

10 years of

# Nordic Societal Security Research





## Nordic collaboration to counter shared societal security challenges

The Nordic Societal Security initiative is designed to generate new knowledge for the safety and security of the Nordic countries' inhabitants. Societal security is growing in importance and relevance due to the rapidly evolving social, political, environmental and security challenges that we are experiencing globally. In the Nordic region, various threats and crises with both global and regional origins have propelled societal security to the forefront of public debate.

These concerns are shared by the Nordic population. In a 2021 report from the Nordic Council of Ministers, surveying attitudes to Nordic cooperation among the Nordic population, societal security-related challenges such as criminality, climate and environment, and crisis management are listed among the most important to address through Nordic cooperation. This is a substantial shift from 2017, when a similar survey was conducted. Although security issues topped the list of areas for Nordic collaboration at that time, other issues such as education, economic and fiscal policy also held a prominent position.

In this context, I am happy to say that the Nordic Societal Security initiative is one of NordForsk's longest and most vibrant collaborations. The initiative has provided timely and relevant knowledge for Nordic societies and beyond to tackle complex societal security challenges. We are now celebrating the ten-year anniversary of the initiative, that has involved twelve funders and the Nordic Council of Ministers, six calls for research proposals and 21 funded projects in a diverse range of subjects, problem areas and study contexts. The initiative has provided a total of almost 270 million NOK to the research community, and has contributed to a strengthening of research environments, as well as networks, and collaboration across the countries involved.

Societal security research has an outstanding potential for Nordic added value, with shared challenges in areas such as climate change adaptation, countering antimicrobial resistance, developing anti-terrorism measures, combating organised crime, strengthening civil protection, understanding the impact of artificial intelligence, and building resilience in all sectors of our societies. It is also instrumental in achieving the Nordic Council of Ministers' vision for 2030 and has strong bearings on many of the UN development goals. So, whilst we are celebrating the initiative and what it has achieved these past ten years, I would like to take this opportunity to call for further research to help us better understand the ongoing and rapid changes we are experiencing and to develop new solutions to evolving sets of societal security problems and challenges.

*Arne Flåøyen, Director of NordForsk*

# Nordic approaches to societal security

Societal security comprises the ability of a society to sustain vital societal functions and secure its population's lives, health, needs, and basic values under extraordinary stresses, known as crises. Crises can appear suddenly or develop in a creeping fashion. Such consequential developments can be caused by nature, by technological innovations or mishaps, or by humans through antagonistic acts, such as major crimes, terrorism, or acts of organized aggression.

This research initiative addresses questions of vulnerabilities, resilience and capabilities for crisis management related to prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. Issues concerning communications, media narratives and impacts of social media are central to the legitimacy and accountability of crisis management and societal resilience. Learning from such experiences and implementing lessons learned in future reforms are instrumental for enhancing capacities over time. Given that societal security challenges are transboundary there is much to be gained from Nordic and wider European and international collaboration.

The Nordic countries have strong track records of practical cooperation in many trans-border work areas since the 1950's. This work was codified in the 1962 Helsinki Agreement outlining the objectives and instruments for Nordic cooperation across several policy fields. Over the last decades, societal security matters have also become the subject of more intense Nordic cooperation. Several political initiatives were launched, such as the Haga Declaration by the five responsible ministers in 2009, the 2011 Nordic Declaration of Solidarity by the Foreign Ministers and more recently the Nordic Council Strategy for Societal Security in 2019. Solid political support exists for continued and strengthened concrete and practical cooperation among the Nordic nations in this field.

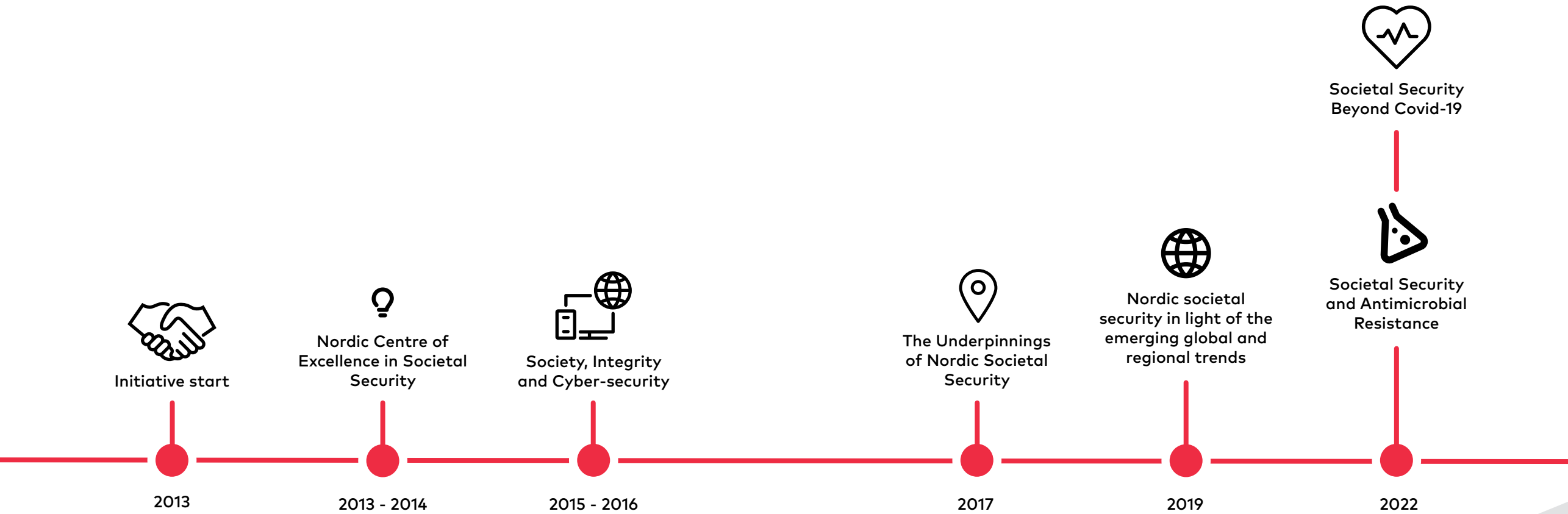
This security-related work ought to be underpinned by research-based and evidence-based knowledge. Following the Haga Declaration, a Nordic expert group was appointed by NordForsk in 2012 to explore the prospects for Nordic research cooperation in this field. Based on its recommendation, the Nordic Societal Security Initiative was established in April 2013. Engagements with the practitioners of societal security, both at policy level and in the field, have been a hallmark of the problem-focused research initiative.

