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RESEARCH ARTICLE

REVISED The MultiRATE Holistic Readiness Level framework for civil security technologies

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Luis Unzueta[1], Eleni Darra[2], Dimitrios Kavallieros[2], Gonçalo Cadete[3], Luke Bates[4], Björn Hoog[5], Sonja Grigoleit[5], Laurynas Adomaitis[6], Alexei Grinbaum[6], Salvatore Vicari[7], Souzanna Sofou[8], Nikolaos Chantavas[8], Michalis Angelou[2], Nicholas Vretos[2], Marcel van der Lee[9], Sirra Toivonen[10], Clara Peters[9], Marcel van Berlo[9], David Ríos[1], Ernesto La Mattina[7], Hassane Essafi[6], Antonis Kostaridis[8], Dimitrios Diagourtas[8], Helen Gibson[4], Babak Akhgar[4], Christelle Magime[11], Anders Åström[12], Zakarias Subeh[12], Theodora Tsikrika[2], Stefanos Vrochidis[2], Seán Gaines[1]

[1]Fundación Vicomtech, Basque Research and Technology Alliance, Donostia, Gipuzkoa, Spain
[2]Centre for Research and Technology-Hellas, Thessaloniki, Makedonia Thraki, Greece
[3]INOV - Instituto de Engenharia de Sistemas e Computadores Inovação, Lisbon, Portugal
[4]Centre of Excellence in Terrorism, Resilience, Intelligence, and Organized Crime Research, Sheffield, UK
[5]Fraunhofer Institute for Technological Trend Analysis, Euskirchen, Germany
[6]Commissariat à L'Energie Atomique et aux Energies Alternatives, Paris, France
[7]Engineering Ingegneria Informatica SPA, Roma, Italy
[8]Satways Ltd, Integrated Security and Defense Solutions, Private Security Services Company, Athens, Greece
[9]TNO, Nederlandse Organisatie Voor Toegepast Natuurwetenschappelijk Onderzoek, Den Haag, The Netherlands
[10]VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland, Espoo, Finland
[11]SDIS 78, Yvelines Fire and Rescue Service, Versailles, France
[12]Polismyndigheten Swedish Police Authority, Stockholm, Sweden

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Abstract

Background

The common use of the traditional Technology Readiness Level (TRL) scale in evaluating civil security technologies has revealed a structural limitation: TRL, although a standard metric, is limited for complex innovations. It does not fully address risks and non-technical factors that are important for successful technological deployment. This creates a gap in assessment approaches, often referred to as the "Valley of Death" in innovation funding and technology transition. To address this, the MultiRATE Holistic Readiness Level (HRL) framework

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1. **Dimitrios Kalfas**, University of Western Macedonia, Grevena, Greece

is introduced in this paper—an integrated assessment methodology that unifies seven technical and socio-technical maturity dimensions into a single evaluation system—aiming to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of civil security technology maturity.

Methods

Our method, developed within the EU-funded MultiRATE project, combines seven key readiness dimensions: TRL, Societal RL (SocRL), Security RL (SecRL), Legal, Privacy, and Ethics RL (LPERL), Integration RL (IRL), enhanced Commercialization RL (en-CRL), and Manufacturing RL (MRL), all adapted to the specifics of the security sector. Our approach, unlike the fragmented nature of existing individual readiness level assessments, provides a unified understanding of technology's readiness, including an investment forecasting module to estimate the costs for maturity progression.

Results

The MultiRATE HRL framework and its components were evaluated through a structured validation process with an external network of experts, following the Design Science Research Methodology (DSRM). This validation confirms the framework's feasibility and practical use in providing a more accurate assessment of security technology maturity.

Conclusions

MultiRATE provides a common language for researchers, end-users, and funding bodies, helping to de-risk the innovation process and bridge the "Valley of Death". The web-based MultiRATE HRL calculator is accessible at https://hrl.multiratehl.iti.gr.

Keywords
TRL, Holistic Readiness Level, Maturity Assessment, Research and Innovation, Civil Security Domain.



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2. **Sheriffdeen Folaranmi Abiade**, University of Massachusetts Lowell City, Lowell, USA

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

Corresponding authors: Luis Unzueta (lunzueta@vicomtech.org), Eleni Darra (e.darra@iti.gr), Dimitrios Kavallieros (dim.kavallieros@iti.gr)

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REVISED **Amendments from Version 1**

This revised version introduces structural, methodological, and contextual enhancements across the manuscript. A dedicated Discussion section has been added to establish a full IMRaD structure, comparing MultiRATE against existing holistic frameworks (DoD SRL, EU 4-Axis, GAO TRA) while addressing ordinal score aggregation, dimension-level transparency, default equal-weighting trade-offs, and context-dependent technology applicability. The Introduction is expanded with details on EU civil security research, procurement pathways (PCP/PPI), regulatory frameworks (GDPR, Trustworthy AI), and Demand RL literature, supported by 19 new references (61 total). Methodologically, selection of the Design Science Research Methodology (DSRM) is now explicitly justified, the screening role of the Quick Assessment mode is clarified, and the full software stack (EU Survey, Angular, JHipster/Spring/MongoDB, GNN VSLII forecasting module) is documented. Furthermore, the Conclusion is strengthened with an explicit limitations section addressing sample size and sector focus, practical policy implications for LEA procurement, and a reframing of validation claims as expectation-based validation. Finally, the Abstract is refined for precision, and an AI-assisted writing tool declaration is included in the Acknowledgements in alignment with European Commission guidelines.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

Introduction

For decades, the concept of Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs) has been fundamental in assessing the maturity of emerging technologies Mankins (1995). Originating within the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in the 1970s to manage risk in complex space missions, the TRL scale provides a standardized language and metric system Sadin et al. (1989). TRL assesses the maturity of a particular technology on a nine-level scale, progressing from basic principles observed (TRL 1) through laboratory validation (TRL 4), demonstration in relevant and operational environments (TRL 6-7), system completion and qualification (TRL 8), up to the actual system being proven in its operational environment (TRL 9). Its primary purpose is to provide a common understanding of a technology's status, manage development risks, and inform decisions regarding funding allocation and the transition of the technology into systems or towards market deployment. Its utility led to widespread adoption by other major organizations, including the US Department of Defense (DoD), the European Space Agency (ESA), and notably, the European Union (EU) for its research and innovation funding programmes like Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe, including the European Innovation Council (EIC) Héder (2017).

While widely used, the TRL scale has well-known limitations Olechowski et al. (2017), making it less effective for assessing complex systems or technologies with broad societal or market impacts. For instance, it does not sufficiently address the risks and complexities involved in integrating multiple technologies, including mature ones, into a larger system. Besides, it does not fully consider non-technical factors that are important for innovation deployment. Furthermore, it often does not adequately cover the transition phase between laboratory validation (typically TRL 4-5) and a market-ready system (TRL 8-9). This gap, often referred to as the "Valley of Death" Markham et al. (2010), corresponds approximately to TRLs 4-7, where funding and focus can be insufficient as technologies transition from academic research to private sector development. Holistic frameworks seek to address this by considering factors beyond technical proof-of-concept earlier in the development cycle.

Bridging this gap in civil security involves institutional dynamics that differ from open commercial markets. European R&I funding instruments, such as Horizon Europe Cluster 3 ("Civil Security for Society"), support collaborative technology development with end-users such as Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs) and first responders. However, a structural bottleneck occurs at project completion: R&I grant mechanisms cannot directly fund public acquisition. Transitioning project outputs into operational capabilities requires public buyers to use formal Pre-Commercial Procurement (PCP) or Public Procurement for Innovation (PPI) pathways (Edquist and Zabala-Iturriagagoitia 2012; Georghiou et al. 2014; OECD 2011). This transition often creates delays due to rigid tendering rules, public sector risk-aversion, and the financial gap between grant expiration and commercial procurement. In parallel, public safety technologies must comply with frameworks on fundamental rights, data protection under the GDPR (European Parliament and Council 2016), and Trustworthy AI guidelines (High-Level Expert Group on AI 2019; Floridi et al. 2018).

Acknowledging the limitations of TRL, several additional Readiness Level (RL) dimensions have been suggested and, in certain instances, implemented to offer a more comprehensive assessment of an innovation's maturity and likelihood of successful deployment. These RL dimensions address critical non-technical factors such as the readiness of the human-system inter- face (Human Readiness Level, HRL) See (2021), integration (IRL) Sauser et al. (2008), the overall system (SRL) Sauser et al. (2006), manufacturing (MRL) Department of Defense (2023), commercialization, business, and market readiness (CRL, BRL, and again MRL) Gerdsri and Manotungvorapun (2021); Vik et al. (2021), societal acceptance (again SRL or SocRL) Stilgoe et al. (2013), acceptance and regulation (Acceptance RL, ARL, and Regulatory

RL, RRL) Vik et al. (2021), organizational and legal alignment (Organizational RL, ORL, and Legal RL, LRL) Bruno et al. (2020), and even technology-specific dimensions such as AI Readiness Level (AIRL) and Data Readiness Level (DRL) for innovations where data is a key resource Eljasik-Swoboda et al. (2019). A more recent addition is Demand RL Paun (2012), a scale proposed to hybridise market-pull with technology-push approaches in technology transfer. Note that the acronym DRL is used for both Data RL and Demand RL; as with MRL above, the intended meaning follows from the context in which the acronym appears. The development of these various RLs, in some cases with the same acronyms but for different concepts, has complicated the landscape, despite addressing TRL limitations. This "Tower of Babel" effect, with multiple terminologies, varying definitions even within the same RL type (e.g., different CRL scales Australian Renewable Energy Agency (2014); Gerdsri and Manotungvorapun (2021); Bruno et al. (2020)), diverse methodologies, and a lack of universal integration, presents challenges for consistent and efficient holistic assessment. Users must navigate this fragmented environment, potentially increasing the burden compared to the simplicity of the TRL scale Straub (2015).

Additionally, the quantitative aspiration suggested by the numerical scales used in most RL frameworks differs from the qualitative, evidence-based evaluations needed for non-technical fields like SocRL or CRL. This can lead to a false sense of precision or objectivity, masking underlying complexities and subjective judgments, and has led to critiques regarding the mathematical validity of combining ordinal scores Mankins (2009); Olechowski et al. (2017). Many of these complementary dimensions (e.g., Manufacturing RL, CRL, SocRL) incorporate external stakeholder interactions and feedback loops as key elements to show readiness Rip (2014); Stilgoe et al. (2013). This represents a shift from the internally focused technical demonstrations commonly associated with TRL assessment, indicating an understanding that effective innovation depends not only on internal R&D but also on alignment with the external ecosystem, market demands, and societal values.

In this context, the EU-funded MultiRATE project aims to create a holistic RL assessment framework to evaluate the holistic maturity of products, systems, or processes developed in civil security R&I projects for both LEAs and non-LEAs. MultiRATE's white paper van der Lee et al. (2025) introduced its components, the design process that they were considering at the beginning of the project and discussed insights for its implementation. The RL dimensions include adapted versions of existing RL scales like TRL, SocRL, IRL, CRL, MRL (Manufacturing) as well as additional RL dimensions relevant in the field, such as Security RL (SecRL) and Legal, Privacy, and Ethics RL (LPERL) Adomaitis et al. (2024). All these dimensions needed to be holistically harmonized to meet the project's objectives. Additionally, the framework includes an investment forecasting module to estimate the costs required to increase RL maturity.

Holistic readiness assessment is especially relevant in the EU civil security research and innovation landscape. Under Horizon Europe, the EU's research and innovation framework programme for 2021–2027 (European Commission 2021), security research is supported through the dedicated "Civil Security for Society" cluster, which funds projects aimed at protecting citizens, society, and infrastructures from a wide range of threats while complying with EU values and fundamental rights (European Commission 2022). Technologies developed in this context must often reconcile technical maturity with societal acceptance and legal and ethical compliance — the dimensions captured by SocRL, LPERL, and SecRL in the MultiRATE framework — which makes a holistic assessment approach particularly relevant for the sector. The uptake of results from such projects — a long-standing concern in EU security research policy (van der Lee et al. 2025) — depends on maturity dimensions that go well beyond technical readiness, which motivates sector-specific assessment frameworks such as the one proposed in this work.

This paper elaborates on the implementation of this holistic framework and the evaluation of its feasibility by the project's conclusion. More specifically, this paper contributes to the state of the art in holistic readiness assessment in the following ways:

- The MultiRATE Holistic Readiness Level (HRL) calculator that integrates the indicators and calculations from seven RL dimensions taking into account all their peculiarities adapted to the civil security sector. The web-based MultiRATE HRL calculator can be accessed here: https://hrl.multiratehl.iti.gr

- The adaptation and harmonization process to the security sector of the seven RL dimensions of the MultiRATE HRL: TRL, SocRL, SecRL, LPERL, IRL, en-CRL, and MRL.

