

CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING THE TOTAL DEFENCE CONCEPT IN THE DEFENCE SYSTEM OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

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Abstract: *The Total Defence Concept, officially proclaimed in Serbia in 2023, presents a defence policy approach designed to enhance national resilience and preparedness in the face of contemporary security challenges. This paper analyses the challenges associated with implementing the concept within the defence system of the Republic of Serbia, while leaving room for further research on broader national security implications. Each challenge has been systematically identified through content analysis of the Total Defence Concept Summary, legal and normative framework of the Republic of Serbia, etc., which enabled the mapping of key issues based on expert assessment and analytical deduction. Following the identification process, possible solutions have been formulated to improve the implementation of the Total Defence Concept, drawing on insights from both the content analysis and relevant literature. The findings highlight that the most pressing challenges lie within legal, training, and financial domains. The study concludes that overcoming these barriers would significantly strengthen Serbia's defence capabilities and deterrence potential, aligning with its status as a militarily neutral state. By addressing these challenges, implementing the Total Defence Concept can contribute to a more resilient and adaptive society and defence system, ensuring a comprehensive approach to national security.*

Keywords: Total Defence Concept, The Republic of Serbia, Military Neutrality, Defence System, Deterrence

1. Introduction

While many European countries have successfully integrated the Total Defence Concept into their national defence strategies, the Republic of Serbia faces a distinct set of challenges in adapting and implementing this model within its existing security and defence framework.

Historically, the foundations of total defence were laid in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia through the Strategy of Total People's Defence and

Social Self-Protection, adopted in 1969. This model promoted a broad societal approach to national defence, combining military, civilian, and ideological components. However, following the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the subsequent emergence of independent states, this strategy was largely abandoned. Today, Serbia's geopolitical positioning presents both an opportunity and a constraint. As a candidate for membership in the European Union, Serbia has aligned

itself with unions' standards in many policy areas. However, due to historical experiences and prevailing geopolitical considerations [1], it has chosen not to pursue NATO (or any other existing military alliance) membership, thereby remaining outside formal military alliances that offer collective defence guarantees. This military neutrality has prompted Serbia to explore alternative models for ensuring national security and resilience.

In this context, the reintroduction and modernisation of the Total Defence Concept emerges as a logical and necessary step to enhance the country's autonomous defence capabilities. Recognising the complexity of this endeavour, this research seeks to identify the core challenges associated with implementing the Total Defence Concept in the Republic of Serbia's contemporary defence system. The object of the research was the Total Defence Concept and its potential application within the institutional and strategic framework of the Republic of Serbia.

To achieve this objective, a combination of methodological approaches has been employed, including content analysis of the Total Defence Concept summary, legal and normative framework, and relevant literature review. These methods aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the structural, legal, operational, societal, and other factors that influence the feasibility and effectiveness of adopting the Total Defence Concept in Serbia. Furthermore, the paper will propose initial solutions to help address these challenges, with the goal of enhancing the capabilities of the Republic of Serbia's defence system and ensuring its effective adaptation to contemporary security threats.

2. The Total Defence Concept of the Republic of Serbia

In the beginning of 21st century, numerous European states, such as Sweden, Finland, and Austria, have either developed or

revised their defence policies in response to shifting security dynamics and varying levels of integration within defence cooperation frameworks [2]. The adoption of such policies reflects a broader recognition that modern conflicts increasingly extend beyond conventional military engagements, incorporating hybrid threats such as cyber warfare, disinformation campaigns, and economic coercion. Recent policy shifts in countries such as Sweden, Germany, and Austria underscore a growing emphasis on national resilience, self-reliance, and the capacity to mobilise society in the face of evolving security challenges [3]. This trend highlights the necessity of a comprehensive, whole-of-society approach to national defence, as reliance on traditional military deterrence alone is no longer sufficient.

In this context, Serbia's adoption of the Total Defence Concept aligns with contemporary strategic imperatives, ensuring that its defence framework is adaptable to the complexities of modern warfare and capable of addressing a broad spectrum of threats through an integrated civil-military response. The Total Defence Concept represents a comprehensive strategic framework that integrates military, civilian, and societal capabilities to enhance national resilience and preparedness. It is designed to ensure that all elements of society - state institutions, the private sector, and individual citizens - contribute to national defence efforts. Rooted in the principles of deterrence, resilience, and cooperation, the Total Defence Concept is set to enable the Republic of Serbia to effectively respond to contemporary security threats while maintaining its policy of military neutrality.

