

## The Politics of Securitising Migration

Written by Samuel Singler

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

# The Politics of Securitising Migration

<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/07/12/the-politics-of-securitising-migration/>

SAMUEL SINGLER, JUL 12 2016

As the forces of globalization have battered down the barriers to interstate trade and global communications, so too has the population of the world become increasingly mobile. Combined with the geopolitical disarray caused by the end of the Cold War, as well as explicit links drawn between migration and the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks against the United States, these transformations have made migration increasingly prevalent in discussions of global politics and international security (Bali, 2008: 471). The aim of this essay is to illuminate the processes by which migration becomes politicized as a security problem, and to analyse the consequences of such a development. The recent highly visible and contentious political debates on migration, in the context of the upcoming presidential elections in the United States and the current 'migrant crisis' in Europe, allow for the utilization of the framework of securitization pioneered by the Copenhagen School (Wæver, 1995; Buzan et al., 1998), which conceptualizes security as a discursive and intersubjective construct. Although existential discursive framings have been central to the securitization of migration, an evaluation of the securitization approach will reveal its tendency to disregard the role of historical institutional developments, technocratic procedures, and diffuse commonplace security practices in framing migration as a security issue. By retaining an awareness of the importance of both dominant political discourse and diffuse processes of securitization, this essay will argue that framing migration as a security issue enacts a specific conception of political community based on fear and distrust, in which the fault lines of belonging are determined beyond the realm of democratic political contestation, thus challenging the liberal democratic norms of modern Western society.

The term 'migration' can encompass a variety of activities involving the movement of populations from one place to another (Huysmans & Squire, 2009: 170), but this essay, concerned with the international political effects of migration, will focus on the cross-border movement of human beings. Cross-border migration can be further categorized into more specific forms, such as economic migration or forced migration, but a broad focus is useful for an examination of the sociopolitical phenomena surrounding migration, as indeed an effect of its securitization is to obscure such differences and present migrants as a unitary, coherent group. Although globalization is often seen as challenging the sovereignty of states by eroding their capacity to control the cross-border movement of people, in fact states retain considerable power over the regulation of border controls, as well as the ability to determine the membership of the political community by categorizing individuals as citizens or non-citizens, both of which are central to claims of territorial sovereignty (Adamson, 2006: 175-176). Indeed, it is in the context of traditional conceptions of state sovereignty that migration was presented as a security issue in the early 1990s. Such an approach is concerned with determining whether or not migration presents a threat, defined by certain objective criteria, to the security of nation-states (e.g. Weiner, 1992/93). However, this approach overlooks the subjective nature of security, evident in the fact that similar material factors may or may not constitute a threat to the security of an actor, depending on how they are perceived (Buzan, 1991: 115-116). Conceptualizing security as a social and political construct, then, allows for the examination of how and why certain issues become framed as security problems while others do not, and what the sociopolitical implications of such a framing are.

The securitization approach developed by the Copenhagen School situates the construction of security in political discourse, whereby 'security is not of interest as a sign that refers to something more real; the utterance *itself* is the act' (Wæver, 1995: 55 – original emphasis). The language of security depicts certain issues, such as migration, as an existential threat to a referent object, usually the state, in order to legitimize exceptional measures and to mobilize resources effectively in order to counteract the threat (Balzacq et al. 2014: 20). Although this approach does not

# The Politics of Securitising Migration

Written by Samuel Singler

necessarily confine the analysis of these 'speech-acts' to language used by state elites and politicians, these groups often at least implicitly constitute the focus of a securitization analysis due to their relative power in shaping international political discourse, and the sustained role of the state in defining modern-day conceptions of political community (Huysmans, 2006: 34-35). However, the securitization approach does not suggest that state elites have complete autonomy in shaping the security agenda, as the success of a securitizing act depends to an extent on underlying material conditions, and, importantly, on the perceived legitimacy of securitizing actors as well as the nature of the referent object, e.g. the state (Buzan et al., 1998: 32). Securitization, then, is an *intersubjective* phenomenon dependent on its acceptance and legitimation by the audience towards which the act is directed, and securitizing moves are not always successful (Wæver, 1995: 75). It is also important to note that the securitization of a certain issue is not solely reliant on the existential rendering of that specific issue itself, but can also work by discursively constructing linkages between the issue at hand, such as migration, and problems that have already been existentially framed, such as terrorism (Adamson, 2006: 195). This understanding of security, as a discursively constructed intersubjective understanding that legitimizes exceptional actions by specific authorities, can provide a useful analytical framework for examining recent political rhetoric and policy outcomes surrounding migration in the United States and Europe.

