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**Populism and the Securitization of the Academic Community:
A Comparative Case Study of the United States and Serbia**

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1. Introduction

1.1. Context and Research Problem – The Academic Community Under Attack

Right-wing populism is on the rise (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2022: 5–6; Grigoriadis and Conpolat 2023: 435). This trend has been noticeable both in traditional bastions of liberal democracy, such as the United States and Western Europe, as well as Eastern European countries where political liberalization and the transition to democracy took place since the 1990s. Illiberal forces have become either parts of ruling coalitions and parties in power (e.g. the U.S., Hungary, Italy, Serbia) or the main opposition actors (e.g. Germany, the U.K.) in these countries (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2022) since the 2010s. Though these actors' specific politics and policies differ, they share some important similarities, such as criticisms, and even attacks on the academic community and higher education. Authors have noticed these tendencies in countries of various levels of democracy, including Hungary, Turkey (e.g. Grigoriadis and Conpolat 2024), the United Kingdom (e.g. Clarke and Newman 2017), as well as Serbia and the U.S. (e.g. Đorđević and Radeljić 2026; Jamshidi 2025), the two selected case studies in this MA thesis. As mentioned above, this wave has not only affected liberal democracies, where securitization theory has generally been understood to be most applicable, but has also affected “hybrid regimes” (often referred to as *competitive authoritarian*, see Diamond 2002, or *illiberal democracies*). Unlike pure dictatorships, hybrid regimes are not so secure in their positions as to not bother with convincing citizens when using extraordinary measures. However, they also do not have to bother with convincing everyone – they often have enough influence on elections and established power as to not worry about losing power as long as their main audience – their key voters, in general, are satisfied.

The academic community, understood in its broadest sense as including university and research institute staff, students, and other scholars, has played an important role in analyzing the democratic backsliding correlated with these political trends. Although not necessarily taking part in parliamentary politics, academics and scholars have provided insight into the mechanisms and consequences of right-wing populism, tracking them in their academic research and contributing to international organizations, NGOs, think-tanks and their reports (e.g. Freedom House and V-Dem). Previous research has proven significant in critiques of these regimes, being used to substantiate arguments both by their parliamentary oppositions, as well as international institutions (e.g. European Commission 2019). In turn, there has been a noticeable growing trend of securitization of the academic community all over the world.

This trend has affected countries traditionally considered liberal democracies (e.g. the U.S., the U.K.), as well as hybrid regimes (e.g. Hungary, Turkey, Serbia). At times, this trend presents itself with the targeting of specific academic institutions considered unfavorable by the right-wing populist leaders, such as the ban of the Central European University from Hungary by previous Prime Minister Viktor Orbán during the 2017-2019 period, or the targeting of Harvard University by U.S. President Donald Trump in 2025. At other times, it is seen in the reactions to student protests, such as the 2025-2026 protests in Turkey, the ongoing protests in India, or the student protests analyzed in this thesis, in the United States of America and Serbia. In many of these cases, the patterns of securitizing rhetoric and policies remain similar, regardless of different contexts, levels of democracy, political culture or history of state-academia relations.

Following the fall of a canopy at the railway station in Novi Sad on November 1, 2024, Serbia has seen an outbreak of massive student protests, which have transformed into general civil protests against corruption. Although the Serbian government has already had a history of securitization of the academic community (Jerkov et al. 2025: 5), these processes only intensified with the government's reprisals to the demonstrations. University funding and wages for staff were threatened, then cut, students were arrested and assaulted by police, and the autonomy of the universities themselves was questioned (Jerkov et al. 2025: 8, 15). With certain similarities, Donald Trump's second term as President of the U.S., beginning in 2025, has also had several cases of conflict with the academic community. Pro-Palestinian student protestors were arrested, and even deported (Sinnar 2025: 124), high-tier universities entered legal conflicts with the government (e.g. Harvard, see Tamanaha 2025: 25), and anti-academic rhetoric became commonplace. Indices of academic freedoms have fallen notably in recent years, according to the Varieties of Democracy Academic Freedom Index (V-Dem 2026). This trend of securitization of the academic community is the main problem this thesis will be analyzing by comparing two notable cases, chosen for their specific elements that showcase the striking similarity in results despite a notable difference in context.

1.2. Research Questions

The identified problem of securitization of the academic community by right-wing populist regimes, and its discursive construction as a security threat, opens several important questions to be explored. Some of the most significant ones that my research could contribute to include: What is the relationship between right-wing populism and the academic

community? Why do right-wing populist regimes securitize the academic community? What aspects of right-wing populist regimes, and what aspects of the academic community lead to these outcomes? What do the similarities and differences between Serbia and the U.S. as case studies tell us about the phenomenon of converging securitizations of the academic community? How come these different contexts (e.g. a small European state and a world's leading academic 'power') have such similar outcomes? This thesis will analyze the securitization of the academic community in the United States and Serbia in order to explore these questions and provide a contribution to our understanding of not only these specific cases, but the wider trend of securitization of the academic community, as well as the nature of populist securitization itself. The thesis will analyze the period between November 2024 and June 2026, as this timeframe shows an overlap in securitization of academia in the two selected cases, starting with a significant 'trigger' in both cases – the re-election of Donald Trump as president of the U.S. and the intensification of pro-Palestine protests on U.S. campuses, and the outbreak of the student protests in Serbia, both occurring in November 2024.

The selected research problem, as well as the research questions, have both practical and theoretical significance. Practically, these issues are current and politically relevant. Because of this, such research could become useful in public policy papers or advocacy campaigns, for example. Theoretically, these particular cases are yet to be thoroughly examined through the lens of securitization theory, especially as they pertain to the wider trend of securitization of the academic community. Securitization theory, as understood here, analyzes how actors with sufficient social capital present an issue as an imminent security threat in order to enable and justify the use of policies and actions that would otherwise not be considered appropriate. Further, the whole phenomenon of the trend of securitization of the academic community is also undertheorized and underdeveloped in the literature. Finally, while there has been literature examining the place of securitization theory in non-democratic regimes (e.g. Vuori 2008; Unal 2025; Wilkinson 2007; Mulvey 2025) this area remains open to further theorization. There have been significant contributions made to the concept of *populist securitization*, and the relationship between populism and securitization (e.g. Kurylo 2022; Magcamit 2017), though there has not been a comparative case study, and the focus of the analyses has been on different aspects of this phenomenon, such as foreign policy and the discourse and aesthetics of populism. This MA thesis could serve as a contribution to at least some of these issues within the area of critical security studies specifically, and security studies and political science more generally. Exploring this trend will contribute not only to our understanding of these processes, but also of the theory of securitization itself, especially

concerning securitization in populist and hybrid regimes, where the theory is still relatively underdeveloped. Populist securitization has been researched, but there is still much to learn about the reasons it occurs, and the mechanisms behind the processes of populist securitization.

1.3. Thesis Structure

This thesis will include seven chapters, including the Introduction (Chapter 1). Chapter 2 serves as the Literature Review, giving an overview of the most important contributions in studies of populism relevant to this thesis. An overview of securitization theory, its main tenets, recent contributions and debates will follow. Further, the chapter will cover the main literature relevant to the cases analyzed in the thesis, mainly the state of the academic community and student protest in the United States and Serbia. The thesis will identify possible gaps within these fields and topics, wherever relevant to this research.

Chapter 3 (Theoretical and Methodological Framework) lays out how the thesis applies securitization theory to the selected cases, which authors' contributions are most relevant to this analysis, and how those theories interact with studies of populism. Additionally, the chapter gives a brief overview of the selected methodological framework, including the nature of a comparative case study, the selection of cases, and discourse analysis as a tool for studying securitization. The chapter will explain the way that discourse is selected and collected, as well as the main possible limitations of the selected approaches and cases.

Chapter 4 is, along with Chapter 5, one of the two chapters analyzing the securitization of academia in my selected cases. Chapter 4 focuses on the case of the United States of America, while Chapter 5 analyzes Serbia. Both chapters will be outlined similarly, with a brief historical context providing a background for the current state of right-wing populist leaders in the U.S. and Serbia respectively, as well as their relationship to the academic community. The sections that follow will provide an analysis of official discourse, using statements from government officials from media sources and official government or party websites. The analysis will map the elements of securitization theory in the analyzed discourse, identifying the main securitizing actors, the claimed threats, the grammar of security utilized in the securitizing moves, among others. Further, applying the concept of strands of securitization, the sections will analyze the nature of the speech acts utilized by the securitizing actors in order to categorize the securitizing moves into different strands of security.

Utilizing the insight found in the analyses from Chapters 4 and 5, Chapter 6 compares the main findings, identifying the key differences and similarities in the securitization of

academia in the United States and Serbia. By comparing the differences in the historical and political contexts of the two cases, the thesis will offer potential ideas about the nature of the securitization of academia in these two cases, about why it occurred simultaneously as part of a wider trend of right-wing populist securitization of academia, and why there are still significant differences in the way the processes of securitization occurred in the two countries. Finally, Chapter 7 (Conclusion) will include closing remarks and brief summation of the findings, while exploring future possible paths of research.

2. Literature Review

To study comparative cases of securitization of the academic community in right-wing populist regimes, it is necessary to understand each of these phenomena. While securitization is a thoroughly researched theory within Critical Security Studies, there are still debates about its various aspects and applications in different case studies. Populism is a contested term in studies of political science, significantly more nebulous to research, as various academics define it differently, including and excluding various different cases as examples. In recent years, however, there have been attempts to solidify a basic, essential definition of populism, which will be the foundation of understanding the term in this research.

2.1. Populism

Populism is an inherently difficult concept to define, as it is often used in political science literature to describe a wide range of phenomena, from political movements, ideologies, to styles of political rhetoric (e.g. Webber 2023: 851; Urbinati 2018: 2; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 1–4; Laclau 2005: 1). For example, some authors, such as Benjamin Moffit describe populism as a political style, focusing on the performative and communicative aspects of populism (Moffit 2016: 37). Others analyze populism as a political strategy, focusing on the opportunistic actions of its leaders (e.g. Weyland 2021). Such different approaches make populism a highly contested term, with various differing, and often contradictory definitions, leading to difficulties in research of populist regimes.

Noting the difficulty in defining populism, and the fact that such difficulty impedes research on the topic, Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser offer a definition that includes generally agreed upon elements from different approaches, defining populism as a:

thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté Générale* (general will) of the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 6).

In this definition, “thin-centered” implies a contrast to “thick-centered”, “full” ideologies which offer a concrete view of what the world should look like. As a “thin-centered” ideology, populism instead tends to attach itself to other, “fuller” ideologies, not offering complex worldviews itself (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 6). This definition is general and wide enough to encompass most significant research on the topic, including the following literature, and will

serve as the basis of understanding populism in this thesis. It has also been widely cited in contemporary literature on populism in political science, and influential in recent research.

Analyzing the phenomenon of populism further, we can identify a few core elements useful for our understanding of populist regimes and their actions. As can be inferred from Mudde and Kaltwasser's definition, populists claim to speak on behalf of 'the people', as a singular entity. Consequently, as the legitimate representative of 'the people', the populist actor's views and policies are presented as the true voice of the people as a whole, rather than any particular segment (Müller 2016: 101, as cited in Webber 2023: 854; cf. Canovan 1999: 4). Populists do not see their policies as the deliberated articulation of the people's will through democratic institutions, instead identifying with the people directly, claiming to personify the people's will even before being elected (Webber 2023: 854). This monopolization of 'the people' and their will in turn creates a distinction between the true people and traitors acting against the people's interests (Webber 2023: 855). 'The people' here are not necessarily an actual majority, but instead an abstract construction by the populists (Laclau 2005; Moffit 2016: 104; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017: 10). Further, populism tends to be anti-pluralist, utilizing primarily 'all-or-nothing' rhetoric instead, avoiding compromise and making general, moralizing claims (Webber 2023: 858). Another key element of populism is its anti-elitism, seen in its general pitting of the 'ordinary people' against 'the corrupt elite', as well as more specific elements such as skepticism towards science, academia, and expertise in general (Webber 2023: 857). These anti-scientific elements are key to understanding the increase of securitization of the academic community.

Approaches within political science and populist studies that analyze populism as a political style can also contribute to our understanding of not only populism itself, but populist securitization as well, when integrated with theories of securitization. Margaret Canovan (1999), for example, analyzed the "populist style of politics" as part of her contribution to populist theory. Canovan argued that populists use a "democratic" political style, aimed at ordinary people, in order to capitalize on "popular distrust of politicians' evasiveness and bureaucratic jargon" (Canovan 1999: 5). The most notable addition to the theorization of populism as a style, however, can be found in Benjamin Moffitt's 2016 work on the global rise of populism (Moffitt 2016). Building on earlier authors' contributions, including Canovan's, Moffitt concludes that the populism as a political style has several key features: (1) an appeal to 'the People' versus 'the Elite', (2) 'Bad Manners', (3) Crisis, Breakdown, Threat (Moffitt 2016: 51–53). While we can see key similarities to Mudde and Kaltwasser's definition of

populism as a ‘thin-centered ideology’, such as the division into ‘the people’ opposed to ‘the elite’, we can see important additions made by Moffit. These additions, especially the *crisis*, *breakdown*, *threat* feature identified by the author which focuses on the performances of populists regarding alleged imminent threats, can be especially useful when analyzing the cross-section of populism and securitization.

2.1.1 Populism and the Academic Community

Scholars have been studying the relationship between democracy and academic freedom for decades, most notably in the academic discipline of Political Science, though just as importantly in other fields, including legal studies as an example (e.g. Byrne 1989). Recently, this topic has come into the spotlight, with many authors contributing to the discussion from vastly different perspectives. The significance of academic freedom for democracy has been analyzed through the targeting of critical scholarship (e.g. Täuber 2026), examining the way illiberal governments attack academic freedoms to consolidate their autocratization (e.g. in Hungary, Pap 2021; or Turkey, Gumrukcu 2023), the role the academic community plays in safeguarding democracy (e.g. Gready and Jackson 2025), or how academic freedoms can be protected from attempts to curtail them (e.g. Ginsburg 2022; Lott et al. 2025), for example. Most of these works come from political science and connect the trends of attacks on academia to the rise of authoritarianism, hybrid regimes, or illiberal democracies. In recent years, there has been a notable increase in research on the relationship between the academic community and populism, particularly driven by certain empirical cases, covered in the following literature. The increase in interest in this research is, at least in part, due to the wider trend of analyzing the backlash against ‘experts’ and ‘expertise’, a closely connected phenomenon to the anti-elitism of populism.

