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Separation and immersion: the changing role of the armed forces in Northwestern liberal democracies

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LIBERAL DEMOCRACY UNDER PRESSURE[12]

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

As explained in chapter 1, the main purpose of this dissertation is to explore the possible contribution of the armed forces to the stability of liberal democracy in Northwestern Europe, specifically in the Netherlands, Sweden, and Finland. I assume that liberal democracy in Northwestern Europe is under pressure from several security and stability related challenges that undermine its stability. When studying stability and security the organizations that come to mind are the armed forces and the police. This dissertation focuses specifically on the role of the armed forces.

This chapter sets up the empirical part of this dissertation by researching the assumption that liberal democracy in Northwestern Europe is under pressure. Many authors have recently stated that there is a gradual decline in liberal democracy in the western world. 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. How can this decline be explained? In this chapter, the security and stability related challenges that may undermine liberal democracy in Northwestern Europe will be explored, focusing on the three categories of undermining that have been defined in chapter 1 (vertical, horizontal, and state undermining). In the second part of this chapter, the hypothesis will be further investigated in relevant databases focusing on liberal democracy, governance, and stability.

The focus on security and stability means that other challenges for liberal democracy, following, for example, from electoral developments or the quality of political institutions, or the literature studying liberal democracy from a philosophical perspective, are not included in this dissertation.

4.2 DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: SECURITY AND STABILITY RELATED CHALLENGES UNDERMINING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

This section, focusing on developments in Europe in the past 20 years, provides the results of a literature review. It shows that the security and stability related challenges to liberal democracy may rise from the blurring of internal and external security and the rise of new security threats (resulting in vertical undermining) and from declining social cohesion in Northwestern European society (resulting in horizontal undermining). Finally, the state itself may play a role in the pressure on liberal democracy (state undermining).

Vertical undermining explained: 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 of 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) and the police were responsible for internal security (safeguarding the population from crime). This clear distinction has disappeared after the Cold War.

What does this blurring of internal and external security mean? Firstly, traditional wars between states are on the decline.[13] At the same time, intra-state conflicts and failing states are on the rise (Carter, 2013). 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. The idea of security is expanded to include human security, and intervening powers seek to stabilize the affected countries (Beken, 2011). 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 stemming from international organized crime, irregular migration, terrorism, drug trafficking, cyber threats and, as has been evident since 2020, infectious diseases (Beken, 2011; Eriksson & Rhinard, 2009; Lutterbeck, 2005; Modderkolk, 2019; T. Weiss, 2011; Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2017). These threats all cross borders, which makes it more challenging for a single state to fend them off. States have been struggling to tackle these transnational security threats.

13 The data for this dissertation were collected before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has had a profound impact on the security landscape in Europe. This impact will be discussed in the epilogue to this dissertation.

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 (Dziedzic, 2016; Lam et al., 2018; Tops & Tromp, 2017). 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 (Tromp, 2015).

The yearly Europol Serious Organized Crime and Threat Assessment (SOCTA) concluded in 2021 that serious and organized crime remains a key threat to the internal security of the EU (Europol, 2021). As Europol states, it deeply affects all layers of society and undermines the economy, state institutions and the rule of law. As the report shows, close to 40% of the criminal networks are involved in the trade in illegal drugs and two thirds of criminals use corruption on a regular basis. Additionally, the use of violence by criminals involved in serious and organized crime appears to have increased in both the frequency of use and its severity. Around 60% of the criminal networks in the EU use violence. In recent years, in several European countries there have been violent payoffs, violence against first responders, threats against politicians and public officials and against certain professions, such as journalists, lawyers and judges. For example, in the Netherlands there was the murder of the brother of a crown witness, a lawyer who defended that crown witness in an organized crime trial and the murder of a crime journalist reporting on that same trial. At the time of writing (February 2023), Dutch newspapers report that both the police and the public prosecutor missed important leads on threats against these three men (Marée & Van de Ven, 2023).

Finally, Western liberal democracies must 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. For example, 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 (Heikkilä & Cerulus, 2020). A recent report by Dutch intelligence services states that activities by state actors in the digital domain pose a concrete threat in the form of digital espionage and preparation activities by, amongst others, Russia and Iran for digital disturbance and sabotage (Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst et al., 2021). The potential repercussions are great.

