Interview – Dimitris Skleparis

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Dr Dimitris Skleparis is Lecturer in the Politics of Security at Newcastle University. His research is at the intersection between critical security studies and migration/refugee studies. Dr Skleparis is interested in how migration is governed, perceived, and experienced amid increasing insecurities. He focuses particularly on the dynamics between security discourse and practice and their human impact. He approaches these issues from an interdisciplinary, and mixed methods standpoint. He has published in a range of international peer-reviewed journals and has contributed to several edited volumes, research project reports, Op-Eds and policy briefs. Dr Skleparis is currently the Treasurer of the Greek Politics Specialist Group (GPSG) of the Political Studies Association (PSA).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I will turn this question on its head, and focus instead on important debates that have not taken place in one of my main research fields: critical security studies. The introduction of emergency measures that ensued the labelling of the spread of COVID-19 as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020, was instantly described as the 'poster child for securitization'. Indeed, to many of us who are familiar with the concept and theory, everything that has unfolded since then instinctively felt like our intellectual 'home turf': the discursive construction of the virus as an existential threat through the use of war metaphors; the adoption of extraordinary measures to deal with the threat; and the othering/alienation of disobedient subjects (e.g. 'Covidiots'; 'anti-vaxxers') and 'suspect' groups. We had all the necessary conceptual and analytical tools that would allow us to critically engage with each and every one of the aforementioned processes. A new 'Golden Age' for the field of critical security studies seemed possible. And, yet, it didn't come. Why?

Having first-hand experience of three crises in the last decade (i.e., Greece's economic and sociopolitical crisis; Lesbos's humanitarian crisis; and a global pandemic) has taught me one thing: aiming at a moving target is very challenging for researchers. Questions that might seem very important at one particular juncture of a crisis, may end up being of a lesser significance at another. In other words, critical engagement with what is happening around us in 'real time' is a tough job. This has been even more so the case in the context of the pandemic. The Copenhagen School postulates that securitizations normally follow politicizations. However, things have played out the other way around in COVID-19 times. In the UK, for example, social-distancing – the flagship of adopted extraordinary measures in the fight against the virus – was politically uncontested at the early stages of the crisis. Yet, it wasn't long before all public health measures became politicized and highly polarizing for the duration of this pandemic. Against this background, a researcher's critical engagement with emergency politics runs the risk of placing them in the eyes of their colleagues, students and the general public in 'one or the other camp' (not in the Agambenian sense). Within this context, and given how fresh the memory of an academic debate spiraling into Twitter gutter talk was, many of us consciously ducked contentious questions altogether. Others went for the 'low-hanging fruits', i.e., engaged with the broader subject, but avoided addressing the 'elephant in the room'. And very few of us, such as political theorist Giorgio Agamben, opted for a head-on confrontation with the matter. Arguing against the establishment of a state of exception on the pretext of an 'alleged epidemic', his series of online interventions instilled a fear of 'getting cancelled' into PhD students who use his theories in their theses. But, in my view, there's another, even more important, reason why a 'Golden Age' for my generation of critical security studies scholars didn't dawn: our theories have 'blind spots'. They always had, yet, this pandemic shed an even brighter light on them. I can barely scratch the surface of what I'd like to say in the next paragraph.

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The main 'blind spot' I'm referring to, emanates from a strong normative conviction in securitization theory: the study of intersubjective threat construction is more valuable than contemplating the existence or not of real threats. Indeed, according to the Copenhagen School, it's not the scholar's job to 'peek behind [threat construction] to decide whether [something] is really a threat'. This is not to say that real threats don't exist, though, as Waever has clarified elsewhere. This creates an obvious challenge to the researcher who wants to critically engage, in 'real-time', with pandemic securitization processes: how meaningful can the study of threat construction be, in the face of an existential threat that claims, directly and indirectly, people's lives *en masse*? And, given that securitization is, essentially, a normative theory, what could be the 'key takeaway' of such a study? That political elites should avoid the securitization of the pandemic? Clearly, such a normative take would be irresponsible and in clash with scientific evidence. Instead, consider: the virus always posed differential levels of threat to different groups of people; the virus's mutating nature, which also comes into play in this; scientific advancements (e.g., vaccines), which can effectively mediate levels of threat; as well as the possibility that the 'cure' (i.e., prolonged implementation of emergency measures) may end up being worse than the disease itself in the long run. Against this background, wouldn't it be more meaningful for a critical security studies scholar to enquire whether pandemic securitization can be justified/justifiable at particular junctures? Posing this question entails, however, a peek behind threat construction. This is exactly what Rita Floyd attempts to do in 'The Morality of Security', and although I may disagree with her moral universalism, I find her project commendable.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The birth of my son. He changed the order of my priorities in life, and made me realize that there are more important things to strive for than work. And, even more importantly, he is helping me grasp some of the issues I am researching better. I never doubted that no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land. But now I can really understand what this means.

