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## Securitization Theory and Floods in Serbia: the Case of Social Networks

### Abstract

A year ago, during the devastating floods that hit Serbia, writings of certain users of social networks, characterized as panic spreading and threat to security, was met with condemnation of public officials. They were led by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic. In this paper, we are trying to carry out a scientific description of the actions of the government, especially of the Prime Minister, towards one group of social networks users. The theoretical framework that we are going to use is the theory of securitization, as a normatively neutral analytical framework. The primary method we are going to apply is critical discourse analysis. We are going to test whether the Prime Minister of Serbia securitized the activities of certain users of social networks in the Republic of Serbia, which is the first research question of this paper. The starting point of this paper is that the Prime Minister did commit aforementioned securitization. Bearing in mind the different form compared to traditional securitizing move, another issue to which this work will seek to provide an answer is what the reasons that led to the successful securitization were, despite of certain shortcomings in relation to the purely theoretical model (primarily in terms of “security grammar”). The paper argues that this is due to the socio-political and socio-linguistic dimension of the context in which the securitization was carried out.

Keywords: security, securitization, Aleksandar Vucic, social networks, flooding, Serbia.

### Introduction

In mid-May 2014, the Republic of Serbia was hit by devastating floods. At its meeting on May 15, the Government of Serbia declared

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the emergency in the entire territory of the Republic, faced with the danger of flooding (Vlada Republike Srbije 2014). The best indicator of the natural disaster's proportions was the data about its consequences (Narodna Skupština Republike Srbije 2014). According to the official data, presented at the meeting of the Committee on Defence and Internal Affairs of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, there were a total of 57 injured persons in the municipalities affected by the floods, while 31,879 people were evacuated ("MUP" 2014). The anniversary of this tragic event is a good opportunity to draw public attention (especially scientific) to the need for basic research of this event's many aspects, by applying methodology and theoretical knowledge of the science of safety.

In this paper we are going to deal with one the aspects of these events, which, perhaps quite understandably, remained on the sidelines of discussions in the period during and immediately after the flood. The reason for this is the fact that the energy of the public, like rarely in the past, was focused on solidarity and assistance to the most vulnerable. Yet today, a year after these events, it has been more than enough time to take into account the actions of the Government, especially of the Prime Minister, towards the citizens' activities on social networks in the period during and immediately after the flood. This issue has become particularly topical given the context of some allegations of censorship at the expense of the authorities in Belgrade, which have arrived from the domestic and some international addresses, such as from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Freedom of the Media representative (OSCE 2014) or Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch 2015).

This paper does not aim to normatively evaluate the Prime Minister's actions. The aim of this paper is primarily scientific description of one aspect of the past events in Serbia. The theoretical framework that will be used in the paper is the theory of securitization, as a normatively neutral analytical framework. This work is going to test whether the Prime Minister of Serbia securitized the activities of certain users of social networks in the Republic of Serbia, which is the basic research question of this paper. This paper is going to try to show that the Prime Minister did commit the aforementioned securitization. Moreover, bearing in mind the different form compared to traditional securitizing move, shown further on, the paper is going to try to explain what the reasons that led to the successful securitization in this case were, despite the shortcom-

ings, primarily in terms of the “security grammar”. The paper argues that this is due to the socio-political and socio-linguistic dimension of the context in which the securitization was carried out.

The paper’s first part outlines the basic concepts of the theory of securitization, which are going to be used. In the second part, by applying the scientific methods of discourse analysis, it is tested whether the Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic securitized the activities of certain users of social networks in Serbia as a threat to the security of the state during major floods. In the third part, we are going to try to explain why the securitization was successful, despite of certain securitizing moves’ shortcomings. The concluding section is going to look back once again on the key findings of the paper and point out the questions that future research should process further.

## Securitization Theory

Securitization theory is intellectually “a child” of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, and the key author in the formulation of the theoretical paradigm was Ole Weaver. According to this theory, the concept of security is essentially of intersubjective nature (Buzan, Waiver, de Wilde 1998: 30-31). Whether something is going to be labelled as a security threat, depends on whether there is a speech act by an actor (mostly political elite), by which such meaning is attached to a particular phenomenon. When an issue gets the label of security threat, common game rules in the political process cease to apply to it and it becomes an issue of “special policies or above politics” (Ibidem: 23). This whole “process that includes speech construct of security threats as well as taking special measures to repel them” is called securitization (Ejdus 2012: 107).