The Total Defence Concept was first mentioned in the Republic of Serbia's 2009 Defence Strategy [4] and later reaffirmed in the 2019 Defence Strategy, which dedicated an entire chapter to its principles [5]. However, the formal development of the

concept only began in 2019, following the adoption of the new strategy.

Recognising the evolving security landscape, the Republic of Serbia officially adopted the Total Defence Concept in 2023 as a response to a range of internal and external challenges. In the officially released Summary, the Total Defence Concept is defined as “an approach to organisation, preparation and provision of defence through a comprehensive and unified response of the defence system to security challenges and threats relevant to defence” [6].

The development of the Total Defence Concept was driven by several key factors. First, the Republic of Serbia’s international position necessitates a self-reliant defence strategy, as it is geographically surrounded by states that are part of established military alliances, while simultaneously pursuing a policy of cooperative security.

Second, growing security threats, including separatist movements, cyber-attacks, and extremist activities, highlight the need for a broad and adaptive defence strategy.

Third, the Republic of Serbia’s historical legacy reinforces the necessity of long-term preparedness. Considering the significant impact of defensive warfare on the nation’s history, it is essential to develop the capacity to respond to threats during peacetime. Further, experiences from past defensive and liberation wars, including world wars, the Yugoslav conflicts, and the NATO bombing in 1999, demonstrate that fighting a militarily superior adversary requires full societal engagement [7].

The concept also accounts for demographic and material constraints, as the Republic of Serbia faces depopulation trends [8], and a degree of external dependence on strategic goods and services [9].

Drawing from international experiences, the Republic of Serbia has modelled aspects of the Total Defence Concept on the approaches of states with similar security concerns, such as Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, Austria, and the Baltic States

[10]. Finally, military neutrality remains a fundamental aspect of the Republic of Serbia’s strategic positioning, as confirmed in the recently published White paper on Defence of the Republic of Serbia [11].

To achieve its objectives, the Total Defence Concept introduces structural changes across three key areas: military defence, civil defence, and command and control authorities.

The implementation of the Total Defence Concept requires a structured and phased approach, involving legal and organisational reforms, infrastructural development, and public awareness initiatives.

While the Total Defence Concept is based largely on the postulates of the Yugoslavian Strategy of Total People’s Defence and Social Self-Protection, its adoption marks a significant step toward enhancing national defence capabilities.

However, its practical application faces numerous challenges, necessitating a detailed examination of the obstacles and potential solutions to ensure its effectiveness.

3. Challenges of Implementing the Total Defence Concept in the Defence System of the Republic of Serbia

The implementation of the concept represents a complex and multidimensional endeavour that necessitates significant legal, institutional, and structural transformations within both the national security and defence systems. As a concept operating at the strategic level, it requires the integration and coordination of all defence subjects, with citizens as the most important one.

Several challenges have been identified in the process of implementing the concept, including: 1) Normative and Legal Challenges; 2) Organisational Challenges; 3) Training and Readiness Challenges; 4) Infrastructure Challenges; 5) Information and Public Communication Challenges; 6) Coordination Challenges; 7) Financial Challenges (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Challenges of implementing the Total Defence Concept in the Republic Serbia
Source: Authors' Marko Golubović, Vinko Žnidaršič, and Dejan Stojković.

Addressing these challenges is essential to ensuring the effective operationalization of the Total Defence Concept within the Republic of Serbia's defence system. Each of these aspects will be further examined in detail to provide a comprehensive understanding of the necessary measures for the successful integration of this concept into the country's broader national security framework.

3.1. Normative and Legal Challenges

The foundational aspect of implementing the concept lies in comprehensive legislative and regulatory reforms. Without a well-defined and structured legal framework, the implementation would face significant obstacles, as there would be no institutional or procedural clarity to guide the process.

One of the primary legal gaps is the absence of a clear normative foundation for the development and execution of the Total Defence Concept, and concepts in general, within the current legislative framework. The existing Defence Law does not provide sufficient legal grounds for structuring and integrating total defence principles, necessitating substantial amendments. The proposed changes to the Defence Law aim to establish a unified command structure for all defence forces and clearly define the

role of civil defence. A key legal challenge is the limited composition of the National Security Council, which excludes essential figures like the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Chairman of the National Assembly. Expanding its membership is vital for intersectoral coordination under the Total Defence Concept.

