



CENTREPEACE

REPORT ON THE ESTABLISHMENT AND OPERATION OF CENTREPEACE FOCUS GROUPS

Deliverable 1.1

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Acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ARES	Armament Industry European Research Group
DG DEVCO	Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development
EU	European Union
EWIS	European Workshops in International Studies
FG	Focus Group
FSS	Faculty of Social Studies
IIPS	International Institute of Political Science
IRIS	Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques
MUNI	Masaryk University
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCMR	Nordic Civil-Military Researchers Network
NGO	non-governmental organization
OSCE	Organization for Security Co-operation in Europe
PRIO	Peace Research Institute Oslo
RMA	Research Management and Administration
TASERR	Tampere Centre for Security, Risk and Resilience
TAU	Tampere University
UoH	University of Helsinki
WP	work package

1. Introduction

Deliverable 1.1 *Report on the Establishment and Operation of CENTREPEACE Focus Groups* aims to inform about the established focus groups during the period from June 2024 to September 2025. In particular, it describes the topical focus of the groups, introduces the personnel involved in these focus groups, the external partners that focus groups interacted with, activities undertaken within the FG and the work conducted by the FG. The report does not describe the research conducted by Focus Groups, as it is described in detail in Deliverable 3.1 *Report on the Implementation of CENTREPEACE Research Programme*.

Focus groups were established during the online kick-off meeting in June 2024, with participants being able to assign to individual focus groups. Four focus groups were established:

- FG1 Cognitive Warfare
- FG2 Defence Industry
- FG3 Eastern Partnership
- RMA FG (Funding Observatory)

The first three focus groups aim at conducting research, preparing articles, and conference contributions, and are responsible for organising events that will lead to suggestions for follow-up project proposals. The RMA FG is responsible for enhancing management and administrative skills and innovations, in order to enable Research Managers and Administrators (RMAs) to successfully develop proposals and manage international projects involving a large number of partners. The RMA FG is also responsible for finding suitable project calls for research FGs.

2. Focus Group 1 – Cognitive Warfare

The evolving landscape of security challenges, particularly in the context of hybrid threats posed by Russia, underscores the critical importance of research in addressing cognitive warfare. Focus Group Cognitive Warfare focuses on two pivotal areas: enhancing security cooperation to encounter cognitive threats and building institutional capacity at the state and regional levels. By examining key regions such as Central and Eastern Europe and the Nordic countries, the research adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining network analysis and discourse analysis, and it illuminates the perceptions of cognitive threats and the principles of security cooperation. By fostering collaboration between leading institutions like MUNI, UoH, and PRIO, this initiative not only advances academic knowledge but also equips policymakers, experts and practitioners with actionable insights to address the challenges posed by cognitive warfare in today's complex security environment. As a result of the project interim meeting in May 2025, the research focus of the FG1 is giving more emphasis on linking theoretical debates with practical security cooperation.

2.1. Members of the FG1

Petra Mlejnková (FG leader, Masaryk University) – her research focuses on political extremism, radicalisation processes in the European context, and propaganda and information warfare. She is a member of several international professional networks, such as the European Network on Terrorism and the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats.

Stine Bergensen (Peace Research Institute Oslo) – in her research, she is interested in topics of risk and threat communication, digitalisation of security and crisis management practices, disinformation and risk perception.

Giacomo Bruni (Peace Research Institute Oslo) – he is focusing on technology and cyber. His research interests include international norms and regulations, great power competition, and China's foreign policy. His PhD project maps and compares normative approaches to cybersecurity and internet governance.

Robin Burda (Masaryk University) – his research specialisations are psychological operations, cognitive warfare, disinformation, and propaganda. He primarily focuses on non-state armed actors in the region of the Middle East and North Africa.

Ilaria Carozza (Peace Research Institute Oslo) – her research focuses on understanding how China extends its influence abroad and challenges the existing world order. She covers topics such as China's foreign policy; the normative, political and security impact of artificial intelligence; great power competition; geopolitics; and the Digital Silk Road. Her broader interests include China's engagement in Africa and Asia, the Belt and Road Initiative, South-South cooperation, and international order.

Jan Kleiner (Masaryk University) – his research primarily focuses on cyberspace and emerging technologies, such as AI, blockchain, and quantum computing. His work explores how these technologies can be leveraged to enhance governance processes while ensuring they are safeguarded against diverse threats, both intentional and unintentional.

