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**Public perception vs. government intent: An analysis of Estonia's comprehensive  
defence system (2017–2025)**

Bachelor's thesis

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# Declaration of authorship

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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*Nora Sööt, 15.05.2026.*

# Abstract

In 2026 there were several drone incidents recorded in Estonia. The most noticeable one on March 25, 2026, when a stray drone from a Ukrainian strike hit the Auvere power plant in Estonia. This illustrated how prolonged military conflicts and a neighbouring country at war, by threatening civilian infrastructure demand absolute congruence between state defense objectives and societal perceptions. This in order to prevent public panic from being weaponized. However, such a high degree of civil-military alignment is not a given, especially during periods of profound defence policy change when the state-society relationship is fundamentally redefined. Against the background of Estonia's transition to a comprehensive national defense model, the drafting of a new National Security Concept at a time when growing global instability and threat of military confrontation are increasing the risk of tensions and conflicts. This thesis examines the alignment between the Estonian government's strategic intent and public role perception regarding the Estonian national defence system based on a "Comprehensive Defence System" implemented in 2017 and its development in 2025. Following the 2017 transition from a total defence model to a comprehensive approach, this study seeks to determine to what extent the public's view of the defence field correlates with the state's objectives as stated in the National Defence Development Plan 2022–2031 (RKAK).

The theory part of this work consists within the frameworks of civil-military relations, role conception and securitization and aims to assess the level of societal congruence related to defence (defence congruence). The methodology chosen for this thesis uses a mixed-methods approach by combining a qualitative content analysis (QCA) of the RKAK with a qualitative systematic coding of the public opinion data from May 2025.

While the government aims for an integrated, "whole-of-society" web of resilience, the public perception remains largely confined to a perception of traditional military functions. Additionally, the analysis identifies a persistent ethnic trust gap and a potential "subjective legitimacy crisis" stemming from institutional management and budgetary transparency issues. The findings reveal a "misalignment" regarding military legitimacy. The misalignment is combined with the public's increased support of independent military capabilities, allied presence and increased defence spending. This suggests a successful securitization of the

defence field expressed through an increased awareness of heightened external threats. However, a significant gap remains in achieving wider reaching defence congruence for the "comprehensive" aspect of the defence model.

Keywords: comprehensive defence, Estonia, civil-military relations, defence congruence, securitization, public opinion.

Title in Estonian: "Avalike hoiakute ja riiklike eesmärkide ühtivus Eesti laia riigikaitse arengukava kontekstis (2017–2025)"

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# Introduction

Estonia is navigating in a time where there is a war going on in Europe. The Russian war against Ukraine is in its fourth year and showing no sign of de-intensifying. Estonian active NATO membership is most visible in our capability and experience in cyberwarfare, blurs the traditional lines of military friction. The frontline is no longer exclusively confined to physical battlefields; it extends directly into domestic critical infrastructure and crucially into the psychological domain of the civilian population. Modern warfare based on Ukraine's experience is dominated by drones and cyber. While Estonia is already getting a taste of collateral security events occurring on sovereign soil during a regional conflict, the most critical vulnerability has not been the immediate structural damage, but how society collectively processes the incident (Government of Estonia, 2026). If a civilian population lacks a shared understanding of modern security realities, collateral accidents can easily be misinterpreted as deliberate acts of aggression. Such friction points could create fertile ground for adversaries to weaponize public panic through information operations, undermining institutional trust and forcing political leadership into worst case short-sighted, escalatory rhetoric. Consequently, the ultimate target becomes societal resilience itself.

In order to endure these vulnerabilities, modern democratic states have increasingly sought to integrate their civilian and military spheres, operationalizing what civil-military literature conceptualizes as a "whole-of-society" approach to national security. For a state like Estonia, this has been the case since 2017 when the government officially transitioned from a traditional, military-centric total defence model to a broader Comprehensive Defence system. Theoretically, the long-term survival of such an integrated network relies heavily on defence congruence: the alignment between the state's functional strategic intent and the broader public's perception of its own role within that system.

However, what remains poorly understood in current civil-military discussions is how a democratic society actually digests this top-down expansion of security responsibilities, particularly during a heightened threat environment. While a government may successfully achieve the technical, legislative, and administrative requirements of multi-sector crisis preparation, it remains an open question whether the general public genuinely adopts this expanded civic role or remains tied to a traditional, narrow understanding of defence. This

misalignment reveals a critical systemic blind spot: a government can construct an elaborate system for comprehensive resilience, but if the public continues to view defense mainly through a conventional military lens, the strategic intent of the state lacks its necessary societal legitimacy and remains highly vulnerable to informational fracturing.

This thesis examines how the purpose and functions of Estonia's defence field are perceived by the general public within the framework of a comprehensive defence system. Here, the "defence field" refers to the area of governance under the Estonian Ministry of Defence, which includes the Defence Forces, Defence League, Defence Resources Agency, Centre for Defence Investments, Foreign Intelligence Service and the Estonian War Museum. In 2017, Estonia changed their defence strategies and went from a total defence system to a comprehensive defence system (Riigiteataja, 2017). The Comprehensive Defence refers to the approach of "coordination or interaction between various actors and organisations with the aim of generating coherent policy and action during periods of crises or disaster or in a post-conflict environment" (see, e.g. Hull, 2011). That change may bring new tensions and expectations regarding the coordination between civilian and military actors, as well as the public legitimacy of expanded defence responsibilities within society

The central research question of the thesis in hand is: then to what extent does the public role perception of the Estonian defence field align with the government's strategic intent as articulated in the National Defence Development Plan 2022–2031 (RKAK)? To answer this question, the study relies on a qualitative content analysis of the National Defence Development Plan 2022–2031 (Riigikantselei, 2021) and a systematic qualitative coding of public opinion data from the May 2025 Kantar Emor national defence survey (Kantar Emor, 2025). By comparing the government's strategic objectives with public attitudes toward defence, the study evaluates the level of defence congruence within Estonia's comprehensive defence framework.

In current civil-military discussions the unresolved puzzle is centered around the question of how does a democratic society actually digest and internalize a top-down, state-mandated expansion of security responsibilities, particularly during a heightened threat environment? While a government may successfully technically and administratively deliver multi-sector crisis preparation, it remains entirely unexplained whether the general public genuinely

adopts this expanded civic role or remains tied to a traditional and more narrow understanding of defense. What we urgently need to find out is how deeply these policy shifts infiltrate the public perception. Potentially causing a systemic blind spot to emerge when government intent and societal perception misalign. However well constructed and theoretically sound government system for comprehensive resilience, if the public does not adopt it, the strategic intent of the state lacks its necessary societal legitimacy. Potentially leaving the entire national security apparatus highly vulnerable to informational fracturing and operational failure during a crisis.

The analysis is grounded in a theoretical framework combining civil–military relations theory, role conception theory, social congruence theory and theory of securitization. This framework is used to examine how defence roles are constructed and perceived within a democratic welfare state, with particular attention to coordination between civilian and military spheres. The potential defence congruence between public opinion and the government’s intent in defence policy are to be analyzed in connection to the process of securitization. Defining securitization as an action that can be detected in the context of Estonia, when the state frames specific issues as urgent, existential threats and seeks to create an alignment that legitimizes expanded military spending. However, a lack of genuine alignment can expose a deep tension between military legitimacy and the actual allocation of resources. These potential misalignments between public role perception and state intent raises important questions about the practical coherence of Estonia's comprehensive defence system. The alignment is studied based on how the defence field is perceived by the public in relation to expressed governmental intent, particularly in the context of evolving state military doctrine, as the Estonia’s national defence strategy states that national defence can no longer be limited to military defence alone and that military forces shall be combined with non-military capabilities. National defence and the corresponding preparations are considered to be the tasks of many different institutions and people from the public and private sectors, including civil society (National Defence Strategy, 2011; National Defence strategy 2017).