In a recent report, Europol points at major developments in cybercrime, such as ransomware, DDoS attacks, payment fraud and criminal abuse on the Darkweb (Europol, 2020). Cyber sabotage of critical infrastructure can lead to physical and ecological damage, casualties, and social unrest (Nationaal Coördinator voor Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, 2019). A commonly used phenomenon is 'trolling'. It involves using disinformation spread on social media by 'real' users to mislead the public or incite fear or hatred. 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 manipulation campaign 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 general. Campaigns of disinformation aim to capitalize on this mistrust, which has the potential to erode social cohesion and, ultimately, the functioning of the democratic legal order (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). As will be discussed in the next section, this is increasingly the case in the area of interest of this dissertation.

A term commonly used to describe these threats in the so-called 'grey zone' between war and peace is 'hybrid threats' or 'hybrid warfare', that the academic literature tends to use interchangeably (Libiseller, 2023). This is a multifaceted and contested concept, which was developed around 2007 by the US Marine Corps and got traction after Russia's annexation of Crimea, as both Libiseller and Galeotti describe (Galeotti, 2019; Libiseller, 2023).

Hoffman, who was one of the first to use the term, has defined the concept as '*Any adversary that simultaneously employs a tailored mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behavior in the same time and battlespace to obtain their political objectives*' (Hoffman, 2014). In this definition hybrid threats can come from both state actors and non-state actors. He defines 'hybrid' as a form of warfare, while recently the term has increasingly been associated with the grey zone, and consequently with non-military aspects before war (Libiseller, 2023, p. 871). Libiseller explains how, through its widespread use, '*the concept's meaning has become increasingly vague and ambiguous*.' (Libiseller, 2023, p. 858)

This dissertation will predominantly describe and use concrete threats, instead of using the term 'hybrid threats'. However, as will be evident in the case study chapters, the term is widely used by my respondents.

Before moving on to the next challenge for liberal democracy, it is necessary to provide nuance to this section on 'new' security threats. Research in the Netherlands shows that in 2019, compared with 2012, 30% less citizens were a victim of a 'traditional' crime such

as a robbery, theft, assault or vandalization. At the same time, cybercrime, drug crimes, and traffic crimes are on the rise. This research also shows that citizens are less likely to report a crime to the police (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2020). Researchers call this the 'enforcement paradox' (*handhavingsparadox*) (Boutellier, 2023). 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? The answer depends on the value attached to various security threats and thereby almost becomes an ideological question, that will not be answered in this dissertation. 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, it can be concluded that the blurring of internal and external security leads to 'new' security threats, such as undermining organized crime and threats in the cyber domain, that can undermine liberal democracy. Consequently, states struggle to provide security for their citizens. Note that this constitutes a broader definition of vertical undermining than is used by Boutellier, as described in chapter 1, who mainly focuses on undermining organized crime (Boutellier et al., 2020).

It must be noted that with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, an external threat is felt again in many European states that has not been felt for a long time, particularly in Western and Southern Europe. For most Nordic and Eastern European countries, this threat has always been there.

Horizontal undermining explained: declining social cohesion, social unrest, and parallel societies

As several authors have noted, inequalities in liberal democracies are rising and the middle class is slowly disappearing (Fukuyama, 2012; Guilluy, 2018). Political theorists are convinced that a sizable middle class is necessary for a stable democracy to exist and that societies with extremes of wealth and poverty are more prone to authoritarian rule or populist uprisings (Fukuyama, 2012, 2018). The growing gap between the elite and the masses can in that sense be seen as undermining (Guilluy, 2018). 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 (Boutellier, 2007; Fukuyama, 2020b, 2020a). Rising inequalities also undermine social cohesion (Bekkers, 2023; Tops & Tromp, 2017).

People who feel more socially marginalized 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 their views (Gidron & Hall, 2019). These feelings lead to identity politics and the 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'. It argues that politics should be an expression of the will of the people (Jones, 2019).