You write a lot about the intersection of migration and security studies. Can you explain how these disciplines interact? How has migration become a securitized issue?

It's important to qualify from the outset what we mean by 'migration' here, because not all 'types' of migrants and migration are or have been securitized. Consider, for example, 'high-skilled' migrants: 'expats' employed in STEM sectors, 'digital nomads', or professionals in elite occupations such as sports. Elite/high-skilled migration is and has been actively encouraged, even by notoriously 'anti-immigration' politicians. The type of migration that has been securitized has increasing class, race and gender overtones. We must be mindful of these, and this is what I am trying to instill into my students of Politics of Immigration.

Migration was not always used to be comprehended from a security perspective. The need to grasp population movements initially emerged in the 19th century. The rise of the industrial age, the disruptive influence of factories, railroads and economies of scale and the resulting uprooting of tradition changed radically the rules of mobility of people. In 1885, Ravenstein published his famous Laws of Migration. Drawing on UK census data from 1871 and 1881, he put forward seven 'laws of migration', which were later extended to ten, that attempted to explain and predict migration patterns both between and within states. Outside the academy, in the world of bureaucratic politics, migration issues were the exclusive concern of immigration and labor ministries for many years. Things started gradually to change in the 1970s and 1980s, following the oil crisis of 1973–1974. Guest worker schemes, very popular in many European countries up until then, were put to a halt, and migration started to become increasingly politicized. The end of the Cold War and the great changes that followed it triggered new mass population movements across the globe. This 'uncontrolled' mass migration became the center of attention not only for humanitarian reasons. Migration issues, apart from immigration and labor ministries, started to engage the attention of defense, internal security, and external relations ministries.

This major shift in how migration was perceived and dealt with in the realm of bureaucratic politics overlapped with a change in how security was understood among academic and policy circles alike. With the end of the Cold War and the demise of bipolarity, Security Studies, as a subfield of IR, fell into a crisis that resulted in the incorporation of

various new insecurities into the field of analysis. The concept of security – exclusively reserved for military threats against the state up until that point – came to be employed in a broader variety of political and economic contexts, indicating a wide range of different challenges, risks, tensions and threats. Thus, Security Studies turned some of its interest away from traditional security concerns, to include a broader range of questions related to the environment, migration and refugee flows, rapid population growth, increasing unemployment and poverty, human rights violations, food deficits, and transnational criminality. International migration started gradually to be identified in Europe and the rest of the West as a threat to 'our' jobs, housing, borders, and also to broader issues like bodily security, moral values, collective identities, and cultural homogeneity. This linkage between international migration, on the one hand, and human and state security, on the other, became known as the 'migration-security nexus'. Huysmans and Squire have a concise and comprehensive chapter on this fusion in the Routledge Handbook of Security Studies.

How has the discourse around migration in Europe shifted in recent years? What are the reasons for this shift?

I don't think that anybody would deny that the discourse around migration has become highly politicized in liberal democracies. This has been particularly the case amid and in the aftermath of the so-called 'Europe's refugee crisis'. Countries in Europe face a 'liberal paradox': in their attempt to regulate uncontrolled/irregular migration, they adopt, among other measures, increasingly restrictive border control and asylum policies which clash with their moral and legal human rights obligations, as well as with contemporary asylum-seeking realities. To put it simply, much of contemporary asylum-seeking takes place via uncontrolled/irregular migration channels, and European states' increasingly restrictive policies are incompatible with their legal obligation to give the opportunity to all those who arrive on their borders to seek refuge. This is Europe's refugee crisis, without quotation marks, which lies at the heart of this extreme politicization.