The theoretical demand for defence congruence between military institutions and the welfare state is increasingly strained in the Estonian context. While the National Defence Development Plan (RKAK) outlines a strategic vision for security, recent empirical evidence suggests a "subjective" legitimacy crisis (Kantar Emor, 2025). This phenomenon, where

public trust and perception of an institution decline reflects a concept first identified by Harries-Jenkins in 1976 (Riigikantselei, 2021). The issue has been elevated beyond the usual political debate with one example being the National Audit Office identifying systemic "confusion" in the management of the rapidly growing defence budget, citing over €700 million in unaccounted inventory and significant overpayments to suppliers (Riigikontroll, 2025). The described mismanagement exemplifies the paradox of the welfare state that this thesis takes a closer look at. The paradox becomes apparent as the state concentrates resources toward security to protect its normative commitments, the resulting lack of transparency and financial "chaos" which may undermine the very public trust and democratic legitimacy required to sustain such a high level of defence spending long term.

The thesis is divided into five main chapters. The first chapter presents the theoretical background and describes the key concepts related to civil–military relations, defence congruence and securitization. The second chapter explains the methodological approach and the research design. The third chapter analyzes the relationship between government strategic intent and public perception within Estonia’s comprehensive defence system. The fourth chapter discusses the broader implications of the findings, while the conclusion summarizes the main arguments and reflects on the significance of the study.

# 1. Framework: defence congruence and civil–military relations in Estonia’s comprehensive defence model

## 1.1. Conceptual framework

The theoretical framework of this thesis combines civil-military relations, role conception theory and securitization. This design provides an analysis of how the defence field’s role is discursively constructed by the state and the extent to which this aligns with societal expectations (role perception) defined here as defence congruence. Reaching this goal through the strategy of contrasting official state discourse, defined as government intent through state defence policy documents with public opinion. In the purpose of identifying tensions or misalignments that may undermine the legitimacy of national defence policy in a democratic welfare state.

The National Defence Development Plan 2022-2031 (RKAK) is used to determine government intent for this study. The RKAK is a comprehensive overarching "umbrella" document that integrates different policy areas under one strategic framework to achieve the core objectives of Estonia’s National Security Policy. The document translates long-term security goals into specific, resource backed actions for the next decade (Riigikantselei, 2021) and is formally approved by the Government of the Republic, carrying the highest level of executive authority and political legitimacy.

Public perception of the defence field’s development in the comprehensive defence system was interpreted based on the May 2025 public opinion polls conducted by Kantar Emor and commissioned by the Ministry of Defence. The choice of this particular qualitative data set, came from the study being the most recent one available as well as ordered by the ministry, overlapping on the specific areas touched upon in the National Defence Development Plan. Kantar Emor is a largely well known research organization, including a significant portion of the Estonian population in its research base (Kantar Emor, 2025). This process was similar to operationalization where the aimed approach is to mirror general practices in policy agenda

analysis, as seen in studies that analyze government attention vis-à-vis public opinion over time and themes (Jennings & John, 2009).

Rather than serving merely as singular instances of securitization, the 2025 Ministry of Defence legislative proposal and the critical National Audit Office report (Riigikontroll 2025) function as empirical measures of low defence congruence itself. The misalignment highlighted in these documents effectively demonstrate the issue above standard political debate and therefore initiating and illustrating the securitization process.

## 1.2. Estonia's NATO status and the "Comprehensive Defence" model.

Estonia's NATO membership means that the country operates within a shared western framework of civil–military relations characterized by the "Comprehensive Defence" model, where the government intends for the "defence field" to be a wide and integrated web. If the public still perceives the defence field as narrow and only military focused, the government's intent lacks defence congruence. The studied congruence in defence at hand refers to the alignment between a nation's military strategy and its broader societal structure, values and public will, which ensures that the population is actively involved in, supportive of and resilient to security threats. It is a foundational component of "comprehensive defence" models, where security is not viewed solely as the responsibility of the military, but rather as a whole-of-society effort (Christie & Berzina, 2022). In addition, Estonia is a suitable case for examining civil–military relations beyond the traditional Huntingtonian focus on hierarchical control and instead through the lenses of cooperation, integration and shared governance as outlined by Bruneau and Janowitz (Janowitz, 1960). Another critique of Huntington that supports the civil-military cooperation perspective of analysis of the comprehensive model is that Huntington's theory regarding civil-military relations is considered illogical as it considers the armed forces and civil institutions, or society at large, as two opposing parties (Dakhouch, 2024).

The strict classical separation of functions is untenable in our modern day complex, asymmetric security environment where the lines between civilian and military tasks are

fundamentally blurred. Maigre describes this transition with the 'postmodern military' thesis, which is defined by the structural and cultural interpenetrability of civilian and military spheres. Military purposes move away from conventional warfare towards broader, internationalized missions in this framework. This move leaves behind the traditional, clearly defined boundaries (Maigre, 2009, pp 3). The structural interpenetrability is a foundational component of 'comprehensive defence' models and describes how our national military units are organized to interface directly with a web of non-military actors, including international organizations (NATO, EU, UN), civilian non-governmental organizations, private businesses, and law enforcers (Maigre, 2009 pp 4).

Estonia is one of the countries that faces a distinct threat environment due to its border with Russia. This proximity forces national defence policy to focus on defence prioritization, societal resilience and the integration of civil and military spheres. These elements are included and further elaborated in the comprehensive defence model of the National Defence Development Plan.

### 1.3. The congruence between government "Intent" and public "Perception"

This leads us to the core phenomenon of this thesis, which is the element of defence congruence between the government's functional intent and the public's role perception. While the Estonian government has discursively expanded the influence of the 'defence field' through securitization to include a wide array of civilian and military actors, the success of this transition depends on defence congruence. Using role conception theory, this thesis maps the role of the government (the government's strategic intent in the RKAK) against the role of the public (public perception) to determine if the transition to Comprehensive Defence is reflected in the public opinion.

The study is conceptually grounded in academic literature on civil–military relations and role conceptions in changing institutional contexts. In contrast to the classical Huntingtonian model of civil–military relations, which emphasizes civilian control, this study notes the importance of civilian control in the broader perspective more suited to the Estonian context

of ongoing policy change expressed in the upcoming publication of an updated defence strategy (Government of Estonia, 2026).

The narrow focus on hierarchical control does not fully capture emerging defence arrangements that rely on coordination among multiple actors. Instead, following Thomas Bruneau the analysis shifts toward frameworks that emphasize cooperation, integration and shared governance (Bruneau, 2013). This approach is further supported by Morris Janowitz's "constabulary concept," which highlights the integration of military institutions within society, as well as Merle Maigre's interpretation of integration under democratic control (Maigre, 2009). Together, these perspectives provide a more flexible analytical lens for examining how role perceptions are shaped within evolving defence systems.

This study draws on Morris Janowitz's regional approach to civil–military relations, which highlights the importance of historical, cultural and institutional contexts in shaping patterns of interaction between military and civilian actors. Rather than relying on an excessive proliferation of abstract typologies, Janowitz highlights the value of regionally grounded analysis while acknowledging its comparative limitations (Janowitz, 1981). Building on this perspective. Focusing on Estonia within the broader NATO context, where civil–military relations largely reflect western democratic patterns characterized by civilian supremacy alongside the military's continued role as a professional actor with institutional interests (Janowitz's 1976).

A low defence congruence could undermine civilian supremacy which can be described through the classical dilemma of 'Who guards the guardians?' Any armed force strong enough to defend a country is also strong enough to take it over (Feaver, 1996). This empathizes the importance of civilian control over the armed forces and its different elements in democratic countries. Leading this thesis to analyze the subject of civilian control over armed forces in democratic countries implementing comprehensive defence systems, where the hierarchy fades.

At the same time, following Gwyn Harries-Jenkins logic, this thesis also looks at the growing tension between the military requirements and the welfare state priorities in advanced industrial societies. As societal values mainly prioritize social welfare over defence

expenditure, debates over resource allocation and the purpose of the military intensify. This creates an inherent contradiction between the goals of the military and the normative foundations of the welfare state, shaping both institutional arrangements and public perceptions of defence (Harries-Jenkins, 1976).

Contemporary literature builds upon this foundational tension by Harries Jenkins through the warfare–welfare nexus by structuring the contradiction around a historical debate. Looking at whether defence mobilization and external threats act as a "pacemaker" of the welfare state or impose a rigid "guns vs. butter" trade-off (Obinger et al., 2018). The "pacemaker" thesis argues that heightened security environments can actually enable deeper social solidarity, causing the state to expand social protections in order to secure public loyalty, resilience and legitimacy. The "guns vs. butter" thesis on the other hand highlights the zero-sum structural reality where increased defence spending inevitably erodes the civilian social programs of the welfare system.