- The integration process of an investment forecasting module to effectively estimate the costs required to increase RL maturity in the context of the MultiRATE HRL.

- The validation process of the MultiRATE HRL and its components with the collaboration of an external network of experts following the Design Science Research Methodology (DSRM) Peffers et al. (2007).

Related work

Setting up a conceptual framework that moves from a disjointed collection of independent one-dimensional RL scales toward an integrated, actionable, truly holistic viewpoint is still the main challenge in addressing the complex nature of innovation. Table 1 provides a comparative overview of the RL dimensions that form the building blocks of most prominent state-of-the-art holistic approaches.

Table 1. Comparison of RL dimensions, complementary to TRL, forming the basis of most prominent state-of-the-art holistic frameworks.

Framework	Primary focus	Strengths	Weaknesses
TRL Mankins (1995)	Technical feasibility of a single component.	Simple, ubiquitous, common language for technical maturity.	Ignores integration, manufacturing, market, and societal factors. Poor predictor of overall success.
SRL/IRL Sauser et al. (2006)	Technical feasibility and integration maturity of a system.	Forces rigorous architectural analysis and focus on interfaces.	Mathematically questionable (ordinal data), complex, lacks formal adoption outside defence/aerospace.
AIRL/DRL Eljasik-Swoboda et al. (2019)	Readiness of algorithms and data for AI/ML systems.	Adapts RL concepts for data-centric innovations, acknowledging data as a key resource.	Highly specific to a technology type, not an application domain; less standardized than other RLs.
ORL/LRL Bruno et al. (2020)	Organizational change management and legal/regulatory compliance.	Critical for deployment in regulated industries or public sector environments.	Highly context-specific; can be difficult to assess proactively before policies are set.
MRL Department of Defense (2023)	Producibility and manufacturing risk.	Structured roadmap for de-risking production; links engineering to manufacturing.	Resource-intensive, requires specialized expertise, limited adoption outside of defence/manufacturing.
Market RL /CRL/BRL Vik et al. (2021); Australian Renewable Energy Agency (2014); Gerdsri and Manotungvorapun (2021)	Commercial viability, market/ business case maturity, and commodification.	Focuses on market-pull and investment-potential from an early stage.	Lack of a single standard leads to inconsistency; can be subjective.
SocRL Stilgoe et al. (2013)	Societal acceptance, ethical implications, stakeholder engagement.	Addresses critical non-technical barriers to adoption for impactful technologies.	Can be highly subjective and difficult to quantify; newer and less validated than other RLs.
Human RL See (2021)	Human-system interaction, usability, and training.	Ensures technology is effective and safe in the hands of users, filling a major TRL gap.	Requires human factors expertise; can be subjective and resource-intensive to test properly.
Demand RL Paun (2012)	Market-pull and technology-push hybridisation for technology transfer.	Supports demand-side assessment in technology transfer practices, complementing technology-push approaches.	Overlaps with Market RL; acronym collides with Data RL (see text).
Acceptance RL/RRL Vik et al. (2021)	User acceptance and regulatory/ legal alignment.	Addresses social and political aspects of innovation that can be major barriers to deployment.	The concepts are less standardized than others and are often highly context specific.

The evolution of RL assessment beyond TRL can be seen as a series of reactive expansions, each designed to address a critical RL dimension over- looked by its predecessors Straub (2015). The development of SRL/IRL addressed technical system-level concerns, with a rigorous analysis of integration risks. However, its methods have been critiqued for performing arithmetic operations on ordinal data—ranked scales where the intervals are not uniform—which can create a false sense of precision Olechowski et al. (2017). Following with technology-specific needs, AIRL and Data RL adapt readiness concepts for data-centric innovations where the quality and availability of data are paramount. Likewise, dimensions like ORL, LRL, and RRL emerged to assess readiness for deployment in complex organizational and regulatory environments, but their context-specific nature makes them difficult to apply proactively before policies are set.

On the other hand, the creation of Market RL and CRL/BRL expanded into the socio-economic sphere. These RL scales focus on market-pull and commercial viability, though the lack of a single standard for these can lead to subjective and inconsistent assessments. It is important to disambiguate MRL, as the acronym has been used to denote both Manufacturing Readiness Level, which provides a structured roadmap for de-risking production Department of Defense (2023), and Market Readiness Level, as defined within the Balanced Readiness Level assessment (BRLa) framework Vik et al. (2021). Henceforth, the acronym MRL will be used exclusively to denote Manufacturing RL.

Another expansion moved into the human and societal context. SocRL, Human RL, and Acceptance RL address public acceptance, usability, and user acceptance respectively, but all require significant qualitative analysis that can be difficult to standardize and resource-intensive to conduct. These complementary RL scales also share common challenges, as noted in Table 1, like that they are often resource-intensive, difficult to quantify, and lack universal standardization, motivating the development of holistic frameworks to manage their complexity.

Current state-of-the-art holistic frameworks can be broadly categorized by their primary philosophy, as reflected in Table 2. These frameworks offer different strategic approaches to holistic assessment. The US DoD's System Readiness Assessment (SRA), yielding an SRL, is a prime example of a "composite index" approach that attempts to create a single, unified score Sauser et al. (2006). For developing complex security systems, its strength is the rigorous focus on integration, which is critical for ensuring interoperability. However, its methodology of calculating a single, composite score has been critiqued for its use of arithmetic operations on ordinal data, which can obscure critical weaknesses in individual dimensions and may be less suited for the nuanced trade-offs required in security R&I Olechowski et al. (2017). In contrast, other frameworks focus on standardizing the assessment "process". The GAO's TRA guide, for example, offers a best-practice approach to carrying out TRAs and formulating Technology Maturation Plans for them U.S. Government Accountability Office (2020). To some extent, this is because it treats the process as an evidence-based, systematic one. However, it is not a multi-dimensional scale itself and remains heavily centred on the TRL metric, thereby not fully solving the problem of a narrow technical focus.

A third category, which most closely aligns with the philosophy of MultiRATE, involves context-specific "dashboards" that visualize multiple dimensions. These have been adapted for specific business contexts, technology types, and application domains. For instance, a framework designed for Innovation-Driven Enterprise (IDE) startups explicitly connects TRL and Manufacturing RL with Commercialization and Business RLs (CRL and BRL) to map a pathway toward sustainable growth Gerdsri and Manotungvorapun (2021). For assessing AI-based innovations, the READINESS-Navigator tool adapts the readiness concept by replacing MRL with specific AI and Data RLs (AIRL and DRL), acknowledging that data is the critical raw material Eljasik-Swoboda et al. (2019). The EU 4-Axis framework (TRL, SocRL, ORL, LRL) is another key example tailored to the application do- main of public sector innovation Bruno et al. (2020). While its inclusion of organizational and legal aspects is highly relevant, it omits the commercialization and manufacturing dimensions that are vital for ensuring a technology can be produced and sustained as a viable product. Similarly, the US Department of Energy's Adoption RL (ARL) framework is tailored to energy commercialization, focusing on a technology's value proposition and market acceptance U.S. Department of Energy (2023), and the Balanced Readiness Level Assessment (BRLa) uses generic dimensions (e.g., "Regulatory", "Acceptance") for agricultural technology that lack the specificity required for the security domain Vik et al. (2021). A notable example in the medical field is the Medical Device RL (MDRL) framework, which integrates Human RL concepts to assess not only technical function but also usability, comfort, and patient response van de Loo et al. (2022).

Finally, it is worth noting the existence of highly detailed holistic maturity models designed for the specific context of cybersecurity, such as the ENISA CSIRT framework European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) (2019) and the Cybersecurity Capability Maturity Model (C2M2) U.S. Department of Energy (2022). Unlike the technology-focused frameworks in Table 2, these models assess the maturity of an entire "organization's" capabilities, processes, and security posture. Methodologically, they are instructive as they demonstrate how a complex domain can be broken down into

Table 2. Comparative overview of state-of-the-art holistic readiness frameworks.

Framework	Core purpose	Key dimensions assessed (beyond TRL)	Limitations/Critiques
Composite Index Approach			
SRA/SRL Sauser et al. (2006)	Assess system-level maturity and risk by combining technology and integration readiness.	IRL	Mathematical validity of combining ordinal data is questioned; potential for misleading results; still largely experimental.
Process-Focused Approach			
GAO TRA Guide U.S. Government Accountability Office (2020)	Standardize a high-quality, evidence-based process for conducting TRAs and managing risk.	Implicitly considers evidence quality, maturation planning.	Primarily a process guide, not a multi-dimensional RL scale itself; relies heavily on TRL as the core metric.
Context-Specific Dashboards			
EU 4-Axis Framework Bruno et al. (2020)	Assess the impact and potential of digital technologies for European public services.	SocRL, ORL, LRL	Proposed framework; needs validation outside digital public services; omits commercialization and manufacturing dimensions.
Adoption RL Framework U.S. Department of Energy (2023)	Assess non-technical commercialization risks and identify barriers to private sector uptake.	Value Proposition, Market Acceptance, Resource Maturity, License to Operate.	Specific to commercialization; may overlap with CRL/MRL; newer framework still gaining adoption.
BRLa Vik et al. (2021)	Provide a balanced, qualitative assessment of emerging technologies using a dashboard approach.	Market RL, RRL, Acceptance RL, ORL	A diagnostic tool, not a prescriptive one; dimensions are generic and require adaptation for specific domains.
IDE Startup Framework Gerdsri and Manotungvorapun (2021)	Map a pathway toward sustainable growth by connecting technical and business readiness.	MRL, CRL, BRL	Context-specific to startups; primarily focused on a commercialization pathway.
READINESS-Navigator Eljasik-Swoboda et al. (2019)	Adapt readiness assessment for AI/ML innovations where data is a key resource.	Replaces MRL with AIRL and DRL.	Highly specific to a technology type; not tailored for an application domain like security.
MDRL Framework van de Loo et al. (2022)	Tailored assessment for high-risk medical devices, integrating human factors.	Human RL concepts (usability, comfort), safety, clinical effectiveness.	Highly domain-specific; requires extensive clinical and regulatory expertise.

granular components (e.g., C2M2's use of domains and objectives; ENISA's parameters for Organization, Human, Tools, and Processes) for detailed assessment. However, their purpose—assessing organizational posture—is fundamentally different from the goal of assessing a specific technology's readiness for uptake, which is the focus of MultiRATE.

In summary, existing holistic frameworks provide valuable philosophical and methodological precedents. The clear evolution toward context- specific, multi-dimensional dashboards aligns with the approach taken by MultiRATE. By visualizing multiple readiness levels, these methods offer a more transparent and actionable alternative to opaque composite indices, allowing for the identification of specific weaknesses. This is a significant advantage over simpler process-focused guides or singular RL scales. However, no existing framework provides the specific combination of harmonized dimensions required for the civil security domain. The state-of-the-art lacks a framework that concurrently and systematically evaluates TRL, IRL, MRL, CRL, SocRL, and, most critically, the specific requirements of SecRL and LPERL Adomaitis et al. (2024). This identified gap calls for a constructive research approach aimed at creating a novel solution. For this purpose, the Design Science Research Methodology (DSRM) provides a suitable structure for developing and evaluating a new artifact to address a specific problem Peffers et al. (2007). Unlike purely descriptive

methods that analyse existing phenomena, DSRM offers a rigorous process for the design, implementation, and validation of a practical solution. Its iterative nature is particularly advantageous for a complex undertaking like the MultiRATE HRL, which requires harmonizing multiple, disparate readiness dimensions into a single, coherent framework validated by expert stakeholders. This methodological foundation ensures that the resulting artefact is not only theoretically sound but also demonstrably useful in its intended context.

Method

The methodological approach of the MultiRATE HRL assessment, first introduced in its white paper van der Lee et al. (2025), integrates seven distinct RL dimensions (TRL, SocRL, SecRL, LPERL, IRL, en-CRL, and MRL) to create a holistic evaluation. A key design principle is to maintain the integrity and unique characteristics of each RL scale while providing a holistic view of a technology's feasibility and progress. To achieve this with heterogeneous RL dimensions, some of which do not share the same number of levels, the MultiRATE HRL adopts a flexible harmonization strategy. This approach is conceptually similar to state-of-the-art holistic frameworks like the IDE Startup Framework Gerdsri and Manotungvorapun (2021), the ENISA CSIRT model European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) (2019), and the C2M2 framework U.S. Department of Energy (2022), which harmonize the levels of different RL scales from a higher-level perspective. This contrasts with the more rigid, one-to-one level mapping found in models like the EU 4-Axis Framework Bruno et al. (2020) and BRLa Vik et al. (2021). The chosen methodology offers the advantage of accommodating diverse RL scales and allowing for the assessment of non-technical maturity improvements required to achieve a ready-to-market solution, even beyond the scope of TRL9.

