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Securitization of Immigration in the Czech Republic and Its Impact on the Czech Migration Policy: Experts' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an exploratory analysis of experts' perceptions of securitization of immigration in the Czech Republic and its impact on Czech migration policy in the aftermath of the 2015–2016 European “migration crisis.” Our findings indicate that the interviewed experts' perceptions correspond more to the logic of the exception than the routine: the importance of day-to-day management is less frequently emphasized than the elite-level security-oriented discourses and their acceptance by the Czech public. Our respondents also identify the relative stability and continuity of the Czech migration policy as a positive repercussion of securitization.

Introduction

Migration has recently become one of the most contentious issues in member states of the European Union (EU). In the last decade, both the public discourse around migration and the actual migration policies of the EU and its member states have been significantly impacted by two significant events: the global economic recession following the financial crises of 2008–2010 and massive migration waves in 2015–2016.¹ While both of these events exacerbated preexisting concerns about excessive politicization of migration in many European countries, the Visegrad Four countries (V4) have recently exhibited the staunchest opposition to all reform proposals of the EU migration policy, especially when it comes to mandatory redistribution of immigrants from the overwhelmed southern EU member states. Among the V4 countries, the vocal anti-immigration stance is particularly puzzling in the case of the Czech Republic, which during the 1990s hosted almost twenty thousand immigrants from war-torn Yugoslavia and passionately promoted human rights as a critical agenda of its foreign policy. Since the mid-2010s, however, the Czech Republic has been among the most restrictive countries regarding immigration and integration policies in Europe (Stojanová 2019). Furthermore, even though the 2015–2016 “migration crisis” produced only minimal inflows of immigrants, representatives of the Czech state have exhibited rather hardline anti-immigration positions in the international arena. The Czech Republic was, for example, one of just five countries in the world voting against the United Nations Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration in December 2018. After the vote, Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (cited in Echo24 2018) proudly tweeted: “[We did] as we promised. We are keeping to our strategy against illegal migration. And we won't accept a single migrant.”

The 2015–2016 “migration crisis” also marked a significant turn in public opinion on migration in the Czech Republic. While prior to 2015, migration only rarely appeared in the media and public discourse in general, it has since “suddenly emerged in mainstream media headlines and became a source of polarization” (Janurová and Drbohlav 2019). According to a media analysis conducted in 2015 at Masaryk University, the Czech media coverage overwhelmingly portrayed migration as a security issue (commonly referred to as a “tsunami” or “invasion”) and included dehumanizing expressions to describe the refugees as objects that are “crammed” or “jammed” and must be “captured” and “placed” somewhere (Tkaczyk, Pospesch, and Macek 2015). Another recent study by Janurová and Drbohlav (2019) argued that “biased views and the lack of public knowledge about migration issues can be largely, though not exclusively, credited to their coverage in the media.” In addition to blaming the biased media coverage for “narrowing public debate to an almost exclusive focus on asylum seekers (a minority among all migrants in Czechia),” the study noted that “the tenor of the debate was also shaped by newly formed right-wing populist movements” and by critical remarks about immigration by key political figures, including President Miloš Zeman and Prime Minister Andrej Babiš. The former, for example, warned in 2015 against accepting any Muslim refugees, claiming they “will have the right of sharia, meaning that unfaithful women will be stoned and thieves will have their hands cut off” (cited in Janurová and Drbohlav 2019).

The available data from public opinion polls confirms that biased information presented in the media and by representatives of both mainstream and extremist political parties (also see below) has impacted Czech citizens' perceptions of immigration and immigrants. Although the unwelcomed immigrants from the Middle East and Africa sidestep the

Czech Republic, which continues to have one of the lowest numbers of immigrants (6.2 per 1,000 inhabitants) in the EU (Eurostat 2018) and which consistently ranks among the ten most secure countries in the world (Institute for Economics & Peace 2020), a large number of Czech citizens feel threatened by immigration and support restrictive immigration measures (see Figures S1–S11 in the [online appendix](#)). According to the data collected for two long-term opinion survey projects conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center at the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences (2020b; Public Opinion Research Center at the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences 2020a), the percentage share of Czech citizens who perceived refugees as a security threat to the Czech Republic ranged between 68 and 82 percent between 2015 and 2019, and an even higher share of Czech citizens perceived refugees as a security threat to the EU and peace in the world in the same time period. Moreover, between 61 and 74 percent of respondents from 2009 to 2019 agreed that foreigners living in the Czech Republic for a long time cause an increase in crime rates and the percentage of those who agreed that foreigners living in the Czech Republic for a long time threaten the Czech way of life ranged between 32 and 53 percent from 2009 till 2020, with a significant rise since 2015 (44 percent or higher). An even higher share of respondents, between 53 and 73 percent in the last two decades, considered incoming foreigners as a problem at the national level. As such, it is not surprising that in the four years following the 2015–2016 “migration crisis,” between 50 and 69 percent of respondents opposed the admission of refugees from countries affected by armed conflict in general, and the opposition to the admission of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, in particular, fluctuated around 80 percent.

Overall, these data indicate that migration is a salient and politically sensitive topic in the Czech Republic. This is also confirmed by the data available from Eurobarometer polls, which indicate that since 2015, Czech citizens have considered immigration the most important issue facing both the Czech Republic and the EU (see Figures S9 and S10 in the [online appendix](#)). Although similar patterns can be observed in several other European countries (Janurová and Drbohlav 2019; Stojarová 2019), they have either experienced significant inflows of refugees (e.g., Italy, Hungary, and Bulgaria) or faced longer-term tensions connected to the presence of an ethnic minority (e.g., Slovakia, and the Baltic states). In contrast, the Czech Republic is ethnically homogeneous and felt only insignificant direct impacts from the 2015–2016 refugee crisis. Nevertheless, at least since the 2015–2016 European “migration crisis,” a majority of Czech citizens have been relatively receptive to securitized immigration discourses and in favor of restrictive immigration policies. In this article, we explore why this has been the case.

