



The Return of International War and Rising Deficits in State Legitimacy: IDOS Constellations of State Fragility 3.0

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Summary

The international context is changing profoundly, owing to rising autocratisation and the return of international war. These transformations also impact the long-standing problem of state fragility.

The IDOS Constellations of State Fragility (CSF) provides a differentiated model to measure state fragility along the three dimensions of *authority*, *capacity* and *legitimacy*. Rather than aggregating scores in these dimensions on a one-dimensional scale, the CSF identifies eight *constellations* of how deficits in these three dimensions occur jointly in reality. The CSF was launched in 2018 and was recently updated for the second time, now covering the period 2005 to 2024.

In this Policy Brief, we pursue three objectives. First, we briefly present the CSF model. Second, we describe the methodological adjustments of the 2025 update. This includes the use of a new measure for “battle-related deaths” – one indicator to assess the state’s monopoly on the use of force (*authority*). The modification became necessary due to a real-world development: the return of international war and, in particular, Russia’s war of aggression on Ukraine. Third, we elaborate on the main empirical trend that emerges from the 2025 update: the global rise of deficits in the legitimacy dimension, reflected in the increase of “illiberal functioning” and “low legitimacy” states. This development is in line with wider autocratisation trends.

We derive the following recommendations for policy and policy-related research:

- **Use multidimensional models to assess state fragility.** Foreign and development policymakers as well as academics should employ multidimensional approaches to conceptualise and measure state fragility. Not only are such models better suited

for adequately capturing the complexity of state fragility, but they also provide better starting points for designing tailored policy interventions sensitive to context.

- **Acknowledge that deficits in the legitimacy dimension are also rising in Europe.** Rather than considering state fragility a phenomenon limited to the Global South, German and European policy-makers would be well advised to acknowledge that deficits in the legitimacy dimension are also growing in Europe, including countries of the European Union (EU). Studying developments in the Global South and mutual learning with Southern policy-makers and civil society actors may contribute to enhanced resilience in Europe as well.
- **Explore the relationship between state fragility and international war.** Future research should explore how international war and state fragility are related, including investigating the relationship between internal fragility dimensions and vulnerabilities to external shocks, and whether defence capabilities matter in determining whether and to what extent a state is fragile.
- **Explore and address the relationship between state fragility and autocratisation.** Investigating how state fragility and autocratisation are inter-related is a promising research agenda. This comprises exploring whether and how changes in fragility patterns and autocratisation trends are correlated as well as under what conditions autocratisation acts as a driver of state fragility by prompting violent resistance. Foreign and development policymakers could build on the findings to design coherent policy interventions.

Introduction

The international political and security context is undergoing profound changes. Autocratisation is increasing and *inter*-state war has made a return to international relations. Concurrently, state fragility has remained on the international policy agenda since the terrorist bombings of 9/11, owing to developments in Afghanistan and political instability in the Sahel amongst others.

Since 2018, the IDOS Constellations of State Fragility (CSF) has provided an empirical and practical model to assess state fragility, capturing the multi-faceted nature of the phenomenon (Ziaja et al., 2019). Models that measure state fragility on a linear, one-dimensional scale – ranging from “stable” to “fragile” to “highly fragile” – reduce complexity to an extent incompatible with the concept’s inherent notion of an interplay between strengths and deficits in different state functions. The CSF reflects this complexity by identifying common patterns (*constellations*) of different fragility dimensions. Accordingly, it provides a starting point for foreign and development policy-makers to design more tailored policy interventions (Lorch et al., 2024).

