



## **MEDIA FREEDOM, DEMOCRACY, AND SECURITY**

### **RESEARCH REPORT**

**COMMISSIONED BY THE OSCE REPRESENTATIVE ON FREEDOM OF THE  
MEDIA**

**AND PREPARED BY**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report highlights the following research findings:

1. Media freedom's critical role in democracy provides insights to why media freedom is a key mechanism to ensure greater security. Free media ensure the free flow of information, foster transparency and accountability of government, and serve as a civic forum for public debate.
2. When countries move towards autocracy, media freedom is the most, and often the first, aspect of democracy to come under attack and be eroded. Assaults on media freedom are a strong indication that other democratic rights and freedoms – and therefore human security – are also in danger.
3. The accumulated research evidence affirms that democracies do not go to war against each other. Democratic practices make democracies prone to seek peaceful ways to resolve political conflicts, while democratic institutions limit incumbents' incentives and capacities to engage in armed conflict, and free media are key in this regard.
4. Free media – as a powerful accountability force in its own right – reduce the risk of international armed conflict by putting security concerns on both public and political agendas and by providing the public with accurate and timely information about the risks of armed conflict and about the horrors and reality of conflict. Media freedom is thus critical for ensuring greater international security.
5. High quality democracies with higher levels of media freedom are also less prone to internal armed conflict. Democratic institutions minimize the risk of violent intra-group conflict by absorbing and channeling discontent and grievances through legal means and established procedures. In this process independent media play a crucial role, by enabling peaceful competition of ideas and resolution of disputes and by facilitating dialogue between contending individuals and groups.
6. Countries that are in a transitioning phase toward either democracy or autocracy are more volatile, less institutionalized, and thus more prone to internal armed conflict.
7. Similar pattern holds for media freedom: moderate levels of media freedom are associated with higher risks of internal armed conflict. Yet, as countries progress beyond a certain threshold, further improvements in media freedom markedly decrease the risk of internal armed conflict.
8. Research evidence also suggests that democracies use less state repression and have better protection of human rights than autocratic countries.
9. Media freedom is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for reducing state repression. Free media expose and scrutinize state repression, identify victims and perpetrators, keep the public informed, and enable condemnation and protest.
10. Media freedom is a requisite for democracies to be a system for peaceful resolution of political conflicts and to generate more secure societies.
11. Media freedom alone cannot prevent conflicts. Yet, media freedom is indispensable for both democracy and security.

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## INTRODUCTION

Can there be security without democracy and media freedom? Democracy is often argued to be a system for peacefully resolving political conflicts, and hence generating more secure societies. Rigorous research evidence provides clear guidance on this topic. Freedom of expression in general, and media freedom in particular, are necessary for peaceful deliberation and resolution of conflicts among contending individuals and groups. Free media are also a key watchdog on decision makers, holding them accountable to the public and thus making sure that ruling parties cannot use deception to lure citizens into supporting internal or international armed conflicts and undermining peace and security.

This report provides a review of the latest and most robust research published on the relationship between media freedom, democracy, and security. It also offers a statistical analysis of the relationship based on the data from the *Varieties of Democracy* (V-Dem), *Uppsala Conflict Data Program / Peace Research Institute Oslo* (UCDP/PRIO), *Correlates of War Project* (COW) and *Militarized Interstate Disputes 4 Dataset* (MID).

The report focuses on one key dimension of security: the violation of the non-derogable human rights to life and to physical integrity through international armed conflicts, internal armed conflicts, and state repression. This focus allows us to take a comprehensive look at how media freedom and democracy impact some of the most serious and large-scale infringements of security and violations of human rights.<sup>1</sup>

Research evidence and analysis presented in this report convincingly demonstrate the links between media freedom, democracy, and security. A large body of scientific studies show that democracies are less prone to engage in international and internal armed conflicts. Available research evidence and statistical analysis also suggest that media freedom – as a critical mechanism – is a key factor explaining why democracies have lower rates of armed interstate and domestic conflict, as well as lower levels of state repression and human rights violations.

In sum, the research reviewed shows that media freedom and democracy improve human security, as well as enhance international and domestic peace. A world with less media freedom and fewer democracies thus means more conflict, worsened security and increased violations of human rights.

## Media Freedom and Democracy Are in Decline

The world is currently in a “third wave of autocratization” (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). The 2024 Democracy Report from V-Dem (Nord et al. 2024) shows that the level of democracy by population-weighted measures is now down to levels last seen in 1985. While the number of countries in the world is about evenly divided between democracies

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<sup>1</sup> Although this report leaves out other types of recurring threats to security (such as riots, terrorism, and organized crime) and does not cover other factors related to basic human rights (such as access to water, food, health care, and education), a large body of scientific evidence shows that democracies outperform autocracies on many important measurements such as economic growth, human development, provision of basic public goods, and achievement of climate targets (see Lundstedt et al. 2023 for summary of research findings). It is thus reasonable to suggest that the link between media freedom, democracy and security would hold for other aspects of human security as well.

and autocracies, 71% of the world population was living in autocracies by 2023. This is up from 50% in 2003.

