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'We are at war': securitisation, legitimisation and COVID-19 pandemic politics in France

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ABSTRACT

This article makes a case for studying the legitimisation of emergency politics from the vantage point of securitisation. To that end, it zooms in on politics during the COVID-19 pandemic – a many-sided crisis that generated a heightened insecurity environment. Based on a qualitative content analysis of the French official rhetoric on two COVID-19 emergency measures, it foregrounds how securitising speech acts construing a macro threat and notable shifts in hierarchical ordering of securitisations underpinned justifications for COVID-19 pandemic politics. Conceptually, this research bridges the literature on legitimisation and securitisation by synthesising scattered securitising elements in typologies of legitimisation and outlining the legitimating function of two securitisation dynamics – macrosecuritisation and securitising dilemma.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19; emergency politics; legitimisation; securitisation; macrosecuritisation; securitising dilemma

Introduction

The politics of legitimacy and legitimisation is central to social practice in general (Johnson et al., 2006; Tyler, 2006) and political practice in particular (Beetham, 1991; Franck, 1990; Habermas, 1976; Scharpf, 1999). The need for legitimisation, understood as the discursive practice of seeking and asserting legitimacy (Reus-Smit, 2007, p. 159), is salient in times of crisis as governments turn on a mode of emergency politics and enact exceptional measures in the name of countering an urgent threat (Honig, 2009; Kreuder-Sonnen, 2019; White, 2019). The attendant bracketing of normal politics and curtailment of rights and freedoms typically raise questions over the appropriateness of crisis responses and the governance capacity and legitimacy of governing authorities (Schmidt, 2022).

This research focuses on the legitimisation of emergency politics, and more specifically, pandemic politics during COVID-19. Its main aim is to outline securitisation as a distinct strategy of legitimisation. To that end, the analysis not only showcases how securitisation can be seen as an umbrella category that brings together a variety of securitising elements scattered in disparate typologies of legitimisation. More importantly, it brings to light the distinct role of securitisation in the legitimisation of emergency politics. Substantively, grounded in an illustrative case study of how the French government

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sought to justify its decisions pertaining to two COVID-19 emergency measures – generalised lockdown and the state of health emergency, this research draws out two securitisation dynamics central to the legitimisation of COVID-19 pandemic politics.

First, the recourse to extraordinary measures was often accompanied by securitising speech acts emblematic of a hierarchical ordering of securitisations (Buzan & Wæver, 2009) wherein public health security was designated as the first priority. This was critical to manufacturing a consensus on the need for such exceptional measures as lockdown and the state of health emergency and sidelining competing frames on the dire consequences of sweeping restrictions. Second, the (planned) rollback or shunning of these controversial measures was bolstered by reference to ‘securitising dilemma’ (Watson, 2013). This drew attention to the security of other referent objects (than public health) threatened by the enactment of hugely impactful restrictive measures, thus preparing the ground for policy shifts that would resolve, or at a minimum, mitigate the securitising dilemma.

This article proceeds as follows. The following section contextualises emergency politics during COVID-19 and highlights the need for legitimisation. The conceptual section first introduces the general understanding of legitimisation and provides an overview of how securitising elements feature in different typologies of legitimisation. Subsequently, it turns to the dynamic literature on securitisation and sketches out how securitisation constitutes a legitimisation mechanism. This is followed by a brief note on the case selection, data and method. The empirical sections dissect the French government’s rhetoric on the two COVID-19 emergency measures through the prism of macrosecuritisation and securitising dilemma.

Contextualising emergency politics during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has wrought unprecedented devastation across industries, countries and continents. Owing to the highly transmissible nature of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (hereafter coronavirus or virus) and different variants of concern and the strict mitigation measures taken to curb the spread of COVID-19, the epidemic quickly evolved to become a mix of health, educational, social, economic and political crises. The confluence of soaring infections, hospitalisations and deaths, overwhelmed health systems and considerable socioeconomic disruption posed a grave threat to countries and societies affected. In response, governments entered in quick succession into a mode of emergency politics and enacted an eclectic set of emergency measures.

Yet, the enactment of emergency measures gave rise to acute dilemmas. For example, there were constant tensions between competing valuations, notably the imperative to protect the most vulnerable and the overstressed health system and the need for minimising disruption to the economy and social life. Mitigation measures such as full lockdown, quarantine, nightly curfew, travel ban, mass testing and contact tracing were effective in breaking the transmission chains and reducing the infection rates, but they came with enormous socioeconomic cost and restricted democratic rights and freedoms. A related aspect is that restrictions were enforced to protect physical health, yet they could cause harm to mental health (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020), especially if not time-limited. Further, governments were given emergency power to act faster in times of crisis. Increased executive power and limited parliamentary oversight nevertheless

sparked deep concerns over the prospect of power abuse, recourse to illiberal measures and regression to authoritarianism (Thomson & Ip, 2020). The multiplicity of trade-offs prompted intense contestation over the perverse consequences of emergency politics and restrictive measures, crystallising the need for governments to legitimate their crisis response.

Government legitimisation acts were central in the management of COVID-19 crisis, for several reasons. First, Given that the crisis was multifold, governments were hard-pressed to balance different and sometimes outright contradictory policy objectives. Any decision to (de)prioritise had to be amply justified. Second, government crisis communication is closely related to popular support for restrictive measures introduced during the pandemic, and therefore, policy effectiveness (Karyotis et al., 2021). A third and more general consideration is that sustained criticism of and resistance to government policy, if not properly dealt with, can erode public confidence in governments, or worse still, trigger a crisis of legitimacy.

