

Social Defence As a Component of Total Defence¹

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To date, no country has decided to abolish its military and prepare for social defence instead. There are some countries without a military² – Costa Rica and Iceland are perhaps the best-known examples – but they have agreements with larger countries that guarantee their ‘security’ in the event of an attack; Iceland is even a member of NATO.

However, there are isolated considerations to include social defence as an element in concepts of ‘total defence’, as has been prepared in large parts of Western and Northern Europe over the last 10-15 years.

The concept of total defence encompasses the protection of society's vital values and interests through the provision and use of state resources, economic potential and civil society, i.e. the integrated engagement of all units of the defence system and the defence potential of the state. ... Today, this concept is referred to by various terms: territorial defence, comprehensive defence and total defence, with the actual meaning of these terms depending on numerous linguistic and cultural factors. (Đukić & Vuletić 2023, p. 623, translation from Serbian with help of DeepL.com)

Modern total defence concepts³ was first developed in the 2010s in response to a perceived threat from Russia in Scandinavia⁴ and the Baltic countries⁵; today, it is also being established by other NATO and non-NATO countries (e.g. Georgia and Singapore⁶, with the details varying. What all concepts have in common is the combination of military defence capability and societal resilience.

The modern-day concept of comprehensive national defence is based on two fundamental principles – resistance and resilience. Resistance refers to the will and readiness to defend a country in case of military threats. Resilience refers to civilian preparedness to maintain the functioning of society in the event of a crisis, including a military attack. (Grigalashvili 2023, p. 241)

In total defence, defence becomes the responsibility of all citizens (or even all those living in the country, as explicitly stated in the case of Sweden⁷. Resilience requires ‘strong psychological foundations to create a national will to resist armed attack and a willingness to accept sacrifices’. (Wither 2020, p. 67) Sometimes there is also explicit reference to ‘psychological defence’ as a pillar of total defence.⁸ In most cases, this involves civil

¹ This is a draft section of a book on social defence Christine Schweitzer is currently writing.

² A good list can be found on Wikipedia (2025a): *Liste der Länder ohne Militär*. Verfügbar unter: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liste_der_L%C3%A4nder_ohne_Milit%C3%A4r

³ However, similar concepts existed much earlier. Germany has had a total defence policy since 1989.

⁴ See, among others, Berndtsson 2024, Binnendijk & Kepe 2021, Deiacco 2024, Dukic 2023, Ericson 2019, Finnish Government Resolution 2017, Norwegian Ministry of Defence 2018 Swedish Defence Commission Secretariat 2017, Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency 2018, Swedish Government 2021, Swedish Defence Commission Secretariat 2023, Sundelius & Eldeblad 2023, Tillberg et al 2025, Ericson 2019, Wither 2020, Deiacco 2024, Terry 2024, Veebel & Ploom 2018

⁵ See Veebel & Ploom 2018 on Estonia

⁶ On Singapore, see Grigalashvili 2023 and SCDF (2025).

⁷ See Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency 2024 or the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency's 2018 guide for the population, ‘If crisis or war comes’. (Incidentally, it is much more detailed and helpful than its German counterpart, the guide ‘Vorsorgen für Krisen und Katastrophen’ (Preparing for crises and disasters) published by the Federal Office for Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance 2025.

⁸ For example, in Finland, Finnish Government Resolution (2017) and Szymański 2020

defence, maintaining unity and the will to defend within society, and providing support for military defence. This is also the case in German concepts, as set out in the 'Framework Guidelines for Total Defence' (2025) and the 'Civil Defence Concept (2016)', which is to be further developed in 2026.⁹

Explicit reference to civil resistance is only found in very exceptional cases. One should not be misled by terminology: for example, the term 'social defence' appears in Singapore's concept, but refers to 'people who live and work together in harmony and devote time to the interests of the nation and the community'. (SCDF 2025) In the 'Resistance Operating Concept' (see below), 'social defence' means something similar, namely 'social cohesion and the preservation of a common culture and national traditions, while ensuring that all citizens have access to government services and benefits and are treated equally before the law' (Fiala 2019, p. 19). In one or two other papers (Norway, Estonia), the term 'civil resistance' appears without being elaborated upon.¹⁰

Only Lithuania has truly incorporated social defence or civil resistance into its total defence concept, and has done so since 1996.¹¹ A 2015 guide for the population contains an entire section on 'Surviving in an area occupied by enemy forces'. It states:

In case the aggressor has succeeded in seizing a part of the country's territory, you must resort to the modes of civil resistance to prevent the aggressor from establishing a lasting rule. Familiarity with the basic modes and principles of civil resistance makes us strong, and using them will defeat the aggressor.¹²

The following is a series of recommendations:

- Seek dialogue with enemy soldiers to make it clear 'that you reject the propaganda of their commanders, but do not wish to harm them as individuals'.
- Inform the attacker's society about the crimes and aggression of their political leadership.
- Disseminate information about the current situation via social media, mobile phones and in person.
- Photograph aggressive behaviour and forward the photos to the media (including international media).
- Launch cyber attacks on the attacker's information system.
- Help victims of violence and repression.

⁹ For an overview of German laws and guidelines, see Schweitzer 2026c.

¹⁰ This is based on a search for the keywords 'resistance' and "occupation" in the above-mentioned sources. In Norwegian Ministry of Defence 2018, the term 'civil resistance' appears once, but it is not explained further; it is only stated that this capability should be strengthened (p. 84).

According to Binnendijk & Kepe 2021, p. 81, the Estonian National Defence Strategy of 2011 also includes civil resistance alongside guerrilla activities, but this could not be verified by current sources (see Clobes et al 2024).

