic resilience, institutional trust, inclusion and civic participation were highlighted as core components of societal stability and national security. In this framing, democracy support is no longer seen solely as a normative or development objective, but as a strategic investment in resilience against hybrid threats, disinformation and authoritarian influence.

The discussion challenged simplified assumptions that greater participation or institutional reform automatically produces legitimacy or peace. Instead, legitimacy was presented as politically constructed and grounded in how citizens experience governance, recognition and inclusion. Democratic mobilisation was shown to often emerge from concrete socio-economic grievances and lived experiences rather than abstract commitments to democratic norms, underscoring the importance of engaging with underlying political and economic drivers of discontent.

A recurring theme was the risk of securitisation narrowing the scope of democracy and peacebuilding efforts, particularly if security is increasingly equated with military preparedness and deterrence. **Participants emphasised that sustainable peace requires a broader understanding of security that includes democratic governance, social cohesion, conflict prevention and human security dimensions such as inequality, access to services and civic space.**

Hybrid threats and information manipulation were identified as key areas where democracy, peace and security intersect most directly. Disinformation, foreign interference



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and societal polarisation were described as deliberate attempts to weaken democratic cohesion from within. In response, resilience was framed as a whole-of-society effort involving institutions, civil society, media ecosystems and citizens, with trust and information integrity seen as foundational security assets.

Independent media and broader information environments were highlighted as critical infrastructure for democratic resilience, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Access to reliable information was linked to civic participation, conflict prevention and social cohesion, with local and community-based media playing a particularly important role in ensuring inclusion and countering manipulation.

Across the discussion, there was also recognition of growing tensions in European policy approaches. While security frameworks are becoming more integrated in some areas, institutional silos and competing mandates continue to limit coherence between democracy support, peacebuilding and security policies. This has reinforced calls for more joined-up approaches that better connect internal and external dimensions of resilience. The importance of the upcoming European security strategy taking a truly comprehensive approach was stressed.

In conclusion, the webinar underscored that democracy, peace and security are increasingly intertwined both in theory and practice. Cooperation exists across these domains, including in civilian crisis management missions, resilience and preparedness frameworks, whole-of-society approaches, and partnerships between governance, peacebuilding, media and security actors. The **key challenge however is how to operationalise further this interdependence in ways that avoid overly narrow security framings and instead sustain a comprehensive understanding of resilience**. This requires balancing military defence and preparedness with sustained investment in democratic governance; protecting the shrinking civic space and information integrity; and supporting inclusive political processes as foundations of long-term stability. This discussion demonstrated that there are opportunities building on and connecting existing practices more systematically, while developing new frameworks or mechanisms.

Democracy–Peace–Security Nexus in a Changing Geopolitical Context

Opening remarks from [CMI | Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation](#) positioned the webinar within a rapidly evolving international environment characterised by heightened geopolitical contestation, growing emphasis on defence and deterrence, and transactionalism in international relations. CMI underlined that Europe is operating in a context marked by rising armed conflict and fragmentation, distrust and uncertainty, as well as democratic backsliding and a reprioritisation in foreign policy and external action.

Against this backdrop, the discussion was framed around a central concern shared by both peacemaking and democracy-support actors: **whether the current prioritisation of defence risks marginalising longer-term investments in democracy and peace**. It was suggested that these shifts are not merely budgetary or institutional, but conceptual, raising questions about how good governance and political processes are understood within emerging European security frameworks.

CMI further situated the discussion within its own institutional approach to peacemaking, focussing on political processes, political agency and policy. The **need for more integrated and mutually reinforcing approaches across peace, democracy and security agendas, particularly through strategic partnerships between the EU, EU member states and other states**, regional organisations and multilateral institutions was emphasised.



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In the keynote framing, **Ambassador Katri Viinikka** from the [Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland](#) advanced the argument that democracy and security should not be treated as competing priorities, but rather as complementary and mutually reinforcing agendas.

Speaking from the perspective of Finland's security environment, including its 1,340-kilometre border with Russia, Europe's weakening security context and the broader implications of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, it was underscored that **democratic resilience constitutes a core component of both national and regional security**. Reference was also made to wider geopolitical instability, including uncertainty generated by developments in the Middle East and shifting transatlantic relations, which together are reinforcing pressure on European states to assume greater responsibility for the continent's security architecture.

It was highlighted how the increasingly contested global environment, characterised by power politics, force and geopolitical competition, is placing growing strain on the rules-based international order. Within this context, changes in the security environment were described as having significant implications for democracy support. Rising defence expenditures and a stronger securitisation of policy approaches were noted as affecting both political attention and public financing available for longer-term democracy, governance and development objectives, including Official Development Assistance (ODA). At the same time, these same developments have also **increased recognition of the strategic importance of democracy and democratic resilience for sustaining stability and societal cohesion**.

Particular emphasis was placed on the role of strong democratic systems, institutions and inclusive political processes in reinforcing public trust and governmental legitimacy. It highlighted how **authoritarian influence, disinformation, societal polarisation and anti-rights movements increasingly operate as instruments of hybrid warfare** aimed at weakening democratic cohesion from within. Specific reference was made to **anti-rights narratives targeting sexual and gender minorities and other vulnerable groups as deliberate attempts to deepen societal divisions and erode democratic trust**. In this framing, democracy support was presented not only as a normative or development objective, but as a strategic investment in security and resilience.

