Societal Safety and Security in Norway: the conceptualizing of securitization in contemporary public documents

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Over the past 25 years, various official documents have shaped the understanding of societal safety and security in Norway (Morsut 2021). These documents demonstrate how resources and political will are sought mobilized to tackle risks and threats, but they also raise questions about democratic accountability and the potential for overemphasizing certain risks at the expense of others. This paper aims to explore the extent to which securitization issues are being expressed in contemporary official documents to examine to what extent there is a shift from the notion of societal security and safety to a more territorial concept of national security. By specifically investigating four significant recent public documents (Meld. St. 5 2020-2021, NoU, 2023:17, NoU 2023:14, Meld. St. 9 2024-2025), this paper reveals how notions of risks and threats are framed and addressed in relation to contemporary risks such as hybrid threats and the war in Ukraine. The paper highlights the risks associated with over-securitization, where an excessive range of issues are framed as security threats. Through document analysis, it investigates references to 'existential' dangers and the deliberate use of 'security' language, including phrases conveying a 'sense of urgency' and 'imagery of exhortations'. Furthermore, it examines how democratic values and civil rights principles are safeguarded in the face of new laws, regulations, and increased civil and military preparedness.

Keywords: Securitization, De-securitization, Social Safety, Societal Security, Normal Policy, Preparedness

1.Introduction

The concept of societal safety and security in Norway has evolved within an increasingly complex and interconnected risk landscape. Morsut (2021) argues that the development of *samfunnssikkerhet* (hereinafter: societal safety and security) in Norway from 2000 to 2020 represents a shift from traditional, state-centric security approaches to a broader, more inclusive model that addresses multifaceted societal risks.[1] This shift, significantly influenced by events such as the 2011 Oslo and Utøya terrorist attacks, has redirected the focus toward resilience, solidarity, and the preservation of democratic values in the face of threats. Over time, Societal Safety and Security in Norway have also become increasingly bureaucratized, balancing technical and procedural measures with a strong commitment to community-driven values and collective resilience.

Recent geopolitical developments have posed significant challenges to the Norwegian concept of societal safety and security and this paper aims to explore the extent to which securitization issues are being further expressed in official documents over recent years and to examine to what extent there is a shift from the notion of 'societal security and safety' to a more territorial concept of national security.

Through document analysis investigating two public documents (NoU) and two White Papers published in the period 2021-2025: *White Paper 5 (2020-2021), Norwegian Defence Commission (2023), Total Preparedness Commission (2023) and White Paper 9 (2024-2025)*, this paper reveals how notions of risks and threats are framed and addressed in relation to risks such as hybrid threats and the war in Ukraine. Hence the analysis looks for references to 'existential' danger and the unequivocal use of 'security' language, such as a 'sense of urgency' and 'imagery of exhortations.'

White Papers are official documents prepared by the government to inform the Storting (the Norwegian parliament) about policies, plans, and priorities, laying the groundwork for debate and democratic oversight through a detailed presentation of background information. Public

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[1] In the paper, we use English terminology related to commission names and concepts. See explanation in Introduction.

Documents (NOU) are independent reports that examine current societal challenges using neutral and professional approaches, providing a solid knowledge base and concrete recommendations for further policy development and reforms. Together, these documents contribute to ensuring an informed and open public debate and strengthening the decision-making processes within the Norwegian democracy.

Although the discourses are distinctly Norwegian, the safety and security analyses in the documents reveal how Norway, as a NATO member and European democracy, responds to emerging global threats and international security conflicts. The insights offered by this discourse are therefore relevant to an international audience

This paper explores how these documents conceptualize societal safety and security and how their use of securitization and security language reflects their respective mandates and priorities. By comparing the militarized, resilience-based, and integrative approaches of the documents, the discussion highlights the balance between national defence, civilian preparedness, and holistic risk governance. Understanding these dynamics is critical to ensuring that societal safety and security strategies in Norway address emerging risks while still maintaining democratic accountability and preventing the over-securitization of broader societal crises challenges.

The study is a preliminary study that will be followed up by a broader longitudinal study on how new risk and threats have affected different national safety and security concepts and policies throughout the last 20 years. A broader study will also enlarge the theoretical scope concerning risk, threat languages and securitisation.