The objective of this multidisciplinary research initiative is to develop new knowledge about and solutions for the many aspects of societal security affecting the Nordic countries. By taking advantage of the typical Nordic openness towards the work of scientists and the range of comprehensive, accessible databases in the Nordic countries, a coordinated research initiative can pave the way for comparative studies of various social, economic, administrative, and political phenomena of importance to societal security.

A distinct Nordic research initiative is also important to gain strategic leverage and to strengthen Nordic contributions within the wider and larger scale security research components of the EU Horizon programme. The Brussels-based programmes do not primarily focus on topics of importance to the Nordic region or on issues in which Nordic scholarship excels. In order to gain leverage in these complex European processes, larger, better networked, more highly profiled and thematically targeted Nordic research communities are needed.

*Bengt Sundelius*, Chair of Call Committee

# Call timeline



# Data and limitations

This report relies on data from our own portfolio analyses as well as our reporting system, Research Fish. As Research Fish was implemented at NordForsk in early 2021, projects whose funding periods ended before 2021 are not included in our reports. Furthermore, research projects that have started in 2023 and later have not reported any output yet. 21 projects in total are included in the Societal Security research field, of which 9 projects have reported impact and outcomes. Thus, all reported output and impact variables except funding value and the sum of projects are limited by sample loss. Apart from these considerations, this report provides a fair overview of the impact, outcomes, and research within the Societal Security research field.

# Funding

The Nordic Societal Security Initiative is funded by the Academy of Finland, Ministry of the Interior in Finland, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, the Norwegian Directorate for Civil Protection, the Research Council of Norway, the Icelandic Centre for Research – RANNIS, The Danish Emergency Management Agency and NordForsk.

In addition, The Dutch Research Council (NWO), The Economic and Social Research Council (UK) were part of funding the call on society, integrity and cyber-security (2016). The Swedish Research Council, Innovation Fund Denmark and the Nordic Council of Ministers were funding partners to the call on Societal Security Beyond COVID-19 (2022). The Nordic Council of Ministers also funded the call on Societal Security and Antimicrobial Resistance (2022).

Financing is contributed to a common pot to ensure that it is the best research, independent of nationality, that is awarded funding.

# Funded projects

Strategic solidarity: Scandinavian countries' COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy | 2023 - 2026

SCOPE 2: Studies of COvId-19 in PrEgnancy - A framework to secure reproductive, maternal and child health during societal crises | 2023 - 2026

Reinterpreting Sector Responsibility in Nordic Crisis Management after COVID-19 | 2023 - 2026

Lessons for the Nordic welfare states from the Covid19-pandemic | 2023 - 2026

Long-term health sequels of COVID-19 infections and mitigation responses in Nordic populations | 2023 - 2025

Tracking of Antimicrobial Resistant Genes in Environmental reservoirs in the Nordic Countries | 2023 - 2025

Societal Security after COVID 19 - Inquiring Nordic Strategies, Practices, Educational Consequences and Trajectories (INSPECT) | 2023 - 2025

Wastewater Treatment plants as a trusted Source of Timely information on antimicrobial resistance threat (TruSTme) | 2023 - 2025

Nordic Fire and Rescue Services in the Twenty First Century | 2020 - 2024

Social exclusion, polarization and security in the Nordic welfare state | 2021 - 2023

Climate Change Resilience in Small Communities in the Nordic Countries | 2021 - 2023

NordicLink – Securing Nordic linear infrastructure networks against climate induced natural hazards | 2020 - 2023

Police detectives on the TOR-network: A study on tensions between privacy and crime fighting | 2017 - 2022

Nordic Multiagency Approaches to Handling Extremism: Policies, Perceptions and Practices | 2018 - 2021

Gender equality, Diversity and Societal Security | 2018 - 2021

The challenge from terrorism in the Nordic countries: An analysis of citizens' reactions, policy responses and legitimacy | 2018 - 2021

Governance of Health Data in Cyberspace | 2017 - 2021

Taking surveillance apart? Accountability and Legitimacy of Internet Surveillance and Expanded Investigatory Powers | 2017 - 2020

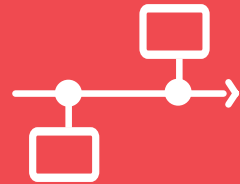
Enablement besides Constraints: Human security and a Cyber Multi-disciplinary framework in the European High North (ECoHuCy) | 2017 - 2019

Nordic Centre for Security Technologies and Societal Values | 2015 - 2020

Nordic Centre of Excellence on Resilience and Societal Security (NORDRESS) | 2015 - 2020

# Key Figures

\*reported 2021-2023



**21**  
Projects



**14**  
Collaborations and  
Partnerships



**9**  
Awards and  
Recognition



**169**  
Publications



**238**  
Dissemination  
Activities



**268**  
Million NOK  
Funding Value

# Nordic added value

**NordForsk funded projects create Nordic added value in a number of ways. For example, by enhancing the scientific quality and building critical expertise at the Nordic level.**

