

## THE SECURITIZATION OF MIDDLE EASTERN MIGRANTS IN EUROPE: THE ARAB SPRING AND ITS AFTERMATH

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### ABSTRACT

*The Arab Spring had significant consequences, one of which was the sharp increase in asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants to various European countries. The large influx of migrants from the Middle East, coupled with economic recession in Europe, intensified public reactions. Some European elites attempted to securitize this issue and were successful to a certain extent. This study explores the securitization of Middle Eastern migrants through the discourses of elites in major European countries. It argues that these securitization efforts have influenced mainstream ruling political parties across Europe, leading to practices such as erecting fences, otherizing, and criminalizing migrants, ultimately resulting in stricter migration policies. The study concludes that such securitizations had several consequences, including rising percentage of unfavorable views toward the Muslim population, a rise in Islamophobia and xenophobia, violations of refugee and migrant rights, and declining trust in the EU and its institutions among Europeans during this period.*

**Keywords:** Arab Spring, Securitization, Discourse, Middle East Migrants, Energy Equation, National Security.

**JEL Codes:** F22, F50, F52.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Europe has always been associated with the phenomenon of migration, particularly aftermath the World War II. The altered borders, decolonization, and division of the Cold War were the basic reasons for the first wave of the immigration to this continent. In this regard, one consequence of new geopolitical outlook shaped following the World War II was the massive intra-European movements, which were composed of mainly ethnic Germans displaced from Eastern bloc countries. In addition, beginning in the 1950s, ethnically diverse population from Southern Europe, the Mediterranean, and former colonies started to immigrate to Western and Northern Europe due to the economic expansion,

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labor shortages, and decolonization. The second wave of migration was basically caused by economic reasons, and refugee movements as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Finally, Europe, in the framework of European Union system, experienced another significant internal migration wave in 2004 due to its eastward expansion (Dustman and Frattini, 2011: 4-9).

Apart from such historical upheavals that have led to large-scale external and internal migration within and across Europe, there has also been a substantial influx of migrants from developing countries, particularly from the Middle East to Europe prompted by either poverty or political constraints, or civil wars in the last two decades. In this regard, the rising numbers of both regular and irregular migrants from the Middle East to Europe have come to be perceived as a threat by a certain segment of society in Europe due to the concerns over security and the region's worsening economic conditions.

The securitization of migration in response to such concerns has fostered a perception among this segment of the European community that the migration from these countries was a national security issue. Securitizing actors, far-right parties together with some media groups backing them, have employed several instruments, ranging from political rhetoric to media, to reinforce this narrative. As a result, such discourses have gained popularity, leading to negative attitudes toward migrants and, in some cases, incidents of violence.

This study seeks to answer how the migration from Middle Eastern to some European states is tried to be securitized, what instruments the securitizing actors employ to convince the audience, and what mechanisms are used to label this migration as an existential threat. In addition, the study examines both the measures that the European authorities take as a result of successful securitizations in a particular segment of the European community, and the multiple consequences of the securitization of migration itself.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The analysis of migration and asylum seekers in the framework securitization theory has been a subject of several studies. Each study seeks to explain the fundamental reasons and motivations behind securitizations or securitization moves in particular places and periods. Huysmans states that migration in Western Europe was increasingly framed as a security issue since the 1980s, linking it to public order, crime, and terrorism. He emphasizes that European integration contributed to restrictive migration policies through agreements like Schengen and the Dublin Convention. He also ties this process to debates on national identity and welfare, shaping who is seen as a legitimate member of society. He concludes that law enforcement, political parties, and social movements play key roles in reinforcing this securitization of migration (Huysmans, 2000).

Ibrahim considers securitization of migration, framing migrants as threats to societal stability and human security, a modern form of racism in the late 1990s and early 2000s in Canada. He states that media portrayals, such as the coverage of 599 migrants reaching Canada's western coast, reflect this narrative, positioning migrants as risks rather than victims. He emphasizes that this discourse directly influenced government policies, as seen in changes to Canada's immigration legislation, which further included the security-driven framing of migration and its exclusionary impacts (Ibrahim, 2005).

Karyotis argues that securitization of migration is often driven by elites who, through their authority, construct images of threats that may not align with objective realities. In his study he focuses on Greek migration politics during the 1990s, and highlights the multifaceted nature of securitization, demonstrating that it can manifest both discursively and non-discursively, be intentional or subconscious, and yield varied consequences for those promoting security narratives. By incorporating elite interviews and examining broader contextual factors, this perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of how migration is securitized beyond discourse alone (Karyotis, 2012).

