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Emotional expectations in case of crisis or war: Migrant responses to Sweden's preparedness communication

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A B S T R A C T

This article examines how people with migrant backgrounds who do not speak Swedish as their first language, and who are relatively new to Swedish institutional and everyday contexts, encountered the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency's 2024 edition of *In case of crisis or war*. Drawing on group and individual interviews, we trace how emotional meaning took shape as the brochure entered domestic routines, conversations and memories of earlier crises.

The analysis attends to how preparedness becomes meaningful through the conditions in which the brochure was encountered: through language access, household resources, care responsibilities and participants' varying relationships to Sweden, whether imagined as temporary or long-term. Particular attention is given to how the brochure's movement between a collective "we" and an individualised "you" is taken up in practice, shaping how belonging and responsibility can be understood and inhabited. The brochure's calm tone and emphasis on self-reliance resonated unevenly, as participants related it to their own experiences and expectations.

By situating preparedness communication within emotional, spatial and relational contexts, the article shows how crisis messages are read, felt and negotiated in everyday life. Preparedness takes form through uneven conditions of belonging, where responsibility is interpreted, negotiated and at times difficult to inhabit. In this process, language, care relations and social position shape how preparedness is understood and taken up, and how emotional demands are distributed across everyday life.

> "If Sweden is attacked, everyone must do their part to defend Sweden's independence – and our democracy. We build resilience every day, together with our loved ones, colleagues, friends, and neighbours." (MSB 2024)

In late 2024, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) distributed a new edition of the brochure *Om krisen eller kriget kommer* (*In Case of Crisis or War*) to all households in Sweden. Published in a context of heightened geopolitical tensions, shifting security imaginaries and renewed public debate about civil preparedness, the brochure combined practical advice with messages about individual and collective responsibility. Accompanied by an updated but recognisable visual design that underscored the seriousness of its message, it positioned preparedness as both an everyday practice and a civic obligation.

State-issued messages about responsibility and national security are not neutral. They carry affective force, shaping how people interpret threat, care, belonging and their own role in times of uncertainty (Appleby Arnold et al., 2021). The opening lines of the brochure thus do more than inform; they invite orientation towards a particular imagined collective and fill preparedness with emotional and relational expectations that may land unevenly across different residents. This raises questions about what the brochure asks households to do, and how its tone, imagery and address shape the conditions under which preparedness becomes meaningful.

To understand the significance of the 2024 edition, it is helpful to situate it within the longer trajectory of Swedish preparedness communication. Earlier nationwide brochures issued in 1943, 1952 and 1961 carried the title *Om kriget kommer* (*In case of war*), reflecting a civil defence logic centred on military threat, civic duty and disciplined strength, closely tied to welfare state ideals (Cronqvist, 2009). After a period in which preparedness had become less prominent in public debate and everyday communication, the brochure was revived in 2018 under its current title, signalling a broader understanding of crisis and a reorientation of responsibility towards households, everyday routines and individual self-sufficiency (Mellander, 2021; Ågren, 2024). The 2024 edition continues along this trajectory but in a context where security concerns and public expectations are again shifting.

Across these trajectories, preparedness communication conveyed information and reorganise affective expectations. Depending on the political and emotional context, campaigns have encouraged

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composure, trust, solidarity, rational planning or calm endurance (Kvarnlöf, 2020). Crisis communication is hence a technical, social and emotional practice shaped by assumptions about who is being addressed, how they live and what emotional orientations are considered appropriate (cf. Anderson and Smith, 2001; Davidson and Milligan, 2004).

How such messages become meaningful in everyday life cannot be taken for granted. Previous research on the 2018 edition shows that responses varied widely, shaped by language access, institutional trust, domestic situations and prior experiences of crisis or displacement (Näslund et al., 2019; Nikkanen et al., 2023). From a European comparative perspective, Petridou et al. (2019) show how Swedish preparedness communication combines a strong institutional presence with an emphasis on individual responsibility, encouraging citizens to manage crises independently and positioning the subject as resilient and self-reliant. Building on this, we shift attention to how preparedness communication is encountered, interpreted and felt in everyday life, particularly by people who do not speak Swedish as their first language and who may be relatively new to Swedish institutional and everyday contexts. Their encounters with state communication involve navigating unfamiliar language, interpreting instructions, discerning normative emotional expectations and orienting themselves within a society where ideas about responsibility, security and citizenship may differ from those they bring with them.

In this article, drawing on interviews with people who do not speak Swedish as their first language and who are navigating Swedish institutional and everyday contexts, we approach the 2024 brochure through perspectives that centre emotion, space and care. Preparedness is examined as something that takes shape through orientational, relational and material conditions that vary across households and life situations.

