

Gradualism versus Strategic Shock: Who Truly Believes that War Is Coming?

Policy Paper #4: Conscription is based on data from the Solvo Institute (2025) and on classical theories of strategic decision-making.

Between Risk Awareness and the Capacity to Respond

Data from the Solvo Institute (2025) reveal a fundamental paradox that has long been observed in democratic societies exposed to slowly escalating security threats. In the Czech Republic, 70% of the population considers the risk of war to be real; however, 55% of these respondents state that this possibility “does not greatly concern them yet,” and only 15% report serious concern. By contrast, 30% believe that war does not pose a threat at all. In international comparison (Germany, Sweden, Slovakia), the Czech Republic is paradoxically the least convinced that an armed conflict is possible, despite the fact that the situation in Ukraine is followed by Czech media and the public far more intensively than in the rest of the region. This discrepancy points to deeper structural factors that shape how national societies interpret risk and how they respond to it.

What is your perception of the risk of war in your country?	CZ	SK	DE	SWE
I have serious concerns that war will soon reach our country as well.	15 %	23 %	27 %	14 %
I perceive the risk of war, but it does not concern me much yet.	55 %	58 %	53 %	68 %
I do not think that war will threaten our country in the future.	30 %	19 %	18 %	19 %

(CZ = Czech Republic, SK = Slovakia, DE = Germany, SWE = Sweden)

Which of the following statements best reflects your current feelings?

This discrepancy between the perception of threat and the absence of a corresponding response has been described by Thomas C. Schelling, N. N. Taleb (2007), and A. F. Krepinevich. Societies tend to rationalize threats, acknowledge their existence, yet refrain from acting until a clear tipping point or a shock event occurs. Similar arguments are advanced by N. N. Taleb, who characterizes the process of a gradual increase in risk as the normalization of risk: populations progressively adapt to the threat and begin to perceive it as a “new normal,” thereby reducing the motivation to take action (Taleb, 2007, p. 74–81). A. F. Krepinevich likewise cautions that modern societies tend to underestimate the need to prepare for low-probability but high-impact scenarios, resulting in a chronic deficit of attention and investment in the security domain (Krepinevich, 2009, p. 15–21). When a window of opportunity eventually opens, the capacity for rapid and adequate response is often lacking.

Collective decision depends on the internal politics and bureaucracy of government and on public opinion, party structures, and pressure groups. This affects the speed of decision. — Arms and Influence, ch. 3 “The Art of Commitment,” p. 87.

The aim of this article is to connect the theoretical concepts outlined above with new data from the Solvo Institute collected in four countries (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany, and Sweden), to analyse how manifestations of so-called gradualism (that is, the gradual accumulation of risk without a corresponding response) are reflected in public attitudes toward military threats, and to identify the factors that shape citizens' willingness to act in the event of a real crisis.

Theoretical framework: when a threat grows slowly

Based on the data and existing theoretical approaches, the following thesis can be formulated:

Societal systems exhibit substantial difficulties in responding to gradually escalating threats. This phenomenon is particularly characteristic of democratic countries during periods of relative stability. Three key mechanisms underpin this form of paralysis:

- **Absence of a sense of urgency** – individual signals of threat are not perceived as critical until they accumulate or until a clear tipping point or shock event occurs.
- **Normalization of the threat** – risk gradually becomes part of the background of everyday life and is interpreted as a routine condition rather than as a call to action.
- **Political caution** – public officials are reluctant to take early measures that might appear excessive or politically unpopular.

Thomas C. Schelling illustrates this pattern through historical examples. In the 1930s, the United Kingdom observed the growing militarisation of Nazi Germany but responded only once the threat had become unavoidable. Similarly, the United States possessed information about Japanese intentions prior to 1941, yet a politically acceptable decision emerged only after the attack on Pearl Harbor. As Schelling notes: *“Human inability to rise to the occasion may lead to Pearl Harbor, or to a remilitarization of the Rhineland”* (Arms and Influence, 1966, Chapter 6, “The Dynamics of Mutual Alarm,” p. 230).

