# Strengthening Democratic Resilience in a Changing European and Transatlantic Security Landscape

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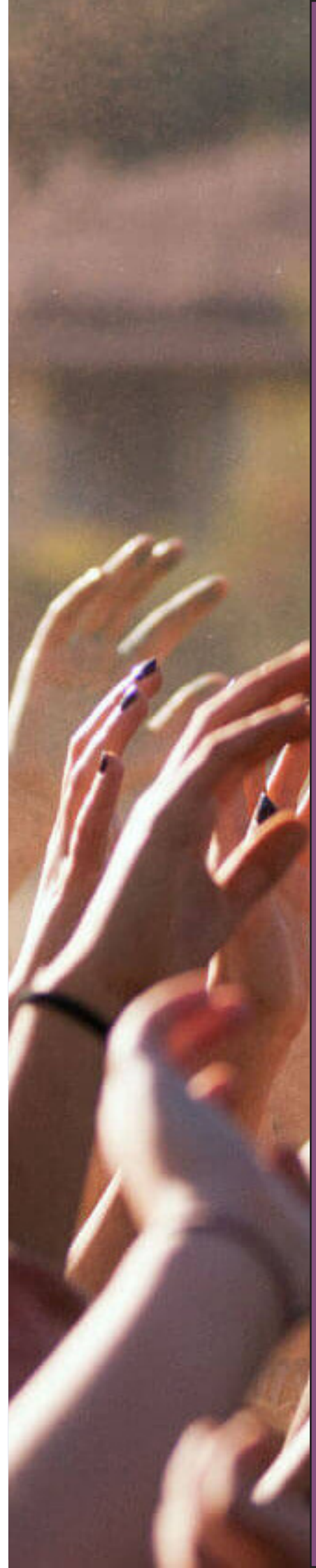
Issue Brief n.03/25

Democracy and
The New Security Agenda

# Contents

# 1. Executive Summary

Democracy is essential to European and transatlantic security. Yet today, it faces unprecedented threats from external authoritarian aggression and global democratic backsliding. Russia's invasion of Ukraine highlights the security risks posed by authoritarian regimes, while the coordinated efforts of Russia and China to manipulate elections, undermine institutions, and spread autocratic models present a systemic threat to democracy and global stability.

Democratic erosion within established democracies compounds these threats, driven by rising populism, institutional capture, weakened independent media, and heightened political polarization. The global democratic decline correlates closely with increased conflict, demonstrating the tangible security dividends of democracy: democratic states rarely engage in conflict with each other, form stronger alliances, and offer mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution.

Historically, strategic democracy support has proven highly effective, transforming Eastern Europe post-Cold War and delivering meaningful progress in contemporary cases such as Ukraine, Moldova, Senegal, and The Gambia. These examples highlight that consistent, locally-grounded democracy promotion fosters resilience against authoritarian interference, enhances governance capacity, and consolidates lasting peace.

To respond effectively to today's security threats and challenges, democracy support must be fully integrated into NATO and EU security strategies and budgets. Recommended actions include:

- **NATO**: Establish a "Democracy Defence Fund" representing 0.5% of NATO defence budgets, create a dedicated NATO Centre for Democratic Resilience, and expand the Building Integrity initiative.

- **EU**: Commit at least 1% of external funding to democratic governance and rapid-response support, protect ODA governance program budgets, and ensure democratic consolidation is central to all stabilization missions and security sector reform efforts.

Democracy support is not a competing priority but a core security function. For NATO and EU allies, investing in democratic resilience strengthens alliances, prevents conflict, reduces long-term defence costs, and limits the space for authoritarian actors to exploit instability. Treating it as a central pillar of collective defence will make transatlantic responses more effective, sustainable, and strategically coherent.

## 2. Introduction: A New Era, a Familiar Fight

Europe and its partners face a security environment more volatile and strategically contested than at any time since the Cold War. Russia's invasion of Ukraine made clear that territorial sovereignty cannot be taken for granted. But mounting cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and economic coercion by authoritarian states underscore how institutional integrity and public trust are also at risk. The threats are not only external. President Trump's repeated undermining of U.S. security support to Ukraine and commitments to NATO triggered a political reckoning, forcing a fundamental rethink of Europe's defence posture and planning.[1]

At the same time, nearly two decades of democratic backsliding have eroded confidence in the ability of democratic institutions—both at home and abroad—to withstand these pressures. Cross-national indices such as Polity, Freedom House, and the V-Dem project point to a sustained decline in democratic values.[2] According to V-Dem's 2025 report, the average person now lives under a regime no more democratic than in 1985.[3] By country averages, democracy has receded to 1996 levels, with core indicators deteriorating in more countries than they are improving. Freedom of expression has declined in 44 countries, and clean electoral processes have worsened in 25. Even long-standing democracies are experiencing democratic erosion.[4]

This global decline is driven by multiple, reinforcing trends: the resurgence of populism, backlash against globalization, rising identity-based conflict, the weakening of independent media, and the gradual capture of democratic institutions by entrenched elites.[5] These forces are amplified by a digital information ecosystem that enables disinformation, polarization, and manipulation. As scholars now

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[1] For the purposes of this analysis, "security" is understood in a broad sense, in terms of interstate coercion, but also hybrid threats such as cyber intrusions, political interference, and economic pressure. Barry Buzan offers a particularly useful definition, framing security as "the pursuit of freedom from threat and the ability of states and societies to maintain their independent identity and their functional integrity against forces of change which they see as hostile." Buzan, Barry (1991), "New Patterns of Global Security in the Twenty-first Century," *International Affairs 67*, no. 3: 432–33. A working definition of democracy can be drawn from Robert Dahl's classic formulation: democracy entails rule by the people, with effective participation, voting equality, informed understanding, and agenda-setting power for all adults subject to collective decisions. Dahl, Robert. A. (1989). *Democracy and its Critics*. Yale University Press.

