Project SAUFEX on "societal resilience" and "whole-of-society approach"

Proposition for a citizen-oriented strategy as an integral part of the post-peace European defense strategy

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Executive summary

The core challenge

Europe faces a new security reality since NATO stated in 2022: "The Euro-Atlantic area is not at peace." This new reality requires the development of a new paradigm. Essential elements in this paradigm are "societal resilience" regarding both external threats (Russian aggression, terrorism) and internal vulnerabilities requiring democratic renewal as well as a "whole-of-society approach".

The SAUFEX project

The HORIZON-funded SAUFEX project operationalizes societal resilience by protecting and enhancing citizens' four fundamental needs: belonging, autonomy, achievement, and safety. As a whole-of-society approach it enables participation of ever more societal stakeholders in resilience-building policies.

A two-phase approach - phase one: Resilience Councils

Based on SAUFEX, Resilience Councils are established that engage NGOs and academic institutions in FIMI analysis and response. Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the first to have implemented this framework, representing an expansion beyond state-centric approaches.

Phase two: Program Interdemocracy

Resilience Councils achieve meaningful progress but remain incomplete as a whole-of-society approach: they do not include the general public and focus only on expert "fact-speaking" while neglecting another discourse type essential in democratic societies: "belief-speaking". Including the general public requires wisdom-of-crowds principles, but these are logistically extremely challenging with adults (requiring simultaneous, independent responses) and face contemporary barriers (liquid anxiety, identity fragmentation, affective polarization). SAUFEX therefore first targets adolescents through educational systems in which simultaneous participation is feasible. However, adolescents present additional, specific challenges: developmental processes (peer pressure, impulsivity) and partial dislocation (high integration in close relationships, low integration beyond). SAUFEX'S program Interdemocracy overcomes these through structured protocols enabling more authentic individual expression while temporarily suspending group dynamics.

Strategic significance

Program Interdemocracy demonstrates that democratic renewal and defense imperatives reinforce rather than compete with each other. By enhancng the whole-of-society approach through systematic citizen engagement, it creates institutional pathways for authentic citizen voices to inform governmental policy. This transforms procedural democracy into active citizen engagement, establishing a model for comprehensive societal resilience against information manipulation.

Call to action

While our societies are under siege, they require democratic revival. Besides a dramatic expansion of our defense capabilities, we need to strengthen societal resilience through a comprehensive whole-of-society approach that offers responses to the current challenges. Now is the time to implement program Interdemocracy at scale.

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Introduction

Europe recently has entered a new era of uncertainty. In 2022, NATO acknowledged this shift in its Strategic Concept, stating "The Euro-Atlantic area is not at peace."[1] This assessment was reinforced by NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte: "We are not at war, but we are not at peace either"[2]. The statements represent a dramatic departure from NATO's previous Strategic Concept of 2010, which asserted: "Today, the Euro-Atlantic area is at peace and the threat of a conventional attack against NATO territory is low."[3]

NATO identifies two primary threats driving this deteriorating security environment. First, the Russian Federation that, through its "war of aggression against Ukraine"[4], "has violated the norms and principles that contributed to a stable and predictable European security order. We cannot discount the possibility of an attack against Allies' sovereignty and territorial integrity."[5] Second, terrorism poses significant challenges, as terrorism "is the most direct asymmetric threat to the security of our citizens and to international peace and prosperity. Terrorist organisations seek to attack or inspire attacks against Allies."[6]

Compounding these security challenges, recent tensions between the United States and the European Union have shaken the transatlantic relationship. Against this backdrop, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, proclaimed: "The West as we knew it no longer exists"[7].

A new paradigm

It is evident that the new era requires a new paradigm underlying European policy-making. Unfortunately, no consistent, well-defined strategic new paradigm has emerged yet. Only fragments have surfaced, such as the need to radically increase defense spending to five percent of NATO members' GDP. A second element is the need for "a wartime mindset"[8], that is "a new, resilient mindset"[9]. In the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, the word resilience is mentioned twelve times (against one time in the longer 2010 Strategic Concept).[10] "Resilience" is also frequently mentioned by the European Commission. It is "a new compass for EU policies"[11]. The concept is mentioned in Directives (e.g. Directive (EU) 2022/2557[12]) and Regulations (e.g. Regulation (EU) 2021/241[13]). It is used to

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[1] NATO (2022), p.3
[2] European Parliament (2025)
[3] NATO (2010), p.10
[4] NATO (2022), p.1
[5] NATO (2022), p.3
[6] NATO (2022), p.4
[7] Liboreiro G (2025)
[8] Rutte quoted in NATO (2025a)
[9] NATO (2024)
[10] See also : https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/search.htm?query=resilience&submitSearch=
[11] European Commission (nd, a)
[12] Directive (EU) 2022/2557 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 on the resilience of critical entities and repealing Council Directive 2008/114/EC, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32022L2557
[13] Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32021R0241

describe Ukrainian resistance[14] and as a goal for European societies[15]. While resilience is viewed by the European Union as a goal, a third, linked element that emerged for the new era, is a mechanism[16] to reach that goal: the "whole-of-society approach", sometimes shortened to "whole society approach". The concept is used by NATO[17] and by the European Commission (e.g. COM/2025/148 final[18], COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION (EU) 2023/2836[19], COM(2020) 605 final[20]) and other European Union institutions.

The HORIZON-funded SAUFEX project brings together organizations from five countries, four of which are frontline states, to examine how "resilience" and "whole-of-society" concepts can inform more effective and democratic strategies for countering foreign information manipulation. This booklet introduces key solutions developed so far in the project, alongside findings from the seminar and workshop "Enhancing societal resilience through listening and being heard," held June 5-6, 2025 in Helsinki and organized by the Polish Embassy in Finland, which explored the solutions in depth.

Project SAUFEX on the concept of "resilience"

Based on a SAUFEX blog post[21], Robert Kupiecki, Polish Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Tomasz Chłoń, Polish Foreign Minister's plenipotentiary for countering international disinformation, wrote their perspective on the concept of resilience[22] for the SAUFEX project. In the text, they attempt to operationalize "resilience". According to them, resilience "can be generally defined as "the ability to cope with shocks and keep functioning in much the same kind of way. It is a measure of how much an ecosystem, a business, a society can change before it crosses a tipping point into some other kind of state that it then tends to stay in (Walker, 2020)". In the SAUFEX project, resilience is taken as a systemic quality. It is both seen as the amount of elasticity a system possesses and as a mechanism to keep the system from overstretching and reaching its tipping point. Resilience is about both trying to prevent the system from reaching a critical point while at the same time making the system more shockproof."[23]

The authors point out that resilience refers mostly to defending the system: anticipating, preventing, detecting, and evaluating FIMI incidents and campaigns; combating and removing its effects; and restoring the system. They then explore what "the system" entails. "It might seem obvious to designate the information ecosystem ("infosphere") as the system that counteracts FIMI. /.../ Although taking the infosphere as the system seems a logical starting point, it is doubtful whether trying to keep the infosphere functioning should be a goal in itself. Perhaps a well-functioning infosphere is a

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[14] European Commission (2024)
[15] European Commission (nd, b)
[16] Mikulski K (2021)
[17] https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/search.htm?query=whole+of+society&submitSearch=
[18] COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on ProtectEU: a European Internal Security Strategy, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52025DC0148
[19] COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION (EU) 2023/2836 of 12 December 2023 on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32023H2836
[20] COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION on the EU Security Union Strategy, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0605
[21] SAUFEX (2024)
[22] Kupiecki R, Chłoń T (2025), Epilogue
[23] Kupiecki R, Chłoń T (2025), p.46

precondition for another larger system to not be shoved over a cliff? The European Commission states: "Disinformation erodes trust in institutions and in digital and traditional media and harms our democracies by hampering the ability of citizens to take informed decisions" (European Commission, 2018b). This implies that, in addition to the sphere of digital and traditional media, "institutions" and "our democracy" could also be harmed. Elsewhere, it specifies the potential victims of that harm as: "democratic processes as well as /.../ public goods such as Union citizens' health, environment, or security" (European Commission, 2018a). The system now seems to encompass media, institutions, democratic processes, and public goods. The frame to protect all these elements from the perspective of the European Commission seems to be the democratic European state. If the state is indeed to be the systemic frame for resiliency, a temptation might occur for the state to rate its own survival above all other goals. It could start prioritising the defence of its institutions and processes as the highest goal and forget what its ultimate task is: serving its citizens through democratic governance. This is the trap of "undemocratic liberalism" as described by Yasha Mounk (2018). The democratic state rather seems an element in the "keep functioning" aspect of resilience's definition. Instead, society is the system. /.../ When taking inspiration from the field of prophylactics, and especially from the work of Bruce Alexander, it can be asserted that people need a few preconditions to minimally function, a state that Alexander (2008) refers to as "getting by". The tipping point for not being able to get by anymore is, according to him, a state of dislocation: "[a]n enduring lack of psychosocial integration". Psychosocial integration, in turn, "reconciles people's vital needs for social belonging with their equally vital needs for individual autonomy and achievement. Psychosocial integration is as much an inward experience of identity and meaning as a set of outward relationships" (Alexander, 2008). Alexander asserts that an experience of dislocation is "excruciatingly painful" to such an extent that it becomes logical for those experiencing it to choose an alternative lifestyle. Many social psychologists, such as Van der Kolk (2014), add a fourth basic human need to the three mentioned by Alexander: safety. The tipping point for people to cease functioning in society therefore is when their four basic needs - belonging, autonomy, achievement, and safety – are unattainable. When the four basic needs are out of reach for a prolonged time, individuals will turn away from democratic society and choose an alternative path. In that situation, they will "become susceptible to the lure of pills, gang leaders, extremist religions, or violent political movements – anybody and anything that promises relief" (Van der Kolk, 2014). Taking all the elements mentioned above together, resilience in the SAUFEX project implies a focus on both (a) defending society against FIMI incidents and campaigns that try to undermine people's experiences of belonging, autonomy, achievement, and safety and (b) actively supporting people's positive experiences of belonging, autonomy, achievement, and safety. The experience of belonging can be undermined by increasing polarisation and alienation. The experience of autonomy can be undermined by empowering an experience of learned helplessness, a state in which we unjustly feel we have no agency. The experience of achievement can be undermined by promoting relativism and nihilism. The experience of safety can be undermined by highlighting real or imagined threats to our physical and psychological health without providing solutions."[24]