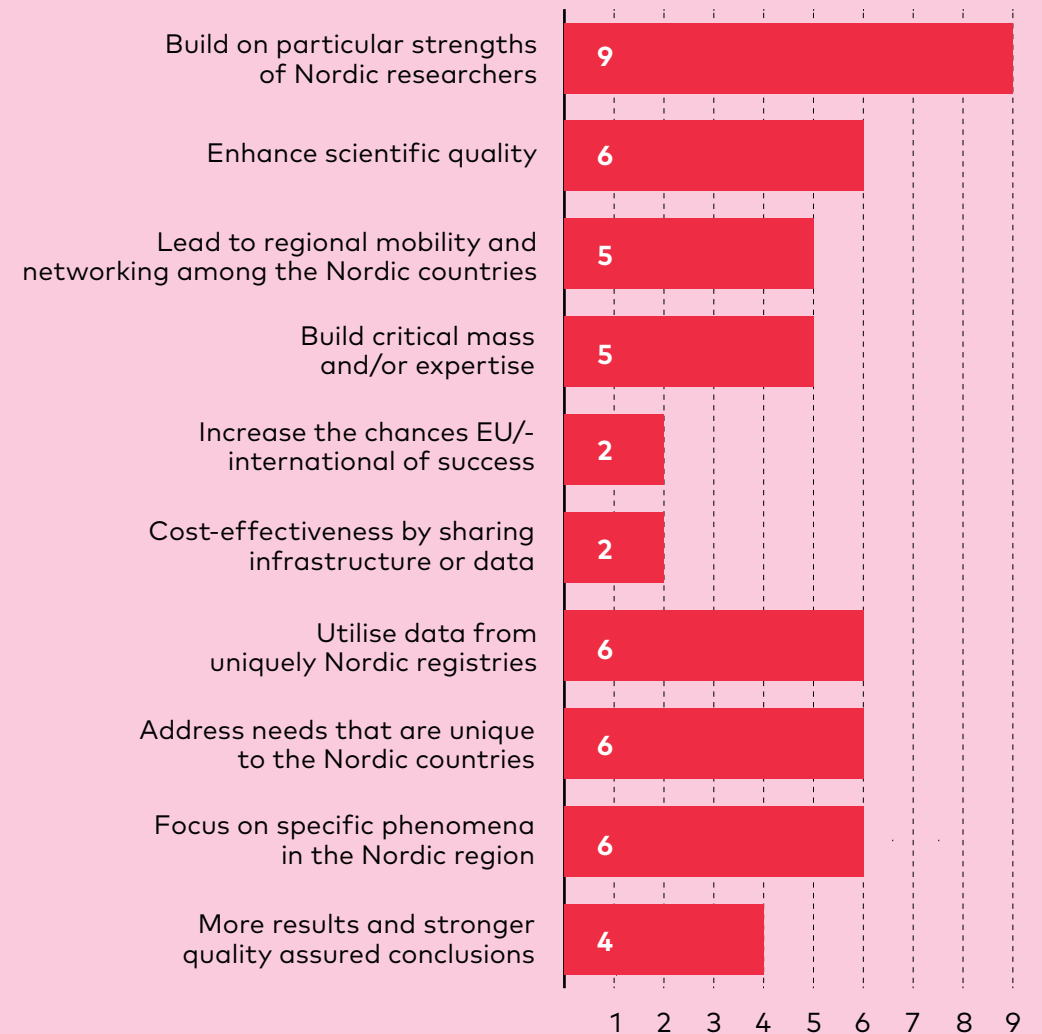
We have devised our own definition of Nordic added value to be used when developing initiatives, designing calls for proposals, assessing grant applications and reporting impact.

In all, we have 11 categories of how research create Nordic added value. Our projects create Nordic added value within all the different categories.

The Nordic added value reported here is all time cumulative live data.

Read more about Nordic added value at [nordforsk.org](http://nordforsk.org).

**Nordic added value reported by Societal Security projects**

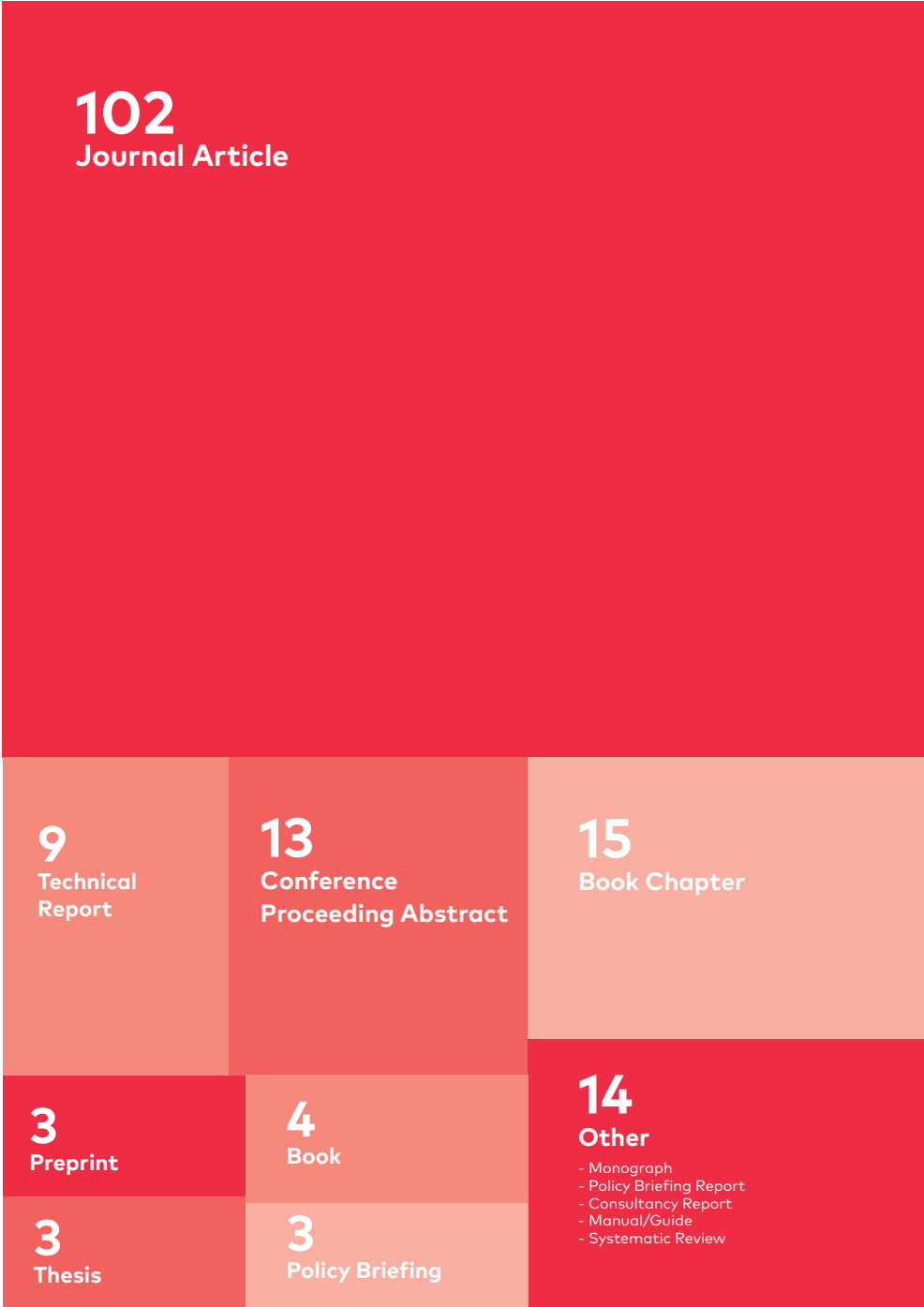


Number of publications by type

# Publications

Research outcomes can be presented in various ways. Of the many different outcome types the funded NordForsk projects can register in Researchfish, publications are among the most commonly reported.

The researchers can choose among 16 different publication types, such as book chapters, monographs, technical reports, and conference papers. Publications are results in themselves, but can also be considered mediators between research and its dissemination, and thus a proxy indicator of any effect.



