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Strategic Communication and Preparedness

Discursive Legitimation Practices in Swedish Total Defence Organizations

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Abstract

The aim of this compilation thesis is to investigate how a group of Swedish public sector organizations with key roles in the country's total defence system discursively legitimate preparedness issues through strategic communication, at a time when the question of preparedness is receiving increasing priority in Swedish society. Using a critical discourse methodology in three empirical studies, the thesis shows how communication about preparedness plays an important role in how three types of organizations seek to gain legitimacy for themselves and for their operations, as well as for preparedness as a societal phenomenon.

The findings show that all three organizations, the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) [*Försvarsmakten*], municipalities, and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) [*Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap*], rely heavily on a normalizing message in their communication, as well as on the legitimation strategies of moralization and rationalization. The findings furthermore pinpoint how the role of the public sector organizations is largely backgrounded in this communication, and the individual citizen's responsibility for preparedness is highlighted instead.

Due to the strategic importance of this kind of communication in these organizations' legitimation process, the thesis concludes that it should be regarded here as a particular form of strategic communication, called "preparedness communication". Through its focus on the discursive micro-levels, the thesis shows how such communication is performed in practice, and how it is an integral part of the public sector's overarching strategic communication, in times of both stability and uncertainty.

Keywords: strategic communication, public sector organizations, preparedness, discursive legitimation, critical discourse analysis

Till Lydia

Älsklingstjej,

älskar dig,

mest i hela världen

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List of Papers

This thesis is based on the following studies, referred to in the text by their Roman numerals. The articles are presented in the chronological order in which they were written, as the last two articles went through different lengths of review time.

I. Ågren, M., & Sataøen, H. (2022). Becoming a “normal” and “ordinary” organization through strategic communication? Discursive legitimation of the Swedish Armed Forces. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *16*(1), 50-69. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2021.2014500

II. Ågren, M. (in press). A tricky balancing act: Legitimating individual responsibility for preparedness while (not) communicating public sector robustness. Accepted for publication in *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*.

III. Ågren, M. (2024). Responsibilization as a return to collectivity? Legitimating the responsibilization of preparedness: The case of the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB). *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, *29*(7), 92-108. https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-06-2024-0110

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1 Introduction

> I mean, the world. You really realize how closely linked we all are and how vulnerable our society can be. New pandemics, but also, like, terrorism and climate change. Oh, there is so much to obsess about. How should one think in order not to lose one's mind?

This quote is from a 2020 preparedness campaign video from Härnösand Municipality. In it, two cartoon characters take a leisurely walk through a picturesque neighbourhood with white picket fences, birdsong, and fluffy clouds. Despite this seemingly idyllic atmosphere, the male character is troubled. His female companion, who is the voice of reason in this story, reassures her friend that "lots of people who are in control of the situation are working so that you will be safe and everyday life will function even in times of crisis". Nevertheless, in a somewhat stern tone, she stresses the importance of being prepared "in case something should happen". The quote and the video from which it originates are part of an increasingly prominent preparedness discourse in Sweden, where different public actors stress for the need for preparedness, in both external campaigns and internal communication. This thesis focuses on how this communication is discursively constructed and how the need for preparedness is discursively legitimated in public sector strategic communication.

Using a critical discourse methodology in three empirical studies, the thesis will show how communication about preparedness plays an important role in how a group of public sector organizations that are part of the Swedish total defence system try to achieve legitimacy for themselves and their operations, as well as for preparedness as a societal phenomenon. Focusing on the discursive construction, challenges, and dilemmas of this kind of communication is important because the ways in which these issues of safety and security are communicated is essential for both public understanding and policy making (Zinn & Müller, 2022). As Van Leeuwen (2007) puts it, "language [in a multimodal sense] is without doubt the most important vehicle for these attempts [to establish legitimacy]" (p. 91). Critical discourse analysis can, for instance, enable one to detect processes of normalization in the

descriptions of risk (Giritli Nygren, 2019), and uncover underlying, problematic meanings in communication practices that might otherwise go unnoticed (Vaara & Monin, 2010). This can reveal "how certain social groups and institutions are defined in terms of risk, based on underlying values and morals" (Giritli Nygren et al., 2021, p. 4). Such an approach can furthermore show how different discursive elements contribute to foregrounding and backgrounding topics and actors. All in all, the discursive approach should be highly suitable for investigating the ins and outs of public sector communication about preparedness.

On a practical note, the foundation of this thesis about discourse, preparedness, and legitimation is the research field of strategic communication. In recent years, the overall practice of strategic communication "has become increasingly relevant for all types of organizations in contemporary societies where trust, legitimacy, crisis, and new modes of interaction … are the focus" (Falkheimer & Heide, 2022a, p. 1). Consequently, there has also been an increasing professionalization of communication departments in public sector organizations at the national, regional, and local levels (C. Eriksson & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2021; Fredriksson, 2021; Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020), a professionalization that also includes how to communicate around safety and security issues such as preparedness (see Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). As Frandsen and Johansen (2009) already noted some 15 years ago, "the communication departments have gained legitimacy and have moved from a technical or tactical function to a more strategic and counselling function" (p. 113).

However, in line with the discursive methodology approach, this thesis narrows down the practice of strategic communication to "a means for conveying conformity to legitimacy expectations, to shape legitimacy judgments, and to discursively conduct institutional work" (Lischka, 2019, p. 197). This work is realized in a variety of strategic communication products, including video, print, and audio materials. For example, preparedness campaigns are disseminated through national television commercials, posters at bus stops, or on publicly produced podcasts. This thesis investigates how this kind of communication is discursively constructed and how different discursive elements affect the

overall message. With its discursive approach, the thesis can thus contribute to a discussion of how strategic communication practices play a constitutive role in society, rather than being of merely instrumental value, as proponents of more traditionalist views have argued (see Jacobs, 2025). As Jacobs further notes, such an approach can also better grasp the heterogeneity of the strategic communication research field and "facilitate a more comprehensive and exhaustive perspective on strategic communication" (p. 32).

While there has been quite a lot of research on the impact of discourse on organizational legitimation processes in general, for example in the many works of Eero Vaara (e.g., 2006; 2008; 2010), less work has been done on the interplay between discourse, preparedness, and legitimation in the field of strategic communication. This thesis is a first step toward such an integration. It will investigate three types of public sector organizations that play key roles within the Swedish total defence system: the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) [*Försvarsmakten*], municipalities [*kommuner*], and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) [*Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap*].[1] Although these organizations are all legally responsible for some aspects of preparedness in Sweden, they have different backgrounds and operate under different conditions and requirements, which shows some of the complexity of the subject. By examining the underlying values and ideas in the communication of the actors studied, it is possible to question taken-for-granted assumptions about preparedness issues and also to show the strategic importance of communication around preparedness within these organizations. To my knowledge, this has not been done before.

1.1 Thesis Outline

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I will first provide some more context about the Swedish preparedness system in terms of legal responsibilities and role definitions. Next, three key concepts for understanding the thesis are introduced: strategic communication,

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[1] In October 2024, the Ministry of Defence announced that the MSB will change its name to the Agency for Civil Defence [*Myndigheten för civilförsvar*] in January 2026. Throughout the thesis, however, the current name will be used.

preparedness, and legitimacy. After this necessary background, the aim and research questions are presented. Chapter 2 provides an overview of previous research related to strategic communication, preparedness, legitimacy, and discourse. This literature review situates the project in a wider context by showing what has been done before and what research gaps the study can begin to fill. Chapter 3 then outlines the theoretical foundations of the project. Here, I adopt a discursive perspective as I deepen the discussion on legitimacy and legitimation. After this, Chapter 4 deals with (multimodal) critical discourse analysis (MCDA) in general and my application of (M)CDA in particular. The research process, case and material selection, generalizability, and ethical concerns are also discussed. Chapter 5 presents a summary of the three articles constituting the compilation thesis. The articles can be found in their entirety at the end of this book. In Chapter 6, finally, I return to the aim and research questions while discussing the findings in depth. I also make suggestions for future studies.

1.2 The Swedish Preparedness System

The Swedish preparedness model focuses on individual responsibility, a high degree of voluntarism, and strong, independent public sector organizations (Bennesved, 2020). Legally, Swedish preparedness measures are delegated to the national, regional, and local levels. A distinction is often made between preparedness actors in the military and civil defence sectors. While the former is rather self-explanatory, the latter is more all-encompassing and consists of actors from most parts of society, such as public sector organizations, private organizations, and voluntary defence organizations, as well as "unorganized" individual citizens. Together, the military defence and the civil defence form the Swedish total defence system (Regeringskansliet, n.d.). In terms of operational tasks, an organization's regular responsibilities also apply in times of crisis. This means that the authority or actor that is normally responsible for a particular task, must also fulfil it during a crisis (e.g., Direktiv 2018:77; Prop. 2001/02:10).

The present thesis studies the communication of three organizations within the Swedish preparedness system: the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF), municipalities, and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency

(MSB). As stated in the introduction, these three organizations all have key roles to play in the total defence system. Their respective roles and responsibilities have been established and sometimes further specified in legislation at different times over the last 30 years or so, showing the evolvement of the preparedness discourses in Swedish society. Starting with military defence, the SAF have perhaps the most obvious role in the preparedness system. The organization has two levels or states of alert: basic alert and heightened alert.[2] If Sweden is at risk of war, has been at war, or if there is war outside the Swedish borders, the government can, by law (SFS 1992:1403), call for a heightened state of alert to strengthen the national defence capability. The requirements for national defence state that in times of heightened alert, military units should be able to begin conducting war tasks within a few days, but no more than seven days for each combat arm unit. The ultimate task of the SAF is then to respond to an armed attack (SOU 2016:88).

In civil defence, the municipalities have far-reaching responsibilities towards their local citizens, even under extreme circumstances. These include maintaining essential functions such as schools, care for the elderly, water supplies, and district heating (SFS 2006:544; SFS 2006:637; SOU 2024:65). In such circumstances, collaboration with other actors on local, regional, and national levels is a basic requirement. The third study object of this thesis, the MSB, has the overarching responsibility for coordinating these activities. Since its establishment in 2009, the MSB has been responsible for all the systematic work of accident prevention, crisis preparedness, and civil defence. This includes all phases of a potential emergency or crisis, from preparation to crisis management (SOU 2007:31).

However, legal policy does not only regulate public actors' preparedness responsibility. Since 2020, it is also explicitly stated in legislation that "the individual citizen should be prepared to manage his or her own support and care for one week without support from the public system" (Prop. 2020/21:30, p. 134, my translation). Individual citizens are furthermore encouraged – for example in communication campaigns

[2] In the military context, the terms "alert" and "state of alert" are often used instead of "preparedness".

from the studied organizations – to contribute to the country's national preparedness by participating in different civil defence organizations, such as the Swedish Women's Voluntary Defence Organization [*Svenska Lottakåren*] and the Swedish Civil Defence League [*Civilförsvarsförbundet*]. These are two clear indications of how the involvement of individual citizens is regarded as a crucial part of Sweden's civil defence, and consequently also of the total defence system.

1.3 Key Concepts

Before going any deeper into the foundations of the thesis, it is necessary to introduce its key concepts. First, I give a basic account of strategic communication and clarify how it should be understood here. Next, I define preparedness and discuss how it relates to similar concepts such as crisis and risk. Finally, I will explain what legitimacy is. This section is rather brief, as I will return to this concept in Chapter 3.

1.3.1 Strategic Communication

Strategic communication is understood here in its usual sense: the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission (Hallahan et al., 2007). By this definition, "a strategic communication campaign is a set of deliberate and purposive communication activities enacted by a communication agent in the public sphere on behalf of a communication entity to reach established goals that are informed by multiple perspectives" (Werder, 2015, p. 81). Although the definition has been debated (see Nothhaft et al., 2018), discussions about the definition and conceptualizations of the term are mainly an academic issue. In the "outside world", communication practitioners mostly refer to strategic communication as a practice, and in more recent years the term has become something of an organizational buzzword, with almost every type of organization having departments specializing in strategic communication (see C. Eriksson & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2021; Falkheimer & Heide, 2022b; Michelsen & Colley, 2019). This practical view of the term is also applied in the present thesis, with strategic communication being understood as a practice performed by professionals from dedicated communication departments. This practice can result in various communication products, such as those listed earlier in this

introduction, but also in oral communication through physical meetings, etc. What all these forms of communication have in common is that they are undertaken with the intention of helping the organization to achieve its strategic goals.

What is considered a "strategic goal" may not be self-explanatory, however, and is worth some further discussion. In its original sense, the word "strategy" refers to the use of military power to achieve political goals (Nationalencyklopedin, n.d.b). In line with this, strategic communication as a practice has always played an important role in the military context (see, e.g., NATO, 2009), and there are signs that the concept may be making a return to its military roots. For instance, a recent PM from the Swedish Ministry of Defence refers to Ukraine's communication work regarding Russia's invasion as "strategic communication" (Ds 2023:34). This is an interesting formulation that shows the close relationship between preparedness issues and strategic communication. Nevertheless, strategic communication is still a very broad concept that goes well beyond the military domain. For instance, according to Zerfass et al. (2018), one should "consider an issue as strategic when it becomes substantial or significant for an organization's or other entity's development, growth, identity, or survival" (p. 493), which appears to leave a lot of room for interpretation. However, there are certain key words here to which one should pay particular attention: substantial, identity, and survival. These characteristics help narrow down the kinds of matters that could be considered strategic.

As a research field, however, strategic communication remains somewhat fuzzy and "spread across various disciplines" (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 491). It is regarded as a complex and interdisciplinary research field, drawing on, for example, organizational communication, public relations, and marketing communication (Falkheimer & Heide, 2022a). What sets it apart from these adjacent disciplines, according to Falkheimer and Heide, is its goal orientation, where the goal is not just a tactical one, such as changing behaviours or selling products, but a strategic one that involves the survival of the organizations themselves. Typically, though, studies of strategic communication take a rather practical approach, with many scholars regarding it as one of many tools for communication. For example, it is considered a useful tool in

the efforts of states and other international actors to counter propaganda, hybrid warfare, fake news, and attempts to manipulate election results (Michelsen & Colley, 2019). It is also seen as a powerful reputation management tool that helps an organization stand out from the crowd (Wæraas, 2020). In addition to this, there is a strong connection between strategic communication and risk and crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2022; Werder et al., 2018).

At the same time, there has been criticism of an overly rationalistic view of strategic communication practices. In particular, scholars in the closely related field of public relations have argued that the general perception that an organization can make strategic rhetorical choices to achieve a desired result is too simplistic (e.g., Heath & Ihlen, 2018; L'Etang, 2006). This perception, these scholars argue, assumes a sort of hypodermic needle approach to communication, and does not, for example, take into account the fact that many voices are competing for the audience's attention. A more critical approach to public relations and strategic communication allows the researcher to analyse and critique the power dynamics, societal structures, and ethical implications of communication practices (e.g., Dinan & Miller, 2007; Frandsen & Johansen, 2014; Heath, 2010; L'Etang et al., 2016; L'Etang & Pieczka, 1996; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006; Miller & Dinan, 2007). In doing so, it challenges the dominant, traditional approaches in these fields, which often focus on achieving organizational goals without questioning their deeper implications for society (Hallahan, 2014).

The critical approach is based on critical theory and the work of Frankfurt School thinkers such as Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas. Critical theory, which gained momentum in the 1920s and 1930s, critiques social structures, capitalism, and power relations by seeking to uncover hidden mechanisms of control (Bronner & MacKay Kellner, 1990; Scherer, 2009). From a critical perspective, strategic communication practices are seen as not neutral, but based on the ideologies and values of interested parties, and as therefore able to reinforce power imbalances, sustain hegemonies, and contribute to societal inequalities (Deetz & McClellan, 2009; Heath, 2010). Strategic communication practices thus become tools that can be used to maintain control over public discourse and shape how issues are perceived by society.

Consequently, communication professionals may contribute to the reinforcement of dominant ideologies. Based on this, critical theorists argue that such communication practices are sometimes more about manipulation than truthfulness (Holtzhausen, 2012; Kozolanka, 2014; Roper, 2005; Weaver et al., 2006). A similar perspective on organizational communication can be found in critical management studies (CMS) (see, e.g., Alvesson et al., 2009).

With this thesis, I join a group of scholars who emphasize how strategic communication can be used to secure legitimacy and gain support for public sector organizations (e.g., Agger Nielsen & Salomonsen, 2012; Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016; Wæraas & Maor, 2014), both with external and internal audiences (Aggerholm & Thomsen, 2016). Inspired by the critical perspective, I particularly agree with the idea that the practice of strategic communication is useful for the discursive legitimation of institutions, where it can be used to manipulate expectations (Lischka, 2019). What is new about the present work is how it aligns this process with matters of preparedness.

1.3.2 Preparedness

In this thesis, preparedness refers to the ability to foresee and handle different kinds of large-scale emergencies or crises. Preparedness is applicable both on a societal level, as with military preparedness or the preparedness of other public actors, and on an individual level, where it refers to the preparedness of individual citizens. In Sweden, preparedness at the level of individuals is often referred to as "*hemberedskap*", literally "home preparedness", which reveals its materialistic view and the notion that it involves stocking up on supplies. In the text, I refer to this as "individual preparedness". Depending on the context, I refer to preparedness on a societal level in various ways, either as "preparedness", "national preparedness", or "preparedness on a general level".

