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War Rhetoric vs. Resilience: Framing Security and Civil Liberties in the Euro-Atlantic Discourse

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Abstract

This policy paper examines the contrasting narratives in the Euro-Atlantic security discourse using the example of the Munich Security Conference 2025 and the meeting of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group at Ramstein Air Base. It compares the war rhetoric, which uses martial metaphors to justify extraordinary security measures, with the narrative of resilience, which emphasises democratic governance and public trust. Drawing on framing theory and concepts of human and democratic security, the analysis shows that while war metaphors mobilise immediate support for robust security measures, they risk normalising emergency measures that limit civil liberties. In contrast, a resilience-oriented framing promotes policies that protect freedoms by incorporating democratic oversight and transparency. The paper concludes with recommendations for integrating sunset clauses, proportionality checks and enhanced public engagement into security strategies to ensure that defence measures protect citizens without undermining the liberal democratic order.²

Keywords: Euro-Atlantic security, war rhetoric, resilience, democratic security, framing theory, civil liberties, public trust

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² Note: The views expressed in this paper are the author's own and are not necessarily those of the EACS.



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Introduction

In early 2025, two high-profile Euro-Atlantic security events, the Munich Security Conference (MSC) and a meeting of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group at Ramstein Air Base, spotlighted a central dilemma: How can national security and civil liberties be reconciled in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape? At MSC 2025 and in Ramstein, participants framed this tension in very different ways. Some leaders invoked war metaphors to mobilise allies against existential threats and potentially create a permanent state of emergency. Others emphasised “resilience”, i.e. the strengthening of democratic institutions and social cohesion, suggesting that security and liberty need not be at odds with each other. This policy paper analyses these opposing frames and examines their influence on democratic governance and public acceptance of emergency measures. Drawing on framing theory and the concepts of human security and democratic security, it examines how language - from calls to arms to calls for resilience - shapes the Euro-Atlantic policy agenda. It concludes with recommendations for crafting security strategies that protect citizens without undermining essential freedoms. As German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier warned at MSC 2025: “What is at stake today is the ability of democracy to stand up for itself and assert itself” (Steinmeier, 2025). For Europe in 2025 and beyond, it is crucial to ensure that the security discourse strengthens rather than erodes democracy.

Framing Trends in Euro-Atlantic Security Discourse

The tension between security and liberty is a persistent theme in Western discourse, but the tone of the debate is changing. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and a series of terrorist and hybrid threats, many heads of state and government now see national security as a battle for the survival of the liberal order. At MSC 2025, the defence of democratic values took centre stage. The official report of the conference emphasised that good governance, civil liberties, political rights and international law must form the basis of any collective security agenda (Munich Security Conference, 2025a). This is in line with the concept of “democratic security”, which regards respect for democracy and the rule of law not as an obstacle but as the basis of security. The MSC theme of “Multipolarity” with a focus on democratic resilience implies that strengthening democratic institutions is key to defence against external threats (CEBRI, 2025). In practise, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called for a “just and lasting peace” to preserve a sovereign and free Ukraine - a direct link between security objectives and the protection of liberty (European Commission, 2025).

Meanwhile, war metaphors are still widely used. Many officials use martial language to emphasise the urgency. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, for example, called for the creation of an “Armed Forces of Europe” so that “decisions about Europe are made in Europe” (Office of the President of Ukraine, 2025). Such rhetoric positions Europe’s security as a civilizational struggle and



implicitly justifies emergency measures. Leading politicians in Central and Eastern Europe also portray Russian aggression as an existential struggle for their way of life and point out that sacrifices may be necessary for victory. For example, former Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė stated that “war can only be stopped by war”, while Latvian politician Valdis Dombrovskis described the Russian invasion as an “existential crisis” and emphasised its far-reaching global implications (Grybauskaitė, 2022; Milano, 2022).

It is worth noting that the metaphors of war and resilience evoke different reactions from policy makers. The framing of war (e.g. a “war on terrorism” or a “war on disinformation”) usually exaggerates the perceived threats and can justify the abandonment of normal policies in favour of emergency measures. In contrast, resilience focuses on strengthening society’s ability to withstand shocks, emphasising continuity of governance and empowering citizens rather than suspending daily life. At the MSC, resilience was brought to the fore: a panel on the main stage entitled “Live to Vote another Day: Fortifying Democratic Resilience” emphasised safeguarding elections and institutions under external stress (Munich Security Conference, 2025b). Overall, the discussions in Munich pointed to a trend towards anchoring the protection of civil liberties in the security discourse. This is in line with the human security paradigm, which extends security concerns to threats to the individual (Bajpai, 2000, 2003; Prezelj, 2008; Paulussen, 2020). In other words, ensuring people’s rights, safety and well-being is increasingly seen as an integral part of national security - a development from previous times when liberty was often subordinated to state-centred security.

