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Countering Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference: Lessons from the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency

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RESEARCH REPORT

Introduction

In an era of rapid technological developments and digital consumption, anyone can fall victim to the effects of disinformation and propaganda. Antagonistic foreign powers use a multitude of tools to influence citizens' opinions and will to defend. This is most notably seen through the Kremlin-led operation *Doppelgänger*, an influence operation by Russia with the aim of spreading disinformation. Between January and April 2024, the Russian Social Design Agency (SDA) operated within the information influence operation and disseminated around 40,000 pieces of content and 33.9 million comments on various social media channels around the world (Pamment & Tsursumia, 2025). In addition, SDA targeted far-right, nationalist, and Eurosceptic parties from countries such as Germany, France, Spain, Italy, and Poland, ahead of the European Parliament election with the aim of influencing parties "most likely to promote resumed cooperation with the Russian Federation" (Pamment & Tsursumia, 2025, p.81). To counter foreign disinformation and propaganda activities that aim to weaken a country's democratic principles as well as its defence and security domains, a strong psychological defence is essential.

During the Cold War, psychological defence became a widespread term in Sweden in the context of total defence. In broad terms, psychological defence refers to "the resilience of a country to foreign propaganda" (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024, p.7). In 2018, former Prime Minister Stefan Löfven announced the establishment of a new Psychological Defence Agency and in 2022, Myndigheten för psykologiskt försvar (MPF) was officially established (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024). Today, MPF focuses on identifying, analysing, preventing, and countering Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI). Its scope of activity is limited to information influence activities by foreign powers (Psychological Defence Agency, 2024a). Although psychological defence emerged in Sweden's total defence strategy during the Cold War, it is relevant to examine current operations due to emerging hybrid threats, rapid geopolitical changes, and the increased use of artificial intelligence in information dissemination. In addition, the World Economic Forum's Global Risk Report 2024 identified dis- and misinformation as the top short-term global risks (World Economic Forum, 2024).

This Research Report is part of a two-paper series focusing on Sweden's strategies in psychological defence as well as how the current Swedish initiatives may complement the European Union's (EU) efforts in countering information influence activities. It draws on relevant concepts and strategies to demonstrate in what ways MPF identifies, analyses, and provides support in efforts aimed at countering foreign malign information influences. First, a summary is presented of the origins of Sweden's anti-propaganda measures during the Second World War and the evolution of psychological defence since the 1950s. Second, recent policy developments and relevant concepts are presented along with an overview of MPF's structure, operational scope, and activities. Finally, the paper outlines the challenges and opportunities in Sweden's current strategy, especially in the context of balancing between protecting citizens' fundamental rights such as freedom of expression while effectively countering foreign malign influence activities.

2. The Concept and Evolution of Psychological Defence

2.1 *Historical Developments*

Sweden did not have a state information service focusing on war-related information during the First World War. This changed during the Second World War, when the State Information Board (Statens Informationsstyrelse – SIS) was established. The agency had the task of countering anti-Swedish propaganda through monitoring media and reviewing private letters, telegrams, and telephone calls. This approach was criticised for being overly interventionistic and promoting censorship. However, SIS also carried out successful operations such as measuring public opinion, conducting educational courses, and supporting grassroots organisation (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024). As the Cold War evolved, Sweden prepared for the possibility of war by developing an extensive total defence sector. Total defence not only consists of military defence, but also civilian defence to prepare the Swedish society in the case of war (Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, 2025). Thus, Sweden was committed to enhancing the preparedness of actors such as civilians, government agencies, private companies, and non-governmental organisations (Government Offices of Sweden, n.d.). In addition, Sweden continued to follow its non-aligned position during the aftermath of the Second World War and aimed to commit to neutrality in case of a new war (Farbøl et al., 2024).

