The transformation of a humanitarian emergency into a security problem: the 2015 migration crisis in Eastern Europe

Fernanda de Medeiros¹
Pedro Henrique Dias Alves Bernardes²

Submitted to the Panel WA05: From Syria to Europe and all the Spaces In Between: Contesting, Containing, and Securitizing Refugees.

This is a work in progress. Please do not cite or quote without permission of the authors.

Abstract

This paper aims at understanding better the turning of refugees into a security issue in Europe following the migration waves of 2015. We apply securitization theory to the matter of refugees, searching how Eastern European governments such as Hungary and Slovakia – the agents – perceive such migration waves as a security problem, and not just a humanitarian situation, and what is their motivation in doing so. We use government leaders’ speeches, government’s official statements and newspaper’s articles to build a realistic analysis through securitization theory, which is the most appropriate method once it speaks to the political leaders’ motivation and provides a strong methodological structure, allowing the understanding of a social/humanitarian question posed as a security problem. This change of sphere – from social to security – is a key aspect of the current refugee crisis. Such a change happens for two main reasons: the right-wing ethos of such governments, especially Hungary and Slovakia, leading to their desire to maintain national cohesion and ISIS and its threats against the West – threats that find resonance among domestic societies following the attacks in France.

Keywords

Migration; Refugees; Europe; Security; Humanitarianism; Syria; Discourse Analysis; Hungary; Slovakia.

¹ University of Brasilia, Brazil
² University of Brasilia, Brazil
1. Introduction

Recently, Europe has been facing an unprecedented number of individuals trying to cross its borders. Many of them are fleeing from war-torn Middle East countries, fueled by the new threats such as the expansion of the Islamic State (IS). Consequently, the number of asylum applications in EU countries has increased, some of them being unable to cope with the large-scale flow of migrants. The attempts to enter Europe turned rapidly into chaos, reflecting a type of suffering that emerges when human pain is dealt with in terms of security and for the benefit of politics.

Concomitantly, European countries are also facing another phenomenon: the rise of xenophobia towards migrants and refugees, including coming from political leaders and decision makers. Those who need most help and protection are facing hate and rejection, while such leaders turn a humanitarian crisis into a security issue. Migrants have been portrayed as a threat to national security and identity, only worsening the situation and hampering its resolution. However, Europe itself has been facing problems; the economic crisis is hardly part of the past, and many countries are dealing with difficult domestic problems. Furthermore, the terrorist attacks of November 2015 and March 2016 in two different European capitals to turn the situation more complex, bringing it to the realm of security – Europeans feel threatened, and they have the right to feel so.

This paper will apply securitization theory to the current European refugee crisis, providing a qualitative analysis of how the humanitarian crisis has been converted into high-politics in Europe. The next section will present the securitization theory along with its main concepts, followed by a brief background of the refugee crisis in Europe. Then, we will expose the securitizing processes occurring in Hungary and Slovakia, analyzing how they have been carried out and if there are any signs of success. Finally, we will make our closing remarks on the impact of the securitization of the crisis, besides trying to understand why they reverberate among national population. We note that this is a preliminary, exploratory work, written concomitantly with the refugee crisis.
2. *Theoretical framework*

As established, this paper aims at analyzing the securitization of the most recent refugee flow in Europe, which reached a critical point in 2015. Therefore, two theoretical digressions are necessary: first, the precise conceptualization of ‘securitization’, followed by the definition of what is a refugee and how does this definition affect the securitization process.

Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde (1998, p. 21), also referred to as the Copenhagen School of security studies, conceptualize security as being all about survival. The variant ‘securitization’ correctly implies a process of building security, in which an agent takes a subject beyond any regular political rules, framing it as a danger that requires extraordinary measures (Buzan *et al.*, 1998, p. 23). This process is justified by the fact that, to one’s point of view, anything that threatens their life is a undisputable emergence. Moreover, ‘securitization’ is an approach strongly based on discourse and intersubjective relations, whence the construction of speech is a core aspect of the process (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p. 213). Waever (1998) claims that securitization should be at the center of security studies once it provides explanations on how an elite turns a problem into a national security problem, mobilizing the entire country and putting it on the top of its agenda.

Before diving into the securitization process, however, we must address the implicit discussion behind the term ‘security’. In a centuries-long tradition, both political science and international relations have perceived as ‘security matters’ only problems directly related to military causes and war (Huysmans, 2006, pp. 45-46). Like the discipline of IR itself, the understanding of ‘security’ began to expand especially in the latter decades of the 20th century. Once related to a state’s fear of disappearance or domination, threats beyond the military sphere became subject of security studies – food shortage, climate change, gender violence and migration waves are examples.