Our aim is to explore how preparedness communication becomes meaningful: how it is encountered, interpreted and felt in everyday life. We analyse how these meanings take shape through participants' engagements with the brochure as a text, together with their everyday contexts, social relations and varying attachments to Sweden. This involves asking how preparedness is negotiated through everyday practices, how responsibility and belonging are interpreted, and how emotional expectations are taken up, adjusted or resisted in different contexts. In this sense, the article examines how preparedness settles, shifts or remains unresolved as crisis communication moves through the everyday worlds of residents whose linguistic, social and biographical positions differ from those implicitly assumed in national communication.

1. Everyday preparedness, emotions and affective governance

Encounters with preparedness communication are shaped by the emotional and spatial contexts in which they occur. As the brochure enters everyday routines and relations, it orients people towards responsibility, belonging and care. Within emotional geography, emotions are understood as social and political forces that shape how people inhabit space, negotiate belonging and assume responsibility (Anderson and Smith, 2001; Davidson and Milligan, 2004; Ahmed, 2013). Emotions participate in the production of space, making some environments feel secure and familiar while others come to feel uncertain or excluding (Bosco and Joassart Marcelli, 2015). Through such differentiated experiences of ease and unease, processes of othering take shape, as emotional responses draw boundaries around who is imagined as part of "us" and who remains outside (Ahmed, 2013). Responses to the brochure thus emerge through the embodied, relational and spatial situations into which it arrives.

Such responses can be further understood through Ahmed's (2004) conceptualisation of emotions as relational practices that accumulate over time and orient bodies unevenly in the world. The focus here is on what emotions do (Ahmed, 2010; Schmitz and Ahmed, 2014): how they shape relations of distance and closeness, and how orientations such as calmness, responsibility and trust take form across linguistic, social and biographical conditions. Encounters with preparedness communication can involve what Ahmed (2020: 157) describes as disorientation, where a sense of stability and direction becomes unsettled. Disorientation draws attention to how preparedness communication is entwined with embodied norms that are more easily inhabited in some situations than in others, thereby making uneven conditions for orientation visible.

While preparedness communication can reproduce normative expectations, moments of disorientation may also create openings for reflection. Tsantsoulas (2025) describes this as dynamic disorientation. Moments of not fully recognising oneself in preparedness messages bring into view the assumptions embedded in communication and the boundaries of belonging that sustain them. In these moments, participants engage with and work through the expectations directed at them, exercising agency in how they interpret, negotiate and take up preparedness in practice.

A spatial lens further highlights how these processes are embedded in wider social and political relations. Drawing on Massey's (1994) relational understanding of space and Foucaldian notions of productive power, crisis communication contributes to shaping subjects and organising social life in anticipation of crisis. These processes unfold through emotional orientations such as trust, fear and solidarity, which make responsibility meaningful while also contributing to differentiated expectations regarding who is seen as capable and reliable. Such expectations take form under uneven social and material conditions.

Within these configurations, the home emerges as a key site where these expectations are enacted and negotiated. As Milligan and Wiles (2010) show, home is a space of care shaped through everyday relations and emotional work, as it is within domestic spaces that practices of care, maintenance and social reproduction are routinely organised and performed (Tronto, 1993). Preparedness becomes embedded in those domestic routines and responsibilities that sustain everyday life, tied to the ongoing work of caring for oneself and others. Yet, as Bhattacharya (2017) argues, these practices are unevenly distributed, reflecting hierarchies of power, gender and race that disproportionately assign unpaid care work to some bodies over others.

From this perspective, crisis preparedness unfolds within already unequal relations, intensifying pressures and expectations for some more than others. As Ahmed (2004) suggests, such expectations "stick" unevenly, shaping who appears responsible and included, and who instead experiences distance from these norms.

Home is also an emotional and political space produced through social relations, labour and attachments (Blunt, 2005), and a site where national imaginaries enter everyday life (Blunt and Dowling, 2022). Practices of becoming "at home", associated with familiarity and ease, are tied to broader processes of belonging (Noble, 2002). Belonging to the nation is thus articulated through particular ways of living and feeling at home, which implicitly define boundaries between those who belong and those who do not. As Davies (2014) notes, home operates both as metaphor and practice, linking everyday relations of care to broader arrangements of governance and belonging. Davies shows how this connection is articulated through the notion of *folkhem*, mobilised as an ideal of cohesion and equality while also shaped by exclusionary practices, including racialised hierarchies and the marginalisation of Sámi populations. Over time, these meanings have been reworked in different directions, at times aligned with multicultural and environmental concerns and at others connected to nationalist imaginaries of Swedishness.