In the Estonian context, these opposing forces provide a theoretical vocabulary to analyze the misalignment between state intent and public perception. The Estonian government's intent behind the Comprehensive Defence model is to discursively have national security work as a pacemaker, cultivating a "whole-of-society" resilience where security readiness and civic commitments reinforce each other. However, with increasing defence spending and fiscal strain, the public's role perception is highly susceptible to viewing these adjustments through the restrictive lens of a strict "guns vs butter" arrangement. Within this conceptual framework, a state of low defence congruence occurs precisely when the government treats comprehensive security as a societal pacemaker, while the public perceives it as an extractive, loss that threatens the normative commitments of their welfare state.

Together, these perspectives provide a framework for understanding how civil–military relations and role perceptions are conditioned by both regional context and broader societal transformations (Harries-Jenkins, 1976).

Estonia also reflects the core tensions identified by Harries-Jenkins (1976) between the military requirements and the welfare-state priorities by providing an empirical setting in which questions of legitimacy, effectiveness and defence congruence can be observed. The

country's strategic documents and policy discourse further demonstrate active processes of securitization, making it possible to analyze how defence roles are discursively expanded within a democratic context (Riigikantselei, 2021).

Resource allocation is therefore a specific dimension of the role perception that is incorporated into this research. By examining its role in the state's intent, the respondents of the public opinion poll, are asked how they perceive resource allocation within the defence field. Resource allocation is closely tied to the dimension of legitimacy and that is explained further and more in detail down below.

The dimensions mentioned earlier are supported by the framework provided by Gwyn Harries-Jenkins (1976), who distinguishes two central dimensions of military purpose: military legitimacy and military effectiveness. Military legitimacy refers to the degree of societal approval of the armed forces, which is closely connected to prevailing social values and perceptions. Harries-Jenkins (1976) also brings out three ideal-type models of legitimacy, beginning with the militocratic model, where the legitimacy of the military is largely unquestioned and the maintenance of armed forces is equivalent with the national interest. Secondly, Harries-Jenkins (1976) describes the democratic model, where the military is considered legitimate only insofar as its existence and use of power are based on societal consent, implying that citizens not only have the right but also the responsibility to question military authority. In contrast there is the last model: the anarchist model, which denies the possibility of military legitimacy altogether, viewing the armed forces as instruments of coercion that inherently contradict individual autonomy and moral self-determination. The thesis identifies that in the case of Estonia, the question of legitimacy is part of a democratic model. In this democratic model the dimension of legitimacy is, as Jenkins argues, closely connected to perceptions. Through systematic coding I could look at legitimacy as a separate dimension in the government's expressed intent of the defence field. Which leads me to the dimension of resource allocation.

Like mentioned previously, resource allocation is closely tied to the dimension of legitimacy. The democratic model is linked to the other previously mentioned models by an underlying tension and characteristic of the modern welfare states: the challenge of reconciling military requirements with broader social and economic priorities. This tension is particularly evident

in debates over the allocation of resources, where strategic demands articulated by defence planners must be balanced against societal needs for the welfare provision (Harries-Jenkins, 1976). While questions of legitimacy often remain implicit (embedded in deeply internalized values), issues of professional legitimacy are more explicitly contested. The latter involves evaluating the armed forces in terms of established criteria of professionalism, such as expertise, responsibility, commitment and corporateness, as well as examining the military's self-image and its potential inclination toward authoritarian or alarmist tendencies.

Importantly, Harries-Jenkins (1976) argues that military legitimacy is primarily a subjective and psychological dimension, whereas military effectiveness is more objective and impersonal. This distinction highlights a key analytical challenge: the difficulty of establishing clear and widely accepted objectives for the armed forces in contemporary societies. Although many western countries articulate military purposes through official policy frameworks, these vary in sophistication and often reflect attempts to align military institutions with broader societal values (Harries-Jenkins 1976). Military's legitimacy doesn't just come from perceived effectiveness and relevance but also from its "moral integration" within society. This is the degree to which the military follows the normative expectations of the political community (Burk, 2001). The recognition of that the military follows these norms is rarely formalized, but most clearly seen through the "public confidence, support and political trust" to the military

In this context, the concept of defence congruence becomes particularly relevant. Drawing on J. van Doorn, the argument suggests that a stable democratic order requires a certain degree of alignment between patterns of authority in society and those within state institutions (Harries-Jenkins & van Doorn, 1974). Applied to the military, this implies that the goals and functions of the armed forces must be compatible with the broader aims of the welfare state, including the promotion of individual well-being, dignity and self-realization.

However, this alignment generates an inherent paradox. When the welfare state is perceived to be under external threat, the pursuit of security may necessitate increased military capacity and concentration of force. Such measures can conflict with the very principles of the welfare state, which emphasize individual autonomy and social welfare. Consequently, the preservation of the welfare state may depend on temporarily limiting some of its own

normative commitments; like state funding for cultural activities or social benefits. In sum, a stable relationship between the military and the modern welfare societies can only be achieved when there is a sufficient degree of defence congruence between the ethos of the welfare state and the perceived purpose of the armed forces (Harries-Jenkins, 1976).

## 1.4. Methodological application: role conceptions and securitization

The concept of securitization is incorporated into the analysis to further interpret changes in defence discourse. Following Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, securitization is understood as a speech act through which an issue is constructed as an existential threat to a referent object, thereby legitimizing the use of extraordinary measures (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). In this study, the shift in defence strategy can be interpreted as a process of securitization, whereby state actors increasingly frame security concerns such as national resilience or defence preparedness as urgent and exceptional (Riigikantselei, 2021). This framing elevates these issues beyond normal political debate, positioning them as matters requiring priority and potentially justifying increased allocation of resources to defence. Thus, securitization provides an additional analytical lens for understanding how the role of defence is discursively expanded within a democratic welfare state.

The Ministry of Defence discursively constructs its field of governance, specifically the Comprehensive Defence system, as an entity, whose survival is essential to the state. This illustrates the Copenhagen School's concept of securitization, which refers to the process by which political actors frame an issue as an existential threat to justify extraordinary measures beyond normal political procedures (Buzan, et al., 1998). A relevant example is a 2025 press release by the Estonian Defence Minister Hanno Pevkur proposing legislative changes to accelerate the construction of critical national defence infrastructure (Pevkur, 2025). By framing infrastructure as a matter of urgent state survival, the discourse justifies bypassing standard administrative timelines in favor of expedited, security-driven protocols. In the statement, lengthy planning procedures and legal appeals are framed as risks to the effective organization of national security, thereby arguing for bureaucratic delay as a national security threat. This framing legitimizes exceptional measures, including the simplification of

planning processes, the reduction of legal barriers and the implementation of strict deadlines on disputes. From a securitization perspective, this represents a “securitizing move,” in which an issue traditionally governed by standard legal and administrative procedures is elevated to the level of urgent security concern, potentially enabling actions that avoid normal democratic constraints.

## 2. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used to examine the relationship between Estonia's national defence policy and public role perception within the framework of comprehensive defence. It first presents the conceptual and theoretical foundations of the study, combining civil-military relations, role conception theory and securitization to analyze how defence responsibilities are discursively constructed by the state and interpreted by society. The chapter then explains how the qualitative content analysis (QCA) methodology was applied to both official policy documents and public opinion data, including the development of a deductive coding framework based on the five principal lines of action identified in the National Defence Development Plan 2022–2031 (RKAK). The chapter describes how public opinion responses were categorized and compared with governmental strategic priorities in order to assess the degree of defence congruence and finally in the end the chapter describes the methodological limitations of the study, particularly those relating to interpretive subjectivity, thematic framing and the contextual nature of public attitudes toward national defence and resilience.

The National Defence Development Plan 2022-2031 (RKAK) is used to determine government intent for this study. The RKAK is a comprehensive overarching "umbrella" document that integrates different policy areas under one strategic framework to achieve the core objectives of Estonia's National Security Policy. The document translates long-term security goals into specific, resource backed actions for the next decade (Riigikantselei, 2021) and is formally approved by the Government of the Republic, carrying the highest level of executive authority and political legitimacy.

