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Co-producing national defense? Strategic considerations for spontaneous volunteer involvement

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore the concept of co-production within the context of national defense, with a specific focus on spontaneous, informal volunteering, a phenomenon highlighted by experiences from the ongoing war in Ukraine. More specifically, the study sought to deepen understanding of the strategic approaches identified in previous research that can be employed to co-produce national defense with spontaneous volunteers, as well as the tensions associated with these approaches.

Design/methodology/approach – This study, conducted in Finland, is based on interviews with 17 key informants, including public authorities, military officials, NGO representatives, and spontaneous volunteers who mobilized in response to the war in Ukraine.

Findings – The study identifies four strategic options for co-producing national defense with spontaneous volunteers: integrate, restrict, channel, and enable. Preparedness planning for spontaneous volunteers also emerged as an overarching and essential strategic approach. The findings emphasize that the selection of a specific option is inherently context-dependent, influenced by factors such as whether the volunteering involves armed or non-armed activities and the readiness and capacity of the official system to defend the nation during a conflict. The study highlights the inclusion/exclusion paradox, the critical yet fragile nature of trust, and fundamental challenges in co-production, including inequalities in access to and sharing of information – challenges that are further intensified in the context of warfare.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the limited body of research that integrates co-production, spontaneous volunteering, and national defense within an administrative sciences context.

Keywords Co-production, Spontaneous volunteers, Informal volunteering, Warfare, National defense

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Over 50 years ago, Miewald (1970) reminded students and scholars of public administration that military organizations are an integral part of the field. Despite such reminders, research in public administration continues to lack a strong focus on military contexts. For instance, Charbonneau *et al.* (2021), in their systematic review of empirical military research in public administration, found that only a small minority of articles in public administration journals address military related issues. This gap appears to extend to the theme of citizen involvement and co-production as well; in their review, covering the period from 1978 to 2019, only two out of 71 articles addressed this topic. By contrast, in non-military crisis contexts – particularly in

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the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic – the topic of co-production has received considerably more scholarly attention (see Raisio *et al.*, 2021; Steen *et al.*, 2024; Krogh and Lo, 2025; Wang *et al.*, 2025).

As one possible explanation for this gap, Charbonneau *et al.* (2021, p. 76) suggest that "[p]ublic administration's infatuation for networks, and citizen participation and co-production, does not naturally lead researchers to ask themselves if their frameworks and theories can be extended to the military." While we acknowledge that researchers may indeed hold this view, we contend that it is based on a misunderstanding. In our perspective, citizen participation and co-production are highly compatible with the military context, particularly when considered through the contemporary lenses of total defense, comprehensive defense, and comprehensive security, all of which emphasize the role of citizens in the co-production of national defense (see Wither, 2020).

In response to the limited body of literature on this topic, this article seeks to explore what co-production entails within the context of national defense. We further contribute to the scholarly discourse by narrowing our focus to spontaneous, informal volunteering, which has been extensively studied in the context of natural disasters (see Twigg and Mosel, 2017) and social crises (see Simsa *et al.*, 2019), but remains underexplored in the context of warfare. However, the mobilization of Ukrainian civil society following Russia's invasion has begun to expand the literature on this topic (e.g. Khoma, 2022; Mikheieva and Kuznetsova, 2024).

A key narrative identified in the research on spontaneous volunteering in natural disasters and social crises pertains to co-production and its inherent tensions – specifically, the extent to which spontaneous volunteers should be excluded from formal operations, integrated as supplementary workforce within organized efforts, or supported by authorities to strengthen their independent initiatives (Harris *et al.*, 2017; McLennan *et al.*, 2017). Similar tensions in co-production have already been preliminarily observed also within the context of national defense (e.g. Asmolov, 2022). In this article, we aim to deepen the understanding of these tensions and the associated strategic options for engaging with spontaneous volunteers in national defense.

The geographical context of this study is Finland, whose relevance as a research subject is underscored by its well-established comprehensive security model, in which essential societal functions are co-produced collaboratively by public authorities, businesses, NGOs, and citizens (Valtonen and Branders, 2021). Drawing on interviews with 17 key informants – including public authorities, military officials, NGO representatives, and spontaneous Finnish volunteers mobilized in response to the war in Ukraine – this study addresses the following question: *What strategic approaches can be employed to co-produce national defense with spontaneous volunteers, and what tensions arise in relation to these approaches?* To be explicit, the crisis context addressed in this article is war or the imminent threat of war, which fundamentally shapes the conditions and boundaries of co-production through factors such as the laws of armed conflict, the state of emergency, and the exceptional mobilization of society.

The article begins by integrating the concept of co-production with the context of national defense. Following this, a more detailed examination of spontaneous volunteering and the associated tensions within co-production is provided. After describing the research data and analysis, the findings of the study are presented. In the discussion section, the research questions are addressed, while the conclusion outlines potential avenues for future research and the study's limitations.

Conceptual framework

Co-production and national defense

Although the concept of co-production has been a subject of academic inquiry since the late 1970s (see Nabatchi *et al.*, 2017), it remains a term open to multiple interpretations. Consequently, it is imperative for research conducted in this field to clearly articulate how it conceptualizes co-production within its specific context. For example, Eriksson (2022) as well

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as Perikangas and Tuurnas (2024) employ a broader definition of the concept of co-production, where co-production is understood as an umbrella term, as described by Nabatchi *et al.* (2017, p. 769), "that captures a wide variety of activities that can occur in any phase of the public service cycle and in which state actors and lay actors work together to produce benefits."

Brandsen and Pestoff (2006) have emphasized a more narrowly defined interpretation of co-production, restricting it to the delivery phase of public services. Similarly, Uster (2024, p. 695), from a local governance perspective, adopts this more limited definition in her study, where co-production is understood as "citizens' engagement in public service delivery, in which both users and non-users of these services voluntarily collaborate with professional staff in providing public services to citizens in their local community." In this article, we build on the definition provided by Tu (2022), which defines co-production with sufficient precision without being overly restrictive, and adapt it to the context of national defense. In this context, co-production is understood *as a process in which national defense and preparedness organizations and citizens make use of each other's assets, resources, and contributions to achieve improved outcomes of national defense efforts*.