Another key design principle is to consider two kinds of assessments: (1) a quick holistic RL assessment of an "element" (i.e., the product, system, or process under evaluation) to get a preliminary result, and (2) a full holistic RL assessment of the same element with more time to get a more detailed result. The full holistic assessment is intended to be conducted by a group of expert users that would answer the full list indicators related to their expertise. The result of this full assessment will be the most accurate and detailed that MultiRATE HRL can provide. On the other hand, the quick holistic assessment is intended to be conducted by only one user, not necessarily an expert in all the fields. In this case, the result will not be as accurate and detailed, but it will be quicker and simpler to answer by a non-expert. Therefore, in practice, the quick assessment modality could be seen as a preparation for a full assessment, while the full assessment modality is required for a formal assessment with more detailed insights on the obtained MultiRATE HRL and the more specific pending points towards a higher maturity of the element. Results from a quick assessment should be interpreted as a screening approximation rather than as a formal evaluation, and should not be used alone for consequential decisions (e.g., funding or procurement). The distinction between expert and non-expert judgement is well documented: expertise develops through extended experience in a domain and does not transfer reliably across domains Kahneman and Klein (2009); Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980). In particular, for dimensions that require specialized expertise — such as LPERL, SecRL, and the qualitative aspects of SocRL and en-CRL — quick assessment results should be confirmed through a full assessment conducted by the relevant domain experts before being used in decision-making contexts.

To measure the MultiRATE HRL of an element, the user must answer a series of indicators associated to each of the RL dimensions. In a full assessment, the indicators of TRL, SocRL, SecRL, IRL, en-CRL and MRL can be answered with five possible answers: "N/A" (Not applicable), "Nothing", "Partially", "Largely" and "Fully" implemented. If all indicators related to a level of the RL scale are answered with "Fully", the level is 100% achieved, if all are "Nothing", the level is 0% achieved, and the in-betweens are calculated proportionally. The "N/A" responses are ignored from the computation, but there is a limit of N/A responses per level to be able to compute the results (20%). In the quick assessment, as there are a few questions per level, N/A is not available as a possible answer. LPERL Adomaitis et al. (2024) is computed in a different way as explained in the following subsection, with "Yes"/"No" possible answers. Next, we will introduce more in detail the individual MultiRATE RL dimensions and then how they are combined for a holistic assessment.

MultiRATE readiness level dimensions

a) Technology Readiness Level (TRL)

The TRL assessment methodology developed within the scope of MultiRATE, is mainly based on the categories of indicators that were defined in previous attempts and builds on them, according to the further research which has been conducted within MultiRATE. Those indicators form the base, on the list of questions which apply for each TRL level. Under MultiRATE project, TRL further expanded the TRL assessment methodology enhancing the developed tool in order to further improve the quality of the assessments. To enrich the framework, an extensive literature review has been conducted, resulting in the extraction and inclusion of additional indicators while the indicators were further modified and tailored to fit the usage of the overall approach to the EU R&D projects. These indicators provide a more comprehensive

Table 3. MultiRATE TRL indicator categories.

Category	Indicative aspects of indicators included
Technology Preparation & Requirements	User requirements, system specifications, architecture, data flows, HW and SW requirements, software specifications
Documentation	Documentation of specifications, installation and operation guides, user guides
Operability & Continuity	Deployment, installation, operation, and maintenance
Evaluation & Usability	End user testing and evaluation, overall efficiency of the tool, end-user friendliness

and context-specific evaluation, ensuring that the framework captures relevant factors for assessing the system's readiness and usability.

The evaluation framework of the MultiRATE TRL assessment, comprises four distinct indicator categories which include all the identified indicators: 1) Technology Preparation & Requirements, 2) Documentation, 3) Operability & Continuity, and 4) Evaluation & Usability. These categories serve as key aspects for assessing the readiness and effectiveness of a system. Each RL is comprised by a set of indicators. Some indicative aspects of indicators per category include the following as indicated in Table 3.

b) Societal Readiness Level (SocRL)

The MultiRATE SocRL is used to assess the level of adaptation of an innovation to be successfully adopted by society. The use of the umbrella term 'innovation' in the case of the SocRL is a purposeful indication of the necessary focus it has for its assessment. Innovations include the use of a new piece of equipment, system, software, methodology, or procedure within a context it has not been used before. Innovations are based on the results of new technological developments, technology combinations, or other knowledge towards societal well-being, and should be developed alongside continuous stakeholder input to ensure they are suitable for their intended purpose and accepted within their context. The inclusion of a variety of different stakeholders in the research and innovation process forms a key component to validating readiness as part of the SocRL assessment.

Previous work has been carried out into societal readiness, with the most well-known scale coming from Innovation Fund Denmark Innovation Fund Denmark (2019). However, the existing works on societal readiness were fragmented and incomplete for the purposes of MultiRATE's proposed comprehensive assessment framework; additionally, past research tended to focus on the areas of energy, decarbonization, and sustainability Sprenkeling et al. (2022); Büscher et al. (2023), and therefore more work was needed in order to apply these societal considerations to the security domain, where they are just as, if not more, relevant than ever.

The MultiRATE SocRL includes measures such as the take-up and acceptance of an innovation by society. There are four categories of indicators that together form the criteria for the assessment: 1) Stakeholder Engagement, 2) Acceptance, 3) Societal Integration, and 4) Societal Good, presented in full in Table 4. These categories and the indicators associated with them are based on the work of past tools used to assess societal readiness in a variety of different ways Space53; New Horrizon; IsITethical. The SocRL features nine levels, ranging from the initial identification of the societal need, societal

Table 4. MultiRATE SocRL indicator categories.

Category	Indicative aspects of indicators included
Stakeholder Engagement	Engaging and involving a wide range of stakeholders and their considerations in the research and innovation process.
Acceptance	Taking into account the benefits, risks, societal concerns, and trust related to the innovation and involved practitioners through stakeholder engagement, especially with citizens.
Societal Integration	How the innovation fits into practices, place-based policy, cultures, and social trends, helping ease the integration of the innovation into everyday lives of the future.
Societal Good	The intentions, priorities, co-benefits, and consequences of the innovation, contributing to and promoting societal well-being.

good, and associated readiness aspects of the innovation in question, all the way up to finally proving its benefit within society after launch on the market. The levels used in the MultiRATE assessment framework are adapted from those previously proposed for societal readiness Sprenkeling et al. (2022); Büscher et al. (2023).

The SocRL predicts the readiness of and helps prepare an innovation along its journey of adoption. The full assessment has a total of 50 indicators, however, a quick version of the SocRL assessment was also developed for MultiRATE that has only 14 indicators across all nine levels. The quick assessment works by using only a handful of the most crucial indicators across the different categories and levels. The result is a highly reduced assessment, but one that can still give an approximation of the user's potential SocRL without undertaking a full assessment.

c) Security Readiness Level (SecRL)

The MultiRATE SecRL scale allows assessing the degree of security of a given element and its assets in relation to its threat environment and the applied security measures as well as the security testing complexity. The SecRL is a scale for measuring the security of an innovation, product, or solution (a process or a technology) and its assets concerning its threat environment. Each level increase implies risk reduction, meaning reducing the likelihood and severity (e.g., damage) of the impact of security incidents by adjustments in design and introducing more or better countermeasures or security capabilities. Since there was no previous attempt for the SecRL that aligns the MultiRATE's purpose of evaluating and determining the security maturity of any kind of solution (in the field of civil security), it had to be built within the scope of MultiRATE. The methodology used was to harmonize the previously identified Security Maturity Model with international security standards such as ISO 15408. The basic framework and level structure are derived from the guidelines for using TRLs in ESA programs. It ranges from SecRL 1 (security considerations) as the lowest level to SecRL9 (Operational Security Validation) as the highest level. The total number of relevant indicators for the nine security levels has been streamlined to 41. There are eight different types of indicators, which provide valuable insights into various aspects of security readiness. Among these types, the largest one is the "Security Testing, Improvement, and Iteration" type, which encompasses most indicators ranging from SecRL 5 to SecRL 8. Although there was a possibility to further divide the "Security Testing, Improvement, and Iteration" type into more detailed subtypes such as "test development," "test conduction," and "test iteration," the decision was made to maintain good alignment with the other RLs in MultiRATE. This ensures consistency across the different readiness levels and facilitates comparison and analysis. The externalization of definitions, explanations, and examples helped to make the indicators shorter and more precise. Further details can be found in Adomaitis et al. (2024).

d) Legal, Privacy, and Ethics Readiness Level (LPERL)

The MultiRATE LPERL scale allows assessing the degree of alignment with European values and rights, provide guidance in ethics by design and promote responsible application of solutions. A key aspect is the identification-characterization-harmonization-control paradigm. The four-level structure of LPERL applies this paradigm to the domain of technology ethics, providing a systematic approach to identifying, characterizing, harmonizing, and taking control of ethical issues.

LPERL 1 encompasses the step of identifying potential ethical dilemmas, privacy concerns, and legal implications associated with the system. At LPERL 2, the relationships and trade-offs between various ethical issues are reflected. LPERL 3 shows operationalization and involves the integration of ethics considerations into the system design, a process often referred to as "ethics by design". Finally, LPERL 4 shows control mechanisms for accountability and the attainment of standard benchmarks and certifications, if applicable. This ERL structure combines anticipatory ethics with ethics by design and streamlines the management of emerging AI technologies.

To evaluate LPERL level, the tool includes more than 200 indicators grouped in blocks. In the area of security, the LPERL blocks include: 1) a basic technology ethics module for all use cases, 2) AI-specific block, 3) Law Enforcement block, 4) Personal data block. The number of indicators actually used during evaluation depends on the use case. Further details can be found in Adomaitis et al. (2024).

e) Integration Readiness Level (IRL)

The Integration Readiness Level (IRL) scale is a framework for determining the maturity and readiness of an element for integration into a larger system or environment. It provides a standardized method for assessing the readiness of technologies, software, or hardware for integration, assisting in the identification of potential risks and issues and promoting effective decision-making during the integration process by establishing clear benchmarks and criteria for

Table 5. Description of the MultiRATE Integration Readiness Levels (IRL).

IRL level	Description
1. High-level concepts identified	Fundamental concepts and overarching principles relevant to the integration process have been identified and delineated. These involve defining high-level goals, outlining the overall architecture, identifying critical components, and establishing initial approaches to integration.
2. Basic requirement specifications defined	The essential functionalities, constraints, and criteria that the integrated solution must fulfil to meet its intended objectives are defined.
3. User requirements and integration tests defined	The user requirements that the integrated solution will meet are clear and a framework for the integration testing is defined.
4. Technology validated in laboratory environment	The functionality, performance, and feasibility of integrating the elements have been validated in a controlled laboratory environment.
5. Technology validated in relevant environment	The performance, functionality, and compatibility of the elements have been validated in an environment that closely resembles the conditions in which it will be deployed and used in real-world scenarios.
6. Technology validated End-to-end operations	The integrated elements were tested and validated across its entire operational workflow, from start to finish, under real-world conditions.
7. System prototype demonstrated in operational environment	A functional system prototype has been demonstrated in a operational environment with a tangible demonstration of its capabilities, performance, and suitability for real-world deployment.
8. System integration validated by its end-users	The integrated system of the element is tested with end-users in the operational environment and is then prepared for long-term maintenance.
9. System integration proven in operational environment	The system is deployed in a operational environment and the monitoring/maintenance procedures are in place.

assessing readiness. Furthermore, it allows stakeholders to track the status of integration efforts, prioritize activities, and allocate resources more efficiently reducing integration risks by encouraging early detection and resolution of difficulties, hence enhancing the overall success rate of integration initiatives.

The IRL framework consists of 34 indicators grouped into nine levels. Originally based on the Sauser and Forbes model, the IRL framework has been refined to provide a more systematic and progressive approach. This updated model guides end-users through the integration process, from initial identification to real-world applicability. The 9 level descriptions are presented in Table 5.

To this end, the IRL follows a structured progression via three key stages: (i) The definition and specification; (ii) the testing and validation and (iii) the deployment and optimization stage. In the first stage key elements are identified, objectives are set, and specifications are clearly defined to establish a solid integration framework. The second phase focuses on testing and validation to ensure successful integration in different context environments. In the last stage, the system is deployed in real-world conditions, monitored for stability, and continuously optimized to ensure long-term reliability and performance improvements.

