

Peer-Reviewed Article

Continuity over change, institutions over innovations, organised over organic: the scales and phases of Nordic resilience

Johanna Ketola, Project Researcher, University of Turku

Abstract

This study approaches Nordic resilience as a continuum and a multi-level process exploring the resilience perceptions across the region. Through a mixed-methods approach combining earlier literature and a unique set of interviews collected in the Nordic countries and regions in 2021–2022, the study develops a heuristic model of Nordic resilience, which is composed of three overlapping phases: resistance, endurance, and transformation. While the study does not attempt to evaluate whether resilience to certain dangers exists either spatially or temporally, it builds a catalogue of perceived resilience elements specific to the Nordics. The research confirms that despite terminological differences, resilience perceptions across the Nordics are aligned. The identified resilience factors appear mostly at the national and international levels emphasising the state responsibility and centrality in resilience production. Simultaneously, the interviewees give little attention to the micro-level responsibility for resilience, namely the role of individuals and communities. This leads to a Nordic resilience paradox where problems with responsibility and governability of resilience are practically absent but the strengths of a resilience approach are not fully recognised as attention to bottom-up agility, innovation, and organic transformation is lacking.

Keywords

Resilience, societal security, comprehensive security, Nordic, crisis

Introduction

Studies on resilience have blossomed as a result of the increasing frequency and intensity of real-life events and hazards, one such example being the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Over the past two decades, resilience has become a central concept for scholars to assess how communities, organisations, and nation-states respond to crises and recover from them (Mikkola et al., 2018, p. 85). Resilience thinking has also clearly broken through in the Nordic region, both in terms of research and policies. As Spruds and Vignuzova (2018, pp. 7-8) maintain, resilience is currently at the core of the evolving societal security community, not only in the Nordics, but also across the wider Baltic region.

Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic from early 2020 to March 2023, combined with Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine, launched in February 2022, have triggered Nordic responses in terms of resilience politics, policies, and practices. Under various auspices, initiatives aimed at making Nordic institutions more *resilient* have now begun. For example, the joint statement from the Nordic Prime Ministers on deepening cooperation in the field of security of supply and preparedness in November 2021 declared:

Our Nordic welfare societies provide a stable foundation to meet crises situations and unexpected circumstances. Well-functioning institutions, open and transparent structures and high levels of education and equality all feed in to societal resilience, flexibility, and the capability to repel, respond to and bounce back from crisis. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2021)

Indeed, the Nordics share a solid common base for building their cooperation as the societies in the region strongly resemble each other economically, culturally, and politically. They all also emphasise transparency and good governance as the cornerstones of their political systems. Although it is fairly easy to generalise all things Nordic, simultaneously downplaying any differences, previous research has demonstrated that the Nordic approach to security is internationally distinctive, characterised by general public acceptance and inclusiveness (Larsson and Rhinard, 2020b, p. 227). The Nordics further share a similar *societal security* approach, focusing on protecting the 'core values of a society from a wide range of intentional and unintentional threats', and they also promote horizontal and cross-sectoral governance models as well as wide range of public and private responses that have been developed to respond to threats (Larsson and Rhinard, 2020a, p. 5).

The Nordic societal security model offers a holistic approach to security whereby the state and society pool 'their efforts to build resilient Nordic societies' (Spruds and Vignuzova, 2018, pp. 7-8; see also Aaltola and Juntunen, 2018, p. 26). Societal security and the closely related term *societal resilience* are both associated with Nordic values such as democracy, good governance, and transparency (Larsson and Rhinard, 2020a, p. 5; Spruds and Vignuzova, 2018, pp. 7-8). Along with many other shared features, these convergences and similarities create opportunities for improving Nordic cooperation and joint action.

Resilience in the Nordic context has been particularly studied in the realms of the economy (e.g., Giacometti et al., 2018; Gylfason et al., 2010) as well as disaster risk reduction (e.g., Henriksen et al., 2018; van Well, 2018; Rapeli et al., 2018). One of the first attempts to explore whether a Nordic model exists in the security policy domain was conducted by Christer Pursiainen (2018). Pursiainen (ibid., 632) assessed Nordic critical infrastructure resilience, arguing that there is indeed a Nordic model being developed, the essential feature of which is emphasis on policies 'securing vital societal functions rather than the individual infrastructures that support these functions'.

Resilience has also been explored in Nordic defense studies where it has been argued that societal

resilience can almost never be detached from territorial defense (Spruds and Vignuzova, 2018; Wither, 2020). Regarding individual countries and their security arrangements, Finland has been expressly explored (e.g., Aaltola and Juntunen, 2018, Hyvönen and Juntunen, 2020) for its perceived uniqueness, characterised as a blend of top-down territorial defense and bottom-up societal resilience (Aaltola and Juntunen, 2018, pp. 27-28). Usually, comparative studies include three of the Nordic countries, typically Norway and Sweden as well as either Denmark or Finland, omitting Iceland and self-rule regions.

The research at hand analyses the differences and similarities between Nordic resilience perceptions by utilising varied *resilience frames*. Not only does this study add to the existing body of knowledge regarding Nordic resilience, but it also assesses what the methodological and conceptual implications of the resulting understanding of Nordic resilience(s) are. The unique empirical data of this study consists of interviews with experts (n=88), mainly civil servants, from all the Nordic countries as well as self-rule regions. The research offers a holistic, processual model of Nordic resilience, introducing the perceived resilience elements specific to the Nordics. What it does *not* attempt to do is to evaluate whether resilience to certain dangers exists either spatially or temporally.

The main finding is that while conceptual use varies, resilience perceptions in the Nordics are closely aligned due to close interactions across the regions at various societal levels. The Nordics offer a blend of organised and robust understandings on the concept, emphasising the institutional ability to bounce back after a crisis. While the approach requires bottom-up legitimacy, it nonetheless relies on top-down capacities and thus pays scant attention to individual and community levels. The study argues that the strength of this approach is the small risk of security becoming detached from leaders. The weakness, however, is that resilience practices are not yet geared towards transformational forward-looking capacities, especially at the micro level.

This article proceeds as follows. The following section discusses the concept of resilience and places it within current security studies. Then the article introduces the methods used in the empirical section, which builds a consolidated model of Nordic resilience by employing a temporal resilience model. The final section restates the main findings and concludes the study.

Conceptual discussion on resilience

Resilience can be anything, at least (but not limited to) a feature, a concept, an ideal, a practice or a policy. As a subject of academic studies, its origins are in different fields such as *ecology*, *engineering*, *psychology*, and *disaster management* studies. Resilience unites different walks of life, academic disciplines, policies and politics. Unsurprisingly, there is thus no single definition of resilience and, in fact, research is extremely widespread. On one hand, the resulting diversity alludes to its conceptual vagueness and ambiguity while on the other, diversity can also be seen as a strength as it allows for different understandings and approaches.

