



Defining *Societal Security* in the Baltic Sea Region

Summary of the discussions in the seminar on the concept of *societal security*,
26 November 2019

Information about the seminar

The first priority area in the [Joint Position on Enhanced Cooperation in the Civil Protection Area](#) in the BSR is: “Building a common *societal security* culture. The strategic objective is to build common attitudes towards *societal security* threats and a shared understanding of prevention, preparedness, and response as well as recovery processes in connection with disasters. The concept of *societal security* should be a basis for developing common *societal security* culture, as this concept is regionally and globally well standardized”.

The concept *societal security* is frequently used in various cooperation formats in the Baltic Sea Region, in the scope of Policy Area Secure in the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) as well as the CBSS Civil Protection Network. The purpose of the seminar on 26 November 2019 was to clarify what this concept entails and how it can be utilized. The seminar was organized by the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) Secretariat, in the scope of the Swedish Institute Seed Funding Project “Baltic Sea Region Research Network on Societal Security” (2018 – 2019).

The conceptual discussion was cross-sectoral and multi-level; the discussion included representatives from research and higher education institutions, policymakers, experts and practitioners from the local, national and international levels.

Two presentations were given to provide initial input for the discussions, by Bengt Sundelius, Professor of Government at Uppsala University and the Swedish Defence University, and Strategic Advisor at the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, and Christer Pursiainen, Professor of Societal Safety and Environment at the Department of Engineering and Safety, Faculty of Science and Technology, UiT, the Arctic University of Norway. Below are the short summary of the opening inputs and the discussion that followed.

Background to the concept *societal security*

The concept *societal security* can be contrasted and compared to other types and definitions of security. *National security* is the responsibility of the state and the government to protect the inhabitants of a state, as a group, from internal and external enemies and threats. A distinguishing feature of the concept of *national security* is giving priority to the protection of the state, or the protection of government institutions and agencies. *Human security* emphasises the protection of each individual and identifies the state as a potential threat to the security of individuals. *Societal security* moves beyond only the survival of the state or only the protection of the individual and presents the society as the important unit; the society as the “family of all”, where various organisations and authorities as well as the inhabitants play a role in creating a safe, secure and resilient society; the society is what



should be protected and empowered. The *societal security* concept is based not only on the equalization of the importance of the state and society, but also on the recognition that the safeguarding of security is a contract between citizens and authorities, under which both parties share responsibilities, obligations and mutual expectations regarding their contribution to building the resilience of the society and to dealing properly when a crisis occurs. *Societal security* means a new governance framework for building resilience in the crisis management cycle.

The concept *societal security* originates from two main schools:

The Copenhagen school uses the term *societal security* and emphasises insecurities connected to the concept and focuses on identity issues in connection to language and culture. Within this schools the often problematic “securitisation” of different sectors is stressed.

From the perspective of the Copenhagen school *societal security* can be defined as:

“...sustainability, within acceptable conditions for evolution, of traditional patterns of language, culture, association, and religious and national identity and custom”. It also “concerns the ability of a society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions and perceived or actual threats” (definition by Ole Weaver, Barry Buzan, et al., “Identity, Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe”, Pinter, 1993, 23, quoted in “Societal Security in the Baltic Sea Region” by the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2018).

The Norwegian tradition draws on experiences in the oil industry, engineering, risk management and for these purposes uses the term *societal safety*. Beginning with the Willoch commission on societal vulnerabilities presented in 2000, Norwegian experts focus also on the broader issues of the functional aspects such as building resilience and protecting inhabitants of the society. In 2001 the notion of *societal security* was introduced also in Sweden by the Pettersson Commission leading to the establishment in 2002 of the Swedish Emergency Management Agency (KBM) and in 2009 MSB. Within this Nordic tradition uncertainties are stressed as an important aspect of understanding and assessing safety and security.

The concept *societal security* is used in the Nordic countries, which can be shown in the [strategy adopted by the Nordic Council in October 2019](#), the “Nordic Council Strategy on Societal Security” (Nordisk råds strategi for samfunnsikkerhet). [Nordforsk](#), the organisation under the Nordic Council of Ministers which provides funding for and facilitates Nordic cooperation on research and research infrastructure, also uses the concept *societal security*, and has since 2013 a designated research program on *societal security*.

