

Migration, Security, and Politics: The Role of Politics in Securitizing Migration

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of securitization and the ways in which these practices are applied in the field of migration. After 9/11, there has been a new wave of securitization, as immigrants have been presented by the political elite and the media as a security threat. This has had an important impact on how migration is threatened through politics and the law, and how migration is presented and perceived as a security threat by an important part of the host population. Migration is a global phenomenon, and in the past years, the securitization of migration has also become one. The article will explore what is understood as securitization, how this process takes place, and how this affects the rights of migrants. Furthermore, a selection of case studies will be presented to show the ways in which political discourses foster the securitization of migration and how these speech acts pave the way to apply laws and policies connecting migration to security. These cases will be useful to exemplify the importance of political acts on this process. Most important, this is useful to understand that securitization is the result of a political process based on inequality that entails the re-conceptualization of an international security threat.

Keywords: migration, security, politics, securitization.

1. Introduction

In academic literature, it has been widely recognised by many scholars that today migration has an intimate link to security studies. Immigrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, are perceived by some as a threat to public safety and social stability. And what is more, since the September 11 attacks and the subsequent terrorist acts perpetrated in other West countries by ISIS, migration has also been associated with terrorism, which has in turn placed it as one of the main security problems of this era.

Because the perpetrators of these acts match a specific ethnic profile (Karyotis, 2011), migrants have been considered a security issue. Migration has been associated with certain existential threats (social, economic, and political) but now they have also been associated with terrorism. That also explains why recently migration has not only been handled through politics, but also using security tactics. As a result, migratory issues have now become part of the national security agendas of many countries. It is interesting in this sense to study the theory of securitization, which in the last years has been studied by academics as a phenomenon concerning migration, not only nationwide, but also internationally.

Migration flows can affect security at different levels. Individually, the security of irregular migrants and refugees can be endangered both during the displacement and at

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the destination country. Not only do they face risks by trying to cross borders illegally in order to not be caught by the police, but many times they also have to rely on criminal groups such as smugglers to find alternative and more dangerous ways to leave their country and find a way to get into another. National security is also affected by migration in the sense that some countries may perceive the arrival of large numbers of people as a threat to their political stability, economic well-being, public order, and cultural and religious values. At the international level, these migration flows can also lead into tensions between States and their bilateral relations and regional stability (Lohrmann, 2000).

The article will review the concept of securitization and how it is executed in practice through law and politics, offering a renewed understanding of securitization in accordance with the political and sociological changes of the current international security framework. In the first part of this article, the concept of securitization and the elements surrounding this concept will be presented. I will give a few examples of political and media discourses of different states showing the early start of the securitization process. Section 4 will show how the securitization process is concluded by the application of laws and policies establishing a formal link between migration and security. An approach to securitization through law and politics will be analysed, to show in which ways migration has been securitized within different legal frameworks. In the final part of this article, I will overview the negative effects that securitization has on the rights of migrants.

2. Literature Review and Methodology

The concept of securitization was first introduced by Ole Wæver in the mid-1990s and more fully developed in *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Buzan, Wæver and Wilde, 1998). Since then, it has been agreed upon and further analysed by other scholars but it has also been subject to debate. Some authors have argued that the security approach developed by the Copenhagen School is problematic and some question whether there is in fact a securitization of migration today. I will now overview both critiques, starting with that on the concept of securitization.

Since the Geneva Convention relating to the protection of refugees 1951, its protocol, and the development of customary law, the principle of non-refoulement has become a weakness of border control and a risk to the integrity of national security systems (Guild, 2007). The State no longer has the power to reject a refugee under international law, even with the massive entries of irregular migrants that we have seen in recent years into Western States. This principle categorically prohibits States from returning refugees to any territory where their security might be jeopardized, yet this principle stands in sharp contrast to state practice today (Donnelly, 2017:256). Western countries have regarded the forced migrant as an important security threat. As Guild (2007) explains:

“The forced migrant becomes the one individual (other than citizens) who has a right in international law to breach the security of the border. Thus the forced migrant is the individual who must be kept as far as possible from ever arriving at the border.”