These intersections of home, nation and belonging help explain the role of positive emotional orientations in preparedness. Emotions such as hope, trust and responsibility, often linked to place attachment support sustained engagement and shape how people imagine futures and their own capacity to act (Henderson, 2008; Ryan, 2016; Woods et al., 2012; Lizarralde et al., 2025). Such imaginaries help sustain expectations of mutual trust in institutions and shared responsibility,

reinforcing a sense that preparedness is attainable and collectively upheld. Yet these emotional orientations are not evenly accessible.

Previous studies show that responses to preparedness communication vary in relation to language access, institutional familiarity, domestic conditions and prior experiences of crisis or displacement (Näslund et al., 2019; Nikkanen et al., 2023). Such communication often presupposes forms of knowledge, resources and familiarity that are unevenly distributed (Hede and Enander, 2018; Haltinner et al., 2021). Building on these insights, the analysis that follows examines how preparedness communication becomes meaningful across the national address, the home, and the emotional norms associated with Swedishness.

2. Methodology and analytical approach

Our methodological approach attends to emotions as relational and situated, emerging through interaction, memory, and the material and social conditions of research (Bondi, 2005; Askins and Swanson, 2019). Siouti and Ruokonen Engler (2025) similarly emphasise that emotions are constitutive of qualitative encounters, shaping both knowledge production and the ethical texture of the field. Within this orientation, attention is directed to what participants articulate and to how meanings take shape through interaction under conditions of uneven familiarity, vulnerability and belonging.

A few months after the brochure was distributed, we conducted five group interviews (three to five participants each) and one individual interview, involving 21 participants in total. Following Wilkinson (1998), group interviews enabled us to explore how emotional meanings of preparedness emerged through collective sense-making, negotiation and mutual positioning. Both researchers were present at all interviews. One researcher's experience of learning Swedish and navigating unfamiliar institutional contexts contributed to a relational and reflexive approach. While not assumed to create equivalence between researchers and participants, these experiences informed attentiveness to how language vulnerability, uneven institutional participation and past life experiences shaped participants' positioning in relation to preparedness communication. One interview was conducted individually due to practical circumstances, and it offered a different setting in which similar processes of interpretation and emotional meaning-making could unfold.

Participants were individuals living in Sweden who did not speak Swedish as their first language and had limited familiarity with Swedish cultural norms and institutional practices. They were recruited through Swedish adult education settings (Komvux), where several were studying Swedish as a second language, and through university contexts, where participants were enrolled as international students. Some were connected to one of these settings, while others moved between both. Participants represented diverse national backgrounds, including Ukraine, Bangladesh, Cyprus, Congo, Uganda, Brazil, Eritrea, Russia, Ecuador, Sri Lanka, Portugal, Romania, Germany and Mexico. Most were in their twenties, and a majority identified as women. While all participants encountered Swedish as a linguistic barrier, this shared condition coexisted with uneven positions in terms of rights, recognition and belonging. These positions were shaped through intersecting relations involving migration status, residence conditions, racialisation, care responsibilities and access to resources. Participants also differed in citizenship status, residence permits, institutional familiarity, experiences of racialisation, encounters with state institutions and histories of war or displacement, shaping how they oriented themselves towards preparedness communication. These differences emerged relationally in discussion as participants compared situations and reflected on their possibilities to act, remain or leave. Preparedness thus became entangled with differentiated forms of agency and constraint. We approached these positions as situational and relational, treating interaction as analytically significant as meanings were negotiated in relation to others.

Interviews were conducted in Swedish or English, lasted 60–90 min, and were recorded, transcribed and anonymised with participants' informed consent. Quotations originally given in Swedish have been translated by us. To support emotional expression, interviews took place in informal settings, with shared coffee and space for conversation before and after recording. These arrangements helped create an atmosphere in which participants could express curiosity, hesitation or discomfort. As Guillemin and Gillam (2004) note, "ethically important moments" often arise in practice; in our interviews, such moments became visible when participants paused or negotiated how to articulate their reactions, including when engaging with more difficult experiences and responding to and affirming each other's feelings.

All interviews began with a shared reading of the 2024 brochure *In case of crisis or war* (MSB 2024). Although many participants had already received it, reading together created a collective moment for revisiting and negotiating initial impressions. A bit later in the interviews, earlier editions from 1943, 1952, 1961 and 2018 (Statens Informationsstyrelse, 1943, 1952, 1961; MSB, 2018) were introduced and led to reflections on changing expectations of responsibility and care. These shared readings made visible how emotional responses were shaped by language access, knowledge of Swedish society, household routines and senses of belonging.