Specifically, based on semi-structured interviews with 69 experts on Czech migration, we offer an exploratory analysis of experts’ perceptions of securitization of immigration in the Czech Republic and its impact on Czech migration policies and practices in the aftermath of the 2015–2016 European “migration crisis.” In contrast to the few existing studies focused exclusively on the (anti-)immigration discourses of Czech

political parties (Naxera and Krčál 2018; Stojarová 2018; Stulík and Krčál 2019), we take into account the key insights derived from both the original securitization theory formulated by the Copenhagen school, which focuses primarily on elite-level securitizing discourses (Buzan, Weaver, and de Wilde 1998), and the more recent Paris school variant, which highlights the importance of routinized day-to-day practices (Didier et al. 2006). While both approaches have been utilized to explore the securitization of migration in Western Europe, only a few studies have analyzed the securitization of migration in the Czech Republic (see below).

The structure of the article is as follows. First, we review the existing literature on securitization of migration in Europe and the Czech Republic. Second, we provide a concise overview of the evolution of the Czech migration policy and its key actors. Third, we introduce our respondents and research design. Fourth, following the Copenhagen school approach, we explore the interviewed experts’ perceptions of securitizing actors and their securitizing discourses, including security threats linked to immigration and their reception by the Czech public. Fifth, following the Paris school approach to securitization, we also explore experts’ perceptions of the actual practices of the Czech migration policy. In the concluding section, we discuss and contextualize our key findings.

Securitization of Migration

Concerns of political elites and ordinary citizens that immigrants pose an economic, cultural, and/or physical safety threat to their society are not new. In recent decades, however, international migration has increasingly been perceived as an existential security threat. In the international relations literature, scholars have referred to this state of affairs as the securitization of migration, and they have attempted to interpret it from the perspective of two different logics (Bourbeau 2017; Messina 2017). According to the logic of exception, formulated in the 1980s by the Copenhagen school of security studies (Buzan 1991; Buzan, Weaver, and de Wilde 1998), securitization is the process by which ostensibly non-security issues, such as migration, are transformed into urgent security threats which in turn justify the use of exceptional—that is, security—countermeasures. Therefore, the key securitizing moves are speech acts performed by securitizing actors (especially governments, political parties, and state bureaucracies) that possess sufficient social capital to convince the audience (in democracies, the general public) that their claims are legitimate. In contrast, the Paris school’s logic of routine (Didier et al. 2006), inspired by the work of French sociologists Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, understands securitization as a process of establishing and inscribing meaning through governmentality and routinized practices by bureaucrats and security professionals, in which technology holds a prominent place.

Several studies have already analyzed the securitization of migration in Europe using either the logic of exception or the logic of routine. The Copenhagen school securitization studies have documented the attempts of various securitizing actors to portray migration as an existential threat that can negatively influence the very existence and wellbeing of a community (Bourbeau 2011; d’Appollonia and Reich 2008; Guild and

Baldaccini 2007). In most EU countries in the last decade, this involved discursive articulation of three lines of argument on immigration: (1) migration as a “societal security” threat (Buzan, Weaver, and de Wilde 1998, 119), based on the idea that immigrants threaten the values and the culture of the community and/or its collective ethnic, linguistic, religious, and national identity; (2) migration as a physical safety threat, public order challenge, and/or a national security threat, emphasizing the link between immigration, crime, and terrorism; and (3) migration as a threat to the existing welfare state, focusing on the negative impact immigration has on the economy, especially by undercutting the wages and employment prospects of native workers and overtaxing social welfare resources. Whenever and wherever these elite securitizing moves—usually in the form of a speech, report, or legislation—resonated with a substantial part of the target audience (the general public in the EU member states), migration was elevated beyond the realm of conventional politics and policy-making into the domain of urgent, emergency politics. This, in turn, opened the door for the use of exceptional and extraordinary measures “justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure” (Buzan, Weaver, and de Wilde 1998, 24), including banning the entry of all people with a particular ethnicity or religion; enhanced border control measures including border fortifications (walls, fences); or off-shore detention centers.

Instead of the Copenhagen school’s emphasis on elite speech acts paving the way for the adoption of exceptional measures, the Paris school studies have explored how security policymaking, institutional competition, and political struggle turn issues like immigration into security problems. Security is conceptualized as a “collection of routinized and patterned practices” (Bourbeau 2017, 106), and securitization as a process of establishing and inscribing meaning through mundane bureaucratic decisions (governmentality), day-to-day practices, and cooperation among security practitioners at the administrative level (Didier et al. 2006; Huysmans 2000). As such, securitization often benefits and strengthens the role of security-related public institutions (e.g., Ministries of Interior), agencies (e.g., intelligence services, police forces, border guards), as well as private suppliers of security and surveillance technologies (e.g., private security companies). Since they all share the same security logic and apply the same means to reach their goals, these “professional managers of unease” mutually accept and even reinforce their institutional claims of an indispensable provision of protection, in order to enhance their respective positions in a permanent competition for mandates, legitimacy, and resources (Bigo 2002). In the migration context, securitization also enables security professionals to extensively apply various surveillance and control measures (e.g., risk profiling, restrictive visa policy, remote border controls) at the expense of alternative policies that aim to secure the human rights of migrants. These measures often involve the use of newly developed technologies (e.g., biometric identification), which otherwise would have been highly controversial, and they often target both legal and illegal migrants, who are uniformly perceived as suspects whose behavior needs to be monitored and supervised (Huysmans 2006; Tsoukala 2005).

While the literature on the securitization of Czech migration is relatively scarce, three studies have already applied the Copenhagen school approach. Stulík and Krčál’s (2019) analysis of transcripts of speeches made by members of the Czech Parliament during the 2013–2017 election period revealed a negative framing of migration as a problem with three main themes that largely echo the aforementioned findings from the other EU member states: (1) the perception of migration as a crisis; (2) pointing out the illegality of migration; and (3) linking migration with the economic situation in the Czech Republic and its adverse effects on the economy. Naxera and Krčál’s (2018) analysis of the election programs of political parties that were successful in the October 2017 parliamentary elections concluded that in the light of moral panic related to the “immigration crisis” in 2015–2016, almost all parties were influenced by this topic and portrayed migration as a threat to the nation. Finally, Věra Stojarová looked at political party scenes in all Visegrad countries in the same time period and found that adverse reactions to migration were instrumentalized not only by the traditional radical right parties but also by newly emerged populist formations as well as by the established mainstream parties across the entire political spectrum (Stojarová 2018, 32).