Chandler and Coaffee (2017) have previously explained how the understanding of resilience has developed in at least three phases. The first 'generation', named the *homeostatic* approach, endorsed recovery abilities and the readiness of (eco)systems to return to an ideal state of balance or equilibrium after a disturbance. Here, resilience is understood as a combination of internal properties. It turned the paradigm of modern problem-solving upside down by focusing first on oneself before engaging with the external world.

At this juncture, the themes of resiliency were also picked up by international relations (IR) scholars, which included topics such as persistence, endurance, and robustness. For instance, Bourbeau

(2018, pp. 42-43; 2013, pp. 3-4) explains how resilience was used to characterise the ways in which international institutions stay in power in the face of exogenous challenge ('regime robustness/resilience') and how authoritarian regimes resist pressures to democratise.

Chandler and Coaffee (2017) characterise the second generation as the *autopoietic* understanding of resilience. It emphasises the dynamic and emergent features of resilience that arise from the rather unique interactions and relationships between different scales (panarchy). As an inter-relational and contextual phenomenon, resilience becomes more than the sum of its parts. Second-generation resilience focuses on internal organisation and self-transformation, thus bouncing forward rather than focusing on maintaining the status quo or returning to it.

In the third phase, which could be called *carpe diem*, the understanding departs from the prior, subject-oriented interpretation of resilience. As an experimental and community-oriented approach, it seeks ad hoc opportunities within current contexts. Chandler and Coaffee (2017, p. 6) argue that this approach has resulted in the reinterpretation of problems as opportunities for international policy interventions. For example, Evans and Reid (2017) describe how resilience became the 'defining motif' for Americans to reflect on their *recovery* from the 9/11 attacks.

In contemporary IR research, resilience is often discussed within the context of security studies but not without controversy. In addition to claims that the term is used vaguely and loosely, the normative basis of resilience has been also questioned: is resilience necessarily a good and/or desirable thing? Evans and Reid's (2017) answer to this question seems to be outright negative. In their assessment, the underlying ontology of resilience is vulnerability (p. 331) and accordingly, resilience as a political choice is nihilistic as it portends both the necessity and positivity of exposure to danger (pp. 331; 340). In a more moderate critique, Bourbeau (2013, pp. 7-8) argues that approaches to resilience should allow theorising situations in which a resilient strategy could be also understood as negative. Bourbeau calls for particular awareness of resilience being an obstacle to positive change in some cases.

Moreover, there is no agreement on what the referent object of resilience studies actually is. For example, Mikkola et al. (2018, p. 91) argue that it is not individuals and communities but rather the vital functions of society that are the true referent object. Alternatively, Evans and Reid (2017) refute the centrality of human life in the equation.

Berling and Petersen (2020, pp. 121-132) identified the two main scholarly disagreements regarding resilience. The first debate is about decision-making levels and responsibilities ('micro versus macro level'), with the argument revolving around the dangers of securitisation and (excessive) trust in an individual's capacity to act and self-reflect in the face of danger. Here, the worst-case scenario is that 'Security becomes detached from decisions of leaders.' The second disagreement concerns 'the meaning of change (adaptation versus progression)' where it is argued that resilience does not offer a strategy for change. In fact, the resilience approach might even prevent institutional change. Similar to Evans and Reid (2017), the study's authors (2020, p. 132) consider resilience as a potential 'antithesis to political planning and strategy' as the practices accept uncertainty as a key feature of the future. Reid (2022) suggests that adopting resilience as a strategy may increase the efficacy of the state, but it will also make 'society itself into a more direct agent of war, and therefore, also a target in war'.

Types of resilience

Perceptions of resilience can be analysed against different pre-existing typologies. Two sets of frames are particularly worthwhile to explore when studying and comparing resiliencies in the Nordics. Firstly, in his study about the securitisation of migration in France and Canada, Bourbeau (2013) suggested distinguishing between three types of resilience: *maintenance*, *marginalisation*, and *renewal* (MMR). In the MMR-frame, *maintenance* is geared towards preserving the status quo through adaptation, although disturbances and shocks might not necessarily be negative, they are socially constructed as threats (2013, p.10). ‘Rhetoric and discursive powers will be deployed to portray the event as a significant threat and security practices will also be either implemented or strengthened as a response’ (p. 11). Resilience as *marginality*, in turn, implies reactions ‘within the boundaries of the current policy’ (p. 12). The responses do not ‘challenge the basis of a policy (or a society)’ (p. 12). *Renewal* represents the most radical type of challenge to existing policies, “characterized by responses that transform basic policy assumptions and, thus, potentially remodel social structures” (p. 14). The MMR typology offered a ‘conceptualization of resilience as the process of patterned adjustments adopted by a society or an individual in the face of endogenous or exogenous shocks’ (p. 9). As a result, resiliencism could be considered ‘a conceptual framework for understanding how continuity and transformation take place under these circumstances’ (p. 9).

Secondly, Trine Villumsen Berling and Karen Lund Petersen have identified three forms of Nordic resilience, *robust*, *reflexive* and *organised* (RRO), in their comparative study on public debates on resilience in Nordic security politics. In the RRO-frame, *robust resilience* refers to the ability of the individual to adapt to new situations and demands. Drawing from Chandler and Coaffee’s (2017) characterisation of the first generation of resilience and bearing similarities to Bourbeau’s category of maintenance, robust resilience stresses the ability to survive in the face of a threat (Berling and Petersen 2020, p. 136). As the authors maintain, *reflexive resilience* is ‘an ability to not only adapt but also to be reflexive about our production of new threats’ (p. 139). Reflexive resilience is a post-modern (cf. Chandler, 2014), and even Beckian, type of resilience whereby resilience is not directed towards any particular threat. Yet almost paradoxically, the whole of society is expected to contribute to the definition and management of threats (p. 139). In turn, *organised resilience* offers a pragmatic type of resilience characterised as ‘a tool of management between means and ends, the end however being defined negatively as a matter of “coping with uncertainty” and the possible catastrophe and the means being that of setting up the right institutional structures’ (p. 141).

Following a discourse analysis, the authors conclude that “the semantic field defining the meaning of resilience all stress societies’ (and individuals’) ability to adapt and defend themselves against new and uncertain dangers” (p. 135). In the authors’ assessment, this openness to unknown threats and dangers comes with a governmentality problem as ‘resilience becomes the standard answer in the Nordic countries, but we are unsure to what’ (p. 147).

Scales of resilience

As resilience is a fluid, context-dependent and *panarchical*, rather than *hierarchical*, phenomenon, Hyvönen et al. (2019) argued that research should, ideally, target the interaction and dynamics between the different levels (or scales) (see also Bourbeau, 2013). To this end, Walklate et al. (2014) have identified seven levels of resilience: *individual*, *familial*, *communal*, *institutional*, *national*, *regional* and *global*, while Hyvönen et al. (2019, p. 1) settle on four societal levels: *individual*, *communal*, *national*, and *institutional*, supplemented by *international* connectivity.