As one can see below, the dictionary definition of preparedness instead differentiates between military defence, civil defence, and the administrative level:

> In military defence, it is a way of specifying capacity requirements for initiating certain operations within a certain time

> frame. The levels of preparedness are adapted to the tasks of the military units and the estimated advance notice period … In civil defence, preparedness means taking measures in peacetime to ensure that the organization can contribute to the overall defence effort in times of crisis and war … At the national level one speaks of administrative preparedness, which refers to society's capacity to adapt its actions to increasingly strict requirements for crisis management and heightened preparedness, as well as different forms of long-term preparedness (several years ahead). (Nationalencyklopedin, n.d.a, my translation)

The key feature of this definition is its emphasis on planning ahead, as expressed in the expressions "in peacetime" and "long-term preparedness". In academia, however, there is no consensus on the definition of preparedness (Staupe-Delgado & Kruke, 2018). For this reason, Staupe-Delgado and Kruke suggest that preparedness should primarily be regarded as an umbrella term covering synonyms such as "readiness" and "contingency planning", noting that it is often further specified by prefixes like "disaster" or "emergency". The phenomenon is also sometimes designated by terms such as "disaster studies", "crisis management", or "emergency management", etc., which further adds to the confusion about how studies of crises, emergencies, disasters, and preparedness should be labelled. For the present thesis, this affected the literature review, which includes studies from several of these research fields, as well as from risk and crisis (communication) studies.

It is therefore important to understand that the concept of preparedness is ambiguous and complex, something that Staupe-Delgado and Kruke (2018) consider in their definition:

> In a broad perspective, preparedness encompasses activities as diverse as risk and preparedness analysis, preparedness planning, resource allocation, training and exercising, deployment in real events and feedback and learning … preparedness encompasses early warning, evacuation, stocking equipment and establishing appropriate governance and coordination structures. (p. 214)

Lidskog and Rabe (2022) simplify this rather lengthy description into a definition of preparedness as “a state of readiness, to have resources available and to be organized to use them” (p. 2). Both of these definitions are consistent with my understanding of preparedness; however, the ambiguity of the concept has led me to also relate my work to the neighbouring concepts of “risk” and “crisis”. The interrelatedness of these concepts is evident in the way they are sometimes used interchangeably, as well as in combination with each other. For example, in the Swedish Government Official Reports (SOU), “crisis” usually precedes “preparedness”, with crisis being defined in the following manner:

> In this report, crisis refers to a condition that affects many people and large parts of society, and that threatens essential values and functions. A crisis is a condition that cannot be managed with normal resources and organization. Resolving the crisis requires urgent, coordinated action by multiple actors. (SOU 2011:78, p. 47, my translation)

Crisis preparedness should then “through training, exercises and other measures, as well as through the organizations and structures created before, during and after a crisis, prevent, resist and manage crisis situations” (SOU 2007:31, p. 49, my translation). In line with this, I often talk about preparedness for “crisis” or “disaster”.

1.3.3 Legitimacy

Legitimacy is concerned with an organization’s fundamental right to operate over time (Suchman, 1995), and it implies “a perceived congruence between the goals, actions, and values of an organization and those of the larger social system of which an organization is part” (Wæraas, 2020, p. 45). However, as Suchman (1995) notes, “the question ‘what is legitimacy?’ often overlaps with the question ‘legitimacy for what?’” (p. 573), pointing to the multifaceted character of legitimacy and how it is highly context dependent.

From a strategic communication perspective, there are at least two views of legitimacy that are important for an organization. First, strategic communication can be used to legitimate the organization and

its operations (Suchman, 1995). This kind of legitimacy can be simplified into two basic questions: *Is* the organization what it is *supposed to be*? Is it *doing* what it is *supposed to do*? Secondly, strategic communication can be used to legitimate a phenomenon or idea that is important to the organization (Aggerholm & Thomsen, 2016). Thus, this kind of legitimacy is not limited to the organization and its activities, but can also include broader issues of societal or political character that the organization needs to communicate.

The quest for legitimacy has been described as a “chronic” problem for organizations (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992), and in particular for public institutions (Brown, 1998; Brunsson, 2002). In line with this, legitimacy has become a central theme in studies of public sector organizations (e.g., Blomgren et al., 2016; Sataøen & Wæraas, 2015; Wæraas, 2020). It has long been argued that “organizations that are larger, and organizations that receive more political and social benefits would tend to engage more heavily in legitimating behavior” (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975, p. 133), and legitimacy is seen as an intangible asset for these organizations, one that includes their very right to exist (Robles López & Canel Crespo, 2017). It can furthermore be seen as an inherent part of the stability and change of institutions, and is also associated with concepts such as authority, power, and ideology (Vaara & Monin, 2010). Public sector organizations may be directed by policy rather than market principles, but like other organizations, they still need to legitimate their actions in order to secure public support (see Wæraas & Maor, 2014). This is also a basic assumption of the thesis.

1.4 Aim and Research Questions

Preparedness has been a rising item on the Swedish political agenda for the last two decades. During the 2000s, there have been several Swedish Government Official Reports (SOU) on national preparedness, addressing, for example, national defence, the health care system, and the monetary system. One of these, SOU 2007:31, concerned the need for a new public authority focused on the overall coordination of national preparedness, and this resulted in the establishment of the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) in 2009. The increasing focus on preparedness is also visible in Sweden’s defence policy, which after

decades of disarmament (see, e.g., Agrell, 2010) has recently seen several increases in budgetary allocations, as well as the reinstatement of obligatory conscription in 2018. Public communication has been and continues to be a key tool in making preparedness a prominent topic, through various external campaigns, of course, but also through internal communication.

Communication is key, I say, because although the security environment both in Sweden and globally has changed rapidly during the writing of this thesis, and events such as Covid-19 and Russia's (second) invasion of Ukraine have certainly shaken our worldview, preparedness has not always been an uncontroversial topic (see, e.g., Ds 2019:8, appendices 2-4). As with any public expenditure, there can be different opinions on how to prioritize and why to prioritize preparedness issues for a relatively safe and secure state as Sweden (for indexes on global security ratings, see, e.g., Disaster Risk Management Knowledge Centre (DRMKC), n.d.). Questions might also arise about whether the calls for preparedness are merely a strategy for these organizations to get better conditions for funding, greater influence on the societal agenda, more media time, etc. Furthermore, and perhaps most controversially, communication around preparedness by public sector organizations also raises questions about our collective and individual vulnerability. Consequently, it may raise questions about the fragility of the state and the capabilities of the very organizations that introduced the issue.

The increasing focus on preparedness thus creates communicative challenges for Swedish public sector organizations, and therefore this thesis is particularly interested in the crucial role that communication plays in the process of obtaining legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). In fact, legitimacy is considered by some not only to be an important purpose of strategic communication, but also a prerequisite for it (Aggerholm & Thomsen, 2016; Lischka, 2019). Aggerholm and Thomsen (2016) even argue that legitimation is a particular mode of strategic communication. I would also like to emphasize that expectations of legitimacy can be discursively manipulated, and that organizations therefore use strategic communication in an attempt to discursively shape their legitimacy (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Scherer et al., 2013). Public communication is regarded as a powerful tool in shaping discourses about what

is right and true (e.g., Stenkvist, 2024; Van Dijk, 2006; Weaver et al., 2006), and the legitimation of preparedness might therefore also function as a recursive process that consolidates public opinion about the need to be prepared in the first place (see Vaara & Monin, 2010).

Against this background, the aim of the thesis is to investigate how Swedish public sector organizations within the total defence system discursively legitimate preparedness issues through strategic communication, in a period when preparedness issues have been given increasing priority in Swedish society. Two overarching research questions have guided the work:

> (RQ1) How are matters of preparedness discursively constructed and negotiated in strategic communication?
>
> (RQ2) What underlying ideas and values about the role, capability, and responsibility of the public sector vis-à-vis the individual citizen can be detected in these strategic communication practices?

While there are studies of how public actors seek to legitimate closely related concepts such as crisis management through strategic communication (e.g., Svenbro & Wester, 2023), more knowledge is needed about the discursive level of public sector communication in relation to preparedness and legitimacy. Simply put, we know *that* these organizations are pushing preparedness (e.g., Asp & Sjölund, 2014; Kvarnlöf, 2020; O. L. Larsson, 2021; Petridou et al., 2019), but more knowledge is needed about *how* they are doing it on a more technical level, that is, what discursive elements are used. For many Swedish public sector organizations, preparedness of different kinds and for different kinds of crises is at the very essence of their overarching mission, with the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) being two of the most obvious examples. Accordingly, communication about preparedness becomes an integral part of these organizations' reason for being, and so they must deliberately communicate preparedness issues if they are to successfully reach their strategic goals. This thesis shows how this is done in practice and discusses the discursive approaches in depth.

Through its critical approach, the thesis aims to contribute to the research field of strategic communication. Its contribution consists of showing how communication about preparedness is used strategically by public sector organizations to achieve organizational goals, in addition to their attempts to influence the societal discourse on preparedness issues. The thesis furthermore shows how different discursive choices are an integral part of this work, and how different discursive elements interact with or sometimes even counteract each other.

2 Previous Research

This chapter provides an overview of previous research related to strategic communication, preparedness, legitimacy, and discourse, with a particular focus on the Swedish preparedness context. I have already mentioned that preparedness research is a complex academic field, and in order to show overarching trends and findings, the studies are grouped into four categories that facilitate further understanding of the thesis: the strategic importance of preparedness issues, the connection to legitimation and discourse, the delegation of responsibilities, and the commodification of risk.

2.1 The Strategic Importance of Preparedness Issues

Crisis, risk, and disaster communication – which I regard as closely related to the concept of preparedness – is a frequently studied topic in strategic communication research (Werder et al., 2018). An important finding from such studies, as well as from studies in adjacent disciplines, is that communication practitioners should consider matters of preparedness, risk, and crisis long before a potential emergency hits, since such issues are of strategic importance to the organization (e.g., M. Eriksson, 2018; Frandsen & Johansen, 2009; Heide & Simonsson, 2014; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013; Longstaff & Yang, 2008; Rasmussen, 2017). One way to do this is to increase the level of trust in the organization. While communication for the purpose of gaining trust and support is of course a vital part of acute crisis management (e.g., Ihlen et al., 2022; Johansson, Sohlberg et al., 2023), previous research has also described building trust in advance as a strategy for increasing the general public's preparedness and ability to cope with a crisis. Planned communication, both internal and external, is an important component of building such trust, and must be coordinated well in advance (Asp & Sjölund, 2014; Heath et al., 2019; Longstaff & Yang, 2008; Oshita, 2019; Siegrist & Zingg, 2014). As Park et al. (2011) note, such communication work is a matter of "mak[ing] friends before you need them" (p. 303). For this reason, practitioners should regard these issues as "continuous work rather than as a separate task that is isolated to specific situations and time periods" (Heide & Simonsson, 2014, p. 141).

Given the similarities in the public systems and cultures of the Nordic countries (Johansson, Ihlen et al., 2023), studies showing the strategic importance of preparedness for the Nordic public sector contribute especially valuable insights to the present thesis. Starting with Denmark, it has been shown how crisis management and crisis communication have been integrated into the overall strategic communication of municipalities and how this communication practice has become largely institutionalized (Frandsen & Johansen, 2009). Although different communication officers may use different words to describe what they do, Frandsen and Johansen argue that they mainly apply the same "toolbox" in such situations. Of particular interest for this thesis is Frandsen and Johansen's description of how gaining legitimacy for this kind of communication is seen as a key challenge for practitioners, especially in the pre-crisis preparedness phase. Such proactive strategic communication is particularly important from an internal legitimacy perspective (Falkheimer et al., 2022). When an actual crisis occurs, Falkheimer et al. argue, internal trust and organizational unity are imperative, and building relationships with insiders should therefore be a priority for communication practitioners.

This proactive focus ties in with a study of the Norwegian police, in which the police stress the importance of keeping social media communication channels "warm all the time" (Rasmussen, 2017, p. 96), so that they can be used to reach large groups of people in times of crisis (see also Park et al., 2011). The use of this approach by security and emergency services has also been demonstrated in another study by Rasmussen (2021), which points to the strategic value that even more informal and mundane forms of communication have for these organizations when it comes to increasing public preparedness.[3] Meanwhile, in Sweden, municipal communication officers have emphasized the importance of "striking the right balance" in communication around preparedness so that it does not negatively affect the attractiveness of the municipality (Lerøy Sataøen & M. Eriksson, 2023). There is also a group of Nordic studies that provide hands on advice for successful

[3] For insights about how such communication is perceived by the public, see, e.g., Sjöberg et al. (2024).

communication about risk and preparedness. These studies emphasize that practitioners should think strategically in their campaigns and combine messages that are just alarming enough with messages about practical preparations that individuals can easily make themselves, the so-called IDEA model (e.g., Johansson et al., 2021; Johansson & Vigsø, 2016). The present thesis builds on this knowledge by providing three new case studies that highlight the strategic importance of preparedness for Nordic public sector organizations.

When discussing the strategic importance of preparedness, it is also worth reflecting on the military use of the term "strategic communication". As mentioned in the introduction, the word "strategy" has military roots, and *strategic communication* (often abbreviated as *StratCom*) or *military strategic communication* (*MilStratCom*) is a commonly used term in the armed forces (see, e.g., NATO, 2009). For example, many armed forces have found strategic communication to be indispensable in creating convincing narratives for their international operations (Cawkwell, 2019; Dimitriu, 2012; Hellman & Wagnsson, 2015; Ringsmose & Børgesen, 2011). Building on this, it has been suggested that the strategic communication of smaller states may be used not only to achieve the overarching mission goal of securing public support, but also to improve the state's own status, prestige, and recognition in military alliances (Pedersen & Reykers, 2020). Despite its military roots, however, some researchers describe the military perspective as a "newer dimension" of the strategic communication research field (Vyklický & Divišová, 2021) that "has gained new attention in the context of terrorism and counterterrorism" (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 490).

In Swedish defence policy, the emphasis on military strategic communication remains stable, and in a recent doctrinal document, the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) describe it as a "central and natural part of the Swedish Armed Forces' operations … to achieve the Swedish Armed Forces' strategic goals" (Försvarsmakten, 2023, p. 17, my translation). In an earlier document, the SAF also emphasize the potential of strategic communication to facilitate organizational change (Försvarsmakten, 2011). However, the ends to which strategic communication should be used by military organizations are a matter of debate (Vyklický & Divišová, 2021). Some argue that it should only be

used in support of broader national policy goals (Paul, 2011), while in the above document the SAF clearly regard it in the more traditional sense, as a means to pursue organizational goals. What is clear from these studies and from the military documents described is that military strategic communication encompasses a very broad range of preparedness issues, from strategic communication aimed at preemptive agenda-setting to acute responses to military operations. The present thesis contributes to the knowledge of how strategic communication is used by the military, in particular by focusing on communication targeting internal audiences.

2.2 The Connection to Legitimation and Discourse

Several scholars have pointed out the connection between preparedness, risk, crisis, and legitimacy, most often highlighting the role of communication in the legitimation process (e.g., Christensen et al., 2016; Falkheimer, 2021; Lidskog, 2016; Merkelsen, 2013; Svenbro & Wester, 2023). For example, previous literature has highlighted the political, rhetorical, and organizational challenges and conflicts that confront efforts to legitimate preparedness (Barbour & Manly, 2016). It has also been shown that the legitimation of complex risks, such as climate change, for example, is a complicated matter that leads to inconsistent and ambivalent communication (Uggla, 2008). It has furthermore been shown that previous or compounding crises affect an organization's legitimacy, and that this in turn affects how stakeholders perceive risk. High legitimacy leads to low perception of risk, while low legitimacy leads to high perception of risk (Veil & Anthony, 2017). However, more knowledge is needed on the legitimation of preparedness in general, as most studies seem to focus on the legitimacy of crisis management in relation to particular events.

In Sweden, several recent studies have focused on legitimacy in relation to the national crisis management of the Covid-19 pandemic (Giritli Nygren & Olofsson, 2021; Kjeldsen, 2023; Svenbro & Wester, 2023). Thus, these studies do not focus on the preparedness phase as the present thesis does. Nevertheless, they provide relevant insights into legitimation in relation to both public sector strategic communication and discourse analysis. For example, using discourse analysis, Giritli

Nygren and Olofsson (2021) have found “discursive struggles over legitimacy” (p. 531) or conflicting perspectives and paradoxes in the narratives about the Swedish handling of the pandemic. In doing so, they show how discourse analysis helps to unmask the underlying ideologies and structures of texts that otherwise go unnoticed. Meanwhile, Svenbro and Wester (2023) show how strategic communication was a central feature in legitimating the Swedish Covid-19 crisis management. Svenbro and Wester find that the Swedish authorities relied heavily on pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy, building their arguments on facts and knowledge claims (see also Kjeldsen, 2023), even when moral issues were addressed. However, the influence of moral values in this type of communication should not be underestimated (Fage-Butler, 2024; Giritli Nygren et al., 2021; Hunt, 2003). According to Hunt (2003), moral discourses have even become intertwined with risk discourses, making it difficult to separate more normative judgements of risk from objective ones.

Risk discourses thus legitimate particular solutions and changes in society, such as the shift from public to individual responsibility for preparedness issues, which I will return to in the next section. However, conflicts over discursive legitimacy, as well as shifts in the argumentation for legitimating and delegitimating actors and actions, are not uncommon in this type of discourse (Öhman et al., 2016). Öhman et al. argue that a consequence of the “normative construction of risks” that they see in their research is that “unintentionally, crisis communication becomes a part of the hegemonic normative power that maintains predominant social structures” (p. 527). The power of language is also emphasized by Selvaraj and Sandaran (2019) and Zaman (2021). According to Selvaraj and Sandaran, studying preparedness discourse is important because “how people view a disaster directly shapes and influences their response and actions during a disaster, and this is always achieved by drawing upon specific discourses” (p. 113). Drawing on Van Leeuwen’s CDA approach, both Selvaraj and Sandaran (2019) and Zaman (2021) study the social actors and social practices around preparedness in climate-related crises in Asia, with a particular focus on lexical choices and the representation of social actors. These studies provide two very concrete examples of how awareness of preparedness discourses can have very direct implications for risk resilience, for

instance when it comes to the negative effects of describing people as "vulnerable" or "victims".