Data from the Solvo Institute reveal an analogous dynamic. While 70% of the Czech population perceives the risk of war as real, only 15% report high levels of concern and a willingness to act. This discrepancy closely corresponds to Schelling's model: awareness of risk is present, but it does not translate into an adequate behavioural response.

Nassim N. Taleb: the fragility of comfortable societies

In *The Black Swan* (2007), Nassim Nicholas Taleb develops the concept of the structural fragility of modern, economically stable societies. According to Taleb, such societies are particularly vulnerable to severe failures when confronted with unexpected shocks because they:

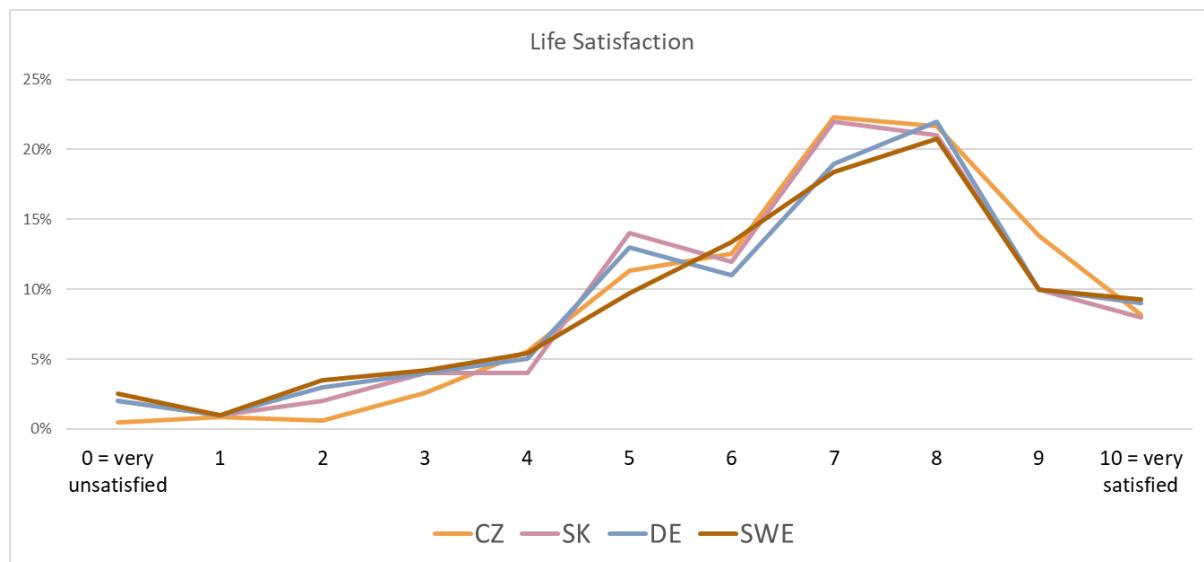
- systematically underestimate the probability and impact of extreme events, favouring smooth and predictable models of reality (Taleb, 2007, Chapters 1–4, 13);

- overestimate their ability to understand risk and maintain control over future developments, leading to an “illusion of control” and excessive confidence in forecasts (p. 135–140; 225–230);
- psychologically suppress information that disrupts a sense of certainty, constructing simplified narratives that reduce complexity and uncertainty (the “narrative fallacy”; Chapters 6–7).

The result is the paradox of comfortable societies: a high subjective sense of security and control combined with low structural resilience to sudden shocks. This framework is also consistent with data from the Solvo Institute. Czech society displays a relatively high level of subjective insecurity (51 %) alongside comparatively high life satisfaction and optimism, reflecting a tension between subjective comfort and objective uncertainty. The patterns described are fully consistent with the empirical findings for the Czech Republic.

