



## **KEY INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED SINCE THE INCEPTION OF THE SWEDISH PSYCHOLOGICAL AGENCY**

**Date:** November 20, 2024

*Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

### **KEY EVENTS**

On November 20, 2024, Director General Dr. Magnus Hjort presented *Key Insights and Lessons Learned Since the Inception of the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The key points discussed in Dr. Hjort's presentation included the current threat landscape from Sweden's perspective, the objectives of the agency, the space the agency occupies within Sweden's larger defence apparatus, and lastly, recommendations for the future of psychological defence.

### **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

The purpose of psychological defense and the objective of his agency are to safeguard an open and democratic society, the free formation of opinion, and Sweden's freedom and independence. Dr. Hjort contextualized his presentation by highlighting the delicate nature of the current threat landscape, punctuated by regional conflicts, terror attacks, and foreign disinformation campaigns, and outlined the key factors shaping Sweden's National Security Strategy, released in July 2024. He also emphasized several strategies his agency is employing to bolster the psychological resilience of all Swedish citizens, enabling them to better withstand attacks from foreign actors aiming to disrupt and divide the proper functioning of democracies.

### **BACKGROUND**

#### **Presentation**

Established on January 1st, 2022, the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency is organized under the civil defense branch of the Swedish government's Ministry

of Defence. The agency represents a revival of a concept with roots in World War II, aimed at countering psychological warfare and creating resilience within the general population. Dr. Hjort explained that in wartime, psychological defense aims to prevent an adversary from breaking down a nation's resistance and will to defend itself through disinformation, propaganda, and psychological warfare. However, in a Swedish context, it can be defined today as the collective ability of society to resist foreign malign information influence activities directed at Sweden.

Sweden's psychological defense, originally a distinct part of its Cold War total defense strategy, has evolved since the end of that era. While most of the total defense system, consisting of military, economic, civil, and psychological defense, was dismantled after the Cold War, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 prompted Sweden to revive it. Today, psychological defense is no longer a separate branch but functions in an integrated role that bridges military and civil defense, reflecting a modernized structure within the broader national security strategy.

In its July 2024 National Security Strategy, the Swedish government declared that the security situation in Europe is the most precarious since World War II. Sweden faces a complex and escalating threat environment, with Russia as the dominant actor in both the kinetic and information domains. This assessment reflects a combination of factors, including Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has reshaped Sweden's security policies and driven its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership application.

The threat landscape is further complicated by disinformation campaigns, such as the late 2021/early 2022 targeting of Swedish social services with false accusations of kidnapping and abuse of Muslim children. These campaigns, alongside Quran burnings and amplified narratives of Islamophobia, have disrupted Swedish society and been used to undermine Sweden's NATO bid, often fueled by Russian influence. The 2023 killing of two Swedish nationals in Brussels, as identified by their football jerseys, also heightened tensions, as it was seen as a targeted act of violence tied to the campaigns targeting Sweden.

Cyberattacks on Swedish institutions and rising terror threats from groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda have further escalated concerns, with Sweden being considered a priority target. This interwoven environment of kinetic, information-driven, and terrorist threats has led to a significant shift in Sweden's

security posture, with the Swedish Security Service raising the national terror threat level.

Dr. Hjort argued that these threats are interwoven, with events like Russia's invasion, the Hamas-Israel conflict, and the targeting of Swedish institutions affecting each other within Sweden's information domain, further complicating its security strategy. He also highlighted the global decline in democracy, citing a publication from the V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg, which shows that most of the world's population now lives under autocratic regimes. In this context, he described democracy as being "under siege," further complicating Sweden's security strategy.

The Psychological Defence Agency's primary objective is to build long-term resilience in Sweden's population by strengthening public preparedness against psychological threats, particularly in the realm of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). The agency furthers this goal by disseminating knowledge, funding a research institute at Lund University, producing a report series and handbooks, such as one on countering information influence activities for journalists. They also publish original research, such as a study on malign foreign interference in video game platforms, a growing yet overlooked threat vector.