As previous literature shows, there are plenty of ways in which discourse analysis can be useful in studies of communication, preparedness, and legitimation. However, more could be done to broaden the knowledge about the micro-levels of preparedness discourses, that is, to focus more on the discursive elements that make up this communication. This is a discussion to which the present thesis can contribute. Since much of the more recent research on communication and legitimation has shown an interest in the actual crisis situation, there is also room for the thesis' focus on legitimation in the preparedness phase.

2.3 The Delegation of Responsibilities

Another theme in the previous literature with important implications for the present thesis concerns the delegation of responsibilities from the state to the individual citizen, often called responsibilization. This refers to the "strategic effort on the part of the state to persuade individuals to shoulder greater responsibility for their own security" (O. L. Larsson, 2021, p. 307). Responsibilization is lined to Foucault's idea of governmentality, where legal regulation and coercion are replaced by ideas of individual autonomy (Foucault, 2008), a shift that is seen as reflecting neo-liberal ideas of freedom of choice and responsibility (Davoudi, 2016). Proponents of responsibilization argue that increasing individual citizens' awareness of risks and dangers will give them a greater incentive to take the necessary preparedness measures (Garland, 2001).

Neo-liberalists argue that an overly powerful government leads to dependent and unfree citizens. Therefore, they want to replace the state's role in matters of safety and security, for example, with the market values of entrepreneurship and competition (Davoudi, 2016; Raco, 2009). Critics of this idea argue that it disconnects individuals from the state and obscures the role of the state (O. L. Larsson, 2021). While some see responsibilization as a way of empowering citizens by giving them agency and resilience (Clarke, 2005), others claim that it allows for transferring public responsibility to the individual, adding a moral obligation to personal and societal security that often comes at an

economic cost to the individual (e.g., Bergström, 2018). In line with this, it has been argued that while discourses of individual responsibility have been normalized and presented as supporting free choice, they are in effect based on moral judgements and values (Fage-Butler, 2024; Giritli Nygren et al., 2015). In addition, the process of responsibilization also makes it possible to categorize people as "capable" and "incapable" individuals (Rådestad & O. Larsson, 2020).

The topic of responsibilization is particularly prominent in the Swedish literature, where it should partly be understood as a response to the normalization of various threats (O. L. Larsson, 2021). The increasing prominence of appeals to normality and common sense in discourses of fear and crisis has also been noted outside the Swedish context (Wodak, 2024). In Sweden, communication around preparedness has historically been characterized by a degree of ambivalence, involving conflicting values such as collectivism and individualism, and welfare and self-reliance [*självskydd*], in a sometimes complicated balancing act (Cronqvist, 2009). According to Cronqvist, self-reliance first came into focus in the pamphlet "In case of war" [*Om kriget kommer*], and then became increasingly central as an effect of the Cold War. As Kvarnlöf (2020) points out, however, there is a notable difference between the rhetoric on the state's role and responsibility in the early preparedness campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s and those of today. Whereas preparedness campaigns used to be a "a joint project involving the state and citizens", such communication is today increasingly "marked by worry about lulling citizens into a false sense of security and assurance of strong societal preparedness for crisis" (Kvarnlöf, 2020, p. 28, my translation). The effect of this new discourse, according to Kvarnlöf, is instead the perception of "a kind of societal preparedness in decline" (p. 28, my translation).

This shift of responsibility from the public to the individual level has been most pronounced in the last 25 years or so (O. L. Larsson, 2019), and has been criticized in recent literature (e.g., Asp & Sjölund, 2014; Giritli Nygren & Olofsson, 2020; Kvarnlöf, 2020; O. L. Larsson, 2019, 2021; Petridou et al., 2019; Sparf, 2015). One criticism has been that Swedish public authorities demonstrate a strong belief in the role of one-way communication when it comes to increasing individual

preparedness, while it is well known that knowledge alone does not automatically lead to preparedness activities (Asp & Sjölund, 2014; see also Storm-Mathisen & Lavik, 2016, on the limited effects of knowledge on preparedness activities). However, Asp and Sjölund (2014) note that there seems to be a discrepancy between what people expect from the state and what the state expects from its citizens. While the state places a large part of the responsibility on individuals, people in general expect to receive both practical and financial support from the state in the event of a crisis.

At the same time, however, previous studies confirm that while Swedish public authorities have high expectations on individual citizens' involvement in their own preparedness, they also have low confidence in individuals' preparedness ability (Hobbins, 2017; Kvarnlöf, 2020; Lidskog & Rabe, 2022). Furthermore, previous research suggests that citizen involvement in preparedness issues may not always be desired (Lidskog & Rabe, 2022). According to Lidskog and Rabe, who have investigated municipalities' preparedness in connection to climate change, "the involvement of layman opinions seems unnecessary and could even possibly be counterproductive" (p. 7). Additionally, while there "was a common understanding among the interviewees that the municipalities had a responsibility to engage their citizens in crisis preparedness and support them in taking responsibility for it" (Lidskog & Rabe, 2022, p. 7), there was a reluctance to talk publicly about risk assessment. According to Hobbins (2017), discrepancies like these may result in contradictory messages, which in turn could have a negative impact on people's willingness to take individual responsibility for preparedness.

Previous scholars have also highlighted the difficulty of allocating responsibility between, for example, municipalities, individual citizens, and the private sector (Palm, 2009), and have stressed the uncertainty inherent in the concept of responsibility itself (Sparf, 2015). Sparf cites several accounts where this uncertainty is apparent. For example, materials about individual preparedness and responsibility produced by Swedish public actors do not specify what capabilities are needed or how to measure them; they only state that such capabilities are needed. It is also unclear what the phrase "take responsibility" means – for what

and when? The uncertainty of the concept spills over into the more legal aspects of responsibility, as the consequences of not taking individual responsibility are highly unclear and difficult to try in court. Individual responsibility thus becomes, according to Sparf (2015), more a matter of morality or culture than of sanctions (see also Hunt, 2003). Another objection to the individualization of responsibility is that "the emphasis on personal safety may imply that what is privately owned is more important than what is held in common" (Sparf, 2015, p. 9, my translation). Sparf furthermore emphasizes the perceived provocativeness of expecting individual responsibility from those with limited means or ability to be self-reliant:

> For those with little or no margins, whether financial, physical, or social, it can be seen as deeply offensive to be held responsible for one's personal safety – especially if it concerns events that are beyond the individual's control. (p. 29, my translation)

Returning to legitimacy, O. L. Larsson (2019) argues quite critically that the shift in preparedness discourses from public to individual responsibility could ultimately jeopardize the legitimacy of the state. According to O. L. Larsson, the idea that individuals are responsible for their own security goes against the idea of a social contract between citizens and the state, a central concept of liberal theory. In this hypothetical contract, citizens voluntarily give up some of their freedom to be a part of the collective, organized state in exchange for security and protection. If the state then requires individuals to be responsible for their own security, there is reason to question why they should accept their loss of freedom in the first place, and ultimately to question the fundamental legitimacy of the state.

Drawing on Foucault's theory of liberal governmentality, O. L. Larsson (2019) argues that power can be expressed not only through punishment, discipline, and force, but also through discourse. With power in the form of discourses, it is possible to steer citizens towards the preferred option, for example by demanding moral responsibility from individuals, while still maintaining individual freedom of choice. This can also be seen in the Swedish Covid-19 strategy, which highlighted individual moral responsibility, social expectations, and the need for

solidarity rather than coercive measures (Giritli Nygren & Olofsson, 2020; see also Svenbro & Wester, 2023). Hobbins (2017) too notes the potential problems in the relationship between the individual and the public when individual responsibility is stressed: “when institutions use rhetoric of responsibilities while disregarding the causes of citizens’ ambivalence, it is possible that this may have an unintended effect: an increasing scepticism towards institutions” (p. 277). In addition, Lidskog and Rabe (2022) conclude that too much emphasis on individual responsibility for preparedness issues may come “at the expense of the role of social mobilization among citizens” (p. 12).

However, as shown by Cassel et al. (2024), what people think should be included in the social contract largely depends on factors such as age, gender, education, and political views. For example, people on the political left tend to emphasize the obligations of the state, while people on the right emphasize the role of citizens. Most Swedish citizens expect the state to ensure free and fair elections, guarantee the safety and security of the citizens, and fight corruption. In return, citizens commit themselves to obeying the law, paying taxes, voting, and not overusing welfare resources. For some respondents, the “premium” version of this contract includes the expectation that citizens should contribute to the country’s defence and be able to provide for themselves (Cassel et al., 2024). For people who hold this extended view of the social contract, it is probably not unreasonable to be expected to contribute to one’s own safety and security by undertaking preparedness measures. Contrary to what O. L. Larsson (2019) argues, individual responsibility for preparedness could therefore also be seen as a part of the social contract rather than a breach of it.

Another take on the social contract comes from Berggren and Trägårdh (2015), in whose concept of “statist individualism”, equality and respect for other people’s autonomy are crucial factors. In contrast to the common view of Swedes as devout collectivists, Berggren and Trägårdh regard Sweden as an extremely individualistic country compared to other states, for example when it comes to independence from institutions such as the nuclear family and religion. This independence, they argue, is a direct effect of the strong welfare state, and state intervention can thus serve to strengthen individual autonomy, since it frees the

individual from having to rely on other people. According to statist individualism, the success of the Swedish welfare system is based on autonomous individuals who strive for freedom, independence, and self-actualization while at the same time sacrificing community, intimacy, and traditional obligations. The Swedish social contact is therefore regarded as a joint project between the state and the individual, aimed at liberating citizens from mutual dependency (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015). In terms of preparedness, one interpretation of this is that Swedes would be quite willing to accept individual responsibility for their own safety and security, as this could be considered a matter of autonomy and freedom.

Regardless of how one views the social contract between the state and its citizens, Swedish public sector organizations place much of the responsibility for preparedness at the individual level. This is not surprising, given the government's 2020 bill (Prop. 2020/21:30) mentioned above. However, as we have seen, this was the case long before this legislation was passed, and Sweden stands out in the European context in this respect (Petridou et al., 2019). This division of roles in preparedness is not a simple matter, and can lead to mixed messages. As Petridou et al. show, in its communication about preparedness, Sweden focuses more than other EU countries on the possible consequences of risks and on providing guidelines to help citizens manage themselves in a crisis without help from the state. Although the Swedish state takes an active stance in communicating preparedness and risk, it also proceeds to absence itself from potential crises, leaving the actual risk management to the citizens. It is thus up to the individual to use the information to handle any situations that may arise (Petridou et al., 2019). This is the case despite that fact that, as mentioned above, information alone does not increase preparedness (Asp & Sjölund, 2014; Storm-Mathisen & Lavik, 2016). The present thesis adds to the research on responsibilization, as two of the three articles focus on how discursive elements are used to legitimate the delegation of responsibilities from the state to individual citizens. By focusing on the *how* of this process, that is, the discursive micro-level, a deeper understanding of the legitimation strategies behind this kind of communication can be gained.

2.4 The Commodification of Risk

In general, preparedness discourses centre around increasing "our ability to cope and adapt to disruption" (Blake et al., 2017, p. 285). These discourses tend to promote self-sufficiency and resilience, characteristics that are mainly associated with the financial and social capabilities of majority groups and the wealthy (Blake et al., 2017). In line with this, Zinn and Müller (2022) argue that risk management reveals the power struggles and inequalities of society. In Sweden, these discourses have led to a rather materialistic view of preparedness, defining it very much in terms of material supplies (e.g., Heidenstrøm & Kvarnlöf, 2018; Kvarnlöf, 2020; Palm, 2009; Petridou et al., 2019). Here, a materialistic focus on preparedness can be seen both in the historical campaigns of the 1940s (Cronqvist, 2009) and in the preparedness campaigns of today (Johansson & Vigsø, 2016). As Petridou et al. (2019) note:

> … the public is urged to have a store of supplies at hand to survive a certain period of time during which a complete disruption of societal functions is imagined, including loss of electricity, water, means of transportation, and any other amenity that one takes for granted in an advanced Western democracy. (p. 219)

This materialistic focus is part of a wider international trend with roots in North America and can also be seen in Germany, for example (Petridou et al., 2019). Its potentially negative consequences have been noted by several researchers (e.g., Heidenstrøm & Kvarnlöf, 2018; Levac et al., 2012; Petridou et al., 2019; Sparf, 2015). Petridou et al. (2019) argue that this focus has resulted in a market for preparedness products, and commodifying risk in this way has led to a perceived resilience among the citizens that correlates primarily with materialistic factors. However, self-efficacy, or the theory that believing in one's own capability has a positive effect on one's actions, does not necessarily lead to better preparedness (Liu et al., 2015; Wirtz & Rohrbeck, 2017). Meanwhile, Petridou et al. (2019) note that the importance of social relations (see also Ghanem et al., 2016; Levac et al., 2012; Palm, 2009) is downplayed in the Swedish communication about preparedness.

Despite what the materialistic focus suggests, it should be kept in mind that there is no clear-cut way of measuring individual preparedness. For this reason, researchers have been critical of the reliance on economic aspects of measuring preparedness, such as taking inventory of a household's emergency supplies (Levac et al., 2012; Sparf, 2015). These supplies, Levac et al. (2012) argue, may depend on the time of the data collection. For example, a household's temporary financial situation may influence its preparedness measures. Heidenstrøm and Kvarnlöf (2018) add to this argument by criticising what they regard as the top-down approach of Norway and Sweden. Households are expected to comply with pre-established policies, for example, regarding necessary equipment (see also Petridou et al., 2019) and knowledge, expectations that they can rarely meet. This approach, Heidenstrøm and Kvarnlöf (2018) argue, does not take into account the actual capabilities of households in a crisis, which they suggest should instead be understood "*as an interwoven ongoing process within the performance of everyday practice* [*sic*]" (p. 280). After studying how British households coped with an actual electrical outage, Ghanem et al. (2016) reached a similar conclusion, finding that "the ways in which households managed during the storm related less to demographics, income or educational background. Rather, their actions depended on elements of their normal everyday practices" (p. 178). These studies all point to the difficulty of defining preparedness and the problem with regarding it simply as a material issue, as well as to the challenges of communicating preparedness. This is a discussion to which the present thesis will contribute further.

3 Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I adopt a discursive perspective on legitimacy and legitimation. Such an approach is useful to highlight the importance of strategic communication in the legitimation of preparedness. In addition, there is a brief discussion of some concepts and ideas from institutional theory that may be helpful in understanding the thesis. Finally, discursive legitimation analysis (DLA), a key framework for all three case studies, is presented.

3.1 A Discursive Approach to Legitimation

This thesis is based on a critical discourse perspective, according to which "*legitimacy means a discursively created sense of acceptance in specific discourses or orders of discourse [sic]*" (Vaara et al., 2006, p. 793). Furthermore, it is based on the idea that "discourses define and redefine what is justified and legitimate" (Tienari et al., 2003, p. 379). Here, we must first acknowledge that "discourse" itself is a contested and confusing concept that can be used in a number of ways (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Wodak, 2008). In its simplest form, it simply refers to talk or text (Ledin & Machin, 2020). However, the most common understanding of the term is that discourse comprises language organized in different ways – discourses – that make up our social world and social practice (e.g., Foucault, 1978, 1980). According to this view, the term discourse refers to how individual signs can connote complex ideas about the nature of the world and human behaviour. This view is also the basis for how discourse is used in critical discourse analysis (CDA, or critical discourse studies, CDS, as many call it).

Fairclough (1992) argues that discourse not only reflects social processes and structures but also reproduces them; it both shapes and is shaped by its social context at the same time. Another definition comes from Van Leeuwen (2005), who defines discourses "note the plural – as *socially constructed knowledges of some aspect of reality [sic]*" (p. 94). Here too, then, the social context in which discourses take place is emphasized. Machin and Mayr (2012) simplify all of this a bit further, stating that discourse is "basically … language in real contexts of use" (p. 20). Based on these definitions, my understanding of what

distinguishes discourse from mere language is that it concerns more than just words and grammar. Unlike language, discourse is not just a tool that people use to make themselves understood. Instead, it has a constitutive function in society, and the idea that it is a social construction that shapes and is shaped by its context is central to my understanding of the concept.

I have taken a discursive approach in this thesis because discourse is an integral part of how organizations explain, motivate, and legitimate particular ideas and behaviours (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). Accordingly, discourse analysis reveals the organization's worldview in terms of what norms, rules, and values that it considers important (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Scott, 2003). This is equally true of communication around risk and preparedness issues (Fage-Butler, 2024). Although not everything can be explained in terms of discourse, it has a strong influence on the legitimation process of organizational activities (Vaara & Monin, 2010). According to Vaara and Tienari (2008), CDA can shed new light on the micro-levels of the legitimation of organizational operations. By using a discursive approach in legitimation analysis, one can "reveal such textual dynamics that have passed unnoticed in previous research" as well as "complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions in legitimation processes" (Vaara & Tienari, 2008, p. 991). A discursive approach also makes obvious the cycle of legitimation and action – how an action requires legitimation and how legitimation then in turn requires new action (Vaara & Monin, 2010).

