

Failed Securitisation Moves during the 2015 ‘Migration Crisis’

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ABSTRACT

The EU has tried to distinguish itself as respecting human rights in its migration policies. In 2015, mass drownings at sea of refugees from war-torn and despotic countries like Syria and Eritrea started to rise with the end of *Mare Nostrum*, the Italian navy’s search and rescue operation in the Mediterranean. One EU response was to declare a war on “criminal gangs” of smugglers and traffickers, reportedly responsible for the surge in refugee deaths. Equating smugglers’ activities with a “new slave trade”, this “securitization move” failed to gain legitimacy from EU publics and media. Military solutions to refugee flight continued to be proposed, and a second securitization move continued to target smugglers and traffickers, but this time the “referent object” became the West itself, and the EU.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we consider two failed securitization moves during the “migration crisis” of 2015. As Watson suggests: “...an issue is securitized only if and when the audience accepts it as such, and securitization is not decided by the securitizer, but by the audience”, and in most cases these audiences are plural and diverse (Watson, 2012: 284). This means that all securitization moves aimed at enacting “emergency powers” have to be co-constructed with audiences. “The attempt at securitization is called a ‘securitizing move’”, and any such move may be wholly or partially: “‘accepted’ or rejected by the target audience” (Salter, 2008: 323). This article focuses on “speech acts” of selected EU actors during the 2015 “migration crisis”, showing how these “moves” in some cases failed to gain wider legitimacy among popular, expert and media audiences.

The first securitization move failed, mainly because refugees and asylum seekers had already been delegitimized as referent objects (i.e. as a set of actors deserving of our sympathy and special protection). Instead, refugees’ and migrants’ presence in the EU was already securitized, through labelling them a threat as “illegal” and “bogus”. If the referent objects named in a securitization move are widely unpopular with the public and the media, then moves to protect them are unlikely to have wide appeal. Dissonance resulted from this first securitization move, after which certain EU actors proposed to represent the EU itself – in the face of all evidence to the contrary – as referent object. In the midst of military-style “search and destroy” measures, EU claims to respect international human rights obligations and humanitarian norms, in its treatment of refugees, were damaged. Despite relatively small numbers of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in the EU compared with in neighbouring countries like Turkey, the main goal of securitization moves in 2015 in relation to “criminal gangs”, was to reject in advance the suggestion that rising death levels

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resulted from EU irresponsibility in the face of the end of search and rescue operations under *Mare Nostrum*. In response to the failure of the EU to live up to humanitarian norms, philanthropic and voluntary sector actors declared an emergency in the Mediterranean, and securitized refugee bodies “from below” as it were. Their interventions to replace *Mare Nostrum* “search and rescue” at sea involved new collaborations among private sector humanitarian actors, who replaced EU states as agents of rights protection. The analysis in this article seeks to explain how the securitisation moves of 2015 among EU actors, failed, and how these failures enabled humanitarian actors to take the moral high ground by linking cross-Mediterranean refugee drownings with restrictive EU immigration policies, instead of with smugglers or criminal gangs.

Securitization can be understood as: “. . . a particular mode of political agency characterised by a rhetoric of exception, which uses presumably existential threats as a trigger to set off extraordinary measures” (Hellman et al., 2014: 375). This is in line with the Copenhagen School (CS) definition (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 2000). The term ‘trigger’, which implies an automatic audience response, has been challenged in recent scholarship (see for example, Côté, 2016). As can be noted:

. . . the audience is a distinct and unique component of the securitization process and is distinguished from other units such as aggressors (the addressee of security actions), referent objects (the entity to be protected), or functional actors (key security influencers that do not have the capacity to legitimize new security meanings alone, but can affect the dynamics of actor–audience interaction) (Côté, 2016: 544).

As Balzacq explains, securitization takes different forms: “discursive and non-discursive, intentional and non-intentional” (Balzacq, 2011: 2). In relation to migration, as Jacqueline Best notes: “substantive limits distinguish. . . citizens from non-citizens. . . internal politics from thinner external relations, and. . . temporal limits separating peace from war” (Best, 2017: 378). Following Buzan et al., this study considers “(t)he key issue is for whom security becomes a consideration in relation to whom” (Buzan et al., 1998: 18). Since various audiences represent: “those the securitizing act attempts to convince” (Wæver, 1995, 2000; Buzan et al., 1998: 41), the question of audience legitimation and institutional support, should be viewed as an “intersubjective” process (Côté, 2016). Once a specific securitization move is legitimated, and becomes institutionalised, it can be hard to de-securitize that issue later on, or remove it from the sphere of “crisis” management (Jutila, 2006; Hansen, 2012).

To gain acceptance or support: “the success of securitization is highly contingent upon the securitizing actor’s ability to identify with the audience’s feelings, needs and interest”, which implies that the “speaker has to tune his/her language to the audience’s experience” and expectations (Balzacq, 2005: 184; see also Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009: 1165). In this spirit, this article considers three securitization moves by actors in the EU, during the 2015 “migrant crisis”. The first two moves “failed”, and a third was “successful”. The main focus is on the first two securitization moves, and why they lacked legitimacy and failed to gain institutional back-up. Why and how a third securitization move was notably less contested, and more “successful”, is also briefly discussed. The first securitization move was limited to the rhetorical level, not resonating with public or expert audiences, and not being accompanied by matching institutional arrangements. The second move, backed by institutionalized security practices among EU member states and FRONTEX, was still challenged by humanitarian and NGO actors’ counter-moves in search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean.