The securitization of migration, particularly in the context of European governance has also been extensively examined by some scholars. Norden highlights the role of discourse in framing migration as a security concern, with institutions such as the Council of Europe influencing narratives surrounding migrants and refugees. The study analyses how the Council of Europe framed migrants and refugees during three migration crises, specifically during the European Union (EU) Presidencies of the Netherlands in 1997, 2004, and 2016. Using discourse analysis as the methodological approach, the study is in an effort to assess the extent and nature of the securitization (Norden, 2016).

The securitization of refugees and forced migrants after the Arab Spring in Germany was examined by Banai and Kredie. They highlight the impact of discourse on immigration policies and exclusionary practices. The study reveals how securitization as a discourse of threat led to restrictions on citizenship and human rights, and refugees and asylum seekers were linked to immediate dangers such as crime and terrorism, while long-term Muslim residents were associated with threats to social values and stability. The study argues that Germany as an individual state and the European Union promote human rights while simultaneously using them as tools for exclusion (Banai and Kredie, 2017).

Examining the Hungarian case with respect to securitization of migration during and after Arab Spring, Miholjic emphasizes the multiple sectors, particularly societal and environmental, in which securitizations occur. Relying on a diverse range of sources, including academic books, scientific articles, working papers, and media reports, and employing a qualitative research approach, the study concludes that in the framework securitization theory, migrants are often constructed as a fundamental threat to societal security, particularly concerning national identity of Hungary. In consequence, following some elite discourses emphasizing the gravity of the migration issue, the country erected a

high-security border fence along its boundary with Serbia to curtail the movement of refugees and asylum seekers as a measurement (Miholjic, 2017).

### **3. THE SECURITIZATION OF MIGRATION: THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The concept of Securitization refers to a discursive process in which an intersubjective understanding is built within a community. This process frames any situation as an existential threat to the referent object and emphasizes, through discourse, the necessity of urgent and extraordinary measures to eliminate this threat (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 491). It stresses that delaying action against this threat could lead to irreversible outcomes (Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde, 1998: 26).

For an issue to be securitized, it must be removed from the sphere of ordinary politics, which focuses on negotiation, and reframed as an existential threat. Notably, it does not need to be an objective threat; merely presenting it as one is sufficient (Buzan vd.,1998: 24). In other words, the focus is not on objective threats, but on the representations of threats that move issues into the security domain (Kaliber, 2005: 36). The success of the securitization is based on the acceptance of the audience (the public). The audience's acceptance can be achieved through both consent and coercion. If the audience doesn't acknowledge the issue as a security problem, it can be seen as a securitization move rather than a successful securitization (Buzan, vd., 1998: 25).

It is obvious that the rapid influx of immigrants into Europe has energized far-right political groups (Davis and Deole, 2017:15). Consequently, over the past two decades, immigration particularly from Middle Eastern countries to Europe has been framed as a security issue by various actors, local political parties, and certain sections of the media across Europe. In this context, the issue of migration has been attempted to be securitized by presenting it as an existential threat through discourse. To gain public approval, immigrants have often been directly or indirectly linked to terrorism, crime, and social unrest in both conventional and social media. As a result of this discursive process, policy practice has come to be another level at which securitization occurred. In this regard, the governments and administrations at various levels in the EU needed to involve in implementation of some binding decisions to limit or prevent irregular migrant from entering the EU zone.

### **4. SECURITIZATION OF MIGRATION FROM THE MIDDLE EAST IN EUROPE**

The increasing number of migrants from the Middle East and Africa due to the latest civil wars or economic reasons stemming from Arab Spring intensified anti-migrant discourses of far-right elites or parties in Europe in the last two decades. The basic idea conveyed through such discourses was the idea that Europe was overrun by migrants, particularly Muslims, and it was Islamicated (Broomley, 2018: 14). Noteworthy in this regard is the fact that there were securitizing actors, a segment of the society who were ready to link terrorism and migration, and several mechanisms and instruments

through which the masses were to be convinced to label migration as existential threat. Consequently, far-right elites have convinced a particular segment of the European community that Middle Eastern migrants to Europe have posed an existential threat to the European identity and economy. They usually drew public attention through discourses or stunning social media messages.

#### **4.1. France**

In France, following the Toulouse attacks in February 2012, Marine Le Pen—then a presidential candidate running against President Sarkozy—frequently framed migrants as an existential threat to the country’s national security. After the perpetrator of the attack was identified, she shared a message that explicitly linked Middle Eastern migrants to terrorism, reinforcing this narrative in her discourse (Pietrandrea and Battaglia: 142):

How many Mohamed Merahs on the ships, on the planes arriving in France every day, full of migrants? How many Mohamed Merahs among the children of these self-segregated migrants?