For some participants, discussing preparedness involved revisiting memories of war, displacement or loss, expressed through bodily unease, fragmented memories or narratives of fear. We did not directly ask about such experiences, but when they arose, we made space for them by slowing the pace, listening carefully and acknowledging the emotional labour involved, while remaining attentive to their effects within the group. Drawing on Theidon (2001), we approach these emotions as integral to how the brochure was experienced, as its calm tone and expectations of self-reliance encountered histories already present.

Our own emotional responses were likewise analytically significant. Feelings of empathy, discomfort and recognition emerged during interviews and analysis. In line with Holmes (2015) and Brehm and Langer (2025), we documented these responses in analytic memos and considered how they shaped interpretation, supporting attention to ambivalence, contradiction and intensity in the material.

These perspectives informed our analytic approach, which combined reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) with Byrne's (2022) emphasis on coding as interpretive and ongoing. Transcripts, analytic memos and notes from shared readings were treated as interconnected, with the brochure itself forming part of the empirical material through both participants' engagements and our analysis of how emotional meanings formed around specific passages, images and tonal shifts. Themes developed iteratively through engagement with the material. Initial coding focused on moments where participants expressed emotional responses, engaged with the brochure or responded to one another, and was developed into broader themes capturing how preparedness was interpreted and felt. We attended to interaction throughout, considering how meanings were shaped collectively and situating emotions such as fear, reassurance, confusion and ambivalence within their relational and spatial contexts.

Differences were approached as intersecting conditions shaping how preparedness was understood and negotiated, while Ahmed's (2004) account of how emotions circulate across bodies, texts and places informed our reading of how markers such as "we," "you" and "responsibility" positioned participants in relation to belonging. Hesitation or inaction was treated not as disengagement but as part of making sense of one's situation (Hede and Enander, 2018; Haltinner et al., 2021). Preparedness thus took shape as a relational practice shaped by language access, care responsibilities and transnational attachments.

3. The national address

The first theme focuses on belonging and responsibility, which recurred throughout the interviews and made the brochure's national

address a central site of interpretation and negotiation. The opening lines of *In Case of Crisis or War* address "all residents of Sweden" and assert that "we live in uncertain times" and "must stand united" (MSB 2024, pp. 1, 3), positioning readers as part of a collective "we." This initial "we" appears inclusive and emotionally expansive, offering belonging beyond formal citizenship.

As the text unfolds, however, the address shifts, moving between an inclusive "we" and an individualised "you." Statements such as "you are part of Sweden's overall emergency preparedness" (MSB 2024, p. 9) place responsibility at the level of the individual household. The reader is thus addressed both as part of a national community and as someone responsible for sustaining it.

We approach this national address as both textual and felt in its reception. In the group discussions, participants worked through the shift in address as they explored belonging and responsibility. Still becoming familiar with Swedish institutional communication, they described responses suggesting that the shift was not only read but collectively sensed as a form of subtle boundary work. This involved emotional labour as participants negotiated whether, and on what terms, they were included in the "we" invoked by the brochure.

As one participant put it:

> "is it really for me … or if I was somehow outside of it" (Group interview 5).

These hesitations took shape within a broader political context in which questions of belonging are already contested. Contemporary debates and state discourses in Sweden increasingly frame migration through lenses of security and social risk, while nostalgic narratives of cohesion may draw affective boundaries around belonging (Sager and Mulinari, 2018; Elgenius and Rydgren, 2019). The brochure's address entered these contexts at a moment when distinctions between those included in "us" and those at its edges were actively negotiated.

Language played a central role in these processes. The Swedish-only mailed version required participants to rely on partners, classmates, neighbours or media reports to understand the content, making interpretation dependent on social relations. This dependence involved additional emotional work, as participants not only interpreted the message but also negotiated what it implied about their place within the national community.

Many participants described encountering the brochure as an event requiring interpretation rather than a straightforward source of information. Its arrival activated relational infrastructures, as people turned to others to ask what it meant and how seriously it should be taken. Meaning-making developed collectively through conversation and shared interpretation. Belonging to the "we" was therefore not secured by the text alone but took shape through the relations in which the brochure was read, as orientations and attachments formed in relation to others (Ahmed, 2004). The encounter set in motion dynamic disorientation (Tsantsoulas, 2025), unsettling participants' sense of how to read the situation. Collective interpretation became one way of re-establishing orientation and navigating uncertainty.

At the same time, these practices of collective sense-making sat uneasily alongside the brochure's emphasis on household responsibility. Meaning-making was relationally, while responsibility was framed in individualised terms. Several participants described preparedness as more secure when shared:

> "It would help if there were collective meetings … not just 'you handle this'" (Group interview 5).

