NORDIC STRATEGIES OF BUILDING RESILIENCE

DOES PREPARING FOR THE WORST CREATE A BETTER FUTURE?

TRINE VILLUMSEN BERLING & KAREN LUND PETERSEN CAST AND NORDSTEEVA
In the Nordic countries, we have come to expect disaster. Therefore, systems are being set up to enable individual citizens, organisations and governments to prepare for the worst, to build resilience. This policy brief identifies three forms of such resilience across Sweden, Norway and Denmark and discusses their implications for the way governments formulate strategies of security when planning for the unknown.
Resilience is the new black in security politics. Also in the Nordic countries, where national security crises such as terror attacks have led states to expect disasters. This has prompted a shift in the focus of security politics towards building a resilient society, asking how we can bounce back or adapt to the catastrophe looming ahead.

WHAT IS RESILIENCE

In security politics, resilience refers to the response to issues of national security in the face of uncertainty. It has been argued that, while the concept of resilience offers solutions to new and unexpected threats, it turns security away from macro-planning, and puts trust in the individual's capabilities to self-reflect and self-govern.
In a study that looked at public debates, governmental reports, plans and strategy papers in Norway, Sweden and Denmark from 2011 to 2017, the authors of this policy brief identified three main concepts of resilience: **robust resilience, reflexive resilience, and organised resilience**.

But while resilience becomes the standard answer in the Nordic countries, it is unsure to what. We find this highly problematic as it does not entail a vision for how we would like our future to unfold, but rather nourishes an inward-looking and anxious mode of existence.

Resilience is however not entirely without promises. But they lie in the expectation that key institutions will deliver on the promise of always adapting and finding new solutions to future challenges. The strategy is, in other words, reduced to a matter of finding the right architecture to cope with future challenges, and does not entail a description of that future – as the future is basically unknown.

**SAME THREATS, DIFFERENT APPROACHES**

The countries of Norway, Sweden and Denmark all have fairly similar political systems. They are all built on a welfare state model of economic equality and individual freedom. Their citizens place a remarkable degree of trust in state institutions and their ability to handle sensitive and personal data.

In all of the three countries, the ability of societies and individuals to adapt and defend themselves against future uncertain threats such as terrorism, extremism and cyber security play an important part in the understanding of resilience.

Considering these traits, one might expect similar policies and attitudes towards security and resilience across the three countries, but it appears that the Nordic approaches to resilience differ considerably.

The three types of resilience were found in all three countries, but they are not equally represented and have variations across the countries, as we shall see below.

Each concept entails a different take on the role of the government and citizens in building resilience and thereby a particular approach to managerial practices and solutions when planning for the unknown. Together, they give us a clearer picture of the role of planning and strategy in an increasingly uncertain security landscape and helps us to see how the different resilience approaches enable some managerial security practices and solutions while rendering others impossible.

**DANISH: Resiliens, samfundssikkerhed, totalforsvar, modstandsdygtig, modstandskraft, samfundsmæssig sikkerhed.**

**NORWEGIAN: Resiliens, Samfunnssikkerhet, totalforsvar, motstandskraft, motstandsdyktig, robusthet.**

**SWEDISH: Resiliens, totalförsvar, samhällsäkerhet, motståndskraftig, motståndskraft, samhällskydd, robusthet.**
### THREE TYPES OF RESILIENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Robust Resilience</th>
<th>Reflexive Resilience</th>
<th>Organised Resilience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal or organisational inner strength and ability to adapt and bounce back. It often implies individual self-sufficiency and survival, physically and mentally. Threats are seen as external to the individual or the organisation.</td>
<td>The ability to reflect on how we ourselves play a role in producing new threats. It is often seen as a process of learning, where we gradually become aware of the future (unknown) consequences of our own actions.</td>
<td>Can be seen as an institutionalisation of the two former mentioned types of resilience: robust or reflexive. In this type, resilience becomes a management tool for handling uncertainty.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Robust Resilience**
- Strongest in Sweden and Norway, almost absent in Denmark.

