

Applying Securitization's Second Generation to COVID-19

Written by Lewis Eves and James Thedham

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LEWIS EVES AND JAMES THEDHAM, MAY 14 2020

This article demonstrates how second-generation securitization thinking can be used to study the securitizations of COVID-19. Previous studies have explored the securitization of past pandemics. Many of these focus on the failures to securitize the pandemic or on the normative implications of securitization (Cook, 2010; Elbe, 2010). This study instead analyses two nations, the UK and Serbia, that have explicitly securitized COVID-19 and showcases how second-generation ideas can provide insights into these securitizations. In direct relation to the securitization of COVID-19, the literature published to date is either calling for the virus's securitization or is under-developed (Mukherjee, 2020; Sears, 2020; Krasna, 2020). These findings are unsurprising, given that the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing and that holistic study will not emerge for at least several months. Therefore, this article is a preliminary analysis, highlighting topics for future study through the application of second-generation thinking.

This article starts by outlining securitization theory and second-generation ideas. It then looks at the UK and Serbia, showcasing how second-generation concepts can provide insights into each nation's securitizations of COVID-19 while indicating avenues for future research. The UK and Serbia have been selected to show how second-generation thinking can be applied to both western and non-western political cultures. The UK is used as an example of a western-liberal democracy, while Serbia is a post-communist Eastern European democracy.

Securitization Theory

Securitization is the process by which political issues are transitioned to being security issues, which justify exceptional measures to address the perceived threat that would not be accepted under normal circumstances (Buzan et al., 1998). To achieve this, social elites invoke a community's subjective values and frame the issue as an existential threat to these values in securitizing moves. Examples of these social elites are political and community leaders as well as the media. Securitizing moves commonly take the form of speech acts conducted before an audience which can either accept or reject the securitization (Waever, 2015). One such securitizing move is former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair's 2003 securitization of Iraq. In a speech to Parliament, he framed Saddam's regime's behaviour as a 'fundamental assault on our way of life' (The Guardian, 2003). Here Parliament is the audience and it accepted the securitization, leading to the UK's involvement in the Iraq War.

Securitization theory is multisectoral. It considers there to be five security sectors: military, economic, political, societal and environmental (Buzan et al., 1998). A potential security threat can be framed within the context of one or more of these sectors. In Blair's speech, he framed Saddam's regime as both a military and societal threat. This was achieved through his reference to both weapons of mass destruction, and the incompatibility of Iraq's human rights infringements with the British values of 'freedom, democracy and tolerance' (The Guardian, 2003).

Securitization theory has been subject to debate, discussion, and critiques over the years (Williams, 2003; Howell and Richter, 2019). In response, second-generation securitization theory has emerged, expanding securitization theory to address these critiques while providing new insights. Presented below are three such expansions: securitization dilemmas, macrosecuritizations and strands of securitization.

Applying Securitization's Second Generation to COVID-19

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Securitization Dilemma – Olesker (2018) describes the securitization dilemma as when securitizing an issue in one sector negatively impacts upon another sector. This creates a dilemma for the securitizer as to whether they should securitize the issue or not. Watson (2013) presents the dilemma faced by Canada during World War II as an example of this. During the 1940s, Canada faced a securitization dilemma as accepting a US presence in the Arctic to guard against the military threat of Germany was itself considered a political threat to Canada's sovereignty over the region.

Macrosecuritization – Buzan and Waever (2009) present the idea of macrosecritizations as a higher-level securitization, which provides an overarching context through which to interpret and prioritise different perceived threats. Returning to Watson's (2013) example, he argues that Canada accepted the US military presence in the Arctic within the context of the macrosecritizations of World War II. However, once the war was over, questions over the threat to Canadian sovereignty re-emerged.

Strands of Securitization – Vuori (2008; 2011) argues that the traditional concept of securitization is too simplistic. Instead, Vuori states that there are at least five different strands of securitization and that the traditional concept is merely the most common strand in western-liberal democracies. These five strands are:

- Securitizing future acts (the strand that traditional securitization theory presented)
- Securitizing to raise the saliency of an issue
- Securitizing to deter behaviour
- Securitizing past acts or to persist an existing securitization
- Securitizing for control

Applying this theory, Blair's securitization of Iraq predates the exceptional acts it sought to justify. Accordingly, it falls within the category of securitizing future acts presented by traditional securitization theory. Another strand is exemplified through the 'decisive action' taken against Iran by the USA in January 2020 (Trump, 2020). As Trump's speech act to justify this exceptional measure took place after the fact, it falls under the category of securitizing past acts, demonstrating the applicability of Vuori's strands concept.