In 1953, the Government published a report on a coordinated Swedish psychological defence strategy (Statens Offentliga Utredningar, 1953). The report emphasised the need to formally integrate psychological defence in Sweden's total defence strategy with two main aims: increase the public's awareness against foreign propaganda and willingness to defend Sweden in case of war (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024). In 1954, the Preparedness Board of Psychological Defence (Beredskapsnämnden för psykologiskt försvar - BN) became the official new authority in charge of planning for war-related operations as well as analysing public opinion, detecting foreign propaganda, and monitoring Swedish information activities. BN operated under the Swedish Ministry of Defence and consisted of civilian personnel with professional backgrounds in areas such as academia, politics, and journalism (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024). In addition, the Swedish government established the National Centre of Public Information (Statens Upplysningscentral – UC) and the National Defence Committee on Public Information (Totalförsvarets Upplysningsnämnd – TUN). UC consisted of 630 individuals responsible for overseeing and coordinating public information activities such as accurate information dissemination from the media about the Swedish military. TUN, on the other hand, encouraged information activities through books, brochures, and films (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024).

In 1985, BN, TUN, and UC merged and formed a new centralised authority; the Psychological Defence Board (Styrelsen för psykologiskt försvar - SPF). SPF led the tasks previously overseen by the previous agencies until the 1990s. An overall improved security situation in the world during the late 1980s led to a new civil defence structure in the 1990s: previous national defence resources were redirected to humanitarian efforts and international peacekeeping missions (Statens Offentliga Utredningar, 2021). In 2002, the Swedish Emergency Management Agency (Krisberedskapsmyndigheten – KBM) was established to complement SPF. In 2009, SPF and KBM were phased out and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (Myndigheten för

samhällsskydd och beredskap – MSB) took over most of the former agencies' responsibilities (Krisinformation, 2023).

2.2 Recent Policy Developments

After increased Russian disinformation campaigns in 2015, the EU experienced a heightened discussion on FIMI. This also influenced Sweden's approach as MSB was given a new mandate in 2016 to target inaccurate information that may harm Swedish interests (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024). One of the most well-known activities by MSB is the brochure *In Case of Crisis or War*. The brochure was distributed by MSB to every Swedish household in 2018 and 2024, containing useful advice and information on how civilians can prepare themselves in the case of a national crisis or war (Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, 2025). In 2018, the Government presented a Directive on the need to strengthen Sweden's total defence sector. The Directive underlined that a new agency for psychological defence should aim to strengthen Sweden's resilience in the event of an armed attack, but that such activities are equally as important during times of peace. Two areas of interest are to ensure that the population is willing to both defend their country in times of peace and to continue to have a will to resist in times of war (Dir. 2018:80).

On 18 March 2021, the Swedish government published a new Directive on the establishment of an agency responsible for Sweden's psychological defence. The Directive presented the appointment of a special investigator that would prepare and implement the formation of Myndigheten för psykologiskt försvar (MPF) (Dir. 2021:20). On 1 January 2022, MPF was officially established and took over MSB's former operations on countering foreign influence campaigns (Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap, 2025). It is important to note that MPF only has the mandate to advice and provide capacity building support to national actors such as other government agencies, civil society, and the media. Thus, the agency cannot intervene in individual cases in which one or more actors create or spread MDM as this may lead to political polarisation within Sweden (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024).

2.3 Terms, Operational Components, and Counter-Measure Capabilities

Following the conceptualisation by Pamment and Isaksson (2024), this paper introduces three groups of problems of relevance to psychological defence. The first group of problems refers to mis-, dis-, and malinformation (MDM) (see Table 1). In other words, MDM refers to the dissemination of false information – deliberately or inadvertently through the internet and via social media. Consequently, FIMI can be viewed as “an umbrella term for misinformation, disinformation, malinformation and other distortions” (Bjurling et al., 2024, p.5). Misinformation refers to false information that is not necessarily created or spread with the intention to cause harm. For instance, an individual spreading false information that they believe to be true without malign intentions is considered misinformation (Psychological Defence Agency, 2024b). Disinformation, on the other hand, refers to false information that is created and disseminated with the aim to negatively affect an individual, organisation, or country. Lastly, malinformation refers to “true or partially true information that is twisted or taken out of context to support false interpretations” (Pamment, 2022, p.15). MDM tend to lack a solid legal basis in many countries, including Sweden. Therefore, mis-, dis-, and malinformation could be viewed as “descriptors for specific types of

contents" (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024, p.24).