Migration has figured prominently in recent political discussions on both sides of the Atlantic. The European Union has faced a 'migrant crisis' due to an influx of refugees and migrants mainly from the conflict zones of the Middle East, as migration flows more than doubled in 2015 (Eurostat, 2016). In the United States, migration has become a contentious point of debate in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, with candidates such as Donald Trump (2016) explicitly framing migration as a 'threat to national security'. The previously outlined discursive processes of securitization are evident in both cases, as migration has become framed as an existential threat as such, in addition to being linked to other existential threats. For instance, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has directly positioned migration as a threat to the continued existence of the European Union, as well as a common 'European identity' (Traynor, 2015). Migration has also become strongly linked to the issue of terrorism in dominant European political discourse, especially in the wake of the Paris terror attacks of 13<sup>th</sup> November 2015 (Economist, 2015). Similarly, Trump has linked the issue of migration to the possibility of ISIS-affiliated terrorists entering the country (Edelman, 2016). An important aspect of these discursive practices of securitization has been the presentation of all migrants as a unitary group, glossing over the distinctions between refugees, asylum-seekers, economic migrants and so forth. Rhetorical practices describing the inflow of migrants as a 'flood', or as Mr. Trump puts it, 'flow[ing] in like water' (Rucker & Costa, 2015), obscure the distinctive backgrounds and motivations of individual migrants, presenting them as a singular, coherent existential threat. Thereby the need for a reasoned argument as to how exactly increased migration constitutes an existential threat to the political community is averted (Huysmans, 2006: 47-48). Furthermore, presenting all migrants as a singular existential threat simultaneously serves to construct a perception of a homogeneous European identity which must be protected, concealing the reality of a multitude of cultural practices within European borders (Bigo, 2002: 80).

However, for the securitization approach of the Copenhagen School, the discursive positioning of migrants as an existential threat does not, as such, constitute the successful securitization of migration. These discursive practices of securitization seek to legitimize 'extraordinary measures beyond the routines and norms of everyday politics', and the successful securitization of migration should thus be reflected in exceptional measures taken by authorities to address the issue, as well as the acceptance of these measures as legitimate by the population (Williams, 2003: 514). Indeed, the migrant crisis in Europe has seen the undermining of EU treaties (e.g. the Dublin Convention), the circumvention of the UN Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (O'Neill, 2006: 338), and the reinstatement of border controls within the EU, betraying the promise of free movement within its internal borders (Bigo, 2009: 583). Furthermore, such measures have been legitimized through popular support, exemplified by public approval of Mr. Orban's policies in Hungary (Buckley, 2015) and of a possible extension of the state of emergency in France, under which border controls have been tightened (Economist, 2016), as well as in Mr. Trump's success in the U.S. presidential primaries so far (Collinson, 2016). It becomes clear, then, that migration seems to have been successfully securitized in both the United States and Europe, and the framing of migration as an existential threat in dominant political discourse has no doubt profoundly affected these developments.

Although the Copenhagen School approach does acknowledge the importance of certain 'facilitating conditions' in

## The Politics of Securitising Migration

Written by Samuel Singler

determining the success of a securitizing speech act, such concepts remain underdeveloped (McDonald, 2008: 571). This approach has proved useful in demonstrating that migration has indeed become securitized and exceptional measures to regulate cross-border movement are seen as legitimate. However, this focus on existential language and the politics of exception cannot exhaustively explain why certain actors and practices have become legitimized in the process of securitizing migration. It overlooks the long-term historical context in which security framings have come to characterize migration policies, as well as the ways in which a specific conception of political community is enacted via not only existential discourse, but also more commonplace security practices used to control cross-border migration and monitor the population within territorial borders. What is needed, then, is a conception of securitization as a multidimensional process involving myriad actors and practices in not simply answering the security questions framed by existential political discourse, but also constructing the problems themselves in a way that allows for the application of a specific 'technique of governing danger' (Huysmans, 2006: 9). Due to the technocratic nature of modern societies, the status of expertise allows for the production of knowledge claims that are recognized as truths and thus go unchallenged, even if the subject of these claims, such as the relationship between migration and security, is inherently ambivalent (Bigo, 2001: 121-122).

Utilising such a conception of securitization allows for an understanding of how the securitization of migration has not only taken place recently in exceptional circumstances, but is also the product of incremental processes and institutional settings (McDonald, 2008: 564). Through long-term political contestation between a variety of actors and institutions, migration has become embedded in institutional and legal frameworks dealing with threats to society. For instance, the 1990 Convention Implementing the Schengen agreement explicitly connected migration to threats such as terrorism and organized crime (Huysmans, 2006: 68); in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the USA PATRIOT Act brought immigration into the remit of the Department of Homeland Security; and security actors such as FRONTEX (Léonard, 2010) and NATO (Stoltenberg, 2016) have been called upon to address the recent European 'migrant crisis'. Embedding migration in such legal and institutional frameworks privileges a conception of migration as the responsibility of security actors, thus translating into diffuse security practices that work to further silence alternative conceptions and institutionalize security discourse and practice in the regulation of migration (Bigo, 2001: 125). This conception of securitization as a multidimensional, incremental process illuminates why the discursive framing of migration as an existential security issue has been widely accepted, as dominant political discourse and everyday security practice serve to legitimize each other in a cycle of mutual reinforcement. The implications of this cycle of securitization surrounding migration are no less than profound.