At the time of writing, 42 countries are undergoing autocratization (i.e., experiencing substantial and sustained decline in levels of democracy), while only 18 countries are democratizing. The 42 autocratizing countries host 2.8 billion people, or 35% of the world population, while the 18 democratizing countries are home to only 400 million people, or 5% of the world population. When countries autocratize, media freedom is the most, and often the first, aspect of democracy to come under attack and be eroded (Nord et al. 2024).

The world map in Figure 1 shows the state of media freedom in 2023 based on the Freedom of Expression and the Media Index from the V-Dem dataset v14. The broader decline of democracy that V-Dem Institute has tracked for the past decade is closely linked to the global decline in freedom of expression and media freedom. Media freedom is the component of democracy that is most consistently and forcefully under attack. A series of V-Dem indicators measuring different aspects of media freedom are among the top 20 indicators declining in the largest number of countries between 2013 and 2023 (Nord et al. 2024). Government censorship of the media, freedom of academic and cultural expression, and harassment of journalists stand out as the top three indicators to have declined in the most countries in that period (ibid).

This snapshot of findings reflects that media freedom is a prime target and often suffers first, and the most, when countries take an autocratic turn. Assaults on media freedom are a strong indication that other human rights and civil liberties are also in danger. As the analyses of this report show, assaults on media freedom not only spell bad news for democracy, but also for international and domestic security.

**FIGURE 1. STATE OF MEDIA FREEDOM, 2023**

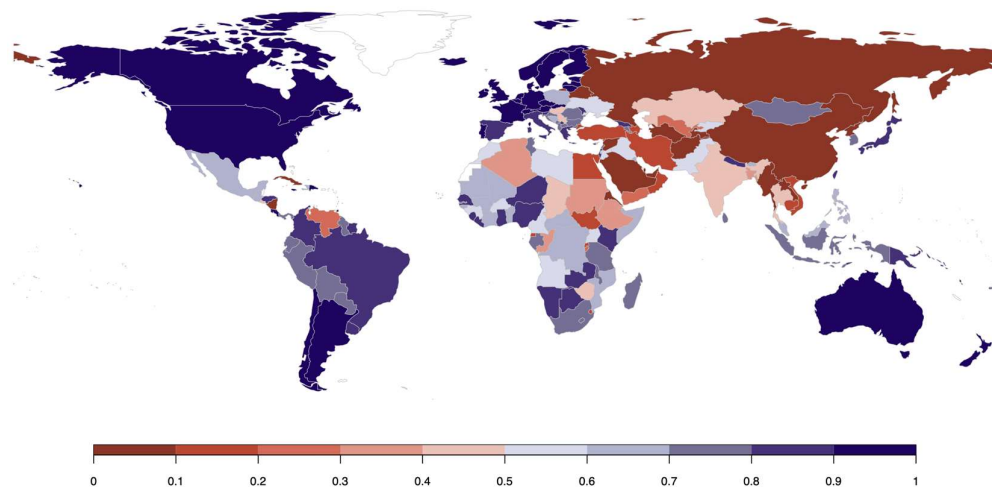


Figure 1 shows the state of media freedom in 2023 based on the Freedom of Expression and the Media Index from the V-Dem dataset v14. The Freedom of Expression and the Media Index measures the extent to which government respects press and media freedom, the freedom of ordinary people to discuss political matters at home and in the public sphere, as well as the freedom of academic and cultural expression.

## MEDIA FREEDOM'S CRITICAL ROLE IN ENHANCING SECURITY

Media freedom is integral to democracy in any modern definition of the term (see, e.g., Adserà, Boix, & Payne 2003; Becker, Vlad, & Nusser 2007; Norris 2004; Pasek 2006; Prior 2007). The critical role of the media in the functioning of democracy also provides insights to why media freedom is so fundamental to security.

First, free media *ensure the free flow of information* in society necessary for deliberation between opposing groups, free and fair recurring elections arbitrating between those groups and ensuring that losing sides get a possibility to come to power in the future, and the capacity to hold elected officials accountable for protecting human rights and resolving domestic as well as international conflicts as peacefully as possible without deception (Dahl 1971, 1989). The media inform citizens about decisions made by executive, legislative or judicial authorities on key issues related to public safety and security and thus play a crucial role in overseeing the work of security and justice providers.

Second, beyond simply reporting on current events, *free, independent, pluralistic media serve as a watchdog* on decision makers by shedding light on the abuses and wrongdoings of state authorities (Norris 2014). The media also reveal attempts to use deception to lure people into supporting unnecessary armed conflicts. This is important for the public to be able to scrutinize and condemn wrongdoing, and to use democratic institutions to make sure leaders follow their preference for security. The media thus foster accountability of state actors to society at large and promote avoidance of escalation of conflict.

