



Bart Cammaerts

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War panic: if you prepare for war to achieve peace, you get war...

LSE's Professor Bart Cammaerts explains how the techniques used to generate moral panics in society are now being used to create a 'war panic' in Europe.

At the intersection of sociology and media and communications studies, the concept of moral panic is well known. First introduced by sociologist [Stanley Cohen](#) in the 1970s, it refers to the way in which a range of [moral entrepreneurs](#), in conjunction with media organisations and journalists who amplify them, have the power to produce fear and create a panic directed at a specific group of people or a particular phenomenon, using moral indignation, exaggeration, distortion, denotations of deviance, and othering. This often intentionally manufactured panic is subsequently abused to legitimise and push through draconian and disproportionate policy interventions against those groups or phenomena. One of the main reasons this has proven to be so effective is because moral panics are in essence highly emotive, manipulative and leave no room for nuance.

While Cohen's original study focused on British working-class subcultures or what he termed "folk devils", later on the concept of moral panic was tied, amongst others, to so-called 'benefit scroungers', gaming, drug use, hedonistic parties, etc. In recent years, the (extreme) right, in conjunction with the media, has created a persuasive moral panic around asylum seekers and immigration more broadly, with profound implications for the inherently diverse and multi-cultural Western societies. In [my own work](#), I argued that the same moral entrepreneurs who demonise immigrants and non-white people also fabricate an effective moral panic against so-called "[woke](#)" [culture](#) and social justice, as terms such as woke-madness, wokery, the woke-mob, or woke insanity attest to.

From moral panic to war panic

Besides moral panics, recent times in Europe are also characterised by a pronounced war panic, which is fuelled by Russian threats, as well as US President-elect Trump's isolationist discourse that includes threatening to reduce US involvement in NATO, which would leave the country less

implicated in Europe's defence. It seems that political and military elites in many European countries have decided that the solution to these threats is to create a war and security panic with a view to 'preparing' the population for war, something that – it is argued – we lost after the end of the cold war. Mark Rutte, the new Dutch Secretary General of NATO, recently gave a **speech** which fans this war panic. In the speech, he said:



Danger is moving towards us at full speed. We must not look the other way. We must face it. What is happening in Ukraine could happen here too. And regardless of the outcome of this war, we will not be safe in the future unless we are prepared to deal with danger.



In Rutte's home country, the banking sector recently recommended that the Dutch population make sure to keep a reserve of money in cash. A director of the Dutch National Bank **said**:



You should not assume that payment transactions will always work. There may be situations in which financial services are disrupted for a longer period of time. The government has a good emergency list of what you should have in the house just in case. This also includes an amount of cash for groceries.



Likewise, the Belgian government and national crisis centre started a new campaign this week to increase the preparedness of the Belgians for the risks of our times. It will address how to hide, how

to evacuate or make an emergency plan, as well as the importance of keeping an emergency battery in the house. The Minister of the Interior **added**:



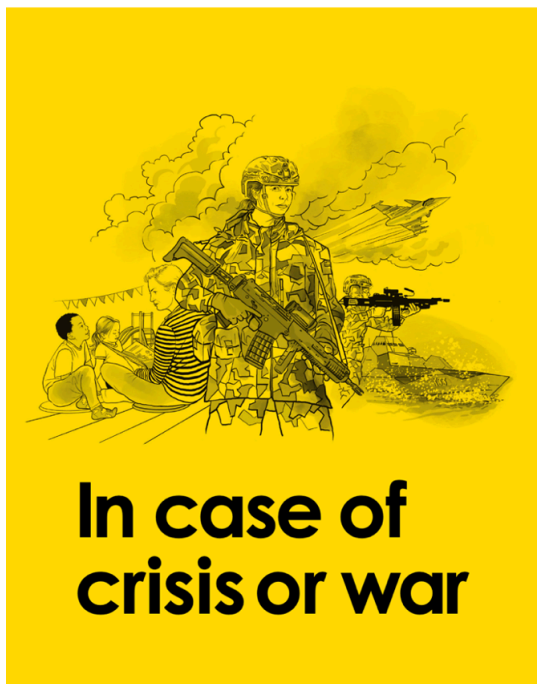
We see a lot of scary things happening around us. In our country too, we have been confronted with disasters, floods and cyber attacks. We all need to prepare ourselves to defend ourselves as best we can against such incidents.



Last November, the Swedish government published a brochure entitled ‘**In case of Crisis or War**’, which reminds Swedish citizens that those between the ages of 16 and 70 are all “part of Sweden’s total defence and required to serve in the event of war or the threat of war”.



Important information to all residents of Sweden



It is clear from this brochure, as well as from other European governments’ communications, that war panic is discursively coupled and intertwined with preparedness for environmental crises due to climate change, and above all with risks from pandemics such as COVID-19. In doing so, an equivalence is created between the war against the virus and a military war with Russia.

Just as with moral panics, the war panic is also designed to affect policies and political choices. The fear and panic created through such discourses are needed to provide the justification for diverting funding from education, health and social policy to defence spending and to engineer the re-militarisation of Europe. The NATO secretary general acknowledged this quite explicitly; “[t]here is no imminent military threat”, and “I know spending more on defence means spending less on other priorities”, but “[t]o prevent war, NATO must spend more”. The ground must be prepared for this, and war panic does just that.

This is very much in line with classic adage: “If you want peace, prepare for war”, as proclaimed by the Roman General Vegetius. The history of how wars start teaches us, however, that war panic is also a recipe for a self-fulfilling prophecy. Aligning with the steps-to-war theory, scholar Andrew Owsiak **points out** that “[e]mpirical evidence generally finds a positive relationship between arms races and the onset of war”. In other words, if you prepare for war to achieve peace, you get war...

This post represents the views of the author, and not the position of the Media@LSE blog nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

About the author



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Bart Cammaerts is Professor of Politics and Communication and former Head of Department in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. His current research focuses on the relationship between media, communication and resistance with particular emphasis on media strategies of activists, media representations of protest, alternative counter-cultures and broader issues relating to power, participation and public-ness.

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