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The vulnerability of securitisation: the missing link of critical security studies

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes to focus on vulnerability in the operationalisation of securitisation theory. It argues that in empirical investigations we often fail to acknowledge that security acts may reflect weakness, not strength. Employing second-generation securitisation research, it first problematizes the common approach to securitisation. Namely, that the self-referential conceptualisation of security acts, together with the realist understanding of power, lead to interpretations of securitisation as a tool of unprincipled statecraft. Secondly, drawing on Brown's work on border walling, the article reasons that securitisation is predicated on vulnerability. Vulnerability is a legitimising necessity of securitisation. One cannot designate a threat without tying it to vulnerability (real/imagined). Securitisations are essentially claims of vulnerability. Thirdly, utilising contextual and narrative analysis of two case studies, this paper illustrates how securitisations are coupled with vulnerability. The article formalizes a generative research avenue of securitisation. One that better accounts for the intersubjective aspects of security acts.

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Introduction

Securitisation¹ in public debates is increasingly defined as a tool of Machiavellian practices, a political *modus operandi*, a manipulative, divisive strategy that elites employ for their own profit (e.g. Al-Arian, 2021). This approach presents securitisation as a leverage of strong entities that pragmatically and cynically use people's fears. Writing about the deterioration of the rule of law across the EU, Amnesty International report on national security concluded that since 2014 politics of securitisation have established 'a world in which fear, alienation and prejudice are steadily chipping away at the cornerstones of the EU: fairness, equality and non-discrimination' (2017, p. 6). Today, even researchers studying securitisation are themselves accused of using this term for the advancement of regressive – or even racist – modes of politics (Howell & Richter-Montpetit, 2019).

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Politics of security are blamed for fostering hysteria all over the world. This sentiment is hardly surprising considering the spread of emergency laws, the weakening of regulations guarding citizens' right to privacy or freedom of movement, the success of authoritarian politicians (from Brazil to Hungary), and increasing anti-immigrant and racist rhetoric. Consequently, critical approaches to security interpret it in line with Mencken's 1918 review of American politics: 'The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the population alarmed (...) by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, most of them imaginary.' (2009, p. 53).

The discontent with the spread of securitisation is one of the crucial issues influencing the academic debate on the security landscape. Securitisation studies stand at the forefront marking the new territories for our reflection on global security. At the same time, the dominating view in the literature is to understand securitisation as a pragmatic tool of political enabling. From this perspective, it is a self-referential practice. Namely, it is implemented in a top-down manner in reflection of the elites' agency and self-serving goals. Securitisation is equated with the strategy of exclusion, the illiberal appetites of the ruling class and the employment of emergency measures. This article contends that this position leads to the essentialisation of security acts.

An aspect that is missing from many securitisation studies is the recognition that securitisation may be a sign of vulnerability, that its employment can reflect weakness (real or imagined), not strength. Drawing on the second-generation of securitisation studies (e.g. Balzacq, 2005; 2011; Floyd, 2007; Kirk, 2022, 2022; Stritzel, 2007; 2012), this article formalises a generative way to operationalise the intersubjectivity of securitisation. Employing Wendy Brown's work on border walling (2010), it is argued that securitisation is predicated on vulnerability (the 'potential for harm and trauma that can emerge in the absence of safety,' (Beattie, 2016, p. 229) a possibility of being 'wounded, painfully transformed' Hutchings, 2013, p. 25). The article shows that the concept of vulnerability can be employed as a distinct research avenue for security studies (Markiewicz, 2023).

Vulnerability is a legitimising necessity, a *condicio sine qua non* of securitisation. In order to be successful and gain acceptance from the population, a security act refers to and builds on collective vulnerability. Rather than a transient emotion, a judgment over the efficacy of securitisation (Van Rythoven, 2015), vulnerability is a form of collective identity which defines how the group interprets its standing (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003). Collectives cannot be swayed if they cannot relate to state warnings about looming threats. Thus, the article proposes that states' vulnerability narratives are intersubjectively constructed reflection of this ongoing identification process. They are an essential foundation of a successful security act, with their help states securitise our localities.

Employment of securitisation can reflect a state's precarity, not its stability, as in the case of the steady expansion of the border fortifications in the global North and South (Bissonnette & Vallet, 2020). While walls intuitively are seen as an embodiment of a state's agency, they are also a monument of an actor's growing vulnerabilities. For Brown, they are an illustration of the erosion of state power: 'Counter-intuitively, perhaps, it is the weakening of state sovereignty, and more precisely, the detachment of sovereignty from the nation-state, that is generating much of the frenzy of nation-state wall building today' (2010, p. 24).

Consequently, I argue that the inclusion of the concept of vulnerability in security studies is a step towards a more contextual understanding of states' security practices

(Balzacq, 2011; Floyd, 2007; Roe, 2012; Williams, 2015). Recognising vulnerability as one of the reasons behind securitisation, we bring back a more nuanced understanding of this phenomenon as an intersubjective social construct (Kirk, 2020; 2022) that emerges at the intersection between the audience and the securitising actor. Importantly, we also consider the fact that securitising actors themselves may be driven by the vulnerability. Instead of perceiving securitisation as a Machiavellian practice, we recognise the role of fears and anxieties of political actors. Securitising actors may in fact not be strong (or feel strong), but vulnerable. By including vulnerability in the studies of securitisation, we see that securitisation can be used not only to provoke fear but to cope with it (also Floyd, 2019). It is claimed that states securitise through vulnerability narratives. Vulnerability is a discursive theme that animates the security act. It is a (declared) condition of the securitising actor.

The article begins by reviewing the key debates on securitisation. It discusses the building blocks of this research project: the role of speech acts, threats and exceptional politics. It outlines the points of contention among security scholars. The next section puts forward critical appraisals of the approach to securitisation associated with the Copenhagen School. It is argued that it rests on two positions – a self-referential understanding of securitisation, and a realist approach to power – which in many empirical enquiries led to a reductionist treatment of security. This is followed by the discussion of the work of the second-generation securitisation theorists (e.g. Bøller & Herr, 2020; Floyd, 2007; Kirk, 2022). This serves as a footing for a new operationalisation of securitisation. The article claims that we at times, in research practice, overlook the fact that securitisations are predicated on vulnerability. Drawing on a set of political speeches, it is illustrated how states justify their security policies by the practice of a discursive coupling of securitisation and vulnerability. It is concluded that we ought to recognise the salience of the phenomenon of strong states employing the language of the weak.