UK Secritizations of COVID-19

This section uses the second-generation ideas presented above to analyse the UK's COVID-19 securitizations. This reveals several findings for further research: the recurring securitization dilemma between public health and the economy; a macrosecritization of COVID-19 between March 16th and 20th; and the applicability of the strands concept in studying the continuation of lockdown measures.

The UK government is reviewing its lockdown measures every three weeks (Kuenssberg, 2020). Therefore, in the days leading up to each three-week deadline, the government faces a securitization dilemma. This dilemma exists in the choice between continuing the lockdown to protect the public health, or easing lockdown measures to prevent further negative economic impact. This represents the societal sector in conflict with the economic sector. On the one hand, if lockdown measures are eased too early, the chance of a second wave of COVID-19 cases and deaths is more likely (BBC News, 2020c). On the other, the predicted economic impact of the lockdown is substantial, affecting the funding of services such as schools and the NHS (Strauss, 2020). Local authorities have already suggested that cuts may be necessary due to a combination of unplanned spending on community shielding initiatives and reduced tax revenues (Butler, 2020).

On April 16th, a three-week extension to lockdown measures was announced with the government emphasising its commitment to the nation's health (BBC News, 2020a). This indicates that the government resolved its securitization dilemma by favouring public health. However, during this announcement, several references were also made to the economy and the impact of an extended lockdown. The presence of references to the economy reinforces the view that the government's securitization dilemma between the societal and economic sectors will continually re-emerge over the coming weeks as future lockdown extension deadlines approach.

It could be argued that there is no securitization dilemma here as COVID-19 poses an intersectoral threat to both the

Applying Securitization's Second Generation to COVID-19

Written by Lewis Eves and James Thedham

societal and economic sectors. However, it is the economic impact of the lockdown measures in place to combat the spread of COVID-19 that are the focus of government and media attention, not the direct impact of COVID-19 on the economy through factors such as staff sickness (BBC News, 2020b). Accordingly, the application of the securitization dilemma concept is appropriate.

Given the securitization dilemma's resolution in favour of public health, it could be argued that COVID-19 has been macrosecuritized over the economy. This would explain why the government's references to economic security are heavily contextualized within the context of the pandemic (BBC News, 2020a). This is a contrast to the USA, where the Trump administration appears to favour protecting the economy over public health. Stating that 'we cannot let the cure be worse than the problem' has framed anti-COVID-19 measures as harmful to the US economy (Reich, 2020).

If we accept that this macrosecuritization exists, it unlocks the opportunity to study when it occurred. The week commencing March 16th is a contender for this based upon the Prime Minister's rhetoric. On the 16th Boris Johnson (2020a) advised lockdown measures, stating that the British people 'should avoid pubs, theatres, and other such social venues'. On the 20th, Johnson (2020b) declared the government would be 'telling nightclubs, theatres, cinemas, gyms and leisure centres to close.' In the earlier statement, the measures necessary to address COVID-19 had not yet justified the suspension of social and economic activity. By the time of Johnson's later statement, it appears that a decision had been made that public health was more important than economic and social activity. Therefore, with the benefit of macrosecuritization, we can identify a possible timeframe in which public health was prioritized over the nation's economy.

The strand of securitization relating to past acts and persisting existing securitizations was present in the government's April 16th announcement that lockdown will continue for another three weeks. Vuori (2008, p.85) explains that the grammar of securitization within this strand is particularly assertive, stating 'we did X to secure Z'. In Dominic Raab's (2020) statement extending the lockdown, he declared 'we have directed people to stay at home to deny the coronavirus the opportunity to spread, to protect the NHS and save lives'. In this, Raab restates past measures, (the lockdown serving as the X) and restates the referent object that the measures are in place to protect (the NHS and people's lives being the Z).

