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Under Pressure: Security and Stability Related Challenges for Liberal Democracy in North-western Europe

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ABSTRACT

Liberal democracy in the world is under pressure. This article will specifically look at security and stability related challenges for liberal democracy in a specific region, namely North-western Europe. As will be shown, three distinct security and stability related challenges put pressure on liberal democracy in this region. Firstly, the struggle by states to provide security for their citizens in an era where the blurring of internal and external security leads to “new” security threats. Secondly, the decline of social cohesion in society, causing unrest and instability. Thirdly, the undermining of liberal democracy by the state. As will be shown, these challenges have an impact on the organizations working in the security domain as well, in particular the armed forces and the police. Paradoxically, efforts by governments to counter the security and stability related challenges could eventually lead to a declining stability of liberal democracy.

KEYWORDS

Liberal democracy; security; stability; armed forces

Introduction

This article is about liberal democracy in North-western Europe. At the time of writing, the coronavirus pandemic is still raging through the world and governments worldwide are taking measures to “flatten the curve”, in order to prevent their health systems to be overwhelmed, all the while trying to vaccinate as many citizens as possible in order to re-open society. These measures infringe on our civil liberties: lockdown measures aim to keep us at home, government apps monitor our movement in order to control the spread of the virus and law scholars in some countries complain that emergency measures have no sufficient basis in the law.¹ At the same time, governments rely on expert advice in determining policy and are hardly challenged in parliament – if it convenes at all – invoking an image of a technocracy, rather than a democracy.²

Is this just the consequence of the crisis we are living in, or is it a more visible sign of an underlying process, a gradual decline in liberal democracy? In recent years, many authors have pointed at the latter. In books with catchy

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titles such as “How democracies die”,³ “The people vs democracy”⁴ and “Rupture. The crisis of liberal democracy”⁵ they point to factors such as a malaise with mainstream political parties, a rise in populism, a decline in social cohesion, pressure on the rule of law, media rights and civil rights, fragmentation of state institutions and a declining trust of citizens in democratic government.

Several authoritative indices in recent years point in the same direction and show a decline in the quality and/or stability of liberal democracy in the western world.⁶ This article will focus specifically on a region that has a long tradition of liberal democracy and that scores in the upper region of these indices, namely North-western Europe.⁷ As will be shown, even in this region ample evidence of the decline in indicators measuring liberal democracy can be found.

How can this decline be explained? This article will focus on security and stability related challenges to liberal democracy in North-western Europe in the last 20 years. In the first part of the article, relevant literature will be examined for possible challenges, focusing on the blurring of internal and external security, declining cohesion and the role of the liberal-democratic state itself. In the second part of the article, the hypotheses following from the literature review will be further investigated in relevant databases focusing on liberal democracy, governance and stability. The last part of this article will focus on the implications of these developments for organizations working in the domain of security and stability, specifically the armed forces and the police. After all, if the security challenges change, an impact on organizations working in the security domain is to be expected, and this again may impact the stability of liberal democracy. I will show that these developments have in recent years led to a growing use of the armed forces in a domestic context. At the same time the militarization of the police, the constabularization of the armed forces and the growth of intermediary organizations in some countries, such as gendarmerie-type forces, have led to a blurring between the armed forces and the police. As will be shown, this may impact Civil-Military Relations in these countries as well. Paradoxically, efforts by governments to counter the security and stability related challenges could eventually lead to a declining stability of liberal democracy.

Methodology

This article is based on a literature review and an analysis of databases on (aspects of) liberal democracy, governance and stability. The article is part of a PhD project on the possible contribution of the armed forces to the stability of liberal democracy in North-western Europe. The project is based on qualitative explorative case study research, which is an appropriate research

method if the impetus for a project lies in broad questions on a social process over which the researcher has little or no control.⁸

Ideally, case studies rely on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion.⁹ Therefore, in this article a combination of literature review and an analysis of databases has been used. The purpose of the literature review is to identify hypotheses on the security and stability related challenges to liberal democracy. These hypotheses will then be further examined in quantitative data from databases on democracy, governance and stability.

The cases (Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden) were chosen for a combination of pragmatic and substantive reasons (similarities and differences between the countries involved, availability of contacts and documentation, etc.). It is important to keep in mind that the results of case study research cannot be generalized in the same fashion as could be done in extensive research.

The article focuses on the last 20 years, meaning that both the literature review and the database analysis will use data from this period. Before delving into the literature on security and stability related challenges, in the next section the main concept of this article, liberal democracy, will be defined.

Defining liberal democracy

Before delving into the literature and quantitative data, it is important to define the topic of study, liberal democracy, and to describe some recent developments concerning this concept. Liberal democracy is a contested concept. Its meaning has evolved over time and is looked at differently in different regions of the world. In this article I will use Mounk's definition, who states that:

- A *democracy* is a set of binding electoral institutions that effectively translates popular views into public policy.
- *Liberal* institutions effectively protect the rule of law and guarantee individual rights such as freedom of speech, worship, press, and association to all citizens (including ethnic and religious minorities).
- A *liberal democracy* is simply a political system that is both liberal and democratic – one that both protects individual rights and translates popular views into public policy.¹⁰

The term “liberal” as it is used in this article should not be confused with *liberalism*, which is a political ideology. As “liberal” is defined in Mounk's definition, it simply refers to institutions that protect the rule of law and guarantee individual rights.

