

Prevention first

Swedish model of anti-terrorist protection



In January 2023, Sweden took over the presidency of the EU Council. One of the four priorities of this Presidency was security, including protection against terrorist threats. Damian Szlachter talks on anti-terrorist solutions used in Sweden, the role of prevention, education and international cooperation in increasing the level of security and challenges for the local services related to the presidency, with **DANIEL HEDMAN**, an expert of the Stockholm Police on building resilience to terrorist attacks.

Sweden took over the six-month presidency of the EU Council. Will protection against terrorism be one of the priorities of this Presidency?

Daniel Hedman: The Presidency of the EU Council always operates in the so-called trio (the classic Troika consists of the member state holding the presidency, the state that held it previously, and the one that will hold it for the next six months - added by D.Sz.). The Swedish Presidency will continue the program agreed with the other two countries of the three. Building resilience to terrorist threats is, of course, one of the priorities of the Swedish government, and the greatest emphasis will be placed on terrorist prevention. This concerns prevention in the context of radicalization leading to violent extremist activities and reducing vulnerability to dangerous ideologies, as well as the terrorist activity itself, crisis management in the event of a terrorist attack and building resistance to such attacks among potential targets. Prevention is the pillar of the fight against terrorism. This approach is particularly close to the Swedish society.

How is the level of terrorist threat in Sweden assessed? Which institution plays a leading role in this regard?

D.H.: In Sweden, the terrorist threat level classification system is very similar to the solutions in force in most EU countries. Currently, this level is 3 (increased threat, no evidence of planning - added by D.Sz.) on a 5-point scale (5 - imminent attack, evidence of planning - added by D.Sz.). The body assessing the level of this threat is the National Center for Terrorist Threat Assessment (NCT, Nationellt centrum för terrorhotbedömning). NCT is a permanent working group within the Swedish Counter-Terrorism Cooperation Council (Samverkansrådet mot terrorism) in the Swedish Security Service (Säkerhetspolisen, SÄPO), but not its formal part. NCT is staffed by personnel from the National Defense Radio Establishment (Försvarets radioanstalt, FRA), the Military Intelligence and Security Directorate (Militära underrättelse- och säkerhetstjänsten, MUST) and the Swedish

Security services. Terrorist threat ratings are also given to 14 government agencies that are part of the Counter-Terrorism Cooperation Council. NCT produces analyses, including strategic analyses, but does not investigate crime. It only formulates an assessment of the degree of risk. The final decision on the level is made by the head of the Swedish Security Service.

Stockholm ranks high on the list of European cities that have experienced various types of terrorist attacks in the last few decades. How the resilience against these attacks in the Swedish capital has been building? What is the emphasis on?

D.H.: At the moment, two issues are the most important - continuing cooperation in the field of preventive actions aimed at preventing radicalization leading to terrorism and building resilience to kinetic attacks. Building this resilience is closely related to the country's civil defense and the state's defense strategy, and due to the geopolitical consequences of the war in Ukraine, it is embedded in the area of integration with NATO. In Sweden, we have a holistic approach to protecting the country from modern hybrid threats. Great importance is given to building resistance in society against various types of threats, and more precisely to shaping social mentality.

We have some systemic gaps in the field of legislation, for example in the assessment of what is critical infrastructure (CI) and what is not, as well as who in the government administration is responsible for protecting facilities other than CI. It is worth bearing in mind that historical and statistical data always describes the past, but it does not allow to clearly predict the future (it should also be remembered that the classification of specific incidents related to terrorism changes over the years. For example, a year earlier an event could have been classified as an extremist incident, and after legal changes as a terrorist attack - added by D.Sz.). Unfortunately, Stockholm is a city particularly affected by terrorist incidents. Several of them took place in the center of this metropolis (five in 22 years - added by D.Sz.). This part

of the city is very vulnerable to attack, as it is home to facilities such as shopping and business centers, government buildings, parliamentary offices, symbolic buildings belonging to the Swedish monarchy, strategic hubs for public transport. A lot of VIPs appear there, as well as a huge number of tourists. This attracts the interest of extremists glorifying violence as a tool of political action and terrorists.

What kind of facilities receive state support in the field of anti-terrorist prevention in Sweden?

D.H.: In 2014-2015, the Swedish Police began to support the Stockholm authorities in the first anti-terrorist initiatives aimed at strengthening the physical security of selected facilities that are highly vulnerable to terrorist attacks. These activities were intensified after the attack on the Norwegian island of Utøya, which was a huge shock for all Nordic countries and a moment of awakening. At the beginning of the prevention projects, we focused on increasing the capacity of the Swedish police to deal with the consequences of terrorist attacks, on preventing radicalization leading to terrorism (cooperation between local authorities and communities at risk of radicalization was deepened - added by D.Sz.), developing an advisory program for increasing the resistance of soft targets to kinetic attacks. The leader in this area was the police, which at the initial stage of work was supported by the government's Agency for Crisis Management/Business Continuity (Swedish Civil Contingency Agency, Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap, MSB).