Resilience in practice

Kupiecki and Chłoń conclude that we need "to be vigilant against foreign activities that aim to promote polarisation, alienation, learned helplessness, relativism, and nihilism. They will work to address threats to our physical and psychological health while at the same time supporting citizens'

[24] Kupiecki R, Chłoń T (2025), p.46-47

psychosocial integration to avoid the tipping point of large segments of citizens turning their backs on democracy and choosing non-democratic alternatives."[25]

A subsequent SAUFEX blog post[26] describes potentially positive interventions to enhance resilience based on citizens' experiences of their four basic needs: belonging, autonomy, achievement, and safety:

- Regarding belonging: "Closeness to another person or group can be measured using the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale[27]. As was explored in the [SAUFEX] blog post on evolutionary psychology[28], humans are genetically programmed to prioritize their kin. However, the concept of 'kin' is flexible and open to interpretation. Cialdini (2016) examines ways to include non-family members in the category of 'kin'. One approach is to emphasize kinship through family-like references for non-family members (e.g., brothers in arms, motherland) or by highlighting localism (geographical proximity). Another method to foster belonging is acting in unison, which reinforces the perception of similarity among individuals and encourages positive mutual assessments. Henri Tajfel demonstrated that a feeling of belonging to a group can be triggered remarkably easily. Being assigned to a group, even through a random process like a coin flip, is sufficient to evoke a preference for one's group members. As Van Bavel and Packer note in The Power of Us[29], "[i]t seemed that the mere fact of being categorized as part of one group rather than another was strong enough to link that group membership to a person's sense of self." Thus, a positive intervention to enhance the experience of belonging is trough inclusion in a group, any group, thereby manufacturing a shared identity. To avoid at the same time cultivating out-group biases, groups should be defined as inclusive (e.g., emphasizing shared humanity or superordinate goals)."[30]

- Regarding autonomy: "The most effective intervention to enhance the experience of autonomy is participation. However, not everything labeled as participation constitutes genuine participation. As discussed in [SAUFEX] blog post five[31], Sherry Arnstein's typology of citizen participation in governmental decision-making ranges from nonparticipation through tokenism to citizen power. Employing tokenism instead of authentic participation can have a more negative impact than no participation at all (see, for example, Alderson (2006), regarding children). The key challenge is not merely to listen or appear to listen but to demonstrate that participating voices are taken seriously. Lundy (2005) notes, also regarding children: "one incentive/safeguard is to ensure that children are told how their views were taken into account". Thus, a positive intervention to enhance the experience of autonomy is participation in a process where voices are genuinely considered and acted upon."[32]

- Regarding achievement: "Achievement can be measured in two ways: relative to others and relative to oneself. Measuring achievement relative to others often leads to a zero-sum worldview: my gain is someone else's loss, and vice versa. This framing undermines the experience of belonging by fostering comparison, rivalry, and disconnection. If we seek to strengthen resilience as a whole, not just one of its parts, we must reject achievement defined in opposition to others and embrace achievement as progress measured against one's own starting point. To experience

[25] Kupiecki R, Chłoń T (2025), p.47
[26] SAUFEX (2025a)
[27] https://sparqtools.org/mobility-measure/inclusion-of-other-in-the-self-ios-scale/
[28] https://saufex.eu/post/44-Evolutionary-psychology
[29] Van Bavel J, Packer D (2021), pp. 17–18
[30] Saufex (2025a)
[31] https://saufex.eu/post/5-A-Resilience-Council-statute
[32] SAUFEX (2025a)

achievement as self-improvement, I must see myself as dynamic and capable of growth. If I consider my abilities fixed and unchangeable, I will avoid challenges that threaten my self-concept and cling to tasks that confirm it. Carol Dweck[33] refers to this as a fixed mindset and contrasts it with a growth mindset: the belief that abilities can be developed through effort, learning, and perseverance. People with a growth mindset embrace challenges, view mistakes as opportunities, and persist in the face of setbacks. That, in essence, is a resilient stance. While Dweck's theory has been criticized (e.g., inconsistent replication results and concerns about the long-term impact of intervention), the core message that anyone can improve their abilities remains a compelling entry point for strengthening the experience of achievement. A follow-up intervention could be to reframe social challenges as opportunities for growth rather than, as FIMI often does, as inevitable vulnerabilities. This would position individuals not as fragile but as capable of adaptation and development. Thus, a positive intervention to enlarge the experience of achievement is consistently promoting a growth-oriented framing of ability and adversity, both in education and in public discourse."[34]

- Regarding safety. "Safety is not simply the absence of danger; it is the felt sense of being protected, supported, and emotionally anchored. The most enduring source of this feeling is not external security, but the quality of our closest relationships. A clear example is the secure attachment between a child and caregiver. In developmental psychology, a secure relationship is characterized by trust, open communication, emotional warmth, and consistent support. Children raised in such environments tend to develop higher self-esteem, better emotional regulation, and greater resilience. What makes these relationships protective is not their perfection but their predictability and responsiveness. A child does not require a flawless parent but one who is reliably available, emotionally attuned, and willing to repair ruptures. This dynamic creates a stable internal model of the world—one in which others can be trusted and one's own feelings are manageable. The same applies beyond childhood. In adults, the experience of psychological safety is also shaped by the consistency and trustworthiness of key relationships. Whether in families, teams, or communities, people feel safe when they know what to expect and when they are confident that expressing vulnerability will not be met with punishment or ridicule. Thus, a positive intervention to enlarge the experience of safety is promoting predictable and responsive communication that avoids being judgmental."[35]

Project SAUFEX on the concept of "whole-of-society"

A SAUFEX project's primary objective is to decentralize and democratize FIMI analysis and response capabilities. This begins with engaging NGOs and academic institutions in identifying, classifying, grading, and reporting FIMI incidents and campaigns, as well as in developing subsequent responses. To advance this goal, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has established a new institution: the Resilience Council. A second Resilience Council specializing in DSA-related matters will be established by the Polish Ministry of Digital Affairs once the necessary parliamentary legislation is adopted.

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[33] Dweck (2016)
[34] SAUFEX (2025a)
[35] SAUFEX (2025a)

The theoretical foundations of Resilience Councils are outlined in Kupiecki and Chłoń's (2025) booklet referenced above. Current developments and practical information can be found on the SAUFEX blog[36], with blog post forty-two[37] serving as a useful starting-point.

A broader approach needed

While Resilience Councils represent meaningful progress toward a whole-of-society approach, they constitute only the foundation of a much broader approach. Resilience Councils for NGOs and academia lack two essential whole-of-society elements. First, though these councils engage important societal stakeholders, they exclude a crucial actor: the general public[38]. Second, they focus on evidence gathering, interpretation, and response formulation, but neglect what Stephan Lewandowsky identifies as intuition-based conceptions of truth[39]. This double exclusion is not accidental: FIMI is deemed a domain for experts, and neither the general public nor intuition are considered valuable assets in an expert domain.

It would be wrong to limit the whole-of-society approach to democratizing the pool of experts only. To begin with, the sole focus on evidence, or "fact-speaking" as Lewandowsky[40] dubs this, limits the discourse on FIMI to producing descriptions. Getting from factual descriptions ("is" statements) to prescriptions ("ought" statements) is not obvious, a philosophical position defended by David Hume[41]. Within Daniel Singer's interpretation of Hume's Is-Ought gap[42], it can be stated that it is impossible to derive recommendations on how to deal with FIMI from a mere collection of described FIMI incidents and campaigns.

