

Central European Journal of International and Security Studies
Volume 17, Issue 2, 2023, pp. 22-43

DOI: 10.51870/PXRR4789

Research article

Special issue

Constructing Crises in Europe: Multifaceted Securitisation in Times
of Exception

Progressive and Regressive Securitisation: Covid, Russian Aggression and the Ethics of Security

Thomas Diez

University of Tübingen, Germany, ORCID: 0000-0001-8056-6693, correspond-
ing address: thomas.diez@uni-tuebingen.de

Abstract

This paper contributes to the debate about the normative assessment of securitisation in light of Covid-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It develops the distinction of progressive and regressive securitisation. In doing so, it emphasises the processual, contextual and ambiguous nature of securitisation. I suggest that progressive securitisation is closely linked to the solidarisation, whereas regressive securitisation implies the pluralisation of international society. The two cases of Covid-19 and Russia illustrate that international order has increasingly been characterised by regressive securitisation and a pluralisation of international society, despite possible alternatives, such as a transnational response to the spread of Covid-19. They have thus contributed to the further demise of the post-Cold War liberal order, which despite its problems, has involved a re-orientation of security away from state territory and national identity as the core referent objects. I end with a plea to take the ethics of security more seriously again, and in particular to scrutinise the ways in which our own behaviour reinforces regressive securitisation.

Keywords: *securitisation, international society, ethics, Covid-19, Ukraine, Russia*

First published online on 21 June 2023, issue published on 21 June 2023

Introduction

The world is in emergency mode. More than two years of the Covid-19 pandemic have not only led to increased death rates but also to continuing restrictions of public life as well as serious societal divisions. Russia's raid on Ukraine has reinforced a resurgence of realist, geopolitical thinking that had already been evident for at least about a decade before (Makarychev 2020) in what Kornprobst and Paul (2021) have called 'deglobalization'. The rise of a post-Cold War liberal order, sometimes problematically hailed as the 'end of history' (Fukuyama 1989), now seems a memory from a distant past (Ikenberry 2018).

As Makarychev and I have argued in the introduction to this special issue, securitisation plays a central role in the construction of such emergencies and the legitimisation of policies to counter them. Most of the literature has focused on the negative consequences of securitisation in terms of the limitations it poses to democratic debate as well as its exclusionary and marginalising force. Others have pointed to potential benefits of securitisation, including the placing of new items on the political agenda. What is the role of securitisation in the current crises?

One of the distinguishing features of the post-Cold War liberal order was a shift in the securitisation modes of international politics. In its ideal form, the main threats were no longer to be seen as located in other states. As the Human Development Report 1994 famously argued: 'The concept of security must change from an exclusive stress on national security to a much greater stress on people's security, from security through armaments to security through human development, from territorial security to food, employment and environmental security' (UNDP 1994: 2). The new order was supposed to be one of cooperation in combatting evils that affected us all, and to overcome the fixation on state territory and its defence against the threats in an anarchical system (Duncombe & Dunne 2018).

Such a vision of a new world order had been blue-eyed from the start – a metaphorical expression perhaps not entirely out of place in this context, given that the vision of a liberal order was carried forward largely by Western states who equated their own interests with a general, global interest (Kundnani 2017). It tended to ignore or marginalise continuing violence in both military terms and through exploitation in the capitalist world system. Yet even so, it would be wrong to dismiss the transformations in international institutions and global governance, the changing security discourse on the global level and the degree

to which this vision of a new order was shared by many actors from the Global South (as exemplified for instance in the work of Francis Deng, see Bode 2014).

How different does the world look today. Instead of humanitarianism and a spirit of cooperation, we seem to find securitisation everywhere – and of the kind that I consider ‘regressive’. The existential threat posed by ‘the Other’ has resurfaced as a standard trope in political debates. The protection of ‘our’ territory is on the forefront of national security strategies again, while nationalist autocrats such as Erdoğan and Putin are questioning agreed borders and advancing claims on territory with references to history that from the perspective of only a few years back could have only been considered bizarre.

This paper develops the concepts of regressive and progressive securitisation to characterise this shift and assess it normatively. In doing so, I draw on previous conceptions of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ security. In contrast to some of the earlier contributions to this debate, I emphasise the contextual nature of normative assessments of securitisation and argue that securitisation must always be thought in a political space in which both progressive and regressive elements are present. Furthermore, progression and regression imply political processes and remind us that security is never fixed but always in production. I also suggest linking securitisation to the political space between a pluralist and a solidarist international society. I thus argue that progressive securitisations involve solidarisation in the sense of an acceptance of broader responsibilities of states. Such responsibilities need to be negotiated in a specific historical context and find their limit in colonial attempts to impose universal truths. Regressive securitisation, in contrast, reifies sovereignty and a prime concern for one’s own fellow citizens, and thus a pluralisation of international society in the sense of increasingly protecting state sovereignty and non-domination. My argument presupposes that taking on responsibility, while never free from power, does not have to equate to forcing one’s own will upon others. The main distinction between progressive and regressive securitisation would thus rest in its construction of referent objects constitutive of international society and their exclusivity.

The paper thus seeks to contribute to the debate about the ambiguous ethics of securitisation (section 2), which had initially stressed the negative effects of securitisation on the political debate and the inclusivity of society, but later emphasised the potentially positive effects on agenda-setting and addressing global threats that would otherwise be ignored by international society. My clarifications on the contextual and processual nature of securitisation and its normative assessment also answer the challenge laid out in the introduction to this special issue that critical security studies need to be re-thought in view of the challenge of the military security threat of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. While I endorse the attempt to move security away from its focus on the military sec-

tor, the re-focusing of the normative assessment on the referent object does not exclude military threats but makes us wary to think of war only in terms of attacking or defending 'nations' and 'states'.