Social polarization can be exacerbated by foreign interference, often aimed 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.' (Nationaal Coördinator voor Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, 2019)*

Another Dutch report points out that social and political stability is harmed by states, like Russia, who attempt to undermine the democratic legal order in other countries and states with active diaspora politics, such as Iran and Turkey. Economic stability in the Netherlands is mainly harmed by Russian and Chinese espionage and other economic activities by China (Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst et al., 2021). Social media also plays an important role: Facebook and Twitter / X have both confirmed that since 2019 foreign influence operations have taken place on their platforms, coming from China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi-Arabia, and Venezuela (Bekkers, 2023).

What are the consequences of these developments for the security and the stability of liberal democracy? Several western liberal societies have seen outbursts of civil unrest in recent years. For example, the 'gilets jaunes' ('yellow vests') in France, protesting farmers in the Netherlands, the unrest in the United States after the 2020 presidential elections and resistance and rioting in several countries against government measures in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent Dutch government report speaks of interaction between an activistic upper layer that protests in public and a radical undercurrent that speaks out against COVID-19 measures. This has created an environment in which the threshold for extremist behavior has been lowered. (Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, 2021; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, 2021).

Research shows that the number of demonstrations worldwide has risen sharply after 2009 to a level that had not been seen since the 1960's, and research on demonstrations in 9 Dutch cities shows an explosive growth in the number of demonstrations: from 1315 in 2014 to 4227 in 2021 (Stekelenburg, 2023). Stekelenburg, in her research, distinguishes between demonstrations following from horizontal polarization (between groups in society) and vertical polarization (against the authorities). The latter category usually leads to more violent protests (in addition to threats against politicians, administrators, scientists, and journalists) (Stekelenburg, 2023). A complicating factor is the mobilizing potential of social media (Stekelenburg, 2023). Social media may work as a valve, releasing some pressure, but also as a bellows, leading to a hardening of protests, as Stekelenburg describes. Her research shows that demonstrations against the government are in many cases not announced to the authorities beforehand, making it difficult for the authorities (particularly the police) to prepare adequately (Stekelenburg, 2023). In addition, research in the Netherlands shows that police performance in situations of social unrest can differ, based on conditions (such as the location or decisions by the local mayor), impotence (lack of operational possibilities, for example when large groups of farmers protested with heavy materiel) or reluctance to act (because of sympathizing with the protesters) (Boutellier, 2023).

Other researchers show that social media facilitate the mobilization of large groups of people in such a short time that the police do not have adequate time to build an intelligence position, which makes it more difficult for them to act (Doeleman et al., 2023). Legal obstacles also prevent monitoring of citizens in many cases (Doeleman et al., 2023). This is related to the third security challenge for liberal democracy: the undermining of liberal democracy by the state.

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 consequently, criminal subcultures can emerge, where a neighborhood is effectively run by a criminal organization (Lam et al., 2018). For example, there are indications in the Netherlands that bars and restaurants, closed for a long time due to COVID-19 lockdown measures, received financial support from organized crime organizations (Hueck & Lange, 2020).

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. Although the use of the term 'no-go zones' remains controversial in Sweden, government authorities and political parties from the left and right agree that there are vulnerable areas in the country where law and order is a problem. Research shows

that deadly street violence is on the rise and organized crime, gang crimes and shootings are a growing problem (Åberg, 2019). Dutch research by Terpstra and Salet speaks about 'hidden neighborhoods' (*verborgen wijken)*, in which authorities find it difficult to identify the problems taking place in the neighborhood and to connect with the citizens (Terpstra & Salet, 2023). This problem is mainly seen in so-called 'superdiverse' neighborhoods with a very heterogeneous population, in which citizens have close relations with people abroad and / or people with comparable political or religious ideas. These 'hidden neighborhoods' provide opportunities for the illegal economy (Terpstra & Salet, 2023).

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, NGOs, and 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 (Börzel & Risse, 2016; Krasner & Risse, 2014; Risse & Stollenwerk, 2018).

Based on this section, it can be concluded that the declining social cohesion in Northwestern European societies, leading to instability and social unrest, is undermining liberal democracy (horizontal undermining).

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, following the 2016 terrorist attacks, the state of emergency was only lifted once new legislation that included state-of-emergency measures was in place (De Massol De Rebetz & Van der Woude, 2019). Van der Woude has also studied Dutch counter-terrorism legislation and concludes that legislative procedure regarding 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 thrive if its government is prepared to uphold the rule of law and protects individuals' rights in the law (Van der Woude, 2012).

