



Civilian preparedness for deterrence and defense is Europe's Achilles Heel

Unarmed civilian-based defense preparedness is a cost-effective tool, favoring sustainability in defense and security autonomy. Strong societal cohesion and social trust are pre-requisites for both its effectiveness and for societal resilience more broadly.

Key Takeaways

- Unarmed civilian-based defense is a weak link in Europe's defense, leaving a key vulnerability for the Kremlin to continue to exploit.
- Understanding, mainstreaming, and resourcing nonmilitary power dynamics, while not sufficient alone, are the defining strategy question of the 21st century as a strategic counter to hybrid attacks.
- Institutional frameworks are insufficient for explaining today's conflictualities and the full range of strategies available to counter them. UCBD frameworks fill in many of the gaps.
- More of a population will mobilize when the barriers to their entry into defense are lifted; they need dedicated space to grow their collective intelligence, as well as state endorsement for their potential actions.
- Europe's prosperity depends on learning from Ukraine's unarmed defenders as much as from its armed forces.

Summary

Civilian preparedness for deterrence and defense is Europe's Achilles heel. Current strategies of emergency preparedness seek to instruct civilian populations on how to survive a hypothetical crisis or get out of the way. Yet an asset-focused mindset to civilian preparedness would appear better suited to modern wartime realities. As observed in Ukraine today and Europe's past, ordinary people inevitably step up to do extraordinary things to protect their freedom, human dignity, and security—even without weapons or military leadership. This phenomenon, studied since the 1960s by military theorists and political scientists, is known as unarmed civilian-based defense (UCBD). Conditioned by peacetime thinking and low levels of social trust and societal cohesion—problems in their own right—some European institutions are still unsure whether they can or even should do something about this human potential for defense. This brief sheds light on this question.

Theory of change

UCBD modifies the terms on which conflict happens, making it essential in asymmetrical conflict. Unarmed means of resistance—strikes, noncooperation, exposing supply chains, naming & shaming collaborators, countering disinformation, occupying public space and discourse, civilian-led protection, and hundreds of other tactics—are complementary to institutional defense, have few barriers to entry, are dispersed and decentralized, and can be taught to, and waged by, members of society of any age or physical condition. If governments and regional bodies can find some way to tap into UCBD's potential, then:

- more of their populations are stirred from apathy and mobilized toward defense;
- defense planning is more robust and inclusive;
- wartime scenarios are more realistic;
- populations dispersed throughout a country (and not just national armies) can act promptly to counter decentralized attacks;
- militaries and humanitarian agencies are less strained; and
- national defense becomes authentically comprehensive.