Table 1

Summary of Misinformation, Disinformation, and Malinformation

Term	Misinformation	Disinformation	Malinformation
Definition	Threat intelligence	False information created intentionally	False information distorted intentionally
Operational components	Truth/factualness of content Intent of content creator		
Counter-measure capabilities	Content correction capabilities Public resilience-building capabilities		

Source: Pamment and Isaksson (2024, p.24).

The second group of problems include more complex campaigns created by hostile actor(s) with the aim of influencing specific groups (see Table 2). Influence campaigns include multiple activities and/or operations where each activity or operation consists of their own individual ends to achieve the campaign's overall objective(s). Examples of objectives include influencing Swedish decision-makers, public opinion, decision-makers and/or public opinion in other countries where Swedish interests can be negatively affected. Information influence is mainly a Swedish term that refers to one or multiple activities that aim to "influence the perceptions, behaviour and decisions of target groups to the benefit of foreign powers" (Pamment et al., 2018, p.14). Information manipulation and influence operations refer to similar harmful activities that aim benefit the actor(s) spreading distorted or false information (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024).

Table 2

Summary of Information Influence, Information Manipulation, and Information Operations

Term	Information Influence	Information Manipulation	Information Operations
Definition	Illegitimate communication with the aim of influencing society to the benefit of hostile foreign actors	Coordinated efforts of false or distorted information to cause political harm	Coordinated efforts to manipulate the public debate for a strategic goal
Operational components	Cause harm to the benefit of hostile foreign actors Illegitimate communication techniques Negative interferences in public debate Covert coordination		
Counter-measure capabilities	Analysis and identification capabilities Strategic communication capabilities		

Source: Pamment and Isaksson (2024, p.25).

Lastly, the third group of problems builds on the above concepts in MDM and influence campaigns with two additional factors explicitly linked to foreign interference (see Table 3). In other words, this is the area of interest for MPF. The first factor is the assumption that a hostile foreign actor carries out the information influence activities. In addition, it is presumed that a foreign state is backing up these activities, even if the original creator is not a foreign state. The second factor is linked to communication activities: in foreign interference, information is not the only tool used by a foreign hostile actor. Other threats, such as espionage, are also considered (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024). Whereas MDM lacks a solid legal basis in most countries, foreign interference is subject to numerous defence and security strategies with strong legal support, such as “military and civilian intelligence, counterintelligence, protection of critical infrastructure, and bilateral relations with hostile states” (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024, p.27).

Table 3
Summary of Foreign Interference

Term	Foreign Interference
Definition	Hybrid influence methods such as disinformation and information influence conducted by a foreign hostile state actor
Operational components	Intent to cause harm to the benefit of the foreign hostile actor Multiple illegitimate communication techniques Negative interferences in public debates Covert coordination: deployment in coordination with other hybrid methods
Counter-measure capabilities	Intelligence: collecting, processing, and use capabilities Security Policy: actor-specific capabilities

Source: Pamment and Isaksson (2024, p.26).