[2] This was already the case 20 years ago. See: Large, Judith; Sisk, Timothy D. (2006). *Democracy, conflict and human security: pursuing peace in the 21st century*. Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

[3] Nord, Marina, *et al* (2025). *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.

[4] Carothers, Thomas; Press, Benjamin (2022). "Understanding and Responding to Global Democratic Backsliding". Working Paper. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

[5] This is supported by various studies, Large, Judith; Sisk, Timothy D. (2006) *Ibid*, on the resurgence of right-wing populism see: Khalil, Lydia (2022). *Rise of the Extreme Right. The New Global Extremism and the Threat to Democracy*. Penguin Books; Richard Youngs, *et al*. (2025), "European Democracy Support Annual Review 2024". Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. European Democracy Hub. https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/European%20Democracy%20Support%20Annual%20Review%202024-2.pdf

warn, democratic erosion is not only external, it is internal and structural. The institutions that underpin democratic governance, including courts, media, education systems, and civil services, are under sustained pressure.[6] Meanwhile, the information space that supports democratic decision-making is increasingly targeted by non-democratic states.[7] Authoritarian powers such as Russia and China actively seek to undermine democratic cohesion and transatlantic unity through election interference, media manipulation, and elite influence.[8]

The global retreat of democracy has been compounded by the withdrawal of U.S. leadership in this space. Under the Trump administration, deep cuts to U.S. democracy assistance led to the closure of overseas offices and the effective shutdown of key programs by USAID, IRI, NDI, and NED.[9] In many regions, this left civic actors exposed and democratic infrastructure weakened, creating openings that authoritarian states can exploit through strategic funding, information operations, and diplomatic influence.

Rearmament may be necessary to deter aggression, but it cannot come at the cost of the very principles Europe seeks to defend. Democracy is not only a political ideal, it is a structural condition for peace, resilience, and alliance cohesion. In this context, democracy protection and promotion must remain core components of both EU and NATO security strategies. If democracy is foundational to the transatlantic alliance, now is the moment to reaffirm it through forward-looking policy, programs, funding, and planning.

This brief argues that support for democracy must be embedded within defence budgets and security planning. It outlines strategic and operational steps to ensure this integration. Failure to act risks undermining NATO and EU credibility, weakening internal cohesion, and ceding influence to authoritarian challengers.

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[6] Smolar, Piotr (2025). « Jason Stanley, professeur à Yale : « Les piliers de la démocratie sont les écoles, les universités, les médias et le système judiciaire. Ils sont tous attaqués » ». *Le Monde.* https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2025/05/02/jason-stanley-professeur-a-yale-les-piliers-de-la-democratie-sont-les-ecoles-les-universites-les-medias-et-le-systeme-judiciaire-ils-sont-tous-attaques_6602149_3210.html

[7] Colomina, Carme; Sánchez Margalef, Héctor; Youngs, Richard (2021). "The impact of disinformation on democratic processes and human rights in the world". *Directorate General for External Policies of the Eiuropean Union.* https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU(2021)653635_EN.pdf. This has also been reiterated in Ursula von der Leyen's political guidelines, Ursula von der Leyen, "Europe's Choice: Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024- 2029," European Commission, July 18, 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf

[8] Applebaum, Anne (2024). *Autocracy, Inc.: The dictators who want to run the world.* Doubleday; MacDuffee Metzger, Megan (2023). "Authoritarian media abroad: the case of Russia and RT News". *Handbook on Democracy and Security.* Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

[9] The International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED)

## 3. Democracy as the Cornerstone of the Euro-Atlantic Security Architecture

NATO and the European Union are founded on democratic principles that carry both legal and strategic weight. NATO's founding charter defines the Alliance's purpose as safeguarding "the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on *the principles of democracy,* individual liberty and the rule of law".[10] Article 2 commits members to strengthening free institutions and promoting stability.[11] Democracy is not only a condition for NATO membership, it is central to its collective defence mission. NATO was created to defend territory and to protect democratic governance. That purpose remains essential today.

The European Union's treaties are equally clear: democracy is a foundational principle, not a policy preference. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union affirms that "the Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom*, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights.*"[12] Article 21 extends this to external action: the EU "shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation… democracy [and] the rule of law" in its international relations and shall "consolidate and support democracy" in the wider world.[13] The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy explicitly connects peace and security with democratic governance.