Since 2016, we have been creating a legal framework from scratch, selecting field leaders, developing a methodology for assessing facilities, procedures and standards standardizing system solutions for protection against terrorism. Specialist guides have been prepared, also in English, in order to reduce vulnerability to attack, devoted to, among others, security of mass events, responding to an active shooter or protection of public spaces. They are considered exemplary and used not only in Sweden, but also at the EU level (the next four are translated into English - added by D. Sz.), e.g. in expertise

published by the EU Joint Research Center of the European Commission in the area of anti-terrorism.

We currently have regulations binding government agencies and 9 out of 12 government sectors that are classified as critical infrastructure systems. However, it has not been clearly defined what is this infrastructure and what is not. For example, Stockholm Central Station is not an CI until an event causing a major disruption to this strategic transport route is classified as critical. In other words, the support of this particular facility by the Swedish secret services takes place only when there is an incident that is critical for ensuring the continuity of rail transport in the city. Nearly 90% of state institutions and related bodies (basic services - added by D.Sz.) belong to the Swedish critical infrastructure and therefore may be covered by programs dedicated to building resistance to terrorist attacks.

Today, it can be said that Sweden has systemic solutions under which local authorities, representatives of social organizations or businesses can ask the police or MSB for support in building comprehensive resistance to terrorist attacks. Until five years ago, people were virtually unaware of the existence of physical anti-terrorist barriers to stop a car attack. Currently, Sweden has a system of protection against a terrorist attack and its consequences, in which dialogue of all parties plays an important role. Let me repeat once again, these are systemic solutions built from scratch.

From the perspective of your experience, what has a real impact on increasing the object's resistance to terrorist attacks? What solutions should be prioritized, for example, in the case of government offices or transport facilities constituting critical infrastructure?

D.H.: The most important issue is designing a detection system that uses a system of sensors, video cameras, gates detecting metal objects or access control points. Increasing the chance of detection is of great importance in preventing terrorist or sabotage threats. The basic condition for creating an effective

detection system is the implementation of a security zone outside the protected facility, at a distance of 10 to 100 meters from its outline. The visibility of each security system is also important. It's an expensive solution, but it's not worth saving on security. This is how we build resistance to terrorist threats at Stockholm Central Station, which I mentioned earlier. In a few months we will know the first data on whether the new protection model for this facility works. It is also worth ensuring that this detection system is designed in the simplest possible way and respecting civil liberties. Sweden is an example of a country that proves that this balance is achievable and acceptable to local communities.

Sweden is very active in the EU in the field of terrorist prevention and undertakes numerous educational initiatives in the field of security. Which of them have a European dimension and could be successfully implemented in other countries?

D.H.: With regard to scientific activities, it is worth highlighting the achievements of Swedish researchers dealing with terrorist threats and social radicalization processes, who co-lead the work of the EU Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN). In particular, I have two professors in mind – Magnus Ranstorp and Hans Brun. When it comes to the issues of physical protection against terrorist attacks, it is certainly worth mentioning the creation of inter-institutional anti-terrorist consulting teams (a kind of experience and knowledge exchange center - added by D.Sz.) for local communities. This initiative is worth taking in other EU Member States and in EU structures. For example, create anti-terrorist advisory teams or centers for improving skills in the field of combating terrorism, consisting of representatives of all organizational units (directorates general) of the European Commission. Currently, each EU body creates its own recommendations and handbooks on protection against terrorist threats, limiting itself only to its area of competence. It is worth going towards the „one for all” principle.

What was the biggest challenge during the Swedish Presidency of the EU in the area of protection against terrorism?¹

D.H.: The biggest challenge was the large number of meetings and the fact that they were held in several different places – in the north and south of Sweden. Some of our police units at the regional level are inexperienced in handling this type of encounter, partly lacking the operational skills needed to deal with such a challenge. This forced large movements of human and equipment resources in a short time. The organization of security for meetings was difficult due to the need to constantly modify the current threat analysis in various places of event organization, which had to be based on the strategic level of assessing the terrorist threat in the country. This was especially true of the meetings where people with VIP status appeared in an unscheduled way. Given that adverse events could seriously damage Sweden's image, it was necessary to increase efforts beyond the norm to ensure comprehensive protection against several different types of threats, including intelligence gathering and monitoring of terrorist offenses in a crisis situation.

He was talking: Damian Szlachter

Daniel Hedman

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¹ The interview was conducted in February 2023. The last question was asked during the authorization - in July 2023, after the end of the Presidency of the EU Council by Sweden (ed.).