Empirically, I focus on Covid-19 (section 3) and the war in Ukraine (section 4) as crises that could have been and indeed are securitised in more or less progressive or regressive ways, and in which regressive securitisations have prevailed, leading to a pluralisation rather than a solidarisation of international society. I thus want to problematise the way in which the debate about Covid-19 has turned a transnational threat into a national one and how the Russian aggression (not only) towards Ukraine has invoked elements of the liberal order as well as its critics to justify a traditional, geopolitical war. I end by suggesting that the reproduction of regressive securitisation towards a pluralisation of international society severely limits our ability to address some of the core global challenges the world is facing today. I thus plead for a re-emphasis on the ethics of security, in terms of an invocation of human security threats, of an inclusive political debate and an appreciation of the ambiguities of securitisation.

Progressive and regressive securitisation

Securitisation as a concept of security studies was introduced in the 1990s by Ole Wæver (1995) and became the core contribution of the so-called Copenhagen School (Wæver et al. 1993; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998). It introduced a formal-discursive definition of security: instead of pushing a particular substantive understanding of security as 'human', 'state', 'environmental' or other security, Wæver and his colleagues were interested in the logic of the articulation that turned something into a security object by representing it as an existential threat to a referent object, thus justifying measures that would otherwise not be considered legitimate (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998; Diez, von Lucke & Wellmann 2016).

The concept has become one of the core reference points in the security debate at least within Europe. The debates surrounding it fill whole libraries (for overviews, see, among others, Balzacq 2011; Balzacq, Leonard & Ruzicka 2016; Butler 2020). This is not the point to rehearse them. Instead, I want to focus on two aspects that are of immediate relevance to my argument and the distinction between 'progressive' and 'regressive' forms of securitisation. These aspects relate to the widening and deepening of security and the normative assessment of securitisation, respectively.

The attempt to move away from a purely military understanding of security is commonly referred to as the 'widening' of the concept of security to relate it to other 'sectors', such as the environment, energy, migration, poverty, etc. (Buzan

1997; Huysmans 1998). The Copenhagen School significantly contributed to this debate. Buzan had already suggested such a move as early as 1983 (Buzan 1983), and the 1998 book *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998) may be seen as one of the central statements of the widening agenda, suggesting five sectors of security: political, military, societal, economic and environmental. However, the book also made a case against taking the widening too far and risking the analytical utility of the concept of security if it became indistinguishable from politics. Thus, Buzan et al. cautioned against extending the referent object of security to the individual (the 'deepening' of security), as for them, security always had to refer to a societal group. Instead, they suggested that their discursive-formal definition, while widening security, allowed a clear separation from politics.

Many have criticised this limitation of widening. One strand of argumentation considers the definition of Wæver and Buzan too narrow to capture the variation of security understandings across space and time (Ciuta 2009; Sheikh 2014), and accused the Copenhagen School of being too state-centric and ontologising its referent objects (McSweeney 1996). While a good part of the problem is more likely a matter of methodological convenience (it is easier to observe securitising moves by state actors than in broader society) than theoretical constraint (as the critics argue) or empirical result (which was Buzan and Wæver's response to the charge of state-centrism, Buzan & Wæver 1997), it is nonetheless true that many of the writings of the Copenhagen School do not advocate widening without restraint. Their hesitation to apply the securitisation framework to human security rests on the condition that to be societally relevant, the referent object must be some form of a collective. To them, 'individuals or small groups can seldom establish a wider security legitimacy in their own right' (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998: 36). While this may be true for specific individuals, there is not a theoretically coherent requirement to exclude individuals as a social category or humankind as possible referent objects. In fact, Buzan and Wæver themselves entertain the possibility of the individual as a referent object in the political sector (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998: 39), and thus accept that the widening of security may also include a 'deepening' towards referent objects within states that do not form politically relevant groups.

Thus, securitisation has undoubtedly been a crucial part in the broader move to take security out of its exclusive link to the military from the 1980s to the 2000s. These efforts sought to heighten the priority of the daily concerns of people on the policy agenda and reorient funding streams away from military spending to productively use what was seen as a post-Cold War 'peace dividend' (Haq 1995). While it is true that military organisations such as NATO later embraced both the widening and deepening of security and re-branded themselves,

for instance, as guardians of gender rights (Wright 2022), historical evidence does not support the view that the efforts to loosen the conceptual boundaries of security were nothing but a plot to reinforce military legitimacy in a post-Cold War world. Instead, securitisation as a widening effort of security may be seen as progressive in the sense that if successful, it would lead to policies combating climate change, malnutrition or pandemics, and move security away from a focus on the nation and state as predominant referent objects and the military as the main security instrument (McDonald 2008: 580).

In contrast, and I consider this one of the main themes of the Copenhagen School, Wæver (1995) has emphasised the negative effects of securitisation in its constraining effects on the political debate and the marginalisation of political actors, although he has also stressed that while 'desecuritization is preferable in the abstract, . . . concrete situations might call for securitization' (Wæver 2011: 469). Against the positive connotations of security, he and others writing from a securitisation perspective have highlighted that securitisation takes an issue out of the bounds of the normal political debate and thus allows actors to pursue policies that would otherwise not be considered legitimate, often infringing on personal rights, from data surveillance to anti-immigration measures and war. Likewise, scholars have noted how the securitisation of migration turns the migrant into a societal threat (Huysmans 2000) or how the securitisation of AIDS leads to turning patients into pariahs (Elbe 2006).

However, the ensuing debate has increasingly pointed to the ambiguities of securitisation and the normative value of security in a more general sense (Nyman 2016; Roe 2012; McDonald 2008). While securitisation may constrain the political debate in some instances, it may open up such debate in others, especially if an issue is not yet on the political agenda. Thus, in the case of climate change, for instance, scholars have pointed to the fact that securitisation was necessary in order to get the international society to move at all, while the problem may thus rather lie with the specific forms that securitisation may take (McDonald 2021; Diez, von Lucke & Wellmann 2016; Trombetta 2008). Likewise, in the case of AIDS, the stigmatisation of patients has to be weighed against the mobilisation of funds for research and treatment programmes (Elbe 2006).