The discursive approach is useful for this project as it highlights the importance of strategic communication in legitimating preparedness. According to an early key work by Dowling and Pfeffer (1975), there are three ways in which an organization can become legitimate in the eyes of the public. One is to adapt its output, goals, and methods to conform to existing definitions of legitimacy. Another is to try to change these very definitions through communication. A third way is to use communication to become identified, in the public perception, with legitimate symbols, values, or institutions. As seen here, two of these ways underscore the role of communication and, as noted above, communication is consequently described as a crucial part of the

legitimation process (Suchman, 1995). In line with this, scholars have shown how communication and communication management are central to legitimacy (Vaara & Monin, 2010). However, it is important to note that communication includes "meaning-laden actions and nonverbal displays" (Suchman, 1995, p. 586) and not just written or spoken activities. Concretely, this may include written or verbal communication in different forms, but also graphic elements such as logos, colours, and images (Stenkvist, 2024). Based on this, I take a multimodal discursive approach in two of the three case studies.

The role of communication in organizational legitimacy is also reflected in the literature on public sector organizations, for which legitimacy is of the utmost importance (Wæraas, 2010). By their very nature, these organizations are accountable to society. They are subject to political decisions and debates, and they need to demonstrate consistency with societal values (such as equality, fairness, democracy, anticorruption, and transparency). Their legitimacy also depends on being seen by the public as relevant and important – otherwise, why should they even exist? In short, public sector organizations exist to serve the public interest (Wæraas, 2010). At the same time, however, such organizations often face legitimacy problems, as they produce intangible, immeasurable results, while at the same time being confronted with disputes over public spending (see Serrano Cinca et al., 2003). There is therefore "little doubt that communication is a relevant and potentially potent tool for public agencies in building and maintaining their legitimacy" (Wæraas, 2020, p. 49).

A discursive approach makes it possible to look more deeply into the communicative components involved in the legitimation of preparedness in a way that also considers what is not explicitly stated but only implied. It is thus possible to detect underlying values and ideas of the communication that are not made visible by other approaches (Vaara & Monin, 2010). As Tienari et al. (2003) state, drawing on specific discourses should be regarded "as part of (organizational) action" which organizations may do to "legitimate their positions and achieve particular ends" (p. 379). It has also been shown how intimately related discursively shaped legitimacy is to stakeholder relations and identity constructions (Hardy & Phillips, 1999). Discourses accordingly provide

the frames for how legitimacy is established, and "legitimation involves more or less conscious discursive strategizing" (Vaara & Monin, 2010, p. 6). This discursive strategizing often involves building links with generally accepted metadiscourses (Tienari et al., 2003), as discourses that are consistent with existing norms seem to simplify the legitimation process (Van Dijk, 1998). This may be the reason why the same discourse can be used to legitimate the operations of different actors, even when they have conflicting goals (Tienari et al., 2003).

The discursive legitimation approach used in this thesis is also relevant because of its focus on communication about preparedness, since how people perceive risk can play a major role in their views on organizational legitimacy (Roper et al., 2004). As Lidskog (2016) argues:

> Public opinion and perceptions can pose a threat to the legitimacy and stability of existing ways of governing risk. Therefore, regulators need to consider what the public thinks and feels about a risk, irrespective of whether regulators share these understandings … From this perspective, heightened concern for public involvement in regulation can be seen as a strategy to influence perception, shape understandings, and produce legitimacy for a specific regulatory proposal. (p. 286)

Risk management, which I equate here with preparedness management, has consequently become an important tool for securing organizational legitimacy. To understand this phenomenon, one needs to understand the interplay between risk and discourse. Risks are discursively constructed and contested (Roper et al., 2004); meanwhile, discourse plays a crucial part in legitimating operations in risk governance (Lidskog, 2016). Public sector organizations are no exception in this respect, as "the expert discourses and the power they entail are prerequisites for the performances of these organizations" (Hobbins, 2017, p. 276). One implication of this is that the legitimacy of public sector organizations, like those studied in this thesis, is highly dependent on their ability to engage in successful strategic communication.

3.1.1 Legitimacy as a Work in Process

Organizations thus seek to build legitimacy through communication strategies, and this work is a collective social process based on social norms (Robles López & Canel Crespo, 2017). To achieve this goal, organizations can adopt different legitimation strategies depending on the situation, and the choice of strategy depends on whether the goal is to gain, maintain, or repair legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). This thesis focuses on the first two goals of gaining and maintaining legitimacy. Suchman also argues that the choice of strategy is linked to the main categories of legitimacy: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive. The present thesis is mainly concerned with moral legitimacy, which has to do with normative societal expectations. In this view, an organization is legitimate if it does "the right thing" according to some generally accepted value system. Naturally, though, organizations may act according to moral standards based on self-interest; for one reason or another the most beneficial option may be for the organization to conform to the social norm and thus make the pragmatic choice. As Suchman (1995) further states, organizations may pursue several types of legitimacy at the same time, and sometimes multiple strategies are in play simultaneously. However, Suchman also suggests that, in general, an organization will not pursue all three types of legitimacy "with equal zeal" (p. 586). Suchman's article is highly recommended for anyone interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the other forms of legitimacy, but for the purposes of this thesis, this basic account will do.

In line with Vaara et al. (2024), the thesis uses "discursive legitimation" as an umbrella term for research from different fields and traditions that explore the importance of language in the legitimation process. This means incorporating concepts and ideas from other research fields, such as organizational and institutional studies, in order to better understand the studied cases. Although the present thesis represents another perspective, the connection between legitimacy and text that has been noted by scholars pursuing such a line of research (e.g., Phillips et al., 2004) is also highly relevant from a strategic communication viewpoint. As Phillips et al. argue, actions of legitimation lead to the production of texts, and these texts leave traces that are in turn important for the legitimation process. This recursive quality of the

legitimation process (Vaara & Monin, 2010) has already been mentioned in the thesis, and is a major reason why public sector communication about preparedness is such a crucial research topic. Public sector organizations can to a large extent set the societal agenda by highlighting certain topics, such as the legitimation of preparedness issues, and when these topics then become dominant in the societal discourse they require further legitimation by the organizations. This view of legitimation as an ongoing and cyclical discursive process is essential to the thesis.

When it comes to legitimacy, it is also worth noting that the transition to the era of New Public Management has forced public sector organizations to position themselves in relation to other organizations (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000; Christensen et al., 2020). Today, even military organizations like the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) are subject to the same market conditions as private, competitive institutions (Deverell et al., 2015; Deverell & Wagnsson, 2016). This means that concepts such as branding, identity, and reputation management have become increasingly important for public sector organizations (e.g., Bulotaite, 2003; Byrkjeflot & Angell, 2007; Fredriksson, 2021; Haider & Lee, 2008; Luoma-aho, 2007; Wæraas, 2010). However, these new communication practices also have the potential to undermine their legitimacy (e.g., Blomgren et al., 2016; King & Whetten, 2008; Wæraas, 2010, 2020). As Wæraas (2010) notes, combining an organization's bureaucratic tasks and traditional values, such as adherence to rules and procedures, with softer values derived from the private sector, such as being perceived as modern, transparent, and service-minded, is a tricky balancing act. Although emphasizing the traditional ways of operating might make the organization appear old-fashioned and ineffective, Wæraas argues that a more modern approach may lead to expectations that the organization cannot meet. This is an example of the negative effects of what institutional scholars such as Kraatz and Block (2008) call institutional pluralism, a situation in which an organization belongs to multiple institutional spheres and thus has to follow multiple sets of formalized rules, norms, and cultural logics.

Another key contribution of previous institutional research is that normative and coercive pressures lead to homogeneity among

organizations, so-called isomorphism, which in turn leads to legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Isomorphism can therefore be used to explain the prevalence of certain common communication practices that are used by seemingly very different organizations (Scott, 2001). Although the present thesis does not adopt an institutional perspective, the potential impact of organizational characteristics and normative pressures on public sector communication should nevertheless be noted. Institutional theory can arguably be used to improve our knowledge of strategic communication practices (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2013; Fredriksson & Pallas, 2014; Sandhu, 2009), and although not treated in depth here, it definitely merits further attention in future studies.

3.1.2 Discursive Legitimation Analysis

With its discursive approach to legitimacy, the thesis relies heavily on discursive legitimation analysis (DLA), which focuses on how the legitimation process works in practice (Vaara & Monin, 2010). As I apply it in this thesis project, DLA is useful to "understand the micro-level discursive strategies used in legitimating contemporary organizational phenomena" (Vaara et al., 2006, p. 789). Based on critical discourse analysis (CDA), DLA was first used by Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) and has subsequently been further developed (Aggerholm & Thomsen, 2016; Mampaey et al., 2020; Vaara & Monin, 2010; Vaara & Tienari, 2008; Vaara et al., 2006; Van Leeuwen, 2007). Although there are many discourse analytical approaches within the social sciences, DLA is particularly useful for clarifying organizations' efforts to make sense of, and generate legitimacy for, their existence and activities (see Vaara et al., 2006). In DLA, it is assumed that discourses are an integral part of social constructions of social order and the distribution of power. Organizational communication is thus not taken at face value (Vaara & Monin, 2010), but is analysed on a micro-level to reveal its underlying meanings (Vaara et al., 2006).

As always when talking about critical discourse analysis, the question arises of whether it should be regarded as a theory, a method, or a perspective (e.g., Van Dijk, 2009; see also section 4.2 of this thesis). Here, I have chosen to place DLA within the theoretical framework, although

I do refer to it as a methodological approach in one of the three studies. The truth is probably somewhere in between. What all three case studies have in common, though, is that they rely on a set of commonly accepted legitimation strategies, understood as "the deliberate use of language to develop, maintain, or change perceptions of legitimacy" (Vaara et al., 2024, p. 2353). Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) originally distinguished four basic legitimation strategies, which have come to constitute a specific "grammar of legitimation" (Aggerholm & Thomsen, 2016). Some years later, Vaara et al. (2006) added a fifth strategy, and the following basic legitimation strategies are now widely used as categories of legitimation in DLA studies: normalization, authorization, moralization, rationalization, and narrativization.

Normalization

Normalization involves seeking legitimacy by presenting something as normal, or as a natural behaviour or way of functioning. This can be done with reference to past or future events that are presented as normal, or by referring to their inevitability (Vaara et al., 2006). Vaara et al. see this as the primary type of legitimation because it refers to the exemplarity of a phenomenon. However, Van Leeuwen (2008) regards normalization as a subcategory of rationalization and authorization.

Authorization

Authorization involves invoking the authority of laws, persons, customs or traditions. Legitimation is consequently achieved with the argument "because X says so", where X can, for example, be an expert, a legal document or a culturally accepted norm. Authorization can thus be personal or impersonal (Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999).

Moralization

In moralization, moral arguments or specific value systems provide the moral basis for legitimation. This can be achieved by for instance reference to higher values such as religion, morally valued final causes or emotional aspects (Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999).

Rationalization

Rationalization means providing specific rational arguments to establish legitimacy, using knowledge claims that are accepted as relevant in a given context. According to Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999), rationalization is achieved by referring to the utility of specific actions or social practices (instrumental rationalization), or to the facts of life (theoretical rationalization). However, Vaara et al. (2006) see this latter category as normalization, and this is also how I use it.

Narrativization

Narrativization, or mythopoesis in the words of Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999), creates legitimacy by telling stories or constructing narrative structures to show how the issue in question relates to the past or the future. Storytelling then becomes a way of making something "acceptable, appropriate, or preferential" (Vaara et al., 2006, p. 802), in a context where legitimate actions are rewarded, and illegitimate actions are punished.

As we have seen here, the definitions or names of these categories can sometimes differ, and in these cases I follow Vaara et al.'s (2006) model, as I find it to be most straightforward. The five legitimation strategies can be used to both legitimate and delegitimate social phenomena and, as with any discourse, their application is highly contextual. However, while some strategies are culturally bound, others are more inherent to the human psyche (Reyes, 2011). Rationalization, for instance, can have clear ties to its surroundings, since what is perceived as rational in one culture may not be considered so in another context. However, normalizing the need to protect innocent children from an enemy is most likely a transnational phenomenon that has more to do with human nature than cultural values.

It has been rightly argued that the concept of "discursive legitimation" covers much more than just the discursive strategies described above. According to Vaara et al. (2024), although these mentioned strategies have been the focus of previous research, they need to be placed in context because discursive legitimation is "a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon" (p. 2345). Therefore, Vaara et al. call for "a more comprehensive and

in-depth theoretical understanding" (p. 2344) of this research field that takes more aspects into account. This is something that the present thesis has taken inspiration from. So, to gain a deeper understanding of the legitimation of preparedness, this thesis also considers the discursive foundations – or the underlying ideological assumptions – that permeate the strategic communication of the organizations studied. Neoliberalism and nationalism are two examples of such ideologies. In focusing on the co-construction of, and interplay between, the discursive strategies and the discursive foundations, the thesis responds to Vaara et al.'s (2024) call for research that enables "a deeper understanding of the discursive legitimation dynamics" (p. 2364). Furthermore, with two out of three case studies taking a multimodal approach, the thesis also responds to their call for more multimodality in discursive legitimation, a "potential [that] has yet to be fully realized in research on legitimation" (Vaara et al., 2024, p. 2364).

4 Methodology

This chapter presents the case selection and research process, the methodological approach, and the selection of material. This is followed by a discussion of generalizability, reliability, and validity, which are somewhat contested but nevertheless important concepts in qualitative studies. Lastly, I share my views on ethical considerations and the limitations of the thesis.

4.1 Case Selection and Research Process

Case studies allow researchers to investigate a phenomenon in great depth, something that is not possible with larger samples (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Here, I have chosen to examine three different cases because preparedness is a cross-boundary phenomenon that occurs on many levels of society, and I want to reflect this comprehensiveness. The selection of cases was based on what Flyvbjerg (2006) calls critical case-selection. This means selecting cases or study objects with "strategic importance in relation to the general problem" (p. 229), whose conditions are likely to apply to other, similar contexts as well. I therefore decided to investigate public sector organizations that are important contributors to different parts of the Swedish total defence system, and for which preparedness issues are of strategic importance. To reiterate, Swedish preparedness measures are developed and implemented on the national, regional, and local levels. This is usually referred to as the total defence model, which includes both military and civil defence. Based on this, I wanted to show how different kinds of public sector organizations within this system communicate preparedness issues.

First, I studied the strategic communication of the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF). Taking the SAF – whose entire existence is based on ideas of preparedness – as the first critical case enables one to understand how issues of preparedness are discursively constructed in the area of military defence. This may also be what the concept of preparedness is usually associated with. Originally, the SAF were intended to be the main study object of the thesis. Given Sweden's long history of peace and non-alignment, combined with recent increases in budgetary allocations and the reintroduction of obligatory conscription

(Försvarsdepartementet, 2017; Ds 2019:8), the original thesis plan was to investigate how the military sought to legitimate itself and its operations in the face of changing conditions. The first article was thus written from a different starting point than the other two. It focuses on the first perspective of legitimacy mentioned in section 1.3.3, legitimation of the organization. In contrast to previous research on public sector strategic communication in connection to legitimacy (e.g., Cawkwell, 2019; Wæraas, 2020), this paper investigates strategic communication targeting internal audiences. Since the material studied was produced well before both Covid-19 and Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, it also shows how an organization devoted to preparedness issues legitimates itself in times when it is not self-evident that these issues should be a priority. Thus we get a picture of how preparedness issues are communicated in a more "normal" state of affairs.

The idea was to follow this up with studies of the SAF's external communication. However, an increasing focus on the Swedish total defence system in the SAF's communication campaigns, stressing the need for joint exercises between the military and civil defence organizations, contributed to a change in the direction of the thesis. These campaigns highlighted actors such as the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), county councils, municipalities, and even individual citizens, to show that preparedness was not just a question for the military. Then the global Covid-19 pandemic hit, followed by Russia's (second) invasion of Ukraine. If preparedness was something of a buzzword for only a select few when the project started, it was now on everyone's lips. To "prove" this point, I was soon invited to participate in the DURCOM project, which studied communication about risk and preparedness mainly from a municipal perspective. This fit well with my interest in the legitimation of issues of preparedness, threat, and defence, although it meant that I had to widen the scope to include other organizations than the SAF. Luckily, a degree of flexibility and the ability to change direction during the research process is one of the perks of qualitative research (Bryman et al., 2022).

The circumstances just mentioned convinced me to take a broader approach to preparedness than just military defence. I decided to also focus on civil defence and communication about individual

preparedness. This is a topic that has been in the spotlight in recent years, and that became even more so during the Covid-19 pandemic. As this is deeply intertwined with questions of responsibility, I also wanted to explicitly address the roles and capabilities of the public sector in relation to individual citizens. More specifically, in the second study, I was curious about how the individualization of responsibility is legitimated in more local public sector communication. In the second study, I therefore investigated legitimacy from the second perspective mentioned in section 1.3.3, the legitimacy of a phenomenon or idea that is of importance to the organization. Here, I chose to study the communication of Swedish municipalities, which was also in line with the DURCOM project mentioned above.

Municipalities are a suitable critical case as they bear much of the practical responsibility in preparedness issues (SFS 2006:544; SFS 2006:637; SOU 2024:65). Furthermore, they are likely to be the most common point of contact between ordinary citizens and public authorities and "are therefore often seen as front-line and essential actors in preparedness" (Sataøen et al., 2024, p. 2). While fewer people have a direct relationship with the SAF, for example, almost everyone interacts with their municipality at some point, either in person or by receiving municipal communications. In addition, municipalities face the very concrete challenge of being able to provide their citizens with functioning services even in a crisis, and doing so with limited means. They are therefore dependent on high levels of individual preparedness so that they can focus their resources on prioritized groups. This makes successful communication about preparedness issues crucial for municipalities in a very hands-on way that is not comparable to other public sector organizations, making this a particularly relevant case to study.

