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Council of Europe Debates on *Democratic security* (2015 - 2017)

Concept paper

Background

Twenty-five years ago Europeans believed that it was possible to build a new unified Europe across the continent, a Europe of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. People took to the streets to show their solidarity and their feeling of belonging to the same common values rooted in our diversity of cultures, religions, traditions and languages. Europe appeared at that time more than ever as a single political, economic, social and cultural space. Today, we have to acknowledge that in reality there was no regular and steady evolution towards this ideal.

The conflicts resulting from the break-up of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union have led to persisting tensions including internal stalemate between different ethnic and religious groups as well as unresolved territorial disputes and protracted conflicts. Most recently, the Russian annexation of Crimea and the hostilities in Eastern Ukraine seem to have dealt a serious blow to the post-cold war security architecture and to a certain consensus on key legal principles of living together on the European Continent.

Furthermore, in recent years the long-standing tensions in the Middle-East have worsened due to international military intervention, civil war, internal frustrations and unrest. This chaotic situation has fostered extremist and terrorist organisations in the region and these groups have found an echo in some young Europeans looking for an identity and a cause that could help them make sense of global complexities. One consequence of these conflicts is that the threat from terrorism also comes from within European societies with a small segment of the population rejecting the fundamental values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

For many people, in particular after the revelations about mass surveillance by national security services, the trade-off between security and individual liberty has become imbalanced; whilst the state has a responsibility to protect people from violence it is also beholden to guard their liberty. Another issue in some countries is the use of state-controlled mass media to manipulate public opinion and a repressive approach vis-à-vis critical media and journalists.

As a consequence, many people are increasingly sceptical about the capacity of public institutions to provide effective responses to their concerns and feel that decision-making about key issues regarding their security and their economic and social well-being is increasingly escaping democratic control. They are demanding greater empowerment of the public in political decision-making processes, greater accountability of politicians and democratic institutions and stronger democratic scrutiny of non-elected watchdog and regulatory bodies in the security and economic spheres.

In such a context, real progress towards good democratic governance and to living together in diversity is hard to achieve; the reality in many countries is growing polarisation, manifesting itself in intolerance and confrontation, fuelled by the polarised and belligerent viewpoints of populist and extremist political leaders who are exploiting these tensions for their own political purposes.

The concept of *democratic security*

The concept of *democratic security* - although it is not a new idea - offers an approach which intends to respond to the above-mentioned trends.

As early as the 18th century philosophers were arguing that, in nations governed by majority rule, people were far less likely to choose war - as were their leaders, wary of bearing the blame for heavy losses. Experience over the last 300 years has overwhelmingly supported this view.

More recently, the central elements of *democratic security* are reflected in the preamble to the European Convention on Human Rights (1950), which states that justice and peace are best maintained by an effective political democracy and a common understanding and observance of Human Rights. The term *democratic security* first appeared after the events of 1989 when it was considered necessary to give security a wider connotation than just the military and political dimensions. It aims to make clear that the effective functioning of democratic institutions and a genuine democratic culture needs to include legal and normative foundations. The 1993 Vienna Summit of the Council of Europe tasked the Organisation to promote the strengthening of *democratic security* on the continent.

Today, it is widely accepted that democracies rarely, if ever, go to war with each other. Democratic practices equally protect states from internal strife. The reasons are threefold:

First, democratic systems provide for effective checks on executive power. Independent judiciaries and strong parliaments prevent power from being abused, mismanaged and corrupted. Free media hold the whole system to account;

Second, democracies foster tolerance, based on a shared set of civic values.

Third, a genuine competition of ideas and plurality of voices makes for more dynamic societies, better able to innovate in the face of new threats.

“Hard security” continues to be vital - based on traditional models of deterrence and military capacity. Alone, however, it can no longer guarantee stability, democratic norms and practices are vital foundations for lasting peace.

The second Annual Report by the Secretary General on ‘The State of Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law across Europe: A Shared Responsibility for Democratic Security in Europe’¹ assesses the capacity of Europe’s nations to guarantee security for their citizens through their commitment to democratic norms.

Objectives, themes and expected outcome of the *Debates on democratic security*

Given the critical situation on the European Continent today, a fresh impetus is required for the Council of Europe’s contribution to enhancing *democratic security*. As the most comprehensive pan-European organisation, the Council of Europe has the capacity to play a substantial role in this regard, particularly because of its specific mandate and its vast

¹ The Secretary General’s annual reports are drawn up on the request of the Committee of Ministers to provide in-depth analyses of the state of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe in the context of growing threats to democratic security. The challenges identified in the annual reports are, in turn, central to structuring the priorities of the Council of Europe’s biennial programmes and budgets.

expertise and experience in the field of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. In this context, the new series of debates will offer input to the Council of Europe's renewed emphasis on *democratic security* whilst at the same time functioning as an element of its implementation.

The aims of the new series of Council of Europe *Debates on democratic security* are threefold:

- to provide an intellectual framework to identify and examine the concept's main components;
- to elucidate their interconnection and functioning in practice;
- to contribute to greater public awareness and understanding of the significance of *democratic security* for the democratic development of states and relations between them.

Moreover, the *Debates on democratic security* are organised as an analytical and intellectual input to the rolling process of preparing the above-mentioned Secretary General's Annual Report on the State of Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law in Europe. The analyses for each report are based on exchanges with and contributions by the different sectors of the Council of Europe. In addition to this, occasional and targeted additional input from relevant external experts is included in order to strengthen the report's precision and intellectual framework. The *Debates on democratic security* are expected to provide aspects of this additional expertise.

Issues addressed in the debates may come from the findings of the Secretary General's Annual Report of 2015 on five areas (efficient and independent judiciaries; freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association; effective functioning of democratic institutions; inclusive society, and democratic citizenship). Other issues that may be addressed include the prevention of radicalisation of individuals, as well as the implications for *democratic security* arising from developments in the environmental, economic/financial and information society domains, including from a gender perspective.

Organisation of the debates

The *Debates on democratic security*, organised in partnership with the Strasbourg-based *Ecole nationale d'administration (ENA)*, will take place at the Council of Europe headquarters in Strasbourg.

The target audience include the Strasbourg diplomatic community and Council of Europe staff as well as, where appropriate, external experts and faculty and students of academic institutions, in particular from ENA.

Each debate will be introduced by a recognised personality or personalities from Europe or beyond who will present their vision of *democratic security* and its components. The interactive format of the debates will encourage frank and thought-provoking discussion between speakers and participants.

After each debate the written contribution by the speaker will be made available online and at the end of the series the presentations will be brought together in a publication.