While increasingly tight border controls have not achieved their goal of reducing migrant flows, they have reduced opportunities for legal migration, thus placing refugees in considerable danger as they attempt to traverse more perilous routes to safety in their escape from war (MSF, 2016: 53-55; Crépeau et al. 2007: 312). Within European borders, security practice and discourse have challenged the values of liberal democracy and contributed to an atmosphere of fear and violence, even as links between migration and activities such as crime and terrorism remain precarious at best (Bigo, 2009). Discourse of a unitary threat posed by all migrants to a coherent 'European identity' not only justifies exceptional measures, but also enacts a specific conception of political community, as the construction of migrants as threatening 'others' simultaneously defines the collective political 'self' (Weldes et al., 1999: 11). Furthermore, far from being neutral, everyday security practices serve to reinforce this distinction. For instance, on the border, citizens of certain nationalities are 'more easily defined as immigrants or migrants than those of others' (Guild, 2009: 13), while data gathering and surveillance practices designate and categorize the population according to 'insecurity profiles' (Huysmans, 2011: 377). The combination of such exclusionary practices and political rhetoric contribute to an atmosphere of racism, violence and fear, as 'security is a practice not of responding to enemies and fear but of creating them' (Huysmans, 2014: 3). Of course, determining the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion is central to modern conceptions of political community, but the securitization of migration has moved the processes by which such distinctions are made beyond the realm of democratic decision-making. Thus the fault lines of political inclusion are determined by political elites and their existential discourse, security actors applying a specific security rationality to migration policies, as well as everyday security practices that enact the parameters of political community in a largely hidden and often automated manner. The boundaries drawn by these actors and processes are frequently based on racist or xenophobic generalizations and existential fears, thus challenging liberal democratic norms of collective decision-making, the rule of law, and equal rights, as a majority of the population is not included in these processes, existing domestic and international legal frameworks are undermined, and the

# The Politics of Securitising Migration

Written by Samuel Singler

distribution of rights is contingent on biological and cultural distinctions.

It thus becomes clear that what is at stake in the securitization of migration is not just the suitability of applying a security framework to issues of migration, but also the parameters of political community, and the values on which those boundaries are constructed. Indeed, the importance of the European response to the migrant crisis in shaping the nature of European political community was acknowledged by German Chancellor Angela Merkel: 'If Europe fails on the question of refugees, then it won't be the Europe we wished for' (BBC, 2015). This essay has shown that while the securitization approach of the Copenhagen School can provide valuable insights into the ramifications of recent existential rhetoric surrounding political discussions on migration, a broader conception of security as a multidimensional process involving myriad actors and commonplace practices is needed in order to grasp the full implications of the politicization of migration as a security issue. It is only through acknowledging these implications that the desirability of the securitization of migration can be evaluated. Not only is the effectiveness of increasingly strict border control policies highly problematic even in terms of achieving their stated goals, but also, as this essay has shown, the securitization of migration constitutes a challenge to modern liberal democratic norms. It thus becomes imperative for the populations of Europe and the United States to consider whether values such as equality, rights, and democracy, on one hand, or racism, fear, and violence, on the other, should constitute the bedrock of modern political society.

## References

- Adamson, F., 'Crossing Borders: International Migration and National Security,' *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2006), pp. 165-199.
- Bali, S., 'Population Movements,' in P. Williams, *Security Studies: An Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).
- Balzacq, T., S. Guzzini, M. Williams, O. Wæver and H. Patomäki, 'Forum: What Kind of Theory - If Any - Is Securitization?' *International Relations*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2014), pp. 1-41.
- BBC, 'Migrant Crisis: Merkel Warns of EU "Failure",' *BBC* [online], 31<sup>st</sup> August, (2015). Available at: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34108224>> [Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2016].
- Bigo, D., 'Migration and Security,' in V. Guiraudon and C. Joppke, *Controlling a New Migration World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001).
- Bigo, D., 'Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease,' *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2002), pp. 63-92.
- Bigo, D., 'Immigration Controls and Free Movement in Europe,' *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 91, No. 875 (2009), pp. 579-591.
- Buckley, N., 'Orban's Hard Line on Migrants Proves a Ratings Winner at Home,' *Financial Times* [online], 20<sup>th</sup> September, (2015). Available at: <<https://next.ft.com/content/248dc176-5f8e-11e5-9846-de406ccb37f2>> [Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2016].
- Buzan, B., *People, States & Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).
- Buzan, B., O. Wæver and J. de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).
- Collinson, S., 'Primary Results: Front-Runners Score Key Western Victories,' *CNN* [online], 23<sup>rd</sup> March, (2016). Available at: <<http://edition.cnn.com/2016/03/22/politics/election-2016-arizona-utah-idaho-primaries-caucuses-highlights/>> [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2016].

