The Importance of Civil Defence in a Society

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What Can Sweden Learn from Civil Defence in Ukraine?

How can Sweden enhance its civil defence strategy in light of the evolving security landscape, particularly considering the lessons learned from the conflict in Ukraine?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 constitutes a breaking point for European defence and security politics. Much that seemed improbable before this is today a reality. The change in European security politics has also resulted in Sweden as the 32nd member of NATO. The much-welcomed

accession of Sweden to NATO sets high standards for the country's civil defence strategy.

Civil defence refers to a system designed to protect civilians and society in the event of emergencies, such as war, natural disasters or other crises. Civil defence is therefore a country's non-military defence with the main goal of minimising the impact of emergencies and ensuring the safety and well-being of the population. This system encompasses the whole of society and comprises collective resilience in the event of war or danger of war. The resilience is strengthened through the preparedness of individuals, government agencies, municipalities, regions, private companies and non-governmental organisations. The Swedish civil defence system was built up during the whole of the Cold War only to, just like the military defence, be largely dismantled by the early 2000s. The argument for Sweden's dismantling of its civil defence was primarily economic, with a focus on political-strategic reasoning regarding reduced threat levels to Sweden and the need to cut back on resources.

Civil Defence in Sweden

Since the accession of Sweden to NATO, major investments in civil defence have been accelerated. Such as the restoration of air raid shelters and increasing cyber security. However, these investments must be accompanied by efforts to rebuild the civil defence structures that were dismantled in previous years, starting with raising public awareness regarding potential threats to Sweden's security. Sweden's minister of civil defence Carl-Oskar Bohlin said during a defence conference by the beginning of this year that Sweden could face a war – something that shocked and frightened the Swedish population. The thought of war for the Swedish people is a distant thought where wars only happen on the news in faraway places. The reality, however, is different.

Lessons from Ukraine

Sweden can draw many lessons from the close war in Ukraine. The Ukrainians have managed to stand united and created a strong national rally in the resistance to the Russian aggression as they have shown willingness to defend their country. The non-military defence in Ukraine has shown that government and civil society actors have come together in strategic communication. This cooperation has shown good results in battling Russian disinformation, highlighting the importance of building robust relationships and cooperation models over time. The civil defence in Ukraine has also shown us the importance of working air raid shelters for the population, as well as user-friendly applications on the phone showing people the nearest air raid shelter. Sweden should take notice of this as our 64.000 air raid shelters built during the Cold War need to be equipped and controlled,

something that the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) believe will take many years as Sweden only has two certified air raid controllers.

A Call for Strategic Investment and Adaptability in Response to Modern Security Threats

While it is commendable that Sweden has accelerated investments in civil defence since it acceded to NATO, it is crucial to acknowledge that these investments alone may not be sufficient to address the complex challenges posed by modern security threats. Simply pouring funds into civil defence structures without a comprehensive strategy may result in inefficiencies or misallocations of resources. Therefore, a better approach is needed, focusing not only on financial investments but also on strategic planning, capacity building, and public engagement. Furthermore, Sweden must recognise civil defence as not solely about preparing for ongoing conflicts but also about developing resilience for future challenges. Sweden must glean crucial lessons from Ukraine. Rebuilding dismantled structures is vital, demanding critical evaluation and ongoing adaptation. Investment in civil defence is an investment in long-term sustainability and resilience. Sweden must not only prepare for immediate threats but also focus on continuous improvement to meet evolving security dynamics effectively. Thus, a balanced approach integrating financial backing with strategic foresight and adaptability is imperative. By learning from past mistakes and leveraging insights from Ukraine, Sweden can fortify its civil defence against present and future challenges, ensuring its preparedness and resilience in an uncertain world.