In 2015, politicians and security experts felt under pressure to provide rapid solutions to a perceived border control emergency, where, as Best notes that: “the speed needed to respond to a security emergency is not often consistent with the pace of deliberative politics” (Best, 2017: 378). The following section outlines the context of the failed securitization moves in the EU ‘migration

crisis'. This is followed by the conceptualizing of the crisis, then each of the two failed securitization moves by political actors in the EU is analysed in turn. Some counter-moves are identified, mainly from the humanitarian-NGO sector, especially focusing on MSF (*Médecins sans Frontières*) maritime rescue initiatives with the private sector.

THINKING THROUGH CONTEXT: THE 2015 'CRISIS'

During the 2015 "migrant crisis", politicians and other actors in the EU could barely keep pace with the rapid shifts in rhetoric and reality. During an emergency situation: "social forms...can no longer...keep their shape for long, because they decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them" (Bauman, 2007: 1). A great deal has been written about how asylum seekers, refugees and migrants have been framed as an existential threat to the EU, starting around 2000 (Huysmans, 2000; Bigo, 2002; Buonfino, 2006; Léonard, 2011; Murray and Longo, 2018).

Audiences exercise their agency in accepting or rejecting securitization moves by elites. It is just as: "...important to understand...how (de)securitizing moves fail", as how it succeeds; a subject that: "...has not received enough attention within the literature" (Salter, 2008: 344). This at least partly justifies the present study, which examines two failed securitization moves in 2015 and considers some counter-moves by humanitarian organizations in the Mediterranean, during the 2015 EU "migrant crisis". In this way, the study hopes to shed light on how a context of crisis may provoke out-of-line securitization moves, which will also provoke audiences to reject – or at least not accept – moves to reframe (in)security.

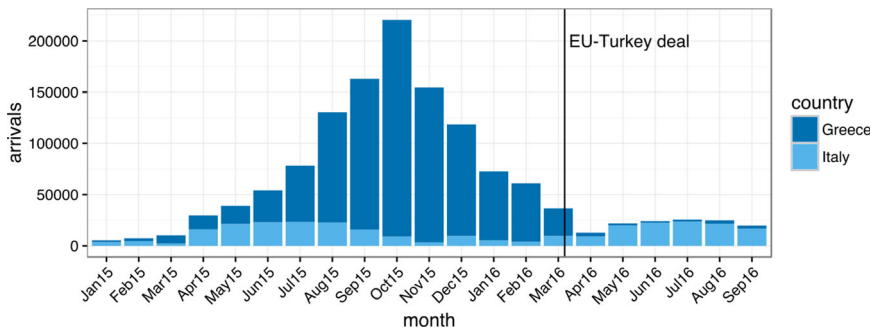
In 2015, across the European Union (EU), various political actors cast about for a suitable framing of the mass movement and drownings of refugees across the Mediterranean, including Syrians. Even before 2015, politicians of all backgrounds, and large parts of the media, had started to represent refugees as well as migrants, as a threat to EU unity, and to the supposedly democratic values of "the West" (Huysmans, 2000; Buonfino, 2006; Léonard, 2011, 2012; Hellman et al., 2014; Murray and Longo, 2018).

Despite emergency measures in more and more EU member states, which place people in detention, speed up deportations, and force failed asylum-seekers into destitution, these measures do not "deter" refugees from arriving in the first place. This is because "pull" factors are less significant for refugees than the "push" factors which force them to flee their homes in the first place, and move on from hopeless conditions in refugee camps in transit countries. The rapidly rising numbers of refugee arrivals in 2014–2015 suggested deterrence was failing to put off new arrivals. I return to the failure of deterrence towards the end of this article.

From 2012 onwards, the EU watched as military campaigns in Syria, civil violence in Iraq, compulsory military service in Eritrea, war in Central Africa, Southern Sudan and Darfur, continued. The FRONTEX 2015 annual report acknowledged that: "fighting in Syria... created the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War. Indeed, most of the detections at the borders concern migrants from Syria, who later applied for asylum within the EU" (FRONTEX, 2015: 6). UNHCR claimed this was the worst refugee crisis since 1946. In 2013, an estimated 51.2 million people were displaced by violent conflicts and persecution, and this number increased to 59.2 million by 2014 (estimates UNHCR, 2014, 2015b). The numbers of refugees arriving at Europe's border by sea rose rapidly in 2015, as shown in Figure 1, as did numbers drowning in the Mediterranean (Figure 2).

Harrowing images epitomized the contrast between tight EU quotas and images of drowned toddler Alan Kurdi's body on a Turkish beach (Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017: 1175). The UNITED list counted 17,306 refugee deaths in and around Fortress Europe in 1993–2012. By mid-2018, the

FIGURE 1
MEDITERRANEAN SEA ARRIVALS



Source: UNHCR: Europe Refugees & Migrants Emergency Response, Nationality of Arrivals to Greece, Italy and Spain, January-December 2015.

count had risen to 34,361, highlighting a massive spike in refugee and migrant deaths between 2012 and 2018 (UNITED, 2019).

