Manifestations of Securitization Elements in Latvia's Government Communication: Examples of COVID-19 and Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract. The third decade of the 21st century brings new challenges, where society navigates in the shadow of unknowns and threats. With the COVID-19 pandemic in Latvia in 2020 and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine two years later, Latvia's politicians and leadership have had to adopt a series of measures to normalise the situation, which inherently contradicted the established order and created constraints for people and the country's economy. The necessity of imposing restrictions also requires an explanation of the need for such a step. This paper seeks to examine how Latvian political actors attempted to implement securitization processes during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as at the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. By analysing the elements of the securitization process in the communication of political actors, it is concluded that the ambiguity and incoherence of the elements hindered the implementation of securitization process that should be accepted by the audience, which manifested itself both in the spread of the dramatic virus and in the inability to understand why Latvia had to give up the benefits and comforts of everyday life for another country. The research problem of the paper is related to the Latvian government's need to reach and persuade the population about the changes related to two major events – the COVID-19 risks and restrictions, as well as the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The aim of the paper is to understand the creation dynamic of securitization move, first of all, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to assess whether the first period of Russia's full-scale invasion somehow follows up the established pattern.

Keywords: securitization, political communication, COVID-19, government communication

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Introduction

Security is one of the keywords of modern communication – it is sometimes used instrumentally in attempt to gain public resources, because it increases the importance of the institutions that use the term, while applying the term usually yields greater results. It is employed to justify various types of reforms, restrictions or expenditure. Sometimes it is also introduced as an explanation, with a purpose to hide certain facts or information from the public. This may give the impression that the inclusion of any particular topic in the security domain can almost always guarantee its prominence (Polko 2020, 389). The founding fathers of the theory of securitization[1] in the so-called Copenhagen School offer their approach to safety. According to their perspective, securitization theory is concerned with how, when and with what consequences political actors frame something (anything) in the security dimension. The emphasis is on political language and the consequences that are produced on political agendas and political relations. Securitization implies that an "existential threat" is identified and a "speech act" prioritises an issue on the political agenda, legitimising extraordinary measures to deal with the threat, such as the use of force, invasion of privacy, etc. (Eriksson, Giacomello 2007).

The dynamics of each safety category are determined by the securitization actor and the reference object. The object is that which is at risk and at the same time must be preserved. Objects can be individuals or groups, e.g., refugees, ethnic minorities. Likewise, they can be areas of concern, such as the state, national sovereignty, ideology and the economy, which is considered a more traditional object (Buzan *et al.* 1998, 36). Actors in the securitization are those who perform the speech act. They can be political leaders, bureaucrats, government, lobbyists, pressure groups and others (Buzan *et al.* 1998, 40). By emphasising that the existence of the object is threatened, the securitization actor states that it is necessary to adopt extraordinary measures to ensure the survival of the object. This takes the issue out of the realm of normal politics and places it in the realm of emergency politics. Outside of normative politics, the problem can also be addressed outside the usual legal framework, which in turn also means that the problem no longer has its original meaning: it becomes what the securitization actor declares it to be (Taureck 2006, 55). It is important to gain the support of the public (audience) in the process of securitization. As Fred Vultee, a researcher at the University of Missouri-Columbia, has pointed out, safety is an intersubjective construct that shows that there is a shared agreement among people about what constitutes a safety threat (Vultee 2007). A speech act is defined as a discursive representation of a particular issue as an existential

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1   The Terminology Commission of the Latvian Academy of Sciences, at its meeting on 2 February 2016, considered the need for a Latvian equivalent of the term "securitisation" used in political science and decided to adopt the Latvian equivalent *drošībošana*.

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threat to security. This means that by expressing an existential threat through language, they can convince the audience of an immediate danger (Emmers 2007, 113). The latter step involves breaking out of the rules, and the extraordinary methods should be appropriate to the scale of the potential threat.

