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Collective securitization and crisisification of EU policy change: two decades of EU counterterrorism policy

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ABSTRACT

One of the founding fathers of the European Union (EU) was very correct in suggesting that people would only recognize the necessity of change once a crisis was upon them, as the “war on terror” would show. The EU, as this special issue shows, joined in this “war on terror”, whereby it collectively securitized the threat to become a European, rather than a national security threat – a European “war on terror”. It aims to assess the collective securitization process in EU counterterrorism, evaluating this as a process between a construction of security threats and the development of supranational governance through crisisification. It posits that EU counterterrorism needs to be analysed as a process driven by collective securitization as part of an ongoing process of crisisification that leads to increased supranational governance.

KEYWORDS

EU counterterrorism;
collective securitization;
crisisification; European Union;
supranational governance

Introduction

People only accept change when they are faced with necessity, and only recognize necessity when a crisis is upon them. (Jean Monnet, 2019)

One of the founding fathers of the European Union (EU) was very correct in suggesting that people would only recognize the necessity of change once a crisis was upon them, as the “war on terror” would show. The EU, as this special issue shows, joined in this “war on terror”, whereby it collectively securitized the threat to become a European, rather than a national security threat – a European “war on terror” (Kaunert & Léonard, 2019). European countries are no strangers to terrorism; several European states have been victims of terrorism in the past, and many remain possible targets today (Kaunert, Léonard, & Pawlak, 2012). Between them, European countries have diverse experiences of terrorism, ranging from left-wing and right-wing terrorism in Germany and Italy respectively, through British and Spanish experiences of separatist terrorism and the forms of Islamist terrorism encountered by France in the 1990s, to Islamist terrorism today, which is generally considered to be the greatest terrorist threat currently facing many European countries. The Treaty on European Union stipulates that one

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of the key objectives of the EU is to provide citizens with a high level of safety within an area of freedom, security and justice (Kaunert, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). Yet, when it comes to the measures taken to combat terrorism, has the EU lived up to this promise thus far? Until 9/11, the EU was almost completely excluded from counterterrorism activities, which remained almost the sole preserve of the member states. However, the attacks on the US proved to be a turning point for the EU as it reacted with impressive speed and decisiveness, including emergency meetings between the member states and the EU institutions; opening itself up to counterterrorism co-operation with the US; a plan of action for combating terrorism outlining a number of areas where the EU could act; and a “month of transformation” where the EU prioritized efforts to combat terrorism (Bossong, 2013; Kaunert, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). Hence, international terrorism has proved to be of great importance in catalyzing the development of measures agreed before 9/11 and has transformed the governance of the EU (Argomaniz, 2009, 2011; Bossong, 2013; Bures, 2011; Kaunert, 2010c). Consequently, the EU is of much greater significance as a counterterrorism actor in 2021 than it was in 2001.

This special issue represents the first attempt to evaluate the first two decades of the EU counterterrorism policy. It aims to assess the collective securitization process in EU counterterrorism, evaluating this as a process between a construction of security threats and the development of supranational governance through crisisification (Rhinard, 2019). Compared to the lack of shared perception of the terrorist threat and the virtual absence of counterterrorism cooperation amongst European states in the 1970s and 1980s, the existence of EU-wide debates, legislative instruments and practical cooperation nowadays is particularly remarkable. This special issue explores this change and seeks to explain it by drawing upon the concept of “collective securitization” (Kaunert & Léonard, 2019). It posits that EU counterterrorism needs to be analysed as a process driven by collective securitization as part of an ongoing process of crisisification that leads to increased supranational governance.

The special issue follows Rhinard (2019) to show how a succession of crises has had a deep-seated impact on the EU. Traditional methods of producing “collective EU decisions now share space with crisis-oriented methods present in everyday policy-making” (Rhinard, 2019). Virtually all EU policy domains feature tools and procedures for scanning the horizon for potential disturbances, early-warning systems for possible threats and risks, special protocols for alerting political actors when a threat emerges and decision-making via abbreviated procedures. These changes amount to a kind of crisisification of European policy-making – a change in the nature of the processes by which collective decisions are made – and have significant implications for how we understand those processes and European cooperation more generally. The analysis here thus marries the traditional EU literature on policy-making dynamics with critical security studies to shed extra analytical light on these developments.