Migration and asylum became security topics following the fall of the Berlin Wall when, as put by Jef Huysmans (2006, p. 16), an important American think tank made the connection between East German refugees and the Wall’s downfall. A large refugee flow could bring about definitive sociopolitical changes, and some entities might perceive this as threat. As time has proven, most host communities do
perceive migration as threatening. The reason is not purely economic, as there is rejection even when there is not any severe restrain on the first community's resources; it is not possible to say either that cultural and/or ideological disagreements between communities are the main reason. More than a combination of the two, it is the presence of an entire other community that threatens the hosts (Huysmans, 2006, p. 45). Simply put, there is a general feeling of insecurity around the idea of immigrants, being them refugees or not, making it easier for the topic to be politically manipulated into mobilizing an audience.

We then go back to securitization itself – the process of turning a subject into a security issue by removing it from the shelf of everyday politics. Taking something into the political arena means that, now, the subject is a matter of public policy. Furthermore, securitizing a subject means not only turning it super-political, but also establishing that such topic demands a more accelerated response and extraordinary actions (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p. 214). This process initiates with an actor perceiving an existential threat to something that influences the collective; we call this something a ‘referent object’. The actor will then make a move to securitize through a securitizing speech. As we previously stated, the speech is the core of the securitization process, defining last whether the securitizing move will be successful or not. (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 34).

Hence, a securitizing move will be successful if the audience accepts the speech, condoning the necessity of emergency acts against that threat. (Peoples & Vaughan Williams, 2010). Three main conditions can determine the success of a securitizing move (Peoples & Vaughan Williams, 2010). Firstly, the speech must follow ‘the grammar of security’, as indicated by Buzan et al. (1998, p. 32). This grammar is a logical structure that comprehends a clear existential threat – a landmark for the problem, a point of no return, which categorizes an emergency – and a possible solution for the threat – a ‘way out’ (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 33). Secondly, the securitizing actor must have certain authority, credibility and/or cultural or political capital to back up the speech. Finally, there must be a background to the issue, that being historical connotations or previous similar threats; some issues will be easier to securitize before a certain community once taking its history and culture into consideration.
Thus, securitization can be perceived as a shared understanding of an existential threat that possesses enough saliency to have an impact on politics. It is not possible to study or analyze securitization objectively. As we previously appointed, securitization is by definition an intersubjective process (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 29). The actor decides what an existential threat is, and it is the audience's choice to accept it or not. As analysts, we cannot disregard any subjects as non-existential threats, but only analyze whether the securitization was successful (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 34).

As the term ‘security’ opened itself for a number of new questions, this reflected upon securitization theory. Barry Buzan and Ole Waever then identify macro-sectors for securitization, categorized as military, political, economic and societal (Buzan et al., 1998). The military sector englobes all clear-cut and traditional security questions. The economic sector reflects on existential threats to financial systems and markets. As for the political sector, it analyzes times when the existence of a government is threatened.

For the purposes of this paper, we will discuss the societal sector in further detail while leaving it clear that security issues in the societal sector usually moves the political sector. These two sectors are specifically connected (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 119-122), and the impact of a societal security issue on politics is clear. Because of this, sometimes it is hard to identify the societal sector with precision. The definition of ‘societal security’ might give us a clue, as put by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever in their 1993 Identity, migration and Security in Europe: “the ability of a society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions and possible or actual threats” (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p. 213). Societal security is a concept closer to Constructivism; however, it is still deeply connected to the more traditional understanding of security.

A societal securitization takes place when a community identifies an existential threat against itself. There are three main examples of societal security issues, as categorized by Buzan et al. (1998, p. 122); they all have an ethnic/national identity aspect in common. ‘Horizontal threats’ respond to the actor’s – the community – fear of losing its cultural identity by an over-the-top influence of another community. Horizontal threats also refer to language influences, as a
country fears the influence of its neighbor’s language. On the other hand, vertical threats refer to an intended cultural merger, usually by a more powerful community – e.g. the unification of the Balkan countries under the Serbs in Yugoslavia. Finally, the third main root of societal security issues is migration.

Migration is directly connected to insecurity and fear, community-wise. The host community might feel that the new population is putting pressure on the local resources; that the newly-arrived are becoming so numerous they might overrule their hosts. There is an utmost fear of change on their core cultural identity due to the large presence of an alien community (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 122). Even in academia, refugees and migrants are perceived as something that necessarily changes everyday life, disturbing normality (Huysmans, 2006, p. 45). In the beginning of this section, we said that migration is an easily-manipulated topic, and this is true: asylum and migration can – and will – be used to mobilize public opinion once political actors realize the collective insecurity feeling towards a different community (Huysmans, 2006, p. 50). We are not accusing every individual of unwelcoming refugees and migrants; as part of a coherent community, however, our personal feelings of ethics might be cast aside, and we might give in into the fear of the unknown.

Giving into the fear is a lot more likely if someone builds a credible speech centered on a salient threat. Building a solid security message is the ability to shed fear and manipulate trust (Huysmans, 2006, p. 51); whether there are subjects important enough to justify such strategy is a question left to the reader. As Jef Huysmans (2006:54) points out, fear is not merely an emotion instigated through securitization. Fear is also an organizing principle that arranges social relations in response to existential threats, turning such fear into an epistemological objectification of the emotion. Fear is the common response to insecurity, and turning a social problem into a security problem is a way to cope with that reaction.