After the Cold War, liberal democracy seemed to become the dominant regime form around the world. Francis Fukuyama in a famous essay spoke about the universalization of liberal democracy as the final form of human government and called this “The End of History”. Democratic consolidation was thought to be a one-way street and once liberal democracy would be achieved, the political system would be forever stable.¹¹ Foa has pointed at both the “intrinsic” (human desire for dignity and recognition) and “instrumental” (economic development and high standards of living) appeal of liberal democracy.¹²

However, as has been pointed out by many authors, Mounk and Fukuyama among them, “democracy” and “liberal” are not inseparable concepts and democratic consolidation does not seem to be a one-way street after all. It is possible to have regimes that are liberal but not democratic, for example Singapore and Hong Kong in the late 20th century. At the same time, some democratic regimes are not liberal. Some Eastern European states, Hungary and Poland in particular, are rapidly moving in that direction.¹³ Foa has shown that proving the instrumental advantages of liberal democracy has become more difficult with the faltering economic performance of liberal democracies on the one hand, and the rapidly rising living standards in various authoritarian regimes on the other hand.¹⁴ Authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China have adopted the Western economic model (capitalism), while rejecting its system of political and social freedoms, and have become increasingly successful.

Foa and Mounk have shown that the support for the democratic form of government and for liberal institutions is declining in western liberal democracies. Their research shows that millennials are a lot less convinced that it is essential to live in a democracy and a growing share of people would support “a strong leader” or “an authoritarian government” running their country.¹⁵ They conclude that the long-time assumption of political scientists that “democratic consolidation” is a one-way street may not be correct and that deconsolidation may take place when a sizable minority of citizens loses its belief in democracy. Mounk’s research shows that three big developments have influenced this trend: the decades long rise in living standards has come to a standstill, mass migration has changed societies and has led to part of society feeling threatened and resentful, and finally, mass communication means have become available to everyone, making it easier for more extreme views to make themselves heard.¹⁶

As will be shown in this paper, even in mature liberal democracies in North-western Europe, a certain deconsolidation is taking place.

Literature review: security and stability related challenges to liberal democracy

As stated in the introduction to this article, I expect that liberal democracy in North-western Europe is put under pressure (amongst other, non-security

related matters) by security and stability related challenges. These challenges may rise from the blurring of internal and external security and the rise of new security threats and from declining social cohesion in North-western European society. Finally, the state itself may play a role in the pressure on liberal democracy. In this section I will explore these possible challenges, by discussing the relevant literature and formulating hypotheses, focusing on developments in Europe in the past 20 years.

The blurring of internal and external security and the rise of new security threats

Several authors have concluded that since the end of the Cold War, there has been a blurring between internal security and external security. Before that period, and in fact since the birth of the modern nation state in the West, there was a clear distinction between the two, which in most liberal democracies also led to a clear distinction between the two main organizations responsible for security: the armed forces were responsible for external security (safeguarding the state and its population from external threats); the police were responsible for internal security (safeguarding the population from crime). This clear distinction has disappeared after the Cold War.

What is meant by this blurring of internal and external security? Firstly, there is a decline in traditional conflicts between states. At the same time, intra-state conflicts and failing states are on the rise.¹⁷ Since the end of the Cold War, regular interstate wars – characterized by states trying to defeat another state – have been increasingly replaced by states intervening in conflicts between or within other states, without their own territory being involved. These interventions are mainly aimed at controlling or directing that specific conflict, instead of at the conquest of territory. Peace building and stabilization replace war fighting as the main aim. Based on the thought that conflicts and security problems are often caused by economic and social problems, the concept of security is broadened to include human security, and intervening powers aim to stabilize the country involved.¹⁸ European states have played a big role in peace building and stabilization operations in the past 20 years, mainly in the Balkans, Afghanistan and the Middle East.

At the same time, the definition of internal security has changed as well. Traditionally, public order management and crime fighting were important elements of internal security. The main actors were police services and their opponents (individual criminals, crime groups, etc.) could be found in the territory of the state. These internal security threats have increasingly been replaced by transnational security threats coming from international organized crime, irregular migration, drugs trafficking, cyber threats and, as we have seen since last year, infectious diseases.¹⁹ These threats have in common that they cross borders, which makes it more difficult for a single state to

combat them. Within the European Union, the Schengen Agreement made traveling between participating member states a lot easier for those with good and those with bad intentions at the same time. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States have led to a growing awareness of the possible terrorist threat in western liberal democracies. Even though the number of victims from terrorist attacks is in fact lower than in earlier decades, the threat perception is quite different. States have been struggling to tackle these transnational security threats. In Europe, the large migration wave in 2015 and the terrorist attacks in the same period have been particularly influential in recent security policies.

At the same time, there are signs that European liberal democracies are being undermined by international organized crime, which is increasingly challenging government authorities and using violence amongst each other and against the government.²⁰ Lam, Van der Wal and Kop call this the “creeping poison” that is undermining the foundations of the constitutional state. Research in the Netherlands has shown that criminal organizations are trying to gain political influence by using figureheads in city councils and infiltrating (local) government.²¹ In recent years we have seen violent payoffs, violence against first responders, threats against politicians and public officials and against certain professions, such as journalists, lawyers and judges. A recent low in the Netherlands was the murder of a lawyer who defended a crown witness in an organized crime trial.

Finally, Western liberal democracies have to deal with threats in the cyber domain, coming from both state- and non-state actors. There have been various incidents over the past years that illustrate the use of cyber capabilities for purposes of manipulation, sabotage and disinformation. One can think of the hacking of the Democratic National Committee in the United States, the hacking attack at the OPCW in 2018 and the hacking attack in Finland in October 2020, where 40.000 medical records were stolen from a psychotherapy center.²² The potential repercussions are great. In its recent report, Europol points at major developments in cybercrime, such as ransomware, DDoS attacks, payment fraud and criminal abuse of the Darkweb.²³ Cyber sabotage of critical infrastructure can lead to physical and ecological damage, casualties and social unrest.²⁴ A new phenomenon is “trolling”. It involves creating confusion and spreading panic or hate by means of disinformation disseminated by “real” users on social media. Some actors have professionalized this tactic by creating troll factories in which individuals spend their days posting on social media. Troll factories as part of a campaign of manipulation can compromise political and social stability. Disinformation campaigns can be particularly successful in a society where (parts of) the population distrusts government, the traditional media and “the establishment” in generally. As we will see in the next section, this is increasingly the case in our area of interest. Disinformation campaigns aim to exploit this distrust and thereby have the

potential to undermine social cohesion and ultimately the functioning of the democratic legal order.²⁵

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned analysis of security-related problems, there is another side to this story. Research in the Netherlands shows that in 2019, compared with 2012, 30% less citizens have become a victim of a “traditional” crime such as a robbery, theft, assault and vandalism. At the same time, cybercrime is on the rise and the same goes for drug crimes and traffic crimes. The same research shows that citizens are less likely to report a crime to the police.²⁶ If “new” security threats are on the rise, while “old” security threats are declining, what does this say about the level of security in a society? That depends on the value attached to various security threats and thereby almost becomes an ideological question, that will not be answered in this article. However, it is good to realize that there is a nuance to this security-related challenge.