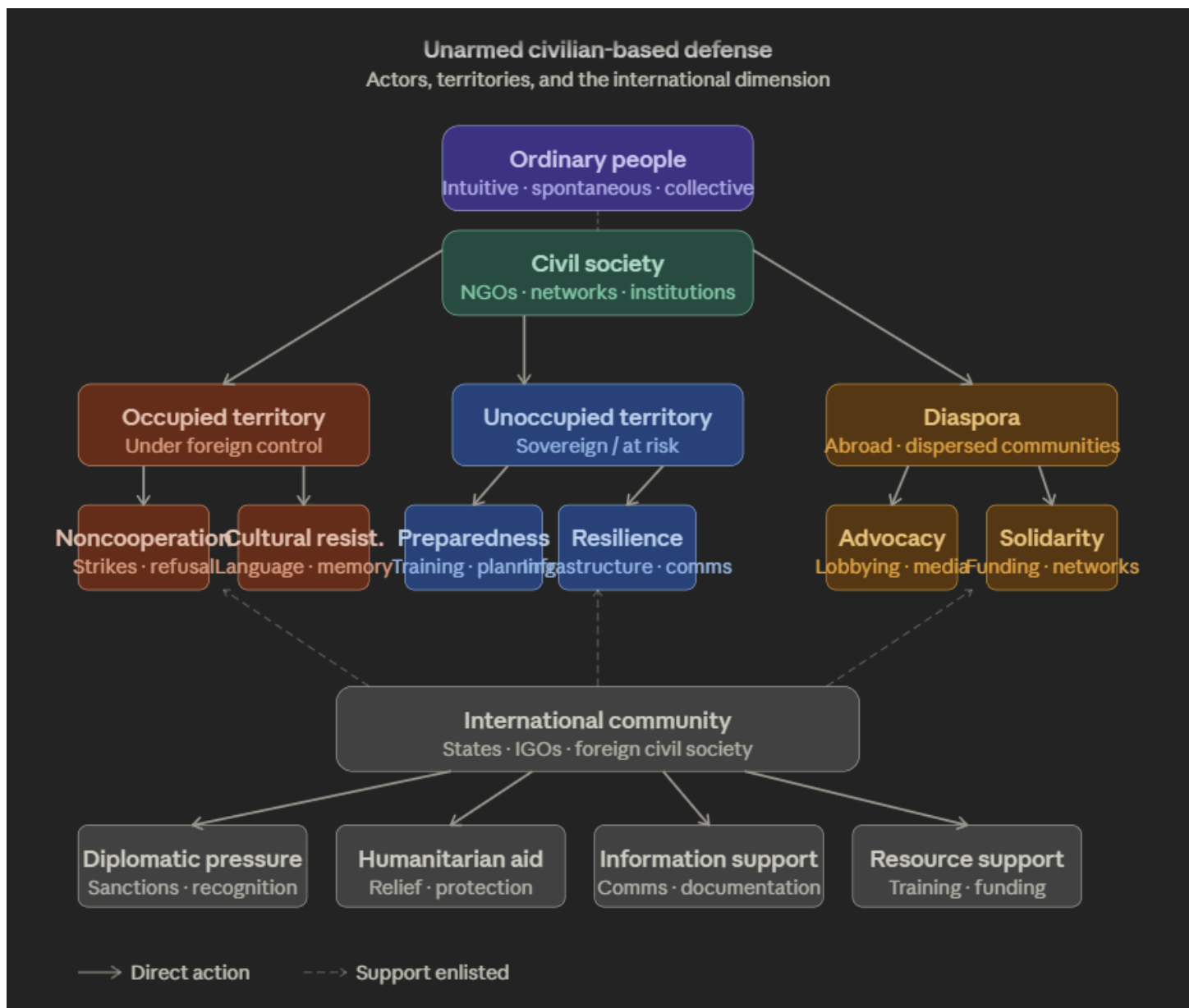
So long as those willing to defend their country have only a choice between armed conflict and the idea of unarmed resistance, they have in reality no choice at all. Organization, research, benchmarking, and adequate preparation are decisive factors in any form of strategic competition, armed or not. This is where institutions can play a role.

Nonmilitary power is nevertheless more power

UCBD primarily aims to disrupt aggressors' goals and their enablers' ability to support them. It also aims to protect attacked communities and strengthen societal resilience more

broadly. Although it is not UCBD's defining characteristic, UCBD does not require arms or military command. It provides populations with an additional path to resisting subjugation and contributing to national defense. UCBD aims to deny legitimacy and support to aggressors (exercising "no" power or paralyzation), while also helping to maintain democratic systems, a population's moral determination, and the continued future prosperity of nations (exercising "yes" power) in parallel with military might.

Although not a panacea, and perhaps not even ideal, UCBD is better than public apathy. It is adaptive, cost-effective, decentralized, scalable, and proposes many low-risk options for participating in defense. Intuitively, often spontaneously, ordinary people and civil society lead UCBD actions in occupied or unoccupied territories, or within diaspora, at times enlisting the participation or support of the international community (see Figure 1).



Relevant UCBD tactics include, among hundreds of other examples:

- Exposing aggressor supply chains and disinformation networks;
- Protecting the aggressed society's cultural heritage and collective memory;

- Organizing mutual aid and local governance continuity;
- Simple sabotage;
- Social and economic non-cooperation
- Parallel institution-building in local governance;
- Coordinated information campaigns that counter false narratives.

By virtue of their end goals, and not always intentionally, UCBD actions complement institution-led defense. They reduce strain on militaries, governments, and humanitarian organizations alike. Governments cannot content themselves with simply remaining open to possible UCBD after crisis erupts. It may not "go boom", but UCBD still wields power--a more diffuse kind. Resilient governments never leave any kind of power on the table.

Above all, UCBD brings a theoretical frame for understanding the power dynamics of asymmetrical conflict, as well as how to counter hybrid attacks, themselves decentralized and not kinetic in nature. Institutions may also benefit directly from learning these frames and mainstreaming them in strategic planning.

Challenges for examining UCBD potential

Default responses to the Russian threat--armed mobilization, encouraging patriotism in youth, crisis preparedness--are necessary but insufficient measures. When it comes to examining populations' actions, prevailing attitudes are rather a "wait-and-see" mentality. More than accessory, understanding, mainstreaming, and resourcing nonmilitary power dynamics across Europe are in fact the defining strategy question of the 21st century. They are a strategic counter to hybrid war.

