Chapter 1

The Fallacy of Securitizing Migration:
Elite Rationality and Unintended Consequences

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Introduction

It has become commonplace to argue that migration in Europe and beyond is intimately linked to questions of security. As mentioned in the introduction to this book, migration is associated with a range of threats covering the whole socioeconomic and political spectrum. Immigrants and asylum seekers are often seen as a threat to public order and stability. They are also believed to be ‘plotting’ to exploit national welfare provisions and available economic opportunities at the expense of citizens. Above all, they are seen as a threat to the identity of societies and thus as a challenge to the very existence of a traditional pattern of living.

The horrific attacks of 11 September 2001, as well as subsequent terrorist incidents in Madrid and London, exacerbated public anxiety towards migrants in Europe (Faist, 2002; Bigo, 2006). In all cases, the perpetrators matched a specific ethnic profile, while some of those involved in the U.S. attacks, had previously lived in Hamburg for years. Nevertheless, these events did not cause the insecurities, uncertainties, ambiguities and complexities that characterize migration policies at both domestic and European Union (EU) level. Rather, they strengthened and legitimized the security logic that has dominated asylum and immigration policies in Europe since the late 1970s (Huysmans, 2000, 2006; Geddes, 2003; Karyotis, 2007).

Lavenex (2001) refers to this logic as the ‘realist policy frame’, which contains a dominant interpretation of migration as a security problem. Framing generally involves making some aspects of a perceived reality more salient in discourse ‘in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation’ (Entman, 1993: 52). In the case of migration, the realist frame is rooted in a state-centric philosophy, emphasizing the need to secure borders, restrict migration and homogenize all
categories of migrants into a single policing-repression scheme. In contrast, the liberal frame focuses on the individual. It is primarily concerned with the protection of migrant human rights and the reduction of barriers to labour migration, which is considered beneficial to the economy.

Once a frame has gained prominence, it becomes established as the ‘correct’ or the ‘standard’ way to define an issue. The construction of the security frame in particular is known as ‘securitization’, where an issue enters the realm of security, not because of the objective threats it poses but because it is presented as such (Buzan et al., 1998). Securitization is therefore a process through which elites, with ‘the most effective means of public persuasion and the best resources for suppressing or marginalizing alternative opinions’ succeed in defining an issue as an existential threat to fundamental values of society and the state (Van Dijk, 1993: 45).

The implication is that the elites’ decision to securitize migration is a deliberate and calculated one. While both civil society and scholars have widely criticized the moral bankruptcy of the realist frame for its impact on migrant rights in particular (McSweeney, 1996; Lohrman, 2000; Thouez, 2002; Guild, 2003), the consequences of securitization on the state and its elites has received scarce attention. The aim of this chapter is to address this imbalance and explore securitization from the perspective of securitizing elites. In doing so, it seeks to provide a pragmatic, rather than an ethical assessment of the political practice of linking migration to security in Europe. Findings highlight the fallacies of securitizing migration, arguing that as a policy option, it is more costly than often assumed.

The argument is developed progressively over three interconnected parts. The first section addresses the philosophical and normative aspects of securitization, which are underpinned by a belief that security justifies any sacrifice, particularly at the expense of migrants. The second part questions whether the decision to securitize is in fact ever based on rational calculations. The final part explores the consequences of the securitization of migration, which it argues serves only short-term needs, while harming in the long-term other interests, including those that supported the security discourse in the first place.

Security values and trade-offs

Many of the normative criticisms of securitization can be located in a long-standing philosophical debate concerning the importance of security and the cost and potential trade-offs associated with its pursuit. In its broadest formulation, this involves a question of whether security, as a value and policy goal, justifies the compromise of other key values, such as freedom or justice. This section will briefly address this and in doing so, draws attention to the ethical dilemmas associated with the securitization of migration.
Traditionally, the realm of security has been dominated by realist ideas, which consider the state as the only referent object of security, i.e. the actor that is to be secured. Accordingly, during the Cold War when realism was at its prime, security became synonymous with ‘national security’ (Yergin, 1997). The survival of the state at any cost was the agenda of security studies, while the state was simultaneously the focus and provider of security. This reasoning echoes Hobbes’ state of nature, described in Leviathan as ‘a war of all men against all men’. The sovereign state comes into existence to provide order and security, ‘while in the absence of authority, unrestricted competition driven by quite rational individual calculation brings about unwished for and disastrous outcome for all concerned’ (Hampsher-Monk, 1992: 25).