By the end of 2015, it was estimated that between 3,771 and 3,713 people had drowned that year in the Mediterranean. In counting fatalities, UNHCR tends to err on the side of caution, and includes only confirmed deaths where bodies have been found and identified as refugees or migrants (UNHCR, 2015a). Real numbers, therefore, are likely to be far above these confirmed numbers. As one IOM report notes, where undocumented migrants travel in boats:

In the sea, without an accurate count of passengers, finding the bodies of all those who drown often does not occur, as hope of recovering survivors dwindles and the number of missing people is unknown. Often, this is compounded by the fact that bodies may wash up on the shores of countries not involved in rescue efforts – thus, these deaths may be excluded from counts

(IOM, 2014: 29–30).

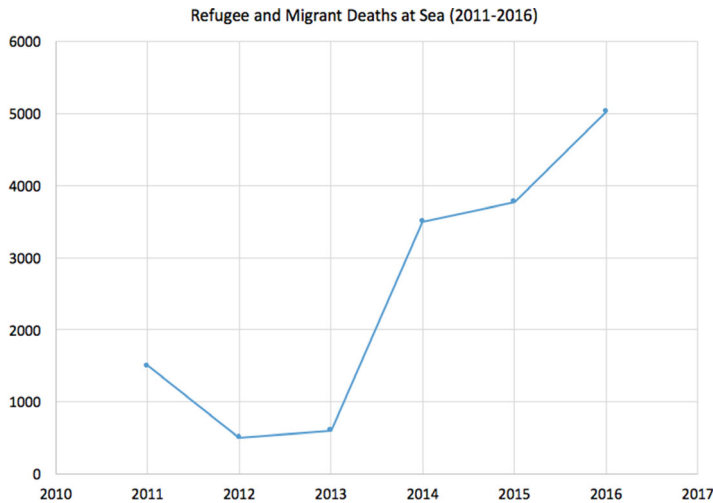
The physical risks taken by refugees and migrants to reach Europe affected the European public imagination, through media images, including those of Alan Kurdi and many others who died *en route* (Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017). Deterrence has made things worse. As UNITED put it: “no matter how hard Europe tries, it will always be incapable of ‘effectively’ shutting its doors. The more they try and the stricter laws are implemented, the higher the number of deaths” (UNITED, 2019). In failing to “act” collectively, EU actors responded in haphazard ways in the face of crisis, failing to show much solidarity with one another. The two failed efforts by specific EU actors to frame the crisis, attributed the crisis to different – always non-EU, external actors – but failed to switch the cherished “referent object” and the existential threat, until the third move “stuck”s.

As Mitzen (2006, 2018) suggests, in such an uncertain policy context, EU actors sought forms of “ontological security”. Their speech acts represented an effort to create greater ontological coherence, addressing their problem of generalized anxiety. In the 2015 crisis, coherence and a sense of purpose seemed difficult for EU actors to achieve, perhaps because

“...agency requires a stable cognitive environment. Where an actor has no idea what to expect, she [it] cannot systematically relate ends to means, and it becomes unclear how to pursue her ends”

(Mitzen, 2006: 342; see also Mitzen, 2018).

FIGURE 2
REFUGEE AND MIGRANT DEATHS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA, 2011-2016



Source: UNHCR

Outside of established routines, the crisis context of 2015 obliged policy makers and politicians across the EU to respond in the face of highly unpredictable outcomes. We now consider in brief, the two failed securitization moves identified in 2015, which failed to achieve “traction”. After placing the failed security “fail”, the second half of the article examines both failed securitization moves in turn, before reflecting on humanitarian counter-moves, and a third and final EU “securitization move” that claimed to end the crisis.

Conceptualizing failed securitization ‘moves’

One early criticism of securitization approaches from within the political economy school is that such approaches are far too concerned with words, rather than with images or routine policies of security (Williams, 2003). Another criticism is that such CS (Copenhagen School) theorising tended to be gender-blind (Hansen, 2000). However, securitization remains a useful – if contested – approach, if it is recalled that this theory is no more than: “. . . a commonly used way to understand how ‘security’ is invoked to legitimize contentious legislation, policies or practices that would otherwise not have been deemed legitimate” (Neal, 2009: 335).

The audience plays a critical role in any successful securitization move, suggesting that: “In the political field. . . the ability of bringing about transformations with words. . . depends on the authority” of those “articulating utterances” (Balzacq, 2011: 25). Floyd similarly suggests that: “an issue is securitized. . . at the point when a relevant audience accepts the existential threat identification” (Floyd, 2015: 3). In general terms, a successful securitization ‘move’ has to go beyond audience responses, requiring: “new or emergency powers accorded to the securitizing agent” (Salter, 2011: 121) to be effective. In other words, securitization moves need both moral and formal, institutional support to be considered to have ‘succeeded’ (Balzacq, 2011: 9).