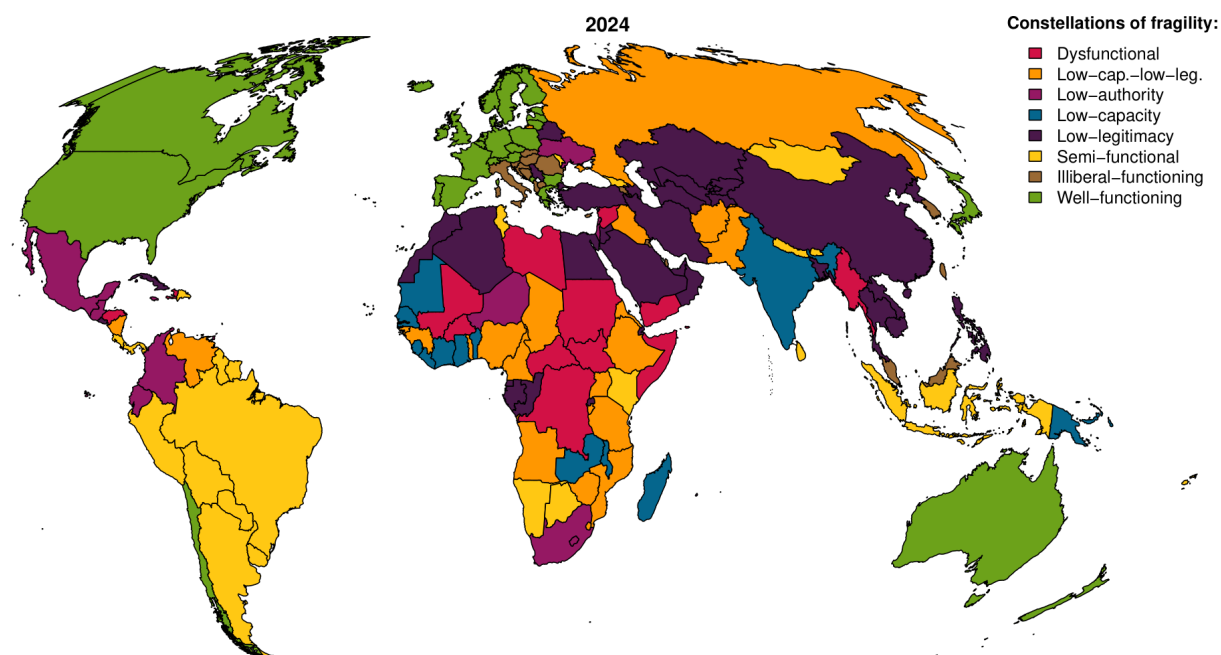
The CSF measures state fragility along the three dimensions of *authority*, *capacity* and *legitimacy*. *Authority* refers to the state’s monopoly over the means of violence and is measured through battle-related deaths on the state’s own territory, homicide rates, and an expert-coded indicator for the state’s monopoly on force. *Capacity* relates to the state’s ability to implement policy decisions and is assessed through access to clean water, child mortality and primary school enrolment rates, and an aggregated indicator of basic administration capacity. *Legitimacy* designates the state’s ability to secure the population’s consent to (or, at least, tolerance of) its rule and is measured through human rights scores, the extent of government censorship and the number of people from that state granted asylum in other countries.

The CSF keeps the three dimensions separate, rather than aggregating a state’s scores in all of them. Subsequently, the approach identifies

empirical constellations in which deficits in the three dimensions occur jointly in the real world. The conceptual justification for not collapsing all scores into a one-dimensional scale is that a state’s functions do not necessarily compensate for each other. Constellations are identified by finding the areas where many countries have similar scores on all dimensions in our three-dimensional data cloud. We find eight fragility constellations:

- *well-functioning states* perform well in all three dimensions, e.g. Sweden and Australia;
- *illiberal functioning states* perform well on authority and capacity but have only medium legitimacy scores, e.g. Hungary and Slovakia;
- *low-legitimacy states* achieve medium scores in the authority and capacity dimensions but low scores in the legitimacy dimension, e.g. China and Algeria;
- *semi-functional states* have medium scores in all three dimensions, e.g. Peru and Botswana;
- *low-authority states* perform poorly on authority but have medium capacity and legitimacy scores, e.g. Colombia and South Africa;
- *low-capacity states* have low scores in the capacity but medium scores in the authority and legitimacy dimensions, e.g. Ghana and Sierra Leone;
- *low-capacity-and-legitimacy states* have low capacity and legitimacy scores but perform better on authority, e.g. Russia and Venezuela;
- *dysfunctional states* perform badly on all three dimensions, e.g. Yemen and Somalia.