Characteristic	CZ	SK	DE	SWE
Uncertainty	51 %	48 %	50 %	51 %
Optimism	30 %	28 %	26 %	18 %
Nervousness	35 %	30 %	19 %	22 %
Anger	20 %	18 %	29 %	20 %
Enthusiasm	12 %	15 %	12 %	13 %
Satisfaction	24 %	27 %	27 %	13 %
Fear	25 %	27 %	28 %	36 %
I do not understand it	24 %	22 %	17 %	26 %
Curiosity	24 %	24 %	20 %	25 %
Panic	6 %	8 %	6 %	12 %
Great opportunities	14 %	12 %	16 %	15 %

When you think about your life and the world around you, which words best describe it?



Average life satisfaction scores: Czech Republic 7.0, Slovakia 6.7, Germany 6.6, and Sweden 6.6. The proportion of respondents assigning a high rating (8–10) amounts to 44 % in the Czech Republic, 39 % in Slovakia, 41 % in Germany, and 40 % in Sweden.

Taleb's argument thus helps to explain why the Czech population and, more broadly, other European societies, are able to perceive escalating threats yet fail to translate this awareness into preparation for crisis scenarios. The psychological need for stability may outweigh rational risk assessment.

Andrew F. Krepinevich: Insufficient Capacities of Democratic Societies

In *7 Deadly Scenarios* (2009), Andrew F. Krepinevich argues that modern democratic societies exhibit a structural tendency to underestimate preparation for crisis situations. He identifies three recurring patterns typical of states at peace:

- maintaining defence capabilities at a minimum level,
- relying primarily on a professional military,
- neglecting the preparation of the civilian population.

This thesis is reflected with striking accuracy in the Czech data from the Solvo Institute. Although 70% of the population perceives the possibility of war as real, 76% of respondents report that they have never undergone any form of military or civil defence training. The Czech Republic thus finds itself in a situation in which a majority of society acknowledges the existence of risk, yet lacks the practical capacities required to respond effectively in the event of a crisis. Modern democracies are therefore becoming fragile and structurally underprepared in terms of readiness, even as objective security risks continue to increase.

Methodology (Solvo Institute, 2025)

The research was conducted in four European countries: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany, and Sweden.

- In total, 4,235 questionnaires were collected from respondents aged 16–75.
- Czech data collection: SC&C, May 2025 (N = 1,235).
- Other countries: Talk Online Panel, August 2025 (N = 1,000 each).

Method: CAWI/CAPI; interview length 20–35 minutes.[1]

A block of questions focusing on defence preparedness, attitudes toward training, and defensive behaviour in crisis situations constituted one of the key sections of the questionnaire. This section measured both respondents' objective experience (e.g., completion of compulsory military service, civilian service, military or other forms of defence training) and their subjective attitudes toward various forms of conscription and voluntary engagement. The questions examined actual experience with military or defence training; support for specific policy measures (e.g., three-month training after secondary school, one-year compulsory service, mandatory registration, systematic civil defence education); willingness to undertake voluntary military training, including scenarios involving financial incentives; attitudes toward financial and non-financial incentives for active reserves and volunteers; willingness to defend the state in the event of armed conflict (both combat and non-combat roles); expectations of government action in situations of military threat; and preferred strategies in the event of personal or family risk. A direct evaluative question on the perceived risk of war was also included, enabling analysis of the relationship between threat perception and willingness to act.

Empirical Findings: Gradualism in Czech Data

Perceiving the threat of war: awareness is not the same as response

The results for the Czech Republic clearly demonstrate an asymmetry between cognitive awareness of risk and willingness to act.

