

Regional Launch of the Integrated Framework for Protecting Elections

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Keynote address

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Let me begin with a simple question.

What does it take for democracy to survive a shock?

Not a theoretical shock. A real one.

A climate emergency that floods polling stations.

A coordinated foreign information campaign.

An AI-generated deepfake released the night before an election.

A cyberattack on voter registration databases.

We tend to treat these as separate policy domains. Climate over here. Cybersecurity over there. Disinformation somewhere else. Elections in their own institutional box.

But the world does not behave in compartments.

And democracies don't fail in compartments either.

What do we mean by democratic resilience?

Traditionally, resilience is defined as the ability to absorb a shock and bounce back to a previous state. A system is hit. It bends. It recovers. It returns to equilibrium.

That definition works well in engineering. It even works in certain economic models.

But when we apply it to democracy, it becomes insufficient.

Because the idea of “bouncing back” rests on two false assumptions.

First, it assumes that shocks arrive unexpectedly – like lightning strikes. Sudden, external, exceptional events we are neither able to foresee nor to prepare for.

Second, it assumes that the pre-shock condition was stable, healthy and worth restoring.

But today, democracies do not face occasional lightning strikes. They operate in permanent turbulence.

And the “pre-shock” equilibrium was not always ideal. If resilience simply means restoring yesterday’s model, we risk rebuilding fragility.

That is why, at International IDEA, when we speak about democratic resilience, we expand the concept.

Yes, democracies must be able to withstand shocks.
Yes, they must be able to recover without losing their core identity.

But that is not enough.

They must also be able to anticipate risks – to detect vulnerabilities before they become crises.

And they must be able to adapt, and sometimes transform, when conditions fundamentally change.

Resilience is anticipatory capacity combined with adaptive integrity. It is the ability to move forward under pressure without surrendering the core pillars that define democracy.

And democracy does have a core identity.

Our Global State of Democracy framework identifies four foundational categories:

Representation.

Rights.

Rule of Law.

Participation.

These are not abstract ideals. They are structural components.

And I know this first hand, because I grew up in communist Poland.

We had elections. But we did not have free and fair representation. The outcome was predetermined.

We had institutions. But they did not protect our rights. Justice was subordinated to power.

We had participation – at least formally. But it was orchestrated, not genuinely civic.

The system was highly efficient.

It was controlled.

It was stable.

Until it wasn't.

That experience teaches you something fundamental: democracy is not defined by speed. Not by executive or administrative order. Not by narrative discipline.

Its identity lies in those four pillars – and when any of them weakens, the system may look stable on the surface, but it becomes fragile underneath.

That is why, when we speak about resilience today, we must be careful.

Resilience cannot mean concentrating authority to eliminate friction.

It cannot mean narrowing rights to prevent disorder.

It cannot mean insulating power from scrutiny.

Democracy is not an airport.

It is not a military command structure.

Its strength does not lie in eliminating contestation.

Its strength lies in sustaining Representation, Rights, Rule of Law and Participation – even under pressure.

Representation

Resilient representation means free and fair elections that remain credible even when exposed to interference or disruption.

Our Global State of Democracy data shows that erosion of electoral integrity is often an early warning sign of democratic decline.

When people lose trust in elections, legitimacy erodes. And when legitimacy erodes, everything else begins to wobble.

Resilience here means protecting the fairness, transparency and credibility of elections – not shielding them from criticism, but strengthening their robustness.

From concept to application: the Integrated Framework

Concepts are powerful. But institutions need tools.

Over the past decade, our data shows more countries experiencing democratic backsliding than improvement. Electoral integrity under strain. Civic space narrowing. Judicial independence challenged.

At the same time, risks around elections have multiplied.

Foreign information manipulation and interference.
AI-enabled disinformation.
Climate disruptions.
Cyber threats.

Democracies today operate in a risk-dense environment.

This is where the Integrated Framework for Protecting Elections becomes relevant.

It is not a political declaration. It is a structured methodology.

It includes four powerful tools that allow electoral stakeholders to systematically assess and address risks and vulnerabilities.

And the Framework strengthens each of the four foundational pillars of democracy:

It reinforces Representation by safeguarding electoral integrity.
It protects Rights by addressing threats without undermining freedoms.

It supports Rule of Law by clarifying institutional roles and dispute mechanisms.

It enhances Participation by strengthening trust and inclusivity.

It is also threat-agnostic.

It can help institutions prepare for climate-related disruptions.

Foreign information manipulation.

AI-generated deepfakes.

Cyber vulnerabilities.

Physical security risks.

Instead of reacting crisis by crisis, it builds anticipatory capacity.

Instead of siloed responses, it encourages coordination.

Instead of ad hoc fixes, it fosters institutional learning.

And it is scalable – locally, nationally, regionally, globally.

Why this matters now?

We are living through a structural transformation of the democratic operating environment.

Security concerns are rising.

Technological disruption is accelerating.

Geopolitical competition is intensifying.

Elections are increasingly discussed in the context of critical infrastructure.

But here lies the tension.

If we protect elections in ways that undermine Representation, Rights, Rule of Law or Participation – we weaken the very democracy we seek to defend.

Our Framework offers a different pathway.

It enables electoral stakeholders to anticipate risks without hollowing out their core.

It helps institutions prepare for AI-enabled interference without curtailing free expression.

To manage climate disruptions without excluding voters.

To resolve disputes without politicising justice.

And this is not only relevant for electoral management bodies.

It concerns governments.

Parliaments.

Judiciaries.

Civil society.

Technology platforms.

Regional organisations.

Because democratic resilience is systemic.

A final reflection

Growing up without genuine representation, without independent courts, without protected rights – you develop a deep appreciation for how fragile democracy can be.

But you also learn how powerful it is when those pillars are real.

The Integrated Framework is one practical step in that direction.

It is not a silver bullet.

But it is a structured, scalable contribution to strengthening democracy's adaptive capacity.

Because if democracy is to endure in this century, it must adapt to a volatile world – without losing its identity.