Legitimation and securitising elements in typologies of legitimation

Legitimacy is widely understood as a normative belief that ‘the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate’ (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). As such, it is conducive to gaining diffuse support and voluntary compliance (Easton, 1975; Matheson, 1987) and is more desirable as a mechanism to exercise authority than coercion or material inducement (Hurd, 1999). As Zürn (2021, p. 200) contends, ‘any system of rule and any authority that is considered legitimate is *ceteris paribus* much more efficient and effective than one without legitimacy’. The relevance of legitimacy motivates governments to engage in legitimisation.

Legitimation generally refers to the process whereby legitimacy is sought, claimed, or created (Hurrelmann, 2017; Reus-Smit, 2007; Von Haldenwang, 2017). It is a practice of justification (Abulof & Kornprobst, 2017) with a view to seeking normative approval for specific policies (Van Dijk, 1998, p. 255), or more broadly, the right to govern or act (Reus-Smit, 2007, p. 158). To that end, actors engage in discursive practices in order to create ‘a sense of positive, beneficial, ethical, understandable, necessary or otherwise acceptable action in a specific setting’ (Vaara, 2014, p. 503), or more generally, to ‘designate rule as rightful, moral, or justified’ (Binder & Heupel, 2015, p. 240). Sociopolitical practices in need of legitimisation are often controversial in the sense that they challenge accepted norms of appropriateness and amplify the incongruence between what is and what ought to be. Examples include war (Cap, 2008; Oddo, 2011), immigration control (Rojo & Van Dijk, 1997; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999), austerity (Fonseca & Ferreira, 2015; Vaara, 2014), authoritarianism (Cassani, 2017; Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2017; Von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017) and more relevant to this research, public health restrictions.

Existing scholarship on the legitimisation of (objectionable) sociopolitical practices has identified a diverse array of discursive strategies, such as invoking authority, expertise, tradition, ideology, identity (self vs other), emotions, (accepted) procedures, goals and effects (Fonseca & Ferreira, 2015; Rojo & Van Dijk, 1997; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara, 2014; Van Dijk, 1998; Van Leeuwen, 2007; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999; Von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017; Yang, 2022). Rather than conducting a systematic mapping exercise of the different discursive strategies present in the legitimisation of COVID-19

pandemic politics, this research concentrates on one strategy – securitisation, with a view to fleshing out how logics and dynamics of securitisation can be useful for (better) understanding the legitimisation of emergency politics. To be clear, focusing on securitisation by no means discounts the importance of other discursive techniques at work. Rather, it is motivated by the observation that emergency politics is typically accompanied and justified by language of (in)security (Kirk & McDonald, 2021).

Securitisation, characterised by the designation of threat, the activation of fear and the call for exceptional measures to counter the threat (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 491; Taureck, 2006, p. 54; Van Rythoven, 2015; Williams, 2011), features explicitly or implicitly in the different typologies of legitimisation. For example, Rojo and Van Dijk (1997, p. 538) include in their comprehensive mapping of legitimisation strategies the invocation of ‘special circumstances, seriousness and threat’. Reyes (2011, p. 781) incorporates appeals to ‘emotions’ (particularly fear of death and destruction) and ‘a hypothetical future’ that will be threatened if no action is taken at present as part of his granular framework for categorising discursive structures and strategies. Drawing on the work of Suddaby and Greenwood (2005, pp. 46–47) on rhetorical legitimisation, Vaara (2014, p. 513) proposes a strategy of ‘cosmological argumentation’ that presents a particular measure as the only choice or a particular scenario as the only outcome possible, thus conjuring up a sense of inevitability. Similarly, Fonseca and Ferreira (2015, p. 682) identify ‘no alternative options’ and ‘state of exception’ as two principal categories around which legitimating rhetoric is organised. For the latter category, they contend that policymakers often appeal to a state of exception in times of crisis ‘to limit political debate, to minimise the contestation to their political actions and, supported in the argument that exceptional times demand exceptional measures, to impose policies that were politically and socially unacceptable under normal times’ (Fonseca & Ferreira, 2015, p. 678).

Discursive practices such as invoking a logic of exceptionalism, a sense of inevitability (and no alternative options) and a hypothetically threatened future that activates fear, bear striking similarity to securitising speech acts. Yet scholarly work drawing explicitly on securitisation to analyse legitimisation has been scarce. The remainder of the conceptual section outlines how securitisation provides a useful analytical lens in this respect.

Legitimation through securitisation

Securitisation is a prominent theoretical perspective across the field of security studies (Williams, 2003, p. 511). It was initially developed by the so-called Copenhagen School with a view to widening the scope of security beyond states and deepening security studies beyond the narrow confines of military threats that were the staple of traditional security scholarship (Huysmans, 1998). In an influential text *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Buzan et al. (1998, p. 24) construe securitisation as ‘the process through which an issue is presented as an existential threat requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure’. At the core of securitisation theory is the idea that security is not an objective condition but is discursively constructed (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 26; Wæver, 1995, pp. 54–55). As such, securitisation is ‘a highly intentional, strategic action’ (McDonald, 2008, p. 569), performed by speech acts that ‘treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat’ (Buzan & Wæver, 2003,

p. 491). Drawing attention to the intersubjectivity of speech acts and the importance of audience and context for successful securitisation, Balzacq (2005, p. 173) conceives of securitisation as 'a sustained strategic practice aimed at convincing a target audience to accept ... the claim that a specific development (oral threat or event) is threatening enough to deserve an immediate policy to alleviate it'.