A broader shift within European policy discourse towards linking democratic resilience with preparedness, societal resilience and comprehensive security was also reflected on. Reference was made to recent EU initiatives, including the [Democracy Shield](#) and the [Centre of Democratic Resilience](#), launched to address Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), strengthen institutions and electoral integrity, support free and independent media, and enhance citizen engagement. It was further noted that **safeguarding democracy should remain reflected in the EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)**. In parallel, reference was made to the [Council of Europe initiative on the Pact for Democratic Europe](#), presented as a strategic and political effort to reinforce democratic security across the continent.

A significant analytical contribution of the opening remarks was the presentation of Finland's "[Comprehensive Security](#)" Model (CSM) as a practical example of how democratic governance and security policy can be integrated. Drawing on Finland's own historical experience and preparedness culture, the model was described as a **whole-of-society approach (defence-social-economic) in which public authorities, businesses, civil society organisations (CSO) and citizens jointly contribute to safeguarding the vital functions of society**. Social cohesion, shared responsibility and trust across institutions and society were identified as central pillars of this approach.

Within this framework, **democratic trust, civic participation, media literacy and digital literacy were presented not as secondary governance concerns, but as foundational**



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elements of national resilience and preparedness. Civil society was likewise highlighted as a critical actor in contributing to openness, participation and societal trust. Democracy support therefore was reframed as a preventative and stabilising mechanism capable of strengthening societal resilience and reducing vulnerability to manipulation, disinformation and authoritarian influence.

The importance of **developing stronger cooperation between democracy-support actors, peacebuilding actors and traditionally security-oriented institutions**, including national ministries of defence and other “high-security” actors was underscored. A stronger whole-of-government approach to democracy support was encouraged, alongside efforts to bridge institutional divides between governance, peacebuilding and security communities. In this regard, **cooperation with civilian crisis management missions of the EU, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the UN** was identified as a potentially accessible entry point for strengthening operational linkages between democracy support and security policy.

Overall, there is an importance of creating spaces that connect policymakers, practitioners, civil society, research institutions and security actors in order to close persistent gaps between policy, practice and analysis. The webinar itself was presented as an initial effort to bridge conceptual and operational divides between democracy support, peacebuilding and security communities, while promoting more coherent and mutually reinforcing responses to contemporary democratic and geopolitical challenges.

Beyond Technocratic Democracy Support

ODI | ODI Global built directly on these opening reflections by interrogating some of the underlying assumptions shaping current debates on democracy, peace and security. While agreeing that democratic resilience and security are increasingly interconnected, it was stressed that the relationship between them is more politically complex than is often assumed within contemporary European policy discourse.

The intervention framed the current geopolitical moment as one that fundamentally challenges how democracy, peace and security have traditionally been understood and supported. In an increasingly militarised and geopolitically contested environment, democratic backsliding, declining public trust in institutions, rising populism and the proliferation of violent conflict are unfolding simultaneously across multiple regions, including Europe itself. At the same time, support for governance, peacebuilding and democratic institutions has comparatively declined over the past decade, while defence and hard-security spending have risen sharply alongside growing humanitarian and crisis-response financing. This **imbalance is significant because it risks narrowing understandings of security** precisely at a moment when questions of legitimacy, trust and political inclusion are becoming more central to societal resilience.

Against this backdrop, ODI Global stressed the need to think “with both sides of the brain” about governance and security simultaneously. However, this also requires re-examining several assumptions that have long underpinned international democracy support and peacebuilding approaches. **A central theme of the intervention was ODI’s caution of the idea that “all good things go together,” namely, the assumption that more participation, more democratic procedures and more institutional reform will naturally generate peace, legitimacy and stability.**

Drawing on ODI Global’s work on governance and political settlements, it was shared that **participation is not politically neutral, nor automatically transformative.** Earlier research on inclusive peacebuilding demonstrated that participatory mechanisms sometimes sidestepped rather than confronted underlying struggles over power, distribution and political



exclusion. In this sense, **participation itself can become technocratic if divorced from the politics shaping who participates, on what terms, and with what influence.**

Similarly, the **intervention challenged assumptions that democratically elected governments inherently generate legitimacy or effective governance.** ODI Global's work on "[democracies that deliver](#)" was used to argue that contemporary democratic decline is driven not only by authoritarian pressures, but also by the **real or perceived inability of democratic systems to meet citizens' expectations and provide effective governance.** Across many societies, frustrations linked to economic insecurity, inequality, institutional paralysis and elite detachment have contributed both to support for anti-system populist actors and to wider public disengagement from democratic politics.¹

Within this context, **state legitimacy was positioned as a critical bridge between democracy and security debates.** Drawing on lessons from fragile and conflict-affected contexts, including the decade-long [Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium](#), the point was made that legitimacy cannot be reduced to elections, constitutions or service delivery alone. Earlier international approaches often presumed that effective service provision would automatically strengthen state legitimacy. ODI's research complicates this assumption by showing **that legitimacy is shaped not only by what states deliver, but also by how they deliver it, to whom, and whether citizens feel recognised and politically included** in the process.

Particular emphasis was placed on the idea that legitimacy is "co-constructed" between states and citizens through ongoing political negotiation rather than technocratic institutional design alone. **Citizens in fragile contexts frequently valued recognition, representation and spaces for deliberation - the ability to "stand up and be counted" by the state - as much as material service provision itself.** The policy implication, it was suggested, is that international actors **need to better understand the context-specific grievances and distributional struggles that shape citizens' perceptions of legitimacy, rather than assuming institutional templates alone will generate trust.**²

These insights informed ODI Global's broader critique of conventional democracy-support approaches. It was stated that political participation must be understood first and foremost as political rather than technical. Approaches focused narrowly on elections, civic participation initiatives or institutional strengthening risk becoming apolitical if they fail to engage with the structural drivers of exclusion, disillusionment and mobilisation. This caution was also connected to contemporary European initiatives such as the EU's Democracy Shield, where civic education and participation initiatives may not sufficiently address the deeper causes of democratic discontent or the appeal of populist politics.

