

ISSN: 2450-6869

eISSN: 2719-6763

No. 17, 2023

DEFENCE SCIENCE REVIEW

<http://www.journalssystem.com/pno/>

[DOI: 10.37055/pno/182930](https://doi.org/10.37055/pno/182930)

Securitization of Migration and Crisis Management in Poland

Original article

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A – Research concept and design, B – Collection and/or assembly of data, C – Data analysis and interpretation, D – Writing the article, E – Critical revision of the article, F – Final approval of article

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Received: 2024-01-02

Revised: 2024-01-08

Accepted: 2024-01-22

Final review: 2024-01-19

Peer review:

Double blind

Keywords:

migration crisis in Poland,
crisis management,
securitization.

Abstract

Objectives: The purpose of article is to present the issue of migration crisis management in the context of securitization theory. It is of key importance to show the way in which the phenomenon of migration and crises are presented to the Polish public by political actors, as well as the actions taken to solve them. The analysis covers two important migration crises in the recent years, namely the EU refugee crisis that was particularly intensified in 2015 and the crisis on the Belarusian border in 2021-2022.

Methods: The approach used in the research process is descriptive and exploratory in its nature. The main methods used in this study include desk research and a systematic review of literature and of websites concerning securitization theory and migration crises selected as case studies.

Results: What is also associated with the policies and practices in place at the time of migration crises, is a negative migration discourse, compounded by a narrative that describes migration and migrants as a threat, and images designed to create fear. Socially constructed “threats of migration” as a security issue in Poland concern migrants from the Middle East and Africa.

Conclusions: In a situation referred to as a crisis, during which migrants are defined as a threat requiring the use of emergency measures, policymakers have an option of managing migration to limit its scale. This model involves, among other things, closing borders, increasing the number of services, denying asylum requests or, finally, erecting a fence and a monitoring system in the cross-border area.

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Introduction

State (national) security can be defined as the probability of survival (preservation) of national statehood, as well as an absence of threats to national values. In this regard, preservation of the existence of the state and its society, its identity, territorial integrity, as well as political, military and socio-economic sovereignty are of vital importance (Cabaj, 2014, p. 101). All of these spheres may be susceptible to crises, representing a turning point in any course of events, a decisive moment or a period of breakthrough, and a stage or event followed by change. A crisis is usually an unpredictable event that might carry potentially negative and unpredictable consequences, ones that significantly restrict the activities of the state (Zakrzewska-Bielawska, 2008, pp. 65-66). According to the definition of the term from the Dictionary of National Security Terms, a crisis is a situation that is a consequence of a threat and leads to a rupture or significant weakening of social ties, “with a simultaneous serious disruption of the functioning of public institutions, but to such an extent that the measures used necessary to ensure or restore security do not justify an introduction of any of the states of emergency provided for in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland” (Mroczo, 2012, 188). The latter statement, however, may give raise some concerns, for in the event of an unfavourable development of a crisis, the need for one of the states of emergency may prove unavoidable.

This article presents the issue of managing migration crises in the light of the securitization theory. It proved to be important to demonstrate how one is to justify the use of extraordinary measures in order to solve the problem of migration at the time of the intensification of the crisis in the European Union area in 2015 and in the situation of the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border in 2021. The article consists of three parts. The first part outlines the theory of securitization and the definition of the security category by representatives of the Copenhagen School. The second part of the paper discusses the issue of the 2015 crisis management in the context of the securitization theory. In turn, the third part contains an analysis of the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. The approach accepted in the research process is descriptive and explanatory in its nature. The main methods used in this study include desk research and a systematic review of literature, as well as of websites on the securitization theory and migration crises selected as case studies.

1. Securitization Theory

The category of securitization was introduced into security studies by Ole Wæver. He defined it as a “speech act” on the basis of which one positions a particular issue in terms of existential threats. Thus, so to speak, it is a speech act that “brings” a threat to life. Key elements in the structure of the securitization process include securitizing actors, objects of reference and recipients. Securitizing actors can include, for example, NGOs, governments, political leaders, military elites, or civil society. In turn, the object to be protected in this process is, for example, state sovereignty, territorial integrity, or socio-cultural identity. When an actor undertakes a speech act (issuing a statement, declaration, or publishing a particular media coverage) and presents an issue as a threat to a specific object, the recipients of the process become the public, society, politicians, government actors or NGOs (Musioł, 2018, p.

49). Those conditions that facilitate a transformation of audience perceptions of an issue include the position of the securitizing actor and their influence on potential audiences.