2. Differences and overlap between Societal safety and Societal security

'Societal security' and 'societal safety' share significant overlaps when addressing contemporary challenges. Societal security focuses on protecting the identity, cohesion, and cultural survival of societal groups, emphasizing perceived threats such as migration, globalization, or cultural assimilation (Balsacq 2015). Societal safety, on the other hand, centers on mitigating tangible risks like natural disasters, pandemics, terrorism, or technological failures to ensure the

physical safety and well-being of populations (Olsen et al 2007). These concepts intersect when issues such as climate change or migration simultaneously challenge both identity and physical systems, as seen in climate-induced migration, which may strain resources (a safety issue) while raising concerns about cultural integration (a security issue). Both aim to build resilience, with societal security addressing the preservation of identity and societal safety focusing on the robustness of systems and infrastructure, underscoring the need for integrated approaches to safeguard both the cultural and physical dimensions of society.

An empirical contribution to societal security and safety, as well as the clarification of distinctions between overlapping concepts like resilience, preparedness, and defense, is found in *Rhinard and Larsson's Nordic Societal Security: Convergence and Divergence* (2021). This edited volume deconstructs the notion of societal security, analyzing its various meanings and implications through a combination of country-specific and issue-focused studies.

In an introductory chapter Rhinard (2021) explores the concept of societal security, tracing its evolution and bifurcation into two main theoretical strands: identity-focused societal security and functional societal security. The identity-based approach, rooted in the Copenhagen School, emphasizes the preservation of cultural identity and community self-conception in the face of perceived existential threats. In contrast, the functional approach, prominent in Nordic policy discourse, concentrates on safeguarding critical, life-giving societal functions, such as infrastructure, governance, and essential services, from a range of risks.

3. Societal Safety and Security in Norway

'*Societal security and safety*' in Norway focuses on safeguarding society from major threats such as natural disasters, pandemics, cyberattacks, and terrorism, with the overarching goal of ensuring public safety and maintaining essential societal functions. The concept is grounded in key principles: responsibility, proximity, equality, and cooperation. These principles guide the efforts of various stakeholders, including the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, the Norwegian Directorate for Civil Protection

(DSB), municipalities, police, and private sector actors.

According to Morsut (2021), 'Samfunnssikkerhet' reflects a balance between national adaptations and shared Nordic principles, providing a framework for navigating an increasingly complex and dynamic security landscape. By prioritizing equality, clear delineation of responsibilities, and local-level management, the concept ensures that crises are addressed equitably and efficiently. Additionally, its emphasis on collaboration fosters strong cooperation among all stakeholders, enhancing Norway's capacity to respond to and recover from diverse security challenges.

This framework embodies the broader Nordic commitment to governance founded on shared values and democratic ideals. Morsut (2021) highlights the evolution of Nordic societal security from Cold War-era civil defense to addressing contemporary challenges such as terrorism, cyber threats, and climate change. The development of 'Samfunnssikkerhet' in Norway closely aligns with this trajectory, with the 2011 attacks in Norway serving as a defining moment. This event underscored the importance of societal resilience, emphasizing the critical role of community and governance in confronting fear and upholding democratic integrity.

Burgess (2024), in contrast, examines societal security and safety in Norway—referred to simply as "security" in his analysis—as an interplay between material processes and deeper ethical, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. He emphasizes that security extends beyond safeguarding infrastructure or implementing technical measures. Rather, it encompasses a broader understanding of how societal values, community cohesion, and collective identity shape both the perception of threats and the strategies employed to address them.

On a material level, societal security and safety encompasses physical infrastructure, logistical measures, and bureaucratic systems, framing security as a technical issue managed through emergency responses, critical infrastructure protection, and coordinated actions. However, Burgess also highlights the ethical dimensions intertwined with societal security and safety, using the aftermath of the July 22, 2011, terrorist attacks in Norway as a case study, where leaders emphasized values like democracy, openness, and

compassion to prioritize resilience over fear-driven measures.