Divergent Narratives: Ramstein vs. Munich

In the midst of these general trends, a clear rift emerged in February 2025. The Ukraine Defence Contact Group meeting at Ramstein Air Base conveyed a different tone to the MSC. At Ramstein, the focus was clearly on hard security, military support, alliance unity and the urgent need to achieve results on the battlefield. In his speech on 12 February, UK Defence Secretary John Healey praised the new US Secretary of Defence’s pledge to remain committed to the coalition (Bondarjeva, 2025). This was remarkable given the new US administration under President Donald Trump, which had previously shown more interest in a diplomatic solution, raising doubts about continued American support (ibid.). Nonetheless, officials in Ramstein demonstrated unity in support of the Ukrainian war effort, portraying it as a fight of determination and common purpose. This “war” rhetoric (e.g., “defending Ukraine”, “defeat Russian aggression”) left little time for discussion of civil liberties, democratic control, or risks associated with continued emergency measures. The implicit message was that national and allied security took precedence over other considerations.

In contrast, Munich offered a more complex perspective just a few days later. Although the heads of state and government there strongly supported Ukraine, they framed the conflict in terms of defending democratic values and maintaining public trust. German President Steinmeier reminded the



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participants that in the fight against aggression, Europe must protect the very principles that make this fight worthwhile (Steinmeier, 2025). Referring to external threats and internal tensions, he warned against a “contempt for our democratic institutions and norms” and emphasised that democracy must remain able to stand up for itself. He even criticised “political populists” for celebrating the “disruption” of democratic systems and declared: “Democracy is not a playpen for disruption!” (Steinmeier, 2025). This establishes a direct link between national security and the health of democracy at home, showing how security and liberty can be mutually reinforcing.

Other speakers at the MSC resonated with this statement on resilience. New NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte rejected any suggestion that Ukraine’s future could be negotiated, emphasising that principles must take precedence over expediency (NATO, 2025). He insisted that Ukraine’s sovereignty and choices, possibly including NATO membership, should remain intact. President Zelenskyy, while combative, made liberty a cornerstone of his appeal: he warned against “backroom deals” and emphasised Ukraine’s right to self-determination (Office of the President of Ukraine, 2025).

Perhaps the sharpest contrast in Munich came from the United States. Vice President J.D. Vance stunned many with his criticism of Europe’s approach to reconciling security and liberty. While affirming the unity of the West, he argued that overzealous security or equality measures in Europe undermine the very freedoms that define democracies - pointing to state measures against alleged hate speech or Koran burnings, as well as protest restrictions near abortion clinics (Munich Security Conference, 2025c; Iyengar & Johnson, 2025). His remarks, described as “accusations related to immigration and alleged censorship”, prompted an uneasy silence in the room (Iyengar & Johnson, 2025). European policymakers largely see such laws as necessary to protect democracy from extremist threats, but Vance reframed them as violations of freedom. The contrast between Ramstein and Munich was thus not only geographical, but also conceptual: one side emphasised military urgency and immediate security requirements, while the other prioritised democratic values and public trust. Policymakers must recognize that support for security policies depends on which narrative - prioritizing absolute protection or emphasizing that “freedom is security” - resonates more strongly.

Theoretical Perspectives: Framing, Human Security, and Democratic Security

The events of February 2025 demonstrate how concepts from framing theory and security studies apply in real time. According to framing theory, how leaders present an issue strongly affects how the public perceives it (Goffman, 1974). Security scholars such as Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) note that calling something a “war” or an existential threat often garners backing for extraordinary measures. Within the Copenhagen School framework, a successful securitization



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“speech act” moves an issue beyond routine politics, making “extraordinary measures” seem necessary (Buzan et al., 1998). For instance, after the 2015 Paris attacks, French President Hollande declared “France is at war” with ISIS, enabling emergency laws outside normal democratic processes (Hollande, 2015). Similarly, Zelenskyy’s claims about “fighting for survival” can justify policies beyond usual bounds (Office of the President of Ukraine, 2025). If the public accepts such framing, leaders gain wide latitude; if not, the moves fail and must remain subject to regular checks (Buzan et al., 1998).

