BULLETIN
OF "CAROL I" NATIONAL DEFENCE UNIVERSITY
https://buletinul.unap.ro/index.php/en/

The Role of Civil Society in Strengthening National Preparedness for Modern Security Threats

Assoc. Prof. Ivan OKROMTCHEDLISHVILI, PhD*
*Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani University, Tbilisi, Georgia
e-mail: i.okromtchedlishvili@sabauni.edu.ge

Abstract

In the contemporary world, the evolving nature of warfare extends beyond traditional battlefields to include cyberattacks, information warfare, and other hybrid strategies. Within this complex security landscape, civil society has emerged as an important—yet often under-explored—component of national defense. This paper examines the potential of civil society to enhance national preparedness for modern threats, focusing on case studies from the Baltic States—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia—and Georgia. By analyzing legal frameworks, institutional roles, and the integration of civil society into state defense systems, the study identifies legal, administrative, and operational challenges and evaluates the effectiveness of civil society in countering emerging threats. Through comparative analysis, the research highlights best practices in civil-military cooperation and provides policy recommendations to strengthen national resilience. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of civil society's transformative role in contemporary security strategies, emphasizing the growing importance of inclusive, whole-of-society approaches in an era of multifaceted warfare.

Keywords:
civil society; national security; threat preparedness; resilience building; crisis response; societal resilience; hybrid threats; cybersecurity.

Article info
Received: 15 May 2025; Revised: 11 June 2025; Accepted: 13 June 2025; Available online: 27 June 2025

Citation: Okromtchedlishvili, I. 2025. "The Role of Civil Society in Strengthening National Preparedness for Modern Security Threats". *Bulletin of "Carol I" National Defence University*, 14(2): 167-199. https://doi.org/10.53477/2284-9378-25-22

Introduction

The security landscape of the 21st century has undergone a profound transformation, with traditional military threats increasingly supplemented or displaced by more ambiguous challenges that blur the lines between war and peace, military and civilian domains. As articulated in the European Commission's Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats (2016), these evolving security challenges underscore "the need for the Union to adapt and increase its capacities as a security provider, with a strong focus on the close relationship between external and internal security." The vulnerabilities exposed by hybrid threats—combining diplomatic, military, economic, and technological methods—necessitate responses that extend beyond conventional defense mechanisms to incorporate whole-of-society approaches.

Conceptual Foundations

This research operates within several interconnected conceptual frameworks. Civil society encompasses the sphere of collective voluntary action outside the state and market, including non-governmental organizations, community associations, professional bodies, and grassroots movements that contribute to public life (Edwards 2014; Salamon 1994). National preparedness refers to coordinated efforts to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from threats that endanger a nation's security and stability (Perry and Lindell 2003). Hybrid threats, as defined by the EU Joint Framework, constitute "the mixture of coercive and subversive activity, conventional and unconventional methods… used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives while remaining below the threshold of formally declared warfare" (European Commission 2016; Hoffman 2007). These threats characteristically exploit societal vulnerabilities and generate ambiguity to hinder effective decision-making. Resilience describes a system's capacity to withstand stress and recover, strengthened from challenges, a quality increasingly recognized as essential in modern security frameworks (Walker, et al. 2004; Norris, et al. 2008).

Theoretical Framework

The evolving nature of security threats has prompted reconsideration of traditional state-centric defense paradigms. Three theoretical approaches particularly inform this study's examination of civil society's role in national security:

Resilience theory emphasizes society's adaptive capacity in facing disruptions, prioritizing systems that can absorb shocks and transform when necessary (Boin and Lodge 2016). This adaptive capacity is distributed across multiple societal layers, with civil society organizations playing crucial roles (Jungwirth, et al. 2023).

The human security approach shifts focus from territorial state security to people-centered security, addressing multidimensional threats to communities and recognizing civil society as both a security referent and provider (Sedra 2022).

The whole-of-society approach acknowledges that contemporary security challenges require coordinated efforts across government, private sector, and civil

society sectors, emphasizing security as a shared responsibility requiring diverse partnerships (Jungwirth, et al. 2023).

Research Rationale

This investigation into civil society's security role is justified by several converging factors. First, hybrid threats specifically target societal vulnerabilities, seeking to "undermine fundamental democratic values and liberties" (European Commission 2016). Civil society represents both a potential vulnerability and a critical defense mechanism against such threats. Second, modern security challenges demand responses transcending traditional institutional boundaries—spaces where civil society organizations often already operate. Third, as noted in the EU Framework, many security challenges "originate from instability in the EU's immediate neighborhood" (European Commission 2016). Civil society organizations, with grassroots connections and cross-border networks, offer unique capabilities for early warning and community resilience that complement official structures.

Hybrid threats specifically target societal vulnerabilities, seeking to undermine democratic institutions and civil cohesion through cyberattacks, information warfare, and political subversion. Countries situated on NATO's eastern flank – including the Baltic States and Georgia—are particularly exposed to these tactics due to their geopolitical positioning and shared historical experiences under Soviet rule. The Baltic States – Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – offer a mature example of civil-military cooperation, having undergone deep integration into NATO and the European Union. These nations have invested heavily in societal resilience and total defense strategies, including formal mechanisms for civil society engagement in national defense. In contrast, Georgia remains a NATO aspirant with an emerging security architecture that still faces institutional, legal, and political constraints. This contrast offers a valuable comparative framework: the Baltic States serve as models of advanced integration, while Georgia provides insight into the opportunities and challenges of adapting these models in less consolidated democracies.

Analyzing these cases together reveals how different stages of political development and alliance integration affect the design, operation, and effectiveness of civil society's role in national defense. Such comparison also helps identify which elements of successful civil-military partnerships may be transferable across diverse governance contexts.

Research Objectives and Methodology

This study aims to:

- Analyze the legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms enabling civil society participation in national security across the selected case studies;
- Identify operational models of civil-military cooperation in responding to hybrid threats;
- Assess challenges and limitations facing civil society engagement in security domains;
- Develop policy recommendations for enhancing government-civil society partnerships in building national resilience.

The research employs qualitative methodology, including:

- Document analysis of legal frameworks, policy documents, and strategy papers
- Case study examination of civil society security initiatives in the Baltic States and Georgia
- Comparative analysis of institutional approaches and operational models
- A written interview with Rimvydas Adomavičius, who contributed to establishing and leadership of Lithuania's Komendantūros system. His insights provide valuable firsthand perspectives on implementation experiences, structural challenges, and practical lessons relevant to civil-military integration. The full transcript is available in Appendix B.

Methodological Note and Limitations

While the interview provides important practitioner-level insights, the study acknowledges the limitation of relying on a single stakeholder perspective. Future research will expand the empirical base through additional interviews with policymakers, CSO representatives, and defense officials across the case study countries to enhance analytical depth and triangulate findings.

In support of the case studies, this paper draws upon peer-reviewed academic literature and official policy publications to substantiate observations. For example, critiques of hybrid threat environments are grounded in NATO, EU, and UN literature (European Commission 2016; Kaska, Osula and Stinissen 2023). Civil-military structures like the Estonian Defence League and the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union are evaluated through national law and programmatic reporting (Estonian Defence League n.d.; LRT 2022). Further triangulation was conducted through grey literature, organization websites, and defense ministry publications.

A volunteer defense organization can be considered a civil society organization (CSO) under certain conditions, though not always. The distinction depends on factors such as legal status, autonomy, and relationship with the state. A volunteer defense group typically qualifies as a CSO if it is non-profit, citizen-based, operates independently from formal government command structures, and engages in public interest activities such as preparedness, civic education, or resilience-building. Estonia's Kaitseliit (Defence League) exemplifies a hybrid model: it is composed of voluntary citizens and maintains a strong societal base, yet it operates under the administrative authority of the Ministry of Defence. While not fully independent, its civic ethos, affiliated youth and women's organizations, and public service orientation allow it to fulfill key functions commonly associated with civil society. As such, it is best understood as a quasi-CSO that bridges the domains of state security and civil participation.

Conversely, organizations lose their CSO character when they are structurally embedded within state institutions, operate under direct government command, or have members who are formal reservists or government employees. In these cases, their function may still be important for national defense, but their independence—and thus their qualification as CSOs – becomes compromised.

These definitional distinctions are informed by general principles in civil society literature (Edwards 2014; Salamon and Anheier 1997) and by applied frameworks in security sector research (Loada and Moderan 2015; NATO 2024). They help clarify when volunteer defense organizations function as CSOs and when they evolve into state-linked entities.