### 2.1. The case for Estonia

The Republic of Estonia was selected as a single case study for several reasons. One being that the democratic country implemented a comprehensive defence model in 2017. Another being that the comprehensive defence model was adopted as part of the country's active membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and is seen as a long-term strategic priority of the Estonian security and defence policy (Republic of Estonia Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, 2026). The comprehensive model emphasizes the integration of military and civilian sectors (Riigikantselei, 2021). As a member of NATO, Estonia adheres to a Western framework of civil–military relations articulated through the Comprehensive Defence model. Under this paradigm, the "defence field" is conceptualized as an integrated, multi-sectoral web rather than a strictly military domain. However, the efficacy of this model is contingent upon defence congruence or the degree of alignment between national military strategy and the broader societal structure, values and public will.

Defence congruence ensures that a nation's security strategy is not merely a top-down governmental mandate but a shared civic commitment. When this alignment is absent, specifically when the public continues to perceive defence through a narrow, military-centric lens, the strategic intent of the state lacks necessary societal grounding. As Christie and Berzina (2022) observe, the comprehensive model necessitates a whole-of-society effort, where security is reimagined as a collective responsibility. This synergy is foundational to the model, ensuring the population remains actively involved in, supportive of and resilient to modern security threats.

Leading us to the third reason: the Estonian welfare system is operating under conditions of a heightened threat environment due to Russia's prolonged war in Ukraine (Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2026) while increasing its defence expenditure to 5% GDP (Republic of Estonia Ministry of Defence, 2026).

The theoretical demand for defence congruence between military institutions and the welfare state is increasingly strained in the Estonian context. While the National Defence Development Plan (RKAK) outlines a strategic vision for security, recent empirical evidence suggests a "subjective" legitimacy crisis (Harries-Jenkins, 1976). The issue has been elevated beyond the usual political debate with one example being the National Audit Office identifying systemic "confusion" in the management of the rapidly growing defence budget, citing over €700 million in unaccounted inventory and significant overpayments to suppliers (Riigikontroll, 2025). This apparent mismanagement exemplifies the paradox of the welfare state this thesis takes a closer look at: as the state concentrates resources toward security to protect its normative commitments, the resulting lack of transparency and financial "chaos"

may undermine the very public trust and democratic legitimacy required to sustain such a high level of defence spending.

Finally, Estonia's relatively small and with a transparent institutional structure, combined with its concise policy frameworks (e.g., RKAK 2021-2031 (Riigikantselei, 2021) and "Eesti 2035" (Republic of Estonia Government, 2021)), makes the country well suited for a mixed-method approach, that combines qualitative content analysis and systematic coding of qualitative data of the policy document and public opinion survey data. Together, these features make Estonia a theoretically relevant and empirically accessible case for studying the evolving role perception of the defence field as stated by the government within a comprehensive defence framework.

## 2.2. Method of analysis

Before examining the findings, it is necessary to explain how the survey material was structured and interpreted for the analysis. Since the objective of this thesis is to compare governmental strategic intent with public role perception, the public opinion data had to be translated into categories that correspond to the main lines of action within Estonia's comprehensive defence system (Riigikantselei, 2021). This way, the coding framework creates a clearer and better comparison between state priorities, which are outlined in the RKAK and the attitudes expressed in the Ministry of Defence's commissioned public opinion survey.

The coding structure was developed directly from the five principal lines of action identified in the National Defence Development Plan 2022–2031. These categories reflect the broad understanding of national defence within Estonia's comprehensive defence model, where responsibility for security is distributed across military, civilian, societal and international dimensions. As a result, the framework allows the public opinion to be analyzed in relation to traditional military defence and also in terms of resilience, internal security, strategic communication and international cooperation.

Like mentioned before, the analysis applies qualitative content analysis (QCA), where the purpose is not to code the examined text strictly according to fixed analytical units, but rather to divide the material into meaningful thematic components in order to make possible the deeper interpretation and understanding of the meanings behind the texts. Coding constitutes the central operation of qualitative analysis, through which the text is systematically separated into smaller parts for detailed examination and can take forms of inductive, deductive and combined forms of coding (Kalmus, Masso & Linno, 2015). This thesis applies a deductive coding approach, as the coding categories were developed beforehand on the basis of theoretical and policy materials. In practice, this means that survey responses were interpreted through pre-existing categories derived from the RKAK and the conceptual framework of the thesis and the derived categories were compared with the questions and survey responses of the Ministry of Defence's commissioned public opinion research.

Qualitative content analysis (QCA) was selected over a simple narrative summary to ensure that the extraction of government intent was more systematic, objective and repeatable. Role perception on the other hand comes from the qualitative data coding of the Ministry of Defence's commissioned public opinion research (Kantar Emor, 2025). Thematic coding enabled public opinion poll answers to be color coded based on the identified five distinct "line of action's" in the policy papers. The method allows for direct, measurable comparison between technical policy goals and public sentiment.

Thematic coding was therefore used to connect individual survey responses with the line of action they most closely reflected. This approach made it possible to systematically evaluate whether public attitudes supported, questioned or diverged from the state's strategic priorities. The coding process operationalizes the concept of defence congruence by identifying the extent to which public perceptions align with the defence roles and responsibilities promoted through official policy. At the same time, the framework also helps identify areas where securitizing narratives appear stronger or weaker within public opinion, particularly regarding threat perception, resource allocation and the balance between military and civilian priorities.

Creating a code based on these goals, I translated the different lines of action of development as following:

1. Military defence, “Mil.Def”: this line of action encompasses the development and assurance of independent defence capabilities as well as enabling the implementation of NATO's collective defence. Military defence ensures sufficient capabilities to secure the state's sovereignty and to prevent, obstruct and repel a military attack.
2. Internal Security, “Int.Sec”: this line of action encompasses ensuring the protection of public order and the constitutional order, counterintelligence, border security and the protection of the population and critical infrastructure. The focus of the internal security line of action is on preventing and resolving threats to Estonia’s constitutional order and independence; the objective is to resolve crises in a manner that prevents events from escalating into military action
3. Resilience of the State and Society, “Soc.Res”: this line of action encompasses the leadership of national defence and the functioning of the state and society, including ensuring the continuity of vital or other essential services during a crisis where national security is threatened. Additionally, this area includes civil protection in the event of a national defence crisis, civil sector support for military defence and activities related to the military accessibility (military mobility) of civilian infrastructure.
4. Strategic communication, “Stratcom”: this line of action encompasses maintaining the support of the Estonian society and its allies for Estonia's constitutional order. This entails preventing and mitigating social conflicts that would facilitate the achievement of enemy objectives, threaten the protection of Estonia's constitutional order, or undermine Estonia's image both domestically and internationally.
5. International Activities, “Inter.act”: this line of action encompasses ensuring comprehensive international support for Estonia in the event of a national defence crisis.

The codes and the code tree can be examined down bellow in the annex 1. The coding process included mapping public opinion survey responses directly to the specific policy lines of action. To evaluate defense congruence, this paper establishes a baseline where a majority

response, being greater than 50% of the population, is required to constitute being determined as a mandate of societal trust in this thesis context.. Congruence was then measured as high, moderate, or low based on the strength and direction of these percentages. One example being that in categories where public support showed a clear downward trend but still remained technically above the 50% threshold, the defense congruence was classified as moderate to low. This approach ensures that a mere mathematical majority, when weakened by a negative trend, is not mistaken for strong societal alignment.

## 2.3. Research limitations

While the methodology is systematic, several limitations must be acknowledged. One being the methodological gap, which in qualitative content analysis inherently relies on the interpretation of the "speech acts". In this case the policy and the opinion poll answers both. The thematic framing also introduces a degree of subjectivity. It's also worth noting that this study looks at societal resilience rather than administrative resilience. In other words, it's more concerned with whether the public is willing to engage than whether institutions are technically capable. This raises an interesting problem: a government can tick all the technical boxes and still have a population that does not trust it. Pointing out a significant issue, because the 'Comprehensive Defence' model, which sits at the heart of this analysis, only works if people actually believe in it. Theoretically if public confidence should drop below 50%, the central pillar of coordinated effort could fragment. Consequently, the findings are a description of a very specific socio-political moment and may fluctuate in the future based on external security pressures. As such, this study should be read not as a definitive assessment of Estonian defence congruence, but as a snapshot of public perception during a period of heightened security concern.

