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Commentaries

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CIVILIAN CRISIS PREPAREDNESS AROUND EUROPE

AS THE SIGNS OF RUSSIA'S HYBRID WARFARE IN EUROPE BECOME INCREASINGLY VISIBLE, MAJOR EUROPEAN COUNTRIES ARE SEEKING TO GET AHEAD OF THE THREAT BY STRENGTHENING THEIR CIVILIAN DEFENCE

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In an era of hybrid warfare, the idea that European societies need to anticipate crises and prepare for them has been gaining ground. The recent drone incident in Leipzig, and its subsequent [attribution](#) to Russia by the German government, may have signalled a step up in the public attribution of such activities to Moscow. But behind the scenes, governments across Europe have been strengthening their defences for some time. In the policy discourse, several concepts have emerged to describe this process, from civilian preparedness and crisis preparedness to civilian defence.

Civilian Defence, what's in a name?

Since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, European governments and societies have realised the need to strengthen crisis preparedness in the civilian realm. Facing a full-scale kinetic war at their borders and growing hybrid threats at home, they have started to take countermeasures. As [documented](#) by the IISS, the language of readiness and defence varies across EU Member States and international organisations. The latter have traditionally used definitions that reflect the military or civilian core of their tasks and *raison d'être*. When NATO spoke of 'civilian preparedness' as a complement to military readiness, the EU preferred the notion of 'civil protection', rooted in disaster relief and civilian crisis management.

The definition of civil defence, now largely used in the Nordic countries, refers instead to the civilian part of total defence. It encompasses civil protection, economic defence and the increasingly discussed notion of psychological defence. The underlying [logic](#) is deterrence: a high degree of civilian defence, coupled with robust military capabilities, should change a potential aggressor's cost-benefit analysis, leading it to assess the costs of aggression as higher than its potential benefits. In the case of an attack, civil defence preparedness would also support the armed forces and ensure the resilience of civilians, critical services and infrastructure.

Finally, as the boundaries of hybrid warfare have expanded to comprise acts of sabotage against critical infrastructure, cyber operations, disinformation and cognitive warfare, resilience has become a policy catch-all term for preparedness against a broad range of hybrid attacks.

The Nordic model

Nordic states are among the most advanced in treating crisis preparedness as a shared responsibility, starting from the premise that

security begins at home and extends beyond the state.

The Swedish model, often presented as one of the most developed in Europe, is centred on the idea of ‘whole of society’, with every citizen and organisation responsible for “ensuring that society can continue to function, even in severely compromised conditions and, ultimately, war”. In 2024, the government passed the ‘Total Defence Bill’ for 2025–2030, which includes more than EUR 3 billion for civilian defence alone. The bill also re-launched a renamed ‘Civil Defence and Resilience Agency’, tasked with overseeing preparedness, coordinating between civil and military defence, as well as acting internationally through multilateral organisations, for example by sending equipment and seconding experts to Ukraine.

To complement its whole-of-society approach and extend preparedness to the growing challenge of disinformation and cognitive warfare, Stockholm runs the ‘Psychological Defence Agency’, tasked with supporting local and regional governments, as well as private companies and organisations, in reinforcing the resilience of the Swedish population in the information domain.

Finland recently ran Europe’s largest civilian defence exercise since the Second World War. More than 2,000 people, including volunteers and students, took part in the exercise, which simulated cyberattacks on national critical infrastructure alongside a Russian missile threat. The objective was to collectively test responses and strengthen knowledge and awareness across society. The simulation also involved participants taking refuge in one of the country’s 50,000 underground missile-proof shelters. By law, every residential building in Finland of more than 1,200 square metres must include a certified civil defence shelter.

The UK and France

The shift towards a broader conception of civilian preparedness is not limited to the Nordic and Baltic countries. The United Kingdom and France are increasingly placing resilience and preparedness at the centre of their national security efforts, while adapting them to their own institutional frameworks.

The UK government announced in July a Resilience Action Plan aimed at strengthening the alignment between military and civilian efforts in the event of international hostilities affecting the country. It will include a national home defence exercise in 2027, involving ministers and hundreds of officials across government and the public sector. Named Exercise Albiston Shadow - the largest of its kind since the Cold War, it will test government preparedness for hybrid attacks against the UK.

The government is also updating its ‘War Books’, last revised in 2004, which set out how departments would respond to threats against the UK. Alongside these institutional measures, a new public engagement campaign will encourage households and communities to strengthen their preparedness. Public awareness appears to be growing too: 74% of respondents said there are effective steps people can take to prepare for emergencies, while 69% considered it important to be prepared even for emergencies that are unlikely to happen.

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France has followed a similar path, increasingly placing national resilience at the centre of its response to a deteriorating security environment. In July, the government's Comité interministériel pour la résilience nationale set out a new roadmap, including measures to secure strategic supplies, a major exercise simulating a nationwide electricity blackout and efforts to expand civic engagement and resilience education. This builds on ORION 26, the large-scale exercise (included within the latest Revue nationale stratégique) held earlier in the year to prepare for high-intensity warfare, which involved the armed forces as well as wider government and support structures. At the individual level, authorities continue to promote a 72-hour emergency kit, reflecting the broader effort to make preparedness a shared responsibility between the state and society.

Operationalising preparedness

The Nordic experience offers some basic lessons for operationalising preparedness: a whole-of-society approach, sustained public awareness and clear guidance for CSOs and the private sector, but also a layered conception of security in which civilian and military preparedness are integrated, including in the information domain.

This also requires a degree of political consensus. In a mature democracy, national defence should remain a bipartisan priority, even where efforts to strengthen democratic resilience against disinformation and foreign interference become politically contested.

The experience of the UK and France further shows that civilian preparedness needs to be anchored in the wider national security strategy. Their recent efforts are not standalone initiatives, but part of broader attempts to adapt national security to the current hybrid threat environment.

At the European level, the EU is beginning to implement this through the Preparedness Union. The challenge is to turn this framework into effective national and cross-border capabilities, providing a common layer to what ultimately remains a shared responsibility between states and societies. After all, as someone rightly pointed out: “in a crisis, resilience cannot be improvised – it must have been built in advance”.

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