**Reflexive Resilience**
- Primarily present in Sweden and Denmark.

**Organised Resilience**
- Dominant in governmental reports across all three countries. In Denmark with a focus on initiatives aimed to build reflexive resilience, in Norway with a focus on creating robustness, and in Sweden a combination of the two.
Robust resilience, which can be defined as a person’s or an organisation’s ability to adapt or bounce back, was strongest in Sweden and Norway, but with different emphases in the two countries.

In Sweden, the individual citizen’s own responsibility is in focus, whereas in Norway, a more group-focused approach is visible.

A representative of the Swedish emergency management services (MSB) clearly emphasises the individual Swede’s responsibility in the face of a crisis: “The system in place for crisis management builds on individual responsibility, at least in the beginning of a crisis. Most people lack the mental preparedness that something could happen”.

In both Norway and Sweden, a brochure with info on how to act in the first 72 hours of a crisis has been distributed to all households, something that has not been done in Denmark.

In addition, a Swedish civilian organisation has held ‘take care of yourself’-courses in crisis preparedness and mental robustness for citizens all over the country.

The individual responsibility is also evident in the Norwegian case, for instance in this quote from the Norwegian daily Aftenposten: “…we can as individuals take responsibility by shielding ourselves (and our children) from too much exposure to media and thereby avoid anxiety and retain robustness”.

But in addition to this, the Norwegians also hold a strong focus on how a shared robustness, standing together in the face of external threats, as in this media excerpt: “…what better societal security exists than the fact that we stand united when some extreme terrorist or terrorist group attacks our society?”

In Denmark, robust resilience is viewed in less positive terms, as individual robustness is not seen as something that can be tested in advance or boosted.
REFLEXIVE RESILIENCE

DO YOU POSE A THREAT?

Instead, the authorities focus on reflexive resilience as part of their preventive security strategy to manage future threats. Here, the role of the citizen is to become aware of the threats and their own role in producing and preventing them. For instance, the Danish emergency management agency (BRS) write in their annual report: “A contingency thinking and culture has to be anchored in society, to make citizens and companies better empowered and self-governed to prepare and manage larger incidents and crises.” This is the underlying notion of new initiatives within security governance, such as public-private partnerships, outreach programmes, and risk communication that all are designed to build up resilient local environments.

In reflexive resilience, the line between the individual and its environment becomes blurred, and thereby, also the line between the individual and the threat. This places a responsibility with the individual to constantly reflect and be aware of the potential threats around, as this volunteer from the Swedish civilian organisation offering ‘take care of yourself-courses’ explains: “there is so much to gain from being mentally prepared in the event of a crisis. You have to learn to turn on your radar and pay attention to connections you might not have seen before.”

In Denmark, reflexive resilience is also visible in media outlets. Here, the debate following the incident known as “Kundby-pigen”, involving a 17-year old girl who was arrested for planning terror attacks on schools, focused on the role of ‘everyday heroes’ such as teachers, social workers, coaches, teachers, who through their work could help prevent the radicalisation of children and youth with social and psychological problems.
The third concept of resilience, organised resilience, carries many of the same traits as the two other forms of robust and reflexive resilience. What sets it apart is its more strategic approach. Simply put, organised resilience can be seen as a tool of management. The focus is on setting up institutional structures that support the self-management and reflexive resilience mentioned above in order to cope with uncertainty. In essence, what this strategy aims to do is manage the unmanageable.

This can also be seen as part of a historic development. In the 1960s and 1970s, focus was on planning for a known future. This changed in the 1980s, where the future was seen as something complex, which could only be managed locally under the supervision of the state. Around 2000, this changed again, leading to a point where the future was seen as fundamentally uncertain, but still as something we can influence by means of co-creation, innovation and rethinking. Examples of this are outreach organisations and public-private partnerships as mentioned above, but also organisations for dialogue with religious communities.

