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## **SECURITIZATION OF MIGRATION IN THE POST-PANDEMIC CONTEXT: DISCURSIVE PRACTICES AND THEIR IMPACT ON SOCIAL INTEGRATION**

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the process of securitization of migration in the post-pandemic context, with a particular focus on discursive practices that reshape public debate and their consequences for social integration in the environments of the Western Balkans and the wider Europe. The research was conducted through a mixed-methods approach integrating analysis of strategic documents of security institutions (2019–2025), qualitative analysis of a sample of 320 media articles on migration in five environments (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia) for the 2022–2024 period, and secondary analysis of survey data on citizens' attitudes toward migrants. The findings show that the COVID-19 pandemic generated a new narrative layer — the biomedical framing of migrants as a health threat — which has been superimposed on existing security, economic and cultural narratives, producing a phenomenon the author calls multilayered post-pandemic securitization. Four dominant patterns of discursive practices have been identified: biomedical framing (28%), classical security framing (34%), economic framing (22%) and civilizational framing (16%). The article introduces the concept of the Inverse Security Paradox of Integration (ISPI) — a

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phenomenon in which intensified securitization systematically undermines the very social cohesion it claims to protect — and empirically demonstrates its manifestation in the regional context. The implications point to the need for integral policies combining the regulation of media practices, education on migration and institutional reforms supporting integration.

**Keywords:** *securitization, migration, post-pandemic context, discursive practices, social integration, biomedical framing, inverse security paradox, Western Balkans.*

## Introduction

The securitization of migration represents one of the central analytical challenges of contemporary social science. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new dimensions into this process that fundamentally change the way migration is discursively constructed, regulated and perceived. The 2020–2024 period saw the intertwining of classical security and economic narratives with biomedical narratives in which the migrant becomes simultaneously a security, economic, cultural and health threat — a phenomenon whose implications for social integration are still insufficiently explored in the academic literature (Léonard & Kaunert, 2022; Mićunović, 2023).

In the environments of the Western Balkans this process acquires a specific configuration for several structural reasons. The region simultaneously represents a point of departure, a transit zone and a destination of migration, so different securitization dynamics overlap in the same geographical space. The post-conflict legacy leaves wide space for the reactivation of ethnic and identity narratives that easily attach themselves to migration topics (Knežević, 2024a; Risojević, 2026). The demographic erosion of the region, manifested through the mass emigration of young educated populations, additionally destabilizes the social foundation and opens space for securitization narratives that present migration as an existential threat (Simović, Vejnović & Knežević, 2025).

The central research question posed by this article is: how does the post-pandemic context manifest itself in the discursive practices of securitization of migration in the environments of the Western Balkans, and what are the

implications of these practices for social integration? Three research hypotheses are derived from this question. The first asserts that the COVID-19 pandemic generated a qualitatively new narrative layer — biomedical framing — which did not disappear with the end of the acute pandemic phase but transformed into a permanent component of the securitization repertoire. The second hypothesis asserts that discursive practices in the media and in strategic documents function as systematic multipliers of securitization, using recognizable narrative patterns that do not correspond to the empirical reality of migration movements. The third hypothesis asserts that intensified securitization produces an inverse effect — systematically undermining the very social cohesion it claims to protect, through a phenomenon this article names the Inverse Security Paradox of Integration (ISPI).

The original contribution of the article consists in a twofold analytical innovation. The first original element is the identification and operationalization of biomedical framing as a separate narrative layer that has not been systematically analyzed in the academic literature on a regional Western Balkan basis. The second original element is the conceptualization of the Inverse Security Paradox of Integration (ISPI) as an analytical tool that builds on Mićunović's (2023) concept of the inverse immunity paradox by applying its conceptual structure to the sphere of social security and migrant integration.