3. The Swedish Psychological Defence Agency

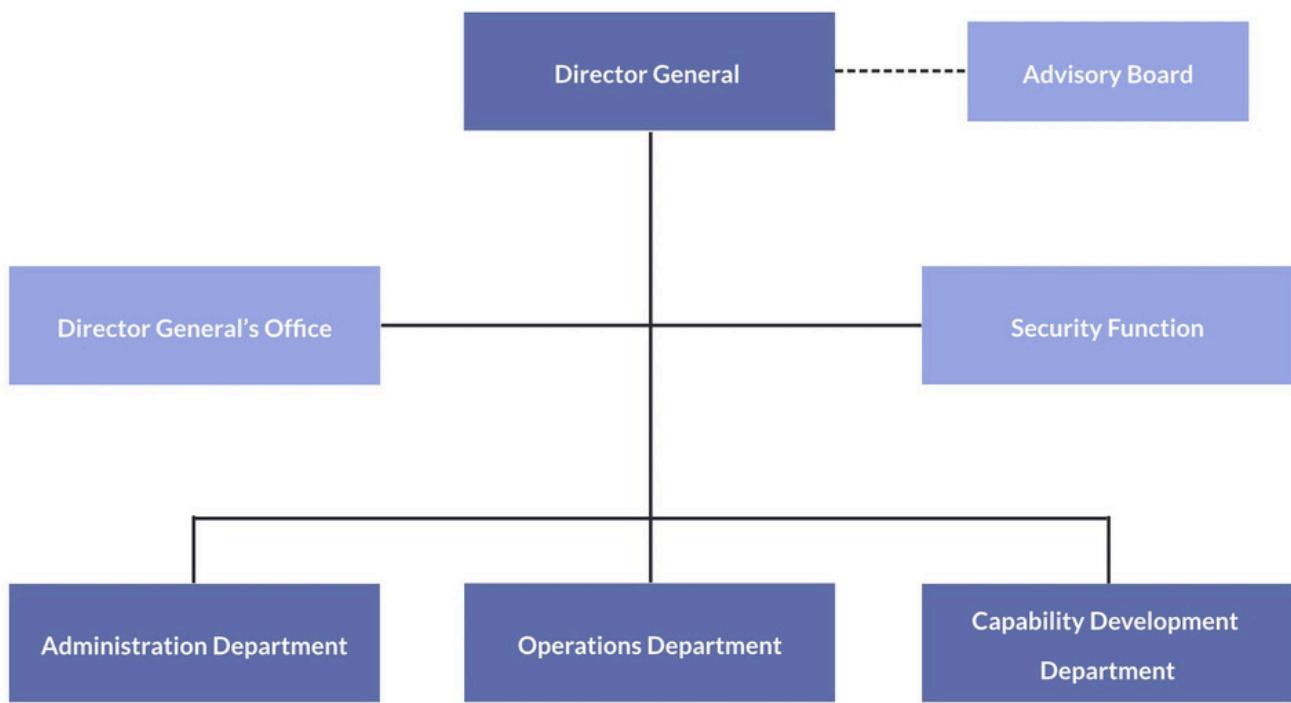
3.1 Mission, Structure, and Operational Scope

In terms of overall mission, MPF focuses on identifying and analysing information influence activities by foreign actors. The agency furthermore coordinates the actions taken by governmental agencies and other actors such as civil society, municipalities, and regions (Psychological Defence Agency, 2024a). In addition, MPF takes an active role in spreading information to the population on how to identify foreign influence activities. Thus, MPF’s role is not to overtake decision-making powers that are subject to other authorities. The agency works on threat assessment can therefore be defined as “threat intelligence based on OSINT and supplemented by secret intelligence” (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024, p.43).

The agency is led by the Director General who ensures that MPF’s operations are implemented in accordance with Swedish law and the obligations under the EU. The Advisory Board, appointed by the Swedish Government, is tasked with ensuring transparency and advising the Director General. In addition, MPF consists of three departments headed by a director who reports to the Director General (Psychological

Defence Agency, 2024a). The Operations Department oversees locating, investigating, and combatting foreign disinformation activities. Such efforts include producing analyses and reports on hostile foreign actors, “vulnerabilities” in society, and “countermeasures”. The Capability Development Department focuses on improving society’s *capacity* in psychological defence. The Administration Department supports MPF in budgeting, human resources, and strategic planning, among other things (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024). Lastly, the agency has a Director General’s Office and the protective Security Function. The former is headed by a Chef of Staff and the former by a Chief Security Officer, both of whom report to the Director General (Psychological Defence Agency, 2024a). Figure 1 provides a visualisation of MPF’s organisational structure.

