

No peace without free citizens

Results of the ECoD Democracy = Peace (?) Survey, presented at the Council of Europe’s World Forum for Democracy

An online survey conducted by European Capital of Democracy (ECoD) demonstrates that a significant majority of the population across the Council of Europe countries recognizes the pivotal role of democracy in promoting and preserving peace. Following recent criticism of the democratic peace theory, arguing that democracies are hesitant to engage in armed conflict with other identified democracies, we want to shed some light on the perceived interdependencies and relationship between democracy and peace.

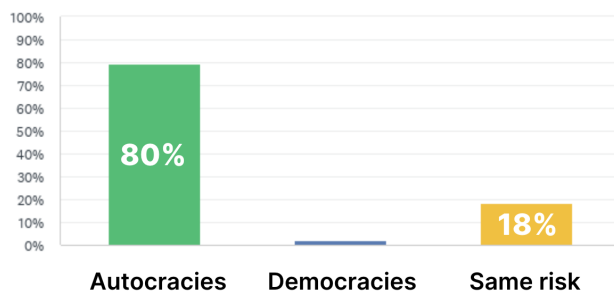
The survey was open from 19 Oct to 30 Oct 2023 for members of ECoD’s network of engaged Europeans and was subsequently complemented by a focus group involving six selected participants on 31 October 2023. The survey panel consisted of 4,018 citizens either born in or residing in a Council of Europe member state or Kosovo. It was thoughtfully structured to maintain a gender and age balance, with a particular emphasis on engaging young people under the age of 26.

Many of the 646 respondents agree that the relationship between democracy and peace is strongly intertwined (46%), but not everyone agrees they are necessarily inseparable (47%). The factors identified by the respondents fostering or threatening peace are manifold, with a lack of democracy seen as critical accelerant.

Autocratic countries have a higher risk for war, but...

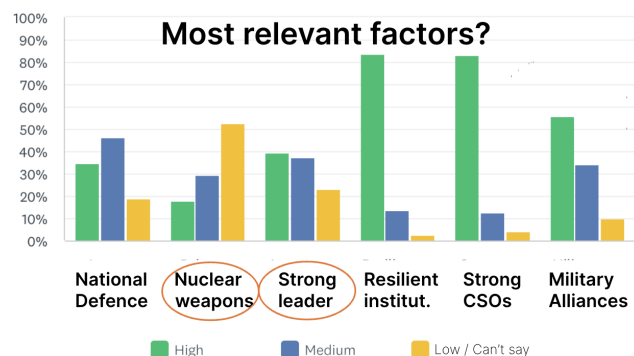
While only a few respondents (2%) believe in a higher risk for democracies to engage in war, almost one fifth (18%) of the respondents think the risks are equal for autocratic and democratic countries.

Higher risk for war?



These doubts are reflected in the question regarding most relevant factors for securing peace. While “resilient democratic structures” and a “strong civil society” were attributed high (>80%) or medium (>12%) relevance and military alliances also scoring rather clearly (55% high, 35% medium relevance), the remaining three factors reflected a less aligned view amongst respondents.

“A strong national defence” (high relevance for 35%, medium relevance for 47%) may exist both in democracies and autocratic states, but “being a nuclear weapons state” (considering the non-proliferation act and the states joining nuclear powers in the recent years) and “a strong leader who can act fast” might have a stronger affiliation to autocratic countries.



Democracy requires education - and free media

Throughout the open comments and focus group discussions, there was a recurring theme that emphasises the crucial roles of education, from an early age and throughout one's lifetime, as well as active civic participation - with a focus on including marginalised groups and less active citizens (often disconnected from political engagement or even voting) stands out as a highly relevant foundation for fair and resilient societies. These factors were consistently highlighted as essential elements for upholding democracy and maintaining peace.

“You need your basic needs covered to be an active citizen.”

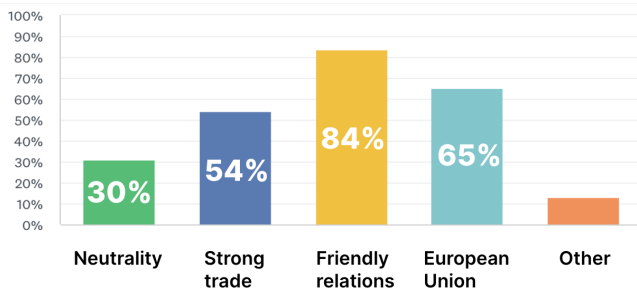
Focus group participant

Additionally, many participants pointed out the significance of a free press and the presence of balanced and diverse media. These elements were seen as robust factors, often considered within the broader context of freedom of expression. Fake news and social media played a major role in polarisation and societal conflicts - a topic that was also explored in this survey. While acknowledging positive effects like rapid organisation of solidarity campaigns and agenda setting, social networks are often seen as accelerants of populist and right-wing movements / parties.