This desire for shared interpretation sat in tension with the brochure's framing. Even statements emphasising unity, "Together we make Sweden stronger" (MSB 2024, p. 6), returned responsibility to the private household. For some, this produced additional strain, as making sense of the message took place collectively, while the responsibility for acting on it was directed at the individual household.

For many participants, these tensions were closely tied to their sense of belonging to Sweden. While some imagined a longer-term future, others described their stay as temporary or uncertain. The brochure's "we" remained open to interpretation, functioning for some as an inclusive civic call and for others as something requiring negotiation.

Differing possibilities for mobility added another layer to these negotiations. The option to leave, whether hypothetical or real, shaped how responsibility was understood. These uneven degrees of agency were shaped by citizenship status, residence conditions and access to resources beyond Sweden. Hence, distance from the national "we" took shape through differing possibilities for staying, leaving or relocating.

Emotional responses to the national address also varied. Some participants felt reassured by its calm tone and framing of crisis as manageable, while others experienced increased anxiety when this calmness conflicted with memories of crisis in other contexts:

> "It made me anxious … like something serious was happening even if it said not to worry" (Interview 6).

For some, uncertainty became harder to hold at a distance. One participant described a more generalised sense of vulnerability:

> "I thought … maybe something is hunting me … maybe there is no safe place for me in this world" (Group interview 1).

Across the interviews, the national address invited different forms of identification, belonging and distance. Participants' possibilities to inhabit the collective "we" were shaped by intersecting inequalities, including language access, migration trajectories, citizenship status, social and material resources, everyday relations and transnational attachments. These conditions shaped how responsibility, safety and emotional orientations were taken up. As recent research suggests, responsibility messages can heighten feelings of individual accountability without necessarily increasing preparedness intent (Sandstig and Eriksson, 2024). Hence, responsibility was often taken up affectively, even where linguistic or material conditions limited the capacity to act.

4. Home as an emotional spatial imaginary

The second theme centres on how the home was positioned as a key spatial and emotional imaginary through which preparedness was discussed, negotiated and made meaningful in everyday life. Often associated with care, domestic life in welfare-oriented contexts is framed as supported by broader structures of state provision, where everyday practices can be understood as forms of nationhood enacted in daily life (Blunt and Dowling, 2022). Where such support is limited, however, these responsibilities may be experienced as individualising and burdensome, adding to the contested position of care as often unpaid, gendered and unequally distributed labour. Domestic practices can then become sites through which the withdrawal of collective responsibility is sustained, shifting accountability onto individuals and households.

Across the interviews, participants described how practical and emotional demands gathered within the home once the brochure arrived. Instructions to store water, gather supplies and maintain routines positioned the home as the primary site of preparedness, folding it into everyday domestic life. The message that "you contribute to our collective preparedness if you can manage on your own for at least one week" (MSB 2024, p. 15) further anchored this responsibility at the individual level.

This resonates with reflections on broader shifts in the organisation of care. According to Kershaw (2006), welfare states increasingly place responsibility for security and wellbeing within households. Bhattacharya (2017) similarly argues that care is increasingly privatised, shifting responsibility away from the state. In the Swedish context, preparedness policy frames self-sufficiency as a civic responsibility and a marker of belonging (Ågren, 2024), while resilience has become a moral expectation within total defence policy (Montelius and Kvarnlöf, 2025; Kvarnlöf, 2020). Together, these perspectives suggest that preparedness has become increasingly tied to ideas of responsible citizenship, while

capacities to absorb such demands remain unevenly distributed. As Conradson (2003) argues, care unfolds through spatial and relational arrangements in which responsibility, vulnerability and interdependence are negotiated.

The brochure shifted between assigning responsibility to an individualised "you" and portraying the household as a cohesive and bounded unit, creating a tension between collective living and individual accountability. Participants' accounts, however, pointed to more complex household arrangements, where living situations were temporary, shared or stretched across multiple places and relations of care extended beyond the immediate household. Home took shape through shifting obligations and attachments rather than a single household unit. Against this backdrop, the brochure positioned the home as a site where calm, responsibility and capability were expected despite unequal capacities. Participants described both clarity and pressure: while some valued the practical guidance, others experienced it as an obligation that began to structure domestic life.

How these expectations were experienced depended closely on material and relational conditions. Differences in housing, resources and institutional familiarity shaped what felt possible. A recent analysis by the Swedish Centre for Total Defence and Societal Security shows that the capacity to engage in crisis preparedness varies markedly across municipalities and population groups (Asp, 2023), which was also reflected in participants' accounts. For some, preparedness demands intensified a sense of constraint:

> "What kills me mostly is … it's us, the poor, that die. The rich are protected" (Group interview 3).