According to Burgess, cultural identity emerges as central to security, with the attacks perceived as assaults on Norwegian cultural ethos, exemplified by the "Rose Demonstration", which symbolized unity and collective resolve. Beyond this, the spiritual dimension addresses society's intrinsic moral and existential foundations, where collective mourning and symbolic acts reaffirmed the shared values and resilience of the community. Furthermore, the dual role of society as both protector and protected underscores its vulnerability to threats while serving as a source of cohesion, solidarity, and security. This duality reflects the interdependence of structural mechanisms and intangible societal qualities, as threats often stem from tensions within liberal societies' own value systems.

The case of 22 July illustrates the homegrown nature of insecurity, challenging simplistic narratives of external threats. Leadership responses transformed collective fear into resilience, framing it as a cultural and moral endeavor, while public rituals like the Rose Demonstration acted as cultural tools to heal and reinforce societal bonds. Ultimately, the book argues that security must extend beyond physical measures to preserve cultural identity, moral responsibility, and spiritual strength, presenting societal security and safety as a holistic concept that nurtures the intangible spirit of a society while addressing practical vulnerabilities.

The Norwegian approach to societal safety prioritizes the protection of critical societal functions and democratic values, aligning closely with Burgess' view of securitization as a construct shaped by social and political dynamics rather than objective realities. For instance, Norway's response to crises, such as the July 22, 2011, attacks, demonstrates how societal resilience is cultivated through public trust and cultural cohesion rather than relying solely on technical or militarized measures. Similarly, Burgess' focus on the "analytics of government" highlights the role of institutional tools, administrative mechanisms, and practices in security governance—paralleling Norway's emphasis on risk governance, preparedness, and infrastructure redundancy as central pillars of societal safety. Both approaches recognize the ethical

implications of securitization, emphasizing the importance of avoiding over-securitization, which can threaten societal cohesion and democratic values. Together, these perspectives advocate for a holistic approach to security, balancing material preparedness with the preservation of cultural, ethical, and societal integrity to ensure legitimacy and effectiveness.

5. Empirical findings

White Paper *5*, The National Defense Commission and The Total Preparedness Commission, all adopt a holistic approach that integrates defense, preparedness, and civil collaboration. Together, the documents aim to strengthen Norway's societal safety and security by balancing material preparedness with the preservation of societal values, fostering cooperation, and enhancing resilience. They highlight an increased focus on addressing complex and multifaceted threats in an era of uncertainty. White Paper 9 appears to signal a shift toward a more militarized and securitized era.

5.1 White Paper 5

White Paper 5 outlines the government's policy on societal security and national security in addressing today's challenges. It emphasizes that societal security involves protecting against and managing incidents that threaten fundamental values, functions, and put lives and health at risk. The challenges include increased globalization, climate change, digitalization, and hybrid threats combining military and non-military means.

The government highlights prevention as a key strategy, stressing the importance of knowledge-based and socio-economic measures to strengthen societal resilience. The Security Act of 2019 is emphasized as an essential tool for preventing activities that pose security threats. Other priority areas included managing the Covid-19 pandemic, strengthening the total defense concept, enhancing digital security, and preventing natural disasters and flood damage.

Collaboration between civilian and military actors is strongly emphasized, particularly through the total defense concept, which ensures mutual support between civil society and the Armed Forces. International cooperation, especially with the EU, NATO, and the UN, is a central part of Norway's approach to societal security. The government is committed to further developing competencies, technological innovation, and systems to address today's complex security challenges at both national and local levels.

According to the White Paper 5, societal safety and security, the Security Act, and the total defense concept are closely integrated elements of Norway's security strategy. Societal security provides the overarching framework, where the Security Act establishes legal standards and requirements to safeguard critical functions and infrastructure. The total defense concept operationalizes this collaboration through practical measures that ensure civilian and military resources work effectively together. Together, these elements contribute to a robust national security structure capable of addressing both todays' and future complex threat landscapes.

5.2 The National Defense Commission

The National Defense Commission considers societal security and safety an integral part of Norway's overall security and emphasizes the need for a holistic approach that includes both military and civilian actors. The Commission acknowledges that societal security is becoming increasingly important in addressing more complex and multifaceted threats, such as influence operations, cyberattacks, climate change, and pandemics. The Total Defense Concept, which integrates civilian and military resources, must be revitalized to address the challenges of today and the future. The role of the civilian society in supporting the Armed Forces, and vice versa, is crucial for Norway's ability to handle crises.