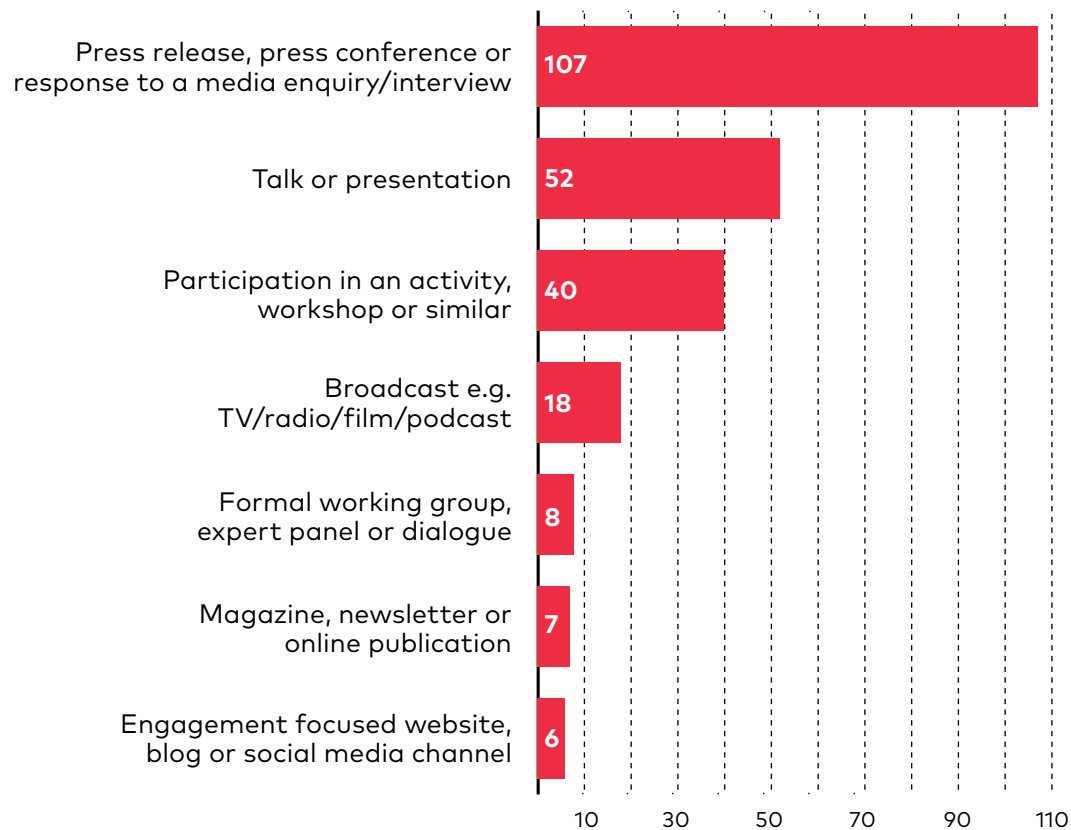


# Dissemination activities

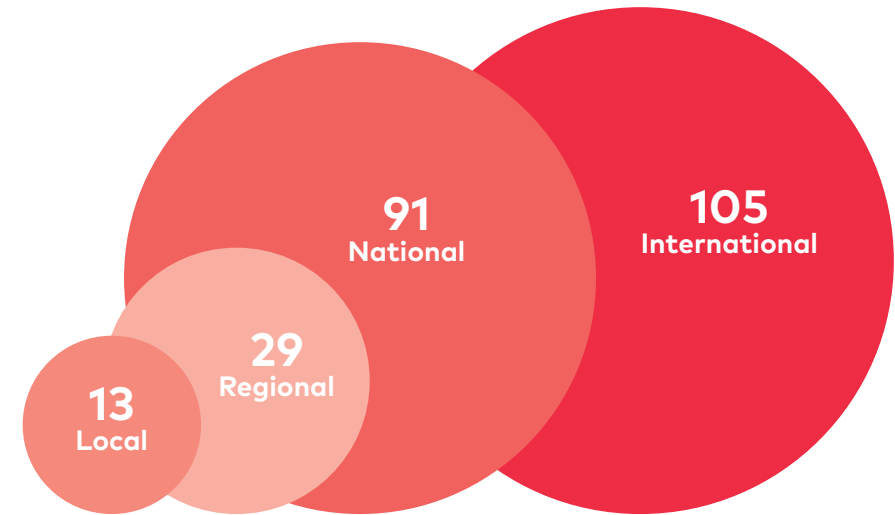
Researchers do not only communicate through journals, books, and other scientific publications. They also inform the public about their work, its importance, and their findings. Effective communication can foster support and understanding for science, highlight its broader societal relevance, and pave the way for informed decision-making.

Every project we support is required to create a communication plan, and they all report on their communication efforts. These reports detail the methods used, primary target audiences, outcomes, and reach.