As seen in section 2.3, the question of responsibility for preparedness has been a very prominent topic in Sweden in the 2000s. I therefore decided to look at this matter anew in the third and final study, but from a different angle. This time, I stayed with civil defence, but returned to the national level to study the MSB. As in Article II, this paper deals with legitimacy from the second perspective, the legitimation of preparedness as an important phenomenon for the organization. However, while Article II is mainly interested in the ongoing

individualization of responsibility, this paper also deals with the general discursive construction and legitimation of preparedness per se. Thus, it also focuses on why *preparedness* is needed at all, which leads to a greater emphasis on the discursive construction of threat as well. The MSB is a very relevant critical case in this respect because it was established to be the central authority responsible for the overall coordination of Swedish national preparedness (SOU 2007:31). As such, it is the director and conductor of much of the communication around preparedness, for example the national campaign Crisis Preparedness Week. With this mission comes a natural focus on the total defence system. A study of the MSB's communication can therefore help reveal the overarching legitimation strategies behind preparedness issues in Sweden. Furthermore, since the MSB is a relatively new public authority, it is also possible to follow its communication from the beginning to the present time. This makes it possible to identify possible changes in the Swedish preparedness discourse over a fairly short period of time, and to highlight how discourses can shape society and vice versa.

To conclude, although there are some tangible differences between the three case studies, they share a common focus on how preparedness issues are legitimated through the strategic use of communication. Taken together, they illuminate the Swedish public sector's communication about preparedness from several angles within the total defence system. The three studies also provide a picture of this kind of communication both in "a normal state of affairs" and during and after dramatic events such as the pandemic. In doing so, they highlight the similarities and differences in these practices, which would not have been possible if the thesis had followed its initial plan. While following a predefined structure throughout a doctoral thesis is often regarded as both commendable and practical (Dunleavy, 2003), a decision to be flexible and adapt the research to new and changing circumstances can be justified (Booth et al. 2024; Pansiri, 2009). As Booth et al. (2024) put it, "your plan will change as your research progresses – if it doesn't, you probably aren't doing your best thinking" (p. 100).

The decision to investigate legitimacy in connection to three different organizations, instead of focusing on just one, makes it possible to show the strategic value of preparedness issues even when the mode,

target audience, and goal of the communication differs. It also opens up for studying legitimacy from the two different perspectives mentioned in section 1.3.3, thereby allowing a shift in focus away from the particular organization and toward investigating preparedness as a societal phenomenon. By adopting a broader perspective on preparedness than initially planned, the project aims to gain greater relevance and significance from both academic and societal standpoints than what the original idea could provide.

4.2 (Multimodal) Critical Discourse Analysis

In order to be able to examine the underlying discourses and to question taken-for-granted assumptions about preparedness issues, I have adopted a (multimodal) critical discourse approach in this thesis. The main reason for this methodological choice is a desire to understand what aspects of preparedness are foregrounded in public sector communication, what aspects are accordingly backgrounded, and what potential legitimacy dilemmas may arise as a result. The critical discourse approach is relevant in this respect because it can both detect what does not immediately meet the eye and highlight how things could have been done differently. It can also reveal the ideological underpinnings of Swedish communication about preparedness (see Machin & Mayr, 2023).

By combining the discursive approach to legitimation (see Chapter 3) with practical tools from critical discourse analysis (CDA) and multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), it is possible to look at the smallest components of the legitimation process – basically the lines and dots that make up its language – to understand how it functions. This is highly important knowledge, given the recursive nature of legitimation and action (Vaara & Monin, 2010). Naturally, methodological modifications have been made and these are explained in detail in the individual articles. In general, though, discursive legitimation analysis (DLA) is used to theoretically understand and thematize how preparedness is legitimated in the studied communication. This is done by applying the commonly accepted categories to code the material and sort the arguments about preparedness into different groups of legitimation strategies.

For example, arguments about preparedness as an act of solidarity or "the right thing to do" have been coded as moralization, preparedness as "the reasonable thing to do" as rationalization, and preparedness "because the law says so" as authorization. This coding made it easier to spot recurring themes in the material. Meanwhile, common tools from CDA and MCDA are used to perform the more practical linguistic and visual analysis, where I look at multimodal language features on the micro-level. The use of these familiar categories and tools is a conscious choice to ensure the quality and reliability of the research, so that others can test the analyses to see whether they withstand scrutiny (see Bryman, 2016, see also section 4.4).

According to Wodak (2008, p. 2), "*discourse analysis* provides a general framework to *problem-oriented social research* [*sic*]" which allows for multiple perspectives in the analytical work. As Wodak points out, however, discourse analysis is a broad research approach that contains many subdisciplines, each with its own perspective on the analytical process. CDA, perhaps the best known of these, is the study of relationships between discourse, power, dominance, and social inequality. However, it is not homogeneous, and many different approaches can fit within it. My approach is particularly inspired by researchers such as Van Leeuwen (e.g., 2005, 2008) and Machin (e.g., Ledin & Machin, 2020; Machin, 2010, 2013; Machin & Mayr, 2023), as well as organizational researchers such as Vaara (e.g., Vaara & Monin, 2010; Vaara & Tienari, 2008; Vaara et al., 2006; Vaara et al., 2024). This means that I use the same methodological tools (see 4.2.1) as these scholars in my linguistic and multimodal analysis, but also that I share their view that communication should be understood as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that goes beyond the explicit.

Although CDA requires researchers to possess linguistic knowledge, it is not limited to linguistic analysis. Rather, CDA scholars are interested in complex social phenomena that "*require a multidisciplinary and multi-methodical approach* [*sic*]" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 2). Researchers in CDA are much more concerned with understanding the meanings, ideologies, and beliefs that lie behind language than with linguistic practice per se (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000), and Van Dijk (2009) describes it (using his preferred term CDS, critical discourse studies)

not as a method, but as a "critical *perspective*, *positio*n or *attitude* [*sic*]" (p. 62). What he emphasizes with this renaming is that it is not just about analysis but also involves theory and application. Here, however, I will use the traditional acronym CDA, arguing that it already encompasses everything described above.

Additionally, and in line with other scholars (e.g., Bouvier & Rasmussen, 2022a; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996; Ledin & Machin, 2020; Machin, 2013; Machin & Mayr, 2023), I argue that communication consists of, and consequently should be analysed as a combination of language, images, gestures, sound, and so on. This is the reason for the choice of video as the empirical material for two of the studies in the thesis. According to Bouvier and Rasmussen (2022a), a multimodal approach is advantageous because it allows attention to be paid to details as well as to how "different modes may be used to 'say' different or even contradictory things" (p. 79). It also gives more room for symbolism and implicit communication. MCDA draws on CDA as well as on social semiotics, in which a visual design is broken down into its basic components to show how they together form our understanding of the whole picture. The idea behind MCDA is that many of the same tools and principles used in linguistic analysis can also be applied to visual communication, for instance social representation, modality, and transitivity (Ledin & Machin, 2020). As with CDA, it is crucial to take a critical stance in order to reveal underlying ideologies, power relations, absences, and taken-for-granted assumptions in the text. For this reason, I view MCDA as an extension of CDA that makes it possible to investigate another kind of material but from the same starting point. This is also one of the reasons why I consider the three studies to be connected and comparable, even though they have slightly different methodological approaches.

Despite its heterogeneous character, it is generally agreed that concepts such as ideology, power, and hegemony are central to (M)CDA. Ideology refers to shared belief systems about how the world works and is a crucial factor in why certain discourses come to be accepted by society at large. It can be used to explain how ideas and values reflect the interests of dominant groups by asking who benefits from a certain discourse (Machin & Mayr, 2023). When it comes to power, research in

CDA has mostly focused on its "persuasive influence" (Machin & Mayr, 2023, p. 37). This is associated with Gramsci's (2003) concept of hegemony, which refers to how dominant groups in society manage to persuade subordinate groups to accept ideologically driven moral, political, and cultural values and institutions as natural givens. Hegemony is thus societal power, but, as Fairclough (2010) points out, it is never complete or eternal. Therefore, hegemony is about alliances and gaining approval from subordinate groups through concessions and ideological means rather than through dominance. Hegemonic power therefore depends on subordinate groups' approval of the existing order of things, Fairclough argues. The "critique" in CDA refers to a desire to unveil these power structures and hidden ideologies, that is, to reveal the latent meanings of the discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). This is also how I see my role as a critical discourse researcher in this thesis project.

4.2.1 Methodological Toolbox

To analyse the empirical material on the discursive micro-level, I have used the following concepts and tools from the (M)CDA-toolbox:

- lexicality
- modality
- imagery
- composition
- representational strategies
- agency
- exclusion
- soundscape

This selection of tools allows for investigating how people, organizations, and actions are represented in relation to preparedness issues, as well as which specific wordings, images, and sounds are used in doing so. Since these concepts are all commonly used and accepted, I will not

cite any particular author in the following description of them. However, for those interested in the details, I rely on and highly recommend the work of Van Leeuwen (2005, 2008), Fairclough (2003), Machin and Mayr (2023), Machin (2010), and Ledin and Machin (2020). It should also be noted that not all tools are applicable to all three articles, and that the independent studies have focused more or less on each of them.

Lexicality

A lexical analysis investigates the vocabulary of a text. The idea is that different lexical choices – words – will convey different meanings or values. Here, one looks at things such as connotation, presupposition, and overlexicalization. Connotation refers to the ideas and values that a word like "mother", for example, brings to mind. This could also be visual: we might physically see an image of a clown, which on a connotational level can make us think of humour or horror, or both, depending on our perspective. Presuppositions are implicit assumptions about the world, statements, or information that are presented as self-evident. Overlexicalization, in turn, refers to the overuse of repetitive and synonymous wordings, which is often a sign of ideological values or something problematic in the text. Other terms of interest in lexical analysis are abstraction, when phenomena are presented in vague, general, or non-specific terms, and in structural oppositions such as good-bad. Rhetorical concepts such as metaphor are also of interest. In this project, the lexical analysis involved careful examination of the vocabulary in the material studied and asking questions about these findings, such as: What are the connotations of certain words? And what does the use of certain metaphors imply about the organizations' worldviews.

Modality

Modality has to do with the degree of certainty or commitment of the speaker, or of the truth claim of the statement. In written or spoken text, modality can be expressed by using modal verbs such as can, may, will, and must, or adjectives and adverbs such as certainly, maybe, and presumably. A concept closely related to modality is hedging, which is a way of making statements more tentative, so as not to commit to them too strongly. This can be done in many ways, for example with

terms such as seems, think, sometimes, maybe, suggest, and many. Hedged, tentative statements such as "it may happen" and "it could happen" are examples of low modality, while more certain statements like "it must happen" and "it definitely will happen" are examples of high modality. In my analysis, I looked for modal markers such as the ones mentioned above in order to investigate how much commitment to their claims the studied organizations displayed. Finally, it should be said that modality can also be expressed in visual communication. This was not part of the analysis, however.

Imagery

Many elements of images can carry meaning, such as settings, attributes, and colours. To begin with, different visual settings convey different messages; nature, for example, can connote "naturalness", "freedom", or "innocence", while urban settings can connote "modernity" and so on. In Articles II and III, I looked at the specific settings of each video and the impressions that the settings convey. For example, one could ask: Is an interview conducted in an office setting, which conveys professionality, or in an outdoor setting, which gives a more rustic feeling? In the same way, I analysed the attributes of the participants. Appearances, props, clothing, accessories, and so on can all convey important information about a person or an event. A suit, for example, can be used to convey professionalism, while grey hair might convey wisdom and experience. In the same way, colours have symbolic meanings. Different colours represent different things. While red is the colour of love, black often symbolizes the opposite, so colour can be used to communicate ideas, attitudes, and coherence.

Composition

The composition or the perspective from which participants are visually represented affects how they are interpreted. Closeness, such as a close-up of someone's face, suggests intimacy and physical proximity, while shots from greater distances create distance from the viewer as we go from the specific to the generic. Looking at something or someone from above makes them appear small and vulnerable, while the opposite angle gives the opposite impression. When it comes to gaze, direct address, when a depicted person is looking straight at the viewer,

creates a sense of closeness and interaction. Someone who is looking out of frame allows the viewer to take on the role of observer instead, wondering what the person is thinking about. In the visual analysis, I have considered all these factors: How close are we as viewers to the person represented, from what angle are they shown, and where is their gaze directed?

Representational strategies

The way in which people are represented as social actors highlights some features of their identity while concealing others. This can be done in a number of ways, but I have focused mainly on those that group people together. To begin with, one can distinguish linguistically and visually between assimilation, where participants are represented as part of a group, and individualization, where they are represented as unique individuals. Within assimilation, it is also common to differentiate between aggregation, where individuals are numerically quantified, and collectivization, where they are represented as part of a group but not as statistics. Another way to represent people is through functionalization, where people are represented in terms of what they do, for example their work, instead of who they are as people.

All of these representational strategies have implications for the interpretation of the depicted participants. Functionalization can sound more official and thus have a legitimating effect, but it also serves to dehumanize the participants. Individualization brings us closer to the participants and makes it easier to empathize with them, while assimilation has an anonymizing and distancing effect. In addition, pronouns such as “you”, “we”, and “them” can be used to create closeness or distance to participants. To incorporate these aspects into my analysis, I looked again at the vocabulary to see how participants are described. In the case of the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF), for example, are they referred to as “soldiers” (as a group, and in terms of their function) or by their given names (as individuals)? Visually, I looked at characteristics such as appearance and clothing. Are the depicted participants represented as a group or in terms of their job function, for example by wearing a uniform, or do they have their own distinct identities? These choices provide meaningful information about how the organizations studied portray the participants in their communication.

Agency

I have also analysed the material in terms of agency, a process that is usually referred to as transitivity analysis. Agency, or the power to act in a situation, can be conveyed in visual, spoken, or written language. Somewhat simplified, transitivity analysis involves the description of events in terms of who does what to whom and how. In transitivity analysis, participants can be described as active agents, that is, in control of their actions, feelings, utterances, and so on, or as passive objects or beneficiaries of the actions. Here, I have analysed the written and spoken texts in terms of active or passive sentence constructions to see who is given agency and when, and the imagery to see who the active participants are (expressed by speaking, for example) and who are passive bystanders (expressed by listening, for example).

Exclusion

I have also canvassed the material to find what was not there that might have been expected to be present. Exclusion has to do with what actors, actions, or phenomena that are excluded from a discourse, either linguistically or visually, and it plays an important part in (M)CDA. The exclusion can be more or less radical. In suppression, something is completely removed from the description of the event. Linguistically, this can be realized, for example, by using nonfinite clauses or nominalization to delete the agent or beneficiary in favour of a passive verb. Backgrounding, on the other hand, is more about de-emphasizing actors, actions, or phenomena by putting them in the background and foregrounding someone or something else. This can be done using the same means as suppression, but in this case what is backgrounded is included somewhere else in the text. Visually, exclusion can tell us who or what is portrayed in a story and who or what is not.

Soundscape

Finally, in the multimodal analysis performed in Articles II and III, I investigated the soundscape to see how different sound elements such as music, noise, and natural sounds are used to convey meaning. For example, music can be used to create a sense of tension, suspense, or threat, but also a sense of happiness and ease. Other sounds, like a

sudden bang, can generate surprising, shocking, or frightening sensations. Meanwhile, natural (diegetic) sounds such as thunder, birdsong, or wind can create a sense of veracity and realism. To analyse the soundscape, I have noted the different sounds in each scene and how they are used in relation to each other as well as to other discursive elements such as speech, written text, and imagery, and what effect this has on the communication being studied.

4.3 The Selection of Material

The material studied originates from Swedish public sector organizations and is intended for distribution. All of it was publicly available online at the time of the study, on open websites or social media channels that do not require membership or approval. The selection was done using purposive sampling, a common sampling technique in qualitative case studies (Bryman et al., 2022). More details on the specific cases can be found in the individual articles, but this section provides a general overview of the process. First, I chose material that would be suitable for each particular study. Having made this initial selection, I then selected every unit that met specific selection criteria: in the first case, selected editorials by the Supreme Commander; in the second case, Facebook videos on individual responsibility for preparedness; and in the third case, YouTube videos on preparedness. It goes without saying that the organizations studied produce a large amount of communication material that did not meet these criteria. Purposive sampling is therefore sometimes criticized for being too subjective, but it is important to remember that this is the very point of the method, as the selection is "based on those who can give [the researcher] the most information on the study topic" (Bryman et al., 2022, p. 82).

Qualitative analysis is also often criticized for its small sample sizes and the effects this has on the generalizability of a study. However, the ability to make statistical claims is not the aim of this type of qualitative research (Bouvier & Rasmussen, 2022b). Nevertheless, sample size is a question that needs to be addressed. I resolved this issue by constructing strict selection criteria after the initial purposive sampling and then applying total selection to any unit that met these criteria. These selection criteria are specified in each article, and they resulted in 31 items

for Article I, 14 for Article II, and 50 for Article III. These may seem like small samples, but it should be kept in mind that (a) this is the entirety of the material that met the selection criteria and (b) as mentioned above, the thesis has prioritized depth over breadth of analysis.