Such co-production, while not always explicitly labeled as such, is inherently embedded within the frameworks of total defense, comprehensive defense, and comprehensive security. Despite their conceptual ambiguity, these frameworks share a defining feature: they embody whole-of-society approaches to national defense that are both vertical and horizontal in nature, extending beyond the horizontally focused, intra-governmental coordination characteristic of whole-of-government models (Rongved, 2025; see also Larsson and Rhinard, 2021). These frameworks have been adopted particularly in the Nordic and Baltic countries (as well as in Israel and Singapore), and their significance has become more pronounced following Russia's acts of aggression (Wither, 2020).

All these frameworks differ from traditional military deterrence and armed defense by emphasizing the direct involvement of civil society. However, notable differences exist in how these frameworks address threats. While total defense focuses on conventional military threats in the spirit of total war, comprehensive defense broadens the focus to more explicitly include hybrid threats (Berzina, 2020). The Finnish Concept for Comprehensive Security further expands the scope in line with an all-hazards approach, extending beyond warfare to address threats such as natural hazards, while still retaining total defense as a core component (Valtonen and Branders, 2021). These whole-of-society approaches to national defense also challenge the traditional view of national defense as an archetypal *public good* provided solely by a monocentric state. Instead, national defense can be understood as a heterogeneous set of goods that are co-produced through contributions from all sectors of society (Coyne and Goodman, 2020).

These frameworks acknowledge that civil society encompasses not only organized entities such as NGOs, but also more self-organizing forms of civic engagement, such as spontaneous volunteers. An integral aim of these frameworks is to enhance citizens' resilience, capacities, and preparedness to respond to various crises (Atmante, 2020; Valtonen and Branders, 2021). However, despite these stated objectives, it appears that they have not yet been fully realized in practice. For example, Rogulis (2024) notes that in Lithuania, citizen involvement in national defense remains more symbolic than substantive, due to factors such as disingenuous rhetoric and bureaucratic obstacles. Similar concerns have been raised in the Swedish context (Rådestad and Larsson, 2020).

In the context of total defense, Rongved (2025) emphasizes that such frameworks become substantive through *systemized* cooperation between the military and civil society. This cooperation should be based on extensive advance planning – including legal frameworks – during peacetime, with clearly defined civil–military collaboration procedures and regular joint training and exercises, rather than relying on ad hoc arrangements.

Co-production and spontaneous volunteers

Spontaneous volunteers are typically defined as individuals who act on impulse, offering their assistance after a disaster without prior affiliation to recognized volunteer organizations, and

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who may or may not possess relevant training, skills, or experience (Paciarotti *et al.*, 2018). Related concepts to spontaneous volunteering include informal volunteering (Whitaker *et al.*, 2015), emergent groups (Stallings and Quarantelli, 1985), and unaffiliated volunteers (Yumagulova and Handmer, 2021), all of which refer to forms of volunteering that, at least initially, take place outside the formal structures of the organized third sector.

While spontaneous volunteering is implicitly a form of co-production, it is not always explicitly linked to the theoretical framework of co-production in the research literature, resulting in a degree of separation between these concepts, although examples of integration do exist (e.g. McLennan *et al.*, 2021; Tu, 2022).

The literature on co-production and the literature on spontaneous volunteering share a common theme in emphasizing the tensions that arise between the actors involved in co-production efforts. In the context of spontaneous volunteering, these tensions are particularly highlighted through the *inclusion/exclusion paradox*, which describes a situation "in which people who want to be involved in responding to an unplanned event can face numerous pressures for their exclusion, even when there is, objectively, a need for the help that they are offering and the resources they can contribute" (Harris *et al.*, 2017, p. 364).

By contrast, Brandsen (2016) has explored the *hedgehog dilemma*, which involves balancing the emergency management organizations' oversight with the independence of spontaneous volunteers. The danger lies in how official actors can "'overdo' affiliation and formalization of outsider emergency volunteering" (McLennan *et al.*, 2021, p. 20), and in the process, "kill or mutate them" (Brandsen, 2016, p. 349). Signs of this have also been observed in the context of participatory warfare in Ukraine, where, in the evolving landscape of volunteerism, it has been noted that in some cases "volunteers refused to enter the state system because it reduces their freedom and makes performing their functions inefficient" (Asmolov, 2022, p. 35).

Regarding these tensions, Harris *et al.* (2017) emphasize that the options should not be viewed as limited to two extremes, either excluding spontaneous volunteers or fully incorporating them into the official response, placing them under the control of formal actors. For example, McLennan *et al.* (2017) outline six strategic options for emergency management organizations to plan for non-traditional emergency volunteering that occurs during the response and recovery phases of disasters and crises: 1) do nothing, 2) curtail, 3) contain, 4) select, 5) adapt, and 6) enable. These six options, depicted in detail in Figure 1, reflect an increasing need for attitudinal shifts within emergency management organizations as one moves up the hierarchy. In a somewhat related vein, Krogh and Lo (2023) identify five approaches: dismissing, directing, cooperating, coordinating, and collaborating. Within the context of total defense and resistance, Petit (2022) presents four strategic options – contain, leverage, influence, and classic command and control – which are applied based on the characteristics of the actors involved.