Moreover, **democratic resilience often emerges not through formal democratic programming alone, but through broader forms of civic contestation around concrete grievances.** Many social movements that later take on explicitly democratic dimensions initially mobilise around socio-economic or rights-based issues such as taxation, energy subsidies, corruption, gender rights or economic exclusion. Examples discussed included Gen Z-led protests around finance bills and taxation in **Kenya** and elsewhere in Africa, as well as feminist mobilisations against restrictions on abortion rights in **Poland**. These cases were presented as illustrations of how democratic mobilisation frequently develops through

¹ ODI Global, Samuel Sharp, "To promote open societies globally, the FCDO must be more realistic, politically savvy and self-aware," <https://odi.org/en/insights/to-promote-open-societies-globally-the-fcdo-must-be-more-realistic-politically-savvy-and-self-aware/>

² Aoife McCullough and Jonathan Papoulidis, "Why we need to rethink our understanding of state legitimacy to address fragility," <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/dev4peace/why-we-need-rethink-our-understanding-state-legitimacy-address-fragility>



contestation around **tangible lived experiences rather than abstract commitments to democratic norms alone.**

Particular attention was given to the role of [women's movements and minority rights organisations as important bulwarks](#) against democratic erosion (including seen with the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda), especially in contexts affected by fragility and conflict. It was raised that democracy-support programming has often overlooked these actors, alongside trade unions, religious organisations, business constituencies, influencers and other actors operating within digital and popular cultural spaces. Future ODI research will increasingly focus on how these actors contribute to democratic resilience and democratic renewal.

At the same time, the intervention warned that civic space itself is under mounting pressure globally, including within Europe. **Restrictions on protest, attacks on civil society and shrinking public space are no longer confined to overtly authoritarian settings.** ODI Global's research on civic space therefore emphasises the need not only to support civil society organisations directly, but also to understand how citizens adapt politically under constrained conditions and how international actors can reinforce these adaptive strategies in ways that strengthen democratic resilience.

Finally, it was stressed that achieving greater complementarity between democracy, peace and security agendas remains difficult because the barriers are fundamentally political rather than merely technical. **Institutional siloes, competing mandates and entrenched bureaucratic cultures continue to inhibit joined-up thinking and action across governance, peacebuilding and security communities.** Building synergies therefore **requires coalitions and individuals capable of bridging these divides and creating space for experimentation** across institutional boundaries.

The intervention concluded by pointing towards emerging efforts to **rethink security more broadly through the lens of democratic resilience, social cohesion and public trust.** Initiatives such as the [Democracy and Belonging Forum](#) and wider "rethinking security" networks were highlighted as examples of attempts to connect governance, peacebuilding and human security debates in more integrated ways. The central argument remained consistent: democratic resilience depends not only on institutions, but on the wider social fabric that enables citizens to organise, contest power, deliberate collectively and hold governments accountable peacefully. In a period marked by geopolitical instability and democratic uncertainty, effective responses will therefore require politically informed approaches capable of rebuilding legitimacy, protecting civic space and addressing the grievances increasingly shaping citizens' relationship with democracy itself.

Democracy, Peace and Security in Europe's Security Turn

Following ODI Global's context setting, the discussion turned to the practical implications of Europe's evolving security environment for democracy support, peacebuilding and governance. The discussion repeatedly returned to a central question raised earlier in the session: **whether current geopolitical shifts risk narrowing European approaches to security in ways that undermine the democratic legitimacy, civic resilience and social cohesion that long-term stability ultimately depends upon.**

CMI emphasised that the discussion could not avoid difficult questions about democratic decline, institutional failures and the erosion of public trust that have contributed to the present moment. It was stressed that the current context requires not only policy adaptation, but potentially a broader rethinking of institutional structures, civic space and prevailing security



paradigms themselves. This framing connected directly to ODI Global's earlier call to rethink inherited assumptions about how democracy, governance and security interact.

Democracy Support in a Security Driven Foreign Policy Shift

Responding to how current geopolitical shifts are reshaping EU democracy support, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, [Carnegie Europe](#) shared that the increasing securitisation of EU foreign policy has contributed to a **more defensive and inward-looking democracy agenda**. In practice, this has meant a **growing tendency to prioritise the protection of EU institutions and internal democratic resilience over external democracy support and governance engagement**.

At the same time, an important paradox was highlighted. While geopolitical instability and Russia's war against Ukraine have intensified securitisation trends, they have also helped revive political attention to democracy within EU policy debates. Initiatives such as the EU's Democracy Shield and [Defence of Democracy Package](#) were presented as evidence that **democracy has re-entered the strategic agenda, albeit increasingly framed through the lens of geopolitical competition, hybrid threats and societal resilience**.

Within this context, the key challenge for the EU is whether democracy, governance and security can continue to be treated as separate policy domains. Although the EU has often approached crises through fragmented instruments and compartmentalised policy frameworks, it was suggested that **more integrated approaches are now required to address the underlying drivers of fragility and instability in complex environments** (e.g. linking security – climate – democratic governance). Democracy support, therefore, should not be treated as secondary to defence and deterrence objectives, but embedded as a core pillar within broader security and resilience strategies.

