SECURITY AS SPEECH ACT.
DISCOURSE CONSTRUCTIONS ON THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

Laura HERȚA

Department of International Relations and German Studies, Faculty of European Studies,
Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Abstract: *The aim of this article is to emphasize the way in which discourse constructions and portrayals of selected issues can be shifted from normal politics and placed under the umbrella of "emergency security issues". The theoretical framework tackled here is the one provided by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies and the case study focuses on the contemporary Syrian refugee crisis. According to the scholars from the Copenhagen School, the concept securitization entails the construction of threats following a "grammar of security" (in Barry Buzan's terms). Consequently, no issue is a threat per se, but "anything could be constructed as one" by employing discourse constructions. As such, (in)security is in fact speech act. The article will apply this theoretical and analytical framework on European and North American speech acts regarding the Syrian refugee crisis. The aim is to show how refugees are portrayed as threats to European and American security and how the refugee crisis is named, presented as existential threat, and shifted into emergency politics. The latter is then employed by certain speech acts as justification for claiming the need to use whatever means are necessary to block the presented imminent threat.*

Keywords*: security; speech acts; Syrian refugees; emergency politics*

1. INTRODUCTION

In this article, the main focus is placed on the analytic and theoretic framework of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies while the case study is centred on the Syrian refugees. The paper will firstly present the traditional, Cold-War period approaches on security (with its focus on state security and military threats) and then briefly tackle the attempts to respond to post-Cold War realities and revisit the concept of security. The second part of this article will present the core elements of non-traditional conceptions of security, focusing on the writings of scholars associated with the Copenhagen School of thought. At this point, the concept of *securitization* will be presented and the way in which speech acts pinpoint to perceived security issues will be described. Finally, the last part will concentrate on the Syrian refugee crisis and will try to demonstrate that recent American and European discursive constructions shift the issue of refugees from democratic politics to "emergency politics", hence turning the crisis into a European one, rather than a Syrian one.

2. DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN SECURITY STUDIES IN THE IMMEDIATE POST-COLD WAR PERIOD

The 1990s witnessed a revisiting of the concept of "security". Several non-traditional (also called "widening" and "deepening") debates on security emerged. The main objective was to challenge or complete the Realist and Neorealist views on security. The latter approaches had overwhelmingly dominated to field of Security Studies during the Cold War period, focusing on national security and on states as sole referents of security. According to (Neo)realism, security issues are centred on state security, on the military sector (as main area of security concern), and on potential threats, which are external to states and which are best counteracted by the states' maximization of military power. Ole Waever underlined that

> security is, in historical terms, the field where states threaten each other, challenge each other's sovereignty, try to impose their will on each other, defend their independence [...] (Waever, 2007: 69).

The traditional or (Neo)realist perspective is based on state-centrism (meaning the centrality of states within security issues and "hard politics"), materialism (meaning the exclusive role assigned to material forces in world politics, such as geography, size of territory, military arsenals, natural resources etc.) and the use of force, which refers to the use of military force by states and implies the prevalence of military threats that states are confronted with (Buzan & Hansen, 2009).

However, the aftermath of the Cold War was marked by the shift from inter-state wars to intra-state ones and brought along new issues for International Security Studies. New threats emerged in the immediate post-Cold War period, which can be roughly subdivided into two main categories: global ones and others which are internal to states. Global threats refer to non-state transnational actors (such as terrorist organizations), the depletion of ozone layer and global warming, the spread of HIV and of epidemics, poverty and underdevelopment. Solutions to such global threats are no longer to be found within *inter*-state relations. Rather, they require global attention, within entities that comprise all the states (such as the United Nations). On the other hand, the post-Second World order witnessed specific threats which are internal to states (intra-state ethnic strife, civil wars, or new wars). Therefore, several states were affected rather by state weakness or state failure, by intra-state violence and irregular or unconventional attacks launched by sub-state actors, or by internally displaced people, famine, and ethnic or religious inter-communal armed conflicts. As a result, it became obvious that states no longer needed to focus chiefly on defending their territory from external equal enemies (*i.e.* other states) or to counter-attack external military threats. New threats (global threats, on the one hand, or internal and internationalized, on the other hand) triggered the need to revisit the concept of security and to analyze its new accommodating dimensions. Hence, *food insecurity, environmental security, societal security, human security* became salient security issues, but also relevant terms within Security Studies.