Although the empirical material and sample sizes differed for each article, I approached all the material in a similar manner. First, to gain an overview, the content was manually coded and charted in table format, and then thematized into different topics on the macro-level. Defining topics inductively in this way is an important first step in a discourse analytical approach (Krzyżanowski, 2010). After this, the material was broken down into its discursive components using the toolbox described in section 4.2.1 in order to investigate what is going on at the micro-level. For the first article, in which only written text was analysed, this involved looking at words and sentence constructions and identifying their linguistic features. The second and third articles included video material, and so I also looked at spoken language, image composition, and sound features. When presenting the results, I then returned to the thematization of my findings, letting a few significant examples from the material illustrate the overall picture (see Bouvier & Rasmussen, 2022b).

4.4 Generalizability, Reliability, and Validity

The usefulness of concepts such as generalizability, reliability, and validity in qualitative research has been questioned from various directions over the years (e.g., Ang, 1991; Denscombe, 2004; Rosengren, 1993). However, in line with many scholars before me, I maintain that it is necessary that case studies are also interpreted through a more general lens (e.g., Halkier, 2003; Höijer, 1990; Jensen, 1995; Schrøder, 1999). There are ways to address generalizability even in case studies, and such research can naturally contribute to scientific development, just as quantitative studies can (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The critical-case approach adopted in this thesis (see 4.1) is one way of addressing generalizability. As an example, Flyvjberg mentions how Galileo was able to refute Aristotle's prevailing law of gravity with just a single experiment. Although I cannot assert a new law like gravity, I have selected cases of strategic importance for the subject matter in order to increase the

value of the findings. In doing so, I also rely heavily on the "the force of example" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 228). Here, I present three cases that I argue provide concrete, context-dependent knowledge that is useful for the further understanding of communication about preparedness. Nevertheless, the thesis focuses more on describing what *is* the case and understanding *why* it is so than on creating another "hard" theory, and this is considered a relevant goal for this kind of study (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Instead of generalizability, some researchers talk about transferability (e.g., Denscombe, 2004). This concept is similar to generalizability, in that it aims to apply research findings to areas outside the material studied. Transferability assumes that an independent person, using his or her own reasoning ability, should be able to transfer the research findings to other, similar conditions (Denscombe, 2004), which S. Larsson (2009) also refers to as generalization through context similarity. However, this requires that the person has sufficient information about the original research process and the author's interpretation of it, so-called thick descriptions (S. Larsson, 2009). Transferability has been an important part of the work with this thesis, and to ensure it, I have strived to be as transparent as possible in describing the research process. This brings us to reliability and validity. Again, the relevance of such concepts in qualitative research has been questioned (e.g., Denscombe, 2004), but issues of transparency, systematicity, and quality are, of course, also essential in this type of research.

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), in qualitative research, reliability refers to whether the research findings are consistent and reliable, meaning that they can be reproduced by another researcher at a different time. Meanwhile, validity in general refers to truthfulness, accuracy, and strength, and a valid conclusion should thus be based on solid grounds. In qualitative research, this largely refers to whether the chosen method is suitable for what the researcher wishes to investigate, so that he or she achieves what is promised (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). To ensure the reliability of the thesis, the analytical process has been carried out in a systematic way, and I have used commonly accepted tools from (multimodal) critical discourse analysis (CDA and MCDA) that others have used before me. This should help to ensure

the quality and consistency of the results. Regarding the validity of the thesis, the two overarching research questions have guided the direction of the three case studies, and these are explicitly addressed here in the joint compilation. Furthermore, the critical discourse approach used should be a highly appropriate and valid method for investigating the discursive legitimation of preparedness issues. All in all, this is in line with the reliability and validity recommendations for qualitative studies (Bryman, 2016; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

All these points aside, the essence of this discussion of generalizability or transferability is whether a single case, or three, can be relevant outside of its own context. Although this thesis investigates communication about preparedness of only three types of Swedish organizations, public sector organizations around the world share many basic similarities and prerequisites, such as being publicly funded and striving for legitimacy, to name just two (e.g., Wæraas, 2020). As mentioned before, the organizations studied are considered to be critical cases for this research problem, which means that their conditions are likely to be applicable to other similar contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This transferability has already been demonstrated between the three case studies, which, despite their individual differences, share several notable findings (see Chapter 6). Even though the organizations have unique characteristics, their communication has different target audiences, and the studied perspectives on legitimacy vary, there are still enough recurring patterns to help build hypotheses for future studies. Based on this, the findings of the thesis should also be transferable to other similar contexts. This should be particularly true for public sector organizations in other northern European countries that share many cultural characteristics with Sweden (see Cornia et al., 2016; Sataøen et al., 2024). Given the similarities between public sector organizations around the world, the knowledge of how different discursive elements and strategies work to legitimate an organization or a phenomenon should also be transferable outside the field of preparedness.

4.5 Ethical Considerations and Methodological Limitations

In this final methodological section, it is appropriate to mention my professional background in the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF). Between

2013 and 2016, I was employed as a copywriter in the Psyops Unit at the Joint Signal Regiment [*Ledningsregementet*] in Enköping. This position also required basic military training [*grundläggande militär utbildning*, GMU]. Apart from this, I also worked as a communications officer at Region Västmanland (The County Council of Västmanland) from 2016 to 2019. My professional background has given me personal insight into how communications work is conducted in public sector organizations. This means that I have a thorough understanding of the types of organizations that I study, as well as of the internal and external factors that can influence both the practices and the end products. However, because of my previous experience, I may also be particularly sensitive to certain discursive choices that would perhaps go unnoticed by people without this experience. Therefore, in order to ensure that my analysis is not tainted by personal bias, I have been meticulous in following the steps to ensure research reliability described in the previous section.

When it comes to more concrete ethical considerations during the research process, there were some questions about how to handle individual citizens who are portrayed in the material. This mainly applies to a few instances in connection with Article II, where local residents appear as experts or interviewees in videos about individual responsibility. Given that all of the material was already published online, and that these individuals were represented with name and image, there was no obvious reason to anonymize them in my work. Presumably, the municipalities in question had to get their consent to appear in these published videos, and with this consent, they should have understood that further distribution may occur. However, out of respect for their privacy, these participants are not shown visually or referred to by name. When it comes to official representatives, such as a municipal official, I do not have this concern, since they are speaking on behalf of the organization, and a certain amount of public exposure is to be expected with the occupation.

On a more general level, it is worth reflecting on the fact that I do not take into account the production or reception of these texts. Among other things, this means that I have no knowledge of the communicators' intentions with their products, or of the conditions or guidelines

that have directed the communication (other than what can be gathered from political decisions and legal documents). Nor do I have any knowledge of how the target audiences reacted to the communication or whether the campaigns were considered successful by the public sector organizations. This taps into a criticism that is sometimes levelled at critical discourse analysis (CDA), namely that it does not care about the views of "real people" or the communication professionals' intentions with the communication (Machin & Mayr, 2023). Admittedly, the three articles do not discuss factors such as economic resources, professional skills, and time pressure, even though such factors may have affected the material analysed. Although I do think these are important aspects of strategic communication, addressing them would be outside the scope of this thesis. As noted earlier in this chapter, qualitative studies favour depth over breadth, and in this study, I wanted to dig deeply into the discursive elements of communication about preparedness in order to understand how they work together to create meaning. This ambition meant that it was not possible to also concentrate on the other aspects mentioned. Whether or not this is an ethical dilemma or a limitation of the thesis is an open question, but it should nevertheless be acknowledged that there are factors behind and around this communication that are not part of the analysis.

Finally, a few words could be said about the very core of the critical discourse approach, namely the researcher's "critical stance". Like the society they are critiquing, researchers in CDA are part of and dependent on the very social structures and hierarchies they are trying to change. Researchers in CDA are no more free of social, economic, and political motives than any other academics, and their critique can therefore be seen as biased or even hypocritical (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). However, this is true of any researcher using any approach in any field. Consequently, there is no such thing as an objective and unbiased researcher, and as long as human beings are involved, this is something that we will simply have to accept. All we can do is to be as open and transparent as possible about the research process, the findings, and our motives.

5 Summary of Articles

In this section, each article is summarized in terms of its aim, findings, and methodological approach. The articles can be found in their entirety at the end of the thesis.

5.1 Article I: Becoming a "Normal" and "Ordinary" Organization Through Strategic Communication? Discursive Legitimation of The Swedish Armed Forces

Published in the International Journal of Strategic Communication in 2022. The article was co-authored with Hogne Sataøen. As the corresponding author, I was mainly responsible for the methodological sections, including material collection, the analytical work, and the discussion. Meanwhile, Sataøen was the main contributor to the theoretical framework. The end result is, of course, a group effort.

This article is based on the idea that the discourse of an organization entirely devoted to preparedness merits further attention. The focus is therefore on the legitimation of the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) as a preparedness organization, rather than the legitimation of preparedness as a societal issue. Starting from an internal strategic communication perspective, the article investigates how preparedness discourses are used to achieve the strategic goals of the military organization. More specifically, the aim is to investigate how the SAF communicate to organizational insiders in order to legitimate their organization, activities, and practices by means of discursive legitimation.

In this paper, we seek to contribute to the understanding of discursive legitimation in internal communication within the area of organizational studies. Our study attempts to build on the knowledge of discursive legitimation by focusing on a public sector organization with a unique task and mission that has faced new communication challenges due to its changing conditions and requirements. Furthermore, the SAF represent an interesting case because previous research on strategic communication in the public sector, including military organizations, has often had an external focus, where the main interest has been on how strategic communication can be used to gain legitimacy in the

eyes of the public (e.g., Cawkwell, 2019; Wæraas, 2020). However, as shown by Deverell and Wagnsson (2016), the changing situation of the SAF has also affected their internal communication. The present study is therefore an attempt to fill the knowledge gap on how discursive legitimation is used in strategic communication targeting internal audiences.

We ask the following questions: (RQ1) How do the SAF discursively legitimate their organization, activities, and practices internally? (RQ2) How can public sector organizations signal legitimacy by means of strategic communication in a context of heterogenic and dynamic expectations? Discursive legitimation analysis (DLA) is used to study 31 editorials written in the SAF's staff magazine by the Supreme Commander between 2014 and 2019 to examine how the SAF's activities and changing role in society are legitimated. A mix of legitimation strategies are identified that are highly intertwined with each other, but at times also inconsistent. Interestingly, the rationalization strategy that portrays the SAF as just like "any other organization" is particularly salient. It is consequently the similarities between the SAF and other organizations that are highlighted, rather than their differences, which runs contrary to the strategic communication of most other organization. Furthermore, this study shows that the ideal of coherency and consistency inherent in strategic communication is difficult to live up to in practice.

5.2 Article II: A Tricky Balancing Act: Legitimating Individual Responsibility for Preparedness While (Not) Communicating Public Sector Robustness

Accepted by the Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research in 2024

Community preparedness campaigns highlighting citizens' own responsibility are a common global phenomenon today. The present study discusses this growing demand for individual preparedness, which creates multiple challenges for public sector organizations when it comes to legitimacy, as there is also a common understanding that societal preparedness to a large extent depends on robust public institutions (e.g., Asp & Sjölund, 2014; Bennesved, 2020). In the light of

this, the aim of this paper is to investigate how public sector organizations discursively attempt to create legitimacy for individual responsibility for preparedness, an area that to my knowledge has not previously been studied. To this end, the study examines how public sector organizations – Swedish municipalities – try to discursively legitimate individual responsibility in audio-visual campaign materials on Facebook, and how this is balanced with communicating their own preparedness.

The following research questions have guided the study: (RQ1) How is the devolution of responsibility from the public to the individual citizen discursively constructed in audio-visual preparedness campaigns? (RQ2) How do the municipalities discursively convey their own capabilities in these campaigns? To answer these questions, I analyse 14 videos posted on the public Facebook accounts of Swedish municipalities from 2017–2021. Using multimodal discursive legitimation analysis (DLA), the study builds on the knowledge of how legitimacy is constructed for preparedness issues and contributes to the understanding of the discursive legitimation of public sector organizations. We already know *that* there is a strong trend of devolution of responsibility to the individual (e.g., Kvarnlöf, 2020; Petridou et al., 2019), but we do not know *how* this is being done discursively. The present study seeks to answer this question. The topic is certainly relevant given the current times and deserves further attention due to its timeless and borderless nature.

The findings identify two main legitimation strategies, rationalization and moralization, which are based on arguments of either self-interest or solidarity. Furthermore, the study confirms previous research showing a strong emphasis on individual (materialistic) responsibility, while the public sector absents itself from the more practical side of preparedness. The study adds to the theoretical knowledge on how discursive legitimation is produced multimodally, as previous studies in DLA have focused on written or spoken language (e.g., Aggerholm & Thomsen, 2016; Mampaey et al., 2020; Vaara & Monin, 2010; Vaara et al., 2006). Additionally, the study highlights the delicate balancing act between (not) communicating public sector robustness and simultaneously calling for increased individual responsibility.

5.3 Article III: Responsibilization as a Return to Collectivity? Legitimating the Responsibilization of Preparedness: The Case of the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB)

Published in Corporate Communications: An International Journal in 2024

This study highlights how national public institutions use communication to try to mobilize citizens and bring about a change in behaviour regarding preparedness issues. This is an increasingly important task for public actors worldwide, as health, security, and climate crises succeed one another. More specifically, the paper investigates how communication is used by a Swedish public authority responsible for crisis management and preparedness, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), to legitimate the responsibilization of preparedness, that is, how the state encourages individual citizens to take more responsibility for their safety and security.

The ongoing responsibilization of individuals in Sweden has been noted in previous research (e.g., Asp & Sjölund, 2014; Giritli Nygren & Olofsson, 2020; Kvarnlöf, 2020; Petridou et al., 2019) arguing, for example, that this new individualistic approach to preparedness contradicts the traditionally strong role of the Swedish state (O. L. Larsson, 2021), and that public sector organizations today seem to be more concerned with communicating what the state is *not* able to do (Kvarnlöf, 2020). Despite this, little is known about how this ongoing responsibilization of preparedness is discursively legitimated in Swedish public communication. The present study is an attempt to fill this gap.

The study investigates how the responsibilization of preparedness is discursively legitimated through linguistic, visual, and audio features in video material published on YouTube. Two research questions are asked: (RQ1) What themes have dominated the MSB's audiovisual communication from its founding to the present time? (RQ2) How does the MSB's communication legitimate the responsibilization of the individual through multimodal resources? To answer these questions, a multimodal discursive approach based on multimodal narrative analysis of video clips and multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) is used. A total of 50 videos published on the MSB's YouTube channel from 2011–2023 have been analysed.

The study shows how communication about preparedness and responsibilization is discursively constructed and legitimated through multimodal features, while previous research has mainly focused on verbal or written communication (Hobbins, 2017; O. L. Larsson, 2021; Rådestad & O. Larsson, 2020). The study finds that the responsibilization of preparedness is legitimated through an ongoing but evolving normalization of threat. The findings also show how responsibilization is legitimated in moralizing terms of individual contribution to society, which may indicate a return from neo-liberal values to more traditional Swedish collectivist values. However, the study also shows a continual relegation of the state to the background, which may be counterproductive if preparedness is to be seen as a joint project again.

6 Results and Discussion

In this concluding chapter, the findings of the three studies in this compilation thesis are summed up and treated in depth. First, the two research questions are reiterated and discussed in turn. I then try to understand and explain the specifics of the Swedish case, and in doing so identify a new discursive legitimation strategy called “individual collectivization”. Finally, I argue that the kind of communication studied here should be considered a specific mode of strategic communication – preparedness communication. I then discuss why such communication is of strategic importance for public sector organizations such as those in the three case studies. This final section then concludes with some suggestions for future research.

6.1 Normal, Moral, and Rational

(RQ1) How are matters of preparedness discursively constructed and negotiated in strategic communication?

Previous scholars have shown how discourses of threat have become increasingly normalized in Sweden (O. L. Larsson, 2021). Through its critical discourse approach, the thesis shows how all three organizations in the study rely heavily on such a normalizing message in their strategic communication. Regardless of the differences between the cases, the normalization of threat, and thus of preparedness, functions as an overarching legitimation strategy and as the very essence of this discourse. The legitimation of both the preparedness organization, the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF), and of preparedness per se is thus achieved through the strategic use of a perpetual threat to attract attention.

The normalization of a general threat is constructed with different discursive elements. Linguistically, the municipalities and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) tend to use lexical choices that point to the weakness of society as a whole and the effects of crises on the individual level, speaking for example of “how vulnerable our society can be”, “society is constantly facing trials”, and “concrete problems in the everyday life of many people”. Meanwhile, the SAF emphasize geographical proximity to the threat, like “in our own immediate

surroundings", "a mere two-hour flight from Stockholm", and "a map of the Baltic Sea". Often, both of these linguistic strategies clearly, yet implicitly, allude to Russia.

Visually, in the two cases that use a multimodal approach, the MSB in particular tends to use quite disturbing images of real disasters and death, while the municipalities use "softer" imagery, seeming to draw the line at forest fires and snowstorms. Both, however, use visual features such as composition, ominous colours, and contrasting settings to create a sense of imminent threat. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the budget limitations, the municipalities seem to use more in-house productions than the MSB, as can be seen from the quality of the videos. The soundscape plays an important role in this construction too, whether it consists of intense, catastrophic-sounding music or cheerful tunes used to contrast the message of threat with that of normality. This is particularly noticeable in the MSB's communication, but can also be found in some of the more "professional" (i.e., advertising agency-like) products in the municipal communication. As the findings of the thesis show, preparedness is then constructed as an acute issue that concerns everyone in society, albeit from different perspectives.