Amid the heated debates over migration in France in 2015, Marine Le Pen characterized the French port city of Calais—then home to thousands of migrants from Africa, the Middle East, and Afghanistan seeking to cross the Channel to England—as a “frightening” place. She implied that, without decisive action, all of France could resemble this town (Jamet and Lafiandra, 2023: 85):

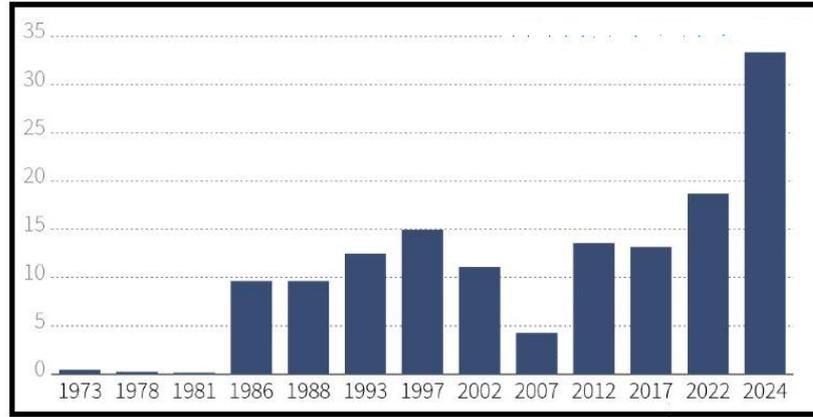
But how many little Calais are there all over France? How many no-go zones? How many neighborhoods, streets, building entrances, and now villages where the police and gendarmerie no longer dare to go—or if they do, with knots in their stomachs and bulletproof vests on their chests?

During the 2022 electoral campaign, migration and identity emerged as central themes for the French presidential candidates. These issues dominated the political discourse, compelling even left-wing parties to address concerns about migration, albeit to varying degrees. Far-right candidates took a more extreme stance, frequently linking migration to national security in their rhetoric and campaign promises. Among these promises was one made by Éric Zemmour, specifically targeting migrants. He proposed the idea of expelling up to one million individuals, emphasizing the establishment of a ministry dedicated to “remigration.” This ministry, according to his vision, would focus on removing certain groups, including offenders, prisoners, individuals residing in the country illegally, and the unemployed. He also suggested significantly restricting asylum rights, allowing only a very small number of applicants each year (Desai, 2022).

The anti-immigration rhetoric promoted by certain French elites and political parties, particularly with respect to Middle Eastern migrants and Islam, can be said to shape public perception to a certain extent, portraying these groups as an existential threat to the nation's cultural identity and security. This

discourse, fueled by concerns over national identity, social cohesion, and economic problems, has found a receptive audience among certain segments of society. Over time, this narrative has contributed to the rising influence of anti-immigrant political movements, particularly those on the far-right. As a result, the electoral support for such parties steadily grew throughout years, reflecting a broader shift in public sentiment and political dynamics in France.

**Figure 1. Timeline of the Rise of France’s Far-Right in the 1<sup>st</sup> Round of Parliamentary Elections**



Source: European Data News Hub, 2024, <https://ednh.news/en/france-s-far-right-vote-in-figures/>

The early 2010s marked the beginning of a significant rise in the influence and prominence of far-right movements in France. This period laid the groundwork for a political and social shift, fueled by growing concerns over immigration and national identity. The trend became even more pronounced during the early to mid-2020s, when the cumulative effects of migration prompted by the Arab Spring became increasingly visible. Simultaneously, economic instability and crises worsened by the Pandemic created fertile ground for anti-immigrant sentiment to gain support.