In 2025, the CSF dataset was updated to cover the period 2005 to 2024. (CSFs 1.0 and 2.0 covered the periods 2005 to 2018 and 2005 to 2020 respectively.) The new data (CSF 3.0) can be accessed through our interactive CSF website (IDOS, 2025), which illustrates the global distribution of the eight fragility constellations, allows the user to track and compare the development of states over time, and offers a detailed overview of the CSF’s methodology, as well as links to related publications.

Figure 1: CSF country classifications 2024

Source: Authors

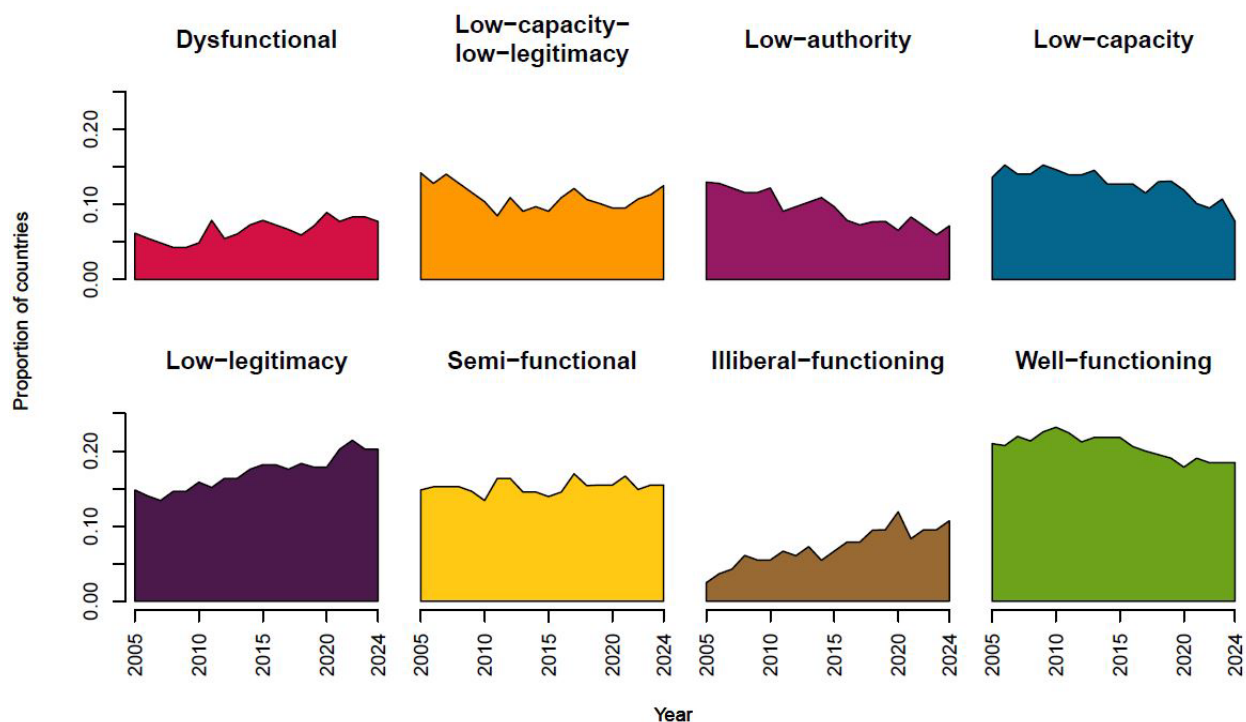
The need for methodological adjustments: reflecting the return of international war

The CSF measures a state's performance in each dimension with three to four empirical indicators. In the past, we replaced indicators when the original sources of information stopped providing data. In 2017, for example, Freedom House discontinued their measurement of "Freedom of the Press", which we had used for our indicator of "government censorship", leading us to replace this source with the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project's measurement of "government censorship effort". Similarly, for the recent update (CSF 3.0), we had to replace the Fariss "latent human rights scores" with V-Dem's "human rights index" to measure the "human rights" indicator in the legitimacy dimension, because the former was not updated with sufficient frequency.