This article adopts a flexible, context-sensitive approach, recognizing that conventional Western definitions, which emphasize independence from state structures, may not fully capture the hybrid nature of volunteer defense formations in post-Soviet settings. It includes "quasi-CSOs" such as the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union and Komendantūros, Estonia's Kaitseliit (Defence League), and Georgia's Mazniashvili Legion and Aisi as relevant civil society actors due to their grassroots composition, voluntary nature, and societal roles, even if they operate with state coordination. This categorization, while not conventional, reflects the functional realities of post-Soviet security systems and supports a more inclusive understanding of civil society's contribution to national resilience.

Structure of the Paper

Following this Introduction, Section 1 examines the legal and institutional dimensions of civil society engagement in national security across the case study countries. Subsections 1.1.1 through 1.1.3 analyze the Baltic models, including Lithuania's, Latvia's, and Estonia's approaches. Section 1.2 examines Georgia's evolving framework for civil society participation in security, highlighting both innovations and persistent challenges. Section 2 presents policy recommendations for enhancing civil society's constructive role in national security, while the Conclusion Section includes reflections on the transformative potential of inclusive security approaches and directions for future research.

By examining these diverse models of civil society engagement in national security, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how whole-of-society approaches can enhance resilience against modern hybrid threats, offering valuable insights for policymakers, defense professionals, and civil society leaders alike.

1. Civil Society and National Security: Legal and Institutional Dimensions

This section examines the evolving relationship between civil society organizations and national defense structures across the Baltic States and Georgia. As modern security threats increasingly transcend traditional military domains, governments have developed varied approaches to harnessing civil society capabilities for enhanced national resilience. The legal frameworks, institutional mechanisms, and operational models discussed below illustrate diverse pathways for integrating civilian volunteers into security architectures while maintaining appropriate oversight and democratic

principles. A comprehensive comparative analysis of civil society engagement across all four case studies is provided in Appendix A, highlighting key similarities and differences in organizational structures, legal frameworks, and strategic approaches. The analysis begins with the Baltic States' models, which demonstrate more mature integration of civil society into defense planning, before examining Georgia's emerging framework for volunteer participation in national security.

1.1 Baltic States

1.1.1. Lithuania

Overview of Civil Society's Role in National Defense

Lithuania presents a comprehensive model of civil society integration into national defense infrastructure, with a multi-layered approach that combines volunteer militias, conscription, and civilian participation mechanisms. The country's historical experience with occupation and its geopolitical position have shaped a defense doctrine that heavily emphasizes societal resilience and whole-of-society approaches to security.

At the center of Lithuania's civil society engagement in national defense stands the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union (LRU), a state-sponsored volunteer organization that unites citizens dedicated to homeland defense. With nearly 15,000 members as of recent data, the LRU serves as a critical bridge between military structures and civil society. The organization's significance in Lithuania's defense ecosystem was underscored in 2022 when the Lithuanian parliament passed legislation expanding its activities and more deeply integrating it into national defense planning.

The LRU's mandate encompasses both armed and non-violent resistance preparation, with members developing capabilities across diverse fields including sports, culture, citizenship education, IT, communication, medicine, and warfare. This multidimensional approach reflects Lithuania's recognition that modern security challenges require competencies beyond traditional combat skills. The organization places particular emphasis on youth engagement, with approximately 6,000 Young Riflemen participating in educational programs and citizenship development activities (Lithuanian Riflemen's Union n.d.).

In 2024, the Komendantūros (Commandant's Offices) were established - the wartime civilian forces, designed to operate alongside local municipalities during armed conflicts. They incorporate both armed and non-armed civilians with various skills, including those with firearms training, medical expertise, or willingness to assist in territorial defense. This recent initiative aims to attract approximately 10,000 citizens who would participate in up to ten days of training annually (LRT 2024).

According to Rimvydas Adomavičius, one of the early leaders of the Komendantūros system, the establishment emerged from "Lithuania's need to strengthen total defense posture through better civil-military integration." The initial vision was to create a structure serving dual purposes: "ensuring effective mobilization in

crisis and providing rear security operations if needed." This was accomplished by "reorganizing and merging the Military Commandant's Offices with the Military Conscription and Recruitment Service" to create a coherent system functioning effectively in both peacetime and wartime (Adomavičius 2025); see Appendix B for the complete interview transcript).

The system evolved through a regional structure consisting of a headquarters and six regional military commandants in major cities (Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda, Šiauliai, Panevėžys, and Alytus), each responsible for their city and district municipalities. By March 2025, approximately 2,500 citizens had actively joined the commandants, with 250 having completed the Basic Commandant Unit Soldier Course. The organization aims to train 1,000 more members by the end of 2025 (Adomavičius 2025). In May 2025, the effectiveness of the Komendantūros system was further tested during the "Interaction 2025" exercise in Klaipėda. This was the first operational activation of the Klaipėda Military Commandant's Office, which coordinated with the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union, the State Border Guard Service, police, fire and rescue, and other municipal entities. About 500 participants simulated a transition from peace to wartime, including curfew enforcement, area control, object protection, and transport checks. The exercise provided a practical demonstration of how Lithuania's total defense structure, including commandant offices and civil society components, can interact under crisis conditions, underscoring the relevance of these institutions in real-world preparedness scenarios (Lithuanian Armed Forces n.d.).

Adomavičius emphasized that "lessons from Ukraine's experience were instrumental in shaping our approach. The war in Ukraine clearly demonstrated that effective territorial defense requires not only frontline military capabilities but also robust rear-area security, protection of critical infrastructure, and mobilization systems that can rapidly integrate civilian resources into the defense effort. We observed how Ukrainian cities and towns that established effective civil-military coordination were better able to resist and recover from attacks, evacuate civilians, and maintain essential services even under extreme pressure" (Adomavičius 2025).

Key implementation challenges included establishing clear lines of authority and coordination between military and civilian structures, attracting sufficient numbers of patriotic citizens willing to commit to defense preparations while maintaining their civilian lives, and securing adequate resources for training and equipment. Adomavičius notes that each commandant's unit required approximately 12,000 euros for new equipment alone, multiplied across the country's municipalities (Adomavičius 2025).

Legal Basis for Involvement

Lithuania has developed a robust legal framework governing civil society participation in national defense, which has evolved significantly in recent years to address emerging security challenges:

Law on the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union (Republic of Lithuania 1997)**:** In 2022, the Lithuanian parliament enacted a significant revision of the Law on the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union (LRU), marking a major step toward strengthening the organization's role within the country's national defense architecture. The updated legislation introduced a modernized organizational framework and ensured deeper integration of the LRU into national defense planning. One of the most notable changes was the shift in the LRU's chain of command, placing it under the direct subordination of the government rather than solely under the Minister of National Defense. To enhance coordination and oversight, the law also established an advisory council tasked with guiding and aligning the Union's activities with broader security objectives. Furthermore, the revision formalized the LRU's responsibilities in both armed defense and civil resistance during periods of martial law, clearly outlining its dual role in national security. A particularly innovative aspect of the reform was the introduction of new categories of riflemen: "kinetic riflemen," prepared for armed resistance, and "non-kinetic riflemen," trained for unarmed forms of resistance – reflecting a comprehensive approach to modern defense needs (LRT 2022).

Regulatory Framework for Komendantūros: New legislation in 2024 established the wartime civilian force structure, defining eligibility requirements, obligations (including an oath that classifies non-compliance as desertion during wartime), and the relationship between these units and existing military and civilian authorities.
The legal architecture reflects Lithuania's strategic prioritization of "society-wide defense" as articulated by Defense Minister Laurynas Kasčiūnas, who has been instrumental in advancing many of these initiatives. This approach draws explicitly from Ukraine's experience during Russia's full-scale invasion, demonstrating how lessons from contemporary conflicts are being rapidly incorporated into Lithuania's civil-military legal frameworks (LRT 2024).

Government-CSO Cooperation Mechanisms
Lithuania has established several formal mechanisms for coordinating between government institutions and civil society organizations involved in defense:

Governance Structure of the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union: The 2022 legal reforms shifted the LRU's subordination from the defense minister to the government as a whole, creating a more integrated approach. An advisory council was established to coordinate LRU activities, address strategic issues, assess performance, and issue recommendations. This structural change reflects recognition of the cross-cutting nature of modern defense challenges that extend beyond traditional military domains.

Integration into Defense Planning: The revised legal framework created what parliamentary Committee on National Security and Defence chairman Laurynas Kasčiūnas described as "a very clear algorithm" whereby the commander of the Riflemen's Union notifies the chief of defense about riflemen capabilities for second-line functions such as facility protection, counter-sabotage operations, and

territorial defense (LRT 2022). This mechanism ensures that civil society capabilities are formally incorporated into military planning processes.