To strengthen societal security, the Commission recommends increased collaboration between civilian and military sectors. This includes cross-sectoral situational understanding, improved crisis coordination, and measures to counter disinformation and digital threats. The Commission also underscores the need to enhance the nation's overall resilience, which involves better prevention, mitigation, and management of crises through improved planning frameworks, increased coordination among authorities, and a more systematic approach to risk management.

The importance of the private sector in societal security is highlighted, particularly in securing critical infrastructure and supply chains. Companies are encouraged to take greater responsibility in contributing to national preparedness and security. Simultaneously, the Commission stresses the need for increased competence and awareness of security and preparedness among the population, including better utilization of conscription and greater use of reservists to bridge the gap between the Armed Forces and society.

The Commission also recommends that authorities develop a unified planning framework for societal security and defense, ensuring that civilian and military sides operate based on the same assumptions. This includes improving the organization and management of preparedness efforts at the national level. Climate challenges and their impact on societal security are a dedicated focus area. Extreme weather events and accelerated climate changes in the Arctic demand adaptations in both civilian and military preparedness. Overall, the Defense Commission emphasizes that societal security and safety cannot be viewed in isolation from defense policy. Stronger integration between civilian and military efforts is necessary to address a more complex threat landscape and ensure the safety of the population in an increasingly unpredictable time.

5.3. *The Total Preparedness Commission*
The Total Preparedness Commission places strong emphasis on societal security and safety as a crucial component of Norway's ability to protect its population and maintain essential functions in the face of an increasingly complex and uncertain threat landscape. The report highlights that societal security and safety involves prevention, management, and resilience against incidents that threaten lives, health, values, and critical infrastructure. Global trends such as great power rivalries, climate change, and technological advancements create increased uncertainty and expose Norway to new and complex threats. Digital threats, including cyberattacks, disinformation, and growing dependence on digital systems, pose significant risks to societal functionality. Additionally, climate change and extreme weather put greater pressure on preparedness and societal security, while demographic changes such as an aging population

and urbanization alter the risk landscape and challenge existing preparedness systems.

To address these challenges, the commission recommends a cross-sectoral approach, intensifying collaboration between public authorities, private actors, and volunteer organizations to ensure comprehensive preparedness solutions. Public awareness and individual preparedness must be strengthened through better information and education, enhancing the overall resilience of society. Critical infrastructure, such as energy, food, water, and digital systems, must be better secured to ensure continuity during crises.

The commission underscores the importance of modernizing the total defense concept and strengthening civil-military collaboration. This includes establishing stronger connections between civilian and military resources to handle complex threats more effectively. Furthermore, local and regional authorities, especially municipalities, must receive increased resources and improved support to play a central role in societal security and crisis preparedness.

5.4 *White Paper 9*
White Paper 9 labels "Prepared for Crises and War" and outlines Norway's strategy for enhancing national resilience and readiness to address crises and conflicts. It responds to an increasingly unpredictable global environment marked by geopolitical tensions, technological advancements, and climate change. The report emphasizes the need for robust civil-military collaboration and a unified approach to preparedness. Key measures include strengthening local communities, ensuring food and water security, safeguarding critical infrastructure, and enhancing digital resilience. Involvement of municipalities, private businesses, and volunteer organizations is highlighted as essential for a comprehensive crisis response.

White Paper 9 introduces structural and legislative changes, such as mandatory emergency councils in municipalities, new laws to protect critical infrastructure, and improved situational awareness systems. It also underscores the importance of international cooperation, particularly with NATO, and prioritizes exercises to enhance readiness. Overall, the strategy aims to build a society that can withstand complex threats

and support military efforts when needed, ensuring Norway's security and resilience in the face of diverse challenges.

6. Discussion

This section examines how the documents articulate and operationalize security language, revealing the varying degrees to which securitization shapes their definitions of and approaches to societal safety and security.

The four documents largely reflect the Norwegian domestic discourse concerning risk, threat, safety and security. In principle, the government has no formal obligation to adhere to the recommendations; however, these documents form an integral part of public debate and contribute to shaping security policy and politics in the coming years.