Particular emphasis was placed on the need for the EU to **identify new entry points for democracy support within an increasingly securitised policy environment**. It was suggested that this requires greater creativity in **linking democracy-related objectives to other policy fields**, while ensuring that democratic governance remains visible within evolving security frameworks rather than displaced by them.

Using the example of the [EU's Common Security and Defence Policy \(CSDP\)](#), Carnegie Europe observed that **European security engagement has increasingly shifted towards narrower, more pragmatic and more militarised approaches, with civilian, governance and democracy-related dimensions receiving comparatively less attention** ([The EU Common Security and Defense Policy: Moving Away From Democracy Support](#)). However, it was also argued that recent geopolitical developments have reopened space for reconnecting democracy and security agendas, particularly in the EU's eastern neighbourhood.

Examples highlighted included EU engagement in **Ukraine**, where security sector reform has become linked to civilian reform and accession-related commitments, as well as partnership missions in **Moldova** and **Armenia** framed around democratic resilience, institutional reform and the safeguarding of democratic values. These developments were presented as examples of an **emerging "democratic security" framing** capable of reconnecting governance and security objectives within EU external action.

It was suggested that this evolving framing could provide an **opportunity to revitalise civilian dimensions of CSDP if accompanied by stronger commitments to democratic accountability, inclusive governance and human rights protections**. Potential avenues identified included **strengthening cooperation with partner countries on institutional reform and rule-of-law commitments, integrating human rights expertise more**



systematically into missions, improving monitoring of democratic and human rights impacts, and promoting more inclusive and pluralist approaches within peace mediation and conflict resolution processes.

The intervention stressed that the implications of securitisation are not only external, but internal to European policymaking itself. **If the EU is moving towards a new security paradigm, citizens and civil society actors must play a more systematic and consequential role** in shaping it. This was linked to broader discussions around the [EU's Preparedness Union Strategy](#) and whole-of-society approaches to resilience.

It was also emphasised that participation should move beyond ad hoc consultation towards more institutionalised forms of democratic engagement embedded within policymaking structures at European, national and local levels. Citizens' input must not only be solicited but translated into concrete policy outcomes. One proposal advanced was the establishment of **regular [security dialogues on democratic values](#) capable of bringing together security actors, democracy practitioners and local civic actors from both Europe and partner countries.**

A further theme concerned the **need to broaden the range of actors involved** in democratic oversight and accountability within security policymaking. Like stressed already by ODI Global, participation cannot be limited to established institutional actors but should involve a wider spectrum of civic and local actors capable of strengthening scrutiny over security policies and instruments. While acknowledging that **this may challenge the traditionally closed nature of security policymaking, it was underlined that contemporary European security policy must become more transparent, accountable and democratically grounded.**

In this regard, the importance of **strengthening the role of democratic institutions, including the European Parliament and national parliaments, in overseeing security policy and governance was reiterated.** The intervention also suggested the possibility of introducing regular independent **"democracy audits" of EU security partnerships** to assess whether they remain aligned with democratic principles and human rights commitments.

Finally, **security should no longer be understood as something designed and delivered solely by state institutions or conventional security actors.** Rather, democratic resilience and security need to be shaped through ongoing democratic participation, civic engagement and locally grounded approaches, both within Europe and in external partner contexts.

Strategic Autonomy, Deterrence and the Future of EU Peacebuilding

Reflecting on research and consultations conducted with the support of [Search for Common Ground](#), [ECDPM](#), notably in its recently published paper ["Strategic Choices to Connect Peace, Defence and Deterrence \(April 2026\)"](#), situated current debates within what it described as a major **"European security realignment."** Europe, and in particular the EU, it suggested, is **moving away from its traditional identity as a predominantly "soft power" actor towards a security posture increasingly shaped by strategic autonomy, military readiness and deterrence.** This shift was presented as both understandable and politically driven by the rapidly deteriorating geopolitical environment, including Russia's war against Ukraine, the proliferation of hybrid threats, instability in the Middle East and growing uncertainty surrounding wider international alliances and security guarantees.

At the same time, this transformation is reshaping EU external action far beyond Europe itself, with profound implications for conflict prevention, peacebuilding and democracy support, all of which have historically formed central pillars of the EU's external identity. The intervention



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framed the discussion **not simply as a reaction to Ukraine, but as part of a much broader reordering of European foreign and security policy priorities.**

Three major structural shifts were identified.

- **First**, a significant political and budgetary reprioritisation in which defence and deterrence have moved decisively to the centre of the European agenda, while conflict prevention and peacebuilding have increasingly been pushed to the margins. This shift is visible both politically and institutionally, including in the agendas of the Foreign Affairs Council and wider EU security discussions, where prevention and peacebuilding now receive considerably less attention. The concern raised was therefore not only rhetorical, but operational and financial. **As defence spending rises sharply, the political space, institutional energy and dedicated funding available for longer-term peacebuilding, governance and prevention objectives are shrinking, including within discussions surrounding the next MFF. If this militarised policy focus becomes structurally embedded over the coming budgetary cycle, the implications for peacebuilding and democratic governance support could be far-reaching.**
- **Second**, a geographical and strategic reorientation of EU external action towards the eastern flank and Europe's own territorial defence. While this was described as politically understandable given the direct security threats facing EU member states and neighbouring countries, **concern was raised that fragile and conflict-affected contexts elsewhere, particularly across parts of Africa and the Sahel, risk losing strategic continuity, political attention and sustained engagement.** This could further **weaken European credibility** at a time when it is already under pressure, particularly regarding the EU's stated commitment to remain engaged in fragile settings and address instability globally. It was also suggested that **emerging democracy and security initiatives in the EU neighbourhood could contribute to a widening differentiation in how the EU approaches democracy, governance and security across different regions.**
- A **third** structural shift identified concerned the **changing narrative surrounding peace and security itself. Deterrence is increasingly being reframed as synonymous with peace or even conflict prevention.** However, **reducing peace to military preparedness or deterrence risks narrowing the broader political and societal foundations** upon which sustainable peace depends. Lasting peace also requires diplomacy, mediation, conflict prevention, democratic legitimacy, social cohesion and inclusive forms of governance. **Importantly, military actors themselves frequently acknowledge that security challenges cannot be resolved through military means alone.**