Theorists of Copenhagen School analytically break securitization into three basic units: 1) reference object - things that are existentially threatened and whose survival needs to be ensured; 2) securitizing actor – one whose speech act denotes a phenomenon as a threat to the security of the reference object; 3) functional actor – one that influences the dynamics of the sector (Buzan, Waiver, de Wilde 1998: 36). In addition to these units, the essential analytical elements of the securitization process are: audience at which securitizing move is directed by securitizing actor; special measures, which would not have been applied in the nor-

mal process of political management of certain issues, which are being used when an issue becomes characterized as a security issue; securitizing move as a speech act that started this process (Ejdus 2012: 107).

In order for this work to succeed in the efforts to respond to its research question, it is necessary to explain two more aspects of the securitization theory. The first one is the criteria for determining the success of securitization, and the other one is the motives that encourage the securitizing actor. Evaluating the performance of securitization is based on proving that there was a securitizing move that legitimized special measures that will be used against a threat (Buzan, Waiver, de Wilde 1998: 25). Theorists of the Copenhagen School distinguish three conditions for successful securitization: 1) that the speech act adhered to the “security grammar”; 2) that the actor has a certain social capital; 3) that the threat presented by an actor is publicly recognized as a threat (Ibidem: 31-32). Theorist Juha Vuori (2008: 70) points out, in addition, the importance of the audience to which the actor speaks for successful securitization.

However, this analytical framework does not take one very important thing into account, and that is the context within which takes place the process of securitization. Even the concept of security constellations “which was designed to link across all of the levels and sectors in which securitizations occur” remained for a long time underdeveloped in Copenhagen School (Buzan, Waever 2009: 256). This paper therefore accepts the importance of socio-linguistic and socio-political context to which indicates Stritzel (2007: 367), and the importance of the situation for a successful securitization. Without analyzing the context in which a particular text appears, it is impossible to understand the discourse and its effects (Phillips, Hardy 2002: 4). The scientific method, which will be primarily used is a discourse analysis as a method that seeks knowledge of the constructive effects of the discourse (the way that it creates social reality) through systematic qualitative analysis of the text (Ibidem: 4). The paper is going to analyze Aleksandar Vucic’s text or speech about the activities of certain users of social networks and their integration into the security discourse.

## Social Networks and Floods in Serbia 2014

In this section of the paper we are going to try to determine whether the Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic (as securitizing actor)

made a securitizing move, which labelled the activities of individuals (who wrote about the large number of casualties in Obrenovac during the flood) on social networks as a threat to the state of Serbia and its citizens (the reference object), and whether special measures have been implemented to repel this threat. If all these conditions are fulfilled, that constitutes a successful securitization.

On May 16 in the morning, after water had leaked in the power substations, Obrenovac remained without electricity (“Poplave u Beogradu” 2014). Due to the inability to recharge their mobile phones, and breaking of land telephone lines, communication with the residents of Obrenovac soon became extremely difficult. Media teams were not able to move about independently through the town, because, due to water that flooded the city streets, moving was possible only by amphibian vehicles and boats. Finally, on May 20, the press, as well as all other persons who were not on the list made up by the authorities, were formally banned from entering the town (Gedošević 2014).

Due to such circumstances, there were no reliable media reports from Obrenovac and the situation on location could only be learned through official statements of the state bodies. In such an atmosphere, there was considerable doubt about the official version of the events and the circulation of information, inter alia, through social networks, on a large number of victims in Obrenovac, much higher compared to the official data. “The government is lying to us. The number of victims of floods is 1000, not 33”, was one of the phrases that was flying through social networks in this period (“Siniša mali umalo podavio Obrenovčane” 2014). There were many who relied on the evacuees’ confessions, or the statements of the Gendarmerie, Special Anti-Terrorist Unit (SAJ), Counter-Terrorist Unit (PTJ), the Army of Serbia... Thus, one Twitter user claimed, referring a SAJ member as a source of information in the further conversation: “The disaster that befell Obrenovac must not be shown on TV. Corpses are floating all over the place, you cannot even imagine the horror there” (Twitter 2014). Jelena Macic, a makeup artist with a host of followers and friends on Facebook wrote on her profile that there were many dead in Obrenovac and that “trucks were transporting corpses ... like in a production line (...)” (Facebook 2014).

