

# What is societal security?

*J. Peter Burgess*

Contribution to the workshop *Security research and Europe's societal challenges: what do citizens want?* Oslo, 8 June 2011

## 1

Among the many successes of the European Security Research Programme is the growing wisdom and insight into what security actually means in our day. Most prominently this can be seen in the growing awareness of the importance of society in the security equation.

European research in the framework programmes has long been aware of the important link between science and society. Indeed the last few programmes have developed a dedicated rubric for this function alone.

Yet among the new insights that have emerged through the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme is the meaning of *security in society* and the notion that security is in fundamental ways societal.

What does this mean? An answer to this question begins by asking another, even simpler, question: What does it mean to make Europe secure?

Well, some would say it's the highways and bridges, airports and train stations, oil refineries and energy production plants that are under threat and require security. Some would say that it's public health that needs securing, others would say it's our economic well-being, jobs, price stability, etc. that stand in harm's way. Others still would say it is our democracy or other rights and privileges, our values, etc.

But whether we are talking institutions, infrastructure, political economy, finance, rights or rule of law, the interest and value of these different components of European social life ultimately return to the security of citizens in European society.

They are all part of the same European societal common ground. The common denominator for security research done and security investments made is the society

whose values, legal and economic institutions, and cultures, make these things possible in the first place.

## 2

In 1993 a group of researchers that later became known as the Copenhagen School first formulated the concept of 'societal security' in the following way:

... the ability of a society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions and possible or actual threats.<sup>1</sup>

The 'essential character' of European society refers to the minimum set of properties that our society would need to have for us to be able to call it European. What is European about European society? What is it that is indispensable? What is the thing that, if taken away, would cause European society to stop being European society? That is its essential character.

There is considerable room here for debate and discussion on what the 'essential character' of European society is. And it is important to create a generous space for that debate. Most would probably agree that a certain set of cultural traditions, languages, and religions, a set of strong economic traditions of agriculture and industry, and a set of democratic values, like freedom of speech, rule of law, pluralism, tolerance, and privacy are the heart of such a definition.

If there is something called European society, encompassing a range of institutions, values, cultures and traditions, how can we, through security research, best contribute to its stability and longevity? That is the question, at the most general level that links all aspects of security research.

Contributing to societal security means enhancing the resilience of institutions that support the communities and cultures that make up Europe. It also means enhancing the security of the economic and commercial principles that make European enterprise and industry a key contributor to European societal security.

---

<sup>1</sup> Barry Buzan et al., *Identity, Migration, and the New Security Agenda in Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. 23.

### 3

There is growing popular and political conviction that the success or failure of security research should be measured by its ability to delivery security, as self-evident as this may seem, security in line with needs and requirements of European society. The impact of security research on European societal security is thus key.

This is not idle idealism, it is pragmatism. A security sector that is in tune with the needs of society and the principles that make that society what it is will itself have far better prospects for success and prosperity. A security industry that responds to the expectations of European citizens, to the needs of European society and the democratic ideals Europe will be contributing to its own well-being and long-term competitiveness.

In my view the centre of gravity around which future European security research will revolve in the coming period is: *accountability*.

We can talk about accountability in a variety of ways. In private commerce, we speak of accountability to investors. In democratic institutions, we speak of accountability to voters. In legal settings, we speak of accountability to laws and rights.

All three of these types of accountability are relevant when it comes to security research in the European framework programmes.

Research should be accountable in commercial terms in the sense that money invested by European citizens in security research will have to show that it is being used and producing security impacts in a relevant way: security value for security money.

Research will have to be accountable in democratic terms in the sense that it will have to show its relevance to the democratically expressed security needs of European citizens.

Finally, research will have to be accountable in legal and ethical terms in the sense that it will have to demonstrate that it not only adheres to European fundamental rights and laws, but that it actively advances them.

This is the future of security research in the Framework programmes. The requirement of accountability is good news since permits us to reformulate and clarify the primary question of our efforts: How can European security research contribute to making European society more secure?