According to the researchers at the Copenhagen School, security can be considered to be a more extreme version of politicization (Buzan, Wæver, Wilde, 1998, p. 22), where actions taken to ensure it move politics outside the established rules of the game. The issue presented as a threat by the securitizing actor is placed above normal politics or treated as a special kind of politics. The actor argues that something poses an existential threat to an object, so it must be dealt with immediately, as soon as survival (of the object) becomes the goal. Once accepted by the audience, the securitization process is successful, and the issue in question is transferred from the realm of normal policy to the realm of security (Musioł, 2018, p. 45). When this happens, emergency measures are introduced that could not be used under normal standard circumstances. Security, according to the securitization theory, is thus socially constructed through an intersubjective process of securitization. This category is not objective in nature; in reality, therefore, the issue in question does not necessarily pose a real existential threat.

2. Actions Undertaken by Poland in the Light of the EU Migration Crisis in 2015

In 2015, migration became one of the most important topics in the European Union and its Member States. With the massive and uncontrolled influx of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa in the summer of 2015, the community's situation was described as "the largest refugee crisis since the end of World War II", one of unprecedented proportions (Eur-Lex, 2015a). According to Katarzyna Jędrzejczyk-Kuliniak, the European migration crisis is in fact a multidimensional concept and it involves several crises that overlap. In its case, we are dealing with: (1) a migration crisis (in demographic terms), which was the result of increased mobility to EU countries; (2) a refugee crisis related to the legal-international status of people trying to enter the Schengen Area by sea, especially from North Africa and the Middle East; (3) a crisis of asylum policy at the EU level, in legal-institutional terms, which showed the divergence of positions accepted by the Member States; and (4) a humanitarian crisis, related to, among other things, illegal encampments (in France) or the problems encountered by such countries as Greece, Italy and Hungary (Jędrzejczyk-Kuliniak, 2017, pp. 100-101).

As noted by Mieczysław Stolarczyk, although crises constitute "an immanent feature of the integration process at its each stage", it is their resolution that "determines continued effectiveness of integration ventures, including a transition to ever higher stages of integration" (Stolarczyk, 2017, p.16). The significance of the 2015 migration crisis was crucial for the Member States not only because it carried numerous consequences in the area of border security. Indeed, its scale may also have had different kinds of effects in the social, economic, religious or cultural spheres (Lasoń, 2018, p. 89). In this situation, the European Union recognized the situation in the region as an emergency (Czachór, 2021, p. 44) and decided to do away with the existing legal procedures, introducing new rules that referred to the EU system based on values and solidarity of its members (Musiał, 2019, p. 129). In September 2015, the Council of the European Union decided to introduce the so-called emergency mechanism for the relocation of migrants, primarily from camps in Italy and

Greece, and directing them to other Member States (Eur-Lex, 2015b). There was a lot of opposition to the decision to adopt the mechanism by a qualified majority, and the document, which was subjected to repeated amendments, was assessed more as a political position of individual states than a binding law (Musiał, 2019, p. 129). Thus, the migration crisis, the consequences of which projected on the political situation in individual countries, demonstrated significant discrepancies in interests between the members of the Community and, in the face of increased migratory pressure, the weakness of the EU institutions, which were unable to develop a plan of action acceptable to all the Members of the organization, became evident (Chwiej, 2020, p. 81).

Despite the opposition of the other Visegrad Group countries, even before the parliamentary elections scheduled in Poland in the fall of 2015, the Civic Platform government headed by Ewa Kopacz agreed to the state's participation in the implementation of the mechanism. This situation provided a significant impetus to intensify the public debate on migration and Poland's migration policy, especially as it coincided with the election campaign for parliament and the presidency. It can even be considered that migration policy became a central issue, both in politics and the media (Trojanowska-Strzęboszewska, 2019, p. 24). The debate on migration ceased to take place only in the circle of experts, academics or NGOs. From that moment on, its relevance was also recognized by the representatives of various Polish political parties, who formulated their positions on the mass influx of migrants into the EU and the possibility of Poland accepting them. The media discourse on migration developed extremely quickly during the crisis. It was reinforced by successive reports from the EU borders, which depicted migrants pushing through wire fences or bodies of people washed ashore who had not survived the Mediterranean crossing. There were also scenes of fashionably dressed young African men, with cell phones in their hands, disembarking from boats arriving at EU shores (Trojanowska-Strzęboszewska, 2019, p. 28). These images were frequently referred to in the context of terrorist attacks, religious fanaticism, and reluctance to work, as well as support expected from the social system (Tymińska, 2022, p. 10). As Monika Trojanowska-Strzęboszewska notes, "on the one hand, [they] led to a deepening state of social unrest and, on the other, reflected the growing tension between waning public support for the humanitarian position and the increasingly expressed sceptical or anti-immigrant position" (Trojanowska-Strzęboszewska, 2019, p. 28). In this situation, in Polish society, as in the case of other EU Member States, the tendency against accepting refugees was strengthening (Stolarczyk, 2017, p.25), despite the fact that the crisis itself did not affect Poland to the same extent as it did Greece, Italy, Hungary or Germany. Indeed, according to Eurostat data, in 2015, there were 12,190 asylum seekers registered in Poland, i.e. those who applied for international protection or were included in the application as family members. In the same period, the figure for Germany was 476,510, 177,135 for Hungary and 83,540 for Italy (Parlament Europejski, 2023).