In order to facilitate the users' assessments, a simplified version of the IRL framework has also been designed. This simplified scale retains the most representative indicators, allowing end-users to conduct assessments more efficiently maintaining the objectives of the original framework.

f) Enhanced Commercialization Readiness Level (en-CRL)

The MultiRATE en-CRL scale enhances previous CRL models Paun (2012); Australian Renewable Energy Agency (2014); Vik et al. (2021); Gerdsri and Manotungvorapun (2021) to align with the Holistic Innovation Management Methodology (HIM) Sofou (2017). Following the HIM, the scale builds on project "Results" -as these are defined in the EU Grant Agreement signed between the European Commission and the consortium of an EU-funded project (i.e., any

output of the action, tangible or tangible, whether or not it can be protected)- and aims to improve the commercialization strategy for the products embodying these "Results".

The en-CRL scale maintains 9 levels suggested in previous work, but differs substantially in that it introduces a list of different indicators for each Level. It allows assessing the maturity of an element to be launched, taking under consideration: the market & competition analysis relative to the element, its IP protection and freedom to operate, the team's expertise, certifications & adherence to standards, contracts with suppliers, exploitation agreements, customer support plans, as well as marketing & risk mitigation plans. Its goal is to support an exploitation team in assessing their product's readiness for the market, and enrich the action plan to improve the product's commercialization strategy and innovation adoption. This is in line with the combined strategy for IP management, exploitation, dissemination and data management of project "Results", throughout their lifecycle, as proposed in Pestana and Sofou (2024).

Six indicator categories (IP Management, Market Potential and Competitive Landscape, Team and Consortium Expertise, Solution Definition/Design/Development, Exploitation Plan, Manufacturing/Supply Chain) are examined in a 9-step assessment process, and the indicators serve as guidelines to achieve the goal. The full version of en-CRL comprises of 9 Levels, 6 categories and 35 indicators. A version for quick evaluation is also available, with 18 indicators covering all 6 categories and 9 levels.

g) Manufacturing Readiness Level (MRL)

The MultiRATE MRL scale allows assessing the maturity of a manufacturing process throughout its conception, proof of concept, realization in a laboratory scale and demonstration in a pilot production line or a low-rate initial production United States Department of Defense (2025). MRL is used to provide decision makers with a common understanding of the relative maturity and attendant risks associated with manufacturing technologies, products, and processes being considered. It aims to define the current level of manufacturing maturity, to identify maturity shortfalls and associated costs, and to provide the basis for manufacturing risk management. This scale is based on prior MRL models Wheeler and Ulsh (2009); Schumacher et al. (2016); Basu and Ghosh (2017). The original indicators served as a baseline and were subsequently refined, adapted, and expanded to address the specific context and aims of EU Research and Development Security Projects. These indicators provide a more comprehensive and context-specific evaluation, ensuring that the framework captures relevant factors for assessing the system's manufacturing readiness. The evaluation framework of the MultiRATE MRL assessment, includes 67 total indicators, consists of 9 levels of Manufacturing Maturity, comprises 8 distinct indicator categories namely: Manufacturing Process, Supply Chain Readiness, Production Capacity, Quality Control and Assurance, Manufacturing equipment and machinery, Cost and Efficiency, Training and Workforce, Regulatory and Compliance.

MultiRATE holistic readiness level assessment

The holistic RL assessment workflow consists of three main phases: (1) Initialization, (2) HRL calculation and (3) HRL results analysis. Next, we will describe each of these phases more in detail.

a) Initialization

During the initialization phase, the user(s) of the HRL assessment system need to select some values from a series of concepts shown in Table 6 to configure the system for a specific assessment.

These concepts include the security field area to which the project belongs, whether the element involves human subjects, and if it includes AI. To aid in understanding the context of the users who will perform the assessment, there are concepts related to the specific use case, user type, purpose of the assessment, and whether it is a quick or full assessment. Additionally, the final concepts assist in refining the starting point of the RL scales or excluding them from the assessment. In the case of LPERL, there is no starting point as previously explained, so it only has the option of being excluded or not.

b) HRL calculation

After the initialization, users can access relevant indicators of the RL dimensions to assess an element's holistic maturity. As explained at the beginning of this section, by responding to these indicators, the degree of accomplishment for each level is calculated as a percentage. A level is considered "Fully Achieved" if the percentage is above 80%, "Partially achieved" if 60-80% and "Not Achieved" if below that. There are also some additional rules to be considered during the HRL assessment. If a level is partially achieved, the next level in that dimensions can be assessed even if it is not

Table 6. Concepts in the initialization form.

Concept name	Options
Security area	Border management, Disaster Resilient Societies, Fighting Crime and Terrorism, Digital Security, Infrastructure Resilience, Strengthened Security Research and Innovation, Other
Nature of the element	Hardware, Software, Hardware&software, Methodology/Procedure, Methodology/Procedure&Hardware, Methodology/Procedure&Software, Methodology/Procedure&Hardware&Software
Involves human subjects	Yes/No
Includes AI	Yes/No
Use case	Tech development orientation, Innovation uptake (sup- ply side), Innovation uptake (demand side), Standardization policy support, R&I programming and management support
User type	LEA (Law Enforcement Agency), Other first responder, Critical entity, Technology supplier, Other
Purpose	Self-assessment, Assessment by another company, Assessment by a 3rd party for certification
Quick assessment	Yes/No
Starting xRL	Excluded/1-9/Complete
Exclude LPERL	Yes/No

Table 7. Alignment among MultiRATE RL dimensions for HRL computation.

HRL	LPERL	SocRL	CRL	TRL	IRL	SecRL	MRL
HRL 4 Ready-to-market solution	**1-4**	**7-9**	**8-9**	**9**	**9**	**9**	**9**
HRL 3 Functional solution	**1-4**	**6**	**7**	**7-9**	**7-9**	**7-8**	**7-8**
HRL 2 Solution prototype	**1-4**	**4-5**	**4-6**	**4-6**	**4-6**	**4-6**	**4-6**
HRL 1 Solution concept	**1-4**	**1-3**	**1-3**	**1-3**	**1-3**	**1-3**	**1-3**

accomplished. Another rule is that if a level is partially achieved, the following one can be fully achieved but the next one cannot be assessed until the previous partially achieved levels grow to fully achieved.

Thus, the user can visualize the results with a multi-dimensional RL dashboard in a similar way to other state-of-the-art holistic RL frameworks. However, our approach also integrates the RL dimensions into four holistic RLs that numerically represent the overall RL during the development of an element until it is ready for the market: HRL1—Solution concept, HRL2—Solution prototype, HRL3—Functional solution and HRL4—Ready- to-market solution. These holistic RLs take the well-established TRL scale as the main reference for the alignment of all RL dimensions into the four holistic RLs. TRL3 "Experimental proof of concept" is aligned with HRL1, TRL6 "Technology demonstrated in relevant environment(s)" is aligned with HRL2, and TRL9 "Actual solution proven in its operational environment" is aligned with HRL3. Beyond TRL9, dimensions that require additional effort for HRL4 include: SocRL7-9, SecRL9, en-CRL8-9, and MRL9. IRL is fully aligned with TRL, while LPERL's evaluation occurs at each HRL transition, ranging from levels 1 to 4. Table 7 shows this alignment more in detail.

Each HRL degree of accomplishment is calculated as the average of the aligned levels and that of LPERL. This average is computed on the degrees of accomplishment (percentages) of the aligned levels, which in turn derived from the proportion of indicators answered as "Fully" implemented in each level, as described above; it is therefore an indicative, transparency-first aggregation of the dimension results rather than an arithmetic operation on the ordinal level values themselves. The four holistic levels are always presented together with the full dimension-level breakdown, so that the underlying ordinal information remains visible and weak dimensions can be identified. Therefore, HRL1 computes the average of TRL1-3, SocRL1-3, SecRL1-3, IRL1-3, en-CRL1-3, MRL1-3 and LPERL1-4, HRL2 the average of TRL4-6, SocRL4-5, SecRL4-6, IRL4-6, en-CRL4-6, MRL4-6 and LPERL1-4, HRL3 the average of TRL7-9, SocRL6, SecRL7-8, IRL4-6, en-CRL7-9, MRL7-8 and LPERL1-4, and finally HRL4 the average of TRL9, SocRL7-9, SecRL9, IRL9, en-CRL8-9, MRL9 and LPERL1-4.

c) HRL results analysis

To better understand the obtained HRL results, we recommend using two kinds of graphs: (1) A spider graph including reference RL dimension distributions per holistic level (Figure 1), and (2) bar graphs showing the degrees of accomplishment (Figure 2). These graphs allow spotting easily the weak points in the maturity of the element being assessed. More specifically, the spider graph shows the levels achieved (partially or fully) in each dimension compared to the expected achievements for each holistic level, making it easier to identify dimensions requiring further improvement to increase holistic maturity. On the other hand, the bar graphs provide a detailed visualization of the degrees of accomplishment across all levels, regardless of whether they have been fully achieved, allowing users to concentrate on specific dimension levels needing enhancement. Furthermore, by identifying these weak points against the references, a simple program can be developed to automatically provide feedback to the user(s), guiding them towards the next steps in improving the holistic maturity of the element being evaluated.

d) Readiness Level Investment Forecasting

One important objective of the MultiRATE project's forecasting module was to develop a robust and objective method for estimating the necessary investment for the development of a specific element. Recognizing the inherent variability and lack of balance in monetary investment across different regions, such as within the European Union, we opted to use effort allocated in EU-funded projects, measured in person-months (PMs), as a more stable and representative metric. This approach allows to address the fundamental question: "How much effort, in person-months, is required for an element to advance from one specific Technology Readiness Level (TRL) to another?"

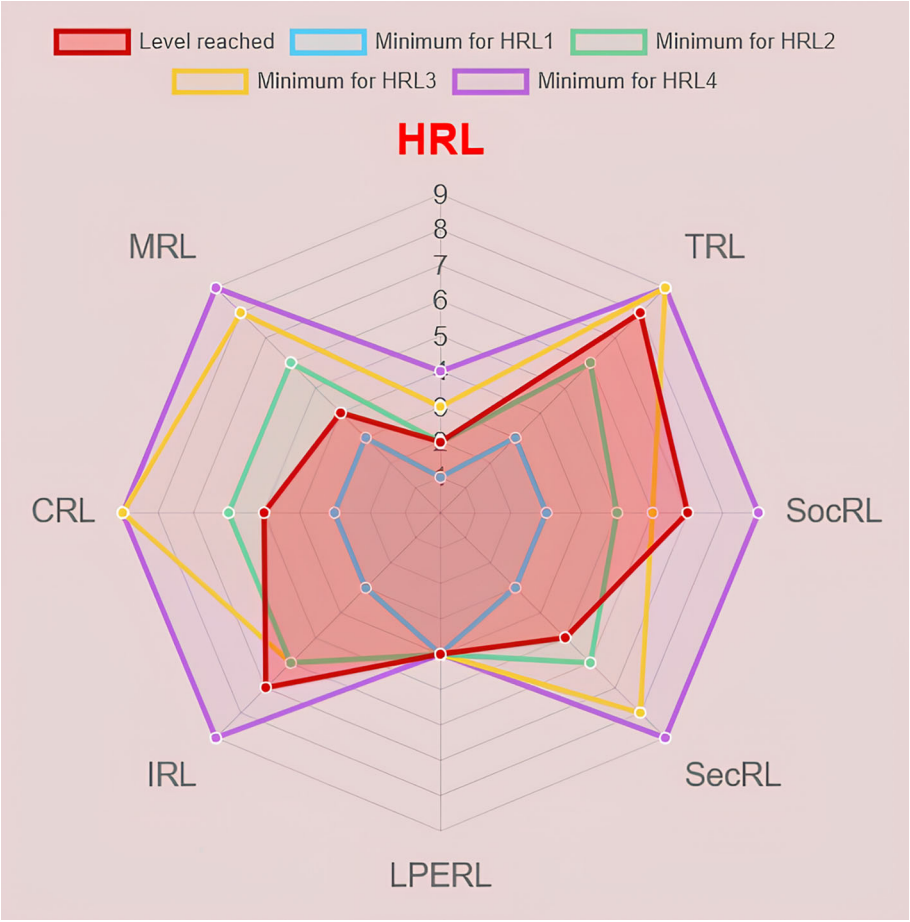


Figure 1. An example of assessment results visualized with a spider graph with respect to levels expected for each HRL.



Figure 2. An example of assessment results visualized with bar graphs showing degrees of accomplishment.