The underpinning theoretical problem of these debates is related to the stark distinction between politics and security that informs the Copenhagen School's conceptualisation of securitisation. Many critics have pointed out that politics always emerges from securitisation, that securitisation may be a matter of degree rather than either/or, and that there may be different forms of securitisation (Williams 2015; Trombetta 2008; Diez, von Lucke & Wellmann 2016). Likewise, scholars have argued that whether securitisation is to be welcomed is dependent on normative criteria outside of the theory itself. Thus, Rita Floyd for

instance has suggested a number of criteria against which securitisation could be measured to assess whether it was 'just' or not, including the 'objective' existence of the invoked threat, the legitimacy of the referent object and the appropriateness of the suggested measures to combat the threat (Floyd 2019, 2011).

All of this suggests that securitisation may not be inherently good or bad, but that securitisation nearly always will be ambiguous in its effects, and lead to ambivalent assessments depending on the normative preferences of the analyst as well as contextual conditions (Kirk 2022: 14; Nyman 2016; Roe 2012). Yet the debate also suggests that there may be more progressive and more regressive forms of securitisation. Thus, *securitisation may be considered progressive if it leads to a widening of security that allows threats to be tackled that would otherwise lead to unnecessary harm (Linklater 2006), while at the same time avoiding the exclusion of those who disagree from the political process.* Such an understanding of progressive securitisation will always imply a deepening of security as well, as it is individuals (and possibly other, non-human beings) that suffer from harm, not states. While states thus may remain the main security providers, progressive security moves the security discourse towards referent objects beyond the 'nation' and the 'state'.

At the same time, very different securitising actors may be involved in the articulation of progressive security – as much as in the production of regressive security. State actors may call for preventing migrant boats from reaching coastal shores as much as societal actors or the media. Or they may call for safeguarding migrants. Progressive security is not about who speaks security, but what and who security is spoken for.

Understood in such a way, progressive and regressive securitisations are closely related to the distinction between pluralism and solidarism as the spectrum in which international society may exist (Bain 2021; Knudsen 2016; Ahrens & Diez 2015). A solidarisation of international society involves the assumption of more responsibility towards 'strangers' (Wheeler 2000), whereas a pluralisation re-inscribes the sovereignty and exclusivity of national identities and state territories. Moving along this spectrum always involves securitisations to legitimise the defence of the status quo or a possible change.

Regressive securitisation thus moves the representation of international order to that of a pluralist state system with weak institutions, inter-state competition and the exclusion of world societal claims. It reproduces 'a fear-based imaginary, which is concerned with the protection of the integrity of the political body in the face of exogenous elements' (Nunes 2016: 550) rather than with the development of strategies to effectively cope with the threat and protect those in need. Progressive securitisation, by contrast, does not invoke the state or nation or any other exclusive community as the referent object of threats, but conceptualises

the referents of threats as contextually and openly defined, transnational groups that do not necessarily share a single societal identity. Yet even such securitisation runs the risk of ‘imposing international purpose’ (Ashley 1989) or engaging in colonial or quasi-colonial practices by assuming that others will universally share one’s own concerns. While as humans, we will never be able to think completely outside of ourselves, responsibility for strangers however always needs to take the stranger as the starting point. In our normative assessment of securitisation, it is therefore important not only to ask about the referent object but also about the standing of this referent object in relation to the self of the securitising actor: is the referent object a mirror of the self on which the securitising actor imposes its own desires, or is it a stranger that we really care about?

In that sense, the *Human Development Reports* engaged in progressive securitisation, as did the activists that warned of the effects of climate change at an early stage. In contrast, securitisation may be considered regressive if it limits security to military force and the protection of nations and state territories or involves infringements of people’s freedoms and rights through stigmatisation, marginalisation and exclusion. These two regressive implications do not necessarily occur together, even if they often do. We have, for instance, seen stigmatisation, democratic backsliding and surveillance as effects of health securitisation that are not linked to classical expressions of national identity and territorial security (Bengtsson & Rhinard 2019; Hassan 2022; Boer, Bervoets & Hak 2022). Indeed, not all regressive securitisation in the Covid-19 crisis has been related to territorial re-inscriptions. Nonetheless, the return of geopolitics as the focus of security and thus the pluralisation of international society is of particular concern and thus the focus of this paper.

The distinction between progressive and regressive securitisation has some advantages over the previous discussion about positive and negative security (see Nyman 2016). First, it highlights the *processual character* of securitisation. Security is not some stable property; it always has to be reproduced in specific contexts that make a difference to what we understand to be harmful and marginalising. Thus, the normative assessment of securitisation cannot rest only on consequentialism as in Floyd’s conception of just security (Floyd 2011). It must look at the securitisation process as much as its outcome. Second, the terms progressive and regressive imply not only a movement over time but also *within political spaces*. As others have pointed out before (Roe 2012; Nyman 2016), the positive/negative debate at times has suffered from establishing a false dichotomy. Securitisation is never only good or bad: it establishes new power relations and political identities, while excluding others even as it opens up new discursive spaces. It will thus move a debate within a political space in which all politicisation will contain some securitisation (Diez, von Lucke & Wellmann

2016). By the same token, there is no international society (and indeed no society in general) without some form of power and even domination.