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 out the risk of ethnic profiling and of a blurring between the use of immigration law and criminal law, and thereby the risk of a misuse of powers by the organization. This could have an impact on how the Dutch population perceives the procedural justice of state practices (Van der Woude et al., 2016).

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 (Mythen et al., 2013). Parmar has studied counter-terrorism measures in the UK as well and concludes that they are based on the concept of pre-emption (act preventively before the enemy does), which is a military based doctrine. In his opinion, feelings of measures being unfair may lead to radicalization, making the measures counterproductive (Parmar, 2011).

Pavone, Santiago Gomez and Jacquet-Chifelle have studied the concept of security and conclude that it has shifted to pre-emptive security. 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, and argue that security and liberty are not mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive of Western democratic societies (Pavone et al., 2016). Hodgson, based on a study of state responses to terrorism in the UK and France, similarly concludes that current political discourse contrasts liberty with security. In her opinion, this contrast is misleading: diminishing liberty also diminishes citizens' security in relation to the state, by allowing for greater executive power. At the same time, it is questionable whether diminishing liberty increases citizens' security against the threat of terrorism (Hodgson, 2013). Richard talks about the intelligence dilemma: security knowledge and technology intended to defend liberal democracy against violence seriously runs the risk of undermining democracy by violating civil liberties (Richards, 2012). In the Netherlands, two recent incidents indicate that government services, both civilian and military, may have used intelligence capabilities to monitor citizens without being authorized to do so (Kouwenhoven et al., 2021; Rosenberg & Berkhout, 2020).

Securitization theory can be seen as an important explanatory factor for undermining by the state. It states that security threats are socially constructed and emerge through a discursive process that dramatizes and prioritizes them. Two main schools of thought can be distinguished, the Copenhagen School and the Paris School. While the Copenhagen School focuses on securitization as the 'politics of exception', the 'Paris School' defines securitization from the notion of a 'politics of unease'.

For the Copenhagen School, the process of securitization usually starts with a speech act. A prime example in the last 20 years is the declaration of the 'war on terror' after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States. Jackson, in his critical discourse analysis of the 'war on terror', 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 (Jackson, 2005). In a recent example, many political leaders, for example the French president Macron, have declared a 'war on COVID-19' (Macron, 2020). The Dutch mayor of Eindhoven, after riots in his city following the establishment of a curfew as a measure to curb the spreading of COVID-19, stated he feared the country was moving towards civil war (NOS Nieuws, 2021). As Steinert states, democratic politicians have learned the value of declaring a crisis in getting things done quickly (Steinert, 2003). Recent research shows that the extent to which disaster response was securitized was the best predictor of domestic use of the military during the COVID-19 pandemic, better than any contextual factor or civilian capacity issues (Erickson et al., 2023).

In the Copenhagen School, the security speech act has performative power. The extraordinary circumstances it illustrates, make it necessary to act quickly, at the cost of the regular democratic process. Securitization calls for *silence* and *speed*. In that sense, the exceptionalism of security is contrasted with the procedural normalcy of democratic politics. Therefore, proponents of this school consider securitization to be bad for democracy, even more so as the proliferation of threats risks extending extraordinary measures and exceptional circumstances to normality (Aradau, 2004). Successfully securitized issues will, according to the Copenhagen School, reflect a national security 'mode' or, as Wæver puts it, a 'logic of war', by which he means a logic of 'challenge-resistance (defense)-escalation-recognition/defeat' (Roe, 2012, p. 258).

The use of a war metaphor may have a different effect as well, namely that the line between warfare and police work becomes blurred (Steinert, 2003). As American general Richard Myers has said "*If you call it a war, then you think of people in uniform as being the solution*" (Stevenson, 2006, p. 48). This process of hybridization of the armed forces and the police has been explored in chapter 2.

The view that securitization is bad for democracy is shared by proponents of the Paris School. The Paris School has focused on how the practices of various agencies, such as the police or border guards, lead to securitization processes without necessarily including a security speech act (Roe, 2012). Bigo, for example, has shown the importance of securitizing practices in addition to discourse (Bigo, 2006). He shows how security professionals exaggerate or provoke existing fears for the purpose of promoting their

own institutional interests (Bigo, 2002, p. 64). Therefore, while the Copenhagen School emphasizes the 'politics of exception', in the Paris School securitization is a consequence of a 'politics of unease'. As stated by Aradau, in the Paris School, "the exceptionalism of security metamorphoses into a different suspension of democratic procedures, a suspension motivated by expert knowledge" (Aradau, 2004, p. 396).