Scholarly work has outlined various approaches to alleviating tensions within co-production. For instance, Carius *et al.* (2024) demonstrate how authorities can confer legitimacy on spontaneous volunteers without formally integrating them into official structures by allocating dedicated space or other resources. McLennan *et al.* (2021) highlight the role of intermediary organizations, showing how non-governmental organizations can act as bridges between spontaneous volunteers and public authorities, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of spontaneous volunteers. They illustrate a model resembling a recruitment agency, in which the NGO registers offers of aid and matches them to the needs of authorities. Krogh and Lo (2025) elaborate on the concept of *intermediated co-production*, emphasizing the role of non-profit organizations in temporarily organizing unaffiliated citizens during emergency responses. In doing so, these organizations serve as a trust-supporting infrastructure that facilitates co-production.

Simsa *et al.* (2019, p. 115S) introduce the concept of *structured self-organization* to describe the balancing acts between coordinating spontaneous volunteers and permitting self-organized processes. This involves "the means to give space to self-organized processes but

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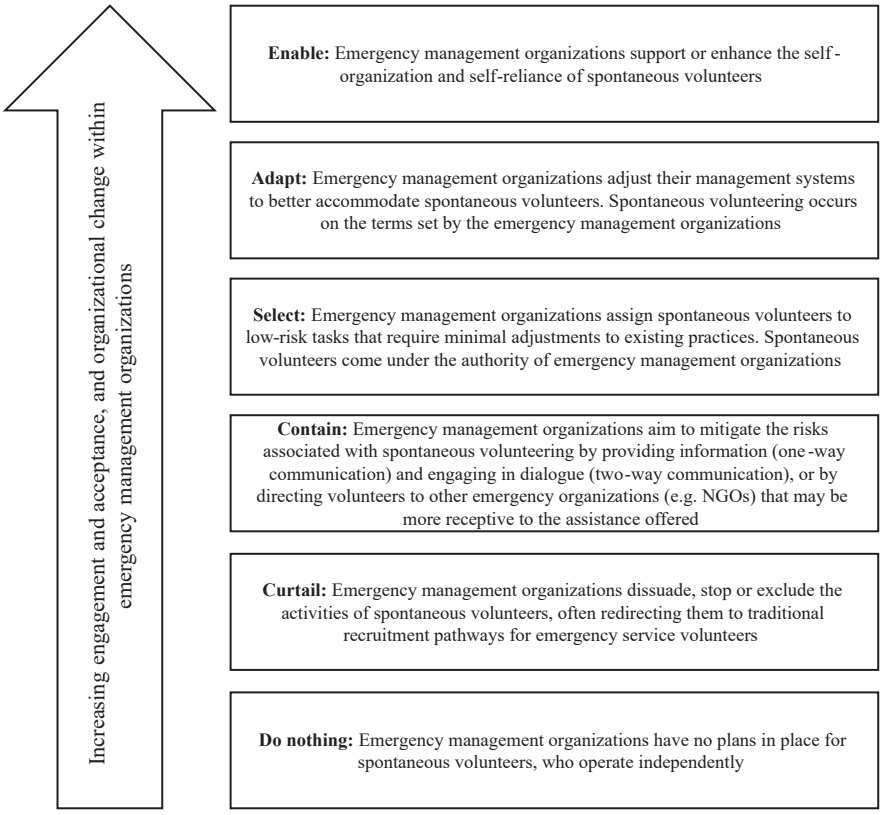

Figure 1. Strategic options for emergency management organizations to plan for non-traditional emergency volunteering. **Source(s):** adapted and redrawn from McLennan *et al*. (2017)

enable their efficiency by basic structures, clear (although often very short-term) goals, and organization." This type of activity is also recognized in national defense contexts, where such constrained self-organization is referred to as *mission command*, a leadership philosophy and military doctrine characterized by "decentralization and local flexibility within the overall intent [of the superior commander]" (Storr, 2003, p. 126). The core principle is that by avoiding overly rigid directives, subordinates are empowered to exercise creativity, make autonomous decisions, and adapt to changing circumstances.

Research methods and data

This article draws on the insights of 17 carefully selected key informants. A purposive sampling strategy (Robinson, 2014) was used to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives on spontaneous volunteering in the context of national defense. The sample included individuals with either direct personal experience of spontaneous volunteering or with professional, political, or organizational roles involving engagement with various forms of volunteering in national defense or crisis contexts. Consistent with the comprehensive security approach, the selection aimed to balance perspectives by including informants from multiple administrative levels (from municipalities to ministries and the Parliament) and societal sectors (from public authorities to NGOs and spontaneous volunteers). The intention was to avoid a narrow focus on active-duty military viewpoints and instead to reflect the broader network of actors contributing to the comprehensive approach to national defense and societal preparedness.

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Given Finland's prolonged period of peace, few individuals have confronted the realities of volunteering under wartime conditions. To address this, particular attention was paid to including spontaneous volunteers who mobilized in response to Russia's war against Ukraine. These respondents offered unique and contextually grounded insights into Finnish civic engagement under conditions shaped by external conflict. They were identified through systematic mapping of traditional and social media, with attention to the diversity of volunteering practices. The remaining informants were identified through professional networks. All were in positions that have enabled them to influence, observe, or reflect on spontaneous volunteering from distinct institutional vantage points.

The interviews were conducted between August and October 2024. Five interviewees were spontaneous Finnish volunteers mobilized in response to the war in Ukraine. Four were individuals active in key NGOs or a public-law association, three were public officials responsible for municipal or national preparedness, two were members of parliament with relevant roles and backgrounds for this study, and one was a civil servant with expertise in non-military service (an alternative to military service). Notably, three of the above-mentioned interviewees were retired officers (a major, a lieutenant colonel, and a colonel). Additionally, two interviewees were active-duty officers (lieutenant colonels).

Five of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, while 12 were carried out via Teams or by phone. A semi-structured interview format was employed. The interview protocol included two sections. The first section addressed spontaneous volunteering in national defense at a general level, with questions about interviewees' perceptions of spontaneous volunteering in national defense, associated concrete activities, underlying factors, and specific characteristics in the context of Finland's national defense. The second section focused on strategies for engaging with spontaneous volunteers, using the strategic options for emergency management organizations to plan for non-traditional emergency volunteering (see Figure 1) developed by McLennan *et al.* (2017) as discussion prompts. Interviewees were asked to consider how the model would apply to the context of national defense in Finland. This article primarily draws on responses to questions from this second section. The average duration of the interviews was 70 min. All interviews were transcribed, resulting in 259 pages of text (Times New Roman, 12 pt, single-spaced).