Furthermore, according to Lewandowsky, fact-speaking in itself is insufficient for productive democratic discourse. Alongside fact-speaking, "belief-speaking" is essential: "While evidence-based discourse provides a foundation for 'reasoned' debate, intuition contributes emotional and experiential dimensions that can be critical for exploring and resolving societal issues."[43] Although evidence-informed policies might seem the rational way to go, belief-speaking narratives address the human and social friction that determines whether those policies will actually be adopted, sustained, and effective in real contexts. Therefore, besides addressing "what is," discourses exploring "what does it mean to me" need to be taken into account when drafting responses to FIMI.

Finally, NGOs and academics do not exclusively pursue the common good: in this case, serving citizens. They sometimes become parties in the process due to their needs for funding and exposure, while NGOs, through their statutes, do not serve the whole spectrum of potential FIMI aspects but focus on a selection of these. This renders NGOs and academics vulnerable to the danger of "undemocratic liberalism" that was mentioned earlier. Under undemocratic liberalism, "elites are taking hold of the political system and making it increasingly unresponsive: the powerful are less and less willing to cede

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[36] https://saufex.eu/
[37] https://saufex.eu/post/42-Resilience-Councils-recap
[38] SAUFEX (2025b)
[39] Lewandowsky S et al. (2025)
[40] Huttunen, K, & Lewandowsky, S (2025)
[41] Treatise of Human nature, Book III, Part I, Section I
[42] Singer D (2015)
[43] Lewandowsky S et al. (2025)

to the views of the people"[44]. Therefore, the decentralization and democratization of FIMI analysis and response capabilities must ensure responsiveness to citizens by including their voices in the process.

Precondition for involving the general audience: wisdom of crowds

In his book The Wisdom of Crowds, James Surowiecki[45] provides a framework for better collective knowledge: ask the crowd. His key insight is that when individual perspectives are aggregated correctly, crowds consistently outperform even knowledgeable individuals across three types of problems: cognition, coordination, and cooperation.

For individual perspectives to be aggregated effectively, participants need at least some relevant information about the subject. Surowiecki notes that larger groups tend to produce more accurate collective outcomes, provided three preconditions are met.

Surowiecki's preconditions

Surowiecki's first precondition is diversity—understood not in sociological terms, but in conceptual and cognitive terms. Effective crowds need a range of perspectives among participants. Interestingly, having everyone be highly intelligent would actually reduce this diversity. The presence of the naïve and the ignorant is important to the process. Even biases, unfounded overconfidence, and selfishness contribute by introducing different viewpoints and approaches.

The second precondition requires independence in thinking. Participants must make decisions without interference from others: no communication among individuals, no negotiation, and no compromising during the process. Individual responses should be presented at the same time to prevent one person's answer from influencing others.

The third precondition emphasizes decentralization. Individuals should draw on their local, specific knowledge and tacit understanding. This approach allows the crowd to access information that might be missed in more centralized decision-making.

Challenges in implementing the next step of the whole-of-society approach

In addition to establishing "fact-speaking"-oriented Resilience Councils, the general public and belief-speaking perspectives need to be involved in FIMI policy-making. However, implementing Surowiecki's second precondition presents significant logistical challenges. In order to render consultation between individuals impossible, a setting needs to be created in which a crowd of citizens receives a question

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[44] Mounk, Y. (2018), p.13
[45] Surowiecki (2004)

simultaneously and has no other option than to respond individually, on the spot. This appears extremely difficult to execute in practice.

An additional challenge involves providing basic factual information so that all participants have at least some relevant information about the subject of the question and can meaningfully contribute. The problem is that any facts provided could be disputed as mere opinions by segments of society. This scepticism toward presented facts has multiple causes.

The first cause is constituted by a groundswell process underlying our current societies that Zygmunt Bauman refers to as the "liquefaction" of our societies. Based on his theory, in our liquid times nothing is permanent, neither our social position nor our achievements or possessions. We are constantly compelled to update ourselves, our behavior, and our property. A new phone, for instance, is only "new" for a short time, quickly replaced by a newer phone that renders the current model outdated. This process of renewal happens so rapidly in our liquid times that we must run at full speed just to stay in place: "it is gratification to survive, the purpose of survival being more gratification".[46] The result is a society in which people "construct, preserve and refresh their individuality"[47] by means of consumption, in fear of exclusion and becoming waste themselves. Our freedom is reduced to the freedom to choose new consumer products and experiences. While in earlier times, liquefaction was a temporary transitional process that gave way to the solidification of new structures, in our era, there will be no subsequent solidification. We are suspended in a state of everlasting liquidity.

The first cause gives rise to the second cause: identity fragmentation. In the vision of Bauman, the liquid times in which we live cause our identities to lose their social anchors. Bauman likens the contemporary creation of our identities to laying a jigsaw puzzle, but "the whole labour is *means-oriented*. You do not start from the final image, but from a number of bits which you have already obtained or which seem to be worthy of having, and then you try to find out how you can order and reorder them to get some (how many?) pleasing pictures. You are *experimenting with what you have*. Your problem is not what you need in order to 'get there', to arrive at the point you want to reach, but what are the points that can be reached given the resources already in your possession, and which are worthy of your efforts to obtain them."[48] By constructing our identities in this way, we are able "to unlock the door when the next opportunity knocks"[49] in our dynamic times. We survive by adapting.

The third cause is a phenomenon known as affective polarization. Tosi and Warmke write: "So-called affective polarization refers to the increasing antipathy to those on the "other side.""[50] Hugo Mercier, for instance, writes of the United States: "The impression of increased polarization is not due to people developing more extreme views but rather to people being more likely to sort themselves consistently as Democrat or Republican on a range of issues. /.../ The only increase in polarization is in affective polarization: as a result of Americans more sorting themselves into Democrats and Republicans, each side has come to dislike the other even more."[51] In the European Union, the situation is more nuanced. National average scores for affective polarization range from relatively low (the Netherlands) to relatively high (Bulgaria).[52] This disparity in scores is even greater at the regional level. Over time, the

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[46] Bauman Z (2005), p.7

[47] Bauman Z (2005), p.24

[48] Bauman Z (2004), p.48-49

[49] Bauman Z (2004), p.53

[50] Tosi J, Warmke B (2020), p.69

[51] Mercier H (2020), p.212

[52] Bettarelli L et al. (2022)

average scores for affective polarization have increased for most countries[53]. Within the European Union, populist radical right (PRR) parties "occupy a particular position in the affective political landscape because they both radiate and receive high levels of dislike. In other words, supporters of PRR parties are uniquely (and homogeneously) negative about (supporters of) mainstream parties and vice versa."[54] Again, morality seems to be the driving force against those who deviate from the perceived group.

Educator Kent Lenci writes: "polarization is at its essence a matter of belonging. "It has more to do with partisan loyalty than it does with ideological principal.""[55] Within this, a motivation attribution asymmetry exists: "In essence, people tend to believe their own group is motivated by love, while others are motivated by something less admirable – such as hatred."[56]

Van Bavel and Packer put affective polarization in perspective. While, according to them, people's "groupishness" is normal, affective polarization is not: "[p]eople typically like their own group more, but this does not necessarily mean they dislike or want to harm out-groups."[57] When the default situation changes, "[w]hen relations between groups harden and we start to see "our" interest as fundamentally opposed to "their" interests, the natural positive emotions and empathy we feel towards our own group can shift in a dangerous direction. We start to think that we're not only good but inherently good. And if that's true, then they must be intrinsically bad and must be opposed at all costs. Issues become moralized in ways that favor our point of view. We become less tolerant of dissent and vigilant against any threat that threatens to dilute the all-important boundary between us and them. We see enemies without and within. We begin to believe that when it comes to pursuing our group's interests, any means justify the ends."[58] For some, this kind of aggressive moral talk (i.e., "grandstanding") is a means "to elevate their social status"[59]. Grandstanding is also an outcome of discussion confined to in-groups: "[e]xperiments that look at the content of the discussions taking place in likeminded groups show that it is chiefly the accumulation of arguments on the same side that leads people to polarize."[60] Polarization co-driven by grandstanding "also encourages people to be unduly confident about their views, making those views more resistant to correction"[61].

The effect of the three causes is that citizens behave like critical consumers rather than as resilient co-creators and that anything that clashes with their group biases, including facts, is likely to be seen as hostile and evil. That does not bode well for any fact-informed introduction to whole-of-society-type questions to a crowd of citizens, nor for independence of thinking.

A third challenge is related to the question of who should be invited to participate. Ideally, all citizens should be included if this could be made feasible.[62] Not only is freedom of expression a human right, but when applying ethical frameworks, the outcome is that no one should be excluded.[63] The traditional solution to this challenge is using representation based on selection by self-selection, voting or lottery. Unfortunately, all methods face criticism for alleged biases toward elite interests rather than

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[53] Bettarelli L et al. (2022)

[54] Harteveld E et al. (2021)

[55] Lenci K (2023), p.15 quoting Barber and Pope

[56] Lenci K (2023), p.107

[57] Van Bavel J, Packer D (2021), p.18

[58] Van Bavel J, Packer D (2021), p.32

[59] Tosi J, Warmke B (2020), p.17

[60] Mercier H (2020), p.209

[61] Tosi J, Warmke B (2020), p.76

[62] Compare: Inclusivity as a potentially positive intervention regarding belonging.