In this light, security and liberty are assumed to be set in a zero-sum game, in which more of one is taken to mean less of the other (Zedner, 2009: 135). This dichotomy is not inescapable, since the two could be seen as ‘interrelated, mutually reinforcing goods’ (Dinh, 2002: 400; Huysmans, 2006). By controlling dangers, the state enables individuals to realize their freedom, while, in turn, the lack of oppression contributes to the maintenance of order within the state. Nonetheless, the presence of imminent threat, real or perceived, stimulates the antagonistic framing of security and other key values, such as freedom.

If we were to accept that such a trade-off exists, then, according to realism, we must prioritize security and allow the state enough power to ensure it. As Hobbes (1985: 225) puts it, ‘there can be no peace without subjection’ and therefore the state can legitimately constrain civil liberties and individual values in order to establish order and unity. Even classical liberal thinkers such as John Stuart Mill (1991: 190–91), who opposed unlimited state control, recognized security as ‘the most vital of all interests’, because in its absence ‘we would have no ability to look forward with any degree of confidence to the future’.

However, placing security above all other values is ethically questionable. Benjamin Franklin famously noted that ‘they that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety’ (Dinh, 2002: 399). Drawing on this, and in contrast to the realist approach, critical security scholars have sought to re-orientate security away from the state and toward ‘human security’ (Ayoob, 1997; McSweeney, 1996). Introduced in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report of 1994, human security is a concept calling for the pursuit of the ‘security of individuals, not just the security of their nations’, in other words, it is about the ‘security of people, not just security of territory’. This is based on a core, moral belief that the only appropriate referent object of security is the individual, whose welfare, wellbeing and freedom cannot be compromised in order to safeguard the state as a political unit. After all, Dworkin (2005: 86) maintains, ‘among the most fundamental of all moral principles is the principles [sic] of shared humanity: that every human life has a distinct and equal inherent value.’

An overemphasis upon statist security at the expense of individual freedoms is, according to Ken Booth (1991: 320), not only immoral but also illogical. To illustrate this, he draws an analogy between a house and its inhabitants:
A house requires upkeep, but it is illogical to spend excessive amounts of money
and effort to protect the house against flood, dry rot and burglars if this is at
the cost of the well-being of the inhabitants. There is obviously a relationship
between the well-being of the sheltered and the state of the shelter, but can there
be any question as to whose security is primary?

In this critique, Booth concludes that states should be the means of security rather
than its end, whereas individuals, citizens or not, should be its primary focus. To
extend Booth’s analogy (1991: 319), what would the value of security really be,
if its pursuit required the imposition of such ‘physical and human constraints’,
which would stop the inhabitants of the house ‘from carrying out what they would
otherwise freely choose to do’?

Relating these to migration, the two contrasting approaches correspond to what
Lavenex (2001) referred to as the realist and liberal policy frames. The former sees
migration as a vulnerability to state security, while the latter examines it primarily
through a humanitarian perspective. At the European Union level, this translates
to an observed tension between the policy objective of managing the perceived
threats from migration on the one hand and the protection of human rights on the other (Balzacq and Carrera, 2006). The conclusion reached by most analysts is that
the realist imperative is the one that has been driving policy developments, at the
expense of humanitarian or other considerations (Geddes, 2003; Guiraudon, 21
2003; Huysmans, 2006). In other words, as Didier Bigo (2006: 35) notes, the EU’s
headlining goals of promoting freedom, security and justice are ‘infiltrated and
contaminated’ by an overemphasis on strengthening security. While this security
bias is not new (Huysmans, 2000), the war on terror has further strengthened it, with the overzealous application of various security practices and border controls in Europe and beyond (see chapters by Maguire and Ribas-Mateos in this volume).

The dominance of the realist frame on migration points towards an updated
reformulation of the philosophical debate between security and freedom: the suggested trade-off is in fact between the ‘liberties of the few against the security
of the majority’ (Waldron, 2003: 194). In other words, the common claim is that
our security justifies limitations to their rights. The securitization of migration is a crucial manifestation of this dichotomy, since it legitimates repressive measures
against migrants, particularly those that match a given ethnic, religious or political
profile. This attempt to mobilize a ‘we’ against a supposedly threatening ‘them’ is
not only a central tenant of social identity theory and self-categorization (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) but also, according to Carl Schmitt, the essence of politics. As he put it, an act or antithesis ‘transforms into a political one if it is sufficiently
strong to group human beings effectively according to friend and enemy’ (Schmitt, 1996: 37; Huysmans, 1998).