A successful communicative act has several components – the communicator, the message, the *medium* and the audience (Campbell 1996). Natalie Frensley, a researcher at the University of Texas, and Nelson Michaud, a researcher at the University of Quebec, point out that the theory securitization treats the communicator, the message and the audience, ignoring the medium as an intermediary (Frensley, Michaud 2004).

Securitization theory assumes that security issues do not exist in themselves – they are the "fruits" of shared perceptions, which in turn are disseminated in the political environment. Williams argues that the social construction of security issues is analysed by examining the speech act of securitisation, through which threats are represented and acknowledged. This means that the problem is securitized and perceived as a security problem through these speech acts, which do not simply describe the existing security situation, but shape it by successfully representing it as such. Martin Shaw said that the media should be seen not only as a structure but also as an agent. Shaw's argument is important because it proposes –to fully understand the role of the media in legitimising the security process, it is necessary to consider not only the images they provide, but also their creation and production (Shaw 1996).

In order to conceptualize the process of securitization in the realm of political communication, Anastasija Tetarenko-Supe developed a model that encompass elements of securitization that are embedded into the mode of political communication where it is important to acknowledge not only actors, messages and the audience but also links that ensure the information flow and connections between the actors of securitization process (see Figure 1). This study
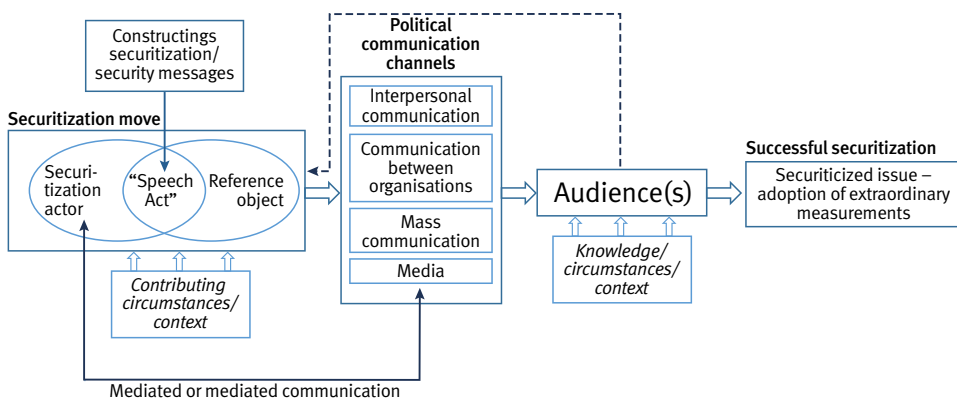

Figure 1. Framework of securitization (author: Tetarenko-Supe)

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is dedicated to the securitisation move, aiming to establish whether political actors – the securitisation actors – have been able to explain to the audience through speech acts what is really at stake and why it is necessary to restrict the activities of everyday life.

Methodology

The data were analysed by content analysis, with a total of 3800 publications. In the case of COVID-19, three stages were distinguished. The first phase: emergency situation (12 March–9 June 2020); the second phase: autumn–winter 2020; the third phase: 6 July–21 October.

The study also used a representative survey of 1016 respondents, designed as part of the project research.

There are two research questions:
1. How did the Latvian government communicate and construct securitization process about COVID-19 crisis and Russia's invasion of Ukraine?
2. How do Latvian citizens evaluate the Latvian government's communication and solutions to the COVID-19 crisis?

Results

The results of the study point to a lack of consistency when political actors try to define the reference object of the securitization process – what is at stake and therefore to be defended.