Figure 1
Overview of MPF’s Organisational Structure

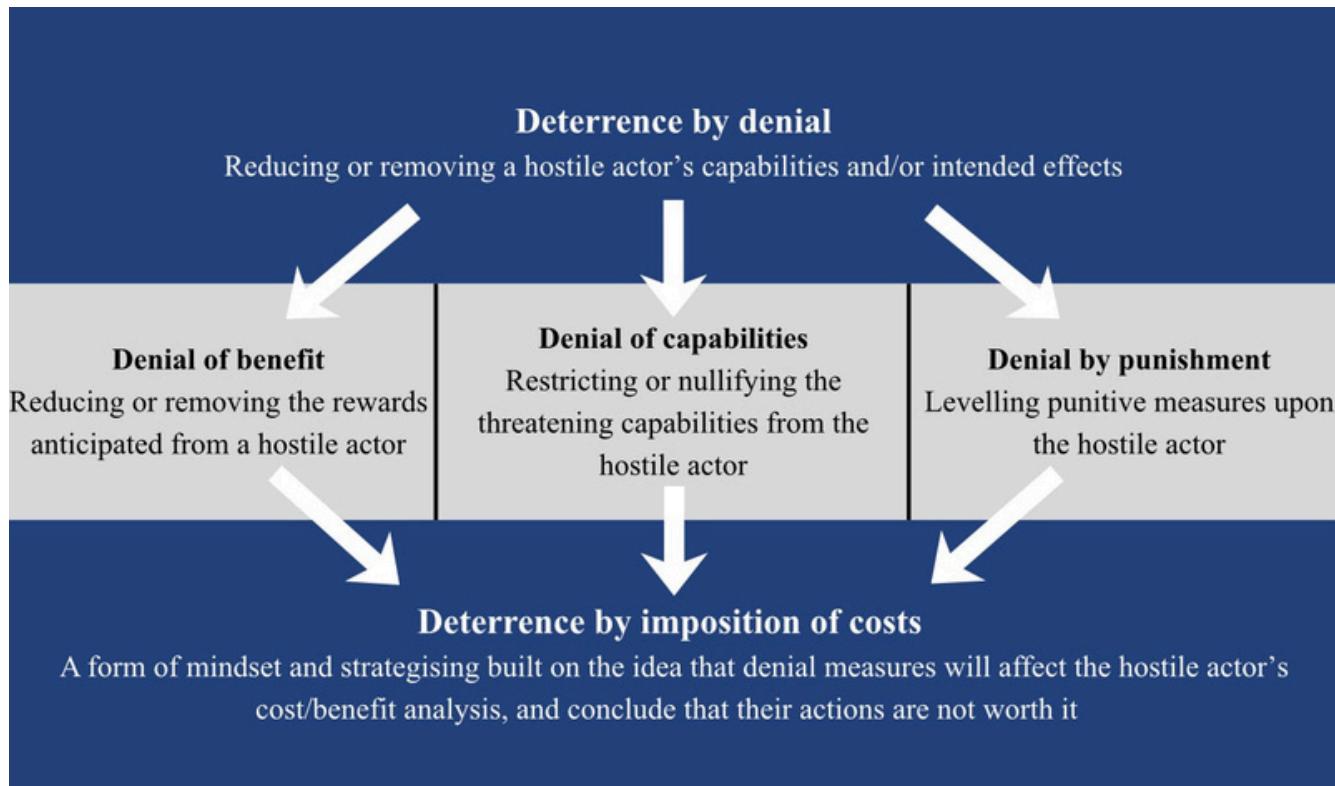


Source: Psychological Defence Agency (2024a).