## **Literature Review and Methodology**

### *Literature Review*

The sociological-security study of the securitization of migration has developed in recognizable theoretical layers. The conceptual foundation is provided by the securitization theory of the Copenhagen School, which is now developing through contemporary reformulations including discursive, sociological and critical perspectives (Léonard & Kaunert, 2022). Securitization is understood as a specific speech act through which a particular topic is moved from the domain of normal politics to the domain of extraordinary security measures, opening space for the suspension of standard democratic procedures.

The specific analysis of the securitization of migration developed as a separate research field, particularly intensively after the European migration crisis of 2015–2016. Karyotis (2020) documented how Greek political actors constructed migrants as an existential threat through media and parliamentary discourse, while Bourbeau (2019) and others developed comparative frameworks showing that securitization patterns vary significantly across states but retain common narrative structures. Léonard and Kaunert (2022), in their synthetic revision, updated securitization theory by integrating critical perspectives and paying particular attention to the sociological dimensions of the process.

The COVID-19 pandemic opened a new research field that has been intensively developing through 2024. Mićunović (2023), in his analysis of Esposito's paradigm of immunization, identified the phenomenon of the "inverse immunitary paradox" — a situation in which protective interventions produce precisely those vulnerabilities they are trying to eliminate. Although the work is focused on the health domain and on post-pandemic vaccination policy in the Western Balkans, its conceptual structure has direct application to the migration sphere — where the same pattern manifests itself through a process of securitization that allegedly protects social cohesion but in fact undermines it.

The specificities of the Western Balkans region produce a research field that cannot be reduced either to Western European migration studies or to classical Balkanology. The post-conflict character of the societies leaves wide space for the reactivation of ethnic narratives that attach themselves to migration topics (Knežević, 2024a). The unfinished process of institutional stabilization, manifested through the perpetual constitutional crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Knežević, 2024a) and more broadly through the question of criminal-legal protection of the constitutional order (Knežević, 2024b), creates an institutional framework in which securitization narratives find fertile ground.

The geopolitical context in which the region operates additionally shapes securitization dynamics. The imperial overstretch of the United States and the wider geopolitical reorientation (Knežević, 2025a), the construction of NATO bases as a source of local political tensions and destabilizing narratives (Vejnović & Knežević, 2025b), and the wider notion of a clash of civilizations as a narrative framework (Risojević, 2026) — all of these elements form the broader framework in which migration narratives are formed. The war reindustrialization of Europe

(Knežević, 2025b) and the strategic implications of technological transformations (Knežević, 2025c), as well as the development of the international legal framework after World War II (Knežević & Martinović, 2024), generate secondary narratives that overlap with migration discourse.

The operational dimension of the securitization of migration also encompasses the technical aspects of the contemporary security sector. Parthasarathy (2023) in *Military Studies* analyzed the resilience of critical port infrastructure to hybrid threats — an analytical framework applicable to understanding how migration is discursively constructed as a component of hybrid warfare. Radovanović (2023) analyzed the cognitive load of unmanned aerial vehicle operators during extended shifts, which has indirect relevance for understanding border security increasingly reliant on automated surveillance systems. Knežević (2025d) developed a theoretical critique of the concept of the dominant battlefield in the context of fragmented war zones, providing an analytical tool for understanding migration as a phenomenon unfolding in the same fragmented spaces. The question of criminal-legal protection of classified information in the contemporary security sector (Knežević, 2026) also overlaps with migration issues through questions of border surveillance and intelligence cooperation.

Broader theoretical perspectives complement this picture. Knežević (2024c) in his monograph on causality and cosmology developed an analytical framework for understanding totalizing narratives, applicable to securitization discourses that place migrants in the space of total threat. The reform of the higher education system (Vejnović & Knežević, 2025a) represents one of the key institutional responses to the challenges that securitization narratives pose, since critical media literacy represents the basic mechanism of resistance to narrative manipulations. The reactivation of ethnic tensions, which Risojević (2026) interprets through the theory of the clash of civilizations, represents the external framework in which the securitization of migration in the region unfolds.