Regardless of the divergent understandings (either of speech acts as performative of security or as only one part of an intersubjective construction of security)¹, securitisation is 'located with the realm of political argument and discursive legitimation' (Williams, 2003, p. 512). More substantively, securitising speech acts are characterised by 'a generic structure of claim, warning and directive ... supported by the propositional content of proof and/or reasons for the claim/warning' (Stritzel & Chang, 2015, p. 550). For a securitising speech act to be accepted by relevant audiences and become a successful securitisation, its central components, including the designation of threat and referent objects, the suggestion of actions to counter the threat, and the breaking free of established rules (Floyd, 2016, p. 679), all need to be justified. A corollary argument is that acceptance of the threat designation does not necessarily lead to agreement with the (exceptional) actions proposed (Kaunert et al., 2022; Salter, 2011; Stritzel & Chang, 2015, p. 561).

Health security, macrosecuritisation and securitising dilemma

Before we proceed further, it is important to point out some refinements to the original theorisation of securitisation relevant for this study. The first pertains to the expansion of security sectors, not least to health. The original formulation included five security sectors: the military, the political, the economic, the societal and the environmental (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 7–8). The list has since been expanded to other issue areas such as energy, religion, cybersecurity and health (Balzacq et al., 2016, pp. 511–517; Hansen & Nissenbaum, 2009). In particular, health has received increasing attention from securitisation scholars, who seek to uncover the processes, practices and normative implications of moving health issues onto the (inter)national security agenda. A key subset of this literature revolves around the spread of selected infectious diseases and how it threatens (inter)national and human security (Davies, 2008; Kamradt-Scott & McInnes, 2012; McInnes & Lee, 2006). In this respect, disease-specific studies have focused on the securitisation of HIV/AIDs (Elbe, 2006, 2009; McInnes & Rushton, 2010, 2013; O'Keefe, 2012; Sjöstedt, 2010), and to a lesser extent, Avian Influenza (Curley & Herington, 2011; Elbe, 2010; Youde, 2008). More recently, in light of the devastation wrought by the coronavirus pandemic, there has been a fast-growing body of literature, of which this study is a part, on the securitisation of COVID-19 (Kaunert et al., 2022; Kirk, 2022; Kirk & McDonald, 2021). The second aspect concerns the concept of macrosecuritisation. It is known that multiple and sometimes competing securitisations operate across different sectors and levels in a complex security environment. This leads to a hierarchical ordering of securitisations (Buzan & Wæver, 2009, p. 259). Higher-order securitisations, known as macrosecuritisations, aim to 'incorporate, align and rank the more parochial securitisations beneath it' (Buzan & Wæver, 2009, p. 253). A related third point is that inter-sectoral or cross-level competition between disparate securitisations and the attendant hierarchical ordering of securitisations can result in a 'securitising dilemma'. Similar to a security dilemma

arising when ‘many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others’ (Jervis, 1978, p. 169), a securitising dilemma exists when ‘policies enacted to provide security in one sector are understood or presented as threatening in another’ (Watson, 2013, p. 266), and generally, it concerns the unintended and perverse consequences of securitisations (Van Rythoven, 2020).

In what follows, the study will show how macrosecuritising health, namely designating public health as the overriding priority, prepared the ground for the recourse to the two emergency measures, and how the securitising dilemma ensuing therefrom featured as justifications for shunning or rolling back these impactful measures.

Case selection, data and method

France was selected as a typical case through which to illustrate the role of securitisation in legitimation and uncover the underlying securitisation dynamics at play at different points in time. More specifically, the case selection is based on four main considerations.

First, France was among those countries caught off guard and worst affected in the early months of the pandemic. After initial mishap, the government reacted by imposing tough containment measures that drastically curtailed civil liberties (Kuhlmann et al., 2021). As a vibrant democracy with solid rights safeguards, France witnessed extensive contestation and mobilisation. In anticipation of or in response to criticism and resistance, the government was active in defending its crisis management, an imperative rendered even more pronounced with political pressure from municipal and national elections. Second, language of (in)security was frequently used by French government representatives, most convincingly evidenced by the phrase ‘we are at war’ (*nous sommes en guerre*) in the second televised speech of President Emmanuel Macron in the COVID-19 context. Third, France experienced five waves of infections as of December 2021. As a function of the evolving health situation, emergency measures such as lockdown and the state of health emergency were introduced, eased, suspended, or reinstated (see [Figure 1](#)). In a climate of lingering uncertainty, such decisions were anything but anodyne. Official rhetoric constitutes a rich reservoir of legitimating/securitising claims and allows a fine-grained analysis of the securitisation dynamics as part of legitimation at the different stages. Lastly, the French government, President Macron in particular, defied in several instances the scientific advice of experts and diverged from the mitigation strategy followed by other countries, the most controversial being the decision to not impose lockdown in January 2021. This fuelled controversy and magnified the need for legitimation.