After winning the elections (held on 25 October 2015), the government in Poland was formed by the Law and Justice Party (PiS), headed by Beata Szydło. Following up on the promises made back during the election campaign, the new cabinet began to modify the existing migration policy. In January 2016, after the terrorist attacks that took place in Paris, there was a change in the Polish position on the EU's refugee relocation mechanism. A month

later, it was finally challenged by Poland and the other Visegrad Group countries, which decided not to accept migrants within the assigned quotas (Tutak, 2018, p. 475). In addition to the negative assessment of the system proposed by the EU, priority issues were identified: (1) supporting EU efforts to reduce the influx of migrants, (2) ending the war in Syria, (3) sealing the Community's external borders, building hotspots and establishing a European border and coast guard, (4) cooperation with Turkey, (5) and supporting the protection of the Greek-Macedonian border (Bałamut, 2018, p. 109).

It should be noted that since the second half of 2015, non-governmental organizations in Poland have been reporting on the practice of the Border Guard, which consists in refusing to accept applications from people expressing a desire to apply for international protection and attempting to cross the border with Belarus (primarily in Terespol, where the highest number of such applications had been recorded for many years) (Białas, Górczyńska, Witko, 2019, p. 3). In the following months, the Polish Ombudsman's office and the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, among others, also reported on further deficiencies in the asylum procedure (Human Rights Watch, 2017). NGO reports show that the percentage of asylum seekers denied entry to Poland by Polish border services via Belarus increased significantly in 2016. Programs to financially support projects aimed at guiding an integration of immigrants (Trojanowska-Strzęboszewska, 2019, p. 29-30) into the local community were also halted. In addition to the policies and practices, at the same time, a migration discourse was shaped through prejudice and negative narratives, which deepened the securitization of migration in Poland and contributed to the social construction of the issue as a security problem.

3. Securitization of Migration and the Polish-Belarusian Border Crisis (2021-2022)

In the subsequent years, despite the real presence of a growing group of migrants in Poland, the topic of migration no longer aroused as much excitement in the political debate as it did during the 2015 EU refugee crisis. However, a change occurred in 2021 when, in response to European Union sanctions, the Belarusian authorities decided that they would no longer stop migrants from trying to enter the Schengen Area from Belarus. The migrant crisis affecting Poland among others, was described as the implementation of the "Sluice" Operation and an element of a hybrid operation conducted by Belarusian special services, with an unofficial participation of Russian services (Fraszka, 2021, p. 2). The smuggling of migrants was defined by the Polish government as "systemic" and "organized" in response to the EU sanctions on Belarus and an attempt to create an artificial political crisis in neighbouring countries that supported the Belarusian opposition (Konieczny, 2022, p. 91). One of its goals was most likely an intention to destabilize the eastern border of the Schengen Area in connection with preparations for the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Ociepka, 2023, p. 192).

According to information provided by the Polish government, among others, migrants arrived in Belarus by plane, on the basis of visas obtained through travel agencies (in Turkey and Iraq). The fact that the Belarusian authorities control the smuggling was evidenced by official documents, constituting invitations to Belarus, as well as permits to stay in the country and confirmations of reservations at a state owned hotel in Minsk (Gov.pl, 2021).

Numerous interviews also cited video evidence that recorded Belarusian border guards not only failing to detain migrants but assisting them in illegally crossing the Polish border (Rust, et. al., 2021, p. 7).

The influx of migrants into Belarus resulted in a sharp increase in attempts to illegally cross the border into Poland. Groups of about 60-80 people often decided to forcibly enter the Schengen Area, destroying fences or throwing branches and stones at Polish border guards (Wawrzusiszyn, 2022, p. 52). As a result of this situation, a decision was made to strengthen the number of services in the areas bordering Belarus, as well as to tighten regulations on illegal border crossings. In addition, starting from September 2021, Polish authorities detained and deported those people who helped migrants illegally enter the territory of Poland (Rust, et. al., 2021, p. 6). In the autumn of 2021, several hundred migrants were jammed between Polish and Belarusian guards in Usnarz Górny on the Polish side for nearly three months, and they camped out in harsh weather conditions without food or sanitary facilities (Konieczny, 2022, pp. 92-93). In addition, media and NGOs reported on violence used by Belarusian services, foreigners wandering in border forests, families with young children taken from the Michalów Border Guard post to the “border line”, as well as the use of push-backs and the pushing of migrants to the Belarusian side by the Polish Border Guard (Mikołajczyk, 2022, p. 472).