The conceptual link of securitization with the Schmittian legacy of ‘reapoltik’ unsurprisingly adds fuel to the critics’ concerns about its ethical integrity and responsibility (McSweeney, 1996). Proponents of the liberal policy frame and human security in particular reject the focus on the state and the pursuit of security
The Fallacy of Securitizing Migration

1 at the expense of other values. Further to the philosophical arguments discussed
2 above, this rejection reflects unease with the exploitation and violation of the
3 human rights of migrants, who, in a securitized frame, are perceived as inherently
4 inferior and/or dangerous (Guild, 2003; Thouzez, 2002; Lohmann, 2000). For
5 instance, Togral in her contribution to this volume explains how the securitization
6 of migration results in the masking of a new form of racism in Europe.
7 Notably, proponents of securitization theory themselves recognize the dangers
8 of securitizing societal issues like migration, and argue that ‘security’ should not
9 be idealized but seen as a failure to deal with issues as ‘normal politics’ (Buzan
10 et al., 1998: 29). Therefore, according to Waever (2000: 6-7), ‘the ideal of the
11 securitization approach is – ceteris paribus – desecuritization, that issues are
12 not lifted above normal politics with an urgency and ‘necessity’ that has often
13 antidesemocratic effects.’ The implication is that securitizing actors, typically
14 political and security elites, should have a heightened sense of responsibility when
15 they talk security. However, the limitation of any normative calls to overturn
16 the security frame on migration, advocates the need to take a closer look at the
17 rationality of the elites that supported the securitization of migration in the first
18 place, an issue examined in the next section.

21 Elite rationality and securitization

22 One key assumption about security decision making is that it differs form other
23 policy areas in the degree of centralization and pluralism. Security ‘is a structured
24 field’ and only those with the societal currency, knowhow and status are able
25 to write legitimate security discourses. Threat perceptions are constructed and
26 appropriate responses are determined by those in positions of power that allow them
27 to be generally accepted as voices of security (Buzan et al., 1998: 31). Therefore,
28 although in principal nobody is excluded from becoming a securitizing actor, the
29 field of security is biased in favour of political elites and ‘security professionals’
30 (Bigo, 1994).

32 Securitization occurs when securitizing actors, speaking or acting in the
33 name of a referent object, succeed in convincing a relevant section of society that
34 exceptional measures are needed in response to an existential threat. Any issue
35 can through this mechanism become a security one, not necessarily because of
36 the nature or the objective importance of the threats it poses but because it is
37 presented as such (on the role of ‘speech acts’ see Waever, 1995). Accordingly,
38 securitization, Huysmans explains (1998: 571), becomes a governmental technique
39 ‘which retrieves the ordering force of the fear of the violent death by a mythical
40 replay of the Hobbesian state of nature. It manufactures a rupture in the routinized,
41 everyday life by fabricating an existential threat which provokes experiences of
42 the real possibility of violent death’.

43 The motives of securitizing actors in framing an issue in security terms remain
44 surprisingly undertheorized in securitization research (Balzacq, 2005; Karyotis,
2007b:275). Do elites support the security frame on migration out of a genuine concern for the existential threats they believe it poses? Are their discourse and policies based on a cost-benefit assessment of a range of possible responses? What other factors impact on their decision to make a securitizing move? Although it is obviously not possible to get inside elites’ heads to fully understand their positioning on an issue, understanding the migration-security nexus, let alone attempting to untangle it, requires a closer investigation of security decision making.

As discussed, securitization is considered a purposeful, orchestrated, elite-driven process. Implicitly, elites are assumed to be acting rationally, in terms of both personal interests and their professional responsibility. The tangible consequences of successful securitization, the theory goes, are an increased urgency to deal with the issue, with additional resources and exceptional means outside the formal and established procedures of politics (Buzan et al., 1998). If the decision to securitize was to be seen as rational, it should theoretically lead to a better handling of an issue, while promoting the vested interests of political elites, security professionals and the mass media, all of which are deemed to benefit from the securitization of migration in particular (Boswell, 2008; Bigo, 2002).