Training and Readiness Development: The legislation provides for establishing a dedicated training center to improve riflemen's readiness, institutionalizing knowledge transfer between military professionals and civilian volunteers. Similarly, the Komendantūros system designates the National Defence Volunteer Forces (KASP) as responsible for training civilian participants, creating structured pathways for skills development (LRT 2022; LRT 2024).

Educational Programs: The Riflemen's Union implements citizenship and defense skills courses for ninth-grade students throughout Lithuania, demonstrating how civil society organizations serve as conduits for defense awareness in educational settings. These programs represent a systematic approach to cultivating defense consciousness from an early age (Lithuanian Riflemen's Union n.d.).

Resource Allocation: The Lithuanian military is legally obligated to provide equipment (weapons, ammunition, protective gear, first aid kits) to citizens assigned to armed units of Komendantūros, ensuring that civil participation is materially supported rather than merely symbolic (LRT 2024).
The relationship between the Komendantūros wartime civilian forces and traditional military structures is "complementary, with clear delineation of responsibilities," according to Adomavičius. The most effective mechanisms for facilitating cooperation included establishing a clear organizational structure where regional commandants oversee municipal commandants, creating a chain of command that parallels civilian administrative divisions. This territorial alignment made coordination with local governments more intuitive. Joint planning processes with municipal administrations for mobilization, protection of important facilities, and other contingency plans "forced both military and civilian authorities to understand each other's capabilities and constraints." Additionally, involving the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union served as a bridging organization between purely civilian volunteers and military personnel, bringing "both paramilitary capabilities and civilian connections that proved invaluable" (Adomavičius 2025).

Regular training exercises involving both military personnel and civilian volunteers created shared experiences and mutual understanding that proved essential for building trust between the different components of Lithuania's total defense approach. The system creates what Adomavičius describes as "a conduit through which civilian capabilities and resources can be integrated into defense planning" (Adomavičius 2025).
The Lithuanian case illustrates a highly evolved model of civil-military integration, where the boundaries between professional military forces, organized volunteer structures, and broader civilian participation have become increasingly fluid. This approach maximizes defense capabilities without proportional increases in standing

military forces, while simultaneously strengthening societal resilience through civic participation and defense education.

The country's ambitious targets – growing Riflemen's Union membership from approximately 15,000 to 50,000 following the 2022 legal reforms and attracting 10,000 citizens to the newly established Komendantūros – demonstrate Lithuania's commitment to significantly expanding civil society's role in national defense (LRT 2022). This expansion reflects both strategic calculation regarding the country's geopolitical position and a recognition that modern security challenges require whole-of-society responses.
However, while innovative, the Komendantūros model remains limited in scale, with only 2,500 trained citizens as of March 2025, compared to its ambitious goals, and its long-term success hinges on sustained state funding and public volunteerism.

1.1.2. Latvia

Key CSO Initiatives
Latvia represents a compelling case study of civil society integration into national defense infrastructure, with the Ministry of Defence (MoD) maintaining formalized partnerships with various non-governmental organizations. These partnerships serve multiple strategic functions: informing public discourse on security and defense policies, facilitating research on defense-related issues, preserving military heritage, and strengthening public support for the National Armed Forces.
The Zemessardze (Latvian National Guard), while technically a component of the National Armed Forces rather than an independent CSO, serves as a crucial bridge between military structures and civil society. It functions as a volunteer territorial defense organization that enables civilians to contribute directly to national defense while maintaining their civilian occupations. This model exemplifies the "citizen-soldier" concept that has become increasingly relevant in contemporary security environments facing hybrid threats.

Beyond the formal structure of the National Guard, Latvia's defense ecosystem demonstrates a diversified civil society engagement, structured around specific functional domains. Military and veterans' associations – including the Latvian Officers Association, the Latvian Reserve Officers Association, the Association of Latvian National Soldiers, the Union of Latvian National Partisans, and the Latvian Riflemen Association – serve not only commemorative and representational purposes but also contribute to the societal anchoring of defense values. Research and policy organizations such as the Latvian Transatlantic Organisation, the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, the Centre for East European Policy Studies, and the Baltic to Black Sea Alliance facilitate strategic dialogue, promote Euro-Atlantic integration narratives, and generate expertise for both policymakers and the public. Historical memory and identity-building are reinforced through actors like the Brothers' Cemetery Committee, while civil education initiatives, exemplified by the

Latvia's Rural Library Support Association, enhance community-level awareness and engagement. International organizations, notably the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, provide normative guidance and capacity-building, reinforcing Latvia's democratic security culture.

These organizations perform varied but complementary roles within Latvia's broader security architecture. Veterans' groups, for instance, play a prominent role in commemorative events such as the Christmas Battles, Lāčplēsis Day (Freedom Fighters' Remembrance Day), and the January Barricade Days – events that reinforce national identity and collective memory, which are key elements of resilience against disinformation and foreign influence operations.
Research-oriented CSOs enhance analytical capacity by producing independent studies on defense and security, shaping informed public debate, and facilitating international cooperation and knowledge transfer – thereby supplementing state capabilities.

State Strategy for Resilience and Civil Engagement
Latvia's approach to civil society engagement in national resilience demonstrates several strategic dimensions:

Formal Partnership Framework: The Ministry of Defence has established structured cooperation mechanisms with CSOs, including delegation agreements that formalize responsibilities and expectations. For example, the Brothers' Cemetery Commission operates under a delegation agreement to locate and maintain burial sites of Latvian soldiers killed in world wars in the Russian Federation – an activity with both commemorative and diplomatic significance (MoD n.d.).

Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer: Latvia strategically employs veterans' organizations to transmit military experience and values across generations. These organizations conduct patriotic educational events for youth, creating continuity in defense awareness and preparedness. This approach builds long-term societal resilience by embedding defense consciousness in new generations (MoD n.d.).

International Networking: Latvia's defense establishment actively promotes CSO participation in international forums and initiatives. The Ministry's partnership with the German Marshall Fund of the United States exemplifies this approach, enabling Latvian NGOs to implement international projects and participate in high-level discussions on transatlantic cooperation and security policy. The Ministry supports the annual Brussels Forum organized by the Fund, connecting Latvian stakeholders with influential international actors across politics, business, academia, and media (MoD n.d.).

Targeted Historical Commemoration: The Latvian approach integrates historical memory work into its resilience strategy, with CSOs conducting inspections of

soldiers' burial locations and organizing commemorative events for significant historical battles. These activities strengthen national identity and promote social cohesion – essential components of societal resilience against information warfare and hybrid threats (MoD n.d.).

The Latvian case demonstrates how smaller states with limited resources can enhance their security posture by systematically integrating civil society organizations into national defense frameworks. This approach multiplies defense capabilities without proportional increases in state expenditure while simultaneously strengthening societal resilience through civic participation and education. However, challenges remain in ensuring sustainable funding for CSO activities and maintaining the balance between state guidance and CSO independence – issues that warrant further comparative analysis with other Baltic and Eastern European states.

1.1.3. Estonia

Estonia presents a distinctive model of civil society engagement in national defense, one that has been shaped by both the country's historical experience and its pioneering identity as a digital society. The Estonian approach combines traditional volunteer defense structures with innovative cyber capabilities, creating a comprehensive framework for societal resilience against both conventional and emerging threats.

Role of the Estonian Defence League (Kaitseliit)

The Estonian Defence League (Kaitseliit) stands as one of the most comprehensive examples of civil-military integration in contemporary Europe. Operating under the authority of the Estonian Ministry of Defence, the organization is structured according to military principles while relying fundamentally on "free will and self-initiative" to enhance national readiness for defense. This balance between military functionality and civic voluntarism represents a defining characteristic of Estonia's approach to civil defense.

The Kaitseliit traces its origins to November 11, 1918, when it was established as a self-defense organization during Estonia's struggle for independence. Following the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991, the Defence League was reconstituted and has since evolved into a significant component of the country's total defense concept. Its status as a legal person governed by public law under the Estonian Defence League Act provides a robust foundation for its activities and ensures appropriate oversight mechanisms (Riigikogu 2013).

With approximately 18,000 direct members and a total of over 29,000 volunteers when affiliated organizations are included, the Defence League represents a substantial mobilization of civil society for defense purposes in a country of just 1.3 million inhabitants. This extensive participation demonstrates the deeply embedded nature of defense consciousness within Estonian civil society (Estonian Defence League n.d.).