Yet within that political space, since the 2000s, we have been witnessing more regressive securitisation, especially in relation to the return of geopolitical exclusion and the 'nation' and 'state' as core referent objects, rather than those who suffer from specific threats or harm, wherever they are. In the following two sections, and by way of illustrating my argument, I discuss this trend in relation to the two dominating security issues in the Europe of the early 2020s, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Regressive securitisation I: Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic is an excellent example of a successful securitisation. The successful representation of the virus as an existential threat that requires urgent action led to emergency procedures and restrictions of public life and individual freedoms that would have otherwise been unthinkable. Within a month after the first outbreaks in Wuhan, China, had become publicly known at the very end of 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. On 11 March 2020, the WHO announced Covid-19 to be a pandemic. By the end of March, many countries had issued decrees restricting public gatherings. Lockdowns with the closure of any non-vital public activity followed in late autumn/winter 2020/21. While some states such as Sweden took a light touch approach on lockdown measures and relied on voluntary distancing (Frans 2022; Larsson 2022), others such as Germany closed down schools for extended periods of time and still demand the wearing of face masks in public transport at the end of 2022. Many East Asian countries even pursued a Zero-Covid strategy and imposed lockdowns that remain partially in place. All of these measures had been unthinkable before early 2020. They represent severe infringements on individual liberties and caused economic shortfalls so that states had to spend billions of extra monies to cover at least some of the lost revenue of private shopkeepers, hotels and restaurants.

The securitisation of Covid-19 illustrates a number of interesting aspects of securitisation processes. For one, constructing something as a security threat does not mean that the threat does not exist (see, for the case of HIV/AIDS, McInnes & Rushton 2013). Covid-19 has been highly infectious and has caused an average of about 120 extra deaths per 100,000 people (Wang et al. 2022) as well as long-term symptoms that may continue to negatively affect the daily lives of millions of people (Wulf Hanson et al. 2022). The point of a securitisation analysis thus is not to say that a threat does not exist and is fabricated; instead, the analysis points to the specific ways in which this threat has been represented

and thus affected the political process and its outcomes. In the context of the US, Kirk (2022), for instance, observes a securitisation of the virus as a 'foreign enemy' as well as a securitisation of everyday behaviour, such as close physical interaction.

Furthermore, in comparison to climate change, which also causes many deaths and has devastating consequences on people's lives, the securitisation of Covid-19 demonstrates various felicity conditions for a successful securitisation. The seemingly unstoppable global spread of the pandemic versus the unevenly distributed natural disasters caused by climate change; the images of piles of dead bodies without any visible cause compared to the havoc caused by floods and storms that are not unique in history but 'only' occur with a higher frequency (on the importance of images in the securitisation of health issues, see Krause 2021); the undisputed linkage between these deaths and the virus opposed to the statistical uncertainty and long-term effects of climate change – all of these point to the importance of the threat characteristics and its possible visualisations in the securitising process.

Yet what is more interesting for the present argument is that securitisations have actually differed between countries in the way that they moved the debate within the respective political spaces. I have already noted the more cautious approach of Sweden. At the same time, New Zealand arrived at strict lockdown measures despite few Covid cases without resorting to a strongly exclusionary rhetoric, and thus did not close down the political debate to the same degree as in other countries (Kirk & McDonald 2021). However, in their analysis of the case, Kirk and McDonald (2021) overstate the difference between riskification and securitisation (see Diez, von Lucke & Wellmann 2016): thus, even though the New Zealand debate invoked risks more than existential threats, such riskifications still display the basic grammar of securitisations in the articulation of a severe challenge to the public. It is thus not surprising that the result was what in Kirk and McDonald's view was 'exceptionalism without securitisation' (Kirk & McDonald 2021). It would thus be more appropriate to consider this a case of progressive securitisation rather than an instance of absent securitisation.

At the same time, Kirk and McDonald (2021) underestimate the transnational character of the pandemic so that differences in the number of actual cases per country may matter less than the possibility that the virus will very soon kill thousands of people 'at home' as well. Nonetheless, it is important to note that while securitisation may have enabled protective measures, it was possible to arrive at such measures without some of the exclusionary rhetoric of securitisation (New Zealand) or to come to less restrictive measures which did not lead to higher degrees of excess mortality (Sweden, Frans 2022). Both instances serve as

examples for how progressive securitisation does not remove contestation from the debate while allowing the formulation and legitimisation of diverse policies to prevent death.

In line with the theoretical discussion above, the problem with the securitisation of Covid-19 was however not only how it shaped the political debate but also that it led to a re-inscription of state borders into global discourse and thus reinforced an already existing trend towards a re-pluralisation of international society after the rise of populism, among others, had started to undermine the post-Cold War liberal order. As any pandemic, Covid-19 is first and foremost a threat to individual human beings and thus a matter of human security (Newman 2022). It is transnational: it does not stop at state borders and spreads easily across distances. One would have therefore thought that an appropriate response would have focused on transnational measures protecting individuals and not territories. Yet, responses were taken at the national level with little coordination even within the European Union (EU), let alone globally. Mobility was constrained on the basis of national boundaries instead of geographical hotspots. Attempts by the European Commission to link restrictions to subnational, regional incidence rates came late and have not really informed policy. Instead, national borders were closed, even between EU member states, cutting through regions with dense economic and personal interrelations. To the extent that borders remained open, immigration conditions varied according to countries and not regional hotspots. Rhetorically, the pattern of blaming health security threats on other countries (Campbell 1992) resurfaced in charges of the 'Chinese virus' (Trump cited in Rogers & Swanson 2020) or blaming the US to be the real source of the virus (BBC 2021). Likewise, Kuteleva and Clifford (2021) have shown how both Putin and Trump used the securitisation of Covid-19 to invoke imaginaries of paternalistic sovereignty protecting their nations.

Thus, a global health emergency that should have had the individual as a referent object was turned into a reification of nation-state borders. While possibly necessary to mobilise action against the disease, the progressive potential of the securitisation of Covid-19 to forge global transnational agency was foregone to promote national security imageries. While there have been other forms of regression in the securitisation of Covid-19, for instance in the stigmatisation of marginalised populations and the way in which they were targeted by preemptive measures (Russell et al. 2022), the rendering of a global pandemic in terms of territorial protection including the representation of the viral threat as coming from outside state borders is nonetheless a particularly disconcerting example of securitisation that undermines the initial impetus of widening and deepening the concept of security.