The function of a watchdog is also critical in the presence of human rights violations (Whitten-Woodring 2009), especially when these are the result of state repression. Free media expose and scrutinize such actions, identify victims and perpetrators, keep the public informed, and enable condemnation and protest. This has the effect of both disincentivizing actors to violate human rights and incentivizing them to cease to do so once it is happening. A government that controls the media will be more capable of either covering up or legitimizing violence and abuse, whereas one that is subject to scrutiny by free, independent, and pluralistic media will have to pay the price of both domestic and international backlash against such actions (Carey et al. 2023). Thus, media freedom is a key component in upholding security and holding actors accountable once security has been put at risk.

Finally, free media are an integral part of the *civic forum* within which democratic public debate, facilitating informed actions, is possible (Norris 2006). Empirical evidence suggests that media freedom leads to greater political stability, rule of law, government efficiency and democracy (ibid).

## Media Freedom is Interlinked with Democracy

Media freedom and democracy are closely linked empirically. Figure 2 visualizes the link between the levels of media freedom and democracy using the V-Dem dataset v14. The left panel of Figure 2 shows the state of media freedom and democracy in all countries in 2023. Autocratic countries in this panel are marked in red, while democratic ones in blue. The right panel of Figure 2 shows the historical trends in the two indices for the period 1900-2023. Two observations are important.

First, there is no democracy without media freedom. This fact is illustrated in the left panel of Figure 1: All democracies cluster in the upper right corner of the graph (relatively high levels of media freedom), and all score above 0.64 on the Freedom of Expression and the Media Index. By contrast, the level of media freedom in autocracies ranges from values down at around 0 up to 0.8. A few autocracies have relatively free, independent media, while others restrict media freedom and prosecute journalists. Free and independent media are thus indispensable for every democratic society, yet media freedom alone does not ensure democracy.

Second, the correlation between media freedom and democracy is very high (0.9 for 2023 and 0.89 for the period 1900-2023). As the trend line in the right panel of Figure 2 makes clear, democracy and media freedom follow almost the same trend. Yet, democracy is more demanding (always falls below than media freedom), confirming the fact that democracy is more than media freedom, but media freedom is an essential pillar for democracy, and no democracy can be achieved without protection of media freedom.

**FIGURE 2. DEMOCRACY AND MEDIA FREEDOM, 2023**

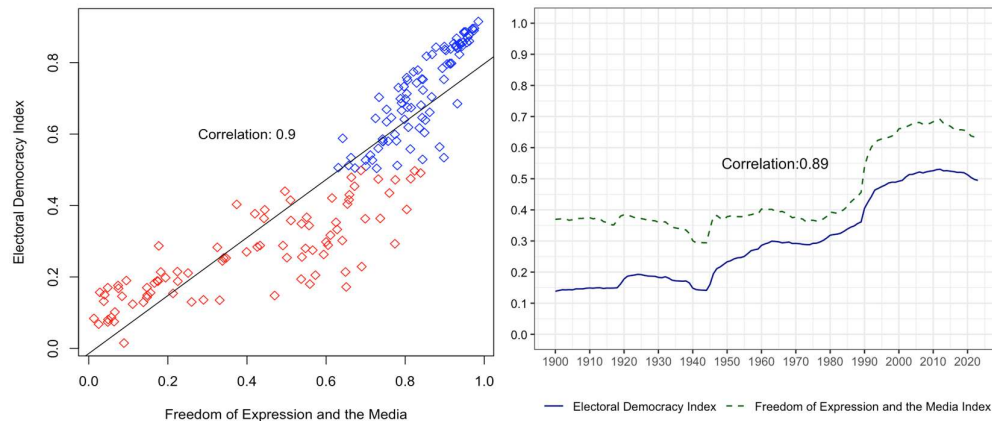


Figure 2 visualizes the link between the level of democracy and media freedom. The left panel shows the state of media freedom and democracy in all countries in 2023, as measured by the Freedom of Expression and the Media Index and the Electoral Democracy Index, respectively. Autocratic countries are marked in red and democratic ones in blue. The right panel shows the historical trends in the two indices for the period 1900-2023. Data for both indices comes from the V-Dem dataset v14.

## Attacks on Media Freedom are Attacks on Democracy

Figures 3 and 4 provide some further evidence on how closely media freedom and democracy are linked. Figure 3 shows mean changes in the Freedom of Expression and the Media Index, and the Liberal Democracy Index during the last decade, distinguishing between autocratizing, democratizing, and relatively stable countries. Figure 4 shows same trends positioning countries on the graph according to the magnitude of change in both indices.

Both figures show that attacks on freedom of expression and media freedom and autocratization go hand in hand and reinforce each other. *The Freedom of Expression and the Media Index declines the most in autocratizing countries and increases the most in democratizing countries.* These two opposite trends indicate that attacks on media freedom are serious threats to democracy and democratic resilience. The current global

erosion of media freedom is thus both a contributor to and a symptom of a global decline in democracy, a fact that makes it truly concerning.