Although we are not aware of any literature applying the Paris school approach in the context of immigration in the Czech Republic, some older studies have emphasized the importance of security practices in the historical evolution of Czech migration policies. Kušniráková and Čížinský (2011), for example, argued that the security emphasis of the Czech migration policy is a consequence of path-dependency in policymaking dating back to the socialist state’s delegation of the migration agenda to the Ministry of Interior, whose main concern was to control cross-border movement and sanction all unauthorized mobility. Their analysis builds on the widely accepted periodization of Czech migration policy along the liberal versus restrictive continuum, reflecting the prevailing socio-economic and political factors (Baršova and Barša 2005).

Czech Migration Policy

Following Drbohlav et al. (2010, 74), we understand Czech migration policy as a set of laws, regulations, strategies, and practices related to the movement of international migrants across national borders and their residence in the Czech Republic. It consists of immigration policy, understood as the regulation of entry and exit, and integration policy, understood as a set of tools offering immigrants the opportunity to settle in the Czech Republic. Similarly to other countries, the Czech migration policy differentiates between several migration streams—labor immigration; secondary immigration (family reunifications); forced migration (asylum seekers and refugees); and irregular migration—which “are not equally beneficial nor do they engender identical economic, political, and social costs” (Messina 2017, 18; Freeman and Hill 2006). However, as in most immigration receiving countries, temporary labor immigration is prioritized, both in the formal migration strategy and via pro-active immigration programs targeting qualified workers from selected countries (for example: Fast Track; Welcome Package; Regime Ukraine and

Regime Other States, which attract highly qualified employees from Ukraine and Mongolia, the Philippines, and Serbia), albeit without prospects for their permanent settlement (Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic 2020). According to Janurová and Drbohlav (2019), this is a consequence of “a strong demand for both skilled and unskilled labor that is not being met through the domestic labor force” due to “specific features of Czech society,” including “a mismatch between labor market needs and the professions of Czech graduates and trainees who leave universities or apprenticeship training; limited geographic mobility; rigid rules hindering flexible employment; and widespread undeclared work.”

The origins of contemporary Czech migration policy can be traced back to the 1989 Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia and the subsequent attempts to liberalize all types of cross-border movements of people, culminating with the accession to the European Union in 2004. During this time period, the Czech Republic became a target country for immigration in Central and Eastern Europe. While in 1993, around 78,000 foreigners were living in the Czech Republic, in 2020, the number of foreigners reached almost 635,000, or 6 percent of the total population (see Figure 1). The majority of immigrants come from Slovakia, Ukraine, Vietnam, and the Russian Federation, mainly reflecting past geopolitical links. In the case of Slavic countries, the relative linguistic similarity also facilitates integration. According to data from the Czech Statistical Office (cited in Janurová and Drbohlav 2019), the primary purposes of immigration to the Czech Republic are employment (45 percent), family reasons (27 percent), and education (20 percent). While the majority of immigrants are employed in the low-paid labor-intensive sectors of the Czech economy (in 2017, 48 percent were in semi-skilled occupations and 31 percent in unskilled work), the Slovak immigrant community, the numerically largest, can be described as a brain gain, especially due to a large number of Slovak students at Czech universities (Stojarová 2019, 99). This reflects the continuing close relations between the two countries and the importance of their shared historical and cultural trajectories.

The development of Czech migration policy since its inception in the 1990s has been rather unsystematic (Baršova and Barša 2005). The current restrictive period dates back to the

economic recession following the financial crises of 2008–2010, when public authorities tried to reduce the number of foreigners working in the country based on security arguments (Kušniráková and Čížinský 2011, 498). Due to the impact of the 2015–2016 European “migration crisis,” the restrictive period continued even as the Czech economy and the demand for foreign labor started growing again in the mid-2010s. This was also reflected in the 2015 Migration Policy Strategy of the Czech Republic, which stipulated security considerations as a critical factor. In the 2016 National Security Audit, illegal migration and poor integration of legal migrants, which can cause social tensions, were listed among the top security threats to the Czech Republic (Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic 2016). Security reasons were also invoked as the key justification for the inclusion of further restrictive measures in the 2017 amendments to the Foreigners Act, overriding the opposition of both human rights activists and business associations. The former were especially critical of the lack of judicial review over the asylum procedure and new restrictions for reuniting families and requests for permanent residence (Consortium of Migrants Assisting Organizations in the Czech Republic 2017).

Formally, Czech migration policy is relatively decentralized, with four different government ministries (Interior, Foreign Affairs, Labor and Social Affairs, and Trade and Industry) and fourteen regional Refugee Facilities Administrations playing an essential role in its various aspects. In practice, however, there has been a gradual centralization of decision-making authority within the Department of Asylum and Migration Policy at the Ministry of Interior (MI) since the early 2000s. According to Kušniráková and Čížinský (2011, 503), the adoption of the Foreigners Act in 2000 was a key milestone in MI’s efforts to strengthen its powers and increase its control over migration as a remedy for the overly liberal approaches in the 1990s, which in the eyes of MI officials had caused undue chaos and risks to the security of the Czech Republic. Furthermore, a 2019 amendment of the Foreigners Act specifically stipulated the key role of MI’s Department of Asylum and Migration Policy in the design and implementation of both immigration and integration policy.

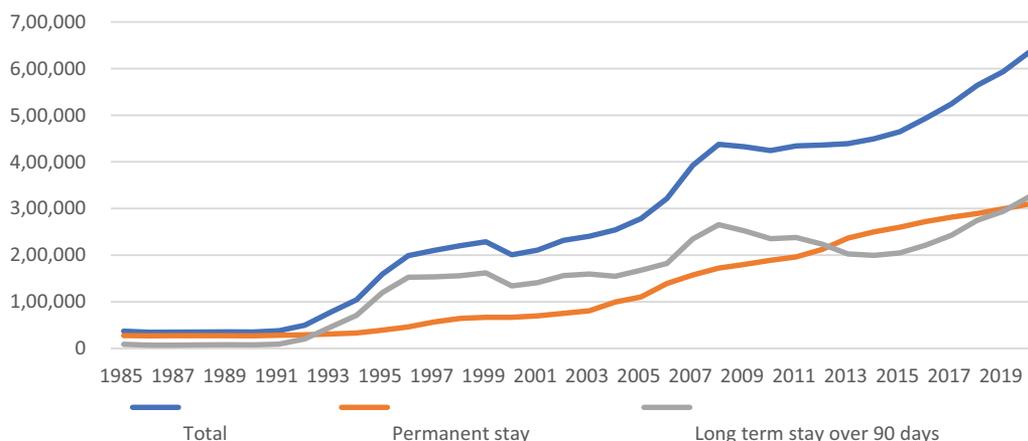


Figure 1. Foreigners in the Czech Republic. Note: Long-term stay over 90 days: since 1985–1999 long-term residence, 2000–2003 90-days-and-over visa, since 2004 temporary EU, long-term residence and 90-days-and-over visa (long-term visa) are included. Source: (Czech Statistical Office 2021a)