However, if by ‘rational’ we refer to the classic expected-utility model, then the assumption of rationality in securitization instances is false for at least three reasons. First, information overload, uncertainty and complexity ‘make it almost impossible’ for policy makers ‘to live up to the ideal of rational method’ (Hill, 2003: 102). In the case of irregular migration, this is very relevant, since statistics about its size and impact are notoriously slippery and unreliable (Brochmann and Hammar, 1999). Second, psychological factors, influenced by a particular cultural and social context, also limit pure rationality. These include pre-existing beliefs, emotions and ideas about their own role and the values that need to be protected (e.g. identity), which shape their ‘operational environment’ (Sprout and Sprout, 1969). Third, path-dependencies and historical conditions associated with a perceived threat can either facilitate or restrict policy-makers’ ability to define it in security or alternative terms (Hay, 2006).

These do not suggest that decision makers are irrational (Gigerenzer and Selten, 2002). Indeed, ‘they want to make rational decisions, but they cannot always do so’ (Jones, 1999: 298), since the constraints discussed above make it impossible to reach the optimized solution to a policy problem. This ‘bounded rationality’ (Simon, 1995) leads them to accept the first outcome which approximates their preferences, rather than strive for the best option, which may be costly and unattainable (Hill, 2003). In turn, once a particular way of viewing or dealing with an issue becomes established and institutionalized, it is likely to resist change, even if the social power relations that facilitated its emergence have changed (Coleman, 1998; Karyotis and Patrikios, 2010).

The crucial question then is how to reverse securitization and, in our case, the security frame which has come to dominate migration policy in Europe. The problem for the analyst is that that ‘[e]ven when one writes about security with the aim of achieving de-securitization or to sensitize everybody to the problems
of securitization, one securitizes by way of putting these issues in security terms’
(Waever, 2000: 15; Huysmans, 1998). As for policy makers, their bounded
rationality that contributed to the securitization of migration in the first place is
likely to make more liberal frames and policies appear risky and costly. This is
despite any ethical or moral considerations, which, when security is at stake, are
disenveled and perceived as expendable. Therefore, instead of focussing on moral
or normative calls for desecuritization, a possibly more fruitful avenue would be to
try to convince elites that the securitization of migration is counterproductive
and damaging.

Securitization aims and unintended consequences

Elites that support the security-migration nexus do so because they believe they
are serving their country’s, and in some cases, their own interests. Nobody wants
to feel that their ideas and policies are unjust or immoral, which is why even
right-wing parties attempt to legitimize and justify their hostile position towards
migrants. For instance, Ian Cobain (2006) from The Guardian, who had worked
undercover in the extreme-right BNP for seven months, reported that members
were explicitly instructed to avoid using racist or anti-Semitic language in public,
in an attempt to clean the party’s image. To pursue electoral gain, one BNP member
was quoted as saying, ‘people must stop seeing us as ogres.’

The main reasons that are commonly used to support the need for securitization
are critically examined in the first part of this section. Drawing on these, the second
part looks at the unintended consequences of securitization, while the final part
assesses the extent to which securitization actually promotes the self-interests of
the elites that support it.

Deconstructing the security-migration nexus

Migration is perceived as a threat for reasons that cut through a range of societal,
criminological and economic arguments. The conviction that migration poses
existential threats to European states and to the EU appears to be the driving force
behind their restrictive policies. This is not surprising according to Ceyhan and
Tsoukala (2002: 22) since, the natural tendency is to fear the ‘different, the alien,
the undocumented migrant, the refugee, the Muslim, the non European’. However,
when assessing the objective significance of the threats that migration in Europe
is deemed to be posing, the legitimation for securitization becomes more difficult
to defend.

The overarching, underlying concern is that migration is, above all, a threat
to societal security. Waever (1993: 23) notes that societal security ‘concerns the
ability of a society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions
and possible or actual threats’. The sacred values that are deemed to be threatened
and need to be protected relate to ‘traditional patterns of language, culture,
association, and religious and national identity and custom’ (Waever, 1993: 23). Cultural norms, which define belonging in a community, can be seen to be violated by ‘unwanted migrants’ (Weiner, 1992). Therefore, elites in Europe, who often see themselves as defenders of national purity and societal security, may feel that their role demands they deal with migrants and asylum seekers as a threat to communal harmony and cultural homogeneity (e.g. Ibrayanova, 2002).