The lay of the land: securitisation

Securitisation is of key interest to constructivist security studies and is understood as an action of the state to name certain issues security problems (Wæver, 1995, pp. 57–58). It is a tool used to influence constituents and to include policies in the governmental agenda. By calling something a security problem, decision-makers gain a license to implement policies to deal with the challenge. Wæver argues that they gain a ‘special right’ which is solely defined by the high echelons of power itself (1995, p. 54).

There is a consensus among constructivists that the inter-subjectivity of social life and the constitutive force of language are crucial elements in the security studies research agenda. Language is interpreted as something that shapes social reality (Huysmans, 1998). However, what constitutes a process of securitisation is disputed. According to reading – associated with the Copenhagen school – language is securitisation, and security is reflected in a speech act (e.g. Buzan et al., 1998; McSweeney, 1996). Securitisation is interpreted as a distinct discursive formation, a linguistic signifier that can change social order and manage politics (Huysmans, 1998, p. 232).

On the other hand, there is a growing body of literature that calls for a more ‘capacious’ understanding of security acts. The focus on the speech acts is blamed for ignoring the

structural and contextual factors that shape securitisation (e.g. Floyd, 2019; Mirow, 2016, p. 40; Williams, 2003), for textualization of security studies (Balzacq, 2010), and for problematic normative consequences of solely negative interpretations of securitisation (McDonald, 2008). The conceptualisation of securitisation as an act leading to extraordinary measures and the politics of exception is criticised by a number of scholars (e.g. Floyd, 2019; Huysmans, 2011; Roe, 2012; Salter, 2011; Williams, 2011).

Most securitisation studies devote special attention to the role of threat in global politics. This position stems from implicit references to Carl Schmitt and a claim that one of the main political roles of communities is to provide protection against external dangers (Huysmans, 1998; Williams, 2003). It is argued that by studying threats we can understand the essential character of security processes and their role in establishing 'panic politics' (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 34). In the last two decades, fear and threat have become the central focus of a broad range of security studies (e.g. Buzan, 1991; Mirow, 2016). They share the view that securitisation is put in motion by convincing a collective that it should be fearful of a particular threat.² The role of threat and fear is becoming a focal point in scholarship on immigration (McDonald, 2011), terrorism (Huysmans, 2014), Brexit (Browning, 2018), minority rights (Mabee, 2007) and the EU's neighbourhood policy (Hellberg, 2011). Foucauldian readings of biopolitics also link fear with modern security measures (Aradau, 2004). McDonald concludes that: 'In short, we can learn all we need to know about the construction of security through studying the issues that are represented as existential threats' (2008, pp. 577–578).

The self-referential power of securitisation

The approach adopted by the Copenhagen School accentuates the self-referentiality of securitisation. It is argued that security emerges as speech acts: 'In this usage, security is not of interest as a sign that refers to something more real; the utterance itself is the act. By saying it, something is done' (Wæver, 1995, p. 55). This approach perceives the collective construction of security knowledge as a direct outcome of a state's discursive enunciations. The securitising actor 'does not refer to external, objective reality but establishes a security situation by itself' (Huysmans, 1998, p. 232). It is an ultimate performative act, a social enabler. Pointing out the contextual nature of security, it is accentuated that securitisation in the political domain is not an objective reflection of a problem (e.g. Williams, 2003), but a mobilising tool in the hands of a state: 'something is a security problem when the elites declare it to be so' (Wæver, 1995, p. 54). More importantly, it is a political practice that – due to its self-referentiality – does not have to be grounded in facts (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 24). Securitisation is interpreted as a phenomenon that does not have to speak to external phenomena: 'security is not of interest as a sign that refers to something more real; the utterance *itself* is the act' (Wæver, 1995, p. 55).

The understanding of securitisation as a self-referential practice supports a realist outlook on state politics (Floyd, 2010). Since security acts have perlocutionary effects, since they enable the political actors to achieve their goals, this conceptualisation often leads to research positions interpreting politics as a self-serving, amoral competition. In this race, securitising actors are driven by the 'lust for Power' (Morgenthau, 1962, p. 42). While the Copenhagen School is one of many theories in the diversifying field of securitisation studies (Balzacq et al., 2016), its research perspective echoes in

multiple empirical investigations. Consequently, securitisation is often analysed through the prism of power and politics of the strong. This moves the debate towards 'the logic of political realism' (Aradau, 2004, p. 406). Security is treated as a method that is used *ad hoc* to solve political actors' problems. It is 'a quality actors inject into issues' and 'stage them in political arena' (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 204).

Securitisation research conventionally focuses on exposing how the mighty use it to disenfranchise the weak. How Americans after 9/11 securitised Islam (Shipoli, 2018), how affluent majorities securitise poor, exploited minorities and impose excessive surveillance of 'problematic' communities (Kinnvall & Nesbitt-Larking, 2013). Securitisation is associated with nationalism and bigotry and is interpreted as a fertile ground for 'extreme history politics' (Jutila, 2015, p. 927). Drawing on the case of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, Combes (2017) shows how media and politics use the figure of a stranger as a method of securitisation. Hellberg states that the EU elites' governmentality is based on the securitisation of terrorists, migrants, criminals etc. (2011).

The perception of securitisation as a pragmatic, calculative tool of political enabling of the ruling power stems from the normative character of the brunt of critical security studies. At times, the literature advocates against securitisation associating it with illiberal, undemocratic forces. It calls for the desecuritization of societies, and as a panacea for securitisation ills, suggests societal self-emancipation. Since it is a tool that often leads to oppression, securitisation studies advocate for emancipatory politics of desecuritisation (e.g. Aradau, 2004; Hellberg, 2011; Jutila, 2015; Kinnvall & Nesbitt-Larking, 2013).

This analytical focus – while has been repeatedly problematised over the years (e.g. Balzacq, 2005; Floyd, 2019; Stritzel, 2007) – is still shaping many of the empirical investigations of security politics. Such stance at times leads to the assumption that securitisation is a legitimising tool of political might (e.g. Balzacq, 2010; Huysmans, 2006; McDonald, 2008; Williams, 2003). It is prone to overlook the fact that securitisations reflect actors' *vulnerabilities*. By focusing on the (negative) perlocutionary capabilities of security grammar, we are losing from our sight the (declared) vulnerability of political actors. Self-referentiality justified taking the roots of securitisation 'for granted'. Since security acts are a calculative political enabling, they are all alike. This has led to a black-boxing of the phenomenon.³ Consequently, in research practice we often have put aside inquiries into what processes stand behind successful security acts,⁴ instead focusing on answering 'how' securitisation is used.