In connection with the definition of a real threat to the security of Polish citizens and public order, on September 2, 2021, President Andrzej Duda, at the request of the Council of Ministers dated August 31, 2021, issued a decree on an imposition of a 30-day state of emergency in the area of parts of Podlaskie and Lubelskie Provinces (under Article 230(1) of the 1997 Constitution of the Republic of Poland and Article 3 of the Law on State of Emergency) (Prezydent.pl, 2021). Under the decree, a number of restrictions of freedoms in the sphere of human and civil rights were introduced, including the following: the right to organize and carry out, in the area covered by the state of emergency, assemblies, mass events, as well as to stay in designated places, facilities and areas at specific time. In connection with the protection of the state border and the prevention and counteraction of illegal migration, access to public information related to activities carried out in the area under the state of emergency was restricted (Dz. U.2021 poz 1612). The ban also included the ability to record by technical means the appearance or other characteristics of certain places, facilities or areas. In addition, an obligation was introduced to carry an identity card or any other document to confirm the identity of persons who are 18 years of age or older (and in the case of those under 18 years of age, a school ID card) and were staying in public places in the area covered by the state of emergency.

These practices are described by Maciej Stępka as “an attempt to hide the border zone from the public” (Stępka, 2021) and to deepen the securitization process of migration. However, actions were intensified in the months to follow. In the summer of 2022, a fence made of steel spans and razor wire, 5.5 meters high, was completed on the Polish-Belarusian border in Podlaskie Province over a distance of 186 km. Over an even greater distance, an electronic barrier (i.e. a system of cameras and motion sensors) (Ziemska, 2023), was prepared to protect, among others, part of waters in the frontier area (LOS, 2023). In turn, in October 2023, representatives of Podlasie Border Guard told the media that the fence on the Polish-Belarusian border did not offer complete protection. Therefore, it proved to be

necessary to spread additional coils of razor wire constituting “integrated engineering protection”. As specified, this is to be an additional element in strengthening the protection of the Polish border, and thus the external border of the European Union, Schengen and NATO (Chołodowski, 2023).

The Polish-Belarusian border crisis, like the refugee crisis of 2015, involved mostly migrants from Muslim countries, predominantly men. As noted by Wiktoria Nylec, the factor of cultural difference plays a significant role in the narrative of politicians, as well as the attitudes of Polish society towards migrants (Nylec, 2023, p. 180). Indeed, the image of the “refugee” in public discourse in Poland varies primarily due to intersectionality in terms of the ethnic or cultural background of migrants (Bielecka-Prus, 2020, p. 184). This conclusion is confirmed, among other things, by the solidarity attitude of Poles towards migrants from Ukraine, who began to cross the border with Poland in large numbers after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict (24.02.2022). According to statistics from the Border Guard, in just the first four days after the start of the war, almost 281,000 people were cleared at Polish-Ukrainian border crossings (Szczepańska, 2022). The first quarter of 2022 saw a 256% increase in passenger crossings from Ukraine (from 896,883 in 2021 to 3,192,754 in 2022) (Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej, 2022, p. 1).

Considering the two migration phenomena that took place at Polish borders in 2021-2022, there is a significant difference in the actions taken towards migrants, as well as the attitudes accepted by Polish people towards those defined in terms of “refugees” (Nylec, 2023, p. 180). This is because, as Polish opinion polls show, in January 2023, the term “refugee” was associated primarily with a person “fleeing war”, or “being forced to leave their country” but, what is important, coming from “Ukraine” and being a Ukrainian (Staniszewski, 2023, p. 20).

Conclusions

In a situation referred to as a crisis, during which migrants are defined as a threat requiring the use of emergency measures, policymakers have an option to manage migration to limit its scale. This model involves, among other things, closing borders, increasing the number of services, denying asylum applications or, finally, erecting a fence and a monitoring system in the border area. In Poland, this model for managing the migration crisis was adopted primarily in relation to the events that took place in 2021 on the Polish-Belarusian border. At that time, there was a militarization of the language concerning migrants, who were described as “weapons in the hands of the Belarusian regime” and a threat to state security and public order. One of the measures used, moreover, was an imposition of a state of emergency in the border regions, restricting journalists, visitors and any third parties from operating in the area.

What is also associated with the policies and practices in place at the time of migration crises, is a negative migration discourse, compounded by a narrative that describes migration and migrants as a threat, and further escalated by images designed to create fear. The socially constructed “threat of migration” as a security issue refers to migrants from the Middle East and Africa associated with Islam, terrorism, infectious diseases or rising crime rates.

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