To enable this estimation, the first step is to define an element through meaningful and precisely measurable features. Through extensive internal discussions within the MultiRATE project consortium, it is established that these features must be quantifiable, consistent, and verifiable to build a reliable dataset for the FM system. The discussion focused on data points that have undergone rigorous validation by the European Commission (EC), ensuring their accuracy as part of either funded or completed projects. The final set of features selected for our analysis includes:

- **Project Duration:** The total time span of the project in which the element was developed, and the duration of the element development.
- **Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs):** Both the initial and final TRLs of the element, indicating its developmental stage.
- **Person-Months (PMs):** The total effort expended on the project, and specifically on the element's development, measured in person- months.
- **Number of Participants:** The total number of organizations or individuals involved in the project and specifically in the element development.

This careful selection process ensured utility of the MultiRATE FM dataset, forming the bedrock for the forecasting methodology.

A significant challenge in developing this forecasting module was to effectively capture the intrinsic relationships among disparate features and individual data samples. The nature of the gathered data, which are unstructured, presented an ideal scenario for the application of graph-based method. The idea is that by treating the data as graphs, these inherent connections could be more powerfully exploited.

Consequently, an end-to-end graph-based method was adopted as the foundation of the forecasting module. Initially, the unstructured raw data is transformed into a fully connected graph. Following this initial construction, the forecasting module (FM) then dynamically learns and optimises the most effective graph structure with respect to the ultimate task of node classification. This adaptive approach allows the system to identify and prioritize the most salient relationships within the data, leading to more accurate and insightful predictions Marthoglou et al. (2024). This methodology moves be- yond simple correlation, enabling a deeper understanding of how different factors interdependently influence development effort.

To facilitate user interaction with the forecasting module and to present the results in an intuitive manner, a custom 3D graphical user interface (GUI) was developed. This GUI is seamlessly integrated into the MultiRATE project's broader visual analytics dashboard, providing a unified and comprehensive user experience.

The GUI empowers users to input the specific features of the element under inspection and submit them to the forecasting service. Upon submission, the forecasting module instantly provides the estimated effort. Crucially, the inserted element is then visually represented within the GUI as a 3D object, offering a multi-dimensional perspective on the forecast. This 3D representation dynamically displays key information, including:

- **Duration Information:** Numerical values and relative proportions for both the overall project and the specific element.
- **Person-Months Information:** Numerical values and relative pro- portions for both the overall project and the specific element.
- **TRL Information:** The TRLs of the project are represented both spatially (through the object's dimensions) and visually (through a colour scale).

A clear legend on the right side of the interface explains the colour coding, enhancing interpretability. For detailed inspection, users can hover over the 3D object to reveal pop-up boxes containing precise data, and all element information is also accessible in an organized list at the bottom of the page (Figure 3). Furthermore, the web application incorporates a valuable comparison feature, allowing users to juxtapose two different elements and analyse their estimated efforts side-by-side, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of development requirements (Figure 4).

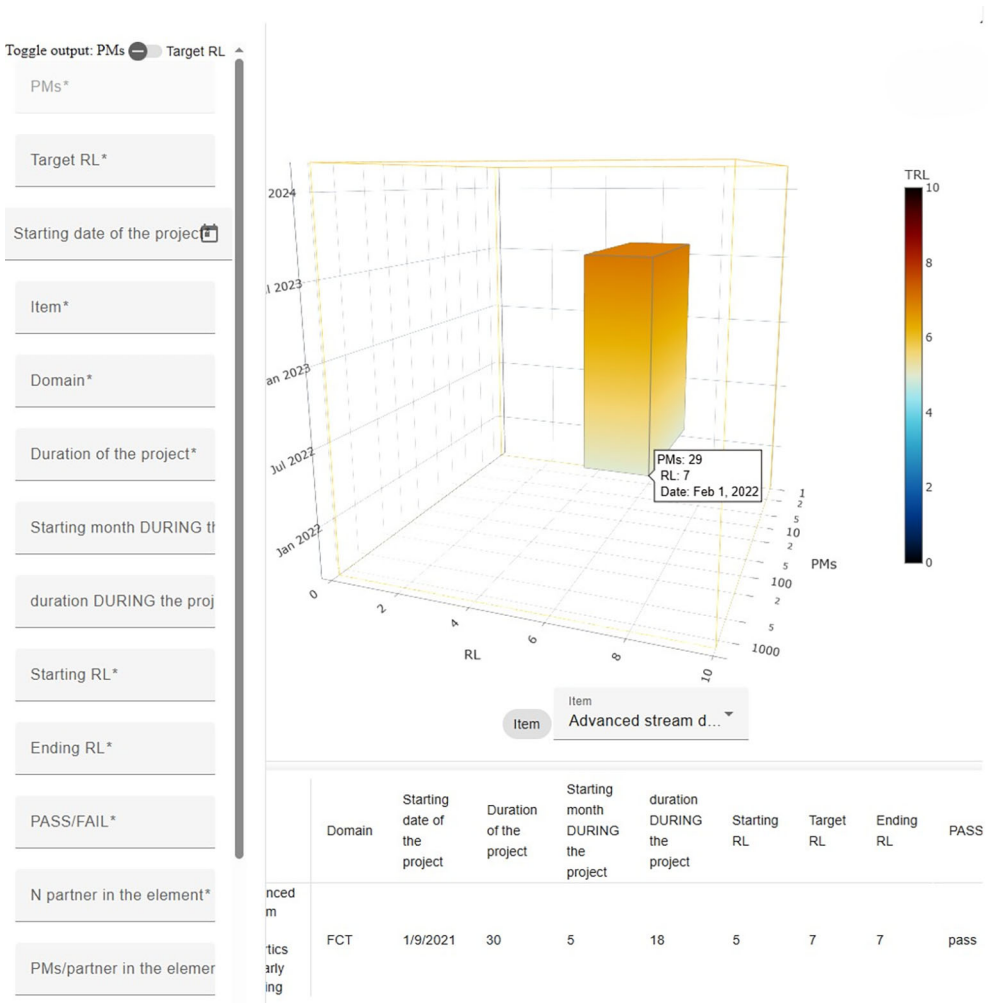


Figure 3. An example of showing one element with input fields in the left sidebar.

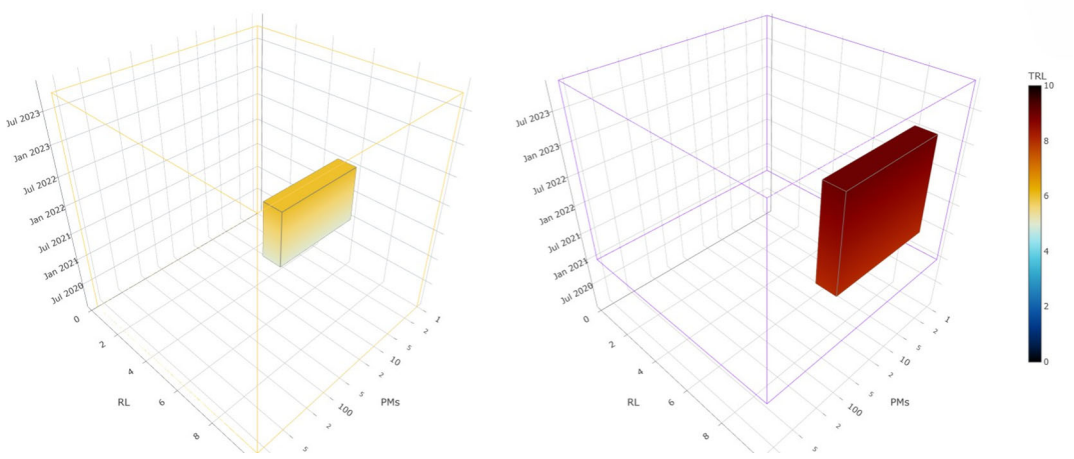


Figure 4. An example of elements comparison.

Evaluation with external network of experts

The presented methodology and all its components (i.e., the artefacts) have been evaluated by the MultiRATE project's stakeholder network; a diverse group of experts and organizations, including research projects and supporting entities, that represents the EU's security Research and Innovation (R&I) landscape. To structure the network, members were categorized by type and by their level of engagement: "hard engagement" involved active collaboration under legal agreements like a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), while "soft engagement" entailed occasional feedback through surveys or events without such commitments. To ensure a representative sample, the Research & Innovation (R&I) projects within the network were further classified by thematic security area. These areas include Border Management (BM), Disaster Resilient Societies (DRS), Fighting Crime and Terrorism (FCT), Digital Security (DS), and Resilient Infrastructure (INFRA). Table 8 and Table 9 summarize the number of members and their distribution based on these criteria.

Table 8. MultiRATE stakeholder network summary.

Category	Identified	Hard	Soft	Total	Eng. rate	Weight
Security R&I projects	87	17	16	33	38%	60%
Supporting entities	15	3	3	6	40%	11%
EC and agencies	4	0	2	2	50%	4%
Other entities and experts	32	5	9	14	44%	25%
Total	**138**	**25**	**30**	**55**	**40%**	**100%**

Table 9. R&I projects engaged.

Area	Identified	Hard	Soft	Total	%
BM	14	2	3	5	15%
DRS	21	3	2	5	15%
FCT	25	10	5	15	45%
DS/CS	18	1	2	3	9%
INFRA	6	1	1	2	6%
Others	3	0	3	3	9%
Total	**87**	**17**	**16**	**33**	**100%**

Validation plan

To conduct the design and validation activities, Design Science Research Methodology (DSRM) was used, to formally implement an objective, utility based, and end-user centric approach, and conduct the activities in iterative cycles to elicit frequent feedback. DSRM incorporates principles, practices, and process models which are adequate to conduct design science research in applied research disciplines, whose cultures value incrementally effective solutions Hevner and Chatterjee (2010). The design science paradigm seeks to create and evaluate "what is effective" in the problem space Hevner et al. (2004). DSRM was preferred over alternative methodological approaches for this study. Agile prototyping approaches (Beck et al. 2001) emphasise rapid, incremental software delivery but do not provide a structured process for the rigorous evaluation of a designed artefact against defined criteria, which is central to our validation objectives. Delphi-type consensus methods (Okoli and Pawlowski 2004) are effective for eliciting expert agreement on a defined issue, but they are consensus-building tools rather than design processes; they do not prescribe how to build and iteratively refine a new artefact. In contrast, DSRM provides an explicit sequence of design and evaluation cycles in which each iteration incorporates feedback into the artefact, making it the most suitable structure for developing and validating the Multi-RATE HRL (Peffers et al. 2007). For the final validation cycle, a System Usability Scale questionnaire was used, tailored to the needs of MultiRATE and mapped to DSRM.

Four design and validation cycles were scheduled to allow for frequent synchronization of insights and lessons learned. Within each cycle, regular meetings were conducted to further synchronize development, validation, and network building activities.

The evaluation activities were performed according to the following procedures:

- **Data collection:** A common DSRM template was used to collect data for each MultiRATE artifacts, containing data fields for use cases, artifacts, system dimensions, evaluation criteria, objectives, formal ratings, and informal evaluators' feedback.

- **Data analysis and reporting:** Each artefact owner collected feedback received during the evaluation sessions; feedback was then shared with other artefact owners, as well as analysed and discussed during regular meetings; additionally, formal reporting was provided through project deliverables.

- **Implementation:** Based on feedback received, as well as the development backlog, each artefact owner selected the set of features to be implemented for the following development iteration.

The DSRM process model adopted was based on the model developed by Peffers et al. (2007), as shown in the diagram of Figure 5.

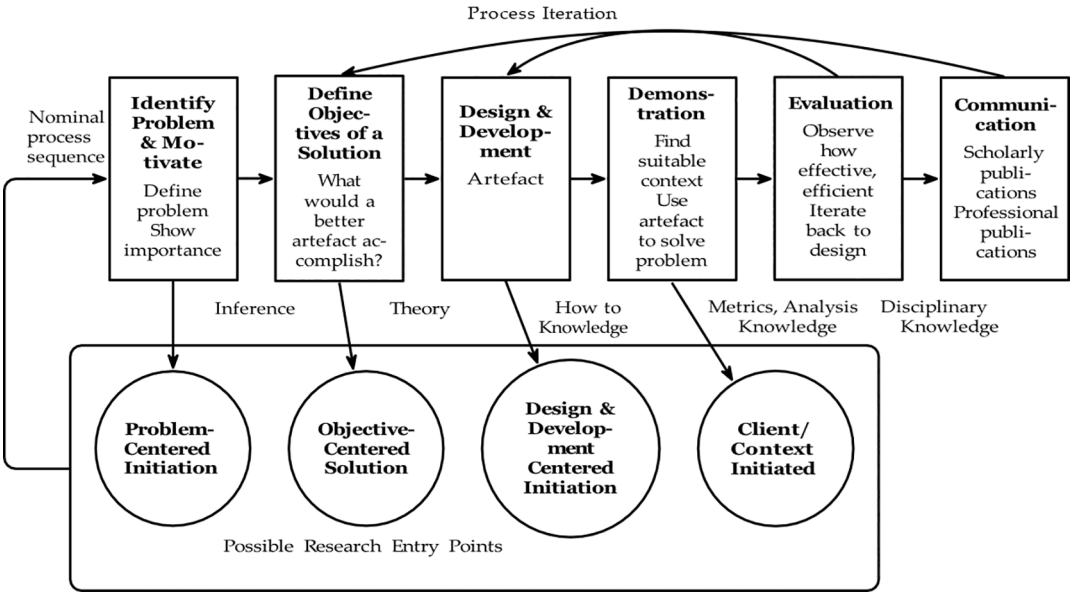


Figure 5. DSRM process model Peffers et al. (2007).