Key findings for the Czech Republic:

- 15 % – “I have serious concerns”
- 55 % – “I perceive the risk, but it does not concern me much”
- 30 % – “I do not think that war is a threat”

This pattern can be interpreted as follows: 70 % of the population is convinced that a threat exists, yet only 15 % reach what Schelling describes as a state of psychological mobilisation, a condition in which individuals perceive the threat as sufficiently imminent and real to begin considering concrete actions. This asymmetry between awareness and action lies at the core of the phenomenon of gradualism: the threat is present, but it is not interpreted as immediately urgent. As a result, society remains in a passive mode even as objective risk gradually increases.

A difference emerges between the Czech Republic and Sweden on the one hand, and Slovakia and Germany on the other, in the proportion of respondents who believe that war could occur in the near future. In Slovakia, this share reaches 23 %, and in Germany 27 %, compared to 15 % in the Czech Republic and 14 % in Sweden. In the Slovak case, geopolitical proximity to the war in Ukraine offers a plausible explanation, while the relatively high level of immediate concern in Germany warrants further investigation.

Absence of Genuine Defence Preparation

Analysis of the Czech data shows that only 17 % of the population has any form of military or defence-related experience, and only 4 % of respondents have completed military training outside the former system of compulsory service. The overwhelming majority of the population - 76 % - has undergone no defence preparation whatsoever. These figures confirm that Czech society is characterised by long-term minimal contact with the armed forces and a low level of practical preparedness.

This deficit cannot be explained solely by the historical abolition of compulsory military service. It also reflects a broader trend of civil–military distancing typical of post-industrial societies, in which direct experience with national defence gradually disappears. In the Czech case, this phenomenon is compounded by a generational effect: younger cohorts have no contact with the conscription system and therefore no opportunity to develop basic skills or a realistic understanding of their potential role in the defence of the country.

According to the analytical framework of the Solvo Institute, the absence of personal experience has a significant impact on attitudes. The lack of real training weakens individuals' ability to imagine their own involvement in national defence, reinforces the normalization of risk, and leads to higher levels of emotional and behavioural passivity when contemplating security threats.