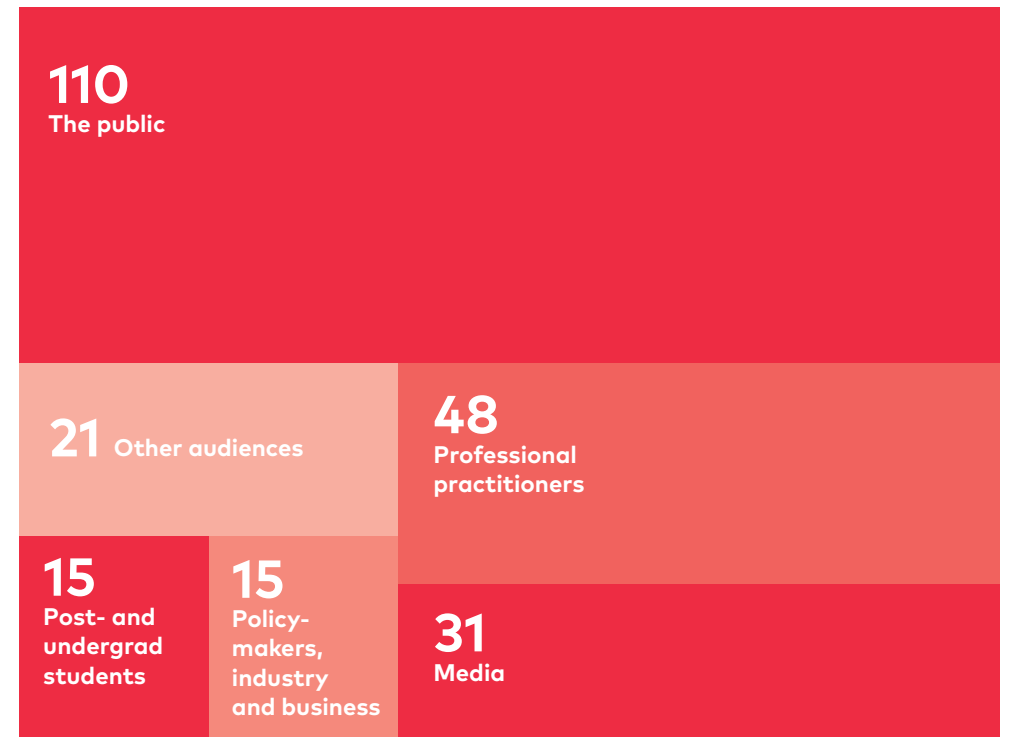
## Dissemination activities by type



## Dissemination activities by geographical reach



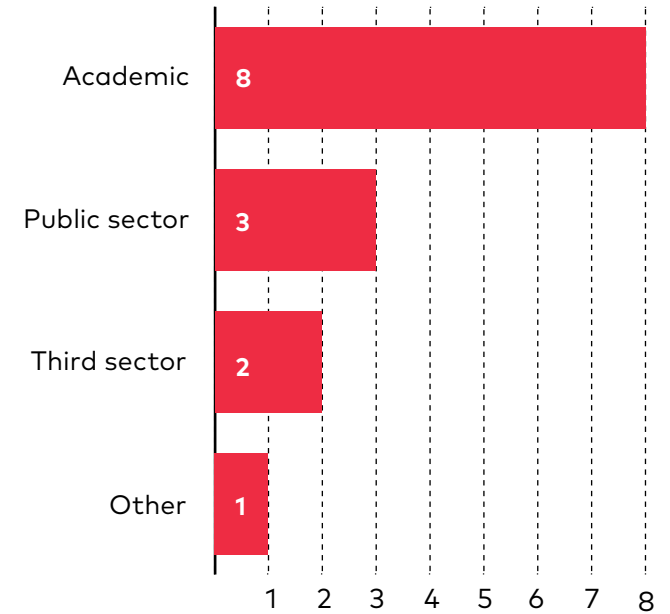
## Dissemination activities by primary audience



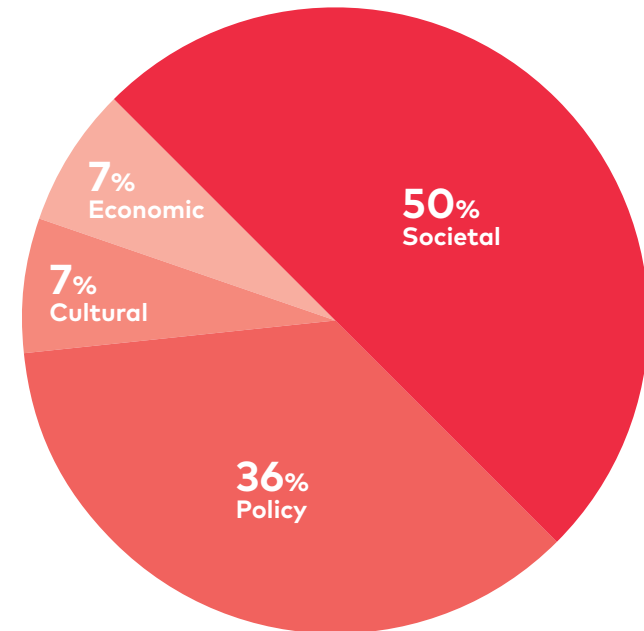
# Collaboration

Researchers collaborate across borders, disciplines, and with various sectors in society. Many of these collaborations yield outcomes that later influence the knowledge base within the research field, the academic paths of researchers, and their career trajectories, among other factors. To provide a clear overview, we've categorized this multifaceted metric by collaborative projects according to sector and the type of impact reported from the collaboration.

Collaborations by sector



Reported collaboration impact by type



# Highlights

The following section showcases select research projects from the Societal Security Initiative calls. These presentations offer a comprehensive view into the research, detailing its background, outcomes, and significance. They highlight the diverse range encompassed within the societal security research field.

## Nordic Multiagency Approaches to Handling Extremism

**Project leader:** Tore Bjørgo, University of Oslo

**Project duration:** 2018-2022

**Participating countries:** Norway, Finland, Denmark, Sweden

**Funding from NordForsk:** 9,5 million NOK

In the Nordic countries, the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism relies on an existing crime prevention collaboration within the SSP framework (school, social and health services, and police). The core tenet of this approach is that early radicalization prevention is best organized as a joint effort, where individual cases are assessed in a holistic manner, and relevant information is shared. However, despite similarities in the multiagency setup, important national and local differences exist concerning the legal leeway for exchanging personal information and the practical implementation of preventive measures. The project investigated how this variation in multiagency approaches to preventing radicalization and countering violent extremism shapes perceptions of legitimacy and levels of mutual trust - among involved stakeholders as well as among public authorities and citizens - in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland.

Furthermore, the research delved into the extent to which variations in perceived legitimacy, trust, and justice are linked to differences in the effectiveness of multiagency collaboration and the prevention of radicalization. The project offers a comprehensive comparison of legal frameworks, institutional setups, perceptions, and practices related to the Nordic multiagency approaches to countering violent extremism. It provides a critical analysis of varying implementations, systematically exploring how core components of a Nordic governance model contribute to, and may be preconditions for, effective multiagency collaboration and secure societies. In doing so, the research aims to provide a more informed platform for disseminating Nordic experiences and models of governance to other countries in the field of radicalization prevention and countering violent extremism.

The question of how different agencies can work better together at the local level to reduce the threats from violent extremism is of great relevance and urgency for policymakers and practitioners in all the Nordic countries. The study found that some Nordic countries have developed models and procedures that are more effective and identifies some of the factors behind this outcome. Close interagency collaboration in the fields of preventing extremism, crime, and other social issues is a hallmark of Nordic societies.