The other strands are likely also present in the UK's COVID-19 securitizations. Arguably, Johnson's advisory statement on March 16th raised the saliency of COVID-19 as an issue. This helped to facilitate the later macrosecuritization that justified the lockdown measures announced on March 20th. Additionally, given that social distancing requires a change to individual and collective behaviour, the role that media has played in terms of securitizing to deter particular forms of social interaction could be considered. With this in mind, Vuori's strands concept applies to, and offers new opportunities for future research into, the UK's COVID-19 securitizations.

Serbian Securitizations of COVID-19

Securitization theory has been criticised for being too western-centric. Howell and Richter-Montpetit (2019) argue that traditional securitization theory's distinction between politics and security make it inapplicable outside of the western-liberal democratic context, where the politics-security distinction is often blurred. Some have taken this a step further to argue that privileging the western distinction as desirable is racist as it implies that non-western states are somehow lesser (Ibrahim, 2005; Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2019). However, second-generation ideas can be applied outside of western-liberal democracies to explore all nation's COVID-19 securitizations, unlocking a vast range of potential research on COVID-19 as a global security issue. This potential is showcased in a case study of Serbia, a newer post-communist Eastern European democracy.

The strands concept aids understanding of how COVID-19 was first securitized in Serbia. Although there had been prior mention of the virus, its official securitization can be seen as the result of President Vučić's announcement of a state of emergency on March 15th (Vučić, 2020). In this speech act Vučić addressed the nation using the declaratory style that Vuori (2008; 2011) prescribes to the deterrence strand of securitization. This declaratory style takes the form of 'accept that X is done in order to repel threat Y' (Vuori, 2008, p.80). Vučić re-iterates several times that

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COVID-19 is a danger, declaring that Serbians should stay inside (accept X) to protect the vulnerable elderly population from COVID-19 (threat Y).

Another strand of securitization is showcased in Vučić's speech on March 25th (Vojiović, 2020), which displays the control strand. Vuori argues that control securitizations take the form of 'do X and desist from Q in order to repel threat Y' (ibid., 2008, p.88). Vučić's speech act presents warnings that Serbia could suffer like Italy, which was at the time experiencing the worst COVID-19 outbreak (Belligoni, 2020). It then continues, framing that compliance with COVID-19 response measures and ceasing unnecessary social interactions is required (do X and desist Q); otherwise Serbia's graveyards would be too small to bury the number of dead (threat Y).

Vučić's speech acts demonstrate how the strands concept can be applied to the country's COVID-19 securitizations. They also offer insight into the nation's other securitizations. One potential exploration is how COVID-19 factors within Serbia's pre-existing macrosecuritizations. It could be argued that both of Vučić's aforementioned speeches incorporate COVID-19 into the macrosecuritization of Serbian national identity. This is because Vučić invokes nationalistically emotive language throughout his speech acts, framing Serbia's COVID-19 measures as acts of gratitude to protect the older generation who built the Serbian nation-state (Vučić, 2020). The macrosecuritization of Serbian national identity can be seen on a range of occasions before the COVID-19 crisis. An example is Vučić's praising of Slobodan Milošević, the leader of Serbia during the 1990s wars and Serbian nationalist icon, despite his indictment for crimes against humanity (Knezevic, 2018). Such rhetoric aligns with the narratives surrounding Serbian nationalism, primarily the formation of the Serbian nation-state during the aforementioned wars (Denitch, 1994; Mojzes, 2011; Mujanović, 2018).

Second-generation securitization theory in application to Serbia and COVID-19 can also offer insights into the greater context of Serbia's foreign relations. This is the case in regards to the international aid provided to Serbia during the crisis. Vučić has used COVID-19 to emphasise the support received from particular countries to support Serbia's broader foreign policy objectives that predate COVID-19. An example of this is with China. In a March 15th speech dismissing European solidarity as 'a fairy tale', Vučić claimed that China is the only nation that can aid Serbia with COVID-19 (Walker, 2020). Another example of this is a speech act by Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, who stated that after the crisis, a monument to Serbian-Chinese friendship should be erected to thank China for its support during the pandemic (ibid., 2020).

Similar political maneuvering can be seen with regards to Serbia's longstanding relationship with Russia. Russian relations play a role within the macrosecuritization of national identity in Serbia, with Serbian leaders quick to highlight cultural links of both nations being orthodox Christian and Slavic (Vuksanoiv, 2019). Serbia's promotion of Russia's aid in fighting COVID-19, therefore, falls in line with the established macrosecuritization, while also reinforcing the nationalist elements used by Vučić (2020) and the Serbian leadership's securitizations of COVID-19.