The agency collaborates with various stakeholders at local, regional, and central government levels and is part of Sweden's national effort to strengthen media literacy. This includes initiatives like the Media and Information Literacy (MIL) Sweden network, chaired by the Swedish Agency for the Media. In partnership with the Fojo Media Institute at Linnaeus University, the agency offers free training for professional journalists on identifying and addressing information influence activities. For preventative efforts targeting vulnerable segments of the population, the agency works closely with civil society organizations, for instance within the Youth Resilience Hub to prepare young people, and produces educational films for senior citizens on election interference. Additionally, the agency runs a broad media campaign to raise awareness, providing resources in Swedish, English, and Arabic.

Operationally, the agency focuses on identifying, analyzing, and providing support in response to FIMI directed against Sweden or its interests. It regularly reports to the Swedish government and other relevant actors, conducting threat assessments and supporting Sweden's defense against foreign information manipulation. The agency is also preparing for wartime scenarios, working to

reduce an attacker's ability to harm Sweden in the event of conflict, drawing on lessons learned from supporting Ukraine's information warfare efforts against Russia.

Through the formation of a cooperative council, the Psychological Defence Agency oversees the coordination and development of Sweden's psychological defense operations, working alongside other agencies and stakeholders. Internationally, the agency maintains extensive cooperation with NATO, the European Union (EU), and several countries, with staff secondments to NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence and the European External Action Service East and West StratCom Task Forces. The agency's focus on FIMI encompasses disinformation, propaganda, and narratives that may be partially true or manipulative, aiming to harm Sweden through hidden, false, or openly deceptive sources.

Dr. Hjort highlighted the rise of Russia's "DoppelGänger" campaign, which involves the creation of new websites in the lead-up to major elections. These include mirror sites that circumvent the EU's 2022 ban on RT News and Sputnik by reposting Russian articles on other platforms, as well as fake outlets like "The San Francisco Telegraph," which does not exist. The campaign also includes fake versions of well-known media outlets, such as The Guardian, using generative AI to create fake articles and purchasing domain names similar to legitimate media. Additionally, an "Operation Overload" campaign targets fact-checking organizations and media outlets with links to fabricated content and anti-Ukraine narratives. This tactic keeps these organizations occupied, and in their efforts to debunk the false claims, they may inadvertently lend credibility to them.

Another emerging concern is the Taurus leak in March 2024, where sensitive discussions between German military officers about the potential transfer of Taurus missiles to Ukraine were intercepted and then exploited by Russian propaganda. Dr. Hjort also recognized that the increasing use of AI-generated material, such as fake war scenes, is a growing issue, with these materials becoming more sophisticated and produced more quickly. Gaming is another area that requires attention, as games like "African Dawn," which was launched in July 2024 are being used to influence perceptions of reality.

To address these challenges, Dr. Hjort suggested that five key actions are necessary: First, the global decline in democracy must be reversed by standing firm in the fight for democratic values and supporting like-minded countries. Second, efforts to safeguard upcoming elections from foreign interference must

continue, as foreign threat actors will persist in trying to influence these elections. Third, it is crucial to strengthen media literacy, critical thinking, and preparedness to better equip the public and institutions to handle misinformation. Fourth, new technologies, including AI, should be leveraged to protect and advance democratic objectives. Finally, continued support for Ukraine is essential, ensuring that assistance remains unwavering as long as necessary.

### KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Sweden's current threat landscape includes rising cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and terrorist threats, with Russia as the dominant actor in both kinetic and information domains.
- The Swedish Psychological Defence Agency aims to build resilience against foreign information manipulation, enhance media literacy, and strengthen public preparedness.
- The agency plays an integrated role within Sweden's defense apparatus, bridging military and civil defense as part of the national security strategy.
- Future recommendations include reversing the decline in democracy, safeguarding elections, strengthening media literacy, leveraging AI, and supporting Ukraine.

### FURTHER READING

- Pamment, J., Falkheimer, J., & Isaksson, E. (2023). *Malign foreign interference and information influence on video game platforms: Understanding the adversarial playbook*. Myndigheten för psykologiskt försvar.  
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- Riehle, K. P. (2022). Information Power and Russia's National Security Objectives. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 4(3), 62–83. <https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v4i3.3791>
- Swedish Psychological Defence Agency. (2024). *Countering information influence activities: A handbook for Journalists*.  
<https://mpf.se/download/18.5ed1a83718d2a5fd639d524/1706648817558/countering-information-influence-activities-a-handbook-for-journalists.pdf> Note: Originally funded by Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency.



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