Given the focus on legitimation, this study only includes official rhetoric for systematic analysis (and critical accounts by other actors are used as contextual information). Specifically, all speeches and interview transcriptions of President Macron in the COVID-19 context were collected. In view of the government’s role in communicating and explaining the emergency measures to the opposition in the Parliament and the public, a complementary sample of speeches during parliamentary debates and press communications by the Prime Minister and the Health Minister, and reports of the Council of Ministers meeting, was gathered. The timeline spans from February 2020 till December 2021. The keywords for search were ‘covid’, ‘coronavirus’ and ‘crise sanitaire’. The key selection criterion was relevance to the two emergency measures under discussion. In total, 13 speeches by President Macron, 51 by the Prime Minister (14 by Édouard Philippe and

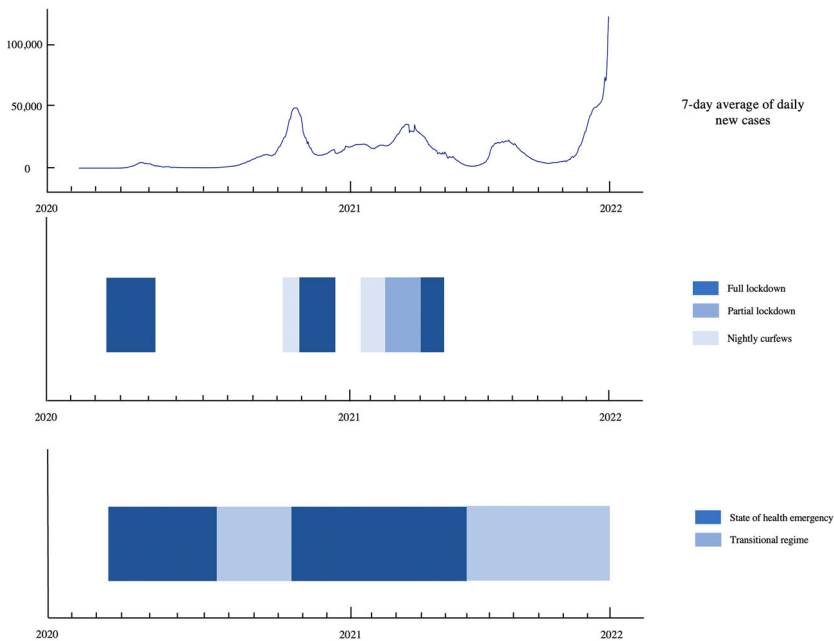


Figure 1. The evolution of COVID-19 daily cases, lockdown, and state of health emergency in France (March 2020 - December 2021).

Note: data source for 7-day average of daily new cases: WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard.

37 by Jean Castex), 32 by the Health Minister Olivier Véran, 26 summary reports of the Council of Ministers meetings were included.

As the study focuses exclusively on legitimation by securitisation, a preliminary content analysis was done to parse all texts and strategically gather excerpts with securitising speech acts. These excerpts were subsequently analysed at the textual and contextual level in view of their legitimating function. At the textual level, the analysis examined both the thematic formations (designation of threat and referent objects, proposition of measures preferred by the government), and where appropriate, the structures of discourse such as lexical choices, rhetorical and argumentative strategies. Equally, the discursive acts of the government were discussed in broad sociopolitical processes wherein alternative accounts contested the narratives and actions adopted by the government.

Macrosecuritisation and enacting emergency measures

As with many other nations, France was unprepared at the start of COVID-19 pandemic and its initial response was shambolic. After the first cases were reported in late January 2020, the government sought to prevent the arrival of the coronavirus by advising against international travels and requiring people returning from high-risk countries to quarantine or self-isolate. But this did not work. By mid-March 2020, France had seen a rapid deterioration of the health situation and a drastic increase in cases and hospitalisations. From then onwards, the country experienced five waves of infections (as of December 2021). During this time period, a variety of measures were taken to address

the multifold crisis. This included little contested policy interventions such as increasing public health spending and launching solidarity funds and partial unemployment scheme to support struggling businesses and workers, and more relevant for this study, an array of impactful yet controversial measures. The analysis here zooms in on two such emergency measures – generalised lockdown and the state of health emergency, which featured large in the government’s COVID-19 response yet were met with pockets of deep contestation.

To better understand the compelling need for legitimisation in the form of macrosecuritisation, it is instructive to provide some relevant context wherein the government’s framing of the threat posed by the rapid spread of COVID-19, and more importantly, its preferred courses of action, namely imposing generalised lockdown and declaring/ extending the state of health emergency, were being challenged and resisted. In view of the exceptional nature and huge impact of these two measures, some contestation by the opposition parties, news media, civil society organisations, and politically engaged individuals (e.g. anti-lockdown, anti-health pass and anti-vaccination protestors) was all but inevitable in such an established democracy as France. Therefrom emerged competing frames. As is shown below, although these frames recognised the gravity of COVID-19, they put greater stress on the negative impact of severe restrictions on the economy, the society and the exercise of democratic rights and freedoms, and consequently, called for less strict, costly policy alternatives. In this regard, a key legitimating function of macrosecuritisation was to preempt and sideline these alternative accounts by designating health as the absolute priority and full lockdown/state of health emergency as the only choice.² In what follows, the analysis will illustrate how government officials framed the COVID-19 as an urgent macro threat to justify the enactment of the two emergency measures.³ A detailed timeline of the two emergency measures, and relatedly, of the epistemological evolution of COVID-19 (7-day average of daily new cases) is presented in [Figure 1](#).