For CSF 3.0, we also decided to refine how "battle-related deaths" are measured due to a real-world development: Russia's continuing war of aggression against Ukraine. The previous versions of the CSF relied on the combined country datasets of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) to source "battle-related deaths" as one

indicator to determine the state's monopoly on violence (*authority*). However, these datasets also include casualties of its citizens that a state suffers abroad. Had we continued using this measurement, Russia would have been categorised as a dysfunctional state owing to the high number of Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine. However, the Russian state's ability to recruit large numbers of soldiers and send them abroad is, in fact, not indicative of its weakness in the authority dimension. On the contrary, it signals that the Russian state's monopoly on violence is quite intact, although it is used in ways that also harms Russia's own population. Thus, we used the UCDP's Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) to capture only those "battle-related deaths" that occur within a state's own territory, excluding casualties that a state suffers abroad. Based on this measurement, CSF 3.0 shows Russia in the low-capacity-and-legitimacy category.

These reflections are also relevant for the wider academic and policy discourse. Since discussions on state fragility emerged in the 1990s, following the collapse of Somalia, scholars and policy-makers mostly associated violent conflicts linked to state fragility with *intra*-state conflicts. This equation was in line with the fact that, until recently,

Figure 2: Proportion of fragility constellations over time, 2005–2024

Source: Authors

most wars were internal – civil wars rather than *inter-state* wars. Moreover, it reflected the insight that *intra-state* conflicts are more indicative of deficits in the state’s monopoly on violence than *inter-state* ones. Accordingly, it also guided the CSF’s previous choice of how to measure “battle-related deaths”.

Trends in state fragility: deficits in the legitimacy dimension continue to rise

While most constellations grow and shrink somewhat over time, CSF 3.0 shows some overarching trends (Figure 2). Specifically, the category “well-functioning states” grew until 2010 but decreased after that (from 21% in 2005 to 23% in 2010 and to 18% in 2024). The share of “dysfunctional states” slightly increased (from 6% in 2005 to 8% in 2024). The share of “low-authority states” decreased (from 16% to 11%), as did the share of low-capacity states (from 21% to 13%).

Particularly remarkable are the increasing shares of two fragility constellations in which deficits in the legitimacy dimension are crucial. The share of the

“low-legitimacy states”, such as China, Algeria and Morocco, increased from 15% in 2005 to 20% in 2024. Similarly, the share of the “illiberal-functioning states” grew from 2% in 2005 to 11% in 2024. Notably, this constellation is increasingly present in Europe, including in EU member states. As of 2024, not only Hungary under Victor Orban (which has been in this category since 2011) but also Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovakia and Italy under Georgia Meloni were “illiberal functioning states”. Poland, in contrast, moved out of that constellation into the “well-functioning” one in 2024, following the 2023 election of Donald Tusk.

The CSF measures a state’s legitimacy through human rights scores, government censorship and the number of citizens from the state granted asylum in other countries, which we view as a proxy for people’s (justified) unwillingness to live under that state’s purview. Accordingly, the CSF’s conception of legitimacy differs from democratic legitimacy as the formation of government through free and fair elections, and the CSF is thus not suitable for directly assessing political regime transformations (from democracy to autocracy or vice-versa). Nevertheless, the increasing relevance

of legitimacy deficits in the form of worsening human rights scores, increasing government censorship, and a growing number of citizens choosing exile are related to autocratisation.