Distinguishing between the scales adds analytical value because ‘resilience is not an objective condition nor an immutable state that individuals or communities can arrive at through working together. Rather, there are multiple resiliencies that manifest themselves along a spectrum of different contexts and conditions’ (Walklate 2014, p. 422). This includes inter-state settings but the larger the tier, the more complex it is to approach and measure it.

In fact, although resilience has the potential to transform (security) governance, it either escapes almost any measurement at the macro-level and above or it is built on assumptions. As will be argued in the next section, this type of multi-level approach to resilience does matter as international resilience discourses are often ‘domesticated’ in a process of negotiation which occurs between the scales (Hyvönen and Juntunen, 2020, p. 157).

Drawing from previous literature, as well as from the empirical material¹, this research adopts a four-level model including the international, national, communal and individual scales in which the dominant levels are national and international, and the interaction between the two.

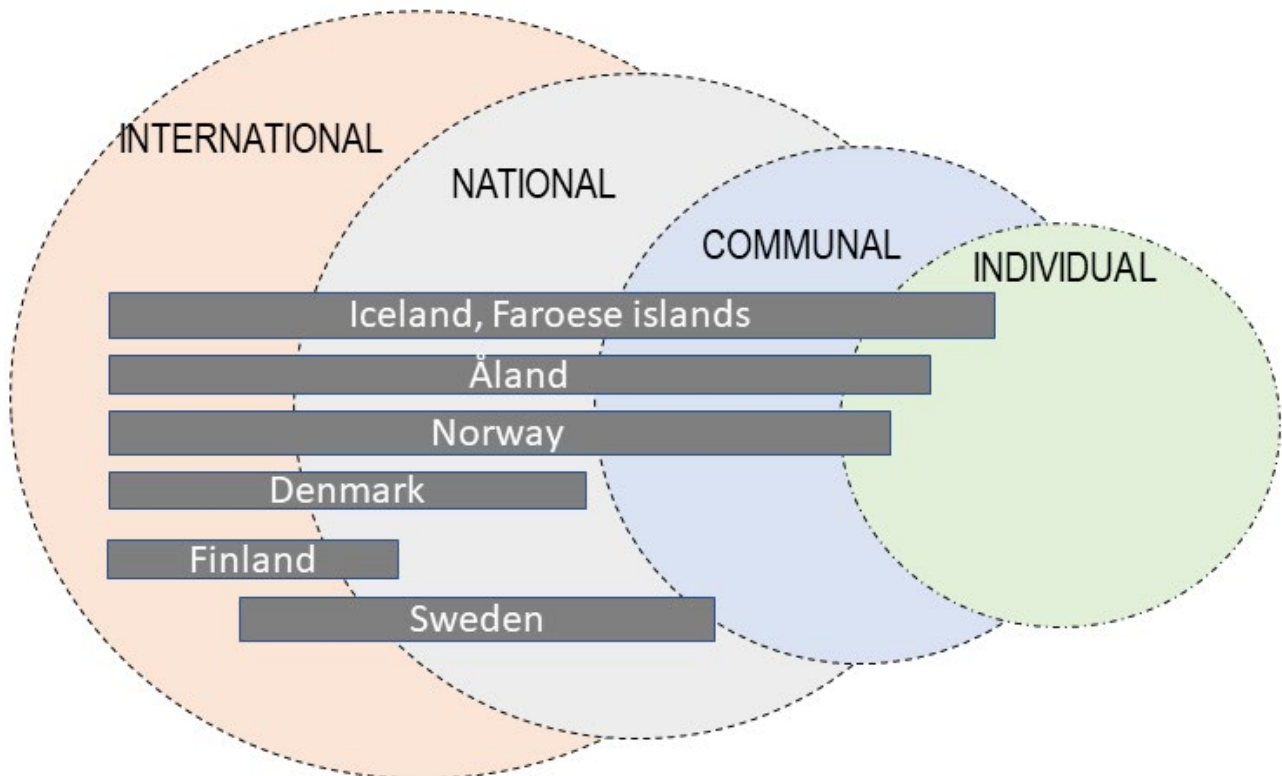


Figure 1. In this indicative illustration, country cases are placed according to the scales that were most discussed. Iceland appeared to have most multi-level view on resilience, spanning from individual responsibilities to global level actors. On the opposite end of the spectrum is Sweden where discussion remained mostly on national level actors and the division of labour between them. Given the low number of interviewees from Greenland, definitive conclusions could not be reached.

1. National and international levels were most referred to in the interviews. The international level encompasses all levels beyond national, including Nordic, European and global. To some, but nonetheless a clearly lesser extent, discussion revolved around the lower levels, individual and communal, while the familiar level was practically absent.

Method

This research consists of a literature review of Nordic resilience as well as interviews that were collected as a part of the research project *Managing Competitive Interdependence in Northern Europe: Nordic Security of Supply in the Age of Disruption* (NOSAD) from autumn 2021 to spring 2022². The semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts, policymakers and personnel involved in practical crisis preparedness work across the Nordics. The expert interviews consisted of a series of predetermined but open-ended questions divided into two main thematic sections related to (1) national policies and the operational environment and (2) Nordic cooperation. The interview questions, 11 in total, were sent to the participants beforehand, along with other information on the research project. The full list of questions can be found as an appendix to this article. The interviews took between 30 and 90 minutes and some were conducted in pairs and groups. With some exceptions, at least two researchers were involved in each interview to take notes as the interviews were not recorded.

The relevant experts were identified through their organisational roles and affiliations. To ensure that gaps in expertise in terms of regions or themes would be covered, the so-called snowballing method (see Taylor, 2015, p. 815) was utilised, meaning that the interviewees were asked to suggest other people who could participate in the research. This approach proved to be valuable in order to access specific communities.

Altogether, 53 interviews were conducted with 88 interviewees. They consisted of 12 background interviews with 17 persons and 41 expert interviews with 72 persons, with almost half of the interviewees (40) being women³. The purpose of the background interviews was to test the interview questionnaire and to scope both the relevant experts and topics that should be addressed. Most interviews were conducted in English, but some were also carried out in Finnish and Swedish. The interviews were conducted anonymously and based on informed consent, which was asked from, and provided by, all interviewees. The semi-structured, qualitative interview method proved to be a suitable approach for accessing the attitudes, interpretations of events, understanding, and values of interviewees, all of whom came from different professional and national backgrounds.

The interview data was collected, managed, and stored according to the established procedures of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. To ensure the security of the information handled during the project, the research data protection guidelines in EU Directive 95/46/EC and the Finnish Personal Data Act (523/1999) were used. The research agency follows the information security and archiving practices stipulated by the relevant Finnish government guidelines and standards.