The organizational structure of the Defence League reflects Estonia's territorial administration, with 16 districts generally corresponding to the country's county boundaries. This regional approach ensures that defense capabilities are distributed throughout the national territory rather than concentrated in strategic locations, thereby enhancing resilience against various forms of attack and providing for localized response capabilities (Estonian Defence League n.d.).
One of the most distinctive aspects of the Estonian model is its inclusive approach to civil defense through affiliated organizations:

Women's Voluntary Defence Organization (Naiskodukaitse): With almost 4000 members across Estonia, this women's organization focuses on involving women in national defense and enhancing broader societal safety. Its training structure is highly systematic, encompassing basic training, professional training, refresher training, and specialized instructor preparation. Members can participate in military defense directly through units assembled by the Defence League or contribute to civil protection initiatives. The organization emphasizes lifelong learning and accommodates members at different life stages – from students to working professionals to retirees – ensuring continuous engagement of female citizens in defense activities (Estonian Defence League n.d.).

Youth Organizations: The Home Daughters (Kodutütred) and Young Eagles (Noored Kotkad) serve as pathways for integrating younger citizens into national defense consciousness. Established in the 1930s and revived in 1989, these organizations provide Estonian youth with opportunities for self-fulfillment through patriotic education. Their activities focus on hiking skills, national defense awareness, safety issues, sports, civic skills, and historical knowledge. The training system includes rank advancement tests and specialized skill development, creating a tiered approach to youth development. These organizations effectively function as preparatory structures for future adult participation in defense activities while simultaneously cultivating values of volunteerism and civic responsibility (Estonian Defence League n.d.).

The Estonian Defence League's approach is guided by philosophical principles that emphasize the power of individual conviction over formal military might, as reflected in the Confucian quote prominently featured in their materials: "A commander of great military forces may be defeated. A simple countryman with a belief is invincible." This encapsulates Estonia's recognition that national resilience ultimately depends on the commitment of ordinary citizens rather than solely on professional military capabilities.

Cyber Defense Unit as Civil-Military Model
Estonia's experience with sophisticated cyber-attacks in 2007 – among the first coordinated digital assaults against a nation-state – catalyzed the development of innovative approaches to cyber defense that leverage civil society expertise. Estonia's

Cyber Defence Unit (Küberkaitse Üksus) within the Defence League represents a globally recognized model for civil-military cooperation in the digital domain.
The Cyber Defence Unit exemplifies Estonia's adaptation of traditional volunteer defense concepts to contemporary threats. Operating as a specialized component of the Defence League, it brings together civilian IT professionals who volunteer their expertise for national security purposes. This structure allows Estonia to mobilize highly specialized technical skills that would be difficult to develop and maintain exclusively within military structures.

Key aspects of this civil-military model include:
Volunteer Expertise: The unit draws upon IT specialists, programmers, cybersecurity professionals, and digital infrastructure experts who maintain their primary employment in the private sector or academia while volunteering their specialized skills for defense purposes. This approach provides Estonia with access to cutting-edge expertise that continuously evolves through participants' professional development in their civilian roles (Kaska, Osula and Stinissen 2023).

Network Defense Focus: The unit's primary mission involves protecting critical national information infrastructure and supporting cyber defense during crises. Members can be activated during cyber emergencies to augment government capabilities, providing surge capacity during incidents that exceed the resources of permanent state structures (Kaska, Osula and Stinissen 2023).

Knowledge Transfer: The unit facilitates bidirectional knowledge exchange between public and private sectors, helping to disseminate best practices across Estonia's digital ecosystem. This improves overall national cyber resilience by raising standards across sectors rather than concentrating expertise solely within government agencies (Kaska, Osula and Stinissen 2023).

Training and Exercises: Regular training sessions and participation in national and international cyber defense exercises ensure that volunteers maintain operational readiness while continuously upgrading their skills. These activities simultaneously strengthen personal networks among participants, creating social infrastructure that can be rapidly mobilized during crises (Kaska, Osula and Stinissen 2023).

Legal and Ethical Framework: The unit operates within clearly defined legal parameters that address complex questions related to civilian participation in defensive cyber operations. This provides members with necessary protections while ensuring appropriate oversight (Kaska, Osula and Stinissen 2023).

The Estonian approach to cyber defense demonstrates how traditional concepts of territorial defense can be reimagined for the digital domain. By creating structures that facilitate civilian expert participation in national cyber defense, Estonia has expanded the conventional understanding of civil-military cooperation to

encompass new threat vectors. This model has proven particularly valuable for smaller states with limited resources, as it multiplies defensive capabilities without requiring proportional increases in permanent government personnel.

Estonia's integration of both conventional volunteer defense structures and innovative cyber defense units under the Defence League umbrella represents a holistic approach to modern threats. This model recognizes that contemporary security challenges span both physical and digital domains, requiring defense frameworks that can seamlessly operate across these boundaries. By facilitating structured civil society participation in both domains, Estonia has developed a comprehensive approach to national resilience that addresses the full spectrum of potential vulnerabilities (Kaska, Osula and Stinissen 2023).
The Estonian case illustrates how smaller states can leverage civil society engagement to enhance their security posture against both conventional and emerging threats. By creating legal frameworks and organizational structures that facilitate civilian participation in defense activities – ranging from traditional territorial defense to cutting-edge cyber operations – Estonia has developed a model that maximizes national resilience while maintaining democratic values and civilian oversight.

1.2. Georgia

Legal and Strategic Provisions for Civil Society Engagement

Georgia has recently formalized its approach to civil society participation in national defense through strategic legislation. The Defense Code of Georgia, adopted in 2023, establishes a comprehensive framework for "organization of defense based on the total defense approach, strengthening national resilience, organizing national resistance and mission command" (Parliament of Georgia 2023, Art. 2). This represents a significant development in Georgia's security architecture, as it specifically creates legal provisions for volunteer participation in the defense sector.
Chapter XVII of the Defense Code is particularly noteworthy as it explicitly defines "volunteering in the defense sector" as "the voluntary, unpaid training of a natural person in defense and security issues within the organizational framework established by this Code and relevant legal acts, and the use of their skills in the defense sector if needed" (Parliament of Georgia 2023, Art. 166). This legislative foundation provides legitimacy to civil society organizations (CSOs) operating in the defense sphere and establishes parameters for their activities.

The Code stipulates that "the state promotes the organization of volunteering" (Parliament of Georgia 2023, Art. 166.3), demonstrating official recognition of the value that civil society brings to national security. Furthermore, it outlines the creation of a legal entity of public law within the Ministry of Defense system specifically for "coordinating and controlling the implementation of volunteer activities" (Parliament of Georgia 2023, Art. 169.1), institutionalizing the relationship between the state and defense-oriented CSOs.

Examples of Local CSOs in Defense Preparedness

Mazniashvili Legion

One of the most prominent volunteer civil society organizations in Georgia is the "Mazniashvili Legion," founded in 2013 (though its conceptual foundations date back to 2007). The organization describes itself as a "voluntary and apolitical organization based on a national worldview, uniting everyone who wants to strengthen the defense forces and state structures" (Mazniashvili Legion n.d.). Its training methodology draws from British Armed Forces light infantry and volunteer training programs.

The Legion has set forth a series of strategic objectives that reflect its growing role in Georgia's national defense landscape. Central to its mission is the provision of initial military training for citizens, aimed at enhancing individual preparedness and contributing to a broader culture of defense readiness. A key component of the Legion's structure is the formation of volunteer "Local Defense Units," which operate under the framework of the national Defense Forces, serving as a grassroots extension of state security. To facilitate its activities and ensure nationwide engagement, the Legion is actively working to establish local organizations across Georgia. Beyond its military focus, the Legion also seeks to prepare the population for extreme situations and crises, promoting civil resilience in the face of natural and man-made threats. Importantly, the organization places significant emphasis on the patriotic education of youth, fostering a sense of national identity and civic responsibility among the next generation (Mazniashvili Legion n.d.).

With approximately 1,600 members as of 2023, the Legion has trained thousands of citizens in various defense-related courses and formats. It has a sophisticated organizational structure with five main directions and corresponding departments, plus specialized sections including medical, mining, engineering, drones, hiking, communications, topography, and military history (Mazniashvili Legion n.d.).

The Legion's activities gained official recognition in January 2024 when the legal entity of public law (LEPL) "Volunteer" of the Ministry of Defense was launched, aligning with the organization's long-term vision dating back to 2007. This development followed the Parliament's approval of the Defense Code in late 2023, which formally introduced the concept of a "defense volunteer" in Georgian legislation.

Aisi

Another significant organization is "Aisi," which was ideologically formed in 2008 after the Russo-Georgian war and officially registered in 2009. Aisi's mission is "to increase Georgia's civil defense capabilities and popularize volunteer work" (Aisi n.d.). The organization emerged as a response to the recognized gaps in the country's ability to respond to disasters and threats without full civil society involvement.