To use a maritime metaphor, that: “securitising agents cannot navigate freely toward successful securitization” (Bourbeau, 2014: 190), since audiences are also constituted by how securitising discourses create boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’, or whatever is claimed to pose an existential

threat to whatever is to be protected (Bourbeau, 2014; Côté, 2016). To become legitimated, a call to action needs to connect with personal “feelings, needs and interests” of various audiences, experts and the general public (Balzacq, 2005: 185; Floyd, 2015). The threat needs to be viewed as well-founded and institutionally supportable (Williams, 2003; Balzacq, 2005). In recent years, the complex role of audiences in threat construction has started to be analysed, defined and redefined (Buzan et al., 1998; Williams, 2003; Balzacq, 2005; Hansen, 2012).

A generally under-researched area in securitization literature is when securitization moves by powerful individuals and institutions fail. As McDonald (2008: 564): “the questions of why particular representations of threat resonate with particular communities, and how particular actors are either empowered or marginalized in ‘speaking’ security” is far from clear. Researchers might pay greater attention to unsuccessful securitization moves, as the logical counterpart of more frequently researched securitization moves that ‘succeed’ (Salter, 2008, 2011). In responding to this call for more studies on failed securitization moves, this article will tentatively suggest that failed securitization moves may be more likely during a crisis period, where widely divergent framings of the causes of crisis are likely to arise. By attempting to convince “oneself”, and convince audiences, key EU actors failed to consider whether their securitization moves would have wider appeal.

The examples in this article address several EU actors’ securitization moves in this broader context of crisis, seeking to make sense of the emergency, and to dispel anxiety about the causes of thousands of refugees and migrants drowning in the Mediterranean, many in front of cameras of the mainstream and social media. The speech acts considered in this article strive both for “moral” meaning-making and for the denial of responsibility, tropes connected to moves towards closure around the EU’s external borders. Both tangible and intangible forms of (in)security are thus brought into play.

In line with this, securitization moves can be viewed as forms of “dramaturgical” action; like moves on a stage or chess board, these moves may or may not receive the hoped-for responses from other players (Salter, 2008, 2011). Since securitization moves always involve an element of risk for actors making such moves, in case they turn out not to be legitimated or institutionally backed by popular and/or expert audiences. In other words, securitization moves can “fail”.

The two failed and one successful securitization moves discussed in more detail in the second half of the article involve, first, Matteo Renzi, then Prime Minister of Italy, declaring that a new cross-Mediterranean “slave trade” was emerging. In this second move, Frederica Mogherini reframed smugglers as a threat to the EU as a whole, and legitimized military measures to combat this threat as an emergency measure (Kaca, 2015). While the first move failed to gain legitimacy with elite audiences, the second move was institutionally backed, but the military responses to smugglers and their vessels in the Mediterranean were abandoned, as potentially damaging to Europe’s reputation as a zone of respect for human rights. During this second securitization move, the drowned body of Alan Kurdi, face down on a Turkish beach, helped spark short-lived sympathy for refugees among EU publics, and reinforcing a humanitarian NGO and private sector response through search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean. A third securitization move that followed, instead of seeing smugglers as the main existential threat, replaced them with refugees, as the EU started to cooperate with smugglers. The EU was now redefining itself as the main referent object, justifying rapid militarization of the Mediterranean. These failed moves, however, arguably facilitated a third which culminated in the EU-Turkey Deal, in March 2016. I now present each securitization move in turn, and try to explain their failure and success.

THE FIRST SECURITIZATION MOVE: A NEW SLAVE TRADE

Around the time toddler Alan Kurdi was washed up on a Turkish shore, the media images uppermost in the minds of EU publics were of vulnerable refugees. Given that: “...contemporary

political communication is increasingly embedded within televisual images” (Williams, 2003: 512), as Alan Kurdi’s father explains: “Everyone claimed they wanted to do something because of the photo that touched them so much” (McKernan, 2016). The idea of refugees and migrants as cherished referent objects emerged in this context, but did not resonate with existing “framings of security threats” among EU audiences (Huysmans, 2000; Buonfino, 2006). The first securitization move was in an Op Ed in the New York Times by then Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi in May 2015. He stated that traffickers were involved in a “new slave trade”, making a direct analogy with the historical trans-Atlantic slave trade. Renzi commented:

“There is a scourge in the Mediterranean and on our continent, this is the new 21st-century slavery trade. We must block these new slave traders because it is about human dignity and security”
(Dzimwasha, 2015; see also Kingsley, 2015).

This claim had not been heard in quite this way before. Renzi’s Op Ed was widely discussed in the media, yet this first securitization move of 2015 would fail to persuade EU popular opinion and expert audiences. Was it believable that smugglers were forcing refugees, including women and small children, to board boats and pushing them across the Mediterranean or the Aegean against their will, and thus profiting from a “new slave trade”?

This framing was soon publicly and openly challenged, both by private sector actors, and by scholars, both through the media. By framing refugees as deserving and needy, Renzi did express a mood of that time, helping indirectly to legitimise steps to engage in private search and rescue by MSF and other NGOs and humanitarian agencies in the Mediterranean. Humanitarian actors took matters into their own hands and were able to reduce drownings at sea in the months of April onwards.