The interview data was first analysed as individual country and region cases (e.g., case Åland, case Iceland) and were then compared. Utilising a theory-driven qualitative content analysis, the key topics emerging from the interviews were thematically coded according to the resilience frames provided by Bourbeau (2013) and Berling and Petersen (2020). Finally, a processual Nordic resilience framework was developed, combining interview material with existing literature on Nordic resilience.

2. The research project was funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers. This article has greatly benefitted from this collaboration during the project. Therefore, I would like to warmly thank the NOSAD team of Christian Fjäder, Emma Hakala, Mariette Hägglund, Harri Mikkola and the team leader Mikael Wigell for the cooperation.

3. Given the particular and substantial added value to the research, three of the background interviews were considered part of the analysis. As agreed beforehand with the interviewees, no direct quotes appear in the analysis but there are several illustrations and remarks provided by interviewees that are formulated in a way to stay true to the original remarks.

The applicability of the resilience frames elaborated on in section regarding types of resilience was tested as part of the study (Annex 1). Both frames offered some useful categories to code and compare resilience perceptions. However, when the data was analysed against both MMR and RRO frames, similarities, rather than differences, across the region became visible. In this vein, all the Nordic cases essentially represented the *marginality*, *robust* and *organised* types of resilience. The category of *organised* resilience proved to be a largely useful description of security management across the Nordics. The discussions with experts in all countries revolved around the dilemma of how to best prepare for threats, how to bridge the gap between means and ends, and how to improve the strategic elements of planning for and managing different security concerns. A pattern emerged of interviewees being rather conservative in terms of challenging the existing security management policies or structures of society amid the recent crises. Thus, the interviews were more often than not coded to represent *marginality* and its close relative, *robust* resilience. Furthermore, there was emphasis on continuity rather than transformation. This approach can be explained, to a large extent, by the fact that most interviewees were civil servants. It is also important to bear in mind the particular crisis setting in which the interviews were conducted: both COVID-19 and Russia's war on Ukraine had instigated crises that united, rather than divided, the respective societies.

Nordic resilience, a processual understanding

The country comparison, combined with the existing literature on Nordic resilience, allows for the development of an approach that accommodates emerging resilience perceptions and understandings. The country cases were best unpacked according to the approach adapted from Mikkola et al. (2018, p. 11), which handles resilience as a *three-tier process* comprised of:

1. *ability to repel threats* emerging from outside the political community,
2. *a tendency of the political community to endure crises* and
3. *ability of the political community to utilise threats to learn and reform* its functions

The first phase concerns *resistance* as the ability to resist and deter threats, thus preventing crises from occurring or escalating. The second resilience phase concerns the ability to endure and remain operational during a crisis. Thirdly, the next phase concerns rebuilding better after a crisis, the focus being on the ability to learn from the crisis and transform.

Distinguishing between the phases is particularly relevant to policymaking and building *strategies* that aim to identify the responsible actors. This type of *processual understanding of resilience* offers an approach to empirically explore the *degree* of resilience. The perks of using the processual approach have been explained by Bourbeau (2018, p. 51) in the following manner:

The processual approach to resilience differs crucially from the critical theoretic approach in emphasising the importance of context in understanding the resilient actions of a community or governing body. Factors such as communal history, collective memory and social convention significantly affect the behaviour of socio-political agents during times of crisis and cannot be disregarded by a well-grounded theory.

Understood as a process, resilience strategies may challenge some of the realist, traditional and state-centric approaches to security that focus on defense, or in other words, the safeguarding of territorial integrity in the face of a threat posed by other states or 'organised collective entities' (Hyvönen and Juntunen, 2020, p. 159). This resilience logic endorses the all-hazards approach, keeping the nature of threats open instead of applying the logics defense, e.g., protection and prevention (Wigell et

al., 2022; Hyvönen and Juntunen, 2020, p. 159). However, as discussed previously, this openness regarding threats represents the core weaknesses of the resilience approach as it might imply a lack of targeted policies or even that preparedness is lacking due to the ‘naturalisation’ of catastrophes and their treatment as ‘inevitable’ (Wagner and Anholt, 2016, p. 419).

Approaching resilience as a *continuum and process* allows us to explore how resilience may be actualised over time and in three overlapping phases (see figure 2 below) that are referred to here as: *resistance, endurance, and transformation* (Hyvönen and Juntunen 2020, p. 159; Juntunen and Hyvönen, 2014; Mikkola et al. 2018, p. 94). While acknowledging that there may be no clear theoretical consensus regarding resilience as resistance and that resilience can be seen as an alternative to resistance, even in ‘conflicting terms’ (Pankakoski, 2023), the evidence presented in the next section suggests that the Nordic understanding of resilience does includes resistance.

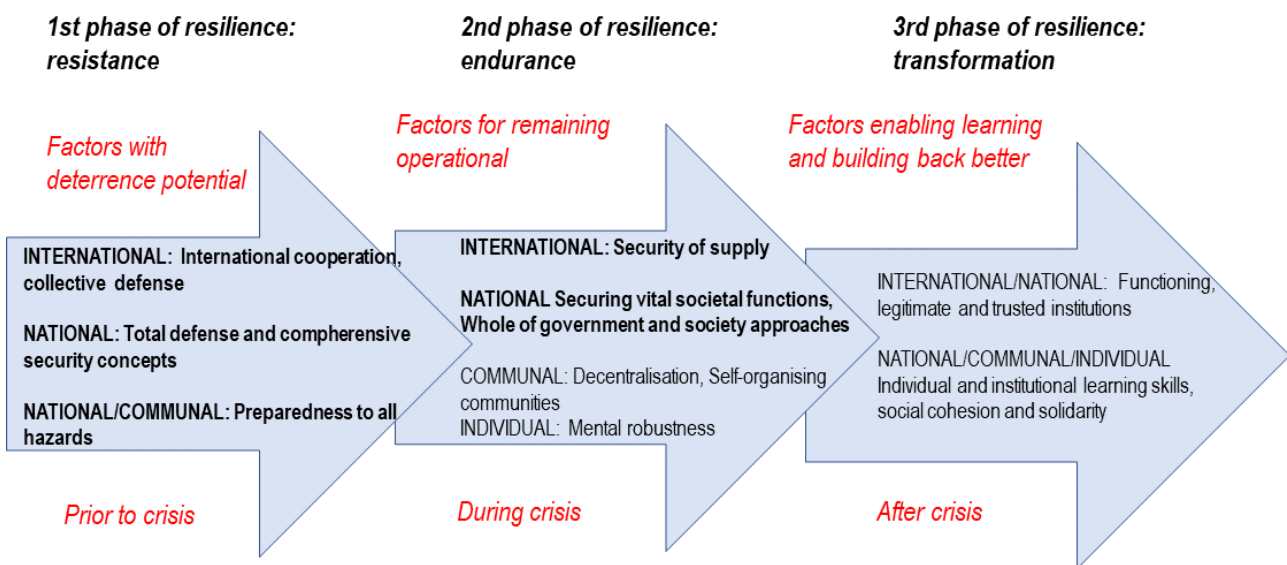


Figure 2. Nordic resilience as process (adapted from Mikkola et al, 2018, p. 94; Hyvönen et al, 2019, p. 20; utilising also Berling and Petersen, 2020, and the interview material). The themes that are particularly well-highlighted in the empirical data compared to previous studies are bolded.