The reality however is that identity can never be seen as frozen or monolithic, as such securitizing discourses suggest (McSweeney, 1996). European societies are not static entities but have been evolving and developing in a rather harmonious way, despite the influx of migrants. After all, all European societies are the result of ‘multiple migration and crossbreeding processes’ and their culture is ‘deeply influenced, even sometimes determined by migrant cultures’ (Ceyhan and Tsoukala 2002: 29). Notably, perspective securitizing actors, the likes of Jörg Heider in Austria or Jean-Marie Le Pen in France to mention but a few high-profile examples, should be reminded of the traumatic warnings from recent European history about misusing the terms ‘ethnic purity’ and ‘racial unity’. As Lohrmann (2000: 9) succinctly puts it ‘the fact that receiving countries are confronted with immigrants with different cultural backgrounds does not represent a threat in itself. Rather, it is the political exploitation of these cultural differences that confers a security dimension to immigration.’

A discourse related to the identitarian axis sees migration as a threat to public order and internal security. The ‘criminal migrant’ thesis is based on the demonization of the ‘other’ and the creation of an artificial continuum between migration, crime, drug-trafficking and terrorism. This ‘security continuum’ is not just a rhetorical one but also reflected in EU institutional structures (Bigo, 1994). To be precise, starting in 1975, the EU’s migration policy evolved gradually within intergovernmental fora, such as the TREVI Groups, the Ad hoc Group on Asylum and Immigration, the Schengen Treaties and Europol, all of which were preoccupied with internal security, thus strengthening the defensive and repressive logic of migration management (Karyotis, 2007a).

However, studies assessing the links between migration and crime have challenged the prejudicial stereotyping of migrants as inherently prone to deviant behaviour. Despite some legitimate security concerns, for instance about the links of migration to organized crime and human trafficking, the overall impact of migration on the crime rate and on the internal security of host countries in Europe is grossly exaggerated (Lohrmann, 2000). For instance, the Association of Chief Police Officers in the UK confirmed that there is no evidence of a higher rate of criminality among refugees and asylum seekers, who are in fact more likely to be the victims of crime in the UK (ACPO, 2001). Furthermore, the participation of migrants in serious criminality does not appear to be dramatic compared to citizens (Karydis, 1998), while where discrepancies are observed, these can typically be attributed to socioeconomic characteristics (e.g. age, education and income of migrants), rather than ethnicity (Hatton and Williamson 2007). Finally, crimes committed by migrants tend to receive greater -often biased and...
Inaccurate coverage, while stories about occurrences of racism are much rarer (Triandafyllidou, 2002; Buonfino, 2004).

Economic concerns too, add to the prevailing insecurity towards immigrants and asylum seekers, who are seen as ‘free riders’, ‘scroungers’ or ‘bogus’, plotting to exploit the socio-economic fabric of host European societies. The economic burden they pose includes increasing unemployment, ‘straining housing, education, and transportation facilities’ (Weiner, 1992: 114) and overburdening ‘already dilapidated welfare systems’ (Held et al., 1999: 313). The local resentment generated leads to what Huysmans (2000: 767) describes as welfare chauvinism, whereby ‘immigrants and asylum-seekers are not simply rivals but illegitimate recipients of socio-economic rights’.

Yet, few dispute anymore that migration has a largely positive impact on European economies. Exaggerated concerns about migration lowering wages, causing unemployment or damaging the welfare system are unfounded. For instance, Home Secretary David Blunkett noted in 2001 that immigrants contributed £2.5 billion more in taxes than they consumed in tax-supported services in the UK (cited in Karyotis, 2007a:11). Immigrant communities bore the heaviest brunt of the restructuring of European economies in the 1980s (Held et al., 1999: 325) and will have an even greater role to play in the future. This is because, as a report by the European Commission (2000: 21) explains, there are ‘growing shortages of labour at both skilled and unskilled levels’, amplified by the ‘declining and ageing populations in Europe’, which make migrants’ contribution ‘to the labour market, to economic growth and to the sustainability of social protection systems’ of crucial importance. Indeed, if the current demographic trend continues, the United Nations (2000) predicted, European economies will need 700 million immigrants for the fifty years to come in order to sustain growth and support their social security systems.