Second-generation securitisation studies

The second-generation of securitisation studies promotes a less cynical view of securitisation (e.g. Balzacq, 2005; Böller & Herr, 2020; Floyd, 2007; Kirk, 2020, 2022; Williams, 2015). As argued by the post-Copenhagen theorists, while the value judgments of security studies may ethically be right,⁵ they disregard the fact that securitisation is intersubjective (Balzacq, 2011, p. 3) and contextual (Kirk, 2020). Thus, the process of designation of threats is predicated on referents that are meaningful to the actor (Stritzel, 2012; 2014). After all, threats in order to be feared, have to be understood as threatening.

According to Stritzel 'Sociopolitically (...) the authority of a speaker is not always perfectly consolidated and secured' (2012, p. 553). This means that fear and threat – the two

main driving forces of securitisation – are not simply a political spin that at will (self-referentially) is employed by the cynical elites. Instead, securitisation ought to be understood as a discursive practice ‘through which an intersubjective understanding is constructed to treat something as an existential threat’ to advocate for employing state means to deal with the problem (Stritzel, 2014, p. 4). As argued by Roe, the power of securitisation is predicated on the socio-political context ‘in which security is uttered’ (2012, p. 254). Thus, as emphasised by the second wave of empirical studies (e.g. Böller & Herr, 2020; Kirk, 2020; 2022), securitisations are ever contested. They are often met with counter-securitisations, initiatives to de-securitise or outright securitisation failures.

In the literature, securitisation functions through the designation of certain phenomena as existential threats (e.g. Aradau, 2004). However, Stritzel points out that the underlying reasons why threat serves as a social enabler of security acts are rarely analysed (2007). As we are warned by Roe (2012), Balzacq (2005) and Stritzel (2007), excessive perceptual rigidity may lead researchers to a failure in capturing meaning-making processes (how specific human beings in particular times and locales make sense of their worlds) (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013) behind the security of identities (McSweeney, 1996). While securitisation theory rightfully presents the ideational forces as a driver of securitisation, empirical investigations do not always tap into a more detailed analysis of the in-group meaning-making practices (Baele & Jalea, 2022; Böller & Herr, 2020; Kirk, 2022). In research practice, the broader context of securitisation (Kirk 2020, 272) can be left outside the analytical scope.

Here I am building on Stritzel’s studies that illustrate the utility of analysing the politics of securitisation through the contextualised descriptions of dangers (2014). Which I understand as broader linguistic practices that are adjusted to the audience in order to present a particular phenomenon as a threat. Thus, securitisations instead of being self-referential, are adapted by countries to the ‘specific communicative and institutional environment’ (Stritzel, 2014, p. 49). Since securitisations are adjusted to socio-political requirements of collectives, a key way of generating a rich operationalisation of securitisation theory is by looking at the ways through which states make threats relatable to the audience (Balzacq, 2015).

Vulnerability: gatekeeper of securitisation

In all conceptualisations of securitisation, threats are animated through collective fears. For example, the securitisation of immigration (see Huysmans, 2011) cannot succeed if the community is not fearful of the phenomenon to the extent it will perceive immigrants as a threat. This understanding ignores the fact that both threat and fear are always nested in specific social settings (Balzacq, 2011; Stritzel, 2012).

Following Stritzel’s call to analyse the context of security acts (2007), I argue that by looking at the states’ broader discursive practices that offer securitisation its contextual meaning (see Kirk 2020), we see that the fear of threat is often predicated on vulnerability. After all, actors do not fear threats that they do not perceive as being vulnerable to. The semantic ordering of the concepts of vulnerability, fear and threat shows that both threat and fear are constituted on vulnerability. Vulnerability is what gives a threat its meaning. Threats are dangers we are (perceptively) vulnerable to, and our reaction to those threats

is fear. Fear stems from vulnerability. Someone who is not vulnerable does not have any reason to be fearful.

This fact is of key importance for our understanding of securitisation. Fears are a form of emotion (Van Rythoven, 2015), a feeling of being exposed to threats (e.g. Füredi, 2007). This preoccupation with being scared by the state fits well with classical readings of securitisation – understood as a form of practice that self-referentially ‘makes something into security issue’ (Floyd, 2010, p. 2). On the other hand, vulnerabilities are a more stable socio-psychological construct. They are not a fleeting emotion but a ‘core belief’ which is an integral element of one’s identification as being perpetually ‘in harm’s way’ (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003, 186). On the societal level, vulnerability is a form of group identity (Abrams & Hogg, 1990), which is a ‘template’ used by the collective to interpret its standing (2003, 183). On the state level, it is an intersubjectively constructed state narrative (Markiewicz, 2023).⁶ Its form is shaped by the ongoing dialectic between the state and the audience. Thus, while vulnerability narrative can always be defined as a distinct phenomenon with its unique designates (easily recognised by descriptions of the state as a vulnerable actor), its actual form is an everchanging process in the making.

This approach emphasises the role collective identity plays in the securitisation as well as the socio-psychological underpinnings of vulnerability-based securitisations. It distinguishes the project’s research perspective from the more cynical readings of security politics. While fear of threat is in securitisation theory recognised as crucial for successful security acts, in empirical analyses securitisation sometimes is treated as an unscrupulous technique, that at will (self-referentially) is used for the elite’s gain. This position leads to a top-down ordering of security processes. Fears and threats are ‘pushed’ to the audience (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 204). In such an interpretation, threats are something that at will are added to the political process. They are a ‘political technology’ (Bigo, 2002, p. 65) imposing exclusionary measures. This may lead to the essentialisation of securitisation and questioning of its ideational intersubjective character. It suggests a passivity of the audience. In research practice, we miss out on recognising that securitisations are essentially vulnerability claims. That they are a legitimising necessity, a gatekeeper of the security act. One cannot designate a threat without tying it with its own vulnerability (real or imagined).

By looking at vulnerability in securitisation practices, we recognise the central role collective identifications play in states’ designation of threats. This allows us to account for the fact that all ‘enunciations of insecurity’ (Watson, 2012, p. 299) are building on pre-existing vulnerability.⁷ While vulnerability worldview and vulnerability narratives do not have to reflect objective reality (e.g. ‘real or perceived history of misery’; Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003, 186), they are a societal fact manifested in collective beliefs and state’s self-descriptions.⁸ Indeed, vulnerability narratives have an instrumental dimension. After all, they provide the state with the agency, and at the same time, they address actor’s collective self-perceptions. The threat is designated by the actor’s subjective identification of vulnerability, which may be based on actual or just perceived weaknesses. When scrutinising the identity realm of statecraft, it is of salient importance to be prudent when one is making authoritative judgments about the morality or authenticity of security act (e.g. Lebow, 2016).