### ***Research Methodology***

The research applies a mixed-methods approach integrating three analytical techniques. The first methodological layer consists of analysis of

strategic documents of security institutions in the 2019–2025 period. The national security strategies of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia, EU documents (the Pact on Migration and Asylum 2024, the Strategic Compass 2022) and reports of Frontex, UNHCR and IOM have been systematically analyzed. The analysis is organized along the dimensions of threat, urgency and the extraordinary nature of the measures the documents propose.

The second methodological layer consists of qualitative framing analysis of a sample of 320 media articles on migration (64 from each of the five environments) drawn from leading national daily newspapers and their web portals over the period January 2022–December 2024. The dominant narrative patterns, the main targets of securitization practices, the rhetorical strategies and the security measures invoked have been systematically coded. Inter-coder reliability was verified by independent double coding of 25 percent of the sample, achieving Cohen's  $\kappa = 0.79$ .

The third methodological layer is secondary analysis of survey data on citizens' attitudes toward migrants in the same environments, using the results of Eurobarometer, BiEPAG surveys and national survey research. The central indicators are the percentage of respondents who perceive migration as a threat, the distribution across demographic groups and the movement of attitudes during the observed period.

The limitations of the research are threefold. First, the sample of media articles is focused on mainstream print and online media and does not cover social networks, which are an increasingly dominant venue for securitization narratives. Second, the article relies on publicly available survey data using different methodologies, which limits direct comparison of absolute values. Third, the 2022–2024 timeframe does not allow the derivation of long-term trends across more than one political cycle.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

Empirical analysis of the collected data has generated findings that can be organized into three main blocks, corresponding to the three research hypotheses, which together document the structure, intensity and consequences

of securitization discursive practices in the post-pandemic context of the Western Balkans.

The first block of findings concerns the identification of biomedical framing as a qualitatively new narrative layer. Analysis of media content shows that biomedical framing of migration first appears massively in the first half of 2020, in the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, in response to border closures and movement restrictions. However, contrary to expectations, this framing did not disappear with the end of the acute pandemic phase at the end of 2022, but rather transformed into a permanent component of the securitization repertoire. In the 2024 sample, biomedical framing is present in 28 percent of media articles, representing a stable layer independent of the concrete pandemic situation (Mićunović, 2023; Léonard & Kaunert, 2022).

The second block of findings concerns the structure of the dominant patterns of discursive practices. Analysis of 320 media articles identified four dominant narrative patterns. Classical security framing (34%) presents migrants as a threat to public safety and border control. Biomedical framing (28%) constructs them as a health threat and potential carriers of infectious diseases. Economic framing (22%) presents them as a burden on local labor markets and social systems. Civilizational framing (16%) constructs them as a cultural threat, often invoking narratives about the clash of civilizations (Risojević, 2026). Table 1 summarizes the key findings by environment.

The third block of findings concerns citizens' perceptions and their implications for social integration. Consolidated survey data show that the percentage of respondents who perceive migration as a "significant threat" rose in all observed environments in the 2020–2024 period — from an average of 41 percent to 58 percent. The strongest growth was recorded in environments with the most intense biomedical framing in the media (Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia), suggesting a direct link between media practices and public attitudes. Disaggregated by demographic groups, the strongest growth in threat perception was recorded among older citizens (65+) and among residents of smaller urban environments.

**Table 1.** Distribution of dominant narrative patterns of securitization of migration by environment (n=320), 2022–2024.

<b>Environment</b>	<b>Security (%)</b>	<b>Biomedical (%)</b>	<b>Economic (%)</b>	<b>Civilizational (%)</b>
Bosnia and Herzegovina	31	33	20	16
Serbia	38	26	21	15
Croatia	33	27	24	16
Montenegro	35	25	23	17
North Macedonia	33	31	20	16

*Source: author's calculation based on systematic framing analysis of media articles 2022–2024.*

### **Biomedical Framing as a Post-Pandemic Innovation of Securitization**

The empirical finding on the persistence of biomedical framing as a permanent component of the securitization repertoire after the end of the acute pandemic phase opens a fundamental question about the nature of contemporary securitization of migration. Classical securitization theory, as developed in the Copenhagen School, recognized three sectors of securitization: military, economic and identity. The post-pandemic context has created the necessity of adding a fourth sector — the biomedical — which does not fit fully into any of the previous ones (Léonard & Kaunert, 2022).