Resilience as resistance

The interviews highlighted the notion that resistance in the Nordics is built at the international level. A common characteristic of the Nordics is the tendency to build national resistance, even deterrence, through international alliances and partnerships – shown recently by Finland’s acceptance into the NATO alliance and Sweden’s application for membership. The Nordics are all small, enjoy open economies and democratic societies that seek to strengthen their security capabilities through active international cooperation.

In terms of policy, the most recent example can be found from Denmark, which states in its foreign and security policy strategy of 2023 that: ‘Denmark must achieve increased resilience through closer European cooperation’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2023, p. 25). Further, the document (p. 25) explains how resilience can be achieved through, inter alia, reduction of dependencies and vulnerabilities, diversifying supplies, export controls, foreign investment screening as well as through increased awareness of research and innovation collaborations. Hence, while international

cooperation is a necessity for building up the resistance of the small, open and import-dependent Nordic countries, in trade and economics, this cooperation might also be considered a downside as it entails risks and vulnerabilities.

Following the two crises noted in this article (pandemic and Russian invasion of Ukraine), a new understanding of the strategically shared Nordic space has emerged that stresses the importance of international cooperation. The interviews, however, revealed differences in the extent to which the responses should be developed. While islanders (Åland, Faroe, Iceland) preferred the Nordic arrangements, the Danish prioritised the EU, for example. For their part, Swedes were mostly focused on developing their own national responses.

Indeed, one of the perceived mutual challenges seems to be that there is no single institution or central manager for joint regional preparedness. But as one interviewee mentions, although each Nordic country is small, they need to be part of a bigger club⁴. The strongest candidates who could become the central manager for joint preparedness in the region were said to be the EU, Nato and the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM). Although the NCM is the only body to enjoy universal Nordic membership, it was nevertheless decried as a largely political body lacking sufficient operational capabilities.

The interviewees nevertheless acknowledged that the NCM seems to be moving towards crisis preparedness and societal resilience, despite the assumption that it lacks capacities and resources for meaningful engagement. Some interviewees from Åland and the Faroe Islands noted that the NCM does not offer them sufficient avenues for practical cooperation as it operates mainly on a high political level⁵. Importantly, the exclusion of the island communities implies that the NCM is not promoting or exchanging ideas on bottom-up resilience approaches enough.

Secondly, at the core of resilience as resistance in the Nordics is the concept of *total defense*. Total defense combines both military and civilian aspects of defense planning and preparation for inter-state conflict as well as the *whole of society approach*. Wither (2020, p. 61) concluded that national resilience and territorial defense are the essential elements of the frameworks of the total defense policies adopted by Finland, Sweden, and Norway as they ‘combine the armed forces and civil society in a comprehensive whole of society approach to security intended to deter an attack by making a target state a very challenging prospect for an aggressor’. Denmark, in turn, stopped applying the system of total defense after the Cold War period in a move away from territorial defense (Jakobsen and Rynning, 2019, p. 893), while Iceland does not have a total defense concept in the strict sense as it has no armed forces.

The Nordics differ from each other when it comes to terminology. Instead of total defense, the Finns refer to comprehensive security whereas in Norway, the term ‘total defense’ is often used as a synonym of *comprehensive security*. The Danes, in turn, equate comprehensive security with *societal cohesion* (see also Berling and Petersen, 2020, endnote 7). Despite this mix of terms (total defense, comprehensive security, social cohesion, lack of armed forces), the holistic idea is largely the same: the resistance to threats and hazards is not only horizontal but also exists as bottom-up and top-down societal processes.

Thirdly, the Nordic resistance frame is distinctively an *all-hazards approach* targeting ‘the full spectrum of threats in preparedness planning regardless of their source, causality or likelihood’

4. Interviewee 48.

5. Interviews 40, 50, 61, 62.

(Wigell et al., 2022, p. 13). The all-hazards approach in each country and region has been shaped by different socio-ecological conditions and experiences, including how security management is focused and organised.

For instance, Icelandic crisis preparedness has its roots in sea rescue which is also the key orientation of Faroese preparedness thinking. In contrast, Finland's orientation has been shaped by the Second World War experience of inter-state war(s) with the Soviet Union. According to the interviews, the all-hazards model does not imply that no one is responsible. In contrast, the overall responsibility for security preparedness is very much in the hands of authorities.

Regarding the types of threats, the interviews suggest that overall, the two recent crises (COVID-19 and Russia's war on Ukraine) are narrowing down the historical, cultural, and geographic differences between threat perceptions across the Nordics. For instance, COVID-19 revealed that the small Nordic states are vulnerable to disruptions in the global supply chain, such as medical supplies. Russia's war has brought back geopolitics and revived some of the Cold-War mindsets in the Nordics, resulting in reinvigorated interest towards learning from the Finnish psychological and territorial defense.

Indeed, the Finnish comprehensive security model was treated as the most advanced because 'it covers it all'⁶. The ongoing war close to the Nordics also begs the question: have we witnessed a return to traditional security thinking? The interviews alluded to the sense that this is not the case, as references were equally made to the so-called new threats such as climate change, pandemics, and cyberattacks as sources of potential crises to which the war added a new layer of complexity. In other words, the all-hazards approach did not become irrelevant at the outset of a traditional war.

Resilience as endurance

Perhaps the most remarkable factor perceived to strengthen endurance during a crisis is the *whole of government approach*, operating on a national level. The approach, shared by all Nordic states, refers to a governance system in which ministers, governmental agencies, and the like work together horizontally (Wigell et al., 2022, pp. 64-72). The Nordic governing structures are a combination of central government and sectoral responsibility depending on the scale and nature of a given crisis.

Generally speaking, Nordic governance systems aim to maintain the same responsibilities in times of normalcy as well as in times of crisis. While this idea of a *competent authority* is clear on paper, the Swedish and Norwegian respondents in particular considered that, in practice, the problem might actualise in the context of so-called grey zone threats that could fall between administrative lines. Thus, such a situation might lead to confusion over who within the government structures takes the lead.

Despite the similarities across Nordics, the Swedish model is somewhat distinct: the agencies have relatively large room for maneuver within their respective domains, and ministerial governance is forbidden (Hägglund, 2020). The difference between Sweden and its Nordic neighbors in this respect became apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, as has been discussed (see e.g. Rainio-Niemi, 2020). The cost of this approach is its lack of agility.

