



THE PREPAREDNESS OF CIVIL SOCIETY – A CORE COMPONENT OF THE EUROPEAN SECURITY ARCHITECTURE –

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DOI: 10.55535/RMT.2026.1-2.15

The concept of “Total Defence” emerged in the second half of the 20th century, particularly within the context of the Cold War, as a strategic response by small or neutral states to the limitations of traditional military deterrence. It promotes an integrated, multi-sectoral approach that mobilizes the entire society – military, civil, economic and psychological – in support of national defence. The expansion of the security sphere beyond the strictly military domain reflects the hybrid nature of contemporary threats, which increasingly target critical infrastructure, social cohesion, and democratic order. Within this framework, “Total Defence” becomes the foundation of a robust model of societal resilience, understood as the collective ability of society to anticipate, manage and recover from a range of crises – whether military, economic, environmental, or informational in nature. This article analyses the strategic role of civil society preparedness within the European security architecture, emphasizing the importance of fostering societal resilience through civil-military cooperation, civic education for security, and the strengthening of inter-institutional capacities in an era marked by instability, uncertainty and hybrid threats.

Keywords: society; resilience; national security; civil-military cooperation; civic education;



INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the European security architecture has undergone profound transformations, generated by a succession of major crises that have disrupted the international order and tested the capacity of states and societies to respond coherently and efficiently to them. The COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine, the intensification of cyberattacks, as well as the proliferation of disinformation campaigns have demonstrated that security can no longer be conceived exclusively from a military perspective. At the heart of the new security paradigm, we now find the idea of societal resilience.

Societal resilience refers to the collective capacity of a society to resist, adapt and reconfigure itself rapidly in the face of political, economic, cyber, military or informational disruptions. This capacity entails not only the soundness of institutions, but also the active involvement of citizens, the cohesion of communities and their ability to react intelligently and in an organised manner in crisis situations. From this perspective, security is no longer the exclusive prerogative of governments and armed forces, but becomes a collective responsibility, shared between state institutions and citizens. According to the Stockholm Resilience Centre, this concept represents “*the capacity of a system, be it an individual, a forest, a city or an economy, to deal with change and continue to develop. The system will experience shocks and disturbances over time, but these also can spur renewal and innovative thinking*” (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2014).

The main objective of this article is to analyse the strategic role of civil society training in strengthening the European security architecture, emphasizing the dimensions of resilience, civil-military cooperation and civic education for security. The aim is to demonstrate that civil society can no longer be seen as a passive beneficiary of security measures, but rather as an active and indispensable actor

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The Global Strategy of the European Union for the Common Foreign and Security Policy explicitly introduces the idea of “societal resilience” as a defining element of modern security, while also emphasizing the essential role of civic participation in defending democratic values.

in protecting the democratic order in the face of contemporary threats. Furthermore, the level of civil society training directly influences the state’s capacity to manage complex crises and to participate effectively within the collective defence system of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The methodology used in this article is qualitative in nature, based on the analysis of public policy documents developed by the European Union, NATO and member states with a tradition of integrating civil society into security systems. The sources used include academic publications, case studies and reports developed by international organizations such as the Stockholm Resilience Centre and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, as well as materials provided by European think tanks specialized in the field of security. We have used a comparative and analytical approach, aiming to highlight examples of both good practices and structural dysfunctions that affect the effective integration of civil society into resilience strategies.

RECONFIGURING THE CONCEPT OF SECURITY: FROM MILITARY DEFENCE TO SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

After the end of the Cold War, the concept of security in Europe has undergone a broad process of reconfiguration, moving from a strictly military approach to an integrative one, in which the social, economic, digital and informational dimensions are treated as fundamental elements of national and regional security (Biscop, 2019). The Global Strategy of the European Union for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (European Union, 2016) explicitly introduces the idea of “societal resilience” as a defining element of modern security, while also emphasizing the essential role of civic participation in defending democratic values.

In parallel, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization revised its interpretation of Article 3 of the Washington Treaty, reaffirming the obligation of member states to develop their domestic resilience capacities. They include actions in areas such as civic education, the protection of critical infrastructure and the strengthening of strategic communication (NATO, 2023). These updates reflect a growing recognition that new forms of conflict – hybrid, asymmetric

or informational – directly affect civilians by transforming citizens into both targets and strategic resources for crisis response.