Against the background of the normalization process, preparedness is often discursively constructed in morally charged terms, a connection that has been noted previously (Fage-Butler, 2024; Giritli Nygren et al., 2021; Hunt, 2003). In the present study, this is seen both at the organizational level, for actors like the SAF, and at the individual level, for "regular" citizens in the communication of municipalities and the MSB. Undertaking preparedness measures, both as a state and as an individual, is presented as "the right thing to do", based on higher moral imperatives. First, in the SAF's communication, lexical choices such as the metaphor "a cog in the wheel" and the repeated use of "we" are used to convey that moral values such as camaraderie, pride, equality, and responsibility are desirable qualities. These values are described as not only fostering a healthy working environment for employees, but also enhancing the military preparedness of Sweden as a nation. This dual perspective on strategic communication (see Hallahan et al., 2007; Paul, 2011) was discussed in section 2.1, and the perspective

keeps shifting throughout the SAF's texts. It is therefore unclear whether the communication aims to promote the SAF as an organization or the Swedish national objectives, and at times these inconsistent strategies collide. What benefits the members of the organization (i.e., health policies and equality) is not necessarily the same as what benefits the state (soldiers who get in line and do what they are told), a fact that sometimes seems to be forgotten.

The moralization of preparedness is especially prominent when individual responsibility and responsibilization are addressed. As Article II shows, in this argument the municipalities studied make repeated moral appeals to solidarity with the most vulnerable members of society – "those who need [help] the most" – in combination with exhortations not to be a burden on society. In addition to these appeals to the conscience of the audience, there are also very hands-on claims about how to act in a morally correct way. Practice-oriented research (e.g., Johansson et al., 2021; Johansson & Vigsø, 2016) has emphasized the importance of simple calls to action in this kind of communication, something which these practitioners seem to have taken to heart. While social actions have previously been downplayed in Swedish communication around preparedness (Palm, 2009; Petridou et al., 2019), here, helping one's neighbours with food supplies and similar social actions are described both linguistically and visually as making one "a bit like a superhero".

Moral arguments for individual preparedness feature prominently in the MSB's communications, particularly in connection with the total defence system. National romanticism is one compelling way to convey the moral aspects of individual contribution to this project. Here, an important part of the discursive construction consists of appeals to traditional Swedish values that provoke emotions in the audience, such as family, equality, collectivity, nature, and summertime. This is conveyed through lexical choices, images, and sounds, such as people dancing around a maypole to the songs of national icon Lill-Babs in a video titled "When summer changes, more people are needed to help out". While individual preparedness was previously associated with materialism (e.g., Johansson & Vigsø, 2016; Kvarnlöf, 2020; Petridou et al.,

2019), this thesis shows how it is increasingly equated with the social action of individual contribution.

Alongside the moralizing strategies, however, preparedness is still very much discursively constructed in rational terms of productivity or self-interest. Although the perspectives on preparedness in these two lines of rationalization differ, they share the idea of "getting what you want". This could either be something big, such as building an effective and efficient defence, or something as mundane as being comfortable during a power outage. In the first perspective, preparedness is hence the goal, while in the second, it instead represents the means. The SAF's communication represents the first perspective, as it uses the rationalization strategy to present itself as a "modern" organization that is "normal", despite having some unusual tasks. However, it all comes down to effectiveness. "Normal" organizational features like personnel policies and policies for gender equality are presented as means for achieving a stronger Swedish defence and better military preparedness: "Gender equal armed forces are stronger armed forces. It has to do with operational effect". Again, we see the contradictory views on strategic communication in the SAF, as it becomes a way of pursuing national rather than organizational goals (see Paul, 2011). The well-being of employees is probably a pleasant side effect of such policies, but it is apparently much less important than the sovereignty of the state: "We must take care of ourselves and each other … to manage Sweden's armed defence".

The second perspective, however, which is particularly prominent in the municipal communication, but can also be found in the MSB's communication, has a more individualistic focus. Here, preparedness is discursively constructed as a way of avoiding personal inconvenience in everyday life. This is conveyed through images of rolls of toilet paper and emergency boxes and rhetorical questions like "What would you do and how would you do it if, for example, there was no running water in the faucet?" Preparedness thus becomes a matter of personal comfort and self-interest, and the most frequently proposed solution is to procure an emergency box (see Heidenstrøm & Kvarnlöf, 2018; Johansson & Vigsø, 2016; Kvarnlöf, 2020; Levac et al., 2012; Petridou et al., 2019). Despite the growing emphasis on social action and

community, the findings of the thesis also suggest that the idea of preparedness as having personal supplies remains strong.

6.2 Vague and Downplayed vs. Capable and Moral

(RQ2) What underlying ideas and values about the role, capability, and responsibility of the public sector vis-à-vis the individual citizen can be detected in these strategic communication practices?

The findings from the three critical discourse studies show several interesting trends when it comes to issues of hegemony and power. These findings pinpoint the different characteristics of the studied organizations and the different perspectives on legitimacy taken in the papers, but also reveal similarities that are somewhat surprising.

To begin with, the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) are presented as a prominent and capable actor with great agency and responsibility for Swedish preparedness as well as for the global security situation. This is done through self-confident wordings of high modality such as: "The Swedish Armed Forces are very much in-demand internationally. Our contributions … are very important". Unsurprisingly, the need for a strong military capacity is very salient in the SAF's communication, and this goes hand in hand with explicit and implicit demands for more budgetary allocations: "… skill shortages and vacancies are straining the organization. Solving the situation is both a responsibility of commanders and a matter of resources".

At the same time, though, the SAF is concerned about presenting itself as just another organization. This is surprising, considering the stream of research that has shown how strategic communication is increasingly regarded by public sector organizations as a tool for branding and reputation management (Bulotaite, 2003; Byrkjeflot & Angell, 2007; Fredriksson, 2021; Haider & Lee, 2008; Luoma-aho, 2007; Wæraas, 2010, 2020). Here, the SAF's "ordinariness" is conveyed in discussions about recruitment policies, well-established personnel policies, and concern for psychosocial health, as well as in common recruitment terms such as "career", "attractive opportunity", and "high-quality education". In this way, military work is discursively constructed as one job among others, and the uniqueness of the SAF is downplayed.

The SAF are thus using this communication to position themselves in relation to other organizations (see Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000) through alignment instead of differentiation. This can be seen, for example, in the use of the colloquial term “work”, as in “working environment” and “working in the Swedish Armed Forces”, instead of the more solemn sounding “serve” that highlights the dedication and hierarchy often associated with the military. In line with this, war, violence, and danger are discursively toned down in the material studied, although they are very real factors in military life. Instead, euphemisms are used such as “the worst that can happen”, “peace operations”, “maintaining security”, and “operational environments”. Paradoxically, backgrounding problematic topics makes them even more prominent, and as a critical discourse researcher, one cannot help but wonder who benefits from this evasive communication. These kinds of discursive choices might give employees very inaccurate expectations about their job, which may ultimately affect the legitimacy of the organization (see Wæraas, 2010). In line with Wæraas, I therefore argue that organizations such as the SAF “should not try to tone down what they are, what they do, and why they do it” (p. 542).

Speaking of toning things down, the SAF consistently downplay their role and agency in addressing organizational issues such as diversity and harassment. Instead, individual responsibility is underscored: “this work must also always begin with you”. When it comes to personnel issues, the SAF do not offer any concrete solutions other than that “everyone [must] do their part”. Considering the hierarchical nature of the military organization, which is very visible in other parts of the communication, the SAF come across as surprisingly powerless in these matters. It is clear, therefore, that their efforts to be perceived as a modern organization that embraces softer “people values” (see Wæraas, 2010) are also fraught with communicational challenges. Ultimately, though, it is a very traditional and hierarchical organization. Anything and everything “has to do with operational effect”, and although not explicitly stated, it is strongly implied that a prerequisite for the organization’s success is that its members just follow orders. This hierarchical tradition can also be seen in how, in contrast to the other two cases, it tends to refer to impersonal decision-making structures such as

political decisions, policies, and reports in the legitimation of itself and its tasks.

While the SAF highlight their own agency, at least up to a point, the other public sector organizations studied are largely backgrounded (see Kvarnlöf, 2020; O. L. Larsson, 2019, 2021; Petridou et al., 2019; Rådestad & O. Larsson, 2020). To begin with, the studied municipalities' roles and capabilities in preparedness issues are described in rather vague terms, if at all, and are most often limited to helping only the most vulnerable members of society. This argument is often made by a well-dressed appointed expert, such as a municipal official. Although there is support for this in the law, this expert authority very rarely cites the relevant legislation, such as Prop. 2020/21:30. This reluctance has been noted previously as well (Svenbro & Wester, 2023). Instead, the experts reiterate that the municipalities' main task in a situation of crisis is to keep important societal functions running and to take care of "those who need [help] the most". Even in the few cases where the municipalities are described as "in control of the situation", their tasks and capabilities are very rarely specified further. Because of this vagueness, they come across as rather powerless actors.

The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), on the other hand, almost completely avoids discussing its own role in preparedness issues. Instead, its communication largely refers to preparedness as a joint project, the total defence system, to which all parts of society can contribute. To illustrate the moral appeal of this contribution, people in public service occupations like the military or health care are represented as highly esteemed but nevertheless regular people who take the subway to work. This kind of message also has obvious links to the preparedness campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s (see Cronqvist, 2009). Today, though, the focus is mostly on the individual citizen's contribution to this project, and what is shared with the state gets lost in the discursive construction. This focus on the role of the individual is illustrated by different lexical and visual representational strategies. Linguistically, there is a focus on "we" and "you", where "we" refers to a group of people but not necessarily (very rarely, actually) the public sector. Visually, for example, people are shown getting into physical shape, cooking with limited resources, and dressed as representatives

of different volunteer organizations. These representatives then come together one by one to form a strong group – the "we". While previous findings have emphasized (and criticized) the value of the personal rather than the communal in public sector communication about preparedness (Sparf, 2015), this latter perspective is partly new.

The fact that both of these public actors focus so clearly on the individual citizen's responsibility for preparedness, while backgrounding the role of the public, creates a perceived imbalance in the delegation of tasks. Regardless of one's view on an imagined social contract between state and citizen (see Cassel et al., 2024; O. L. Larsson, 2019), these two studies show a very heavy emphasis on the individual citizen's role in this supposedly "joint" deal. As Hobbins (2017) notes, this could lead to "an increasing scepticism towards institutions" (p. 277). One can also detect, in the studied communication, the construction of the ideal citizen as a rational, capable, and responsible individual with the physical, mental, and financial capacity to provide for his or her own well-being as well as that of his or her peers. The ideal citizen is also a person who has the time and skills needed to contribute to a civil defence organization. While it is explicitly stated that those who do not fit this description will be taken care of, this is only the case, for example, if they are in elderly care. Lacking the right knowledge, resources, or motivation is not an acceptable excuse. Overall, this creates a division between "us" and "them", between the "capable" and the "incapable" (see Rådestad & O. Larsson, 2020). Given the materialistic view of preparedness that is still very prevalent in this communication, being incapable could simply come down to being poor (see Sparf, 2015).

To summarize, we can discern in the communication the idea of a somewhat powerless Swedish welfare state that values the collective but is also highly concerned with productivity and its own limited resources, and the ideal of a rational, capable, but also morally guided individual who is equally concerned with his or her own well-being and the greater good of society. However, given previous findings on the public sector's low trust in the preparedness capability of individuals (Hobbins, 2017; Kvarnlöf, 2020; Lidskog & Rabe, 2022), it is doubtful whether even the organizations themselves believe that such an ideal citizen really exists.

6.3 Understanding the Swedish Case

Previous research has demonstrated a widespread materialistic focus in communication about preparedness, which is concerned with stocking up on supplies (e.g., Kvarnlöf, 2020; Levac et al., 2012; Petridou et al., 2019). In Sweden, this communication has specifically focused on the responsibilization of preparedness, where individual citizens are assigned increasing responsibility for their safety and security (e.g., Cronqvist, 2009; O. L. Larsson, 2021; Rådestad & O. Larsson, 2020). Swedish scholars have also noted an ambivalence in this kind of communication between traditional, collectivist social-democratic values and modern neo-liberal ideas of individual independence and responsibility (Cronqvist, 2009; O. L. Larsson, 2021).

The findings of the thesis reflect this ambivalence and show how the discursive foundations of the studied communication are still very much based on the contradiction between a strong welfare state and strong calls for responsibilization. However, the focus on the former seems to be diminishing, as the role of the public sector is consistently backgrounded. Adding to this, the thesis shows an intense moralization of belonging to and contributing to the Swedish collective, which increasingly seems to emphasize the communal over the individual. Despite the previously noted influences of neo-liberal values in Swedish preparedness issues, the thesis then finds that the ideology of collectivism remains strong, especially in connection with discourses about the total defence system. Nevertheless, the idea of collectivism is something that mainly concerns the individual level and not so much the state.

Based on the findings of the thesis, it is possible to identify a recurring legitimation strategy that stands outside of Vaara et al.'s (2006) original five. I define this new legitimation strategy as "individual collectivization". As a subcategory of moralization, individual collectivization pinpoints the main message of this communication about preparedness and shows how conflicting values are combined in the same argument to pursue a single goal (see Cronqvist, 2009; Giritli Nygren & Olofsson, 2021). Individual collectivization is thus a clear example of a culturally bound legitimation strategy (see Reyes, 2011) that is very typical for the Swedish case. On the one hand, solidarity and collectivity are highly

valued, but on the other hand, the individual citizen is regarded as independent and free, and as such responsible for his or her own happiness and well-being. However, individual collectivization does not primarily promote autonomy and freedom (cf. Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015). Instead, it is notable how the “we” is always superordinate to the “me”, and how solidarity with the weak, the importance of being a cog in the wheel, and equality across hierarchical levels are promoted as core values of Swedish society.

At the same time, the complexity of this communication shines through, as the ideal Swedish citizen is described as independent and capable of taking care of him or herself, as well as of others. Interestingly, this ideal is applicable to all three studies, even when the communication targets internal members of the organization, as in Article I. In this case, employees of the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) are made individually responsible for handling health and safety issues at work, instead of it being a general leadership matter. Organizational issues that likely depend on entrenched structures and traditions then become a matter of employees doing “their part”. One might well ask why improving women’s working conditions in the SAF must “always begin with you [the employee]” rather than with things like gender equality policies, adapted equipment, and enlightened leadership. Such discursive choices, which despite their individual differences can be seen across all three cases, make the highly valued collectivity appear like mainly a one-sided obligation. In the end, then, the ideal of personal independence and capability mostly comes down to not burdening the collective by taking up unnecessary resources.

Blach-Ørsten et al. (2023) argue that discourses that promote individual responsibility and solidarity in this way are only possible in high-trust societies such as Sweden. In the studied material, there is undoubtedly more talk about what the individual citizen should do for society than what society should do for the individual citizen (or the employee for the employer, in the case of the SAF). This is especially prominent in the two articles that deal with individual responsibility. Here, we are repeatedly told that the individual citizen should contribute by increasing his or her own personal preparedness, helping the neighbours, or joining a civil defence organization. The fact that this may come at a

personal cost – financial or social – is largely ignored. However, it is made very clear that due to limited resources, society – here personified by the municipalities and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) – must concentrate on its own tasks, and that it will only help its most vulnerable citizens in the event of a crisis. Although the state is not completely excluded, the backgrounding of its role and tasks implies a lack of agency and power that is surprising in this kind of communication. It also creates a perceived imbalance between the state and the individual in the much-vaunted total defence project as well as in the basic social contract that most Swedes agree with (Cassel et al., 2024). Returning to the introduction of this thesis, this might raise questions about the vulnerability of the state and of its ability to protect us.

Another interesting feature of the Swedish case is how the historically strong ideologies of neutrality, equality, and consensus cause even a military organization like the SAF to tone down its own traditional values of hierarchy, power, and readiness to use force, even in its internal communication. Previous research has shown that public actors try to tone down parts of their tasks that are perceived as "non-communicable" (Stenkvist, 2024), and this could be another sign of the increasing marketization of the public sector (Deverell et al., 2015; C. Eriksson & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2021). It is worth noting, however, that what cannot be communicated seems to be the core operations of the organization. Perhaps this can be explained by the centuries of peace that have made discourses of war and threat seem distant, along with the substantial weakening of the military's role in Swedish society in the late 20th century (see Agrell, 2010). However, with the increasing focus on preparedness and the expansion of the armed forces, Article I shows how the SAF must now try to change the script that Sweden's surroundings are stable and safe. There is certainly a delicate balance to be struck between communicating the urgency of the situation but not the fragility of the state, which can be seen in all three empirical studies, but is most pronounced in the SAF's communication. This might also be the reason why "sensitive" words such as "war", "death", and "Russia" are excluded from the SAF's discourse, even when the message clearly seeks to create a sense of imminent danger.

Notably, though, the MSB seems less concerned about the use of such potential triggers. In fact there are several examples where the MSB uses various discursive elements to create messages of a quite apocalyptic nature, including disturbing images of real-life disasters and fictional scenarios, and bombastic music with catastrophic connotations. There seems to be no concern for balance here; instead, the discursive choices pinpoint *both* the urgency of the matter *and* the fragility of the state. The difference between these two cases could perhaps partly be explained by the different target audiences of the communication. Balancing a message of external threat with reassurance about the state's capability may be more important for the SAF, which are primarily speaking to those who should respond to such threats – their own members. Meanwhile, the MSB may feel less need to reassure its more anonymous audience about the robustness of the state. The MSB may even find that a less balanced approach in this respect is more conducive to raising awareness of the issue.