In “Societal Security in the Baltic Sea Region” by the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2018, Gediminas Vitkus presents three ways of how the concept of *societal security* can be understood, and analyses how it has been applied to the Lithuanian context. The following are the three definitions:

- “Societal security” as a sector of national security. In this case, societal threats are primarily perceived through the prism of the state as a whole, i.e. societal security is subordinated to state security. Theoretically (and most probably practically), a situation is even possible where state security can be guaranteed at the cost of societal security;



- Societal security is an equivalent/parallel referent object to state security for security policy developers. In this case, duality and equivalence mean that rivalry among security policy referent objects reflected by the “securitisation” concept, developed by the Copenhagen School, is under way; and
- Societal security is perceived as a dominant security policy referent object of top priority, to which all the other sectors, including national security, are subordinated. In this case, theoretically (and most probably practically) it may even be possible that societal security can be guaranteed at the cost of other sectors or, in a crucial case, even at the cost of restricting state sovereignty.

Components of the concept of *societal security* important for cooperation

Several components of the concept of *societal security* were highlighted in the discussion. The following aspects were emphasised as parts of the concept for the cooperation in the area of *societal security* in the Baltic Sea Region:

- Creating, establishing and protecting *societal security* should be understood as a permanent continuous process.
- The full civil protection cycle is included in the notion of *societal security*: prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.
- Disaster Risk Management and building resilience are vital for increased *societal security* – focus in on reducing vulnerabilities and building capacity to respond to potential emergencies.
- There is a responsibility of residents to contribute – engaging all actors in the society and building individual resilience as well as collective resilience.
- Law enforcement should be seen as a process contributing to building stability and safety in society.
- The concept entails the recognition of security as a complex issue, including the need to analyse threats and hazards and assessment of risk with potential treatment measures.
- It is a “contested” concept (like power and security itself) as it concerns values and the difficult question of what and whose values to safeguard.

Uncertain and complex issues

During the discussion some aspects were identified as uncertain or complex, making it difficult to arrive at one, agreed upon, definition of the concept of *societal security*.

- Uncertainty regarding how cooperation on preventing and responding to antagonistic threats should be organised in the BSR, considering the agencies responsible differ between the countries, e.g. whether it is civilian or military organisations responsible.
- There are different definitions and understandings of the concepts *safety* and *security* depending on country and/or sector. For some experts, safety is linked to risks, while security is linked to threats. In Icelandic, Swedish and Norwegian (*öryggi, säkerhet, sikkerhet* respectively) the word for *safety* and *security* are synonyms.
- The word for *societal* is the same word as *societal* in Latvian, making it difficult to distinguish between the two concepts.
- There are country specific ways of understanding key concepts related to the way concepts are described in local languages. In Estonia, the concept for resilience *Kerksus* is defined durable flexibility.



- How to operationalize the concept in such ways that it can form the basis for actions, work plans, concrete measures etc. “How do I recognize *societal security*, when I see it? How do I know, when I see more or less of *societal security*?”

Conclusions

There are several ways to define the concept of *societal security* theoretically and to operationalize its meanings in different contexts. These definitions might exert impact on security policies as well as practical consequences, thus, the theoretical and operational definitions matter. The continued discussions of the theoretical definition is an indication that the concept is relevant, and the discussions are themselves important parts of the activities, therefore, there is no reason to once and for all make a final definition that would apply for the activities and cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region. However, there is consensus regarding which organisations, fields and topics that are relevant for *societal security* cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region, and what the general objectives of the cooperation are, and this is what is important for moving forward with planning joint activities.

The practical definition of *societal security* in the Baltic Sea Region entails that the cooperation in this field includes various types of organisations that contribute to building resilience as well as safe and secure societies. These organisations can be from the civil protection or the law enforcement fields, and they can be authorities, civil society organisations, research or education institutes, or from the private sector. The practical cooperation in the field of *societal security* in the Baltic Sea Region also recognises the need to take on a whole-of-society approach considering all individuals in the society, and also how different individuals and groups might need attention due to vulnerability or their potential to contribute to building resilience. Furthermore, the topics relevant for *societal security* cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region can vary and the field is broad, however, the topics can be defined as those that are of relevance for resilience, safety and security of people and societies.

Key components of *societal security* are:

- Holistic and whole-of-society
- Protecting lives, property and values (human, political, cultural etc.)
- Includes insurances and recovery processes, as well as learning processes
- Recognises the governance framework emphasising the partnership between professional agencies/services and the civil society.

Moreover, as several discussion participants noted, besides being an interesting topic for theoretical discussion, it is important to remember that whatever definition is used, it should be chosen for its positive potential impact on practical cooperation between the countries in the region, rather than for the academic clarity.