Arguably, such institutions and programmes are formulated as a means for governing resilience and thereby as the solution to many of the new security threats. These organisations seemingly dissolve the paradox of uncertainty by claiming to organise that which cannot be planned, assuring flexibility, agility and decision in the face of the unknown.
In the three Nordic countries of Sweden, Denmark and Norway, this overarching strategy of organised resilience comes in two types, based on whether the dominant discourse is one of robust or reflexive resilience.

Hence, in Denmark, the focus has primarily been on initiatives of reflexive resilience, whereas in Norway, organised resilience primarily comes in the form of robust resilience, while finally in Sweden, organised resilience is a mix between initiatives that stress the creation of robustness and ones that aim to enhance reflexiveness.

Examples of organised resilience with a focus on robustness include the 72 hour campaigns in Norway and Sweden, where the aim of the authorities is to make every household have its own crisis response strategy. The focus here is on emergency preparedness and a clear distinction between the citizen and the threat environment.

Organised reflexive resilience tends to focus more on the need for citizens, school children and employees to be more reflexive about their own production of risks. Examples of this include educational and dialogue initiatives on extremism and cyber security targeting groups across society such as school children, private companies, teachers. Here, the aim of the authorities is to make these various groups partners in managing the threat; not by defining exactly what should be fought, but to have their ears and eyes open to new developments.
In Sweden, the web-based educational tool ‘Samtalskompassen’ (The Dialogue Compass) teaches people who meet individuals in risk of radicalisation “supportive and preventive dialogue to strengthen the resilience against extremist messages”.

In interviews, the Swedish national coordinator on violent extremism, Mona Sahlin explains what is clearly a method of organised reflexive resilience: “In order to identify these people in time and to prevent that they commit crime, the different parts of society have to cooperate. Parents, sports trainers, social workers, teachers, priests, nurses, after school teachers, imams and police in the vicinity of the person in question have to come together to discover, understand and act.”

“The fact that the dialogue compass is available to all means that there is no longer any excuse for not participating in the preventive work”.
PREPARING FOR THE WORST – A GOOD IDEA?

However, similar for all initiatives under the umbrella of organised resilience, the original focus on potentials for the future mentioned above have been turned around, as the perspective on the future has shifted from positive to negative. Strategy has become a question of avoiding the worst case scenario, not one of creating a better future.

Yet, organised resilience rests on a belief in knowledge accumulation and information sharing as ways of improving and preparing us for the unforeseen or unprecedented incidents often referred to as black swan events.

In its organised version, resilience comes to resemble what we would normally associate with a precautionary approach to risk: it is not described as ‘just’ a matter of ‘muddling through’ by strengthening the capabilities to cope with new situations. Instead, it is based on the belief that it is possible to set up an institutional structure, that makes society able to circumvent potential future catastrophes.

The concept of organised resilience raises many new questions and concerns, as it is ultimately democratically untenable. Dialogue initiatives, outreach programmes, educational initiatives and ‘how to survive’ guidelines are presented as ‘sponges’ that can absorb the worst in any crisis, yet what exactly must be absorbed is rather unknown.

While all three countries agreed that future threats were uncertain and that prediction and a positive end goal no longer steered security planning, they all enacted initiatives to make authorities and citizens expect the unexpected. To prepare for the unknown. To a large extent, this produces a normalisation of the exceptional and legitimises a range of initiatives in the name of safeguarding against any future threat.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Karen Lund Petersen is Professor (with special responsibilities) and Director of NordSTEVA (Nordic Centre of Excellence for Security Technologies and Societal Values) at the Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen.

Trine Villumsen Berling is Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen.

This policy brief was adapted by journalist Line Louise Bahner from a chapter by the authors in the book ‘A Nordic Model of Societal Security?’. 

LAYOUT: SIGNS & WONDERS