More specifically, in 2015-2016, we saw the use of different categories to describe those on the move become the subject of contestation. On the one hand, many of those arriving across the Mediterranean were dismissed by Europe's political leaders as 'economic migrants' taking advantage of host states' human rights obligations to secure entry to the EU to work. At the same time, there was a strong political and media narrative which suggested that even where people have been forced to leave their countries due to conflict, persecution and human rights abuse, they should remain in the first countries to which they arrive rather than making the hazardous journey across the Mediterranean to Europe. Their decision to do so was viewed, under the false pretext of the 'safe first country' clause, as confirmation that they are 'migrants' rather than 'refugees', and therefore undeserving of protection. Finally, there is the discourse that insists on the need to distinguish 'real refugees' from 'economic migrants' in order to allow for the protection of the former who deserve it. These debates have led the UNHCR and a multitude of other national, international and civil society organizations to engage in efforts to educate the public on the differences between 'migrants' and 'refugees', often privileging the rights and needs of the latter. Others have challenged the media to use the term 'refugee' rather than 'migrant' which, it is argued, undermines the rights of those fleeing violence and conflict. Our article (with Heaven Crawley) presents evidence that, not only raises questions about the extent to which existing categories are able to capture people's complex and messy social realities, but also challenges us to think more carefully about the use of categories, and the process by which the boundaries between them are constructed.

Much of your research is on migration policy and migrants throughout Europe. Are there differences in migration policies and discourses across Europe? What factors contribute to these differences? In particular, how do policies and discourses compare between Greece and the UK?

There are important differences in migration policies and discourses across Europe, which tend to remain concealed if one sticks to a 'security lens' of analysis. With specific regard to the UK's asylum politics in particular, the country's location, and special relationship with the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) up until Brexit, enabled much more control over who seeks asylum, when, and how, compared to, say, Greece. Consider, for example, the UK in reference to the Syrian war and mass forced displacement that ensued. At the early stages of the war, the UK government argued that support was best provided to Syrian refugees in and around Syria rather than to Syrians in the UK or elsewhere in Europe. The UK opted out of the relocation of refugees who had already made it to the EU.

Nevertheless, the UK Government was not able to completely abstain from any form of support for Syrian refugees, announcing the Syrian Resettlement Programme in January 2014. The scheme prioritized only the most vulnerable, and it received just 239 people in the first 20 months of its operation. To put this figure into perspective, about one million people had crossed the Greek-Turkish border during the same period of time. It was not until autumn 2015, when the pictures of Alan Kurdi emerged, that concerted civil society pressure led to what became known as the Syrian Vulnerable Person's Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) with a new target of resettling 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years. In contrast, those attempting to arrive in the UK to claim asylum were treated as problematic and referred to by Prime Minister David Cameron as 'swarms'. In short, a discourse has emerged in the UK that distinguishes resettled refugees, and those recognized as refugees after traversing the asylum process: the former are seen as legitimately vulnerable and, thus, worthy of protection; the latter are viewed with suspicion. This distinction is reflected in the UK's policies too: resettled refugees receive a personalized, state-funded integration package upon arrival, which provides them with access to accommodation and social services. By contrast, there is no state-funded, tailored integration support and strategy for refugees who have followed the asylum route. My co-authors and I have explored this two-tier system of international protection and its consequences, whereby people 'from the same street' in their home country can be treated differently and face divergent integration pathways and outcomes in the UK, based entirely on how they entered the country.

This distinction between deserving and less-deserving refugees does not apply in the case of Greece. People who cross the border from Turkey to Greece have been blanketly viewed and treated with suspicion, if not hostility, by the Greek authorities (almost) consistently in the last 20 years or so. The fact that asylum-seeking in Greece takes place almost exclusively via uncontrolled/irregular migration channels, of course, feeds into this suspicion and hostility. The country's location at the external border of the EU, in combination with her membership in the CEAS and the Schengen Area, also contribute to this discourse and policies, and I've explored these effects here. Party politics play a role too, and I've analyzed here what happens when a left-wing party with a more liberal migration agenda ascends to power within this context, and amid overlapping crises and bailout negotiations. Finally, the militarized nature of the Greek-Turkish border and the 'culture' of, what the Paris School calls, (in)security professionals are two additional important factors, the effects of which I've examined here and here. An integral part of this 'culture' is the deep-seated fear that Turkey is instrumentally using migration flows to destabilize Greece. This rationale ties the plight of those who attempt to cross the border into the Greek-Turkish relations, and, by extension, into several longstanding disputes. No serious analysis of the Eastern Mediterranean migration route should ignore this dimension. At the end of the day, however, policies and discourses in Greece, the UK, and all other liberal democracies, are, essentially, a matter of political choice. The police and border guards just follow orders. Bear in mind, for example, that the Greek officers turned heroes who were performing search and rescue operations at the Greek-Turkish sea border in 2015, are practically the same people who were and have been performing pushbacks before and after that juncture.