Sweden’s current psychological defence strategy can be viewed through the lens of four key principles: (a) resilience; (b) threat intelligence; (c) deterrence; and (d) strategic communication. MPF is the main coordinator for these four principles, especially in terms of defining, conducting, and organising strategies that strengthen the principles within psychological defence. (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024). Resilience refers to efforts that enhance a population’s ability to resist harmful activities by antagonistic foreign powers. It emphasises the enhancement of knowledge and the population’s will to defend. This is particularly important since a country with a strong resilience is considered “a less attractive target” (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024, pp.39). The second principle, threat intelligence, focuses on increasing our understanding of the threat at hand. In psychological defence, this is mainly linked to “monitoring foreign propaganda and developing effective methods for analysing, investigating, and sharing insights about trends” (Pamment &

Isaksson, 2024, p.9). The third principle, deterrence, refers to measures that influence a hostile foreign actor's cost/benefit analysis. More specifically, the aim is to deter harmful information influence activities by sending out signals that such activities will be more costly than beneficial for the antagonistic foreign power. Deterrence involves political measures, such as diplomacy and international cooperation, as well as operational measures, such as security policy (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024). Figure 2 displays the key concepts and strategies within deterrence based on Pamment and Isaksson's (2024) conceptualisation.

Figure 2
Summary of Concepts and Strategies Within Deterrence

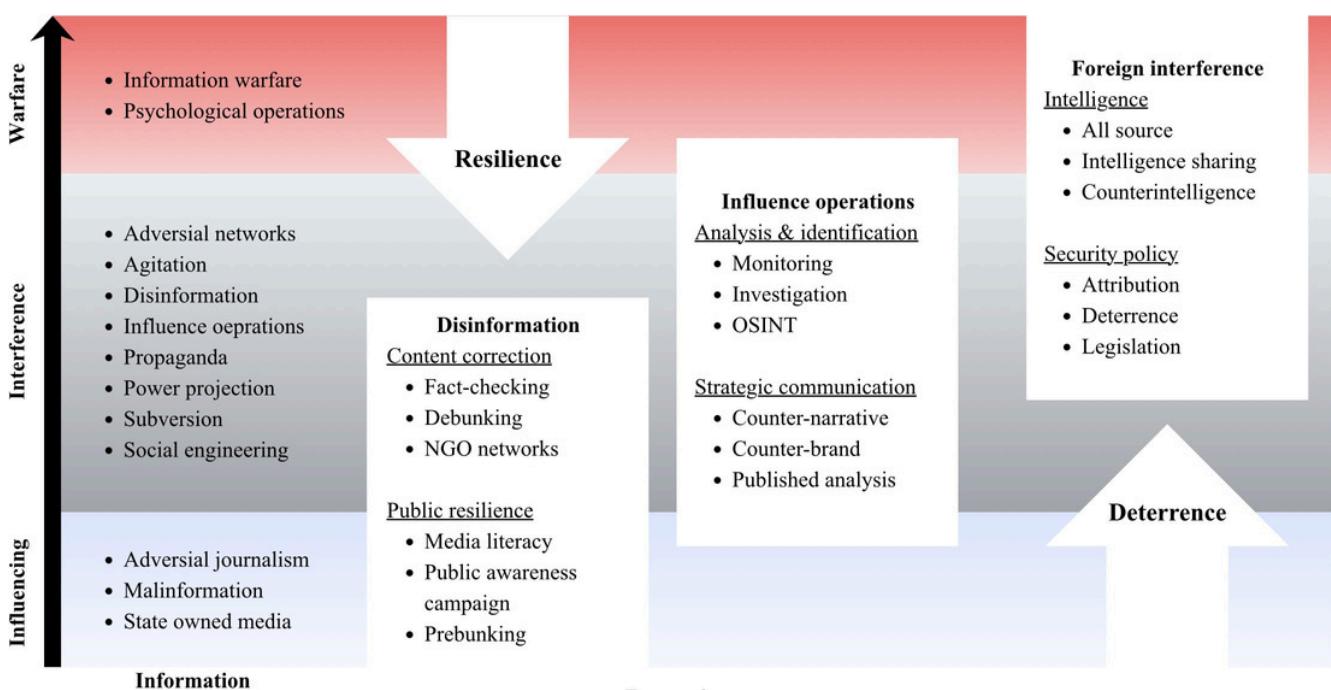


Source: Pamment & Isaksson (2024).