In fact, securitization theory is linked to the interaction between the securitizing actor and its audience. And if that is the case, designating something as a security issue can be done in a wide range of sectors of social life (Balzacq, Léonard and Ruzicka, 2015: 496). As long as something poses a vital threat to the community, may this threat pertain or not to the military domain, the issue can become securitized. As explained, migration may be subject to this securitization in a variety of ways; from discourses of the political elite and mass media, to enacting new laws, public policies, and other security measures. But this latter part, from my understanding, is key in securitizing migration.

Therefore, securitization is compound by a first process in which speech acts by the political elite and reinforced by the media appear, and a second part in which these discourses are put in practice through laws and policies. Both parts of the process are relevant, as speeches are a determinant factor for fostering an anti-immigrant feeling among the population. Speech acts are no less relevant than formalization measures -that is, laws and policies- as these are the ones having a direct impact on the way in which immigration is perceived as a security threat by the citizenry.

However, I believe that the process of securitization is not completed until formal steps are taken. These are the ones which have a direct impact and put at stake immigrants' rights. Discourses connecting security to migration are the basis for the adoption of these measures later on. They are the ones that people hear in political discourses, on television, or reading the newspaper. This is what people hear and start believing. This is what makes it more difficult to integrate migrants in the host society. The adoption of laws and policies limiting the rights of migrants and establishing more administrative burdens and higher security controls are what can end up breaching international law and the human rights of migrants.

Migration can start being securitized through political and media discourses, as these are the ones which start establishing this link between migration and security. However, securitization is culminated with the application in practice of political and legal measures. It is only when this process is formalized, that we can talk about the securitization of a particular subject, and this is the 'addition' that this article wants to aggregate in the notion of securitization. In order to put these ideas into practice, the following section will present and analyse the aforementioned political discourses and the subsequent policies put into practice.

3. Results and Discussion

At this stage I will focus on both steps of the securitization process. In the first part of this section, I will give as an example some political and media discourses forging anti-immigrant feelings and setting the base for the securitization of migration. In the second part, I will use other case studies to show the ways in which migration is securitized through public policies and legislation. These case studies will be useful to understand the role of politics on securitizing migration and to further identify the initial moments of this process as well as its culmination.

3.1. Political discourses

Analysing speech acts from both the political elite and the media there can be a wide range of examples. For instance, a study on the Czech Republic found that there was a striking disproportion between the number of asylum applications in the country and the critical relevance that the national media attributed to them. The intense broadcasting of the issue "could be perceived as an unreasonable amplification of the problematic social issue". This research argues that the three Czech online news portals analysed very commonly used the words "urgency", "extraordinariness", "overload" and "insecurity" when referring to migrants entering Europe, and they also relied only on institutional sources and government officials when talking about the European migration crisis, thus transmitting the news from a particular perspective, that of the government (Tkaczyk, 2017).

In Switzerland, the impact of political discourse is remarkable, especially that of the Swiss People's Party (also known as the Democratic Union of the Centre (UDC) or Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP) in German). This party radicalized its discourse seeking to tighten Swiss policies on asylum and Swiss asylum law. In its political campaigns it has presented foreigners as "polluting Swiss society, straining the social welfare system and threatening the very identity of the country" (Sciolino, 2007) and

even presented posters, flyers and newsletters in public spaces showing a white sheep (representing the swiss) kicking a black sheep (the migrant) over the border. Over time, SVP, the biggest political party in Switzerland, has made proposals to deny asylum to “criminal asylum-seekers” and to suspend the asylum procedure to those coming from countries which are at war, by making their status a temporary one of five years (Casagrande, 2012). They have also proposed to legalize expulsion of foreigners who have committed two offenses within a 10-year period without a trial or appeal (Quito, 2016).