## **|| The most streamlined and effective model for interagency collaboration to handle extremism is clearly found in Denmark.**

In the analysis of national policies governing the multiagency approaches, based on comparisons of legal frameworks, action plans, and other policy documents, the research uncovered several key findings:

1. Multiagency setups in the Nordic region are similar in some dimensions, organized in a three-level structure: the governing/executive level, the coordinating level/practice level where local actors are responsible for working with clients. Denmark's approach is most exclusively formatted to handle extremism, while the other countries use already established structures that address various societal challenges, including extremism. Differences are also observed in the coordinating function, with the head of the multiagency groups coming from the police in Denmark and Finland, from the municipality in Norway, and representing the social services in Sweden.
2. When comparing the legal frameworks that govern confidentiality and secrecy between authorities in the four Nordic countries, the research found that they are quite similar. However, important differences exist in the Danish Administration of Justice Act (§112-114), which facilitates the exchange of information for preventive purposes under certain conditions to a greater extent than in the other countries. All countries provide considerable leeway for interpreting legislation.
3. The police acts in Denmark and Norway place a greater emphasis on prevention and collaboration than similar police acts in Sweden and Finland. This weaker preventive mandate partly explains why the police in Sweden are far less involved in interagency collaboration than the police in the other Nordic countries.
4. The research identified differences in the policy and setup of the multiagency approaches stemming from different institutional logics. Two distinct logics were teased out: a societal security logic and a social care logic. The Danish approach leaned most towards a social security logic, followed by Finland. The Norwegian, and particularly the Swedish approach, leaned more towards a social care logic. These institutional logics both shape and (re)produce the actions, challenges, and possibilities for multiagency teams to cooperate.

Good practices of interagency collaboration require some basic conditions to be fulfilled, including legislation that facilitates partnership and information sharing, a high level of trust in public institutions among the population and relevant minorities, and a high level of trust between practitioners in relevant agencies. The most streamlined and effective model for interagency collaboration to handle extremism is clearly found in Denmark. This is attributed to strong preventive mandates, legislation that facilitates the exchange of personal

information between agencies for preventive purposes, longstanding experiences of interagency collaboration between school, social services, and the police (SSP), the implementation of the Infohouse model in all municipalities, and a common tool used by the involved agencies to assess whether a case of concern for an individual constitutes a security risk.

Interagency collaboration is also well developed in Norway, albeit with significant variation between different municipalities and uncertainties among practitioners about the extent to which they can share sensitive information on individuals of concern with partners from other agencies. Information sharing is mostly based on consent (from the individual or parents) but sometimes relies on personal trust between practitioners, stretching the rules for a good purpose. There is a need for clearer regulations and more uniform practices. Although some Norwegian practitioners would like to have similar legislation for facilitating the exchange of information as in Denmark, others are skeptical, as this might undermine trust relations with clients and professional ethics and values. Finland's Anchor programme, inspired by Danish and Norwegian experiences of interagency collaboration, has a stronger participation from the health sector than the other Nordic countries. Sweden is clearly lagging behind the other Nordic countries in interagency collaboration. The police play a relatively marginal role, partly due to a weaker preventive mandate, as well as legislation (and interpretation) on confidentiality and information sharing, and, most importantly, dominant professional logics. Clarification and rethinking of possibilities for information sharing and interagency collaboration models that also include the police are recommended.

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Nordic Council of Ministers' Objectives



COLLABORATION WITH CIVIL SOCIETY



TRUST AND COHESION



KNOWLEDGE AND INNOVATION

The UN Sustainable Development Goals



# Lessons for the Nordic welfare states from the COVID19-pandemic

Project leader: Simen Markussen, The Ragnar Frisch Centre  
Participating countries: Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden  
Project period: 2023-2026  
Funding from NordForsk: 9 million NOK

In the Nordic countries, the deep societal, cultural, and institutional similarities, characterized by a generous social security system, active labour market policy, high labour market participation, and high social mobility, were put to the test during the pandemic, challenging the social and economic resilience of the welfare state model. Despite these commonalities, there were significant differences in the policies implemented across the Nordic welfare states to deal with the pandemic, including measures such as school closures and the design of wage compensation schemes. These implemented policies and institutional variations may have implications for the resilience of the welfare state when confronted with global crises like the pandemic.

The Nordic countries have been at the forefront of utilizing administrative microdata in social science research. While administrative data offer numerous advantages compared to other data sources, conducting comparative studies using such data faces several challenges, resulting in a scarcity of cross-country studies. This research project's ambition is to overcome these obstacles and establish a comprehensive collaboration for Nordic comparative microdata research.

The project has multiple objectives, including making significant contributions to research on various topics, such as the social gradient in schooling and youth mental health, unemployment hysteresis, the effects of labour market institutions, and the optimal design of social insurance policies. Additionally, the project aims to provide high-quality descriptive analysis of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Nordic countries. This analysis is expected to enhance our understanding of the crisis and generate new hypotheses for future research. Furthermore, the project will offer credible evidence to improve the foundation for policy design in the Nordic countries, particularly in preparation for future crises.

Importantly, the project lays the groundwork for an ambitious comparative research agenda by combining registry microdata for the Nordic countries and providing documentation and codes to facilitate future comparative research endeavours. This research initiative is inherently Nordic in nature, fostering collaboration among research groups from four countries, utilizing data from all four countries collectively, and explicitly considering both similarities and differences in institutional details across countries. Such research would be challenging to undertake in any single country alone.

***|| The project will offer credible evidence to improve the foundation for policy design in the Nordic countries, particularly in preparation for future crises.***

The research project is expected to yield several sets of results, all of which will contribute to the research frontier and be of high relevance to policymakers. It aims to investigate whether similar economic shocks, filtered through policy and institutional variations, lead to different outcomes for otherwise comparable individuals (e.g., those with similar socio-economic backgrounds, working in similar firms, residing in similar regions). Any observed differences in outcomes would be attributed to variations in policies. Overall, the research intends to enhance our understanding of the current health crisis by allowing for a careful comparison of the economic crisis's effects and its aftermath in all four participating Nordic countries in great detail.

The first set of results from the project will focus on the social gradient in the impact of school closures on learning and mental health among young people in the Nordic countries. The research will leverage different school closure policies across these countries to assess how students from various socio-economic backgrounds are affected by the disruption of schooling. It will investigate whether these policies exacerbate socio-economic gradients in human capital development and mental health. These findings will be valuable for policymakers when designing future crisis-management policies, enabling them to target their interventions effectively. Additionally, the results will shed light on how well the Nordic school systems address fundamental issues related to equality in education.

The second set of results will provide valuable insights into how labour market interventions implemented during March to May 2020 have influenced labour market dynamics. This analysis will contribute to the refinement of future crisis-management policies while offering a deeper understanding of the inner workings of the welfare state. For example, the research will explore the impact of graduating into a recession on later-life labour market outcomes. Denmark's extensive unemployment insurance system for recent graduates will be compared with

the experiences of graduates in the other three participating Nordic countries to determine whether immediate labour market protection mitigates or exacerbates the effects of graduating in a recession. The research design also allows for insights into differences in institutions and rules related to sickness absence, short-term disability, active labour market policies, and more. Ultimately, these insights will inform the optimization of the current and future Nordic welfare state.