In this new context, the civilian population can no longer be considered a simple observer of conflicts, becoming a vulnerable, yet indispensable actor in the process of collective defence. The lack of minimal civic preparation and active participation in public life makes European societies vulnerable to propaganda, manipulation, collective panic or institutional collapse (Kloubert, 2018). Therefore, the contemporary approach to security involves not only strengthening military capabilities, but also developing a societal ecosystem capable of actively contributing to national and European resilience.

This integrative perspective is organically correlated with the notion of societal resilience, understood as the ability of a society to resist, adapt and recover from crises of a military, economic, ecological or informational nature. Under these circumstances, *“Total Defence”* (Norwegian Directorate for Civil Protection/DSB, 2025) provides the structural and strategic framework necessary for strengthening resilience, by institutionalizing mechanisms for preparation, prevention and adaptability at an intersectoral level. By promoting collective responsibility, civic education and inter-institutional cooperation, this paradigm ensures not only the protection of society from external aggressions, but also its fortification against internal risks, such as disinformation, polarization or systemic shocks. In this light, *“Total Defence”* should not be understood exclusively as a security strategy, but rather as an essential conceptual framework for the sustainable development of societal resilience in an era defined by hybrid threats and highly complex emergencies.



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TOTAL DEFENCE AND SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

The concept of *“Total Defence”* has gained traction in recent years in response to the complexity of new threats and forms of conflict. It involves the mobilization of all resources and actors of society, not just the armed forces, to ensure national security. Total defence transcends the traditional limits of conventional warfare, encompassing civilian, economic, social, informational and digital dimensions.



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The concept of “*Total Defence*” has evolved into a comprehensive strategy, involving all sectors of society – military, civilian, economic and psychological – to respond to a wide range of threats. Originating in the Nordic countries during the Cold War, this model has been adapted to current challenges, such as hybrid warfare, disinformation and attacks on critical infrastructure (Berzina, 2020, 2022).

EU and NATO member states are beginning to recognize the importance of developing robust societal resilience, including civil preparedness, protection of critical infrastructure, and increased responsiveness to hybrid or cyber attacks. Resilience is not just a defensive measure, but also a dynamic process, involving education, public awareness, and close collaboration between authorities and citizens.

Thus, “*Total Defence*” is no longer the responsibility of only the military, but a shared mission, requiring the active and conscious involvement of the entire population. In this regard, national security strategies have begun to include detailed civic education and public information plans, to counter the destructive influences of disinformation and to strengthen trust in institutions.

The model is based on the principle of “*whole-of-society*”, where all components – from government and military to the private sector and citizens – collaborate within a coherent framework. “*Total Defence*” becomes a combination of aspects of a security doctrine with those of a societal philosophy based on shared responsibility and active participation (Burrell, Collison, 2025), as can be seen from the following list containing the key elements of total defence:

- *Military defence*: armed forces prepared for conventional defence;
- *Civil defence*: protection of the population and maintenance of essential services;
- *Societal preparedness*: civic education, crisis training, community resilience;
- *Integrated coordination*: partnerships between the state, civil society and the private sector;
- *Hybrid risk management*: countering disinformation, cyberattacks etc.

As an example, we can mention Finland and Sweden, which promote citizen training and participation in national exercises; also, educational campaigns are integrated into the education system and defence strategies, and intersectoral cooperation is systematized to ensure continuity of governance in crisis.

The European Union's "Preparedness Union" strategy approved on 26 March 2025 aims to strengthen resilience to new threats and adopt a "whole-of-society" approach to EU security, preparedness becoming part of the "basic logic" of all EU actions – that is not just reactions to the crisis, but prevention, anticipation, integration of preparedness into public policies (Lazarou, 2025).

Finland and Sweden have laws and policies that require citizens to actively participate in defence preparation, including civilian volunteering, emergency training, and national exercises. Educational campaigns and school programs introduce knowledge about security and each person's role in maintaining it. There are cooperation structures between ministries, energy companies, transport, healthcare entities and the armed forces to ensure the continuity of the state in a crisis.

Why is it important? The concept of "Total Defence" reflects the new reality of modern security, where threats no longer come only from direct military confrontations, but from a complex mix of factors – political, economic, technological and social. Thus, a strongly prepared and mobilized society is essential for protecting democracy and fundamental values. At the heart of the concept of "Total Defence" is societal resilience – the capacity of communities to withstand, adapt and recover from crises, while preserving essential social functions and values.