In their 2017 article, John Clarke and Janet Newman analyze the influence of anti-expert populist sentiment on Brexit, the 2016 UK vote to leave the European union. The authors note that failings of the neoliberal status quo have led to a sort of ‘rediscovery of class’, though significantly influenced by other issues such as race and identity (Clarke and Newman 2017: 105). The authors view the government promotion of Brexit as an attempt to articulate this decision in terms of ‘the people’ taking control back from the technocratic, liberal ‘elite’ (Clarke and Newman 2017: 108, 110–111). Similar rhetoric can be identified in the right-wing criticisms and attacks on the academic community. For example, Barbara Read analyzes the anti-elitist attacks on universities, utilizing the case study of the U.S. during Donald Trump’s

first term as president (2017–2021). The author analyzes this case through a feminist perspective, researching the ‘masculinity’ of such anti-intellectualism (Read 2018: 10). Read notices certain similarities between left-wing critiques of ‘technocratic rationalism’ and the anti-academic, anti-expert rhetoric found in the aforementioned cases (Read 2018: 4). Similarly, Taner Edis analyzes the ‘revolt against expertise’ in right-wing populist regimes, focusing on examples of Turkey and the U.S. Like the previous authors, Edis notices that academics represent the ‘liberal elite’, often promoting democratic participation (Edis 2019: 5). The author argues that this crisis of expertise is at least in part influenced by the failings of neoliberalism, which at certain periods dominated the academic and technocratic mainstream (Edis 2019: 18), and whose potential failings open up the door to a resurgence of a distrust in experts. In alignment with the previous authors, Grigoriadis and Conpolat’s 2024 article analyzes the relationship between populist governments and universities, using the examples of Hungary and Turkey. The authors showcase similarities in these right-wing populist governments’ targeting of universities. Finding that the academic institutions represent bastions of liberalism, pluralism, and fundamental rights and freedoms (Grigoriadis and Conpolat 2024: 440–441) in countries where these values are under attack, universities tend to serve as scapegoats for the ‘liberal elites’ that allegedly threaten national sovereignty that these governments proclaim to protect (Grigoriadis and Conpolat 2024: 445).

All of these authors analyzed various aspects and examples of right-wing populists’ attacks on the academic community and experts as symbols of the “liberal elite”. Though the authors differ in their methodologies and theories, there are clear similarities in the cases studied (The U.S., Turkey and Hungary, most notably), as well as the understanding that universities are targeted as part of a wider trend of anti-expert, anti-academic rhetoric aimed at reinforcing the ‘people vs elites’ dichotomy that serves as the basis of populism. Academic freedom and the independence of universities serve as a key element of democracy, producing and disseminating knowledge necessary for democratic deliberation and decision-making (Ignatieff 2024). It is precisely because of this role in the defense of democracy that academia is under attack by populist actors which diminish the deliberative and pluralistic elements of democracy, reducing it to simple majority rule, within which they purport to be the legitimate representatives of that majority.

2.2. Securitization

The main tenets of securitization theory were outlined in Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde's seminal work *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (1998). The authors defined an issue as securitized when it is "presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of procedure" (Buzan et al. 1998: 23–24). While politicized issues are subject to debate and traditional democratic processes of decision making, securitized issues are framed as "above politics". The process of securitization requires a securitizing move, "presenting something as an existential threat to a referent object". Further, it requires an audience, which can accept or deny such an attempt. Only if the audience accepts it is securitization successful (Buzan et al 1998: 23–25). The authors define the three main elements of a successful securitization – "existential threats, emergency action, and effects on interunit relations by breaking free of rules" (Buzan et al. 1998: 26). The concept of a securitizing move is predicated on Austin's speech act theory, which remains an important point of contention in further writing on this theory. Another key part of the Copenhagen School's contribution is the introduction of sectors of security, significantly broadening the concept of security. They identify the military, political, economic, societal, and environmental sectors (Buzan et al 1998: 7).

Many of the main developments and critiques of the original theory as presented by the Copenhagen School refer to its under-development of key theoretical concepts and unclear normative implications. The need for a more refined theory applicable to wider array of cases led to the "second wave", or "second generation" of securitization theories (e.g. Stritzel 2012: 552; Mulvey 2025: 2). For example, Thierry Balzacq attempts to correct certain underwhelming aspects of the original securitization theory by focusing on overlooked elements such as the audience, the context, and power relations as key to securitization (Balzacq 2005). Disagreeing with the Copenhagen School's *internalist* understanding of context, Balzacq posits an externalist approach, explained below. Further, he argues for an audience-centered understanding of securitization, in which securitization depends on both the semantic aspects of the securitizing speech act, as well as the contextual circumstances, which have to be taken into account by the securitizing actor (Balzacq 2005: 183–184).

Similarly, Holger Stritzel also attempts to rectify some of these issues in his 2007 article, arguing that the theory has not been consolidated, it has "only just begun to transform the new idea into a more comprehensive security theory" (Stritzel 2007: 358). His

work focuses on the internal tensions and undertheorization of Securitization theory, attempting to provide a more systematic approach, with more guidance for empirical analysis. Instead of being a coherent theoretical framework, he identifies what he calls “two centres of gravity” of securitization theory, which reflect “two autonomous readings of securitization”, based on “two separate metatheoretical convictions”. The first focuses on the speech act event, grounded in performativity, while the second focuses on the process of securitization (Stritzel 2007: 358–359). The former is considered *internalist* (closer to post-structuralism), and the latter *externalist* (akin to constructivism). Stritzel notices Wæver’s influence from Derrida and Butler, both of which focus on the text itself, rather than context (Stritzel 2007: 361–362). However, the author includes context in multiple key elements of securitization theory – the authority of the securitizing actor, the grammar of security, and the features of the alleged threat – all of which influence the success of the securitizing move. Stritzel further notices Schmidtian influence on the theory (Stritzel 2007: 364–366). This causes more internal tensions or contradictions, further expanded on by Lene Hansen in her 2011 work. Here, Hansen focuses on desecuritization – “the shifting of issues out of emergency mode and into the normal bargaining process of the political sphere” (Hansen 2011: 525). Hansen claims that this particular aspect of the theory has been undertheorized due to the Copenhagen School’s “repudiation of the concept of emancipation”. This undertheorization has allowed a wide array of readings through the lens of highly different political theorists, such as the aforementioned Schmidt and Derrida, as well as Habermas, Foucault, Arendt (Hansen 2011: 525). Similar to Stritzel, Hansen also identifies Schmittian influence – specifically in the Copenhagen School’s understanding of ‘security’ as “the sovereign authority’s ability to legitimate the use of emergency measures in the face of exceptional threats”. On the other hand, there is also an influence from Arendt’s idea of politics as plurality and debate, in the theory’s intersubjective process of securitization, and the need of the audience’s acceptance for the securitizing move to be successful (Hansen 2011: 529–530). Both of these authors recognize the underdeveloped normative aspects of Securitization theory, and the internal tensions rising from contradictory philosophical and ontological influences of the theory.

Further additions to securitization theory were introduced by Rita Floyd in her 2011 work on normative aspects of securitization theory. Noticing a gap in writing regarding the morality of securitization, Floyd proposes a revision of the theory, inspired by just war theory. Floyd specifies three criteria: the objective existential threat, a morally legitimate object of security, and an appropriate security response. This requires revision of the Copenhagen

School's original theory, as the original is deemed incompatible due to its preclusion of objective threat assessment and theorization of securitizing actors' intentions. The author expands on her earlier work, defining securitization as a combination of securitizing move (as per the original theory's definition) and securitizing practice – “a change in relevant behavior justified with reference to the declared threat” (Floyd 2011: 427–429). Floyd contributions introduce a normative aspect to the theory, in contrast to securitization being understood as simply an analytical tool for analyzing empirical processes. Another novel approach is offered by Tadek Markiewitz (2024), in his analysis of vulnerability in securitization processes. Building on certain contributions from Floyd, Markiewitz shows that securitizing moves are always coupled with vulnerability, and uses that insight to re-interpret cases of securitization, such as the U.S.'s response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and securitization of migration by President Donald Trump (Markiewitz 2024). Approaches such as these contribute to our understanding of securitization by introducing important concepts from other fields of political science and international relations, broadening the scope of the Copenhagen School's original theory of securitization.

There has not been much written about whether empirical applications of securitization theory have been successful. The most notable exception is Caroline Cordeiro Viana Silva and Alessandro Eugenio Pereira's 2024 work which analyzed 260 articles about securitization theory, 184 of which included empirical applications (Silva and Pereira 2024: 1). The results showed a lack of methodological and theoretical rigor in securitization studies: 38% of articles mentioned no methodology, and the vast majority did not include all of the basic elements of securitization theory, with less than half identifying a securitizing agent, for example (Silva and Pereira 2024: 8). This is notable, as that is the most commonly occurring element in the analyzed studies; less present elements are significantly rarer, with emergency actions and extraordinary measures appearing in a mere 30% of the analyzed cases (Silva and Pereira 2024: 8). This meta-analysis proved that securitization theory is often not applied consistently, rigorously, and with a well-defined methodological and theoretical framework. Terminology is often confused or misused, the key elements of the theory are not mapped onto the analyzed cases, resulting in an insufficient theoretical basis for research. This thesis aims to avoid these traps, mapping all of the key elements of securitization in its analysis.

Overall, the main identified agreement between authors tends to be regarding the underdeveloped and undertheorized aspects of the Copenhagen School's theory. The authors identified similar gaps, though their suggested solutions often differed depending on their

ontological and theoretical perspectives. The recognized internal tensions have led to a widely noticed lack of understanding of key elements of securitization theory, such as audience assessment and identification, which would be necessary to improve the empirical value of this approach. This is especially relevant to my case studies, as audience selection is a key part of what differentiates this new wave of securitization from previous.

2.2.1. The Audience Turn in Securitization Theory

The aforementioned critiques and revisions of the Copenhagen School's version of securitization theory all point to a lack of development of one of the key aspects of securitization theory – the audience (Balzacq 2005, 2019; Stritzel 2007; Salter 2008; Léonard and Kaunert 2010; Côté 2016). This undertheorization led to the 'audience turn' in securitization studies (Soares 2022: 3). The understanding of the audience and its role has remained one of the major debates during the development of securitization theory. In the foundational 1998 work by Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, the audience is, in different places, defined with different levels of agency within the process of securitization. The securitizing act is an illocutionary act, which by its mere utterance *does* something, and yet securitization is successful only if the audience accepts it, implying a perlocutionary, intersubjective nature of the act (Buzan et al 1998). This apparent contradiction is the basis for the audience debate, which has divided securitization theory scholars into two primary strands, sometimes labeled as philosophical (political) securitization and sociological securitization, though the categorization is not strict (Balzacq 2011: 1, 2015: 498; Soares 2022: 2)

The philosophical (political) approach to securitization theory is based on the philosophy of language and focuses on the illocutionary aspect of securitizing speech (Soares 2022: 4). This approach sees the audience as the recipient of the speech act, while the utterance itself affects the world (Balzacq 2011: 1–2); uttering security creates a threat, rather than simply recognizing an existing one. The sociological approach to securitization, on the other hand, tends to be more empirically oriented, focusing on the intersubjective perlocutionary effects of the speech act (Soares 2022: 4; Balzacq 2011: 1; Balzacq et al. 2015). Inspired by sociology and social theory (e.g. Bourdieu), this approach recognizes the significance of practices, context and power relations (Balzacq 2011: 1). Some authors go even further, dismissing the significance of the audience as a key element of securitization (Floyd 2015: 9, as cited in Soares 2022: 9), while others attempt to bridge the gap by reconceptualizing the audience (e.g. Soares 2022). The audience debate, in many ways, a continuation of the *internalist-externalist* divide

(see pp. 15) and is a result of the same contradictory philosophical underpinnings in the original Copenhagen School theory of securitization. Building off of Balzacq and other authors' understanding of context in securitization theory, Juha Vuori (2025) understands securitization as a "context-changing speech act". Utilizing theoretical contributions by speech act theorists Searle and Sibià, Vuori affirms that "speech acts have the capacity to transform social situations", that they can "alter the context of subsequent acts", and explores the illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects of securitization speech acts, giving a stronger speech act theory foundation to analyzing processes of securitization (Vuori 2025: 1061–1062, 1067). In essence, Vuori attempts to bridge the gap between the two strands, focusing on what securitization itself does, i.e. changes the context, instead of focusing on the effect the context has on securitization itself.

The 'audience turn' in securitization theory scholarship has not been limited to the philosophical-sociological debate, however. Several authors have identified other underdeveloped aspects of the audience in securitization theory, such as how to identify the audience or how to recognize acceptance of a securitizing move by the audience. Mark B. Salter, for instance, focuses on this gap on the "politics of the acceptance" and innovatively uses dramaturgical analysis to classify different types of possible audiences: popular, elite, technocratic, or scientific (Salter 2008: 324, 328). Balzacq, Leonard and Ruzicka (2016) also notice this gap, and recognize that it has even been noticed by Wæver himself (Balzacq et al. 2016: 499). The Copenhagen School offers no specifics regarding what constitutes sufficient acceptance of a securitizing move by an audience, or how such a phenomenon could be assessed, making any sort of thorough empirical research on this theme difficult (e.g. Balzacq et al. 2016). The authors further conclude, in agreement with Salter and other authors, that there is rarely one single audience – rather, there are often "several possible audiences". Similar to the aforementioned texts, these authors also recognize a tension between subjectivity and intersubjectivity (Balzacq et al. 2016: 499–500; Côté 2016: 2), with some attempting to bridge this tension by introducing concepts from other disciplines, such as political psychology (Wertman and Kaunert 2022). The unclear nature of the audience, related to the shaky theoretical foundation of intersubjectivity in securitizing theory (e.g. internalist vs. externalist readings, Schmitt vs. Arendt, etc.) has led to issues when attempting to recognize whether an audience has accepted a securitizing move, what ought to be considered a sign of sufficient acceptance from the audience, or even what should be analyzed as the relevant audience in a specific case. Further, it is important to understand the well-known limitations of securitization

theory when analyzing decisions by authoritarian regimes – it is possible to consider securitization theory as applicable, while considering the relevant audience to be certain elites, or specific parts of the population, rather than the general public, for example.