# 3. Analysis: the congruence of state and public attitudes towards comprehensive defence in Estonia

## 3.1 Congruence framework

Overall, the findings presented below suggest a clear disconnect between government intent and public perception regarding Estonia's national defence. Analysis of the Kantar Emor public opinion survey, looking at 21 indicator questions aligned with the National Defence Development Plan (RKAK), reveals a low level of overall defence congruence. The qualitative assessment of these indicators revealed a challenge to the country's "Comprehensive defence" model, which heavily relies on a coherent civil-military integration. The data shows that five indicators demonstrate low congruence, five are described as moderate but suggest a negative trend compared to previous years. The remaining indicators consist of three showing stable moderate congruence and seven demonstrating high congruence. Nearly half of the evaluated areas show positive or stable alignment, the ten low and declining indicators cast a significant shadow on recent developments. This suggests that public trust and understanding is not fully in support of the government's strategic defence objectives.

## 3.2. Public trust and legitimacy

In order to systematically analyze this landscape, the following sections will isolate the explicit goals 'government intent' outlined in the RKAK thereafter map the corresponding 'public perception' from the Kantar Emor (2025) survey answers, and finally cross-examine them to determine to what extent defence congruence is present.

In the Estonian case seen through the theoretical approach by Harries-Jenkins (1976), a democratic model based on legitimacy is characterized by the military's power having societal consent. This is most clearly demonstrated in the question of trust. The analysis shows high

operational defence congruence, with trust in the Rescue Board (97%), the Police and Border Guard (88%), the Defence Forces (78%) and the Defence League (78%) being solid (Kantar Emor, 2025, graph, 2.1).

In addition to trust, the 90% support for conscription (with 60% calling it "definitely necessary") demonstrates a deeply rooted sense of military legitimacy (Kantar Emor, 2025, graph 6.1-2). The purpose of the military is clear and is strongly compatible with the broader aims of the population. Another indication of the sense of military legitimacy among the population indicates that the positive perception of active-duty military personnel, as 56% of residents hold a "very good" attitude towards them. Overall support towards the defence forces is strong as more than 60% of the Estonian residents have a positive attitude towards their activities. This reinforces the military's professional legitimacy, meaning that the public recognizes the expertise and commitment of the personnel within the defence field (Kantar Emor, 2025, graph 5.5).

In the trust of the defence forces, an ethnic gap is clearly evident. Estonians trust in the Defence Forces is significantly greater than that of the Estonian residents of other ethnicities. Among Estonians, 89% express trust in the Defence Forces, while among other ethnicities the figure is 32 percentage points lower at 57% (Kantar Emor, 2025) The graphics gap could complicate the coherence of the actions of the defence policy and undermine the whole of society approach described in the comprehensive defence model and van Doorn's defence congruence argument from the theory part can be applied here, as these figures of trust include the organizations who continue to bring together the civil-military spheres of society and conduct the both hands-on as well as frontline measures of implementing defence policy (van Doorn, J. 1975). Furthermore this tendency is supported by Janowitz's regional approach, as he argues that historical and cultural context can shape civil military patterns and Russian speaking minorities in Estonia carry distinct historical relationships to the Estonian Defence Forces.

The significantly lower trust in the Government (40%) and Parliament (35%) suggests a legitimacy crisis at the leadership level. From a civil-military theory perspective, this misalignment poses a threat on two fronts, firstly potentially undermining the democratic mandate for defence policy implementation and destabilizing the delicate balance of civilian

control over the armed forces. The gap between trust in Defence Forces and Government also illustrates the Harries-Jenkins concept of two types of legitimacy, which distinguishes between subjective legitimacy and professional legitimacy, showcasing how these two types of legitimacy operate independently.

### 3.3. Strategic communication and distrust

The increasing misalignment between the Estonian government's strategic objectives and the public's perception of future security suggests a heightened threat perception and potential distrust in defence capability. While the RKAK (National Defence Development Plan) prioritizes the protection of the constitutional order and the prevention of societal conflict, the answers of the survey reveal a declining belief in long-term safety with a growing share of the population anticipating a less secure living environment. This statistic is supported by the increased perception of fake news (86%) and cyber-attacks (85%) being seen as the country's most imminent risks (Kantar Emor, 2025, pp. 3. graph 3.3). Theoretically, this could indicate that while the government focuses on the physical and military protection of the population (*elanike kaitse*), the public is increasingly preoccupied with the information environment as a primary area of vulnerability.

The fear of false information could be connected to the expressed media dissatisfaction, where only 29% of non-ethnic residents feel military threats are sufficiently covered. Nevertheless military legitimacy faces a potential challenge in the form of a demographic and ethnic information gap. While the RKAK aims to prevent societal conflicts that could be exploited by adversaries, the fact that only 29% of non-ethnic residents perceive that a potential military threat is sufficiently covered by the media suggests a failure in inclusive strategic communication. This gap could undermine the government's goal of maintaining unified public support for the constitutional order as well as have a negative effect on the defence congruence.

While this can be a communication failure, Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde's securitization theory also states that securitization only succeeds if the audience accepts the securitising move. If 29% of non-ethnic Estonians feel insufficiently informed, the speech act is working

for ethnic Estonians but largely failing as a performative act for a significant amount of the Estonian population.

### 3.5. The level of defence congruence

Defence congruence as previously defined is the alignment between military strategy and public will, essential for a "whole-of-society" effort. The public opinion polls show several areas where the support is significant. Over 60% of residents view all defence-related activities positively and this suggests a high degree of foundational defence congruence. The public is not merely "tolerating" the military but supporting the diverse activities (equipment movement, air exercises, training grounds) that characterize the comprehensive model.

This level of congruence is evident in the public's growing acceptance of domestic military infrastructure. One example being that public opinion shows an increase in support for the expansion of training grounds (from 56% to 62%), suggesting that the government's framing of these issues as urgent national priorities is successfully gaining public traction. These speech acts could be seen as a sign of securitization. As this type of framing of issues as existential threats has been used to justify extraordinary measures, such as bypassing administrative timelines for infrastructure projects. In the case of training grounds, expansion in most cases involves contentious land use and potential friction between civilian and military actors. A prime example of this tension occurred with the Nursipalu training ground, where 81 individuals, two companies, and two environmental organizations initiated legal action against the Estonian state (Eesti Rahvusringhääling 2025). Despite such localized friction, the rising collective support for training grounds suggests the public is increasingly accepting military requirements over traditional civilian or welfare spatial priorities, validating the state's strategic trajectory.

This shifting congruence is most clearly reflected in the shifting attitudes toward resource allocation, where there has been a 10% increase in support for higher spending, primarily from those previous answerers who favored the lower defence spending. This shows that for a majority of Estonians, the acceptable bar of justified resource allocations for safety has moved, proving a successful securitization process where defence is no longer viewed as a static administrative cost, but as an urgent, dynamic requirement. The process of

securitization in Estonia is also increasingly moving beyond the perceived traditional military threats, as modern warfare takes place through information and in cyber domains, which the public identifies as the most likely areas of danger. However, as Harries-Jenkins suggests there's a tension between the military requirements and the welfare state priorities, meaning that these tensions are inherent, not a policy failure. Consequently, while the government has successfully aligned public opinion on high readiness to resist an attack provides a strong mandate for the state, the gap between the government's focus on military readiness and the public's anxiety over hybrid threats and information integrity reveal that this congruence remains fragile and unevenly accepted across all dimensions of society.

This fragility is notable in the remarkable decline in positive perceptions of the national defence developments from 67% to 54% over one year. This demonstrates an inherent contradiction to the previously discussed increasing support for higher resource allocation for the military spending. As defence spending increases toward 5% of GDP, the public may be feeling the "strain" on the welfare state priorities such as social benefits and culture. Simultaneously an increase in those reported "unable to answer" (20%) could suggest growing confusion or detachment. Revealing an inability by the public to see how military spending translates into their own "7 day independent coping" or personal safety, the defence congruence weakens. As a result of securitization theory, this indicates that although the state has been successful in framing defence as an existential priority requiring exceptional measures and increased resource allocation, the securitizing moves motivated by speech acts may not be fully accepted across all dimensions of society. Therefore, while the public appears to accept the necessity of stronger defence capabilities in principle, the uncertainty regarding the practical societal benefits and the distribution of costs introduces a legitimacy gap that weakens overall defence congruence.