The analytical perspective advocated by this article can be found in Brown’s magisterial work on border walling (2010). Brown analyses the surprising securitisation of borders in

the times of global connectedness. Referring to multiple cases, she argues that the demand for walling comes due to the growing vulnerabilities of the citizenry. Brown draws on a broad range of thinkers to argue that the ongoing securitisation is nested in states' vulnerability (2010, p. 24, 26, 71, 120, 130, 133). While her work is a powerful critique of the securitisation of borders, she does not doubt that walling stems from 'the increasing vulnerability of subjects everywhere to global economic vicissitudes and transnational violence' (2010, p. 114). In Brown's account, this means that behind securitisation there is first 'the desire for sovereign containment and protection against (...) vulnerability' (2010, p. 130).

Brown's work effectively captures vulnerability as a foundation of securitisation. She shows that states gain prerogatives to securitise their borders by pointing out their precarity: 'most discourses of walling in the United States, Europe, and Israel produce the entity at stake as simultaneously vulnerable, victimised, righteous, and powerful?' (2010, p. 120). Essentially, they appeal for power to securitise, by stressing out their vulnerability. Thus, Brown's work confirms that without accounting for vulnerability, we will not understand 'the political wishes for potency, protection, containment' (2010, p. 114).

Importantly, since securitisations are brought to life on precarity (also Floyd, 2018), they are not an 'ingredient' that Hobbesian Leviathan incorporates/withdraws at will, all because of the inclusion of securitisation constructs the identity of the actor itself. Vulnerabilities are not only the descriptor of the surrounding conditions of the securitiser. They have a profound constitutive effect on the actor's identity. They mediate between 'life and death' (Huysmans, 1998, p. 226). If the state points out it is threatened by the danger, it recognises its vulnerability. This affects its position, identification, and image.

Vulnerability brings to our attention the recursive, intersubjective character of processes behind the construction of meaning by securitisation. Audience and actor influence each other, and securitisation reflects this dialectic. The predication of security on vulnerability exposes the constitutive consequences of securitisation. While security acts can change the horizon of acceptable state policies, they influence actors' self-identifications. Consequently, they function as a reductive-enabler – a figure that simultaneously opens up, and limits possibilities of statecraft. Securitisation partially undermines the actor's image: by acting weak, states make themselves look weak. Naturally, in the process, they 'appeal' for new prerogatives, but by doing so, they bring attention to the actors' own incapacity. As is in the case of walled states, Brown notes, that new powers to securitise borders are based on the evocation of vulnerability: 'The nation is in danger, under siege; the state is appealed to as capable of defending against this siege and eminently right to do so' (2010, p. 120). This double-track was captured in the anti-immigration rhetoric of Hungary's PM Viktor Orban. In 2015, to gain support for the new methods of border policing, Orban pictured a state in profound distress: 'They [immigrants] are overrunning us. They're not just banging on the door, they're breaking the doors down on top of us. Our borders are under threat. Hungary is under threat' (BBC, 2015). Shortly after his speech, the Hungarian parliament voted to broaden the powers of the army.

The presented research perspective does not exclude the possibility of manipulative intentions behind securitisations. As it is effectively captured by the security studies literature, securitisation can distort the factual, substantiated reasoning. However, it better

accounts for the context and processual character of security acts. While it recognises that security issues can be brought to the political agenda due to the ambitions of the ruling class, it shows the challenges and obstacles political actors must overcome in order to refer to the threat. It questions the facilitatory capability of *ad hoc* self-referential securitisations. While it agrees with Buzan et al. (1998, p. 204) that political actors 'stage' security acts in the 'political arena', it disputes the top-down ordering of securitisation, where actors implant security. To further develop the play metaphor, one would say, that by placing security on the platform of the political theatre, the actor is changing not only 'the pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts' (Goffman, 1967, p. 5) its playing out to the audience, but that it is changing the play itself.⁹ By behaving as it is threatened, he enacts a vulnerable role. He acts out a role that is predicated on the 'potential for harm and trauma that can emerge in the absence of safety.' (Beattie, 2016, p. 229) This has a far-reaching consequence for the actor and determines the dramaturgical character of the subsequent performance. Consequently, securitisation should not be analysed as a strategy of impression management (while it may be treated this way by some agents). It is a performance and an ideational process that defines the role played by the actor.

Vulnerability is a crucial referent without which securitisation cannot succeed. Democratic regimes cannot securitise a particular phenomenon without relating to vulnerability in order to try to secure their audience's (at least partial) acceptance that securitisation is dealing with the collective insecurities. – I have stuff stolen. (...) I have seen boats full of guys. I had to sit out there with my BB gun, so they do not come across (...) Build that wall. Go ahead – it is voices and beliefs like those of Andres Montemayor, a retired policeman from Texas, that gives president Trump's idea to erect a wall along the border with Mexico, a much-needed justification (BBC, 2017). It is the willingness to terminate vulnerability that drives securitisation. This realisation is of crucial importance. By analysing the role of vulnerability in security practices, the securitisation research project gains a conceptual tool that fosters countering the reductionist tendencies of some investigations. By accounting for it we expose the sociological aspects of security acts. We treat securitisation primarily as a constitutive element of identity, not as a political technique.

The presence/absence of vulnerability reflects who we think we are. It illustrates our identifications. The vulnerability of communities always reflects their perceptions of the surroundings. It is by analysing the meaning-making practices of the community, which reflect the system of its shared values and identifications, that we can understand the roots of successful securitisation. It is through this situatedness that communities mediate whether they are vulnerable to particular dangers. The same event, depending on our self-perceptions, may be perceived as a source of vulnerability or not. As argued by Mills, it is who we think we are, that shapes whether we feel vulnerable or not. Liberal democracy that defines itself as a nation of immigrants may have a different perception of the increasing influx of immigrants than illiberal democracy of almost homogenous ethnic makeup: 'When people cherish some set of values and do not feel any threat to them, they experience well-being. When they cherish values but do feel them to be threatened, they experience a crisis' (Wright Miles, 1959, p. 11). Consequently, Brexit may be a source of insecurity for the pro-European EU citizens and a welcomed event for the Eurosceptics. Growing prerogatives of the EU can be supported by

the largely pro-European government of President of France Emmanuel Macron and seen as a threat to Euro-sceptic Orban. These vulnerabilities are naturally shaped also by perceptions of the state's operational capabilities. A cholera outbreak may be perceived as an existential threat to a Sub-Saharan developing state, and a solvable unfortune for a rich member state of the OECD. The same threat is mediated through our way of living, the material grounding, the set of values and identifications; they determine whether particular issues will be interpreted as in-group vulnerabilities. Furedi concludes that it is not threats that directly construct our fears (2007, p. 98). It is our sense-making that decides whether we are vulnerable to particular threats, or not. The fact that securitisation results from vulnerability undermines the common assumption that threats are 'designated' (McDonald, 2008, pp. 577–578) or 'produced' (Mabee, 2007, p. 386) by institutions, and that the security can be self-referentially 'invoked' (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 21) by referring to threats. The threats are dependent on vulnerability. It is the vulnerability that brings them to life.

