Grotius and migration: non-securitisation in the Netherlands

Tibor Hargitai[1]

Abstract

When looking at the influx of migration over the last years, the behaviour of the Netherlands is that of a small state. Where some countries in the EU securitise migration, the Dutch position is one that can partially be explained through its historical emphasis on human rights in its foreign policy. The overwhelming majority of the political parties and public opinion see the need to find a humane solution to the challenges related to migration, and this prevents the securitisation of the issue. To show this, party manifestos and official government statements about this highly politicised issue will be presented and analysed.

Keywords: migration, the Netherlands, securitisation, human rights, small states, European Union

Introduction

The mass influx of migrants into Europe and the Netherlands has catapulted migration and asylum policy into the ranks of the most salient political issues in both EU politics and the domestic politics of most EU member states. At the height of the recent wave of migration into the EU in 2015 and early 2016, the situation developed into a crisis where a number of countries decided to close their borders, and even build fences. In the Netherlands, 43,000 first-time asylum applications were registered (Eurostat, 2017a). About 70 percent of these applications were accepted (Eurostat, 2017b) – one of the highest figures in the EU – which required concerted efforts from the national government and the municipalities to house these refugees.

Without going into the debate on the definitions and thus the categorisation of small states, two arguments are used to justify why the Netherlands ought to be considered

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[1] Tibor Hargitai is a PhD student at the Faculty of International Relations at Corvinus University in Budapest, Hungary. His research dissertation focuses on the effects of Eurosceptic parties on the EU policies of the Netherlands.

a small state rather than anything else. Rood makes the point that the Netherlands might consider itself a middle-sized member state, yet this self-image "underlines the Dutch position of asymmetry in relation to the bigger member states. The Netherlands may be 'big' compared to Luxemburg or Malta, but it is 'small', and in general in the position of 'demandeur', in its relation with France or Germany" (2010: 120-121; see also Bakker, 2011: 105). For the sake of this paper it will suffice to call the Netherlands simply a *small state* since, in relation to Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Poland, it hardly has more bargaining power than other small member states, when considering size. Formally it has one more vote than Belgium, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary and Portugal in the European Council, and less than half of the votes Spain and Poland have (European Council, 2017). Historically, there have been episodes where the Netherlands advocated supranationalism in order to prevent having to succumb to the pressure of the Big 3, i.e. Germany, France and Italy (Rood, 2010: 119-121; Soetendorp, 1999: 35-41). Segers, however, states that the Netherlands was not dedicated to supranationalism as previous research suggests, and that the Dutch focus was instead much more on the relations with the United States. The focus in Europe was to be on economic cooperation; however, the dominance of the big states was a real concern in The Hague (2013: 73-83). Be that as it may, the Dutch have pursued highly ambitious policy goals, thereby punching at times above their weight, as expressed by former foreign minister Knapen (Knapen et al, 2011: 36). Therefore the Netherlands will be considered a small, albeit wealthy and ambitious, state.

Turning to the second conceptual aspect of the paper, Security Studies, and more specifically the securitisation of migration: Buzan et al. argue that migration might be a threat to security on the basis of pressures on the capacity of "social, economic, political and administrative institutions to integrate large numbers of immigrants, and the resistance of some immigration communities to assimilation affects the stability of society and therefore the ability of receiving states' governments to govern" (1993: 162). They go on to argue that these problems are exacerbated when states are struggling with deep-rooted economic and political issues (Ibid.).

Waever (2007: 83-84) later goes on to argue for the need to separate two dimensions of security within the state: namely, state security and societal security – where sovereignty is the key criterion for state security and identity is its equivalent for the societal dimension. Elsewhere, Buzan et al. (1998: 121) highlight that migration is one of the prime examples of a threat to societal security, in case of major changes in the

composition of populations. There is currently no such threat in any of the EU member states as a consequence of the migration crisis. However, on a local level, the construction of shelters for refugees might be perceived as a threat to the ethnic composition of a municipality. When political actors frame refugees and migrants as potential terrorists, this would make it a securitising *move*, "but the issue is securitized only if and when the audience accepts it as such" (Ibid. 25).[2]

When theorising, it is important to outline what we expect to see when we find support for the theory (George and Bennett, 2005: 115-118; Beach and Pedersen, 2013: 120-143). In the case of small state behaviour in light of the securitisation of migration policy, we would expect that the state would treat the inflow of migrants as a threat, and thus would try and minimise the number of migrants coming into the country. How does this threat perception manifest itself? Specific manifestations would be the use of terms that refer to (1) migrants as (potential) terrorists and statements like (2) "whole towns and cities are being flooded by migrants/refugees." Other possibilities are related to (3) the protection of borders and (4) the use of small stateness (and the consequent possibility of being overwhelmed) to explain migration as a security threat.