Balzacq calls these securitizing practices the '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 (Balzacq et al., 2015, p. 2). This could for example be the case when activities that have traditionally been implemented to tackle security issues and/or can be seen as extraordinary are used on this specific issue. Léonard applies this theory to Frontex and concludes 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 (Léonard, 2010).

Is securitization indeed bad for democracy? As has been pointed out by Roe, fast-tracking legislation does limit the functioning of normal politics. On the other hand, even though the legislative process is accelerated, some level of examination and oversight is still required to gain approval of the citizens of the state concerned. He also underlines that there can be a good cause to speed up legislation in unusual circumstances (Roe, 2012).

He illustrates this with the UK example, where security laws are often fast-tracked. A 2009 House of Lords report on fast-track legislation shows that although fast-tracking is not restricted solely to the proposed implementation of emergency measures, many of the fast-tracked bills in the UK indeed relate to security issues, and particularly to the threat of terrorism (Roe, 2012). The 2001 Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act (ATCSA) only took a month from the bill's introduction in the House of Commons until it received Royal Assent. However, as Roe does point out, some securitized issues are handled more in accordance with a normal mode of politics; the subsequent Counter Terrorism Act (CTA) of 2008 took 10 months from introduction to Royal Assent.

The COVID-19 crisis provides another example of governments taking swift measures and subsequent legislation being fast-tracked through parliament. Dutch experts in constitutional law have stated that the 'Temporary law measures COVID-19' provides the government with too much power at the expense of the democratic process of passing a low (Dietvorst, 2020). However, with the COVID-19 crisis feeling less acute, the Dutch Senate, in May 2022, refused to extend this temporary law for the fifth time, and in early 2023 refused to speed up the parliamentary procedure to discuss the adjusted Public Health Act, which the Minister of Health had requested (Eerste Kamer, 2022, 2023).

The COVID-19 crisis an also be seen as an example of the 'politics of unease'. As noted above above, Bigo has pointed out how security professionals exaggerate or provoke existing fears for the purpose of promoting their own institutional interests (Bigo, 2002). According to Aradau, this leads to a different suspension of democratic procedures, motivated by expert knowledge (Aradau, 2004). This is not to say that in the COVID-19 crisis governments exaggerated or provoked fears, but it has been stated that their trust in experts for determining policies in this crisis has more similarities with a technocracy than with a democracy (Boersema, 2020).

State undermining is not limited to the state taking measures that curtail civil liberties or disturb the normal democratic process. It also has to do with state responsiveness and checks and balances between the executive, legislative and judicial powers. For example, the recent large scandal in the Netherlands that revealed that thousands of parents have been unduly accused of fraud with government allowances for childcare and have been systematically ignored in their attempts to get justice. The scandal is indicative of the legitimacy crisis in government and has led to a growing distrust in the government (Hooven & Ven, 2021). Research shows that the Netherlands has become a low trust society and that trust in Parliament and government have never been this low before (Bekkers, 2023).

In criminology, scandals like this one are defined as 'crimes of the powerful', that are related to a disbalance in power between government actors and citizens, but also between big companies and consumers. Other examples of 'crimes of the powerful' are corruption, institutional racism, but also, for example, war crimes. The term 'crimes of the powerful' can be confusing because many of these events or scandals are not criminalized in legal terms. Therefore, the focus in this subfield of criminology has shifted towards limiting or restoring the harm caused by these actions. This is called the 'social harm' or 'zemiology' approach (van Swaaningen, 2020). If the authorities fail in restoring harm, this may lead to polarization, social unrest, and demonstrations (Stekelenburg, 2023).

Tjeenk Willink argues for checks and balances not only between the powers within the state, but also between the state and society. A democratic government, in his opinion, needs self-conscious citizens and a strong civil society (Hooven & Ven, 2021; Tjeenk Willink, 2018). Politicians plead for a new social contract to restore trust between the government and its citizens (Omtzigt, 2021).

