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DIIS Brief

The Securitisation of Migration: A Risky Strategy for European States

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Abstract

Debates about the “securitisation” of migration may over-state the effectiveness with which states are able to link immigration policies with the defence of the national political community against external threats. The example of Italy under Berlusconi, or UK policy since 9/11, show that a “securitarian” rhetoric is sometimes still accompanied by liberal economic policies and regularisation programs, or can easily undermine state legitimacy when a tough line on closed doors is difficult to deliver. Because of the lack of scrutiny on some policies at the European level, however, European immigration policies have been one area where governments have been able to avoid political protest or human rights concerns and implement a tough security based policy, often “outsourcing” the implementation to regions of origin.

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IT HAS BECOME rather fashionable to characterise migration as one of the new security issues. This hardly seems far-fetched if one considers recent public debates on migration in Europe. Immigration has been correlated with problems of criminality, social unrest and inter-ethnic conflict, and – especially since 9/11 – Muslim immigrants have been associated with the threat of fundamentalist extremism. Many commentators have argued that this “securitisation” of migration is propagated by sections of politics, state officials and the mass media, all of whom have a vested interest in depicting migration as a security threat. In the case of states, it is argued that securitising migration can help them to justify more stringent approaches to migration control, and normalise the use of otherwise “exceptional” derogations from human rights standards. States are keen to depict migration as a security threat, because it helps them to secure public legitimacy and expand their control.

I would like to question this claim. My argument is that there is a range of objectives states have in the area of migration policy, which can conflict with an interest in securitisation. This implies that in practice, states often refrain from emphasising correlations between migration and security. I will illustrate this by looking at some recent developments in European immigration policies, and especially policies on migration control.

Why might states securitise migration?

The basic assumption underlying theories of the “securitisation” of migration is that states have an interest in depicting migration as a security problem. Why should this be the case? One argument is that it can help consolidate notions of collective identity, helping mobilise support for the relevant political community. Depicting certain phenomena as security threats can confer legitimacy on the state, by portraying it as able to protect citizens from such threats. As a result, securitisation can justify introducing a range of policies to control migration, policies that would not otherwise have been considered legitimate. So the idea is that a securitisation of political rhetoric justifies introducing security practices and technologies. The state is able to expand its power through promoting a “politics of insecurity”.

However, I would like to suggest that this form of securitisation can be a risky option in an area such as migration control, for at least three reasons.

Conflicting Interests

The first reason is that states have conflicting interests in the area of migration control. To be sure, they want to be seen as capable of protecting citizens from security threats. But migration touches upon at least three other core functions of the liberal state.

- the function of ensuring conditions for economic growth, or accumulation;

- the function of pursuing what is perceived to be a fair distribution of finite socio-economic resources (fairness).
- and the function of guaranteeing individual rights, or institutional legitimacy.

Even if we just take the state's function of providing security, the state needs to secure sufficient social cohesion to prevent inter-ethnic conflict.

Now states need to be seen to perform all four functions in order to secure legitimacy. They are rarely interested in the unbridled pursuit of purely protectionist approach in migration policy. And this constrains the interest in framing migration as a security issue. In fact, defining migration purely as a security issue can raise expectations about need for restrictive responses, which may conflict with goals of accumulation, or institutional legitimacy. For example, if migration is depicted as a security risk, this will make it more difficult for a state to justify economically beneficial labour migration. Highly draconian restriction, meanwhile, may raise concerns about human rights, or inter-ethnic relations.

Delivery

The second reason why securitisation might be a risky option is the problem of meeting public expectations, or what can be termed "delivery". European governments have a far from perfect record of delivering on promises in the area of migration. The dynamic of party political competition encourages governments and rival parties to claim they can achieve goals that are often practically quite unfeasible. One obvious example of this is that of the deportation of failed asylum-seekers. There is often a quite considerable gap between publicly articulated expectations, and what may be feasibly achieved.