We confirm that all participants in this study provided informed consent. Interviewees were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights as research subjects, and verbal consent was obtained at the beginning of each interview. The interview data were provided by the first author at the University of Vaasa, where formal approval from a research ethics committee is not required for non-sensitive research involving human participants, as long as individual participants provide their informed consent to participate.

Although the framework described above (McLennan *et al.*, 2017) provided a general point of reference for the interviews, the analysis did not follow a purely deductive, theory-driven approach. Instead, it employed abductive content analysis, allowing for a dynamic interplay between inductive engagement with the data and deductive reflection informed by the article's conceptual framework. In this context, abduction refers to an iterative process of moving between empirical observations and conceptual reflections in order to generate plausible interpretations and deepen analytical understanding. Rather than serving as a rigid coding template, McLennan *et al.*'s framework functioned as a *heuristic tool*, that is, a flexible conceptual tool to support sense-making and guide the organization of findings.

The analysis proceeded in several stages. Two researchers (the lead and second authors), both with formal training and practical experience in qualitative methods, began by immersing themselves in the data through repeated readings of the transcribed interviews. This was followed by an open, inductive coding phase, during which meaning units were identified and grouped into data-driven, third-level categories. These initial codes captured recurring patterns across the interviews, remaining close to the participants' own language and perspectives.

In subsequent stages, the emerging categories were iteratively compared with the McLennan *et al.* (2017) framework. This facilitated the refinement of the data into

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increasingly abstract second- and first-level categories, enabling synthesis between empirical data and the conceptual structure. Ultimately, five overarching first-level categories were formed: (1) *preparedness planning for spontaneous volunteers*, (2) *integrating spontaneous volunteers*, (3) *restricting spontaneous volunteers*, (4) *channeling spontaneous volunteers*, and (5) *enabling spontaneous volunteers*.

To illustrate the layered nature of this process, the category *channeling spontaneous volunteers* can serve as an example. This first-level category included second-level categories of *channeling beyond military defense*, *responsibility for channeling*, and *sensitivity of channeling*. These were built upon more detailed third-level categories that emerged in the early inductive phase. For instance, the category of responsibility for channeling encompassed references to the *roles of NGOs*, *municipalities*, and *skill registries*.

The overall analytical structure thus evolved progressively through abductive reasoning rather than through the linear application of a conceptual framework. Throughout the process, coding decisions and category development were informed by constant comparison within and across transcripts. This iterative strategy ensured internal consistency and allowed the findings to develop in close dialog with the data.

Following the initial analysis, three additional researchers (the third, fourth, and fifth authors) served as *critical friends* (Sparkes and Smith, 2014), providing alternative perspectives and encouraging reflection on different interpretations. This process aimed to strengthen the reliability of the research through triangulation, thereby reducing the potential for bias or interpretative errors. Additionally, to reinforce the credibility of the findings and avoid selective reporting, anonymized direct quotations were carefully selected based on their relevance to the research question and incorporated into the analysis (interviewees identified as #1–#17). In the following section, the results are organized and discussed in accordance with these five first-level categories, in the sequence presented above.

Findings

Preparedness planning for spontaneous volunteers

From the analysis emerged a consistently emphasized viewpoint that spontaneous volunteering should be anticipated in advance and incorporated as a phenomenon into preparedness planning. The strategic option of doing nothing – lacking even basic plans – was perceived as the worst possible scenario, even a dangerous one. As one interviewed public official remarked, "*I think everyone should give some thought to how to engage with spontaneous volunteers*." (#8) It was stressed that it is imperative to address this issue proactively, before any potential war occurs, since the absence of plans might result in operational paralysis.

The interviewees expressed the view that spontaneous volunteering as a phenomenon has not been sufficiently considered at present. A contributing factor was identified as the prolonged absence of a significant military threat to Finland. This has led to limited consideration of such a phenomenon, with the assumption prevailing that the Defense Forces and reservists would manage any such challenges. Another contributing factor has been the perceived sensitivity of the topic, making it challenging to discuss openly. For instance, one interviewee from the Defense Forces shared how a military colleague had previously attempted to initiate conversations about civil resistance: "*I clearly remember the speeches and the awkward silences that followed when the topic was brought up in various settings. This is something we need to be able to discuss more openly.*" (#5)

The interviewees highlighted several practical aspects of preparedness planning. First, the importance of legislation was emphasized, highlighting the need to examine the legal boundaries relevant to engaging with spontaneous volunteering in the context of national defense. Second, it was proposed to attempt quantifying spontaneous volunteering, for instance, through calculations estimating the potential number of Finns without pre-assigned wartime roles, thereby making this potential resource more visible. Third, it was suggested that

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spontaneous volunteering be incorporated as a phenomenon into preparedness exercises and war games, ensuring better preparedness for its occurrence. Fourth, it was implied that preparedness planning should still account for the inherent difficulty of predicting how spontaneous volunteering might manifest in real-world situations.

Insights from the interviews also brought attention to strategic considerations related to preparedness planning, with comparisons particularly drawn to the model proposed by McLennan *et al.* (2017). For instance, the question was raised whether planning should include a broader range of strategic options (i.e. the six options presented in Figure 1) or if a more limited set would suffice. A potential challenge with having a large number of options was that the distinctions between them might become blurred, making them resemble lines drawn in water. It was also noted that the dynamic nature of strategic options should be considered, as evolving situations may require transitioning from one option to another. Furthermore, multiple options could be implemented simultaneously, indicating that there might not always be a single, static correct choice: "*The situation may develop in a way that necessitates implementing all strategic options, even if the initial decision was to abstain from action. Rapid escalation – potentially within just a week – underscores the critical need for comprehensive preparedness across all [strategic options].*" (#9).