The specificity of biomedical framing lies in its seemingly apolitical nature. While classical security narratives openly mobilize fear and ethnic/cultural difference, biomedical framing operates through the prism of "objective" health risks and scientific expertise. Mićunović (2023), in his analysis of Esposito's paradigm of immunization, showed how biomedical discourse, although seemingly neutral, systematically produces divisions between the "protected" body of the community and the "dangerous" foreign body. This mechanism manifests itself directly in contemporary securitization of migration, where the pandemic experiences of quarantine, isolation and medical testing are transposed onto migration policies.

A specific pattern in the regional context is the tendency of biomedical framing to combine with other narrative layers. Our analysis shows that in 67 percent of media articles using biomedical framing, it is combined with at least one other narrative — most often the ethnic/civilizational one (Risojević, 2026). This hybridization of narratives is particularly characteristic of the region and represents a difference compared to Western European environments, where narrative patterns are more clearly separated.

The implications of this finding for political practices are significant. Biomedical framing enables the activation of migration-security measures without openly invoking ethnic or cultural difference, making them more politically acceptable in public discourse. At the same time, this framing legitimizes the suspension of classical liberal freedoms — from freedom of movement to the right to asylum — through reference to "objective" health requirements. The pandemic experiences thus produced a permanent shift in the repertoire of legitimate securitization practices that goes beyond the specific pandemic and becomes a structural element of contemporary migration policy (Mićunović, 2023; Knežević & Martinović, 2024).

Comparative analysis shows that the intensity of biomedical framing varies between environments. It is most strongly expressed in Bosnia and Herzegovina (33%) and North Macedonia (31%), somewhat weaker in Croatia (27%) and Serbia (26%), and weakest in Montenegro (25%). This distribution does not simply correlate with objective epidemiological indicators — on the contrary, Croatia, which had high infection rates during the pandemic, uses biomedical framing less than BiH or North Macedonia. This finding suggests that biomedical framing is not a reflection of actual health risks but a discursive resource activated when it overlaps with other security, political or demographic pressures in a given environment (Léonard & Kaunert, 2022).

It is interesting to observe how biomedical framing transforms over time. In the acute pandemic phase of 2020–2021, the framing was directly linked to COVID-19 and concrete epidemiological measures. In the normalization phase of 2022–2023, the framing was extended to broader topics of health security — including other infectious diseases, mental health and general "hygiene" of the community. By 2024, the framing became institutionalized as a standard component of the security repertoire, activated independently of the specific

health situation. This trajectory reflects a wider theoretical understanding of securitization as a process which, once established, becomes self-sustaining and resistant to changes in empirical reality.

### **Discursive Practices and Institutional Mechanisms in the Regional Context**

Discursive practices of securitization of migration do not unfold in a vacuum — they are always structured by concrete institutional mechanisms that enable, amplify and operationalize them. In the regional context of the Western Balkans, these institutional mechanisms have a specific configuration that arises from the post-conflict legacy, geopolitical position and the specific link between media and political systems.

The strategic documents analyzed in this research show significant growth in the salience of the migration topic in national security strategies. While in documents from 2019 migration was typically treated as one of several security challenges, in documents from 2024 it is often cited among the top three priorities. Frontex reports for the same period document increased operational engagement on the Western Balkan route, institutionally confirming the securitization treatment. The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum (2024) introduces new mechanisms of "mandatory solidarity" that can be interpreted as an institutional manifestation of securitization in which member states have limited possibility of individual choice (Léonard & Kaunert, 2022).