Several non-traditional approaches on security developed during the 1990s and they all focused on extending and deepening security. As shown by Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams, the "new thinking on security" entailed several axes. Most importantly, there have been many

> attempts to *broaden* the neorealist conception of security to include a wider range of potential threats, ranging from economic and environmental issues to human rights and migration (Krause & Williams, 2007:135).

Such broadening approaches have been accompanied by

> discussions intended to *deepen* the agenda of security studies by moving either down to the level of individual or human security or up to the level of international or global security (Krause & Williams, 2007: 135).

Moreover, as emphasized by Emma Rothschild, "different entities (such as individuals, nations, and 'systems') cannot be expected to be secure or insecure in the same way; the concept of security is extended, therefore, from military to political, economic, social, environmental, or 'human' security" (Rothschild, 2007:2). Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen traced the growth and evolution of the **"**widening–deepening side" of International Security Studies and explored the non-traditional branches of Security Studies, categorized as follows: Constructivist Security Studies, The Copenhagen School of Security Studies, Critical Security Studies, Feminist Security Studies, Postcolonial Security Studies, and Human Security (Buzan, Hansen, 2009).

In what follows, this article will focus on *securitization*, the concept coined by scholars of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, and will try to demonstrate its relevance in the case of the contemporary Syrian refugee crisis.

3. SECURITIZATION AND THE COPENHAGEN SCHOOL OF SECURITY STUDIES

The Copenhagen School and its leading scholars Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, Lene Hansen and Jaap de Wilde revisited the concept of security by focusing on its broadening attributes. Drawing on previous security commentators, such as Arnold Wolfers (1962), Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde indicated that security can be tackled both objectively (as real threat) and subjectively (as perceived threat), and contended that *securitization*, just as politicization, should be understood as intersubjective process (Buzan *et al.*, 2011:52).

Also, the Copenhagen School scholars theorized the binary concepts *securitization* and *desecuritization* and analyzed security as a speech act. *Securitization* is the process of making an issue a "security" issue. The securitization process transfers issues from "normal" (accountable/

democratic) politics to "emergency" politics. Therefore, securitization refers to the following core feature of security: "the ways in which threats are discursively tackled and presented" (Bright, 2012: 863). The concept entails the construction of threats following a "grammar of security" which indicates "an existential threat, a point of no return, and a possible way out" (Buzan, *et al.*, 1998:33). The essence of the securitization idea is that no issue is a threat *per se*, but that "anything could be constructed as one" (Bright, 2012:866). The twin concept *desecuritization* focuses on "moving out of security" (Hansen, 2012:526) or "the shifting of issues out of emergency mode and into the normal bargaining process of the political sphere"; Barry Buzan argues that this is the "optimal long-range solution" (Buzan *et al.*, 1998:4, 29). As Huysmans observed, "the speech act of security draws upon a historically constituted and socially institutionalized set of meanings" (Huysmans, 2006:25).

Ole Waever explained that a security problem emerges when a certain development is *named as security issue:*

> What then is security? With the help of language theory, we can regard 'security' as a speech act [...] By uttering 'security', a state-representative moves a particular development into a specific area, and thereby claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it (Waever, 2007:73).