These accounts draw attention to how domestic responsibilities are structured by class and gender inequalities (Enarson, 1998; Kvarnlöf, 2020; Bhattacharya, 2017), and how home is shaped through processes of inclusion and exclusion (Blunt and Varley, 2004). Lists and recommendations often intensified pressure rather than reassurance, especially in shared or limited spaces, as the expectation to "prepare ahead of time" presupposed resources that were unevenly distributed. In this sense, engagement with these demands followed uneven social and economic conditions, where those with greater stability and institutional familiarity were more likely to respond (Eriksson and Denk, 2024).

In participants' descriptions, the home took shape as an emotional infrastructure where calm, responsibility and capability were expected, but not always easily sustained. Feelings of guilt, worry and frustration arose when preparedness demands exceeded what felt possible, highlighting how preparedness is lived through emotional experience (Börner, 2023). Emotional and reproductive labour, which intensifies in times of crisis (Fothergill, 1996), tended to fall unevenly on those already responsible for care (Whittle et al., 2012). Participants often described this emotional labour as more demanding than practical tasks. In one group interview, "keeping everyone calm" (Group interview 3) was described as a central challenge, while another participant asked:

> "How can I protect my son? I feel like I'm not prepared for anything" (Group interview 3).

The significance of home was further shaped by care responsibilities and attachments that extend beyond the nation. Although the brochure addressed "all residents of Sweden" (MSB 2024, p. 3), several participants encountered it through reactions from relatives abroad:

> "My father thought 'war is starting in Sweden.' I had to tell him it's nothing" (Group interview 3).

> "When my family heard about the brochure, they panicked more than I did" (Group interview 4).

These moments show how care was enacted as labour across distance, as participants reassured and managed the concerns of others while also making sense of the situation themselves. Home, in this sense, unfolded through multiple attachments and temporalities (Massey, 1994), shaped by local conditions as well as concerns situated elsewhere. Preparedness thus took shape through intersecting relations involving economic resources, housing conditions, care responsibilities, migration trajectories and access to information, which shaped participants' possibilities to respond to preparedness expectations in different ways. Emotional labour linked to preparednes became a caring practice and, consequently. unevenly socially distributed, often concentrated among those in more precarious positions (Bhattacharya, 2017).

This positions the home as a site of emotional governance, where preparedness is organised through uneven expectations of care and responsibility. Within the dynamics of social reproduction, these expectations are unevenly distributed, requiring some subjects to undertake greater emotional labour to manage uncertainty, interpret risks and align with preparedness norms.

5. Swedishness and emotional norms beyond borders

The third theme concerns how the brochure was described as distinctly "Swedish", highlighting the emotional norms through which preparedness was communicated and interpreted. Participants pointed to its measured language, orderly layout and visual design as characteristic of Swedish institutional communication. Phrases such as "We must stand united" (MSB 2024, p. 3) and "If Sweden is attacked, we will never surrender" (MSB 2024, p. 5) were read as serious yet restrained, aligning with imaginaries of rationality and control. As one participant put it:

> "Swedes like to be prepared … So in that matter, it makes sense that this is very Swedish" (Group interview 1).

These impressions resonate with broader narratives of Swedish identity, where order, equality and emotional moderation have long played symbolic roles. As Jezierska and Towns (2018) show, Swedishness is articulated through ideals of transparency, rationality and collective responsibility, qualities participants recognised in the brochure. In one group interview, these orientations emerged relationally. Some participants emphasised institutional trust, noting that "I feel very confident in how Sweden will handle a crisis" (Group interview 1).

These interpretations unfolded within broader narratives of Swedish exceptionalism, where Sweden is described as rational, egalitarian and cohesive, with crisis governance grounded in transparency, trust and calm public conduct (Schierup and Ålund, 2011; Elgenius and Rydgren, 2019). Such narratives carry emotional expectations, where calmness and measured responsibility become markers of belonging. Participants' descriptions of the brochure as "very Swedish" point to how these expectations circulate and shape how preparedness is felt. Others described how their own inclination to act was tempered by the responses of those around them:

> "I would have done it, but because everyone is so chill about it, I didn't" (Group interview 1),

Several described adjusting their reactions in relation to Swedish partners or colleagues, suggesting that calmness took form as a relational norm rather than an individual disposition. In this way, calmness shaped what counted as an appropriate response, distinguishing between those able to align with this expectation and those whose reactions remained more unsettled. As Ahmed (2004, 2010) suggests, emotions orient bodies towards certain positions while making others harder to inhabit. Calmness thus directed participants towards ways of feeling and responding that could be recognised as "Swedish," while other reactions became more difficult to sustain. For some, the brochure unsettled an existing image of Sweden as stable and distant from crisis:

> "I never expected to receive something like this here … it didn't fit with the image I had of this country" (Group interview 4).