The specificity of the regional context is reflected in the presence of actors that are not primarily migration-related — including NATO bases, hybrid security dimensions and geopolitical tensions. Vejnović and Knežević (2025b) analyzed the construction of NATO bases as a factor of destabilization of the Western Balkans, showing how geopolitical tensions shape the local security narrative. In the context of migration, NATO and the geopolitical dimension appear as secondary narratives in which migration waves are interpreted as a weapon of hybrid warfare of great powers — a narrative particularly pronounced in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war (Knežević, 2025a).

The operational dimension of securitization also encompasses ever more sophisticated technical systems of border surveillance. Parthasarathy (2023) analyzed the resilience of critical port infrastructure to hybrid threats, which has

direct application to understanding contemporary border surveillance. Radovanović (2023) in the same journal analyzed the cognitive load of unmanned aerial vehicle operators, increasingly used in surveillance of migration routes. Knežević (2025d) developed a theoretical critique of the concept of the dominant battlefield in the context of fragmented war zones — an analytical framework applicable to migration as a phenomenon unfolding in the same fragmented spaces across multiple jurisdictions.

The demographic dimension further complicates the picture. Simović, Vejnović and Knežević (2025) documented the demographic erosion of the region through the mass emigration of young educated populations. The paradox of the region is that states losing their own population simultaneously securitize the entry of other migrants — creating a structural mismatch between demographic needs and discursive practices. The reform of the higher education system (Vejnović & Knežević, 2025a) and broader institutional reorganization represent attempts to respond to these structural challenges.

A particularly important channel through which discursive practices are institutionalized is the relationship between official strategic documents and media practices. Our analysis shows a high degree of narrative coherence between these two layers — narrative patterns that dominate in national security strategies find their media reproduction in the sample from the same environment, with a time lag of 3 to 8 months. This finding suggests the existence of a systemic mechanism through which institutional narratives pass into the media space, probably through a combination of briefings, sources within security services and selective access to information. A similar pattern has been documented in Western European contexts (Léonard & Kaunert, 2022), but is particularly pronounced in the regional context due to lower professional autonomy of media and the close ties of media ownership to political structures.

### **Inverse Security Paradox of Integration and Implications for Policy**

The central concept introduced by this article — the Inverse Security Paradox of Integration (ISPI) — describes the phenomenon in which intensified securitization of migration systematically undermines the very social cohesion it claims to protect. Conceptually, ISPI builds on Mićunović's (2023) inverse

immunitary paradox by applying its structure to the sphere of social security and integration.

The mechanism of ISPI manifests itself through three channels. The first channel is narrative: securitization produces and entrenches binary categories of "us"/"them" that prevent authentic integration, since integration by definition requires the permeability of these boundaries. The second channel is institutional: the securitization framework legitimizes resource allocation to police, borders and surveillance instead of to programmes of integration, education and social support. The third channel is psychosocial: continuous exposure to securitization narratives shapes cognitive schemes even among those citizens who declaratively support integration, manifesting in "automatic" generation of suspicion and fear in everyday encounters with migrants.

The empirical basis of the ISPI phenomenon in our research manifests itself through three findings. First, survey data show a strong negative correlation ( $r = -0.67$ ) between the intensity of securitization framing in the media of a particular environment and the percentage of respondents declaring willingness for social contacts with migrants. Second, data on actual integration (employment, education, social assistance to migrants) negatively correlate with the intensity of securitization rhetoric in strategic documents. Third, qualitative analysis shows that identity divisions, which are a legacy of the post-conflict context (Knežević, 2024a; Knežević, 2024b), are reactivated through securitization narratives about migration, which in turn destabilizes an already vulnerable social structure.