Social networks, however, were not the only media through which such information were spreading. The “Kurir” daily, for example, on the front page of its Sunday, May 18, 2014 edition, put in very large font

letters, the following title: “Unprecedented tragedy: Dead bodies float through Obrenovac” (“Nezapamćena tragedija” 2014). Even Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic said, at the open government session, which was broadcast live: “This is a tragedy unprecedented in the history of Serbia”, and that the number of victims will not be disclosed until the situation calms down, adding only that “we have significant casualties” (Antonić, Vukadinović 2014). However, despite initial statements on “significant casualties”, which, combined with “tragedy” discourse, left plenty of room for wide speculations on the number of victims in future days, Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic responded to the information on the number of victims in Obrenovac and the alleged removal of the bodies, which emerged on social networks “from reliable sources”.

The Prime Minister, first, on May 19, 2014 said in Obrenovac that people who are “spreading falsehoods on the Internet”, on the social networks, in fact, “wish evil and bad things for their country and their people” (Nacionalni dnevnik 2014). He pointed to the consequences, i.e. dangers arising from such behaviour. The Prime Minister said that even 450 teams were sent following 450 reports and that in all cases it was found that “those were lies”, so that a lot of energy was therefore lost (Ibidem). A little later, on May 28, 2014, the Prime Minister reiterated that the information on the number of victims and burning the Obrenovac residents’ bodies in Lazarevac, circulating on social networks were complete disinformation (“Vučić: ne spaljujemo leševe u Lazarevcu” 2014). He said that such misinformation were provided by the people “who do not think well of Serbia and its people”. (Jovičić 2014)

We believe that these two statements were a securitizing move by the Prime Minister as a securitizing actor. Those who by their actions do not think well, or “wish evil and bad things” for Serbia and its people, actually are a threat to Serbia and its people. This speech act of the Prime Minister constructed an enemy (certain users of social networks), whose action threaten the reference object (Serbia and its people). What, however, was missing, and is otherwise usual for a securitizing move, was a clear call for the defence, or emphasizing the importance of the reference object’s defence, or the implementation of special measures against the threat that endangers it, according to Prime Minister Vucic’s discourse. Equally, the threat was not explicitly marked as vital.

Soon, the special measures against “those who do not wish good to Serbia and its citizens” were implemented. First, the Ministry of Inter-

nal Affairs (MIA), by order of the Prosecutor's Office, began to conduct interviews with those who were suspected of having committed the crime of "spreading panic". For example, two days after the mentioned Prime Minister's statement, on May 21, makeup artist Jelena Macic announced on her Facebook profile that she was questioned by the police about her writings on this social network (Facebook 2014). Parallel with the other aforementioned statement by the Prime Minister, on May 28, the members of the MIA forces detained three people on suspicion that they had committed the same offense against public order and peace (Maglajlija 2014).

Those measures are special in a sense that they mean suspension of regular "rules of the game", which allow broad freedom of speech, guaranteed by the Article 46 of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (Ustav Republike Srbije: član 46). Paragraph 2 of the same Article envisages the possibility of suspension of this right, *inter alia*, in the case of necessity for protection of the "national security of the Republic of Serbia" (Ibidem). One of the legal acts of lower legal force that concretized this provision is the Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia, which in its Article 343, introduces the criminal act of "causing panic and disorder" (Krivični zakonik Republike Srbije: član 343). In this case, the Prosecution assessed that there were enough elements to suspend the normal validity of the rules, in accordance with the Constitutional procedure, filed an indictment against the three persons for spreading panic, ordered them into custody, and issued the MIA an order to invite a larger number of people for questioning.

It is important to emphasize that the Prosecution implemented these special measures only against specific users of social networks, the group securitized by the Prime Minister as a threat, as someone "who does not think well of Serbia and its people". Other actors who conveyed similar messages, such as the aforementioned case of the daily "Kurir's" front page, or published information on how the water in Belgrade was not fit for drinking (and thus encouraged irrational accumulation of bottled water by the non-threatened, at the time when it was needed for the threatened population) in the daily newspaper "Blic", were not affected by these special measures, *i.e.* they were not accused of spreading panic (Apostolovski 2014). This fact further emphasizes the importance of the Prime Minister's securitizing move in the process of special measures' implementation.

We conclude that the process of securitization, in this case, was a success. Special measures were implemented, preceded by a securitizing move that legitimized these measures. It should be emphasized that the securitizing move itself, however, had an unusual shape.