The third set of results will investigate the role of social insurance in reducing the spread of the virus by mitigating contagious presenteeism. This research will shed light on the argument for more generous sickness insurance, which compensates sick workers to stay away from the workplace, potentially resulting in reduced overall sickness absence. The analysis will test the extent to which differences in sickness insurance schemes, both between and within countries during the pandemic, led to higher rates of contagious presenteeism due to less generous insurance coverage. Moreover, it will explore whether these factors can explain why Sweden had higher mortality rates among the elderly population during the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond its immediate relevance to discussions on high infection rates among elderly individuals in Sweden, these findings will be highly valuable for future policymakers when designing effective policies to combat seasonally recurring influenza pandemics.

Nordic Council of Ministers' Objectives



TRUST AND COHESION



WELFARE FOR ALL



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The UN Sustainable Development Goals



## Reinterpreting Sector Responsibility in Nordic Crisis Management after COVID-19

**Project leader:** Rasmus Dahlberg, Royal Danish Defence College

**Participating countries:** Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden

**Project period:** 2023-2026

**Funding from NordForsk:** 9 million NOK

When COVID-19 hit the Nordic Countries in early 2020, a distinct Nordic crisis management principle known as the sector responsibility principle was subjected to its hitherto most dramatic test: managing a full-scale crisis response across virtually all societal sectors and with an open-ended timeline, which stretched for months and, as it turned out, years. Sector responsibility showed its worth as a flexible, efficient and effective structuring principle in the Nordics during the decades leading up to 2020. However, after two years with COVID-19, Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian government commission reports all concluded that the sector responsibility principle had if not failed, then at least been challenged and transformed by the longevity and permeative nature of the pandemic.

RESECTOR (Reinterpreting Sector Responsibility in Nordic Crisis Management after COVID-19) sets out to investigate what happened to the sector responsibility principle in Denmark, Norway and Sweden during COVID-19. In response to the most comprehensive crisis in societal security since the Second World War, the sector responsibility principle's underlying philosophy of decentralized crisis management to various degrees gave way to strong political leadership, centralized decision-making and strategic, top-down direction-setting. Ad hoc transformations of the sector responsibility principle during the COVID-19 crisis calls for systematic analyses of

the principle's implications, of how it was reinterpreted during the crisis, of the long-term consequences for Nordic crisis management, and of the very way in which Nordic societies organize and navigate the relationship between different societal sectors in the future.

During COVID-19, a grand, society-scale experiment thus unfolded in real time in the Norway, Sweden and Denmark: How would the sector responsibility principle fare in the face of the largest societal crisis since WWII? Would it live up to its promise of local agility and sectorial expertise? As the commission reports concluded, the comprehensive and long-lasting COVID-19 crisis revealed severe coordination gaps and cross-sector weaknesses of the sector responsibility approach. Requiring swift and coordinated action across virtually all sectors of society for an extended duration, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the limits to decentralized crisis management. In the midst of the crisis, this produced new and improvised ways of coping with cross-sectorial coordination in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. And now, after the challenges of COVID-19 are less urgent, national emergency management authorities in those same countries have begun the difficult and important work of systematically re-thinking the basic philosophies of crisis management.

**|| The research project aims to guide Nordic decision makers as they implement the lessons from COVID-19 in future emergency planning at the broad societal level.**

With a project consortium consisting of a balanced mix of junior and senior researchers from Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, RESECTOR aims to develop new knowledge that will contribute to the ability of Nordic societies to manage future cross-sectorial societal crises more effectively. Due to the topic's inherent complexity and boundary-crossing nature, the project is cross-disciplinary in nature, including perspectives from sociology, anthropology, history, and political science, and relies on a number of different approaches and methodologies. Together, the project group unpacks the intricate connections and complex empirical problems found in the sector responsibility principle's ability to cope with the COVID-19 crisis from a variety of complementary lines of attack.

Apart from providing scholarly insights into emergency planning and crisis management, RESECTOR will provide lessons directly applicable to decision makers and practitioners based on novel insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the sector responsibility principle in the Nordics. The project takes advantage of the "natural experiment" aspects of intra-Nordic differences in managing the crisis, considering how the different responses activated, affected, and challenged the sector responsibility principle. Building on the assumption that sector responsibility principle remains relevant for the Nordic countries; the project seeks to identify "best practices" of overcoming the inherent tensions between centralized, cross-sector crisis management and sector-specific crisis management in ways that meet the future needs for centralized direction-setting and individual sector responsibility simultaneously. The project thus maps the lessons identified and facilitates a debate on the prospective course of action in the Nordic crisis management post-COVID-19.

To ensure a strong connection to decision-makers and practitioners, RESECTOR engages with key stakeholders from Norwegian, Swedish and Danish emergency management authorities through workshops, seminars and courses. The findings of the project also feed directly into teaching and training programs on societal

security at the involved consortium institutions. As a whole, the research project aims to guide Nordic decision makers as they implement the lessons from COVID-19 in future emergency planning at the broad societal level. RESECTOR also contributes to the development of crisis management capabilities in the Nordic countries, thereby not only contributing important academic knowledge, but also helping to strengthen the knowledge base for practice and for research-informed policy.

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Nordic Council of Ministers' Objectives



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# Social exclusion, polarisation and security in the Nordic welfare state

Project leader: Helena Blomberg-Kroll, University of Helsinki  
Project duration: 2021-2023  
Participating countries: Denmark, Finland, Sweden  
Funding from NordForsk: 10 million NOK

Polarisation, hate crimes and violent extremism are commonly mentioned as central security challenges in contemporary Nordic societies. In order to maintain and strengthen the welfare state and democracy, the SEPOS project develops a broader, policy-relevant conceptualization of societal security, built on the notion of human security that covers aspects such as social cohesion, trust and drivers for marginalization. Instead of naming new issues as security challenges, the project highlights and intervenes in the unequal distribution of security, particularly among marginalized and racialised groups, studying how the divergence in the lived experience of safety, and the securitizing practices contributes to polarization and social exclusion.

Islamophobic and white nationalist groups have emerged in all Nordic countries; introducing new types of security threats, particularly in the aftermath of the violent attacks in Oslo and Utoya (2011), Copenhagen (2015), in Turku and in Stockholm (2017). Extreme movements are mobilising new members and supporters, transnational ties are manifested by participation in foreign conflicts (pro-Russians in Crimea; jihadists in Syria and Iraq). This has triggered forms of transnational exchanges and mobilization among extremist groups such as the Nordic Resistance Movement, incentivising them to generate hybridly mediated coverage for extremist advocacy. SEPOS responds to the need of conducting in-

depth empirical research on the manifestations of these security issues, being aware of the interactions between these phenomena: social exclusion, polarisation and extremism.