The situation of Poland is different, because even though the country does not face a high wave of refugees and is more used to refugees passing by but not staying to apply for asylum, has still enhanced its political discourse against immigration and, particularly, against refugees. They are perceived as a threat because of their “cultural and religious foreignness” and, more specifically, because they are a potential terrorist threat. Problems related to the influx of refugees were part of the electoral campaign as never before and many political parties were strong opponents of admitting immigrants, refugees included, into Poland, on the grounds that they pose a security threat (Podgórzanska, 2019). Discourses against migration included that of Korwin-Mikke, leader of the KORWIN party, saying he would “not admit a single immigrant” if coming to power, and in 2015, after national elections, the new government has been firmer contesting the EU in migration matters and reinforced the conviction that a terrorist threat is posed by immigrants, who at the same time lower the security level of the country (Podgórzanska, 2019).

New Zealand is also testimony of an increasing negative perception of migration, and this is exemplified through the media. Publications such as the New Zealand Herald often publish pieces portraying immigrants, including refugees, derogatorily. In an article published in 2007, and making reference to immigrants, it was written that “We have more than enough rapists, murderers, child-abusers and wife-beaters in this country, born here, and whom we have no choice but to keep”. They also refer to refugees as people who need help in settling and integrating and are used as part of election campaigns to win votes through the discourse that they take on services designed for nationals (Salahshour, 2017).

Slovenia, from its side, has also connected the notions of migration with security, and also with criminality. The Slovenske novice, the tabloid newspaper with most circulation of the country, has published several news of different incidents, putting an emphasis on the fact that the one perpetrating the acts was a migrant: “A fire was set in a camp and a group of migrants stoned a firemen”, “An asylum seeker killed a woman”, “Refugees attacked a woman and two senior citizens” (Malesic, 2017). This media has indirectly revealed the main attitudes towards migration, making the “migration element” the most relevant of these news.

The Australian government sent the Special Air Service (SAS) troops to control the ship and to send these peoples to third countries, including Papua New Guinea and Nauru, which were not signatories of the 1951 Refugee Convention, meaning that the situation of these asylum seekers could even worsen. As seen in the media, the decision of Prime Minister Howard was mostly respected and further reinforced by the media. The Daily Telegraph, for instance, wrote that “Australia should stand firm and not accept illegal immigrants” (Watson, 2009). As put by Kasic, this situation was perceived as a “moral panic” situation for Australian nationals, understood as the concern that these asylum seekers could be a threat to the values of the country or perceiving that “a cherished way of life is in jeopardy” (Kasic, 2014; Garland, 2008). It seems that the government’s securitization of migration at that point was largely accepted by both the public and even the Labor Opposition (Kasic, 2014).

In Greece, for instance, elites have long connected migration with poverty and higher rates of criminalization (Karyotis, 2012), a practice which has also similarly been spread through Europe (Buonfino, 2004). The repeated visualization of certain security incidents involving migration did not contribute to change this view (Williams, 2003). The security discourse on migration in Greece remained mostly untouched well throughout the 1990s, contributing to increasing public insecurity on migration and enhancing the differentiation between “us” and “them”. This securitization of migration has meant that elites have been able to pursue a range of controversial goals related to national interests which would have been very difficultly approved by the public otherwise, but which have since then been approved because of the acceptance of the citizens of something as a security threat (Karyotis, 2012).

France’s case has been at the spot for those studying the securitization of migration. Discourses such as that of the back then President Nicolas Sarkozy saying that there “we have too many foreigners” in France and that the system to integrate them was “working worse and worse” have contributed to this view (BBC, 2012). But even harsher comments have been made against migrants, with former French Interior Minister Calude Gueant saying that allowing foreigners to vote would lead to traditional Muslim halal meat being served in school cafeterias or that immigrants are “two to three times more likely to commit crimes than average French nationals” (Borrud, 2012; Reuters, 2012). The National Front, with Marine Le Pen at its front, has also often played with the idea that immigrants pose a threat to France. In this way, this political party has talked about the threat to the French way of life (The Economist, 2015), and has presented them as an existential threat to the French society, thus contributing to the establishing perception of migrants as a threat, and so contributing to the securitization of migration.