It's the economy, stupid?

Economic factors behind wars should not be underestimated in the view of many participants, at the same time strong (economic) ties and trade relations with neighbouring countries are perceived to help reduce the risk of war, although they are not seen as a bulletproof guarantee.

How can countries lower their risk?



When asked directly, “friendly relations to neighbouring countries” are a strong contributing factor to secure peace for a whopping 84% of the respondents, 65% see “EU membership” as highly important, and still more than 54% confirm “strong trade relations” have an impact, as described above. States ‘declaring themselves neutral’ only convince less than a third of the respondents (31%).

Relationship of democracy & peace: “It’s complicated”

Answers to the question “how closely intertwined are democracy and peace” came as a surprise, as respondents were in a tie between “They are inseparable; democracy is a foundation for peace” (45.8%) and “They are connected but can exist independently” (47%). Our focus group participants were strongly leaning towards democracy and peace being twins, and clearly emphasised the coexistence of the two.

“Peace is extremely connected to democracy, it connects peaceful countries. Autocratic countries are always at war.”

Focus group participant

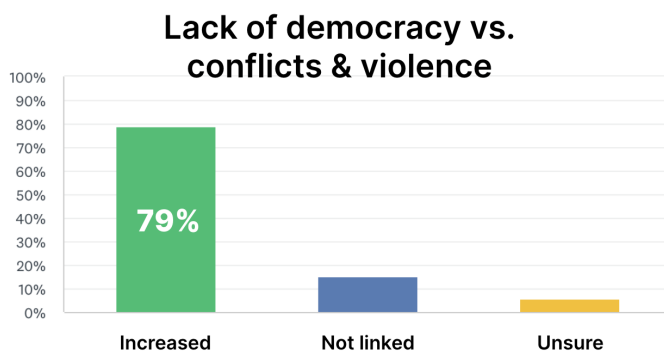
Participants who have experienced authoritarian regimes and/or war, e.g. in former communist countries or the Balkans, pointed out that citizens need stability and peace to be engaged in public and politics - as a crucial element of everything you do as a citizen.

Autocratic countries - always at war?

Autocratic regimes can go through extended periods of peace (potentially leading respondents to choosing the “existing independently”) - but their citizens don’t enjoy freedom, and almost all of them have an “enemy”. They “are always at war, with other countries, the opposition, their citizens...”, “using their strength to keep people quiet - like a barrel of powder, one day it explodes”, as one focus group participant stated.

A significant portion of the European population has been fortunate to never have experienced war, and as a result, they have been living in a highly secure and peaceful environment. However, this very security has led to a tendency for some to take democracy and peace for granted. Therefore, a focus group participated highlighted that “we are not aware enough of people who experienced autocratic regimes and wars.” A call for vigilance - and resilience.

A lack of democracy - so what?

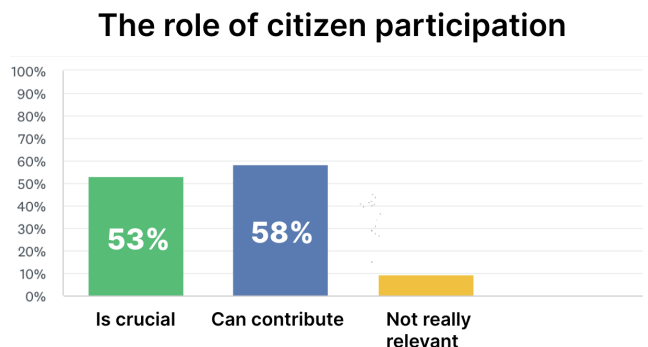


Democracy is not a convenience for two fifths (79%) of the participants, with “a lack of [it] often resulting in conflict and violence”. Individual citizens, each and every one of us, are needed to fill democracy with life.

Although citizen participation does not necessarily lead to peace (10%), it can contribute (59%) or is even crucial for peaceful societies (53%).

We also asked our focus group participants about their stance on the relevance of citizen participation and what governments can do to promote peace by engaging with their inhabitants.