Renzi was appealing for protection of “good refugees”, as opposed to “bad illegal migrants” and as Turner explains, “genuine” refugees should be protected. This kind of double-think confuses audiences, however, and may have undermined wider acceptance of Renzi’s securitization move.

It proved almost impossible for Renzi to avoid the impression of weakness in the face of the belief that Western generosity and respect for human rights was being “abused” under the cover of refugee law. Instead, blanket border controls and harsh returns policies were being recommended by other EU leaders whilst Renzi made his “move”. His claim that a massive rise in cross-Mediterranean migration was fuelled by “forcing refugees across the Mediterranean”, however, singularly failed to convince. Reframing smugglers as cruel slave traders, with their refugee “cargo”, made refugees into the referent object. This ran counter to years of media and political depictions of refugees themselves as mostly “bogus”. Following this logic, real refugees are hidden among: “(t)hose who are ‘bogus’, simply seeking financial betterment in Europe” and who should be repelled, “discouraged or promptly returned” to where they came from (Traynor, 2015: 1–2). Refugees being kept out of the EU by FRONTEX, repulsed in Ceuta and Mellila and denied visas in regional embassies, could hardly become referent objects overnight, pitied and granted protection by EU publics and professionals alike.

The principle that applies here is one of “path dependence” in terms of framing. Renzi’s framing of refugees as referent objects went counter to long-standing securitization of group (Bourbeau, 2014: 188). Efforts to justify EU military intervention in order to “rescue” refugees from smugglers thus proved improbable, as refugees continued to be viewed as by-standers at best, and “illegal” or criminal at worst. For some EU publics: “‘asylum seekers’ have now replaced the...malignant spooks and hobgoblins of former legend” (Bauman, 2007: 43). It was too much to expect the conjuring trick of turning refugees into worthy referent objects to work without major institutional support.

Renzi made his move sound humanitarian, but meanwhile the UK government drafted a proposed UN Security Council resolution that would allow military strikes against traffickers and smugglers,

which was to be presented in the second securitization move by Mogherini. These proposals in early 2015 to militarize EU solutions to smuggling meant that any refugees caught up in this “war” with smugglers and “criminal gangs” would more likely be viewed not as “referent objects”, but as “collateral damage”.

Although the “new slave trade” frame sought to explain how massive numbers of refugees and migrants were being trafficked forcibly to the EU in 2015, UNDOC data completely contradict this. Among convictions in 2015 for human trafficking in France, the UK and Netherlands, not one clearly involved anyone from the most important refugee countries as victims or perpetrators of trafficking. These carefully documented legal cases did sometimes involve Chinese restaurant workers, Polish workers or Portuguese and Indian forced workers. A Dutch man prostitutes his partner, whose nationality is not given. In the 22 UK that year, most cases concerned UK nationals accused of exploiting other UK nationals. Only a few cases seemed to involve any cross-border element in the trafficking cases that came to court (UNODC, n.d.). The claim of mass ‘trafficking’ of refugees was simply not credible, on any basis.

Expert audiences, specifically legal scholars and historians, were highly critical of Renzi’s “new slave trade/trafficking” securitization move. Equating smugglers with latter-day slave traders drew a fierce response from more than 300 migration, criminology, human rights law and other scholars, who signed a letter in reply to the New York Times. They explicitly associated this “new slave trade” discourse with justifications being made for military force against smugglers, accusing Renzi of pretending to “rescue” refugees from smugglers as a cover for proposed militarization of cross-Mediterranean migration routes (Kingsley, 2015). The scholars’ and experts’ letter explained:

Today, those embarking on the journey to Europe want to move. If they were free to do so, they would be taking advantage of the flights that budget airlines operate between North Africa and Europe at a tiny fraction of the cost of the extraordinarily dangerous sea passage. And it is not ‘slaves’ or ‘traffickers’ who are preventing them from accessing this safe route

(Open Democracy, 2015).

At the end of the letter, they noted: “It is the policies of the EU that are creating the many complex, often bureaucratic and sometimes crude military barriers that journeys across the sea are trying to get around.” Renzi’s attempt to make an analogy with the history of the slave trade was dismissed as a deceptive move, (mis)using sympathy for vulnerable refugees post-Alan Kurdi, in a bid to morally justify EU military action first proposed by the UK. More generally, as Mumford explains:

Contemporary political communication rests on a fundamental desire to control the narrative of events. Such narratives can often be strengthened by using (or abusing) an historical metaphor to create cognitive connections in the public mind between the policy option being justified today with an historical event commonly conceived of as popular or just

(Mumford, 2014: 9).

Renzi’s historical analogy backfired, since here as “the policymaker [he used]. . . an inappropriate historical metaphor in order to justify a decision without detailed regard for the analogy’s propriety or context” (Mumford, 2014: 14). Renzi’s attempted metaphor of the slave trade was condemned both for being “too soft” on refugees, and a cynical justification for illegitimate EU military intervention in the Mediterranean (Kingsley, 2015). This “securitization move” was discredited from all sides, failing to convince EU popular and expert audiences. Indeed, refugees and migrants fleeing Libya on smugglers’ boats were also fleeing real slavery inside Libya, so that Renzi’s securitization move looked ironic as well as inept. Getting on to smugglers’ boats was the only way to avoid enslavement and imprisonment in conditions so dreadful that UNHCR soon worked to “rescue” and resettle Africans imprisoned in Libya (UNHCR, 2018). This first (failed) securitization move

of 2015 opened up the possibility for a second securitization move, which emerged shortly afterwards.