[63] Hansen-Staszyński O, Staszyńska-Hansen B (2025a)

encouraging genuine critical input. Even when scientific selection methods are applied rigorously, critics point to potential biases and suspect indoctrination or top-down whitewashing rather than true democratization. The only approach that might avoid polarizing a priori criticism is involving everyone, although it cannot be fully excluded that some kind of resentment still might be triggered.

SAUFEX'S next step in implementing the whole-of-society approach

In project SAUFEX, the whole-of-society approach is piloted among adolescents as a next step, following up on the establishment of the NGO- and academia-based Resilience Council. Adolescents form a group in a vulnerable developmental phase with a dire need for resilience, as they find themselves on the frontline of FIMI due to their extensive online presence. This is also a group with a strong legal right to participate in the whole-of-society approach, even though, as a rule, they are not allowed to vote yet.

Adolescents' legal position

Adolescent (and child) vulnerability is elaborated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention's Preamble mentions children's "physical and mental immaturity"[64] as its ground. Consequently, according to the Convention and the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (art. 25(2)), children "are entitled to special care and assistance"[65]. Within the context of FIMI this means that minors have a special legal position when it comes to illegal and potentially harmful content, as specified in the DSA[66], article 28.

This does not mean that the voice of the child is to be ignored because of the child's not yet fully evolved capacities. Article 12 of the Convention states that States Parties "shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child"[67]. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (art. 24(1)) interprets this as follows: "Children ... may express their views freely. Such views shall be taken into consideration on matters which concern them in accordance with their age and maturity."[68]

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child provides an authoritative interpretation of article 12 of the Convention. It calls the children's right to participate "one of the four general principles of the Convention" alongside non-discrimination, the right to life and development, and the primary consideration of the child's best interests[69]. According to this interpretation, the right to participate in decision-making processes concerns individual children as well as groups of children (section 3). Whether children make use of this right is a choice made by the child or group of children (paragraph 16). The capability of a child to form their own views should be assumed (paragraph 20). State parties

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[64] https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child
[65] https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights
[66] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/2065/oj/eng
[67] https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child
[68] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf
[69] https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/crc/2009/en/70207

should not use the child's evolving capacities as a limitation. The Committee also declares (paragraph 70) that "public or private welfare institution[s], courts, administrative authorities or legislative bodies" are bound by article 12: therefore, providing children the right to participate is mandatory for these parties. The Committee adds (paragraph 72): "States parties must examine the actions of private and public institutions, authorities, as well as legislative bodies". Non-state service providers are recommended "to respect the principles and provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child" (Recommendation 16) as part of their self-regulation mechanisms (Recommendation 17).

On the EU level, the Strategy on the Rights of the Child declares: "the EU needs to promote and improve the inclusive and systemic participation of children at the local, national and EU levels"[70]. It mentions a new EU Children's Participation Platform and the Conference on the Future of Europe as child participation opportunities. The document adds: "[n]onetheless, too many children do not feel considered enough in decision-making. /.../ While a majority of children seem to be aware of their rights, only one in four consider their rights respected by the whole of society."[71]

Adolescents as whole-of-society stakeholders

Reaching adolescents is slightly less of a logistical nightmare than it would be regarding adults; that is why they have been chosen as SAUFEX'S primary follow-up target group. Many adolescents can be reached through the education system, something that would be near impossible for most other societal groups. While it remains a logistical challenge to organize special participation sessions for all of them at exactly the same time throughout all schools, it seems possible to reach a whole cohort of citizens with an identical question simultaneously and gather their simultaneously provided answers without mutual consultation, if planned well.[72]

On the other hand, overcoming adolescent scepticism and achieving a setting in which adolescents will express themselves authentically (that is: in line with what they know about their localized surroundings and with their experienced inner states[73]) is probably even harder when compared to adults. In addition to liquid anxiety, fragmentation, and affective polarization, two additional elements play a negative role: adolescent developmental processes and partial dislocation.

Adolescent developmental processes

In her work, Sarah-Jayne Blakemore identifies what is likely the most import lifecycle characteristic of adolescents: "Until about twenty years ago, the unwelcome side of adolescent behaviour was put down to raging hormones and changes in schools and social life. We know now that the brain undergoes substantial development during adolescence, and this brain development probably contributes to the ways adolescents typically behave."[74]

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[70] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021DC0142

[71] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021DC0142

[72] Adolescents within the education system fulfill Surowiecki's first and third preconditions: diversity and decentralization. Adolescents in the school system represent every possible background and level of intelligence, provided sufficient cohort-related classrooms are included.

[73] European Commission (2025)

[74] Blakemore S (2019), p.193

The three most relevant aspects of typical adolescent behavior across the developmental spectrum are: peer pressure and conformism, impulsivity, and heightened excitability around peers.

- Peer pressure and conformism. Adolescent brains are attuned to encouragement and confirmation, rather than to punishment and rejection.[75] Especially, peer confirmation and peer rejection weigh heavily.[76] For the adolescent brain, rejection is hard to deal with rationally.[77] Eveline Crone adds that adolescents "prefer being part of the group over having the nicest or most expensive scooter and being by themselves"[78]. Blakemore summarizes: "In adolescence, friends matter. It is particularly important to adolescents to be accepted by their peer group. This has many consequences, including an especially strong susceptibility to peer influence"[79]. This prompts Crone to call adolescence the "conformist stage"[80].
- Impulsivity. The adolescent brain is work in progress. The development of the adolescent brain is incremental. During adolescence there is a developmental mismatch[81] between the quickly developing emotional center (the limbic system) and the late development of the cognitive center that is capable of calming emotions (the prefrontal cortex). As a result of this developmental mismatch, adolescents' emotions can rise rapidly and intensely without the calming influence of the prefrontal cortex. This adolescent impulsivity is typically triggered by "hot" situations. Even when these "emotional and arousing stimuli"[82] are irrelevant to a specific activity, younger adolescents will look for them and react to them.
- Heightened excitability around peers. An example of a "hot" situation is the mere presence of other peers.[83] Presence of peers typically leads to a state of heightened excitability that is hard to cool down.

The three factors together create a perfect storm against authentic adolescent expression. A wisdom of crowds-based whole-of-society approach directed at adolescents needs to address all three simultaneously.

Partial dislocation

Research in Poland[84] found many adolescents live in a situation of partial dislocation: a situation in which adolescent levels of experiencing psychosocial integration (autonomy, belonging, achievement, and safety) are high when among close family and friends and low when beyond that group. It seems as if many adolescents have withdrawn to little islands of trust within a sea of anxiety and awkwardness. Also in Finland strong indicators of partial dislocation can be found.[85] Jean Twenge found similar patterns in her research on generational characteristics in the United States.[86]

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[75] Crone, E (2017), p.35
[76] Hansen-Staszyński O et al. (2017), p.6
[77] Crone E (2017), p.91
[78] Crone E (2017), p.93
[79] Blakemore S (2019), p.31
[80] Crone E (2017), p.8
[81] Blakemore S (2019), p.135
[82] Blakemore S (2019), p.131
[83] Blakemore S (2019), p.131
[84] Summarized in Hansen-Staszyński O, Staszyńska-Hansen B (2025a), chapter three
[85] Hansen-Staszyński O (2025)
[86] Twenge J (2017)

What research regarding current adolescents uncovered[87] is, concerning autonomy, that adolescents show a diminished general sense of agency, although they experience agency in their immediate environment, a condition that was further aggravated by the top-down decision-making regarding adolescents that occurred during the pandemic. Regarding belonging, a noticeable withdrawal is observed into a parental cocoon, in which comfort is exchanged for acceptance of parental control, coupled with avoidance of in-real-life contact, widespread loneliness, and distrust of institutions. Additionally, adolescent behavior regarding safety, research found, points to a general tendency toward risk aversion. Lastly, among young adults a follow-up trend is noted to create their own, personal cocoon as a sign of achievement.

The result of adolescent partial dislocation is a series of paradoxes: many adolescents experience loneliness while being surrounded both by peers and adults with whom they can talk honestly; many adolescents encounter mental problems and feels useless while indicating to enjoy high well-being; and many adolescents shun new and challenging situations as well as contact with others while being part of the most connected and online-first generation.[88]

Challenges of engaging with adolescents in the classroom

As a result of both general factors (liquid anxiety, fragmentation, affective polarization) and factors specific for (current) adolescents (adolescent developmental processes, partial dislocation), engaging adolescents in the classroom is challenging, especially when dealing with potentially divisive topics as disinformation[89]. The main challenge for teachers is "[g]etting students to open up and talk about what they do online" in front of other classmates[90].

As was found in Polish research[91], the two main reasons for adolescents to not want to open up in the classroom are that the classroom is seen as "public" as opposed to "private" and that the classroom is seen as dangerous since any statement can trigger a negative, moralistic judgment by peers.

Responding to the experienced challenges in the classroom, the European Commission published in 2022 its Guidelines for teachers and educators on tackling disinformation and promoting digital literacy through education and training[92].

