

Krulík, Oldrich; Stejskal, Libor

Research Report

Security Agenda in a Risk Society: A Stable and Rational Policy, or Chaotic Securitization?

EUSECON Policy Briefing, No. 20

Provided in Cooperation with:

German Institute for Economic Research (DIW Berlin)

Suggested Citation: Krulík, Oldrich; Stejskal, Libor (2012) : Security Agenda in a Risk Society: A Stable and Rational Policy, or Chaotic Securitization?, EUSECON Policy Briefing, No. 20, Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung (DIW), Berlin

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/119601>

Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

Terms of use:

Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.

You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.

If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.

Oldřich Krulík and Libor Stejskal



Albrecht Dürer, The Four Horsemen of Apocalypse, 1498

- **To what extent are security policy formation and the setting of national security priorities subject to societal and media pressures?**
- **Is it reasonable to change security priorities radically in response to sudden shocks?**
- **Is it possible to achieve an open, flexible and comprehensive security policy?**

Summary:

The processes whereby security policy tackles security challenges and converts them into security priorities (at least since September 11, 2011) are criticized by experts working in the field as erratic and susceptible to media and society pressures. We are always being warned of the emergence of new threats requiring close attention of the relevant authorities and security forces, but the existing security challenges do not disappear or become less serious with such declarations. Uncontrolled securitization forces all those concerned to concentrate their efforts and resources on ever-shifting priorities, thus increasing the burden borne by national security systems. The vital question is how to build a long-term rational security agenda, flexibly accommodating the whole range of security challenges.

POLICY BRIEFING

April 2012 EUSECON Policy Briefing 20

Security agenda in a risk society: a stable and rational policy, or chaotic securitization?

Introduction

The current situation of advanced western societies, such as the EU or its individual members, is characterized by a greatly expanded range of phenomena perceived as “threats”. We live in a heterogeneous risk society: some of the risks are group-specific, but many are shared by all, while no one has the power to influence their sources. This sociological observation may also be applied to the narrower category of security risks.

Not only the general public, but also security institutions and security forces face successive tides of real or imagined threats coming from all sides. When exploited to full effect by the media, these threats produce the impression that they – and only they – represent the key priorities on which the state should focus.

Stages of the security discourse

In Cold War times the dominant threat was always the same: military attack with conventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Apart from that there was the everyday order-keeping and crime-fighting agenda. Even before the end of the Cold War it was clear, however, that security cannot be defined narrowly, merely as an absence of a war or conflict

abroad and acceptable crime levels at home. With the end of the bipolar world concept at the latest, the concept of security began to widen, opening ways for the acknowledgement of new threats and legitimizing the interests of many new actors apart from the state. The development of discourse that followed can be divided into several stages, each having its own dominant paradigms of security and key threats. The first stage was characterized by new instability and internal conflicts in failed states, which, due to globalization, threatened even affluent societies. The following wave was that of environmental security: concerns about local and global environmental damage and its destructive impact on societies. A major wave of concern was provoked by international terrorism, especially 9/11 attacks. Hurricane Katrina, tsunami and the subsequent nuclear disaster in Japan, the growing likelihood that unpredictable states may develop long-range missiles and WMD, the risk of pandemics – all these and other threats have contributed to the present-day overloaded security agenda.

Major shifts of perception are quite commonplace. Until recently, terrorism was perceived as the dominant threat (at least in the United States and the EU Member States), but since 2008 or 2009 it has been overshadowed by the “economic crisis” narrative, by problems over gas supplies from Russia or the swine flu threat. With the exception of the “terrorism era” and “post-Katrina era”, it is impossible to point to a precise moment in time when any of these concerns became part of the security agenda. Moreover, all the aforementioned stages in the securitization process invariably lack a clear end. No one of consequence has declared – or can be expected to declare – that some of these security challenges have lost their relevance. The current situation thus can be described as hyper-accumulation of securitized agendas.

Securitization as a strange beast

The securitization process is a strange beast: a good servant but a bad master, useful for analysis, but easily abused in real-life circumstances.

The theory of securitization opposes the positivist and “objectivist” views of security. It explains securitization as a process in which competent actors – be it politicians, business leaders or academic authorities – declare that a certain phenomenon constitutes a security threat in relation to the vital values and interests of a given referent object. The acceptance of this claim by relevant audience and the audience’s acknowledgement of the phenomenon as a security threat then open the way for extraordinary measures. Reasons for the particular politicization or securitization effort may be the following:

- To release funds for a particular project;
- To justify special powers;
- To give reasons for information confidentiality;
- To speed up a certain process;
- To promote a non-standard solution avoiding legal procedures, breaking the rules, “bending” public procurement.

Securitization can be characterized as a self-referential process – the threat in question need not be very serious or even exist. If a particular problem is presented as a security threat long enough and loudly enough, the majority of the society will accept it as such. The media thus play an absolutely essential role. Another risk factor is the growing sensitivity of

The current situation can be described as hyper-accumulation of securitized agendas

consumerist populations to any discomfort: nowadays, people may feel threatened even by an insignificant disruption of services or a short-time lack of a particular commodity. It thus becomes increasingly easy to trigger the securitization process, which then easily spirals out of control.

Another important factor is forgetting and the resulting collective memory loss. Forgetting is a natural mechanism in humans as well as other living organisms: inability to forget may cause multiple psychic traumas. The incidents and threats which yesterday seemed so alarming that the responsible actors promised to entirely rearrange the community’s priorities are no longer that urgent

tomorrow; in public perception there are always new challenges to be tackled. However, a structured bureaucratized society should try to balance the benefits and disadvantages of forgetting and aim for continuity, particularly in security concerns.