Securitization can be regarded, according to this analytic framework, as an extreme version of politicization. The process of securitization entails the transference of some issues from normal politics to emergency politics, because such issues are presented as "existential threats", for which emergency measures and procedures are needed; the latter emergency actions are justified outside of normal, bargaining politics. Certain issues are considered as security issues by political elites and are presented to an audience (usually public opinion) as being more important than others, hence having absolute priority. In this process, the entire political logic of evaluating security issues is transformed not because there is a real existential threat, but because the issue is presented as such. Basically, this is achieved through speech acts, by declaring or labelling an issue as being an existential threat for the security of the state, nation, community, identity or for any other principle of existence. Once the emergency and priority are established through the speech act, emergency measures can be legitimized in order for the referent object to survive (Buzan *et al.*, 1998:23, 24; Buzan *et al*, 2011:44-47).

4. DISCOURSE CONSTRUCTIONS ON THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

The usual image associated with refugees is indicating a rather desperate picture. Refugees are victims of conflict and they flee the area of violence, trying to find rescue in other countries. In international organizations' lexicon, refugees are presented as people who are forced to leave their homes, because they legitimately fear persecution. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR),

> a refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries (UNCHR, *What is a refugee?*).

From a legal standpoint, refugees are an issue of humanitarian action (hence based on compassion for fellow human beings) and are the concern of the international community. According to the 1951 Refugee Convention,

> one of the outstanding achievements of the 20th century in the humanitarian field has been the establishment of the principle that the refugee problem is a matter of concern to the international community and must be addressed in the context of international cooperation and burden-sharing (UNHCR, 1951).

The issue of refugee is linked to the principle of human rights protection and is considered as essential part of international law:

> Principles of human rights have considerably widened the ambit of protection afforded to persons generally. Moreover, the Convention is based on humanitarian ideals embellished in the concept of human rights. Indeed the preamble to the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees affirms the principle enunciated in the Charter of the United Nations that human beings shall enjoy fundamental rights and freedoms without discrimination. The grounds on which persecution is recognised in the Convention, namely, race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group are identical to those on which discrimination under human rights standards is prohibited in general international law (UNHCR, 1951).

This representation of refugees is centred on the idea of victims who try to escape persecution and who are in desperate need of protection. In this sense, refugee and security and intertwining terms, because insecurity triggers the forced displacement of refugees and their arrival in other countries where they seek asylum. The case of the Syrian refugees is an illustrative example for this, due to the fact Syrians have been leaving their country ever since the civil war broke out after the uprising from 2011.

However, some recent and contemporary discourses portray the current Syrian refugee crisis in a different way. In such portrayals, the Syrian refugees are presented as threats to European or North-American security. In what follows, this article tries the briefly capture the core content of such discursive representations, to show how such discourse constructions are shaped, and to demonstrate that all these entail a process of securitization. In a press conference, American president Donald Trump pictures the Syrian refugees as threat to North-American borders. His discursive construction links refugees to "the bad ones" or "the criminals" (*Trudeau and Trump on Syrian Refugees*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmbjCcVk08A). Trump said "immigrants would face questions about honour killings", he mentioned their view on "women and gays and minorities", but also their attitudes on "radical Islam". According to this speech act, refugees are synonymous to major potential dangers: "we have no idea who these people are, where they come from", Trump said of Syrian refugees during a speech in Phoenix, and added: "I always say, Trojan horse. Watch what's going to happen, folks. It's not going to be pretty." (*The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/us-ews/2016/sep/02/donald-trump-syria-refugees-us-immigration-security-terrorism).

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban attacked the European Union's migration policy, by portraying the refugees as existential threats to "European Christian values", since "refugees pose a danger to European traditions of Europe". In Orban's speech act, receiving refugees is equal to "importing crime, terrorism, homophobia […]" (*Hungary, PM Orban blames refugees for undermining Christian Europe*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wrrdKOFt00).