Based on this literature review on the blurring of internal and external security, my first hypothesis is that states are increasingly struggling to provide security for their citizens in an era where the blurring of internal and external security leads to “new” security threats.

Declining social cohesion and social unrest

As several authors have noted, inequalities in liberal democracies are rising and the middle class is slowly disappearing.²⁷ Political theorists have always believed that stable democracy rests on a broad middle class and that societies with extremes of wealth and poverty are susceptible to authoritarian government or populist revolution.²⁸ The growing gap between the elite and the masses can in that sense be seen as undermining our society.²⁹ Other authors point out that changing social structures, individualization and the creation of a network society have caused insecurity, unease and resistance, mainly with population groups on the lower end of the economic spectrum.³⁰ Rising inequalities undermine social cohesion,³¹ as does the rise in fraud with government allowances, as has been shown by the same authors. In fact, this can be seen as a variety of undermining the government as well.

People who feel more socially marginal – because they lack strong attachment to the normative order, social engagement, or a sense of social respect – are more likely to be alienated from mainstream politics and to support radical parties. These feelings can follow for example from the loss of economic position or from the perception that cultural elites no longer attach values to one’s views.³² This leads to identity politics and a rise of populism and has the risk of polarizing society. The main characteristic of populism is in fact that society is separated in two distinct groups, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” and argues that politics should be an expression of the will of the people.³³

Social polarization can be exacerbated by foreign interference, often attempted at influencing members of a country's diaspora, so-called "long arm" tactics. However, foreign interference can go much further than that. A recent report by the Dutch government states:

'These are systematic, deliberate and in many cases covert activities on the part of state and non-state actors, which can compromise, weaken, destabilize, undermine or sabotage democracy, the rule of law and the government that bears responsibility for upholding these structures, as a result of the objectives being pursued, the means used or the eventual effect. They also include activities that, on account of the goals being pursued, the tactics used or the resulting effects, cause serious harm to necessary social cohesion by undermining trust and solidarity among members of the public. In many cases this does not lead to direct, acute upheaval, but over the long term it can cause serious disruption to and dysfunction in the democratic legal order and open society.'³⁴

What are the consequences of the above, related to security and the stability of liberal democracy? Several western liberal societies have seen outbursts of civil unrest in recent years. One can think of the "gilets jaunes" in France, protesting farmers in the Netherlands, the unrest in the United States after the last presidential elections and rising resistance and rioting in several countries against government measures in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

In some cities parallel societies are emerging of groups of people that pull back from society, organize themselves and their own security. These areas are attractive for criminal organizations and as a consequence, criminal subcultures can emerge, where a neighborhood is effectively run by a criminal organization.³⁵ There are indications in the Netherlands that bars and restaurants, closed for a long time due to COVID-19 lockdown measures, receive financial support from organized crime organizations.³⁶ In extreme cases, zones are being created where the government has lost (most of) its authority, as has been stated about the banlieues of Paris and certain neighborhoods of Swedish cities. On the other side of the spectrum, the wealthy elite move to gated communities, guarded by all sorts of technology and private security guards.

The work of Risse on "limited statehood" is especially relevant to these developments. Limited statehood in his words concerns those areas in a country in which central authorities lack the ability to implement and enforce rules and decisions and/or in which the legitimate monopoly over the means of violence is lacking. In other words, there is no full domestic sovereignty. In these areas, collective goods and services may be provided by a variety of actors, including companies, NGO's or criminal organizations. Therefore, governance (the provision of rules and regulations as well as of public goods and services) does not necessarily depend on the existence of functioning state institutions. Though it mainly impacts non-Western countries, elements of limited statehood can be found in European liberal democracies as well.³⁷

Based on this section, my second hypothesis is that the declining social cohesion in North-western European societies, leading to instability and social unrest, is putting pressure on liberal democracy.

Undermining of liberal democracy by the state

In recent years, governments in the West have taken several measures that can be seen as undermining liberal democracy. For example, De Massol de Rebetz and Van der Woude have looked at the use of criminal and administrative law in the fight against terrorism and conclude that in France, the state of emergency after the 2016 terrorist attacks was only terminated when new legislation was in place, incorporating state of emergency measures.³⁸ Van der Woude has also studied Dutch counter-terrorism legislation and concludes that legislative procedure with regard to criminal legislation has been greatly affected by the dynamics of the culture of control, leading to a permanent state of exception. In her opinion, a liberal democracy can only flourish if its government is willing to be bound by the rule of law and commits to the legislative protection of individual's rights.³⁹

In other research by Van der Woude on the performance of mobile border checks on the land borders with Germany and Belgium by the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee, she points at the risk of ethnic profiling and of a blurring between the use of immigration law and criminal law, and thereby at the risk of a misuse of powers by the organization. This may affect the perceived procedural justice of state practices in the Netherlands.⁴⁰