Integrating spontaneous volunteers

While preparedness planning for spontaneous volunteers emerges in the data as an overarching and essential strategic approach, the first concrete strategic option identified is the integration of spontaneous volunteers. This option was considered particularly relevant to armed national defense, where selected spontaneous volunteers are integrated directly into the operations of the Finnish Defense Forces. As one representative of the Defense Forces remarked, "*the military side will probably take care of itself*" (#5). This reflects the structured system in Finland, which effectively integrates reservists through a well-rehearsed and strictly regulated establishment process, ensuring that armed activities are carried out within the formal military framework.

This integration would grant spontaneous volunteers the legitimacy to act in an armed capacity on behalf of the state, as part of the National Defense Forces. However, a key condition for such participation is that they must have a background as reservists. A partial challenge arises from the fact that while Finland's wartime strength is 280,000 soldiers, the total of conscript trained reserve consists of nearly 900,000 individuals. Interviewees highlighted that troops would be supplemented as the war progresses, and reservists could also volunteer for service without a formal order to report. As one interviewed spontaneous volunteer remarked, quick responsiveness from the Defense Forces would likely be expected in such scenarios: "*In the event of war, I would wait for the Defense Forces' orders, but if no orders came within 24 h, I would go to [the regional office of the Defense Forces] and ask, 'So, what should I do?'*" (#13)

Restricting spontaneous volunteers

The option of integrating spontaneous volunteers is closely tied to that of restricting them. A key narrative emerging from the data emphasized the importance of preventing rogue armed groups from operating, advocating for either their restriction or, as previously described, their integration into established systems. Spontaneous armed activation was perceived as potentially disrupting the operations of the Defense Forces, increasing the risk of friendly fire, and possibly undermining societal order. The interviewees consistently emphasized the notion that "*[t]he use of violence must be extremely precisely directed and coordinated*." (#2) Informal handling of explosives, ammunition, and weapons was identified as a significant challenge, with concerns raised about the risks of overenthusiasm leading to unsafe practices. One representative of the Defense Forces illustrated this by stating:

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> [F]or those of us working in national defense, volunteering represents a normal, responsible citizen who is engaged and steps forward to say, 'Hey, I am available.' That is the ideal. It is not someone who, so to speak, forms their own army, arrives armed and ready, and declares, 'Now I am prepared to kill.' That is exactly what we do not want. (#16)

The option of restriction was also understood to include geographical limitations, emphasizing that spontaneous volunteers should be kept out of areas critical to national defense, particularly those near the frontlines. Additionally, one interviewed public official reflected on whether public authorities might need to address potential spontaneous domestic anti-war movements. She questioned whether such movements would be accepted or tolerated, or instead categorized as victims of hybrid influence, thereby justifying measures to restrict them. The data also provided an example of how spontaneous volunteers may impose restrictions on their own activities. One interviewed spontaneous volunteer described efforts to minimize risks to life, such as ensuring fire safety in accommodation facilities. Instead of ignoring the issue or handling it entirely alone, they actively sought assistance from fire authorities to conduct safety inspections.

Although the interviewees acknowledged the necessity of restricting certain activities related to spontaneous volunteering, they also questioned the feasibility of such restrictions. First, concerns were raised about whether the Defense Forces and other authorities would have sufficient resources to enforce these limitations. This connects to the previously discussed preparedness planning phase, emphasizing that both responsibility and resource issues should be addressed proactively. Second, it was noted that the use of a restriction option could lead to individuals acting despite efforts to prevent them. Additionally, the potential negative consequences of implementing restrictions were highlighted. It was suggested that restricting spontaneous volunteering could lead to frustration among volunteers, potentially suppressing the phenomenon altogether. This concern was described as follows:

> Well, in a way, the worst-case scenario is that people are extremely eager to help, but there is no channel for that willingness, leading to frustration. And as I have said, one of the most important aspects of volunteering is not just the output it produces but the way it enhances people's own resilience. It helps them remain functional for longer by allowing them to participate. That is significant. If everything is categorically prohibited or restricted – 'do not participate, do not do this, it is dangerous' – then it becomes problematic. (#17)

Channeling spontaneous volunteers

The interviewees emphasized that, in addition to integration and restriction, a third option exists: channeling spontaneous volunteers to support national defense. While the integration option incorporates spontaneous volunteers fully into the official system, channeling preserves a stronger dimension of volunteerism. This strategic option highlights the perspective that "*security is so much more than just military defense, there would certainly be tasks for everyone*" (#4). This implies that spontaneous volunteers are channeled toward non-armed roles, such as assisting in tasks like organizing food services, arranging accommodations, or managing traffic control.

More broadly, this option involves maintaining the functioning of society to ensure the country's defense capability. As one interviewed public official remarked: "*But in such a situation of attack, or even in the face of a military threat, comprehensive security ultimately determines the outcome. As has been discussed, if the wartime strength of the Defense Forces is 280,000 and there are five million of us left, what those five million do is at least as critical as the actions of the Defense Forces*." (#2)

A significant challenge, however, was identified in determining who would take responsibility for this channeling. Among the entities suggested in the interviews, NGOs involved in security-related activities were particularly emphasized. For instance, the potential role of the Finnish Red Cross was discussed. In normal circumstances, this NGO coordinates

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voluntary rescue services, a network comprising over 50 NGOs and partners, including reservist associations.

However, one interviewee highlighted the potential challenges posed by wartime conditions, given the Finnish Red Cross's obligation to maintain neutrality: "*The entire NGO field's logic gets somewhat turned on its head in the event of an armed conflict. [. . .]. Coordination would be crucial because there will certainly be many volunteers, but how it will be done – I do not have an answer to that.*" (#17) In addition to the Finnish Red Cross, other entities more directly connected to national defense were proposed as potential coordinators, such as the National Defence Training Association of Finland and the Women's National Emergency Preparedness Association.