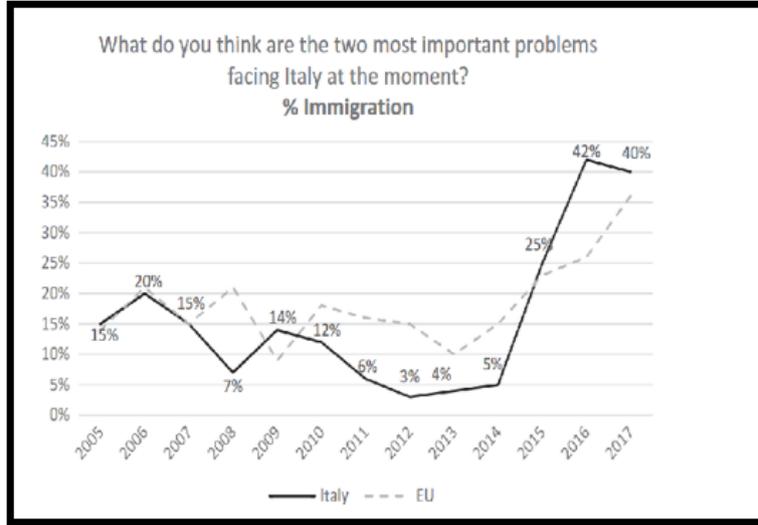
#### 4.2. Italy

Similar to the situation in France, several elites in Italy actively sought to securitize Middle Eastern migrants through their rhetoric during the early 2010s. This period saw a notable increase in the number of migrants arriving in Italy, largely driven by the impacts of the Arab Spring. Amid ongoing debates about how to manage this irregular migration, certain political figures—particularly those affiliated with far-right parties—articulated anti-migrant discourse. In this context, Lorenzo Bodega, a parliamentarian from The League party, voiced strong concerns over the growing influx of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa. His statements reflected broader anxieties within Italy’s political landscape, where migration was increasingly framed as a threat to national security and social cohesion (Emanuela, 2014: 136-137):

The worry felt by many Italians, who fear the arrival of potential terrorist fugitives or mere profitters exploiting the confusion in order to land in Italy in the guise of refugees, is justified.

Maroni is therefore right to request support from Europe. This should not be used to facilitate the stay of abusive but should be used to encourage their repatriation. Lega Nord supports an attitude of firmness, so that Italy is not overwhelmed by an unsustainable number of migrants.

**Figure 2. Italians' Attitudes Toward Immigration**



Source: (Castelli Gattinara, 2017: 323)

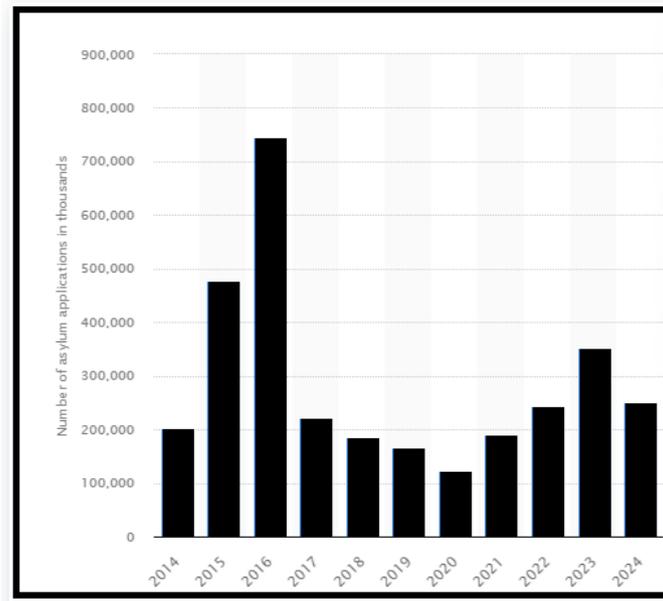
Likewise, Matteo Salvini, a member of the European Parliament and leader of Italy's far-right party, The League, expressed strong concerns about the "Islamic presence" in Italy during 2018. At the time, the economic pressures associated with migration were increasingly felt across the country, contributing to a significant rise in public opposition to immigration. Salvini's rhetoric portrayed migrants as an existential threat to Italy's national security and cultural identity. He claimed that the influx of migrants, particularly from predominantly Muslim countries, endangered Italy's culture, society, traditions, and way of life. Furthermore, he argued that the spread of Islamization could erode centuries of Italian history, framing immigration not merely as an economic or social challenge but as a threat on the nation's heritage and values (Fernandez, 2018).

The securitization efforts of far-right parties, combined with Giorgia Meloni's right-wing Brothers of Italy party—whose key political promises included reducing immigration— led to the formation of a right-wing coalition in 2022. While not wholly decisive, the rhetoric of political elites regarding immigration concerns has played a substantial role in shaping public opinion. In other words, such discourses have significantly influenced the Italian audience, persuading many to align with these views.

### 4.3. Germany

In Germany, anti-immigrant rhetoric has already been a significant element of right-wing political rhetoric since the 1990s, driven by concerns over cultural integration, and national identity. Over the years, such narratives gained remarkable support from certain factions. One of the leading factors contributing to the increase of support was the influx of asylum seekers and migrants fleeing from war-torn regions in the Middle East in the mid2010s, which not only fueled of new far-right groups, but also strengthened the existing ones.