**FIGURE 3. MEAN CHANGES IN THE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND THE MEDIA INDEX, AND THE LIBERAL DEMOCRACY INDEX AMONG AUTOCRATIZING AND DEMOCRATIZING COUNTRIES, 2013-2023**

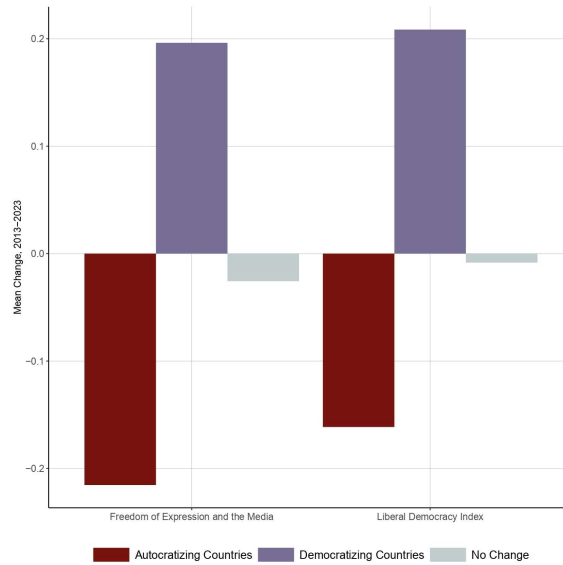


Figure 3 shows mean changes in the Freedom of Expression and the Media Index, and the Liberal Democracy Index during the last decade, distinguishing between autocratizing, democratizing, and relatively stable countries. Data for both indices comes from the V-Dem dataset v14.

**FIGURE 4. CHANGES IN THE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND THE MEDIA INDEX, AND THE LIBERAL DEMOCRACY INDEX, 2013-2023**

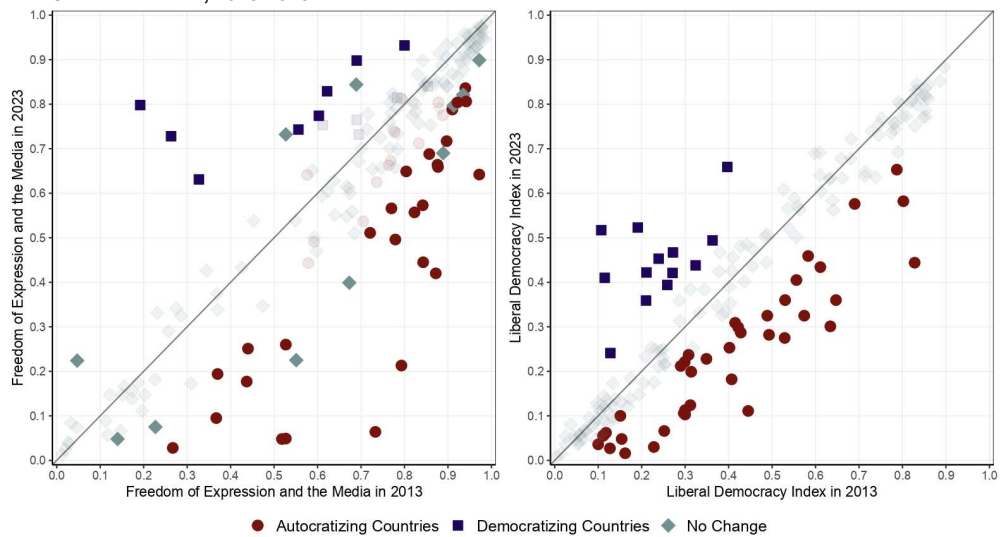


Figure 4 shows changes in the Freedom of Expression and the Media Index, and the Liberal Democracy Index between 2013 and 2023. Data for both indices comes from the V-Dem dataset v14.



## **MEDIA FREEDOM, DEMOCRACY, AND SECURITY**

This report focuses on one key dimension of security: the violation of physical integrity, through events such as international armed conflict, internal armed conflict, and state repression. Thus, it does not cover the whole of OSCE's approach to comprehensive security but zooms in on the aspect of security that reflects the extent to which non-derogable human rights to life and to physical integrity are respected.

Drawing on much of the focus of earlier research, we distinguish between international and domestic threats to security. At the international level, we focus on the incidence of international armed conflict, i.e. "A conflict between two or more governments" (UCDP 2024). At the domestic level, we zoom in on internal armed conflict, meaning "A conflict between a government and a non-governmental party, with no interference from other countries" (UCDP 2024), and state repression, which is the abuse of state authority on its territory through acts such as political imprisonment, torture, and extrajudicial execution (see, e.g., Hill & Jones 2014).

Below follows a summary of the most important scientific evidence of the impact of democracy in general, and media freedom in particular, along with some original analyses, on the three aspects of security: international armed conflict, domestic armed conflict, and state repression.

### **International Armed Conflict**

International armed conflict is among the worst threats to security, and inevitably leads to large-scale suffering and breaches of human rights. Reducing the incidence of interstate wars constitutes one of the main objectives for improving security around the world.

A large body of scientific evidence convincingly demonstrates that democracy creates a more secure international environment. Factually, empirical analyses prove the point beyond doubt. There are two main theoretical propositions on why international peace is strongly and positively related to democracy.