Forfeiting freedom of expression

While the challenges that many adolescents experience when asked to open up might appear to be merely classroom or educational problems, their implications are fundamental. Reluctance to share authentic views in public settings and pervasive fear of judgment stifle genuine expression, obstructing freedom of expression as enshrined in article 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Simultaneously, the tendency to dismiss differing opinions and react with moralistic judgments to deviating viewpoints hampers the informed and rational individual decision-making process crucial to the free formation of opinions,

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[87] See for a more detailed description: Hansen-Staszyński O, Staszyńska-Hansen B (2025a), chapter three
[88] See for a more detailed description: Hansen-Staszyński O, Staszyńska-Hansen B (2025a), chapter three
[89] Hansen-Staszyński O, Staszyńska-Hansen B (2022)
[90] European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2022b), p.64
[91] Hansen-Staszyński O, Staszyńska-Hansen B (2025a); Hansen-Staszyński O, Staszyńska-Hansen B (2025b)
[92] European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2022a)

obstructing freedom of thought as protected under article 10 of the Charter and article 9 of the Convention.

Together, the reluctance to share authentic views and the tendency to react negatively to differing opinions create a situation in which many adolescents forfeit their freedoms of expression and thought. This is particularly alarming given that schools are increasingly tasked with teaching active citizenship through citizenship education and media literacy programs. When students self-censor in the very institutions designed to be a major training ground to develop their civic capacities, this poses an existential threat to democracy, both presently and in the future.[93] While significant focus exists on external factors interfering with the free formation of opinions, such as FIMI, and rightly so, it is equally important to address these internal factors that significantly undermine societal resilience. Involving adolescents in a whole-of-society approach accomplishes precisely that.

Overcoming adolescent self-censorship: method and format Interdemocracy

Project SAUFEX bases its next step, engaging belief-speaking adolescents in a whole-of-society approach to enlarge societal resistance, on the method and format Interdemocracy.

The European Commission Expert Group on tackling disinformation and promoting digital literacy through education and training recognized the Interdemocracy method as exemplifying good practice in multiple implementations documented in its Final Report.[94] The Final Report references an academic article[95] detailing Interdemocracy's method and applications[96]. The Expert Group published the Interdemocracy format as a recommended activity plan in its Guidelines.[97]

A book on Interdemocracy[98] has received very positive reception across diverse professional communities, including policy-makers, academics, and practitioners. The scientific article on Interdemocracy[99] was positively peer-reviewed thirteen times by representatives of academia.

Interdemocracy was positively evaluated by an observer of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs who observed a pilot session in November 2024. Their observation report declared: "In the current geopolitical climate, building the resilience of young people to hybrid threats and disinformation is not merely important—it is absolutely essential. Hybrid threats, which encompass a wide spectrum of tactics including disinformation campaigns, foreign interference in democratic processes, and digital manipulation, are often subtle, complex, and deliberately designed to erode trust in democratic institutions and social cohesion.

Due to the complex and multifaceted nature of these threats, it is essential to begin developing critical thinking skills, media literacy, and civic awareness at an early age, particularly during primary

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[93] See also: RAN (2021) p.6. The document states that distrust towards institutions, including schools, is one of the two "key factors" driving violent extremism. It specifies: "If trust in schools is eroded, what will the consequences be? They are at best, likely to be damaging and at worst, catastrophic."

[94] European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2022b), p.89; 96

[95] Hansen-Staszyński O, Staszyńska-Hansen B (2022)

[96] European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2022b), p.39

[97] European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2022a), p.18

[98] Hansen-Staszyński O, Staszyńska-Hansen B (2025a)

[99] Hansen-Staszyński O, Staszyńska-Hansen B (2022)

education. Early childhood education plays a foundational role in shaping cognitive abilities and ethical frameworks that are crucial for recognizing and resisting misinformation. Educating children at this formative stage equips them with the necessary cognitive tools to critically evaluate information sources, discern bias, and understand the mechanisms of manipulation before such influences become deeply internalized.

Hybrid challenges demand a comprehensive and multidisciplinary educational approach that integrates digital literacy, critical analysis, and civic responsibility. Programs such as "Interdemocracy" exemplify this approach by providing young learners with practical knowledge and skills to identify manipulative tactics, comprehend democratic principles, and participate thoughtfully and responsibly in public discourse, both online and offline. By fostering a culture of informed, resilient, and engaged citizenship, initiatives like "Interdemocracy" proactively counteract the destabilizing effects of hybrid threats.

In conclusion, civic initiatives that promote prosocial attitudes, critical thinking, and awareness of hybrid threats are indispensable tools for empowering the younger generation to withstand external manipulative influences and disinformation. Prioritizing the support and implementation of such educational projects within national policies on education and information security is vital for safeguarding democratic societies in the digital age."

What is Interdemocracy?

Over a period of fourteen years, Interdemocracy was developed and refined as a method and format to help adolescents express their thoughts more authentically and listen more attentively to their peers. This approach was co-created with students across multiple European Union countries, with primary development taking place in Poland.

Interdemocracy is built on two pillars. The first pillar is inspired by Richard Rorty's vision of humanistic intellectuals: "If one asks what good these people do, what social function they perform, neither "teaching" nor "research" is a very good answer. Their idea of teaching - or at least of the sort of teaching they hope to do - is not exactly the communication of knowledge, but more like stirring the kids up. /.../ the real social function of the humanistic intellectuals is to instil doubts in the students about the students' own self-images, and about the society to which they belong. These people are the teachers who help insure that the moral consciousness of each new generation is slightly different from that of the previous generation."[100] This pillar is dubbed "constructive confrontation".

This pillar does not function on its own. It stands next to a second, fundamental pillar: providing adolescents with an experience of security. Without the second pillar, constructive confrontation could potentially have a negative impact on the wellbeing of adolescents[101].

The guiding principle of the program is thus to provide both a safe haven and a launching pad[102]. Interdemocracy consists of the creation of a safe haven between people (inter) through temporary suspension of group loyalties and judgment. Within this space, a launching pad for democracy appears: the opportunity for individuals to show and absorb otherness based on their own experiences (democracy).

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[100] Rorty R (2006). See also: Bauman Z (2005), p.13
[101] RAN (2023), p.4 simply states: "There is no trust without safety."
[102] Compare: Siegel D (2015), p.151

The method

Interdemocracy as a method consists of the following principles:

- The teacher assumes the role of facilitator. While teachers, particularly class teachers with pastoral responsibilities, often feel compelled to provide direct, guiding intervention, a facilitator's function is to steer a session logistically while maintaining pedagogical responsibility for its overall course. When interventions are deemed necessary that do not address extreme situations, these interventions should occur outside the session itself.

- The facilitator provides a facts-inspired introduction.[103] This introduction should not be treated "as fodder for disagreement"[104].

- The facilitator poses questions.

- All students[105], without exception[106], formulate their answers to the facilitator's questions individually, without consultation.

- Students base their answers solely on their experiences as adolescents.

- All answers take on the I-form, not a we-form.

- No student is allowed to react other than the one invited by the facilitator to answer[107]; the facilitator only reacts to the answers by means of a neutral "thank you". The facilitator in no way provides content-related assistance to students answering questions[108].

The format

Implementation of Interdemocracy follows a three-element structure: check-in, thought experiment, and check out.

- Check-in: The check-in is a seemingly simple activity that involves asking every single adolescent present, individually, the question: "How do you feel today?" It is important to address every adolescent in attendance in order not to exclude anyone. The question should be consistently posed with the same intensity in verbal and nonverbal communication, even when repeated thirty-odd times, with the facilitator showing equal interest in the wellbeing of all participants. Some adolescents may consider the question intrusive into their private lives and may view the facilitator as part of their external world. Conversely, a social desirability

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[103] According to Levy N (2022), p.iv: "we should focus on improving the epistemic environment /.../ The epistemic environment /.../ consists in agents and institutions as well as messages, and the former may often be more significant than the latter." He continues: "We can improve belief formation through what I will call *epistemic engineering*: the management of the epistemic environment."

[104] Lenci K (2023), p.98

[105] Compare: Inclusivity as a potentially positive intervention regarding belonging.

[106] Wiliam D (2011), p.81ff. describes the effect of a situation in which adolescent students are allowed to choose whether they participate: the achievement gap between them widens. This is an undesirable situation since achievement is one of the key components of psychosocial integration.

[107] This excludes the occurrence of any judgments, including negative judgments. Compare: Avoiding judgment as a potentially positive intervention regarding safety.

[108] Wiliam D (2011), p.84

bias may exist.[109] The form and content of the adolescents' responses provide clues to the facilitator's perceived position and thus the amount of effort needed to build rapport. The facilitator should not react to the answers or lack thereof provided by the adolescents, but rather should only say "thank you" in a consistently neutral tone and with a neutral facial expression. The facilitator should also instruct the adolescents to refrain from reacting to one another's responses. The order in which the adolescents are addressed should be randomized[110], as this randomness breaks the logic of the adolescents' seating order since they typically tend to sit next to a person from their friend group. If the adolescents are asked in the order of their seats, they may feel pressure to respond similarly to the individuals in their friend group who answered prior to them. With a randomized order of responses, the participants are less likely to do so.