Concluding, this section has, based on the literature, shown that liberal democracy can be undermined vertically, horizontally, and by the state. In the next section, the hypothesis 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.

4.3 LIBERAL DEMOCRACY UNDER PRESSURE: THE DATA

The previous section contained a literature review, providing evidence for the first hypothesis of this dissertation, concerning the undermining of liberal democracy in Northwestern Europe. In this section, relevant databases will be explored for the same purpose.

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, the percentage of respondents stating it is 'absolutely important'l to live in a democracy is much lower for younger respondents than for older respondents (Foa & Mounk, 2017). This may very well indicate a declining popular support for democracy, although a different option would be that support for democracy grows as respondents get older. The data for Finland, The Netherlands and Sweden can be found in figure 4.1.

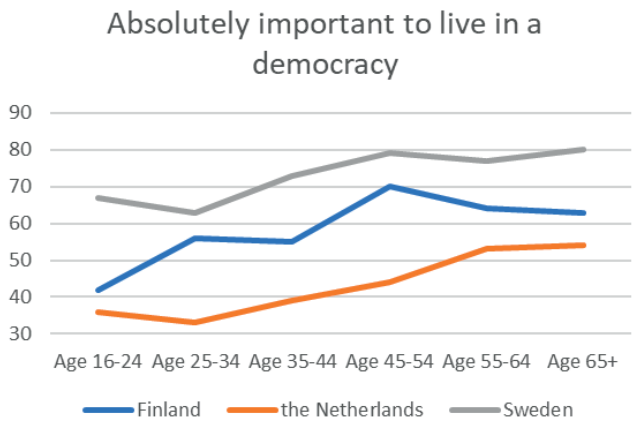

Figure 4.1: Importance of democracy by age intervals
Percentage of respondents rating it 'absolutely important' (a rating of 10 on a 10-point scale) to 'live in a country that is governed democratically' in the World Values Survey, wave 2017-2020 (Haerpfer et al., 2020).

As is clear from these data, a relatively small percentage of young people finds it 'absolutely important' to live in a democracy in the three studied cases. For the Netherlands and

Finland, it is 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.

Liberal democracy: V-Dem and IDEA

As shown 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 under pressure? As has been stated before, this study addresses the last 20 years.

Two high standard databases (Boese, 2019; Landman, 2012; Munck & Verkuilen, 2002) 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 (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2019).
- 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).

The IDEA and V-Dem data for Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden can be found in figure 4.2[14].

For V-Dem, only the Liberal Democracy Index itself is presented in figure 4.2. For IDEA, some other indicators from their conceptual framework have been included, as these may shed some extra 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 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 'funda-

14 The underlying data can be found in Table 4.1 in the appendix to this chapter.

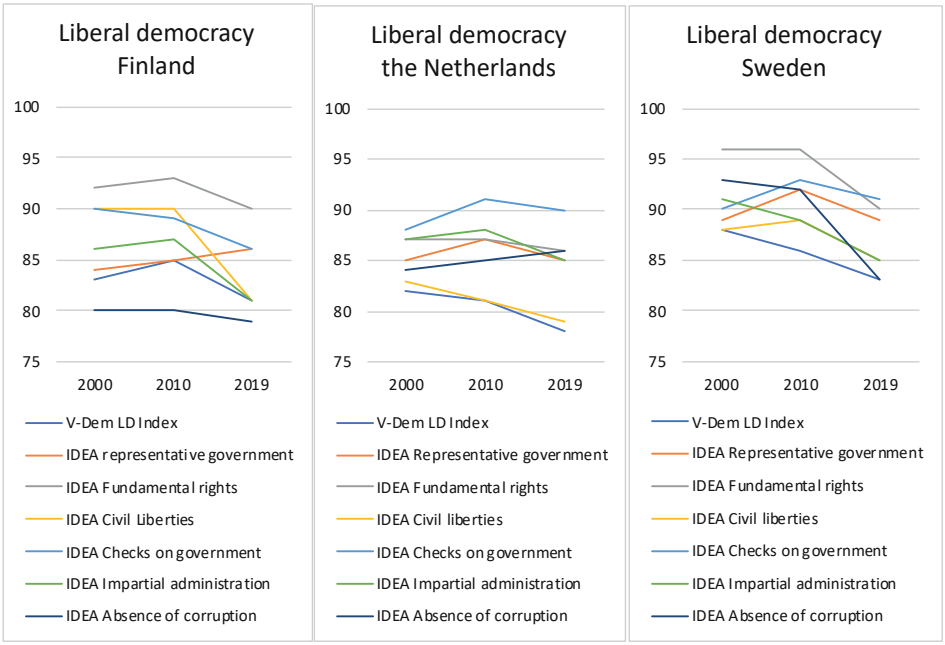

Figure 4.2: Liberal democracy in Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden

mental 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 both horizontal and state undermining.