A recurring theme throughout the intervention was therefore the risk that democracy, peacebuilding and governance become treated as secondary, competing or sequential concerns within current European security debates: first deterrence, then democracy and peace. Against this logic, democratic legitimacy and societal resilience should instead be understood as integral components of security itself. If the EU adopts an overly narrow security lens, it risks sidelining precisely the political and societal conditions that underpin long-term resilience and stability.

Beyond diagnosis, ECDPM reflected on the **operational implications** of these shifts and on the practical limitations of existing integrated approaches. Frameworks such as the **EU's integrated approach, the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and broader "3D"**



approaches linking diplomacy, development and defence were described as remaining conceptually relevant but functioning unevenly and often weakly in practice. According to the intervention, **where integrated approaches have succeeded**, this has depended less on formal frameworks themselves and more on **deliberate investments in coordination, trust-building and clearly defined complementary roles between different actors and sectors**.

Drawing on consultations and operational examples, including experiences from **Afghanistan**, the importance of sustained dialogue between civilian, military, humanitarian and peacebuilding actors operating with different institutional cultures, timelines and vocabularies was highlighted. One example referenced involved **Dutch civilian and military leadership structures** deliberately coordinating positions internally in order to present coherent joint approaches externally. Such examples were used to illustrate that integrated approaches can function **more effectively when cooperation is intentionally designed, locally grounded and sustained through continuous exchange rather than ad hoc coordination**.

At the same time, these approaches remain inherently fragile. They frequently **break down when coordination relies too heavily on individual personalities rather than institutionalised incentives, or when competing priorities and intensifying crises push actors back into siloed approaches**. Integrated approaches are often “messy” in practice, but still necessary if security, peacebuilding and governance objectives are to reinforce rather than undermine one another.

Particular attention was also given to **questions of conflict sensitivity, accountability and due diligence in the context of rising defence expenditure**. ECDPM raised concerns about the **relative absence of systematic impact monitoring regarding how increased defence spending and military assistance contribute to broader peace and security objectives**.

Questions were posed regarding whether defence-related interventions are being held to standards of accountability and conflict sensitivity comparable to those applied to international cooperation and peacebuilding programmes.

Looking ahead, the development of **a new European Security Strategy was identified as a potentially important opportunity to redefine European security in more comprehensive terms**. While expressing concern that current trends could reinforce a narrowly militarised understanding of resilience, it was suggested that the emerging strategy could still reaffirm the EU’s role as a peace actor if approached more holistically. This would **require broadening understandings of deterrence towards a whole-of-society resilience agenda, maintaining commitments to democratic accountability and conflict sensitivity, and ensuring that space for conflict prevention and peacebuilding remains protected alongside growing defence investment**.

Hybrid Threats, Democratic Resilience and the Whole-of-Society Approach

The discussion then turned to the growing challenge of hybrid threats and what they reveal about the increasingly blurred boundaries between democracy, peace and security. Reflecting on how hybrid threats cut across all three domains simultaneously, [Hybrid CoE | European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats](#) stressed that these challenges demonstrate clearly the deep interdependence between democratic governance, societal resilience and security policy.

From Hybrid CoE’s perspective, **hybrid threats are fundamentally shaped by the asymmetry between democratic and authoritarian systems**. While authoritarian actors are



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often able to deploy hybrid tactics without legal or normative constraints, democratic states must operate within frameworks defined by rule of law principles, democratic accountability and international obligations. This structural asymmetry creates vulnerabilities that hostile actors intentionally seek to exploit.

Particular attention was given to election interference, disinformation campaigns and broader forms of information manipulation (e.g. Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)) designed to exploit existing societal divisions and polarise democratic societies from within. These strategies, it was noted, aim **not only to weaken social cohesion domestically, but also to undermine collective unity within institutions such as the EU and NATO**. Hybrid threats therefore target democratic institutions and public trust directly, making democratic resilience itself a central component of European security.

Against this backdrop, protecting and strengthening democratic institutions is not separate from safeguarding peace and security, but increasingly central to both. **Efforts to counter hybrid threats through resilience-building, societal preparedness and institutional trust** simultaneously reinforce democratic stability and reduce societal vulnerabilities to external manipulation.

A recurring theme was the importance of a **“whole-of-society” and “whole-of-government” approaches**. Given the cross-sectoral and cross-border nature of hybrid threats, **effective responses require coordination not only across government institutions, but also with civil society actors, media organisations and the private sector**. It was highlighted that many EU and NATO member states are already **developing national coordination mechanisms designed to strengthen this type of integrated resilience architecture**.

Ukraine’s experience during the war was referenced as **an important example of societal resilience under extreme pressure**. Cooperation between state institutions, civil society and private sector actors, including in countering disinformation and responding to emerging technological threats such as drones, was presented as demonstrating how broad societal mobilisation can strengthen resilience even in wartime conditions.