Ironically, analysts, politicians, and military officials already recognize nonmilitary power when they speak of Russian hybrid attacks against Europe. The unwillingness to recognize the notion of nonmilitary power in the form of UCBD to defend European prosperity shows at best a double standard, and at worst, a sort of fatalism. Applying self-limiting frames, institutions tend to valorize civilians who emulate the military, overlooking the nonviolent strategies that actually shape conflict outcomes, just through more subtle, off-the-radar means.

This, coupled with a perfectly natural disposition for arms-based strategies in defense circles, kills potential for examining UCBD in its embryo, much to the Kremlin's liking. Yet what occupied populations understand, and aggressed governments usually realize too late, is that unarmed people (indeed the vast majority of populations) are critical in the months prior, as well as in the first hours and days of an aggression. Leaving their fate to spontaneity is not a winning strategy.

A second layer of challenges counterintuitively emerges in humanitarian circles. The absence of shared international definitions or humanitarian norms for UCBD paradoxically leaves civilian populations underprepared and unprotected—even appears to dissuade collective action in crisis. The emphasis on institutions protecting civilians is critical but stops short of recognizing human agency capable of contributing directly to defense. The vacuum this creates only benefits aggressors, whose advances rely on confusion, fear, and paralysis among populations—especially in the early phases of conflict.

Historical and analytical basis

The roots of UCBD lay in civil resistance studies, documented since the 1960s, but also popularized earlier by John Steinbeck, in his 1942 fictional novel, The Moon is Down, translated and printed clandestinely en masse across occupied Europe. When unarmed populations and civil society organize specifically to deter, repel, or transcend foreign domination, their collective action obtains the UCBD classification. Europe has deep precedents: the unarmed components of resistances in Norway, France, Denmark, the Netherlands, and other countries during World War II helped protect Jewish lives, infrastructure, the economy, and national legitimacy. Later episodes took place in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the Baltic states against Soviet domination.

In these episodes of UCBD, power was derived from leverage and legitimacy—not moral principle but strategic logic. It operated on conflict dynamics in ways that stacked the odds a little more against an aggressors' goals and/or in favor of the aggressed society.

Solutions and good news

Power is something that is wielded. Indeed, armed forces do not have the monopoly on power—and this is some very rare good news for European policymakers right now. Also welcome news is the fact that the timeline of basic UCBD preparedness is not a matter of years but a matter of weeks or months—potentially contributing to deterrence (but not for much longer). Further, associated budgets are in the millions of euros Europe-wide, not hundreds of millions per country.

At the policy level, regional and national governing bodies would benefit from:

1. Recognizing civilian power as strategic power. Expand defense planning frameworks beyond kinetic and soft power to include UCBD—the capacity of organized and trained populations to resist aggression in sustainable, impactful ways and en masse.
2. Integrating UCBD into comprehensive defense planning. National and EU strategies should include UCBD readiness alongside military, emergency preparedness, and civil-protection components, aligning with shared values of democracy and human rights.

3. Investing in preparedness, not spontaneity. Support and help scale civil society's nascent UCBD initiatives: MOOCs, working groups, trainings, scenario planning, publications, research, conferences, seminars, and more.
4. Building evidence and norms. Establish definitions and indicators that codify UCBD within European and NATO resilience frameworks. Update articles and other international texts to reduce antagonism against UCBD.

European civil society has already begun to act, publishing UCBD guides, developing trainings, academic seminars, and more. Therefore, more good news is that, instead of needing to take on leadership of UCBD preparedness, institutions can let civil society actors lead, providing them with platforms and resources. However, social trust and societal cohesion are pre-requisites for cross-sector cooperation in this field.

The ONM Initiative

The Organization for Nonviolent Movements (ONM)—a France-based NGO—has launched a European roadmap to formalize UCBD preparedness. Drawing lessons from Ukraine and Europe's own history, ONM coordinates cross-sector collaboration between academia, governments, militaries, the private sector, and grassroots networks.

Ongoing and planned actions (2025–2031):

- Map organizations in Europe and its neighborhoods engaged in UCBD preparedness activities;
- Build an international consortium to co-create new UCBD preparedness activities;
- Conduct research, training, and benchmarking pilots in Ukraine, across Europe and Taiwan;
- Recover and popularize historical European UCBD cases;
- Provide policy advice to the EU, NATO, and national ministries on integrating UCBD into resilience strategies;
- Convene cross-sector seminars and conferences linking defense, humanitarian, academic, civil society, and media actors;
- Develop a repertoire of civil society-led initiatives and academic research, which contribute to UCBD preparedness and can be supported and scaled for accelerated readiness.

“Free men cannot start a war, but once it is started, they can fight on in defeat. Herd men, followers of a leader, cannot do that, and so it is always the herd men who win battles and the free men who win wars.”

The Moon is Down (1942), John Steinbeck

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