# The Politics of Securitising Migration

Written by Samuel Singler

Crépeau, F., D. Nakache and I. Atak, 'International Migration: Security Concerns and Human Rights Standards,' *Transcultural Psychiatry*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (2007), pp. 311-337.

Economist, 'Europe's Response to the Paris Attacks is Different This Time,' *The Economist* [online], 14<sup>th</sup> November (2015). Available at: <<http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21678514-je-suis-charlie-was-about-free-speech-time-issue-migrants-europe-sees-paris-attacks>> [Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> March, 2016].

Economist, 'The End of Insouciance,' *The Economist*[online], 26<sup>th</sup> March (2016). Available at: <<http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21695562-france-realising-its-state-emergency-may-last-long-time-end-insouciance>> [Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> March, 2016].

Edelman, A., 'Donald Trump to Syrian Refugee Children: "You Can't Come Here",' *New York Daily News* [online], 8<sup>th</sup> February (2016). Available at: <<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/trump-syrian-refugee-children-article-1.2524215>> [Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2016].

Eurostat, 'Record Number of Over 1.2 Million First Time Asylum Seekers Registered in 2015,' *Eurostat* [online], 4<sup>th</sup> March (2016). Available at: <<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7203832/3-04032016-AP-EN.pdf/790eba01-381c-4163-bcd2-a54959b99ed6>> [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2016].

Huysmans, J., *The Politics of Insecurity: Fear, Migration and Asylum in the EU* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

Huysmans, J., 'What's In an Act? On Security Speech Acts and Little Security Nothings,' *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 42, No. 4-5 (2011), pp. 371-383.

Huysmans, J., *Security Unbound: Enacting Democratic Limits* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

Huysmans, J. and V. Squire, 'Migration and Security,' in M. Dunn Cavelty and V. Mauer (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Security Studies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

Guild, E., *Security and Migration in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

Léonard, S., 'EU Border Security and Migration Into the European Union: FRONTEX and Securitisation Through Practices,' *European Security*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2010), pp. 231-254.

McDonald, M., 'Securitization and the Construction of Security,' *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2008), pp. 563-587.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), *Obstacle Course to Europe: A Policy-Made Humanitarian Crisis at EU Borders* (Brussels: Médecins Sans Frontières, 2016).

O'Neill, P., 'The European Union and Migration: Security versus Identity?' *Defence Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2006), pp. 322-350.

Rucker, P. and R Costa, 'Donald Trump: "We Have to Take Back the Heart of Our Country",' *Washington Post* [online], 11<sup>th</sup> July (2015). Available at: <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-tells-supporters-we-need-to-take-back-the-heart-of-our-country/2015/07/11/066aecf2-27dd-11e5-b77f-eb13a215f593\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-tells-supporters-we-need-to-take-back-the-heart-of-our-country/2015/07/11/066aecf2-27dd-11e5-b77f-eb13a215f593_story.html)> [Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2016].

Stoltenberg, J., 'NATO and Europe's Refugee and Migrant Crisis,' *North Atlantic Treaty Organization* [online], 26<sup>th</sup> February (2016). Available at: <[http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_128645.htm?selectedLocale=en](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_128645.htm?selectedLocale=en)> [Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> March, 2016].

Traynor, I., 'Migration Crisis: Hungary PM Says Europe in Grip of Madness,' *The Guardian* [online], 3<sup>rd</sup> September,

## The Politics of Securitising Migration

Written by Samuel Singler

(2015). Available at: <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/03/migration-crisis-hungary-pm-victor-orban-europe-response-madness>> [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2016].

Trump, D., 'Immigration Reform That Will Make America Great Again,' *Donald J. Trump For President* [online], (2016). Available at: <<https://www.donaldjtrump.com/positions/immigration-reform>> [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2016].

Wæver, O., 'Securitization and Desecuritization,' in R. Lipschutz, *On Security* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995).

Weiner, M., 'Security, Stability, and International Migration,' *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (1992/93), pp. 91-126.

Weldes, J., M. Laffey, H. Gusterson and R. Duvall, 'Introduction: Constructing Insecurity,' in J. Weldes, M. Laffey, H. Gusterson and R. Duvall (eds.), *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

Williams, M., 'Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics,' *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (2003), pp. 511-531.

*Written by: Samuel William Singler*  
*Written at: Queen Mary University of London*  
*Written for: Prof. Jef Huysmans*  
*Date written: March 2016*