**Figure 3. Number of Total Asylum Applications in Germany from 2014 to 2024**



Source: STATISTA, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1107881/asylum-applications-total-germany>

One of the prominent factions that emerged in Germany with an anti-immigration stance in Europe was Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident), founded in 2014. The group organized rallies in various German cities and expanded its influence to international dimensions, gaining attraction in some other European countries as well as in the United States (Hanzelka and Schmidt, 2017: 147). Pegida employed a range of anti-immigrant rhetoric, particularly targeting migrants from the Middle East and Muslim-majority countries, through public demonstrations and online platforms. During a 2015 protest in Dresden, one participant expressed opposition to Germany's official immigration policy, stating (Conolly, 2015):

We have hardly ever been so vulnerable in our history as we are now, with the borders open and everyone and anyone, including suicide bombers and economic freeloaders, pouring in.

Similar to Pegida, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) movement emerged in 2013 as a political party in Germany, initially positioning itself as an anti-Euro protest party. While the relationship

between Pegida and AfD experienced fluctuations, the two began to align more closely in 2015 (Grabow, 2016: 174-175). Over time, the AfD evolved into a far-right political party, adopting a strongly anti-immigration stance, particularly targeting immigrants from the Middle East. In a 2016 interview with *Der Spiegel*, Frauke Petry, the then co-chair of the party at the time, outlined the party's stance on migrants as follows (Beyer and Fleischhaur, 2016):

One thing is clear: The immigration of so many Muslims will change our culture. If this change is desired, it must be the product of a democratic decision supported by a broad majority. But Ms. Merkel simply opened the borders and invited everybody in, without consulting the parliament or the people.

The securitization of the growing influx of migrants from the Middle East, largely driven by the ongoing civil wars in the region, has become a focal point for certain political actors in Germany. The far-right actors have framed the issue in terms of national security, often linking it to fears of radicalization and the potential Islamization of German society. This narrative has sparked significant concerns about the preservation of Germany's cultural identity, particularly among certain segments of the population who feel threatened by the demographic shifts. As a consequence, this fear-based rhetoric has played a key role in the rise of far-right political parties in recent years, reflected in their increasing support at the ballot box.

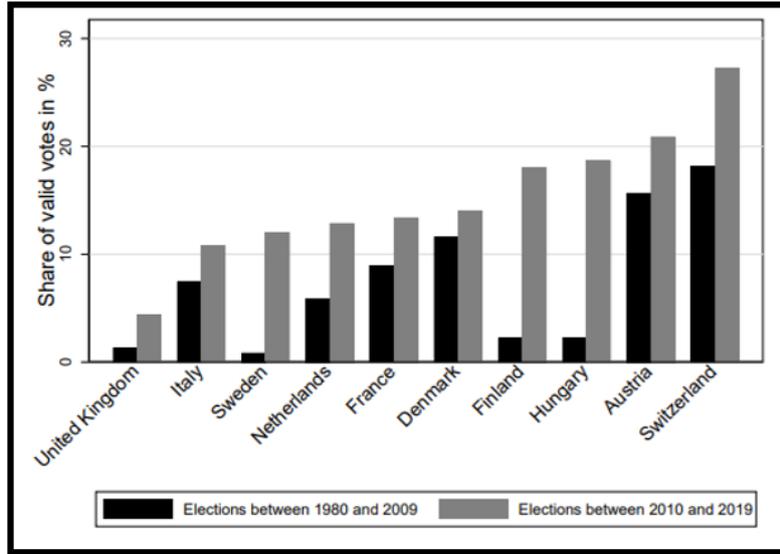
#### **4.4. Austria**

In Austria, the FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria) has been central to anti-immigrant discourse and xenophobia since its foundation in 1956. Over time, the party shifted its focus from general anti-immigrant rhetoric to specifically targeting Muslims. This transformation became evident during elections in the early 2010s, when the party adopted slogans such as “More courage for our Viennese blood. Too many foreigners do no one any good” and “Love of the country instead of Moroccan thieves”, which fueled both ethnic and religious discrimination (Tekin, 2021: 90-91). Subsequently, anti-immigrant rhetoric against Middle Eastern immigrants escalated significantly during the mid-2010s, paralleling an increase in migration driven by civil wars in the region. This rise in hostility contributed to a growth in Islamophobic attacks within the country. A 2016 report by the Documentation and Consultancy Center for Muslims revealed a 62% year-on-year increase in attacks against the Muslim community, totaling 253 incidents. The research categorized these attacks as follows: 31% involved written or verbal abuse, 30% were classified as hate speech, 12% targeted Muslim institutions, and 5% were physical assaults (Kıyagan, 2017).