This is not to say that states should not have played a role in dealing with the challenge of the pandemic, or that the world would be better off without states. Given the infrastructural requirements of our contemporary lives, the resources needed to meet them, and their simultaneous contestation within societies, states are important agents to provide the means through which such public goods may be provided. The problem rather lies with the exclusionary state narratives and externalisations of threat that regressive securitisation sustains. The effect is a re-pluralisation of international society in which responsibility is first and foremost for one's own kin, undermining effective transnational efforts to combat crises.

Regressive securitisation II: Russian aggression

The Russian invasion of Eastern Ukraine is an even more obvious case of regressive securitisation. The invocation of history to defend Russian territory and influence or the representation of NATO as an existential threat to Russia played the tunes of classical security to bolster the military and engage in geopolitical violence. The Russian transgression of both state and human rights falls squarely into the military-strategic logics that progressive securitisation was meant to overcome.

If Putin had intended to weaken NATO influence at its Western borders, the war has achieved the opposite, with more states queuing up for NATO membership, including long-time adherents of neutrality such as Finland and Sweden (Alberque & Schreer 2022). Likewise, countries such as Germany, in which, despite some steps towards more military involvement since the 1990s, military expenditure has long been viewed sceptically and in tension with its civilian power identity (Maull 2000), have significantly increased their defence budgets. Both the applications to NATO and the rise in military expenditure have been legitimised through the representation of Russia as an existential threat to Western democracy and state integrity, resembling the dominant rhetoric of the Cold War.

Yet Putin has also invoked human security claims to support Russia's war, thus demonstrating that it is not the rhetoric as such that matters but its broader context. For instance, in Putin's justification of the invasion, he has cited human security arguments by pointing to the violation of the human rights of Russian speakers in the Donbas, amounting to what Putin claimed was 'genocide': 'The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime' (Hinton 2022). In his speech announcing the partial mobilisation of reservists on 21 September 2022, Putin argued that what he refers to as 'the West'

used indiscriminate Russophobia as a weapon, including by nurturing the hatred of Russia for decades, primarily in Ukraine ... They used the army against civilians and organized a genocide, blockade and terror against those who refused to recognize the government that was created in Ukraine as the result of a state coup ... We cannot, we have no moral right to let our kin and kith be torn to pieces by butchers; we cannot but respond to their sincere striving to decide their destiny on their own (Washington Post 2022).

Some observers have argued that the logic of justifying an invasion through references to human security, and thus instrumentalising progressive securitisation in the name of regressive securitisation has been a common feature of Western powers in relation to their interventions in Iraq, Kosovo or Libya (e.g., Murray 2022; Saul 2022). Yet while it is true that these interventions, to various degrees, have been problematic from a legal as well as a normative point of view, there are also some fundamental differences (Brunk & Hakimi 2022: 690–92). Three of them stand out:

- In contrast to Russia, the United States and its allies performed their legitimating securitisations in the UN Security Council, providing evidence for the violation of human rights or the imminent threat posed by the development of chemical weapons. Even if this evidence turned out to be false in some cases, it was not always incorrect. Russia, in contrast, did not even bother to take the Security Council route or provide evidence to the international society at large. It even attempted to prevent a debate in the United Nations General Assembly in September 2022. This raises important question marks about the credibility and sincerity of its claims.
- While all the three mentioned Western cases led to long-term military occupation or interventions, none of them had the explicit aim to eliminate a country (as opposed to changing its regime) and to integrate parts of its territory into the aggressor's territory. The fact that Putin claimed Ukraine as historical Russian territory is at odds with the human security justification and serves to undermine it, as it ultimately negates the essential norm that sustains international law and returns to pure geopolitical strategy (Brunk & Hakimi 2022: 691).
- To bolster his claims, Putin has linked them with explicit references to the threat posed by the Nazi regime. In his mobilisation speech, he used the term neo-Nazi to characterise the Ukrainian government ten times. While the official argumentation of Western states in relation to Iraq or Libya involved analogous rhetoric, for instance in the 'debaathification' of Iraq

(Longobardo 2022: 20–21), it by and large shied away from making such an explicit link.

In addition, Russia has taken severe steps to increasingly silence public debate – a classic concern in securitisation theory. In March 2023, for instance, a bill was proposed in the Duma to make it a criminal offence not only to discredit the military but also private security actors fighting in the war (Moscow Times 2023). Observers have called the twelve months following February 2022 ‘the most repressive in Russia’s modern history’ (Ivanova 2023). Even granting that the sources I have used here are second-hand reports that may have their own agenda, there can be no doubt that the Russian government has been limiting the scope of political debate by portraying those who question the military as threats to national security.

Thus, the securitising moves performed by Putin in justifying Russia’s aggression against Ukraine are an example of regressive securitisation in which arguments of deepened security are instrumentalised for the sake of geopolitical power claims, while at the same time silencing opposing views. In addition, they have led to a reinforcement of regressive securitisation on a broader scale, especially in Europe, the self-assumed forerunner of a solidarist international society (Ahrens & Diez 2015; Diez, Manners & Whitman 2011), in which geopolitical considerations of military security have taken on renewed significance in political debates.

Yet these securitisations may also serve as a reminder of the contextuality and complexity of normatively assessing securitisation. In the case of Ukraine, the broader regressive move needs to be set against the harm done to the many civilians and their food, energy and health security. So while the overall re-emphasis on military security of sovereign states pushed by Russia’s invasion is deplorable, this cannot serve as an argument against military support for Ukraine, as Russia’s destruction of vital infrastructure and more direct infringements of individual bodily and psychological integrity need to be countered, although it does remind us of the problematic nature of over-stating Ukraine as an exclusive nation (as opposed to the individuals whose physical security is threatened) as the main referent object.