Not only migration and asylum inspire such fear and require security measures so extraordinary. By saying so, we are taking the concepts away from their context. Do we fear the unknown? Yes. Do we fear communities who are unfamiliar to us? Yes. However, it is necessary to understand the greater context of such threats. The same European Union that seems unwelcoming to Arab refugees
incentives migration, especially from qualified workers. The main cultural and political context make it possible for actors to elaborate a salient speech. Even though international trends obviously matter, as do ethic/cultural identity, internal security questions also play a big part in the securitizing of migration (Huysmans, 2006, p. 81). There are undisputable dangers in the opening of borders, and such dangers must be taken into consideration when analyzing why some governments might not be as welcoming.

Securitization theory has not escaped criticism, mainly from the critical security studies researchers, such as Ken Booth. To Booth and other critical security researchers, the Copenhagen School’s poster theory does not really approach reality, keeping out of contact with real people and their lives (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p. 215). The point of such criticism is advocating for a much larger expansion of the security concept. The Copenhagen School is also criticized for objectifying the threats by dividing them into sectors and for offering a fixed concept of identity, even though the school’s methodology is less positivist and more constructivist (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p. 215-216). Besides this, the process of securitization itself has been criticized; we previously addressed some of the concerns revolving around the mobilization of people through manipulation – securitization might bring about loss of fundamental rights and repression, because the topic in question will be dealt with outside a reachable political arena, limiting access and democratic participation in the matter. Moreover, the process of de-securitization, that is, when a securitized subject loses its emergency status through compromises, solutions and debates (Waever, 1998), cannot be reached in countries that are not similar to the liberal democracy of Scandinavian countries, the main inspiration for the Copenhagen School.

Lene Hansen (2000) sheds more light on these problems, showing us that securitization theory is undermined in its universality when there are actors who cannot voice their security problems. Hansen’s argument is pertinent to our research as well, even though her analysis revolves around the Copenhagen School’s blind side on specifically gender-related topics (Hansen 2000, p. 286). If we consider that multiple securitization processes can take place at an emergency, each representing the various’ actors insecurities, we can affirm that the refugee situation
in Europe presents more securitizing processes than the ones presented by the official governments, of which we here try to point out. The refugees coming into Europe are in the midst of a security problem; these refugees, however, cannot voice these insecurities – they may not be heard, even though there is an existential threat to their very existence.

Securitization is the theoretical framework of this paper, but we cannot proceed without making it clear what do we understand as ‘refugees’. The UN 1967 Protocol, well-established and known, provides a clear definition of what are refugees – those persecuted due to ethnicity, religion, nationality, social group or political opinions; who find themselves away from their national territory and cannot come back under a real threat of such persecution. Refugees are not “common migrants”, that is, those who decide to move, and are not threatened by persecution in their home countries (Toole & Waldman, 1993, p. 600). Being a recognized group with certain rights before the international community, why are refugees facing such difficulties in exercising those rights? Even though this is not the main point of our paper, it is necessary to point out that a speech built around the rights of refugees – people who lost one of their basic rights already, the right to their home – was not necessarily assimilated and accepted by all the international community. There appears to be a limitation to the concept of refugee, and that limitation has ethnical and religious connotations, especially when the number of displaced persons is so large.

One must also consider, however, that Europe has been facing a migration crisis for years. Before the break-apart of the Iraqi and Syrian territories and the rising of ISIS – the main cause behind the refugee situation – migrants referred to as ‘economic migrants’ attempted, in large numbers, to enter Europe through the Mediterranean. Considering the European Union’s right to regulate migration, a right that exists no matter how non-humanitarian it can seem at times, we must realize how complex is a situation that clashes international law and convention and human beings’ survival. The 2015 refugee situation will be better addressed in our next section, which presents the current scenario of the refugee crisis in Eastern Europe.
3. *The Refugee Crisis in Europe*

The years of 2014-2015 mark a substantial rise in the number of people entering Europe in search of protection. Besides that, the countless deaths of migrants and refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean through this period kept asylum and migration high on the EU's political agenda, turning immigration into the major challenge facing the Union, according to EU citizens (European Council on Refugees and Exiles [ECRE], 2015).

According to Eurostat (2016a), a record number of 1,255,640 first time asylum seekers applied for protection in the Member States of the European Union only in 2015, a total increase of 123% regarding the previous year. The three main countries of citizenship of asylum seekers in the EU Member States were Syria (29% of total number of first time applicants), Afghanistan (14%) and Iraq (10%), accounting for more than half of all first time applicants (Eurostat, 2016a). The chart below presents the number of asylum seekers in the EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland.