Respondents and Research Design

We employed a qualitative research approach focusing on perceptions and opinions of leading Czech experts, practitioners, and policymakers. Specifically, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 69 experts on various aspects of immigration and migration policymaking in the Czech Republic, representing both central and regional governmental bodies, nonprofit organizations, the private sector, and academia. Table 1 provides an overview of our respondents, their expertise, position, sector, and the codes assigned to them. The interviews were conducted in person or online between September 2018 and December 2019. We guaranteed anonymity to all respondents.

We were careful not to impose on our respondents any particular conceptualization of securitization during our semi-structured interviews. Thus, at the beginning of all interviews, we asked all our respondents only the following two general questions. In your opinion: 1. Has immigration in the Czech Republic been securitized? 2. What are the key manifestations and repercussions of (the absence of) securitization of immigration in the Czech Republic? Since all our respondents answered the first question affirmatively, we explore only their perceptions of securitization of immigration in the Czech Republic in this article. Although the opinions of all our respondents reflect years-, and in several cases, decades-long professional experience with Czech immigration and Czech migration policies, further qualitative and quantitative research is necessary to test their relevance in the long run. As such, this explorative study sets the agenda for such future research.

To code and analyze the interview transcripts, we used the Atlas.ti software to identify the key concepts corresponding with the original securitization theory formulated by the Copenhagen school and the more recent Paris school variant. As discussed above, the former focuses primarily on elite-level securitizing discourses and their reception by the general public, while the latter highlights the importance of security practitioners and routinized low-level security practices. Thus, in line with previous studies of securitization of migration, we used government, politicians, discourse, threat, fear, and public opinion as the key codes for identifying experts' perceptions corresponding to the Copenhagen school, and practitioners, practice, routine, and technology as the key codes for identifying experts' perceptions corresponding to the Paris school.

Experts' Perceptions Corresponding to the Copenhagen School

Securitizing Actors

When it comes to securitizing actors, the Ministry of Interior was most frequently mentioned by our respondents due to its key role in both the formulation and the execution of the Czech migration policy (10 respondents).² Moreover, the protection of internal security is a key agenda of the Ministry. As emphasized by several of our respondents: "The Ministry is a bit pinched in the pliers. After all, it is a state authority, so whatever they say, which would frame migration positively, they

Table 1. Respondents' Characteristics.

Leadership/Sector	Public (Pu)	Academic (A)	Nonprofit (N)	Private (Pr)
Decision-making position (L)	21 (PuL)	1 (AL)	9 (NL)	6 (PrL)
Non-decision-making position	6 (Pu)	11 (A)	9 (N)	6 (Pr)
TOTAL	27	12	18	12

would be immediately accused of being under the influence of someone. That the Ministry just doesn't play its proper role (N10, also Pr23, N59)."

The general category of "political representation" was the second most frequently mentioned securitizing actor (10 respondents),³ with several additional respondents naming specifically the government (4 respondents),⁴ the Security Committee of the lower chamber of the Czech Parliament (Pr23, N59), and the anti-systemic populist parties (PuL06, Pr23, A58). Only a few respondents named specific politicians as key securitizing actors when it comes to migration: Tomio Okamura (the chairmen and founder of several right-wing populist parties, PuL06, N10, Pr23); Andrej Babiš (the prime minister of the Czech Republic since 2017, PuL06); Miloš Zeman (the president of the Czech Republic since 2013, Pr23); and Milan Chovanec (the former minister of the interior from 2014 to 2017, N25). Overall, the aforementioned securitizing actors list corresponds with the Copenhagen focus on elite-driven securitization.

Securitizing Discourses

According to our respondents, the negative framing of immigration emphasizing the association of migration with various security risks became dominant in the aftermath of the so-called 2015–2016 "migration crisis," when the previously politically neglected topic of migration became one of the key topics of political discussion by not only the populist but also the traditional political parties:

[T]he crisis led to a profound change of the public narrative and how the topic is perceived politically. It led to politicization. Because for a long time, the migration and asylum policies were very technocratic. The Ministry of Interior always played a big role. And after the migration crisis, the topic became part of the parliamentary negotiations that were not necessarily expert debates but utterly political debates. (N10)

However, these highly politicized debates persisted even in the aftermath of the 2015–2016 "migration crisis." Specifically, our respondents noted that both political representatives and public officials, especially from the Ministry of Interior, have continued to emphasize the predominant association of migration with various security risks (see below) and economic problems, while failing to recognize and communicate the benefits of migration publicly, especially for the Czech economy and other spheres of life (NL17), as well as accepting migration as a regular part of the globalized world (NL07) and its necessity in demographic terms (PrL69). The prevailing emphasis on security risks in elite-level discourses on migration indicates that securitizing actors are trying to move this sensitive topic

out of the realm of the general political debate. According to the Copenhagen school, this represents the first move in the securitization process.