The concept of “securitization” was initially developed by Ole Wæver to make a major contribution to the so-called “widening-deepening” debate in security studies, which had begun in the 1980s and intensified with the end of the Cold War. However, what is striking is that, even when Buzan and Wæver considered regions, their work remained firmly focused on states, their patterns of amity and enmity, as well as the distribution of power amongst them and the role of global powers (Buzan & Wæver, 2009; Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). The first scholars to address this gap in the

literature were Haacke and Williams (2008). They coined the concept of “collective securitization”, which they defined as

securitization within a regional arrangement as involving one or more securitizing actors within that arrangement identifying a particular development or issue as an existential threat to a security referent, making relevant validity claims, and finding a receptive audience among other regional actors. (Haacke & Williams, 2008, p. 785)

As highlighted by Sperling and Webber (2016, p. 29), Haacke and Williams’s approach “[assumed] that a state [would] initiate a securitising move that [would] then be generalised within a regional arrangement or organisation”. They did not consider cases where a regional organization itself could initiate a securitizing move. In order to study this process of collective securitization, Sperling and Webber (2019) have outlined a six-stage model, which comprises (1) the status quo security discourse and policies; (2) a single precipitating event or a cascade of events; (3) the securitizing move; (4) the response of the audience; (5) the formulation and execution of policies to address the securitized threat; and (6) routinization and the emergence of a new status quo. As emphasized by Sperling and Webber, although it might be analytically possible to distinguish the securitizing move from the audience response, the two stages “are co-dependent through the process of recursive interaction”.

In order to assess the extent to which the EU has entered into a phase of supranational governance in the area of counterterrorism, we need to assess the degree to which EU counterterrorism policies are now being governed supranationally. 9/11 provided the kind of major exogenous shock that was required for significant change in the EU polity. It was the worst event of modern international terrorism, as nearly 3,000 people were killed (Kaunert, 2010c). This, in turn, pushed forward cooperation in related fields, such as crime, policing and intelligence (Kaunert et al., 2012). In addition to a major exogenous shock like 9/11, the EU saw very significant instances of policy entrepreneurship, most notably by the European Commission, as well as the Council Secretariat. As argued by Kaunert (2010c), EU institutional actors have played a crucial role in shaping the development of the AFSJ in particular ways. The European Commission and its ally, the Council Secretariat have acted in an alliance of supranational policy entrepreneurs in the area of counterterrorism, as evidenced notably by the cases of the European Arrest Warrant (Kaunert, 2007) and the measures against the financing of terrorism (Kaunert, 2010c). Member states have often been pushing towards dealing with these new security threats, which have traditionally called for national solutions. European institutions, in particular the European Commission, have managed to channel this process towards developing a “European” – rather than a “national” – solution. As a result, supranational governance has been increased in the AFSJ.

Despite the aforementioned unprecedented policy relevance and almost two decade-long history, the EU’s counterterrorism policy has relatively recently received due attention in the academic community. This stands out in stark contrast to a sizeable body of literature devoted to national counterterrorism policies of the various EU Member States. The few available volumes on the topic of EU-level counterterrorism policy include a handful of post-9/11 volumes focused on specific aspects of EU counterterrorism efforts only. In January 2008, the *Journal of Common Market Studies* devoted a special issue to selected EU counterterrorism issues, primarily from the perspective of

European Studies. Argomaniz, Bures and Kaunert published a special issue on the first decade of EU counterterrorism cooperation in Intelligence and National Security (2015).

This special issue is both extremely relevant and timely for readers outside the area of research for several reasons. First of all, EU counterterrorism is often argued to be at the forefront of the EU's response to new security threats, in particular international terrorism and irregular migration. The "EU acquis" on the AFSJ has grown significantly over the last years, which confirms the choice made by the member states to delegate new competences increasingly in this area. A majority of Union citizens, according to Eurobarometer (1997-2021) periodic surveys, increasingly feel that EU-level actions have an added value compared to those taken solely at the national level and two-thirds of citizens support EU-level actions in the fight against organized crime, irregular migration and terrorism. Only 18% consider that EU-level actions have had no extra benefit. Consequently, it is crucial and very timely to examine EU counterterrorism – exactly 20 years after the first significant measure were adopted in the wake of 9/11. Thus, the proposed special issue will generate significant policy-relevant findings, which will be of interest to policy-makers and academics. This topic is high on the EU political and policy-making agenda. Given the sustained interest of governments and academics in the development of this most dynamic policy area in the EU, this special issue will have an important impact on both academic and governmental debates.

Outline of articles

Joerg Monar ([Forthcoming](#)) analyses the responses of states to terrorism and their dependency on the normally "unitary" threat perceptions of their respective governments. In the case of the EU he suggests, a "common" terrorist threat perception requires the integration of the different perceptions of 27 Member States with various EU institutional structures playing an important role. In his assessment, there continues to be wide variations in national terrorist threat assessments and – indeed – the different degrees of exposure to and historical experience with this form of internal security threat. Nonetheless, he posits that the EU level of threat perception and response by EU Member States today are unique in the world for countries retaining full sovereignty in internal security matters.