Generalised lockdown

Nowhere was the French government’s resolve to fight COVID-19 so revealingly in evidence as in its decision to (re)impose generalised lockdown (*confinement généralisé*), given the enormous social and economic impact. In total, the exceptional measure was introduced three times.

The first full lockdown was announced by President Macron in a televised speech to the nation on 16 March 2020. In the speech, the President presented the coronavirus as a virus from which ‘no one is invulnerable’ and its rapid transmission as an epidemic that had fast evolved from a ‘distant idea’ to a ‘pressing reality’ and caused hospitals to reach their limits, and consequently, the overriding priority of the government was to ‘slow down the progression of the virus’ (Macron, 2020a). Through a strategy of proximation (Cap, 2008), namely designating an apparently distant event or object as endangering the speaker and the addressee, a fear-inducing situation was created. As such, exceptional measures were in order. This logic is aptly captured by the following excerpt from the speech:

We are at war, certainly in a health war. We are not fighting against an army or another nation. But the enemy is there, invisible, elusive, and on the move. This requires our general mobilization.

We are at war. All the actions of the Government and the Parliament must be shifted from now on to fight against the epidemic. (Macron, 2020a)

'We are at war' was iterated six times in the speech. The unmodalized assertion in effect closed off the debate on whether there was a war and whether the war logic was appropriate for addressing an infectious disease. Its (re)iteration activated a logic of exceptionality, insecurity and survival. The 'war' would be fought between 'we' (the French people as a whole) and an 'enemy' that is 'invisible', 'elusive' and fast gaining ground. This excerpt is a prime example of macrosecuritization: the coronavirus was presented, first and foremost, as an imminent threat to public health.

The lockdown started on 17 March 2020 (initially planned for at least 15 days, later extended to 11 May 2020). Early on, there was a broad consensus over the gravity of the crisis and the necessity of a full lockdown. Parliamentary debates in the National Assembly and the Senate following the presidential address did not centre on the question of whether such exceptional measure as lockdown was necessary but on other aspects of the government's (mis)management of the crisis (e.g. lack of medical supplies, economic support measures) (French National Assembly, 2020a; French Senate, 2020a). Also, a public opinion survey conducted in early April 2020 estimated 88 percent of the French population agreed that lockdown was the only effective means to stop the spread of COVID-19 (Barroux, 2020). Yet gradually, the effectiveness of lockdown was questioned and its pernicious effects accentuated by news media, as evidenced by their editorials (*Le Figaro*, 2020; *Le Monde*, 2020a). Also, progressively stricter lockdown conditions and heavy-handed enforcement by the police, later led to violent protests in the suburbs of Paris and other cities. Protestors cited the severe and disproportionate impact of lockdown on the poor and police brutality and racial discrimination in enforcing the stay-at-home policy (McAuley, 2020; Reicher & Stott, 2020, p. 698). It should be noted that this occurred in the context of already tense state-public relations as a consequence of the Yellow Vest (*Gilets Jaunes*) movement and widespread public discontent with a state perceived to be disconnected from the sufferings of ordinary people (Jetten et al., 2020).

To (further) argue for the lockdown, officials repeatedly invoked the logic of exceptionalism and inevitability. Specifically, lockdown was presented as the only way to stem the rapid spread of COVID-19, ease strain on the health system, and shield the public from the unprecedented health emergency. As justified retroactively by the then Prime Minister Édouard Philippe (2020b) in a speech to the National Assembly in April 2020:

Never in the history of our country have we seen such a situation: not during the wars, not during the Occupation, not during the previous epidemics ... The lockdown was an effective tool to combat the virus, contain the progression of the epidemic, prevent hospitals from saturation, and in doing so, protect the most fragile of the French people.

Extraordinary historical events were used to highlight the categorially exceptional nature of the COVID situation, which provided justification for introducing lockdown. Verbs with positive connotation such as 'combat', 'contain', 'prevent' and 'protect' were used to substantiate the effectiveness of lockdown.

Typical macrosecuritising claims can also be found in official rhetoric on the introduction of the second and third lockdown. In a televised speech to the nation on 28 October 2020, Macron announced the government's decision to reintroduce lockdown for four

weeks. The announcement came two weeks after the government already imposed nightly curfews in nine big cities most affected. This nevertheless failed to contain the surge in infections. The fast-deteriorating health situation and recurrent criticism of ill-preparedness and inconsistency piled pressure on the government to adjust its COVID-19 response. In this speech, the President painted a grim picture in which France became an embattled nation that was ‘submerged by the sudden acceleration of the epidemic’ and ‘overwhelmed by a second wave that will undoubtedly be harder and deadlier than the first’ (Macron, 2020b). Hyperbolic words ‘submerged’ and ‘overwhelmed’ conjured up an apocalyptic scenario. Also, Macron warned of extremely distressing scenes where ‘hospitals would be saturated’ and ‘doctors would be forced to choose which patients to save’ if the rapid spread of COVID-19 were left uncontrolled (Macron, 2020b). In doing so, he appealed to a logic of self-cancelling prophecy, namely ‘credibly raising the prospect of further chaos as a way to reassert control’ (White, 2019, p. 24), to make lockdown as the only morally defensible course of action.