In addition, several respondents also noted that, as in other V4 countries, almost all political representatives and policy-makers in the Czech Republic have perceived and publicly presented migration primarily through a national perspective, manifested, for example, in the categorical refusal to accept EU quotas for resettlement of refugees. Instead of accepting any refugees (including orphaned children), Czech political representatives have discursively promoted the “aid in place” policy targeting would-be refugees in the regions of origin to prevent large migration flows. However, many of our respondents were rather skeptical about the effectiveness of this policy. They regarded it predominantly as a rhetorical political strategy to legitimize the rejection of accepting any refugees arriving in Europe (5 respondents).⁵

Security Threats

When it comes to specific threats, in the view of our respondents, the following two were mentioned most frequently by the elite-level securitizing actors in relation to migration in the Czech Republic: (1) criminality (21 respondents),⁶ and (2) the influx of Arabs (PuL06, NL17, A43) and/or Muslims (PuL06, NL07). However, when it comes to personal assessments of the linkages between migration and these security threats, most of our respondents, including those from the security sector, disputed either their magnitude or their very existence:

I don't want it to sound like I think we are not in any danger, but I wouldn't overestimate it. [...] There was more hype around it, more fear and inconvenience than how many people actually came here. (PrL51)

[The] security considerations and arguments have entered the public debate and impacted the direction of the discussion on migration, which was formed under the pressure of security arguments. [...] But I still see all this as arguments based on political considerations more than real threats. (Pu08)

Migration is not a security issue. It's a crazy securitization—a construct that has never been confirmed. [...] It is good to remember that illegal border crossing is only a minor offense, an administrative problem, not a crime, although it is now perceived differently in the Czech Republic. (Pu19)

Some respondents, nevertheless, also emphasized that the situation can change over time, especially in case of uncontrolled mass migration in the Czech Republic in the future: “It would be in the general interest to talk about the fact that uncontrolled mass migration is, of course, a risk” (NL17, also NL61).

When asked to provide their insights and/or share their own professional experience regarding actual immigration-related security threats, our respondents noted that in the Czech Republic, it primarily amounts to petty, rather than serious, criminality, including traffic and parking violations, drunk driving, pub brawls, and street fights, or vandalism (6 respondents).⁷ Several respondents also mentioned undesirable social behavior, which may amount to minor offenses under the Czech legal code when repeated, and which has been recently discussed in the context of

low-skilled labor migration in some regions and cities in the Czech Republic, including pollution of public spaces and living quarters, or excessive noise at night (9 respondents).⁸ Some respondents have, therefore, been particularly critical of the excessive concentration of temporary foreign workers in several regions of the Czech Republic (especially the Pilsner and Mlada Boleslav regions), where the local infrastructure was not able to absorb hundreds or even thousands of newcomers: “When you bring 20,000 workers to a plant in the local town, there will logically be more social problems in that locality” (PrL54). However, other respondents noted that this is not a problem unique to migrant labor populations:

As far as I know, this is a one-generation group of people, single men, who have this job there and then nothing. So, it is quite logical that there will be some problems. These young men will spend their free time with alcohol or other drugs, which occasionally leads to disturbances. But it is nothing new or unique. It is like in our socially excluded localities with the accumulation of Czech citizens on our society's margins. (NL17)⁹

Alternatively, one respondent argued that while there are similar problems within the majority Czech population, foreigners are more “visible”: “When a Mongol pees on a sidewalk, you can see him more than when a Czech pees on a sidewalk. He is different and thus more visible. That's just the way it is” (PuL48). For similar reasons, some respondents also urged caution when it comes to interpreting temporary changes in local criminality statistics: “This may be a natural rate of increase. With 6,000 more people in a year, the crime numbers probably won't stay the way they were before” (Pr56).

Concerning serious crime, drug production, dealing, and smuggling were noted only by a minority of our respondents, mainly in connection to criminal networks within the Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic (7 respondents).¹⁰ Some of our respondents also mentioned that Vietnamese organized criminal networks are engaged in financial criminality, especially tax avoidance schemes and money laundering (PuL06, NL17), forced and exploitative labor (PuL04, A26), counterfeits of luxury goods (PuL06), and forgery of official documents (A26). Two respondents also noted that the Vietnamese community is very organized. There have been “concentrated efforts to control and manage this community” by the Vietnamese embassy to advance its interests in the Czech Republic (PuL30, also A43). Jointly, the aforementioned factors probably played a crucial role in the temporary suspensions of processing of Vietnamese visa applications in 2008 and 2018 (PuL04, NL60). Nevertheless, it is important to note that all our respondents considered the majority of the Vietnamese community to be very well integrated into Czech society. As noted by one respondent:

I once lectured after the head of the police unit focused on drugs, and then people came to me and said, we don't know whom to believe. If the police officer, who portrayed it in the darkest colors, or you, who tells us that basically nothing is happening, that Vietnamese children go to schools, study at university, stay here, and take Czech citizenship. And I said we are both right. Somewhere in the five percent of the [Vietnamese] community, it is really dark. So, he is right about these five percent (PuL30).

Other immigrant communities mentioned by some respondents in the context of organized criminal networks were Albanians (drugs and people smuggling, Pu27, PrL54), Russians (abuse of business visas, economic criminality, money laundering,

corruption, PuL06, PuL62, PrL54), and Ukrainians (abuse of business visas, economic criminality, tax evasion, illegal labor, corruption, extortion, 6 respondents).¹¹ Similar to the Vietnamese community, some respondents warned that Russian and Chinese authorities are actively recruiting and/or already using various individuals from their immigrant diasporas in the Czech Republic as “Trojan horses” and spies for political, security, and economic purposes (NL17, PuL62, PrL54).

Albeit occasionally raised by elite-level securitizing actors in the Czech Republic, terrorism was not considered a migration-linked security threat by any of our respondents. Nevertheless, some respondents explicitly mentioned that the relatively low risk of terrorism may be correlated with the relatively small number of foreigners living in the Czech Republic, especially compared to many other European countries (S012, N18, Pr45). As a consequence, the Czech Republic also does not face security threats related to integration failures:

A convinced individual can commit terrorism in any country, including our own, and may not come here as a migrant. But what is not yet in our country and what is in Western Europe (England, France, the Netherlands) are second- and third-generation migrants, who, for various reasons, have not integrated well into society, and their frustration rises. (NL17, also PuL06)

With references to negative experiences with radicalization abroad, two respondents also warned against risks related to the ghettoization of migrants in some regions (PuL06) or city suburbs (A26).

Overall, when it comes to both petty and serious criminality, all our respondents from the security sector noted that criminality by migrants in the Czech Republic is perfectly in line with their representation in the general population. As such, it does not represent either an extraordinary security threat or a systemic problem:

If we look at the criminality of foreigners, then, of course, some of the acts are more represented, those typical for certain nationalities. Still, in my opinion, it does not reach the level of a national security risk (NL17).