2.2.2. Securitization in Specific Contexts – The Academic Community and Populist Regimes

Although securitization has traditionally been used to analyze processes in ‘open societies’, i.e. liberal democracies, an important part of the literature covers securitization in authoritarian and hybrid regimes. Most notably, Vuori (2008, 2011) explores the ways that securitization theory can evolve beyond the Euro-centric constraints of liberal democracy, what he calls a “democratic bias” of the theory (Vuori 2008: 67). Going against the common argument that securitization theory is only appropriate to analyze processes in democratic regimes, as non-democratic regimes do not need to legitimize their actions, Vuori argues that even though they do not rule democratically, authoritarian regimes of all types still need to perform securitization acts for various purposes. Further, Vuori provides a novel categorization of possible “strands of securitization”: (1) raising an issue; (2) legitimating future acts; (3) deterrence; (4) legitimating past acts (the ‘traditional’ approach to securitization, as introduced by Wæver); and (5) control. These *strands* all differ in their illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects, their “speech act sequences” (e.g. first claim *x*, warn about *y*, then request *z*), as well as their degrees of strength – whether they need to be argued or not (Vuori 2008: 67). Building on Vuori’s work, Luke Eves applies it to anti-protest policies and introduces an additional “strand of securitization” – the *protest* strand, which does not fit within Vuori’s previous five (Eves 2025: 83–84). The terms *illocutionary* and *perlocutionary* are taken from speech act theory, with the former marking the intended act of the speech itself (e.g. a promise), and latter referring to the effect the speech act has on the audience, making it intersubjective in nature (e.g. Austin 1975, quoted in Vuori 2008; Vuori 2025). Illocutionary aspects of speech acts are by their very nature dependent on conventions, having “conventional efficacy”, as opposed to perlocutionary acts “natural efficacy” (Austin 1975 and Moati 2014, as cited in Vuori 2025: 1067).

There have been various attempts to apply securitization theory to empirical, non-democratic cases. One example applies the theoretical framework of securitization theory to Kyrgyzstan, concluding that the theory’s Eurocentrism and ‘Westphalian straitjacket’ significantly hinder its utility in non-Western contexts (Wilkinson 2007). Recently, several

scholars have analyzed various aspects of securitization in Turkey, focusing on different aspects such as fear politics (Ilbiz and Kaunert 2023), migration (Özoflu et al. 2026), gender (Unal 2025), academia (Grigoriadis and Işık 2023), among others. The most common empirical case analyzed, however, is that of China, including examinations of securitization of the Fulan Gong Movement (Balzacq 2010), the Uyghur population (Baker-Beall and Clark 2021) and universities (Mulvey 2025), among others. Although differing in their specific applications and conclusions, these examples show the importance of securitization theory's recent development, showing its applicability in non-Western and non-democratic contexts.

While many authors have applied securitization theory to non-democratic or populist regimes (e.g. Baker-Beall and Clark 2021; Wilkinson 2007; Mulvey 2025), there have not been many comparative analyses of similar securitizing moves in democratic and non-democratic regimes, a gap that this thesis contributes to. Other relevant literature covers how authoritarian regimes use securitization to discredit, or even eliminate political opposition (see e.g. Ilbiz and Kaunert 2023). These elements can also be found in hybrid regimes, though to a lesser extent and more covertly, as these regimes tend to try and keep a perception of democracy, at least on a surface level. In addition, there has also been significant literature analyzing the relationship between securitization and populism. The most significant number of authors use examples of border and migration securitization (e.g. Slaven 2021; Müller and Gebauer 2021), or securitization of identity (e.g. De Pelichy 2022; Unal 2025). While significant, neither of these correlated or overlap directly with securitization of the academic community, though they share certain important elements.

Authors such as Michael Magcamit (2017), Francois Gilles de Pelichy (2022), Mike Slaven (2021) and Thorsten Wojczewski (2020) have in recent years analyzed how populism affects securitization. Wojczewski (2020) notices a gap in the literature on the relationship between populism and securitization. Focusing on poststructuralist approaches, Wojczewski offers insight into the way populist discourse constructs 'the people' as a referent object of securitization, utilizing the case study of Donald Trump's discourse (Wojczewski 2020). The (re)construction of 'the people' in populist securitization is also analyzed by Bohdana Kurylo, whose approach of "populism as securitisation style" sees a securitizing move as a necessary prerequisite for populism, and securitization as an important part of populism in general (Kurylo 2022). Both Wojczewski's and Kurylo's approaches contribute to our understanding of the role of 'the people' in populist securitization, both as the audience that the securitizing move is aimed at, as well as the referent object it claims to protect. Using the case study of the

US–Mexico Border State, Slaven analyzes the similarities in ideational approaches to populism and securitization theory, especially the sociological strand. Also noting the gap in the “dialogue” between these two fields of study, Slaven finds certain key similarities, such as the focus on an “essential legitimate political community”, a shared fixation on autonomy as key referent object, and the fact both populist and securitization politics tend to present themselves as being ‘apolitical’, common-sense, and necessary for the community’s survival (Slaven 2021: 7). De Pelichy similarly offers an ideational approach to the analysis of the link between populism and securitization, focusing on the securitization of identities in populist regimes (De Pelichy 2022). Magcamit, like the previous authors, analyzes the populism-securitization theoretical relationship, offering insight into the way these elements shape foreign policy (Magcamit 2017). There is notable alignment on the compatibility of securitization and populism studies, with some authors going as far as considering securitization necessary for populism, although comparative analyses of such processes in empirical cases are still lacking.

Regarding securitization of the academic community, there is a gap in literature that analyzes this phenomenon in a ‘Western’ context. Most work focuses on this practice in the Middle East and Asia (e.g. Zelin 2021; Zreik 2025), so my research could be relevant in helping bridge this gap. The most recent work that does exist in this sphere primarily focuses on securitization of *science* itself, rather than *academia* as an institution (e.g. Ruohonen 2026; Ördén and Markussen 2026). Finally, there is a major and notable gap in the research regarding both of my cases, as they are recent/ongoing. There have, however, already been significant strides, with authors covering the events from different perspectives (e.g. Beširević 2025; Milojević and Pantić 2025), although rarely through the lens of securitization theory. As such, my research has a novel approach to the problem.

2.3. Case Studies

Although traditionally considered the bastion of liberal democracy, recent research in political science indicates that the United States of America are in a process of democratic backsliding (e.g. Levitsky and Way 2025: 1). Increasing polarization and the threat of populism, culminating in Donald Trump’s 2024 re-election as President, threaten American liberal democracy (Ross 2024). Sidelining of political critics, misuse of law enforcement and the legal system and the weaponization of government bureaucracy are among the main possible elements of possible democratic breakdown of the U.S. (Levitsky and Way 2025). Another notable sign of populism and illiberalism has been President Trump’s (as well as his

Cabinet members' and close associates') conflict with, and securitization of, the academic community. The U.S. government's legal battles with universities, most notably Harvard University, as well as the cutting of funds by the government, have undermined centuries of academic freedom in the United States in an attempt to discredit expertise in general, and universities specifically (Post 2025), due to their association with the 'liberal elite'. Other than directly fining and suing universities, the U.S. government has also utilized other measures, such as threatening to increase indirect costs, to revoke universities' tax-exempt status, or even affect universities' accreditation (Bozeman 2025: 34–38). Another part of this anti-academic wave has been the systemic dismantling of public science, most notably through the Elon Musk-headed *DOGE* (Department of Government Efficiency) which has laid off more than 1300 employees at the National Institutes for Health and cut the budget of the National Science Foundation, among others (Bozeman 2025).

There have been various articles analyzing the securitization of the academic community in the U.S. from different perspectives and disciplines. Maryam Jamshidi (2025) provided an in-depth analysis of the history of security relations between the state and the higher education institutions. While tracing the origin of this securitization process to the latter half of Joseph Biden's presidency (2021–2025), the author concluded that the securitization of academia accelerated during the second term (2025–) of President Donald Trump (Jamshidi 2025: 310). Other authors have also identified this tendency of increased attempts to securitize the academic community, and have similarly concluded the government's responsibility (e.g. Mutua et al. 2025: 11–15, Sinnar 2025: 1–3). Many authors (e.g. Shih and Wagner 2024; Brint 2025) have analyzed this phenomenon from the perspective of economic development and competitiveness, concluding that the trend of research and academic securitization will likely have a negative impact on economic growth and innovation. Most of these articles, however, use the term *securitization* as general process of deeming something a security threat, rather than actually applying securitization theory. The articles do not name or reference securitization theory or its scholars, instead analyzing the trend from the perspective of legal studies, economics, or political science. Others, however, explicitly utilize securitization theory, focusing on the securitization of international students, but also the *security needs* of those students specifically (Ozkan and Tasci 2023: 2–3). These authors analyzed different sectors of security for these students, concluding that governments ought to provide and ensure security for their international students, and suggest improvements in national legislation and policies (Ozkan and Tasci 2023: 17–18). Other than this example, there is a notable lack of

scholarship on the securitization of academia in the U.S. that utilizes the Copenhagen School's securitization theory.

After a period of democratic transition, recent political science literature indicates that democracy in Serbia has been steadily backsliding in a process that has only intensified since the victory of the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka* – SNS) in the 2012 elections and the 2014 start of Aleksandar Vučić's first term as Prime Minister (Castaldo 2020; Pavlović 2019; Vladisavljević 2019). This democratic backsliding has been analyzed from various perspectives. Some authors have focused on the general backsliding democracy in this period, whether in Serbia specifically (Vladisavljević 2019; Castaldo 2020), or in the Western Balkans as a whole (Bieber 2019). Others have written about specific aspects of this democratic backsliding, such as the political economy behind it (Pavlović 2019), the role of press freedoms (Milutinović 2024), or how democratic sliding in Serbia affects University autonomy (Tomić and Radeljić 2022), among others. This fall has also been noted in democracy indices published by international think-tanks and institutes (e.g. Freedom House 2026; Varieties of Democracy 2026), as well as institutions of international organizations, such as the European Commission (2025), and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (*ODIHR / OSCE*, 2024). The rise of populism in Serbia has also been agreed upon by various authors (e.g. Spasojević 2023; Bešlin and Žarković 2022). Even though authors and institutes differ on when exactly the democratic backsliding began, there is a near unanimous consensus on its occurrence.

Although Serbia has seen a number of protests in the period since, ignited by various causes and occupied under different ideologies, the 2024 student protests, sparked by the collapse of a railway station canopy which killed 16 people, have proven to be the most resilient, long-lasting, and impactful. In spite of the fact that the student protests in Serbia are recent and still ongoing, there have already been analyses from various, non-securitization, perspectives. For example, several authors (e.g. Beširević 2025; Milojević and Pantić 2025; Jerkov et al. 2025) provide an analysis of the context that caused the ongoing student protests in Serbia, which are the main targets of securitization within the wider sphere of the academic community. These authors find common links to historical examples of anti-authoritarian student protests in Serbia, drawing comparisons to the anti-Milošević protests of the late 1990's (Beširević 2025: 31–32; Milojević and Pantić 2025: 5; Jerkov et al. 2025: 5–6). They further analyze specific aspects of the protests, such as their 'depolitization' (Jerkov et al. 2025), their change-making capabilities (Milojević and Pantić 2025; Beširević 2025) or their 'hypermedia

mobilization' (Džunić and Golubović 2026). Vladimir Đorđević and Branislav Radeljić's 2026 article provide a first attempt at applying the securitization theory on the case of the student protests in Serbia, focusing on the creation of an "us" and "them" by the government's discourse. Still, this article does not focus on other aspects of securitization theory when applied to such cases, such as 'audience' selection, and sees this as a specific case of securitization of the academic community, rather than part of an ongoing trend in the world. Further, they explain this process as part of general and unspecific attempt by the ruling party to "cement its hold on power" (Đorđević and Radeljić 2026: 10), without looking at why, specifically, the focus is on the academic community, or why similar processes have occurred in other right-wing populist countries. My research could contribute to these yet underresearched questions.

Overall, the trend of increased securitization of the academic community, in both the cases of student protests in Serbia and attacks on universities in the U.S., has been recognized and analyzed. Most authors find a link between the (right-wing populist) government and the process of securitization, though other factors and specific explanations of these processes differ. There is still a lack of literature comparing specific cases to similar ones abroad. Further, the specific reasons behind this connection between right-wing governments and attacks on higher education have not been fully researched. This thesis could provide a contribution in both areas. The thesis connects these different processes and phenomena, studying not only the relationship between populism and securitization, but also how this *populist securitization* interacts with the academic community. This study also contributes to our understanding of these processes of securitization of academia in the specific cases of Serbia and the United States. Although, as seen previously, both cases have been examined from various perspectives, deeper examinations of the cases using securitization theory are still uncommon.

3. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

3.1. Theoretical Framework

This thesis uses the Copenhagen School's Securitization theory to explore how the governments in Serbia and the United States of America attempt to present the academic community as a security threat in order to legitimize the use of extraordinary measures, such as police intervention and arrests, funding cuts, and accreditation removal, among others. Utilizing the Copenhagen School's contributions, the thesis will place the analyzed cases of securitization within the sectoral approach to security. The Copenhagen School identifies the military, political, economic, societal, and environmental sectors of security (Buzan et al. 1998: 7). These sectors are differentiated based on what kind of interactions they identify. As Buzan et al. put it:

the military sector is about relationships of forceful coercion; the political sector is about relationships of authority, governing status, and recognition; the economic sector is about relationships of trade, production, and finance; the societal sector is about relationships of collective identity; and the environmental sector is about relationships between human activity and the planetary biosphere. (Buzan et al. 1998: 7)

The primary focus in this thesis' study of populist securitization will be on the societal and the political sectors of security. This focus on the societal sector is due to the specifics of populist securitization – 'the people', as identified by populist leaders, tend to be the main referent object of securitization, making the societal sector most applicable. 'The people' in populist securitization are presented as the true community, with a shared identity, making the 'elites' who oppose the populists, including the academic community, "a threat to their survival as a community" (Buzan et al. 1998: 119). The attempts to securitize popular sovereignty itself by claiming 'elite' control of democratic institutions, also common to populist securitization, results in the political sector also being relevant, as "the organizational stability of social order" is threatened (Buzan et al. 1998: 141). Authors of populist securitization have similarly noted these as either the main sectors of analysis, or at least as being equal to other identified sectors (e.g. Kurylo 2022: 129; cf. Wojczewski 2020: 16).

Further, the study will utilize the contributions made by "second wave" securitization theory. These contributions include Thierry Balzacq's work on theorizing of the audience, the context, and power relations (Balzacq 2005). The elements identified in Balzacq's work are significant to the analyzed cases as the context and power relations represent some of the key differences between Serbia and the U.S., while the audience seems to be an unexpected

convergence. Using Balzacq's approach to securitization, we can further complement Kurylo's understanding of populism as a securitization style. Kurylo's understanding of the process of securitization being used in order to constitute the very subject that simultaneously becomes the object of securitization can be complemented by Balzacq's analysis of how context and power relations influence the way securitization processes unfold. As Balzacq notes, persuading an audience requires that the securitizing actors "tune[s] his/her language to the audience's experience", adding that "to study securitization is to unravel the process by which a securitizing actor induces an audience to agree with a given interpretation of an event or a set of events" (Balzacq 2005: 184, 187). That "tuning" of the securitizing speech, of the language used in the relevant discourse, is especially notable in cases of populist securitization. The specific, dual-purpose nature of populist securitization inherently requires a distinct form of securitizing speech, in which the audience is not only being convinced of a threat and that they are the threatened object, but that they even exist as a separate, identifiable group in the first place.