These are examples of speeches that seek to securitize migration to bring it to the security realm in order to increase control over migration policies. More often than not, we see headlines of news pointing at the nationality of the perpetrator of a crime. When she is a national, it may not be mentioned, or it may be seen as part of the description of the events in a news article. But when the person is a foreigner, often times that is part of the information shown at the headline. Speeches securitizing migration come from the political elite, but others are seen in media outlets. Some promise laws or harsher measures, others directly speak of migration as a threat, a “source of tension”, something can be differentiated from “us”. And these comments, after a while, are spread among the population and start being believed by some. They obviously will not convince everyone, and not all political parties or media outlets will be accomplice of these practices. But even if only a small part believes in them, that is a big enough threat for the protection of these vulnerable groups and for facilitating their integration.

3.2. When Discourse Becomes Practice

The securitization of migration through the law is what it is known as the “institutionalisation of securitization” (Dücker and Lucke, 2019). Enacting new laws and changing existing ones are examples of how this process can take place. It is then clear that this securitization goes beyond the ‘discursive practice’ and it materializes in a set of heterogeneous practices (Aradau, 2001). The securitization of migration has actually been perceived in a wide range of areas, one of them being, for instance, border policy. The case of the United States is quite clear. Donald Trump acceded to presidency with the repeated message throughout its campaign to build a wall across the U.S.-Mexican border and stop illegal migration from entering the United States. Although many have argued against it, the Trump administration called strongly in its favour from the very beginning and on January 25, 2017, he signed an executive order (“Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements”) to include plans to militarize the border and demanding the construction of a wall along the more than 3.000-kilometre border.

The European Union, on its side, has also participated in the dynamics of constructing walls to bolster border control. The Schengen agreement of 1985 already introduced measures calling on States to reinforce external borders as part of the requirements to become part of the European Union's area of free movement. And after the 9/11 attacks, the EU also announced new actions to securitize its borders. The 2003 European Security Strategy ("Europe in a Better World") established a relation between globalization and local security, and although migration as such was not mentioned, border control was a relevant part of the new strategies (Ruiz and Brunet, 2018).

Migration is also frequently linked to crime, and increasingly punitive laws have been spread throughout in the past years. In the United States, for instance, the criminalization of immigration has lately been reconsidered to the point where a "criminal alien" has been redefined using "increasingly stringent definitions and standards of 'criminality' that do not apply to U.S. citizens" (Ewing, Martínez and Rumbaut, 2015). This allows for U.S. immigration laws to create more "criminal aliens" and for these to be detained and deported in larger numbers as well. Furthermore, post-9/11 policies were introduced as part of the fight on the "war on terror" and in relation to immigration as part of a wider effort to enhance national security (Ewing, Martínez and Rumbaut, 2015).

Another legal area in which migration has been linked to security concerns is that of nationality and citizenship. Some countries have enacted laws by which persons with dual nationalities who have engaged in terrorism can be removed their citizenship. This is the case of Australia, which introduced the Australian Citizenship Amendment (Allegiance to Australia) Act 2015 to the Australian Citizenship Act 2007 allowing removal of Australian citizenship in these cases. Human rights organizations contested the new provisions alleging that international human rights law requires that any limitation on rights -including citizenship- must be reasonable, necessary and proportionate, three requirements that according to them are not met in these amendments. Involuntary removal of citizenship is a very serious matter and the new provisions are in clear detriment of the rights of migrants. Unfortunately, other countries such as Italy have followed the same path and amended national legislation allowing the revocation of citizenship in the same circumstances (see Art. 14 of the 2018 Decree Law).

Canada has also faced a set of legislative and policy changes towards immigration. In 2012, the government amended the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, the Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act and the Balanced Refugee Reform Act. Among the new measures, there were expedited refugee claim hearings, reduced procedural guarantees and reviews in refugee claims, growing use of socioeconomic deterrents an increased immigration detention. New securitization measures resulted in violations of asylum seekers' human rights, but also on the worsening of conditions of the refugee protection system. Interestingly, while practices like these can be traced already in the 1990s, specifically harsh measures were applied following the arrival of two boats containing 600 Tamil asylum-seekers (MV Ocean Lady in 2009 and MV Sun Sea in 2010). Coincidentally, shortly after the arrival of these boats, the aforementioned measures reforming the refugee system of the country were applied in 2012.