Civil service (as a substitute for compulsory military service) – 2 %

Other training – 1 %

None of the above – 76 %

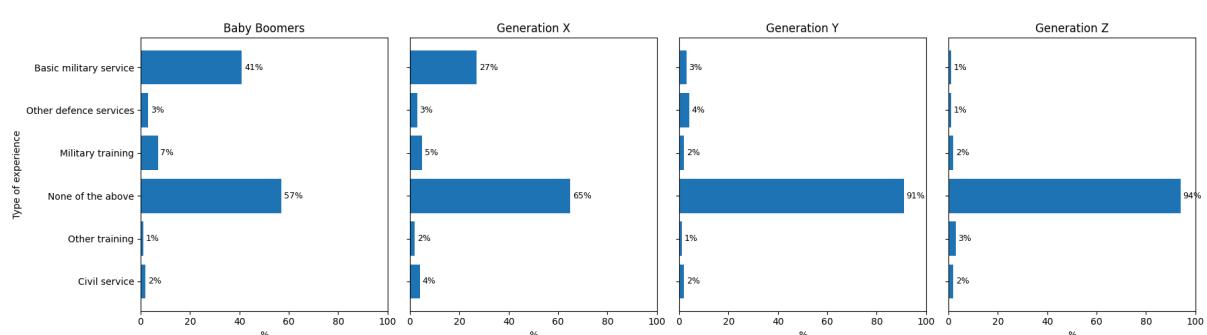
Military training (any form) – 4 %

Training for other defence services (firefighters, police) – 3 %

Compulsory military service (excluding civil service) – 17 %

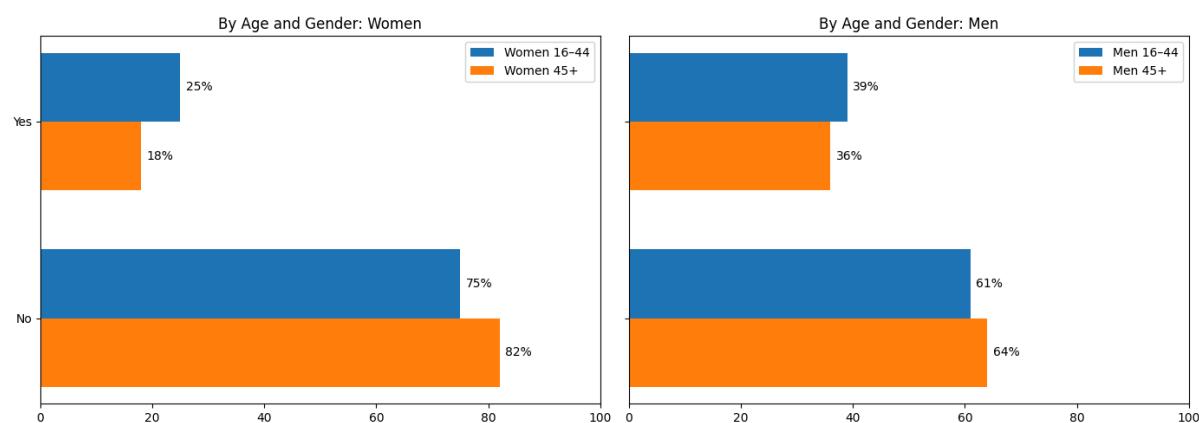
Have you ever completed any of the following? (multiple answers possible)

Only 17% of respondents report having completed compulsory military service.



Have you ever completed any of the following? (multiple answers possible)

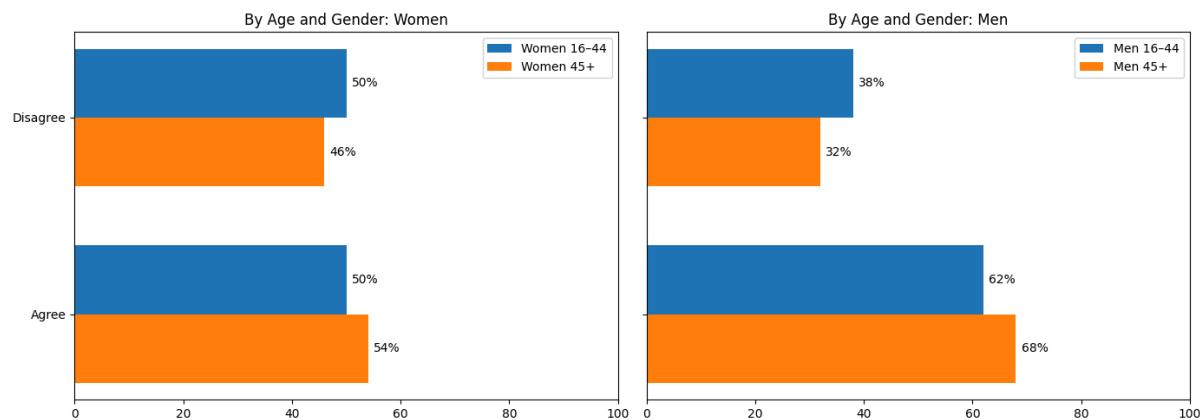
Willingness to Undergo Training: A Latent Reserve That Is Not Automatic



Would you be willing to participate in voluntary military training (maximum duration of 12 weeks within a single calendar year)?

The results confirm significant differences in willingness to undertake voluntary military training across age and gender groups. Men aged 16–44 show the highest willingness (39%), while among women in the same age group the figure is 25%. In older cohorts, interest declines further (men aged 45+: 36 %; women aged 45+: 18 %). When extrapolated to the population level, this suggests that within the current age group of 18–60 years (approximately 6 million people), potential willingness to participate in training could extend to several hundred thousand citizens.