Taking into account Serbia's broader foreign relations alongside second-generation thinking, a potential securitization dilemma emerges from Serbian-EU relations. Serbian-EU relations have improved during the crisis after the EU offered aid to Serbia (The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2020). However, the EU does not approve of Serbia's desire to promote its shared heritage with Russia (N1, 2020b). In this context, a securitization dilemma can be observed with one of Serbia's political objectives under the umbrella of the macrosecuritization of Serbian national identity – the consolidation of its Russian ties, weighed against securing the funding necessary for protecting Serbia's public health.

Similar to the UK, Serbia's securitization dilemma seems to have been resolved in favour of public health. However, this resolution is contextualized within the macrosecuritization of Serbian identity. In a speech by Vučić's government on April 24th, it acknowledges that the EU has provided €93 million for Serbia to combat COVID-19, but stresses Serbia's right to 'think for itself' (ibid., 2020b). This statement implies that, while combating COVID-19 is the current priority and funds from the EU are welcome, Serbia's own identity and its ties with nations such as China and Russia will continue to be a dominant theme in Serbian securitizations.

Applying second-generation concepts to Serbia's COVID-19 securitizations showcases the potential of such

Applying Securitization's Second Generation to COVID-19

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approaches outside of western liberal democracies. It also demonstrates how securitization theory can garner new insights into Serbia's international politics more generally. Explicit analysis of Serbian securitizations is mostly absent. The work of Pål Røren (2013) on the securitization of ethnicity in Serbia appears as a lone example of such research. Accordingly, research on Serbia's securitization of COVID-19 can also offer insights into the understudied topic of Serbian securitizations. If applied to Serbia, securitization theory could shed light on the overlapping religious, ethnic and historical disputes within the Balkans region.

Conclusion

Three examples of second-generation thinking have been presented in this study: securitization dilemmas, macrosecuritizations and strands of securitization. These have been applied to preliminary case studies on the UK and Serbia's COVID-19 securitizations, highlighting the insights that these concepts can offer.

These case studies have shown that these concepts are of use when studying each country. In the case of the UK, future studies could examine how the securitization dilemma between public health and the economy evolved during the pandemic, and how the proposed macrosecuritization of COVID-19 was established and maintained. Vuori's strands concept has also proven applicable and could be applied further for additional insights.

The strands concept also unlocks the study of Serbian securitizations of COVID-19. This is despite traditional securitization theory's western-centric focus on liberal democracies. Resultantly, this preliminary study has observed that Serbia's COVID-19 securitizations appear to be taking place within Serbia's pre-existing macrosecuritization of its national identity. It has also presented a securitization dilemma relating to this macrosecuritization and the use of international aid to combat the virus. Furthermore, given the lacking research on Balkan securitizations, this study has indicated the potential of applying securitization theory to Serbia to provide new insights on its foreign relations and the Balkans region more generally.

COVID-19 and its impact will be the topic of academic study for years to come. One way in which it will be studied is through securitization theory. It is apparent from the above discussion that second-generation ideas have value in helping us study COVID-19 securitizations in a variety of political cultures; unlocking new avenues for future research. Once enough time has passed to allow for a holistic perspective, these avenues should be pursued to further our understanding of how different countries responded to the COVID-19 threat.

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Applying Securitization's Second Generation to COVID-19

Written by Lewis Eves and James Thedham

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Applying Securitization's Second Generation to COVID-19

Written by Lewis Eves and James Thedham

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Applying Securitization's Second Generation to COVID-19

Written by Lewis Eves and James Thedham

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About the author:

Lewis Eves is a PhD student at Sheffield Hallam University, specialising in International Security Studies. He previously studied BA International Relations and History and MA International Security Studies at the University of Leicester. He is also an alumnus of the Ambitious Futures management programme.

James Thedham graduated from the University of Birmingham with an MRes in Modern European History. He has undertaken PhD research at the University of Belgrade, specialising in Balkan Studies, focusing on the development of nationalism in the region. He previously studied a BA in Contemporary History at the University of Leicester.