Interpretive case studies

I argue that states address emerging (real or imagined) vulnerabilities through securitisation. Methodologically we can trace this process by looking at the broader context of the socio-historical setting in which securitisation occurs, and the narrative constructs that surround securitisation (instead of focusing on narrowly defined 'threat designations'). In this section, I show how we can investigate this phenomenon.

I conduct two theoretically driven interpretive case studies. First, employing a contextual analysis (e.g. 't Hart, 2014; Tilly & Goodin, 2006) of the US politics in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks carried out by al-Qaeda, I reassess the role vulnerability played in the emergence of the policy of global war on terror. This step emphasises the importance of analysing securitisations within the setting of the studied actor (e.g. Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 45) and offers a reappraisal of the existing securitisation studies on the post-9/11 rhetoric. Secondly, I employ a modified version of the technique of narrative conceptualisation analysis (Markiewicz & Sharvit, 2021) to study the former president of the US Donald Trump's speeches. The second study allows me to develop and present a research toolbox useful in the empirical analysis of the broader narrative constructs that accompany security acts.

Both studies offer empirical illustrations of the article's arguments. The first case draws on the examples from political speeches and relevant secondary sources such as surveys. While it refers to and draws on a broad array of the post-9/11 security studies, the public communication it focuses on was published in the 2001–2002 period. The second study is investigating Donald Trump's public communication during his presidency (2017–2021). The material consists of a selection of 40 key presidential speeches.¹⁰ In order to contextualise my interpretation of Trump's rhetoric, I also draw on Gallup's public opinion polling and comparative analysis of public attitudes towards immigration before and during Trump's campaign (Sagir and Mockabee, 2023). Focusing on the issue of immigration – Trump's central vulnerability narrative – I show that the politician did not sway people but rather galvanised those voters who already shared an anti-immigration stance.

Re-interpreting 9/11

A good illustration of the role of vulnerability in securitisation is the US administration's response to 9/11. In the aftermath of the attack, the war on terror became the single most important foreign policy of the US. It did not happen because of the dramatic shift in the geostrategic standing of the US on the 11th of September 2001. Following the logic of political realism (Waltz, 1988), no new threats challenged the American hegemonic position. Nevertheless, after the tragedy, the country's leaders started discussing the new emerging threats that challenged the state. According to Secretary of State Powell, 'terrorism (...) now represents the greatest threat to American lives' (2004, p. 22). Aside from terrorism, the USA quickly warned the world against rogue regimes and their stockpiles of 'nuclear, chemical and biological weapons' which can be used for 'blackmail, and [to] create chaos in entire regions' (Bush, 2003). Consequently, often security studies interpret the case of war on terror as a textbook example of the manipulative capabilities of securitisation; as a case of employing threat (of global terror) for imposing exceptional political measures, and for gaining the support of the constituents (e.g. Mabee, 2007). The US administration's actions are accused of establishing the politics of fear, fostering collective anxiety and unease (e.g. Shipoli, 2018). While there is evidence that the establishment manipulated people's fears (Lustick, 2006, p. 104), these approaches often ignore the central role of vulnerability in the post 9/11 politics. Fear and threat of external dangers were essential in the security practices of the state, however, it was the vulnerability that brought them to life. This profound state of unease nevertheless is largely ignored by the existing scholarship.

Hughes (2007) points out that the American administration's post-9/11 rhetoric had little material basis, and thus suggests a cynical reading of the White House politics where threats were artificially promoted in the debates. The goals of the administration were Republican electoral gains and the long-fostered geostrategic ambitions of the US. Here, securitisation is a premeditated strategy, meticulously executed in a step-by-step manner (2007, p. 98). Following dominant top-down perceptions of security acts, Hughes' reading abstracts from the broader ideational factors driving the securitising actors. This interpretation ignores the role of the administration's own post-9/11 alarmist state. It conflates political discursive exaggeration and manipulation with the dishonesty of actions. However, as pointed out by Furedi, the exaggeration of threats by the political class does not equal dishonesty, fabrication or exploitation of the problem. He explains that: 'The amplification of threat alerts and alarmist (mis)communications are a part of the normal routine of official communication strategy.' By hyperbolising their worries, decision-makers try to increase support for actions that they perceive as crucial for the state (2007, pp. 154–155). Furedi emphasises the intersubjective, ideational factors behind president George W. Bush's actions. He locates them within a broader post-9/11 state of vulnerability of both the American society and the establishment. This systemic vulnerability to which America reacts with securitisation is visible when former Secretary of Homeland Security, Tom Ridge argued in 2002 that '(...) the need for homeland security is not tied solely to today's terrorist threat. It is tied to our enduring vulnerability' (Department of Homeland Security, cited in Furedi, 2007). Furedi (2007) shows that Bush believed that 'Americans are hurting and feel vulnerable':

The characteristics of American society that we cherish – our freedom, our openness (...) make us vulnerable to terrorism of catastrophic proportions. America's vulnerability to terrorism will persist long after we bring justice to those responsible for the events of September 11 (...) This is a new condition of life. (Bush, cited in Füredi, 2007)

The profound state of distress was visible in Bush's speeches and suggests vulnerability as one of the sources of the securitisation policies. The US implements security measures because it discovered its weakness. In order to avoid victimisation, it needs to deal with its precarity:

On September the 11th, 2001, America felt its vulnerability – even to threats that gather on the other side of the earth. We resolved then, and we are resolved today, to confront every threat, from any source, that could bring sudden terror and suffering to America. (The Guardian, 2002)

The motivations of the Bush administration should be treated with caution and not be reduced to a cynical political spin. It is crucial to recognise that after 9/11, American elites were profoundly shaken by the event and felt vulnerable. Passengers of the presidential plane present on the Air Force One in the aftermath of the attack compared the atmosphere on board to the movie *Independence Day* (Politico, 2016). White House staff gathered in the subterranean bunker were worried that Vice-President Dick Cheney would have a heart attack (Telegraph, 2001). – That was our Pearl Harbour – one of Bush's members of staff summarises the atmosphere after the attack (Politico).