The second lockdown had a much less favourable (initial) reception than the first. In the wake of the presidential address, the opposition parties berated the government’s COVID-19 policy and voiced concerns, largely shared by news media (*Le Monde*, 2020b; *Les Echos*, 2020a), over the devastating impact on already struggling businesses and the socioeconomically disadvantaged (French National Assembly, 2020d; French Senate, 2020c). Prior to the government’s decision, many in the opposition advocated for less draconian alternatives such as rapid testing and reinforced curfew (Faure, 2020). Popular resistance also increased. Anti-lockdown protests erupted in Paris, Toulouse and Nantes (*Les Echos*, 2020b), and a public opinion survey carried out shortly after the presidential address estimated that only two-thirds of the French people were in favour of lockdown (Pecnard, 2020) – a sharp fall from the high approval rate in April 2020. Owing in large measure to the waning public support for lockdown and the huge socioeconomic cost of restrictions, there was disagreement, even within the government (e.g. between the President and the Prime Minister, see Faye & Lemarié, 2021), over whether to reimpose a lockdown in January 2021 when France saw a surge in COVID-19 infections caused by the highly contagious Alpha variant. In the end, the government decided against lockdown and only imposed additional restrictions on businesses and borders.

A third generalised lockdown was eventually announced on 31 March 2021 for four weeks, extending a partial lockdown of high-risk administrative departments to the ensemble of metropolitan France. As before, the government sought to rationalise the generalised lockdown by accentuating the gravity of the threat to public health (especially to the unvaccinated) presented by the more ‘contagious’ and ‘deadly’ Alpha variant, the emergence of ‘an epidemic in the epidemic’, and the near-exhaustion of intensive care unit beds (Macron, 2021). Again, the need of lockdown was backed by macrosecuring speech acts about the acute threat of COVID-19 and the absolute priority of public health security. After the government repeatedly claimed since late January 2021 that lockdown was not necessary, its volte-face unsurprisingly elicited a barrage of criticism from the opposition (French National Assembly, 2021; French Senate, 2021), media (*Le Figaro*, 2021; *Le Monde*, 2021) and the health-scientific community (Lemarié, 2021). Many berated the government for mismanaging the COVID-19 crisis (e.g. delaying lockdown decision), downplaying the adverse consequences of lockdown measures and eviscerating democratic procedures with its top-down decisionmaking

that showed little regard for the Parliament. Also, the social acceptability of lockdown further decreased, with only 54 percent of the public in favour (Martin, 2021).

State of health emergency

The state of health emergency (*l'état d'urgence sanitaire*) was pivotal to the French government's crisis response to COVID-19. This was not least because many emergency measures, including lockdown, would not be possible without first declaring the state of health emergency. Shortly after introducing restrictions aiming to stem the spread of the coronavirus in mid-March 2020, such as banning mass gatherings, closing schools, universities and non-essential businesses, and most controversial of all, the first lockdown, the government swiftly presented to the Parliament a 'Draft Law to Address the COVID-19 Epidemic' on 18 March 2020. In urging a swift approval of the law, the then Prime Minister (Philippe, 2020a) stressed the acuteness of the COVID-19 threat to public health and the government's top priority to 'protect the most vulnerable', 'slow down the spread of the virus' and 'flatten and crush the epidemic peak'. The law, of which declaring the state of health emergency was a key pillar, was approved via fast-track procedures by the National Assembly and the Senate only four days later.

Given the exceptional nature of the state of health emergency (declared for the first time in the history of France) and its empowerment of the executive at the expense of the legislative (government would gain the power to rule by decree with limited parliamentary oversight), it was little surprise the exceptional regime was vigorously contested by the opposition parties. In the processes of negotiating and enacting this regime, contention between the government and the opposition revolved primarily around the scope of new powers to be conferred on the government and the degree of scrutiny to be exercised by the Parliament (French National Assembly, 2020a; French Senate, 2020a). Specifically, the opposition, while concurring with the need to give the government important powers in times of crisis, expressed concerns about the institutional imbalance that would inevitably follow and its direct bearing on democracy and the rule of law. These concerns persisted as the exceptional regime (largely) remained in place throughout the time period examined. For example, a report by two deputies of the National Assembly in December 2020 noted the significant number of decrees issued by the government in the name of managing the COVID-19 crisis and the need to keep the exceptional nature of the state of health emergency (and the distinction between the state of emergency and the rule of law) and reinforce the 'counter-powers' of the Parliament (French National Assembly, 2020e). Similar concerns were aired by French news media (Fressoz, 2020; Jacquin, 2021; Slama, 2022) and civil society organisations (Ligue des droits de l'Homme, 2020). Equally relevant for the discussion is that the state of health emergency was prolonged several times amid the arrival of more infectious variants and epidemic rebounds. Its repeated extensions, associated with the persistence of the state of emergency in the wake of the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, prompted mounting concerns over a 'permanent state of emergency' (Henette-Vauchez, 2022) and led some to conclude 'the normal regime of democracy has become the exception and the regime of exception the norm' (Slama, 2022).

To quell criticism and justify the exceptional regime, officials advanced macrosecuritising claims not dissimilar to those in the service of lockdown, that is the drastic measures

backed by the government were commensurate with the gravity of the macro threat COVID-19 posed to public health. This excerpt from the government statement announcing the decision to reinstate the state of health emergency mid-October 2020 is a case in point:

The COVID-19 epidemic constitutes a health catastrophe which endangers, by its nature and its severity, the health of the population. It justifies the declaration of the state of health emergency in order that measures strictly proportional to the health risks incurred and appropriate to the current circumstances can be taken (Council of Ministers, 2020).