Oldrich Bures ([Forthcoming](#)) examines the efforts to disrupt, deter and dismantle terrorist financing networks in the EU post-9/11. Using the EU's own goals from its action plans and counterterrorism strategies as the baseline criteria, his article examines how successful the EU has been in implementing the relevant aspects of various UN Security Council resolutions, the special recommendations of the Financial Action Task Force, and its own CTF measures since 9/11.

Christian Kaunert, Briony Callander and Sarah Léonard ([Forthcoming](#)) investigate the expansion of European Union cooperation on aviation security as part of collective securitization of terrorism in the EU. 9/11 provided the precipitating event which put terrorism and aviation security in the spotlight and, also, changed the collectively held understanding of the security threat posed by terrorism sufficiently to establish aviation security as a common policy framework rather than a national issue, as it was previously considered to be.

Christian Kaunert and Alex MacKenzie ([Forthcoming](#)) investigate whether the EU was an "absent friend" in external counterterrorism. The contribution of this article is in examining the two main regions of the "war on terror", namely, Afghanistan and

Pakistan and the Middle East, and assessing the extent and trajectory of EU activity. Three arguments are made: (1) EU activity has occurred and grown due to terrorist attacks and external events; (2) the EU has developed tools of its own that have enhanced its abilities in external counterterrorism; and (3) despite this, there is no assurance of the longevity of the EU's commitment to combating terrorism.

Ethem Ilbiz ([Forthcoming](#)) examines the electoral cost of adopting EU-promoted norms for governments both struggling in counterterrorism and seeking EU integration, notably with the example of Turkey as an exceptional case. The core argument discussed in this article is that EU-promoted liberal norms have electoral costs for a candidate country.

Christopher Baker-Beall and Gareth Mott ([Forthcoming](#)) argues that the new CounterTerrorism Agenda for the EU is based on logics of anticipatory action. Building on research by Ben Anderson, three types of anticipatory action are identified: preparedness, precaution and preemption, which it is argued have been central to the development of EU counterterrorism policy.

Alistair Shepherd ([Forthcoming](#)) examines the first two decades of EU counterterrorism policy as emblematic of the emergence of an internal-external security nexus, developed through the EU's collective securitization of terrorism as a transboundary threat that blurs the traditional divide between internal and external security requiring a multi-dimensional and transboundary EU counterterrorism policy.

Christine Andreeva ([2021](#)) analyses the aftermath of the critical juncture in EU CT brought by the attacks in Paris and Brussels (2015–2016) and its consequences for the development of EU CT information-sharing. Her article demonstrates the increased efficiency of cross-border and inter-agency coordination in CT intelligence and police work since 2015, due to improved institutional design and legislative framework, which were able to contribute increased added value to national CT efforts.

Athina Sachoulidou ([Forthcoming](#)) examines the rules proposed at EU level for cross-border access by law enforcement agencies to electronic information, by presenting the compromise proposal that the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties voted in favour of in December 2020. It explores the origins of the e-evidence initiative as a whole by placing it in the context of the EU's cooperation on counterterrorism and digitalization strategy.

Hans Schindler ([Forthcoming](#)) explores two emerging challenges for combatting the financing of terrorism (CFT) within the EU that have not yet been adequately covered by common instruments: the emerging challenge to counter the financing of violent right-wing extremism and terrorism and the increasing misuse of new technologies, such as internet tools and cryptocurrencies for the financing of terrorism.

Lars Berger ([Forthcoming](#)) calls for a better understanding of how transnational securitization processes can mutually reinforce or contradict each other. In the case of counterterrorism, successful securitization can depend on the reactions of international actors and audiences. Yet, differences in political systems and political cultures can produce reactions among these actors and audiences, which run counter to the interests informing the initial securitizing move. In the case of relations between European and Arab countries, the overlap and tensions associated with different political calculi behind such transnational processes are particularly relevant in terms of the fallout which the securitization of terrorism and Islamism produces for political reform in the Arab world and Muslim communities in Europe.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Prof. Sarah Léonard joined the University of the West of England as a Professor of International Security in July 2018. Sarah holds a PhD in International Politics from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, a Master of Arts in Russian and Eurasian Studies from the University of Leeds, as well as an MA in European Studies and a BA in Politics (International Relations) from the Université Catholique de Louvain (Belgium). Prior to taking up her post at the University of the West of England, Sarah was a Lecturer in International Security at the University of Salford, a Marie Curie Research Fellow at Sciences Po Paris, a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Dundee and an Associate Professor in International Affairs at Vesalius College, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium).

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