Aisi conducts two-month free military-camping courses and has trained over 1,000 volunteers in skills including topography and navigation, first aid, trench preparation, forest camping, hiking, and rock climbing. The organization has been cooperating with the Ministry of Defense since its establishment, with formal memoranda of

understanding signed in 2016 and 2021, indicating progressively closer cooperation with state defense structures (Aisi n.d.).

Challenges: Evolving State-Civil Society Relations, Legal Ambiguity, Lack of Funding
Despite recent legislative progress, civil society organizations involved in defense preparedness in Georgia face several challenges:
Evolving State-Civil Society Relations: While Georgia has made significant progress in formalizing civil society's role in defense preparedness, the relationship continues to develop. The Defense Code establishes oversight mechanisms requiring Ministry approval for volunteer organization status (Parliament of Georgia 2023, Art. 168), which can be interpreted as both a quality control measure and a potential limitation. This regulatory framework reflects the sensitive nature of defense activities and the government's responsibility to ensure proper coordination in security matters, rather than necessarily indicating mistrust. The Ministry's involvement may serve to harmonize civil society efforts with national defense strategy while providing legal protection and recognition for these organizations. However, finding the optimal balance between necessary oversight and operational flexibility for CSOs remains an ongoing process in Georgia's evolving security landscape.

Legal Ambiguity: Although the Defense Code creates a framework for volunteering, there remain areas of uncertainty regarding implementation. For example, Article 170.3 states that volunteer organizations may cooperate with municipalities, private entities, and NGOs "in agreement with" the Ministry's public legal entity, potentially creating bureaucratic hurdles. Additionally, the Code stipulates that volunteer registry information "is internal information of the Ministry... and does not belong to public information" (Parliament of Georgia 2023, Art. 172.7), which may limit transparency.

Lack of Funding: While the Defense Code allows the Ministry to "issue a grant to the legal entity of public law... /volunteer organization to achieve a specific goal" (Parliament of Georgia 2023, Art. 169.2), sustainable funding remains a challenge. Organizations like the Mazniashvili Legion emphasize that their activities are free to participants, noting "the Legion is not an organization with political goals or for commercial gain" (Mazniashvili Legion n.d.). This commitment to free service, while noble, creates financial sustainability issues. Furthermore, volunteer organizations bear considerable financial responsibilities, including obligations to "compensate a third party for damage caused" and to "compensate a member of the organization/ volunteer for damage caused to them due to deterioration of health" (Parliament of Georgia 2023, Art. 170.4). Without sufficient funding sources, these requirements may create substantial financial burdens for CSOs.
It is important to note that the civil society organizations discussed—such as the Mazniashvili Legion and Aisi—occupy a hybrid space between traditional, independent CSOs and state-coordinated structures. While grounded in grassroots volunteerism, they operate with varying degrees of cooperation or oversight by the

Ministry of Defense. Therefore, referring to them simply as CSOs requires nuance. These are better understood as quasi-CSOs or state-affiliated volunteer formations.
Furthermore, Georgia's political context presents a complex landscape for civil society engagement. On one hand, the government has actively supported initiatives that promote patriotic volunteerism and civic preparedness as part of its total defense vision. On the other hand, some independent NGOs—particularly those involved in governance monitoring and foreign-funded advocacy—have expressed concerns about proposed regulatory changes and public discourse that may impact their operational space (Freedom House 2025; European Parliament 2024). This dual trend—of encouraging civic involvement in defense while reassessing the role of traditional watchdog organizations—warrants careful observation when evaluating the broader inclusiveness and sustainability of Georgia's whole-of-society approach to national security.

2. Policy Recommendations

Drawing from the experiences of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Georgia, several key policy recommendations emerge for enhancing civil society's role in national preparedness against modern security threats. These recommendations are informed by both comparative analyses of the case studies and firsthand implementation experiences shared by practitioners, with particularly valuable insights drawn from the interview with Rimvydas Adomavičius documented in Appendix B. The recommendations aim to strengthen institutional frameworks, improve training programs, foster public-private partnerships, and promote inclusive approaches to national resilience.

2.1. Enhancing Institutional Frameworks for CSO Engagement

The case studies demonstrate that effective civil society participation requires robust institutional and legal frameworks. Governments should:

- Establish clear legal foundations for civil-military cooperation, similar to Lithuania's Law on the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union and Georgia's Defense Code, which formalize the role of volunteer organizations while providing necessary oversight.
- Create coordinating mechanisms between defense institutions and CSOs, following Estonia's model, where the Defense League operates as a legal entity under public law with specific governance structures that balance military functionality with civic voluntarism.
- Develop advisory councils like Lithuania's approach for the Riflemen's Union, enabling systematic coordination between government institutions and civil society organizations while addressing strategic issues.
- Formalize delegation agreements that clearly delineate responsibilities between state actors and CSOs, as seen in Latvia's framework with veterans' organizations and historical preservation groups.

- Balance oversight with independence by designing frameworks that provide necessary supervision without stifling the initiative and flexibility that make civil society contributions valuable. The case of Georgia — still in the early stages of implementation — illustrates the risks posed by excessive control mechanisms, which may undermine trust and effectiveness.

2.2. Investing in Civil Preparedness Training

Training programs represent a critical component for building meaningful civil society capacity in national defense:

- Establish dedicated training centers for civil defense volunteers, following Lithuania's approach of creating specialized facilities to improve riflemen's readiness and institutionalize knowledge transfer between military professionals and civilian volunteers.
- Develop comprehensive, multi-domain training curricula that address both traditional defense skills and emerging threat areas, as demonstrated by Estonia's Defense League programs that span conventional territorial defense, medical support, communications, and cyber defense.
- Incorporate civil preparedness into educational systems, building on Lithuania's citizenship and defense skills courses for ninth-grade students and Estonia's youth organizations that provide structured pathways for integrating younger citizens into national defense consciousness.
- Create tiered training systems that accommodate various levels of commitment and prior experience, similar to Estonia's Women's Voluntary Defence Organization model that includes basic training, professional training, refresher training, and specialized instructor preparation.
- Ensure sustainable funding for training programs, addressing the challenges faced by organizations like Georgia's Mazniashvili Legion that provide free training to citizens but risk facing problems with financial sustainability due to their commitment to providing services without charging participants.

Lithuania's Komendantūros system offers valuable insights into effective training methodologies for civilian defense participants. Adomavičius explains that their approach was designed around several core principles. First, they developed a Basic Commandant Unit Soldier Course providing essential military knowledge and skills in a condensed format. Second, they leveraged the expertise of the National Defense Volunteer Forces to deliver training, ensuring professional military standards while recognizing the part-time nature of volunteers' commitment. Third, they focused training on specific wartime tasks related to rear security, protection of important facilities, and support to mobilization rather than attempting to create fully combat-ready units (Adomavičius 2025).

To balance military skills development with civilian career demands, the Komendantūros limited annual training requirements to 3-10 days per year, scheduled training to coincide with exercises involving other reserve components, tailored assignments based on individuals' civilian skills and qualifications, and

created a progressive training system that built competencies over time rather than requiring intensive initial training. They also established more accessible health and physical requirements compared to regular military service, opening participation to a broader segment of society who might otherwise be unable to contribute to defense efforts (Adomavičius 2025).

2.3. Encouraging Public-Private Partnerships in National Defense

The examples highlight the importance of leveraging diverse societal resources through public-private partnerships:

- Develop frameworks for mobilizing specialized civilian expertise during crises, modeled on Estonia's Cyber Defence Unit that enables IT professionals to volunteer their skills while maintaining their primary employment in the private sector.
- Create mechanisms for bidirectional knowledge exchange between public and private sectors, facilitating the transfer of best practices across national security ecosystems, as seen in Estonia's approach to cyber defense.
- Establish partnerships with research and academic institutions, following Latvia's cooperation with organizations like the Latvian Institute of International Affairs and the Centre for East European Policy Studies, which supplement state analytical capacity.
- Integrate private sector capabilities into defense planning, allowing for what Lithuania describes as "a very clear algorithm" whereby civilian capabilities are formally incorporated into military planning processes.
- Develop liability and compensation frameworks that address concerns about potential damages, taking note of Georgia's current implementation, where volunteer organizations bear considerable financial responsibilities, which highlights the need for sufficient funding mechanisms.

The Lithuanian experience demonstrates effective strategies for attracting and retaining civilian participants in defense structures. Adomavičius identifies several successful approaches implemented in the Komendantūros system. First, they appealed to patriotism and civic duty, with public messaging emphasizing that the system provides a concrete way for citizens to contribute to national defense without necessarily joining professional military or volunteer forces. This approach was supported by public opinion research showing that more than half (52 percent) of Lithuania's citizens would be willing to contribute to armed resistance during aggression against Lithuania (Adomavičius 2025).