Using the collected discourse, the thesis will be mapping the key elements of securitization, including the securitizing actors, the securitizing moves, the extraordinary measures that were employed or requested, as well as the target audience. Various felicity and facilitating conditions of these securitizing moves will be identified, including the usage of the grammar of security, the social capital of the securitizing actors, historical context and conditions of the identified threat, and the nature of the audience. Felicity conditions here are understood as the "conventions that regulate the appropriate use of utterances", which make successful speech acts possible, while facilitating conditions have to do with the "more general social or political context" (Vuori 2025: 1058, cf. Stritzel 2007: 364–365). The collected discourse will, importantly, not be analyzed as a large number of separate instances of securitization, but as one *process* of securitization of the academic community. As such, the discourse is a form of "*(threat) text*", not limited to the speech act event, but rather a linguistic structure that can "evolve sequentially over longer periods of time, consisting of more complex configurations which stem from various influences" (Stritzel 2007: 374). This thesis also accepts the idea that there is not a single, total audience in any process of securitization, but rather that there are "several possible audiences" (Balzacq, Leonard and Ruzicka 2016; Salter 2008). It is important to note, however, that while the research on populist securitization does presuppose the possibility of various audiences, it does not necessarily utilize any of the categories of audience (*settings*) offered by Salter, namely popular, technocratic, elite and

scientific (Salter 2008: 329). While the ‘popular’ setting may seem appropriate at first, it does not account for the specificities in populist securitization’s securitizing actors and styles. Instead, “populism can be understood as a specific style of securitisation which is distinguished by an appeal to the people who are claimed to be in need of protection by the populist leader and against the elite” (Kurylo 202: 133).

Influenced by the second wave of securitization theory (sometimes called ‘post-Copenhagen School securitization’), this thesis will be utilizing Juha Vuori’s classification of different types of securitization (Vuori 2008: 77; as well as the additions from Eves 2025: 83–84) to identify the present *strands of securitization*. These strands include: (1) raising an issue; (2) legitimating future acts; (3) deterrence; (4) legitimating past acts (the ‘traditional’ approach to securitization, as introduced by Wæver); (5) control; (6) protest (addition by Eves 2025). These strands of securitization differ in their main elements. First, their “elementary speech act sequences” take different form. For example, the securitizing actor in the legitimating future acts strand *claims*, then *warns*, and then *requests*. An example could be a securitizing claiming that there is an increase in recent immigration to a country, warning that this immigration could lead to increase in crime and threaten the safety of the country, then requesting extraordinary measures such as deportation of migrants without due process. On the other hand, a securitizing act of deterrence has the speech act sequence of claim-warn-declare. In a similar context as the previous example, a could make the same claim and warning regarding increased immigration, but then declare that it will employ certain extraordinary measures, such as the aforementioned deportation, in order to intimidate potential migrants and deter them from entering the country. Another difference is the temporality of the securitization – is it talking about possible future measures, or legitimating those that have already occurred.

Other than the differences in their elementary speech act sequences, strands of securitization also have different illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects. For example, the legitimating future acts example has a directive illocutionary nature (directing the audience to accept an action to repeal a threat), and a perlocutionary aim of legitimacy (justifying otherwise illegitimate actions). We can, again, contrast this to the deterrence strand, where the illocutionary aim is declarative (it aims to change the state of affairs using the speech act), and the aim is to intimidate and deter the threat. Finally, a key element of the strands of securitization is their degree of strength, determined by the authority of the securitizing actor and the power relations in the context of securitization. While some securitizing moves, such as that of legitimating future acts, need to be argued, others, such as deterrence, require formal

authority and by that nature need not to be argued. An actor applying the deterrence strand of securitization is warning the threat of future measures, implying that they have the ability to utilize those measures if the threat does not cease (Vuori 2008). All of these strands are, in some shape or form, present in the public discourse on the academic community during the analyzed period. While raising an issue on the agenda and the additional protest strand are mostly employed by non-official entities, this study focuses on official discourse. In these cases, that includes legitimating future acts, deterrence, legitimating past acts, and control strands of securitization.

Strand of securitization	Elementary speech act sequence	Perlocutionary aim	Degree of strength
Legitimizing future acts	Claim-warn-request	Legitimacy	Has to be argued
Legitimizing past acts, reproducing a security status	Claim-warn-explain	Legitimacy	Has to be argued
Raising an issue on the agenda	Claim-warn-suggest	Convincing	Has to be argued
Deterrence	Claim-warn-declare	Intimidation, deterrence	Requires formal authority
Control	Claim-warn-require	Obedience, discipline	Requires formal authority
Protest	Claim-warn-demand	Fulfilment of demands	Has to be argued

Table 1. *Strands of securitization, synthesized by the author based on Vuori (2008) and Eves (2025).*

In order to explain many of the securitizing moves in the collected discourse, the thesis will be relying on classifications and explanatory mechanisms of populism studies. As mentioned previously, this thesis will be employing Mudde and Kaltwasser’s definition of populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). The analyzed main elements of populism will, in accordance with that, similarly be inspired by their work. “The people” will be analyzed as a construction, a flexible phenomenon distinct from “the elite” due to a vague and case-dependent mix of their political power, socioeconomic status, and nationality (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 9–10). The concept of “the elite” is similarly flexible, often being used as a catch-all term for sometimes disparate groups, such as the political establishment, as well as the economic, cultural or media elites (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 11–12). This

understanding of “the elite” remains true even when the populist comes into power, such as the cases of the U.S. and Serbia analyzed in this thesis. In such cases, the populists tend to claim that the “*real* power does not lie with the democratically elected leaders”, but rather “some shadowy forces” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 12), i.e. ‘the swamp’ that Donald Trump promised to drain. After identifying the presence of key elements of populism in the cases of Serbia and the U.S.), the study will focus on the populist regimes’ relationship to knowledge, expertise, and academia. The thesis will explore the connection between the construction of ‘the people’ and the securitization of ‘the elite’, arguing that these are part of the same, reciprocal process, which serves to bolster the populist leaders’ support while suppressing and undermining oppositional forces. This combination of approaches will offer insight into the mechanisms of securitization employed in the selected cases of Serbia and the U.S., allowing the identification of the main overlaps and differences between the two cases.

Inspired by Thorsten Wojczewski’s poststructuralist approach combining elements of studies of populism and securitization, as well as Bohdana Kurylo’s insight into populist securitization as a style of securitization, the thesis will be analyzing the way populist discourse serves as a method of establishing ‘the people’ as the subject of populist rhetoric, as a referent object of securitization by the populist regimes, as well as the audience that the securitizing moves are addressed to (Wojczewski 2020: 3; cf. Kurylo 2022: 129–130). Inspired these authors’ contributions, this MA thesis will be mapping the securitization attempts of the academic community by the populist governments onto the Copenhagen School’s Sectors of security, as both identify societal sector as the primary sector within which populist securitization operates (Kurylo 2022: 129; Wojczewski 2020: 16), though Wojczewski also notes political security as significant. Populism cannot emerge without a securitizing act that “posits the people as an identity community whose way of life is under attack” (Kurylo 2022: 130). In effect, populist securitization serves to create the populist, the audience, and the referent object. This is a unique relationship, in which the securitizing actor gains the authority for the securitizing move’s success in the same process which identifies and produces the audience, and marks the securitizing object. After the initial securitizing act that ‘creates’ the populist, these leaders constantly create and identify new threats, in order to reproduce the status of their audiences, “the people”, as threatened (Kurylo 2022: 130), thus repeatedly re-articulating their position within the populist securitization process. Further, the thesis will be using Wojczewski’s insights into President Donald Trump’s populist securitization during his first administration and applying them to the recent securitization of the academic community

in the U.S. Afterwards, the paper will identify similar processes and discourses in the case of Serbia, identifying further similarities in the two analyzed cases.

The thesis will explore the similarities and differences in these two cases, examining the different aspects of the analyzed cases that lead to them. Inspired by contributions from the ‘second-wave securitization’ theorists, I echo the securitizing acts as “contextually located within broader structures of meaning and power”, “related to and analysed within the context of specific social settings and textual fields, as well as broader historical sequences and continuities” (Stritzel 2012: 553). In other words, the current processes of securitization of the academic community in Serbia and the United States, i.e. the attacks on student protestors, cannot be understood without analyzing the impact of the political and historical contexts in these countries. These contexts shape and influence the processes of securitization, meaning that taking them into account is necessary in order to fully comprehend the reasons for, and differences in, the securitization of the academic community in Serbia and the U.S.

3.2. Methodological Framework

This research will be conducted as a comparative case study. There are multiple factors behind the reasoning for choosing to do so. First, case studies are the most commonly utilized research strategy in empirical securitization literature, useful for exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory purposes (Balzacq 2010: 32–33). When trying to demonstrate a possible trend in international relations (and other fields), we should attempt to highlight specific examples, from a wide variety of contexts, to show that they are not merely isolated exceptions, but actually signify a trend. To do so, case selection is important. The cases should not be too similar in their contexts, as that could lead to having similar outcomes because of third, independent factors. For example, selecting Serbia and Hungary would not be as useful, as they have had similarities in the ruling parties’ illiberal rule (at least during the rule of Fidesz), often categorized as a hybrid regime, they have similar sympathies for authoritarian regimes such as Russia, and to a certain extent China. Any of these similarities could possibly influence the decisions made regarding securitization of the academic community and analyzing them could imply a trend where there is, in fact, none. Instead, this thesis takes one hybrid regime (Serbia), and one consolidated democracy (the U.S.) for analysis. Though there has been democratic backsliding under President Trump, the U.S. is still ranked as a liberal democracy by most indices (e.g. Freedom House 2026). As such, this approach is inspired by the ‘least-similar cases’ research design, which attempts to provide information by analyzing a similar

independent variable (in this case, this securitization of the academic community) in otherwise different cases (the U.S. and Serbia; Bennet and Elman 2007: 175; cf. Seawright and Gerring 2008: 304). If we can identify similar results regarding the securitization of academia from the right-wing populist nature of these regimes, even with the significant differences in their political contexts, histories, and other aspects, we can have stronger conclusions, with more external validity (Ruffa 2020: 1141). There are still similarities between the cases – such as right-wing populist rhetoric by the ruling parties, but these aspects of the cases are part of the object of study, as the trend of academic securitization is analyzed as part of a wider wave of right-wing populism. When defining the levels of democracy of my selected cases, the thesis will be relying on widely reputable think-thanks measuring democracy in the world, such as Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) and Freedom House.

The analysis of securitization in this thesis will be done primarily through qualitative discourse analysis. This approach is considered the standard for securitization theory (e.g. Buzan et al. 1998: 177–178; Hansen 2006: 29–32, Balzacq 2010: 39; Salter 2011: 935–936), and is most appropriate for the analyzed cases. Inspired by Lene Hansen’s categorization of models of discourse analysis, the thesis will focus on official discourse by members of the government and other key actors (Model 1, as categorized by Hansen 2006: 53–54). While Hansen’s approach is designed for foreign policy discourse analysis, its key contributions, such as the importance of intertextual links of the analyzed text, can be adapted to the analysis of securitization within political communities. Although media sources will be used frequently, as most of the statements given by officials were disseminated through media, the study is still focused on official discourse. The media sources here are simply mediums through which the official discourse is transmitted, the editorial choices and outlooks of media outlets are not analyzed. As such, a mixture of pro-government and more independent sources is used, seeing as their choices regarding the publishing of official discourse are not relevant to this study. The result of choosing discourse produced by officials and disseminated through popular media is that the texts will be, in general, clearly articulated, widely read, and have formal authority to shape policy, which are important criteria when analyzing contemporary discourse (Hansen 2006: 76).

An important element of the analyzed processes of securitization is the constitution of the academic community as threatening, which in turn helps construct ‘the people’ by the populist leaders. In Hansen’s terminology, these are discursive encounters, in which “the Self is constituted through the delineation of Others” (Hansen 2006: 68). The thesis will analyze

government communication through official documents, speeches, interviews, media statements of leaders and prominent politicians, and court cases. The most common source of this analyzed discourse will be local and international media, though some will come from official websites of the analyzed cases' governments or parties (e.g. the Serbian Progressive Party website, or the U.S. Department of Homeland Security website). After collecting the relevant sources, the paper will be analyzing the usage of "security grammar", e.g. framing academic actors as acting against state interests, claiming foreign influence and espionage, using metaphors and comparisons to military actions, and any other relevant reference to threat and security in the context of the academic community. This thesis will also identify the results of these securitizing moves, e.g. enacted policies, specific government actions. The specific threat images used, i.e. associations to previous or otherwise known historical threats by securitizing actors, will also be examined to identify what associations are made and why (Salter 2011: 938). Other elements of securitization will also be mapped, such the main securitizing actors and referent objects. With the main elements of securitization identified, the thesis will examine how the securitizing actors actually make their securitizing moves and the nature of their speech acts, placing them within the relevant strands of security. Such mapping provides insight into the mechanisms of the present securitization processes, and makes the similarities and differences between the two cases clearly comparable.

The analysis will be focusing on the period spanning from November 2024, until June 2026, as this period coincides with both the reelection of U.S. President Donald Trump (elected November 2024) and the fall of the railway station canopy in Novi Sad, Serbia (November 1, 2024), and the student protests that followed. Although the period of analysis spans over 18 months, it can be understood a single *event*, containing "events within events" (Hansen 2006: 71). The two events, i.e. the processes of securitization of academia in the U.S. and Serbia, are constructed of such 'events within events', such as specific noteworthy protests, arrests, or implemented policies. Analyzing the same timeframe helps map these cases as part of a wider trend, rather than them being two isolated cases with coincidental similarities. Further, it allows us to examine how the discourses in the selected cases evolved, and how the construction of the alleged identified threats changed over time. By seeing the differences in discourse in the two cases, we can learn about not only the processes of securitization of the academic community in the two countries, but also about the securitizing actors themselves.