In this moment, the message and the imagined context in which it

appeared were called into question. These observations also point to how emotional norms did not align uniformly. While the brochure's calm tone produced reassurance for some, it generated tension for others, particularly when their reactions did not match what they understood as expected in Sweden. These differences also intersected with other distinctions, including gender.

As one participant noted:

> "Having a woman soldier on the front page … is a very Swedish thing" (Group interview 4),

while others initially experienced discomfort rooted in memories of conflict:

> "It was not a good feeling … But then I remembered that I am in Sweden, and it is more likely about gender equality" (Group interview 3).

In these accounts, gender equality became a frame through which the brochure and "Swedishness" were understood. The woman soldier was read as signalling both military preparedness and a national narrative of equality and inclusion (Linehagen, 2023). At the same time, the image evoked different associations depending on participants' prior experiences of conflict. Visual elements thus attached unevenly to bodies and memories (Ahmed, 2010).

Describing the brochure as "very Swedish" became a way to position oneself in relation to these meanings. "Being Swedish" was understood in relation to language, institutional familiarity, citizenship, trust and belonging, conditions that require time and resources and remain unevenly distributed. Processes of inclusion are further shaped by broader inequalities, including migration regimes, racism and labour market structures.

Participants' interpretations of the brochure were also shaped by transnational ties, experiences of displacement and attachments elsewhere. Distance to "Swedishness" reflected the intersection of social, political and biographical processes. Describing the brochure as "very Swedish" both named and worked through this distance. Such moments can be understood as instances of dynamic disorientation (Tsantsoulas, 2025), where norms of belonging cannot be comfortably inhabited and require ongoing interpretation and repositioning. The emotional labour described by participants thus extended beyond the content of the brochure to the boundaries of belonging it brought into view.

The Swedish-only mailed version brought together constraints related to language access, reliance on others and uneven capacity to act, shaping how these meanings were accessed and negotiated. Reception thus highlights how Swedish governance operates through administrative practices as well as affective relations. Swedishness travelled here as an emotional model, suggesting how citizens should feel and respond in crisis. Encountered through other geopolitical contexts or personal histories of crisis, the same message could take on a different intensity, appearing more urgent or alarming.

Swedish emotional norms thus highlighted the conditionality of belonging. Transnational connections added further complexity, not only through affective ties but through the circulation of information. For several participants, the brochure was first encountered through international media reports and reactions from relatives abroad, where it was framed in more dramatic terms. As one participant described:

> "My phone buzzed before I even saw it myself … friends sent me the news saying Sweden was sending this out" (Group interview 4).

In this way, the brochure entered everyday life through information circulating across borders that shaped how it was interpreted from the outset. What appeared as measured preparedness in Sweden could be read as escalation elsewhere, refracted through other political contexts and crisis experiences. These circulating interpretations formed part of the conditions through which the message was understood, extending beyond individual encounters.

Swedish preparedness communication also travels outward as a model, for example through initiatives such as MSB's PreparEU Pilot (2024–2025), where principles of self-preparedness and risk communication are promoted across the EU. The brochure has served as a template for several countries, while also being described as unusually direct:

> "Many countries are impressed that we actually send the brochure to every household … In many places, this would be unthinkable, as authorities fear it would create considerable anxiety or even panic" (MSB 2025).

Across these movements, preparedness communication, and through it, Swedishness, exceeds a national frame, as meanings are interpreted, intensified and reworked across contexts.

6. Concluding discussion

The 2024 edition of *In Case of Crisis or War* can be understood as an affective object through which emotions circulate, attaching preparedness to particular understandings of home, responsibility and belonging. Its affective force is constituted through circulation across different spatial settings and its entanglement with contemporary discussions of crisis and security. Sent directly to households while also becoming an object of public debate, the brochure reflects and reproduces understandings of preparedness in the present moment. Participants described feelings of responsibility, care, guilt, frustration, reassurance and trust, suggesting that preparedness communication mobilises multiple affective registers. Shaped by experiences of crisis, migration, displacement and transnational family relations, these responses highlight how preparedness messages become entangled with personal histories and everyday circumstances, linking preparedness to broader questions of care, responsibility and belonging.

Following Ahmed's insight that "we are moved by things" (2010:33), the brochure can be understood as a site where state communication encounters lived experiences, memories and attachments that shape how preparedness is interpreted and made meaningful. Its tones of urgency and reassurance are interpreted unevenly in relation to prior experiences of crisis, displacement and belonging. These encounters unfold within uneven conditions, as the brochure meets lives marked by different forms of familiarity, responsibility and attachment to Swedish norms and Western imaginaries of preparedness and care. Orientations towards calmness, uncertainty, responsibility or distance draw attention to the emotional politics through which preparedness takes shape, as emotions organise how social and spatial relations are inhabited (cf. Anderson and Smith, 2001; Davidson and Milligan, 2004), including how responsibility comes to be felt and taken up.