[Migration] brings some “normal” security risks that are perfectly covered by the everyday activities of the police and other security agencies. It is not beyond their capabilities. It is an ordinary crime, not systemic above-threshold security risks (Pu19, also mentioned by N18).

Specifically, three respondents noted that “criminality of foreigners has long been relatively stable among detected crimes, ranging between 5 and 9 percent in the last 15 years” (NL17, also N18, Pu19). These figures correspond with official crime statistics compiled by the Czech Statistical Office (Czech Statistical Office 2021b), and they include criminality by all foreigners, including the numerically largest Slovak community and migrants from other EU member states. However, one respondent also cautioned about the correlation between police activity and criminal statistics: “If there is an increased incidence of people somewhere and the local police preventively send three patrols instead of one patrol, then, of course, three patrols will solve more offenses than one patrol. And then, suddenly, you have in the statistics an increase in offenses by 300 percent” (Pr16).

Finally, in stark contrast to the dominant elite-level securitization discourse, several of our respondents argued that migrants are more often the victims of crime than their perpetrators. In the Czech context, two respondents noted that domestic violence and exploitation are rising, especially in the case of housewives recruited from migrant communities (PuL04, M040). Other respondents noted concerns about the absence, or lax enforcement, of work safety rules and procedures by some employers hiring migrant workers, particularly the temporary workers on short-term contracts hired via work agencies (PrL50, PrL51). Specifically mentioned were excessive and unpaid working hours, lack of reporting of accidents at work, missing or inadequate safety equipment, and inadequate housing (4 respondents).¹² Work in such conditions is “dangerous not only for the migrant workers but also for the regular Czech workers employed in the same companies” (N25). In this context, it is worth highlighting that albeit all our interviews pre-date the outbreak of the COVID pandemic, three respondents noted that there had been instances of the spread of serious illnesses among foreign workers in some companies, which can also be considered a security, or at least public safety/health, issue: “Problems indeed arose in some companies. Foreign workers brought diseases, etc. It spreads very quickly among people” (N18, also noted by Pu19, PuL62).

Audience Receptiveness

Since we did not want to impose any particular conceptualization of securitization during our semi-structured interviews, many of our respondents did not explicitly state their views regarding the receptiveness of the Czech public to the aforementioned securitizing discourses. Respondents who did comment on this aspect of securitization offered contradictory accounts. On the one hand, three respondents argued that the majority of the Czech population does not have such a negative view of migration and immigrants, pointing out “a gap between media reporting and reality” (PuL64, also PuL65, Pr55): “A lot of people perceive foreigners more as wretches. When they are just a little interested, they can see the conditions in which these people live, work, etc.” (PuL64). On the other hand, one respondent noted that a substantial part of Czech society is relatively receptive to the securitization discourse when it comes to immigration in the Czech Republic: “The tendency in the last years is that in the Czech Republic, primarily from the perspective of the political representation, but supported of course by the people, is that migration is something that can threaten us. So, our approach to migration is that we don’t want migration” (NL07). According to another respondent, the securitization of minorities in the Czech Republic has a long history. As such, securitization of migration is both easier and more dangerous due to higher receptiveness in the Czech society (NL17).

Alternatively, one respondent noted that securitization of migration in the Czech Republic is very dangerous because “we are not used to major differences in our society,” and most Czech citizens have never actually met a migrant personally: “We have a frightened nation that doesn’t understand things, it’s starting to vote based on assumptions. I say to myself, do people know who the economic migrants are when they hate

them so much? Do they know that our Prime Minister is an economic migrant, getting to the heart of the matter?” (A43). Another respondent from the academic sector was even more critical of Czech society: “Unfortunately, sociological surveys show us an unequivocal finding—that Czech society is xenophobic and nationalistic” (A26).

The available data from national public opinion surveys (see above and the [online appendix](#)) indeed suggest the majority of the Czech population does not have a favorable view of foreigners in general and refugees in particular. Moreover, the data from a recent public opinion survey focusing on the public evaluation of the activities of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, the Czech government, and the EU in connection with the developments around refugees since the 2015–2016 European “migration crisis” point to a relatively positive view of the restrictive activities of the Ministry of the Interior and the Czech government by almost half of the Czech population (and an overwhelmingly negative view of EU activities by a large majority of Czech citizens, see Figure S11 in the [online appendix](#)). The public support for restrictive immigration measures indicates that the elite-level securitization discourses have sufficiently resonated with the audience, which is a key sign of successful securitization, according to the Copenhagen school.

Experts’ Perceptions Corresponding to the Paris School

According to our respondents, the restrictive and securitized approach to migration has been reflected in specific practices when it comes to the day-to-day functioning of various aspects of Czech migration policy, including complicated administrative procedures, lack of transparency of the bureaucratic processes, lack of comprehensive and accessible information provision in the language of the migrants, emphasis on circular migration, and tightening of requirements for obtaining the Czech citizenship (8 respondents).¹³ In a hyperbolic statement, one respondent even argued that: “If I speculate a bit, it is realistic that in ten years, every migrant will have a camera that will constantly monitor him. The direction really goes towards more and more control. But the whole world, Europe, is in it as well. It’s just more discussed here. It’s more pronounced” (Pr23).

Several respondents viewed the aforementioned barriers and restrictions that migrants face in the Czech Republic as symbolic expressions of the unwelcoming general ethos that prevails in the public sector: “Everything is set up in quite a repressive manner so that they don’t get the sense of being wanted, welcomed here” (NL66, also A33, N52). Some respondents also noted that the restrictive measures have not only targeted refugees, but have also negatively affected labor migration by promoting the perception of the undesirability of permanent immigration:

We can see that with the refugee crisis, the change of rhetoric using an anti-immigration narrative also affected labor migration as it offered legitimization for its temporariness and for these people not being able to obtain full-fledged status, even if they bring wealth to the society. There is a tendency to integrate them as little as possible so that their stay can be interrupted, and they can quickly leave the country anytime it is necessary from the perspective of their employer or the state (N25).

This implies that the proponents of using Czech migration policy for short-term (current labor market) goals have thus far prevailed over the proponents of using immigration for long-term (economic growth and demographic) goals.