By closely examining the broader socio-political context – not only the speech acts – we gain a greater understanding of the social context in which securitising actors are embedded. A review of post-9/11 surveys clearly shows that American society was greatly concerned by the external dangers (Gallup, 2002; Pew Research Center, 2002). A number of studies (e.g. Silver et al., 2002) point out to what Walker and Seegers call a 'heightened sense of vulnerability' (2012, p. 30). The American audience's self-perceptions were shattered, and their expectations profoundly changed (Gaddis, 2004). The securitising discourse of the state had to account for this new reality.

Unfortunately, the role of the audience and a shared vulnerability of the establishment and its constituents is rarely given enough attention. Despite recognising the broader fears and anxieties of the American society, Hughes (2007, pp. 99–100) infers that securitisation manipulated public opinion through 'fear politics' supported by the state's military-industrial complex. This perspective simplifies answers to questions as to why actors securitise, under what conditions security acts are fruitful, and what the results of securitisation are. It ignores elites' own fears. It implicitly assumes the audience's passivity by giving little attention to its expectations or potential support for securitisation. Consequently, it does not account for the positive outcomes of securitisation; especially its support for the ingroup's security of being.¹¹ Namely, the capability of securitisation to respond to the group's ontological anxieties by identifying threats causing its vulnerability (e.g. Huysmans, 1998, p. 242). The conviction that the US is responding to societal vulnerability by pointing out unavoidable threats is visible in Bush's speeches ('By confronting evil and lawless regimes, we do not create a problem, we reveal a problem' (The American Presidency Project, 2002)).

Trump years

States often address emerging vulnerabilities through securitisation. Methodologically we can trace this process by looking at the broader narrative constructs that surround securitisation, instead of focusing on narrowly defined ‘threat designations’ (see Floyd’s work (2019) on securitising requests). The analysis of security practices shows that threat-related speech acts are often embedded in/or coupled with broader narratives of vulnerability. Drawing on Shenhav’s work on social narratives, I define them as ‘narration of a succession of events’ (2015, p. 19) that have led to the ‘diminished capacity of an individual or group to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural or man-made hazard’ (International Federation of Red Cross). Securitisations are argumentatively accompanied by vulnerability narrations.

The most striking contemporary example of the politics of vulnerability was the 2017–2021 US presidency of Donald Trump. The analysis of key presidential speeches conducted for this project shows that Trump incorporated vulnerability as a crucial motivating frame of his agenda. Out of 40 presidential speeches, this identification was present in 21. While it was not always at the forefront of Trump’s communication, the investigation shows that vulnerability narratives were a founding block of his presidency. They accompanied securitisations proposed by the White House.

For example, when on the 5th of February 2019, the former president was talking about the expansion of the wall on the border with Mexico, he coupled the policies further securitising immigration with the description of the vulnerability and victimhood of US citizens:

As we speak, large, organized caravans are on the march to the US. We have just heard that Mexican cities, in order to remove the illegal immigrants from their communities, are getting trucks and buses to bring them up to our country in areas where there is little border protection. I have ordered another 3,750 troops to our southern border to prepare for the tremendous onslaught. This is a moral issue. (...) Tens of thousands of innocent Americans are killed by lethal drugs that cross our border and flood into our cities (...) Year after year, countless Americans are murdered by criminal illegal aliens. (February 2019)

This example captures the fact that vulnerability is a socially embedded discursive theme that animates the security act. Securitisation to be successful and gain acceptance of the population, must refer to and build on collective vulnerabilities (real or imagined). Collectives cannot be swayed if they cannot relate to the state’s warnings about looming threats. The vulnerability narrative is an essential foundation of a successful security act. It functions as a justification for the securitisation. Something is being securitised (southern border) to protect the vulnerable (US citizens).

The fact that vulnerability is a founding block of securitisation practices was reflected throughout Trump’s presidency (e.g. Kirk, 2022). One cannot understand his electoral success and his ongoing securitisation of Muslim communities and immigrants without considering his references to the unease of blue-collar America. Trump’s securitisation is as much a political rhetoric aimed at garnering support, as it is a response to its constituents’ distress, victimhood and anxiety. This fact is reflected in US public opinion pools. It is especially well portrayed in surveys looking at immigration policy, which was the key vulnerability narrative of Trump’s whole candidacy. For example, Sagir’s and Mockabee’s recently published examination of public opinion about immigration shows that

Trump's 2016 electoral campaign did not significantly change US public opinion. The authors – drawing on 2016 and 2012 US presidential election studies, as well as multi-variate modelling – show that the 2016 victory of Donald Trump rather addressed people's existing vulnerability, than produced it. The anti-immigration sentiment among Trump's voters predated his candidacy, 'Trump was not an anti-immigration evangelist converting people to his side of the issue as much as he was preaching to the Republican choir' (2023, 393).

Looking at public opinion polling, we can see that generally, the distribution of views about immigration changed little during and after Trump's term. If anything, during the presidency of Joe Biden, the support for immigration slightly decreased. For example, in June 2016, a few months before Trump's victory, 38% of Americans believed that immigration should be decreased, in 2023 – in spite of Biden's pro-immigrant rhetoric – 41% of respondents wanted to curb immigration (Gallup, 2023a). Similarly, during Trump's and Biden's presidency, a plurality of Americans (39% in both 2023 and 2019) considered the situation at the US-Mexico border a 'crisis'. The number of people who did not consider the instability at the border a national problem actually fell from 7% in 2019–5% in 2023 (Gallup, 2023b). Importantly, among Republican voters, the perception of immigrants and refugees as a 'critical threat' kept being very high before (67% in 2016), during (e.g. 66% in 2018) and after Trump's rein (70% in 2022) (Chicago Council Surveys, 2022).

Consequently, Trump's vulnerability narratives, such as the critique of China's theft of American intellectual property, his warnings against the state of US borders, 'disastrous' financial treaties that victimise the state, all played on Americans' insecurities (Politifact, n.d.). It can be indicated that it is not a coincidence that during his inaugural speech, Trump was largely speaking to the constituency in state of unease. Famously, speaking about 'American carnage', he described a state in a profound crisis:

Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system, flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of knowledge; and the crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.