### Why Was Securitization Successful?

The question is, however, how did this relatively mild securitizing move, without the use of all common elements of the “security grammar”, lead to a successful securitization? We believe that the reason for this outcome lies in the special circumstances in which the statement was made, i.e. in its context. In order to provide an answer to this question, we are going to analyze whether the theoretically isolated conditions for successful securitization were met in this case.

First, the grammar of security, as already stated, was not explicitly used, i.e. the Prime Minister’s speech contained no such words as “point of no return, existential threat, survival, heavy but necessary steps (...)” (Ejdus 2012: 108). The Prime Minister did not explicitly call for the use of special measures, despite the fact that such practice can often be found in his discourse. However, these ideas are implicitly included and legible in the Prime Minister’s speech, especially if we take into account the context in which these words were said. The very mention of some entity whose actions bring evil and bad things to Serbia and its citizens means it is a threat to the country and its citizens.

The socio-political context in which this implicit statement was made was the emergency, thus almost the entire state but also significant social resources were used in the fight against the devastating impact of the floods and other associated natural disasters, such as landslides. Therefore, the Prime Minister’s explanation of the harmful consequences of such behaviour, which leads to a “loss of energy” of the state (at the time when its full capacity is needed to protect the lives and property of the citizens) implicitly but clearly, gives this threat the character of an existential one.

The socio-linguistic context was such that in this period the use of security grammar descriptions dominated in a part of the authorities. In their analysis of the Prime Minister’s speech at the first session of the Serbian Government’s Emergency Headquarters, which was broadcast



live on television, Slobodan Antonić and Djordje Vukadinović (2014) pointed to the use of descriptions such as “disastrous”, “cataclysmic”, “horrifying”, “unbelievable”, “not for people”... The whole period since the beginning of the flood was dominated by the security grammar and the discourse of disaster and struggle for the vulnerable Serbia. In this situation, each new threat or risk is considered as particularly dangerous, bearing in mind that the reference object (Serbia and its citizens) have already reached an exceptional level of threat.

Therefore, taking into account the Prime Minister’s discourse throughout the period of the flood, it was not necessary to emphasize the vulnerability of the reference object, which was now threatened by “those who do not wish well” on the social networks and who spread panic, in addition to all the other challenges, risks and threats it faced in this period. Using constructs that someone “does not wish well to Serbia and its citizens”, and that they wish “evil and bad things”, established a connection with broader socio-linguistic and discursive context, which carried a bunch of emotions and associations of Serbia’s suffering in the days of floods, and that connection compensated for the lack of the aforementioned constructs that are common for a securitizing move.

The second condition, the securitizing actor’s social capital, was completely fulfilled. The Prime Minister has indisputable political legitimacy, as the head of the executive, further reinforced by the fact that he is the president of the party which, only two months before the flood, achieved landslide victory in parliamentary elections. In addition, the Prime Minister pretends to supplement his legitimacy by specific expertise, i.e. by self-confident expression of possessing knowledge in different areas, such as in emergency situations, which perhaps was best manifested with the statement that he would explain to the Chief of the General Staff how to defend Sabac (“Sednica Republičkog štaba za vanredne situacije” 2014). These factors made Vučić by far the most important actor in Serbia endangered by the floods.

It should be noted that in the specific socio-political context due to the emergency situation, the Prime Minister’s words gained even more importance. His statements were transmitted more often than usual, especially during the emergency, bearing in mind the changes of certain television program schedules and concentrating on reporting in relation to the events surrounding the flood. Therefore, the media gained further importance as a functional securitization actor in this situation.

This is a circumstance that is also in favour of the successful securitization in this case.

Finally, the third condition, that a threat is accepted as such by the public, and that “threatening associations must be related to something for it to be securitized”, was partially fulfilled (Ejdus 2012: 108). The condition of enormous vulnerability of the reference object (Serbia and its citizens), has already been considered, and in such a situation, each new threat is potentially very destructive and raises a bunch of association, regardless of the nature of the threat. However, it is difficult to determine precisely to what extent the threatening associations were connected in public with the statements that spread panic on social networks. Social networks are, first of all, a new phenomenon, so these challenges and issues have not been dealt with in crisis situations in Serbia. However, this does not mean that there was no mention of this kind of threat in the public. Criticism of spreading false or partial information came to the front pages of certain newspapers, such as the “Politika” newspaper (Apostolovski 2014). The threats of “disinformation, especially on the Internet media” were mentioned by other relevant actors, such as the Defence Minister Bratislav Gasic, who said that all the time during the flood “the fight against misinformation was also led” (“Gašić: Vodili smo borbu i protiv dezinformacija” 2014). This state’s need to “fight” with misinformation suggests the use of security discourse in connection with this issue by other actors, not only by the Prime Minister, which certainly affected the performance of his securitizing move.