As a national address, the brochure brings together collective belonging and individual responsibility. The movement between "we" and "you" invites readers to position themselves in relation to both. However, identification with the collective "we" was a differentiated process rather than a shared experience. Participants' encounters with the brochure were shaped by migration trajectories, caring responsibilities, housing situations, economic resources, transnational family ties and degrees of embeddedness in Swedish society. These positions influenced whether the invitation to belonging felt accessible, ambivalent or difficult to inhabit. The brochure's national address thus became a site where belonging and preparedness were negotiated through uneven social positions.

Where the "we" cannot be readily inhabited, preparedness becomes more difficult to translate into a personal obligation (Ahmed, 2004). This uneven distribution of responsibility became particularly visible in participants' reflections on the home, where national expectations were imagined as everyday practices of storing supplies, maintaining routines and caring for family members. In this way, preparedness is folded into domestic life, situating the household as its key site. The ability to prepare depends on sustaining calmness, caring for others and managing fear, what are all aspects of the labour through which responsibility is

enacted (Enarson, 1998; Kvarnlöf, 2020; Whittle et al., 2012). From this perspective, preparedness is embedded in the social reproduction of everyday life (Bhattacharya, 2017), where care shapes how responsibility is organised, distributed and sustained across uneven conditions (Tronto, 1993)

The brochure's assumption that the home can provide care, storage and continuity in times of disruption increases the distance between the "we" and those with different domestic environments. As responsibility for security is increasingly located within the household, participants less familiar with the imaginaries through which such responsibilities are learned and enacted did not always find these expectations readily available. Taking up preparedness as a personal responsibility could therefore involve reorienting expectations about the relationship between the state, household and individual. In this sense, the organisation of care became part of what needed to be learned and negotiated.

Cultural norms shape how these expectations are taken up. Calmness, reasonableness and measured responsibility, described as recognisably Swedish (Jezierska and Towns, 2018), function as tacit standards of belonging. Across the interviews, calmness, rational action and individual preparedness were recurring expectations associated with the brochure, reflecting broader norms of appropriate conduct in times of uncertainty. Emotions operate here as orientations that align subjects with particular norms and social worlds (Ahmed, 2010). These expectations also resonate with recent crisis contexts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, calmness, voluntarism and rationality were framed as national characteristics, while fear or critique could be positioned as disruptive (Simonsen, 2022; Giritli Nygren and Olofsson, 2021). The emotional expectations circulating in the brochure thus form part of a broader repertoire through which Swedishness is enacted in times of uncertainty.

Across the interviews, preparedness was understood through relationships, media narratives and experiences extending beyond Sweden. References to family members abroad, media coverage of international conflicts and changing geopolitical conditions informed how preparedness and security were understood. Attachments beyond Sweden thus shaped engagement with the brochure. The war in Ukraine and Sweden's NATO membership were particularly important points of reference, capable of both reinforcing trust and unsettling a sense of security. Preparedness was therefore interpreted through relations extending beyond national space, as national preparedness messages became entangled with concerns, experiences and responsibilities that were not confined to the Swedish context.

Expectations of belonging, care and responsibility circulate through preparedness communication, positioning the brochure as a form of affective governance. Across the interviews, these expectations became visible in negotiations of the national "we", in accounts of care responsibilities within and beyond the home, and in reflections on emotional norms associated with calmness, self-reliance and responsible conduct. Preparedness thus takes shape through affect as much as through information (Anderson, 2013), shaping how responsibility is interpreted, inhabited and acted upon. Responsibility may therefore be taken up affectively even where the capacity to act remains limited (Sandstig and Eriksson, 2024).

Participants sometimes described uncertainty about how to position themselves in relation to the message or what preparedness meant in practice. Difficulties in recognising the "we" or locating how to act made visible how norms of belonging define who can be recognised as part of the collective (Ahmed, 2004), while unsettled orientations had to be worked through and re-established (Tsantsoulas, 2025). Engagement unfolded through this process as participants turned to others to interpret, discuss and negotiate meaning.

Preparedness is lived through negotiations of belonging, care responsibilities and emotional norms. Situated within everyday relations of care and responsibility, preparedness becomes inseparable from questions of how collective obligations are recognised, interpreted and enacted. Through preparedness communication, expectations of trust, responsibility and belonging shape how preparedness is understood, felt and lived under uneven social conditions.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Lisa M. Hillerbrand: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Linda Sandberg:** Writing – original draft, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Generative artificial intelligence (AI)

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