A particularly sensitive legal issue is the reactivation of mandatory military service, which is a core component of the Total Defence Concept. The reintroduction of conscription requires not only legal adjustments, but also careful political and social deliberation. Legal reforms are essential to ensure broad societal participation in national defence. Their implementation requires long-term institutional commitment and inter-agency coordination. While initial changes are planned in the short term, full integration of the Total Defence Concept into sectoral legislation will take years. The timely and coordinated adoption of these reforms, particularly a new Defence Law, is critical to the concept's success.

3.2. Organisational Challenges

Without a well-structured institutional framework, integrating civilian and military defence elements will remain fragmented, reducing the efficiency of the concept

measures. Organisational improvements are therefore essential to establish a coherent system capable of addressing modern security challenges.

Key issues include the absence of a dedicated civilian defence department within the Ministry of Defence, the lack of the strategic and operational expertise necessary for effective defence planning by many civilian officials, and the lack of cross-sectoral cooperation within the national security system.

Possible solutions could be establishing a Civil Defence Sector or Department within the Ministry of Defence, Home Affairs, Emergency Situations or any similar Ministry, for introducing comprehensive training programmes for civilian officials involved in defence planning, and forming a permanent defence coordination body within the National Security Council. Implementing these measures would significantly enhance the country's capacity to execute the concept effectively, ensuring a more resilient and integrated national defence system.

3.3. Training and Readiness Challenges

Effective implementation of the Total Defence Concept in the Republic of Serbia requires a comprehensive approach to training and readiness, with a focus on both the general population and those responsible for conducting training. Well-trained personnel are essential to lead these efforts, particularly in preparing command structures for civilian defence. The potential reintroduction of mandatory military service would require significant infrastructural, logistical, and legal adjustments. Simultaneously, fostering patriotism and youth readiness through mandatory or elective defence-related subjects in secondary schools would strengthen national resilience [12].

Given resource constraints, the Civil society organisations could play a key role in bridging gaps in civilian defence training [13]. Sailing clubs, scout organisations, adventure training centres,

and private facilities already possess expertise in navigation, survival skills, first aid, and crisis response. Integrating these entities into national training strategies would enhance training quality and accessibility without overburdening state institutions.

To ensure broad participation in defence efforts, the country could develop alternative models of military service, adjusted to the 21st century way of living, including structured emergency preparedness programmes. Drawing from Sweden and Finland, comprehensive guidelines and educational materials should be introduced to equip citizens with essential crisis-management skills [14]. This could enhance national resilience, optimise resource allocation, and define the role of every citizen within the Total Defence Concept framework.

3.4. Infrastructure Challenges

One of the most pressing infrastructure-related challenges is ensuring adequate conditions for the potential reactivation of mandatory military service.

Beyond conscription, the broader task of territorial organisation and preparation for national defence remains a continuous challenge [15]. This includes the development of infrastructure necessary for the protection and functioning of the civilian population in crisis scenarios, and in the case of war. While this remains an ongoing effort, the Republic of Serbia has previous experience in deploying military resources to support civil authorities in emergency situations, such as the 2014 floods and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 [16]. These experiences highlight the importance of maintaining and upgrading defence-related infrastructure, ensuring that both military and civilian structures are equipped to respond efficiently to crises.

Building on the previous solutions, it is possible to adapt training and infrastructure to support a modern, alternative model of military service suited to the demands of the 21st century while ensuring the primary

goals of reactivating military conscription - securing sufficient defence forces and preparing the population for national defence. Leveraging existing civilian infrastructure, such as sports clubs, training grounds, and technological hubs, can optimise resources and expand access to defence preparedness. By integrating modern technologies and innovative training methods, the Republic of Serbia can create a comprehensive and inclusive system that strengthens national defence while accommodating the evolving needs of its society.

3.5. Information and Public Communication Challenges

A major challenge in implementing the Total Defence Concept is effectively communicating its purpose and benefits to both domestic and international audiences. Without a well-structured communication strategy, misunderstandings may arise, including the perception that the Total Defence Concept seeks to militarise society rather than enhance national resilience [17]. International communication is equally important, as unclear messaging could raise concerns among regional and global actors about the nature and scope of the Total Defence Concept. Regular public briefings, targeted diplomatic messaging, and engagement with international media will help ensure that the concept isn't perceived as a shift towards militarisation.