SECOND SECURITIZATION MOVE: EU AS REFERENT OBJECT

The second securitization move took place in mid-May, and centred on EU Foreign Policy Chief Federica Mogherini, who then met UN Security Council members to ask them that European forces be allowed to undertake: "...military action against migrant smugglers in international and Libyan waters in the Mediterranean Sea" (Traynor, 2015). According to one study on Mogherini's role:

"The migration crisis...has become an urgent issue to be solved at the EU level. In this respect, the High Representative was entrusted by the European Council in April 2015 to prepare a possible Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operation to identify, capture and destroy smugglers' vessels...the EU approved in May a plan for naval operations to go after human traffickers by chasing and boarding boats"

(Kaca, 2015: 3).

By attacking smugglers militarily, the EU claimed it could secure its Southern borders which were being "besieged" by organized criminal gangs. Suddenly, the EU was the referent object of an existential security threat posed by smugglers and traffickers. The crisis of 2015 was perhaps also a crisis of self-confidence of EU institutions and officials, which: "...easily turned into the fear that precious normative achievements may be in danger and must be defended against possible assaults" (Hellman et al., 2014: 382). Proposals to militarize EU external borders were already proposed by UK Home Secretary David Blunkett in 2002, in the shape of a "rapid joint operations force" for addressing: "seaborne illegal migration and tackling human trafficking" (cited in Bauman, 2007: 43). Frontex had been created to help legitimate the framing of the migration crisis as a security problem, and provide a policing solution. Mogherini's role was to reinforce that, by making it a matter of military priority, focusing on ISIS and its having become embedded in Libya, as contributing to the 2015 migration crisis. As was reported:

...Mogherini engages personally in diplomacy aimed at building the government in Libya. She tries to get backing from other actors by highlighting the effect the lack of a stable government in Libya is having on the EU migration crisis

(Kaca, 2015: 3).

Libya thus became a "soft" target in relation to EU actors' claims of lawlessness, blamed for forcing refugees to cross in dangerous boats. The FRONTEX report for 2014 suggested that: "...facilitation of illegal migration remains a significant threat to the EU external borders. Detentions of facilitators rose from 7,252 in 2013 to 10,234 in 2014" (FRONTEX, 2015: 6). In most cases, smugglers' vessels, including fishing vessels, were collected up, impounded and destroyed. "Pushback" and "search and destroy" operations involved sinking "facilitators'" boats and this resulted in a shortage of seaworthy vessels, especially in Libya. Between Turkey and Greece, a new generation of inflatable dinghies proved even more dangerous than overloaded fishing vessels. Ruthless policing of sea-lanes has become the norm since 2015. Thus, for example:

All the persons that are intercepted, returned or otherwise prevented to reach the EU's territory as a result of the operations coordinated by FRONTEX are treated as if they were all illegal immigrants. No provision is made for the potential asylum-seekers amongst them which can lead to situations where the EU Member States do not fully respect their international obligations

(Léonard, 2011: 240–241).

This second securitization move was reinforced by closer cooperation with Libyan coastguards and military authorities, as well as with the Turkish government. Refugees were no longer framed as referent objects, and Renzi's slavery analogy simply disappeared. Instead, refugees started to be identified as part and parcel of the generalized threat to the EU's borders. The EU was firmly framed as referent object, something Mogherini herself contributed to, by seeking support from member states for a "threatened EU" (Kaca, 2015). In securitizing the EU collective self, external threats loomed large (Hellman et al., 2014). In this second identifiable securitization move of 2015, the EU institutions were: "...actors as well as referents of security" (Sperling and Webber, 2019: 240).

Counter-securitization moves by 'humanitarian actors'

Clear warnings of the consequences if EU member states failed to support a new search and rescue operation, had been ignored and instead a "Search and Destroy" campaign had been launched against the boats of smugglers. The signs had been there, and had been ignored. In November 2014, even the Pope had warned: "we cannot allow the Mediterranean to become a vast migrant graveyard" (Biles, 2014). Yet this is precisely what happened in 2015.

In early 2015, especially from April onwards, fatalities at sea rose rapidly, especially in the Central Mediterranean route between Libya and Italy. EU leaders' and government talk of direct military action against smugglers did not mitigate refugees' suffering. More families with children, and unaccompanied minors, arrived in the Greek islands from Turkish shores, painting a different picture for the media. Only one in three unaccompanied children that arrived in Greece was housed. Hundreds simply disappeared, along with the drowned uncounted at sea (UNHCR, 2018: 26). This desperate situation, and EU officials' apparent indifference to refugees suffering, prompted counter-moves by various humanitarian and private sector organizations, who refused to stand-by any longer.