Navigating the difficult normative terrain of war ultimately requires political choices that cannot be anchored in any unambiguous ethical consideration (Moses 2018: 55). Yet the regressive securitisation of the broader security discourse in Europe that Russia’s war has, if not caused, then at least intensified, must not lead to forgetting the many other harms that our world inflicts on people – indeed, at least some of them, such as those related to energy and climate security, are deeply intertwined with the war. Emphasising military secu-

rity would thus be problematic if it is not accompanied by addressing the risks caused by Western policies themselves, such as the privileging of cheap gas and thus energy security over climate security, which in turn have been crucial factors in the genesis of the war.

Conclusion: Remembering the ethics of security

In this piece, I have set out an argument to distinguish between progressive and regressive securitisation. I have associated progressive securitisation with inclusive political debates and an expansion of security towards individual and global rights and needs in a solidarising international society, which would otherwise go unnoticed or would not be tackled. In contrast, I have associated regressive securitisation with exclusionary debates and a narrow conception of security that reifies state boundaries and exclusionary state practices in a pluralist framing of international society. I have, however, also pointed out that no securitisation can ever be purely progressive. Instead, I have suggested that both progressive and regressive be understood as movements within contextualised political spaces, pulling debates into different directions. Thus, securitisations will always entail a degree of normative ambivalence.

Yet this does not mean that we cannot identify the direction in which debates are moving. The two examples I have provided demonstrate the marginalising or even exclusionary force of regressive securitisation processes as well as the reification of militarised geopolitics as their consequence. It is such an understanding of security that the debate about widening and deepening security since the 1980s has attempted to undermine to open up the political debate and pave the way for a redistribution of resources and a change in the global security agenda.

I have also claimed that since about 2010 at the latest, regressive securitisation has started to prevail, which I have exemplified through my brief considerations of the cases of Covid-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The success of these securitisations illuminates some of the facilitating conditions for securitising moves to work, including the credibility of the urgency and existentiality of the threat through media visibilisation (Vultee 2011; Lukacovic 2020). Yet they also share a re-inscription of national territory and geopolitical concerns into the broader discourse. This is more immediately obvious in the case of Russia's aggression, in the justification of which human security references may hardly be interpreted as nothing else but a smokescreen for imperialist aims. However, even in a case such as the Covid-19 pandemic, which first and foremost threatens the health and lives of individuals, states have turned to regressive securitising moves and have linked the Covid threat to the protection of national territories and borders, while managing the crisis through thinking in conceptions of national territory instead of inter- and transnational cooperation.

While regressive securitisations have reinscribed nation and state as referent objects and geopolitics as the main mode of international thinking, they have also been enabled by the continuing domination of pluralist modes of international order based on a division of the globe into state territories. Whereas the humanitarianism of the post-Cold War liberal order was supposed to enhance solidarist visions of transnational responsibility, in fact it never really succeeded in undermining the ‘territorial trap’ of our dominant conceptualisations of the international (Agnew 1994). Thus, Covid-19 is just another illustration that in times of crisis, framing challenges in relation to the state and national identities provides the most likely option to make sense of a rather complex world. Likewise, invocations of national history and territorial defence produce rally-round-the-flag effects that are able to override the daily struggles in the minds of many people and serve to silence those with different views.

These developments are pushing the security debate back towards the early 1980s. They have significant effects on governmental budgets and on the global governance agenda. We are at a historical juncture in which the ethics of security need to be re-emphasised. On the one hand, this implies a reminder that there are significant threats to individuals, humankind and the planet as a whole, from food shortages to climate-change induced disasters and species extinction, which are not receiving the attention they require, and thus need to be securitised further to legitimise necessary action. On the other hand, we need to take into account that progression and regression are inherent pulls in all securitisations. Thus, it is important to always leave enough room for political debate and avoid or at least counteract the marginalising and exclusionary consequences of securitisation. In the case of Covid-19, this would necessitate a stronger global or at least transnational reaction, placing individuals at the centre as referent objects. In the case of Russia’s aggression, the need to build up defence capacities to protect individuals’ lives and freedoms notwithstanding, it implies a change in the way EU member states, for instance, cooperate in energy security and link it to environmental security, and not only to rely on realist deterrence in thinking about a post-Putin European security architecture (Diez 2022).



Funding

This paper draws on a presentation at a workshop on Europe’s Crises and Experiences of Leadership at the Johan Skytte Institute for Political Studies, University of Tartu, on 5-6 November 2021, funded by a generous grant from the Baltic-German University Liaison Office (BDHK).

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the workshop participants, especially Andrey Makarychev, as well as the referees and editors of this journal, especially Aleš Kamarzin, for their comments on previous versions of this article, as well as to Anna Ungiadze for her research assistance and help with editing the final version of this article.

THOMAS DIEZ is professor of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Tübingen and a former president of the European International Studies Association (EISA) 2015-7. From 1997 to 2000, he was Research Fellow at the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute and subsequently taught at the University of Birmingham. Among his recent publications are *The Routledge Handbook on Critical European Studies* (co-editor Routledge 2021), *The EU and Global Climate Justice* (co-author Routledge 2021), *The EU, Promoting Regional Integration, and Conflict Resolution* (co-editor, Palgrave 2017), and *The Securitisation of Climate Change* (co-author, Routledge, 2016). In September 2009, he received the Anna Lindh Award for his contribution to the field of European Foreign and Security Policy Studies.