Of course, the timing of the communication is another probable explanation of these different strategies regarding alarming messages about the nature of the threats. As mentioned previously, the study on the SAF covers material from 2014–2019, before the second phase of Russia's war on Ukraine and Sweden's accession to NATO. Today, the rhetoric is undoubtedly different, as there is no longer a need to convince others of the instability of Sweden's surroundings. The changes in public opinion should give the SAF more wiggle room to make tougher discursive choices today. Interestingly, though, when one compares this case with that of the MSB, there is very little difference in the MSB's communication regarding threats before and after the events mentioned above. The MSB is seemingly just as inclined to use threatening, apocalyptic messages in a "normal state of affairs" as when pandemics, war, and military alliances have turned everything upside down. One explanation of this more aggressive approach may be that the MSB, as a significantly younger organization, has a greater need to position itself and justify its raison d'être than the SAF. The differences between written and multimodal media formats might also affect the communication, as the latter by its nature allows for more dramatic and complex messages. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy and somewhat

surprising that the MSB's discursive construction of threat comes across as consistently more harsh than that of the SAF.

The different approaches to threat can probably also be explained by the different perspectives on legitimacy that are taken in the two studies. Since the SAF are using this communication to legitimate themselves as an organization, they naturally cannot make discursive choices that make them come across as fragile. The MSB, on the other hand is seeking to legitimate preparedness as a societal issue, and from this perspective, it might make sense to focus more on urgency, threat, and danger. The normalization strategy could thus be a way of priming individual citizens to undertake preparedness measures by making them more aware of different risks and dangers (see Garland, 2001). However, by constructing this as a potpourri of imminent threats with very little reassurance that the public sphere can and will protect its citizens, the recipients of this communication may be left with a sense of a complete breakdown of security in all aspects of society and life. As previous research has pointed out (Lidskog, 2016; Roper et al., 2004; Suchman, 1995; Wæraas, 2010, 2020), this may ultimately have a negative impact on the legitimacy of the organizations that are expected to protect us.

Speaking of balance, there is an innate conflict between the nature of a crisis and people's expectations that society should always function as normal. This conflict is also reflected in the studied communication, particularly in Article II. Swedish people have exceptionally high trust in the state (Asp & Sjölund, 2014; Cornia et al., 2016; Johansson, Sohlberg et al., 2023) and most Swedes believe that the state should protect them from harm (Cassel et al., 2024). However, while "the general public expects society to function perfectly" (Hobbins, 2017, p. 274), such high expectations may be difficult to meet in a crisis. The very definition of a crisis is that things do not function as normal, and it is perhaps unreasonable for Swedes to expect otherwise. Backgrounding the role of the public sector and foregrounding the responsibility of the individual might therefore be a way for the studied organizations to address a perceived problem and present a more realistic view of society's capabilities. However, given the many formulations about how "society should function as normal, even in a crisis" that are particularly prominent in the municipal communication, the public sector also seems

unwilling to abandon these high expectations of normality. However, as Hobbins (2017) argues, if the idea is that people should take preparedness seriously, contradictory messages about what should be expected in an actual crisis may be counterproductive.

6.3.1 Beyond the Discursive Level?

When trying to understand the studied cases, it is also worth noting that at least two of the organizations are quite clear examples of the previously mentioned institutional pluralism (see section 3.1.1). The Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) are perhaps the most telling example of an organization subjected to multiple and sometimes conflicting demands. The fact that the rules, norms, and culture of the military sphere are very different from those of the wider public sector could explain why the SAF put so much emphasis on legitimating themselves as an organization like any other. This could also explain why strategic communication, which is normally used to make organizations stand out from the crowd (e.g., Wæraas, 2010, 2020), is used in the opposite way by the SAF, in order to blend in. Institutional pluralism might also help explain the discursive legitimation strategies of the municipalities studied. The backgrounding of the municipalities' tasks in crisis preparedness could be understood as a response to the various demands to which they are already subjected and to their key role in maintaining important societal functions, which requires them to prioritize.

The other concept related to legitimacy mentioned in section 3.1.1, isomorphism, could also help explain the communication studied in all three empirical cases. Coercive isomorphism clearly occurs through national regulations, such as political policies about preparedness (e.g., Prop. 2020/21:30), and forces these organizations to pursue certain goals with their communication. Meanwhile, normative isomorphism and the professionalization of communicators could explain why similar discursive strategies are used in this communication. Mimetic isomorphism may also explain the discursive construction of the studied communication. This is probably most noticeable for the SAF, which, due to their recent history of uncertainty regarding budgets, personnel, defence policies, etc., may feel under pressure to imitate other organizations in order to show that they are adapting to their changing

surroundings. However, as noted above, this is not a thesis in institutional theory, and it does not test or prove whether organizational characteristics like these affect strategic communication. However, it should be noted, and perhaps investigated further, that there are possible explanations for the discursive choices that go beyond the discursive foundations of ideology and the present thesis' finding of individualized collectivization.

6.4 Preparedness Communication as a Mode of Strategic Communication

A thesis project takes place over an extended period of time, and there is no denying that much has happened with our world since 2019, when this work commenced. The findings of each case study are of course time-bound and are best understood in their specific context. Back in 2019, conscription had just been reinstated in Sweden, we had never heard of Covid-19, and Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine was still in the future. Since 2019, Swedish preparedness legislation has also changed, and the responsibilization of the individual is now supported by law. This thesis covers material from 2011–2023 and shows how the dramatic changes during that period have affected the discursive strategies used in the legitimation of preparedness, but also how the strategies have largely remained the same. While there has been a continuous normalization of threat, the moralization of individual contribution has become increasingly prominent as the focus on the total defence model has increased. At the same time, the rationality of taking preparedness measures at all levels of society is ever present. The ongoing discursive construction of preparedness as a normal, moral, and rational thing thus appears to be highly strategic, both in terms of legitimating the studied organizations themselves and legitimating the Swedish preparedness project per se.

Previous scholars have already pointed out the strong interrelation between legitimacy and strategic communication (Aggerholm & Thomsen, 2016; Lischka, 2019). Based on the findings of the thesis, I would like to add preparedness issues to that mix. Because of its strategic importance in the legitimation of certain organizations and their tasks, I argue that the kind of communication studied here should be regarded

as a specific mode of strategic communication. From now on, I will refer to it as “preparedness communication”. The concept refers to communication activities aiming to increase the ability of individuals and society to anticipate and handle different kinds of large-scale emergencies or crises (see Lidskog & Rabe, 2022; Staupe-Delgado & Kruke, 2018). While previous research has stressed the importance of such communication (Longstaff & Yang, 2008; Rasmussen, 2017), this thesis has shown in three case studies how preparedness communication is an integral part of the public sector’s overarching strategic communication, in times of both stability and uncertainty.

While some would refer to this as simply the precrisis stage of crisis communication (e.g., Coombs, 2014), I find it useful to regard preparedness communication as a separate concept with its own specific characteristics. I thus take a more narrow approach to crisis communication, arguing that it should be regarded as a response to an acute and concrete situation (see Johansson et al., 2021), while preparedness communication also involves anticipating, preventing, and resisting a wide range of emergencies (see Staupe-Delgado & Kruke, 2018). In contrast to crisis communication, preparedness communication refers to something that may or may not happen, and that may be either concrete or more generally described. Although this has clear connections to risk communication (Johansson et al., 2021), I argue that there are important differences between these two types of communication, and that they therefore can be distinguished.

To begin with, I would argue that the key words “large-scale” and “different kinds” in the definition pinpoint the gravity and scale of what preparedness communication is about. This excludes more limited risks, such as mould spores at a primary school or asbestos fibres at a municipal swimming pool (see Sataøen et al., 2024), which should instead be regarded as risk communication. Having said that, risk communication could of course also refer to risks of great magnitude (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020), and therefore, the main reason for my argument lies in the strategic importance of preparedness communication. Arguably, successful risk communication can have a positive impact on the general public’s perceptions of an organization, for example when it comes to trust (e.g., Oshita, 2019). However, while risk

communication is ultimately about keeping people safe (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020), preparedness communication has a broader strategic, political, and societal agenda. It could therefore also be regarded as an attempt to position an organization, set a political agenda, or increase budget allocations. Given this political perspective, I argue that public sector organizations, which are dependent on political decisions and public support to maintain their legitimacy (see Wæraas, 2020), are the main entities that engage in preparedness communication.

I therefore argue that the way in which the organizations studied communicate around preparedness issues can have serious consequences for their legitimacy (see Lidskog, 2016; Roper et al., 2004). Preparedness communication is therefore a strategically important tool for gaining and maintaining organizational legitimacy (see Agger Nielsen & Salomonsen, 2012; Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016; Wæraas & Maor, 2014). Let me conclude by explaining why I make this argument. In all three cases, the communication studied seems not only to aim at a desired attitudinal or behavioural change in the target audience, but also strongly contributes to legitimating the organizations and their main tasks (see Falkheimer & Heide, 2022a). For example, by normalizing the risk of war in Sweden, the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) highlight their own importance as a preparedness organization, contribute to an increasingly prominent societal discourse on threat and preparedness, and thereby strengthen the argument that more resources need to be allocated for Sweden's defence. While the general claim of an increased threat level and a consequent need for preparedness is not necessarily wrong, there is an interdependence between it and the organization itself that needs to be noted.

The reasoning thus goes like this: if preparedness is needed because of a looming threat, there must also be a need for public actors that know how to handle such issues. Preparedness communication consequently becomes a strategic tool for staying relevant, so that the organization can continue to do what it believes it should be doing. Sometimes, as with the SAF, this is done rather explicitly: the global security situation is deteriorating; hence we need a stronger defence. Other times, as with the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), it is less about legitimating the organization itself and more about legitimating its claim to

existence – the need for preparedness at all levels of society. The municipalities fall somewhere in between and are interesting in their own right, because here it largely becomes a matter of legitimating *a limitation* of their tasks. In all three cases, though, the strategic importance of this communication for the organizations becomes clear. It is a question of efficiency, legitimacy, and ultimately, of survival.

The thesis furthermore shows the many challenges that come with preparedness communication. Although the thesis does not make normative claims, critical studies are also relevant for practitioners as they can raise awareness of underlying values and encourage new ways of thinking (Alvesson, 2021). As Alvesson notes, this is particularly important for the public sector. However, as Alvesson further argues, it requires the researcher to be "straightforward" about the practical relevance of the research. I would therefore like to conclude this section with some overarching points for communication practitioners to reflect on:

- Preparedness communication is highly dependent on the discursive construction of a message, that is, the micro-levels of communication. Practitioners should consider how different discursive elements, such as words, images, and sounds, affect the overall message, and how these elements can support or contradict each other.

- Preparedness communication is a tricky balancing act. An excessive focus on threats and dangers can create an image of a weak, fragile state and a society in complete decay, which may damage the public sector's legitimacy. Communicators need to carefully consider how to balance messages of threat with reassurances of the state's robustness, or at the very least be aware of the consequences of choosing not to.

- Preparedness communication about individual responsibility tends to relegate the public sector's responsibilities almost entirely to the background. This creates a perceived imbalance in the delegation of tasks. Being more explicit about what the public sector will and should do in the event of a crisis, can enable a more balanced view of responsibilities.

- Preparedness communication appears to be challenged by the inherent conflict between the nature of a crisis and people's – even the public sector's – high expectations of a functioning society. Reassurances in public sector communication that everything will still function as normal may create unrealistic expectations that cannot be met. Again, a more balanced message, for example one that does not emphasize the word "normal", could lead to a more realistic view of what a crisis entails.

- Preparedness communication sometimes suffers from being overly driven by a market perspective. For example, the urge to tone down an organization's core functions because they might be seen as "non-communicable" might lead to vague and misleading perceptions. Practitioners should be open about what an organization is and what it does, in both internal and external communication.

- Preparedness communication tends to emphasize the idea of an "ideal citizen", which excludes many people from the message. Professional communicators should consider the impact this may have on people who, for whatever reason, do not fit the mould of a moral and rational citizen. They should also consider how this may affect the goal of the communication.

To conclude, I would like to summarize in one sentence the relevance of the discursive approach taken in this work: how we talk affects how we view the world. We must therefore always be mindful of the recursiveness of discourse (Fairclough, 1992; Vaara & Monin, 2010). By normalizing, moralizing, and rationalizing certain ideas about preparedness, we run the risk of contributing to a rather one-sided view of the world, a world of constant fear and threat with very limited possibilities for moral and rational action. We also run the risk of dividing people into in-groups and out-groups by categorizing them as capable or incapable based on their physical, mental, or financial resources. As I have tried to show in this thesis, preparedness communication is thus not only a powerful tool for achieving organizational goals and legitimacy, but it can also be a means for conveying greater underlying values and ideas about how society and its citizens should be and behave. Therefore, as we observe these campaigns, we should take a minute or

two to reflect on the ideological basis of this communication, instead of just accepting these ideas about preparedness as unquestioned truths. Highlighting this effect of ideology on strategic communication is something to which critical studies like the present one can contribute, not only regarding preparedness issues, but also in the research field as a whole. In doing so, the thesis reflects the comprehensiveness and heterogeneity of strategic communication as a research field (Jacobs, 2025) and paves the way for further studies of this kind.

6.4.1 Suggestions for Future Studies

There are, of course, several other perspectives that could be taken that would further the understanding of public sector preparedness communication. Here, I will present some suggestions based on other approaches to case selection, methodology, and theoretical framework that could be fruitful in this endeavour.

First, the thesis presents three cases from the Swedish context, where the total defence system is a key concept, both historically and in the present time. It would be interesting to broaden the scope of future studies to include cases from other national contexts, with other preparedness systems. Such comparisons have indeed been made before (Petridou et al., 2019; Sataøen et al., 2024), but not from a legitimation perspective. Investigating how preparedness issues are legitimated elsewhere could help to advance the understanding of preparedness communication as a matter of strategic importance for public sector organizations. Two possible avenues could be explored. First, one could study countries that are similar to Sweden in terms of their political system and culture. How, for example, do municipalities in other high-trust societies such as Germany try to legitimate individual responsibility for preparedness? Are there similarities or differences to the Swedish case? This would make it possible to test whether the findings of the thesis are largely transferable to similar contexts, or if they are dependent on specific legal, political, and cultural factors. Secondly, one could study states that are very different from Sweden. What discursive legitimation strategies are used by the military in a state where the army has a more unquestioned status, such as the USA? And how do public sector organizations in less state-oriented countries than Sweden

communicate about responsibilization? Such questions might shed light on whether there is anything universal about preparedness communication that has more to do with the topic itself than the given context.

To improve the understanding of the specific Swedish case, similar questions to those in this thesis could be asked, but about other types of public sector organizations. These could include regional county councils, rescue services, and the police. While there have been previous studies of such organizations' communication (e.g., Rasmussen, 2017; Sjöberg et al., 2024), they have taken other starting points than the discursive legitimation perspective. Adding other organizations to the mix would therefore provide further insights into the strategic importance of preparedness communication for the public sector. It might also shed new light on how discursive legitimation practices differ or overlap between different organizations. In such studies, it would also be highly relevant to consider the rapid development of preparedness issues in Swedish society, as was mentioned at the beginning of section 6.4. One could thus continue the tradition of making historical overviews such as those of Cronqvist (2009) and Kvarnlöf (2020), but focus instead on one public actor's communication, or on a single topic, like voluntary defence organizations, in order to reveal discursive changes in legitimation over time.

For researchers with a specific interest in Swedish preparedness communication, much more could be done in terms of methodological approach and material selection. As stated in section 4.5, the present thesis does not consider the reception of the communication, which would make for a highly interesting and relevant follow-up study. Future reception studies or effect studies of particular campaigns, similar to that of Johansson and Vigsø (2016) but with a greater focus on legitimation, could improve our understanding of how legitimacy is created in relation to preparedness issues and give important insights into the impact of this kind of communication. In addition, interview studies with the professional communicators behind these campaigns could reveal the intentions behind this communication, something that is also not covered by the present study. As shown by Lidskog and Rabe (2022), interview studies are a valuable source of information

about practitioners' knowledge of and attitudes toward preparedness issues. Further interview studies could therefore provide insights into the practitioners' awareness of the challenges mentioned in section 6.4, as well as of how consciously they make different discursive choices.

In addition, since qualitative studies usually favour depth over breadth (see Chapter 4), much could be gained by broadening the selection of material. As I mentioned in section 4.3, the investigated organizations naturally produce a great deal of other communication that would be of interest for analysis, such as press briefings, internal documents, interviews, advertisements, etc. For future researchers following a different methodological and material path, it is also worth reflecting on the affordances that come with certain types of media and material, and the effects these could have on the communication studied.

Finally, the thesis investigates public sector preparedness communication from a discursive legitimation perspective. Switching the theoretical framework would be fruitful both for the understanding of the particular Swedish case and for advancing the knowledge of preparedness communication as a part of the research field of strategic communication in general. The institutional perspective, which receives some attention in the thesis, is one such framework that could contribute more knowledge in both of these respects. From an institutional perspective, for example, it would be highly relevant to examine the effects of organizational characteristics like those mentioned in sections 3.1.1 and 6.3.1 on public sector preparedness communication. This could provide more insight into the normative and coercive pressures faced by public sector organizations responsible for preparedness communication. Such pressures also include expectations coming from the current media system, both external media and the organizations' own social media channels. All in all, there is much more to be learned about the discursive legitimation of preparedness in public sector organizations, and judging by the times we live in, the topic will remain relevant for years to come.

7 References

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