From the above it can be concluded that the dominant belief that migration poses existential threats to society and the state is a fallacy that can be convincingly refuted, if a cost-benefit assessment was to be conducted. Yet, to explain why political elites, in many cases continue to reproduce fabricated truisms that heighten public anti-immigration attitudes, we need to recognize that their rationality is bounded. Preconceived ideas about their responsibility to protect the symbolic boundaries of the nation, in all its manifestations, provide a speculative answer for their persistence on securitization. An additional reason can be sought in the historical and operational context in Europe which saw receiving countries adopt highly restrictive policies since the 1970s. Since the security frame was subsequently fully institutionalized and adopted by the EU and even new immigration countries, policy makers may be hesitant to challenge it, despite the weight of the evidence against it.
1 Unintended consequences of securitization

2 Deriving from the above, a second related fallacy is that securitization is the best option to manage perceived or real threats from migration. Occasionally, securitization of certain issues can indeed bear fruitful results for society and the state (e.g. see counterterrorism policies in Greece in Karyotis, 2007b). With regards to migration however, securitization is a counter-productive management strategy, even if we were to accept that the threats discussed merit urgent attention.

3 The unintended consequences of securitization are explored in this section.

4 First, securitization as a response to perceived threats to the identity of the host nation has the opposite of the desirable effect. Typically, migration in Europe has been short-term, with the majority of economic migrants opting to eventually return to their country of origin. For instance, despite increased migration movements from Central and Eastern Europe during the 1990s, permanent migration declined substantially in the same period (Grabbe, 2001). Paradoxically, it is the very restrictive policies advocated by the security frame that are more likely to lead migrants into settlement. This is because not only do restrictionism and inflexible barriers to entry encourage irregular movements but also they discourage migrants from investing and keeping strong ties with their own countries, in order to secure their access to work in Europe. This was the case for example in Germany after the oil crises in the 1970s, when the restrictive policies introduced encouraged family reunification and ultimately increased Turkish settlement (Entzinger, 1985). As Harris (2002: 31) explains ‘preventing people working so that they would not become citizens forced them to become citizens in order to work’.

5 Second, the securitization of migration also leads to an increased rather than a reduced possibility of physical threats to public order. The scapegoating of migrants and reproduction of the criminal-migrant discourse, amplified by misinformation given by the media and politicians poses a major obstacle to their inclusion in European societies. In turn, as sociologist Robert Agnew (1992) explains, an increased intensity and frequency of strain experiences for migrants, e.g. through discrimination and presentation of negatively valued stimuli, is likely to trigger migrant anger, aggression and criminal behaviour, not reduce it. Examples of such racial tensions include the 2001 Bradford riots in Britain, the 2005 civil unrest in France, and the 2010 riots in Rosarno, Southern Italy. In the last case, hundreds of mostly African immigrants clashed with police during a demonstration, blaming racism and their atrocious living conditions for the violence and carrying placards which read ‘We are not animals’.

6 Furthermore, justifying restrictive policies with reference to the threat of terrorism, particularly since the Seville European Council in 2002, has the unfortunate effect of blurring all types of migrants and incorporating illegal immigrants, labour immigrants and asylum-seekers into a single policing repression scheme (Statham, 2003; Karyotis, 2007a). For instance, newspapers such as Britain’s biggest selling tabloid The Sun play on public fears, by claiming that ‘asylum in Britain is now a Trojan Horse for terrorism’ (20 January 2003)
and that ‘terrorists are using Britain’s asylum shambles to sneak into the UK and
go into hiding’ (19 July 2005). Stories like the former, with headlines instructing
readers to ‘Read this and get angry’ inevitably fuel social tensions and insecurities,
while being legitimised with reference to official police statistics. Nevertheless,
the 2005 London attacks would not have been prevented by stricter immigration
and asylum policies or a closing down of borders, which would instead only make
it more difficult to scrutinise and screen those that would subsequently attempt to
erase European states through illegal routes.

In sum, the assumption that by securitizing migration elites are promoting their
country’s greater good is also a fallacy. Securitization does not create a safer society
but one that lives in permanent fear from real or perceived threats. Paradoxically,
it exacerbates negative effects on societal homogeneity and harmony through its
distractive unintended consequences. Thus, even if we if we were to accept that
migration poses existential threats to identity and public order, securitization does
not appear to be conducive to a better way of managing it.

