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Europe's security environment is increasingly shaped by sustained low-threshold pressure that exploits societal, informational, and institutional vulnerabilities rather than military force alone. Using Finland as a leading case, this analysis shows how declining institutional trust is emerging as a concrete security risk within high-trust Nordic systems built on voluntary compliance and coordination. Erosion in trust amplifies the impact of hybrid activity, persistent ambiguity, and low-cost asymmetric tactics, such as drone incursions near critical infrastructure, by slowing alignment, increasing coordination costs, and widening space for hostile narratives. The core finding is clear: in a contested security environment, institutional trust functions as a strategic enabler comparable to critical infrastructure, and its gradual erosion narrows margins for decisive action. Sustaining psychological resilience and legitimacy is therefore not a societal concern but a security imperative for Nordic states operating under continuous pressure.

THE VULNERABILITY OF HIGH-TRUST SOCIETIES

THE CASE OF FINLAND'S COMPREHENSIVE SECURITY MODEL

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Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary	3
2. Finland's Comprehensive Security Model and the Centrality of Trust.....	3
3. Measuring Institutional Trust and Interpreting the Decline	4
4. Data Snapshot: Institutional Trust in Comparative Perspective	5
4.1. Trust in National Government: Finland and OECD Average	5
4.2. Nordic Comparison: Sweden and Norway	5
5. Why Trust Erosion Matters for Security	6
6. Drone Activity as a Trust-Sensitive Stress Test.....	7
7. Social Mobilisation, Visibility, and Legitimacy	7
8. Crisis Governance under Conditions of Eroding Trust.....	8
9. Forward-Looking Risk Assessment and Early-Warning Signals	8
10. Recommendations	9



A.	Institutionalise Psychological Resilience as a Security Function.....	9
B.	Treat Trust Metrics as Early-Warning Indicators	9
C.	Adapt Crisis Communication to Persistent Ambiguity.....	9
D.	Deepen Nordic Coordination on Psychological and Hybrid Resilience.....	9
11.	Conclusion	9



1. Executive Summary

Europe has entered a prolonged period of strategic competition characterised by sustained political, economic, informational, and technological pressure below the threshold of open confrontation. In this environment, internal resilience increasingly determines external security outcomes. Vulnerabilities are no longer defined primarily by military capability, but by the social, psychological, and institutional conditions that enable states to coordinate, decide, and act under stress.

Finland offers a particularly instructive case. Its comprehensive security model, developed during the Cold War and continuously refined since, places citizens at the centre of preparedness. Authorities, private companies, civil society, and the population itself are anticipated to function as an integrated system across military, economic, and civilian domains. This model depends fundamentally on high institutional trust, and this trust is not a supporting condition but a core enabling asset without which coordination, compliance, and legitimacy degrade.

This report assesses declining institutional trust as an emerging security vulnerability. It demonstrates how erosion in trust amplifies the effects of hybrid pressure, information ambiguity, and low-cost asymmetric tactics such as drone incursions. Drawing on Finland as a primary case while situating the analysis within a broader Nordic and European context, the report argues that trust erosion functions as a force multiplier for hostile activity. It increases coordination costs, prolongs uncertainty, lowers the threshold for social mobilisation, and narrows margins for decisive action in crisis governance.

The analysis integrates recent patterns of drone activity near critical infrastructure and transport hubs across Northern and Central Europe as concrete illustrations of how technologically simple, low-attribution actions can exploit trust-sensitive environments. It concludes with targeted, operational recommendations for national and Nordic-level adaptation, emphasising psychological resilience, early-warning capability, and coordination mechanisms that treat trust as a security-relevant variable rather than a sociological afterthought.

2. Finland's Comprehensive Security Model and the Centrality of Trust

Finland's national security architecture is structured around a comprehensive security model that deliberately externalises significant elements of preparedness to society. Authorities, companies, organisations, and citizens are expected to act as a single preparedness system. The model relies on voluntary compliance, rapid coordination, and broad acceptance of state guidance rather than coercive enforcement.