- Thought experiment: The thought experiment element consists of adolescents first writing and then recording their answer to a question prepared by the facilitator. This element starts with the facilitator providing adolescents with a facts-inspired introduction and then with open-ended question that is linked to the introduction. The adolescents are to answer the question individually in handwriting. Their answers should be based on an individual experience and written in the "I" form without a claim to external validation. Next, the adolescents are to transcribe their answers digitally in such a way that they can read their text aloud without being hindered by illegible passages. The facilitator should request that they end their text with the words "thank you" and subsequently send it to a common online communication channel. Next, the facilitator randomly selects adolescents one by one to record their text on a recording device. The adolescents are then to send their audio recordings to the communication channel. During the whole duration of the thought experiment, all refrain from talking, except from those reading out their answer aloud. The "element helps blur the dividing line between adolescents' private and external worlds. This element allows for the temporary use of the safe haven as a launching pad.

- Check-out: The check-out is similar to check-in, but centred around a different question: "What meaning did this session have for you?" Some adolescents may be uneasy with this question because it requires them to make a judgment about their experience. They may also feel the impact of social desirability bias, which may lead to biased responses as they attempt to provide what they perceive as an acceptable answer rather than their authentic assessment. The form and content of the adolescents' answers provide the facilitator with clues about their perceived position within the group and indicate the amount of effort needed to build rapport with individual participants.

Effects

Interdemocracy triggers several mechanisms related to adolescent psychosocial integration. On the one hand, the experience of belonging by adolescents to existing in-groups, whether composed of those present or absent, becomes temporarily diminished. This occurs through the active reduction of peer and social pressure via random selection, the requirement to speak exclusively with the "I" form, the stipulation that participants share only their own experiences, and the request for silence while

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[109] William D (1998), p.1 writes: "If they [students] think that the teacher has a particular answer in mind, the students will often … be trying to 'guess what's in teacher's head'." This might lead to biased answers that are deemed socially acceptable.
[110] Compare: Wiliam D (2011), p.82ff

others answer. On the other hand, a new temporary experience of belonging emerges based on the commonly experienced predictable structure. The keyword here is "temporary"; the aim of Interdemocracy is not to replace prior relations of belonging but to create a short interlude for adolescents to collect experiences beyond existing in-group limitations. The three major potentially negatively impacting adolescent developmental characteristics (peer pressure, impulsivity, and excitability) are temporary rendered less relevant.

Additionally, answering while surrounded by a silent peer group enlarges adolescents' experiences of autonomy; since participants are individually performing their communication, they experience their own agency. While the predictable structure and facilitator[111] provide an experience of safety, the method and format presents adolescents with individual challenges. Trying and succeeding in the setting of constructive confrontations helps enlarge the experience of achievement too.

Since levels of psychosocial integration increase beyond adolescents' little islands of trust, their levels of resilience increase. To begin with, Interdemocracy strengthens personal judgment before exposure to group dynamics, thereby enabling students to formulate their opinions more authentically. It lowers levels of naive realism as students listen to peers with authentic but different perspectives. Interdemocracy increases cognitive immunity by exposing students to multiple peer perspectives, helping them understand that simple, monolithic perspectives are superficial. Additionally, it fosters democratic engagement by creating an inclusive environment where every student is heard and feels heard, offering a constructive pathway to belonging that counters the appeal of extremist ideologies.

Limitations

While Interdemocracy enables adolescents to view the classroom as a safer, more private space and thereby overcome much of their self-censoring, it has a significant limitation. Its main deficit is that its positive effects are experienced within the boundaries of individual classrooms. Although these effects do spill over into personal interactions and personal resilience beyond the classroom, they fall short of eliminating adolescents' broader experience of societal dislocation.

In its original form, Interdemocracy does not engage adolescents in society-wide democratic participation or provide them with means to act as active co-creators of democracy. At best, facilitators gain access to more authentic student input, but this input remains skewed, as a result of the inherent lack of broad diversity within individual classrooms.

Adding participation: program Interdemocracy

Drawing inspiration from the first Resilience Council implementation, project SAUFEX has developed a participatory process for adolescents that combines the Interdemocracy method and format with wisdom of crowds principles, creating the Interdemocracy program.

The program operates through simultaneous Interdemocracy sessions across multiple classrooms. Students in participating classes receive identical fact-based introductions and respond to the same question simultaneously. Rather than using online class communicators, their digitized responses feed into a central server where artificial intelligence analyzes them through pattern detection, clustering,

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[111] Compare: Predictable communication as potentially positive intervention regarding safety.

outlier identification, insight aggregation, sentiment analysis, and quality control. Through two or three stages of binary forking, the AI uncovers underlying semantic structures within the response set.

Crucially, the AI never formulates recommendations[112]; this responsibility belongs exclusively to the Youth Resilience Council (YRC). The YRC drafts one primary recommendation alongside outlier recommendations that preserve the multi-perspectivity evident in student responses. These recommendations return to students with feedback requests, following Interdemocracy's thought experiment methodology. The AI then analyzes this feedback, enabling the YRC to formulate definitive recommendations that conclude the first process stage.

In the second stage, the YRC presents recommendations to relevant governmental institutions, whose responses are conveyed back to participating students.

Concretely, each Interdemocracy session comprises two 45-minute modules: one for addressing a new question and another for reflecting on YRC recommendations from the previous session. Sessions are to take place biweekly or monthly.

Ideally, all classes with adolescent students are to participate in Interdemocracy sessions, enabling the program to amplify an entire generation's voice in democratic processes as a second step in SAUFEX'S whole-of-society approach of enlarging societal resilience.

External observation and evaluation

Program Interdemocracy was piloted in April and May 2025 in Poland. Its pilot sessions were observed and evaluated by the Pomeranian Teacher Education Centre (PCEN). The resulting opinion (recommendations) on the method and format of the "Interdemocracy" project prepared by teacher-consultants of PCEN states the following: "A strong point of this form of classes is the development of both technical competencies related to the use of information and communication technology tools, including AI, and social skills concerning the ability to formulate statements, listen attentively, express one's own views without infringing on the rights of others, and respect the diversity of opinions.

The scope of topics, discussed content, and objectives of the classes is consistent with the core curriculum of general education in secondary technical schools, high schools, and primary schools, namely:

- improving cognitive and linguistic skills, such as: reading comprehension, creative writing, formulating questions and problems, using criteria, justifying, explaining, classifying, drawing conclusions, defining, using examples, etc.;

- acquiring the ability to formulate independent and well-thought-out judgments, justifying one's own and others' opinions in the process of dialogue within an inquiring community;

- combining critical and logical thinking skills with imaginative and creative abilities;

- developing thinking skills—understood as a complex mental process involving the creation of new representations by transforming available information, which includes the interaction of multiple mental operations: reasoning, abstracting, judging, imagining, problem-solving, and creativity. Because upper secondary school students learn various subjects simultaneously, it

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[112] Compare: SAUFEX blog post The case against AI simulated empathy. https://saufex.eu/post/48-The-case-against-AI-simulated-empathy

is possible to develop the following types of thinking: analytical, synthetic, logical, computational, causal, creative, and abstract; maintaining continuity in general education also develops both perceptual and conceptual thinking. The synthesis of both types of thinking forms the basis for the comprehensive development of the student;

- creatively solving problems from various fields through the conscious use of methods and tools derived from computer science, including programming;

- efficiently using modern information and communication technologies, including respecting copyright laws and navigating cyberspace safely;

- the ability to independently access information, select, synthesize, and evaluate it, and use sources reliably;

- instilling in students a sense of personal dignity and respect for the dignity of others;

- developing critical and logical thinking skills, reasoning, argumentation, and inference;

- providing students with knowledge and shaping skills that allow them to understand the world in a more mature and structured way;

- shaping an open attitude toward the world and other people, engagement in social life, and responsibility for the community;

- using their knowledge to interpret events in social, including public, life;

- knowledge of democratic procedures and applying them in school life and in the groups in which they participate;

- understanding the importance of civic engagement;

- formulating judgments on selected contemporary social issues; considering proposals for actions aimed at improving the living conditions of other people around the world.

It is worth noting that the presented method and use of technology are consistent with the principles of universal design in education, which supports the activation of persons with special educational needs at a level compatible with their potential. The form of the classes does not require special or excessive adjustments to the needs of persons with Special Educational Needs.

The "Interdemocracy" method has a structure that necessitates proper teacher preparation through training.

Conversations with students after the classes indicate that they create conditions for activity, encourage focus and concentration on the task. The sense of security provided by the prohibition of commenting on statements helps them feel good during the lessons and gain trust in others. The advantages of the project include building students' resilience to disinformation through critical thinking unclouded by emotions, as well as learning the rational use of technology. Each participant shares their opinion without fear of being ridiculed or judged. As a result, they say what they truly think, not what is expected. In this way, they develop the ability to express themselves, increase their self-esteem, attentively listen to the opinions of others, and draw conclusions.