The political legitimacy trap

The discussion so far suggests that securitization is an excessive and ineffective
response to the need for migration management. Does it at least serve the
interests of the main securitizing actors that support it? In some cases, security
professionals and law enforcement agencies involved in the provision of internal
security may benefit from the securitization of migration, which may allow them
to attract more resources (Bigo, 1994; 2002). However, since migration is ‘a highly
institutionalized field with a relatively weak level of civil society engagement’, it
is political elites that are best placed to shape public attitudes and determine ‘in
a relatively autonomous way’ policy outcomes (Statham and Geddes, 2006: 248).

This section explores the unintended consequences of securitization to political
elites that support it in the first place.

Other than a threat to societal security, migration represents a direct threat
to the legitimacy of political elites and the systems of government of the state
(Buzan, 1991: 19). Determining who belongs in a community – commonly in an
adversarial way - and controlling access to its territory is a defining function of
the state, one which, in the final instance, is always determined by its elites. Since
migration calls into question these symbolic boundaries of belonging, political
elites use securitization in order to maintain a certain myth of control and thus
safeguard their legitimacy (Bigo, 1998). A soft stance on migration, elites worry,
may prove costly in electoral terms or ‘lead to xenophobic popular sentiments and
the rise of anti-migrant political parties that could threaten the regime’ (Weiner,
1992: 114). Under these circumstances, elites may sustain the security frame on
migration to cement their power positions and prevent public reactions.

Securitization is, in the short term, a convenient and easy way of shifting blame
and responsibility for all society’s ills and their own failings (Guiraudon, 2003).
The climate of crisis it creates, however, disguises its longer-term consequences.
Paradoxically, Bhagwati (2003: 99) notes, ‘the ability to control migration has shrunk as the desire to do so has increased. The reality is that borders are beyond control and little can be done to really cut down on immigration.’ A vicious circle is the outcome: The ‘decisively restrictionist stance’ of elites (Statham and Geddes, 2006: 248) creates unattainable public expectations for effective ‘defence’ against the perceived existential threats that migration poses. Inability to deliver on their promises leaves governing elites and security professionals responsible for controlling migration susceptible to scrutiny and public criticism, which is exploited by anti-migrant parties and other political opponents (Boswell, 1998).

This in turn, makes political elites sustain the security frame, even verging in some cases on outright xenophobia, since they feel that ‘their policy proposals must compete for this political territory’ (Statham, 2003: 167). These suggest that while securitization may protect the political legitimacy of elites in the short-term, it ends up undermining it in the medium and long term. Securitization hampers elites’ ability to support contradictory aims, such as those relating to labour needs for immigration. This is because, as discussed above, under conditions of securitization, the distinctions between ‘desirable’ economic migrants, asylum seekers and irregular migrants become muddled in the public mind. As a result, construction of the security frame from the top-down creates demand for more securitization from the bottom-up, thus constraining political action and choices.

Conclusion

The analysis in this chapter suggests that securitizing migration is not just a question of ethics and humanity, relating for instance to the rights of migrants and to Europe’s pursuit of justice and freedom. It is also not just a philosophical debate between proponents of security vs. liberty, which effectively translates to limitations in the freedom of migrants, who are seen as inferior and dangerous, for the benefit of the security of citizens. It is above all a question of consequences. Since securitization is a top-down process, orchestrated by goal-maximizing elites, it is their inherently bounded rationality that should be questioned in order to explore ways of untangling the security-migration nexus.

Through assessing the consequences of securitization, a number of contradictions can be traced and exemplified. First, the assumption that migration poses such grave dangers that legitimize its securitization and the adoption of exceptional measures by the state is a fallacy. As discussed, many studies have demonstrated that these threat perceptions are socially constructed and grossly exaggerated. Similarly, the conjecture that securitization reduces the level of threat and thus it results in better management of migration is equally false. In the end, securitization has unintended consequences that reduce not only the security of migrants and asylum seekers but also that of those it seeks to protect, by exacerbating threats to identity and public order. Finally, securitization creates
The Fallacy of Securitizing Migration

1 a vicious circle of supply and demand for security, which is unattainable and
2 ultimately harms the political legitimacy of securitizing actors and constraints
3 them from pursuing contradictory goals in the area of migration. Elites should
4 therefore seek ways to overturn the hegemony of the security frame, which, it is
5 argued, is damaging to the state as well as to their own interest in the long term.

8 References

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The Fallacy of Securitizing Migration

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