Do you see a future where migration is de-securitized?

No, at least not in Europe where my research mainly focuses. There are mainly two reasons why I don't see such a future. The first reason has to do with how migration, as described earlier, has been securitized in the EU in the first place. Following Huysmans, I have argued that the interdependence of EU internal and external controls entails that repressive and controversial asylum and border control policies cannot simply be abolished within the context of the EU common market area. Migration to the EU is rendered governable, manageable, and controllable, always at the expense of those in need of international protection, insofar as some EU member-states rely on certain controversial and restrictive policies and tactics more than others at all times. Consider Greece in 2015, for example: in the face of rapidly increasing numbers of people crossing the Greek-Turkish border, the SYRIZA-led coalition government started framing the issue in humanitarian, rather than security, terms and, effectively, abandoned border controls. In turn, although the desecuritization was successful, it did not lead to the intended outcomes. It rather triggered an inevitable displacement of the very same repressive and controversial policies of migration government, management, and control that Greece had been employing for years, and the SYRIZA-led coalition government had temporarily given up, to other EU (as well as non-EU) states. Now, readers may rightly ask at this point: would a departure from the EU then enable a state to pursue a successful and effective desecuritization of migration? Well, that wouldn't cut it either, in my opinion, and here's the second reason why I believe that a successful

desecuritization of migration with the intended outcomes is unattainable. If securitization is the process whereby an issue is moved from normal politics into the realm of security politics, desecuritization, in its original formulation by the Copenhagen School, is the unmaking of this process, which involves the termination of security language and measures, and the management of the said issue according to the rules of normal/democratic government. What is meant by 'normal politics' though? In one of the theory's iterations, Hansen suggests that desecuritization is the move of an issue from the securitized to the politicized (i.e., the issue continues to be part of public policy, requiring government decision and resource allocations). This is where my pessimism is rooted: the politicization of migration has become so extreme, particularly following the so-called 'Europe's refugee crisis' as we said earlier, that is almost impossible to distinguish it from securitization. It's in this sense that I understand the Paris School's argument that the securitization of migration has become banal and routinised in the everyday practices of law and the normal mode of government of liberal regimes.

You also write frequently on migrant activism. What factors contribute to migrant mobilization and what forms does the activism take?

Over the last decade or so, the frequency, nature and salience of migrant protest in Europe and beyond have marked a 'new era of protest'. This has revitalized academic interest, and has also attracted significant media and public attention. I recently co-authored a paper which attempts to offer a theorization of this new migrant activism. More specifically, there are three features that distinguish contemporary migrant mobilizations from those of the past. First, new migrant movements increasingly rely on radical forms of collective action that put migrant and refugee bodies and lives on the line. Hunger strikes, for example, unlike demonstrations or marches, are a radical form of collective action, which can effectively bring protesters' claims under the spotlight. Only last year (2021), about 500 undocumented migrants in Brussels participated in a nearly two-month-long hunger strike in an attempt to bring longstanding grievances, exacerbated by the pandemic, to light. Second, although feelings of desperation might well be a key mobilization factor, new migrant movements tend to frame their claims strategically in rational, rather than emotive terms. They emphatically reject the exclusive categorization of their mobilization based on traditional binaries (e.g. citizen/non-citizen, voter/non-voter, employed/unemployed, migrant/refugee, legal/illegal migrant). At the same time, they construct a collective identity by demonstrating identification with the core normative and moral values of the host nation, and by designating 'friends and foes', often seeking to provoke hope and enthusiasm for an alternative social order. Finally, new migrant movements rely heavily on vertical solidarity networks which consist of both citizens and non-citizens. The 'plurality of subjectivities' in new migrant movements include workers, the unemployed, migrants of different statuses, trade unions, NGOs, and social movement organizations and political parties of the left-libertarian family, to name a few.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of international relations?

Always discuss your ideas with 'real people in real places'. If they make sense and matter to them, then they make sense and matter more broadly.