In practical terms, NATO's own institutions reflect these commitments. All member states must have civilian, democratic control of their militaries (a criterion for joining the Alliance), and NATO has supported democratic institution-building in partner countries through tools like the Building Integrity program and governance benchmarks in the Membership Action Plan.[14] The Alliance's 2022 Strategic Concept reaffirms its identity as a "community of values" confronting an "authoritarian challenge."[15] Similarly, the EU enforces democratic standards internally through rule-of-law mechanisms (e.g., Article 7 TEU) and externally through conditionality in agreements with third countries. The 2024–2029 European Council Strategic Agenda places democracy and defence at the heart of EU priorities.[16] While

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[10] North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), *The North Atlantic Treaty*, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm.
[11] *Ibid*.
[12] European Union (2012). *Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union,* OJ C 326, 26.10.2012, p. 13–45. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF
[13] *Ibid*, p. 28-29. 21.1; 21.2.
[14] NATO. (2025). *Building Integrity*. North Atlantic Treaty Organization. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_68368.htm
[15] NATO. (2023). *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*. North Atlantic Treaty Organization. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_210907.htm
[16] Drachenberg, Ralf (2024). "Setting the European Political Priorities for 2024-2029," *European Parliamentary Research Service*, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762863/EPRS_BRI(2024)762863_EN.pdf.

enforcement of these principles is sometimes inconsistent, the treaties provide a clear basis for integrating democracy support into security policy.

This commitment has delivered results. Over seven decades, NATO and the EU have reshaped Europe's political order, not just by deterring conflict, but by expanding and consolidating democracy.[17] NATO's enlargement process incentivized democratic reform and civilian control of the military; EU accession criteria and instruments helped steer transitions in Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe.[18] Its "democracy clause" and targeted funding instruments reflect a conviction that democratic governance is central to peace, stability, and development.[19] Together, NATO and the EU have used the leverage of security to promote democracy very effectively.

## 4. Rising Authoritarianism and Democratic Backsliding

NATO and the EU face a global landscape increasingly shaped by authoritarian powers actively working to undermine democracy and the post–Cold War order. Russia and China have grown more coordinated in challenging liberal norms, not only through military build-up, but through what Anne Applebaum calls "Autocracy, Inc."[20] These regimes learn from one another, share tactics, and support each other's efforts to suppress dissent, weaken democratic institutions, and project authoritarian models abroad. China exports surveillance tools and political control technologies; Russia offers disinformation playbooks and private military support. They collaborate in multilateral forums to block human rights initiatives and jointly promote a narrative that autocratic rule is more efficient than liberal democracy.[21]

From legal advisors who help weaken constitutional checks, to hybrid warfare including cyberattacks and election interference, these regimes act as a mutual reinforcement system.[22] Their coordinated efforts amplify the threat facing democracies globally. Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, enabled by Russia's lack of democratic checks and balances, is the most extreme example. China's growing

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[17] Person, Robert; McFaul, Michael (2024). "Why NATO Is More Than Democracy's Best Defense". *Journal of Democracy*. https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-nato-is-more-than-democracys-best-defense/

[18] *Ibid*.

[19] Slovakia, for example, was denied entry in the 1990s due to democratic backsliding and admitted only after enacting reforms. Cardwell, Paul James (2017). "Explaining the EU's legal obligation for democracy promotion: The case of the EU-Turkey relationship". *European Papers: A Journal on Law and Integration*, 2(3), 863–886. https://www.europeanpapers.eu/es/system/files/pdf_version/EP_eJ_2017_3_8_Article_Paul_James_Cardwell_00180.pdf

[20] Applebaum, Anne (2024). *Ibid.*

[21] Cottiero, Christina (2024). "Understanding and Interrupting Authoritarian Collaboration: Domestic Opponents." *International Foundation for Electoral Systems*. https://www.ifes.org/understanding-and-interrupting-authoritarian-collaboration/domestic-opponents

[22] Healey, John; Braw, Elisabeth (2023). "The Need for a Democratic Resilience Centre", Commentary, *RUSI*. https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/need-for-democratic-resilience-centre

belligerence, from the South China Sea to economic coercion campaigns, follows a similar pattern. Western strategists now define the Russia–China partnership as a "systemic challenge" to the democratic order.[23]

Their influence is not limited to great-power rivalries. Autocracies also exploit weak governance in other countries to advance their strategic aims, often worsening conflicts. In regions like the Middle East and Africa, Russia and China have backed authoritarian leaders or militias (e.g., Wagner Group in Mali, Russian support for Syria's Assad) to gain footholds, typically aggravating violence and human rights abuses. Where democracy falters, Moscow and Beijing see opportunities. Recent coups in the Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger) illustrate this interplay. Military juntas seized power citing security failures, then pivoted to expel Western missions and invite Russian assistance (including Wagner mercenaries), while denouncing regional organizations for insisting on democracy.[24] The juntas explicitly argued that "adherence to democratic ideals" had been prioritized over urgent security needs, and used that to justify realigning with authoritarian partners.[25] The outcome has been more regional instability: migration and displacement has increased, terrorist attacks in the Sahel have not abated, and Western influence to promote good governance has plummeted, feeding a cycle of ongoing and future conflict. When democratic governance collapses, authoritarian powers are ready to fill the vacuum, often to the detriment of long-term (Western) security interests.[26]

Even long-established democracies have faced internal strains. The United States, guarantor of European security, experienced a democratic crisis with the January 6, 2021 Capitol attack and continues to grapple with extreme polarization and worrying authoritarian tendencies.[27] European officials have repeatedly voiced uncertainty about the U.S. commitment, especially when isolationist or anti-NATO sentiments gain political ground. One senior official likened a sudden U.S. policy reversal to a strategic shock on par with a nuclear strike.[28] Even the perception of democratic dysfunction in a major ally creates instability, fuelling calls for greater Europeans strategic autonomy. Strengthening democratic