After thousands died and thousands were rescued at sea in the first few months of 2015, MSF President Loris De Filippi, echoing the Pope, stated: "A mass grave is being created in the Mediterranean Sea and European policies are responsible", and he compared the deaths to: "figures from a war zone" (Fantz et al., 2015).

Operating Search and Rescue Boats, Meinie Nicolai, Director of MSF (*Médecins sans Frontières*) took the moral high ground, slamming EU governments' indifference, by stating:

"Based on our experiences of the past few weeks in rescuing thousands of people in distress at sea, we can only condemn the twisted logic of launching military operations against smugglers while still failing to provide legal alternatives – essentially entrapping and leaving stranded thousands of people in a life-threatening situation in Libya, a country at war"

(Nicolae, 2015).

Those who had already experienced brutalization, starvation, torture and rape, were being treated with brutality instead of humanitarian compassion (UNHCR, 2018). The MSF operation and others like it, framed refugees as referent objects, and the EU as existential threat.

By collaborating with a private initiative by a US businessman and his Italian wife, in April 2015 MSF launched their search-and-rescue effort in the Mediterranean, to add capacity to the very limited EU Poseidon operation that replaced the Italian Navy's *Mare Nostrum* search and rescue operation, ended in 2014. Nicolai again explained that:

"...no political willingness exists in Europe to carry the legal responsibility to provide protection and assistance for people in distress calling for help in the waters just off European shores...European states have demonstrated a united political will to focus on the boats rather than those who are on the boats"

(Nicolai, 2015).

Some experts agreed with this counter-securitization move. Thus, Hein de Haas, a leading migration expert at Oxford University and Maastricht University, tried to explain, in the summer of 2015, that smugglers did not create illegal migration, but simply responded to border controls by supplying journeys for would-be refugees, in exchange for money. Journeys that would cost much less if they had not been made illegal by the EU. As he explained: “The real crisis is European impotence to respond, and it would be outrageous if Europe can’t cope with that when the vast majority of refugees are in much poorer countries like Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey” (Robins-Early, 2015). Yet so it was.

The third move: towards the EU-Turkey deal

In 2016, more than three-quarters of EU nationals surveyed stated that they disapproved of the “EU’s handling of refugees” (Pew, 2016). Lest this might be thought to reinforce the humanitarian message of MSF, for example, it can be noted that the highest proportions disapproved in Greece, Sweden, Italy, Spain and Hungary. Some who “disapproved” might have wanted EU to be harsher, not less cruel. Three years after the crisis was said to be over, things had become in some ways worse. In 2018, UNHCR reported that, compared with one death in every 250 people crossing the Mediterranean in 2015, a combination of Italian refusal to allow boats to land, and other factors, diverting migratory movements to more dangerous routes, had by 2018, resulted in:

...one death for every seven arrivals in Europe from Libya in June (when over 450 people are believed to have died after leaving Libya)...and one death for every 14 arrivals from Libya in 2018 as a whole (compared to one for every 38 arrivals from Libya in 2017)... as a result of the big reduction in overall search and rescue capacity

(UNHCR 2018: 10).

The net effect of ending the “crisis”, and the banning of the counter-moves of humanitarian actors in the Mediterranean (which we have not been able to cover in this short article) was a dramatic loss of both governmental and humanitarian search and rescue capacity. Even fishing and cargo vessels were unwilling to rescue those in trouble at sea. As shown in this article, a rapid succession of securitization moves, served to reinforce an overall perception of crisis among EU publics and experts as ‘the new normal’. Refugees, framed as undesirables, could only be reframed as referent objects by countering official EU positions on the ‘crisis’, which is what happened in the humanitarian sector. What Bourbeau calls: “the sedimentation of security practices” operated in all other respects (Bourbeau, 2014).

A third securitization move took place late in 2015, which viewed refugees as bodies to be diverted, rather than as vulnerable or in need of protection. This included returns of unaccompanied minors, of families with small children and of other vulnerable groups, to both Libya and Turkey. As Sperling and Weber express this, in a recent article on the EU: “it is now not unfashionable to premise analyses of the EU on the assumption that the Union...faces ‘an existential crisis’” (Sperling and Webber, 2019: 229).

Axiomatic to all EU securitization moves, whether failed or not, was to avoid implying any EU responsibility for the migration crisis. Italy first unilaterally imposed restrictions on Mediterranean landings of “boat people” from North Africa in 2017, so that refugee movements diverted back to the Western Mediterranean and Spain. This produced a massive rise in the rate (though not the number) of deaths. UNHCR reported that in 2018, when refugees and migrants were rescued in the Mediterranean:

...there were disputes between European states over whether or not a vessel was in distress as it was passing through one state’s search and rescue region, coupled with allegations of avoiding their responsibility to carry out rescues

(UNHCR, 2018: 15).