This article argues that refugees are portrayed as major dangers and that this discourse construction is part of a securitization process. Some political elites (President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Viktor Orban are selected here, because their speeches are illustrative in this sense) resort to speech acts, construct a specific discourse, and present a specific

issue (the contemporary Syrian refugees) as existential threat to North-American borders and to European security, respectively. Moreover, the issue of Syrian refugees is presented to an audience (American public opinion, Hungarian public opinion, but, *in extenso*, European and international public opinions) and it is emphasized as key priority for American or European survival and values. Also, these speech acts trigger the shift from normal, accountable, democratic politics to "emergency politics" which require specific actions (such as building fences in order to fend off the incoming flows of refugees). The "point of no return" (key stage in the securitization process) is also stressed, since the existential threats are presented not only as sources of insecurity for American and European citizens, but also as major dangers to fundamental Christian values and to the very basic pillars of the West.

The UNHCR presents the issue as "Syrian emergency", since "millions of Syrians have escaped across borders, fleeing the bombs and bullets that have devastated home" (UNHCR, http://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html). And yet, the discourse which links Syrian refugees with existential threats to European values or terrorism indicates a European crisis. In speech acts presented above, the issue is turned into a turning point wherein refugees pose a major threat. In other words, the refugees, usually associated with desperate people who are forced to leave their homes because of fear and violence, are described as existential threats and potential sources of insecurity.

5. CONCLUSIONS & ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The content of this paper is the result of the author's research work which has been undertaken over the last two years and which has been implemented in the author's academic work with students, as well as in her research. The author takes full responsibility for the contents and scientific correctness of the paper.

It is the author's pleasure to have the opportunity to present this paper at the 6th International conference *Redefining community in intercultural context* (Bari, 5–6 June, 2017), organised by Henri Coandă Air Force Academy, Brașov, in cooperation with "Aldo Moro" University, Bari.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Bourbeau, P. (2011). *The Securitization of Migration. A study of movement and order.* London, New York: Routledge.

2. Bright, J. (2012). Securitization, terror, and control: towards a theory of the breaking point. *Review of International Studies*, October 2012, 38: 4. 861-879.
3. Buzan, B.; Hansen, L. (2009). *The Evolution of International Security Studies.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4. Buzan, B., Waever O., de Wilde, J. (2011). *Securitatea. Un nou cadru de analiza.* Cluj-Napoca, CA Publishing.
5. Buzan, B.; Waever, O.; de Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A New Framework For Analysis*. Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner.
6. Hansen, L. (2012). Reconstructing desecuritization: the normative-political in the Copenhagen School and directions for how to apply it. *Review of International Studies*, July 2012, 38:3. 525-546.
7. Gambino, Lauren. (2016). Trump and Syrian refugees in the US: separating the facts from fiction. *The Guardian.* September 2.
8. Huysmans, J. (2006). *The Politics of Insecurity. Fear, Migration and Asylum in the EU.* London and New York: Routledge.
9. Krause, K. & Williams, Michael C. (2007). Broadening the Agenda of Security Studies: Politics and Methods. In Barry Buzan & Lene Hansen (eds.), *International Security (volume III Widening Security).* London: Sage Publications, 135-165.
10. Rothschild, E. (2007). What is security? In Barry Buzan & Lene Hansen (eds.), *International Security (volume III Widening Security).* London: Sage Publications, 1-34.
11. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). (1951). *Refugee Convention* [online]. Available: http://www.unhcr.org/4ca34be29.pdf [Accessed May 2017].
12. UNCHR. (2017). *What is a refugee?* Available http://www.unrefugees.org/what-is-a-refugee/. [accessed May 2017].
13. Waever, O. (2007). Securitization and Desecuritization. In Barry Buzan & Lene Hansen (eds.), *International Security (volume III Widening Security).* London: Sage Publications, 66-98.
14. Wolfers, A. (1962). *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
15. ***. (2016, March 16). Hungary, PM Orban blames refugees for undermining Christian Europe. Available https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wrrdKOFt00 [Accessed April 2017].
16. ***. (2017, February 13). Trudeau and Trump on Syrian Refugees. *YouTube* [online]. Available https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmbjCcVk08A [Accessed April 2017].