If Sweden is then at one end of the Nordic agility spectrum, Denmark is at the other. In the Danish context, several examples of institutional agility were brought up. For instance, interviewees described how the roles and functions of the national crisis management body (National Operative Staf) were

6. Interviewee 1a.

shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic and how private companies changed their operations⁷.

Secondly, on endurance, the Nordics share a *whole of society approach* aimed at responding to threats in a comprehensive manner on national and communal levels (Wigell et al., 2022, p. 60). This approach can be characterised as the key cornerstone of Nordic resilience. Not only does it refer to shared responsibilities with civil society organisations, such as Red Cross societies, but also to the inclusion of private sector entities in security management. Across the Nordics, private corporations are responsible for securing the vital functions of societies, often in conjunction with public entities⁸.

In particular, the small island communities that are prone to natural hazards perhaps endorse the whole-of-society approach most vigorously because assistance from outside the community might not be immediately available. This is particularly the case in the geographically vast and sparsely populated Greenland. Given the limited amount of personnel in remote regions, preparedness seems to be everyone's business while only a handful of individuals are formally responsible.

The third common endurance factor is the degree of *decentralisation* that is applicable to the sub-national level. At the heart of decentralised governance is the often constitutionally bound idea of proximity, i.e., decision-making should be as close to people as possible. Decentralising security management is often a necessity, particularly in areas prone to natural disasters such as Norway and Iceland where self-organising local communities are in charge of early responses. However, in the Nordic mindset, this *modus operandi* is not meant to circumvent security responsibilities but is rather a necessity driven by logistical factors.

There are communities that might need to withstand on their own for some time, though they are not expected to survive without eventual central-government assistance. The cooperation between central authorities and local communities is, according to the interviews, mainly straightforward and unproblematic. Tensions were, however, observed between islands (Åland, Faroe) and the capitals (Helsinki, Copenhagen) when the discussion turned to having the islanders' voices heard on the topic of resilience policies at the national level⁹. Indeed, the decentralisation of security management has been a topic of concern with respect to the Nordics' sparsely populated and self-governing regions, which often have their own particular security management arrangements, such as Greenland which is neither part of the EU nor NATO¹⁰.

The island communities represent an interesting case of Nordic resilience and provide a potentially easily approachable set of communities whose resilience could be explored more in detail. The interviewees from Åland, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland highlighted that while their institutional capacity to respond to crises may be limited due to the population size and geographical distance to capitals, the small communities have nonetheless developed their own individual and less formal survival strategies. In contrast to some of the national crisis preparedness documents, which list possible threats and offer detailed descriptions of competent authorities, the small communities' strategies involve networks of skilled people who have assumed the responsibility to act in emergencies.

7. Interviews 3a, 27, 66

8. E.g. interview 37.

9. Interviews 40, 52, 60, 61, 71.

10. See discussion, e.g., Gray, A. (2023) *NATO's Northern Flank Has Too Many Weak Spots*. Foreign Policy. August 7th 2023.

The fourth observation relating to endurance is that across the Nordics, the importance of the *security of supply* (SoS) in resilience work is well recognised¹¹. This is largely due to the pioneering work of Finland whereby strong readiness prevails over societies needing SoS to endure a crisis. SoS plays a crucial role in ensuring the business continuity in a society during a crisis, yet it is fundamentally global due to economic globalisation and interdependencies in supplies. This does not mean that SoS issues are equally shared, and in fact, SoS is more of an issue for some of Nordic regions than others.

Without necessarily conceptualising the phenomenon, SoS appears to be, in practice, a particular dilemma for the small Nordic island regions who are vulnerable to disruptions in sea traffic, a situation that is further complicated by limited storage facilities (Wigell et al., 2022, pp. 37-38, 80). While Finland also shares this particular island mentality, its SoS work is based on the possibility of the Baltic Sea being closed off due to war or a similar disturbance – Finland relies heavily on functioning connections in the Baltic Sea. In contrast, for the internationally well-connected Denmark, SoS has historically appeared less relevant¹².

Resilience as transformation

The interviews confirmed an earlier assessment made by Aaltola and Juntunen (2018, p. 36), namely that the responsibility for *resilience production in the Nordic societies is clearly with the state entities*. Albeit to a markedly different degree, the interviewees also attached heightened importance to inter-state institutions such as the EU, NATO, and Nordic formats. The centrality of state authority was generally not questioned in the interviews¹³, which thus distinguishes Nordic resilience from some of the Anglo-American approaches. It seems there is little risk of the responsibility for security shifting to individuals and communities¹⁴. In fact, the elite interviews might suggest the opposite: it could even be argued that *Nordic understanding of resilience pays too little attention to the micro level's agency for resilience*.

The marginalisation of the micro level opens the door for critically theorising Nordic resilience as the model does not seem to genuinely challenge the traditional security paradigm and nor does it embrace bottom-up approaches. For instance, remote communities were referred to¹⁵ as 'fragile', lacking in capacity to respond to crises, and in need of outside help. Moreover, state-centrality becomes an issue in analysing resilience as transformation as it leads our attention to institutional change rather than organically blossoming self-growth and the ability to bounce forward¹⁶.

The Nordics are often referred to as *trust societies* due to their relatively high trust in government, civil service, and security agencies. On top of this vertical and institutional trust, what matters for Nordic resilience is the horizontal, social trust that plays a key role in building resilience both at the individual and community levels, according to Hyvönen et al. (2019, p. 60). Trust is definitely at the

11. SoS, in short, refers to the availability of a product, service or function such as digital networks, energy, financial infrastructure, food, pharmaceuticals, and transport (Aula et al., 2020).

12. It was described in interview 33 that the security of supply is not a concern in the public sphere and that, in turn, the population in Denmark are used to having a high level of supply.

13. Only one clear deviation from the pattern in Norwegian context: the enormous faith in governments' ability to take care of the population was considered as a problem (interview 46).

14. The distinction might be also a bit artificial and more theoretically than empirically driven.

15. Interview 37

16. Results may be different if the focus is shifted from resilience in security to the resilience of democracies, as was done by Poyet et al., 2023.

heart of Nordic identities and self-understandings that manifest themselves politically. For instance, the Nordic Council's Strategy on Societal Security argues that trust in the authorities is a 'Nordic Gold' that needs to be protected (Nordic Council, 2019, p. 4).

The Nordics' relatively well-funded social services and social security networks aim to protect the most vulnerable groups of the population, and due to the resulting relative absence of economic disparities, social cohesion and solidarity is expected to further contribute to (national) resilience. In terms of recovering from crises, 'it is essential to encourage equality and equal opportunity' (Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, 2021).