This architecture has historically delivered exceptional resilience. High institutional trust, rooted in competent administration, perceived fairness, and a strong social contract, enabled rapid alignment during crises, strong participation in national defence, and limited internal traction for hostile narratives. For decades, Finland regularly topped international



comparisons of public trust in government, reinforcing perceptions of Nordic exceptionalism.

Trust in this context functions as a strategic enabler equivalent to critical infrastructure. Households are expected to maintain a 72-hour self-sufficiency margin. Companies participate voluntarily in security-of-supply arrangements. Reservists and civil organisations train without compulsion. Binding legislation exists, however many relationships are not practically enforceable. High trust compresses decision-to-action cycles, preserves institutional bandwidth, and allows crisis governance to focus outward rather than on managing domestic friction.

Recent developments indicate that this enabling condition is weakening.

3. Measuring Institutional Trust and Interpreting the Decline

The most robust longitudinal measures of institutional trust are provided by Eurobarometer and OECD surveys. Trust is typically measured as the share of respondents who report that they “tend to trust” their national government, usually operationalised as a score of six or higher on a ten-point scale.¹

Eurobarometer data show that trust in the Finnish government declined from a peak of approximately 76% in 2007 to 61% in 2021, and further to roughly 47% by 2023. The sharpest drop, approximately fourteen percentage points, occurred between 2021 and 2023.² This places Finland close to the European average rather than markedly above it.

OECD data add interpretive depth by disaggregating trust into competence-based dimensions (responsiveness and reliability) and value-based dimensions (openness, integrity, and fairness). Finland continues to score well above OECD averages on responsiveness and service delivery. The recent erosion is concentrated in value-based perceptions, particularly fairness and integrity, which are directly linked to legitimacy and willingness to comply under uncertainty.

Methodological changes in OECD reporting after 2021, which aggregate previously separate institutional scores, complicate precise comparisons over time. Nevertheless, the overall trajectory is clear: Finland has shifted from historically exceptional trust levels to a more contested environment.

Behavioural indicators such as willingness to participate in conscription remain stable, and in some cases have strengthened. However, attitudinal signals suggest growing fragility. Urban–rural trust gaps, perceptions of unfair treatment, and increased online contestation

¹ OECD, July 2024, “OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions - 2024 Results”, available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results_9a20554b-en.html

² OECD, January 2025, “OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions - 2024 Results: Finland”, available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results-country-notes_a8004759-en/finland_596ba5da-en.html



around national events point to a system that remains functional but more sensitive to stress.

The tables below summarise recent trust levels in Finland relative to OECD and Nordic comparators and should be read as indicators of heightened scrutiny of institutional authority rather than direct predictors of immediate behavioural breakdown.

4. Data Snapshot: Institutional Trust in Comparative Perspective

This section provides a consolidated empirical snapshot of recent institutional trust trends relevant to the analysis that follows. The tables below are retained verbatim to anchor the assessment in observable data, while the surrounding analysis focuses on interpretation rather than raw measurement.

4.1. Trust in National Government: Finland and OECD Average

Country	Year	High or moderately high trust	Neutral	Low or no trust	Don't know
Finland	2021	61.46%	21.63%	16.76%	0.15%
Finland	2023	46.99%	13.24%	39.64%	0.14%
OECD Average	2021	43.20%	14.54%	40.00%	2.26%
OECD Average	2023	40.79%	15.35%	43.20%	0.66%

The Finnish decline between 2021 and 2023 is both rapid and asymmetric. The reduction in high-trust responses is mirrored by a sharp increase in low or no trust, rather than a shift toward neutrality. This pattern is particularly relevant from a security perspective, as it signals polarisation rather than simple disengagement.

4.2. Nordic Comparison: Sweden and Norway

Country	Year	High or moderately high trust	Neutral	Low or no trust	Don't know
Sweden	2021	38.98%	12.28%	45.77%	2.98%



Country	Year	High or moderately high trust	Neutral	Low or no trust	Don't know
Sweden	2023	42.95%	14.23%	42.35%	0.47%
Norway	2021	63.78%	11.98%	22.33%	1.92%
Norway	2023	47.63%	12.54%	38.79%	1.03%

Norway's trust trajectory closely mirrors Finland's recent decline, despite differing geographic exposure to direct security pressure. This convergence suggests that broader structural factors may be at work across Nordic societies, increasing the relevance of comparative analysis and joint early-warning approaches.