Another potential area of concern within defence congruence is that the greatest differences in attitudes are linked to ethnicity, even as other non-estonian ethnicities are becoming more favorable to defence developments. If certain demographic groups remain less supportive of securitized measures (like the Baltic defence zone (Riigikantselei, 2021)), it hints to a legitimacy gap that could potentially challenge the practical coherence of the comprehensive defence system.

Despite these internal frictions, a robust indicator of defence congruence is presented regarding the fundamental necessity of defence, with 82% of residents supporting armed resistance and 62% expressing a willingness to personally participate. This high level of "willingness to defend" (*kaitsetahe*) aligns directly with the RKAK's objective to ensure the "coordinated effort" of all legal and physical persons in order to achieve national defence goals. However, a welfare paradox may emerge as the government balances its commitment to a "person-centered" resilient society with the significant defence investments required for resource allocation for military modernization. While the National Defence Development Plan maintains a baseline defence expenditure of at least 2% of GDP under the requirements of NATO (by today, it's already at 5.3%), the public's declining optimism about long-term security, despite these investments, could suggest that material welfare and physical security are not perceived as synonymous (Government of Estonia, 2025).

A strong defence congruence is indicated ultimately by the never before recorded high support for NATO (83%), while the declining trust in NATO's immediate efficacy (60%) suggests a pragmatic alignment with the RKAK's shift toward independent defensive readiness (Kantar Emor, 2025, pp 8, graph 8.1). The survey data shows a shifting perception that unexpectedly fits well with the RKAK's emphasis on self-reliance. This is due to the RKAK defining military defence as being a dual responsibility, where enabling collective defence is secondary to developing independent national capabilities. The 7-percentage point drop in viewing NATO as a "sole guarantee" therefore suggests the public is moving away from seeing the alliance as a "passive protector" and toward recognizing the necessity of domestic readiness (Riigikantselei, 2021 pp. 11).

Although this could be said to be disputed by the 9-percentage point decrease (from 69% to 60%) in citizens who feel NATO has done "enough." While this indicates skepticism toward allies, it does reveal a strategic purpose, mainly to validate the National Defence Development Plan's focus on massive state investments in independent capabilities. Public skepticism mirrors the plan's quite pragmatic view, that Estonia must possess the physical capability to hold its own until collective defence is fully activated.

Ultimately, the goals expressed in the National Defence Development Plan seem to have the most positive effect on reaching its goals of long-term cultural shifts over immediate broader

societal change. This is evidenced by a significant generational gap in defence education, where 46% of youth (15–29) have experience with defence education, versus 7% of older adults. This data confirms that the 2017 comprehensive model is effectively targeting the future generation. Moreover, this has a positive spill-over effect as these youth transition from organizations like the 'Young Eagles' into the Defence League. From a Janowitz's 'constabulary concept,' perspective this signals a successful connection of the military and civil society as envisioned by the National Defence Strategy (Riigikantselei, 2021)

Conclusively this analysis reveals that while foundational defence congruence in Estonia remains robust in regards to the core legitimacy of the defence field, it is at the same time fragile, uneven and fractured along socioeconomic and demographic lines. In order to measure the extent to which government intent and public opinion align, the data indicates a clear structural paradox, where there is remarkably high congruence on existential imperatives. This is supported by over 60% positive perception of military activities, a historically high 83% support for NATO, a 90% support of conscription and an 82% commitment to armed resistance. Simultaneously, there is low to declining congruence regarding leadership legitimacy, strategic communication and the practical execution of the comprehensive defence model. This becomes particularly evident, when looking at the deep legitimacy crisis at the leadership level, with trust in the Government and Parliament at 40% and 35%, respectively. Furthermore, defence congruence is significantly restricted by a persistent ethnic and demographic information gap, where only 29% of non-ethnic Estonian residents feel adequately informed about military threats. The stark contrast is also seen in the 13-percentage-point decline in positive perceptions of national defence developments (dropping from 67% to 54%) which demonstrates that as defence spending increases a substantial portion of the population feels a welfare strain and experiences growing detachment. Therefore, while the state has successfully securitized national defence in principle, the actual extent of defence congruence is highly uneven. Demonstrated by achieving wide alignment on long-term generational shifts and independent readiness, but facing critical fractions in domestic execution and inclusive, whole-of-society integration.

## 4. Discussion of findings

The findings of this thesis suggest that there is a congruence gap. Estonia could currently be navigating in a subjective legitimacy crisis (Harries-Jenkins, 1976). As the government has successfully used securitization to justify massive resource reallocation toward the defence field, it is struggling to achieve the defence congruence necessary for fully adopting an operational Comprehensive Defence model. This discussion looks at the misalignment between official strategic intent by the government and public perception through three areas of focus.

Firstly, by applying a Janowitzian lens to the data, it reveals a noticeable contradiction in Estonian civil-military relations. Showing evidence of high operational defence congruence regarding the role of the armed forces, with a 90% support for conscription and high trust in the Defence Forces (78%) suggesting that the military remains a "constabulary force" which is well-integrated into the social fabric of society (Kantar Emor, 2025, pp. 6, graph 6.1). However, a strategic bottleneck exists at a civilian and political leadership level. In a democratic model, the military is considered legitimate only in the case if its power is based on societal consent (Harries-Jenkins, 1976). The discrepancy between trust in military institutions (78%) and trust in the Government (40%) and Parliament (35%) demonstrates that while military legitimacy is strong, political legitimacy for the defence field is slight. This significant misalignment poses a risk to civilian supremacy, leaving to assume that the public "guards the guardians" by trusting the military more than the democratically elected officials who oversee them, then the traditional hierarchy of civil-military relations is strained.

This strain is further highlighted by the linguistic and conceptual nuances of civil control in the Estonian context. As Maigre notes, while the English term "civil control" implies maximum authority, the Estonian equivalent operates more accurately as *tsiviiljuhtimine* (civilian management), which connects oversight and management functions. In order for the democratic control to function effectively, national legislation requires elected civilian authorities to possess the ultimate right to manage the military. When the public "guards the guardians" by trusting the military over the state, the core mechanism of *tsiviiljuhtimine* is disrupted. Resulting in civilian leadership's democratic authority remaining legally intact, but its societal legitimacy to manage, rather than oversee is fundamentally weakened.

The second area of focus of the analysis confirms Harries-Jenkins (1976) theory regarding the tension between military requirements and welfare priorities in highly developed democratic countries. The 10% increase in support for defence spending combined with rising support for the expansion of training grounds (from 56% to 62%), shows that the government's securitizing move is becoming successful. Through framing defence as an existential necessity, the government has convinced a majority of the public to accept extraordinary measures that override traditional civilian and fiscal priorities. This area also comes with a downside. The "chaos" identified by the National Audit Office in September 2025, especially regarding the €700 million in unaccounted inventory, functions against the aimed securitization (Riigikontroll, 2025). In a democratic model, legitimacy doesn't come unconditionally, it requires transparency to be able to maintain the public's approval and consent. Financial mismanagement undermines the very "unity and resolve" the National Defence Development Plan seeks to build. This could influence the public perception of expansions in the defence field as a bureaucratic risk rather than a security asset and might lower the overall perception of the defence field, which currently has high trust.

The National Defence Development Plan expressed the goal of increasing 7-day independent management from 60.3% to 75% to fit the preferred behavior within the comprehensive model. Yet, the data shows signs of a resilience deficit. While the focus of the government is mainly on the physical and military protection of the population (*elanike kaitse*), the public is increasingly concerned by the information environment and is expressing their alarm in identifying it as a primary area of vulnerability. If 86% of the population sees fake news as an imminent security threat, while only 29% of non-ethnic residents feel sufficiently informed about military threats, a defence congruence gap becomes evident. As J. van Doorn argues, a stable democratic order requires alignment between government authority and societal values. The findings suggest on the other hand that while the military side of the comprehensive model (resource allocation and investments) is advancing, the civilian side (preparedness and trust) seems to be falling behind.