Securitising dilemma and phasing out or shunning emergency measures

As shown above, the enactment of generalised lockdown and the state of health emergency was bolstered by discursive representation of COVID-19 as a macro threat and health security as the supreme priority. As emergency measures are by definition temporary, the government was under pressure to adjust, roll back, or completely lift lockdown and the state of health emergency when the health situation improved. The need to remove or phase out such measures was much less contested as this would constitute steps back to normal politics. But the appropriate speed and scope of deescalation remained under scrutiny. Interestingly, just as the legitimisation of government decisions to enact the two emergency measures, deescalation decisions were also accompanied by language of (in)security, albeit of a different sort. More particularly, they were justified by invoking a securitising dilemma, which arises when measures aiming to securitise one sector end up endangering the security of other sectors (Watson, 2013).

Substantively, the following analysis will show how the logic of securitising dilemma underlies the government's decisions in the process of deescalation. In this light, the competing frames discussed in the preceding section were quintessentially referring to a securitising dilemma. As is shown below, a considerable number of elements in these frames, most notably those accentuating the adverse impact of sweeping restrictions and calling for the right balance between different valuations, were incorporated in the government's justificatory rhetoric for decisions to phase out or shun the two emergency measures. Important to note that the focus on public health security and the idea of finding a good balance between reining in the health emergency and minimising disruption to the economy, the society, and individuals were common threads in the French official rhetoric during the COVID-19 crisis (Or et al., 2022). But when the government sought to rationalise its decisions to roll back or to not resort to these measures, the hierarchical ordering of (in)security would clearly shift in favour of more attention to the security of other sectors than health.

Exit from or reluctance to impose generalised lockdown

In official rhetoric, the French government attributed its decisions to lift lockdown in large measure to a securitising dilemma. A phased exit from the first lockdown was proposed by the government late April 2020, despite the still-worrying health situation and the significant risk of an epidemic rebound warned by the government's COVID-19 Scientific Council (Benkimoun & Hecketsweiler, 2020). Devastating consequences of lockdown rules, particularly for the economy, were foregrounded to articulate the case for an

exit. This quote from the then Prime Minister (Philippe, 2020b) when he proposed the exit plan after the receding of the first wave is an emblematic example:

An extended lockdown beyond what is strictly necessary would have severe consequences for the nation. We feel that the extended halt of production across the entire sectors of our economy, sustained disruption to the education of a large number of children and youth, interruption of public or private investments, prolonged shuttering of borders, extreme restrictions of freedom to move, gather and visit family, are not only the painful inconveniences of lockdown, but actually [incur] the much worse risk of collapse.

In comparison with the macrosecuritising claims outlined in the previous section, a notable shift can be observed in the hierarchical ordering of securitisations. With a significant decrease in the number of infections and hospitalisations, the threat presented by COVID-19 to public health became less of an overriding consideration and was no longer able to trump and sideline other pressing concerns. Instead, the collateral damage of an unnecessary, extended lockdown to a collective of referent objects, including the economy, education, investment, international travels and fundamental freedoms, and the increased risk of collapse, were thrown into sharp relief to justify the progressive lifting of lockdown restrictions.

That said, securitisation of COVID-19 as a continuing health threat remained in place and still featured high on the government's policy agenda, as shown by its emphasis on caution and individual responsibility when easing the restrictions. As such, the government's priority was to walk a fine line, relaxing lockdown all the while minimising the possibility of a second wave. As stated here, 'We must protect French people without freezing France to the point that it collapses. This is a fine line we must follow. A little too much carelessness, the epidemic restarts. A little too much caution, the entire country collapses' (Philippe, 2020b).

Strong emphasis on the detriment of lockdown to the security of other sectors was also reflected in the rhetoric about lifting lockdown in November 2020 and April 2021. For example, when unveiling the decision in November 2020, President Macron (2020c) emphasised the negative impact of lockdown on the economy and mental health and its bearing on increased violence against women and children. In this light, the need to safeguard (physical) health would have to be balanced against the socioeconomic crisis resulting from continued lockdown. As stated by the President (Macron, 2020c), 'save as many lives as possible, contain the epidemic, all the while taking into account ... other sick people, isolation of certain people, our economy, and what is part of our life: education, culture, sport, and our way of life'.

Further, the need to balance different valuations was used to justify the government's reluctance to impose a third lockdown in January 2021. This was a highly contested decision as it was taken against the advice of the government's COVID-19 Scientific Council. Specifically, facing a fast-worsening health situation caused by the Alpha variant in January 2021, France, rather than imposing lockdown as its big neighbours did, opted for supplementing nightly curfews with a tightening of restrictions. This was widely decried by the opposition and the health-scientific community as woefully inadequate and irresponsible. For example, the president of France's COVID-19 Scientific Council was quoted saying, 'If we continue without doing anything more, we will find ourselves in an extremely difficult situation ... by mid-March' (Faye & Lemarié, 2021). Officials

sought to legitimate this controversial decision by emphasising the ‘economic, social, human, and health cost’ of lockdown and the heavy toll on a COVID-weary public and a country already struggled with two lockdowns and various restrictions (Castex, 2021a). Therefore, lockdown should only be used as a last resort. As said here,

[Lockdown] is a measure to which we should take recourse when we cannot do without ... Our goal remains the same: go through the protracted crisis by saving as many lives as possible and protecting our hospitals, but also do whatever we can to preserve our way of life, our economy, the education of our children (Castex, 2021b).