Lastly, strategic communication focuses on a country's ability to counter hostile foreign propaganda by minimising its impact. Thus, strategic communication fosters both resilience and deterrence (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024). Figure 3 displays the various information activities considered to be actions of warfare, interference, or influence campaigns as well as strategies within resilience and deterrence based on Pamment and Isaksson's (2024) conceptualisation.

Figure 3

Resilience and Deterrence Strategies in Information Activities



Source: Pamment & Isaksson (2024, p.38).

3.2 Activities and Research

In 2024, MPF conducted various national and international activities of relevance to psychological defence (see Table 4). The agency is also active in enhancing knowledge through research by producing analyses and reports on specific issue areas such as how information repetition can make individuals susceptible to disinformation through the illusory truth effect, Russia's propaganda machinery, and citizens' perceptions of current threats against Sweden (Edevald & Österberg, 2025; Pamment & Tsurtsumia, 2025; Wildmalm & Persson, 2024). Since the establishment of MPF, there have been numerous information influence activities against the country. One of the most notable examples was a large-scale influence campaign that began in late 2021, targeting the Swedish social services. The campaign argued that Sweden is governed by fascists and spread false claims that the social services abducted children, particularly Muslim children, and placed them in Swedish Christian homes where they were, among other things, forced to consume alcohol as part of an assimilation strategy (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024). Initially, most of the false narratives were spread within Sweden, but the news went viral when Moustafa El-Sharqawy, an influential social media content creator originally from Egypt, started to spread the disinformation on various social media platforms (Ranstorp & Ahlerup, 2023). The campaign led to "widespread mistrust among Muslims both in and outside of Sweden" (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024, p.32). In the end, MPF was able to seize control of the narrative by going public and talking about the active threat of the influence campaign and provide people with the correct information. This action led to a decrease in the dissemination of false claims (Chandler Institute of Governance, 2024). Other influence campaigns have aimed to negatively influence Sweden's accession to NATO and multiple campaigns have led to a heightened terrorist threat level (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024).

Table 4*Summary of Activities by the Psychological Defence Agency in 2024*

Date	Activity
7-9 January 2024	<p>Folk och Försvar annual meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MPF's Director General, Magnus Hjort, attended and spoke at an annual national conference by Folk och Försvar, a non-profit organisation consisting of over 130 member organisations. Aim: promote debate and spread knowledge about Swedish and international crisis preparedness, total defence, and security policy.
19-20 March 2024	<p>Nordic School Leader Congress</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MPF held a speech to 400 principals and school leaders. Aim: share knowledge about the educational system's role in psychological defence.
16 April 2024	<p>Doggerland, Germany</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> International exercise with participants from 13 countries. Aim: training in identifying and countering malign information influence.
3 June 2024	<p>National information campaign</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Don’t get fooled” campaign. Aim: increase public awareness, knowledge and resilience against malign information influence ahead of the European Parliament elections.
30 August 2024	<p>Globsec Forum, Prague</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meeting with international partners such as researchers and government representatives. Aim: discuss AI and social media as well as supporting Ukraine in strategic communication.
23-24 September 2024	<p>Research conference</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MPF and the Research Institute for Psychological Defence arranged a conference at Lund University. Aim: promote research on psychological defence.
24-25 September 2024	<p>International conference, New York</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MPF and the American Global Engagement Center (GEC) organised a conference in connection with the UN summit in New York. Aim: spread knowledge about disinformation in video games.

3-6 October 2024	<p>Lecture, Bratislava</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lecture for Slovakian youths. • Aim: increase knowledge on source criticism and Russian narratives.
29 November 2024	<p>Doggerland, Estonia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International exercise with participants from Estonian agencies. • Aim: training in identifying and countering malign information influence.