The first proposition is normative, claiming that democracies cultivate characteristics and norms that make them prone to seek peaceful ways to resolve political conflicts (Maoz & Russett 1993; Russett & Oneal 2001). The second proposition is institutional, focusing on checks and balances, veto powers, division of powers, civil society, free and fair elections, and free media that in democracies constrain political leaders (Russett 1994). These institutional mechanisms of executive accountability are argued to limit incumbents' incentives and capacities to engage in armed conflict (Hegre et al. 2020). Hence, democracy is expected to improve international security, and media freedom is a key mechanism through which it does so.

Democracy is one of the most analysed factors for reducing the likelihood of international armed conflicts. In both older and contemporary research, the claim that democracies are less prone to engage in armed conflict with other democracies has received substantial empirical support (Rummel 1983; Maoz & Abdolali 1989; Gleditsch 1992; Maoz & Russett 1993; Bremer 1992; Dixon 1994; Russett & Oneal 2001; Dafoe et al. 2013; Bernhard et al. 2017; Altman et al. 2021; Hegre et al. 2020). Already in the 1980s, one prominent scholar

in this field noted that the democratic peace theory is “as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations” (Levy 1989: 270).

While the exact combination of mechanisms behind the democratic peace remains subject to a scientific debate (Hegre 2014), there is evidence that media freedom in particular reduces the risk of interstate armed conflict by keeping populations informed about the risks, horrors, and reality of such conflict (Van Belle 1997; Choi & James 2006). It is nevertheless important to note that less research has been done on the direct link between media freedom than democracy and international armed conflict, and findings are hence less robust than those regarding democracy and international armed conflict.

A recent publication illuminates how, and how much, democracy matters for international security. Altman et al.’s (2021) study, using V-Dem data and a global panel of countries, establishes that similarity between regimes in terms of their democracy levels is not sufficient for an international peace within a two-state relationship, or dyad. Instead, even dyads with different regime types are more peaceful *if their combined mean level of democracy is high*. More specifically, they find that pairs of states with scores of above 0.61 (out of 1) on the V-Dem’s Electoral Democracy Index have never gone to war with each other. States located in regions with low levels of democracy are 70% more likely to engage in conflict than states in regions with high levels of democracy. Thus, their study concludes that the level of democracy matters greatly for the likelihood of interstate conflict, and that the magnitude of this effect is large.

Another recent study (Hegre et al. 2020) investigates the structural mechanisms that make democracies behave peacefully towards each other. Leveraging the fine-grained features of V-Dem data on a sample of 173 countries for the period 1900-2010, the scholars focus on the three aspects of accountability – vertical (elections); horizontal (checks and balances); and social (civil society). Their study demonstrates that social accountability – a vigorous civil society – is the aspect that provides the strongest and most consistent explanation for the “democratic peace.” They also find that horizontal accountability is still important, but that vertical accountability only matters when combined with a strong social accountability. In other words, civil society paired with free and fair elections are the critical components eliminating the risk of interstate armed conflict. Unfortunately, this study does not test the impact of media freedom directly. However, media freedom is included in one of the robustness tests in the Appendix, and the results show that the effects of media freedom are statistically significant and substantial, suggesting that media freedom relates to interstate peace in a similar way.

## **MEDIA FREEDOM AND INTERNATIONAL ARMED CONFLICT**

We replicate the study by Hegre et al. (2020), focusing on the effects of media freedom on the onset of militarized interstate disputes (MID) that cause the death of at least one person.<sup>2</sup>

In line with expectations and the discussion presented above, the effect of media freedom on international armed conflict is consistent with the democratic peace: when both

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<sup>2</sup> Media freedom in this study is measured as the first principal component of the indicators tapping into the extent of print/broadcast censorship effort, harassment of journalists, media bias against opposition parties, media self-censorship when reporting on issues that the authorities consider politically sensitive, criticism of the government among the major print and broadcast outlets, and how wide a range of political perspectives the major print and broadcast media represent.

countries in the dyad have higher levels of media freedom, the risk of a fatal military dispute between the two states is much lower than if either have low scores. In size, the effect of media freedom is comparable to the effects of horizontal constraints.

Figure 5 provides evidence for this. The graph plots the marginal effect of media freedom on militarized interstate disputes. The metric for the y-axis is the change in the estimated probability of a militarized interstate dispute when comparing a pair of countries. The figure shows the marginal effect of a two standard deviation increase in the Media Freedom Index of one country as a function of the Media Freedom Index of another country in a pair of countries. The figure shows that as media freedom increases in the two countries, there is a corresponding decline in the likelihood of a militarized interstate dispute between them.