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[23] Lindley-French, Julian (Chair); The Alphen Group. (2022). *The TAG NATO Shadow Strategic Concept 2022: Preserving Peace, Protecting People*. A Report by The Alphen Group (TAG) for the Secretary General on the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept. https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/TAG%20-%20NATO%20Strategic%20Concept%20-%20NONPRINT.pdf

[24] Siegle, Joseph (2023). "Intervening to Undermine Democracy in Africa: Russia's Playbook for Influence". *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*. https://africacenter.org/spotlight/intervening-to-undermine-democracy-in-africa-russias-playbook-for-influence/ ; Ramani, Samuel (2023). *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power or Bellicose Pretender*. Oxford University Press, 455 p.

[25] Debenham, Catherine (2024). "Democracy vs. Security: The Sahel's Geopolitical Realignment". *Vision of Humanity*. https://www.visionofhumanity.org/democracy-vs-security-the-sahels-geopolitical-realignment/

[26] *Ibid*.

[27] Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way (2025). "The Path to American Authoritarianism: What Comes After Democratic Breakdown." *Foreign Affairs*. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/path-american-authoritarianism-trump

[28] Spatafora, Giuseppe (2025). "The Trump card: What could US abandonment of Europe look like?". *European Union Institute for Security Studies*. https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/trump-card-what-could-us-abandonment-europe-look

resilience within the transatlantic alliance and across Europe is essential to ensuring dependable security cooperation and is part of sustaining a robust and reliable security alliance.[29]

At the same time, there remains strong societal demand for more accountable, inclusive governance, even in authoritarian or hybrid regimes. From Mongolia to Bangladesh, civic actors continue to push for democratic norms, even under repression. These signals challenge the notion that autocracy is ascendant by default. Rather, they point to contested political spaces where external support still matters. To be effective, democracy support must be able to sustain civic space under pressure and move quickly when political openings emerge.[30]

This shifting global landscape also creates an opportunity—particularly for Europe and partners in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs)—to lead in redefining democracy promotion. Rather than defaulting to the U.S. "national interest" model, which often ties democracy assistance to security imperatives, a new approach can take shape: one that is regionally grounded, inclusive, and less militarized. As Annika Silva-Leander notes, LMICs are playing a growing role in shaping democracy agendas at international forums. Any renewed strategy for global democracy support must reflect this multipolar reality and treat democracy not simply as a foreign policy tool, but as a foundational element of long-term stability.[31]

## 5. Democracy's Security Dividends

Democratic nations have a well-established track record of peaceful and cooperative relations. *Democratic peace theory*, widely regarded as the closest thing to a law in international relations, holds that democracies almost never go to war with one another.[32] This pattern has endured across both time and geography, confirmed by decades of scholarly research and historical observation. In parallel, *democratic alliance theory* finds that democracies tend to form stronger, more resilient security partnerships than any alternative. These alliances are grounded not only in shared interests but in

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[29] Pudussery, Jessica; Gulrajani, Nilima (2025). "Aid and defence: a data story of two global targets". *ODI Global*. Online: https://odi.org/en/insights/aid-and-defence-a-data-story-of-two-global-targets/

[30] Interview with Timothy Sisk, June 6, 2025

[31] Silva-Leander, Annika (2024). "Who's defending democracy at the UN General Assembly? Unpacking the rhetoric and debunking myths," *News, International IDEA*: https://www.idea.int/news/whos-defending-democracy-un-general-assembly-unpacking-rhetoric-and-debunking-myths?utm.

[32] Russett, Bruce (1993). *Grasping the Democratic Peace*, Princeton University Press; Doyle, Michael (2024). "Why They Don't Fight. The Surprising Endurance of the Democratic Peace". *Foreign Affairs*. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/why-they-dont-fight-doyle#:~:text=Yet%20the%20proliferation%20of%20wars,The%20world%2C%20then

common institutions, transparency, and values; factors that dramatically reduce the risk of internal defection, miscalculation, or strategic surprise. Empirical evidence strongly supports both theories.[33]

Because democratic peace theory is one of the most empirically robust findings in international relations, scholarship has focused not only on whether it holds, but why.[34] Democracies are complex systems, and while research has explored the individual components that contribute to democratic peace, no fixed formula or hierarchy of elements exists. Yet several core features consistently emerge as important to understanding how democratic governance reduces the likelihood of conflict. A core explanation lies in how democratic leaders are socialized: they emerge from domestic systems that institutionalize compromise, protect dissent, and resolve political conflict through negotiation rather than coercion.[35] These habits carry over into international behaviour, particularly in relations with other democracies, where leaders can reasonably expect their counterparts to be operating under the same constraints and norms.[36] This mutual expectation reduces the risk of escalation and makes peaceful dispute resolution more likely. Institutional checks, such as parliamentary approval for war, a free press, and judicial review, also increase the domestic political costs of aggression, making alliance defection or unilateral escalation less likely. These dynamics explain why democratic alliances such as NATO and the EU have proven remarkably cohesive, even under pressure.