Second, they created a tiered approach to involvement, allowing citizens to participate according to their capabilities, time availability, and commitment level—a flexibility crucial for attracting professionals who could not commit to more intensive military service. Third, they provided meaningful training that developed not only military skills but also emergency management capabilities useful in civilian contexts, making the training more immediately relevant. To maintain engagement during

peacetime, they organized regular training events that created a sense of community and purpose, integrated commandant units with the National Defense Volunteer Forces for training, emphasized the protection of participants' own communities and important local facilities, and created pathways for advancement and recognition within the system (Adomavičius 2025).

2.4. Promoting Inclusive National Resilience Strategies

Effective national resilience requires broad participation across demographic groups:

- Design structures that accommodate diverse forms of contribution, similar to Lithuania's differentiation between "kinetic riflemen" for armed resistance and "non-kinetic riflemen" for unarmed resistance, ensuring that citizens with different capabilities and preferences can participate.
- Create dedicated pathways for women's participation in defense activities, building on Estonia's Women's Voluntary Defence Organization model that involves women across different life stages—from students to working professionals to retirees.
- Develop youth engagement programs that cultivate values of volunteerism and civic responsibility from an early age, following the examples of Estonia's Home Daughters and Young Eagles organizations and Latvia's patriotic educational events for youth.
- Leverage veterans' organizations for intergenerational knowledge transfer, as seen in Latvia's strategic employment of veterans' groups to transmit military experience and values across generations.
- Incorporate historical commemoration into resilience strategies, recognizing how Latvia's integration of historical memory work strengthens national identity and promotes social cohesion, essential components of societal resilience against information warfare and hybrid threats.

These policy recommendations reflect the growing recognition that modern security challenges require whole-of-society responses that extend beyond traditional military domains. By enhancing institutional frameworks, investing in training, fostering public-private partnerships, and promoting inclusivity, nations can significantly strengthen their preparedness for the complex and multi-dimensional security threats of the contemporary era.

Based on Lithuania's experience, Adomavičius offers several recommendations for countries developing similar civil society integration into defense structures. He emphasizes building on existing institutions rather than creating entirely new ones, noting that Lithuania's success partly stemmed from merging and reorganizing existing military offices and services. Creating clear territorial alignment between military and civilian administrative structures facilitates coordination and local ownership. Developing flexible participation models that accommodate varying levels of citizen commitment maximizes societal involvement. He recommends focusing on realistic wartime tasks that civilians can perform with limited training,

such as protecting local infrastructure, supporting mobilization, and facilitating civil-military coordination. Adomavičius identifies the most transferable elements of the Lithuanian model as the regional commandant structure that bridges national military and local civilian authorities, the incorporation of existing civil society organizations, the dual peacetime/wartime function of commandant's offices, the focus on local defense and protection of familiar territory, and the graduated training system that builds capabilities over time (Adomavičius 2025).

Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

This study has examined the evolving role of civil society organizations in strengthening national preparedness against modern security threats, with particular focus on the Baltic States and Georgia. Several key findings emerge from this comparative analysis.

First, the legal and institutional frameworks enabling civil society participation in national security vary significantly across the examined countries. As summarized in Appendix A, while Estonia and Lithuania have developed robust, formalized mechanisms for integrating civil society into defense planning—exemplified by Estonia's cyber defense volunteer units and Lithuania's well-established Riflemen's Union—Latvia and Georgia demonstrate more nascent approaches, though with increasing recognition of civil society's potential contributions.

Second, successful civil-military cooperation models share common elements despite their contextual differences: clear legal mandates, dedicated funding streams, structured training programs, and institutional respect for civil society's autonomy and expertise. The Estonian Defence League (Kaitseliit) and Lithuania's integration of the Riflemen's Union into national defense planning illustrate how historical volunteer defense organizations can be effectively modernized to address contemporary hybrid threats while maintaining their civilian character.

Third, significant challenges persist across all examined contexts. These include: resource constraints limiting civil society's operational capacity; variable levels of trust between state security institutions and civil society organizations; legal ambiguities regarding civil society's role during crises; and difficulties in maintaining appropriate boundaries between state and civil society in security matters.

Fourth, the research reveals that civil society's most distinctive contributions to national resilience lie in areas where traditional security institutions typically demonstrate limitations: community-level engagement, rapid response flexibility, specialized expertise (particularly in emerging domains like cybersecurity), trust-building with vulnerable populations, and transnational cooperation networks that operate beyond state constraints.

The insights provided by Rimvydas Adomavičius, one of the early leaders of Lithuania's Komendantūros system, reinforce the importance of structured civil-military integration for enhancing national resilience. His firsthand account confirms that successful civil society engagement in defense requires clear organizational structures, realistic training focused on specific wartime tasks, and approaches that respect the primarily civilian nature of participants' lives and careers. The Lithuanian experience demonstrates that defense structures can effectively incorporate civilian capabilities when they provide meaningful participation opportunities tailored to various commitment levels and when they emphasize the protection of participants' own communities, making abstract national defense concepts personally relevant.

To summarize, the findings indicate that successful civil-military cooperation models share common institutional elements such as legal mandates, structured training programs, and mutual respect between government and civil society. At the same time, notable differences in implementation, political context, and resource availability shape the effectiveness of these models.
In cases like Lithuania and Estonia, civil society has become a structured and strategic partner in defense. Georgia's trajectory, while promising, remains constrained by evolving political dynamics and institutional ambiguities. The contribution of civil society in each context depends not only on volunteerism but also on enabling environments that preserve CSO autonomy and pluralism.
Given the shared legacy of Soviet-era institutions and similar security challenges, the policy models and civil-military frameworks analyzed here may be adapted to strengthen resilience and preparedness in other Eastern European and NATO partner states.
While this study highlights promising practices, it also cautions against uncritical optimism. Whole-of-society approaches must be designed to avoid the risk of instrumentalizing civil society or compromising its independence in the name of national security.

Reflection on the Transformative Role of Civil Society in Modern Security
The findings of this research point to a fundamental transformation in how security is conceptualized and practiced in the face of hybrid threats. As warfare increasingly targets societal cohesion, information environments, and civilian infrastructure rather than military targets alone, the boundary between civilian and military domains has eroded. This transformation necessitates rethinking traditional security approaches that rely exclusively on state institutions.

Civil society's emerging role in national security represents not merely an expansion of existing security paradigms but a qualitative shift toward more distributed, adaptive, and socially embedded security practices. This shift aligns with the theoretical frameworks outlined at the outset—resilience theory, human security, and whole-of-society approaches – which emphasize security as a co-produced outcome emerging from the interactions of multiple actors across social systems.

The Baltic and Georgian experiences demonstrate that civil society can transform security practices in several critical ways. First, by localizing security – bringing defense concepts and practices into communities and everyday spaces where hybrid threats often manifest, but traditional security institutions rarely reach. Second, by democratizing security, expanding participation beyond professional security actors to include diverse citizen perspectives and capabilities. Third, by humanizing security, recentering defense efforts on the protection of human values, social cohesion, and democratic processes rather than territorial integrity alone.

This transformative potential is perhaps most evident in the Baltic cyber defense models, which have pioneered approaches to digital resilience that fundamentally rely on volunteer expertise and civil society networks rather than traditional military structures. Similarly, Lithuania's approach to societal resilience through the Riflemen's Union demonstrates how historical civil defense traditions can be reimagined to address contemporary hybrid threats.

Nevertheless, this transformation brings legitimate concerns regarding the militarization of civil society, the potential erosion of civilian oversight, and risks to the independence that makes civil society effective. Successful models, as seen in Estonia and increasingly in Lithuania, maintain clear distinctions between military and civilian domains while creating structured interfaces for collaboration. These balanced approaches preserve civil society's distinctive character while harnessing its complementary capabilities for national resilience.

Call for Further Research and Cross-National Cooperation

The evolving nature of both hybrid threats and civil society responses underscores the need for continued research and cross-national learning. Several promising directions for future investigation emerge from this study:

- **Longitudinal assessment of effectiveness:** Research tracking the long-term impact of civil society security initiatives on national resilience metrics would significantly advance understanding of which approaches yield sustainable results. This should include developing standardized metrics for evaluating civil society's contributions to security outcomes.
- **Public perception and legitimacy:** Further study is needed regarding how citizens perceive civil society's security role and how these perceptions influence the legitimacy and effectiveness of whole-of-society defense approaches. This is particularly important in contexts like Georgia, where historical experiences may complicate public trust in security institutions.
- **Knowledge transfer mechanisms:** Research examining how security knowledge and practices transfer between state institutions and civil society organizations – and across national contexts – would enhance understanding of effective capacity-building approaches.
- **Digital dimensions of civil resilience:** The role of digital platforms, social media, and online communities in both amplifying vulnerabilities and

enabling civil society responses to hybrid threats represents a critical frontier for security research.