References

- Agnew, J. (1994): The territorial trap: The geographical assumptions of international relations theory. *Review of International Political Economy*, 1(1), 53–80.
- Ahrens, B. & Diez, T. (2015): Solidarisation and Its Limits: The EU and the Transformation of International Society. *Global Discourse*, 5(3), 341–55.
- Alberque, W. & Schreer, B. (2022): Finland, Sweden and NATO Membership. *Survival*, 64(3), 67–72.
- Ashley, R. K. (1989): Imposing International Purpose: Notes on a Problematic of Governance. In: Czempiel, E.-O. & Rosenau, J. (eds.): *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges: Approaches to World Politics for the 1990s*. Lexington: Lexington Books, 251–290.
- Bain, W. (2021): Pluralism and Solidarism. In: Navari, C. (ed.): *International Society*. Cham: Palgrave, 95–108.
- Balzacq, T. (2011): A Theory of Securitization: Origins, Core Assumptions, and Variants. In: Balzacq, T. (ed.): *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*. London: Routledge, 1–30.
- Balzacq, T., Leonard S. & Ruzicka, J. (2016): ‘Securitization’ revisited: theory and cases. *International Relations*, 30(4), 494–531.
- BBC (2021): Wuhan Lab Leak Theory: How Fort Detrick Became a Centre for

- Chinese Conspiracies. *BBC News*, 23 August, <accessed online: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-58273322>>.
- Bengtsson, L. & Rhinard, M. (2019): Securitisation Across Borders: The Case of 'Health Security' Cooperation in the European Union. *West European Politics*, 42(2), 346–368.
- Bode, I. (2014): Francis Deng and the Concern for Internally Displaced Persons: Intellectual Leadership in the United Nations. *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organization*, 20(2), 277–95.
- den Boer, M., Bervoets, E. & Hak, L. (2022): Preparing for Future Pandemic Policing: First Lessons Learnt on Policing and Surveillance during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *European Police Science & Research Bulletin*, 5(1), 261–272.
- Brunk, I. & Hakimi, M. (2022): Russia, Ukraine, and the Future World Order. *American Journal of International Law*, 116(4), 687–97.
- Butler, M. J. (ed.) (2020): *Securitization Revisited: Contemporary Applications and Insights*. London: Routledge.
- Buzan, B. (1983): *People, States and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations*. Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Buzan, B. (1997): Rethinking Security After the Cold War. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 32 (1): 5–28.
- Buzan, B. & Wæver, O. (1997): Slippery? Contradictory? Sociologically Untenable? The Copenhagen School Replies. *Review of International Studies*, 23(2), 241–50.
- Buzan, B., Wæver, O. & de Wilde, J. (1998): *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Campbell, D. (1992): *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Ciuta, F. (2009): Security and the Problem of Context: A Hermeneutical Critique of Securitisation Theory. *Review of International Studies*, 35(2), 301–326.
- Diez, T., Manners, I. & Whitman, R. G. (2011): The Changing Nature of International Institutions in Europe: The Challenge of the European Union. *Journal of European Integration*, 33(2), 117–138.
- Diez, T. (2022): Russia's War and the Future of European Order. *Transatlantic Policy Quarterly*, 21(1), 11–20.
- Diez, T., von Lucke, F. & Wellmann, Z. (2016): *The Securitisation of Climate Change: Actors, Processes and Consequences*. London: Routledge.
- Duncombe, C. & Dunne, T. (2018): After Liberal World Order. *International Affairs*, 94(1), 25–42.
- Elbe, S. (2006): Should HIV/AIDS Be Securitized? The Ethical Dilemmas of Linking HIV/AIDS and Security. *International Studies Quarterly*, 50(1), 119–144.

- Floyd, R. (2011): Can Securitization Theory Be Used in Normative Analysis? Towards a Just Securitization Theory. *Security Dialogue*, 42(4-5), 427-39.
- Floyd, R. (2019): *The Morality of Security: A Theory of Just Securitization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Frans, E. (2022): Did Sweden's Controversial COVID Strategy Pay Off? In Many Ways It Did - But It Let the Elderly Down. *The Conversation*, 12 August, <accessed online: <https://theconversation.com/did-swedens-controversial-covid-strategy-pay-off-in-many-ways-it-did-but-it-let-the-elderly-down-188338>>.
- Fukuyama, F. (1989): The End of History? *The National Interest*, (16), 3-18.
- Haq, M. (1995): New Imperatives of Human Security. *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, 4(1), 68-73.
- Hassan, H. A. (2022): The Securitisation of COVID-19 in Africa: Socio-Economic and Political Implications. *African Security Review*, 31(1), 19-32.
- Hinton, A. (2022): Putin's Claims that Ukraine is Committing Genocide are Baseless, but Not Unprecedented. *The Conversation*, 25 February, <accessed online: <https://theconversation.com/putins-claims-that-ukraine-is-committing-genocide-are-baseless-but-not-unprecedented-177511>>.
- Huysmans, J. (1998): Security! What Do You Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier. *European Journal of International Relations*, 4(2), 226-55.
- Huysmans, J. (2000): The European Union and the Securitization of Migration. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 38(5), 751-77.
- Ikenberry, G. J. (2018): The End of Liberal International Order? *International Affairs*, 94(1), 7-23.
- Ivanova, P. (2023): 'If There's a War, Call It a War': Russia's Relentless Crackdown on Free Speech. *Financial Times*, 17 February, <accessed online: <https://www.ft.com/content/f487fb5a-42c9-4720-8fd7-658d18045520>>.
- Kirk, J. (2022): 'The Cure Cannot Be Worse than the Problem': Securitising the Securitisation of COVID-19 in the USA. *Contemporary Politics*, online first.
- Kirk, J. & McDonald, M. (2021): The Politics of Exceptionalism: Securitization and COVID-19. *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1(3), 1-21.
- Knudsen, T. B. (2016): Solidarism, Pluralism and Fundamental Institutional Change. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 51(1), 102-109.
- Kornprobst, M. & Paul, T. V. (2021): Globalization, Deglobalization and the Liberal International Order. *International Affairs*, 97(5), 1305-1316.
- Krause, K. (2021): Disentangling the Protection Suit: Images, Artefacts, and the Making of the Health-Security Nexus. *Millennium - Journal of International Studies*, 49(3), 472-97.
- Kundnani, H. (2017): *What Is the Liberal International Order?* Washington, D.C.: German Marshall Fund.