The research indicates that motivational factors - particularly financial compensation, legal certainty, and a clearly defined framework for voluntary training - could further increase willingness. This mechanism can be interpreted in light of Taleb's theory: systems and individuals become more resilient when exposed to calibrated stress under conditions of appropriate incentives, which transform latent willingness into actual behaviour. In the case of the Czech population, a substantial latent defence reserve thus exists; however, its activation is not automatic and requires suitable conditions.



What is your opinion on the following proposal: There is a need to provide substantial financial support to active military reserves and voluntary military training. Participants should receive financial compensation equivalent to their wage/salary for the duration of the training, and employers...

“Antifragility is not resilience. Resilient systems resist shocks. Antifragile systems get better from them.” — N. N. Taleb

Support for Mandatory Measures: Soft Yes, Hard No

The data show that the Czech public clearly distinguishes between “soft” and “hard” forms of preparedness. While 71% support the inclusion of civil defence education in schools, 46 % support a compulsory three-month training programme after secondary school, and only 36 % support the reintroduction of one-year compulsory military service. These findings support Krepinevich’s thesis on the “maintenance of civil comfort”: the public is willing to accept measures so long as they do not significantly disrupt individual life trajectories.

What is your opinion on the following proposal:

After finishing secondary school, everyone (men and women) would complete three months of basic training. The army would thus gain reserves for territorial defense. Would you agree with this?

Yes – 46 %

No – 54 %

It is necessary to introduce systematic education in the field of civil defense, including survival courses, within secondary schools, which would include at least one week per year.

I disagree – 29 %

I agree – 71 %

It is necessary to reintroduce compulsory basic military service for men and women lasting 12 months. It would be possible to replace it with civilian service.

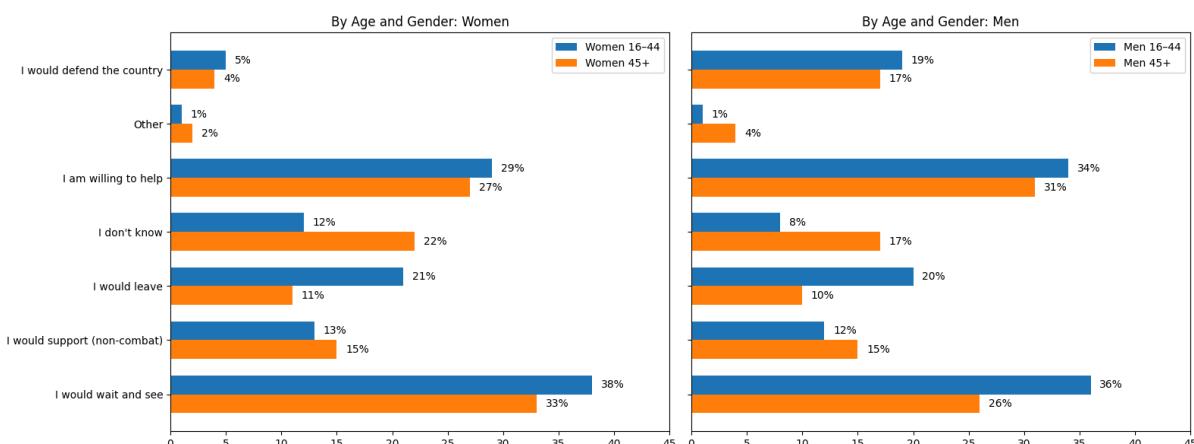
I disagree – 64 %

I agree – 36 %

Willingness to Fight: The Reality of Strategic Shock

Only 11 % of the Czech population declare that they are prepared to defend the country with a weapon in hand.

In international comparison, the Czech Republic performs worse than both Sweden and Slovakia (20 %). The Swedish exception is linked to high levels of social trust (discussed in more detail in Policy Paper #3), which increases willingness to engage in collective action.



How would you behave if the Czech Republic was under military threat?