*Figure 1: First time asylum applicants in the EU Member States (Eurostat, 2016b)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of first time applicants</th>
<th>Share in EU total (%)</th>
<th>Number of applicants per million inhabitants*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>562,680</td>
<td>1,255,640</td>
<td>+123%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>25,675</td>
<td>85,505</td>
<td>+233%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>14,045</td>
<td>38,990</td>
<td>+178%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>10,805</td>
<td>20,165</td>
<td>+87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>-63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>1,480</td>
<td>2,105</td>
<td>+42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>905</td>
<td>1,235</td>
<td>+36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>14,535</td>
<td>20,825</td>
<td>+43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>+54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>3,490</td>
<td>32,150</td>
<td>+822%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>58,845</td>
<td>70,570</td>
<td>+20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>172,945</td>
<td>441,800</td>
<td>+155%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>7,585</td>
<td>11,370</td>
<td>+50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>41,215</td>
<td>174,435</td>
<td>+323%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As it can be noticed in the chart, the highest number of applicants was registered in Germany (35.2% of all first time applicants in EU Member States), followed by Hungary (13.9%), Sweden (12.4%), Austria (6.8%), Italy (6.6%) and France (5.6%), respectively (Eurostat, 2016a). Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that there may be pending applications, that is, all persons who have made an application for international protection that are still under consideration by the responsible national authority. At the end of 2015, circa 922,800 applications for international protection in the EU Member States were still pending (Eurostat, 2016a).

Most asylum seekers arriving in the EU have come by irregular means via land or sea (Garlick, 2016). In 2015, more than 900,000 migrants, refugees and asylum seekers have arrived in the EU through the Mediterranean, almost entirely via the Eastern and Central Mediterranean routes to Greece and Italy (Swing, 2016). According to the 2016 Frontex Annual Risk Analysis, there were three choke-points of illegal border-crossing: the maritime border between Turkey and Greece, the
Central Mediterranean border, and the border with Western Balkan countries, as a consequence of the entry through Greece (Frontex, 2016).

Those illegal migrations are influenced in part by the conflict between EU law and the Common European Asylum System (CEAS): the CEAS requires individuals to be on the territory of the state in question in order to claim asylum, but the EU law makes it virtually impossible to get to that country safely and legally without a visa (Costello, 2016). This contradiction has created space for an illicit market of one-way trips with few safeguards against exploitation and profiteers, handing the keys to the UE to smugglers (Costello, 2016). The EU’s failure to guarantee international humanitarian safety led to more than 3,500 deaths of people struggling to cross the Mediterranean in 2015, not to mention how many deaths go unreported (Swing, 2016). That death toll only gets higher when taking into account migrants who die en route to Europe in Africa and the Middle East (Swing, 2016).

However, the refugee crisis in Europe did not start yesterday. In 2011, there was significant evidence of a potential overspill of the Arab Spring into Europe, especially regarding the flow of immigrants originated from North Africa (Jamestown Foundation, 2011). Back then, thousands of sub-Saharan Africans were taken to the sea in overcrowded boats in desperate attempts to escape the violence in Libya (Jamestown Foundation, 2011). Even after NATO’s intervention in the country and the following death of former leader, Muammar Gaddafi, the country faces a political and security crisis deepened by the conflict between two rival governments. A notorious number of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants reached Europe from Libya by sea in 2015, despite many having died in the hands of criminal smuggler networks (Human Rights Watch, 2016). The incoming migrants are also originated by other fragile and failed states, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, which are under internal combats or in a “post-conflict” situation – but with no peace in sight (Bundy, 2016; Majidi, 2016).

---

3 Since 1999, the EU Member States have been committed to develop a Common European Asylum System (CEAS) to tackle the Union’s asylum challenges. Several legislative measures were taken with the aim of harmonizing the asylum systems of member states, although there are still significant differences between EU members in their approaches to protection, refugee recognition and reception conditions (UNCHR, n.d.).
Also dating from 2011, the ongoing civil war in Syria has led to a humanitarian crisis and the world’s worst refugee crisis in a generation (Amnesty International, 2014). The armed conflict in the country is marked by war crimes, crimes against humanity and widespread human rights abuses. In 2015, more than 50% of the country’s population was displaced due to the conflict, and more than 4 million refugees from Syria (95%) were in just five countries: Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt (Amnesty International, 2015). The Syrian crisis has unprecedented social and economic impacts on the region, at times affecting their stability and development pathways (UNHCR, 2015). Indeed, there is a huge contrast between the region and the EU. Although the increasing number of Syrian refugees reaching Europe, that percentage remains small compared to the neighboring countries (UNHCR, 2014). Turkey hosts the world’s largest community of displaced Syrians, and the numbers keep rising, as the war does not seem to be close to an end (UNHCR, 2015). Moreover, Turkey has also been a passageway for migrants to a longer journey, mainly to Europe, of not only Syrians but also Afghans, Iranians and Iraqis, which has been having effect on public and political debates on humanitarian and protection policies (Migration Policy Institute, 2015).

One point that has been worsening the situation of the Syrian and Iraqi refugees is the rise of the terrorist group known as Islamic State (IS), which is carrying more war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity (Council of Europe: Parliamentary Assembly, 2015). The group has taken over key cities in Iraq and Syria, and has been implementing operation cells in more than a dozen countries, including Libya and Egypt (Fairfield, Wallace & Watkins, 2015). The IS attacks in Syria have been aggravating the conflict and consequently causing a huge influx of refugees to neighboring countries (Council of Europe: Parliamentary Assembly, 2015). Since June 2014, the spread of the Islamic State across northern Iraq has triggered a wave of displacement, with ethnic and religious minorities being particularly targeted. Many refugees from Iraq have travelled to neighboring states, but also to Europe, the US and other Western nations (Minority Rights Group International, 2015).