Katri Pynnöniemi (University of Helsinki) – in her research, she examines changes in Russian strategic thinking, in particular threat analysis and the assumptions that guide it, the war rhetoric that underpins

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and the debate in Russian war studies on the aims of the (aggressive) war.

2.2. Cooperation Outside the Consortium

Masaryk University became a member of the Nordic Civil-Military Researchers Network (NCMR) coordinated by the Tampere Centre for Security, Risk and Resilience (TASERR), at Tampere University (TAU). The consortium serves as a pool for research project partners and for developing research ideas.

As a result of the matchmaking event held in May 2025 in Helsinki, we have been developing a pool of potential research partners, including partners in Horizon Europe project proposals. In these terms, the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, the University of Jyväskylä, VTT Technical Research Centre and National Defense University of Finland are on the board and expressed interest in FG1 research activities and future project collaboration. FG1 aims to develop the idea of the Horizon Europe project proposal on generative AI agents. Once FG1 has a clear idea about the follow-up research proposal, we would like to organise a project development workshop.

2.3. Activities Undertaken under the FG1

2.3.1. Matchmaking Event

On 26th to 27th May, a matchmaking event was organised in Helsinki, focusing on the topic of cognitive warfare and the role of artificial intelligence (AI). This matchmaking event was attended by multiple researchers from various organisations: Prime Minister's Office of Finland, National Defence University, Finnish Defence Research Agency, Laurea University of Applied Science, OSCE, VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland, The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, and the University of Jyväskylä. The matchmaking event enhanced networking opportunities for FG1 and laid the foundations for new synergies and cooperations.

2.3.2. Mobilities

In September 2024, a kick-off meeting was organised in Brno. Focus group 1 was established and defined its research purpose, and the roles of members and participating institutions were identified. The follow-up meeting was organised on 28th May 2025 as an interim meeting. The FG1 redefined some of the research aims to make them more feasible in the framework of the project. It was also agreed to interconnect more theoretical debates about civil-military cooperation and practical performance of these principles in the context of cognitive warfare/threats in the cognitive domain. Another mobility is planned for Q1-Q2 2026 as part of the data collection activity (interviews with stakeholders in the Nordic region). In October 2026, we plan to attend the Aleksanteri conference at the University of Helsinki, where we will offer a panel on cognitive warfare.

3. Focus Group 2 – Defence Industry

Focus Group Defence Industry aims to capture the transformation of roles ascribed to the defence industry by society, as transformation is understood to have a profound impact on national policy and international cooperation. FG2 examines this transformation in three dimensions: the theoretical one of burgeoning roles expanding our former understanding of global defence industrial roles; the discourse level of how these roles are shaped and formed in societal debate; and the practical dimensions of impact on policy – namely in defence industrial cooperation, EU initiatives, and the future of European armament capacity. Special attention is devoted to the period of rapid change as a consequence of Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

3.1. Members of the FG2

Martin Chovančík (FG leader, Masaryk University) – he focuses on the defence industry, defence cooperation, and the societal dimension of arms production and arms trade. His research expertise is based on modern patterns of defence-industrial cooperation and integration, especially in the European context.

Adriana Ilavská (Masaryk University) – focuses on topics of tackling changes in the defence industry, with a strong emphasis on data-driven analysis and profound changes in global economic, social, and migration flows. She is using advanced mathematical methods and data analysis to a wide range of issues in international relations, providing new insights into complex global phenomena.

Oldřich Krpec (Masaryk University) - he specialises in international political economy, economic development, and trade policy. His research focus further consists of multilateral trade systems, international economic organisations, and Europe's role in the global economy.

Nicholas Marsh (Peace Research Institute Oslo) – he mainly focuses on arms trafficking, data and methodology used to research the trade in small arms and light weapons, arms acquisition by non-state parties involved in civil war and arms export and transfer controls.

Bruno Oliveira Martins (Peace Research Institute Oslo) – his main research interests lie in the intersection between technological developments, security practices, and societal change.

3.2. Cooperation Outside the Consortium

The group has initiated close cooperation with two other groups: 1. The association of defence economists – holding two annual conferences and representing the journal Defence and Peace Economics; and 2. ARES (The Armament Research Group under French IRIS). Renaud Bellais, University of Grenoble, is an instrumental connection in both groups and is also, therefore, co-editor of the special issue for European Security journal. The mentioned groups will also serve to continue building a consortium on defence research via future events in Prague (April 2026) and explicit matchmaking with regional experts in Brno (June 2026).