- Kuteleva, A. & Clifford S. J. (2021): Gendered Securitisation: Trump's and Putin's Discursive Politics of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *European Journal of International Security*, 6(3), 301–17.
- Larsson, O. L. (2022): The Swedish Covid-19 Strategy and Voluntary Compliance: Failed Securitisation or Constitutional Security Management? *European Journal of International Security*, 7(2), 226–47.
- Linklater, A. (2006): The Harm Principle and Global Ethics. *Global Society*, 20(3), 329–43.
- Longobardo, M. (2022): Legal Perspectives on the Role of the Notion of 'Denazification' in the Russian Invasion of Ukraine under Jus Contra Bellum and Jus In Bello. *Revue Belge de Droit International*, forthcoming.
- Lukacovic, M. N. (2020): "Wars" on COVID-19 in Slovakia, Russia, and the United States: Securitized Framing and Reframing of Political and Media Communication around the Pandemic. *Frontiers in Communication* 5.
- Makarychev, A. (2020): Introduction: "Bad Weather" Regionalism and the Post-Liberal International Order at Europe's Margins. *Polity*, 52(2), 221–234.
- Maull, H. (2000): Germany and the Use of Force: Still a 'Civilian Power'? *Survival*, 42(2), 56–80.
- McDonald, M. (2008): Securitization and the Construction of Security. *European Journal of International Relations*, 14(4), 563–587.
- McDonald, M. (2021): *Ecological Security: Climate Change and the Construction of Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McInnes, C. & Rushton, S. (2013): HIV/AIDS and Securitization Theory. *European Journal of International Relations*, 19(1), 115–138.
- McSweeney, B. (1996): Identity and Security; Buzan and the Copenhagen School. *Review of International Studies*, 22(1), 81–93.
- Moscow Times. (2023): Duma Votes to Expand Russia's Military Discreditation Law. *The Moscow Times*, 2 March, <accessed online: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/03/02/duma-votes-to-expand-russias-military-discreditation-law-a80379>>.
- Moses, J. (2018): Peace Without Perfection: The Intersections of Realist and Pacifist Thought. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 53(1), 42–60.
- Murray, A. (2022): The Iraq War Exposes the West's Ukraine Hypocrisy. *Tribune*, 19 March, <accessed online: <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2022/03/the-iraq-war-exposes-the-wests-ukraine-hypocrisy>>.
- Newman, E. (2022): Covid-19: A Human Security Analysis. *Global Society*, 36(4), 431–54.
- Nunes, J. (2016): Ebola and the Production of Neglect in Global Health. *Third World Quarterly*, 37(3), 542–56.
- Nyman, J. (2016): What Is the Value of Security? Contextualising the Negative/Positive Debate. *Review of International studies*, 42(5), 821–39.

- Raik, K. & Seselgyte, M. (2023): Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In: Tardy, T. (ed.): *The Nations of NATO: Shaping the Alliance's Relevance and Cohesion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 279-299.
- Roe, P. (2012): Is Securitization a 'Negative' Concept? Revisiting the Normative Debate over Normal Versus Extraordinary Politics. *Security Dialogue*, 43(3), 249-266.
- Rogers, K. & Swanson, A. (2020): Trump Defends Using 'Chinese Virus' Label, Ignoring Growing Criticism. *The New York Times*, 18 March, <accessed online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/us/politics/china-virus.html>>.
- Russell, E. K., Phillips, T., Gaylor, A. & Trabsky, M. (2022): 'It Is Not about Punishment, It's about Protection': Policing 'Vulnerabilities' and the Securitisation of Public Health in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, OnlineFirst. doi:10.1177/17488958221120480.
- Saul, B. (2022): The Law of the Jungle: Western Hypocrisy over the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. *Australian Book Review*, no. 444: July.
- Sheikh, M. K. (2014): The Religious Challenge to Securitisation Theory. *Millennium - Journal of International Studies*, 43(1), 252-72.
- Trombetta, M. J. (2008): Environmental Security and Climate Change: Analysing the Discourse. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 21(4), 585-602.
- UNDP. (1994): *Human Development Report 1994: New Dimensions of Human Security*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Vultee, F. (2011): Securitization as a Media Frame: What Happens When the Media 'speak Security'. In: Balzacq, T. (ed.): *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*. London: Routledge, 91-107.
- Wæver, O. (1995): Securitization and Desecuritization. In: Lipschutz, R. D. (ed.): *On Security*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 46-86.
- Wæver, O. (2011): Politics, Security, Theory. *Security Dialogue*, 42(4-5), 465-80.
- Wæver, O., Buzan, B., Kelstrup, M. & Lemaitre, P. (1993): *Identity, Migration, and the New Security Agenda in Europe*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Wang, H., Paulson, K. R., Pease, S. A., Watson, S., Comfort, H., Zheng, P., Aravkin, A. Y. et al. (2022): Estimating Excess Mortality Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Analysis of COVID-19-Related Mortality, 2020-21. *The Lancet* 399 (10334): 1513-36.
- Washington Post. (2022): Read Putin's National Address on a Partial Military Mobilization. *Washington Post*, 21 September, <accessed online: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/21/putin-speech-russia-ukraine-war-mobilization/>>.
- Wheeler, N. J. (2000): *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Williams, M. C. (2015): Securitization as Political Theory: the Politics of the Extraordinary. *International Relations*, 29(1), 114–20.
- Wright, K. (2023): Challenging Civil Society Perceptions of NATO: Engaging the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 58(1), 61-80.
- Wulf Hanson, S., Abbafati, C., Aerts, J. G., Al-Aly, Z., Ashbaugh, C., Ballouz, T., Blyuss, O. et al. (2022): A Global Systematic Analysis of the Occurrence, Severity, and Recovery Pattern of Long COVID in 2020 and 2021. *medRxiv*. doi:10.1101/2022.05.26.22275532.