

There is an entrenched perception among civilians and politicians that it is the State alone that should bear responsibility for providing security to its citizens. As fear of terrorist activities grow, however, this perception is coming increasingly under threat and EU citizens are looking elsewhere for their security provision, and demanding more sophisticated products and services as they do so. Given that the private sector has a lot to offer in terms of technological capacity and skilled manpower, has the time not come to acknowledge that security is a challenge that might be shared by both government and society? While important questions need to be asked such as who will ensure the highest possible standards and total coverage for the population, there are also tremendous opportunities offered by close public-private partnerships.

In recent years and in almost all policy sectors, the distinction between 'public' and 'private' has lost its traditional focus and relevance, and private-public partnerships have been formed with the intention to increase efficiency, cut costs and add real value to the lives of citizens.

Security is one of these sectors. Starting back in 1989 with approximately 500,000 operating private companies, there are now almost 37,000 companies and some 1.4 million private security personnel in Europe. The European private security industry is constantly growing as a provider of commercial services as well as a provider of public security in areas previously managed by the state.

If the Lisbon Treaty comes into force, this capacity will be allowed to grow still further. The Treaty will merge the existing three pillars allowing security related decisions to be taken by qualified majority instead of by unanimity as is currently the case. In essence, there will no longer be a total of 27 different private security systems and the scope of the EU's competence in other security related matters will be extended leaving the door open for private security industry to eventually play a greater role in internal market issues, as well as common foreign security policy and Justice and Home Affairs.

Naturally, there is a concern that this development will lead to a situation whereby the private and public sectors compete with one another for the delivery of police or even military services. Whilst this concern is understandable, academic research has demonstrated that private security can add real value in various areas of activities in the form of Private Military Companies, Private Intelligence Services, Private Security Transport as well as Health Care Security Services by increasing efficiency, competition and reducing costs.

It is a trend that is spreading across Europe as EU member states increasingly share best practice and their experience of different local pilot programs - guarding industrial estates and shopping malls, anti-fraud projects, projects for young delinquents, border management and protection of critical infrastructure and transport networks. Some member states have even started integrating private security into their criminal public policies. Crime prevention initiatives are being launched in close cooperation with the private sector for instance in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Despite this sharing of experience across Europe, and the gradual convergence that it brings, there is a distinct lack of homogeneity and clear regulatory guidelines for the industry at the EU level. This is a source of concern which, if not managed properly, will hamper the growth of the private security sector. In order to have true piece of mind, politicians and citizens will want to see that there are rules in place which ensure the highest possible standards for the industry before endorsing this type of cooperation. Only by doing so can the private security sector and the states convince citizens that public-private partnerships will make a real difference to the protection of their daily lives and property.

If the EU is serious about the benefits to be gained from the reforms laid out in the Lisbon Treaty, this is as good a place as any to start.

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