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Securitization of Refugees in Europe

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MARTIN BECK, SEP 18 2017

Agenda Setting By Securitizing Actors

The reasons why migration towards the Global North has become the subject of major attempts of securitization in Europe (and the US and Australia) are highly contested. However, interestingly enough, a rather broad consensus exists on the mere fact that migration has become the subject of attempts of securitization in the 21st century – more so than most other contested socio-political issues. The present paper's point of departure is the latter observation. Taking the securitization of the recent influx of refugees from the Middle East to Europe as a case in point, it is argued that one of the reasons for the strong trend of securitization is rooted in the fact that diverse political camps (which in other political arenas would pursue rather different policies) contribute to the observed strong trend of securitizing the influx of refugees, this is they attempt to justify extraordinary measures by means of political communication.

Securitization is an extreme form of politicization created by speech acts. Thus, what sets a securitizing speech act apart from regular politicization is that the issue is dramatized and presented as an existential threat or a matter of "supreme priority," i.e. something "which calls for extraordinary measures beyond the routines and norms of everyday politics" (Williams 2003: 514; see also Buzan et al. 1998: 26).

The major thesis for critical discussion in the present paper is that socio-political actors attempting to securitize recent migration from the Middle East to Europe set the agenda in the discourse on immigration. Note the following three major implications of this hypothesis. First, impact is conceptualized as agenda setting rather than hard policies. There are cases of effective securitization (cf. Williams 2003: 518), i.e. hard policies were implemented, for instance, border controls in violation of what the members of the Schengen agreement are legally bound to were re-introduced, border fences were built to keep refugees out of European territory, and systems of policing the Mediterranean were introduced, thereby establishing structures that contribute to the drowning of refugees (Lutterbeck 2006). Securitizing policies have had a measurable impact all over Europe. In order to comprehend why the hard policies of (member states of) the European Union are widely considered as legitimate by the respective constituencies, it is crucial to analyze the political debate on the recent influx of refugees to Europe.

Second, not only have securitization policies been launched, but also measures of desecuritization have been taken, i.e. attempts that aimed at reversing securitization and moving migration issues back to regular politics (cf. Taureck 2006). Most prominent is German chancellor Angela Merkel's dictum "We can do this" (*Wir schaffen das*). Yet, there is quite some evidence that — high praise for Merkel's motto from different camps on a global scale notwithstanding — a huge gap between illocution and perlocution of Merkel's speech act occurred on both the domestic German and the European level. Merkel's speech act backfired insofar as it was grist to the mill of those who attempted to securitize the influx of migrants and felt left in the lurch or pretended to do so.

Third, there were more radical versions of desecuritization which pointed out the opportunities (rather than the challenges, as Merkel also did in her statement) presented by immigration to Europe, such as the option of juvenilizing the aging European societies. Moreover, motivated by humanitarian and/or political concerns, numerous non-governmental organizations have been active, for example, in protecting refugees in the Mediterranean and demanding the renunciation of the increasingly rigid border control system of the EU. Yet, as will be shown in more

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detail in the following section, actors aiming at securitizing the recent influx of refugees from the Middle East have been prevalent.

The Securitization Discourse on Middle Eastern Refugees to Europe

The following analysis of the securitization debate on recent immigration to Europe is confined to verbal interventions of European top-ranking politicians and leading activists, because they have the potential and capability to succeed in securitization. The discourse on the refugee influx from the Middle East to Europe has indeed been shaped by securitization to a rather high degree. One of the reasons why securitization has set the agenda is that this kind of discourse has not just been fueled by the xenophobic (and racist) attitudes of populist (and right-wing) political parties and movements. In fact, securitizing lines of argument are widespread in the entire spectrum of political camps and ideologies in Europe and span political groupings of conservatives, social democrats, and the left and liberals, including feminists. This is shown in three prominent lines of argument in the securitizing discourse on immigration: the link between migration and terrorism, the allegation that immigrants drain a nation's resources, and the claim that immigration threatens a society's cultural achievements.

Linking Migration to Terrorism

Right-wing politicians are outspoken in constructing a causal relationship between immigration and organized Islamist terrorism. A drastic example is a comment by Marcus Pretzell (AFD: Alternative for Germany) on the death casualties of Anis Amri's attack on the Christmas market in Berlin on December 19, 2016: "These are Merkel's dead". Possibly most prominent and elaborate among representatives of right-wing parties who link migration to terrorism is Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who at the 2017 Malta congress of the European People's Party tagged migration as the "Trojan wooden horse of terrorism". Although none of the audience of Orbán's speech — leading European politicians of Christian Democratic and conservative political parties — explicitly challenged his contribution at the congress, it should be pointed out that Merkel in her speech steadfastly defended her immigration policy (ibid.). At the same time, clearly demarking populist right-wing from political conservatism is difficult in the case of Orbán's political party 'Hungarian Civic Alliance'. The same applies to Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydło's 'Law and Justice Party' and to a certain degree also to Nigel Farage, who was engaged in the Conservative Party before co-founding the United Kingdom Independence Party: Both Szydło and Farage were among those who linked the London terrorist attack in March 2017 with migrant policy. Moreover, some centrist conservative politicians embraced the linkage between migration and terrorism. Jon Craig's claim that then British Home Secretary Theresa May "links terrorism to mass migration" may be considered exaggerated. Yet, one of the leading figures of the German Christian Social Union and Bavarian Finance Minister Markus Söder had to be rebuked by party leader Horst Seehofer because he linked the November 2015 attacks in Paris to the refugee influx to Europe. Another indicator that the right-wing camp managed to set the agenda in this strand of the debate on immigration is that renowned academic institutions such as the Migration Policy Institute, the Danish Institute for International Studies, and the CATO Institute seriously addressed the issue of immigration and terrorism.