While the numbers arriving in Europe increased in 2015, igniting tensions and drawing media attention, this is not a crisis beyond the capability of Europe to
manage together as a Union (Swing, 2016). There is a clear-eyed understanding of the policy challenges that need to be tackled – the problem is the current migration narrative that has been posed by the media and by policy makers. The misleading myths and stereotypes about migrants and refugees are a denial of both European history and values (Swing, 2016). Next, we will analyze how policy makers in Eastern Europe, particularly in Hungary and Slovakia, are framing the current crisis as a security problem and not facing it as the humanitarian disaster that it is.

4. Hungary’s Security Response: fear of a different community

As previously stated, Hungary registered the second highest number of asylum applications in 2015 among EU states (Eurostat, 2016a). The country’s foreign policy in the same year was dominated by the refugee crisis, adopting aggressive anti-migrant measures to try to stop the flux of migrants, most of them coming from war-torn Syria, which has led to mounting tensions with Germany and neighboring Austria, Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia (Freedom House, 2016; Radio Free Europe, 2015e). The Hungarian government has been explicitly dealing with the refugee crisis as a security matter, conducting a securitization process against the migrants entering the country. Hungary is a noticeable actor in this process, making it our reason for choosing it for this paper.

The speech act: xenophobic rhetoric by Hungary’s government

Hungary’s government has engaged in a nearly xenophobic rhetoric during the last years in order to limit public sympathy for migrants and refugees (Freedom House, 2016a). In February 2015, the government launched a wide-ranging public campaign against migrants and asylum seekers, which consisted in anti-immigration billboards across the country with slogans such as "If you come to Hungary you must respect our culture" and "If you come to Hungary, you cannot take the jobs of Hungarians" (Radio Free Europe, 2015d; U.S. Department of State, 2016). It is important to highlight that, since the billboards were in Hungarian only, the message was not for immigrants, but for the national population, with the clear intention of inoculating the Hungarian public against feeling sympathy for people crossing its borders (Kounalakis, 2015). The campaign also included the circulation
of a "National Consultation on Immigration and Terrorism" survey-style questionnaire, which contained suggestive questions linking migrants to terrorism, promoting hostility towards migrants and spreading xenophobia within the country (U.S. Department of State, 2016).

The securitizing actor: Prime Minister Viktor Orban

Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban has played a decisive role in the government's securitizing narrative. Soon after his election in 2010, Orban and his Fidesz party began a so-called Two-Thirds Revolution, in which 700 new laws were voted and a new constitution was adopted, at lightning speed and with little or no input from opposition parties or civil society stakeholders (Kounalakis, 2015). The populist Prime Minister has been one of the most prominent political voices arguing for the fortification of European borders against migrants. Orban has been trying to stop the flow of undocumented people entering Hungary, which is located on the Balkan migration route to Europe (Robins-Early, 2015). He has even stated that there is a clear link between illegal immigrants arriving in Europe and a rising threat of terrorism, saying that it is not possible to filter hostile terrorists from the massive influx of people migrating to the country (Radio Free Europe, 2015c). According to Orban, the migratory movement is composed of “economic migrants, refugees and also foreign fighters” who “look like an army”, arguing that Hungary has a moral responsibility to return them to their countries (Agence France-Presse, 2015).

Defining an existential threat: Muslim communities as a threat to Europe’s identity

Viktor Orban has explicitly claimed an existential threat to his country and Europe as a whole. He argued that the future of Europe was threatened by the migrants fleeing the war-torn Middle East (Moffett; Feher, 2015). He mentioned a “competition of cultures” between Christianity and Islam, saying that the Christians would lose if many Muslims were allowed to come to Europe. Orban affirmed that Muslim societies put more weight on family and children, and for this reason eventually the number of them would rise among European Christians (Moffett; Feher, 2015). He declared that the migrants’ radically different culture could undermine the idea of Europe itself, which would become a minority interest in its
own continent (Kounalakis, 2015). Orban has argued that the migrants represent a set of values that are irreconcilable with the core principles of European civilization: a Christian heritage, belief in the rule of law, fundamental rights, including freedom of expression and gender equality (Pogány, 2015). Undoubtedly, Orban’s rhetoric fits the societal securitization proposed by Buzan et al. (1998), as it exposes an existential threat to the European identity provoked by the introduction of a large foreign community with different social and cultural values.

The Hungarian Prime Minister also stated that the nation-state as a concept is being eroded by migration, with support from the European Left and American Democrats, as fully integrated migrants would be left-wing voters, according to Orban (Pálfi, 2015). He believes the migrant crisis could destabilize the EU, because commitment to democracy would be questioned (Pálfi, 2015). Orban declared that people want the Europeans to be masters of the situation and defend its borders, criticizing the European ‘elite’ for only discussing secondary issues such as Human Rights, peace and tolerance, instead of freedom, Christianity and national pride (Kounalakis, 2015; Pálfi, 2015).