The implications of the ISPI phenomenon for policy are threefold. First, the classical model of "hard security" — increasing border capacities, intensifying surveillance, restrictive measures — has limited effect on long-term social cohesion and may even destabilize it. Second, securitization communication must be regulated through mechanisms of media self-regulation and education, reducing the systemic multiplier of fear. Third, institutional investments in integration programmes — from language courses through housing to employment — must be returned to the priorities of security-social policies. The broader theoretical perspective, which Knežević (2024c) develops in his monograph on causality and totalizing narratives, warns that only an integral

approach can break the vicious circle of ISPI, since partial interventions leave untouched those structural mechanisms that reproduce the paradox.

More broadly, the securitization of migration in the post-pandemic context cannot be treated in isolation from global and European dynamics. Geopolitical reorientation (Knežević, 2025a), war reindustrialization of Europe (Knežević, 2025b), strategic implications of technological transformations (Knežević, 2025c) and the questions of criminal-legal protection of sensitive information in the contemporary security sector (Knežević, 2026) — all this forms the external framework that shapes migration discourse in the region. A policy of reducing the harmful effects of ISPI therefore requires an integral model that goes beyond the isolated migration sector and addresses the wider structural configuration in which securitization unfolds.

Particular attention should be paid to how ISPI manifests itself in different demographic groups. Our analysis shows that the effect is not evenly distributed — it is strongest among older citizens (65+) and among residents of smaller urban environments, while it is weakest among younger educated citizens in larger urban centers. This distribution partly overlaps with the demographic profile of media consumption (older citizens consume more classical media where securitization framing is more pronounced), and partly with the level of direct experiential encounters with migrants (younger educated citizens in larger cities have more daily contacts, which erodes the securitization narrative). This segmentation has significant implications for policy — targeted educational and communication intervention must be differentiated according to demographic profiles.

The increasingly broad application of border surveillance technologies represents another dimension that policies must address. Systems of unmanned aerial vehicles, biometric controls and automated detection (Radovanović, 2023) structurally shift the relationship between the migrant and border institutions — from human encounters to algorithmic selection. Although technically more efficient, this shift produces new ethical and legal problems requiring special legal and institutional responses (Knežević, 2026). Without understanding this technological dimension, contemporary migration policy remains structurally incomplete.

## Conclusion

The investigation of the securitization of migration in the post-pandemic context of the Western Balkans, conducted by combining analysis of strategic documents, qualitative framing analysis of media content and secondary analysis of survey data in the 2022–2024 period, has produced findings that confirm all three research hypotheses.

The first hypothesis, on the COVID-19 pandemic as the generator of a qualitatively new narrative layer, finds full empirical confirmation. Biomedical framing of migration did not disappear with the end of the acute pandemic phase but transformed into a permanent component of the securitization repertoire — present in 28 percent of media articles in 2024 and structurally integrated with other narrative layers in 67 percent of cases.

The second hypothesis, on discursive practices as systematic multipliers of securitization, is also confirmed. The identification of four dominant narrative patterns — security, biomedical, economic and civilizational — and their distribution by environment documents the structure of contemporary securitization practices in the region (Léonard & Kaunert, 2022).

The third hypothesis, on the Inverse Security Paradox of Integration, is confirmed through the empirical correlation between the intensity of securitization and indicators of social cohesion. The more intense the securitization practices, the weaker the indicators of cohesion and integration — a phenomenon whose theoretical foundation derives from Mićunović's (2023) analysis of the inverse immunitary paradox.

The principal original contribution of the article consists in a twofold analytical innovation: the identification of biomedical framing as a post-pandemic innovation of securitization of migration, and the conceptualization of the Inverse Security Paradox of Integration (ISPI) as an analytical tool for understanding the structural consequences of contemporary discursive practices. Both elements open directions for future research in regional and comparative perspective.

The implications for practice are clear. Policies in the region must develop an integral approach combining the regulation of media practices, education on migration through a reformed higher education system (Vejnović & Knežević,

2025a), institutional investments in integration, and confrontation with the post-conflict legacy that further amplifies securitization narratives. Without such an integral approach, securitization will continue to reproduce the inverse paradox that weakens social cohesion precisely while claiming to protect it.

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