In the first wave of COVID-19 (spring–summer 2020), the reference object emphasised by the government members, whose defence required extraordinary measures – sacrificing the economic momentum, restricting freedom of movement – was uniform. The threat to public health, to human life was emphasised in the public communications of politicians at the time. Thus, during that period, the underlying messages of securitization, substantiating why interference in democratic freedoms and free market economies was permissible, were linked to the need to protect human lives without questioning the value of this reference object in relation to other possible objects at risk. It is undeniable that COVID-19 in the spring of 2020 brought not only dangers but also unknowns, which in turn contributed to the success of the security measures adopted by the government. In the face of uncertainty, experts – medical, public health, authoritative and recognised international organisations – were put forward as opinion leaders, so that decisions were at least ostensibly based on expert advice. Given the different levels of public awareness of COVID-19, the diversity of sources of information used on a daily basis, and the political/ideological divide, a common voice across the political spectrum was also essential: in the face of an unknown

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virus, public health was, at least initially, emphasised as the reference object of the safety process by both the parties forming the government and those in opposition, as well as by their most prominent politicians. It can therefore be concluded that the focus of public communication by a wide range of political actors on a single object at risk identified by experts – public health – combined with the fear of the unknown, contributed to Latvia's successful overcoming of the COVID-19 wave number one. From a theoretical point of view, it can be argued that the Latvian government succeeded in implementing a process of securitization: having identified an existential threat, the COVID-19 virus, the government took extraordinary measures – declaring a state of emergency with restrictive elements on citizens' freedoms aimed at protecting a single reference object – public health. Given the low infection rates in the so-called first wave (spring–summer 2020), it can be assumed that the need for the audience's consent to the adoption of the plague, as predicted by theory, was also fulfilled.

Meanwhile, the second wave of COVID-19 (autumn–winter 2020) and the waves that follow, are largely characterised by the end of Latvia's success story in overcoming COVID-19, with Latvia facing anti-incidence records and leading EU positions. This undeniably acted as the contextual backdrop against which new processes of securitization were attempted in the context of containing the spread of COVID-19. The most important difference in the messages is the difficulty in identifying the object of reference or in saying what is really at stake and what should be defended.

Whereas in the first wave the reference object was public health, which could be preserved by variety of measures, including restriction of the economy, one of the elements of national development, in the second wave the entity that was previously subject to restriction or extraordinary measures (the economy) has itself been transformed into an alternative element, which, firstly, hinders the primary process of securitization and, secondly, serves as an alternative object of reference, which must also be protected without restrictions, which can be considered as an extraordinary measure during the course of the spread of a dangerous and lethal virus.

While in the first phase the securitization messages, in terms of the adoption of extraordinary measures, are mainly based on the need to protect public health, in the second phase the securitization actors both drive the safety process and in parallel offer a potential step backwards, to be achieved by the public complying with the measures imposed so far, thus seemingly motivating the public to accept the changes proposed by the government in order to get rid of them sooner. This, in turn, suggests that the government understands that the public is not satisfied with the restrictions and will only tolerate them for the greater good. This points to the need for the government to clearly define this "greater good", but this is a significant problem in the second and subsequent waves of COVID-19.

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Moreover, with the need to re-declare a state of emergency, the government contradicted itself with its initial statements that the actors would not do so. Thus, it could have given the impression of a failure to fully anticipate scenarios, or of concealing such possibilities from the public.

The government has been forced to take the step of securitization in a cyclical manner because the overarching goal of the securitization process – public health – is not being achieved, and the range of extraordinary measures is being extended with each successive pass. The primary securitization move is influenced by individual interests competing with the public interest: by proposing blanket restrictions, sectors try to justify their exceptional position, which, given the range of people involved, also acts as a questioning of the securitization message. In addition to the two reference objects mentioned above, the reference object "democratic values", which flourished later, also begins to develop.

The subsequent waves of the COVID-19 pandemic mark the interplay between political actors in a situation where the epidemiological situation is deteriorating significantly, but where what has been done so far is no longer enough. Unlike the first phase, which emphasised unity of purpose, the subsequent phase clearly marks the inability of political actors to acknowledge even collective mistakes without looking for individual culprits. There is a difference here, however: while representatives of the political actors – the government – tend to look for individual culprits, the economic sectors as well as experts tend to look at what is happening from different perspectives, blaming the government as a whole. This phase also marks the political profiling in the context of COVID-19, when ministers of the respective parties were basically concerned only with their own sector, without looking at the broader context of the situation.