The main possible issue with this method is the reliance on media sources, meaning that verifying their validity and credibility will be key. Another possible issue is selection of

relevant instances of discourse (as noted in Dunn and Neumann 2016: 90–92), as they are numerous, and spread through various channels. Further, the processes of securitization of academia are ongoing in both of the selected cases, inhibiting the possibility of analyzing the process as complete, including analyzing audience acceptance, as useful data is severely limited. Finally, there are possible limitations caused by the language difference in the selected cases, as all of the sources concerning the case of the United States are in English, while many of the sources and all of the discourse produced in the case of Serbia is in Serbian, making translation necessary. Although discourse analysis is not considered appropriate when trying to interpret hidden motives and agendas, that criticism is not relevant to securitization. Discourse itself is what makes securitization, prioritizing issues and requesting legitimacy for extraordinary measures, the intentions of those producing the discourse are not relevant (cf. Buzan et al. 1998: 177–178; Hansen 2006: 31).

The analyzed period, in both the U.S. and Serbia case, contains various examples of discourse produced and extraordinary measures taken. As mentioned above, rather than being understood at many similar, separate instances of securitizing moves, the thesis will instead analyze them as intertwined into longer processes of securitization. This process is not limited to any single speech act event, instead evolving over time, influenced by various factors (Stritzel 2007: 374). There are no clear-cut beginnings and ends of discourses and practices, making it impossible to analyze them separately. Further, seeing as the securitizing actors, referent objects, threats, and the utilized grammar of security generally remained the same, any attempt to separate the process into segments would be artificial, and would not contribute to our understanding of the analyzed phenomenon. These discourses, as well as the main securitizing actors and referent objects, will be analyzed in the following sections.

4. The United States of America – Trump versus the Academic Community

This chapter will focus the case of securitization of the academic community in the United States of America. The first section will provide an overview of the political context within the U.S., focusing on the crisis of democracy during the two terms of President Donald Trump (2017–2021, 2025–2029). After summarizing the appearance and rise of right-wing populism in the U.S., there will be a brief explanation of the Trump administration's relations towards the academic community, placed within the historical context of the academic community's historical place in U.S. society. The rest of this chapter will focus on the specific discourse produced by government officials and disseminated through media and official government sources, regarding the academic community. This discourse will be analyzed, and elements of securitization will be identified and examined. The speech acts present in the official securitizing discourse will be reviewed in order to place the securitization process in the U.S. within the relevant strands of securitization.

4.1. Context – The U.S. as a Liberal Democracy Under Duress

To understand the contemporary processes of the securitization of the academic community in the United States of America, a traditionally liberal-democratic political system, it is important to first briefly explore how the political landscape in the U.S. has changed in the past decade. Recently, the American liberal-democratic tradition has been called into question. Right-wing populism, exemplified in the twice-elected president Donald Trump (e.g. Wojczewski 2020: 2, Magcamit 2017: 15) has become mainstream, and has taken over the Republican party. Anti-democratic tendencies were recognized even during Donald Trump's first term as President of the United States (2017–2021, see Mickey, Levitsky and Way 2017, Lieberman et al. 2019), continuing through Joseph Biden's term (2021–2025) with the public questioning of the elections' results (Levitsky and Way 2025). Rhetoric and policies that were deemed illiberal, such as anti-migration stances, removal of minority protections, attempts at increasing barriers for voting, among others, have only intensified during President Trump's second term, starting in 2025 (see Ross 2024; Levitsky and Way 2025).

Populist rhetoric has been an important part of President Trump's campaigning and government. A major element of Donald Trump's three presidential electoral campaigns for the 2016, 2020 and 2024 elections was the idea that he was an 'outsider' to Washington politics, not part of the political elite, promising to 'drain the swamp' (Donald Trump, as quoted in Widmer 2017). Trump's rhetoric contained all of the major elements of populism, of pitting

the ‘regular people’ against the ‘corrupt elite’. As he puts it, he spoke for the “silent majority” (Campani et al. 2022). This ‘silent majority’ was contrasted against the globalist elite: “The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots” (Donald Trump 2019, as cited in Campani et al. 2022). After the Democratic party’s candidate Hillary Clinton called Trump supporters a “basket of deplorables”, who are “racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic and Islamophobic”, Donald Trump’s campaign focused on the way that wealthy liberal elites, personified by the Democratic candidate, vilify and demonize “hard working people” (Trudo 2016). To represent himself as a ‘man of the people’, a representative of the ordinary working-class Americans, Donald Trump often employed an exceptionally informal voice (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2024, cf. Moffit 2016), contrasting himself further from the rich, wealthy, often educated elites.

An important element of Donald Trump’s anti-liberal, anti-globalization discourse, from the very beginning of his campaign for the 2016 U.S. presidential race, was anti-immigration rhetoric. Mexican immigrants were labeled criminals and rapists (Winsor 2016), and part of his campaign included building a wall on the U.S.’s southern border with Mexico. Similar discriminatory rhetoric was used against other groups, such as Muslims. These were not merely empty campaign promises, however, and were the basis for anti-migrant and anti-Muslim policies (Campani et al 2022: 15). These ‘regular people’ who Donald Trump claimed to represent were threatened by the ‘liberal elites’, the main antagonists of Trump’s populist rhetoric. This was portrayed as a form of defense of the ordinary people, who were not only the democratic majority giving legitimacy to Donald Trump and his policies, but also the underprivileged socioeconomic classes being exploited by business owners importing foreign labor and costing ‘American jobs’, and even with a significant element of nativism, giving an ethnic element to the ‘people’ – ‘elite’ divide (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 10–11). ‘The elite’ was clearly more than just the political establishment in Washington, it was also the rich business owners. The anti-elitism Donald Trump’s campaign and administration extended to skepticism of science and expertise, as seen through the President’s climate change denial and unsupported medical claims regarding the COVID-19 virus during the 2020 pandemic (Verweij 2025: 8, Magcamit 2017). This anti-expertise rhetoric continued into President Donald Trump’s second term, starting in 2025, during which the academic community became a primary target.

The United States’ liberal-democratic tradition has historically included the respect for academic freedoms and university autonomy. Universities were seen as places of innovation

and elite production, both indispensable to the liberal economic and political order (Cole 2017: 3). Furthermore, free and independent universities are understood to be important indicators, and even protectors of liberal democracy (e.g. Cole 2017; Ignatieff 2024). On the other hand, there were historical instances of attacks on academia and universities due to perceived ‘problematic’ politics of academics. These periods were, in general, simultaneous with other attacks on rights and freedoms. An important example is the Espionage and Seditions Acts of 1918, which resulted in the firing of professors who opposed the World War I draft (Cole 2017: 2). Another, more recent instance can be seen in the McCarthyism period during the ‘red scare’ of post-World War II America, during which many academics lost their jobs over alleged socialist or communist sentiments (Cole 2017: 2–3). Although significant in the history of the U.S., these episodes are seen as unfortunate exceptions, with the ‘red scare’ in particular becoming a term used to criticize suspicion of foreign students by some media outlets (e.g. Economist 2020).

President Donald Trump’s second term, beginning after his inauguration in January of 2025, has showed a revival of such targeting of the academic community for ideological and political reasons. As part of his wider ‘culture war’, he has claimed the academic community responsible for propagating the ‘woke culture’ that he and the Republic Party are combatting (Salajan and Jules 2025: 385, 389). President Trump, as well as many other members of his administrations and the Republic Party in general, have repeatedly talked about these issues, focusing on the ‘woke liberal left’, anti-white racism, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programs, and Critical Race Theory (e.g. Schickler and Rodriguez 2026; Zimmerman 2022; Kamola 2024), while considering academia and universities as the sources, or at least significant disseminators, of these ideologies (e.g. Keck 2025). An illustrative example is the weaponization of Critical Race Theory (CRT) by conservative think-tanks and politicians. Critical Race Theory was developed in the 1990s as a method of understanding “both the *cause* and the *context* for disparate and unequal outcome for racially marginalized peoples” (Lynn and Dixon 2022: 1). This conceptual social framework was targeted by President Trump, as well as other conservative politicians and think-tanks. CRT was labeled as “racist” by the president (Donald Trump, quoted in Lang 2020), redefined to be an “elitist, anti-American” invention, and a “cult indoctrination”, with it ending up being effectively banned from classrooms and federal agencies (Kamola 2024). This example showcases how culture wars play an important part in American right-wing populism, often superseding liberal traditions such as academic freedoms and the autonomy of the academic community. These culture wars

are tied to the high levels of polarization in American society (Vukelić 2023), which is in turn an important aspect of the populist nature of the Trump administration. Further, the culture wars are sometimes utilized by the government to underplay the legitimacy of actual concerns about the U.S.' foreign and domestic policy by those considered to be on the opposing side of those culture wars.

Following the October 7 2023 attacks on Israel by Hamas, an armed conflict was reignited in the region, resulting in hundreds of thousands of casualties, the vast majority of which are Palestinian (Jamaluddine et al. 2025; UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2026). Soon after the 2023 Gaza war started, pro-Palestinian student protests ignited in almost every state in the United States of America. Although specifics vary, the main demands of the students were generally related to severing financial ties with Israel, and pressuring the U.S. government to end military support for Israel. Although the protests remained peaceful, several mass arrests occurred (Human Rights Watch 2025). While the process of securitization of the academic community, especially when it comes to pro-Palestinian protests, started during the last fifteen months of the Biden administration during late 2023 and throughout 2024, many of the specific policies measures began during the second Trump administration (Jamshidi 2025), along with a change and radicalization of the official rhetoric. Universities being identified as hotbeds for spreading 'woke' values as part of the 'culture wars' in the U.S., combined with the start of political protests critiquing official American foreign policy and general critiques of the Trump administrations from academics due to democratic backsliding all culminated in a period of heightened targeting of the academic community from government officials, including the President. This targeting has been part of the process of securitization of the academic community, painting them as threats to the United States. In the following section, the thesis will be analyzing this process of securitization, and identifying the key actors, securitizing acts, and extraordinary measures taken in this process.

4.2. Contemporary Securitization of the Academic Community in America

Early on into Donald Trump's second term as president of the United States, his administration started focusing on the academic community. This focus was two-fold: first, as part of the administration's pro-Israel stance as the wave of pro-Palestinian student protests continued and at times intensified; and second, as part of the culture war against 'wokeism', 'Marxism' and 'anti-white racism' that was allegedly present at American universities. Starting

in January 2025, mere days after his inauguration, the president announced a plan to “combat antisemitism”, instructing federal agencies to deport students with visas if they found that laws were broken during protests. “The US must ensure that admitted aliens and aliens otherwise already present in the US do not bear hostile attitudes toward its citizens, culture, government, institutions, or founding principles” (Trump, quoted in Dunbar 2025). The President’s statements made clear allusions to the possible threats posed by foreign students. The mention of hostile attitudes towards “citizens, culture, government, institutions, or founding principles” of the U.S. as referent objects under threat shows a clear identification of the societal and political sectors and security. We can also identify examples of extraordinary measures, with the instructions for deportations of certain foreign students. As such, elements of securitization of the academic community were present from the very beginning of Donald Trump’s second term, after his electoral victory in November 2024. They included claims about student protestors, warnings about the effects of their alleged behavior, and emergency measures that were either already undertaken, or were announced.

As the protests continued into the year, so did the actions against protestors. In March of 2025, the president threatened to cut funding for universities that allowed allegedly ‘illegal protests’, and to prosecute and deport foreign student protestors (Debusmann Jr 2025). Education Secretary Linda McMahon claimed in a statement:

Americans have watched in horror for more than a year now, as Jewish students have been assaulted and harassed on elite university campuses – repeatedly overrun by antisemitic students and agitators. (...) [U]nlawful encampments and demonstrations have completely paralysed day-to-day campus operations, depriving Jewish students of learning opportunities to which they are entitled. (Debusmann Jr 2025)

Such statements claim the threat of antisemitic assault and harassment, connecting it to the ‘woke’ academic community. The Education Secretary’s discourse continues earlier securitization processes. Although Jewish students are the main referent objects in this specific securitizing discourse, the securitizing actor still mentions “Americans” as another key referent object, who suffer and are threatened by “watch[ing] in horror”. The White House published a fact sheet claiming that the proposed measures sought to “protect law and order, quell pro-Hamas vandalism and intimidation, and investigate and punish anti-Jewish racism in leftist, anti-American colleges and universities” (White House, quoted in Debusmann Jr 2025). Here, we can see further securitizing rhetoric, and a continuation of implications that ‘Americans’ and their values are under threat. Such elements not only sustain the placement of the identified threats within the societal sector, but also further identify ‘the people’ as a key element of this

process, proving its populist features. These populist aspects, wherein the academic community represents ‘the elite’ in this instance, explicitly pitted in opposition to “Americans”, i.e. the regular people represented by the populists. The right-wing nature of this populism is also highlighted through the allegations of a leftist nature of these educational institutions, which is even equated to being ‘anti-American’. The claims and warnings about the protests are similar as in the period of late 2024, though now the universities themselves were identified as significant actors. The announced measures also remained similar, though they also included actions against the institutions themselves, rather than just the students.

The same type of rhetoric was used in May of 2025 by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, after a student’s visa was revoked due to writing an op-ed criticizing Tufts University’s ties to Israel:

The people that we're getting rid of in our country are vandalizing, they're not protesters. They're taking over college campuses. They're harassing fellow students... They're not demonstrating, they're going beyond demonstration (...). We want them out. Every one of them I find, we're going to kick them out (Rubio, quoted in Pamuk 2025).

Rubio compared the actions of protestors to vandalism and harassment, and even destabilization of the country, adding that the government will “aggressively revoke visas for Chinese students”, specifically mentioning those with connections to the Communist Party of China and those studying in ‘critical fields’ (Rubio, quoted in Feng 2025; though critical fields were not defined), while the Department of Homeland Security claimed that the students engaged in activities in support of Hamas (McFall 2025). The Secretary’s discourse further exemplifies the process of securitization of the academic community. Without proof, academics and students are accused of violence, and even government destabilization, all connected to major foreign threats already common within U.S. discourse, such as China (and specifically the Communist Party of China) and terrorism (represented by Hamas). Such comparisons are the result of the populist leaders modulating and tuning their message, identifying the most likely threat images to produce the desired effect of labeling academia as a threat. The focus on ‘critical fields’ in State Secretary Rubio’s statements is also significant as, even though the term remains unspecified and undefined, it implies specific knowledge and expertise to be especially important. As seen here, claims and warnings regarding the academic community and its alleged threat were intensified and radicalized. This period is further notable for its explicit call for extraordinary measures, such as the removal of foreign student protestors, another key aspect of the process of securitization, justified through the allegations of violence and foreign influence.