Allegation of Immigrants Draining the Resources of European Countries

Right-wing populist political leaders in Europe are very outspoken in portraying immigration as a cause for draining the resources of their respective countries. For instance, in an interview during her campaign for French presidency, President of the National Front Marine Le Pen claimed that immigrants, particularly Muslim immigrants from North Africa, have flooded in and are draining French resources. Yet, the basic argument stems from centrist politicians such as May, who argued in a speech delivered in 2011: "... we know what damage uncontrolled immigration can do. ...To our infrastructure, as our housing stock and transport system become overloaded. And to our public services, as schools and hospitals have to cope with a sudden increase in demand". On the basis of these assessments, May justifies extraordinary measures such as drastically "cutting immigration" and "removing foreign nationals who, in all sanity, should have no right to be here". The argument that immigration drains resources also falls on fertile ground in major segments of the social democrats and also the left: German Vice-Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel dramatized the scope of the migrant influx to Germany in August 2016 when lamenting that "it's inconceivable for Germany to take in a million people every year," at the same time criticizing Merkel's *Wir schaffen das* approach. German opposition

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leader Sahra Wagenknecht from The Left claimed in March 2016 that it is a fact that German capacities to absorb migrants are limited and outlined a scenario in which impoverished Germans and poor immigrants will compete for access to food.

Immigration as a Threat to Cultural Achievements

The claim that refugees, particularly with Muslim religious background, create a threat to European culture and its achievements takes multifaceted forms in the immigration debate. Le Pen declared it as undeniable that “There are a number of neighborhoods where you are no longer living a French life”. Le Pen’s tone in reference to Islam is based more on populist culturalism than ideological agitation, culminating in the statement that “France isn’t burkinis on the beach. France is Brigitte Bardot. That’s France” (ibid.). In Orbán’s concept of declaring Islamization as unconstitutional in order to protect Hungarian culture, the lines between Islam as a religion and Islamism as a political ideology are much more blurred. Wilders even goes one step further and explicitly denies that Islam is a religion—to him it is a totalitarian ideology. Moreover, he recommended that Muslims convert to Christianity or declare themselves as atheists.

However, the lines of argument securitizing immigration in terms of it being a threat to European cultural achievements are by no means confined to right-wing or populist parties. Rather, some segments of political liberalism in particular construct the immigration of ‘non-enlightened’ Muslims as a cultural threat. A prominent example is German leading feminist Alice Schwarzer, who in October 2015 published in her feminist journal *Emma* a charter of demands that entails *inter alia* the following extraordinary measures to be implemented: there must be zero tolerance for attempts at intimidation (for instance, if male immigrants refrain from accepting help from waitresses or police women), security personnel in refugee shelters must immediately stop Islamist agitation, no relativization of German customs (*Sitten*) is acceptable, enlightenment courses on democracy including gender equality and acceptance of sexual orientations beyond heterosexuality are mandatory, advertisement and recruiting activities of Salafis and other backward Muslim associations in refugee camps must be strictly banned. According to Schwarzer, these measures are necessary in the light of a threat to gender equality which is caused by the influx of hundreds of thousands of mostly young men who come from traditions hostile to women and are shaped by violence in (civil-)war countries.

Conclusion

Securitization on the recent influx of refugees from the Middle East to Europe varies when measured in terms of intensity and effectiveness. Yet, as has been shown, the *political discourse* on the recent influx of refugees from the Middle East to Europe has been significantly shaped by securitization attempts. A major reason for this significant finding is that securitization attempts are by no means confined to the ‘usual suspects’, i.e. populist and right-wing parties. Their approaches of securitizing the ‘issue’ are certainly more pronounced and blunt. However, securitizing attempts are also pursued by some conservative, social democratic, and even leftist actors, as well as liberal representatives, including feminists.

Some of the securitizing policies come close to conspiracy theories in the sense that furtively planned actions committed by strong actors are constructed where there is very little evidence that these actors exist (as coherent actors) and even less that they have the will and/or the control of the resources and organizational skills for powerful coherent actions. Le Pen’s populist culturalism appears to be embedded in a conspiracy theory, as she argues that “At some point in the 2000s, migrants and their children – not all, but a large majority – declared war on France”. Orbán’s construction of the recent influx of refugees to Europe as “mass migration” that “... masquerades as a humanitarian issue but its true nature is to occupy space” seems no less conspiratorial than Le Pen’s theory. At the same time, it should be noted that liberals are not immune against conspiracy theories. Schwarzer claimed that the sexual assaults in Cologne on New Year’s Eve 2015/16 were a political act organized by a handful of backers and committed by young North African men who – heated by patriarchal traditions and incited by political Islam – intended “to show the ropes to those Western ‘bitches’ and their men, those European ‘wimps’”.

Notes

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