Domestically, a robust information system could be established to ensure that citizens receive clear and timely updates, particularly in emergency and wartime scenarios. Implementing an SMS-based alert system would play a crucial role in crisis communication, providing immediate and reliable information. Additionally, leveraging digital platforms such as TikTok and Instagram can enhance outreach, particularly among younger generations, through engaging and informative content tailored to their interests. Simultaneously, printed informational materials should be distributed to older populations via utility

bill envelopes to minimise costs while ensuring broad reach.

Apart from that, Serbia could adopt a cost-effective public communication strategy that promotes the Total Defence Concept as a defensive, cooperative effort to strengthen national security and societal resilience through consistent, trust-building messaging across all media platforms.

3.6. Coordination Challenges

Effective coordination between military and civilian defence structures is essential for the successful implementation of the Total Defence Concept. A major challenge lies in managing the roles of governmental and non-governmental entities involved in defence planning. The concept requires a broad network of actors, including the military, civilian government bodies, emergency services, and private sector stakeholders. Without a central authority to oversee these efforts, operational inefficiencies and miscommunication may arise, weakening defence responses in both peacetime and crisis situations. Clear command structures and effective communication channels among all actors are necessary to mitigate these risks.

To address these challenges, the Republic of Serbia could establish a Supreme Command, a Supreme Command Staff, and civil defence commands at all levels, alongside a Defence Affairs Management Working Body within the National Security Council. The Supreme Command, led by the President as Supreme Commander, could unify key decision-makers, ensuring strategic oversight of national security operations.

Civil defence commands at national, provincial, and local levels would enhance coordination between military and civilian defence efforts, optimising resource allocation and strengthening crisis response capabilities.

3.7. Financial Challenges

The financial challenges associated with the implementation of the Total Defence Concept stem primarily from the substantial

increase in defence-related expenditures necessary to support a comprehensive and effective defence system. While many aspects can be integrated into existing structures without requiring significant additional funding, certain key provisions—such as the procurement of protective equipment for the population, the development of necessary infrastructure, and the enhancement of military and civilian defence capacities—will demand increased budgetary allocations. Given the evolving security landscape, this rise in defence spending aligns with the broader trend across European nations, where investments in national security have been steadily growing in response to emerging threats [18].

A major concern is ensuring the financial stability of the system during emergency and wartime conditions. In such scenarios, economic disruptions could significantly impact the country's ability to sustain defence operations and maintain essential public services. As a result, financial planning must incorporate measures to secure stable funding streams for defence and emergency response efforts, preventing budgetary shortfalls in times of crisis. This includes the development of contingency financial plans, the establishment of dedicated reserve funds, and the creation of adaptable fiscal policies that can accommodate increased defence spending when necessary.

Possible solutions for addressing these financial challenges could be the formulation of measures to ensure the stability of the financial system in case of emergencies and wartime conditions [19]. This would involve close coordination between the Ministry of Finance, the National Bank, and other relevant institutions to maintain economic resilience. Additionally, exploring alternative funding mechanisms, such as public-private

partnerships and strategic defence investments, could help offset some of the financial burdens while ensuring that the Total Defence Concept remains both effective and sustainable in the long term.

4. Conclusion

The implementation of the Total Defence Concept presents a range of challenges, but the most pressing ones lie in the normative-legal framework, training and readiness, and financial sustainability. Establishing a solid legal foundation through a Defence Law is essential to provide the necessary structure for other normative and legal changes. Simultaneously, training both the general population and specialised personnel is crucial for ensuring preparedness, while financial planning must secure long-term sustainability without jeopardising economic stability.

By applying the Total Defence Concept and implementing the possible measures, the Republic of Serbia would significantly enhance its defence capabilities and deterrence potential. This is particularly important given the Republic of Serbia's status as a militarily neutral country, which cannot rely on the collective defence mechanisms of military alliances. Strengthening national resilience through a well-rounded, independent defence system ensures that the Republic of Serbia remains capable of addressing modern security threats while steadily trying to achieve its strategic autonomy.

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