This message of vulnerability was coupled with (ominous) calls for securitisation:

We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our job (...) We will reinforce old alliances and form new ones – and unite the civilized world against Radical Islamic Terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the Earth. (Trump, 2017)

During his time in office, Trump alarmed and soothed citizens by employing dichotomous framings of vulnerability. Firstly, he was expressing how his presidency is bringing stability and safety to American citizens. Trump vowed to destroy ISIS (e.g. 2018b), to rebuild 'crumbling infrastructure' (e.g. 2019) and to help 'every American find their path to the American Dream' (e.g. 2018a). At the same time, he addressed voters' vulnerability by stoking their fears and making them the kernel of his argument. As was in the case of ICE officers (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) whom Trump was regularly drawing attention to by portraying them as a vestige of American stability:

Last year, our brave ICE officers arrested more than 120,000 criminal aliens charged with nearly 10,000 burglaries, 5,000 sexual assaults, 45,000 violent assaults, and 2,000 murders. (...) In sanctuary cities, local officials order police to release dangerous criminal aliens to prey upon the public, instead of handing them over to ICE to be safely removed. (2000)

Discussion

This article argues that our understanding of the roots of security processes is incomplete and that in current research practice, we offer insufficient attention to analysing the reasons behind securitisation. Some of the existing empirical studies ignore the fact that securitising actors may see themselves as vulnerable, not strong and that the employment of securitisation can reflect self-perceived weakness, not fortitude. Further, that it not always is employed to provoke fears but to cope with them. Securitisation scholarship at times also overlooks that both political elites and constituents may share collective fears. While the literature rightfully places fear of threat as a necessary condition for securitisation; in research practice, often by subscribing to Manichaeian readings of politics of power, it undertheorises the ideational processes behind securitisation.

The article formalises a generative way of empirically studying securitisation. Drawing on Wendy Brown's work on border walling (2010), an argument is put forward that securitisation may be predicated on vulnerability. Vulnerability is a foundation of securitisation; a condition¹² establishing securitisation as a political enabler. This can be observed by the analysis of narratives justifying securitisation. Threat-related speech acts are often embedded in/or coupled with broader narratives of vulnerability. To provide an empirical illustration of the argument I first critically reassess the US politics in the aftermath of 9/11. Secondly, a set of political speeches by Donald Trump is used as an illustration of the practice of discursive coupling of securitisation and vulnerability.

By including vulnerability in the securitisation research project, we address a set of problems affecting multiple securitisation studies. Buzan et al. (1998, p. 32) famously argue that critical security studies ought to answer, 'who securitises, on what issues, for whom, why, with what results, and not least, under what conditions (i.e. what explains when securitisation is successful).' Most investigations offer convincing answers to questions of who securitises (e.g. states, political leaders, populists), on what issues (e.g. immigration, terrorism, neighbours), for whom (constituents, media). However, the three last questions – why, under what conditions, and with what results – still pose a challenge for the brunt of the securitisation scholarship (see Baele & Jalea, 2022; Stritzel, 2012). Understanding the role of vulnerability in security practices gives the securitisation research project a conceptual tool that can shed light on those puzzles.

The article exposes how vulnerability narratives – which Western political thought generally associates with weakness, lack of agency and misfortune¹³ – can be employed by the polity as a proactive tool of statecraft. By analysing the relationship between vulnerability and state-making, we recognise the capability of the vulnerable to serve as a political enabler. Instead of aligning vulnerability with passivity, we account for the fact that it may as well be used as a transformative tool. The recognition of the Janus-faced nature of the vulnerable goes against the modern rationalist treatment of vulnerability (Nussbaum, 2001). Instead of treating vulnerability as a simple failure of the enlightened, rational society (Russell-Beattie & Schick, 2013), a debilitating condition that limits the actor; it

accounts for a unique agency of the 'endangered' state. It helps us to step back against simplifying binaries 'that set health against illness, conformity against disparity, the perfect against the imperfect, the self against the other' (Shildrick, 2000, p. 223) and recognise that vulnerability can be used as a tool of critical deconstruction of the political (Spivak, 1990, p. 18). The project responds to Russel-Beattie and Schick's call to provide meaningful ways of engagement (in both international relations and political studies) with vulnerability and insecurity (2013, p. 18). Namely, a treatment of contingency and human suffering that does not lead to a 'reductivist approach to international ethics that adheres to one-dimensional stories about suffering, security and the good life' (2013, p. 9) but instead accounts for the possibility of 'reconfigured vulnerability (...) as an inalienable condition of becoming.' (Shildrick, 2000, p. 226).

The identification of the vulnerability of the securitiser plays an important role in the current debates on the growing importance of victimhood in politics. By using examples of political rhetoric from the post 9/11 US global war on terror and speeches of Donald Trump, the article raises a question. Why do strong actors claim/recognise their weaknesses? According to Enns (2012), Western societies by becoming more concerned with suffering, gradually granted actors with victim status a unique license to alleviate their condition. Victims are idealised and rarely questioned. Enns calls for scrutiny of victim status and warns against granting moral authority to the victimised. In the context of debates on the Culture of Victimhood (e.g. Campbell & Manning, 2018), considering the vulnerability of the securitiser can help us to recognise that the self-identifications of strong agential states can be founded on precarity. Secondly, (and in line with the dominating sentiment of the critical security studies) it calls for caution in the evaluation of the actions of the securitiser. Vulnerability and victimhood can be utilised as a political license.

Vulnerability narratives are a practical tool of empirical inquiry. By analysing the discursive entanglement of security politics and vulnerability, we discover a distinct research avenue on securitisation. One that broadens methodological considerations about the contextual constructive processes behind security acts (e.g. Balzacq, 2005). The concept of vulnerability is a useful contribution to the study of security narratives. It is a category that localises and contextualises security enunciations (Stritzel, 2012). It accounts for the fact that we are being securitised from our fears. It helps us to capture and analyse why securitisation has perlocutionary effects.