Pressure on academic institutions continued and intensified with multiple examples of further budget cuts and investigations of diversity practices. In April of 2025, President Trump signed an executive order targeting the accreditation process, for example (Klein and Waldenberg 2025). The same month, Cornell University had over \$1 billion in funding frozen due to alleged civil rights violations. Northwestern University, Brown University, Princeton University, and Columbia University all had similar measures taken against them, primarily due to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies, and alleged antisemitism (de Guzman 2025). Soon after, in early July 2025, the President announced that the government was freezing \$175 million of federal funding to the University of Pennsylvania due to the institution's policies on transgender athletes as part of an initiative to ban “biological males from infiltrating women’s sports” and “protect female athletes” (Wise 2025). These events, focused on both alleged antisemitism and DEI policies, linked all the purported threats, in both the political and societal sectors of security, into a single interconnected and interrelated claim of threat to the American people and state, by the academic community. The securitizing actors attempted to bolster the strength of their securitizing moves by claiming that every aspect of the ‘regular Americans’ is under threat, from their state to their culture and values. The result of this discourse is painting ‘the elite’, here symbolized by the academic community, as an all-encompassing threat. This linking of alleged threats served to justify the decisions to freeze university funds and target the accreditation processes, measures with an otherwise questionable legal basis.

Another attempt to present the academic community as a threat in the ‘culture war’ was a White House Roundtable on Left-Wing Ideological Capture of Universities, entitled “Biased Professors, Woke Administrators, and the End of Free Inquiry on U.S. Campuses”, organized in December 2025, and attended by U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon.

The challenge before us is immense. Unfortunately, today’s college classroom has become more a source of indoctrination and absurdity than of ideas or leaders who change the world (...) Progressive ideology creates more than just the threat of censorship. Recently, students have faced violence from “peaceful protesters”—particularly the antisemitic activists who turned campuses into battlegrounds after the October 7th terror attacks. Meanwhile, school administrators and faculty either stood by or actively joined the chaos. (McMahon, U.S. Department of Education 2025)

Education Secretary McMahon added that “DEI policies” and “the woke monoculture” have started dominating and limiting free thought and speech (U.S. Department of Education 2025). These events and the discourse produced by government officials showed a clear pattern of painting the academic community as an enemy of the ‘culture war’, focusing not only on the

foreign-policy requests of the student protestors as potential threats to the U.S. as a political community, but also on DEI policies, transgender athletes, ‘woke’ administration as threats to American culture and society. The ‘woke’ aspects are rarely defined and instead tend to be a catch-all term covering progressive values and causes. Progressivism, liberalism and leftism are purported to be linked to violence and censorship. By claiming attacks on free speech, a core value espoused by the Republic party and the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement, the securitizing actors further tune their discourse for the true audience, ‘the people’ supporting the populists. Student protestors are alleged to be indoctrinated, violent, and antisemitic, while school staff is marked as either disinterested, incompetent or complicit. Building on earlier claims and warnings of a similar nature, such discourse adds to the securitization of the academic community, discrediting them in the eyes of ‘the public’, the audience of this securitization process.

The most intense campaign against specific institutions, however, was levied by U.S. government officials against Harvard University. The campaign against Harvard started in February 2025, intensifying with budget cuts in April, and is still ongoing at the time of writing. “Harvard is an Anti-Semitic, Far Left Institution, as are numerous others, with students being accepted from all over the World that want to rip our Country apart” (Trump, quoted in Friedman 2025). The President of the United States further labeled the institution a “threat to democracy” (Speri 2025). These comments, made by the president in April 2024, marked Harvard not simply as another institution on the opposite side of the ‘culture wars’, but went further. The allegations of Harvard being a ‘threat to democracy’, along with the mentions of purported antisemitism and far-left biases, served to legitimize the measures President Trump was employing against the University at that time, namely the freezing of billions of dollars in federal funding and government investigations over the alleged antisemitism. In April 2025, Harvard responded by suing the Trump administration for the retaliatory act, claiming it to be unlawful and unwarranted (Patel and Yoon 2025). This represents a significant instance of opposition to the securitizing moves made by U.S. officials, most notably the president. However, such opposition does not alter the main aims of these securitizing moves. Even if Harvard were to win, the argument that academia, and Harvard specifically, represents ‘elites’ with true power, disconnected from the will of the people, would be bolstered. The measures enacted against these institutions are not merely there to financially weaken them, but serve to discredit and discourage academia in general.

Other members of the Trump administration were also involved with the attacks on Harvard. On May 6, 2025, Secretary of Education Linda McMahon wrote a letter to Harvard University President Alan Garber, claiming that Harvard was involved in a “systemic pattern of violating federal law”, questioning how foreign Harvard students got into the country, and claiming that the University allowed “ugly racism” (McMahon, quoted in Wehner 2025). Even Vice President JD Vance commented on the situation in June 2025, comparing academic communities to North Korea, due to academics’ alleged support for former Vice President Kamala Harris in the 2024 election. “(...) [T]hat’s where the universities have become almost quasi-theocratic or quasi-totalitarian societies” (JD Vance, quoted in Stancy 2025). This discourse was followed with further measures, with the White House’s Joint Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism calling Harvard “a breeding ground for virtue signaling and discrimination”, and the government slashing over \$2.5 billion in total funding (Rose and Krupa 2025). “There is a dark problem on Harvard’s campus, and by prioritizing appeasement over accountability, institutional leaders have forfeited the school’s claim to taxpayer support” (Department of Education and Department of Health and Human Services, quoted in Rose and Krupa 2025). Here, we notice simultaneous application of extraordinary measures, i.e. the cutting of funds, and arguments for the justification of those measures, claiming ideological and political problems with the institution. The specific wording of this justification compares Harvard and other universities with totalitarian societies, labels them law-breakers and discriminatory.

In another statement given on a morning talk show on Fox News on June 1, Secretary Noem claimed that Harvard had “perpetuated Chinese government priorities”, adding that China “want[s] to destroy us, and Harvard is allowing that to happen”, but that “the Trump administration is going to stop it” (Noem, as quoted in Kovacs 2025).

It's alarming the danger that our country is in, and it's because we've allowed universities like Harvard to infiltrate our country with Communist Chinese ties and students and spies. (Noem, as quoted in Kovacs 2025)

This period sees a further intensification of government rhetoric. Harvard is not merely alleged to be ineffective as a scientific and education institution, or in allowing antisemitism and anti-white racism on its grounds, but is now purported to be directly responsible for working in alignment with interests of the United States’ main international rival, the People’s Republic of China. With securitization of China being common in the U.S. (e.g. Shah 2021), interlinking the academic community with an already recognized threat helps boost the effectiveness of the

securitization of academia. Furthermore, we see a clear transition from the societal sector of security, in which American society is threatened due to indoctrination and anti-American values, for example, into the sector of political, or even military security, with warnings that Harvard is alleged to be helping China destroy the United States. This multi-sector securitization is notable, and represents a reoccurring trend, rather than an isolated case.

During the same period, on May 22, 2025, another example came with Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem ordering the Department of Homeland Security to terminate Harvard's ability to enroll foreign students, and make existing foreign students transfer. "This administration is holding Harvard accountable for fostering violence, antisemitism, and coordinating with the Chinese Communist Party on its campus", claimed the Homeland Security Secretary (Kristi Noem, quoted in Department of Homeland Security 2025). Similar rhetorical devices and security grammar as earlier were used in these instances as previously: Harvard, its staff and especially foreign students, were labeled 'violent', 'antisemitic', alleged to be foreign agents. Harvard staff was painted as being either incapable or unwilling to mitigate such threats, in a direct attack on the institution's prestige and reputation. Simultaneously, legally questionable emergency measures continued, with further funding freezes and bans on foreign student enrollment. The involvement of the Department of Homeland Security, instead for, for example, the Department of Education, is notable, as this decision can be understood as part of the securitization itself. Such a decision paints the Harvard conflict not merely as a question of educational policy, but of legitimate domestic security threat, handled by the same part of the government that handles terrorist threats, for example. This can be seen as another element of the move merely societal, to the political or military sectors of security. The measures taken by the government in targeting the academic community were not limited to universities as institutions, however, targeting individuals as well.

Specific examples of foreign-student deportation illustrate such further special measures taken by the U.S. government. Some have garnered international media attention, becoming significant for the attempts to legitimize the extraordinary measures by the government. The deportation of Turkish Tufts University student Rümeyşa Öztürk is one example. After co-signing an opinion column published in March of 2024 in a student newspaper calling for the divestment of Tuft University's ties to Israel, Öztürk was accused by the Department of Homeland Security of having "engaged in activities in support of Hamas". These claims were then used to justify measures taken against Öztürk. In March of 2025, she

was arrested and held for 45 days in detention by the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and released in May (Al Jazeera 2026). Another illustrative example occurred in the same month, when Columbia University student and lawful U.S. permanent resident Mahmoud Khalil was arrested by plain-clothes ICE agents, without being accused or charged with a crime, after protesting the Gaza war (NYCLU 2025). He was held for 104 days in an ICE detention center. After Khalil was released on May 28, 2025, the government continued to seek his deportation, though Khalil has since challenged the legality of his detention and attempted deportation before federal court (NYCLU 2025; Betts 2026). These examples illustrate the extraordinary measures employed by the U.S. government in order to defend against the alleged threat posed by student protestors. The legally questionable and often inhumane arrests, detentions and deportations are legitimized through the claims and warnings that these students are, in fact, terrorist supporters, antisemitic and anti-American; in short, as threats to America and American society.

As can be concluded from the statements made by government officials, the administration of Donald Trump's second presidential term in the period from November 2024 to June 2026 has securitized the academic community through two primary methods: labeling them as a threat to political security of the state of the United States, as well as the societal security of American society. Universities were faulted for allegedly allowing foreign students, with not enough vetting, or with potential ties to U.S. enemies such as the Communist Party of China, or even terrorist organizations such as Hamas. The students, professors, and academic institutions were also accused of allowing and propagating antisemitism, resulting in harassment and assaults on Jewish students. Regarding societal security, the academic community was framed as an enemy in the ongoing 'culture wars'. Universities allegedly ceased to allow free thought and speech, indoctrinated students into communism, discriminated against white men, endangered women through inclusion of transgender athletes, and generally undermined the societal fabric of the United States through policies of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. As seen from the variety of analyzed discourse produced by high-level U.S. government officials, including the President and various Secretaries, we can conclude that the cases of securitization of the academic community in the United States are not simply the targeting of a specific movement or group, but rather a more general attack on academia itself.

When analyzing the securitizing discourse from the U.S. government, we can identify elements of multiple "strands of securitization", as identified by Vuori (Vuori 2008). The traditional Copenhagen School strand of securitization which is used to legitimize future

measures is present. Its *claim-warn-request* speech act sequence can be seen, for example, in the claims that universities are allowing suspicious foreign students to attend, warnings that these students are committing antisemitic and anti-American violence, thus enabling the extraordinary measures of visa cancelation, deportation, and fining of the institutions they attended. Similarly, we can identify a continuation of this process in the presence of the ‘legitimizing past acts or reproducing a security status’, which operates based on a *claim-warn-explain* speech act sequence (Vuori 2008: 76). This process is used for legitimizing already taken measures, such as the Department of Homeland Security’s move to disallow Harvard to enroll foreign students. This measure was signed, and then later justified with claims of students’ cooperation with the Chinese Communist Party and warnings of violence and even the destruction of the U.S.

Elementary Speech Acts	Claim	Warn	Request
Discourse Examples in the Analyzed Case	Elite universities are allowing ‘suspicious foreign students’ to attend	These foreign students are ‘antisemitic’, ‘violent’, or have ties to foreign nations and terrorist groups	The foreign students should be deported, and the universities should be financially punished

Table 2. *Legitimizing future acts strand in the case of the U.S.*

There are elements of other strands of securitization present in this discourse, as well. The securitizing actors intended to utilize their institutional authority in order to affect the behavior of Harvard and other institutions as is the aim of the control strand of securitization, which has a *claim-warn-require* speech act sequence (Vuori 2008: 88–89). The claims and warnings remain similar to the previous strands, but with a *requirement* to cease the securitized activities that stems from formal authority of the securitizing actor, i.e. the President and his administration. However, Harvard’s defiance and suing of the U.S. government show that the control strand securitizing move failed, unable to use the very authority of the securitizing actor in order to influence the actions of the identified threat, i.e. Harvard. The act’s perlocutionary aim of obedience did not succeed.

Elementary Speech Acts	Claim	Warn	Explain
Discourse Examples in the Analyzed Case	Elite universities are allowing ‘suspicious foreign students’ to attend	These foreign students are ‘antisemitic’, ‘violent’, or have ties to foreign nations and terrorist groups	The deportation of foreign students and the freezing of funds for universities were justified

Table 3. *Legitimizing past acts (reproducing security) strand in the case of the U.S.*

Evaluating the discourse regarding the academic community from President Trump’s second term lets us identify all of the elements of securitization. Suing and freezing funds for universities, arresting and deporting students, all represent clear examples of extraordinary measures enabled by this process of securitization. President Trump, his administration and other Republican officials serve as the securitizing actors, notable for their high-ranking official positions (e.g. President, Secretary), but also their social capital. This is most relevant for President Trump, known his previously mentioned populist rhetoric, managing to rally significant support from as early as the 2016 election campaign, to today. This mixture of official authority, gained from the position as president of the U.S., and social capital from presenting himself as a champion of the outsiders and the global elite, provides a strong basis for securitizing moves. ‘The people’ as identified and produced as part of the right-wing populist rhetoric by these actors, are both the referent object that is, in their view, being threatened by the foreign students and governments, ‘dangerous ideologies’ and ‘anti-Americanism’, as well as the audience that is being addressed. This audience-object overlap and production is an important part of populist securitization, in which both elements create a unique phenomenon. The securitization might not be successful without the populist rhetoric helping identify the audience and referent objects, giving authority to the securitizing actors, and saliency to the threat. At the same time, the same securitizing process and its elements help bolster the populists’ arguments, and end up facilitating the (re-)production of ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’ which are at the core of populism. In other words, the populist elements and securitizing moves co-constitute each other.

The securitizing moves in the official discourse also use language that harkens back to earlier, recognized threats. President Trump referred to Harvard as a “Far Left Institution”, and Secretaries Rubio and Noem alleged ties to the Communist Party of China, specifically. The threat of communism is reignited from its Cold War and McCarthy era roots through the labeling of students as ‘communists’, and the insinuations of connections to the Chinese

Communist Party, representing the main contender to U.S. global hegemony, as the Soviet Union did during the Cold War. The specter of communism is also present in the wider ‘culture war’ phenomenon, with labels such as ‘cultural Marxism’ being used, further connecting these securitization processes with the populist rhetoric present during Donald Trump’s presidency. Other securitizing moves towards the academic community, such as the inference of possible ‘support of terrorism’ (e.g. Hamas) due to pro-Palestinian protestors are also influenced by historical context, namely the War on Terror launched by the United States after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York. This usage of imagery and rhetoric helps the populist leader’s securitization attempts, making the threat seem more credible due to its connection with historical cases serving as precedent.