Moreover, public support for intrusive measures hinges on how those measures are framed. If governments present them as temporary responses to genuine crises, people are more likely to accept limits on their freedoms (Chmel, Marques, Mironyuk, Rosenberg, & Turobov, 2021). This emphasis on “temporary” reflects why metaphors matter. For instance, a “war on terror” garnered public consent for vast surveillance post-2001, whereas a “resilience” or “public health” frame might produce more moderate cooperation. Institutional trust also plays a key role: democracies enjoy more flexibility if citizens deem threats credible and the measures proportionate (Chmel et al., 2021). On the flip side, Europe learned from COVID-19 and various terror incidents that, if the public suspects “temporary” powers are becoming permanent or misused, support rapidly erodes.

Human security strengthens the argument for balanced framing. Adopted in the 1990s, it shifts the focus from state protection to the well-being of individuals (Bajpai, 2000, 2003; Paulussen, 2020; Prezelj, 2008). This perspective, evident in MSC discussions on climate, public health, and related topics, implies that restricting civil liberties can actually weaken overall security if it alienates or harms the population it aims to protect. Hence, framing that spotlights societal resilience and human rights isn’t naïve, it’s strategic, affirming that real security depends on people feeling both safe and free. For example, the MSC’s focus on inclusive governance in Africa and on “epidemics of coups” (MSC, 2025) reflects an understanding that human security threats i.e. instability, oppression, or lawlessness, intertwine with state security (Prezelj, 2015; Suhrke, 1999).

Equally relevant is the distinction between “democratic security” and “militant democracy”. According to Max Steuer (2023), democratic security holds that imposing broad limits on fundamental rights, like free speech, can pose a greater danger than the hateful or extremist ideas themselves, because such overreach emboldens anti-democratic forces. Militant democracy, by contrast, posits that banning or restricting certain anti-democratic activities is necessary to preserve the system (Steuer, 2023). Both approaches surfaced at MSC 2025: some officials see bans on extremist content or symbols as essential, while others, like Vice President Vance, criticize them as illiberal. Countries that favor militant democracy argue that limited infringements protect the whole; supporters of democratic security caution that overreactions degrade legitimacy. Recognizing that most democracies blend these ideas, the specific frames leaders adopt, protecting freedom versus preventing its abuse, can decisively shape public acceptance.



In short, both theory and practice illustrate that framing security against liberty is dangerous. By presenting emergency measures as safeguarding freedom, policymakers may preserve legitimacy. A resilience-focused narrative is one such approach: it underscores that strengthening democracy and societal cohesion inherently enhances security. The following section analyses how these frames lead to concrete policy implications and influence public willingness to tolerate extraordinary measures.

Implications for European Security Policy

The framing used at the beginning of 2025 has very real consequences for Europe. Firstly, the consistent description of threats in “war footing” terms can mobilise public opinion in favour of robust security measures, but risks marginalising democratic processes. Leaders who invoke a constant sense of siege may inspire greater willingness among citizens for expanded surveillance or censorship, but history warns that emergency powers can become entrenched. Policymakers must therefore equip all extraordinary measures with sunset clauses and oversight and balances. By framing an initiative as a temporary response to a specific challenge (Chmel et al., 2021), governments not only gain buy-in but also prevent these measures from becoming permanent. The MSC’s emphasis on democratic resilience signals that Europe knows it cannot trade liberty for security indefinitely without undermining the democratic order. Steinmeier’s warning against “a small elite contemptuous of democracy” emphasises that even in the West, leaders must be careful not to slip into authoritarian practises (Steinmeier, 2025).

Second, the transatlantic divide emphasised in Vice President Vance’s speech could accelerate European autonomy in security policy. European leaders have been shaken by suggestions that Washington may no longer prioritise liberal values as it once did. Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said that if Vance’s speech “wasn’t a wake-up call for Europe, I don’t know what is” and encouraged the EU’s ambition to develop common security and defence capabilities - reflected in Zelenskyy’s call for “Armed Forces of Europe” (Iyengar & Johnson, 2025; Vakulina, 2025). However, strategic autonomy must go hand in hand with accountability. A stronger European Union (EU) or NATO-European pillar could lead to more defence decisions being shifted to centralised bodies, which means that parliamentary oversight, both at European and national level, needs to be strengthened. Citizens are more willing to support an EU army or higher defence budgets if they are confident that these instruments will not undermine domestic democratic control. Europe may seek greater independence in the area of security, but it must remain transparent and accountable.