Mythen, Walklate and Khan have studied counter-terrorism measures in the UK and conclude that they have led to partial securities where some groups are protected, and others are not. They call this the risk/security contradiction: people seen as a risk by the government feel themselves at risk from that government.⁴¹ Parmar has studied counter-terrorism measures in the UK as well and concludes that they are based on the concept of preemption, which is a military based doctrine. In his opinion, feelings of measures being unfair may lead to radicalization, making the measures counterproductive.⁴²

Pavone, Santiago Gomez and Jacquet-Chifelle have studied the concept of security and conclude that it has shifted to preemptive security. In an earlier edition of this journal, they point at the trade-off approach where any increase in security will lead to a reduction in civil liberties, threatening the roots of democracy. They state that security and liberty are not mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive of our Western democratic societies.⁴³

Richard talks about the intelligence dilemma: security knowledge and technology that is meant to protect liberal democracy against violence seriously risks undermining it by infringing on civil liberties.⁴⁴ In a related matter Hodgson, on the basis of a study of state responses to terrorism in the UK and France, concludes that current political discourse

contrasts liberty with security. In her opinion, this contrast is misleading: diminishing liberty also diminishes our security in relation to the state, by allowing for greater executive power. At the same time, it is questionable whether or not it increases our security against the threat of terrorism.⁴⁵ Finally, Jackson, in his critical discourse analysis of the “war on terror” published in an earlier issue of this journal, has concluded that the language and the practice of the war on terror poses several challenges to the democratic state, including destabilizing the moral community, weakening democratic values and civic culture and undermining the legitimacy of democratic institutions.⁴⁶

In fact, this change in language that Jackson sees, does not stand alone. Where crime and war were once two very distinct phenomena, we now regularly speak of the “war on drugs” and the “war on terror”.⁴⁷ Last year, French president Macron announced that France is at war with the coronavirus.⁴⁸ The use of this language has an effect in itself.⁴⁹ As quoted by Stevenson, American general Richard Myers has said: “If you call it a war, then you think of people in uniform as being the solution”.⁵⁰ A related phenomenon is that of securitization. Securitization theory states that security threats are socially constructed and come into being through a discursive process that dramatizes and prioritizes them. Bigo has shown the importance of securitizing practices in addition to discourse.⁵¹ Balzacq in this respect talks about “tools of securitization”, which he defines as activities that by their intrinsic qualities convey the idea to those that observe them that the issue that they are tackling is a security threat.⁵² This could for example be the case when activities that have traditionally been implemented to tackle security issues and/or that can be seen as extraordinary are used on this specific issue. Léonard applies this theory to Frontex and comes to the conclusion that all main Frontex activities can be seen as securitizing activities, thereby confirming her hypothesis that the issue of migration in Europe has been securitized.⁵³ The change in discourse and the phenomenon of securitization are of course related to the blurring of internal and external security that has been described before. As will be shown at the end of this article, it has implications for the actors in the security domain as well.

Based on this section, my third hypothesis is that the state itself is undermining liberal democracy in North-western Europe.

To conclude, this section has generated three hypotheses on security and stability related challenges to liberal democracy from the relevant literature. In the next section, the hypotheses will be tested in several databases on liberal democracy, stability and governance, followed by a section where the results from both the literature review and the database analysis are combined. The last section will discuss the implications for the organizations working in the security domain.

Liberal democracy under pressure: the data

The previous section contained a literature review, resulting in three hypotheses concerning security and stability related challenges for liberal democracy. In this section, relevant databases will be investigated for the same purpose. To what extent do they confirm or negate our three hypotheses?

Importance of democracy: world values survey

Before delving into various databases concerning liberal democracy and different aspects of governance, the World Values Survey provides some interesting data concerning support for democracy. As has been shown by Foa and Mounk for several liberal democracies across the globe and described earlier in this article, the percentage of respondents stating it is essential to live in a democracy is much lower for younger respondents than for older respondents.⁵⁴ This may very well indicate a declining popular support for democracy, although a different option would be that support for democracy grows with age.

The data for Finland, The Netherlands and Sweden can be found in [Figure 1](#) and confirm Foa and Mounk's findings for these three countries.⁵⁵

As is clear from these data, a relatively small percentage of young people finds it absolutely important to live in a democracy. For the Netherlands and Finland, it's not even a majority. The percentage rises with age. The difference between the countries is visible as well, with Sweden showing the most support for democracy.

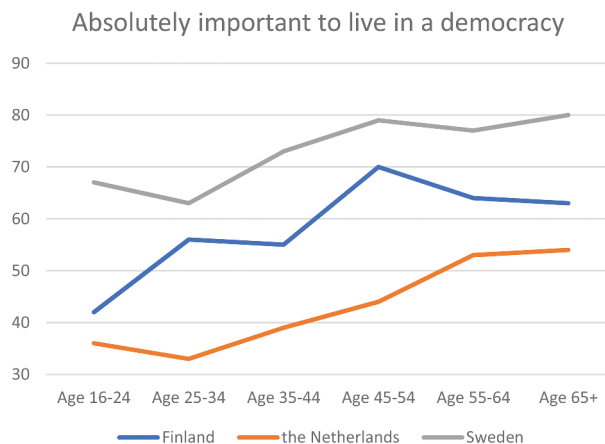


Figure 1. Importance of democracy by age intervals. Percentage of respondents rating it “absolutely important” (a rating of 10 on a 10-point scale) to “live in a country that is governed democratically” in the World Values Survey, wave 2017–2020.

Liberal democracy: V-Dem and IDEA

As we have seen in the previous section, the support for democracy seems to be lower in younger generations than in older generations. This section will focus on liberal democracy itself: based on relevant databases, is liberal democracy declining? As has been stated before, focus lies on the last 20 years.