In conclusion, we can say that "Total Defence" and societal resilience are interdependent and essential to ensure an effective response to new challenges, being a pillar of the 21st century European security.



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In NATO's view, resilience involves the ability of societies to maintain essential functions and recover rapidly from shocks, while maintaining cohesion and trust. Discussions at the NATO Warsaw Summit led to the development of seven core requirements for assessing resilience.

SOCIETAL RESILIENCE – THE PIVOT OF THE NEW SECURITY PARADIGM

NATO defines societal resilience as the ability to withstand and recover from major shocks while maintaining the continuity of essential public services (Christie, Berzina, 2023). Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty contains the beginning of the idea of resilience: *“In order more effectively to achieve the objectives of this Treaty, the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack”* (NATO, 1949). Resilience is therefore both technical and societal – including trust in institutions, civic engagement, and social solidarity (Christie, Berzina, ib.).

In NATO's view, resilience involves the ability of societies to maintain essential functions and recover rapidly from shocks, while maintaining cohesion and trust. Discussions at the NATO Warsaw Summit led to the development of seven core requirements for assessing resilience (NATO, 2016). The resilience model is based on three stages: preparation, response and recovery. Similarly, the development of psychological and community capacities is essential for the effectiveness of decentralized and participatory defence. Examples from Finland, Estonia, Taiwan and Singapore show that the collective perception of a legitimate threat strengthens trust in government and civic participation (Burrell, Collison, 2025).

The seven basic requirements to be used for states to measure their level of resilience include not only technical readiness, but also intangible capacities such as mutual trust, social cohesion and civic engagement structured as follows:

- Continuity of governance and authority – including the ability of leadership and essential institutions to function in crisis situations.
- The ability to manage energy crises – securing energy supply and protecting critical energy infrastructure.
- The ability to manage uncontrolled population movements – including receiving and supporting refugees or other categories of people on the move.

- The ability to treat the affected population – ensuring essential medical services in case of emergencies or attacks.
- The ability to secure water and food supplies – protecting essential supply chains for the population.
- The ability to ensure mass communications – including the functioning of telecommunications networks and the internet in crisis situations.
- The ability to transport armed forces and equipment within the national territory – and to support military mobility (CIMIC-COE, n.d.)

A RAND report on the United Kingdom highlights that resilience operates in three phases: preparation, response, and recovery – with psychological resilience becoming an increasingly important, albeit underexplored, component (Caves, Lucas, Dewaele, Muravska, Wragg, Spence, Hernandez, Knack, Black, 2021). By developing these adaptive capacities, societies can better cope with complex disruptions and reduce reliance on centralized intervention, thereby strengthening the effectiveness of “Total Defence” as a decentralized, community-oriented strategy. In addition, effective implementation of “Total Defence” requires sustained coordination, transparency, and inclusive governance. Case studies from Finland, Estonia, Sweden, Taiwan, and Singapore show that when citizens perceive threats as common and the response as legitimate, trust in government increases and democratic engagement is strengthened (Burrell, Collison, 2025).

Indicators such as the Fragile States Index or the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators show that progress is uneven and that the success of total defence depends on investments in education, communication and infrastructure. It suggests that while “Total Defence” can strengthen societal cohesion, it is not a universal solution and must be complemented by long-term investments in education, crisis communication, and health infrastructure. Ultimately, total defence is not just about strengthening the state against external threats, but also about cultivating a resilient, participatory, and adaptable civic culture, capable of responding to uncertainty with confidence and cohesion.



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For civil society to become a pillar of the European security architecture, a coherent and integrated strategy is needed at national and European level.

Preparing civil society as a security tool involves developing the population's capacity to react responsibly and in an organized manner to threats. This includes security education, volunteer training, civil-military simulation exercises and the development of a public culture of responsibility.

In Finland and Sweden, the “Total Defence” (Totalförsvar) model involves all citizens, public institutions and the private sector in a national network of protection and crisis response (Wrangé, Bengtsson, Brommesson, 2024). In these countries, civil society training is integrated into school curricula, media campaigns and national defence policy.

For civil society to become a pillar of the European security architecture, a coherent and integrated strategy is needed at national and European level. It should include:

- 1 – integrating security education into the education systems;
- 2 – promoting partnerships between governments, NGOs and academia;
- 3 – strengthening strategic communication and combating disinformation;
- 4 – financial support for civic preparedness and resilience initiatives (Biscop, 2019; Wrangé, Bengtsson, Brommesson, 2024).