This is also suggested by a quick, selective, comparison between CSF 3.0 and V-Dem's 2025 Democracy Report (Nord et al., 2025). All the "low-legitimacy states" identified by CSF 3.0 are categorised as "closed" or "electoral autocracies" by V-Dem. The European state of Hungary, which CSF 3.0 categorises as "illiberal functioning", is classified by V-Dem as an "electoral autocracy" in an episode of further autocratisation. The "illiberal functioning states" of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovakia were classified by V-Dem as "electoral democracies" (rather than "liberal democracies", which effectively protect individual liberties and have strong institutional checks and balances).

There are conceptual and empirical overlaps between CSF 3.0 and the V-Dem dataset, particularly due to the reliance of CSF 3.0 on V-Dem's "government censorship effort" indicator and "human rights index". Nevertheless, the above examples indicate that the relationship between state fragility and autocratisation is worth exploring in more depth.

Relatedly, some of the CSF's country classifications indicate that repression and human rights violations – which are more common in autocratic regimes – may drive state fragility more broadly, including in the *authority* and *capacity* dimensions, by prompting violent resistance. Myanmar, for instance, shifted from the "low-capacity" to the "dysfunctional" category following the 2021 military coup. The military brutally suppressed the massive popular demonstrations staged against the coup, leading large parts of the pro-democracy movement to go underground, take up arms and seek military assistance and training from the country's long-standing ethnic armed organisations. From 2022 onwards, civil war escalated, spreading to all parts of the country.

Conclusions and recommendations

The 2025 update of the CSF again underlines the usefulness of using a fine-grained, multi-dimensional model for assessing state fragility. Such a model is much more suitable for capturing the complex interplay between deficits in different state functions than aggregated, one-dimensional ones. Consequently, it also allows scholars and policymakers to track changes in patterns of fragility (*fragility constellations*) over time.

On a methodological note, the update indicates that the return of international, *inter*-state war may impact the ways in which state fragility has to be conceptualised and measured. To adequately capture the current state of Russia's monopoly on violence, we adjusted our measurement of "battle-related deaths", with the CSF now distinguishing between deaths suffered by a state on its own territory and those suffered abroad.

On a more general level, the apparent return of international war (Rustad, 2025, p. 8), as exemplified by Russia's war on Ukraine, also raises other important questions that are beyond the scope of this Policy Brief. For instance, means of violence controlled by the state and state capabilities for public administration and the delivery of services can be destroyed by foreign aggression, rendering previously functioning states *de facto* (more) fragile.

Empirically, the major fragility trend that emerges from CSF 3.0 is the growth of deficits in the legitimacy dimension of states worldwide, including in Europe. While the CSF is not suitable for measuring transformations in regime type (democracy or autocracy), this finding is in line with wider global autocratisation trends.

The following recommendations are made for policy and policy-related research:

- **Use multidimensional models to assess state fragility.** Policymakers and academics should employ multidimensional approaches to assess state fragility so as to capture the complexity of the phenomenon and design well-tailored, context-sensitive policy interventions.

- **Acknowledge that deficits in the legitimacy dimension are rising in Europe.** German and European policymakers should acknowledge that deficits in the legitimacy dimension are also growing in Europe, including in EU countries. Learning from processes and actors in the Global South may contribute to enhanced resilience in Europe as well.
- **Explore the relationship between state fragility and international war.** Future research should explore how international war and state fragility are related. This includes investigating the relationship between internal fragility dimensions and vulnerabilities to external shocks as well as exploring the role played by defence capabilities in determining whether and to what extent a state is fragile.
- **Explore and address the relationship between state fragility and autocratisation.** Future research should explore whether and how changes in fragility patterns and autocratisation trends are correlated. Moreover, it should investigate how and under what conditions autocratisation drives state fragility by sparking violent resistance. Policymakers could build on the findings to design coherent policy interventions.

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