The Pomeranian Teacher Education Centre in Gdańsk, as an Institution of the Self-Government of the Pomeranian Voivodeship, recommends the use of the "Interdemocracy" method and format in education after prior training of teachers. Its skillful application in practice teaches careful listening to

the statements of others, formulating and expressing one's own opinions, and builds a sense of safety and trust, which constitute the foundation of resilience understood as an active, but not aggressive, defense of one's rights and beliefs. The class format requires the active participation of each person, thereby implementing one of the principles of democratic society: giving a voice and an opportunity to act to all citizens, both locally and nationally.

It is worthwhile to implement the ongoing pilot at different educational levels, monitor and study its effectiveness, and introduce modifications that foster the development of resilience and shape the ability to conduct dialogue based on democratic principles.

The group dynamics present in every class, as well as the variability of conditions in which the classes are conducted, should also help raise awareness among teachers and students that school, apart from its educational function, is also a place for learning democracy. Democracy is not limited to occasional participation in events such as elections or referenda but requires daily activity, standing up for one's rights, and being open to the views of others."

Helsinki Seminar and Workshop

On June 5-6, 2025, the Polish Embassy in Finland organized a seminar and workshop in Helsinki titled "Enhancing Societal Resilience Through Listening and Being Heard." The event was held as part of Poland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The seminar explicitly connected the Interdemocracy program to the dynamic context of European frontline states. Representatives were invited from service providers addressing potential FIMI demand and from institutional structures that could further embrace whole-of-society co-creation of policies to enhance societal resilience.

Following a brief Interdemocracy introduction and workshop, participants shared their perspectives. They collectively described the context whin which program Interdemocracy is to function.

Assessment of the context- summary of day one

The program is set to operate within a dense and evolving landscape of disinformation, social fragmentation, and institutional strain. This context is shaped by both external threats (notably Russian and, increasingly, Chinese influence operations) and internal vulnerabilities, ranging from educational gaps to trust deficits and widening societal divides.

Disinformation is no longer perceived as purely foreign or exceptional. The shift toward *domestic actors* — local influencers, politicians, and media outlets co-opted into disseminating manipulated narratives — is seen as a major development. Social media platforms have enabled low-cost, high-impact campaigns, often run through large, semi-private groups that function without accountability yet wield significant influence. Russian-speaking Facebook communities in the tens of thousands illustrate this dynamic vividly.

Disinformation ecosystems are increasingly fragmented, personalized, and persistent. The old gatekeepers (editors, institutions, traditional media) have been replaced, or bypassed, by individualized feeds shaped by algorithms and peer influence. Meanwhile, many audiences perceive

institutional media as politically biased, leading them to seek out "authentic" but often unverified sources.

Many countries, especially those with recent histories of Soviet influence, are strengthening educational efforts around media literacy, civic resilience, and digital citizenship. However, even in best-case scenarios (like Finland), there is widespread recognition that teacher training and classroom implementation lag behind policy intentions. Cross-cutting themes like critical thinking and democratic participation exist in curricula, but educators often lack the tools or confidence to apply them effectively.

In addition, a "hidden curriculum" seems to exist in schools: a structure that simulates participation without granting meaningful agency to students. This breeds cynicism and disengagement, particularly among adolescents, who perceive democracy as ineffective or irrelevant. A core insight is that democracy is experienced as disappointing, and youth are rarely taught how to navigate that disappointment constructively.

In response, some systems are embedding resilience training in early education, conducting national disinformation exams, and fostering youth advisory councils at the regional level. These efforts aim to move from passive literacy to active citizenship—but they remain unevenly implemented.

Policymakers and civil society actors are calling for integrated, whole-of-society responses. The Council of Europe and EU institutions are supporting national strategies that combine media regulation, legal protections (e.g. against SLAPPs), and youth education. However, a lack of enforcement mechanisms and inconsistent political will hinder implementation. Recommendations often go ignored, especially where they touch on sensitive issues like platform accountability.

There's also growing attention to inclusion. Media systems are widely seen as lacking diversity and failing to represent minority groups. The underrepresentation of marginalized voices contributes to a lack of trust and leaves communities vulnerable to alternative, often hostile, information ecosystems.

The erosion of trust, in governments, media, and even education, is a recurring theme. Yet the Finnish example of comprehensive security demonstrates how trust can be proactively cultivated through consistent, honest, and accessible communication. Agencies like the Finnish Border Guard invest in transparency and human-centered messaging long before crises erupt, building a reserve of social capital that can be drawn upon in emergencies.

Crucially, participants underscore that trust is mutual. Young people are unlikely to trust institutions that do not trust them. Interventions must therefore respect youth as capable decision-makers and invite them into difficult, meaningful conversations about democracy, safety, and societal challenges.

What emerges is a call for a lived experience of multi-perspectivity and shared responsibility. Participants advocate for:

- Empowering students and educators with both knowledge and agency.

- Reframing disinformation not only as a communication problem but as a reflection of deeper social fractures.

- Acknowledging that modern media habits, including preference for influencers over institutions, are rational responses to perceived credibility gaps.

- Embracing the idea that youth participation must go beyond symbolic inclusion toward genuine power-sharing.

In essence, Interdemocracy enters a space shaped by distrust, disillusionment, and disruption—but also by a growing awareness that democracy itself must evolve to remain credible.

Assessment of the context- summary of day two

The context in which *Interdemocracy* is to operate is marked by social fragmentation, democratic fatigue, emotional detachment, and a growing disconnect between youth and institutions. Participants portray a society in which disillusionment with democratic processes, a lack of inclusive educational structures, and deep affective divides limit the potential for meaningful participation. And yet, there is also hope: a vision of renewed public life rooted in trust, creativity, and emotional safety.

Young people are increasingly reluctant to express their authentic selves, especially in public or institutional settings. Many fear moralistic criticism, peer judgment, or simply being misunderstood. Schools, in particular, are seen as environments where self-censorship is the norm and emotional safety is scarce. Adolescents grow up learning to protect themselves rather than engage.

This suppression of voice isn't a minor issue, it's described as fundamental to the health of democracy. Without space to think aloud, tolerate ambiguity, or explore differences safely, democratic skills remain underdeveloped. Finding and using one's voice is not a luxury, but a necessity for both personal resilience and democratic life.

Art is highlighted as a powerful counterforce to rigid thinking, emotional isolation, and polarized narratives. It offers not only emotional regulation and well-being but also democratic practice. Through creative expression, visual arts, performance, music, individuals learn to navigate complexity, tolerate different perspectives, and co-create meaning. Artistic thinking is not supplementary but essential. It builds moral imagination, fosters inclusion, and supports identity formation, particularly in a time when emotional detachment and disorientation are on the rise. Art is also described as a medium that resists the sanitized, oversimplified narratives produced by both authoritarian regimes and generative AI systems.

A recurring theme is the need for participation to be real,. Many youth are skeptical of participatory invitations that do not lead to outcomes. They report fatigue with being consulted without impact, and express a clear desire for follow-through. To them, participation is not an exercise in being heard, but in being taken seriously. Participants advocate for models such as youth councils, democratic classrooms, hackathons, and structured digital feedback systems. Participation must be diverse, including those typically excluded: neurodivergent youth, those from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds, and those with no prior access to civic engagement. There's also an emphasis on experimentation. Young people should be given the chance to try, fail, and revise, not just speak as representatives. Participation, then, is understood as a discovery process, not just a delivery mechanism.

Formal education systems are critiqued for being overly goal-oriented, performance-driven, and emotionally sterile. Even arts education is often shaped by career logic rather than play and exploration. Children are constantly interrupted, their attention redirected, their curiosity cut short. Imagination requires uninterrupted time, but modern schooling interrupts constantly. The solution is not simply to inject more content, but to redefine the classroom as a relational space, one where emotions, creativity, and shared risk are part of the curriculum. Teachers should not only deliver information but model trust, vulnerability, and openness. Crucially, education should support the

development of a rich personal vocabulary. Without language, emotional, conceptual, artistic, imagination cannot flourish.

Technology plays a dual role in this context. On one hand, it creates overwhelming streams of content that fragment attention and undermine democratic focus. Social media environments encourage instant reactions over slow reflection. On the other hand, digital tools can support democratic resilience, if used creatively and ethically.

There is a clear demand from young people for digital literacy and AI education. But participants warn: these tools must not be used to reinforce surveillance or conformity. Instead, they should empower creativity, critical thinking, and co-creation. The ultimate goal is not to consume information more efficiently, but to produce meaning together.

Democracy is not a matter of simple consensus or efficiency, it is a messy, emotional, pluralistic experience. What democracy needs is not agreement, but the capacity to deal with discomfort, difference, and complexity. This emotional literacy, knowing when to speak, when to listen, and how to disagree without withdrawing, is portrayed as a core democratic skill. It is also a skill that must be practiced, not preached. And that practice must begin early, across all layers of society.