In Eastern Europe, where the memory of authoritarianism is still alive, the promotion of a culture of civic security is met with scepticism, passivity and sometimes even institutional resistance. However, initiatives such as those of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung have demonstrated not only that, through civic education, community engagement and dialogue with authorities, civil society can become a valuable partner of the state in strengthening resilience (KAS, 2023), but also that, in Central and Eastern Europe, challenges related to democratic resilience persist, including the vulnerability of institutions and the decline of civic trust (Casimir Pulaski Foundation, 2023).

KEY STRENGTHS AND GOOD PRACTICES IN EUROPE, AS WELL AS THE CHALLENGES OF CIVIL SOCIETY INTEGRATION INTO SECURITY STRUCTURES



Following the analysis of the documents and reports cited above, we have been able to identify the advances that have been made in this field, as well as the shortcomings that still exist, information that has been structured into two categories: *European strengths and good practices* and *challenges in integrating civil society into the security system*.

1. European strengths and good practices

1.1. Integrating security education into the education system.

In Lithuania and Estonia, defence and security education is part of the high school curriculum, with courses on civil protection, disinformation detection and hybrid risk awareness. This approach leads to the formation of active and resilient citizens from adolescence onwards (Rogulis, 2023). The focus is on young people, teenagers and young adults, considered a key group in developing a culture of democratic participation. At the same time, there are efforts to extend security education to other broad groups in society, such as adults, teachers, vulnerable groups. Involving young people helps to develop a culture of democratic participation (Šešelgytė, Bladaitė, 2021; Estonian Rescue Board, 2025).

The Nordic countries frequently organize crisis simulations in which the civilian population is actively involved. In Finland, for example, information warfare, cyberattack or power outage scenarios are tested annually, in which members of local communities also participate.

1.2. *Civil-military simulation exercises.* The Nordic countries frequently organize crisis simulations in which the civilian population is actively involved (Yle, 2019). In Finland, for example, information warfare, cyberattack or power outage scenarios are tested annually, in which members of local communities also participate.

1.3. *Collaboration between the state, NGOs and the private sector.* In Sweden, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) works together with local organizations to create volunteer networks, develop media campaigns and action guides for the population. This type of collaboration creates a culture of co-responsibility between the state and society (Slavkova, Sichtermann, Mužina, Goldstein, Hahn-Madole, Hansen, Jacobetty, Kolleck, 2025). The role of non-formal civil society actors (non-formal civic educators) that are NGOs



In many European countries, including Romania, civil society training is not integrated into a coherent national security vision. Measures are often fragmented, reactive and poorly funded. Security education is rarely included in the school curriculum and does not benefit from consistent national programs.

and various local initiatives fill the gaps that formal education does not address – for example, the training of teachers who are essential in the process of integrating education for security and active citizenship into school curricula (Ib.).

1.4. Innovation in the methods and tools used

Using various methods: workshops, trainings, public events, digital tools, training of trainers, active participation, hybrid formats etc. It helps to adapt to local needs and increase civic engagement.

2. Challenges in integrating civil society into the security system

2.1. Lack of a coherent strategic vision. In many European countries, including Romania, civil society training is not integrated into a coherent national security vision. Measures are often fragmented, reactive and poorly funded. Security education is rarely included in the school curriculum and does not benefit from consistent national programs. The lack of consensus on what “*civic education*” means has consequences: different objectives, variable terminology, divergent historical and ideological interpretations between countries (Ciolan, Stancu, 2021).

2.2. Low level of trust in institutions. In the absence of effective communication, citizens remain passive and distance themselves from decision-making processes. This distrust affects civic participation and reduces the effectiveness of any collective preparedness or resilience initiative (Slavkova, Sichtermann, Mužina, Goldstein, Hahn-Madole, Hansen, Jacobetty, Kolleck, 2025). It generates passivity, cynicism, and reluctance to engage in any security-related processes. In many cases, citizens perceive security as an exclusively military or state responsibility, ignoring the participatory dimension of democratic resilience.

2.3. Lack of dedicated institutional infrastructure. As noted in the EU policy document *How the EU Responds to Crises and Builds Resilience* (Consilium, n.d.), the Union recognizes that improvements are needed in cross-sectoral and cross-border crisis management, crisis communication, and disinformation countermeasures, indicating gaps in unified institutional responsibility and coherent vision across domains.