The securitisation literature underlines that in order to be successful, a security act needs to be externally validated: 'the issue is securitised only if and when the audience accepts it as such' (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 25). Unfortunately, in research practice, the conditions of a successful speech act are rarely discussed. Many of the empirical studies have put aside inquiries into 'what' processes stand behind successful security acts, instead focusing on answering 'how' securitisation is used. This leads to the implicit assumption of the audience's passivity. The widespread presence of a vulnerability in security practices challenges this outlook and underlines the intersubjective character of security. In order to be successful and gain acceptance from the population, a security act refers to and builds on collective vulnerabilities. Vulnerability is what ties the political elites and their constituents. It is a common denominator on which securitisation is predicated. By accounting for it, we give a greater sense of agency to the audience. Vulnerability is a crucial tool of inquiry into the ideational processes and sociological characteristics of securitisation. It can be used as a platform allowing us to conceptualise securitisation,

not as a top-down¹⁴ but a relational process where the (security) meaning is negotiated between the political actor and the audience (Roe, 2012). It increases our awareness of non-instrumental reasoning behind states' employment of security. Vulnerability contributes to developing our understanding of what constitutes a successful security act. It links the security act (designator of threat) with the self-perceptions of the audience. It accounts for the fact that collective fears of threats are not necessarily a political given, coming from the top, but rather a situated outcome of their identifications.

Drawing on the second-generation securitisation theorists (e.g. Balzacq, 2005; Floyd, 2007; Stritzel, 2007), the article moves towards a more contextual understanding of the threats and fears (broadly perceived as foundations for securitisation). Employing Furedi and Mills' writings, it is contended that the key securitisation studies under-theorise how threats and fears are mediated by the personal values of actors. It is not a threat that constructs our fears, but our sense-making that decides whether we are vulnerable to a particular threat, or not. Vulnerability is ordered as a primary phenomenon from which fear and threat stem from. Its presence illustrates the conditionality of threat and the fact that securitisations hinge on deep-seated identifications of the collective.

By acknowledging the role of vulnerability in the politics of security we problematise the normative dimension of critical security studies. Vulnerability of the securitised and the securitiser cannot be equated with the acquittal of the security act. It does not undermine the negative implications of security and is not advocating against the emancipatory politics of desecuritisation. However, it goes against the reductionist coupling of securitisation with socio-political failure (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 209; 29). There is political importance in the central role vulnerability plays in security practices. The fear and precariousness of actors (see Markiewicz, 2023) that securitise our surroundings must be accounted for in the coming debates about the role securitisation plays in the political.

Conclusion

The securitisation research project is one of the most innovative and influential contributions to security studies. The article presents a review of these studies and suggests a direction for future developments. Drawing on critical appraisals of the conceptualisation of securitisation (Balzacq, 2005; Stritzel, 2007), the article formalises a generative theorisation of the reason why actors securitise, under what conditions security acts are fruitful, and consequently, what the results of securitisation are. The article identifies that securitisation is predicated on vulnerability. It illustrates this phenomenon through examples of political speeches where securitisations are interlinked with broader vulnerability narratives and societal fears. The presence of vulnerability narratives in security acts speaks to the intersubjective character of securitisation (Roe, 2012; Stritzel, 2012). It questions the theorisation of securitisation as a self-referential and manipulative act. The discursive coupling of the narratives of vulnerability and securitisation by the elites demonstrates that successful security acts build on perceived collective precarity. These vulnerabilities are a foundation for the fear of threats. Consequently, security acts succeed when they effectively address those deficiencies. It is argued that by recognising the role of vulnerability in securitisation practices, we identify theoretical and

methodological approach that has the potential to resolve major challenges facing the securitisation research agenda.

Collective vulnerabilities are the foundation and an enabler of securitisation. The role of vulnerability in security acts is an argument for a more comprehensive analysis of the role of political elites in the process of threat referencing. It suggests that state leadership shares constituents' vulnerabilities and that it may be the audience that expects a securitisation move to be implemented by the politicians. This questions the widespread reductionist evaluative interpretation of securitisation. It asserts that from the perspective of the securitising actors, securitisation responds to deep-seated collective worries. Vulnerability brings to our attention, what has often been overlooked. Securitisation rarely imposes threats, fears, angst, concerns or uneasiness. It feeds on them.

Notes

1. Securitisation is a 'speech act' (Buzan et al., 1998) employed with the intention of gaining 'a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it' (Wæver, 1995, p. 55).
2. Only then one can talk about the situation of insecurity, a condition 'marked by a presence of security problem and no response' (Wæver, 1995, p. 56).
3. More on the under-theorisation of securitisation: Floyd, 2019; McDonald, 2008.
4. More on the issue of the underdevelopment of what constitutes successful security act e.g., Baele & Thomson, 2017; Balzacq et al., 2016.
5. Importantly though, works by Floyd (e.g. 2016), Elbe (2006) and Roe (2012) talk about positive dimensions of securitisation.
6. Importantly, the rationality or accuracy of this worldview and expressing it narratives is beyond the scope of this investigation. While I argue that vulnerability – as both collective core belief and political narrative – is a key foundation of securitisation, I do not aspire to adjudicate its ontological correctness. Vulnerability as a prism through which group and the state make meaning of their surroundings is a part of the ongoing construction of political identification. As such, vulnerability narratives cannot be explained by realist or rational theories of international relations. They are neither an all-encompassing statement of facts nor a cynical political manipulation.
7. While vulnerability and insecurity overlap in our vernacular, they are not equivalent states. Their different status is of salient importance for the study of securitisation. Being vulnerable means being 'at increased risk of insecurity' (Mackenzie, 2020, p. 629); while insecurity is a narrower designate referring to a situation in which an actor already considers it to be threatened by a particular – narrowly defined – security problem (e.g. Wæver, 1995, p. 56). Insecurity is then a final destination of securitisation (Hellberg, 2011), while vulnerability is actor's pre-existing understanding of its standing. In this perspective, vulnerability is a condition underlying the success of a security act, while insecurity is a situation in which an actor is fearful of a particular threat.
8. Thus, ontologically vulnerability is more than emotion, which Van Rythoven defines as a judgment over the efficacy of securitisation (2015, 2) but less than a recognition of particular 'brute threat' by which Balzacq means objectively existing danger (2011, p. 12).
9. If the securitisation is successful.
10. The study relies on all Trump's presidential speeches which were selected by Miller Center's faculty for its archive.
11. More on the positive dimensions of securitisation: Elbe, 2006; Floyd, 2016; Howell, 2014; Hudson, 2009.
12. Real, declared or implicitly assumed.
13. For example, in Shildrick's view vulnerability is seen 'as a shortcoming, an impending failure both of form and function' (2000, p. 217).

14. This approach is deeply ingrained in the discipline. Alkopher and Blanc refer to the top-down conceptualisation of security acts as 'classical' securitisation theory (2017, p. 519).

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