Beyond inter-state relations, democracy serves as a tool of conflict prevention in deeply divided societies. As Anna K Jarstad and Timothy D. Sisk have noted, post-war democratization in countries such as South Africa and East Timor replaced armed struggle with structured political competition. In each case, democracy created a system in which former enemies could pursue their interests without fear that political losses would lead to exclusion or persecution. Even in fragile contexts, where risks of backsliding are real, no alternative system has more consistently enabled peaceful power-sharing and long-term security and stabilization.[37]

While democracy has repeatedly demonstrated its role in promoting peace and stability, its erosion appears to coincide with the opposite dynamic: rising conflict. Strikingly, the global increase in armed conflicts since 2008-2009 closely mirrors the timeline of democratic backsliding observed worldwide. According to data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, the number of violent conflicts, especially

[33] Deudney, Daniel;Ikenberry, John (1999), "The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order," *Review of International Studies.*

[34] Halperin, Morton; Siegle, Joe; Weinstein, Michael (2010). *The Democracy Advantage How Democracies Promote Prosperity and Peace.* Routledge. 312 p.

[35] Kinsella, David; Rousseau, David L (2008). "Democracy and Conflict Resolution," in Bercovitch, Jacob; *et al*. (eds). *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, 475–91. United Kingdom: SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857024701.n25.

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] Jarstad, Anna K.; Sisk, Timothy D. (2008). *War-to-Democracy Transitions: Dilemmas of Peacebuilding.* Cambridge University Press.

civil and internationalized civil wars, has sharply increased since that period.[38] At the same time, global measures of democratic performance, as tracked in International IDEA's *Global State of Democracy Reports*, have consistently declined since 2008, marking the end of a long democratic expansion.[39] While correlation is not causation, the parallel trends are difficult to ignore. The erosion of democratic norms and institutions undermines conflict resolution mechanisms, erodes public trust, and often empowers authoritarian actors who benefit from instability. These dynamics can exacerbate social fractures, fuel polarization, and make violent escalation more likely. Recognizing this pattern reinforces a key insight: advancing democracy yields tangible security dividends, while democratic decline poses long-term risks to peace and stability. Understanding this dual reality—of democracy as both a source of stability and a potential fault line when undermined—is critical. It is equally important to examine how *democracy promotion* has worked in practice, and what approaches have proven most effective in sustaining democratic gains in diverse and challenging contexts.

## 6. Effective Democracy Support in Practice

### a. Historical lessons

Since the Cold War, democracy has been central to European strategic thinking. One of its clearest success stories is the democratic transformation of Central and Eastern Europe after 1989.

This transformation was rooted in a broad and forward-looking understanding of security. The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE)—the precursor of today's OSCE—defined security not only in military terms, but also through political rights, human dignity, and freedom of expression. These commitments became powerful normative tools that undermined the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes unable to meet them. Stability does not emerge from deterrence alone; it is rooted in the legitimacy of institutions, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and the trust of citizens in their leaders and systems.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, this approach was institutionalized.[40] With sustained support from Western partners, many formerly communist states across the region transitioned to consolidated

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[38] See the Uppsala database https://ucdp.uu.se/

[39] See, for example, the chart on page 13 of IDEA's *Global State of Democracy Report 2024,* https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/sites/default/files/2024-09/the-global-state-of-democracy-2024-strengthening-legitimacy-elections.pdf

[40] Person, Robert; McFaul, Michael (2024). "Why NATO Is More Than Democracy's Best Defense". *Journal of Democracy*. Online: https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-nato-is-more-than-democracys-best-defense/. The authors argue that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, many predicted NATO's demise, but the alliance instead proved essential to expanding democracy and securing a post–Cold War peace in Europe that defied realist expectations.

democracies. Key support instruments included the 1989 U.S. Support for East European Democracy Act,[41] which provided funding for democratic institution-building, and the European Union's own accession framework, which tied political and economic reform to membership incentives.[42]

The 1990 Copenhagen Document of the CSCE/OSCE further cemented democracy, rule of law, and media freedom as foundations not only of good governance, but also of lasting peace. The subsequent Charter of Paris established concrete mechanisms to uphold these values, including the Conflict Prevention Centre in Vienna and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in Warsaw, and the office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities in the Hague. These tools supported civil society development, judicial independence, free media, anti-corruption bodies, and competitive elections.

The results were transformative. States such as Poland, Hungary (initially), the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and the Baltic countries underwent rapid democratic consolidation in the 1990s and early 2000s. They not only transitioned from authoritarianism but became full members of both the EU and NATO, fundamentally reshaping the security architecture of Europe.

EU conditionality was especially effective in the Baltic states. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania undertook wide-ranging governance reforms under EU guidance, including judicial restructuring, anti-corruption efforts, and electoral transparency. These efforts helped lift all three countries into the top ranks globally for government integrity and democratic performance. According to Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index, Estonia ranks 14th globally, ahead of France, the U.S., and Canada.[43] The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute consistently classifies them as liberal democracies, with high scores on rule of law, electoral integrity, and freedom of expression.[44]

These countries have translated democratic gains into credible defence commitments. Today, they are front-line NATO contributors, hosting enhanced forward presence battlegroups and committing more than 2% of GDP to defence.[45] Their democratic legitimacy and institutional capacity have made them