2.4. Disinformation and social polarization. External interference through disinformation campaigns, emotional manipulation, and narrative fragmentation affects society's ability to react in a unified manner. In the absence of a minimum level of media and digital literacy, the population is easily exposed to messages designed to undermine trust in institutions, create panic, or encourage passivity (Wardle, Derakhshan, 2017; NATO StratCom COE, 2021; European Commission, 2020).

2.5. Underfunding and lack of continuity of civic initiatives. NGOs and civic education projects for security are often dependent on external grants, which leads to discontinuity and the impossibility of building sustainable programs. In the absence of real financial and political commitment from the state, these initiatives remain local and isolated, without systemic impact.

EUROPEAN FUNCTIONAL MODELS AND ACTION PLANS

To strengthen societal resilience, several European countries have developed policies and practices that can serve as models to replicate:

1. The Nordic model of Total Defence. Finland and Sweden have been implementing a form of “Total Defence” for decades, in which every citizen, organization, and institution plays a role. In Finland, civil self-defence manuals are distributed to the population, and the authorities organize annual crisis exercises involving both the public sector and civil society. These practices increase the ability of society to respond effectively to complex crises, including cyberattacks or disinformation campaigns (Ålander, 2024; Government Offices of Sweden, 2024).

2. Security education in school curricula (Baltic countries). In Lithuania and Estonia, content related to defence and security education is introduced as early as high school (Wrange, Bengtsson, Brommesson, 2024). Students learn about the functioning of democratic institutions, information manipulation, behaviour in emergency situations, and the importance of social cohesion in the face of external threats.

3. Structured civil-military collaboration (Sweden, Norway). In Sweden, the Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) cooperates directly



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with NGOs, local authorities and academia to develop emergency plans, organize training and manage strategic communication. The Norwegian model includes a national civil cooperation platform that enlists experts from all relevant sectors: education, healthcare, media, transport, energy etc.

4. *International initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe.* In regions where the culture of civic security is less developed, international organizations such as the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung or the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats support the development of civic resilience networks. They provide training courses, educational materials and support for local partnerships between administration and civil society.

Perspectives and Directions for Action

In order for the civil society to become a pillar of the European security architecture, a coherent and integrated strategy is needed at national and European level. It should include:

1. *Integrating security education into education systems – with a focus on digital literacy, critical thinking and knowledge about the functioning of democratic institutions.*

2. *Promoting sustainable partnerships between public authorities, NGOs and academia, with a view to building a common culture of participatory security.*

3. *Combating disinformation through strategic communication campaigns, accompanied by transparent public platforms for informing citizens.*

4. *Stable and predictable financing of civic resilience projects, including through European funds dedicated to strengthening democracy and social cohesion.*

5. *Creating national societal resilience coordination structures, which include civil society representatives in security-related decision-making processes.*

CONCLUSIONS

The analysed European examples demonstrate that societal resilience cannot be built in the absence of coherent national and European strategies, real cooperation between institutions and civil society and education oriented towards democratic participation and collective responsibility. The Nordic and Baltic models demonstrate that involving citizens in security education, crisis exercises and civic initiatives significantly contributes to strengthening social cohesion and the capacity to react to complex threats.

At the same time, the identified challenges – from lack of trust in institutions and chronic underfunding, to the absence of a dedicated institutional infrastructure – highlight how fragile this construction can be in the absence of clear political commitment and a functional strategic framework. It is necessary for security education to become an integrated component of public policies, supported by sustainable partnerships and predictable funding.

In a period marked by instability and disinformation, transforming citizens from spectators into active participants in democratic life becomes an essential condition for protecting European values. Resilience is not based solely on formal structures or state intervention, but on the capacity of communities to cooperate, learn and act together. Only by assuming this shared role between state and society can Europe build sustainable security, centred on education, solidarity and shared responsibility.

Romania has significant potential in developing societal resilience, primarily based on its young and receptive human capital, who is increasingly active and informed in the digital environment. This young generation can become a key driver in promoting a culture of resilience through involvement in security education programs, crisis simulation exercises, and civic volunteer networks. Moreover, the country benefits from an active network of non-governmental organizations and local initiatives, which – through their experience and expertise in civic education and democratic participation – can be mobilized in partnership with public and military institutions to develop and implement sustainable civil-military training and collaboration projects. Such integrated cooperation represents



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an essential component for consolidating a modern security system, in which civil society becomes an active and responsible partner within the national security architecture.

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