Some of our respondents, however, also noted that the strong anti-immigration discourse developed during the 2015–2016 “migration crisis” went hand in hand with large-scale admission of legal migrants, most of them laborers and family members, and with the development of new programs for temporary labor migration that were pushed for by employers in specific sectors experiencing a shortage of laborers. As such, there has been a significant contradiction between the prevailing negative and often securitized political discourse on migration and the actual policies enabling large-scale labor immigration (N10), which can be interpreted as acknowledging that immigration is a necessity for the Czech economy (NL21). Thus, according to one respondent, “the Czech Republic should take a more pragmatic approach and draw inspiration from Germany and accept people seeking refuge in Europe who match with the profiles needed on the Czech labor market” (NL07).

When it comes to integration policies, several respondents from the nonprofit and academic sectors were particularly critical of the fact that the entire agenda related to the integration of foreigners in the Czech Republic is under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior: “They are trying to do something, but they are simply an inherent security body. And in the current political reality, they can’t be expected to launch a public campaign for good coexistence with foreigners. [. . .] [T]hey will not do it because it is politically toxic for them” (N10, also A58, N59). Several respondents further argued that the Ministry of Interior makes a mistake when it attempts “to speak two languages to build a sense of security. On the one hand, to protect only citizens and, on the other hand, to say that integration is a two-way process when, in fact, those policies that talk about immigration conceptualize integration in a very assimilative way” (A33). Similarly, another respondent specifically pointed out a “rather strange” contradiction between the official Czech strategies for migration and integration, both of which were written by the Ministry of Interior:

Whereas the migration policy strategy emphasizes the security of all people, the integration concept emphasizes the security of all citizens, which is quite different. Because the moment we talk about the people, it’s about making everyone feel safe. [. . .] However, the migration policy strategy emphasizes only citizens and ignores the fact that a large proportion of people do not yet have that citizenship. (A58)

These arguments resonate with the recent literature on the relationship between migration and security, which suggests that: “[T]he discussion of migration in the language of security can have significant constitutive effects that, beyond typically framing the nature of policy responses considered, are also often fundamental to how identities of them and us, and perceptions of security and threat, are conceived” (Browning 2017, 41)

Finally, it is important to note that several of our respondents acknowledged that there had been some improvements over time. Specifically, one respondent argued that “[t]he big shift for the better probably occurred when the agenda was

handed over from the Foreign Police to the Department of Asylum and Migration Policy [at the Ministry of Interior]. The attitude towards migrants improved diametrically” (PrL54).¹⁴ Other positive developments include specific migration projects such as *Fast Track*, *Welcome Package*, or specific regimes for Ukraine and India, “since they arose from some needs of the Czech Republic” (PrL54); adoption of new legislation and types of permits, many of which were implemented “thanks to the European Union” (PrL54); and improvements when it comes to coordination between the different ministries responsible for various aspects of migration policies (PuL06). This, in turn, confirms that both the details of specific migration-related policies and their actual day-to-day implementation by lower-level practitioners matter, as emphasized by the Paris school.

Repercussions of Securitization of Immigration in the Czech Republic

Negative

In line with both the Copenhagen and Paris school literature on securitization, a majority of our respondents warned about the dangers of securitization of immigration in the Czech Republic. They include the following:

Of course, there are efforts to present migration as a security threat. This is the card that is played in politics. In my opinion, it is terrible. [...] [I]t is dangerous to scare people, show them the enemy and try to control them in this way, because you never know where that fear may turn and how it may be abused. (NL17)

Securitization evokes unnecessary tensions and xenophobic moods toward foreigners, a feeling of danger. And I think that politicians who are in some way responsible for handling immigration are populist when they point out that the foreigners themselves are to blame for these problems. (NL68, also N52)

Portraying an agenda that is natural as a security risk is a mistake. [...] Migration [in the Czech Republic] is a socio-economic, rather than security, problem. Securitization of migration merely hides more general problems in the Czech Republic, especially intolerance, frustration, and insufficiently rooted foundations and protection of constitutionality. Securitization will continue for a few years regardless of the actual data on migration—it is an irrational fear. The Czech society’s real security problem is its intolerance, intolerance of liberal democratic principles. (Pu19)

It is all about creating fear of something and then controlling those scared people better. (Pr55, also Pr56)

One respondent from the security sector further added three more specific interconnected concerns about “the polarization of society [which] is becoming more and more noticeable”; the rise of “extremist sentiments in the security forces”; and the “feeling that it is necessary to establish militias, which will patrol the streets and borders” (PuL06). In this context, another respondent also stated that “I really regret and I perceive as a pretty serious thing the negative reactions to people who work with migrants, including some threats of attacks” (A58).

Other respondents have warned about the negative consequences of the neglect “to also work with the majority [population], [...] the relationship of the majority has deteriorated,

and if there is a larger influx of foreigners again, it will be perilous” (N59, also PuL67). Thus, according to one respondent from the security sector, public officials should do more to “[i]nform objectively about the current situation and the real threats. Not to present it in such a way that armed hordes of migrants are waiting for us at the borders, to pounce on us. [...] Not to mix criminal policy with migration control, that is, to control migration with criminal law. This crime-migration discourse is not good because its consequences turn against the society” (NL17, also A58). Alternatively, according to another respondent from the academic sector: “I would emphasize state campaigns. Not on the endless support of migration, but on what we have actually written in the migration strategy. Promoting economic migration, which will benefit the labor market, labor market flexibility. And it will be adjusted to the Czech socio-cultural environment. Because the Czech majority is terribly inflexible when it comes to some multicultural approaches” (A26, also N10). In terms of the securitization process, these suggestions call for its reversal, that is, a return to a standard political discussion of both the advantages and disadvantages of migration in the Czech Republic.

Positive

In contrast to both the Copenhagen and Paris schools’ conceptualizations of securitization, which tend to accentuate only its negative aspects and implications, some of our respondents also highlighted its benefits. For example, one respondent saw the long-term security emphasis by the Ministry of Interior as a form of prevention against populism that ensured the relative stability of Czech migration policy, even in the aftermath of the 2015–2016 “migration crisis”: “Nobody dares to attack the [Ministry of] Interior so its migration policy cannot be destroyed as easily as I would have expected” (PuL40). Several respondents have also stressed that one reason why foreigners like to migrate to the Czech Republic in the first place is that “it is a very safe place to live” (Pr45),¹⁵ thus acknowledging that “it is good when an efficient and robust system of security checks on immigrants is in place. When public services and institutions know who is moving in the country. And what he does there” (Pr55).¹⁶ Some respondents further emphasized that precisely because the migration management “tools used in the Czech Republic are stringent compared to other countries,” we do not have to deal with many problems, including “large segregated immigrant communities with no-go zones where you get lost, and nobody takes care of you” (Pu27, also NL17).