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 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 (V-Dem Institute, 2020).

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 both old and new democracies (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2019). Older democracies are struggling to guarantee equitable and sustainable economic and social development. Consequently, 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 delivers. Migration issues have sparked 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. The report states that populists disrespect the accountability institutions that check government, protect political pluralism, and constitute democracy. This propensity for unchecked power makes populism a danger 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, IDEA states that there are signs that their quality is eroding, especially those aspects which are related to civic space. Information and communication technology and individualization are reshaping civic space, resulting in looser and more fluid types of interactions facilitated by social media. The 'gilets jaunes' and Extinction Rebellion are good examples of these interactions. At the same time, civic space is shrinking because 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 their democratic attributes. Among them the three cases of this study.

Governance: World Bank

Since 1996, the World Bank has produced its yearly Worldwide Governance Indicators (Kaufman & Kraay, 2019). 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 critique on the construct validity of 'governance', the data are widely used (Kaufmann et al., 2010; Thomas, 2010). The World Bank 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 this chapter, 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 provides insight in 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 4.3.[15]

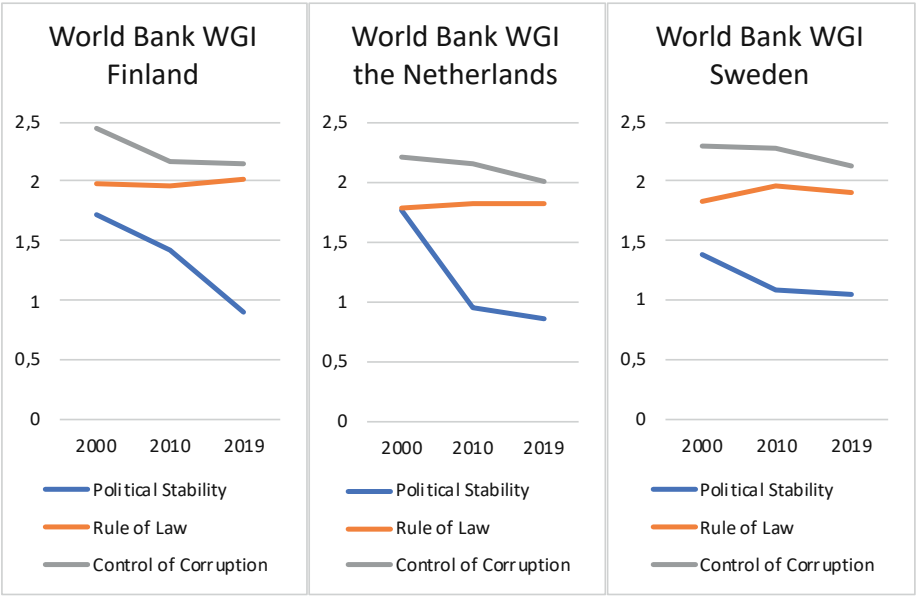

Figure 4.3: World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators

As is clear from figure 4.3, 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. After the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the war in Ukraine this was followed 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 showed a marked decline for

15 The underlying data can be found in Table 1 in the appendix to this dissertation.

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 concluded that democracies are under pressure (Fund for Peace, 2019). 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 has led to xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiment. The third shock taking place since 2020 is the COVID-19 crisis.