- **Ethical frameworks:** Developing robust ethical guidelines for civil-military cooperation that protect civil society's independence while enabling effective security partnerships remains an urgent research need.

Beyond research, this study underscores the value of cross-national cooperation platforms where civil society organizations, security practitioners, and policymakers can exchange experiences and best practices. The Baltic-Georgian context examined here represents a microcosm of wider challenges facing democracies globally. Establishing formal mechanisms for knowledge sharing, particularly between countries with advanced civil society security integration and those developing such approaches, could accelerate the dissemination of effective models.

In conclusion, as modern security threats increasingly target the societal fabric rather than conventional military objectives, civil society's role in national resilience will only grow in importance. The experiences examined in this study suggest that effective national preparedness increasingly depends not on the strength of military capabilities alone, but on the adaptive capacity of whole societies, with civil society organizations serving as critical connective tissue between citizens, communities, and formal security institutions. This evolution toward more inclusive security paradigms may ultimately prove the most effective response to the hybrid threats characterizing our contemporary security landscape.

Disclaimer

The views represented in this paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Government of Georgia and Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani University.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration on the Use of AI Tools

The author utilized OpenAI's ChatGPT and Anthropic's Claude to assist with language editing during the drafting of this manuscript. The author retains full responsibility for the content, analysis, and accuracy of the work.

References

Adomavičius, Rimvydas. 2025. *Written interview on the leadership of Lithuania's Komendantūros system.* Personal communication.

Aisi. n.d. *Mission and history.* https://aisi.org.ge/ .

Boin, Arjen, and Martin Lodge. 2016. "Designing resilient institutions for transboundary crisis management: a time for public administration ." *Special Issue: Symposium: Designing Resilient Institutions for Transboundary Crisis Management* 94 (2). https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12264.

Edwards, Michael. 2014. *Civil Society.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Estonian Defence League. n.d. *Kaitseliit.* https://www.kaitseliit.ee/en/edl.

European Commission. 2016. "JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL. Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats a European Union response." Brussels. https://tinyurl.com/mwubyt2s.

European Parliament. 2024. *European Parliament resolution of 25 April 2024 on attempts to reintroduce a foreign agent law in Georgia and its restrictions on civil society.* https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2024-0381_EN.html.

Freedom House. 2025. *Georgia.* https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-world/2025.

Hoffman, Frank G. 2007. "Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars." *Potomac Institute for Policy Studies.* https://tinyurl.com/mb53ct5t.

Jungwirth, Rainer, Hanna Smith, Etienne Willkomm, Jukka Savolainen, Marina Alonso Villota, Maxime Lebrun, Aleksi Aho, and Georgios Giannopoulos. 2023. "Hybrid Threats: A Comprehensive Resilience Ecosystem." Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. doi:10.2760/37899.

Kaska, Kadri, Anna-Maria Osula, and LTC Jan Stinissen. 2023. *The Cyber Defence Unit of the Estonian Defence League. Legal, Policy and Organisational Analysis.* Tallinn, Estonia: NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence. https://ccdcoe.org/uploads/2018/10/CDU_Analysis.pdf.

Lithuanian Armed Forces. n.d. *The Military Commandant's Board is conducting exercises in Klaipėda for the first time.* https://www.kariuomene.lt/kas-mes-esame/naujienos/karo-komendanturos-valdyba-pirma-karta-vykdo-pratybas-klaipedos-mieste/26478.

Lithuanian Riflemen's Union. n.d. *About the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union.* https://www.sauliusajunga.lt/en-puslapis/.

Loada, Augustin, and Ornella Moderan. 2015. "Civil Society Involvement in Security Sector Reform and Governance." In *Toolkit for Security Sector Reform and Governance in West Africa*. Geneva: DCAF. https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/ECOWAS_Toolkit_T6_EN.pdf.

LRT. 2024. *Lithuania sets up wartime civilian force – explainer.* https://tinyurl.com/473a5ez8.

___. 2022. *Lithuanian parliament expands activities of Riflemen's Union.* https://tinyurl.com/46m44a9d.

Mazniashvili Legion. n.d. *About us.* https://legionerebi.com/.

MoD, Ministry of Defence Republic of Latvia. n.d. *Cooperation with NGOs.* https://www.mod.gov.lv/en/nozares-politika/public-involvement/cooperation-ngos.

NATO. 2024. *Resilience, civil preparedness and Article 3.* https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132722.htm.

Norris, Fran H., Susan P. Stevens, Betty Pfefferbaum, Karen F. Wyche, and Rose L. Pfefferbaum. 2008. "Community Resilience as a Metaphor, Theory, Set of Capacities, and Strategy for Disaster Readiness." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 41 (1-2): 127-150. doi:10.1007/s10464-007-9156-6.

Parliament of Georgia. 2023. "Defense Code of Georgia." Law of Georgia.

Perry, Ronald W., and Michael K. Lindell. 2003. "Preparedness for Emergency Response: Guidelines for the Emergency Planning Process." *Disasters* 27 (4): 336-350. doi:10.1111/j.0361-3666.2003.00237.x.

Republic of Lithuania. 1997. "Law on the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union, No. VIII-397."

Riigikogu. 2013. *The Estonian Defence League Act.* https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/521032014005/consolide.

Salamon, Lester M. 1994. "The Rise of the Nonprofit Sector." *Foreign Affairs* 73 (4): 109–122. https://doi.org/10.2307/20046747.

Salamon, Lester M., and Helmut K. Anheier. 1997. *Defining the Nonprofit Sector: A Cross-national Analysis.* Manchester University Press.

Sedra, Mark. 2022. *A People-Centered Approach to Security.* New York, USA : One United Nations Plaza. https://www.undp.org/publications/people-centered-approach-security.

Walker, Brian, C.S. Holling, Stephen R. Carpenter, and Ann Kinzig. 2004. "Resilience, adaptability and transformability in social–ecological systems." *Ecology and Society* 9 (2): art. 5. http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol9/iss2/art5/.

Appendix A: Comparative Analysis of Civil Society Role in National Security Across Baltic States and Georgia

Key Element	Lithuania	Latvia	Estonia	Georgia
Primary Civil Society Organizations	- Lithuanian Riflemen's Union (LRU) - Komendantūros (wartime civilian forces)	- Zemessardze (National Guard) - Military/veterans associations - Research/policy organizations - Historical memory organizations	- Estonian Defence League (Kaitseliit) - Women's Voluntary Defence Organization (Naiskodukaitse) - Youth Organizations (Kodutütred & Noored Kotkad) - Cyber Defence Unit	- Mazniashvili Legion - Aisi
Legal Framework	- Law on the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union - 2024 Regulatory Framework for Komendantūros	- Formal partnership frameworks with MoD - Delegation agreements with CSOs	- Estonian Defence League Act - Legal person governed by public law	- 2023 Defense Code of Georgia - Chapter XVII on "volunteering in the defense sector"
Membership Size	- LRU: ~15,000 members (target: 50,000) - Komendantūros: target 10,000 citizens	- Multiple organizations with varied membership	- ~18,000 direct members - ~29,000 total volunteers with affiliated organizations	- Mazniashvili Legion: ~1,600 members - Aisi: trained over 1,000 volunteers
Governance Model	- LRU subordinated to government rather than defense minister - Advisory council for coordination	- Ministry of Defence maintains formalized partnerships with various NGOs	- Military principles while relying on "free will and self-initiative" - 16 districts corresponding to county boundaries	- LEPL "Volunteer" under Ministry of Defense oversight - Requires Ministry approval for volunteer organization status
Unique Innovations	- "Society-wide defense" approach - Clear distinctions between armed ("kinetic") and non-armed ("non-kinetic") roles	- Systematic integration of historical commemoration into resilience strategy - International networking for CSOs	- Cyber Defence Unit leveraging civilian IT expertise - Comprehensive affiliated organizations structure including women and youth	- Recently formalized total defense approach - New legal entity specifically for coordinating volunteer activities
Training Focus	- Structured citizenship and defense skills courses - Dedicated training center for riflemen	- Patriotic educational events - Intergenerational knowledge transfer	- Systematic tiered training (basic, professional, refresher, instructor preparation) - Specialized cyber defense training	- Military-camping courses - Training in topography, first aid, trench preparation, forest camping, etc.
Key Challenges	- Integration of volunteer capabilities into formal defense planning	- Ensuring sustainable funding for CSO activities - Balancing state guidance and CSO independence	- Maintaining balance between military functionality and civic voluntarism	- Evolving state-civil society relations - Legal ambiguity - Financial burden of liability requirements
Strategic Approach	- Lessons drawn from Ukraine's experience - "Very clear algorithm" for incorporating civilian capabilities into military planning	- Structured international partnerships - Strategic use of veterans' organizations for continuity	- Distributed territorial approach ensuring nationwide coverage - Digital society integration with traditional defense	- Total defense approach still in early implementation - Volunteer registry as "internal information" of the Ministry

Appendix B: Written interview on leadership of Lithuania's Komendantūros system

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Establishment and Evolution: As one of the early leaders of the Komendantūros system, could you describe the initial vision behind its establishment in 2024 and how the organization has evolved since then? What were the key challenges you faced during the implementation phase?