The observable manifestations of such threat perceptions would be found in the language that is used in official documents and in interviews or public statements by political parties. Especially if the government, as the current representatives of the Dutch national interests, uses speech acts that indicate threat perceptions, that will strengthen the securitisation effect. Documents such as party manifestoes can give an insight into the party-level image of migration, while government reports or the content of interviews with government ministers and the head of government reflect the official government's position.

In order to answer the question *„Does the Netherlands securitise migration?,"* the perceptions of the Dutch public and their political representatives will be presented. Furthermore, an explanation will be offered as to why the Netherlands does not securitise the migration issue. Lastly, the conclusion will reflect on the theoretical integration of the small state literature and securitisation and its fit in the case of the Netherlands.

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[2] The author does note that the political integration of the EU and its member states over time has led to framing the EU itself as a threat to the sovereignty of the individual member states, an image that is frequently invoked by Eurosceptic populist parties. Yet it may be shown that the sovereignty argument does not hold strong in the Netherlands when it comes to the migration issue.

The migration debate in the Netherlands: Securitisation?

For reasons discussed later on in the article, the self-conception of the Netherlands is that of a state attaching much value to human rights. As this paper will show, most segments of the political elite and public opinion thus state the need to find humane solutions for the migration issue. According to Eurobarometer 86 data, no less than 83% of the Dutch are in favour of a common asylum policy (versus 69% as the EU average). Also, 87% of the respondents see the need for the Netherlands to help refugees, even as the same percentage expressed that additional measures are needed to tackle unregulated immigration from outside the EU. A further relevant finding concerns the perceptions of the public on the contribution of refugees to the Netherlands: 49% see refugees as making a large contribution to the Netherlands, while 47% disagree with that statement.

The relevance of these figures lies in that they might be considered practical indicators of the presence or absence of a threat perception related to migration. While there appears to be broad support for the need to help refugees, the public seems to want government to ensure that the situation is dealt with regionally (on the European level), and not in the Netherlands - hence the need felt by them for additional measures to tackle unregulated immigration. The „net positive perception" (though it is only a 2% gap) of refugees making a positive contribution to the host country is a particularly mild position, since the statement is so explicit about the position of having refugees stay in the Netherlands – the oft-seen framing of the issue of immigration, centered around anticipated *negative* effects of the arrival of refugees in the form of public disorder, is not present in strength. At the same time, the Dutch see immigration as the most important issue for the EU to deal with (European Commission, 2016b).

A short analysis of the party manifestoes of the 13 political parties that are in parliament in the Netherlands after the general elections of March 2017 may provide insight into how the Dutch political elite looks at increased migration flows since 2015. Four elements were specifically examined in the case of each party: if they expressed (1) a sense of responsibility towards refugees; (2) a threat perception related to the large influx of migrants; (3) a desire to handle the situation on the EU level with a common asylum policy; and (4) whether they invoked „small stateness" in support of framing migration as a security concern.

There is broad consensus among the political elite in the Netherlands that cooperation on the EU level is a necessity to deal with migration flows, with ten of the 13 parties opting for a European approach in this respect. Secondly, 11 of the 13 parties

are explicit about the need for a fair and humane asylum policy – the majority expresses a responsibility to develop clear policies that further support the rights of refugees and that are focused on dealing effectively with housing, job opportunities, and swift application procedures for incoming migrants. Only the far-right party PVV (Freedom Party) outright rejects any responsibility to deal with migration flows, arguing for completely closing the borders. The new anti-establishment party Forum for Democracy (FvD) challenges the conventional wisdom of the "party cartel" on having taken in large numbers of migrants over the last decades, arguing that migrants should be settled in „their own region," and that those who really must be accepted in the Netherlands should not be eligible to get permanent residency status.