**Extraordinary measures: Governmental actions against migrants**

In June 2015, Orban announced the construction of a 4-metter high razor-wire barrier along the 175-kilometer border with Serbia in order to keep out migrants coming from the non-EU country (Radio Free Europe, 2015b). He stated that the fence would protect the whole Europe from every illegal entry, defending its construction as a state obligation to defend its borders (Radio Free Europe, 2015a). After blocking the migrant path, a massive influx of more than 15,000 people reached Croatia over three days. Unable to cope with the inflow, the country began escorting people to the border with Hungary, which in response transported them to the border with Austria by bus and train (Radio Free Europe, 2015f). Hungary also decided that migrants whose applications were rejected would be returned to Serbia, which stated being unable to handle the rejected asylum seekers together with the thousands of migrants gathered on its sealed border (Radio Free Europe, 2015g). Recently, the Prime Minister called for a new frontier through the Balkans and Central Europe as a line of defense to stop migrants and refugees trying
to reach the EU (UNHCR, 2016). Hungary’s extreme measures fall into the argument that the securitized subject is an emergency that needs an immediate and strong response (Buzan & Hansen, 2009) – which is clear in Orban’s speeches and actions.

In addition to barriers, the Hungarian parliament approved new laws under which crossing its borders illegally constitutes a criminal offense punishable with imprisonment and expulsion (U.S. Department of State, 2016). The laws approved by the parliament allows the government to deploy its army against migrants who are crossing its border, including the use of non-lethal force such as rubber bullets, pyrotechnical devices, tear gas grenades and net guns (Eleftheriou-Smith, 2015). Concerning the new laws, Viktor Orban Viktor Orban claimed that millions of refugees were laying siege to the borders of his country and Europe, reiterating his view that most were coming for economic and not safety reasons (Eleftheriou-Smith, 2015).

**Audience’s reception: support and objection**

It is important to analyze how the national community – its audience – has assimilated the Hungary’s rhetoric. Despite the condemnation of neighboring governments, multilateral organizations and opinion leaders, the country’s actions seem to have boosted Orban’s popularity at home. Pools show that Orban’s anti-immigration policies have helped him gain support in the country, presenting that 82% of Hungarians favor tighter immigration controls (Moffett; Feher, 2015). The public approval of Orban’s measures has also decelerated the rise of a far-right opposition, which was emerging as the second largest political force in Hungary (Moffett; Feher, 2015). The international criticism towards Viktor Orban also strengthens him politically, since he is doing something significant to keep reaching international headlines as a Prime Minister of a country of 10 million with few natural resources (Moffett; Feher, 2015).

Nevertheless, the surge of migrants – and the government’s hostility toward them – has also provoked a stirring of social activism among Hungarians with a more welcoming view (Moffett; Feher, 2015). Thousands of activists provided help to refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, setting aid stations for migrants. Besides, Hungary’s first large-scale crowdfunded civil campaign placed across the country
several billboards countering the government narrative (Freedom House, 2016b). The campaign produced 1,000 billboards to satirise the government advertisements against migrants, bearing slogans such as “If You Come To Hungary, Bring Another Person With You” and “Sorry About Our Prime Minister” (Nolan, 2015).

It is noticeable that Hungary's government – especially the Prime Minister Viktor Orban – are the agents behind the securitization process of the migrant crisis in the country. However, it is not possible to assure until when this rhetoric will have effect over the Hungarian people. It is known that the anti-immigrant campaign has successfully served as a decoy from more harmful issues for the government, such as mass corruption at brokerage houses (Nolan, 2015). Orban’s reforms have also weakened democratic norms and institutions within Hungary, dismantling of many checks and balances (Pogány, 2015). An audience is never homogenous: the securitization process has been successful on part of the Hungarian population, but we may not know if the percentage of those who differ from the government’s rhetoric will rise or not.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Hungary's securitization of refugees</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Referent object</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Existential threat</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Securitizing actor</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speech act</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audience</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Slovakia’s securitization of refugees: instrumentalization of a cross-national problem

The Slovakian government attempted at securitizing the refugee crisis in Central Europe, especially through the speeches of Prime Minister Robert Fico. Curiously, however, Slovakia received much less refugees than its neighboring countries such as Hungary and Germany; the country decided not to take in any refugees, refusing the EU’s quotas proposed in 2015 (Robert, 2015). We chose the Slovak case mainly because of this incongruity, and we will argue that, in this case, the securitization of the refugee crisis was an instrumentalization aimed at the general elections of 2016 (Mude, 2016).

We will analyze Fico’s speeches and government propaganda and try to connect them with the strengthening of Slovakia’s right-wing parties and movements. The results of the Slovakian 2016 general elections will also be taken into consideration, as they are an indicator of the audience’s reception of the government’s narrative.