'The National Defence Commission', 'The Total Preparedness Commission', 'White Paper 5' and 'White Paper 9' address societal safety and security with distinct emphases, reflecting their specific mandates and priorities. The National Defense Commission focuses on societal safety within the framework of national defense, emphasizing geopolitical threats, hybrid warfare, and the importance of civil-military collaboration through the total defense concept. Here, societal safety and security is framed as part of broader national security, with attention to critical infrastructure protection, technological innovation, and preparedness for external crises.

The Total Preparedness Commission adopts a broader, civilian-centered approach to societal safety, addressing risks such as natural disasters, public health crises, cyber threats, and climate change. It highlights the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration, empowering local governments, and increasing public resilience through education and preparedness initiatives. This commission also prioritizes protecting critical infrastructure and addressing societal vulnerabilities, focusing on risks beyond military threats.

White Paper 5 provides a comprehensive view of societal safety and security, emphasizing prevention, risk reduction, and resilience against a wide range of threats, including natural, technological, and human-made crises. It underscores the need for integration across national and local levels, governance, and international collaboration. Specific focus areas include digital security, enhancing civil-military cooperation, and strengthening local and regional preparedness capacities.

In terms of scope, National Defense Commission primarily addresses defense-related threats like hybrid warfare, while Total Preparedness Commission focuses on broader societal risks, such as pandemics and supply chain vulnerabilities. White paper 5 takes a holistic approach, incorporating both military and civilian perspectives and addressing environmental and governance challenges. Regarding collaboration, National Defense Commission emphasizes NATO alignment and military-civil synergy, while Total Preparedness Commission highlights broader multi-sectoral collaboration, including private and voluntary sectors. White paper 5 emphasizes government-led coordination across levels and sectors.

When it comes to resilience and prevention, National Defense Commission ties resilience to defense readiness, while Total Preparedness Commission stresses public preparedness and community-based resilience. White Paper 5 integrates resilience as a key element of a comprehensive societal safety strategy, combining preventive measures with adaptive capabilities. Together, these perspectives provide a nuanced understanding of societal safety, balancing military preparedness, civilian resilience, and coordinated governance to address evolving and complex threats. On the contrary, White Paper 9 focuses heavily on the integration of civil and military preparedness (total defense concept), addressing geopolitical threats, complex hybrid threats (e.g., cyberattacks, disinformation), and crisis scenarios such as natural disasters or armed conflicts.

It prioritizes both immediate crisis management and long-term structural resilience, targeting national readiness at all levels of governance and emphasizing collaboration between state, private, and international actors (e.g., NATO).

Securitization and the use of security language play pivotal roles in shaping how societal safety and security is conceptualized and operationalized in policy frameworks. By framing specific issues as security threats, securitization mobilizes resources and justifies extraordinary measures to address perceived risks. However, this framing also carries implications for how

societal priorities are set, potentially overshadowing broader safety concerns. Within Norwegian governance, the interplay between securitization and societal safety is evident in key documents like National Defense Commission, Total Preparedness Commission, and White Paper 5, each of which employs distinct security narratives tailored to their mandates. White Paper 9 on the other hand can be seen as a more strategic and comprehensive governmental document specifically designed to strengthen Norway's preparedness for crises and war.

All documents reflect a spectrum of approaches, from the militarized and defense-oriented language of 'National Defense Commission', White Paper 9 to the civilian-focused and resilience-based discourse of Total Preparedness Commission, with White Paper 5 occupying a middle ground. Together, they provide insight into the nuanced ways in which securitization is applied, balancing national security imperatives with broader societal safety goals.

6.1 Securitization and Security Language

The use of securitization and security language varies across the documents, reflecting their respective scopes and priorities: National Defense Commission adopts a securitized approach, framing societal safety and security within the realm of national defense. Its language emphasizes hybrid threats, military readiness, and the Total Defense Concept, portraying societal safety and security as integral to Norway's ability to handle geopolitical and existential threats. This aligns with the Copenhagen School's notion of securitization, where societal safety becomes a priority when framed as an existential threat to national security.

Total Preparedness Commission uses a broader and less militarized security language. It emphasizes societal resilience, cross-sectoral collaboration, and public empowerment. This approach reflects a functional understanding of societal safety, focusing on maintaining critical functions and addressing risks such as natural disasters, cyber threats, and climate change without over-securitizing issues.