As shown in the foregoing analysis, referring to a securitising dilemma, namely the devastating impact of lockdown on other sectors than public health, was a key part of the justifications for decisions to exit from lockdown or opt for less stringent mitigation measures. Such references were equally present in official rhetoric on the plans to gradually exit from the state of health emergency.

Gradual exit from the state of health emergency

In between the (re)imposition and repeated prolongation of the state of health emergency, the French government twice (June 2020 and May 2021) proposed a plan that would organise a gradual exit from the exceptional regime. Similar to the justificatory rhetoric on the rollback or shunning of lockdown, government officials used rhetoric emphasising the securitising dilemma to rationalise the gradual exit, citing the wide-ranging negative implications of the exceptional regime and the public health directives associated with it. As stated by the Health Minister Olivier Véran (2020) when he was defending the first exit plan in the National Assembly in June 2020, the state of health emergency ‘had dire consequences for the economy, and more importantly, for the daily and personal life of the French people’. Reference to the need to strike a ‘good balance’ (*juste équilibre*), such as between addressing the health crisis and responding to public weariness and protecting democratic values, was also present in the justifications for rolling back the state of health emergency in May 2021 (Véran, 2021).

Through the prism of securitising dilemma, the economy, the society, democracy and the rule of law became referent objects endangered by (tough restrictions prescribed by) the state of health emergency regime. Given that public health remained a moral imperative, the crux of the issue became how to find the right balance and reduce socio-economic disruption within the limits of the possible. Consequently, the optimal arrangement proposed by the government was a transitional regime that would move back from a full-fledged state of health emergency but at the same time avoid an abrupt exit.

Exiting from the exceptional regime that had empowered the government and bracketed normal politics was what the opposition parties had hoped for and sought after. As such, they were irked by the proposition of a transitional regime that would allow the government to retain considerable emergency powers and continue to impose restrictions at its discretion in the context of addressing the COVID-19 crisis (French National Assembly, 2020c; French Senate, 2020b). As stated by a member of the Socialist Party during a parliamentary debate on the government’s exit plan in June 2020,

The Government invents a curious third way: there was the rule of law and the state of emergency, there is now a new regime of derogation called “transitional” ... Contrary to what it

claims, the text does not aim to organize the end of the state of emergency, but aims to extend it in another form. (French National Assembly, 2020b)

To justify the need for such arrangement, government representatives again invoked the need to walk a fine line, warning the possible advent of a deadly epidemic rebound and forced return to lockdown if the exit were not properly organised (Véran, 2020).

Conclusion

This research seeks throughout to articulate a case for understanding the politics of legitimisation in times of crisis from the perspective of securitisation. To that end, it zooms in on the legitimisation of emergency politics during COVID-19 – a many-sided crisis that disrupted the socio-politico-economic dynamics of many countries and gave rise to a heightened insecurity environment. Empirically, it dissects the French government's justifications for controversial decisions on two COVID-19 emergency measures.

Conceptually, this research attests to the analytical purchase of securitisation in the context of legitimating emergency politics. As illustrated in the foregoing empirical analysis, securitisation can function as an umbrella concept accommodating such diverse discursive techniques as invoking fear, a threatened future, and the logic of exceptionalism and inevitability (Fonseca & Ferreira, 2015; Reyes, 2011; Rojo & Van Dijk, 1997). Substantively, the analysis draws out the legitimating function of two securitisation dynamics: macrosecuritisation and securitising dilemma, with the former considerably narrowing the range of acceptable options by construing a supreme priority and relegating the rest to the background, and the latter accentuating the unintended and perverse consequences of macrosecuritising moves and the need to balance different imperatives.

Specifically in this case study, macrosecuritisation was illustrated with discourses that construed the spread of the coronavirus and its variants as a macro threat and public health as the supreme priority. This left little room for the security of other sectors and provided grounds for the enactment of the two emergency measures examined. Despite notable downsides and enormous impacts, lockdown and the state of health emergency were presented as commensurate with the magnitude of the macro threat to public health. By contrast, referring to securitising dilemma was key to the legitimisation of government decisions to gradually roll back these drastic measures or to opt for less restrictive alternatives. Here the linkage between the security of different sectors and the adverse impact of strict health restrictions on other sectors were spelt out. This substantiated the need to mitigate the securitising dilemma and facilitated the transition to more balanced policymaking.

Notes

1. For discussions on the difference between the internalist, poststructuralist understanding of securitisation as a self-referential practice (security as a speech act) and the externalist, more constructivist account of securitisation as an intersubjective process (security as negotiated between a speaker and an audience), see Balzacq (2005), Stritzel (2007), McDonald (2008, pp. 572–573), Vuori (2008, pp. 73–76) and Hansen (2011, pp. 359–360).
2. On the enactment of the two emergency measures, both official rhetoric and competing frames reference to the importance of different valuations (i.e., referent objects) such as

public health, the economy and democratic rights. The difference lies in the relative weight assigned to them.

3. The focus here is on securitising speech acts, which constituted only part of the justifications. Other discursive strategies such as referencing to scientific expertise, cost-benefit rationalisation and positive self-presentation versus negative other-presentation were present as well.

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