¹¹ See Miniotaitė 2004, Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence 2015, MOND Lithuania 2016, Ramonaitė et al 2018, Binnendijk & Kepe 2021, Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence 2022, Clobes et al. 2024, Jackūnaitė 2023, Rogulis 2023, Vilikanskytė 2023, Terry 2024

¹² Handout 'Prepare to survive emergencies and war: a cheerful take on serious recommendations' by the Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence 2015, pp. 45.

The new National Defence Plan of 2023 identifies civil resistance as an important element. It states that a system for training the Lithuanian population in civil resistance should be established.¹³

The other two Baltic states also adopted new defence plans in 2023. However, civil resistance plays a much smaller role in these plans (Estonia, where there is talk of a so-called 'national defence service', but which is more likely to be a kind of civilian service) or no role at all (Latvia). (See Clobes et al. 2024)

Based on a series of workshops with experts from the military and political science from the Baltic and other countries on resistance under occupation, which the US Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR) conducted between 2014 and (presumably) 2018 (Fiala & Pettersson 2020) a 'Resistance Operating Concept'¹⁴ was developed, which proposes civilian resistance as an element of defence alongside conventional military and partisan activities. The proposals range from "classic" partisan actions (sabotage, attacks on key figures) to passive resistance in the form of slowdowns and civil resistance. It was intended for 'certain partners' (presumably European middle states such as the Baltic states), but it claims global relevance.

Civilian elements in the ROC concept include considerations of what the government could do in the event of an occupation and 'passive/non-violent resistance':

The population at large that are not members of the resistance organization has many opportunities even outside of organized events to passively resist. Individuals from all layers of society can take individual actions to weaken enemy morale or disrupt the daily operations of the enemy, through nonviolent, clandestine, or passive resistance. Prior to a crisis, the government should ensure that the population is aware of how they can contribute to a possible resistance against an occupation, such as passive methods for the majority who will not be active members of the organization. During an occupation, the responsibility to communicate these options falls particularly to the underground within the occupied territories. Passive resistance encompasses slow performance of work, ignoring certain procedures or rules while claiming to be unaware, miscounting or not accounting for goods required by the enemy, and many other activities or lack of activity that can be excused or disguised as acting out of ignorance, fear, or wrong information (see appendix D, case study 2, Poland, for examples). (Fiala 2019, p. 14)

Further down (p. 75 pp), the text suddenly refers to 'non-violent resistance' rather than 'passive resistance'. Methods and goals are described in detail and could also be found in this form in any book on social defence. The authors distinguish between the following techniques: 1) attention-grabbing measures, 2) non-cooperation, 3) civil disobedience and 4) cyber activism.

There is also an appendix on methods of non-violent resistance with examples from Poland and Serbia, which refers in particular to Gene Sharp's catalogue of methods.

According to a SOCEUR spokesperson, at least 15 countries are expected to have participated in training in this doctrine of resistance by 2022. In November 2021, a conference on ROC was held in Hungary with representatives from nearly a dozen countries. (Liebermann 2022).

However, it is not clear what role ROC actually plays in the defence doctrines of these medium-sized states. Lithuania's inclusion of civil resistance in its defence predates the creation of ROC. In the other two Baltic states, as mentioned above, there are few traces of plans for civil resistance in current documents. In 2022, Ukraine created a website and a

¹³ According to Clobes et al. (2024, p. 2), a large-scale mobilisation exercise and a system for training the Lithuanian population in civil resistance were to be established in 2024. Unfortunately, it was not possible to determine whether this has happened.

¹⁴ Fiala 2019, see also Wither 2020 and Friberg 2019

handbook¹⁵ with suggestions on what civilians could do, recommending civil resistance in addition to sabotage. The site, which is no longer online, described, among other things, boycotting public events, strikes and even the use of humour and satire. Sabotage actions in Crimea in 2022 were also attributed by the US military to the application of ROC.¹⁶

Conclusion

The concept of social defence was developed in relative detail until the mid-1990s, and much of what was conceived at that time is still relevant today. However, more on this in Chapter 4 below.

The critical question that must be asked about the inclusion of civilian resistance in total defence concepts is whether military means do not negate or at least severely damage the effectiveness of non-violent resistance.¹⁷ There is no doubt that from the perspective of total defence, it makes a lot of sense to integrate civilian resistance. But if the goals of social defence are to minimise casualties and destruction, then these goals will not be achieved. If civilians cannot be distinguished from combatants¹⁸, then it can be assumed that, in case of doubt, the enemy will consider everyone to be a combatant. The non-violent resistance in Ukraine, which took place in the first months after the Russian attack in 2022 and – albeit in a greatly reduced form – can still be found today¹⁹, is eloquent testimony to this.

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¹⁵ Schulz 2023, Ukraine 2022

¹⁶ The author asked several experts on civil resistance in Ukraine this question in web seminars. No one was familiar with ROC. In a hearing before the US Senate in 2022, it was mentioned that, in the course of their training of the Ukrainian armed forces, which they have been providing since 2014, the US has created a 'resistance company' similar to a homeland security association since 2020, which has been embedded in the military armed forces. (United States Senate 2022, p. 80.) See also Liebermann 2022.

¹⁷ There had been earlier proposals to combine military means and civil resistance. One model was a geographical division (military forces in rural areas, social defence in cities) (see Nolte & Nolte 1984 and this, 2025, Afheldt 1983) or a chronological sequence in which social defence is deployed when the military has been overrun by the attacker (Committee for Fundamental Rights and Democracy (ed.) 1982, p. 185).

¹⁸ Binnendijk and Kepe (2021) recognise this problem and therefore recommend the use of uniforms to make them distinguishable, as Lithuania does with its paramilitary forces. (p. 110).

¹⁹ Daza 2022 and 2025.

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