The securitization of Middle Eastern immigrants in Austria can be considered as one of the most successful examples across Europe, driven by two primary factors. Firstly, the securitizing actors effectively leveraged the existing anti-immigrant sentiment, which had already gained significant

support among the population. Secondly, the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) successfully exploited this rhetoric, and became one of the most important actors of Austrian politics. Subsequently, apart from a dip in 2019, when corruption scandals and the ÖVP's (Austrian People's Party) adoption of anti-immigration policies (Dražanová, 2019) led to the FPÖ securing only 16.2% of the vote, the party saw consistent growth in recent years, achieving 20.5% in 2013, 26% in 2017, and ultimately becoming the largest party with 28.8% in 2024 (PolitPro, 2024).

**Figure 4. Electoral Results Obtained by Extreme Right-Wing Parties in Parliamentary Elections**



Source: (Edo and Giesing, 2020: 5)

Consequently, across Europe, it is evident that elite discourses on securitization have successfully influenced specific segments of society and, to a certain extent, have gained support beyond these groups over the past two decades. This growing influence can be observed not only in electoral outcomes across the continent but also in shifts in policy and rhetoric among mainstream political parties. In particular, some center-right and social democratic parties, under increasing pressure from far-right movements, have incorporated anti-immigrant stances into their platforms. This trend suggests that securitization narratives, once primarily championed by the far-right, have gradually affected broader political and social landscapes, shaping public opinion and policymaking at multiple levels.

## 5. THE PRACTICES OF THE SECURITIZATION OF MIGRATION IN EUROPE

### 5.1. Border Security Policies

The securitization of migration, particularly in response to the influx of migrants from the Middle East during the Arab Spring, has significantly influenced migration policies of the mainstream political parties across Europe. Many individual European states adopted hardline policies and rhetoric, framing migration as a security threat and implementing strict border control measures to deter arrivals. These

policies were driven by concerns over national security, social stability, and political pressures, leading to restrictive asylum procedures and the reinforcement of border security.

As a precaution for the growing refugee crisis, Greece constructed a 12.5 km fence along its land border with Türkiye in December 2012. In 2013, Bulgaria erected a 3-meter-high razor-wire fence and deployed 1,500 police officers along its border with Türkiye. In 2015, Hungary announced plans to build a 175 km fence along its border with Serbia and Croatia. Over time, countries along the refugee route began to impose limits on the number of refugees allowed to cross their borders (Zaragoza, 2017: 64-65).

In contrast to Individual countries, European Union (EU) institutions approached the issue with a more measured response, focusing on managing migration flows rather than fully securitizing them (d'Eça, 2021: 90). Nevertheless, security concerns remained an underlying factor in the EU's migration management strategy, particularly when engaging with non-EU countries. In its external migration policies, the EU prioritized border security and sought to prevent migrants from reaching European territory by strengthening cooperation with transit countries and externalizing border control. Agreements with neighboring states, increased funding for border management, and efforts to avoid irregular migration reflected a broader strategy aimed at reducing migration pressures on EU borders.

In this regard, the EU held a meeting with the leaders of states influenced by the refugee flows across the Balkan region. The leaders under the leadership European commission President Jean-Claude Juncker decided to cooperate and coordinate on refugee movements to fortify European borders. In addition, the summit forefronted Frontex (European Border and Coast Guard Agency) to monitor border crossing, registering, and fingerprinting to provide security (Zaragoza, 2017: 66).

Following this summit, the European Union signed a deal with Türkiye in 2016 to avoid the influx of migrants escaping war and hardship via the Aegean and Mediterranean Sea routes. The deal aimed at helping the EU regain control over its external borders. Under this agreement, Türkiye vowed to contain refugees on a large scale and prevent their entry into Europe in return of reactivation of its EU accession process, visa liberalisation, and substantial financial aid (Haferlach and Kurban, 2017: 85).

The drive to secure Europe's internal and external borders—both at the individual and institutional levels—was a direct outcome of the securitization of Middle Eastern migration. Policymakers recognized that inaction could enable far-right narratives portraying migrants as an existential threat to take root across broader segments of society, escalating into a long-term issue. To counter this, they pursued strategies beyond border security, aiming to separate Europe from the destabilizing effects of anti-migrant rhetoric.

## **5.2. Otherizing and Criminalizing Refugees and Migrants**

The media has always played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and societal attitudes toward migration and refugees. Negative portrayals can contribute to their exclusion, manifesting in various forms such as victimization and marginalization (Pandır, 2020: 104). In this regard, Following the Arab Spring, the increasing influx of Middle Eastern migrants and refugees, combined with elite-driven securitization, fuelled widespread media-led criminalization across Europe.

