

Commentary

Securitization Narrative in the West and its Restrictive Impact on Research on Russia and China

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the rise of China have catalyzed a powerful "securitization" narrative in the West, which has, in turn, influenced academic freedom and intellectual discourse, especially in subjects concerning Russia and China studies, security (policy) studies, and international relations. The narrowing of academic freedom is partly driven by political, public and diplomatic pressure on universities to align with government stances against Russia and China. This overwhelming securitization environment can and has not only stifled research critical of Western strategies (incl NATO's role) in the region but has forbidden working together with Russian academics and limited academic collaboration with China. Consequently, we are losing insights into the trajectories of Russian and Chinese societies. We in the academic community face a paradox: while universities should do critical work on our own societies and policies and advocate for freedom of speech and critique authoritarianism abroad, we are facing a new normative environment where open domestic discourse are threatened to be silenced under the pressure of securitization discourse.

Rising Tide of Securitization Narrative

In this article we utilize securitization framework as a process in which academic work with Russia and China are treated as security threats and therefore should be banned or restricted and align with government policies.

We can pinpoint certain moments and processes that have triggered and are feeding into securitization framing processes in our Western societies. It was since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the continuation of Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine that began in February in 2022 and China's fast technological advancements and becoming a genuine economic super-power challenging the position of US, when Western nations have increasingly labelled Russia and China as security threats. This rising tide of a securitization narrative has become the dominating line in policy-making, news media, public perception, labeling both Russia and China

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as challenging and threatening our Western security, economic rights and order, and even fundamental values and practices.

Restrictions on and consequences of Russian and Chinese Research

The securitization process has led Western governments to impose direct and indirect restrictions on research concerning Russia and China. Following the Russian war on Ukraine, the European Union Commission decided to suspend cooperation with Russian entities in research, science and innovation. A great majority of the EU member states (with the exception of Hungary), Norway and Great Britain gave national level ministry level bans forbidding universities and research institutes collaborating with their Russian counterparts.ⁱ

The collaboration and partnerships with Chinese research institutes, enrolling Chinese researchers and academic work on China has also been subjected to restrictions. This process began during Trump's first presidential term as a part of his China containment policies. Trump famously stated in August 2018 that “[A]lmost every student that comes over to this country [from China] is a spy.”ⁱⁱ As a part of this policy the Department of Justice launched their “China Initiative” campaign that carried out detailed investigations on US university researchers affiliated with China or being of Chinese origin. Despite the campaign directed at finding Chinese spies on US campuses the result was embarrassing – no one was convicted or even charged with spying in any China Initiative case. The Initiative reportedly largely targeted individuals based on any connection to China or scientists of Chinese heritage, and increasingly targeted “research integrity” issues and was accused of racist practices rather than economic espionage and hacking.ⁱⁱⁱ These policies also reached Europe where nation states and security authorities restricted and warned universities of China related collaboration.

The Russian war on Ukraine in 2022 and Beijing's open reluctance to condemn the illegal war of aggression created a situation where all China-related research and collaboration are seen as a security risk. The securitization pressure on academia is even broader. For instance, US embassies are contacting university leaders and funding agencies behind the curtains asking universities to align with Western policies against China and domestic security apparatus are warning of perceived risks involved in China collaboration.

Consequences of securitization measures and narrative

The silencing force of the securitization narrative and measures are legally questionable as these measures can be seen as hindering the freedom of academic research and freedom of expression guaranteed by laws and constitutions in Western liberal democracies. This silencing is not conducted under Martial Laws of these countries, but merely as ministry level stipulations or EU Commission decisions.

Furthermore, different universities in given countries are interpreting these ministry-level orders differently. The most famous case being the treatment of Emeritus Professor Lassi Heininen of University of Lapland and Visiting Researcher at Aleksanteri Institute of Helsinki University. Heininen participated in an international conference arranged in Moscow together with a number of other Western scholars. Consequently, the University of Lapland stripped him of his Emeritus Professor contract whilst Helsinki University did not punish Heininen for participating in this conference^{iv}. Notably, no other Western participant was punished by their home universities. This kind of treatment questions the principle of equality in and between respective countries.

The securitization narrative is most visible in the news media and how news media selects the specialists for interviews. When news is solely produced through a security lens, not only policy-makers receive a limited perspective but the wide public gets a skewed and negative stigmatizing understanding of these countries. This limited perspective reinforces a cycle in which perceived threats are amplified, and the danger of denouncing all Chinese and Russian people as potential threats becomes “a truth”.

Funds for research critical of securitization policies are increasingly limited, pushing scholars toward self-censorship or pro-securitization narratives. Consequently, researchers fearing repercussions may avoid controversial topics or choose an approach that aligns with prevailing securitization narrative. This self-censorship can also spill over to publications, where editors may be reluctant to publish work that could be seen as challenging the dominating Western views on Russia or China.

Furthermore, the securitization cloak limits our possibilities to discuss with liberal and critical Chinese or Russian researchers who have deep personal knowledge of their domestic societal moods and potential policy trajectories. By keeping in contact with these researchers we can also express our support for them.

These chilling consequences have implications for fact-based policy making due to limited access to Chinese or Russian liberal voices. One-sided news broadcasts combined with self-censorship omit insights to potentially alternative trajectories of these societies. When certain narratives or interpretations are prioritized over others, and others are silenced, the actual hard-core security and other policy making becomes one-sided due to a lack of diversity in perspectives.

The Dangerous Paradox

The securitization narrative restricts academic freedom, drives self-censorship, and narrows the scope of scholarly inquiry related to Russia and China. It will cast a long shadow over research related to these countries. By emphasizing security over a broader and open approach to these countries, we miss opportunities for gaining understanding of potential alternative societal trajectories of these countries and are not able to have constructive engagement that could have significant global implications.

The prevailing securitization trend raises ethical, legal and practical questions about the boundaries of academic freedom. Maybe the most alarming is that the securitization narrative and practices harm the actual democratic values we cherish. This paradox has not gone unnoticed in China and Russia and is, as a matter of fact, providing powerful propaganda tools for autocratic rulers boosting their political legitimacy. By displaying this paradox Chinese and Russian state-lead media expose our Western “double speak” – how we speak of freedom of speech whilst we readily silence domestic critical voices.

There is a danger that we have entered a securitization dominated world where only very few brave academics voice their concerns. This is reminiscent of the Communist Party governed Poland that reminded “a room where people unanimously maintain a conspiracy of silence, one word of truth sounds like a pistol shot,” in the words of Polish Nobel laureate of literature (1980) Czesław Miłosz^v. It is notable that the Nobel Committee recognized him for his writing in dissident silencing Poland of the 1980s, which “with uncompromising clear-sightedness voices man’s exposed condition in a world of severe conflicts”.^{vi}

Notes

ⁱ <https://okm.fi/-/suomi-jaadyttaa-korkeakoulu-ja-tutkimusyhteistyon-venajan-kanssa-suomessa-olevia-ukrainalaisopiskelijoita-tuetaan>;

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_1544

ⁱⁱ <https://asamnews.com/2018/08/10/chinese-students-are-spies-president-donald-trump-reportedly-told-u-s-business-leaders/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1593&context=crsj>

^{iv} <https://yle.fi/a/74-20087766>

^v <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1980/milosz/lecture/#:~:text=In%20a%20room%20where%20people,to%20think%20of%20anything%20else.>

^{vi} <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1980/milosz/lecture/#:~:text=In%20a%20room%20where%20people,to%20think%20of%20anything%20else.>