The distinctively Nordic *welfare state* is closely intertwined with the Nordic *warfare state* and their mutual (good) performance further builds societal trust (Larsson and Rhinard, 2020a, p. 7). The trust factor comes across well in the interviews and is not limited to national crisis management bodies but rather expanded to regional and more informal settings.¹⁷ In addition to trust, Hyvönen and Juntunen (2020) have highlighted the case of Finland in which the top-down model requires bottom-up legitimacy.

Previous resilience literature suggests that the Nordics benefit from their well-functioning institutions, even after disruptions. The notion is that self-reflexive institutions, as well as well-educated individuals, are able to learn from disruptions and use their respective experiences in self-transformation. However, in the interviews, there was only one clear reference that drew a connection between the welfare state model and resilience in the security domain¹⁸.

Resilience as recovery from crises mixes and overlaps with resilience as resistance. In the Nordics, both resistance and this 'bouncing back better' are practiced at the international level. The logic for this approach, which requires active foreign policy, is clear according to the interviews and previous literature: the Nordics are small, open economies and democracies that rely on free trade and strong international institutions to provide the needed stability and predictability in the global arena.

While there were also some nationalistic tones (particularly for Sweden), the interviewees highlighted the importance of strengthening resilience through international connections. One interviewee mentioned that Nordic cooperation should not be maintained only at the PR-level¹⁹. The respective NATO accessions by Finland and Sweden was seen by many to broaden not only institutional cooperation but also practical work on resilience. One downside might be that civil servants' focus on international cooperation (macro) could distract them from identifying resilient practices at the micro level.

Conclusion

This study identified common denominators and factors that are believed to produce resilience across the Nordic countries, regions, and communities. Mapping and placing these resilience

17. Trust, or the lack of thereof, of neighbors and Nordic institutions was discussed throughout the interviews but not systematically. Indeed, the relationship between trust and resilience is intriguing. A previous study on Nordic travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic by Creutz et al. (2021, p. 82) illustrates that in the border areas of Öresund, Svinesund and Tornedalen, trust became one of the major negative issues and the lack of trust was not limited to national decision-making machinery. Particularly traumatic for individuals and communities in cross-border regions were the visible borders that were raised for the first time in the more than 70 years of Nordic free movement. The 'imposition of hard borders' was perceived as a 'betrayal of the Nordic and European project' as coined by the authors (p. 83).

18. Interview 24.

19. Interview 49.

factors on a continuum provide a structured model for future studies of the Nordics as well as those seeking to challenge the Nordic model. These elements help to pose future research questions more concretely: resilience to what, when, and by whom? While this study did not attempt to evaluate whether resilience to certain dangers exists, it compared the Nordic countries and regions and built a catalogue of perceived resilience elements specific to the Nordics. Similarities in resilience perceptions are a potential strength, offering a basis to start imagining a joint resilience vision, strategy, or policy. Yet some critical theorists would warn against adopting a strategy of resilience as it is the ‘polar opposite’ of security and a ‘social insecurity by state design’ (Reid, 2022).

The resulting, empirically-driven understanding is hardly a universal tool. Despite the shortfalls and limitations of the scope of the study, it identified key resilience factors. Importantly, those factors mostly appear on national and international levels, emphasising state responsibility and centrality in resilience production. The resulting Nordic resilience understanding underestimates micro-level responsibility for resilience while overstressing state institutions as central managers of resilience.

This leads to what could be called a Nordic resilience paradox: resilience does not come with problems of responsibility and governability due to the absence of conflict between micro and macro level resilience-building. In fact, the two levels (micro and macro) are perceived to complement each other. With some exceptions, particularly in Danish and Icelandic contexts, the focus on institutions and the macro level alludes to certain lack of attention to agility, innovation, and organic transformation, implying that the strengths of a resilience approach are not well recognised.

In this regard, it seems that the theory of resilience has preceded the practice in the Nordics: the complexities of the security environment and importance of local empowerment are recognised but there is not necessarily a full paradigm shift. Moreover, the imagination of public officials seems to be limited to the ability of societies to bounce back (first generation resilience) at best, not geared towards transformational bouncing forward skills (second and third generation resilience), with the possible exception of Denmark.

Regarding the pre-existing resilience frames against which the empirical data was analysed, the typologies were useful for understanding the general features of Nordic resilience but not optimal for discovering the differences between the countries and regions. While testing the frames, it became apparent that civil servants across the region shared similar perceptions when it comes to the management of crisis preparedness and response.

As the differences appeared mostly on resilience scales, a processual and scale-sensitive approach was selected and applied. Based on this study, it could be hypothesised that the MMR-frame is more useful for discourse analysis of crises that divide societies rather than unite them, while the RRO-approach offers a frame for assessing (documented) policies. Hence, to some extent, the resilience perceptions are dependent on context and crisis.

Nordic interviewees found resilience in security management reasonably governable and they saw little risk of security becoming detached from the decisions of leaders. Indeed, state-centrism links resilience to territoriality and defense fairly easily, blurring the lines between resilience and governance research. Future resilience research designs in the Nordic context should more vigorously move away from treating resilience as a nation-state affair and look at the security management practices of sub-national communities. These types of studies could reveal the full potential of resilience approach in the Nordics.

This work was supported by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland (grant number 345950), the Foundation for Foreign Policy Research and the Nordic Council of Ministers.

References

- Aaltola, M., and Juntunen, T. (2018) *Nordic model meets resilience—Finnish strategy for societal security*. Societal Security in the Baltic Sea Region. Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 26–42.
- Aula, I., Amundsen, R., Buvarp, P., Harrami, O., Lindgren, J., Sahlén, V., and Wedebrand, C. (2020) *Critical Nordic Flows: collaboration between Finland, Norway and Sweden on security of supply and critical infrastructure protection*. National Emergency Supply Agency.
- Berling Villumsen, T. and Petersen Lund, K. (2020) ‘Designing resilience for security in the Nordic region: Implications for strategy’ in Larsson, S. and Rhinard, M. (ed.) *Nordic societal security: Convergence and divergence*. London: Routledge, pp. 131–153.
- Bourbeau, P. (2013) *Resiliencism: premises and promises in securitisation research*. Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses, 1(2), pp. 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21693293.2013.765738>
- Bourbeau, P. (2018) *On Resilience: Genealogy, Logics, and World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chandler, D. (2014) *Resilience and the autotelic subject: toward a critique of the societalization of security*. International Political Sociology, 7(2), pp. 210–226. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ips.12018>
- Chandler, D. and Coaffee, J. (2017) ‘Introduction: Contested paradigms of international resilience’ in Chandler, D. and Coaffee, J. (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of International Resilience*. London: Routledge.
- Creutz, K., Berglund S., Karacan, T. B., Giacometti, A., Haugevik, K., Nyberg Sørensen, N., Wøien Meijer, M. and Lares, A. (2021) *Nordic cooperation amid pandemic travel restrictions*. FIIA Report 68.
- Evans, B. and Reid, J. (2017) ‘Dangerously Exposed: The life and death of the resilient subject’ in Chandler, D. and Coaffee, J. (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of International Resilience*. London: Routledge, pp. 331–341.
- Finnish Academy of Science and Letters (2021) *Bending, but not breaking – From the coronavirus pandemic to strengthening Finland’s crisis resilience*. Available at www.acadsci.fi/statement2021.pdf
- Giacometti, A. and Teräs, J. (2019) *Regional economic and social resilience: An exploratory in-depth study in the Nordic countries*. Nordregio.
- Gylfason, T., Holmström, B., Korkman, S., Söderström, H. T., and Vihriälä, V. (2010) *Nordics in global crisis. Vulnerability and resilience*. ETLA B.
- Henriksen, H.J., Roberts, M.J., van der Keur, P., Harjanne, A., Egilson, D. and Alfonso, L. (2018) Participatory early warning and monitoring systems: A Nordic framework for web-based flood risk management. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 31, pp. 1295–1306. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijdr.2018.01.038.
- Hyvönen, A-E. and Juntunen, T. (2020) ‘From ‘Spiritual Defence’ to Robust Resilience in the Finnish Comprehensive Security Model’ in *Nordic Societal Security: Convergence and Divergence*. Routledge New Security Studies, London, pp. 154–178. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003045533-11>
- Hyvönen, A.-E., Juntunen, T., Mikkola, H., Käpylä, J., Gustafsberg, H., Nyman, M., Rättilä, T., Virta, S. and Liljeroos, J. (2019) *Kokonaisresilienssi ja turvallisuus: tasot, prosessit ja arviointi*. Valtioneuvoston