5. Why Trust Erosion Matters for Security

Declining institutional trust erodes security through a relatively predictable sequence of effects. As confidence in institutional guidance weakens, public scepticism toward official communication increases. Acceptance slows, coordination costs rise, and ambiguity persists longer. This widens the space for contested interpretations and reduces the effort required for adversarial actors to achieve strategic effect.

Trust erosion therefore functions as a force multiplier. It does not create new threats, but it amplifies the impact of existing ones. Actions that rely on ambiguity, behavioural fragmentation, or social activation encounter less automatic deference. Pressure that would previously have been absorbed now consumes disproportionate attention and capacity. This dynamic is particularly relevant in environments characterised by persistent, sub-threshold pressure rather than overt escalation.

Contemporary security pressure increasingly operates through deliberately ambiguous incidents where cause, intent, and responsibility resist immediate clarification. Authorities must balance reassurance, investigation, and proportionality amid incomplete information. When such incidents recur, unresolved ambiguity becomes normalised.

Since 2024, Nordic and European states have recorded persistent drone sightings near energy installations, military sites, ports, and major airports. These uncertainly attributed incidents have encountered operationally justified responses, yet their repetition prolongs interpretive uncertainty. Over time, this increases the communicative burden placed on authorities and conditions the public to expect limited clarity.

Institutional trust shapes how this uncertainty is processed. High trust allows official explanations to anchor public judgment and narrow ambiguity relatively quickly. Where trust has eroded, alternative interpretations gain viability and thus consensus becomes harder to achieve. Parallel narratives persist longer, fragmenting shared understanding.



Hostile information activity exploits this dynamic at low cost. Russian influence operations, for example, frequently rely on selective framing of real events rather than fabrication. Finland's NATO accession has been framed through historically selective comparisons, while symbolic elements of Finnish history have been recontextualised to complicate contemporary interpretation. The effectiveness of such narratives depends less on their intrinsic plausibility than on the absence of rapid interpretive closure.

6. Drone Activity as a Trust-Sensitive Stress Test

The asymmetric use of unmanned aircraft systems has recently emerged as a defining feature of grey-zone competition. Commercial drones are inexpensive, widely available, and difficult to attribute. Their use exploits the ambiguity between civilian and military domains and deliberately remains below thresholds that would trigger overt defensive responses.

Recent patterns across Northern and Central Europe illustrate how drones serve multiple interlocking purposes: reconnaissance of critical infrastructure, calibrated provocation that tests legal and bureaucratic seams, psychological shaping through visible vulnerability, and experimentation with tactics that could be scaled in future campaigns. Each incursion tests response times, coordination mechanisms, and public tolerance for uncertainty.

In Finland, sightings near energy installations outside Oulu and in central regions during 2024 were logged as unusual but non-escalatory events. Similar patterns were observed across Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Poland, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, with temporary airport closures and airspace disruptions occurring at critical nodes. None of these incidents alone constituted a strategic shock. Collectively, they generated a persistent background of uncertainty.

In trust-sensitive environments, the strategic value of such activity lies less in immediate disruption than in cumulative psychological and governance effects. Each unresolved incident marginally increases scepticism, normalises ambiguity, and consumes coordination capacity. Over time, this narrows margins for manoeuvre when additional shocks occur.

7. Social Mobilisation, Visibility, and Legitimacy

Declining trust, particularly perceptions of unfairness, lowers the social and reputational costs of oppositional action. Mobilisation becomes more likely, more heterogeneous, and more visible. Concurrent demonstrations around unrelated grievances increase coordination demands and amplify the perception of societal fragmentation.

Symbolic national moments illustrate this concentration effect. When multiple demonstrations and counter-demonstrations occur alongside official ceremonies, the visibility itself becomes valuable to external observers. Russian-aligned outlets have repeatedly portrayed protests in Nordic capitals as evidence of democratic decline, irrespective of scale or motivation.