The securitization of academia also has a practical, pragmatic use for the populist government in power. It serves to entrench the populist divide of society into ‘the people’, whose champion is the populist leader, and ‘the corrupt elite’ opposing them. Wojczewski’s conceptualization of populist securitization is identifiable in the analyzed discourse: there is dramatization and fearmongering used to present an existential threat to ‘the people’ – the destruction of the United States, collusion with terrorists, communists and foreign governments are notable examples. Further, there is notable simplification and scapegoating: diversity, equity and inclusion measures are simplified to be ‘anti-white racism’, the academic community is the scapegoat for the alleged disruption of American society and values. Finally, there is a propagation of a state of emergency: mass deportations, fund-cutting, foreign student bans. The purpose of these measures is to “homogenize and naturalize ‘the people’” (Wojczewski 2020: 19–20); by speaking of a threat to the ‘people’, the President conjures both the threat, as well as ‘the people’ who are alleged to be threatened. Only with such threats, and an identified *Other* in the ‘corrupt elites’ of Harvard, for example, can ‘the people’ that Trump represents become a singular and homogenous group (Wojczewski 2020: 23, 29), with a unique political will. The entrenchment of ‘the people’ provides the populist leader with a stable base of supporters, ensuring enough political capital to stay in power. With such a wide array of identified threats, the populist leader remains popular, making even internal challenges and opposition within their own party (in this case the Republican party) unlikely to be successful.

When examining the discourse analyzed in this chapter, we can find definitive elements of securitization of the academic community in the United States. There are clear securitizing actors (President Trump and members of his administration), identified threats (universities, their professors and students, especially foreign students), securitizing moves using the

grammar of security (found in the analyzed rhetoric), emergency actions and extraordinary measures taken (arrests and deportations of students, lawsuits and financial cuts for universities), and a referent object (the United States of America as a political entity and, importantly, ‘the people’ that make up its society), which also represents the audience. Further, this process of securitization is significantly affected by the populist nature of the government, affecting every one of these elements of securitization. The discourse is tuned and modulated in such a way to be especially effective towards this specific audience, while also being used to constitute a relationship between academia as the threat within this specific securitization process, and progressivism in general, as a signifier of ‘the elite’ that the populist leader opposes. In contrast, the liberal-democratic tradition of the United States also shapes these processes, affecting the way this securitization occurs. To understand populist securitization of the academic community on a deeper level, it is necessary to examine how it occurs in contexts with less robust democratic institutions and a different political culture than the U.S.

5. Serbia – Constructing Student Protests as a Threat to the Populist Regime

This chapter will focus the ongoing student protests in Serbia, and the resulting securitization of the academic community by Serbian officials. Similarly to the previous one, this chapter will begin with an outline of the current political landscape of Serbia, informed by relevant historical events related to Serbia's partial transition to liberal democracy. A brief summary of events related to the November 1, 2024 railway station canopy collapse in Novi Sad and the resulting protests in Serbia will follow. The subsequent section will provide examples of discourse by government officials regarding the student protestors specifically, and the academic community in general. This discourse will be analyzed, and elements of securitization identified and mapped onto the different possible strands of securitization. Further, there will be examples of extraordinary measures taken by the securitizing actors.

5.1. Context – From Unfinished Democratization to Autocratization

In order to fully comprehend the context behind the recent securitization of the academic community in Serbia, an overview of Serbia's recent political history is necessary. During the 1990's and the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Serbia (then, together with Montenegro known as the *Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, FRY*) was led by the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), headed by Slobodan Milošević, serving first as president of Serbia (1991–1997, within the FRY), then as president of the FRY (1997–2000). The 'Milošević era', generally classified as a 'competitive' or 'electoral authoritarian' system (Vladisavljević 2010: 14; Vladisavljević 2016), saw wars, economic sanctions, international isolation, state repression and media control (Tomić and Atanacković 2009: 187). Because of Milošević's control over institutions and limitations of the opposition's ability to affect policy, public protests and demonstrations became the primary outlet for anti-SPS sentiment. The fact that Milošević's regime was a 'competitive authoritarian' regime, rather than totalitarian, meant that protests and demonstrations were possible, and to a certain extent tolerated. Such regimes have formal democratic institutions, but rules are often broken, elections manipulated (though rarely outright stolen), the different branches of government subservient to the powerholders (Vladisavljević 2010: 14–15; Vladisavljević 2016: 36). Many of these protests had significant student involvement, as there was a noted increase not only in the number of students in Serbia, but of different forms of student organizations and movements (Tomić 2009: 188–190). Student involvement in these protests was not limited to merely academic demands (e.g. university autonomy), but also included open calls for democratization in general (Tomić 2009:

190). The most notable student movement was *Otpor!* (Resistance!), which grew into the most significant anti-Milošević movement in Serbia (Tomić: 2009: 190). Other parts of academia, including many professors and other faculty members, were also involved in the protests. Because of this, universities were targeted by the government in various ways, including the *University Act* of 1998, which attempted to undermine the autonomy of universities and led to the firing of many openly oppositional professors (Human Rights Watch 1999; Radenković Jeremić 2025).

The year 2000 saw the October 5 demonstrations in Belgrade. Following the elections of September 23 mired with major discrepancies and irregularities, massive protests broke out, led by the Democratic opposition of Serbia (*Demokratska opozicija Srbije, DOS*). The protests resulted in Milošević's admittance of the electoral defeat and resignation on October 5, 2000, and DOS' coming into power. The period following the fall of Milošević's government was marked by competition and power sharing between the two most significant parties of the ex-opposition, the Democratic Party (*Demokratska stranka – DS*) whose leader Zoran Đinđić led the government, and the Democratic Party of Serbia (*Demokratska stranka Srbije – DSS*) whose leader Vojislav Koštunica was the head of state. During this era, Serbia's international isolation ended, the first steps towards European integration of Serbia were taken, the economy was liberalized and the process of democratization started (e.g. Vladiasvljević 2019). However, views on European integration and other issues differed between the two parties in power, limiting the scope of these reforms (Staletović and Bieber 2024: 490).

Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), as well as their allies, the far-right Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka, SRS*) were out of power, although they still retained significant support among the voting public (Bieber 2019: 42–43). Afterwards, SPS returned to power as a *kingmaker* party in 2008, while SRS's more radical stances prevented them from being involved in ruling coalitions (Bieber 2019: 43–44). Because of these factors, Aleksandar Vučić and Tomislav Nikolić, two important members of the SRS, founded the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka, SNS*), a formally more pro-European alternative (Bieber 2019). The newly formed SNS under Tomislav Nikolić unexpectedly won the 2012 presidential elections, while also winning the most seats in the Parliament. The elections came after a period of democratic backsliding, corruption, and the negative effects of the 2008 economic crisis (Vladisavljević 2019). The power of the Serbian Progressive Party grew quickly, especially with the 2014 early parliamentary elections seeing a near doubling of SNS's

seats in Parliament (Bieber 2019), cementing the new Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić's hold on power, leading into an era of democratic crisis in Serbia.

The period since the Serbian Progressive Party came into power in 2012, and especially since Aleksandar Vučić became Prime Minister in 2014, has been one of significant democratic backsliding and autocratization in Serbia (Staletović and Bieber 2024: 490–491). Signs of this backsliding could be seen during the parliamentary elections of 2016, which saw a major increase of suppression of the opposition, as well as the illegal action in which masked men demolished buildings in *Savamala*, for example (Vladisavljević 2020: 1003). Elections have not been fair, mainly due to factors such as media control and bias (Vladisavljević 2020: 1004). Issues with elections, corruption and the rule of law have garnered international attention (e.g. European Commission 2025; OSCE ODHIR 2024); organizations such as Freedom House and Varieties of Democracy have recognized similar issues, noting the trend of democratic backsliding. For example, Serbia was categorized as 'free' in Freedom House's 2017 and 2018 reports, after which it was categorized as 'partly free' instead, with steadily falling scores on political rights and civil liberties since (Freedom House 2017; 2018; 2019). Similarly, Varieties of Democracy reported Serbia's 'Liberal Democracy Index' as 0,49 in 2012, dropping to 0,21 in 2025 (Varieties of Democracy 2026). While not perfect, these indices showcase a clear trend of constricting freedom in Serbia's political landscape and the process of autocratization. This democratic backsliding has affected the academic community, as well. In these years, the government has, at different times and with different methods, challenged university autonomy and academic freedoms (e.g. Tomić and Radeljić 2022). This process has only intensified with the breakout of the student protests in 2024.

Aleksandar Vučić's rule, first as prime minister and later as president of Serbia, has been commonly labeled as populist (e.g. Todosijević, Pavlović and Komar 2022: 21). Part of Vučić's populist rhetoric has been the attempt to present himself as part of 'the people', fighting on their behalf against the 'corrupt elite'. This was exemplified in some of the Serbian Progressive Party's campaign promises before the 2012 election, including the promise the arrest billionaire businessman Miroslav Mišković. The promise was eventually followed through with, though without a successful conviction, resulting in the government paying Mišković 32.7 million euros in damages (Andrić 2025). On a smaller scale, attempts by Aleksandar Vučić to identify with the common people have included publicly visiting bakeries and being recorded eating traditional pastries (e.g. Danas 2025; ePančevo 2026), claiming to have "never lit a cigarette, seen drugs, or drank coffee" (Aleksandar Vučić, quoted in Beta

2025). Such examples of “performances of ordinariness” are used by populist leaders in order to differentiate them from the purported elites, making them appear as ‘outsiders’, in touch with the people they represent (Moffit 2016: 65). Overall, each example points to the pitting of ordinary people against corrupt elites and purported representation of those ordinary people by the political leader, noted as clear signs of populism. Even with the increased stranglehold on power and strong populist base of support, however, the rule of the Serbian Progressive Party and Aleksandar Vučić have recently faced a major crisis, arguable the most significant one since coming into power.

On November 1, 2024, a railway station canopy collapsed in Novi Sad, killing 16 people. Public outcry over alleged corruption during the canopy’s reconstruction, and the government’s negligence and lack of any accountability from government officials, led to an outbreak of massive public protests. After an attack on students at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade during a silent tribute to the victims of the canopy collapse on November 22, 2024, organized student protests spread throughout most universities in Serbia. Protests included the blockades of faculty buildings, daily traffic blockades with 16 minutes of silence meant as a vigil for the 16 victims, as well as public demonstrations (Beširević 2025; Glušac 2026). The student protests set out a list of demands, including the publication of the relevant documentation on the reconstruction of the collapsed canopy, the release and the dropping of charges against arrested protestors, legal prosecution of those who attacked student protestors, and a 20% increase in public spending for institutions of higher education (Beširević 2025). Eventually, the lack of government response to the protestors’ demands, as well as increasing violations of the rule of law, led to the protestors starting to demand snap parliamentary elections (Davies 2025 and Petrušijević 2025, as cited in Đorđević and Radeljić 2025).

5.2. The Government’s Securitization of Students

The early phases of the student protests following the tragic fall of the railway station canopy in Novi Sad on November 1, 2024 were already marked by official discourse framing the protestors as foreign agents. This discourse was produced by the highest political authorities, including the President, the Prime Minister, and the President of the National Assembly, among others. “We will ensure that you make an honest living and help your country in an honest way. Don’t fight, slap and grab each other because someone wants you to destroy your country”, said the President in a press conference after a student protest in December of

2024 (President Aleksandar Vučić, quoted in RTS 2024). A few weeks later, on December 27, the Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin similarly said:

Color revolutions, such as the one in China where they tried to overthrow China in Hong Kong, are done through students because they want changes, because they are young, we all love them, they are our children, but on the other hand, they are very susceptible to manipulations. (...) Nobody, children, will move out of your way, nobody will give you their money. Foreign services will, but not to everyone. The vast majority of students and youth are there because it's interesting to them, they sometimes believe in something but those who are leading you are getting paid for it. (Aleksandar Vulin, quoted in Slobodna Bosna 2024; T.S. 2024)

In the same statement, he claimed that a 'hybrid war' was being conducted against the President (T.S. 2024), and that the students are in fact working in the interest of Croatian politicians, who, he claimed "believe that Jasenovac was a good thing, that Jasenovac was not genocide" (referring to a World War II concentration camp in modern day Croatia; Vulin, quoted in Slobodna Bosna 2024). That the same month, the National Assembly President alleged that the protests politicized children, arguing that "we have to protect those children" (Ana Brnabić, quoted in Tanjug/RTV 2024). In these early phases of the protest, we can already identify claims of the students being 'manipulated' or 'paid' by foreign actors, and warnings about the negative consequences of protesting, such as an alleged 'color revolution', or destabilization by foreign nations. In addition, from the very beginning of the protests, government officials used imagery of World War II atrocities as part of their discourse. Such rhetoric continued into early 2025, with the President explicitly claiming interference by Croatian intelligence agencies, and the Prime Minister at the time repeating warnings of a 'color revolution':

And what is happening in Serbia, I have no problem in saying that these are clear traces of a color revolution, because I can't call what is currently at work any other way. With the fact that, for the first time, we are seeing children from some primary and secondary schools being used and abused by someone. (Vučević, quoted in N2 2025)

Already, in these earliest stages of the protests, we can identify securitizing rhetoric from government officials. The officials' rhetoric claims the students to be foreign agents, implying that the protests were not an organic response to corruption, democratic backsliding or lack of accountability following the tragedy of Novi Sad, but instead foreign-backed projects intended to destabilize and undermine the security of Serbia. The framing of students as foreign agents, sometimes malevolent, but mostly misguided and manipulated by foreign intelligence services as part of a 'color revolution' became one of the major themes of the official discourse, serving as a warning of what could allegedly happen if the protests continued, or the protestors demands fulfilled. Further, the organizers of the protests were alleged to be 'using and abusing'

children and students, labeling them as a clear and significant threat to Serbian society. In addition, the securitizing actors use World War II imagery in order to magnify the alleged threat of the protests due to their association with these events. These models of discourse remained in use by government officials throughout the whole analyzed period, though specifics changed, and rhetoric intensified.