What stood out was that “democracy” and even “peace” are defined differently in European countries, closely connected to the individual nation’s history and past experiences.



Democracy defence: Citizens standing last

The “correction factor” of a strong and active civil society is an interesting thought, confirmed by observations how fast and easy democratic institutions can (and have been) undermined in the last decades in some European countries, and how resilient democratic institutions proved to be in others. Safe (public) spaces to discuss, participate and protest are a vital prerequisite here. In many cases, we can see that cities play a pivotal role in providing these spaces and bringing together a critical mass of engaged citizens and civil society organisations. There were strong views that active citizenship might even prevent (young) democracies from turning into dictatorships, by putting pressure on the government and by bringing the “right” politicians to power.

“We need to build capacities and skills of young people regarding social media, fake news and the like.”

Focus group participant

Social networks - both a blessing and a curse

It is well established and has also been expressed by many respondents of the survey and all focus group participants: communication and factual information are foundational factors in securing peace, and information about politics is key to participation. But have fake news and social media changed democracy and communication? And if so, how?

“Journalism is a profession in extinction”

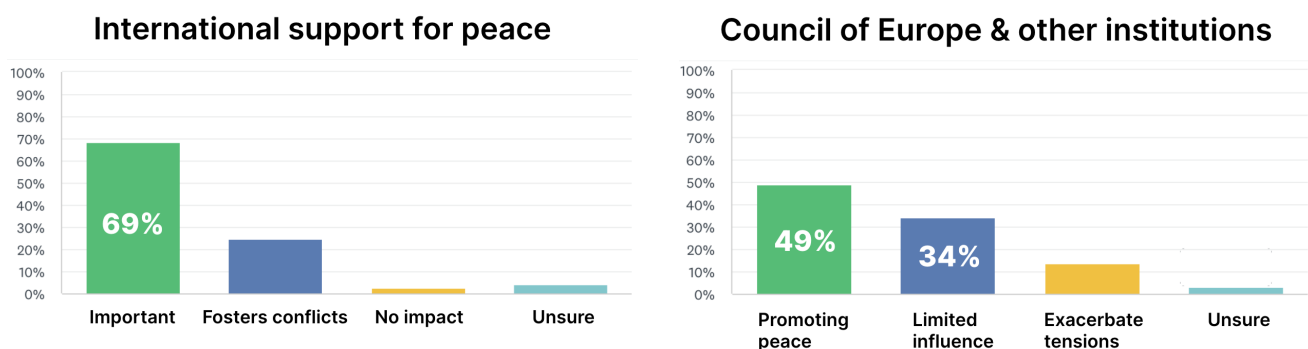
Focus group participant

When asked how they felt about “the role of social media in promoting or hindering peaceful and constructive discussions”, survey respondents were almost equally split between the options “Powerful tool for political activism and peaceful protests” (56%), “often unclear who is deriving campaigns and positions” (60%) and “contribute to escalating conflicts and divides opinions” (62%). An astounding 98% of respondents believe social networks are impactful in one way or the other.

Acknowledging the positive aspects of social media, like instant access to information, quick gatherings for urgent issues or organising waves of solidarity, overall, the negative effects prevailed for our focus group participants. Thus it is absolutely key to learn to deal with social media and networks, and how to be critical - starting as early as possible. As communication is “just a tool”, it is important to know who is behind campaigns - transparency helps a lot.

An international quest - and a personal one

While over two thirds of respondents (69%) agree that “international support is very important for peace”, a quarter of them (25%) believe it “can sometimes lead to conflict”. The role of the Council of Europe and other European Institutions in strengthening democracy and peace” a similar distribution shows: While about half of the respondents (49%) attest to the institutions’ positive contribution, one third (34%) experiences their influence as “limited”, while only 14% stated that “they sometimes exacerbate tensions”. International institutions like the Council of Europe are seen as the right organisations to develop and provide standards and tools.



Conclusion

It is strongly reflected in both the survey results and the focus group discussion: Citizens play a pivotal role in securing and defending democracy and peace. Governments need to invest heavily in education and provide equal possibilities for all citizens to foster participation and strengthen civil society. Independent journalists, free media and freedom of expression also need to be protected and supported financially. To overcome the current global challenges and work towards a better world necessitates an approach that combines robust top-down institutional support with grassroots bottom-up demands for democracy and peace.

Authors

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- giving your feedback and exchange on burning issues
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