FRONTEX concluded that: “(t)he most problematic aspect of the [FRONTEX border] operations is that their organisation does not seem to ensure respect for the ‘*non-refoulement*’ principle...a cornerstone of the international protection regime” (Léonard, 2011: 240; see also Neal, 2009). The joint EU military-style border operations are challenged by UNHCR, as violating the *non-refoulement* principle, with push-backs of those entitled to seek asylum now frequent across the EU (UNHCR, 2018). As IOM, not known as a radical organization, stated bluntly in its 2014 report, a year before the “crisis” hit Europe:

“Limited opportunities for safe and regular migration drives would-be migrants into the hands of smugglers, feeding an unscrupulous trade that threatens the lives of desperate people. We need to put an end to this cycle. Undocumented migrants are not criminals, but human beings in need of protection and assistance, entitled to legal assistance, and deserving respect”

(IOM, 2014: 5).

CONCLUSION: CHECKMATE?

The concern in this article was mainly to account for failed securitization moves during the EU migration crisis, when audiences, far from passively consenting to the reframing of security threats by those in dominant positions, did not participate in co-constructing the named security threats as framed. These examples contradict: “...a perception of securitization as a linear, straightforward event, in which securitizing actors speak at (or act towards) the audience”, implying that securitising actors have to: “...engage with the audience”, or audiences, who in turn help co-determine what form securitization takes, or whether it takes place at all (Côté, 2016: 551).

Manz’ declaration that refugees were being enslaved by human traffickers, by making refugees into referent objects, was out of line with dominant EU framings of that group as threatening to broader EU security (Moreno-Lax, 2018; Buonfino, 2006; Huysmans, 2000). As Best reminds us: “Although the moment of declaration can be powerful, it is never sufficient in itself and depends on myriad processes – sometimes involving legislative approval and often requiring bureaucratic implementation, diffusing political authority in various ways” (Best, 2017: 383). The “slave trade” framing was then hotly denied by historical and legal experts who challenged the “trafficking” language of the New York Times *op ed*, claiming the “new slavery” headline was a cover for moves to militarise EU solutions to cross-Mediterranean human movement (Kingsley, 2015).

Renzi’s reframing of smugglers as “folk devils” persisted into the second failed securitization move, which took place after his move was check-mated. This second securitization move was associated with Mogherini’s formal request for military capacity to combat smugglers’ boats. Institutional support for this second framing was strong, and smugglers’ boats were actually destroyed. This second move too was abandoned, since it was not credible that smugglers were the main existential threat. Through this second failed move, however, the EU had come “full circle” and had declared itself the referent object, while refugees and migrants – rather than their smugglers – were now becoming identified with an external, existential threat to the EU. The threat to European democratic and human rights norms, was “headed off at the pass” with the second threat, by passing responsibility for violating those norms back to Turkey. Even EU states not receiving significant numbers of refugees were now viewed as referent objects themselves. One UNHCR official stated critically:

With the number of people arriving on European shores falling, this is no longer a test of whether Europe can manage the numbers, but whether Europe can muster the humanity to save lives” (Pascale Moreau, Director of UNHCR’s Europe Bureau, 3 September 2018 cited in UNHCR, 2018: 15).

The claim to be beleaguered and victimized does not seem to depend on the numbers of arrivals; it is existential, and rooted in the anxiety identified by Mitzen as integral to EU internal compromises over identity and democratic norms (Mitzen, 2018). The ‘securitising of the West’ has made inroads into mainstream political opinions in many EU member states, as racism and xenophobia become openly visible (Hellman et al., 2014).

Desecuritizing smugglers after the second failed securitization move, appeared a logical next step for the EU, but resulted in refugees themselves becoming the “bad guys”. The next step was EU actors deciding to work with smugglers by asking them to close migration routes, especially in the African continent. Paying smugglers to stop people moving seems a high-risk strategy, and casts the EU, as a “complex security actor” (Sperling and Webber, 2019), that risks future legal liability for the actions of criminal groups, under EU instruction from 2017 onwards. According to UNHCR, of those who arrive in Europe, close to half have seen people killed or dying. As criminals are rewarded for crimes, human lives continue to be sacrificed in the name of EU border security.

Whether these deaths “count” for EU decision-makers and politicians is not clear. Certainly, the deaths at sea seemed to influence policy towards yet harsher measures, even blocking search and rescue by humanitarian actors from 2016. The death count has fallen, but the rate has grown rapidly. As total EU arrivals by sea fell from just over 1 million in 2015, to 116,000 in 2018, the death rate around Europe’s Southern borders overall increased from an estimate of one death per 274 arrivals in 2015, to one in 51 arrivals by 2018 (UNHCR, 2018: 6).

EU member states, directly and indirectly, are implicated in many military interventions and authoritarian human rights abuses that cause refugee flight. One recent study termed this a ‘wicked’ legitimacy crisis for EU actors and institutions, since:

“...the refugee crisis brings to the fore many contradictory and connected problems of the EU’s processes and values, with negative implications for its legitimacy, as different actors in EU governance seek to impose their own solutions on a system under strain and the EU struggles to retain salience and coherence”

(Murray and Longo, 2018: 411).

Since 2015, instead of combating “criminal gangs” militarily, the EU has started to pay criminals to stop committing crimes. The single most significant enemy group of official EU actors, earlier blamed for the 2015 “migrant crisis”, described as slave traders and traffickers, were now welcomed on-board the EU policy train (or boat), as partners in continued effort to combat illegal entry into the EU.

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