Two high standard databases⁵⁶ on liberal democracy have been developed by V-Dem Institute and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance:

- The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, an intergovernmental organization with 34 member states, has developed the Global State of Democracy Indices, that measure democratic performance for 158 countries. The conceptual framework consists of five elements: representative government, fundamental rights, checks on government, impartial administration and participatory engagement.⁵⁷
- The V-Dem Institute is an independent research institute based at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. It produces a yearly report on democracy and uses a Liberal Democracy Index to measure the quality of democracy. It aggregates two other indices, namely the Electoral Democracy Index (measuring the democratic part of liberal democracy) and the Liberal Component Index (measuring civil liberties, rule of law and constraints on the executive by the judiciary and legislative).⁵⁸

The IDEA and V-Dem data for Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden can be found in [Figure 2](#).⁵⁹

For V-Dem, only the Liberal Democracy Index itself is presented in [Figure 2](#). For IDEA, some other indicators from their conceptual framework have been included, as these may shed additional light on the hypotheses. It is clear from the data that in all three countries, liberal democracy is under pressure. For Finland, all indicators except “representative government” are declining in the last 10 years. The decline in civil liberties is particularly strong, as is the decline in impartial administration in the last 10 years. This may indicate evidence for our third hypothesis concerning the undermining of liberal democracy by the government. For the Netherlands, the same indicators stand out, especially in the last 10 years. Sweden in general scores higher than the other two countries, but has a sharp decline in fundamental rights, civil liberties, as well as absence of corruption. The decline in impartial administration and representative government indicates that part of the population does not feel adequately represented or treated fairly, which could provide evidence for the second hypothesis.

In their last reports, both V-Dem and IDEA shed some extra light on these data. In its 2020 yearly report, the V-Dem Institute notes a global decline in

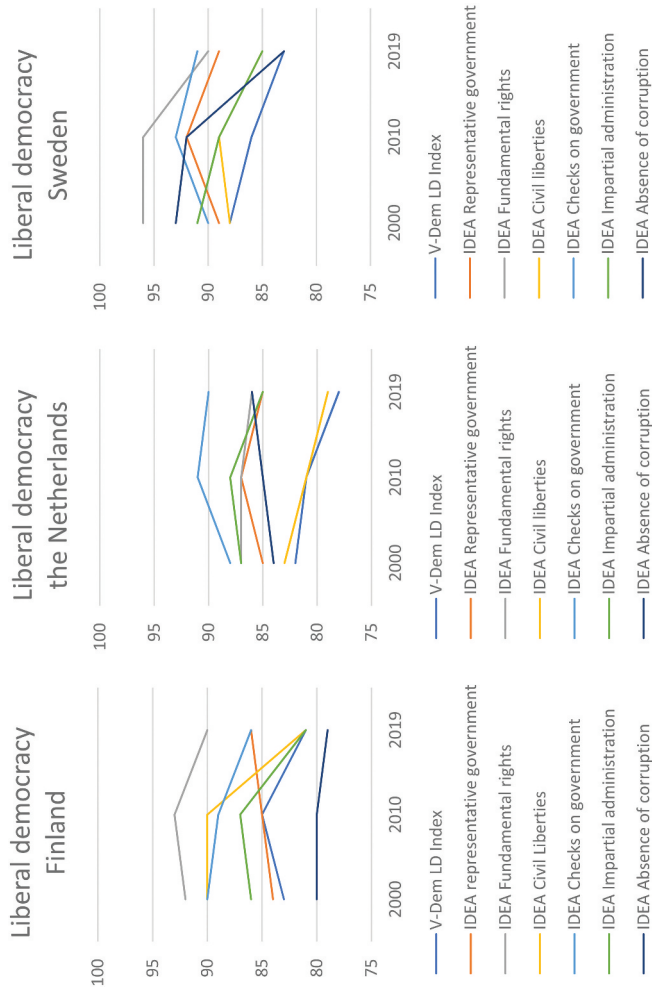


Figure 2. Liberal democracy in Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden.

liberal democratic institutions: for the first time since 2001, the world has more autocracies than democracies. According to V-Dem, Hungary is Europe's first non-democratic member state.⁶⁰

In its yearly report "The Global State of Democracy 2019: Addressing the Ills, Reviving the Promise" IDEA concludes that a significant decline in quality affects old and new democracies alike.⁶¹ Older democracies are struggling to guarantee equitable and sustainable economic and social development. As a consequence, many high-quality democracies are confronted with populist challengers, which combine exclusionary claims with a disregard for democratic principles. IDEA links the rise of populism to disenchantment with political actors, a perceived inability of political systems to address core societal and economic problems, and a clash between expectations of what democracy should provide and what it actually delivers. Inflows of immigrants and refugees have compounded fears and resentment among socially vulnerable citizens, that question the nation state's ability to protect them against the perceived threats of globalization. Polarization is on the rise. It states that populists disrespect the accountability institutions that check government, protect political pluralism and constitute democracy. This predisposition for unconstrained power makes populism a threat to democracy.

IDEA states that democratic weakness and fragility are closely interlinked, pointing out that two-thirds of fragile democracies are also low-performing weak democracies. Democratic weakness or low democratic quality make democracies more vulnerable to partial or full democratic backsliding or breakdown. As for the high-performing democracies it states that there are signs that their quality is eroding, especially those aspects which are related to civic space. Civic space is transforming as a consequence of information and communication technologies and individualization, leading to looser and more fluid forms of interactions, facilitated by social media. The "gilets jaunes" are a good example. At the same time, civic space is shrinking as a consequence of government measures to combat terrorism, promote law and order and national security.

All in all, IDEA identifies 21 countries with high performance on all of their democratic attributes. Among them our three cases.

Governance: World Bank

Since 1996, the World Bank yearly produces its Worldwide Governance Indicators.⁶² It defines "governance" as the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised. This includes the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced; the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies; and the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them. Although there has been some criticism regarding

the construct validity of “governance”, the data are widely used.⁶³ It uses a diversity of data sources, among them the data of Freedom House, V-Dem and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index. Countries are categorized on a scale of -2,5 (weak) to + 2,5 (strong).