In contrast to the first phase, which emphasised the role of experts in decision-making, the second and subsequent phases mark a departure from this position, and this is evident among both political actors and economic agents. In an attempt to remain open for business, industries promoted mistrust of safety requirements and restrictions proposed by experts, arguing that the proposed or accepted restrictions were disproportionate or counterproductive. Similarly, politicians' statements and calls have been contrary to what they themselves have endorsed. Alongside this, there is also a growing fragmentation of society, with the emergence of a new dividing line: belief in the dangers of COVID-19.

It can be said that the changes in the content of the public communication of political actors, or their inability to implement the act of securitization, are also largely linked to Latvia's actual performance in overcoming COVID-19. The more coherent and inclusive the message across the political spectrum, the relatively better Latvia's infectology data have been.

Although the study confirms that Latvia's poor epidemiological indicators have gone hand in hand with chaotic government communication, the survey

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shows that people generally want to hear all the existing views and reject the idea of silencing different views when the government communicates about solutions to the crisis. According to the survey conducted during the project, the majority, or 66.5% of the Latvian population, disagrees that the government should not allow dissenting views to be heard, but instead the government should communicate as a whole on crisis solutions. 1/3 of respondents would like to see a united communication. There is almost the same division on the question of whether the communication of solutions should conceal differences of opinion among ministers.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 in Latvian government communications painted a picture similar to that of the first phase of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020 in terms of cohesive and operational information transfer. Government representatives acted proactively within their respective sectors, strongly advocated support for Ukraine, expressed solidarity with the Ukrainian people, and highlighted the values associated with democracy, such as freedom, independence, and unity, which do not give rise to doubt or controversy. The difficulty, as in COVID-19, was to (un)realise these and other values in the face of disagreement, resistance, including again political disagreement. A similar problem that the country faced in going deeper into the COVID-19 pandemic is also being experienced in the context of the war, with the state unable to find a sufficiently clear rationale why the population should give up tourism, goods, income and other benefits that it has received so far in Russia and Belarus.

Conclusions

Each emergency event may highlight different potential issues, but the key principles in the public sphere – cognitive, emotional and informational resilience – are the same. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the importance of effective public communication to convince the population of the validity of the restrictions to be put in place. In the light of the above, it can be concluded that clear, unambiguous and expert communication by governments can contribute to the success of the policies to be implemented. According to the elaboration probability model, the public can process information in two ways: centrally or peripherally. Assuming that government issues affect everyone and that individuals are interested in the topic, they process information centrally and are persuaded by evidence and reasoned positions. (Perloff 2017, 340). The COVID-19 pandemic proved that citizens are willing to temporarily abandon their routines in the face of danger, given a rational and reasoned explanation of why and for what purpose. Given the complex [geo]political situation and the various challenges that require a departure from the normative patterns of behaviour, crisis

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communication and communication in a crisis involving security threats and the involvement of the whole society must be implemented with a focus on a clear benefit-loss narrative, i.e., what is at stake and what is the cost to protect it. Understanding the economic situation of the population, the problems related to the reduction of people's earning potential, the communication should be considered with particular care, clearly indicating and making it clear that the refusal to respect any economic constraints, no matter how painful, is incomparable to other losses that the State has identified as a reference in the security process.

Given the high level of distrust in politicians, the communicative activity of anti-establishment actors must be adequately assessed, taking into account the information flows in other bubbles in their communication with the public. When thinking about reaching and listening to citizens, opinion leaders from different groups should be identified who have the potential to reach a specific target audience. For example, the vaccination campaign carried out by the Vaccination Bureau, which involved well-known opinion leaders in society, raised doubts as to whether there was an understanding at national level of who were the people that certain demographic groups listen to, so that certain groups were effectively ignored in the campaign (Russian speakers, young people, etc.).

Although the adoption of mayorships of a different nature and scale outside the normative politics is a political decision, it should be based in the communication with the public on a considered analysis and expertise of the situation and/or on a clear statement of personal/political responsibility in case of a different decision.

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