Securitisation of Migration in Europe: Processes, Influences, and Paths to De-securitisation

Introduction

Securitisation is the process of elevating problems to the level of high security concern and presenting them as such, necessitating immediate and extraordinary action. This concept, which has its roots in the Copenhagen School, explores how certain issues or subjects are presented as existential threats in order to support extraordinary measures that might circumvent ordinary political processes or social norms.1 The securitisation process shows that, unlike in the traditional understanding of security, intersubjective security concepts such as existential threats are not a natural given, but are intentionally constructed by politicians. This process involves several key steps:

Framing: The narrative surrounding migration is deliberately constructed by political actors, policymakers, media, security forces or powerful individuals, who highlight the possible threats it poses to economic stability, cultural identity and public safety. Presenting migration as an existential threat requires this particular framing.

Emphasising urgency: Securitisation proponents seek to marginalise migration by classifying it as a threat to security above and beyond regular political discourse. The urgency of the issue is emphasised, meaning that responding to the perceived threat will require urgent action.

Justification of extraordinary measures: The adoption of extraordinary measures can be authorised once migration is securitised. Under the pretext of preserving national security, these actions might involve strict border controls, increased surveillance, emergency regulations, or military intervention.

Seeking acceptance: The narrative set out by adherents of securitisation needs to connect with and be accepted by the intended target population in order for it to be successful. The general public, decision-makers, international organisations and other political actors could all be included in this audience.

After going through these steps, the securitisation process can either succeed – significantly altering the political landscape and the balance between liberties and security, and reshaping public discourse – or it can result in failure.

Internal Factors

The securitisation of migration is not a recent phenomenon: its existence spans decades. However, particularly following the Syrian Civil War, its escalation has reached alarming proportions, nearing a point of complete success. Populist figures such as Viktor Orbán, Santiago Abascal, Geert Wilders, Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini and Alice Weidel have capitalised on this humanitarian crisis to fuel their political agendas. Employing the step-by-step securitisation process, they have created divisive 'us' versus 'them' boundaries, fostering an environment of heightened hatred and fear among the public. They have strategically linked every societal issue to migration, effectively making it the sole focus of their political platforms, aiming to sway public opinion in their favour by fostering these connections.

During the recent Spanish elections, a striking example of this phenomenon emerged. Yolanda Díaz, leader of Sumar (Greens/EFA-The Left) and Deputy Prime Minister, proposed a universal inheritance of €20,000 to ensure societal equality of opportunity. However, Santiago Abascal and his Vox party (ECR) vehemently opposed this proposal, asserting that "the news has already spread in Morocco, and people will come to Spain for this money". This statement proved problematic on two counts: firstly, the screenshot they shared as evidence had been doctored and no such news existed, and secondly, it undermined efforts to address societal inequalities. By weaving a narrative that linked migration to

the proposed policy, they not only brought migration into the spotlight but also positioned their party as the sole entity capable of resolving this purported issue.2

In a bid to counter the rise of far-right influence, certain politicians have opted to mirror its rhetoric, offering measures akin to those espoused by these factions. Denmark stands as a prominent case in point: its Social Democrats have embraced an anti-migrant stance, implementing stringent measures including border controls and contentious laws such as the "ghetto law" and "net zero migrant target".3 Initially, their strategies seemed effective: the far-right populist Danish People's Party (ID) experienced a decline from 21.1% to 8.7%. However, the political landscape now includes two additional far-right parties, collectively accumulating a 16% vote share and steadily gaining traction. France provides a more recent illustration of this trend. Marine Le Pen claimed an "ideological victory" after successfully rejecting the initial version of France's New Migration Pact, compelling Emmanuel Macron and his party to adopt a tougher and constitutionally contentious version. Notably, Le Pen's parliamentary group lacked the clout to achieve this on its own: it collaborated with the so-called Gaullist-right Republican Party (EPP) to effect these changes.4 However, while Le Pen's electoral support is surging, both the Republicans and Macron's "liberal" party are witnessing a decline in their polling figures. By affording Le Pen such visibility, these parties have inadvertently conferred legitimacy and popularity on her. Additionally, this dynamic has fostered public resentment toward the political establishment and the democratic process itself. The narrative propagated by politicians urging people to vote to prevent the ascent of the far-right has been undermined, as disillusionment grows among citizens who perceive little distinction between these competing factions.