Validation results

In the fourth evaluation cycle, external evaluators were contacted to test the HRL web-based calculator, with all RLs now fully integrated as a part of the methodology. Overall, based on the feedback received, the HRL calculator shows potential as a useful tool but requires significant enhancements across multiple domains. A primary and widespread concern is its understandability; evaluators frequently reported that concepts were complex, wording was confusing, and results, particularly graphs, were difficult to interpret without further explanation. Users requested clearer HRL level explanations, improved guidance, and a more intuitive UI/UX design. Efficacy is another critical area needing attention, with specific feedback highlighting potentially flawed HRL calculations when Industrial or Manufacturing Readiness Levels (IRL/MRL) are not applicable or are dropped. The tool's current primary focus on "products" rather than processes, and the absence of key assessment components such as the usability of a product by a user (Human Readiness Level) or items like the availability of training curricula, were also noted as limitations to achieving its purpose. Regarding its practical utility for users, issues such as the inability to change initial parameters once set and cumbersome UI elements like the lack of an "expand all" feature for questions were raised. For the tool to achieve better organizational fit and utility, suggestions included making it more generic beyond specific EU-funded security research actions, ensuring it encompasses a broader range of project types and funding areas, and providing clarity on its value proposition, data handling, and integration into organizational practices like proposals. Finally, a need for a greater level of detail through more sufficient contextual help and guidance within the tool was also explicitly requested by users.

Throughout the final evaluation cycle, the web-based calculator has been modified in response to the feedback received. More specifically, a couple of updates have been applied starting from additional explanations that have been added to the indicators that contained keywords that weren't clear enough. Secondly, the wording in some explanations has been improved for use beyond EU projects or products. Then, the menu for selecting different assessments has been enhanced by including additional details such as the project name, element name, and whether it is a quick or full assessment. This improvement allows easier navigation between assessments and enables users to compare, for instance, the quick and full assessments of the same element more effectively. Additionally, the user manual has been improved, adding a step-by-step guide with a practical example showing the differences between the quick and the full assessments of an element. Last but not least, graphs have been improved with more explanations to better understand their meaning. Besides, automated feedback for improving the holistic RL of the assessed element has been added.

During the fourth evaluation cycle the System Usability Scale (SUS) questionnaire, tailored to the needs of MultiRATE, was used to simplify the evaluations and the method to receive feedback from the external participants. SUS is a well-established usability questionnaire Brooke (1996), with documented psychometric properties for post-task and post-session usability assessment Lewis (1991), which uses 10 questions, and the responses are based on the Likert scale with 5 response options. Except for the ten questions of SUS, we added one question per RL (including HRL) to measure the expectation of the evaluator compared to the results of the assessment for each RL. Six more questions were added, focused on the HRL from which two are open questions. The questionnaire was created and distributed using EU Survey, the European Commission's online survey tool. The HRL web platform, available at https://hrl.multiratehl.iti.gr, follows a three-tier architecture (presentation, application, and data tiers) and consists of a frontend and a backend. The frontend was implemented as an Angular application (Angular 12.2.17, Bootstrap 4.5.0, Chart.js 4.4.7 for the readiness-level visualisations, Angular Material 12.2.13 for the UI components, TypeScript 4.3.5). The backend was developed with the JHipster framework (JHipster 8.1.0, Spring 3.2.0, MongoDB 4.4), which provides native Spring capabilities and integrated security mechanisms, and exposes a REST API layer that separates user management and CRUD services from the business logic (score calculation, assessment status). The investment forecasting module applies graph neural network methods (VSLII) for clustering, classifying, and visualising RL evaluation outcomes, and estimates the budget and market entry time required for a technology to reach higher maturity levels. Furthermore, MultiRATE consortium created a mapping between the SUS (Table 10) based evaluation questionnaire and the DSRM methodology (Table 11). The questions as well as the number of replies are depicted. For coherency purposes, the questions are presented below from i to x.

i) I think that I would like to use this system frequently.

ii) I found the system unnecessarily complex.

iii) I find the system easy to use.

iv) I think that I would need the support of a technical person to be able to use this system.

v) I found the various functions in this system were well integrated.

Table 10. SUS (System Usability Scale) evaluation results. The table displays response counts for ten questions (i-x).

Response type	i	ii	iii	iv	v	vi	vii	viii	ix	x
Strongly Agree	12	1	9	3	11	1	17	0	6	1
Agree	14	2	20	0	18	1	8	2	19	2
Somewhat Agree	7	4	4	2	5	2	8	5	7	4
Somewhat Disagree	2	3	2	5	2	2	2	1	4	5
Disagree	2	17	2	8	0	15	0	10	1	16
Strongly Disagree	0	6	0	11	0	8	0	9	0	5
Blanks	**0**	4	0	8	1	8	2	10	0	4
Total Responses	**37**	**37**	**37**	**37**	**37**	**37**	**37**	**37**	**37**	**37**
Positive Responses	**89.2%**	**78.8%**	**89.2%**	**82.8%**	**94.4%**	**86.2%**	**94.3%**	**74.1%**	**86.5%**	**78.8%**

Table 11. MultiRATE HRL evaluation criteria and objectives based on DSRM.

System dimensions	Evaluation criteria/ Subcriteria	Objectives
Goal	Efficacy	The degree to which the HRL has achieved its purpose.
Environment	Consistency with people/Utility	While conducting the maturity evaluation of a project element, the HRL tool/method is useful for assessing it holistically.
Environment	Consistency with people/ Understandability	While conducting the maturity evaluation of a project element, the HRL tool/method enables easy understanding of the intermediate achievements needed in order to reach the desired final achievement and comply with the project contractual obligations.
Environment	Consistency with organization/ Utility	The HRL is useful for the services offered by the organization, it provides evidence on whether the element is on good stage.
Environment	Consistency with organization/ Fit with organization	The HRL can be easily fit in the organization practices.
Structure	Level of detail	The HRL provides a sufficient level of detail needed for its goal on an executive summary level.

vi) I thought there was too much inconsistency in this system.

vii) I would imagine that most people would learn to use this system very quickly.

viii) I found the system very cumbersome to use.

ix) I felt very confident using the system.

x) I needed to learn a lot of things before I could get going with this system.

Regarding the individual RLs, i.e. TRL, SocRL, SecRL, LPERL, IRL, en-CRL, and MRL, evaluators were asked to what degree the RL assessment results matched their expectations. The results demonstrated that, on average, the RL assessment results matched the evaluators' expectations in more than 80% of the cases; we interpret this as

Table 12. Evaluation results for the forecasting module.

Question	Answers
Was the procedure clear enough for the user to follow and were the instructions adequate to understand the usage?	Yes: 5/7 Needs more tooltips/ info: 1/7 Not exactly: 1/7
How easy was the tool to use? (Scale 1-7)	14.3% (5)|71.4% (6)| 14.3% (7)
Environment Consistency with people/Utility (Scale 1-7)	28.6% (6)|71.4% (7)
What is the Goal of the tool - About Efficacy	57.1% LA|42.9% FA
Environment Consistency with Organization/Utility	42.9% LA|57.1% FA
Structure - Level of detail	71.4% LA|28.6% FA
Activity - Performance (Scale 1-7)	57.1% (6)|42.9% (7)

expectation-based (perceptual) validation, reflecting the alignment between the assessment outcomes and expert expectations, rather than as predictive or empirical accuracy against an external benchmark. Additionally, regarding the evaluation on the FM, as presented in Table 12, all 7 answers are positive, since in all answers evaluate the goals as Largely or Fully Achieved (LA and FA respectively), and the other questions are rated highly on a 1-7 Likert scale (1 answer 5/7, and all other answers 6 and above).

Discussion

The MultiRATE HRL framework addresses a gap identified in the related work: no existing framework concurrently evaluates the seven dimensions needed for the civil security domain, and the state of the art lacks security-specific scales such as SecRL and LPERL Adomaitis et al. (2024). Our results show that the integrated assessment, supported by the web-based calculator and the forecasting module, was evaluated positively by the external expert network in terms of usability, utility, and expectation matching. In this section we discuss how the framework relates to prior holistic approaches and reflect on its limitations.

Compared with composite-index approaches such as the DoD SRA/SRL Sauser et al. (2006), MultiRATE avoids reducing the assessment to a single opaque score. As discussed in the Method section, the four holistic levels (HRL1–HRL4) are always presented together with the full dimension-level breakdown through the spider and bar graphs, which keeps weak dimensions visible. This mitigates — although it does not fully eliminate — the critique of arithmetic operations on ordinal data Olechowski et al. (2017), because the aggregation is computed on percentages of indicator achievement within each level rather than on the ordinal level values themselves. We present this as a pragmatic trade-off consistent with the measurement properties of ordinal scales Stevens (1946) and with multi-attribute evaluation practice Keeney and Raiffa (1976). In this respect, MultiRATE follows the approach of context-specific dashboards Gerdsri and Manotungvorapun (2021); Vik et al. (2021) rather than opaque composite indices.

A further design consideration is the weighting of the dimensions in the HRL computation. In the current version, the aligned levels of the seven dimensions contribute equally to the four holistic levels, a choice made for transparency and ease of interpretation rather than as a claim that all dimensions are equally important in every context. The framework provides mechanisms for context-dependence: the initialization phase allows users to exclude non-applicable dimensions (e.g., the “Exclude LPERL” option and the “Starting xRL” concept in Table 6), and the dimension-level results remain fully visible in the dashboard, so that in cases where legal or ethical considerations dominate — such as surveillance or predictive policing technologies — these dimensions surface explicitly through the LPERL and SecRL results rather than being hidden inside a weighted composite. The exploration of configurable, context-dependent weighting schemes, potentially informed by multi-criteria decision analysis methods such as the Analytic Hierarchy Process Saaty (1980), is left for future work.

The scope of the framework spans the broad category of products, systems, and processes developed in civil security R&I projects, which includes technologies as different as low-risk administrative tools and highly sensitive systems such as predictive policing or surveillance platforms. For the latter, societal and legal dimensions may become dominant constraints rather than merely additional factors; structured ethical impact assessment has been proposed precisely for such technologies Wright (2010). The framework does not impose a fixed weighting of dimensions: the initialization phase captures the assessment context (security area, nature of the element, whether human subjects are involved,

whether the element includes AI — Table 6), non-applicable dimensions can be excluded, and the results are always interpretable at the dimension level. This allows dominant constraints to surface explicitly. We recommend that, for sensitive technologies, results be interpreted primarily at the dimension level, with particular attention to the LPERL and SecRL outcomes, before considering the holistic levels.

Compared with the EU 4-Axis framework Bruno et al. (2020), which assesses digital technologies for European public services along societal, organisational, and legal axes, MultiRATE adds the commercialization and manufacturing dimensions that are vital for ensuring a technology can be produced and sustained as a viable product, as well as security-specific dimensions (SecRL and LPERL) that are critical in the civil security domain. Unlike process-focused guides such as the GAO TRA U.S. Government Accountability Office (2020), which remain centred on the TRL metric, MultiRATE operationalises a genuinely multi-dimensional assessment while retaining the evidence-based, indicator-driven discipline that process guides promote. The investment forecasting module is, to our knowledge, a distinctive feature of MultiRATE: it provides an evidence-based estimate of the effort required for maturity progression, supporting decisions on resource allocation that other readiness frameworks do not offer.

The limitations of this work are discussed in the Conclusion, and the scope of applicability across different types of civil security technologies is addressed in relation to the framework's initialization options. Overall, the results support the MultiRATE HRL as a practical, transparent assessment tool for the civil security domain, while indicating that further refinement of usability, indicator wording, and the forecasting model is warranted, as detailed in the validation results.

