

Cycling into Norway – Borders as Creative, Contested Controversies

Written by Fanny Falkenberg

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FANNY FALKENBERG, OCT 18 2018

Recent years have seen an emerging literature on the (in)securitization of borders. This essay wants to move away from thinking borders as sites of security only, to a controversy drawing upon multiple contested rationales. By looking at the case study of migrants cycling into Norway during the autumn of 2015, I seek to reveal the insights it provides to the study of border controls. To do so, the essay will be structured into three parts. First, I briefly sketch out the case study, situating its socio-political context. I find that the event's 'exceptionality' initially makes it look as a case study for the Securitization Theory. However, whereas the Securitization Theory can provide a framework to understand the firm response, it fails to account for the complexity of rationales underpinning it. In the second part, I make the case for studying borders as controversies. Interpreting controversies as 'contested moments', I highlight how different rationales underpinned the actions taken. Overlapping, but also contested, I focus on the following three rationales: 1) legal, 2) geopolitical, and 3) cultural. The aim is not to black-box different factors but to provide critical space for thinking around the event. Finally, I argue that a fundamental problem with all these three rationales is their lacking subjectivity of the migrant. I conclude by making the case that security studies should critically explore factors that are not only 'exceptional', perhaps not even initially 'security-oriented', to reveal the complexity around the (in)securitization of borders.

Cycling into Norway

'It is now impossible to seek asylum in Norway unless you swim here from the Middle East' (Ebeltoft 2015).

'No one can expect to be carried into Norway on a golden chair' (Listhaug 2015).

During the autumn of 2015, the Norwegian political climate was polarised. The increasing numbers of migrants[1] crossing the Norwegian-Russian border had led to intense discussions around migration. However, the rising numbers of crossings was not the only thing that caught attention. The pictures of cycling migrants in minus degrees captured headlines worldwide. The bicycles, used to circumvent laws on both sides[2], were bought in the Russian town, Nikel. From there, migrants took taxis to the Russian border and cycled into Norway. Crossing the border, they were driven to the closest town, Kirkenes. The municipality, being a three hours flight from Oslo, had initially considerable autonomy in dealing with the border crossings. At first, the local authorities offered migrants to stay in hotels, but as the numbers increased, most were accommodated in sports halls. The local population brought food, invited people to their homes, and provided legal assistance (Naguib 2017). These actions were not part of a governmental thought-out plan, but formed a local, spontaneous response. Nevertheless, the central government was dissatisfied with how things played out. They claimed that things were 'out of control' and that this 'chaos' must come to an end. In less than a week, a new law was rushed through parliament with instructions to increase forced deportations (Bangstad 2016: 405). Extra police forces were sent to the border. Since 2016, there has been a massive reduction in asylum applicants.

Is this another example of another successful securitization? Adopting the Securitization Theory, this event *can* turn into an example of a successful securitization process. Briefly explained, the Securitization Theory emphasises how security issues are constructed through speech acts (MacDonald 2008: 567). Here, issues are placed 'above the

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normal rules of liberal democratic politics' for so to 'justify emergency action to do whatever is necessary to remedy the situation' (Abrahamsen 2005: 59). Security, according to Ole Wæver, 'undercuts the political order' (Wæver 1995: 6). At the heart of this approach lies therefore the idea of exceptionality. An event must be framed as exceptional, acted upon and agreed upon as such. Applying the Securitization Theory to the case study above, these criteria *can* be fulfilled. There would not be difficult to find politicians who claimed that this was an 'exceptional' event, and the forced deportations could be interpreted as a form of 'emergency action'. In other words, adopting the Securitization Theory, one could reach the conclusion to having identified yet another example of a successful Securitization process.

The problem with applying the Securitization Theory is that it hides more than it reveals. Indeed, its emphasis on how security is constructed is useful, but the framework serves to silence several important aspects in understanding the complexity of (in)security issues. As already highlighted, the idea of exceptionality and its break with normality lies at the essence of the theory. However, scholars have shown how problematic this dichotomy between the norm and the exception is (Huysmans 2011, CASE 2006). It overlooks how (in)security practices rather move along a continuum between the two (Williams 2011: 459). It is therefore important, as Andrew Neal emphasises, to rather focus on the *conditions of possibility* of exceptionalism (Neal 2006: 44). To do so, one needs to understand the event through a different lens than the one sketched out by the Securitization Theory. The remaining part of the essay will therefore explore this event as a controversy, highlighting the plurality of rationales at play.

Borders as controversies

'Every form of border produces its own spectacle, its own representations' (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015: 68).

The core argument of the article is that borders are best understood as controversies. The study of controversies, linked to Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT), has recently been used to enhance our understandings of (in)securitization processes[3]. To be sure, the ANT is not a unified approach, and the study of controversies has been done differently. In this essay, I interpret controversies as 'moments' where 'diverse groups struggle to authoritatively establish understandings of issues (...)' (Schouten 2014: 26). My argument is that the Securitization Theory serves to establish understandings of (in)security by emphasising elements of importance and unimportance. Seeing the Securitization Theory as a structuring approach, I see controversies as open-ended. This does not mean that 'everything' is of interest, but that border practices are always embedded in context and needs to be understood as such. This impels the researcher to seek proximity to events, carving out details left out by the Securitization Theory. By so doing, one can see how border practices are carried out through multiple, contradictory rationales. From this follows a shifting focus on 'the decision' to the many dispersed relations (Doty 2007: 124). This complements the work done on (in)security experts[4], and reveal the various forms of power/knowledge networks that constitute the given border regime (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015: 68). By studying the border as a controversy, I aim to provide insights that are easily lost in the Securitization Theory.