Behaviour Under Threat: Strategies of Withdrawal Rather Than Resistance

In the event of military threat, 18% of respondents would move their family to a safer part of the Czech Republic, 15% would leave the country, while only 10–11% would actively engage in defence. More than 50% of the population would adopt a wait-and-see strategy. This behavioural pattern corresponds closely to Schelling's analysis of decision-making under uncertainty: societies without prior crisis experience tend to postpone costly decisions until an unequivocal signal or external pressure emerges (Schelling, Arms and Influence, 1966, p. 203–205). Schelling shows that a "wait-and-see" strategy represents rational, albeit potentially risky, behaviour when immediate threats are not fully internalised.

How would you address your family situation if the Czech Republic were militarily threatened? (Please select the option that best corresponds to your view.)

I have close relatives who would need my help (e.g. elderly parents, people with health problems), so I would primarily focus on that. – 8 %

I have no family obligations; I would decide depending on the situation. – 10 %

I don't know / I prefer not to answer. – 16 %

I would wait for recommendations from the government or authorities. – 11 %

I would move my family to a safer place within the Czech Republic (e.g. the countryside). – 18 %

I would try to protect my family while also actively taking part in defense. – 10 %

I would arrange for my family to leave the country. – 15 %

I would stay at home with my family and not look for other solutions. – 11 %

Discussion: Czech Gradualism in a European Context

Schelling's model of threat response aligns well with the Czech data. The Czech population clearly perceives military risk, yet remains largely inactive at the behavioural level. What is missing is an internally activated response that would translate risk perception into concrete action. The pronounced gap between high threat perception and low willingness to participate in national defence can be interpreted as an expression of psychological latency, which Schelling describes as a tendency to defer costly decisions until the threat becomes immediate and unavoidable. The wait-and-see strategy that dominates Czech society thus represents a rational but, from the perspective of defence capability, problematic pattern of behaviour.

Taleb's concept of comfort as a source of fragility offers an additional interpretation of this paradox. Modern, stable societies characterised by high living standards and relative safety tend, according to Taleb, to underestimate extreme events, rely on predictability, and psychologically suppress warning signals that disrupt a sense of certainty. The Czech Republic is a textbook example of this pattern: it exhibits high life satisfaction alongside one of the highest declared levels of subjective uncertainty or anxiety. This tension shapes a society that is simultaneously psychologically burdened and behaviourally passive—a fragility arising from comfort and from the long-term absence of stressors that would otherwise activate collective resilience.

From the perspective of defence policy, Krepinevich's thesis on the structural vulnerability of states lacking sufficient reserves is equally critical. Low training capacity and limited willingness to defend the country indicate that the Czech state relies on a very narrow segment of individuals prepared to enter the active reserve. This situation creates a need for a substantial strengthening of voluntary reserves through incentives, institutional support,

and broader societal communication aimed at restoring the link between the civilian population and defence institutions.

Conclusion

Empirical data show that Czech society perceives the threat of war as real; however, this perception has not yet translated into an adequate level of mobilisation readiness or into consistent support for measures that would systematically strengthen state resilience. The paradox persists: while the majority of the population acknowledges the possibility of armed conflict, this awareness is not accompanied by behaviour consistent with the logic of preventive adaptation.

The central challenge, therefore, is not to persuade the public that war could occur, this belief is already widely shared. The key task is to create institutional, social, and cultural conditions that allow threat perception to be transformed into real capacity for action before a strategic shock occurs. The appropriate response to the gradualist nature of contemporary security threats cannot be further postponement, but rather a gradual and cumulative strengthening of national resilience, enhancing society's ability to absorb shocks and reduce their systemic impacts.

Such a transformation requires a combination of long-term policies in defence, education, critical infrastructure, and risk communication, as well as the strengthening of trust between the state and citizens. Mobilisation readiness is not a one-off act but the outcome of a trajectory that connects individual motivations, social norms, and institutional capacities. It is this trajectory that will ultimately determine whether a future crisis produces disorientation and paralysis, or activation and a collective capacity to confront the threat.

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