The SEPOS project has three main objectives: a) to deepen our understanding on the challenges of human security in Nordic societies, b) to produce policy relevant, empirical knowledge on how different extremist movements, anti-democratic mobilisations in media and discriminatory patterns of policing influence experience of safety and trust in public institutions of racialized minorities in Nordic countries, and c) to channel research-based understanding on policy practices and policy measures pertinent to societal security to stakeholders. Marginalisation and social inequality, the role of internet and social media in the dissemination of radical ideologies and the importance of policies and preventative measures being formulated by policymakers, stakeholders and researchers are core issues considered throughout the project.

**|| Polarisation, hate crimes and violent extremism are commonly mentioned as central security challenges in contemporary Nordic societies.**

Empirically the comparative design of SEPOS contributes with insights in differences and similarities between the three Nordic countries in policies and in experiences of societal discourses of radicalization within politics and authorities on national and local level. Sweden and Denmark have until 2010s been considered to operationalize opposing strategies for implementing policy on migration, with Finland adopting policies influenced by both paradigms. While the Nordic countries have experienced trajectories of more rigorous control coinciding since the 2015 "refugee crisis", practices and measures of governance to advance encompassing security vis-à-vis terrorism, extremism and global migration at large are far from harmonized between local and national authorities. Against the background of divergent "national models" of implementing security-pertinent policy and practices, it is particularly fruitful to conduct a comparative study through a consortium based on each of the Nordic EU countries, thereby allowing the SEPOS project to combine the best of both most similar systems and most different systems research designs.

The SEPOS has taken two broad strands of development and research foci to highlight differences and similarities: 1) a focus based on the study of the effects of racialization, social exclusion and polarization, in particular towards minorities, also considering practices and activities put up over time to tackle these issues at national, local and community level to enhance democratic participation, inclusion, empowerment and trust building; 2) the study of the political, societal and media/communication (transnational) developments of the populist and the far-right environs in times of multiple crises, including the relationship to dynamics of exclusion, inequality and de-democratization.

An example within the first framework of reference is the study of the Neighbourhood Mothers/ Bydelsmødrene (BDM) in Denmark. The BDM are women with migrant background (although not exclusively) organized in active groups



with chapters in all Danish main cities. The BDM strive to foster societal inclusion, and participation both at the individual and group level. Our interviews with BDM activists and with municipal representatives and street-level practitioners show the endeavor to develop and consolidate democratic and participatory strategies and practices, within a frame that has taken different directions in the various municipalities. Polarization and stigmatization/racialization may impact on these outcomes, particularly when gender is involved. The mapping of the women minority organization also deals with the prevention of radicalization, particularly when radicalization happens in relation to perceived exclusion, lack of trust and personal security. However, our results indict that these issues are of minor concern compared to others.

This research approach involves and facilitates the contact and discussion with several different actors: volunteers, local level practitioners, municipal employees, street-level bureaucrats, besides prompting comparative analyses and discussions with the other Nordic cities and within the forum of the Nordic Safe Cities. Another finding within the first framework, point at the strong gate keeping processes within the Finnish police towards research on police practices and the views of the police as regards non-discrimination and equity. Preliminary results of a survey to police officers show that a large part of the police are committed to fair organization culture and leadership, but the awareness of racism varies within the police.

Among the key foci within the second framework has been the online mobilization of extremist and radical actors. One of the preliminary findings in this regard pertains to the corpus of some 2 million Telegram messages. These messages were exchanged in groups such as Soldiers of Odin and QAnon Suomi and collected during the pandemic in collaboration with the project Extremist Network, Narcotics, and Criminality in Online Darknet Environments (ENNCODE). The preliminary analysis of this corpus suggests that about 5% of the messages call other group members to participate in a range of offline action, from boycotts and demonstrations to street patrolling and other forms of direct action. While further analysis is needed in order to both validate and qualitatively assess the findings, it would appear that the violent potential of these groups is not accentuated by calls to violent action in fast messaging apps.

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#### Nordic Council of Ministers' Objectives



COLLABORATION WITH CIVIL SOCIETY



TRUST AND COHESION



WELFARE FOR ALL

#### The UN Sustainable Development Goals



# Conclusions and future research

Over the past decade, societal security has evolved as a prominent research field in the Nordic region. Numerous universities have launched academic courses dedicated to this subject. Moreover, a practical application of societal security is emerging, evidenced by the Nordic Council's 2019 Strategy on Societal Security and the ongoing Action Program of the Council for Baltic Sea States (CBSS). The NordForsk initiative has significantly shaped these developments throughout the decade.

However, the requirements for knowledge in both policy and practice are dynamic. They change with shifting socioeconomic, technological, and geopolitical landscapes, as well as the advancement of research and innovation. As we move beyond 2023, the research agenda for societal security will naturally diverge from the focal points set in 2013. Technological breakthroughs, especially in artificial intelligence and the surge of social media, are set to redefine research necessities. There's a pressing need for multidisciplinary research projects, as they are vital to bridge the knowledge gaps in this fast-paced domain.

The transboundary nature of emerging risks and threats will become even more intricate. Interdependencies, which have repercussions for people, organizations, economies, and governments, are on the rise. Addressing these concerns requires joint problem-solving and governance collaborations that transcend traditional boundaries, including national borders. This became abundantly clear during the global pandemic of 2020-22, which heavily impacted societal security in the Nordic region and beyond.

Today, the adversarial aspect of international relations is more pronounced than a decade ago. This resurgence of antagonistic geopolitics, especially around the Nordic region, has profoundly influenced societal security and resilience strategies. Such geopolitical shifts will undoubtedly shape the Nordic research agenda for the upcoming decade. Antagonistic threats now stand alongside structural, natural, or human-induced risks in the realms of national, societal, and human security. The all-hazards approach to managing threats has gained renewed significance among security practitioners, with substantial implications for both research and training the upcoming generation of professionals.

The Nordics remains a fertile ground for comparative studies, as acknowledged at the inception of this program. Such comparative analysis should continue to guide future research investments. An intriguing possibility is expanding this perspective beyond the N5 to include the N8 – integrating the experiences of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. This shift from 5 to 8 has already manifested in related policy and practical realms.

Furthermore, EU-based security research programs remain crucial for Nordic scholars. Participating in these EU-funded projects can significantly benefit Nordic research communities. The NordForsk program plays an instrumental role in amplifying Nordic representation and fostering connections within these broader EU initiatives. This strategic vision, established at the program's foundation in 2013, holds true today and promises to remain relevant in the coming years.



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