Finally, participants propose a regional model for innovation, particularly in the Baltic Sea region. Initiatives such as youth-led recommendations, school-based democratic exercises, and cross-sector hackathons are already underway. The hope is to scale such models up to the European level, and eventually embed them into systemic frameworks. Yet institutional resistance remains a challenge. Education is a national competence, and many existing initiatives suffer from fragmentation or lack of visibility. Participants call for better information sharing, stronger civil society support, and bottom-up pressure to ensure that already-agreed democratic frameworks are actually implemented.

What is needed is a cultural shift. Democracy needs more than being defended, it needs to be alive again.

Interdemocracy's relevance and applicability

During the Helsinki seminar a workshop took place to establish the perceived program's relevance and applicability within the context described in day one and day two. The workshop followed Interdemocracy's method and format. It focused on two questions:

1. How is program Interdemocracy relevant in your professional context? What leads you to that conclusion?
2. How is program Interdemocracy applicable in your professional context? What leads you to that conclusion?

Relevance

Four core value propositions emerged from the analysis of the answers provided by the participants to the first question:

- Counter-narrative capability: the program effectively addresses disinformation challenges (identified in 47% of responses);

- Youth empowerment: targeted focus on enhancing young people's democratic participation (noted in 40% of responses);

- Systemic resilience: building comprehensive societal resistance to diverse threats (recognized in 33% of responses);

- Educational utility: practical applications spanning both formal and informal learning environments (highlighted in 27% of responses);

The binary fork analysis revealed distinct pathways:

- Fork 1 (confidence segmentation): Differentiates participants by their confidence levels in program assessment - 53% expressed high confidence in their assessment, 27% indicated moderate confidence, and 20% reported low confidence or uncertainty in their evaluation;

- Fork 2 (implementation use): Among high-confidence respondents, 53% identify direct implementation use cases while 33% focus on research, analysis, or learning applications;

- Fork 3 (direct-use domains): Within the direct-use segment, two primary domains dominate: counter-disinformation/ security operations targeting false information and security threats (33%), and youth development/ education initiatives emphasizing engagement and educational applications (20%).

Geographic scope: responses demonstrate clear relevance across the Nordic/Baltic region, with strong indicators suggesting European expansion potential.

Relevance implications

The findings reveal that the program functions as a strategic asset with dual capacity: it operates effectively within traditional educational frameworks (27% educational utility, 20% youth development/ education applications) while simultaneously addressing critical societal challenges beyond the classroom, particularly in operations dealing with information distortions (47% counter-narrative capability, 33% security applications) and democratic resilience building (33% systemic resilience).

This cross-domain applicability suggests the program's core methodology translates effectively across different professional contexts, making it valuable for educators, security professionals, policy makers, and civil society organizations alike. The geographic relevance spanning Nordic/Baltic regions with European expansion potential indicates the program addresses universal democratic challenges rather than context-specific issues.

Perhaps most significantly, the confidence levels and implementation pathways suggest practitioners recognize both immediate practical applications and longer-term strategic value, with 53% identifying direct use cases.

The data supports viewing program Interdemocracy not merely as an educational tool with broader applications, but as a comprehensive democratic resilience platform that happens to have strong educational components, a distinction that positions it for wider adoption across multiple sectors and regions while preserving its educational efficacy.

Applicability

From the answers by the participants to the second question four core application areas can be identified:

- Educational settings: Schools, universities, classroom sessions (mentioned in 45% of responses);

- Youth engagement: Youth councils, student boards, peer-to-peer learning (36% of responses);

- Media literacy: Integration with existing digital literacy programs (27% of responses);

- Professional development: Expert discussions, colleague brainstorming (18% of responses).

The binary fork analysis shows the following forks:

- First fork (implementation readiness): 55% sees the program as ready to apply while 45% needs more information;

- Second Fork (application scope): those who see the program as ready to apply identify direct educational implementation (36%) and broader professional application (18%).

Applicability implications

The data suggests that while participants recognize the program's educational value, there's a need for clearer guidance on translating its principles into specialized interventions dealing with information distortions and security applications. The gap between the program's security objectives and participants' predominantly educational applications indicates room for improvement in demonstrating practical security-focused use cases.

Elements for a new paradigm

The Helsinki seminar revealed a complex reality. Our societies grapple with a profound crisis of trust and authenticity, demanding democratic renewal. Yet within these same societies forces appear capable of revitalizing democracy.

The need for democratic revival emerges precisely as our democracies are under siege, suspended in an uncertain liminal space between war and peace. Consequently, democracies are currently confronted with a twin existential challenge: both democratic renewal and self-defence.

The task of self-defence has prompted a dramatic expansion of our defense capabilities. In parallel, we must address the equally pressing need for democratic revival. To neglect this responsibility would reduce our newfound military strength to a mere instrument of power politics.

The cornerstone of democratic revival lies in strengthening societal resilience through a comprehensive whole-of-society approach that offers responses to the current challenges. This approach must encompass those elements that demonstrate the potential to transform our current procedural democracies into democracy as a citizen activity. According to SAUFEX, this concretely means defending all citizens against interventions aimed at diminishing their resilience (e.g. by means of promoting polarization, alienation, learned helplessness, relativism, and nihilism) while offensively supporting interventions aimed at enlarging their resilience (e.g. by means of inclusive inclusion in

groups, and promoting genuine participation, growth-oriented framing, and predictable and responsive communication).

This interpretation of the emerging paradigm aligns with NATO's strategic vision. As NATO's secretary general recently declared: "we are finalising a plan to dramatically increase defence spending across the Alliance. This plan will mean more money for our core military requirements – hard defence. And more money for defence-related investments, including infrastructure and resilience."[113]

Institutions within the European Union are more cautious but seem to move in the same direction. The Council of the European Union for instance proposes the following, as an outcomes of the 2025 Polish Presidency: "The Presidency of the Council of the European Union /.../ INVITES the Commission and the European External Action Service to explore ways to bring together all relevant stakeholders including Member States, EU institutions, civil society, research, academia, private entities and other relevant experts from different areas in a systematic manner in order to share best practices and to provide strategic guidance on policies pertaining to democratic resilience, making best use of existing efforts and with due respect for Member States' competences."[114] It adds: "The Presidency of the Council of the European Union /.../ HIGHLIGHTS the need to map measures aimed at strengthening democratic resilience and to secure the appropriate EU funding to support such measures."[115]

Program Interdemocracy emerges as a concrete manifestation of this new paradigm's dual imperative. Rather than treating democratic renewal and self-defense as separate endeavors, the program demonstrates how they can function as mutually reinforcing processes within a single educational framework.

The program's foundational architecture directly addresses the paradigm's core challenge of transforming procedural democracy into citizen activity. By engaging adolescents before they enter formal democratic participation, Interdemocracy creates foundational experiences of democratic practice that extend far beyond electoral processes. Students experience democracy not as future civic duty but as immediate lived practice of individual expression within collective structures, establishing patterns of democratic engagement that precede and inform their eventual voting participation.

This transformation occurs through what the program terms "constructive confrontation" paired with security, a design that reflects the paradigm's recognition that democratic revival requires both offensive and defensive elements. The program's defensive dimension operates by temporarily suspending the very forces that diminish societal resilience: peer pressure, group conformity, and the tendency toward polarized thinking. Simultaneously, its offensive dimension actively cultivates resilience-building behaviors: authentic self-expression, attentive listening to diverse perspectives, and the development of individual agency within democratic structures.

The whole-of-society approach finds practical expression in Interdemocracy's scalable design. By incorporating artificial intelligence to analyze patterns across multiple simultaneous sessions, the program creates pathways for youth voices to reach governmental institutions while maintaining the integrity of individual expression. This creates a form of democratic participation that operates

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[113] NATO (2025b) According to Rutte, 3.5% of NATO countries' GDP is to be spent on core military requirements and 1.5% on defence-related investments. (NATO, 2025c) This was confirmed by the The Hague Summit Declaration (NATO 2025d) which included "resilience" as an explicit investment category within the 1.5% category.
[114] Council of the European Union (2025), 23
[115] Council of the European Union (2025), 21

independently of voting age requirements, demonstrating that citizen activity can begin well before formal political participation.

The program addresses the paradigm's requirement of strengthening societal resilience through predictable and responsive communication. The structured format provides the safety necessary for vulnerable adolescents to engage with challenging ideas, while the method ensures that this engagement builds their capacity for future democratic participation. This careful balance between protection and challenge reflects the paradigm's understanding that democratic renewal requires cultivating democratic capacities during formative years, when resilience patterns are established.

In essence, Interdemocracy provides a concrete model for how educational institutions can serve as laboratories for democratic revival while contributing to societal defense, demonstrating that the paradigm's twin challenges need not compete for resources or attention but can instead be addressed through integrated approaches that strengthen both individual resilience and collective democratic capacity.

Call to action

While our societies are under siege, they require democratic revival. Besides a dramatic expansion of our defense capabilities, we need to strengthen societal resilience through a comprehensive whole-of-society approach that offers responses to the current challenges. Program Interdemocracy represents a viable intervention framework.

At the Helsinki seminar, host Tomasz Chłoń envisioned the event as a historic catalyst for implementing program Interdemocracy at scale. This critical moment calls for our decisive action to initiate that process.

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