Moreover, despite the general criticism of placing integration of immigrants under the remit of the Ministry of Interior (see above), some of our respondents appreciated the recent developments in some of its policies, especially the institutionalization of the network of integration centers on the local level, where tensions occasionally arise between the newcomers from abroad and the locals, especially in smaller municipalities that were unprepared for these arrivals in large numbers. One respondent specifically connected this development with the intense politicization and securitization of the Czech migration debate: “[A]s the awareness about the topic rose, on the one hand, it led to polarization and escalation of the debate and

a repressive approach, but on the other hand it also led towards the strengthening of the debate about integration, especially on the local level. Many cities took part and began more conceptual approaches to the integration of foreigners” (N10).

Concluding Remarks

The analysis of our interview transcripts suggests that although the number of immigrants coming to the Czech Republic to work, study, or join their family members for both short-term periods and long-term settlement has been steadily rising since the 1990s, the overall Czech approach to migration has been substantially framed by security concerns. In particular, all of our respondents confirmed that immigration to the Czech Republic had been securitized since the 2015–2016 “migration crisis.” When it comes to making sense of this securitization, and its impact on the migration policy of a relatively economically prosperous and secure EU member state which experienced only insignificant direct impacts from the 2015–2016 “migration crisis,” the interviewed experts’ perceptions corresponded more frequently to the Copenhagen school’s logic of exception. While the importance of day-to-day practices was also noted by some of our respondents, especially when it comes to the implementation of various aspects of the Czech migration policy, the Paris school’s logic of routine was less frequently emphasized than the elite-level security-oriented discourses and their acceptance by the Czech public.

Specifically, our respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the Ministry of Interior is the key securitizing actor, followed by representatives of political parties. However, most of our respondents vehemently disputed the magnitude of the specific security threats invoked by these securitizing actors in relation to immigration in the Czech Republic (i.e., serious criminality, including terrorism, and the influx of Arabs/Muslims). In their perception, the actual immigration-related security threats are petty, rather than serious, criminality and public order violations, especially in regions with sudden significant increases in the number of low-skilled labor migrants. When it comes to the receptiveness of the Czech public to securitizing discourses, our respondents’ perceptions differed substantially. While most argued (with reference to public opinion polls discussed above) that a substantial part of the Czech public is relatively receptive, some respondents went a step further to claim that Czech society is rather xenophobic and nationalistic. A minority, however, noted that many Czechs actually do not have such a negative view of migration and immigrants as it may appear from media reports. Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that according to some of our respondents, most current public concerns about migration are, in fact, not about the actual immigration but about the possible, yet hitherto absent, mass immigration to the Czech Republic and its consequences.

When it comes to the day-to-day functioning of various aspects of the Czech migration policy, several insights from our respondents correspond to the Paris school’s logic of routine, especially when it comes to complicated administrative procedures conducted in Czech only and the strong emphasis on the temporary nature of migrants’ presence in the Czech Republic. Many respondents were also highly critical

of the management of integration policies by security professionals from the Ministry of Interior. On the positive side, however, several respondents praised the recent creation of a network of integration centers on the local level.

Finally, and arguably most interestingly, in stark contrast to generally purely negative accounts of securitization of migration in other European countries by the proponents of both the Copenhagen and Paris schools, some of our respondents also noted the positive aspects of securitization. Perhaps most notably, they argued that the concentration of power in the hands of an already security-oriented Ministry of Interior ensured relative stability and continuity of the Czech migration policy, even in the aftermath of the 2015–2016 “migration crisis,” which prompted a substantial tightening of migration policies in many other European countries. Moreover, it was also noted that a restrictive migration policy with robust security aspects is beneficial to both Czech citizens and immigrants because it helps keep the Czech Republic among the most secure countries in the world. Similarly, even before the outbreak of the current global COVID pandemic, some respondents have highlighted the need to think beyond the physical, social, and economic security of Czech citizens only, especially when it comes to workplace safety standards and public health provisions to migrants. Overall, the emphasis some of our respondents put on the benefits of securitization for both immigrants and Czech society offers a different, albeit partial and tentative, answer to the vexing questions of how much security, and for whom, than the mainstream literature on securitization of migration.

Notes

1. Both the data collection and the analysis for this article preceded the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As such, they do not reflect either the unprecedented influx of Ukrainian refugees into the Czech Republic (more than 300,000 as of late March 2022) or the even more unprecedented changes in both elite-driven discourses and day-to-day practices of Czech migration policy.
2. N10, PuL04, Pr23, N25, N41, M073, PrL50, N52, A58, N59.
3. NL07, N10, NL11, NL17, N18, PuL64, PuL67, NL53, Pr56.
4. Pr23, Pu08, Pr55, NL60.
5. Pu08, NL07, A09, A42, N5.
6. PuL06, NL11, Pr16, NL17, Pu19, A26, S033, Pu27, PuL04, N25, PuL67, PuL30, N41, PuL47, Pu49, PrL50, PrL51, PrL54, Pr55, Pr56, NL60), terrorism (NL11, NL17, N18, S023, Pr46, Pr55.
7. Pr16, N25, PuL67, PuL48, A26, Pu27.
8. M034, PuL64, PuL67, PuL47, PrL54, Pr55, Pr56, A26.
9. Also N25, N41, A26, Pr55, Pr56.
10. PuL06, NL17, PuL30, PrL51, N41, N52, NL60.
11. PuL06, N25, PrL51, PuL62, PrL54, Pr56.
12. PrL63, N25, PuL62, NL60.
13. Pr23, A33, N52, Pr55, A58, NL60, NL11, N10.
14. Also A26, PrL63, Pu08.
15. Also Pr46, PrL50, PrL54.
16. Also PrL50, PrL51, PrL54, Pr56.

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