In Italy, media misrepresentations of refugees often depicted them as “invaders”. Some television coverages relied heavily on stereotypes, reinforcing a divisive “us vs. them” narrative, where refugees were portrayed as “threats” and locals as “defenders”. This framing was particularly evident in following headlines (Bruno, 2016: 49):

“Lampedusa: still an emergency”, “Alarm on immigrants, the invasion has restarted”, “Lampedusa, the days of the exodus”, “Immigrants: record landing”, “An assault that our country cannot stop”, “The Great invasion has begun.

Likewise, the media representations concerning refugees during the peak in the influx of Middle Eastern migrants during 2015 and 2016 in major transit and target European states contained both empathy and fear. In the German media, 76 % of articles mentioned defensive measures, and over 85 % of articles talked about humanitarian measures (Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017: 12). However, whenever there were attacks across the Europe, terrorism and quickly linked to the refugee crisis by some newspapers. Amid these attacks in 2015, some German newspapers labelled refugees as existential threats in various headlines (Holzberg, Kolbe and Zaborowski, 2018: 543-544):

Fairy-tale of the undercover terrorist”, “Refuge and terror are siblings”, “Secret plan of terror-refugees”, “IS trains fighters for asylum process”, “the Syrian War hits civilians the hardest – why Syrians flee to Europe”, “control over who comes into our country”, “Arab refugees import ‘culture of violence’”

In French media, the mentions of defensive measures such as closing borders, tightening registration, and increasing police and army presence were more common. There were also different approaches between the major newspapers, Le Monde and Le Figaro. Le Monde often showed empathy and described refugees as victims, while Le Figaro focused more on fear and portrayed refugees as perpetrators (Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017: 12). In September 2015, Le Figaro published a public opinion emphasizing that most of the French people were against welcoming migrants (Bastié, 2015).

## **6. THE CONSEQUENCES OF SECURITIZATIONS**

The securitizations or securitization moves of elites, and the misrepresentation of migrants and refugees in the media have had unintended consequences for European society. These factors have

contributed to the rise of Islamophobia and xenophobia, undermining social cohesion and weakening the integration of migrants. This phenomenon has not only unsettled social peace but has also deepened divisions, making it more challenging for migrants to become part of their new communities.

In this regard, a survey conducted by Chatham House in 2016 revealed that the majority of people across ten major European countries, all of which were affected to some extent by the migration and refugee crisis, opposed further migration from predominantly Muslim countries. The survey found significant support for halting such migration in several nations, with Belgium at 64%, Germany at 53%, Greece at 58%, France at 61%, Italy at 51%, Austria at 65%, the UK at 47%, Hungary at 64%, and Poland at 71% (Goodwin, Raines and Cutts, 2023).

Another 2016 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center revealed that a significant portion of Europeans held unfavourable views toward Muslim population in their countries, with varying degrees of negativity across different countries. The findings showed that in Italy, 69% of respondents expressed unfavourable opinions, followed by 65% in Greece and 72% in Hungary. In contrast, France (29%), the United Kingdom (28%), and Germany (29%) reported comparatively lower levels of negative sentiment. Meanwhile, Spain (50%), Poland (66%), Sweden (35%), and the Netherlands (35%) also exhibited varying degrees of unfavourable views (Wike, Stokes and Simmons, 2016).

Apart from the rise of Islamophobia, xenophobia also surged across Europe during this period, particularly in Central European countries, despite their relatively low immigrant populations. Anti-immigrant sentiment was often fuelled more by symbolic fears and political manipulation than by actual immigration. In particular, some factions in the Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) exploited anti-immigrant rhetoric for political advantage, thereby legitimizing xenophobic attitudes. By using the concept of securitization, politicians exploited public fear to maintain control, but this strategy led to the rise of xenophobia. With no significant influx of immigrants, the continued focus on immigration issues ultimately benefited far-right and various groups, undermining mainstream populist parties and deepening public resentment (Hunyadi and Molnár, 2016: 1).

In addition to the societal consequences of Islamophobia and xenophobia, there were significant legal and ethical violations concerning refugee rights during this period. The European Union's Common European Asylum System, established in 2005, was not effectively implemented in 2015, when the influx of migrants was at its peak. Rather than a uniform asylum process across Europe, refugees and asylum seekers encountered varying systems depending on the country. Particularly some frontline European countries like Greece and Italy, struggled to provide basic necessities such as shelter, food, clothing, medical care, and adequate legal counsel due to the overwhelming number of asylum seekers. As a result, many new arrivals were left homeless, forced to sleep on the streets or in parks (Fullerton, 2017: 54).