To map this controversy, I below outline three rationales that are important to understand this peculiar border practice. I refer to them as 'legal', 'geopolitical' and 'cultural'. This is not to say that these rationales can be crisply distinguished – nor is it to say that these were the only rationales at play. The idea is to highlight how these three elements were used in both justifying the need for stricter border practices, and to make sense of the event. Thus, it is an attempt to broaden space for critical interventions in approaching the (in)securitization of the Norway-Russia border

The legal rationale

In understanding how the border practices changed, the legal rationales are imperative. As already highlighted, the governmental response was to rapidly change laws. Whereas this easily can be approached as the 'sovereign decision of exception' (Schmitt 1985: 5), this would be a misleading line of thought. The decision was not made *outside* the law – and neither was it a radical break with previous liberal democratic practice. Norway has for long adopted strict immigration policies, and the legal measures enjoyed full support from almost all parties (except the Socialist Party[5]). It should, however, be mentioned that legality was not only invoked as a reactionary solution to a

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proclaimed problem. More widely, it was used to 'make sense' of what was going on. One of the most common questions raised was; to what extent do these people 'need' and hence 'deserve' to be here? Commentators, politicians, lawyers and others highlighted that most of the people arriving were not 'refugees' but 'economic migrants'. References were made to the Geneva Conventions with the conclusion that they did not have the 'legal' right to stay. Whereas these accounts framed the issue as one existing outside politics, these 'legal' rationales were by no means apolitical. After all, the law is an outcome of social and political processes (Klabbers 2010: 310). Contemporarily, illegal migrants are not inherently illegal – they are *made* illegal (Fassin 2011: 217). But whereas this binary logic between 'refugees' and 'migrants' has proven untenable (Long 2013), it nevertheless served to delegitimise a clear majority of those crossing the border. It is therefore necessary to think critically about how legal knowledge is produced (Orford 1999: 683). In sum, the legal rationale was not only imperative to the governmental response, but also vital to 'make sense' of why this response was seen appropriate.

The geopolitical rationale

These border crossings were not understood in isolation, but within larger contexts. The humanitarian approach emphasised the atrocities the migrants were escaping. Norway, as one of the richest countries in the world, was seen as having a duty to help. Nevertheless, another geopolitical context increasingly gained political attention. This one was directed towards Russia. The question here was whether Russia had intentionally encouraged migrants to go to Norway. This was discussed in newspapers, by politicians and scholarly institutions alike, referred to as a 'hybrid warfare' declared by Russian authorities. The reason for this, they presumed, was the sanctions Norway together with the EU had been part of imposing. The migrants arriving were therefore seen as a 'payback move' from Russia (De Carbonnel 2015). But by up-scaling the event into a geopolitical context, the migrants became a tactic of great power politics. This idea was not only problematic for its lacking empirical evidence, but also for its geopolitical assumption of the immanent Other. Here, packed into geopolitical discussions and speculations about Russian's intentions was an underlying idea of the Other utilised as a threat against Norway[6]. Left out was the possibilities of migrants having anything positive to bring. Indeed, this assumption was not explicitly uttered, and many did probably not even reflect upon it themselves. Nevertheless, the geopolitical idea of seeing politics as a zero-sum game, where more migrants inevitably lead to more destruction, was constantly underlying these discussions.

The cultural rationale

The third underlying rationale was the notion of cultural differences. To be sure, none of the governmental policies were formally justified with reference to 'culture', and I recognise the importance of being careful by using identity as a salient factor (Campbell 1992: 280). Nevertheless, cultural differences cannot be ignored. Existential exception is also driven by the marginalisation of those who are different (Huysmans 2006: 21). Security is closely tied to identity, and identity needs difference to be (Connolly 1991: 64). It follows that for the Other to become seen as a threat, knowledge needs to be produced (Neumann 2017: 5). In Norway, there has for long been an intensified emphasis on cultural explanations explaining socio-political issues. Today, standards of being considered 'Norwegian' appears particularly strict, containing not only the 'right' documents, but also cultural commitments and ethnicity[7]. Applied to this event, culture should not be seen as an isolated rationale, but as a taken-for-granted background that gives meaning to the world (Jabri 2007: 141). Culture plays therefore a constitutive role, meaning that it can be intertwined with other rationales. At its core, however, is always the generalised knowledge ascribed to the Other. As Etienne Balibar emphasises, the Other becomes constructed not as a simple *stranger*, but one who holds *completely different set of human values* which towers national differences (Balibar 2006: 29). Few would disagree that if the people crossing the border were Swedes, the reactions would be different. Similarly, very few, if none, ever raise concerns around the many Swedes living in Norway. These are also 'economic migrants' but unproblematised because of the different knowledge attributed to them. This is not just about people crossing a national line, it is about *who* these people are, and the knowledge ascribed to them. To understand how border practices function and change, one should be attentive to the cultural rationales at play.