The strategic value of such mobilisation lies in its visibility rather than its ideological content. Observable domestic activity provides anchoring material for influence narratives that frame societies as divided and governance as contested.

8. Crisis Governance under Conditions of Eroding Trust

Finland's crisis management system is built around coordination rather than command. The National Emergency Supply Agency (NESA) sits at its core, relying on voluntary cooperation across public authorities, private actors, and service providers. Under high trust, this distributed architecture enables flexibility and rapid alignment.

As trust erodes, governance conditions shift. The ecosystem sees the emergence of frictions that do not immediately disrupt performance but reduce tolerance for sustained stress. Preparedness increasingly becomes a continuous activity rather than an episodic response. Maintaining functional networks consumes institutional capacity even in the absence of acute crisis.

Recent developments reflect this shift. Security-of-supply objectives have expanded to emphasise energy, cyber, and digital resilience. Incidents such as undersea infrastructure disruptions have reinforced a more reactive posture. Expanded Nordic cooperation, particularly with Sweden, strengthens resilience and reflects heightened uncertainty about disruptions and public response.

Psychological resilience remains a comparatively underdeveloped pillar. NESA's recent engagement with the cultural sector acknowledges that security of supply depends on confidence and behaviour as much as material availability.³ However, initiatives remain fragmented and lack a clear coordinating entity.

9. Forward-Looking Risk Assessment and Early-Warning Signals

The trajectory of institutional trust does not indicate imminent failure. Finland's governance capacity and regional partnerships remain strong. However, the system has become more sensitive.

Modest pressures now generate disproportionate effects. Early-warning indicators include prolonged ambiguity around hybrid incidents, increasing delays in interpretive closure, rising frequency of visible mobilisation around disparate grievances, and greater resource consumption by coordination itself. The convergence of low-cost asymmetric tactics with trust erosion increases the strategic value of actions designed to test rather than overwhelm the system.

³ Government of Finland, October 2024, "Government Decision on the Objectives of Security of Supply", available at: <https://tem.fi/en/security-of-supply-and-securing-of-vital-functions>



Left unaddressed, declining trust risks constraining societal cohesion and reducing the effectiveness of comprehensive security precisely when demands on coordination are rising.

10. Recommendations

A. Institutionalise Psychological Resilience as a Security Function

Finland should consolidate psychological resilience within a clearly mandated national coordinating function. NESA is well positioned to serve as a hub for integrating research on public perceptions, grievance patterns, and narrative dynamics into preparedness planning. This function should be resourced, continuous, and operationally linked to crisis communication and security-of-supply decision-making.

B. Treat Trust Metrics as Early-Warning Indicators

Institutional trust data should be systematically integrated into national and Nordic risk assessments. Declines in value-based trust dimensions should trigger targeted review of communication strategies, policy trade-offs, and coordination mechanisms before behavioural effects materialise.

C. Adapt Crisis Communication to Persistent Ambiguity

Authorities should explicitly acknowledge uncertainty as a structural feature of the current threat environment. Communication strategies that manage expectations around incomplete information reduce the space for alternative narratives to fill gaps left by delayed attribution.

D. Deepen Nordic Coordination on Psychological and Hybrid Resilience

Comparable trust declines in Norway and similar dynamics elsewhere suggest shared vulnerabilities. Nordic cooperation should expand beyond material preparedness to include joint analysis of societal resilience, hybrid signalling, and trust-sensitive stress tests, ensuring that national adaptations are mutually reinforcing.

11. Conclusion

Finland's comprehensive security model remains robust, but it operates under altered conditions. Declining institutional trust does not undermine the model outright, yet it narrows margins for coordinated action and increases sensitivity to hybrid pressure. In a contested security environment, trust must be treated as a strategic variable rather than an assumed asset.

Recognising trust erosion as a structural vulnerability clarifies why early and targeted adaptation is essential. Sustaining legitimacy, coordination, and psychological resilience will determine whether Nordic societies retain their capacity to absorb pressure without escalation. The cost of inaction is not immediate breakdown, but gradual loss of strategic freedom under persistent stress.