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[41] Support for East European Democracy (SEED) (1989). *Act of 1989*, H.R. 3402, 101st Cong. https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/house-bill/3402. USAID did a thorough evaluation of long-term outcomes in 2008, but it is no longer available following the dissolution by executive order of USAID.
[42] European Commission. (1997). *Agenda 2000: For a stronger and wider Union* (COM(97) 2000 final). Brussels. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:51997DC2000; See also the European Commission's summary of the document, *Agenda 2000: For a Stronger and Wider Union*, available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=legissum:l60001#:~:text=The%20Commission%20communication%20highlighted%20a,and%20to%20allow%20the%20accession
[43] Transparency International. (2024). *Corruption Perceptions Index 2024*. https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024
[44] https://www.v-dem.net/
[45] Countries like Poland have significantly increased their defence spending, with Poland becoming NATO's defence spending leader. Kateryna Kvasha (2025). ""Security, Europe!": Poland's Rise as NATO's Defense

dependable partners in regional security planning and collective deterrence. The experience of Eastern Europe demonstrates that, with sustained support and credible incentives, democracy assistance can not only build liberal institutions but also help anchor long-term regional stability.

### b. Contemporary examples

In West Africa, countries like Senegal and The Gambia also demonstrate the impact of long-term, targeted democracy support. Despite growing instability across the Sahel, and its own recent political turmoil, Senegal has remained a stable democracy in the region.[46] Decades of donor investment in its independent electoral commission, civic education, and media development, supported by partners including USAID, the EU, and UNDP, have contributed to peaceful transfers of power since 2000 and a robust culture of electoral competition and civil liberties.[47] In The Gambia, the fall of Yahya Jammeh in 2017 marked a turning point. In the aftermath, the EU co-hosted a donor conference that mobilized €1.45 billion to support the country's democratic transition.[48] Key initiatives, including justice sector reform, truth and reconciliation efforts, and a new constitutional process, implemented by actors like International IDEA, have enabled successive free elections and a return to civilian-led governance.[49] While The Gambia continues to face structural challenges, surveys by Afrobarometer and national civic groups show that democratic aspirations remain high, and reforms have created an institutional foundation for long-term consolidation.[50]

In Eastern Europe, Moldova offers a compelling recent example.[51] After electing a pro-reform government in 2020, the country launched aggressive anti-corruption and governance reforms with EU

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Spending Leader". *Wilson Center.* https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/security-europe-polands-rise-natos-defense-spending-leader

[46] Yabi, Gilles; Holman, Saskia. (2024). "Senegal: From constitutional crisis to democratic restoration". *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.* https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/04/senegal-from-constitutional-crisis-to-democratic-restoration?lang=en

[47] Press and information team of the Delegation to SENEGAL (2024). "The European Union launches electoral observation mission in Senegal". *Delegation of the European Union to Senegal.* https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/senegal/european-union-launches-electoral-observation-mission-senegal_en; Ahmed, Sami (2024). "International IDEA and Econec: Promoting peer learning and strengthening regional cooperation". *Idea.* https://www.idea.int/news/international-idea-and-econec-promoting-peer-learning-and-strengthening-regional-cooperation

[48] EEAS (2019). "A comprehensive overview of the new chapter of The Gambia-EU Cooperation". *European External Action Service.* https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/58850_en

[49] Webpage "*The Gambia*", International IDEA, https://www.idea.int/country/gambia

[50] Afrobarometer "Gambia", https://www.afrobarometer.org/countries/gambia/; Afrobarometer (2024). "Gambians show increasing support for democracy, but are dissatisfied with democratic governance". https://www.afrobarometer.org/articles/gambians-show-increasing-support-for-democracy-but-are-dissatisfied-with-democratic-governance/

[51] Minzarari, Dumitru, (2024), "The good, the bad, and the ugly of Moldova's recent elections," *Stockholm Center for Eastern European Studies,* https://sceeus.se/en/publications/the-bad-the-good-and-the-ugly-of-moldovas-recent-elections/ Between 2017 and 2022, Moldova has made notable progress across several dimensions of the Rule of Law. This democratic improvement is highlighted in International IDEA's *Global*

financial and technical support. In 2023, the *Varieties of Democracy* (V-Dem) project ranked Moldova among the world's top ten democratizing countries, highlighting marked improvements in electoral integrity, liberal institutions, and state capacity.[52] These reforms have also had strategic impact: Moldova has distanced itself from Russian influence and advanced its EU candidacy, enhancing both its internal resilience and regional security role.

Ukraine demonstrates how long-term democracy support builds institutional strength even under extreme conditions.[53] Since Russia's annexation of Crimea and the onset of armed conflict in 2014, Western donors have invested heavily in anti-corruption bodies, judicial reform, decentralization, and defence transparency. This included establishing the *National Anti-Corruption Bureau* (NABU) and *Prozorro*, an e-procurement system that ensures open access to public contracts. Both institutions have improved accountability and reduced reliance on oligarchic or patronage networks.[54] Despite the pressures of full-scale war, Ukraine has continued implementing reforms aligned with its EU candidacy, supported by the €50 billion EU Ukraine Facility (2024–2027). The fact that its government continues to function, conduct oversight, and tackle corruption, under wartime conditions is a testament to the resilience built through years of democratic institution-building. Ukraine has advanced anti-corruption reforms that now meet, or even exceed, OECD standards in key areas.[55]

Democracy support can be effective even in fragile, post-conflict or high-threat environments when it is consistent, locally grounded, and backed by sustained political and financial commitment. The benefits are both normative and strategic: stronger state resilience, greater legitimacy, reduced space for

*State of Democracy Report 2023*, particularly in the section on Europe, which emphasizes Moldova's broad-based gains. See International IDEA, *The Global State of Democracy 2023: The New Checks and Balances* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2023), 105–112, https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/sites/default/files/2024-02/the-global-state-of-democracy-2023-the-new-checks-and-balances.pdf.