What now? Rethinking subjectivity

Studying controversies means paying attention to 'moments' of contestations, and the opportunities of redefinitions

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they bring. No single actor has full authority over the border. The border is fluid, constantly contested, and made through a myriad of different rationales (Basaran 2008). The increasing number of migrants crossing the Norwegian-Russian border was not met by a rational automatic response. Politicians, local authorities, border guards, journalists, academics, activists, and others, all played a role. Some used this event to open their homes, share food, collect clothes and provide juridical assistance. Others used this moment to solidify hatred, despising the ones reaching out and clinging onto nationalist rhetoric. The government steered away from these most 'emotional' utterances, but the politics imposed was more in accord with the latter approach than the first. What was then claimed as an appropriate response to effectively 'deal' with the situation contributed to legitimising a rising fear of migrants. Today, an increasing collective indifference has allowed new (in)security practices to be imposed with limited resistance (Basaran 2015: 215). This indicates a normalisation of the problematisation of difference.

Whereas the Securitization Theory wants people to be attentive to the word 'security', this has the potential to direct our attention away from how (in)securitization processes happen through multiple rationales. In fact, in this controversy, I found the word 'security' to be strikingly absent. The increasing deportations were not justified by protecting the 'national security' but done in the name of 'law' as an 'appropriate' response. This tells us that when studying border practices, one needs to be aware of apolitical claims flagged under 'law', 'order', and other 'common-sensical' explanations for why migrants should be deported. Studying controversies means critically intervene in spaces that are not interpreted as a security practice, but nevertheless creates profound (in)securities in many lives[8]. (In)security practices can be framed as 'common-sense', making them difficult to capture, but nevertheless important to highlight.

What these (in)security practices show is a tension of subjectivity. By stripping away the migrant's agency, by clinging onto apolitical claims such as 'law' and 'order', many pretended to take the political out of question. The common determinant for the discussions around the event was then not the emphasis on security, but the limited understandings of the migrant's subjectivity. The assumptions made around the Other, and the lack of agency attributed to them, ran through legal, geopolitical, cultural and other rationales. Crucially, by recognising subjectivity, one can escape seeing migrants as rational-choice actors confronting external structures (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015: 83). One can see that the individual is not a pre-given identity, but a product of power relations (Foucault 2007: 180). These power relations fluctuate throughout society in ever more creative ways and studying controversies should encourage the researcher to be more attentive to this complexity.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have looked at how borders are not only sites of security, but works as creative, contested, controversies. Through the case study of the increasing migrants entering the Norway-Russia border during the autumn of 2015, the intent was to open critical space for thinking about the event. To do so, I structured the essay into three parts. First, I presented the case study, highlighting the governmental rapid response to increase forced deportations. Whereas this could be seen as case study of the Securitization Theory, I argued that such an interpretation would hide more than it revealed. Drawing upon this finding, I argued in the second part that border practices should be understood as controversies. This allowed me to see the various rationales at play. I outlined three of them which I called 1) legal, 2) geopolitical and 3) cultural. By sketching out these different rationales, I sought to open critical space. Finally, I argued that the study of controversies shows the importance of not focusing on security only, but on a range of rationales that also leads to (in)securities. What was striking in this controversy was the absence of the word 'security', which meant that the border practices were built upon more hidden, and creative rationales. Particularly important, I argued, was to focus on migrants' subjectivities, and how it risks being packed into legal, political, cultural and other arguments. At a more general level, studying borders as controversies has shown the critical importance to be open when approaching the political. As (in)security practices become ever more 'common-sensical', it forces us to be more attentive to the plural, creative (in)security practices at play.

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Notes

[1] Due to the problematic distinction between migrants and refugees, I use the term 'migrants' to embrace a more inclusive meaning of the term (see Carling 2017).

[2] In Russia, it is illegal to leave the border by car – in Norway, it is illegal to enter by foot.

[3] For elaboration please see (Salter and Walters 2016, Barry 2012, Walters 2014, Best and Walters 2013, Bueger 2013, de Goede 2017)

[4] I share Philippe M. Frowd's observation that the ANT theory 'supplements' rather than 'displaces' Bourdieusian approaches (Frowd 2014: 229).

[5] At the time, the Socialist Party held 7 out of the 169 parliamentary seats.

[6] This should be seen within a wider discourse of states seeing migrants as potential weapons (see Garelli & Tazzioli 2017).

[7] This claim is supported by recent research showing the centrality of racial sentiments in Norway both historically (Kyllingstad 2014, Evjen 1997, Wessel 2016) and contemporary (Andreassen 2014, Bangstad 2016b, Myrdahl 2015, Hylland-Eriksen 2011, Gullestad 2004, Gullestad 2002)

[8] Deported to Russia, many of the migrants were again deported to their states of origin. Upon return, some were physically abused.

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