

Sweden creates Psychological Defense Agency to counter disinformation from Russia, China, and Iran

On 1 January, Sweden launched its Psychological Defense Agency, which will work to identify, analyze and respond to inappropriate information influences and other information directed against Sweden or Swedish interests. It is part of the Swedish concept of “Total Defense.”

The launch comes several days after Moscow threatened retaliation if Sweden and its Nordic neighbor Finland become full members of NATO, with which Russia is having a standoff, having demanded the military alliance provide the Kremlin guarantees it will not expand to Ukraine and other eastern European nations.

Sweden’s new agency is headed by Henrik Landerholm, a Lieutenant Colonel in the reserve, member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Military Sciences, and Sweden’s former ambassador to Latvia and the United Arab Emirates. Landerholm also chairs the Riksdag’s Defense Committee.

Following his appointment, The Telegraph reported, Landerholm named Russia, China, and Iran as three countries known for carrying out disinformation campaigns against Sweden. He told that the propaganda often only aimed at sowing division in society and undermining confidence in the authorities:

“If we look at how the stories about how Sweden works or does not work are shaped, much of it aims to destabilize or undermine trust in government agencies,” he told Swedish Radio in an interview, adding that the tactic was effective in the USA, where Russia sowed discord before the presidential election.

The Agency, which will work during peacetime and in war, is located in Karlstad and Solna. According to its official website, its main mission is “the coordination and development of agencies’ and other actors’ activities within Sweden’s psychological defense. We offer support to agencies, municipalities,

regions, companies, and organizations and contribute to strengthening resilience within our population.”

It views the purpose of psychological defense as safeguarding an open and democratic society, the free formation of opinion, and Sweden’s freedom and independence:

“Psychological defense must be able to identify, analyze, meet and prevent undue information influence and other misleading information that is directed at Sweden or Swedish interests both nationally and internationally. It can be disinformation aimed at weakening the country’s resilience and the population’s will to defend itself or unduly influencing people’s perceptions, behaviors, and decision-making.

Psychological defence must also strengthen the population’s ability to detect and resist influence campaigns and disinformation. Psychological defense contributes to creating resistance and willingness to defend among our population and in society as a whole.”

The institution will be divided into three departments:

Administrative Department;

Operations Department, which will work to “identify, analyze, and respond to the impact of undue information influence and other misleading information directed at Sweden or Swedish interests” through situational analyses and reports on actors and activities that may pose a threat to vulnerabilities in society and proposing relevant countermeasures;

Capacity Building Department, which will develop and strengthen society’s capacity for psychological defense through providing support to the population, agencies, municipalities, the media, voluntary defense organizations, and civil society in general, as well as working for increased coordination between these actors.

Talks about creating a government agency to protect Sweden from Russian and other propaganda commenced in 2018, as the country was facing an election it sought to safeguard against foreign influence. Then, Swedish prime minister Stefan Lofven said that the primary threat to Sweden’s election came from Russia, but added he “cannot rule out that there may be others.”

The same year, Dr. Björn von Sydow, Chairman of the Swedish Defence Commission and Head of the Swedish delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly penned an article outlining the Swedish concept of “Total Defense.” In his words, it begins with

“the willingness of the population to participate in the defense of the country. Awareness of crisis and war is necessary to withstand the initial shock and to resist an attack. Residents and decision-makers alike must be aware of what wartime conditions may require of them. Moreover, it is increasingly important to actively protect open society, the rule of law, and our sovereignty. The government has already pushed forward with one of the Commission’s proposals for a new agency with the general responsibility to develop and coordinate the country’s psychological defenses. This entails, for instance, combatting disinformation and ensuring the transmission of public information.”

The launch of the agency for 2022 was announced in 2020, in the Government bill “Total Defense 2021-2025.” Inter alia, it noted that

“the deterioration of the security situation creates a need for psychological defense that is adapted to current societal conditions and contributes to the preservation of the free exchange of knowledge and information.”

The new institution has its roots in the 1940s and 1950s, since when Sweden saw the operation of the Swedish Information Agency and National Preparedness Commission for Psychological Defence, and the later Swedish Board for Psychological Defence, the Swedish Emergency Management Agency, and Swedish National Board of Psychological Defence, which were merged in 2009, forming the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency.

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