Failures to meet performance indicators are frequently the object of political and media scrutiny – indeed, governments are constantly held to account for their supposed deficiencies. This results in what can be termed the "scandalisation" of such transgressions in the mass media. It implies that governments may have limited interest in securitisation where it fuels such expectations. It can raise the stakes, making failure to redeem promises far more risky.

Losing credibility

The third risk concerns the need for states to retain what can be termed epistemic credibility. Most governments are concerned to ensure that their diagnosis of social problems, and the remedies they propose, correspond to available knowledge on the phenomena in question. They risk losing credibility if there is too wide a discrepancy between what they are claiming, and acknowledged facts about the situation. Even if the level of precision in mass media reporting is somewhat lacking, there are plenty of public fora in which the coherence of government statements and decisions are closely scrutinised, such as parliamentary debates and committees, or through the public critique of interest groups. Governments lose authority if they are not seen to be in command of the facts. This implies the existence of a kind of

cognitive constraint, holding governments back from constructing implausible correlations between migration and security.

If we take these three points together, it seems clear that we should not assume an inevitable, omnipresent interest in securitisation – either discourse, or in praxis.

Three examples

I would like to consider three brief examples that illustrate the different ways states try to juggle these considerations.

Italian migration control under Berlusconi

The first is a fairly classic pattern of response: what I call a dualist approach. It is well exemplified by the right-wing coalition government recently in power in Italy.

The Berlusconi government adopted a highly restrictionist rhetoric, whilst tolerating substantial levels of irregular migration and employment in practice. So in its public pronouncements, the government was clearly prioritising the security dimension of policy. It was claiming to adopt a tough line with respect to irregular migration. Some areas of the government's practice were also quite securitised. For example, in March 2002 the government declared a state of emergency after the arrival of a ship carrying 900 Kurdish immigrants. The government was also keen to take part in joint naval patrols of the Mediterranean with other EU countries. Yet at the same time, the government effectively turned a blind eye to widespread illegal residence and work. Indeed, it continued to allow periodic regularisations of irregular migrations, which almost certainly encouraged further irregular migration. So it was able to meet the goal of economic accumulation, through tolerating irregular labour. Gaps in labour supply were being met through illegal entry and labour.

This meant that the government was trying to reconcile different goals through maintaining a gap between proclaimed, restrictive migration policy, on the one hand, and the *de facto* toleration of a more liberal approach on the other. In effect, then, this was a case of securitised rhetoric, but rather more lax implementation in practice.

How effective was this strategy? In terms of the different functional imperatives of the state, it did offer a partial reconciliation of the security or protective function, and that of economic accumulation. But it certainly did not meet human rights standards, nor is it likely to have had a very constructive impact on inter-ethnic relations. The government benefited from a relatively low level of criticism on these issues in the public debate. Compared to some more established immigration countries in Europe, there was rather limited mobilisation of public concern about the government's securitised rhetoric.

However, this attempt to reconcile different goals was also seriously flawed in other ways. In particular, it was a risky strategy in terms of delivery. It was clear to many commentators that this approach was not very effective in reducing irregular migration. In effect, it represented a rather precarious balance – one that aimed to secure short-term populist support, but which ultimately was not very sustainable.

UK migration and counter-terrorism post-9/11

The second example is one in which there were initial attempts to securitise migration, which were then abandoned. Immediately after 9/11, the UK government clearly felt the need to come up with measures that demonstrated their ability to protect citizens from the threat of terrorism. This included some initial attempts to link terrorism to the question of immigration control. For example, soon after 9/11, the Home Secretary called for tightening the asylum procedure to prevent the recognition of suspected terrorists.

However, for a number of reasons, the government did not further pursue this securitising agenda in any consistent way. One reason for this was the problem of conflicting interests. The government was trying to garner public support for expanded labour migration programmes, and was keen not to raise concerns about possible security risks associated with admitting more foreign nationals. The Home Office also had a very poor record of delivering on migration targets. This meant it was keen not to raise expectations about migration control. If the government were to link migration to terrorism and then fail to deliver on targets, this could risk a serious legitimacy deficit.