2. Civil-Military Integration: The Komendantūros represents an innovative approach to incorporating civilian capabilities into national defense. How would you characterize the relationship between these wartime civilian forces and traditional military structures? What mechanisms proved most effective in facilitating cooperation?

3. Volunteer Motivation and Retention: What strategies did you employ to attract and retain the civilian participants? How did you address the challenge of maintaining volunteer engagement during peacetime when the organization's wartime purpose might seem less immediate?

4. Training Methodology: Could you elaborate on the training approach developed for Komendantūros members? How did you balance the need for military-relevant skills with the reality that participants maintain primary civilian careers and can only dedicate limited time to training?

5. Lessons for Other Countries: Based on your experience leading the Komendantūros, what recommendations would you offer to other countries, particularly those like Georgia that are in earlier stages of developing civil society integration into defense structures? What elements of the Lithuanian model do you believe are most transferable to other contexts?

ANSWERS

❶ The establishment of the Komendantūros system in 2024 emerged from our need to strengthen Lithuania's total defense posture through better civil-military integration. Our initial vision was to create a structure that would serve dual purposes: ensuring effective mobilization in crisis and providing rear security operations if needed.

Lessons from Ukraine's experience were instrumental in shaping our approach. The war in Ukraine demonstrated clearly that effective territorial defense requires not only frontline military capabilities, but also robust rear-area security, protection of critical

infrastructure, and mobilization systems that can rapidly integrate civilian resources into the defense effort. We observed how Ukrainian cities and towns that established effective civil-military coordination were better able to resist and recover from attacks, evacuate civilians, and maintain essential services even under extreme pressure.

The foundation of our approach was reorganizing and merging the Military Commandant's Offices with the Military Conscription and Recruitment Service. This allowed us to create a coherent system where commandant's offices could function effectively both in peacetime and wartime.

The key challenges we faced during implementation included:
First, establishing clear lines of authority and coordination between military and civilian structures. We needed to ensure that municipal administrations and commandant's offices could work together seamlessly on mobilization plans and facility protection. Ukraine's experience showed that unclear chains of command between military and civilian authorities could lead to dangerous gaps in emergency response.

Second, attracting sufficient numbers of patriotic citizens willing to commit to defense preparations while maintaining their civilian lives and careers. We initially aimed for 2-5 thousand volunteers, and by March 2025, we had approximately 2.5 thousand citizens actively joining commandants, with 250 having completed the Basic Commandant Unit Soldier Course. The Ukrainian volunteer mobilization demonstrated both the potential and challenges of integrating civilian volunteers into defense structures during crisis.

Third, securing adequate resources for training and equipment. Each commandant's unit required approximately 12 thousand euros for new equipment alone, multiplied across the country's municipalities. Ukraine's experience underscored that even basic equipment can make a significant difference in effectiveness when properly distributed and utilized.

The system evolved from concept to reality through a regional structure consisting of a headquarters and 6 regional military commandants in Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda, Šiauliai, Panevėžys, and Alytus, each responsible for their city and district municipalities. This territorial approach was directly informed by Ukraine's experience with local defense councils and territorial defense units that proved most effective when aligned with existing administrative boundaries.

❷ The relationship between our wartime civilian forces and traditional military structures is best characterized as complementary, with clear delineation of responsibilities. The Komendantūros represents the military in municipalities while simultaneously serving as the conduit through which civilian capabilities and resources can be integrated into defense planning.

The most effective mechanisms for facilitating cooperation included:
First, establishing a clear organizational structure where regional commandants oversee municipal commandants, creating a chain of command that parallels civilian administrative divisions. This territorial alignment made coordination with local governments more intuitive.

Second, joint planning processes with municipal administrations for mobilization, protection of important facilities, and other contingency plans. These collaborative efforts forced both military and civilian authorities to understand each other's capabilities and constraints.

Third, involving the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union as a bridging organization between purely civilian volunteers and military personnel. The Riflemen brought both paramilitary capabilities and civilian connections that proved invaluable.

Finally, our regular training exercises involving both military personnel and civilian volunteers created shared experiences and mutual understanding that proved essential for building trust between the different components of our total defense approach.

❸ To attract and retain civilian participants, we employed several effective strategies:
First, we appealed to patriotism and civic duty. Our public messaging emphasized that the Komendantūros provides a concrete way for citizens to contribute to national defense without necessarily joining the professional military or volunteer forces. A public survey commissioned by the Ministry of National Defense confirmed that more than half (52 percent) of the country's citizens would be willing to contribute to armed resistance during aggression against Lithuania.

Second, we created a tiered approach to involvement, allowing citizens to participate according to their capabilities, time availability, and commitment level. This flexibility was crucial for attracting professionals who couldn't commit to more intensive military service.

Third, we provided meaningful training that developed not only military skills, but also emergency management capabilities useful in civilian contexts. This dual-use approach to skills development made the training more immediately relevant.

To maintain engagement during peacetime, we:

- Organized regular training events (3-10 days per year) that created a sense of community and purpose
- Integrated commandant units with the National Defense Volunteer Forces for training, exposing our members to professional military standards
- Emphasized the protection of their own communities and important local facilities, making the commitment personal and concrete
- Created pathways for advancement and recognition within the system.

❹ Our training approach for Komendantūros members was designed around several core principles:
First, we developed a Basic Commandant Unit Soldier Course that provided essential military knowledge and skills in a condensed format. This became our standardized initial training program, with 250 citizens completing it by early 2025 and plans for 1,000 more by the end of the year.

Second, we leveraged the expertise of the National Defense Volunteer Forces to deliver training, ensuring professional military standards while recognizing the part-time nature of our volunteers' commitment.

Third, we focused training on specific wartime tasks related to rear security, protection of important facilities, and support to mobilization rather than attempting to create fully combat-ready units. This mission-specific approach allowed for more efficient use of limited training time.

To balance military skills development with civilian career demands, we:

- Limited annual training requirements to 3-10 days per year
- Scheduled training to coincide with exercises involving other reserve components
- Tailored assignments based on individuals' civilian skills and qualifications
- Created a progressive training system that built competencies over time rather than requiring intensive initial training

We also established more accessible health and physical requirements compared to regular military service, opening participation to a broader segment of society who might otherwise be unable to contribute to defense efforts.

❺ Based on our experience with the Komendantūros, I would offer several recommendations to countries developing similar civil society integration into defense structures:
First, build on existing institutions rather than creating entirely new ones. Our success partly stemmed from merging and reorganizing the Military Commandant's Offices with the Military Conscription and Recruitment Service, which provided an institutional foundation and credibility.

Second, create clear territorial alignment between military and civilian administrative structures. Our regional and municipal commandant system parallels civilian governance, facilitating coordination and local ownership.

Third, develop flexible participation models that accommodate varying levels of citizen commitment. Not everyone can or should contribute in the same way, but creating diverse pathways to participation maximizes societal involvement.

Fourth, focus on realistic wartime tasks that civilians can perform with limited training. Protecting local infrastructure, supporting mobilization, and facilitating civil-military coordination are more appropriate than frontline combat roles.

Fifth, leverage public patriotism and willingness to contribute. Our survey showed that 52 percent of citizens would contribute to armed resistance and 61 percent to peaceful resistance. This latent willingness needs practical channels for expression.

The most transferable elements of the Lithuanian model include:

- The regional commandant structure that bridges national military and local civilian authorities
- The incorporation of existing civil society organizations (like our Riflemen's Union)
- The dual peacetime/wartime function of commandant's offices
- The focus on local defense and protection of familiar territory and facilities
- The graduated training system that builds capabilities over time

For Georgia specifically, I would emphasize the importance of creating a system that respects local traditions and existing civil-military relationships while providing a structured framework for civilian contributions to national resilience.