The role of municipalities as intermediary organizations was considered, facilitating the coordination between spontaneous volunteers and other public authorities. Additionally, the significance of regional differences was highlighted, particularly in how the logic of organization may vary. For instance, in rural areas, where people tend to know each other, the dynamics of coordination might differ significantly from those in large cities, where pre-existing social networks are less likely to be in place.

The importance of various skills registries was also emphasized. Their role was seen as a means of matching spontaneous volunteers with specific skills to tasks requiring their expertise: "*[W]ith a registry, we could provide some guidance on where you might be called upon if needed. This could also give individuals the sense that they need to further develop their skills to be better prepared and to maintain their readiness.*" (#9).

Similarly to the restriction option, the channeling option also requires a "*sensitive ear*" (#6) to determine how strongly spontaneous volunteering should be coordinated and who should take on the role of the coordinating entity. The interviewees highlighted that excessive control and rigid hierarchies could risk discouraging volunteers altogether: "*Then someone might just say, 'Oh well, if my style and resources as they are aren't acceptable, then fine. I won't do anything. Damn it, if it is not appreciated.'*" (#2) Similarly, it was noted that if the coordinating entity does not align with the values or beliefs of spontaneous volunteers (e.g. a religious organization) or if the volunteers lack trust in the coordinating body, the process of channeling spontaneity can become challenging.

Enabling spontaneous volunteers

The interviewees also considered situations where, instead of opting for integration, restriction, or channeling, the strategic approach could involve enabling spontaneous volunteers to operate in a self-organized manner. This option was seen as primarily applicable to non-armed activities. In practice, it was perceived as encompassing various forms of caring for one's local community, actions that "*do not jeopardize national defense in any way, but rather strengthen the will and spirit of national defense and bring people together.*" (#12) In certain situations, however, this option was also considered applicable to activities more directly related to warfare. First, this was seen as particularly relevant to cyber warfare (e.g. conducting or countering cyberattacks), where self-organized spontaneous volunteering was perceived as a natural fit. Second, if the official defense system were insufficiently prepared or failed, it was considered possible that spontaneous volunteering could take a more kinetic form, manifesting as armed, guerrilla-style civilian resistance.

The interviewees highlighted several ways in which the enabling option could be facilitated. Representatives of the official system particularly emphasized communication and training as key means of enabling spontaneous volunteering. Communication-based enabling refers, for example, to public authorities and NGOs providing potential spontaneous volunteers with guidance related to preparedness activities. This might involve sharing information on how to prepare or explaining the reasons behind the need for preparedness. It could also include communicating with spontaneously activated groups in the digital sphere about suitable targets for cyberattacks or disseminating lists and instructions regarding the

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supplies and equipment needed for various national defense tasks. Training-based enabling, in turn, refers to NGOs organizing training courses related to national defense activities. These courses were regarded as a potential "*pathway*" (#3) for spontaneous volunteering, equipping individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to participate effectively, should the need arise.

The interviewed spontaneous volunteers heavily grounded their perspectives in their own experiences. Both implemented and hoped-for measures to enable spontaneous volunteering included providing access to facilities (such as municipally owned storage spaces), offering guidance (e.g. on export licensing for humanitarian aid and military logistics), and financial assistance (e.g. reimbursing travel expenses for those transporting war refugees). There were also widespread calls for reducing bureaucracy. The narrative centered on the hope that official systems would meet spontaneous volunteers halfway by enhancing their own agility. This could involve, for instance, being more accessible and making decisions more swiftly. Interviews also revealed a desire for recognition. This referred to an expectation that the official system would take an interest in what spontaneous volunteers are doing. Fundamentally, it was about establishing a two-way dialog, as one interviewee explained:

> There is no need to compete with each other, in my opinion, in any sense. It benefits no one. I am not trying to be a public authority, and the public authority is not trying to be me. If it went in that direction, this would not work at all. What would be ideal is if the public authorities, like [a Finnish ministry] has done a couple of times, occasionally invite us in. They could ask, for instance, what we are doing. And then we could ask the public authorities how things are being handled . . . For example, they could explain how they are supporting Ukraine through their channels and how that support reaches the end user. (#10)

An emerging central narrative in the co-production between spontaneous volunteers and the official system was the importance of trust – how it develops gradually and remains relatively fragile. The interviewed spontaneous volunteers described how building trust took time and how authorities initially approached them cautiously, testing the waters. One interviewee shared their experience: "*I remember when we met [representatives of the Defense Forces] for the first time. It was clearly a tentative approach on their part, where they wanted to assess whether we were sensible and rational actors or some completely eccentric group that did not understand what they were doing and with whom it might not be worth maintaining contact*." (#15)

In the interviews, various experience-based ways were outlined in which spontaneous volunteers could contribute to building trust. One approach involved actively introducing themselves to Finnish politicians, Defense Forces personnel, and other relevant stakeholders, thereby reducing the perceived distance that might otherwise arise if these stakeholders only observed them through social media. Additionally, leveraging existing contacts or highlighting one's background (e.g. as an active reservist) was seen as a way to enhance the legitimacy of their activities. The importance of demonstrated performance was particularly emphasized, referring both to the tangible outcomes of their actions and the sustainability of their efforts. For instance, one interviewed spontaneous volunteer described how they initially faced skepticism from all directions, with doubts about whether they would endure. Building trust, in this case, took time:

> Interviewer: "At what point did trust start to develop?"
>
> Interviewee #7: "Well, when our activities did not fall apart immediately. We just kept going and going."