3.3. Activities Undertaken under the FG2

Focus Group 2 actively participated in all plenary meetings of the project, where the research plans of the FG were further developed. There were also other mobilities that contributed to the advancement of the group's research work.

In October 2024, Martin Chovančík and Adriana Ilavská visited PRIO for data gathering from Factiva and for drafting joint research plans. Nicholas Marsh visited MUNI in February 2025 to continue work on the drafts, and the group started developing a special issue proposal.

In June 2025, Martin Chovančík joined the Defence economists conference in Bordeaux with a contribution on “EU militarisation in defence spending,” where he presented some of the findings of the Focus Group. Furthermore, in June 2025, Nicholas Marsh, Martin Chovančík, and Oldřich Krpec joined the EWIS workshop in Krakow on the Defence industry in the EU, convened by the FG under the EWIS platform, with 12 attendees, solely focused on the defence industry. The titles of the contributions corresponded with the special issue articles.

In September 2025, Nicholas Marsh and Martin Chovančík joined the Prague “authors’ workshop” on the Special issue, including editorial meetings.

Research activities of the Focus group are covered in D3.1.

4. Focus Group 3 – Eastern Partnerships

Focus Group Eastern Partnership explores the Clash of Diffusions within Eastern Partnership nations, where domestic norms promoted by the European Union intersect with authoritarian influences from Russia, shaping the political paths of these regions. Furthermore, FG3 analyses the Strategic Weaponisation of essential resources to demonstrate how commodities can be employed as instruments of influence in the changing geopolitical environment. Finally, the FG delineate the complex Conflict Dynamics in the post-Soviet region, examining how evolving power dynamics and the diminishing influence of Russia may alter conflict patterns, thereby providing insights for EU foreign policy and conflict mitigation. Collectively, these studies offer an extensive insight into the dynamics transforming Eastern Europe, encompassing political conflicts and resource-driven strategies of dominance.

4.1. Members of the FG3

Zinaida Bechná (FG Leader, Masaryk University) – her research focuses on conflict figurational analysis within post-Soviet contexts, examining threat perceptions, NATO expansion, and foreign and national security strategies of Russia.

Pavel Baev (Peace Research Institute Oslo) – his research focuses on Russia's war against Ukraine, Russian military reform, Russia's conflict management in the Caucasus and Central Asia, energy interests in Russia's relations with Europe and NATO and the evolution of Russia-China partnership.

Vladimir Gel'man (University of Helsinki) – his research focuses on political regime dynamics, political institutions, governance and policy-making, elections, political parties and political protests, and sub-national politics in Russia and Eurasia. He also has expertise in authoritarianism, electoral and party politics, contentious politics, and regional and local government.

Martin Jirušek (Masaryk University) – he focuses on geopolitics, energy security, central and eastern Europe, Russia, the United States, and the transatlantic dimension of energy security.

Katalin Miklóssy (University of Helsinki) – is a historian and an area specialist in East Central and South Eastern Europe. She researches how the rule of law, strategic culture and nationalism present themselves in European countries. Previously, she also studied the role of competition in societal development and Cold War interactions.

Veli-Pekka Tynkkynen (University of Helsinki) – his research focuses on energy and environmental policies, energy security, and political power in Russia and Europe, for example, the Flowision project, unfolding how resource flows are made (in)visible and (de)politicised in Finland and Russia, and how they are being imagined as part of climate mitigation policies.

4.2. Activities Undertaken under the FG3

Zinaida Bechná undertook a research visit to the Aleksanteri Institute from 9–17 August 2025, during which she delivered a lecture titled “No War, No Peace: Unresolved Conflicts in the South Caucasus.” As part of the visit, access to the University of Helsinki libraries was established, enabling her to collect data for her ongoing research within the focus group.

An interim meeting was held in Helsinki in May 2025, which reviewed and consolidated the progress achieved to date and discussed the next planned steps in a synergistic manner. A matchmaking event is currently under preparation and is scheduled to take place at PRIO in May 2026; discussions are already underway, though still at an early stage.

Preparations for developing a new Horizon Europe project are beginning to take shape. Zinaida Bechná has initiated preliminary discussions with Veli-Pekka Tynkkynen, and together with Martin Jirušek, they are working on ideas to build a larger consortium with the aim of applying within the next Horizon Europe call.