The all-hazard approach is a must, not a deviation from the correct path

Governmental security agendas are thus largely determined by external media pressure and the society's response to it, not by the government's own expertise: this is when security becomes a reactive instead of a proactive policy.

Hybrid agendas: an obscure trend or a necessity?

The observations above, although from different angles of view, attempt the same: to emphasize that the obsessive concern with terrorism, presented as the most crucial security challenge of the present, needs to be reconsidered. We are confronted with a colourful array of threats, whose impact is no less serious than the impact of terrorism. Moreover, western societies not only face a number of explicit threats, but also have to cope with growing internal tension and risks that may at any time acquire security status.

The past years' clamant opinions that terrorism (tackled with tools of prevention, protection, and recovery) should not be mixed with other agendas like natural disasters or industrial hazards somewhat resemble the dispute between the wideners and the promoters of the vision that "security" is more or less the same as "defence". Security policies (not only in the EU context), however, do not take much notice of these disputes and continue to verge on the so-called all-hazard approach. This can be best illustrated by the development between the first and second round of the EU counter-terrorism peer evaluations. While still called "counter-terrorism", they have long been oriented toward a much wider agenda that can be generally labelled as crisis and consequence management.

Security issues are no more as singular and transparent as they were during the Cold War period. Manpower and resources for security provision are limited and decision makers are often pressured by

the general public or the media. They have no choice but to promise they will tackle with increased efficiency that security challenge which currently dominates the societal discourse.

Realistic policy, with limited resources and under media pressure, must aim to cover as many challenges as possible, preferably with a single set of capacities (a legislative or an organizational change, better equipment for a particular security force, or a campaign aimed at the general public). There can be no assigning of separate forces and resources to individual threats. It is unthinkable to withdraw an ordinary rapid response unit and replace it with a specialized counter-terrorism squad once gangsters holding a hostage in a bank start making political demands. The all-hazard approach in a broad sense is a must, not a deviation from the only correct path. It does not really matter whether a dam, a power station or a commuter train is affected by a terrorist attack, an industrial accident or a natural disaster. This is a matter of prevention and investigation, not a key factor in tackling the situation once it has occurred.

It might be difficult in a post-incident situation not to "lose head" and to refrain from the blatant political and media talk calling all to summon all their strength to combat terrorism, illegal immigration, floods, or tension in socially excluded communities.

How to find room for an open, inclusive, but also stable and rational security policy?

Is there a possibility of a stable, rational security agenda? Yes, but to be manageable with the means and forces available, not through mobilizing additional resources under utterly non-standard conditions, such an agenda must be based on a truly integrated security policy that does not separate individual priorities, types of threats, and, especially, sets of tools and capacities.

A prerequisite for this is a more open, less exclusive perception of "security", a concept that still divides theoreticians and practitioners across fields and institutions. Members of each group consider

themselves the true “security experts”, while denying others even the right to interpret the term. This applies to all: theoreticians of international relations, soldiers, crisis managers, diplomats, rescue workers, policemen. It is vital to overcome departmentalism and highlight the common logic of all security policies, both external and internal: the logic of challenges (threats) and responses at the level of the relevant referent object – international organization, state, community, company, and citizens. The required narrowing of the security agenda can be achieved by defining the existential or key threats that affect the vital core of the referent object. (“Economic crisis” is thus no security threat.)

The attempt to define a stable, rational agenda should not be interpreted as a prediction. Sometimes, challenges arise quite suddenly, though even 9/11 did not come completely out of the blue. The important thing is not to allow the content of security policy to be determined by uncontrolled securitization (which might result in radical and chaotic shifts of priorities), but structure capacities and tools according to more general scenarios. Such scenarios may then include even the lessons learned from the recent waves of swine flu, piracy in East Africa, home-grown terrorism, tsunami, war conflicts in Libya and Syria, or right-wing extremism.

This stabilized security agenda that would replace the terrorism mantra should also take full account of the fact that, although, historically, “new security threats” were primarily external, explicit and objective, today we live in a genuine risk society. In many EU states not only security threats, but also more complex societal and economic risks, differentiated for various population groups and much intensified by the economic crisis and governmental austerity measures, greatly exceed the usual level of instability. The growing social tension, distrust and anger within our societies may, after long decades, once again gain explicit security status. Although the advocates of traditional approaches to security strictly reject any extension of the agenda in this direction, security sector practitioners and current strategies formulated by them suggest that this unrest should not be underestimated.

Policy Recommendations

The language of security is naturally not reserved for experts alone. Media and politicians must sometimes be forgiven for using reactive, populist statements (targeted at domestic audiences that they want to calm or whose vote they seek, and at terrorists and extremists that need to be deterred). However, spontaneous securitization must not spiral out of control: changes in security sector’s priorities and tasks must not be dictated by the latest media headlines. Public fears should not be used to promote special, departmental interests. On the contrary, it is necessary to foster an integrated perception of various security challenges and respond with joint forces and capacities of the given state’s security institutions, not by creating special procedures and capabilities for individual threats.

Credits

This EUSECON Policy Briefing was authored by Oldřich Krulík from the Police Academy Prague, and Libor Stejskal from Charles University Prague. The views expressed in this briefing are the authors’ alone.

References

Buzan, B., Waeber, O. & de Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: a new framework for analysis*. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Pub.



EUSECON, or ‘A New Agenda for European Security Economics’ is a four-year collaborative research project, administered by DIW Berlin and funded by the European Commission that analyses the causes, dynamics, and long-term effects of both human-induced insecurity threats and European security policies.

For more information on EUSECON, please visit our website:

<http://www.economics-of-security.eu>

Or contact us at:

EUSECON
Department of Development and Security
German Institute for Economic Research
Mohrenstrasse 58
10117 Berlin, Germany
Tel: +49-30-897889-277