The intervention also emphasised that **countering hybrid threats requires a combination of situational awareness, resilience-building and credible deterrence measures**. Situational awareness was described as essential for detecting, attributing and responding to hybrid operations, while international cooperation, particularly between the EU and NATO, remains critical for intelligence sharing, joint analysis and coordinated responses. Regional initiatives such as the [Baltic Sentry operation](#) in the **Baltic Sea** was cited as an examples of how governments are increasingly cooperating to build shared situational awareness across borders.

At the operational level, a wide range of emerging EU and national initiatives designed to strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerabilities were highlighted. These include the Democracy Shield, the [Digital Services Act](#), the [AI Act](#), the [Critical Entities Resilience \(CER\)](#) and [Network and Information Systems 2 \(NIS2\)](#) Directives, the Preparedness Union Strategy, the forthcoming [Cyber Security Act](#) update and the [Action Plan on Drone and Counter Drone Security](#). Together, these initiatives were presented as evidence that resilience-building is becoming increasingly embedded within European security thinking.

At national level, governments are also expanding legal and institutional preparedness measures, including revisions to national security legislation, emergency preparedness systems, foreign direct investment screening mechanisms and public awareness campaigns aimed at improving crisis readiness and societal preparedness. Particular emphasis was placed on **media literacy, digital literacy and public**



preparedness campaigns, especially in Nordic countries, as long-term investments in societal resilience.

Importantly, **resilience is not simply a defensive measure, but a form of deterrence in itself.** By reducing societal vulnerabilities and strengthening preparedness, democratic societies become less attractive and less effective targets for hostile actors. In this sense, societal resilience contributes to what was described as “**deterrence by denial,**” reducing the likelihood that hybrid operations can succeed or generate strategic gains.

At the same time, the discussion also acknowledged the growing focus within European security debates on “**deterrence by punishment,**” namely increasing the costs for hostile actors through more credible countermeasures and response capabilities. Yet throughout the intervention, the central message remained that strong democratic institutions, social trust, societal cohesion and public resilience constitute not merely governance objectives, but strategic security assets in their own right.

The intervention concluded by underlining that trust and coordination themselves are foundational components of resilience. Whole-of-society cooperation, sustained dialogue and institutional coherence were repeatedly identified not only as operational necessities for countering hybrid threats, but also as essential conditions for strengthening democratic resilience and preserving peace in an increasingly contested geopolitical environment.

Independent Media as Infrastructure in the Democracy-Peace-Security Nexus

The final intervention focused on the role of media and information ecosystems within the broader democracy-peace-security nexus. [Fondation Hironnelle](#) stressed that independent media should be understood not as a secondary communications sector, but as a core component of democratic and societal infrastructure, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Professional, **independent journalism plays a fundamental role in strengthening democratic resilience by enabling citizens to access reliable information, understand evolving crises and participate in public life.** In contexts marked by violence, political instability or weak institutional trust, the absence of credible information environments can rapidly deepen fear, polarisation and manipulation. **Independent media was therefore presented as essential not only for democratic participation, but also for conflict prevention, social cohesion and human security.**

A central theme throughout the intervention was the **importance of locally grounded media ecosystems.** Access to information depends **not only on the production of content, but also on language, format, infrastructure and distribution.** Local media operating in local languages and through accessible formats such as radio remain indispensable across many regions where internet access, electricity or digital infrastructure remain limited or unevenly distributed. It was **cautioned against overly digitalised assumptions about participation and resilience,** noting that many international policy debates continue to **underestimate the continued importance of offline and community-based communication channels.**

Drawing on operational experience in the [Central African Republic](#), Fondation Hironnelle illustrated how trusted local radio can simultaneously support democratic participation, civic inclusion and peacebuilding. Broadcasting nationwide in both French and Sango, local radio platforms were described as spaces where citizens could access information, discuss community concerns and engage with electoral processes. During the country’s recent elections, radio programming contributed to voter education, equal airtime for candidates and nationwide public access to electoral information, including for populations geographically



distant from political centres. It was further highlighted how trusted local media can help reduce vulnerabilities to [disinformation](#) and political manipulation [during electoral periods](#) by providing fact-based reporting and inclusive public debate in contexts where institutional trust remains fragile.

Beyond connecting citizens with institutions and public authorities, local journalism can amplify voices frequently excluded from formal political and peace processes, [including women, youth and rural communities](#) in public debates. **Media was therefore described as facilitating both [vertical inclusion](#), by linking populations with decision-makers, and [horizontal inclusion](#), by ensuring representation across different social groups and lived experiences within communities themselves.**

Particular attention was given to the continued importance of civic dialogue under increasingly restrictive political conditions. Fondation Hirondelle's work in the **Sahel** was presented as a further illustration of the role media can play in preserving social cohesion under conditions of political fragmentation and insecurity. In contexts such as **Mali**, [Burkina Faso](#) and **Niger**, where political space has narrowed significantly and open discussion of security or governance issues may be constrained, local media continue to provide trusted forums for dialogue on issues directly affecting communities, including access to water, agriculture and climate-related pressures. **Maintaining such spaces for public deliberation is essential for sustaining non-violent civic engagement, preserving social cohesion and maintaining the foundations necessary for future democratic recovery and peacebuilding.**

To conclude, Fondation Hirondelle stated that **information integrity depends on the broader resilience** of local media and information ecosystems rather than solely on digital regulation or content moderation. This **includes infrastructure, distribution systems, access to electricity and internet connectivity, legal protections for journalists, professional capacity and media and information literacy.** Supporting these ecosystems is a preventative and strategic investment in democratic resilience and societal stability, enabling societies to reduce vulnerabilities before crises escalate rather than responding only after instability has already emerged.