5. Funding Observatory

The Funding Observatory (RMA Focus Group) is a stable working group comprising pre-award funding advisors from MUNI, PRIO, and UoH, which regularly screen HE/FP work programmes and identify topics and calls that may finance more in-depth studies on topics initiated by the R&I focus groups. Furthermore, it aims to strengthen research management and administration skills and capacities to access European research funding. Through knowledge exchange and innovative approaches, we foster excellence in administrative practice and support institutions in developing frameworks that enhance collaboration and project implementation.

The training activities of the RMA Focus Group are under WP7 and will be reported in D7.1 in 2027.

5.1. Members of the Funding Observatory

Marián Koval (Masaryk University) – is a project administrator at the International Institute of Political Science (IIPS) at the Faculty of Social Studies. He is a project manager of CENTREPEACE, and his agenda also consists of searching for funding opportunities for researchers at IIPS. Since 2022, he has worked at the faculty at the Office for Research and Project Support, where he has provided administrative support for research and operational projects.

Anne Duquenne (Peace Research Institute Oslo) – is a Senior Adviser specializing in EU funding, with expertise spanning the entire project cycle – from proposal development to project management. She has served as Project Manager for a large Horizon Europe project as well as a FP7 Network of Excellence. In recent years, she has designed and implemented a targeted support programme for ERC applicants at PRIO, aimed at boosting the number as well as the quality of applications.

Maija Harju (University of Helsinki) – is a Project Planner. Her work tasks include managing communications, arranging events, coordinating between the different participant universities and institutes, and assisting in research.

Anna Korhonen (University of Helsinki) – is a Senior Advisor at the University of Helsinki Research Services. She has initiated, designed concepts for, and implemented various successful programmes, including the Aleksanteri Institute Visiting Fellows Programme, which has over 160 Alumni in 30 countries; a series of international annual conferences, now the second biggest in Europe within its field; international doctoral training summer schools series, and other international initiatives. Additionally, she has focused on supporting project development and securing funding for new projects by offering editing, co-writing, and other pre-award services to selected scholars.

Damian Laws (Peace Research Institute Oslo) – is one of the five Department Managers at PRIO. In addition he is Management Adviser. And as such undertakes tasks of relevance to the PRIO Administration and Communication Department, including data collection and reporting, information integration and publishing, and project development.

Lynn Nygaard (Peace Research Institute Oslo) – is Special Advisor on professional development, gender and diversity. She focuses on both developing the professional skills of the researchers at PRIO and developing PRIO as an institution with a diverse staff. Her main area of expertise is academic writing and publishing. In that respect, she also focuses on various aspects of academic writing in research-producing settings. In addition to the writing workshops she offers both at PRIO and to other

institutions, she also provides training and support in project development, supervision, mentoring, and other aspects of professional development.



6. Summary

During the period June 2024 – September 2025, CENTREPEACE has founded one observatory group (RMA Focus Group) and 3 research focus groups: Cognitive Warfare; Defence Industry; and Eastern Partnership. The project has organised a in-person kick-off meeting in September 2024 and another interim project meeting in May 2025. The research focus groups consist of a total of 18 researchers.

During the mentioned period, multiple academic mobilities advanced the research work – 3.6 work weeks of mobilities to the IIPS MUNI and 12 weeks of mobilities from the IIPS MUNI.

So far, CENTREPEACE has organised one matchmaking event in Helsinki, which was attended by 8 external institutions.

The project concepts will be further developed in the second part of the project.

Figure 1 KPIs progress of WP1 + WP2

Name of indicator	Planned KPI	Realised KPI	Progress
T1.1 + T2.1: CENTREPEACE R&I integration and coordination			
SO1a: 3 focus groups	3	3	100%
SO1a: 4 meetings in person	4	2	50%
SO1a: 32 involved researchers	32	18	56%
T1.2 + T2.3: Funding Observatory			
SO1b: Advisors' working group	1	1	100%
T1.3 + T2.5: Visiting scholar scheme			
SO1e: 14 weeks mobility to IIPS	14	3,6	26%
SO1e: 35 weeks mobility from IIPS	35	12	34%
T2.2: Matchmaking to broaden collaboration			
SO1c: 3 matchmaking events	3	1	33%
SO1c: 12 external partners involved	12	8	67%
T2.4 Project development			
So1d: 3 project concepts	3	0	0%