This process of building trust was also implicitly tied to the formalization of spontaneous volunteering. All interviewed spontaneous volunteers described how, as the war in Ukraine continued, their activities evolved into formal NGOs to establish reliable financial systems, gain accreditation as recognized aid actors, or ensure sustainability beyond a few key

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individuals. However, two of them explicitly mentioned that this transformation occurred due to external pressures rather than their preference; they would have preferred to continue operating informally. The other interviewee eventually reverted to informal operations after their NGO ceased its activities.

Spontaneous volunteering was perceived as more fragile in terms of trust-building compared to established NGO operations. Interviewees representing the official system expressed concern that a single misstep by a spontaneously acting volunteer could set a precedent, potentially undermining trust in future collaborations with similar groups. The interviewed spontaneous volunteers were also conscious of this risk: "*Because if the activities had been a complete disaster all the time, with chaotic actions and communication, it surely would have sunk this ship sooner rather than later.*" (#15).

The interviews revealed that even a high level of trust does not resolve the inherent challenges of co-production in the context of warfare, where secrecy and deception are fundamental elements. Public authorities, particularly the Defense Forces, are limited in the extent to which they can inform spontaneous volunteers about their operations. Nevertheless, public authorities can partially mitigate this limitation. For instance, one interviewed spontaneous volunteer shared how a public official suggested they report any suspicious activities directed at them, thereby providing indirect support and enabling their activities within the constraints of operational secrecy.

Discussion

The study's findings suggest that co-production and military organizations are not inherently incompatible (cf. Charbonneau *et al.*, 2021), especially when examined through the comprehensive approaches to defense and security employed by Nordic and Baltic countries (see Wither, 2020). The results highlight that co-production plays a pivotal role, not only in directly supporting national defense but also, and perhaps more significantly, in fostering societal resilience. This study focused particularly on the co-production involving spontaneous volunteers, whose significance has become increasingly evident, especially in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine (see Khoma, 2022; Mikheieva and Kuznetsova, 2024). Through a diverse set of interviews, this study aimed to enhance understanding of what strategic approaches can be employed to co-produce national defense with spontaneous volunteers and what tensions arise in relation to these approaches.

The findings support previous research (e.g. Rådestad and Larsson, 2020; Rogulis, 2024) suggesting that, despite being acknowledged in strategic documents and official discourse, co-production can remain more symbolic than actionable. The data emphasized the need for spontaneous volunteering to be addressed more thoroughly and transparently within defense administration, and for it to be incorporated into preparedness planning, moving beyond reliance on ad hoc arrangements in wartime (see Rongved, 2025). Instead of lacking plans altogether – which resembles the "do nothing" option in McLennan *et al.* (2017) – such preparedness planning should serve as a cross-cutting framework encompassing all strategic options (see Figure 2). This approach could help ensure the effective utilization of society's diverse resources and avoid overwhelming the official system during crises, particularly when it is already under significant strain managing other pressing responsibilities. These results may, however, partly reflect social desirability bias, as acknowledging inaction (cf. the "do nothing" option) could be perceived as incompatible with the normative expectations of national defense planning.

The four primary strategic options that preparedness efforts should account for, as identified in this study, are *integrate*, *restrict*, *channel*, and *enable*. The findings clearly demonstrate that the choice of a particular option is always context-dependent, shaped by factors such as who the spontaneous volunteers are, their backgrounds, and the specific circumstances at hand. As such, these options are not ranked in any order of preference or superiority but are selected based on situational needs. Key situational factors include whether

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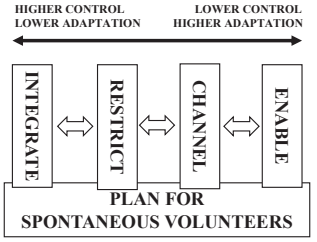

Figure 2. Strategic options to co-produce national defense with spontaneous volunteers. **Source(s):** author's own work

the spontaneous volunteering involves non-armed or armed activities and whether the official system has been prepared and capable of defending the nation as the conflict or war progresses.

Ideally, when spontaneous volunteering is armed and rooted in the volunteers' background as reservists, the strategic option is integration. This reflects the classic command-and-control model (Petit, 2022), in which spontaneous volunteers formally become part of the national defense forces, thereby losing their status as volunteers. This stands in clear contrast to non-military crisis contexts, where full formal integration of unaffiliated volunteers is rare or virtually nonexistent (see, e.g. Raisio *et al.*, 2021; Krogh and Lo, 2025). In the context of national defense, being a reservist can function as a proxy for legitimacy and readiness, thereby facilitating integration into the formal defense structure. However, a key challenge lies in the disparity between the size of the wartime forces and the significantly larger pool of reservists. This can give rise to the inclusion/exclusion paradox described by Harris *et al.* (2017), which in turn may prompt some reservists to activate themselves spontaneously outside the formal system.

The counterpart to integration is the restrict option, where spontaneous volunteering is limited, based on the principle that armed activities should always be under the strong leadership of the official system. However, the data also highlighted concerns about whether sufficient resources are available to enforce such restrictions and whether spontaneous volunteering might still occur despite these efforts to limit it. On the other hand, there was some acknowledgment that, in certain situations, spontaneous armed activities might be deemed acceptable, aligning with the enable strategic option. For instance, in Ukraine, such circumstances arose when the official system was unprepared for Russia's actions (particularly in 2014). In this context, spontaneous efforts initially emerged to address gaps in the official system's operations. Over time, these efforts were subsequently integrated into Ukraine's armed forces (see Bukkvoll, 2019).

The data emphasized that national defense encompasses much more than armed activities, with various support functions playing an equally significant role. For such tasks, the channel option was highlighted, involving a balance between coordinating spontaneity and allowing self-organization. A potential risk in this context is the hedgehog dilemma described by Brandsen (2016), where excessive control over spontaneity might lead to resistance among spontaneous volunteers (see also Asmolov, 2022). This balancing act could take the form of structured self-organization or mission command, approaches that deliberately navigate this dilemma (see Storr, 2003; Simsa, 2019). While the integrate option naturally positions the defense forces as the responsible authority, discussions surrounding the channel option raised the question of who would serve as the appropriate coordinating entity, especially given the constraints that wartime conditions might impose on organizations like the Red Cross. Additionally, the role of intermediary structures (McLennan *et al.*, 2021; see also Krogh and Lo, 2025), such as skill registries, was brought up in relation to the channel option, emphasizing their potential to act as bridges between spontaneous volunteers and the official system, thereby granting spontaneous actors, to some extent, the status of affiliated volunteers.