Third, the competing approaches emphasise the need to manage expectations and achieve broad consent. Leaders who use a resilience-focused, values-based narrative create an expectation among the public that any emergency response will respect these values, this fosters trust. When Germany promises to strengthen the Bundeswehr “not to wage war – but to prevent war”, it is signalling that



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the rearmament is defensive (Steinmeier, 2025). However, if a government overshoots the mark, e.g. by restricting protests under the guise of security, it will face backlash for violating its stated democratic norms. Conversely, openly alarmist war rhetoric may mobilise support in the short term, but ultimately those responsible must achieve tangible victories. Europe's policy makers must therefore maintain the urgency of genuine threats (Russia, terrorism, cyber-attacks) while avoiding "threat fatigue". Public acceptance of emergency measures has its limits and depends on whether these measures appear effective and compatible with democratic principles. Research suggests that support for civil liberties can collapse when threats are high and confidence is low (Mader et al., 2024). In this climate, citizens who fear institutional overreach may either give up their freedoms or reject security policy altogether, both of which destabilise governance.

Ultimately, Europe's credibility on the global stage is also at stake. EU leaders often claim that Europe's power lies in its example, a community of democracies that provides security without oppression. When the EU denounces oppression abroad but condones or embraces it in its own member states, it undermines its soft power and moral authority. At the MSC meetings with African, Asian and Latin American delegates, it was emphasised that the West's credibility is "at stake", especially when accusations of double standards are levelled (Munich Security Conference, 2025a). The way in which Europe shapes security and how it ensures that freedom is protected, directly influences global alliances and shapes the outcome of conflicts. Every example of Europe adhering to rule of law and democratic standards counters Russia's claim that Western security support for Ukraine is hypocritical. Yet every slip-up, such as the surveillance of journalists or the banning of opposition media, gives opponents easy propaganda victories.

In short, framing influences both the design of policy (laws, institutions) and the degree of public consent to a considerable extent. A resilience-oriented approach promotes transparency and oversight, i.e. symbols of democratic security, while a war-like approach accelerates decisions but erodes governance over time. As the events of February 2025 have shown, Euro-Atlantic leaders are aware of this problem. The challenge now is to implement policies that strike a balance between freedom and security while maintaining public trust.

Policy Recommendations

Bringing democratic resilience into the security discourse

Heads of state and government should always emphasise democratic resilience when discussing security challenges, whether terrorism, cyber-attacks or hybrid warfare. Emphasising social strength and adaptation rather than fear reassures citizens that threats can be overcome without sacrificing fundamental freedoms. For example, instead of declaring a "war on disinformation", policymakers



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could talk about “building social resilience to misinformation”, encouraging citizen engagement (e.g. media literacy) and avoiding blanket censorship. By framing resilience as a core value, governments are making it clear that security measures are aimed at protecting open societies, not turning them into fortresses.

Strengthening the legal framework for emergency measures

All extraordinary security powers, such as the extension of surveillance or new terrorism laws, must include clear sunset clauses, proportionality checks and independent (judicial and parliamentary) scrutiny. This will ensure that they really are truly temporary and are regularly reviewed. For example, laws extending the surveillance of suspected extremists should automatically expire (e.g. after two years) if the legislator does not extend them through regular utilisation reports. Such safeguards maintain democratic control and signal that individual freedoms remain protected. The EU could also issue model guidelines (along the lines of the Venice Commission recommendations) to harmonise best practise across Member States.

Strengthening transparency and public trust

Trust is the basis for security in a democracy. Governments should communicate openly about security threats and measures by disclosing threat assessments where possible and making public statements when certain protests are restricted or content is removed. The clearer the boundaries and intentions of security policy, the less room there is for mistrust or populist exploitation. Commissioning independent experts to scrutinise threat data can provide additional security for policy decisions. This approach counters the perception that security decisions are “beyond democratic control” and respects citizens’ right to information, thereby strengthening democratic security.

By taking these steps, clearly limiting emergency powers, promoting open dialogue and treating democratic values as an integral part of security, Euro-Atlantic policymakers can address urgent threats without compromising public confidence. The debates and speeches at the beginning of 2025 pose a direct challenge: They must prove that democracies can be resilient and succeed under the pressures of the 21st century.

Conclusion

Events such as the Munich Security Conference and the meeting in Ramstein show how strongly language shapes both policy and public opinion. Describing security as a never-ending “war” can stimulate short-term action, but risks normalising extraordinary measures that weaken democratic



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institutions. By framing the issue in the context of resilience and core values, you can maintain long-term popular support and promote solutions that are compatible with a free society.

Ultimately, winning public opinion is crucial. Citizens must see any exceptional measures as genuinely necessary, proportionate and time-limited, while leaders must uphold their commitment to the ideals of liberal democracy. The concept of democratic security offers a promising roadmap: Open societies can develop external resilience through respect for rights and transparency. However, the realisation of this promise depends on how European politicians shape and implement security policy. If people feel protected and respected, Europe can tackle pressing security challenges without giving up the freedoms that define it.

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