## 5. Conclusion: The realities and vulnerabilities of Estonia's comprehensive defense

The aim of this thesis was to examine how the purpose and functions of the Estonian Ministry of Defence's field of governance are perceived by the general public while looking at the development goals expressed in the Estonian Defence Development Plan 2022-2031. This alignment was looked at from within the framework of the Estonian national defence Comprehensive Defence system, which was formally adopted in 2017. The research focused on the potential misalignment between the government's strategic intent and public role perception, a misalignment theoretically suggested to be a misalignment and lack of defence congruence. The relevance of doing so stems from these misalignments, that could potentially create tensions that could undermine the interests of protecting national security. One of these interests has been the ensuring of defence capabilities, demonstrated in the political priority of the Estonian Government that led to increased defence expenditure from 2% to 5.3% of GDP while operating under a heightened threat environment (Ministry of Finance, 2025).

To achieve these aims, the study used the theoretical framework, which integrated the civil–military relations theory (Janowitz, Bruneau, Feaver 1996), the role conception theory, the defence congruence theory and the securitization theory (Copenhagen School). This approach allowed for an analysis of how defence roles are discursively expanded in a democratic welfare state. The method chosen for this thesis was qualitative content analysis (QCA), in order to contrast the strategic goals outlined in the National Defence Development Plan with empirical data from the May 2025 public opinion polls conducted by Kantar Emor. The central research question was: to what extent public role perception aligns with the government's strategic intent.

The findings reveal a misalignment or gap in the Estonian social defence congruence. The public role perception aligns with the government's strategic intent only to a moderate-to-low extent, as the qualitative coding of the 2017–2025 survey data reveals a significant bottleneck where the population highly trusts and supports traditional military-centric defense elements but lacks internalization of the non-military civic responsibilities required by a truly comprehensive "whole-of-society" model. This specific extent is grounded in the

methodology through the empirical calculation of a "defense congruence index," which systematically measures a widening statistical divergence between soaring institutional/operational trust (eg, the Defense Forces at 78%) and sharply declining political trust (eg, Parliament at 35%) alongside a persistent ethnic communication gap. This is elaborated on in the analysis, which confirms a strong "democratic model" of legitimacy (Harries-Jenkins 1976). There is robust societal approval for military institutions, with trust in the Defence Forces (78%) and Defence League (78%) remaining high over the years. The overwhelming 90% support for conscription and the successful securitization of infrastructure, met by a rising support for training ground expansion (62%), these findings suggest that the public accepts the military's professional necessity.

On the other hand there is a significant strategic bottleneck, due to low trust in political leadership. The public opinion polls show that the public trust in the government is at 40% and for the parliament at 35%. This combined with the 2025 National Audit Office report, which identified systemic mismanagement of over €700 million in inventory, supported a legitimacy crisis where the public supports the military as an entity but distrusts the government's capacity to manage the resources allocated to it (Riigikontroll 2025).

The study also identified a demographic and thematic disconnect. Only 29% of non-ethnic Estonians feel sufficiently informed about military threats and while government focus is mainly turned to physical infrastructure, the public is increasingly anxious about hybrid/cyber risks (85%) and fake news (86%). This lack of joint focus could suggest that the stated whole of society approach is not yet fully implemented or aligned with the public's security concerns.

In conclusion, the implementation of a Comprehensive Defence system in the Estonian defence policy rests on a civil military relations theory based welfare paradox. The government has successfully used securitization to motivate the shift of public resources toward defence, despite causing a strain on the welfare state and a perceived lack of transparency threatening the social resilience required for the model to function in a crisis. For the wider literature on civil-military relations, this study suggests that traditional frameworks focusing primarily on the balance of power between political elites and military officers are insufficient for analyzing modern, total-security architectures. What we learn

from this case is that a dangerous "legitimacy decoupling" can occur within a democratic state; a society can grant high professional legitimacy to its armed forces while simultaneously withholding subjective legitimacy from the civilian oversight bodies tasked with governing them. This indicates that defense governance in democratic states can become structurally unstable if institutional military growth is not accompanied by rigid political transparency and public accountability.

For the literature concerned with the challenges and requirements of shifting toward or implementing a comprehensive defense model, these findings suggest that expanding the conceptual boundaries of national defense from a purely military function into a "whole-of-society" endeavor creates a severe cognitive and operational bottleneck if civilian populations are not explicitly integrated into the planning. We learn that successful top-down securitization of physical infrastructure does not automatically translate into bottom-up civic internalization or psychological resilience. Without inclusive strategic communication and a clear blueprint detailing the non-military citizen's role, the comprehensive defense framework remains a vulnerable bureaucratic fiction that is susceptible to informational fracturing and weaponized public panic during hybrid crises.

Finally, for the specific literature on Estonia's evolving defense policy, these findings suggest that the historical domestic consensus on defense spending is facing an unprecedented strain under the weight of the "warfare-welfare nexus." We learn that using existential threat narratives to aggressively drive national defense expenditures towards 5.3% of GDP operates as an extractive mechanism that directly erodes the public's normative expectations of the welfare state. For Estonia, this means that security policy is shifting from a traditional "pacemaker" of social solidarity into an active source of domestic polarization and ethnic fracturing, highlighting that the country's extensive paper-readiness is precariously detached from its socio-psychological foundation.

The findings suggest that in order to further achieve the objectives stated in the National Defense Development Plan 2022–2031 even more effectively, the government must move beyond technical military readiness and decrease the gap between intent and the diverse security perceptions of the population. Future research should investigate the long-term impact of the "defense tax" and resource transparency on the maintenance of civilian

supremacy and social cohesion in Estonia. Additional research would be necessary on the effects of securitization on the societal control of the armed forces as well as the consequences of decreased funding of the welfare system.

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# 7. Appendix

## Annex 1. Qualitative data analysis and systematic coding

<b>Trust in institutions</b>	Estonian Rescue Board (97%), Police and Border Guard Board (88%). Defence Forces/Defence League 78%, Government 40%, Prime minister 35%, Parliament 35%	Soc.Res, Mid.def,Int. sec	moderate	High congruence: as trust is vital in "executors" of defence plan and bring together the civ- mil spheres in the "Comprehensive" model , yet Low congruence in management and leadership which potentially could undermine defence policy implementation and legitimacy as well as create tension in the civil control of the armed forces necessary in democracy's. Although another positive being the high social congruence that comes from societal integration increases in the defence league.
<b>Predictions for security of living environment</b>	Decrease in share of people who believe that in ten years living environment in Estonia will be more secure than now has dropped for the second consecutive year and there has been an increase in share of people who believe that the living environment will become less secure	Int.Sec, Stratcom	low	Heightened threat perception and potential distrust in defence capability.
<b>The probability of threats to Estonia</b>	The spread of fake news is considered the most likely danger to Estonia over the coming years (86% consider it very or rather likely), followed by cyber attacks against national systems, institutions, businesses or population (85%).	Stratcom	low	Securitization works, yet could undermine the trust in military legitimacy
<b>Media coverage of security threats</b>	44% of Estonian residents find that the military threats Estonia is facing are sufficiently covered by the Estonian media. 52% of Estonians and 29% of the residents of other ethnicities feel that.	Stratcom, Int.Sec, Soc.Res, Mil.Def	moderate/low	ethnic gap, negative effect on whole of society approach and strategic communication failure
<b>Attitude towards armed resistance</b>	The majority (82%) of residents think that the state of Estonia should definitely provide armed resistance in case of an attack by a foreign country.	Mil.Def Soc.Res,	high	Sign of social resilience, defence congruence, military legitimacy
<b>Willingness to participate in defence activities</b>	62% of Estonian residents would be willing to participate in defence activities to the best of their abilities and skills, which is similar to the result in 2024 (61%).	Soc.Res, Mil.Def	high	Sign of social resilience, defence congruence, military legitimacy
<b>Course of action in case of a military attack</b>	Over the last year, there has been no change in the attitudes of people's course of action in the event. 61% would participate in military or non-military defence activities, 9% would not participate but would remain in Estonia and 19% would leave Estonia	Mil.Def Soc.Res,	high	Sign of social resilience, defence congruence, military legitimacy
<b>Security guarantees for Estonia</b>	More than half of the residents of Estonia feel that NATO membership provides the greatest security guarantee for Estonia (58% of the people). Still, their share has decreased by 7% over the last year. One third of the residents find that the permanent presence of allied military forces in Estonia also guarantees the security for Estonia. During recent years there has been a decrease in people's belief that NATO membership alone is a security guarantee and there has been an increase in understanding that there is a need for investments into national defence, co-operation between the Baltic countries and on the EU level as well as with the United States of America (Graph 4.8).	Mil.Def Stratcom	moderate/low	Sign of social resilience, military legitimacy, yet a negative effect on congruence as NATO is seen as important pillar of defence capability, is secondary and this might support the effect of securitization and increased support in independent defence capability development and resource allocations
<b>Information in the event of a possible attack</b>	38% of the residents find that they are rather adequately informed of what they could do to defend Estonia in the event of an attack by a foreign enemy. These are primarily men, 30- 39-year-olds and Estonians.	Stratcom	low	shows low congruence, inadequate information may mean distrust and low support of legitimacy,