The World Bank distinguishes between six dimensions of governance: voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law and control of corruption. For the purpose of this article, political stability and the absence of violence, rule of law and control of corruption are most relevant. With the political stability dimension the World Bank aims to capture perceptions of the likelihood that the government will be destabilized or overthrown by unconstitutional or violent means, including politically motivated violence and terrorism. The rule of law dimension captures perceptions of the extent to which agents have confidence in and abide by the rules of society, and in particular the quality of contract enforcement, property rights, the police, and the courts, as well as the likelihood of crime and violence. Control of corruption captures perception of the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain, as well as “capture” of the state by elites and private interests.

The relevant data for our three countries can be found in [Figure 3](#).⁶⁴

As is clear from [Figure 3](#), all cases have seen a marked decline in political stability in the last 20 years. As this dimension measures the likelihood of the government being overthrown by violent means, including terrorism, this sharp decline could perhaps be explained by the rising terrorist threat in Europe after the 9/11 attacks in the United States and the following wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, followed after the annexation of the Crimea by Russia and the war in Ukraine by a rising national security threat, that has certainly been felt in Finland and Sweden. No big change in rule of law can be identified in either of the countries. Control of corruption shows a small decline for all three countries, which is interesting, as the IDEA data show a marked decline for Sweden in absence of corruption. This could indicate that, while the level of corruption is rising, it is certainly not out of control yet.

Cohesion: fund for peace

Fund for Peace is an American non-governmental organization. The Fund for Peace measures state fragility and is based on four categories of indicators: cohesion, economic, political and social. In its annual 2019 report, the Fund for Peace concludes that democracies are under pressure.⁶⁵ Two major shocks in the last 10 years have accelerated the trend. The 2008 financial crisis has led to a rise in populism, while the 2014 refugee crisis led to xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiment. The third shock taking place since last year is the coronavirus crisis.

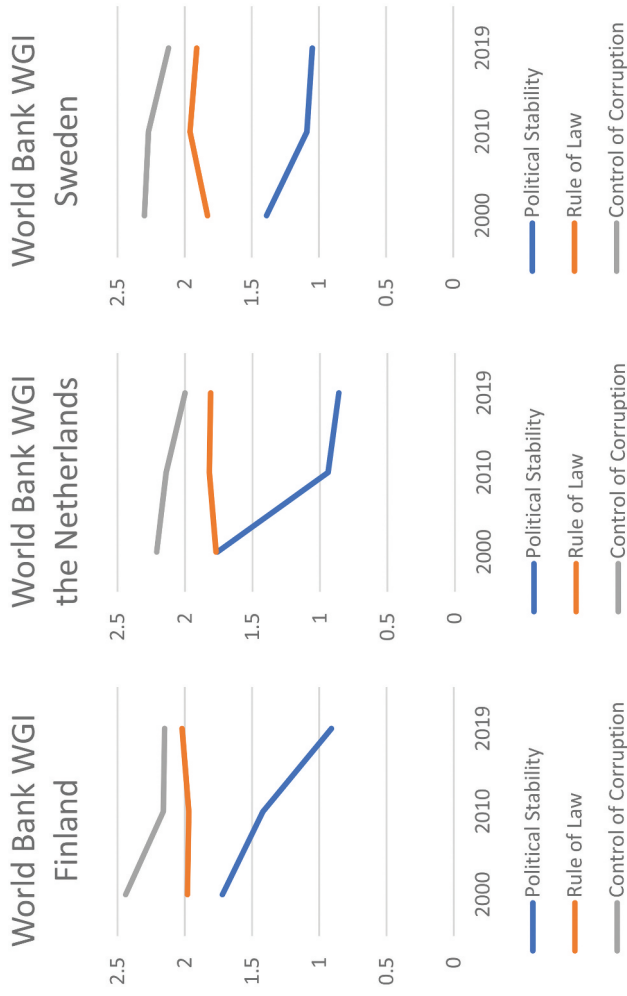


Figure 3. World Bank worldwide governance indicators.

Relevant indicators of the Fund for Peace for our purposes are “security apparatus”, “factionalized elites” and “group grievance”, which are all classified as cohesion indicators. The security apparatus indicator considers security threats to the state, serious criminal factors and perceived trust of citizens in domestic security. The factionalized elites indicator measures the fragmentation of state institutions along ethnic, class, clan, racial or religious lines, as well as brinkmanship and gridlock between ruling elites. It also factors in the use of nationalistic political rhetoric by ruling elites. The group grievance indicator measures divisions and schisms between different groups in society, particularly based on social or political characteristics, and their role in access to services or resources and inclusion in the political process. It also considers whether specific groups are singled out by state authorities or where there is public scapegoating of groups.

The relevant data can be found in [Figure 4](#).⁶⁶

As is clear from [Figure 4](#), all three cases have seen a marked decline in the security apparatus indicator, especially in the last 5 years, which is an indication for our first hypothesis. This could very well be related to the rising national security threat in Sweden and Finland. For all three countries, the large influx of migrants in 2015–2016 may have led to feelings of insecurity rising, as is probably also the case for the growing terrorism threat in this period. As for the factionalized elites indicator, the Netherlands and, to a lesser extent Finland, have worsened, while Sweden has remained stable. This could be an indication for our second hypothesis concerning declining social cohesion. On the other hand, group grievances do not seem to be a major issue in our Nordic countries. The level of group grievances in the Netherlands is a lot higher, though it seems to have declined a bit in recent years.

All in all, the databases considered provide us with some additional evidence for both the statement that liberal democracy in the three countries studied is under pressure, and for the three security and stability related hypotheses that may explain this pressure. In the next section, the results from both the literature review and the databases will be combined.

Results

Based on the data, we can conclude that liberal democracy is under pressure. Both V-Dem and IDEA show a decline on (most of) their indicators, for all three countries involved, and for the period studied (2000–2019). As we can learn from their reports, this pattern can be found in other Western liberal democracies as well.