Conclusion

The traditional TRL scale does not fully address the complexities associated with security innovation. This paper introduced the MultiRATE Holistic RL framework as a direct response to this challenge, providing a validated, multi-dimensional approach to maturity assessment. By harmonizing seven critical RL dimensions our framework moves beyond a narrow technical focus to offer a truly holistic view.

Our main contributions are twofold. First, we developed a unified methodology that effectively integrates various readiness scales while preserving their distinct characteristics. Second, we implemented this methodology in the publicly accessible HRL calculator, a practical tool that provides not only a comprehensive assessment dashboard but also a novel investment forecasting module to guide resource allocation.

The validation of the HRL framework through the Design Science Research Methodology confirms its utility and feasibility for the civil security domain. Ultimately, MultiRATE provides a common language for researchers, end-users, and funding bodies, helping to de-risk the innovation process and bridge the "Valley of Death." This work serves as a model for developing similar holistic assessments in other complex, high-stakes fields, championing a more responsible and effective pathway for technological transition. Future work will focus on adapting the framework for new domains, enhancing it with additional dimensions such as a Human Readiness Level, and conducting longitudinal studies to confirm its long-term impact.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the validation relied on a sample of external evaluators engaged through the project's stakeholder network (55 engaged members out of 138 identified, as summarised in Table 8), which is moderate in size and not statistically representative of the full civil security R&I community. Second, the framework was designed and validated within the civil security sector, which limits the generalisability of the results to other application domains without adaptation. Third, the validation is based on expert self-reports and expectation matching rather than on external performance benchmarks; as discussed in the validation results, the reported accuracy reflects perceptual agreement between the assessment results and the evaluators' expectations.

The framework also offers concrete implications for policy and practice. For EU research and innovation programming, the MultiRATE HRL could complement TRL-based reporting in Horizon Europe projects by providing a more complete picture of maturity across security-relevant dimensions, supporting programme-level assessment of uptake potential. For LEAs and other end-users, the framework provides structured evidence for procurement decisions, enabling the comparison of candidate solutions across technical, societal, legal, and security dimensions. For startups and technology suppliers in the civil security market, the investment forecasting module offers an evidence-based estimate of the effort required to reach the market, which can inform funding strategies and investment roadmaps.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the [MultiMoDal Data Fusion and Analytics Group ethics and legal team/Center for Research and Technology Hellas (CERTH)/Information Technologies Institute (ITI)] (Approval No.: A/A #2 14.01.2025). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation.

Data availability

No specific data associated with this article.

Acknowledgements

During the preparation of this work, the authors used the AI-assisted writing tools Gemini 2.5 Flash, M365 Copilot and Kilo 7.4.20 with the DeepSeek V4 Flash 0731 model, to assist with drafting and refining parts of the text, in order to improve its clarity and readability. All AI-assisted content was reviewed, edited, and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final text. No AI was used to generate data, results, or analyses.

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Version 2

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✔ **Dimitrios Kalfas**
Department of Business Administration, School of Economic Sciences, University of Western Macedonia, Grevena, Greece

All five of the points I marked as mandatory have been met, and in most cases the authors have gone past what I asked.
The manuscript now follows full IMRaD, with a genuine Discussion sitting between the validation results and the Conclusion. That Discussion does the comparative work I was looking for: MultiRATE is set explicitly against the DoD SRA/SRL, the EU 4-Axis framework and the GAO TRA process guide, with the differences argued rather than asserted. The treatment of the ordinal-aggregation problem is better than I expected - rather than sidestepping Olechowski et al., the authors concede that arithmetic on ordinal data is not fully escaped, explain that aggregation runs on percentages of indicator achievement within each level rather than on the level values themselves, and defend the four-level output as a pragmatic trade-off with reference to Stevens and to Keeney and Raiffa. Equal weighting is now presented as a transparency choice rather than a claim about commensurability, with configurable weighting and AHP identified as future work.
The reference list stands at 61, with 19 new entries covering EU civil security funding, PCP and PPI procurement pathways, GDPR and Trustworthy AI, and recent readiness-level critiques. The Method section now opens with an overview, justifies DSRM explicitly against agile prototyping and Delphi rather than merely naming it, and documents the full software stack - EU Survey, the Angular frontend with its component versions, the JHipster/Spring/MongoDB backend, and the graph neural network forecasting module - which is more than sufficient for replication. The Conclusion carries an explicit limitations paragraph (55 engaged evaluators from a network of 138, sector-specific scope, expectation-based rather than benchmark validation) and a substantive policy paragraph covering Horizon Europe reporting, LEA procurement and investment roadmaps for suppliers.
Two further changes deserve mention because the authors were not obliged to make them. The "more than 80% accuracy" claim has been reframed as expectation-based perceptual validation, which is a downgrade of their own headline result and the correct description of what a System Usability Scale exercise measures. And the use of generative writing tools is now declared by name in the Acknowledgements, with a statement that no AI was used to generate data, results or

analyses, in line with the Commission's Living Guidelines. Both were handled straightforwardly. One housekeeping item only: the ethics statement still carries square brackets around the approving body, which reads as an unresolved template and should be tidied at proof stage.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Urban and peri-urban green, Natural Heritage, Contingent Valuation Method, Regional Development of Mountain and Semi Mountain Areas, Sustainable Small Cities, Sustainable Development, Environmental Economy, Ecosystem Services, Land use, Decarbonization, Delignification, coal transition, Disaster Risk Reduction, Civil Protection

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 07 April 2026

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Sheriffdeen Folaranmi Abiade
University of Massachusetts Lowell City, Lowell, Massachusetts, USA

The manuscript develops what is, at its core, an attempt to resolve a long-standing problem in innovation assessment: the inadequacy of the traditional Technology Readiness Level (TRL) scale for complex, high-stakes domains like civil security. The authors argue that TRL's "narrow technical focus" fails to capture the broader ecosystem in which technologies operate, particularly non-technical dimensions such as societal acceptance, legal compliance, integration, and commercialization . In response, they construct the MultiRATE Holistic Readiness Level (HRL) framework, which integrates seven distinct readiness dimensions—TRL, SocRL, SecRL, LPERL, IRL, en-CRL, and MRL—into a unified assessment system. The framework is operationalized through a web-based calculator, supported by a structured indicator system and an investment forecasting module that estimates development effort using project-level data such as person-months and TRL progression . Methodologically, the authors rely on Design Science Research Methodology (DSRM) to iteratively design, implement, and validate the framework through expert engagement, producing what they present as a practical, policy-relevant tool that can "provide a common language" and help bridge the so-called "Valley of Death" in innovation systems .

What I find compelling in this approach is the authors' explicit recognition of the fragmentation problem in the readiness-level literature. Their description of a "Tower of Babel" of competing RL frameworks captures a real issue in the field, where multiple dimensions exist but lack integration

. The move toward a dashboard-style, multi-dimensional framework is therefore well justified and aligns with broader trends in innovation systems thinking. However, precisely because the paper positions itself as a corrective to earlier conceptual and methodological limitations, I think it needs to be more explicit about the extent to which it actually escapes those same problems.

One point where I struggled conceptually is the treatment of aggregation. The authors explicitly acknowledge that “the mathematical validity of combining ordinal scores” has been widely critiqued and can produce a “false sense of precision” . This is an important admission. Yet later, the framework operationalizes the Holistic Readiness Level by calculating each HRL as “the average of the aligned levels” across dimensions . The way I see it, this averaging procedure appears to reproduce the very issue the paper initially problematizes—namely, treating heterogeneous and partially ordinal constructs as if they were commensurable on a single numerical scale. I would encourage the authors to clarify whether they see this as a justified simplification for usability, or whether there is a deeper methodological distinction they intend to draw between their approach and earlier composite indices. As stands, the work could use a concrete theorization of the move from critique to implementation.

A related issue concerns the implicit symmetry across dimensions. The framework structures HRL as an average across TRL, SocRL, SecRL, LPERL, IRL, en-CRL, and MRL, thus appears to assume that these dimensions contribute equally to overall readiness. Yet the paper itself emphasizes that these dimensions differ not only in content but in epistemological status—some are evidence-based and technical, while others are qualitative and context-dependent. The authors note, for example, that societal and commercial readiness “require significant qualitative analysis that can be difficult to standardize” . If this is the case, then equal aggregation raises questions about whether the framework is flattening meaningful differences between dimensions. I think the paper would benefit from explicitly addressing whether weighting is fixed by design or context-dependent, especially in a domain like civil security where ethical or legal considerations may outweigh purely technical maturity.

I am also enthused to ask how the framework handles variation across types of technologies and use cases. The authors state that the framework is designed to evaluate “products, systems, or processes developed in civil security R&I projects” , which is an extremely broad category. However, they did not fully unpack the implications of this breadth. Especially since technologies in this domain can range from low-risk administrative tools like say, bookkeeping software, to highly sensitive systems like predictive policing or surveillance platforms, and as a result, societal and legal dimensions becomes, not just additional factors but potentially dominant constraints. So I think the standardized structure of the framework forces a one-size-fits-all approach, especially since the paper does not fully address whether or how the relative importance of dimensions shifts across contexts. Even a short reflection on this would strengthen the applicability of the model.

On the validation side, I think the use of DSRM and expert feedback is appropriate for a design-oriented contribution, and the iterative structure is clearly described. At the same time, I think the paper could be more precise in how it characterizes its validation claims. For example, the results state that the framework achieves “more than 80% accuracy” based on evaluator feedback . This suggests to me that the “accuracy” reflects alignment with expert expectations rather than an external benchmark. That is not a weakness in itself—indeed, it is typical for this kind of research—but I would encourage the authors to frame it more explicitly as expectation-based or

perceptual validation. Doing so would prevent readers from interpreting this as predictive or empirical accuracy in a stricter sense.

Finally, I think one of the most interesting tensions in the paper lies in the trade-off between usability and rigor. The authors deliberately introduce a “quick assessment” mode that “is intended to be conducted by only one user, not necessarily an expert in all the fields” . This is clearly motivated by practical considerations and enhances accessibility, however, it also throws questions about reliability into the frame, especially for dimensions such as legal, ethical, or security readiness that typically require specialized expertise. Note that the authors briefly acknowledge that this mode is “not as accurate and detailed,” so I think the implications of this trade-off could be more fully explored, particularly in terms of how results from quick assessments should be interpreted or used in decision-making contexts.

Overall, this is a conceptually ambitious and practically relevant framework that addresses a real gap in readiness assessment for complex technologies. However, the manuscript requires major revision to strengthen its methodological coherence and conceptual clarity--It should more directly address the implications of aggregation across heterogeneous dimensions, justify or refine its equal-weighting logic, clarify the scope of applicability across different technology types, and more precisely frame the limits of its validation strategy. With these revisions, the paper would make a strong and credible contribution to the literature.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and does the work have academic merit?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Partly

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Global political economy, technology governance, and the study of digital and AI-enabled surveillance systems, particularly in the context of developing countries. I interrogate the adoption, evaluation, and governance of complex technologies across different institutional and political environments.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of

expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 09 Sep 2026

Luis Unzueta

Thank you for all the insightful comments. The question of whether the framework actually escapes the problems it critiques is addressed explicitly in the new Discussion section. MultiRATE does not claim to fully escape the critique of arithmetic operations on ordinal data; it mitigates it in two ways. First, it never reduces the assessment to a single opaque composite score (unlike SRL): the four HRLs are always presented alongside the full dimension-level breakdown via the spider and bar graphs. Second, it keeps each RL dimension's ordinal structure intact and computes percentages of indicator achievement per level, rather than treating level values as an interval scale.

Regarding the comment about the treatment of aggegation, the tension between our critique of combining ordinal scores and our use of averaging in the HRL computation is addressed in the Method section and in the Discussion. The average is a deliberate simplification for usability, not a claim that the dimensions are commensurable on a single interval scale. We do not produce a single composite index: we produce four holistic levels (HRL1–HRL4) that are always accompanied by the full dimension-level breakdown, so ordinal information remains visible and weak dimensions can be identified. The aggregation is computed on the percentages of indicator achievement within each level (with N/A handling and the 80%/60% thresholds), not on the ordinal level values themselves, which reduces the false-precision concern. We present this as a pragmatic trade-off, consistent with the properties of ordinal scales (Stevens 1946) and multi-attribute evaluation practice (Keeney and Raiffa 1976), and we discuss it in the Discussion section.