External Factors

The European Union's endeavours to externalise migration and render it less conspicuous commenced well before the Syrian Civil War. Spain, for instance, has historically engaged in analogous migration agreements with Morocco and Senegal.5 After the Syrian Civil War there was a notable escalation in Frontex operations and fresh diplomatic endeavours regarding this issue. The most widely discussed agreement was the one with Turkey, yet regrettably, other than in the Greens/EFA group, there was minimal hostile reaction to it, either at the time or later. Consequently, President Erdoğan discerned a shift in relations and increasing dominance for Turkey, prompting him to leverage this newfound power to quell European reactions when deemed necessary. His message was succinct: "Do not provoke me, or I will open the borders."

Erdoğan first used this rhetoric in 2016, when the European Parliament decided to suspend membership negotiations with Turkey.6 However, anyone who looks closely can see that Erdoğan never had any intention of becoming a member of the European Union and that he only used this process as a tool to gain external support and realise his political agenda in the first years of his power, and this rhetoric was used in 2016. Given that this statement was made in 2016, when the migration agreement had just been signed, it can be understood that he was giving the message that he would open the doors if there was any intervention in his ruling style and the direction he is taking Turkey in in the future. Since the European Union understood this message very well (or so it seems, at least), it acted as Erdogan wanted and there were no problems until 2020. However, in 2020 Erdoğan chose to wield his leverage and opened the borders, resulting in startling scenes. Ankara accused Athens of deploying disproportionate force against migrants, while Athens pointed the finger at Ankara, accusing it of exploiting migrants for political purposes. This situation seemed perplexing, since its original cause was a Russian attack on Turkish forces in Syria, unconnected to Greece or the EU. Consequently, the intention underlying these actions remains ambiguous. Speculations arose regarding motives, suggesting that Turkey might have been driven by a desire for increased EU funding or to compel NATO and the EU to intervene in the Syrian conflict. Despite these purported aims failing to materialise, Erdoğan eventually decided to halt the actions.7

One year later, a similar incident occurred between Morocco and Spain, but this time motivations were clearer. US President Trump's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara (official name: Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic [SADR]) was not helpful in terms of resolving the issue between Spain and Morocco. In April 2021, when Brahim Gali, Secretary-General of the SADR, sought

Covid-19 treatment in Spain without giving prior notification to Morocco, Rabat chose not to cooperate further. As a result, approximately 8000 individuals crossed the border into Ceuta. Following these events, Karima Benyaich, Morocco's ambassador to Spain, drew a direct connection between Ghali's presence in Spain and the irregular border crossings, suggesting retaliatory motives. She emphasised that "there are actions that have consequences for inter-country relations".8 The incident highlighted the intricacies and persistent tensions in Spanish-Moroccan relations, demonstrating the rapid effects of diplomatic actions, or lack thereof, on border dynamics and international cooperation on migration.

Conclusion

Although securitisation cannot be easily undone once it starts, it is not an irreversible process. When an issue has been given a securitised framing, multifaceted efforts are required to challenge the established narrative, policies and perceptions in order to reverse securitisation. In the Danish and French examples, we saw that following far-right rhetoric is not at all helpful. It does not block the rise of these parties' popularity, and gives them legitimacy. In the Turkish and Moroccan examples, we saw that externalising the issue is not helpful either. Even though some Green parties have unfortunately also started to follow the Danish and French way, there are ways to break the securitisation process.

First and foremost, it is imperative to challenge the notion that a particular issue presents an existential threat demanding immediate action. De-securitisation involves reshaping the discourse surrounding an issue, including by introducing alternative narratives and perspectives. This process aims to dismantle the predominant narrative that frames specific issues such as migration solely within the context of security concerns. Secondly, it is crucial to advocate policy reforms centred on human rights in order to transcend the limitations of security-focused rhetoric. Prioritising human rights-based policies allows us to move beyond a security-centric approach. Thirdly, educating the public about the multifaceted nature of the issue is essential. For instance, fostering an understanding of the intricacies of migration helps to counter fear-based narratives and encourages more nuanced and empathetic viewpoints. Lastly, legal activism plays a pivotal role. Challenging securitisation involves legal interventions, advocacy campaigns and mobilisation within civil society. Court cases, human rights activism and opposition to discriminatory policies contribute significantly to reshaping the narrative and altering the political atmosphere.

By Serdar Şengezer

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