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The enable option pointed to opportunities for supporting spontaneous volunteering that remains highly self-organized. While some measures mentioned were tangible, such as providing financial resources and access to facilities (see Carius *et al.*, 2024), intangible elements also played a significant role. These included effective communication efforts and gestures of appreciation from the official system toward spontaneous volunteers. Consistent with previous research (e.g. Ruohonen and Backholm, 2023), this study underscored the critical role of trust and its inherent fragility. Similarly, in line with earlier studies, the findings highlighted fundamental challenges in co-production, such as inequalities between actors – particularly regarding access to and sharing of information – which become even more pronounced in the context of warfare compared to non-military crisis settings (e.g. Krogh and Lo, 2023).

In contrast to the model presented by McLennan *et al.* (2017), this study did not identify adapt-option – understood as the need for official systems to adjust their management practices to better accommodate spontaneous volunteers – as an independent strategic option (see Figure 1). Instead, adaptation emerged as a cross-cutting concept along a control–adaptation continuum, as illustrated in Figure 2. In this sense, it is a feature reflected, in different ways, across all the identified options.

Within this framework, the integrate option represents a highly controlled approach, as it incorporates spontaneous volunteers into the existing command-and-control structures, particularly those of the Defense Forces. Because it operates within established systems, it requires relatively little adaptation. The restrict option, by contrast, seeks to limit or deter spontaneous volunteering and often necessitates slightly more adaptation, particularly regarding the availability of sufficient resources to implement this approach effectively. While it may appear more controlling in principle, restriction involves responding to unforeseen and informal volunteer activity, which can require new tools and procedures. Moreover, it raises the fundamental question of whether spontaneous volunteering can, in practice, be fully restricted or controlled.

In the channel option, adaptation becomes more pronounced, both due to the ambiguity surrounding existing coordination structures and the potential risk of exerting excessive control over spontaneity. Finally, the enable option demands the highest level of adaptation from the official system, as it pushes them furthest beyond their traditional comfort zones. Ultimately, none of these options alone constitutes a definitive solution applicable to all circumstances. Instead, a dynamic, context-dependent interplay between different options – represented in Figure 2 by the bidirectional arrows linking the strategic options – appears necessary.

Conclusions

In light of escalating tensions between great powers and certain nation-states, including the ongoing war in Ukraine and developments in the Baltic Sea region, there is a growing need for research on warfare and military-related topics to be included in leading administrative science journals, rather than remaining solely within the domain of military science publications. This article revisits Miewald's (1970) assertion that military organizations play a crucial role in the study of public administration, highlighting the importance of also considering citizen involvement and co-production. Such an approach broadens the focus beyond traditional civil-military relations research (see Shields, 2006), which predominantly examines interactions between military forces and political leadership, while often overlooking the active role citizens can play in co-producing national defense. The article contributes to shifting the perception of national defense from a unitary public good to a more complex and heterogeneous set of co-produced goods involving various actors, including spontaneous volunteers (see Coyne and Goodman, 2020).

The contributions, limitations, and directions for future research of this study are closely interwoven. Inspired by the activation of Ukraine's civil society in response to Russia's

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aggression, this study examined the phenomenon within the Finnish context. Its primary contribution lies in advancing the understanding of co-production and the tensions it entails in the specific context of warfare, particularly within the framework of spontaneous volunteering. A limitation of the study is that Finland's unique context may limit the generalizability of its findings. For example, Finland is a member of both the European Union and NATO and shares a 1,344-km border with Russia, the longest of any EU or NATO country. It has also consistently maintained strong national defence capabilities, exemplified by its universal male conscription system, with voluntary military service available for women (Jonsson *et al*., 2024).

It should also be noted that the insights provided by the key informants were not based on firsthand experience but on *perceptions* of what might occur in the event of an armed aggression against Finland. Although the actions of spontaneous volunteers were real, they related to the war in Ukraine and its consequences (e.g. the refugee flows it generated), as Finland remains at peace. The inclusion of interviewees with indirect experience was therefore a deliberate methodological choice, enabling a prospective exploration of how spontaneous volunteering could materialize in the Finnish context. Experiences related to the Ukrainian case did not serve as direct empirical data applicable to Finland but rather as a comparative and reflective reference point that informed the interviewees' perceptions and reasoning. This design allowed for the development of a framework grounded in anticipatory insights. The framework was not intended to generalize from empirical cases but to function as a heuristic tool for identifying and analyzing potential strategies toward spontaneous volunteering and for refinement in future research.

It is additionally important to acknowledge that introducing the McLennan *et al*. (2017) framework during the interviews may have influenced participants' responses. This raises the question of whether the framework developed from the data (Figure 2) fully captures the range of possible strategic approaches, or whether the use of the McLennan *et al*. framework may have inadvertently constrained participants' thinking. Future research could identify additional options that were not surfaced in this study. However, Ukraine's experiences with spontaneous volunteering in national defense demonstrate comparable dynamics, lending further support to these results. Nonetheless, the findings remain highly relevant for other nations that employ whole-of-society approaches to national defense.

A promising avenue for future research would be to investigate how co-production takes shape in countries with professional armies and relatively low levels of willingness to defend the country. Additionally, given that Finland is now a member of the NATO defense alliance (Jonsson *et al*., 2024), it would be relevant to explore spontaneous volunteering in the context of *collective* defense, particularly how it may manifest across borders within this broader geopolitical framework.

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