**FIGURE 5. CHANGE IN PROBABILITY OF AN INTERSTATE ARMED CONFLICT AS A FUNCTION OF MEDIA FREEDOM**

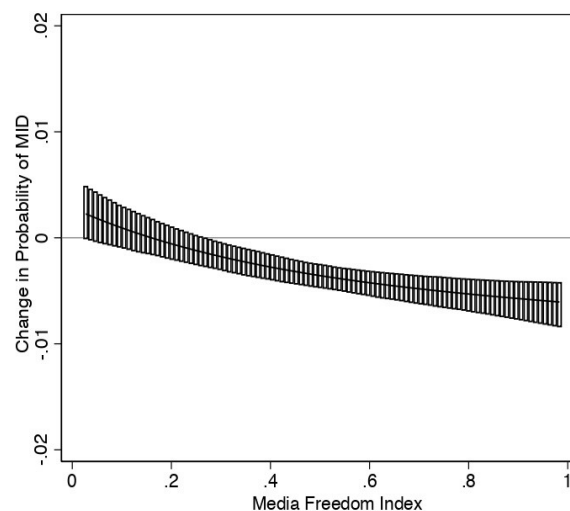


Figure 5 shows the marginal effect of a two standard deviation increase in the Media Freedom Index of one country as a function of the Media Freedom Index of another country.

We conclude that the evidence is strong that media freedom is critical for ensuring greater security in terms of lower incidence of interstate armed conflict. Put simply, media freedom promotes international peace.

## Domestic Armed Conflict

Domestic armed conflict undercuts security and typically leads to widespread violation of human rights.

*Rigorous scientific evidence suggests that democracy as a system for peacefully solving political conflict is key to domestic security.* A famous argument along this line is Arend Lijphart's (2004) idea of consociational democracy where the institutions, such as a proportional electoral system, are designed to ensure that all groups are fairly represented and to minimize the risk of violent intra-group conflict. Naturally, freedom of expression and media freedom play a key role by facilitating dialogue between individuals and groups. Thus, democracy and media freedom are expected to improve domestic security.

Scholars generally expect democracies to have less domestic armed conflict because democratic institutions find ways to absorb and channel discontent and conflict through legal and institutional means (Hegre 2014; Acemoglu & Robinson 2006; Fearon 2004). Independent, pluralistic media and wide-ranging freedom of expression, association, elections, and the like, enable peaceful competition of ideas, compromises, and resolution of disputes. These provide incentives for various groups in society to pursue their interests via peaceful means rather than feeling cornered into having only the option of violence. Democratic institutions also provide the possibility for losing sides to look forward to “another day” where they can come into power through elections and have their say. Free media, in turn, provide channels for a plurality of voices, which is key to such a prospect being viable.

By contrast, intra-group conflicts in authoritarian societies are much less likely to find ways to be resolved peacefully taking different sides into account. Disgruntled groups are therefore much more likely to feel “forced” to take arms. At the same time, the government, knowing this, is more likely to act repressively and violently.

Supporting the thesis that democracy provides mechanisms for peaceful resolution of conflict, robust recent evidence (focusing on the relationship between specific democratic institutions and civil conflict in a global sample of countries from 1817 to 2006) shows that *truly* free and fair electoral competition leads to the lowest risk of civil conflict (Bartusevičius & Skaaning 2018). Independent and pluralistic media are essential to a context where elections are free and fair. The best available scientific evidence thus suggests that media freedom seems to be critical for lowering the risk of domestic armed conflict as well.

An important caveat, supported by a wealth of empirical evidence (Muller & Weede 1990; Hegre et al. 2001; Fearon & Laitin 2003; Gleditsch & Ruggeri 2010; Cederman et al. 2010; Jones & Lupu 2018) is that “semi-democratic” or “hybrid” regimes, especially those transitioning from one regime to another, have a higher risk of onset of domestic armed conflict compared to both durable democracies and stable autocracies. Such regimes are more volatile, less institutionalized, and less predictable, and are therefore prone to internal armed conflict.

Evidence confirms that regimes that are in the “muddled middle,” or a transitioning phase, remain at a higher risk of conflict, while elections in post-conflict transitional settings run a high risk of renewing violence and conflict (Brancati & Snyder 2013; Flores & Nooruddin 2012). In their study of 134 developing countries from 1950 to 2012, Donno et al. (2022), show that low-quality presidential elections increase the risk of civil conflict in developing countries.

Looking at specific mechanisms linking democracy to domestic security, Fjelde et al.’s (2021) analysis demonstrates that both vertical (electoral) accountability and horizontal (checks and balances) accountability mitigate risk of civil conflict.<sup>3</sup> However, the relationship is non-linear and resembles an inverted U-shape confirming that the “muddled middle” is at the highest risk of internal armed conflict. The estimated marginal effect on risk of civil conflict from increasing vertical constraints first increases when moving up to 0.2 (on a scale from 0 to 1) and decreases afterwards. For horizontal

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<sup>3</sup> Moving from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 90<sup>th</sup> percentile on vertical (electoral) constraints reduces the probability of conflict onset in a given year from 2.9 to 0.9 percentage points, even if the risk of conflict is at its lowest when combined with horizontal (checks and balances) constraints.