White Paper 5 and White Paper 9 strike a balance between the two, incorporating elements of securitization through its focus on hybrid threats and geopolitical risks while maintaining an emphasis on prevention, resilience, and local

governance. The language bridges military and civilian frameworks, underscoring collaboration and comprehensive risk management. Symptomatically, White Paper 9 does not discuss Samfunnssikkerhet explicitly.

6.2 Definitions of Societal Safety and Security

National Defense Commission defines societal safety and security as inseparable from national security, emphasizing civil-military collaboration and preparedness for multifaceted threats. The securitized framing integrates societal safety into defense policy, prioritizing strategic risks like influence operations and climate-related military challenges.

Total Preparedness Commission adopts a civilian-centered definition of societal safety and security, focusing on safeguarding critical societal functions through prevention, public preparedness, and collaboration across stakeholders. Its broader scope extends to addressing vulnerabilities beyond traditional security threats, emphasizing societal resilience and local responses.

White Paper 5 incorporates societal safety and security into a comprehensive framework, blending military and civilian perspectives. It emphasizes prevention, risk reduction, and resilience across various domains, including digital security, climate adaptation, and local crisis management.

White Paper 9 explicitly integrates military and civilian efforts under the total defense framework, preparing for scenarios where societal resources must support military operations and vice versa. The White paper addresses threats at the upper spectrum of crises, including armed conflict and national security challenges.

6.3 Balancing Securitization and Societal Safety and Security

While securitization helps prioritize and mobilize resources for existential threats, it risks overshadowing broader societal challenges. The National Defense Commission 's focus on hybrid threats illustrates this potential, as it leans heavily on military-oriented solutions. In contrast, the Total Preparedness Commission counterbalances this by promoting decentralized, collaborative, and public-focused approaches, which prevent over-securitization and ensure democratic accountability. White Paper 5 synthesizes these

perspectives, integrating securitization where necessary while advocating for a holistic approach to societal safety and security.

Combining securitization, security language, and societal safety definitions reveals a spectrum of approaches in Norwegian governance. The 'National Defense Commission' emphasizes existential threats within a defense framework, 'Total Preparedness Commission' promotes comprehensive civilian resilience, and White Paper 5 bridges these perspectives by blending securitization with multi-level governance. Together, they strive to provide a nuanced framework for understanding and addressing the evolving landscape of societal safety and security.

While societal safety and security is a foundational concept aimed at ensuring a resilient society in the face of all kinds of risks, White Paper 9 narrows this focus to align with national defense, emphasizing preparedness for crises and war, civil-military collaboration, and systemic resilience against hybrid threats and geopolitical tensions.

7. Conclusion

White Paper 5, National Defense Commission and Total Preparedness Commission exemplify nuanced narratives that integrate securitization where necessary while emphasizing resilience, collaboration, and governance rooted in democratic ideals. This balance ensures that societal security and safety strategies are not only effective in addressing threats but also protective of the democratic foundations that underpin societal cohesion. White Paper 9 however places a stronger focus than the other documents on integrating civil and military preparedness within the framework civil and military collaboration. It specifically addresses geopolitical threats, complex hybrid challenges such as cyberattacks and disinformation, and crisis scenarios like natural disasters and armed conflicts. It is thus reasonable to say that the security language and war rhetoric is stronger and more explicit in White Paper 9 than the former documents. White Paper 9 is the last one and it is also based on the analysis and discussions in the former commissions. In this context it is worth noting that it signals a development of *Societal Safety and Security* in direction of *National Security*.

Nonetheless, all the four documents demonstrate a deliberate calibration between securitization and desecuritization. They highlight the importance of achieving this balance through transparent decision-making, clear accountability mechanisms, and ongoing public dialogue. Such measures prevent securitization from becoming a tool for unchecked power while promoting desecuritization as a pathway to sustainable and inclusive governance, thereby strengthening societal trust and resilience. This balanced approach equips societies to navigate complex risks effectively without compromising ethical values, democratic principles or social and cultural cohesion. However, whether these ideals are consistently reflected in real policy remains an empirical question that warrants further investigation.

Acknowledgement

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