There was another important element constraining securitisation, which concerns the government's epistemic credibility. In Autumn 2001, the government introduced a new Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act. Part Four of the act introduced provisions for the detention and deportation of foreign nationals suspected of terrorist activities. But from Winter 2001 onwards, there was increasing information emerging about the profile of suspects. They were not necessarily foreign: indeed, at least half of suspects detained in the UK were British nationals. Moreover, even if suspects were foreign, it was questionable whether exclusion from the UK would be the best method of reducing the threat. It may be more sensible to allow them to remain in the country under more effective surveillance. These points were raised in various reports and parliamentary debates on the government's response to terrorism, between 2002-4. They encouraged the government to abandon its initial focus on targeting foreign nationals for detention or deportation. This is a good example of the cognitive constraint mentioned above. Politics could not ignore information that was emerging about the profiles of those engaged in fundamentalist activities. And these facts militated against targeting foreign nationals for exclusion.

EU Immigration and asylum policy and the external dimension.

Finally, I would like to consider how EU has approached the question of migration and security. We have seen that states have a problem juggling competing interests and constraints at the national level. It has been argued by some authors that EU cooperation provides an opportunity to bypass some of these dilemmas.

For a start, cooperation at the EU level may not be subject to the same intensity of scrutiny. The media, domestic courts, NGOs, or national parliaments are all still very much focused on national debates. There is far less systematic scrutiny of EU policy developments. Second, the EU has increasingly been “outsourcing” various areas of migration control and refugee protection to countries in “regions of origin”. Where this occurs, states have more scope for getting away with looser respect for human rights commitments. For example, outsourcing border control or refugee protection to countries outside of Europe can imply lower standards of human rights and protection. Many of the countries involved will have less robust legislation; and any human rights abuse that does occur will be more difficult to oversee.

A third factor is that the externalisation of areas of migration control can help to minimise obvious conflicts with other domestic policies. For example, many aspects of border or internal migration controls are perceived as highly discriminatory, and may have a negative impact of inter-ethnic relations in European countries. Clearly, where such controls are exerted outside of the territory of the EU, such impacts will be less pronounced.

In sum, by externalising migration control, European states may have found a way of avoiding many of the conflicts created by attempts to securitise migration within their own territories.

Conclusions

These examples have revealed three rather different ways of dealing with the tensions of migration policy-making.

The first is what we can term tough rhetoric, combined with relatively lenient practice. In this scenario, some areas of migration policy are securitised, and subject to very restrictive rhetoric; but in practice, there may be substantial deviation from this stringent approach in practice. This strategy is probably only possible in a context where there is a fairly underdeveloped tradition of inter-ethnic relations, and a relatively low sensitivity to human rights abuses in this area.

The second strategy involves the avoidance of securitisation, because of fears of raising expectations about delivery, or losing epistemic credibility. Another reason for holding back is that it might reduce public acceptance of economic migration.

The third approach combines tough rhetoric with tough practice. I argued that this approach was rendered possible in a scenario where European countries were outsourcing control to other regions. The implication is that many of these conflicts only kick in within liberal democratic states: they derive their force from government concerns about public scrutiny of their record on respecting constitutional arrangements, or being sensitive to inter-ethnic relations, or respecting human rights.

In conclusion, while securitisation may seem like a tempting option for governments, it also creates a number of serious risks. For this reason, most governments will think twice before emphasising correlations between security and migration; or, where they do draw such linkages in their rhetoric, they may be displaying far more lenience in their practice. It may be that cooperation at the EU level reduces some of these risks, especially in the context of the external dimension of immigration and asylum. This provides all the more reason to ensure close scrutiny of the EU's expanding activities in the "external dimension" of immigration and asylum.