[52] Coppedge, M., et al. (2023). *V-Dem democracy report 2023*. V-Dem Institute. https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf

[53] Since 2014, Ukraine has undertaken major democratic reforms – strengthening parliamentary and electoral processes, fighting corruption, and supporting civil society and media freedom – leading to measurable improvements in governance indicators, as can be shown in International IDEA (2022). "The Ukraine War and the Struggle to Defend Democracy in Europe and Beyond," *GSoD In Focus No. 12*, p. 8: IDEA's data shows dramatic improvements in key indicators, such as Absence of Corruption, Clean Elections, Media Integrity and Local Democracy, between 2014 and 2020. These efforts have been closely tied to the country's European integration agenda, including a constitutional commitment to EU and NATO membership and a deepening relationship between the Verkhovna Rada and the European Parliament. See also International IDEA (2022). "Supporting Ukraine's Democracy After the War," *GSoD In Focus No. 14*, https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/sites/default/files/2022-11/ukraine-war-struggle-to-defend-democracy-in-europe.pdf; https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/sites/default/files/2022-11/supporting-ukraines-democracy-after-the-war.pdf.

[54] OECD (2025). *OECD Integrity and Anti-Corruption Review of Ukraine*, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/7dbe965b-en.

[55] OECD (2025). *OECD Integrity and Anti-Corruption Review of Ukraine*, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/7dbe965b-en.

authoritarian influence, and a greater likelihood of sustaining democratic institutions all contribute to the strategic and security objectives of NATO and the EU.

# 7. Policy Recommendations

## a. Integrating Democracy into Security Strategy

1. **Make Democracy a Security Priority:** Democracy should be a strategic priority in national and collective security strategies, given that authoritarian interference now poses direct threats to transatlantic stability. Recent high-level reviews reflect this shift: NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept identifies "advancing authoritarianism" as a key threat to Alliance security, and the EU's 2022 Strategic Compass similarly warns that European security must be framed around a global "competition of governance systems."[56] Germany's 2023 National Security Strategy references defending democracy more than 30 times, and the UK's *Integrated Review Refresh 2023* bluntly concludes that intensifying systemic competition with autocracies is the dominant driver of today's volatile security environment.[57] Just as with military or cyber dangers, governments need deliberate, coordinated responses to counter foreign political interference, corruption, and institutional erosion. This means integrating democracy support and resilience-building measures into security planning and threat assessments, rather than treating them as separate concerns.

## b. Concrete funding and programming recommendations for NATO members:

1. The **new NATO spending target** will likely include a core military component and a separate category for defence-related investments, both pegged to GDP. Within this latter category, NATO allies should include a marker for democracy defence and promotion, including cybersecurity, countering foreign information manipulation and interference, and electoral risk management, but also support for media integrity, civic infrastructure, and democratic resilience in both member and partner countries. This approach would reflect the fact that democratic institutions are part of a nation's critical infrastructure, a designation already formally recognised in the United States. Establishing a dedicated "Democracy Defence Fund,"

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[56] Youngs, Richard (2024). "The Defensive Turn in European Democracy Support," *Carnegie Europe*, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/03/the-defensive-turn-in-european-democracy-support?center=middle-east&lang=en. Youngs also cautions, however, that the EU's defensive turn, while pragmatic, risks fostering a fatalistic mindset that overlooks democratic openings and conflates democracy support with geopolitical competition, potentially blurring objectives and weakening credibility.

[57] HM Government (2023). *Integrated Review Refresh 2023. Responding to a more contested and volatile world.* Https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/641d72f45155a2000c6ad5d5/11857435_NS_IR_Refresh_2023_Supply_AllPages_Revision_7_WEB_PDF.pdf

equivalent to 0.5 percent of overall defence spending, would create fiscal space for NATO allies to strengthen protections against foreign interference and support democratic governance as a core element of transatlantic security.

2. The **creation of a Centre for Democratic Resilience** is essential to move beyond the current fragmented, ad hoc approach to democracy.[58] Despite 18 formal calls from the NATO Parliamentary Assembly since 2019, NATO has yet to establish a dedicated entity to consolidate and coordinate its democracy-related work. Yet democracy touches nearly every aspect of NATO's mandate. Nothing this important should be left to scattered efforts across various units. A centre would provide exactly what is missing: dedicated staff, a mandate to coordinate, and the institutional memory to ensure long-term consistency and effectiveness. Institutional memory cannot be built outside an institution. A Centre for Democratic Resilience could function as a clearing house, tracking ongoing efforts, identifying relevant actors, connecting internal and external democracy expertise, and capturing lessons learned to inform future responses. It could maintain a central database, support planning and training, and reduce duplication across the Alliance. This would yield substantial gains in efficiency, coherence, and prevention, particularly as democratic vulnerabilities increasingly intersect with core security threats. Ukraine's eventual post-war election is a clear illustration of what's at stake: ensuring legitimacy in a disinformation-heavy environment, managing complex logistics, and navigating contested territory will require coordinated support.