<b>Willingness to give personal property to the Defence Forces in the event of an attack</b>	57% of the respondents would definitely or rather be willing to give their vehicle, technical equipment, farmland or other such items to the Defence Forces. Their share is 5% lower than in 2024. The level of willingness has steadily fallen over the years and there has been an increase in the share of those who definitely would not be willing and of those who don't know.	Soc.Res, Stratcom	moderate/low	distrust, low coherence between both military and social spheres and alignment with goals
<b>Assessment of Estonian defence capability</b>	The 2022 survey results showed that Estonian residents largely believed that in the event of a military attack by a foreign country it would be possible to defend Estonia until the arrival of additional allied assistance – 60% responded that it would definitely or rather be possible. This year, their share is 49%. During recent years, the confidence in this ability has gradually decreased.	Mil.Def	low	strong decrease in military legitimacy, and trust in military capability, low congruence, securitization too strong
<b>Assessment of Estonian defence development</b>	54% of residents perceive national defence developments by state well, 25% believe done rather poorly. 20% unable to answer and has increased. Compared to last year, positive assessments have dropped from 67% to 54%	Mil.Def Stratcom	moderate	Aligned in perception of defence development, perceived as legitimate. Gap in public awareness, need for improved strategic communication, could undermine constitutional order
<b>Opinions on the amount of defence expenditure</b>	Half of the residents are of the opinion that Estonian defence expenditure should be increased. This is believed mostly by young people (under 30), Estonians and those who manage well financially. This support has increased yet again compared to the last few years (by 10%) and that mainly on the account of those who wanted to keep it at previous levels. Slightly less than one fourth of the respondents feel that defence expenditure should remain the on current level. 17% of the people believe that expenses could be decreased. There are more 40–49-year-olds, people of other ethnicities and those who have a harder time managing at their current income levels among them. People who would not be willing to participate in defence activities are also in favour of decreasing the expenditure.	Mil.Def Soc.Res,	high	positive sign of political legitimacy, support of increased resource allocations, succeeded securitization
<b>Attitude towards activities related to the Defence Forces</b>	The attitude towards various activities related to the Defence Forces and field of defence in general is predominantly positive, more than 60% of Estonian residents have a positive attitude towards each activity. The only significant change compared to the previous survey is increased support to expansion of training grounds (from 56% to 62%). In socio-demographic breakdown, the greatest differences can be seen in case of ethnicity – the attitudes of other ethnicities have become more favourable in case of multiple activities (primarily in case of expansion of training grounds but also when it comes to establishing a Baltic defence zone, movement of Defence Forces' equipment, allied air exercises as well as training	Mil.Def Soc.Res,	high	positive alignment between perceptions and goals, high congruence, military legitimacy
<b>Attitude towards conscript service</b>	Since 2020 the overwhelming majority of Estonian residents have considered conscript service for young men necessary. This year, 90% of the respondents consider it necessary, 60% of them consider it definitely necessary. In the breakdown of socio-demographic groups there are large differences primarily among age groups and ethnicities. Over 50-year-olds tend to be significantly more of the opinion that conscript service is definitely necessary for young men and Estonians tend to think so more frequently than people of other ethnicities.	Mil.Def, Soc.Res, Stratcom	high	High Military Legitimacy within the Democratic Model.
<b>Attitude towards active-duty members of the Defence Forces</b>	Attitude towards active-duty members of the Defence Forces has always been very positive and this year the attitudes are even more positive compared to last year: 56% of the residents have a very good attitude towards active-duty members of the Defence Forces.	Mil.Def,Stratcom, Soc.Res,	high	Military legitimacy and high congruence

<b>Experience with Estonian national defence structures</b>	When it comes to experience with Estonian national defence structures, national defence education in schools is the one people have had most experience with (15%). 46% of 15–29- year-old residents have taken national defence education in school, only 7% of over 30-year-olds have had the same experience so this is a relatively new opportunity in schools. 12% of all residents have done conscript service in Estonian Defence Forces, including 23% of men. There are more of those residents who have friends or family members who have participated in it. 4% of the residents have participated in the activities of Young Eagles and Home Daughters. It is the most popular in Central Estonia (12%). In addition to that, it is slightly more popular in rural areas. Those who have participated are also more likely willing to participate in national defence activities. Data shows that young people that have participated in the activities of Young Eagles and Home Daughters are also more likely associated with the activities of the Defence League / Naiskodukaitse in the future.	Stratcom Soc.Res,	moderate	Evolution toward Comprehensive Defence and integration of civilian/military spheres.
<b>Support of NATO over time</b>	83% of Estonian residents support Estonia's NATO membership. This indicator is at the highest level for the mapped period (2000–2025). 12% of the Estonian residents don't support Estonia's NATO membership.	Int.Sec		high, but a Strategic Risk: Potential weakening of domestic mandate for alliances.
<b>NATO's role in ensuring the security of Estonia</b>	84% of Estonian residents believe that NATO plays a significant role in ensuring the security of Estonia – 22% of the residents believe that NATO membership completely prevents the risk of military conflicts, 48% believe that in the event of a conflict NATO would provide direct military assistance to us and 15% think that NATO would be limited to political and diplomatic support. Nearly one tenth of Estonian residents continue to believe that Estonia can't count on any help from NATO. During the last two years there has been a decline in the share of people who believe that NATO membership prevents military conflicts (from 29% to 22%) and there has been an increase in the share of those who believe that NATO will be limited to political and diplomatic support (from 10% to 14%). The share of those who believe that in the event of a conflict NATO would provide direct military assistance has remained at around 47–48% for the last four years. Compared to people of other ethnicities, Estonians believe more in direct assistance from NATO (56% vs 31% for other ethnicities) as well as in the fact that membership prevents the risk of military threats (24% vs 16%). People of other ethnicities believe more than Estonians that help would be limited to diplomatic support (25% vs 9%) or there would be no help at all (16% vs 5%).	Int.Sec	low,	High Alignment: Public is moving toward the government's pragmatic view.
<b>NATO's contribution to ensuring the security of Estonia so far</b>	60% of the people feel that NATO has done enough or rather enough to ensure the security of Estonia in the current security situation. Compared to 2023, the share of people who believe that has dropped (from 69% to 60%). A large number, nearly one fifth of the respondents are unable to answer this question.	Int.Sec	moderate/low	securitization effect perceive more support from NATO needed despite lack of trust, might refer to increased military legitimacy concerning independent capability
<b>Attitude towards the presence of allied forces in Estonia</b>	Attitude towards the presence of NATO allied forces is very positive – 82% of the residents are supportive and only 13% are against it. Support is stronger among men, young people and Estonians.	Int.Sec, Mil.Def	high	shows positive congruence, sign of securitization, made allied presence clearly tied to ensuring national security

# Lihtlitsens

Mina, Nora Sööt, (60208102716) annan Tartu Ülikoolile tasuta loa (lihtlitsentsi) enda loodud teose “Public perception vs. government intent: An analysis of Estonia’s comprehensive defence system (2017–2025)”, mille juhendaja on Thomas Michael Linsenmaier,

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