How about the three hypotheses that try to find an explanation for this decline in liberal democracy? Recapitulating, based on a literature review I have hypothesized that the decline may be explained by the struggle by states to provide security in an era where the blurring of internal and external

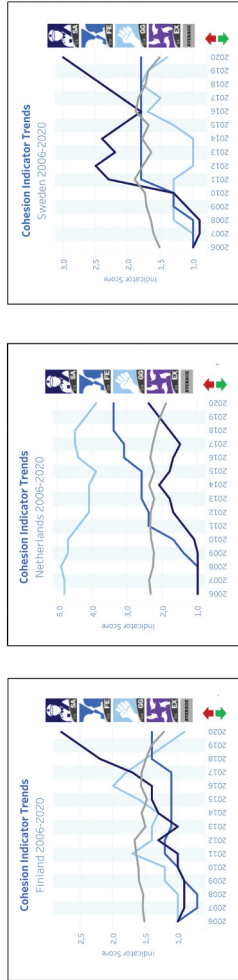


Figure 4. Fund for peace cohesion indicators.

security leads to new security threats, by the decline of social cohesion in society leading to unrest and instability, and by the undermining of liberal democracy by the state.

To start with the first hypothesis, the literature review has identified quite a few security threats in Europe in the 20-year time frame. Examples are the terrorist threat, the organized crime threat, the rise of irregular migration, the resurging national security threat following the annexation of the Crimea by Russia and the Ukraine conflict and the rising cyberthreat. All these threats have in common that they cross borders. Some confirmation for this hypothesis can be found in the World Bank and Fund for Peace data as well. The World Bank data show a marked decline in political stability, which measures the likelihood of the government being overthrown by violent means, including terrorism. Fund for Peace shows a marked decline in the Security Apparatus indicator in all three states, measuring security threats to the state, serious criminal factors and perceived trust of citizens in domestic security. Based on the IDEA and World Bank data, corruption seems to be a (albeit slowly) growing problem in all three countries. For the Netherlands, this has been associated with the growing influence of organized crime on (local) government.

As for the second hypothesis, the literature review has shown that inequalities in European liberal democracies are rising and undermine social cohesion. Some groups in society feel increasingly socially marginalized, which leads to identity politics, polarization and the rise of populism. There are indications that foreign actors exacerbate this polarization in an attempt to destabilize Western liberal democracies. Recent years have seen outbursts of social unrest and the emergence of parallel societies in some cities, leading to situations of limited statehood. From the IDEA data we can learn that there has been a decline in representative government (Sweden and the Netherlands) and impartial administration (all three countries), indicating that part of the population might not feel represented or treated fairly by the government. In its report, IDEA points at economic and social problems leading to discontent in the population, polarization and the rise of populism. Citizens are increasingly discontented with the results that the democratic system delivers. The data from Fund for Peace provide some additional evidence, although they are not completely consistent: while the factionalized elites indicator shows a decline in Finland and the Netherlands, the group grievances doesn't show a marked decline in any of the countries, although there is quite a difference between the Netherlands and the Nordic countries, the latter scoring better on this indicator.

As for the third hypothesis, undermining of liberal democracy by the state, the literature reviews shows that European governments have taken several measures that can be seen as undermining liberal democracy, for example in counterterrorism, the move toward preemptive security and the rise of

securitization, where all sorts of issues (for example migration) are formulated as a security threat. The databases provide evidence for this hypothesis. IDEA points at signs that the quality of high-performing democracies is eroding, especially those aspects related to civic space. It points out that civic space is shrinking as a consequence of government measures to combat terrorism, promote law and order and national security. Consequently, we see a decline in civil liberties in all three countries. An interesting case-study in this respect will be the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, that has led governments everywhere, also in western liberal democracies, to impose heavy restrictions on – amongst others – freedom of movement, assembly and demonstration.

Implications: blurring lines between the police and the military

This section will focus on the implications of the above-mentioned security and stability related challenges for organizations working in the security domain, more specifically the armed forces and the police. After all, a change in security and stability related challenges will most likely have an impact on the organizations dealing with these challenges as well. A relevant field of research in this respect is the field of Civil-Military Relations (CMR). The field of CMR investigates relations between the military and society. Several models for CMR can be distinguished, among them a democratic regime, a military regime (where the armed forces rule the country) and a police regime (where the armed forces develop toward a constabulary force). In a democratic regime, there is usually⁶⁷ a clear distinction between the organizations responsible for internal security (the police) and external security (the armed forces).⁶⁸ Only in very specific circumstances, the armed forces assist the civilian authorities (eg disasters or crises). A larger role is deemed inappropriate in a liberal democracy, as it may erode civilian control over the armed forces, undermine civil rights and compromise civilian authorities, thereby delegitimizing the state.⁶⁹ However, the three challenges mentioned above have led to a blurring of these roles.⁷⁰

Recent years have seen a rise in the use of the armed forces in a domestic context, especially in case of transborder security threats, when the police were overburdened or a more robust performance by the authorities was deemed necessary.⁷¹ Recent examples in the Netherlands include the use of Army search teams in counter-drugs operations and the use of armed forces materiel to block the parliament area for farmers protesters. Operation Sentinel has seen 10.000 French soldiers deployed on the streets as part of a military operation to protect the population from terrorism. Other European countries, such as Belgium, Italy and the United Kingdom, have also deployed the armed forces for this reason. Recently, the COVID-19 crisis has led to the use of the armed forces as well, varying from logistical support to hospitals in the Netherlands and the use of Army personnel to restore public order on the

Dutch Caribbean island of Curaçao, to border control and enforcement of lockdown measures in southern Europe but also in Finland for example, in support to the police and civilian authorities.