While there is broad agreement on the need to take responsibility for the plight of refugees, the concerns over capacity and societal pressures are quite strong among 6 of the 13 parties, with some other parties expressing concern and others which do not really mention it or are neutral on this issue. In light of this, the absence of securitisation is not necessarily obvious.

Referring back to the types of observable manifestations that would be signs of the migrant issue becoming securitised, we see a much more nuanced language in most cases, whereby, following Buzan et al.'s definition of a politicised issue,[3] the statements are rather highlighting the need to „deal" with the migration issue. Except for the PVV, that is, which clearly attempts to securitise the issue, associating it with terrorism, framing Islam as a problem related to this (Wilders, 2017).

In order to have a more comprehensive picture of the sentiments in the Netherlands concerning the migration issue, the policy of the Rutte II (VVD and PvdA) government, as the representatives of the Dutch people, is briefly considered below.

On the basis of a non-exhaustive study of the press conferences that Prime Minister Rutte (VVD), Foreign Minister Koenders (PvdA) and State Secretary Dijkhoff (VVD) have held at the European Council and the Council of the EU, as well as for Dutch media, the position of the Dutch government on migration appears clear – the Netherlands is willing to take in a limited number of refugees on a yearly basis, believes that the migration issue should be dealt with in a European context, on the basis of the principle

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[3] "[T]he issue is part of public policy, requiring government decision and resource allocation or, more rarely, some other form of communal governance" (1998: 23).

of solidarity,[4] and by focusing on keeping migrants in their own region. The approach of the government is of a problem-solving nature. When Prime Minister Rutte, Foreign Minister Koenders and State Secretary Dijkhoff speak in interviews or in parliament about the migration situation, the above-mentioned themes are recurring. Notably, there was an indirect reference to small stateness in June 2015 during a doorstep interview on the occasion of the Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting with State Secretary for Security and Justice Dijkhoff, where Dijkhoff mentioned that the „big" member states – Germany, France and Italy – have been taking the initiative in dealing with migration, and he emphasised the large overlap between the German and French initiatives and the Dutch position, saying that the Netherlands "is supportively walking behind it" (Dijkhoff, 2015). This is a significant statement in that it refers to the Dutch policy as being much in line with the policies of Germany and France, the two largest EU member states.

At the same time, a good number of parties express at least some concern over the capacity of the Netherlands to deal with the migration issue. This is a crucial point, in that it could translate into a securitisation act. However, it seems that a reasonable explanation to posit that why this is not happening may be connected to the Netherlands' focus on settling the issue outside of the borders of the European Union, while political parties aim to deal with those refugees that have entered the country in a way that is humane – an approach that may resonate well with public opinion, as could be seen from the Eurobarometer data cited above.

All in all, the small stateness of the Netherlands has not translated into a securitising act by the majority of the political parties, with the exception of the far-right party PVV. The latter is capitalising on the discontent of the part of the population that does not support taking in any refugees.

Having observed this, what may be the factors preventing the securitisation of migration? It is certainly one of the important elements of non-securitisation that the Netherlands has not been expecting very large inflows of migrants. A far larger proportion of migrants arrived in Germany and Sweden.

At the same time this is certainly not the only explanation. A second important element that may be found to play a role – which thus deserves further explanation – is

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[4] In reference to Article 80 of the Lisbon Treaty: The policies of the Union set out in this Chapter and their implementation shall be governed by the principle of solidarity and the fair sharing of responsibility, including its financial implications, between the Member States. Whenever necessary, the acts of the Union adopted pursuant to this Chapter shall contain appropriate measures to give effect to this principle.

the strong emphasis on human rights by countries like the Netherlands and Sweden for the matter.

Human rights

According to Dekker and Scholten, most of the immigration frames in the Dutch media landscape in their period of investigation (2011-2015, but before the start of the escalation of the migration issue) were „managerialist" – implying an approach that "maintains a depoliticized and pragmatic approach toward immigration issues. It considers certain rules and regulations related to immigration as necessary and justified. The central argument is that to be able to accommodate immigrants, the government needs to be selective in who may enter and in the services that are provided" (2017: 209). At the same time, in 9 of 16 cases, the „human-interest frame" was the dominant frame in media coverage (Ibid.: 210).