Emerging Questions: Human Security, Legitimacy and Democratic Trade-Offs

Additional reflections from the [German Institute of Development and Sustainability \(IDOS\)](#) reinforced the empirical links between democratic governance and peace. Research findings highlighted that global trends of autocratisation significantly increase the risk of internal violent conflict, underscoring the structural link between democratic backsliding and fragility. At the same time, democratisation processes can also generate instability, particularly in post-conflict settings, where political liberalisation may reopen or intensify societal cleavages if not accompanied by adequate safeguards. Against this backdrop, IDOS stressed that external democracy support can play an important mitigating role in managing the destabilising effects of post-conflict democratisation.

Three interlinked findings were highlighted:

- **First**, inclusion and pluralism are essential but must be complemented by strong institutional constraints. Effective **checks and balances** were identified as necessary to prevent political openness from translating into violent competition.
- **Second**, post-conflict democratisation requires **sustained external support**. Without it, political liberalisation may exacerbate tensions rather than resolve them, making democracy assistance a key stabilising factor in sequencing and structuring reforms.



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- **Third, the stability–democracy trade-off** was identified as central for international actors. Prioritising short-term stability over democratic governance is not necessarily less risky and may be counterproductive, undermining prospects for sustainable peace in the medium to long term. **Sustained attention to democratic norms and institutions was therefore presented as more conducive to lasting stability than narrowly security-focused approaches.**

There was also a **strong call to move beyond narrow or overly militarised understandings of security**. Questions raised by [Oxfam Intermón](#) focused on whether **current European debates increasingly conflate security with defence and territorial protection, while overlooking broader dimensions of “human/citizen security”** linked to inequality, shrinking civic space, organised crime, political polarisation and wider social tensions affecting citizens’ everyday lives. In this context, it was **questioned whether European institutions are sufficiently exploring more holistic understandings of security rooted in societal realities rather than primarily geopolitical or state-centric lenses.**

Related concerns were raised regarding the **long-term implications of Europe’s current security realignment** (defence spending, military preparedness vs. democratic governance, peacebuilding, conflict prevention). Reflecting on discussions at the [Copenhagen Democracy Summit 2026](#) held shortly before the webinar, the growing shift was noted in political discourse from “peacetime” to “wartime” mentalities across Europe.

Responding to these questions, **Fondation Hironnelle** stressed that human security remains central within fragile and conflict affected contexts, particularly from the perspective of local populations and the information environments that shape their daily understanding of crisis. It was underlined that **conflict is often experienced not primarily through shifting frontlines or military violence, but through disruptions to everyday life**, including access to food, education, markets and basic services. People living through conflict continue to face immediate concerns of survival and dignity even when external narratives focus predominantly on armed dynamics. In this sense, **public interest media was described as integral to how human security is both experienced and made visible**, helping to bridge the gap between lived realities and external perceptions. They also function as key components of societal resilience, democratic participation and conflict prevention, particularly in environments where credible information is scarce or contested.

Hybrid CoE reflected on the dilemmas democratic societies face when responding to hybrid threats, stressing that these are often **deliberately engineered to create strategic trade-offs**. It was noted that actors can **use reflexive control to provoke responses** that may be detrimental in the longer term, particularly in the information space. **Efforts to counter disinformation, foreign interference and hostile influence operations therefore require difficult balancing between security concerns and democratic freedoms, especially freedom of expression and open political debate.** At the same time, it was emphasised that **many disinformation narratives are domestically rooted before being amplified by external actors, which complicates simplistic attribution and risks making overly securitised responses counterproductive.** The discussion also introduced concrete governance tensions, including **how to respond to hybrid threats while remaining compliant with international legal frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea in cases involving the so-called shadow fleet.** In this context, resilience building measures such as media literacy, preparedness and public trust were highlighted not only as protective tools but also as forms of deterrence, reducing societal vulnerabilities and limiting opportunities for manipulation.



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Building on these points, **ECDPM** cautioned against allowing peace to disappear from political discourse amid the current security shift in Europe. It was underlined **that language and framing carry political consequences**, particularly as deterrence and military preparedness increasingly dominate strategic debates. A key risk identified was that peace may become hollowed out from public policy discourse if defence considerations crowd out broader societal reflection. ECDPM stressed the **importance of maintaining open and democratic debate on the implications of expanding defence policies**, including effects on infrastructure, spending priorities and civilian populations. Concrete examples were raised, such as **whether sufficient dialogue is taking place with workers in strategic sectors like ports and transport infrastructure, where increased militarisation and risk exposure may have direct consequences**. It was also highlighted that security policymaking must involve a wider range of actors beyond military institutions, including citizens, civic organisations, local communities and other stakeholders directly affected by these decisions, ensuring that **security choices are socially embedded rather than technocratically insulated**.

Similarly, **Carnegie Europe** emphasised that democracy and security should not be treated as separate or competing policy agendas. Reflecting on the discussion, it was noted that the current geopolitical environment demands more comprehensive approaches capable of simultaneously addressing external threats, democratic renewal, institutional reform and civic participation. Political engagement and democratic mobilisation were framed not as secondary to security policy but as central components of long-term resilience and stability, particularly in contexts where external pressure intersects with internal democratic fragility.