Defining an existential threat: protecting Slovakia from a ‘compact Muslim community’

Ethnic tensions are not unbeknownst to Slovakia, a land-locked country in Central Europe. The country has Hungarians and Roma as its largest minorities, and has had experienced tensions over how to integrate them (Cunningham, 2016). Apart from that, however, Slovakia has a relatively homogeneous community and very few migrants, including refugees. It is necessary to consider that there a few main guidelines to Slovak identity and the Catholic faith is an important one.

This became the government’s referent object in its securitization attempt: protect a homogenous Christian population from the presence of a ‘compact’ Muslim community, as once put by Prime Minister Robert Fico. The government’s narrative is permeated by references to the Paris’s terrorist attacks of November 2015, and goes out of its way to reaffirm Slovakia as a ‘Muslim-free country’, where there are no mosques (Cunningham, 2016). This has everything to do with Barry Buzan’s thoughts on societal security, as the fear is linked to the presence of another community and the spillover of its values. Fico says he does not want Slovakia to
‘become another France or Germany’, countries which have been dealing with a conflict of identities between its European-Christian population and its Arabic-Muslim one. Jan Culik (2015) and Daniel Kral (2016) put that, in Slovakia, polls show a nationwide dislike for foreigners, and that might suggest fear of foreign cultures suppressing their national values and identity.

However, as we previously stated, Slovakia does not have neither a migration, nor a refugee problem. In the European Union discussions, the country showed a solidarity contrary to the government’s speech, claiming it could receive refugees, just not as many as larger countries. This leads us to interpret that the country is not protecting itself from another community, but that the government is saying two different things domestically and internationally. By belonging to the EU and being a frontier-member, Slovakia is closer to the crisis faced mainly by the Southern members, such as Greece; its proximity to Hungary provided a glimpse of what the crisis actually looks like. We can assume that Slovakians are not oblivious of the crisis, and this proved to be an opportunity in an election year for a government facing too many domestic problems (Cunningham, 2015). As Jeff Huysmans (2004) warns, securitization is playing with one’s fears. In Slovakia, the government bet on Slovakians’ fear of the unknown and its threat to their day-to-day life as a platform for its re-election.

The speech act: a securitizing move by Slovakia’s government

Slovakia’s Prime Minister Robert Fico is our main source for speech acts, voicing his party’s stance on migration. He has publicly rejected the EU’s refugee settlement quotas as ‘nonsense’ (Bacchi, 2015). The government’s official position is not to accept the quotes proposed by the EU; one must consider, however, that the Prime Minister has defended this position, but rebutting false quotes attributed to him, such as that Slovakia is not ‘built for minorities’ (De La Baume, 2015). In such a sensitive matter it is, at times, difficult to separate what has actually been said from what has been ‘reportedly’ said.

Other government officials such as the minister of Interior and the minister of Foreign Affairs have supported his allegations, stating that Slovakia ‘doesn’t even
have any mosques’ and, because of that, ‘will be only welcoming Christian refugees’ (Tharoor, 2015).

Government propaganda has also been spreading a very clear message. Fico’s party, Smer, adopted the ‘We protect Slovakia’ slogan during the 2016 general elections campaign. This campaign, by the way, focused specifically on the refugee crisis, and practically all parties running for parliament seats have used the anti-refugee rhetoric at some point in the campaign (Scholtyssyk, 2016).

The securitizing actor: Smer and Robert Fico

The most identifiable securitizing actor, in this scenario, is Smer, the party currently ruling Slovakia. Of a left-socialist origin, the party recently engaged in a more nationalist, populist rhetoric – a tendency observed in many Central Europe countries. Domestic problems relating to the general slowing down of European economy, which decreased the population’s wealth, job prospects and access to education and health, have emerged and created the perfect social-political scene for a change in direction: Smer rapidly acknowledged the need for a foreign enemy, and refugees proved to be just as good as any (Kral, 2015). Robert Fico, Slovakia’s Prime Minister, is notorious for being a Putin follower, a proximity that brought discomfort among other left-socialist parties in Europe.

Polls predicted Smer’s victory on the 2016 general elections, albeit not an overwhelming victory like the one four years before. The party and Fico’s anti-refugee rhetoric, unpopular outside Slovakia, proved to be effective inside, helping to turn the refugee crisis into a political consensus, something that Katarina Lezova (2015) says to be very rare in Slovakian politics. Thinking on the necessary felicity conditions for securitization, the anti-refugee campaign was a clear message, structured over people’s fear of what the entrance of an entire different community could mean to Slovakia. The idea was to increase both Smer and Fico’s political capital, in which the securitization attempt succeeded – the party retained its majority in parliament, and Fico stayed as Prime Minister. In addition, the government used the recent terrorist attacks of France (2015) and Belgium (2016) as examples of the risks in absorbing refugees. A so-called Muslim intolerance towards Christian values, mainly through the actions of ISIS, also played an
important role in the cultural resonance of Fico's message. The matter of cultural resonance is a tie-in to our next section, in which we will go over the Slovakian audience's preferences in more detail.