Regarding the comment about the implicit symmetry across dimensions, equal weighting is the default in the current version, chosen for transparency and simplicity of interpretation, and it does not imply that all dimensions are equally important in every context. The framework already handles context-dependence in practice: the initialization phase lets users exclude dimensions that do not apply (e.g., the “Exclude LPERL” option and the “Starting xRL” concept in Table 6), and the dashboard shows the contribution of each dimension, so when legal or ethical considerations dominate (e.g., surveillance or predictive policing technologies), the assessment reflects this through the LPERL and SecRL results rather than hiding them inside a weighted score. Configurable or context-dependent weighting, potentially informed by multi-criteria decision analysis such as the Analytic Hierarchy Process (Saaty 1980), is noted as future work.

Regarding the comment about how the framework handles variation across types of technologies and use cases, the breadth of the framework's scope is addressed in the new Discussion section. We recognise that civil security technologies range from low-risk administrative tools to highly sensitive systems such as predictive policing and surveillance platforms, and that for the latter, societal and legal dimensions can become dominant constraints rather than additional factors. We clarify that the framework does not prescribe a one-size-fits-all weighting: the initialization phase captures the context (security area,

nature of the element, involvement of human subjects, inclusion of AI — Table 6), the user can exclude non-applicable dimensions, and the results are always interpretable at the dimension level, so dominant constraints surface.

We also added a brief reflection on how the relative importance of dimensions shifts across contexts and how users should interpret the HRL accordingly. Regarding the comment about the validation, we have reframed the validation claims. The reported "more than 80% accuracy" is now described explicitly as expectation-based (perceptual) validation: the degree to which the assessment results matched the evaluators' expectations, not predictive or empirical accuracy against an external benchmark.

We also added references to the usability questionnaire literature (Brooke 1996; Lewis 1991) to support the description of the SUS questionnaire used in the final validation cycle. Regarding the comment about the trade-off between usability and rigor, the quick assessment trade-off has been addressed in the Method section. We now state explicitly that the quick assessment is a preparatory screening modality: it gives an initial approximation and supports the decision to undertake a full assessment, and it is not intended for formal or consequential decisions. For dimensions that require specialised expertise (legal, ethical, security), quick assessment results should be treated with particular caution and confirmed through a full assessment by the relevant experts before being used in decision-making contexts (e.g., funding or procurement decisions).

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

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Dimitrios Kalfas
Department of Business Administration, School of Economic Sciences, University of Western Macedonia, Grevena, Greece

The manuscript titled "The MultiRATE Holistic Readiness Level framework for civil security technologies" intends to address the limitations of the traditional Technology Readiness Level (TRL) scale for complex civil security innovations by introducing a comprehensive, multi-dimensional Holistic Readiness Level (HRL) framework that integrates seven RL dimensions tailored to the security sector, including an investment forecasting module. This work aligns well with Open Research Europe's emphasis on open, reproducible research outputs with practical utility, such as the publicly accessible HRL web calculator, and it fits the platform's flexible article guidelines for research articles. I recommend major revision: the framework is innovative and the validation process is sound, but structural reorganization, expanded contextualization, and clearer

methodological details are needed to fully meet the platform's standards for transparency and completeness.
The abstract follows a clear structure: it sets the context (TRL limitations and the "Valley of Death" in security tech assessment), states the objective (to introduce the MultiRATE HRL framework), outlines the methods (EU-funded project development, seven RL dimensions, expert validation via Design Science Research Methodology), reports key results (unified assessment with cost forecasting, positive validation), and concludes with implications (common language to de-risk innovation). It is concise and should encourage downloads by highlighting the free online tool. To refine further, the authors could trim a few adjectives (e.g., "significant problem") and ensure all terms like "MultiRATE HRL" are immediately self-explanatory.
The introduction clearly articulates the research problem: TRL's narrow technical focus fails to capture non-technical risks (integration, societal, legal, commercial) critical for civil security tech deployment, leading to fragmented assessments and the "Valley of Death." It reviews key RL extensions (e.g., IRL, MRL, SocRL) and their "Tower of Babel" challenges, motivating the need for a harmonized, sector-specific holistic framework. However, the section feels short and could be strengthened by expanding to 60–70 references overall (current count appears lower), adding more on civil security specifics (e.g., EU funding contexts like Horizon Europe) and explicitly stating the contributions in a dedicated paragraph.
The manuscript largely follows acceptable academic methods for framework development and validation. It employs Design Science Research Methodology (DSRM) within the EU MultiRATE project, adapting seven RL scales (TRL, SocRL, SecRL, LPERL, IRL, en-CRL, MRL) to security, integrating them into a dashboard with investment forecasting, and validating via structured expert questionnaires (positive ratings, e.g., mostly "Largely" or "Fully Achieved"). This is rigorous for an applied, design-oriented paper. However, the methods section dives into components without a brief general overview (e.g., "This study developed and validated a holistic framework using DSRM through iterative design, adaptation, integration, and expert evaluation"). It also lacks explicit justification for DSRM over alternatives (e.g., why not agile prototyping or Delphi method) and does not specify software used for analysis (e.g., for questionnaire scoring, web tool development—name and version). The authors should add these for full reproducibility.
The results present the framework's components, the HRL calculator (with link), and validation outcomes (e.g., high Likert scores, goal achievement ratings), supported by tables comparing RLs and expert feedback. These are clear and demonstrate feasibility. However, the manuscript lacks a distinct Discussion section, blending interpretation into Results and Conclusions, contrary to standard research article structure (Introduction, Materials and Methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusions). The authors must insert a Discussion to compare findings with prior holistic frameworks (e.g., how MultiRATE improves on DoD SRL's ordinal issues or EU 4-Axis's omissions, per Table 1/2), highlighting unique attributes like security-specific RLs and cost forecasting.
The Conclusions summarize contributions (unified calculator, sector adaptations, validation) and implications (de-risking innovation for funders/users), with a nod to future work (e.g., other domains). To strengthen, it should explicitly list main limitations (e.g., validation sample size, security sector focus limiting generalizability, reliance on expert self-reports) and elaborate on policy/practical implications, such as EU R&I program integration, procurement guidance for LEAs, or startup investment roadmaps.
For the plagiarism I used the Turnitin software and found a similarity score of 12% which equally means >4% text in common with one source, >3% text in common with one source, >1% text in common with 2 different sources and <1% text in common with 27 different sources. The similarity score of 12% is good for me.
Furthermore, Turnitin software found that "this submission has been generated by AI" for 25%

(Likely AI-generated text from a large-language model 25% and Likely AI-generated text that was likely revised using an AI-paraphrase tool or word spinner 0%). I do not know what about text generated by AI. Moreover, I also checked the references.
Overall, this is a practical, timely framework with real-world potential, enhanced by the open calculator tool. With major revision to reorganize into full IMRaD structure (adding Discussion), expand references/introduction, provide methodological overview/justification/software details, and deepen comparisons/limitations/implications, it will be an excellent fit for Open Research Europe. I look forward to the revised version.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and does the work have academic merit?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Urban and peri-urban green, Natural Heritage, Contingent Valuation Method, Regional Development of Mountain and Semi Mountain Areas, Sustainable Small Cities, Sustainable Development, Environmental Economy, Ecosystem Services, Land use, Decarbonization, Delignification, coal transition, Disaster Risk Reduction, Civil Protection

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 09 Sep 2026

Luis Unzueta

Thank you for all the insightful comments. Both suggestions on the abstract have been implemented.

First, we replaced “a significant problem” with “structural limitations”, which is more precise:

it indicates that the problem lies in the design of the TRL scale itself, not in its use.

Second, we made the framework term self-explanatory: the abstract now introduces the MultiRATE Holistic Readiness Level (HRL) framework with a brief description of what it is — "an integrated assessment methodology that unifies seven technical and socio-technical maturity dimensions into a single evaluation system" — so that readers encountering the term for the first time understand its scope without having to reach the Methods section. These minor edits improve clarity without altering the structure of the abstract.

Regarding the comments about the introduction, we have strengthened it in three directions. On the civil security specifics: we added two new paragraphs. The first describes the EU civil security research and innovation context (Horizon Europe and its "Civil Security for Society" cluster, European Commission 2021; European Commission 2022). The second examines the procurement and compliance bottleneck that follows project completion: R&I grants cannot directly fund public acquisition, so results must transition through Pre-Commercial Procurement or Public Procurement for Innovation pathways (Edquist and Zabala-Iturriagagoitia 2012; Georghiou et al. 2014), while security technologies must comply with the GDPR (European Parliament and Council 2016) and Trustworthy AI guidelines (High-Level Expert Group on AI 2019).

On the readiness-level landscape: we extended the overview of complementary RL scales with Demand RL (Paun 2012) and made explicit the acronym collision between the Data RL and Demand RL variants of DRL, which illustrates the Tower of Babel problem discussed in the Introduction. Table 1 was updated accordingly with one new row, keeping its comparative structure unchanged. On the contributions: we reworked the closing of the Introduction so that the contributions are introduced by a framing sentence in a dedicated paragraph. On the references: the revised manuscript includes 61 references in total, 19 of them new, covering EU civil security funding, procurement policy, readiness-level literature, expert validation, and methodological foundations.

We have also addressed the three points raised on the Method section. First, regarding the general methodological overview: the paragraph that introduces the design approach, immediately before the Method section, states that the identified gap "calls for a constructive research approach", that "the Design Science Research Methodology (DSRM) provides a suitable structure for developing and evaluating a new artifact to address a specific problem", and that "its iterative nature is particularly advantageous for a complex undertaking like the MultiRATE HRL". We strengthened this introduction with an explicit justification of DSRM over alternatives: agile prototyping (Beck et al. 2001) and Delphi-type consensus methods (Okoli and Pawlowski 2004) were considered less suitable — agile prototyping lacks a formal evaluation lifecycle for the artefact, and Delphi-type methods are consensus-elicitation tools rather than artefact design processes — whereas DSRM provides an iterative design-evaluation loop aligned with the development of a practical tool (Peffers et al. 2007). Third, we specified the software used in the study. The evaluation questionnaire was created and distributed using EU Survey, the European Commission's online survey tool. The HRL web platform, available at https://hrl.multiratehl.iti.gr, follows a three-tier architecture (presentation, application, and data tiers) and consists of a frontend and a backend. The frontend was implemented as an Angular application (Angular 12.2.17,

Bootstrap 4.5.0, Chart.js 4.4.7 for the readiness-level visualisations, Angular Material 12.2.13 for the UI components, TypeScript 4.3.5). The backend was developed with the JHipster framework (JHipster 8.1.0, Spring 3.2.0, MongoDB 4.4), which provides native Spring capabilities and integrated security mechanisms, and exposes a REST API layer that separates user management and CRUD services from the business logic (score calculation, assessment status). The investment forecasting module applies graph neural network methods (VSLII) for clustering, classifying, and visualising RL evaluation outcomes, and estimates the budget and market entry time required for a technology to reach higher maturity levels.

Regarding the Discussion section, we agree that it is required for a complete IMRaD structure. We have inserted a new Discussion section between the evaluation results and the Conclusion. It compares our findings with the holistic frameworks discussed in the Related work section — in particular the DoD SRA/SRL, the EU 4-Axis framework, the GAO TRA process guide, and the dashboard-style approaches of Gerdsri and Manotungvorapun and Vik et al. It highlights how MultiRATE handles the ordinal-data critique of composite indices (Olechowski et al. 2017) by retaining dimension-level transparency, how it extends the EU 4-Axis framework with commercialization and manufacturing dimensions, and how the security-specific dimensions (SecRL, LPERL) and the investment forecasting module are distinctive features of the framework.

We have also strengthened the Conclusion in the two requested directions. First, we added an explicit limitations paragraph listing the main limitations: the validation sample size and composition, the civil security sector focus which limits generalizability, and the reliance on expert self-reports (perceptual validation) rather than external benchmarks. Second, we elaborated on the policy and practical implications: integration of HRL into EU R&I programming, procurement guidance for LEAs, and investment roadmaps for startups and technology suppliers. Finally, regarding the usage of AI-assisted writing tools during the preparation of this work, we confirm that we used them. The tools used were Gemini 2.5 Flash, M365 Copilot and Kilo 7.4.20 with the DeepSeek V4 Flash 0731 model. They were used to assist with drafting and refining parts of the text, including sections of the original manuscript and of this revision. They were not used to generate data, results, or analyses, which are entirely the authors'.
All AI-assisted content was reviewed, edited, and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final text. This use is consistent with the European Commission's Living Guidelines on the responsible use of generative AI in research (https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/document/2b6cf7e5-36ac-41cb-aab5-0d32050143dc_en), which require researchers to declare substantial use of generative AI and affirm that accountability for the research remains with the human authors. In line with the guidelines, we have added an explicit statement of AI use to the revised manuscript, in the Acknowledgments section.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.