Source: Myndigheten för psykologiskt försvar (2025, pp.8-9).

4. Discussion: Challenges and Opportunities

Sweden's extensive experience and current efforts in psychological defence can contribute to the EU in terms of countering MDM in information influence activities. In particular, the concepts of resilience and deterrence are highly relevant for various reasons. First, education in source criticism and fact-checking strategies decreases the risks of citizens spreading information they genuinely believe to be true, but that could be disinformation created by a foreign actor. Cooperation with non-governmental actors play a crucial part in this since such actors can reach out to specific groups that may be especially vulnerable to disinformation. For example, political activists with limited knowledge of disinformation and source criticism will be an easier target for an antagonistic foreign actor's influence campaign. Second, strong resilience leads to more effective deterrence strategies: a hostile foreign actor is less likely to target a country if they are aware of the public's knowledge of information influence campaigns and foreign interference. Lastly, continuous monitoring, OSINT, and investigations of the information landscape allows a country to map trends which in turn provides a basis for future false narratives that could possibly be created.

One key challenge in psychological defence is the definition of MPF's mandate to perform in-depth studies of the domestic information environment. For example, certain actors spreading disinformation may play a double role in the sense that they are considered both "domestic" and "external". Such actors could operate in Sweden whilst at the same time being part of foreign networks. As a consequence, MPF does not have the ability to properly study the domestic information environment (Pamment & Isaksson, 2024). Considering this challenge, it is crucial to continue supporting the cooperation between actors that operate across multiple levels with their own specialisation. The Security Police (SÄPO) oversees counterterrorism through intelligence work and cooperation with both national and international actors (Säkerhetspolisen, 2025). By continuously assessing the possibility for actors such as SÄPO to contribute with new insights to MPF on hostile actors that play a double role, today's psychological defence will be further strengthened. Such efforts should aim to close current intelligence gaps. This is not an easy matter: as MPF continue to evolve and integrate itself further into the Swedish intelligence landscape, new hybrid threats adapt to the current structure. This calls for coordinated cooperations, whereby multiple actors work together to defend the country against FIMI.

The second key challenge in psychological defence is to successfully counter disinformation while upholding democratic values such as freedom of speech. According to MPF's Deputy Head, Mikael Tofvesson, the agency does not interfere with the fundamental rights of Swedish citizens if they spread disinformation created by a foreign actor or with identifying individuals that spread untrue information anonymously online. Instead, the key strategy is to search for liabilities such as specific topics that create polarisation. The only context in which the MPF treat an actor as a threat is when that same actor is of a foreign entity that is active in any untrue information dissemination that could undermine Sweden's interests, national security, or sovereignty (Chandler Institute of Governance, 2024).

5. Conclusion

As the first part of a two-paper series, this paper has demonstrated the relevance of Sweden's efforts in psychological defence in the context of countering foreign information influence campaigns. By emphasising resilience, threat intelligence, deterrence, and strategic communication, MPF has the mandate to define, conduct, and organise strategies that strengthen Sweden's psychological defence. In addition, the agency's focus on knowledge sharing and international exercises on malign information influence allows MPF to effectively share current efforts with other countries. Despite challenges such as the lack of mandate to perform in-depth studies on the domestic information environment, the future for psychological defence is promising if close cooperations remain between MPF and other government agencies, civil society, and the media. Such cooperations allow for effective counter operations against societal actors with both domestic and foreign traits. The Swedish approach moves away from strategies that only rely on punishment towards foreign actors, but rather reinforces societal resilience through continuous fact-checking, knowledge sharing, and transparent dialogues between other government agencies, civil society, and the media. MPF's current operations should be applied to a broader European context: the combination of resilience and deterrence activities, along with a strong support for fundamental rights, demonstrate that psychological defence activities do not have to be conducted at the expense of democratic rights such as freedom of expression.

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