The focus on human rights in the Netherlands can partially be explained by an historical commitment to international law and human rights. At the same time, although Dutch parties might refer with pride to the person of Hugo de Groot – internationally known as Grotius[5] – as a source of this, the priority of human rights in the conduct of foreign policy is in fact more recent than the Dutch believe it to be (Malcontent, 2015: 128-129).[6] Until the 1970s, calling the Netherlands a key promoter of human rights on the international level would have been hard to justify. One example was continued support by the Netherlands of the Indonesian military and the violent leadership of General Suharto in its former colony Indonesia in 1966 (Ibid.: 131). The mid-1970s in the Netherlands marked a heightened attention towards human rights, with a large increase in NGOs and action group activities in this field (Ibid.: 141-142).

While Oomen makes the case that the Netherlands actually fails to frame many human rights issues on the domestic level as such, and thus leaving those issues insufficiently addressed, the plight of refugees is considered as an international human rights issue rather than a domestic one, and thus receives the kind of attention that domestic human rights issues may fail to get (2011: 8-11). In the context of the migration crisis, the Dutch government has made additional funds available for dealing with the

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[5] Hugo de Groot was a jurist and is known for laying the foundations of international law and justice.
[6] According to Malcontent the thesis that the Netherlands promoted human rights for centuries simply does not hold up. The Dutch attempts to keep their colonies of Indonesia and Papua New-Guinea in the middle of the last century and the very soft policies towards *apartheid* in the 1970s in South Africa are some examples of this.

migration crisis, providing aid to UNHCR, which is contributing in delivering aid to a major proportion of refugees settling in the primary host countries around their countries of origin – a declared policy priority for the Dutch government (IOB, 2015: 67).

The emphasis of the Netherlands on human rights might thus be considered a scope condition that puts a brake on the process of securitisation in the Netherlands. In other words, the high regard for human rights as a foreign policy principle contributes to the non-securitised status of the migration issue in the Netherlands.[7] Another consideration connected to this is that the Netherlands is generally perceived to have a fairly strict immigration policy (Oomen, 2011; Akkerman, 2015), in line with the aims of the government (State Department of the Netherlands, 2017). In the absence of a more human-rights-oriented agenda, this highly restrictive immigration policy of the Netherlands might have facilitated a rhetoric that would focus more on the threat of refugees, rather than using a „human-interest" or „problem-solving"[8] frame (Dekker and Scholten, 2017).

Another important dimension of the Dutch policy towards migration is the awareness of and compliance by the Dutch government to the multi-dimensional game that the Netherlands has to play. As mentioned above, the Dutch cabinet and most political parties in the Dutch parliament all see the need to deal with the migration situation on the European level, collectively. While it is outside of the scope of this paper to go further into this, it is highly likely that the Europeanised nature of the Dutch polity (IOB 2014: 91-104), and the socialisation of the Dutch political elite as inheritants of founding fathers of the European Communities, has also played a role in the emphasis on finding EU-wide solutions for EU-wide problems. A common asylum policy, along with its revision if necessary (Commission 2016a), may be the key instrument to prevent the need for a serious securitisation process at the domestic level.

Conclusion

The theoretical integration of the Copenhagen School's concept of the securitisation process and Small States Studies in the context of the recent large influx of migrants into

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[7] In other small states, other factors might facilitate or obstruct the securitisation of migration; note that this does not imply that other member states do not hold human rights to be a priority in their domestic or foreign policy conduct.

[8] Dekker and Scholten use the term of "managerialist frame" to describe a depoliticized and pragmatic approach to immigration.

the European Union may produce diverse, even divergent, insights across cases (such as the ones discussed in this journal issue).

In the Dutch case, most of the political actors in the Netherlands have not looked to securitise the migration issue so far. It would come at a high political cost in the context of the European Union. Moreover, the recently-historic Dutch emphasis on human rights has become an important policy principle that is echoed widely across the political spectrum. The securitising statements/messages of the far right PVV party have therefore not prevented the broad majority of public opinion from favouring the efforts of the Netherlands to support Syrian refugees.

„Small stateness" in the case of the Netherlands plays a role mostly in its approach towards its international partners and major international political developments – of which the migration situation is one – for it compels the Netherlands to take an outward-looking perspective when faced with (potential) threats.

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