3. **Expand NATO's Building Integrity and governance benchmarks:** NATO in 2025/26 could approve a more ambitious Building Integrity Action Plan for 2026–2030, with greater funding and staffing. This plan should aim to institutionalize Building Integrity across NATO exercises and missions (e.g., include anti-corruption advisors in NATO deployments and require Building Integrity evaluations in defence planning). Partners like Ukraine, Georgia, and Bosnia should get intensified Building Integrity assistance as part of preparing them for deeper security cooperation.[59]

## c. Concrete funding and programming recommendations for the EU:

1. **Adopt a democracy funding target in the EU:** In the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF 2028–2034), establish a clear target for spending on democracy and governance support globally. Experts have proposed that at least 1% of EU external assistance

[58] NATO Parliamentary Assembly. "Defending Democracies: A Blueprint for the Democratic Resilience Centre Within Nato". *Retrieved May 30, 2025*. https://publication.nato-pa.int/democraticresilience/centre/centre-for-democratic-resilience
[59] NATO (2025). *Building Integrity*. North Atlantic Treaty Organization. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_68368.htm

be devoted to democratic institutions, civil society, human rights, and free media.[60] Currently, democracy aid is relatively modest and hard to track. A 1% democracy aid commitment would mark a significant advance. It mirrors the way defence spending has explicit benchmarks (2% of GDP, etc.). For context, 1% of the EU's ~€100 billion external action budget would be €1 billion, a hefty boost to democracy programs (today only a fraction of that is spent as such).[61] This target should be accompanied by transparent accounting: the EU and member states must start publishing accurate, timely data on democracy aid. Currently figures are opaque and lagging. An EU democracy fund or a scaled-up European Endowment for Democracy could manage some of these resources flexibly. This commitment would ensure democracy support isn't forgotten in budgets, and create accountability (much like climate mainstreaming targets have done).[62]

2. **Protect and increase ODA for democratic governance:** Member states, in their national budgets and in the EU budget contributions, should resist further ODA cuts and ideally raise ODA back toward 0.7% GNI, with a focus on governance programs. The recent aid cuts announced to free up funds for defence and security represent short-term solutions only. The EU and likeminded donors could initiate a 'Democracy and Development Pledge' whereby increases in defence spending will be matched by a proportionate (but much smaller) increase in funding for development and democracy. For example, if a country raises defence by 0.5% of GDP, it commits to raise ODA by 0.05% of GNP to fund stabilization and governance. This creates a balanced security investment. At the very least, increased security spending should "do no harm:" do not finance weapons acquisitions by cancelling election observers. Going forward, European finance ministers should classify democratic assistance as high impact spending. A relatively small reallocation can maintain these programs, for instance, ODI notes that keeping aid flowing is feasible even as defence grows, since defence rises by percentage points of GDP whereas aid needs fractions of that.[63] In sum, locking in funding for democratic resilience support in parallel with defence spending increases will help to avoid a scenario where the military confrontation is won, but the governance war is lost.

3. **Scale up EU democracy instruments and rapid-response support for democratic openings and civic spaces at risk:** The EU should expand the reach and flexibility of its democracy support tools, such as the European Endowment for Democracy, and the EU's Neighbourhood,

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[60] Youngs, Richard (2024). *A call for democracy: Towards a European democracy support strategy*. European Endowment for Democracy (EED), https://www.democracyendowment.eu/assets/Publications/EED_A-Call-for-Democracy_2024_Publication_V3.1-FA-digital_compressed.pdf

[61] *ibid*

[62] *ibid*

[63] Pudussery, Jessica; Gulrajani, Nilima (2025). "Aid and defence: a data story of two global targets". *ODI Global*. Online: https://odi.org/en/insights/aid-and-defence-a-data-story-of-two-global-targets/

Development, and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI), to respond quickly to windows of democratic opportunity and to protect civic actors under threat. This includes creating a rapid-response funding mechanism to support media, civil society, and pro-democracy movements during crises, transitions, or backlash. These instruments should be treated as core components of the EU's geopolitical toolkit.

4. **Ensure long-term democratic consolidation is built into security and stabilization programming:** Security-focused EU and NATO interventions, such as stabilization missions, security sector reform etc. must be designed with a clear pathway to long-term democratic consolidation. This means integrating support for political participation, inclusive governance, and civilian oversight from the outset, not as an afterthought.

5. The EU should ensure **continued support for soft power interventions,** such as **local independent media, emotionally resonant creative content, and early-stage backing for pro-democracy leadership**. Existing instruments within the EEAS and Commission, including those under NDICI and StratCom, should maintain and expand funding for these efforts, particularly in relation to Russia and other authoritarian contexts.

## Conclusion

Democracy is a strategic imperative for European security. Tools like independent media, civic education, and civil society engagement must be treated as core elements of defence policy, not side-lined in shrinking development assistance budgets. Framing support for democratic resilience as a trade-off with military spending is a false dilemma. Abandoning value-based engagement fuels long-term instability, while sustained, locally grounded democratic support builds resilience and reduces conflict.

Effective democratic institutions also deliver measurable security gains. What is at stake is not only the defence of sovereign borders, but the institutional and civic infrastructure that underpins stability, accountability, and resistance to authoritarian influence. Protecting and promoting democracy must remain central to EU and NATO security strategies.

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