ODI Global further highlighted the importance of addressing the **deeper political economy underlying democratic vulnerability**. While stronger citizen participation and more inclusive security governance are necessary, it was noted that they may not be sufficient to address rising distrust, populism and democratic disillusionment across Europe and beyond. Particular emphasis was placed on **“information architecture,” understood not simply as media systems but as the broader political economy of information production, distribution and trust**. It was emphasised that vulnerabilities within Europe’s own information environment increasingly shape internal democratic resilience, while also affecting the credibility and coherence of EU external action abroad. This includes recognition that disinformation ecosystems are often rooted domestically and only subsequently amplified externally, reinforcing the need for systemic rather than narrowly defensive responses.

Closing the panel discussion, the **Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland** acknowledged both the importance of human security and the political realities currently driving defence centred policymaking across Europe. **While recognising the dominance of “realpolitik” considerations in the present context, it was stressed that identifying practical entry points for democracy support within emerging security frameworks remains essential**. The discussion ultimately converged around the need to **preserve comprehensive understandings of security** that integrate democratic governance, societal resilience, conflict prevention and peacebuilding, even amid rapidly changing geopolitical conditions and evolving legal and strategic constraints.

As a synthesis, **CMI** distilled three overarching takeaways from the discussion.

- **First, the interdependence** between democracy, peace and security has become increasingly evident, both within Europe and through EU external action, particularly as **internal democratic resilience and external strategic posture are now tightly linked**.
- **Second, there are clear opportunities to strengthen coherence** across these domains through **more integrated and participatory approaches** that better reflect lived realities and operational constraints.



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- **Third**, achieving this will require **not only technical coordination but also deeper political, institutional and cultural shifts**, including more explicit engagement with the political economy of information, the governance of hybrid threats and the democratic legitimacy of evolving security policies.

Closing Reflections: Keeping Democracy and Peace on the Agenda

Closing reflections were provided by **DG INTPA**, that situated the discussion directly within ongoing EU policy debates and institutional reforms concerning fragility, resilience, security and peacebuilding. Speaking from the perspective of **unit (G5)** working simultaneously on peace, resilience and security issues, DG INTPA underlined the importance of strengthening coherence across policy domains that have too often been treated separately, while also connecting the EU's internal and external security dimensions more systematically.

The intervention highlighted that many of the themes raised throughout the discussion are already informing ongoing EU policy processes, including the recent European Commission [Joint Staff Working Document: Integrated Approach to Fragility](#) (part of the [Humanitarian Communication Package \(ECHO\)](#), publication 27th of May 2026), which seeks to further integrate security considerations alongside conflict prevention, peacebuilding and resilience objectives. These discussions are particularly timely given the wider strategic realignments currently taking place across EU external action.

A strong emphasis was placed on the **need to understand security in broader and more interconnected terms**. Alongside traditional security concerns, DG INTPA pointed to the **growing importance of addressing illicit financial flows, organised crime, societal resilience and “security by design” approaches**. Particular attention was given to **the role of the private sector**, especially within the context of the EU's Global Gateway agenda. Building trust with private sector actors and **involving them more in sensitive security and resilience discussions** was presented as an increasingly important dimension of a more coherent and joined-up EU external action.

The remarks repeatedly returned to the operational challenges of coordination across sectors and institutions. Existing approaches, including the **humanitarian-development-peace nexus and broader integrated approaches, were acknowledged as necessary but inherently demanding**. Coordination was described not simply as a technical exercise, but as a resource-intensive political process requiring sustained investment in time, staffing, dialogue and trust-building between actors operating with different mandates, cultures and priorities.

At the same time, the importance of ensuring that integrated approaches remain inclusive and context-specific was stressed. Considerable effort has already been **invested in broadening consultations beyond traditional interlocutors**, particularly through engagement with youth organisations, women's groups and local actors outside capital cities. However, further progress remains necessary to move beyond engagement with the “usual” actors and ensure that local perspectives shape policy design and implementation. **Context sensitivity was identified as essential**, with the clear recognition that no single model or template can be applied uniformly across fragile and conflict-affected settings.

A particularly strong message concerned **the importance of maintaining peace as a central political objective within current European security debates**. Against a backdrop where stabilisation and deterrence increasingly dominate policy discussions, **“positive peace”** grounded in inclusion, participation and democratic legitimacy remains the only sustainable foundation for long-term stability. Linking closely to reflections on democratic transitions and the heightened vulnerabilities that often emerge during periods of political transformation.



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Particular emphasis was placed on the **need for stronger early warning, targeted support and sustained investment in civil society, civic space and societal resilience during these critical transitional phases.**

The closing reflections also underscored the value of the exchanges themselves, noting that the reflections and recommendations raised throughout the discussion would directly feed into ongoing EU policy thinking, including wider strategic processes such as the next annual Strategic Foresight Report (2025 issue: [Strategic Foresight Report](#)) examining the EU's role in an increasingly contested and unstable global environment.

Looking ahead, DG INTPA reaffirmed the importance of continued dialogue between EU institutions, civil society, peacebuilding actors and security communities. **The Webinar was presented not as a standalone exchange, but as part of a broader and ongoing effort to rethink how the EU approaches democracy, peace and security in a rapidly changing geopolitical context, while ensuring that peace, inclusion and human security remain firmly on the agenda.**

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- [Principles, pragmatism or both? A critical debate about EU peacemaking - CMI](#)

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- [How women's movements lead demands for democracy in the face of backlash and politicised religion | ODI: Think change](#)
- [Supporting democracy is about more than 'open societies'. Democracy also needs to deliver | ODI: Think change](#)
- [Why we need to rethink our understanding of state legitimacy to address fragility](#)

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- [Securitization and European Democracy Policy | Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#)

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Fondation Hironnelle:

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