**Audience’s reception: a rare consensus and the rise of right-wing groups**

As put by Barry Buzan *et al.* (1998) securitization is most likely to succeed if it is based upon the audience's fears and historical values. In Slovakia, researches show the country to be unwelcoming of foreigners in general (Lezova, 2015), or even of its own ethnic minorities (Cunningham, 2016). Following the euro crisis, after which economy in the continent suffered severe blows, Slovakia faced the emergence of many domestic problems: unemployment, debt, inefficiency of public services, corruption (Cunningham, 2015). In such a difficult scenario, the government chose to focus on an external problem as a way of escaping electors' scrutiny over Slovakia's domestic problems. For example, it is not to say, however, that the government simply created an anti-migrant narrative; there are elements in Slovakian nationalist that allow for the construction of such discourse. In a poll regarding the accommodation of refugees in a nearby facility in countryside Slovakia, 90% of the local population voted 'no' (Tharoor, 2015).

In addition, one must consider the rise of right-wing parties all across Europe (Lebor, 2016), as a direct reaction to the continent's economic problems and political turmoil. This condition worsened with the arrival of thousands of refugees and the attacks carried out by ISIS in Paris and in Brussels. In Slovakia, for the first time since the country became independent, an extreme right-wing group, the People’s Party of Slovakia – LSNS, ascended to the Slovak parliament. As we previously stated, all parties directed their campaigns towards nationalistic topics, especially regarding migration. This reflects the audience's acceptance of the securitization, as the actors’ objectives – re-election – were fulfilled, even though the government failed to obtain majority in parliament (Al-Jazeera, 2016; Lebor, 2016).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Slovakia’s securitization of refugees</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Referent object</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

21
of another large community engulfing its culture and identity was instrumentalized for a successful securitization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Existential threat</strong></th>
<th>Muslim refugees in large numbers entering Slovakia.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Securitizing actor</strong></td>
<td>Smer, Slovakia’s majority party and Robert Fico, Prime Minister.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speech act</strong></td>
<td>Government propaganda; Fico’s speeches and interviews; the construction of refugees as a threat to Slovaks and their community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audience</strong></td>
<td>Slovak electors.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. **Concluding remarks**

As we write this paper, the refugee crisis brought to the world’s attention in 2015 was far from over. The situation is no longer one of pure compliance with international refuge law, once a number of sociopolitical, geographical and even religious aspects makes it much more complex than this. The construction of anti-Islamic refugee narratives by Eastern European governments is part of such complexity.

While it is not easy to leave our humanitarian beliefs aside, one must make an effort to recognize the numerous ways in which such complexity impacts human fear. We can look at Slovakian and Hungarian peoples and say they are going down racist path – but exactly why does such a speech act has so much impact upon regular people? Why does it have resonance? To answer these questions, we must attempt to leave our beliefs behind, and try to understand the fears allowing these narratives to soar. As ours was an exploratory, initial work on the matter, we still cannot grasp the total complexity of this situation, or answer these questions thoroughly.

However, some aspects are common in both Slovakia and Hungary, as they face this crisis – a crisis that puts even the European Union as it is in jeopardy. In both cases, the population is suffering with unemployment, corruption, an increase in poverty and, maybe as a result, a spike in the number of extreme right-wing
groups. Whenever such domestic problems come to the surface, governments are quick to find a new enemy, something that could work both as a diversion and as a solution. The inflow of thousands of desperate Syrians, fleeing from the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, proved to be something that could be worked into the logic of a security message. “They are Arabs, they are Muslims, and there are no way to know if they are innocents or terrorists. We are already living difficult times, and they will put a severe strain on our resources. We are few, and they are many. Then look what is happening in France, and in Germany. Attacks and rapes”. This is not a real quote, but it could have been – and that is precisely the message behind the securitization attempts here analyzed. The fear exists, as it does within us all, and it can rapidly change into racism if put to the ‘right’ direction.

Audiences’ reactions have not been homogeneous, once the audience itself rarely is. Slovakia is a homogeneous country, but there still Slovak voices opposing Smer’s anti-refugee rhetoric. Nevertheless, it is notable that most of the Slovak elections revolved around the matter, even though the country has received no considerable number of refugees in the past year. In Hungary, reactions to the government’s narrative have been stronger, indicating that Orban’s message is not as much of a consensus as it would be, if the securitization were truly successful among all Hungarians.

These cases are, as put by Barry Buzan, a clear case of a community fearing the presence of another, thinking in terms of protecting its own identity before a group that seems too numerous, too different. They are also a clear narrative construction with electoral means, and answering to a new part of the population. Less than a year after the most critical point so far, we still cannot even speculate what will this mean for Hungary and Slovakia, for the European Union, for the refugees or for international law. By putting the initial impressions on this paper, however, we open the discussion. If politics will not give more answers, maybe academic research will.
References


Council of Europe: Parliamentary Assembly. (2015, April 1). Humanitarian consequences of the actions of the terrorist group known as “Islamic State".