selvitys- ja tutkimustoiminnan julkaisusarja 17/2019.

Hyvönen, A-E. and Juntunen, T. (2018) *Resilienssi avaimena laaja-alaiseen kokonaisturvallisuuteen: haasteita ja mahdollisuuksia*. Valtioneuvoston selvitys- ja tutkimustoiminta, Policy Brief 25/2018. Helsinki: Valtioneuvoston Kanslia.

Hägglund, M. (2020) *Rebuilding Sweden's crisis preparedness: Lack of clarity impedes implementation*. FIIA Briefing Paper 283.

Jakobsen, P. V. and Rynning, S. (2019) 'Denmark: happy to fight, will travel', *International affairs*, 95(4), pp. 877-895. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2021.1932476>

Juntunen, T. and Hyvönen, A-E. (2014) 'Resilience, Security and the Politics of Processes', *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses*, 2(3), pp. 195-209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21693293.2014.948323>

Larsson, S. and Rhinard, M. (2020a) 'Comparing and conceptualising Nordic societal security' in Larsson, S. and Rhinard, M. (ed.) *Nordic societal security: Convergence and divergence*. London: Routledge, pp. 3-21.

Larsson, S. and Rhinard, M. (2020b) 'Conclusion: Convergence and divergence in Nordic societal securities' in Larsson, S. and Rhinard, M. (ed.) *Nordic societal security: Convergence and divergence*. London: Routledge, pp.225-234. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003045533>.

Mikkola, H., Aaltola, M., Wigell, M., Juntunen, T., Vihma, A. (2018) *Hybridivaikuttaminen ja demokratian resilienssi: Ulkoisen häirinnän mahdollisuudet ja torjuntakyky liberaaleissa demokratioissa*. FIIA Report 55.

Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland (2021) *Nordic Prime Ministers' joint statement on deepening cooperation in the field of security of supply and preparedness* https://um.fi/current-affairs/-/asset_publisher/gc654PySnjTX/content/nordic-prime-ministers-joint-statement-on-deepening-cooperation-in-the-field-of-security-of-supply-and-preparedness (accessed 17.6.2023)

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (2023) *Foreign and Security Policy Strategy*. Available at <https://um.dk/en/foreign-policy/foreign-and-security-policy-2023> (accessed 23.10.2023)

Nordic Council (2019) *Nordic Council strategy on societal security*. Available at <http://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1362729&dswid=4992> (accessed 23.10.2023)

Poyet, C., Niemikari, R. and Raunio, T. (2023) 'What makes democratic institutions resilient to crises? Applying a novel analytical framework to the case of Finland', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2230456>

Pankakoski, T. (2023) *Concepts We Recover by: Metaphorical Concepts in Post-Covid-19 Transition to Normalcy*. Paper presented at Politicisations of Pandemic Recovery: Knowledge, Justifications and Democratic Agency, University of Helsinki, June 15-16, 2023.

Pursiainen, C. (2018) 'Critical infrastructure resilience: A Nordic model in the making?', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 27, pp. 632-641. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2017.08.006>

Rainio-Niemi, J. (2020) 'Koronakriisi ja valtio: Suomen ja Ruotsin mallien vertailua', *Kosmopolis*, 50(2), pp. 162-173.

Rapeli, M., Cuadra, C., Dahlberg, R., Eydal, G.B., Hvinden, B., Omarsdottir, I.L., and Salonen, T. (2018) 'Local social services in disaster management: Is there a Nordic model?', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 27, pp. 618-624. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijdr.2017.07.018

- Reid, J. (2022) 'Resilient Ukraine' and the Future of War in Europe. E-international relations <https://www.e-ir.info/2022/03/17/opinion-resilient-ukraine-and-the-future-of-war-in-europe/> (accessed 30.6.2023)
- Spruds, A. and Vignuzova, E. (2018) 'Introduction', in Aaltola, M., Kuznetsov, B., Sprūds, A. and Vizgunova, E. (ed.) *Societal Security in the Baltic Sea Region*. Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs
- Taylor, S., Bogdan, S. and DeVault, M. (2015) *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource* (4th edition). Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley.
- Wagner, W. and Anholt, R. (2016) 'Resilience as the EU Global Strategy's new leitmotif: pragmatic, problematic or promising?' *Contemporary Security Policy*, 37(3), pp. 414-430, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2016.1228034>
- Walklate, S., McGarry, R. and Mythen, G. (2014) 'Searching for Resilience: A Conceptual Excavation', *Armed Forces & Society*, 40(3), pp. 408-427. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X12465419>
- Van Well, L., van der Keur, P., Harjanne, A., Pagneux, E., Perrels, A. and Henriksen, H.J. (2018) 'Resilience to natural hazards: An analysis of territorial governance in the Nordic countries', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 31, pp. 1283-1294. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijdrr.2018.01.005
- Wigell, M., Hägglund, M, Fjäder, C. Hakala, E. Ketola, J. and Mikkola, H. (2022) *Nordic Resilience: Strengthening Cooperation on Security of Supply and Crisis Preparedness*. FIIA Report 70.
- Wither, J. K. (2020) 'Back to the future? Nordic total defence concepts', *Defence studies*, 20(1), pp. 61-81. DOI: 10.1080/14702436.2020.1718498