Relevant indicators of the Fund for Peace for the purpose of this study 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 whether there is public scapegoating of groups. The relevant data can be found in figure 4.4.[16]

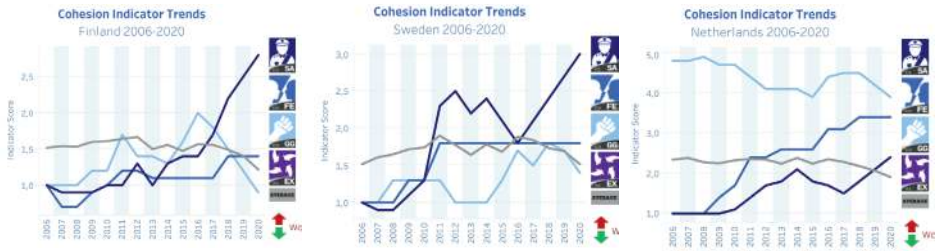

Figure 4.4: Fund for Peace cohesion indicators

16 The underlying data can be found in Table 5.1 in the appendix to this chapter.

As is clear from figure 4.4, all three cases have seen a marked decline in the 'security apparatus' indicator (SA), especially in the last 5 years, which is an indication for the 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 the case for the growing terrorism threat in this period. As for the 'factionalized elites' indicator (FE), the Netherlands and to a lesser extent Finland have worsened, while Sweden has remained stable. This could be an indication for horizontal undermining. On the other hand, 'group grievances' (GG) do not seem to be a major issue in the 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 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 challenges that may explain this pressure. In the next section, the results from both the literature review and the databases will be combined.

4.4 RESULTS

Based on the data, it can be concluded 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.

As for the hypothesis that liberal democracy is put under pressure by three forms of undermining, based on a document analysis, section 4.2 concluded that the decline may be explained by the struggle by states to provide security in an era where the blurring of internal and external security leads to new security threats (vertical undermining), by the decline of social cohesion in society leading to unrest and instability (horizontal undermining), and by the undermining of liberal democracy by the state (state undermining).

To start with the first kind of undermining, 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 Crimea by Russia, the Ukraine conflict and the rising cyberthreat. What all these threats have in common is that they cross borders. Some confirmation for this form of undermining 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 countries, 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. Europol has associated this with the growing influence of organized crime on (local) government.

As for the second kind of undermining, 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 can lead to identity politics, polarization, and the rise of populism. There are indications that foreign actors exacerbate this polarization 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 it can be gathered 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, which can be related to both horizontal and state undermining. 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 dissatisfied with the results that the democratic system delivers. The Fund for Peace data 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' indicator does not show a marked decline in any of the countries. However, there is a significant difference between the Netherlands and the Nordic countries, the latter scoring better on this indicator.

As for the third form of undermining, undermining of liberal democracy by the state, the literature review shows that European governments have taken several measures that can be seen as undermining liberal democracy, for example in counterterrorism, COVID-19 measures, the move towards pre-emptive 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 because 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.

4.5 CONCLUSION

As shown in this chapter, liberal democracy in Northwestern 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 that constitute three categories of undermining.

The undermining of liberal democracy is perhaps not an acute crisis, but rather fits the pattern of a creeping crisis as defined by Boin, Ekengren and Rhinard:

> *A creeping crisis is a threat to widely shared societal values or life-sustaining systems that evolves over time and space, is foreshadowed by precursor events, subject to varying degrees of political and / or social attention, and impartially or insufficiently addressed by authorities (Boin et al., 2021, p. 3).*

The key challenge for such a crisis is to generate enough political and societal attention so that this may lead to action (Boin et al., 2021). This dissertation aims to contribute to that process and generate options for the armed forces to foster the stability of liberal democracy.

In the next chapter, the empirical part of this dissertation will continue with the results of the first case study, the Netherlands.

APPENDIX: TABLE 4.1: DATA ON LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN NORTHWESTERN EUROPE

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

	2000	2010	2019
- Representative government	89	92	89
- Fundamental rights	96	96	90
- Civil liberties	88	89	85
- Checks on government	90	93	91
- Impartial administration	91	89	85
- Absence of corruption	93	92	83
World Bank			
- Political Stability	1,39	1,09	1,05
- Rule of Law	1,83	1,96	1,91
- Control of Corruption	2,3	2,27	2,12
Fund for Peace	(2006)		
- Overall score	18,2	20,9	20,3
- Security apparatus	1,0	1,3	2,7
- Factionalized elites	1,0	1,3	1,8
- Group Grievances	1,0	1,3	1,7

NB: V-Dem and IDEA use a 0-1 scale, which I have adjusted to 0-100 for better readibility. 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.