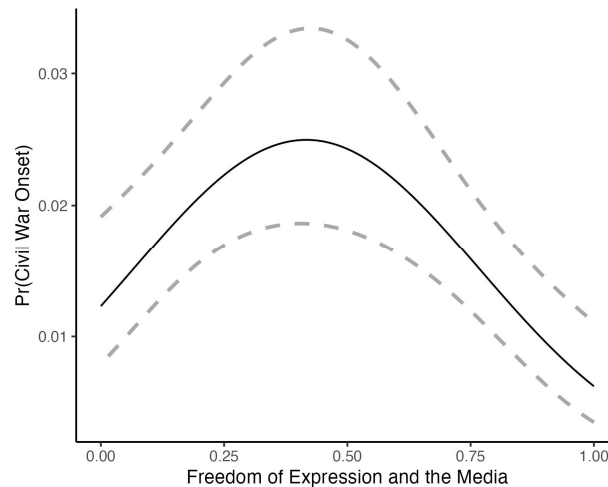
constraints, increases from around 0.4 (on a scale from 0 to 1) and upwards are associated with a markedly decreased risk of conflict.

The reasoning for the curve-linear relationship is that semi-democratic states are open enough for insurrections against the regime to occur in uncontrolled spaces, but are also still repressive enough so that mechanisms for expressing protest and peaceful dissent leading to compromises are not present. Thus, democracy must be “good enough” to provide enhanced domestic security.

## MEDIA FREEDOM AND DOMESTIC ARMED CONFLICT

To probe the specific relationship between media freedom and risk of domestic armed conflict, we replicate the study by Fjelde et al. (2021), substituting vertical and horizontal constraints with the Freedom of Expression and the Media Index. Our analysis thus empirically tests the relationship between media freedom and domestic armed conflict onset.

**FIGURE 6. NON-MONOTONIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND THE MEDIA AND DOMESTIC ARMED CONFLICT ONSET**



*Figure 6 shows an inverted U-shaped relationship between the Freedom of Expression and the Media Index and the onset of domestic armed conflict. Adjusted predictions are shown with 95% confidence intervals.*

Figure 6 plots the estimated non-linear relationship between media freedom and onset of domestic armed conflict. It shows an inverted U-shaped relationship: when moving from a situation with full restriction of media freedom to one with moderate levels of media freedom, predicted armed conflict risk increases. From 0.42 on the Freedom of Expression and the Media Index, however, increases in media freedom are associated with a markedly decreased risk of domestic armed conflict. The lowest estimated risk of conflict onset (the right-hand side of the figure) occurs in countries that score very high on the Freedom of Expression and the Media Index (above 0.83 on a scale from 0 to 1). These are typically liberal democracies, which safeguard not only media freedom but also free and fair elections, the rule of law, and other democratic rights and freedoms.

We conclude that the evidence is strong that media freedom is critical for ensuring greater security in terms of lower incidence of domestic armed conflict but that the relationship is clearly curve-linear.

## State Repression

State repression is a third way in which security (in terms of the extent to which basic human rights of life and physical integrity are respected) can be undermined. Social groups often have competing interests, and points of contention – economic, religious, ethnic, and so on – that risk erupting into violent conflict. State repression of oppositional groups and of groups in contention is a common way in which physical integrity rights are violated.

Scholarly experts expect democracies to provide better security in terms of physical integrity, because levels of state repression are lower in democracies. The costs of repression (Dahl 1971) for incumbent governments in democracies are high, because they can be removed from power in the next election (if not before). Governments in autocracies, on the contrary, can often strengthen their hold of power by the use of repression (e.g., Escribà-Folich 2013; Keremoglu et al. 2022).

Institutions that constrain power – including independent and pluralistic media and a vibrant and strong civil society both acting as watchdogs – provide strong incentives for governments to refrain from using state repression and violating human rights.

Multiple studies find robust evidence for these claims, showing that democracies use less state repression and have better protection of human rights than autocratic countries (Poe et al. 1999; Carey 2010; Hill & Jones 2014; Richards et al. 2015). Yet, due to the relative proximity of some human rights and democracy it may be difficult to assess the relationship empirically (Hill 2016).

A recent study that analyses 239 episodes of large-scale repression for the period 1976-2006 finds that democratization is the only factor to systematically lead to such episodes of repression to cease (Davenport & Appel 2022). Hence, in the face of ongoing repression, democratization is a significant pacifier. Inversely, another recent study takes a first look at how democratic backsliding impacts human rights protection and finds that it substantially deteriorates the extent of such protection (Adhikari et al. 2024). For example, the protection of human rights deteriorates more if a country goes from being non-backsliding to backsliding than if it moves from being a high-income to a low-income country.

Independent media play a key role in reducing the risk of state repression (Kim et al. 2015). An independent media reporting on state violence, such as police and military clamping down on protesters or the use of torture and killings against opponents and dissidents, substantially raises the cost of such repression for governments. Conversely, governments can use state control of the media to both cover up repression and to legitimate it in various ways (Carey et al. 2023).