In the international context, western armed forces have been increasingly deployed in crisis response operations. In the security gap, right after fighting has stopped but before civilian authorities are capable to provide security, this has often led to the armed forces performing police tasks such as restoring public order, crowd and riot control and stability policing.⁷² This phenomenon has been defined as a constabularization of the armed forces.⁷³ The performance of police tasks in crisis response operations might make the armed forces better equipped to perform in a domestic context.

On the police side of the equation, a certain militarization seems to be taking place. This militarization is particularly visible in the United States,⁷⁴ but can be found in Europe as well. Hovens and Neuteboom point at centralizing tendencies in the police, the use of more robust gear and means and the development of a more military mind-set, which is stimulated by the use of war metaphors for police work (war on drugs, war on terror) by the authorities.⁷⁵

Some western countries have an intermediary or hybrid force in between the armed forces and the police. These so-called “gendarmerie-type” forces combine police and military characteristics and have historically only formed in continental Europe, not in Nordic or Anglo-Saxon countries. They usually perform police tasks related to the security of the state, which require a higher level of robustness than regular (community-related) police tasks. The blurring of internal and external security has led to a fast growth in these gendarmerie-type forces.⁷⁶

Is this blurring line between the police and the armed forces problematic? Some fear a politicization of the officer corps and are of the opinion that the armed forces should never be used against their own population.⁷⁷ Others point at factors such as lethality (the armed forces might sooner be inclined to use force), risk, readiness (the primary mission of the armed forces is national defense), cost and appropriateness.⁷⁸ On the other side of the spectrum, authors state that even in a liberal democracy, one should look for an optimal mix of capabilities and competencies.⁷⁹ Using the armed forces may also prevent the militarization of the police.⁸⁰ One could differentiate between tasks, as a larger role for the armed forces in crimefighting would most likely be less controversial than for public order management.⁸¹

The next, concluding, section, will show how this discussion is relevant to the topic of liberal democracy.

Conclusion

As I have shown in this article, liberal democracy in North-western Europe, however stable it is compared to other parts of the world, is under pressure, and both the literature and the relevant quantitative databases indicate that at least part of this pressure can be explained by three parallel but intertwining security and stability related challenges. The first two challenges (the blurring of internal and external security and the rise of new security threats and declining social cohesion leading to social unrest) have in recent years led to a larger role for the armed forces in a domestic context in for example the fight against terrorism and organized crime or in the restoration of public order. This has especially occurred in situations where the police were overburdened and/or a more robust performance by the authorities was deemed necessary. At the same time, a (thus far limited) militarization of the police seems to have taken place.

The third challenge (undermining of liberal democracy by the state) has on several occasions included the use of the armed forces in a domestic context, for example Operation Sentinel in France. An interesting case which is still unfolding is the use of the armed forces in the COVID-19 crisis in support of the civilian authorities. The extent of this support remains to be seen.

This leaves us with a normative dilemma: increasing efforts by organizations in the security domain to counter the three security and stability related challenges to liberal democracy and thereby to stabilize liberal democracy, may as a side-effect undermine liberal democracy. After all, according to CMR theory, in a democratic regime there is usually a clear distinction between the police and the armed forces, with the armed forces focusing on external security and only supporting the police in a domestic context in very specific (crisis) situations. A (much) larger domestic role for the armed forces and/or a militarization of the police could stimulate a move toward a military regime or a police regime. Further research is required to determine the extent to which a larger role of the armed forces in a domestic context and/or a militarization of the police can contribute to the stability of liberal democracy in North-western Europe and is still appropriate in a democratic regime.

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Appendix.**Table A1.** Data on liberal democracy in North-Western Europe.

	2000	2010	2019
<i>Finland</i>			
V-Dem LD Index	83	85	81
IDEA	84	85	86
• Representative government	92	93	90
• Fundamental rights	90	90	81
• Civil liberties	90	89	86
• Checks on government	86	87	81
• Impartial administration	80	80	79
• Absence of corruption			
World Bank	1,72	1,42	0,91
• Political Stability	1,98	1,97	2,02
• Rule of Law	2,44	2,16	2,15
• Control of Corruption			
Fund for Peace	(2006)	19,3	16,9
• Overall score	18,2	1,0	2,5
• Security apparatus	1,0	1,0	1,4
• Factionalized elites	1,0	1,2	1,2
• Group Grievances	1,0		
<i>The Netherlands</i>			
V-Dem LD Index	82	81	78
IDEA	85	87	85
• Representative government	87	87	86
• Fundamental rights	83	81	79
• Civil liberties	88	91	90
• Checks on government	87	88	85
• Impartial administration	84	85	86
• Absence of corruption			
World Bank	1,76	0,94	0,86
• Political Stability	1,77	1,82	1,81
• Rule of Law	2,21	2,14	2,0
• Control of Corruption			
Fund for Peace	(2006)	27,9	24,8
• Overall score	28,1	1,1	2,1
• Security apparatus	1,0	1,7	3,4
• Factionalized elites	1,0	4,7	4,2
• Group Grievances	4,8		
<i>Sweden</i>			
V-Dem LD Index	88	86	83
IDEA	89	92	89
• Representative government	96	96	90
• Fundamental rights	88	89	85
• Civil liberties	90	93	91
• Checks on government	91	89	85
• Impartial administration	93	92	83
• Absence of corruption			
World Bank	1,39	1,09	1,05
• Political Stability	1,83	1,96	1,91
• Rule of Law	2,3	2,27	2,12
• Control of Corruption			
Fund for Peace	(2006)	20,9	20,3
• Overall score	18,2	1,3	2,7
• Security apparatus	1,0	1,3	1,8
• Factionalized elites	1,0	1,3	1,7
• Group Grievances	1,0		

NB: V-Dem and IDEA use a 0–100 scale. Higher values correspond to better scores. World Bank uses a –2,5 to +2,5 scale. Higher values correspond to better scores. Fund for Peace uses a 0–120 scale. Lower values correspond to better scores. The overall score is based on 12 items, only 3 of which are used in the table.