Another serious consequence of treating migrants and asylum seekers as a security threat during and after the Arab Spring was the weakening of unity among European Union (EU) member states and the decline of trust in EU institutions. The migrant crisis of the mid-2010s created major challenges for the EU. Combined with the economic crisis that had begun in 2008, it led to serious political disagreements among member states, raising doubts about the ability of European governments and EU institutions to deal with such problems. This, in turn, reduced optimism about the future of the Union. According to Eurobarometer data, the percentage of EU citizens who believed the EU was a good thing dropped from 72.6% in 2007 to 50% in 2013. Between 2013 and 2016, less than one-third of European respondents had a positive view of the EU (Di Napoli and Russo, 2018: 196-197).

## 7. CONCLUSION

The issue of migration in Europe, particularly in the wake of the Arab Spring, has had profound social, political, and institutional effects. Some European elites played a crucial role in securitizing migration through anti-migrant discourses in response to the large influx of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers from the Middle East. By framing migration as a security threat, they were able to shape public perception and influence political outcomes, particularly among far-right groups. The consequences of this securitization process have been extensive, impacting not only the treatment of migrants but also the broader political landscape of Europe.

One of the most notable outcomes of the securitization of migration has been the success of far-right political parties in several major European countries, including France, Italy, Germany, and Austria. They effectively employed speech acts to exploit the anxieties and fears of certain segments of the population. By presenting migration as a crisis that threatens national identity, culture, and security, they gained significant political support, resulting in increased voter support and policy influence.

The securitization of migration has led to various national and supra-national measures aimed at limiting the influx of migrants from the Middle East and fortifying European borders. Several European nations constructed physical barriers, such as fences, to prevent unauthorized entry. Additionally, the European Union sought to externalize border security by making agreements with non-European countries to manage migration flows. Such engagements, which prioritized security concerns over humanitarian considerations, reinforced the perception of migrants as threats rather than individuals in need of protection.

The role of the media in the securitization process is significant. Media representations of migrants and refugees during this period often emphasized negative stereotypes, portraying them as criminals, economic burdens, or even potential terrorists. Such misrepresentations contributed to the otherization and criminalization of migrants, fostering a climate of fear and suspicion. The impact of

these narratives extended beyond media discourse, influencing public attitudes and shaping policy decisions that further marginalized migrant communities.

The securitization of migration has also had significant social and political consequences. One of the most alarming outcomes has been the rise of Islamophobia and xenophobia across Europe. As migrants from the Middle East were increasingly labelled as cultural and security threats, hostility toward Muslim communities intensified. Hate crimes and discriminatory practices became more prevalent, worsening social divisions and undermining social cohesion.

Additionally, the rights of migrants and refugees were increasingly violated. Reports of abuses, pushbacks at borders, and denial of asylum claims were some signs of the deteriorating conditions faced by those seeking refuge in Europe. The failure to implement a cohesive and effective Common European Asylum System (CEAS) further compounded these issues, as asylum seekers encountered inconsistent policies in different member states. This lack of uniformity in asylum procedures not only left migrants vulnerable but also contributed to broader dissatisfaction with the European Union and its institutions in this period.

The decline in trust toward the EU and its institutions was another significant consequence of the securitization of migration. As member states adopted divergent approaches to handling the crisis, the EU struggled to enforce a unified response. The perception of EU inefficiency in managing migration fuelled doubts over the institution's ability to address complex transnational challenges. This erosion of trust has had wider implications, affecting public confidence in the EU's governance and integration efforts in through the years when the migrant numbers were at peak.

Despite the depth of analysis covering the securitization of migrants from the Middle East, the study acknowledges certain limitations. One key limitation is the absence of interviews with elites or influential factions who played a role in securitizing migration through their discourse. Understanding their motivations, strategies, and objectives would provide valuable insights into the securitization process and its impact on public opinion and policy. Additionally, the study does not explore the responses of mainstream political parties that sought to counteract the securitization narrative and promote desecuritization efforts. Examining these alternative discourses and strategies would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the political dynamics surrounding migration in Europe in this period.

Future research should address these gaps by investigating the potential consequences of a scenario in which the majority of the European public becomes wholly convinced that migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers from the Middle East pose an existential threat to European identity. Such a shift in public perception could lead to even stricter migration policies, increased support for far-right movements, and further erosion of democratic values. It is crucial to examine the long-term implications

of securitization on European societies, including its effects on social cohesion, political stability, and human rights.

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