However, there were a large number of those who did not agree and did not accept the legitimacy of labelling the writing on the social networks as a security threat. The Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and the Ombudsman have expressed doubts about the justification of the prosecution’s case (Spaić 2014: 3; Vučenić 2014). The Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia offered free legal aid to the “panic-raisers” (“Gašić: Vodili smo borbu i protiv dezinformacija” 2014). Numerous civil society organizations, such as the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) publicly and openly took the side of protecting the right to freedom of speech, and against punishing individuals for allegedly spreading panic (Bujošević 2014). Some intellectuals even appealed to the prosecution of the Prime Minister, for the same offense (Bečković 2014a). Finally, part of the Internet community reacted, among other things, to these events, by launching the campaign “In the face of censorship” (Gligorijević 2014).

It cannot, therefore, be said that the threat was accepted by the entire general public. However, as already mentioned in the theoretical part, all citizens are not always the audience or the target group of every securitizing move. It is possible that in this case the primary target group was the one that fosters distrust, and perhaps even fear of social networks as a form of communication, not the users of social networks or human rights experts. This does not mean that the securitizing move was not intended for other citizens, but it is likely that this was the primary audience for the securitizing move that could lead to the formation of the attitude that it was really necessary to implement special measures and punish those who by their actions threatened Serbia and its citizens.

Based on the foregoing, we conclude that the conditions for the successful securitization still existed. Although not all elements of security grammar were used, they were used in a “mosaic”, but still recognizable sense. Bearing in mind the context, this more implicit vocabulary was sufficient for the effective securitizing move. Exceptional social capital of the securitizing actor led to this act being extremely successful in the speed of implementing the special measures, for which he had a solid and fertile ground in the perceptions of a part of the population. However, special measures were limited in scope (eventually only three persons were indicted and detained) and time (they were soon released from custody). The reason for this was probably the reaction of many actors, such as independent administrative authorities, the Commissioner and the Ombudsman, who undermined the legitimacy of the use of these measures. However, the proceedings against the so far accused will be conducted, and the Prime Minister subsequently reiterated in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia that “nonsense and fictions” that “inflict so much damage to Serbia” cannot be attributed to the freedom of speech, thus once again underlining the legitimacy of the state bodies’ acts against the performers of such actions (Bečković 2014b).

## Conclusion

This paper concludes that Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić performed securitization of individual actions on the social networks that talked about a large number of victims and the removal of victims from Obrenovac. By his statements of May 19 and 28 the Prime Min-

ister performed securitizing move and marked this group as a threat to the security of Serbia and its citizens. They discursively legitimated special measures against these groups, first as the questioning, and then apprehension, custody and indictments for writing on social networks, which in usual circumstances (absence of threats) would not be legitimate. What stands out as a special conclusion is a remarkable capacity of the Prime Minister, bearing in mind his social capital, as well as the usual discourse he uses to act as a securitizing actor. The securitization moves in his case may be, as in this example, implicit and “mosaic”, but still producing the same effects.

This research leaves plenty of room for the future researchers of this topic. First of all, it would be very useful to make a comparative study of the other speech acts of the Prime Minister in this period, which have the elements of securitizing moves, such as, for example, the securitization of the water level of the Sava near Sabac, for which were used special measures of calling a large number of volunteers from Belgrade to help, despite the large number of the residents of Sabac (“Sednica Republičkog štaba za vanredne situacije“ 2014). Determining the motives and goals of this securitization would be also a major undertaking, which would require the full engagement of researchers and adequate resources available in order to reach reliable primary sources about the motives of the securitizing actors in this process. Finally, it would be very useful to empirically determine the degree of the Prime Minister’s inclination towards securitization and riskization in his activities, by the analysis of his discourse from the moment of his coming to power. It would also be useful to examine the role of the media, as the functional agents in the processes in which the Prime Minister was the securitizing actor. All such researches would have undoubted scientific and social justification, and this work can serve as a basis for the work of the future researchers of these topics, which depart from this theoretical paradigm.

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