Assessing a global sample for the period 1989-2002, one robust study finds that better access to news media, radio, TV, and internet all reduce the extent of human rights violations (Apocada 2007). Another rigorous study provides unambiguous evidence that state repression is very likely when media freedom is poor, but that such repression is unlikely when media freedom is high (Carey et al. 2023).

Similarly to the risk of domestic armed conflict, countries in the middle of the spectra are more volatile and have a higher risk of human rights abuses (Davenport & Armstrong 2004; Jones & Lupu 2018). Simply put, the relationship between media freedom and state

repression depends on a country's level of democracy – and only in good democracies, more media freedom is associated with better protection of human rights (Whitten-Woodring 2009). Hence, the benefit of reduced state repression takes effect mainly when countries have relatively well-performing institutions such as independent media.

## MEDIA FREEDOM AND STATE REPRESSION

Figure 7 shows our own analyses of correlations between media freedom and state repression. State repression in this figure is measured by the Physical Violence Index – an index that measures the extent to which physical integrity (i.e., freedom from political killings and freedom from physical or mental torture by the government) is respected. The left panel of Figure 7 shows the state of media freedom and the level of state repression in all countries in 2023. Autocratic countries in this panel are marked in red, while democratic ones are marked in blue. The right panel of Figure 7 shows the historical trends in the two indices from 1900 to 2023.

**FIGURE 7. MEDIA FREEDOM AND STATE REPRESSION**

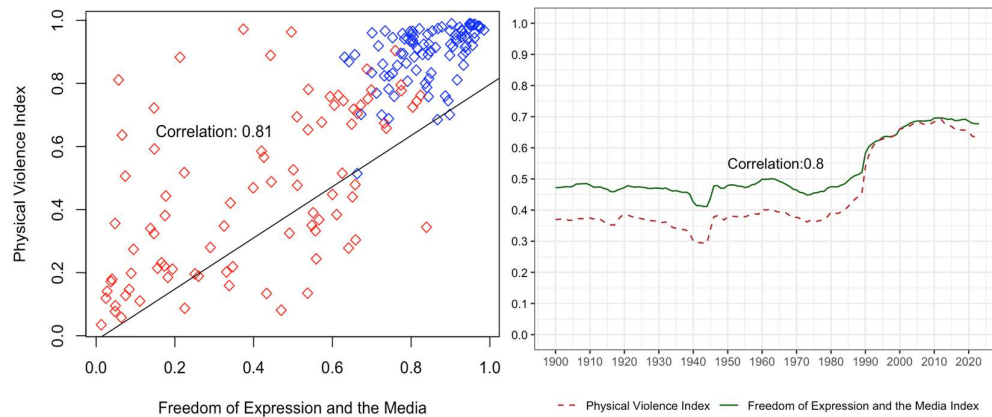


Figure 7 visualizes the link between media freedom and state repression (as measured by the Physical Violence Index). The Physical Violence Index measures violence committed by government agents, such as political killings and torture, that is not directly related to elections. The left panel shows the state of media freedom and the level of state repression in all countries in 2023. Autocratic countries are marked in red, while democratic ones in blue. The right panel shows the historical trends in the two indices for the period 1900-2023. Data for both indices comes from the V-Dem dataset v14.

Figure 7 shows that media freedom and state repression are closely related (correlation for 2023 is 0.81, and for the period 1900-2023 is 0.8). Most democracies cluster in the upper right corner of the figure, confirming that higher media freedom is associated with less state repression. For autocracies, the pattern is less clear, which is in line with the findings from the existing literature discussed above. There are some autocracies that score relatively high on media freedom but have high levels of state repression (i.e., low scores on the Physical Violence Index). The opposite is also true: some autocracies score low on media freedom but have relatively low levels of state repression.

The average correlation between the two indices for the period 1900-2023 is 0.8 (right panel). Hence, 64 per cent of the variation in the one index can be explained by the other. This is, statistically seen, quite high. These findings suggest that media freedom is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for reducing state repression.

## CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Media freedom and democracy are not only fundamental goods in themselves, but also the most promising path to security. The evidence presented in this report affirms that there is a clear link between media freedom, democracy, and security, and that democratic norms and practices lead to better security outcomes. Based on rigorous scientific evidence, this report shows that democracy improves domestic and international security, and the free media is one mechanism through which it does so.

The evidence affirms the standard observation that democracies do not fight each other. Democratic institutions find ways to absorb and channel dissent through nonviolent means and solve conflicts through respect for the rule of law. Statistical analysis provides further evidence that media freedom contributes to democratic peace.

The research also shows that the relationship between democracy and domestic security is not linear. Countries with moderate levels of democracy (and also moderate levels of media freedom) are often the most vulnerable to domestic conflicts. Yet, as countries progress beyond a certain threshold, both democracy and media freedom start to deliver on all types of security. This factor also explains why particularly liberal democracies deliver the best outcomes in terms of security.

The most fundamental point from the accumulated academic knowledge in this field is that there is no security without democracy, and there is no democracy without media freedom. The implications of these findings are clear: to ensure international and domestic security, it is essential to protect and promote independent and pluralistic media.



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