This is the case of Belgium, prior to December 2003 the country had no specific terrorism-related legislation and most of it was developed between 2003 and 2015, in part because of the 9/11 events but also to implement EU legislation such as the 2002 and 2008 EU Framework Decisions. However, most legislative changes were passed between 2015 and 2016. Some examples are the Law of 27 April 2006 (Law Terro II), which allows for arrests between 9pm and 5am when related to terrorist offences, and Laws of 3 August 2016 (Law Terro III) and 14 December 2016, which extends those crimes stipulated in the Criminal Code and extends the Belgian extraterritorial jurisdiction in relation to terrorism (European Parliament, 2017).

New introductions such as this have been criticised by NGOs such as Human Rights Watch (2016b), which pointed out that amendments to the penal code criminalizing the act of leaving Belgium “with terrorist intent” were written with vague language that could lead to conflicting arrests. They also criticised the law allowing stripping of Belgian citizenship to those with two nationalities could lead to discrimination towards “second-class” citizens based on ethnicity and religion.

Since the 2015 attacks, after which France declared the state of emergency, the government has extended the duration of these extraordinary powers multiple times. Among other things, these special faculties allow the interior minister and local government officials warrantless search homes and premises as well as the restriction of people’s movements, the use of deadly force when encountering terror suspects, additional surveillance systems that since then had only been available to intelligence agencies, and the power to shut down religious places for half a year if hate, violence or discrimination was upheld within them. This demonstrates that for years, France has been under an exceptional security threat which has involved the application of extraordinary measures to defend its national security (Sweet, 2017). While this is not proof that migration is a threat, it talks by itself after analysing the legislative developments of the past years, and especially those that emanated after the terrorist attacks. This is significant for different reasons, one of them being related to the vulnerability that many migrants’ face and because these measures can be applied in detriment of their rights. The new counterterrorism bill of 2017 made some of the characteristic elements of the state of emergency as normal criminal and administrative practice (intrusive search powers, closure of places of worship, etc.) (HRW, 2017). As Human Rights Watch warned, “France has a responsibility to ensure public safety and try to prevent further attacks, but the police have used their new emergency powers in abusive, discriminatory, and unjustified ways” (HRW, 2016a).

These are just but a few examples showing how the political elite and lawmakers have linked security and migration through politics and legislation, taking real steps to put securitization measures at practice and therefore having a direct impact on the rights of immigrants in these countries.

4. Conclusions

I have offered a few examples of the securitization process that can be found in the public discourses and legal frameworks of different countries. There are speech discourses connecting security to migration, and they are delivered both by the political elite and the media. But there are also laws, policies, security strategies, and agendas focused on bringing migration to the security arena and thus having a stronger control of migration, bringing securitization to a more practical level.

As explained in the previous section, speech acts are an important part of the securitization process, as these ‘spread the word’ that migration is a national security threat from which the country needs to protect. However, the enactment of laws and policies are what formally securitize migration and have a direct impact limiting or even breaching the rights of migrants. And sadly, as it has been seen, this is mostly a negative process. Therefore, it is when both steps -the political discourse and the adoption of legal measures- are taken, that we can talk about the process of securitization being concluded.

Identifying the securitization process is important to prevent discrimination. If societies base their national identities on race, ethnicity, or religion, and exclude those who are different, conflict is more likely to arise. Multiculturalism enriches societies and cannot be seen as a social threat. However, we see that in many countries, measures linking immigration to security are becoming more common. There are higher border controls, restrictions to access education and healthcare, administrative burdens, difficulties to

formalize the legal status in the host country... These are just some of the examples of the limitations and difficulties that migrants face when being abroad. And on top of that, if they also hear anti-immigration discourses and feel unwelcome by the citizenry, their integration becomes almost impossible. In a globalized and multicultural world, the protection of human rights and universal values should prevail.

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