Analyzing the illocutionary logic of the official discourse in this earliest phase of the student protests, we can place it within the control strand of securitization. This strand aims to direct or forbid the audience from certain acts, without leaving room for disagreement due to the authority and reasoning of the securitizing actors (Vuori 2008: 88–89). The *claim-warn-require* elementary speech act sequence of the control strand is present here. Serbian officials, including the President himself, *claimed* that the students’ protests are a foreign-backed and manipulated, *warned* that they will lead to a non-democratic ‘color revolution’ and instability, and *demand*ed that the students cease protesting. Although it may seem to fit the deterrence strand at first, there are no specific threats or declarations of consequences issued at this stage. Claims are being made about the actors and the situation, but there is no rhetoric about specific measures that could be taken in case the students decline to cease protesting; the securitizing actors (government officials) make claims about the negative consequences of the threat (the protests), but only appeal to their authority and the students’ conscience, rather than saying that the students will be arrested or beaten, for example (extraordinary measures). Other than the very nature of the securitizing actor’s authority, both as the president, and as the most powerful political actor in the country, the students were demanded to stop protesting, and instead ‘make an honest living’ and ‘help their country’, in an attempt to appeal to their conscience. The fact that the attempt to curtail protests through this authority was unsuccessful, as the protests spread and escalated, led to a change of discourse and securitization in the following period.

Elementary Speech Acts	Claim	Warn	Demand
Discourse Examples in the Analyzed Case	Student protestors are manipulated and influenced by foreign agents	The student protests are actually a ‘color revolution’, which will lead to political and economic instability	The students should cease protesting

Table 4. *Control securitization in the case of Serbia*

The middle of the year 2025 was marked by the intensification of the rhetoric employed by government actors. Early signs of this radicalization could be seen in April, when students who were allegedly planning a blockade of the Belgrade Airport were labeled as ‘terrorists’ by National Assembly President Ana Brnabić:

They have turned the Faculty of Medicine into a faculty where a group meets which (...) is planning a most serious terrorist action that could have the aftermath of hundreds and thousands of dead people. (...) But what you planned was not radicalization, it was terrorism. (Ana Brnabić, quoted in Beta/Danas 2025)

Here, we can see discourse that not only labels the students as ‘terrorists’, but even claims that the institution of the Faculty of Medicine itself has been, in a way, corrupted, and is now a security threat. The reasoning behind the warning that blockading the airport would lead to “hundreds and thousands of dead people” was not substantiated, instead serving to create an atmosphere where any action announced or undertaken by the student movement can be presented as radical, dangerous, and threatening to the Serbian state and people. Such discourse implies that further extraordinary measures are appropriate and necessary, serving as a warning to student protestors and their supporters. While the measures were not specified, using the security grammar associated with terrorism to warn of possible consequences of allowing the protests to continue makes any measures seem acceptable.

This escalation of discourse continued in June and July of 2025, as the student protests intensified. After a protest in front of an SNS office in Novi Sad, a group of students were attacked and beaten by four men, who were soon arrested. Following this incident, President Vučić, in a media statement, called the attackers “heroes”, demanding their freedom, while labeling the student protestors “akin to the Nazis in ’34, assaulting the Party premises of their opponents, attacking their opponent’s homes” (Aleksandar Vučić, quoted in I.M. 2025). Ana Brnabić quickly joined in the President’s rhetoric, claiming on June 15, 2025, that the students were being paid to protest, saying that they occupied public universities, leading to “months of terror” (Ana Brnabić, quoted in Beta/Nova 2025).

We haven’t seen such scenes since World War II and the Nazi era. In its essence, it is a Nazi ideology, in which you do not allow someone who has a different opinion to you to exist. (Ana Brnabić, quoted in Beta/Nova 2025)

Days before the massive protests on June 28 (Vidovdan, an important national holiday in Serbia), Brnabić added that the protestors were “planning violence”, repeated comparisons to Nazis and Fascists from World War II, and claimed that the protestors wanted to recognize that there was a genocide committed in Srebrenica (Ana Brnabić, quoted in Politika 2025). Students

were not alleged to be merely ‘terrorists’, but Nazis as well. This heightened rhetoric seems coordinated, as both Vučić and Brnabić started utilizing the imagery of Nazism around the same time, leading up to the June 28 student protests. The use of imagery of Nazism as a significant historical threat to Serbia and its people will remain relevant in the following period, in concurrence with the further escalation of government official’s discourse. The claim that the student movement does not allow people with different opinions to exist is meant to represent them as specifically opposed to supporters of the government, helping constitute them as an identifiable group, while simultaneously claiming that the group is under attack.

The period from late 2024 to the middle of 2025 showed a major shift in the government officials’ rhetoric. The student protestors were no longer labeled just misguided youths manipulated by foreign intelligence agencies. Now, the students were claimed to be ‘terrorists’, ‘Nazis’, ‘Fascists’, ‘extremists’ and ‘radicals’ planning violence and ready to cause the deaths of hundreds and thousands of people. Those who physically assaulted the protestors were defended and supported, in a clear message to the students that their safety is not guaranteed even by the police and government. Instead, official discourse implied that attending protests could be dangerous, likely in an attempt to discourage further demonstrations. Students, along with their professors, were framed as a significant and major threat to national security. The comparison to Nazism is especially relevant in the context of Serbia, primarily due to Serbs being victims of the Nazi holocaust in former Yugoslavia (most significantly in the Nazi puppet state *Independent State of Croatia*), a period of history that is still significant in contemporary discourse, and frames Serbia’s identity and foreign relations (see Odak and Benčić 2016). The use of such imagery seeks to heighten the imminence and importance of the alleged threat, making any sort of response by the government seem possible, if not justified.

In response to a protest in front of the Prime Minister’s house in July, a member of the presidency of the Serbian progressive party, Milica Nikolić, posted a statement in which she called the protestors lunatics and fascists, and warning that “we will fight even harder against the fascist-terrorist gang of blockaders, and the time of responsibility is yet to come!” (Nikolić 2025). Maja Gojković, president of the government of Vojvodina, commented on the same event.

And that was the task of this revolution, with the violent overthrow of the government and President Vučić, without elections. When they didn’t succeed, they started fearmongering and individually attacking and targeting anyone who does not think like them and who does not want to be involved in the demolition and rape of Serbia”. (Maja Gojković, quoted in Borba 2025)

She further compared the protestors to post-World War II communists, claiming that they want to economically destroy Serbia and undermine its political stability (Gojković, quoted in Borba 2025). Additionally, Gojković repeats a motif in the discourse regarding the students' alleged intolerance of different opinions, reinforcing the idea that the students are not merely opposed to the non-democratic government, but are in fact a danger and threat to 'the people', implied to be all of the supporters and voters of the ruling party. This escalated rhetoric continued into 2026 with Information and Telecommunications Minister Boris Bratina claiming on a television talk-show in early April that students have been 'sold' an anarchist ideology, and that they "are not aware that the police have a right to beat them and kill them" (Boris Bratina, quoted in N1 2026), cementing the government's message that attending protests is not safe, and that student protestors cannot expect protection by the government and police, in order to disincentivize and discourage further protests. The allusions to Nazism and communism continued in this period, supplemented with threats of often non-specific retaliation by the government.

As seen from the government officials' statements, this period of escalated rhetoric included further comparison of student protestors with 'extremists', 'fascist', and 'revolutionaries' wanting to undermine state and societal security. However, there was an increase in language, although vague, that implied future policy measures, e.g. fighting harder against the protestors, or implying the possibility of police violence. This rhetoric is more closely aligned with the deterrence strand, attempting to stop a threat through intimidation. In the deterrence strand, the securitizing actor with sufficient authority warns about possible future acts, if the threat is not stopped (Vuori 2008: 81–83). The speech act is aimed at the threat itself, as the audience in deterrence securitization *is* the threat, e.g. the student protestors, in this case. The speech act sequence in this strand is *claim-warn-declare*. The protestors were claimed to be 'fascist', 'terrorist' or 'anarchists', the government officials warned of a 'color revolution' and political and economic destruction of the country, and declared possible consequences, e.g. a vague "time of responsibility", or the more specific beating (and even killing) of protestors. The deterrent discourse is aimed at the academic community, and student protestors more specifically, i.e. the identified threat itself.

Elementary Speech Acts	Claim	Warn	Declare
Discourse Examples in the Analyzed Case	Student protestors have ‘fascist’ and ‘terrorist’ tendencies	The student protests are actually a ‘color revolution’, which will lead to political and economic instability	If the students continue protesting, they could be ‘arrested’, ‘beaten’ or ‘killed’. The student protestors will eventually lose, and face responsibility.

Table 5. *Deterrence securitization in the case of Serbia*

However, while the main audience is the threat (the student protestors), there is another key function of this discourse, namely further securitization of the academic community in the eyes of ‘the people’, the public consisting mostly of government supporters. Even if the securitizing move aimed at students and intended to dissuade further protests fails, its dissemination through various popular media channels, and the facts it is produced by important government officials, has an important effect on ‘the people’, constantly reestablishing the students as dangerous. As such, while the main perlocutionary aim of this discourse was to deter and disincentivize further protests and demonstrations, or at least their spread and intensification, it also served simultaneously to prepare and legitimize the possibility of actually going through with the measures used as threats, and to justify similar examples that have already occurred. For example, threats by minister Bratina regarding police violence and brutality towards the protestors actually happened during some of the protests, although they were not widely reported on by pro-government media. According to these factors, we can identify elements of two more strands: legitimating future acts, and legitimating past acts (reproducing security). However, they remain secondary to the deterrence strand, especially in this period.

One of the measures that the government used to deal with the alleged security threat of the student protests during this period was a government decree enacted in March of 2025 that changed the structure of academics’ work, nearly doubling the number of hours dedicated to teaching, and nearly eliminating the hours for research (Andrić 2025). The Act was a government decree, avoiding the parliamentary procedures for changes in legislation. Universities were also financially targeted, with one example being the centralization of university finances into the *SPIRI* system, part of the Treasury Administration, Ministry of

Finance. Members of the academic community protested this decision, claiming it brought university autonomy into question (Andrić 2026). Arrests of students during protests were also a common occurrence, with dozens of examples all over the country (e.g. Sudar 2024; FoNet/Danas 2025; D.D. 2025; N1 2025; N1 2026; N1/FoNet 2026). In addition, there was a similarly high number of physical assaults by the police and the gendarmerie in an attempt to subdue peaceful demonstrations (e.g. Ozonpress 2025; Cvijić 2025; Milovančević 2026). Furthermore, there were attempts to enter university buildings, such as the gendarmerie forcefully entering the blockaded Faculty of Sport and Physical Education (V.A. 2025). While the most common extraordinary measures and emergency actions taken by the government against the student protest labeled as a threat include cutting university funding by the state, arrests and beatings of students and other protestors by police, there were examples of more extreme measures. Arguably the most significant special security measure employed by the government occurred during the March 15 protests, when a ‘sound cannon’ (a Long-Range Acoustic Device, LRAD) was allegedly used, leading to massive panic and a stampede among the protestors (Đurić 2026).

On March 15, 2025, Serbian citizens gathered in one of the largest protests in Serbia’s history, involving over 300,000 people (De Launey 2025). While the protestors stood silent for 15 minutes, honoring the 15 (at the time, as the sixteenth person passed from their injuries a later date) lives taken by the canopy’s fall, a sudden and powerful sound emerged, causing mass panic (Građanske Inicijative 2025, cited in Glušac 2026: 11–12). While the government denied claims of the usage of a ‘sound cannon’, claiming that the police possessed no such weapon, reports showed proof that the government had, contrary to those claims, installed two LRAD’s on vehicles present during the protests (BIA 2025, as cited in Glušac 2026: 12). The alleged usage of this less-lethal weapon resulted in over 3,500 reports of psychological and physical consequences, many of which were medically documented (Massam 2025, as cited in Glušac 2026: 12). After the incident, the Serbian government announced their request to the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) for help in investigating the events that occurred during the protests (European Western Balkans, 2025). The incident also gathered international attention, resulting in an interim measure against Serbia by the European Court of Human Rights (European Court of Human Rights 2025, as cited in Glušac 2025: 13). Looking at the totality of the government’s rhetoric and actions in this period, we can see that all the essential elements of securitization are present. The securitizing actors are easily identifiable as members of the ruling party, including the

President Aleksandar Vučić, former Prime Minister Miloš Vučević and National Assembly President Ana Brnabić, most commonly, though other actors appeared sporadically. The emergency measures that ensued, i.e. the police brutality and alleged use of an LDR, might not have been possible without such rhetoric laying the groundwork.

The alleged usage of the LDR was also used as a way to further securitize student protestors. As the government denied using the ‘sound cannon’, they simultaneously claimed that the allegations themselves were a plot by the students against the government. Minister of Internal Affairs Ivica Dačić claimed that the allegations that the police used an LDR during the protests were proven to be a “brutal lie”, adding that:

It was a cold-blooded, planned a month ahead, scenario with only one goal – causing mass panic, conflict in the streets and, finally, a civil war in Serbia. (...) It clearly shows who was giving the orders, and in whose interest is a weak, destabilized and smothered Serbia, which would be controlled through foreign pressure. (Ivica Dačić, as quoted in MUP 2025).

President Vučić agreed, similarly stating:

The investigation will be completed in full within 48 hours, after which all responsible for such fabrications and lies will be held accountable before the law. (...) You remember the accusations that Yanukovych brought snipers who shot at the people... They have started the same thing here, as well. (Vučić, as quoted in Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2025b)

This official discourse seeks to delegitimize local and international claims of the use of illegal weaponry and measures against the protestors. Additionally, the argument that the allegations were not only incorrect, but malicious lies, whose goals are ‘violence’ and even a ‘civil war’, serve to paint the protestors as violent extremists, and significant threats to Serbia. These ideas are complemented by the claims about people who were alleged to be in charge of the protests, allegedly seeking to ‘destabilize Serbia’ for foreign interests. The imagery of Euromaidan protests alluded to by the comparisons to Yanukovych also reinforce the commonly repeated claim of the student protests being a foreign-backed color revolution. Such presidential discourse is also echoed in the securitizing discourse coming from the government, with the key motifs of security being repeated: protestors are allegedly violent, insincere in their purported values, and backed by foreign governments seeking to destabilize Serbia through a ‘color revolution’. While vague, there are also implications of measures taken against protestors, such as the ‘accountability before the law’ mentioned by the president.

The government commonly used historical comparisons and World War II-era imagery to make the threat of the academic community seem more credible. The most obvious example

was the labeling of the student protestors as Nazis, fascists, and communists, by various actors and at different times. Although internally incoherent due to the different nature and historical role of those ideologies in Serbia, this type of rhetoric, which was commonly used by government officials, is nevertheless effective due to each of those movements having significant impact in the country's history. As previously mentioned, the comparison to Nazis is especially significant due to their actions against Serbs and other peoples in Yugoslavia during World War II, and the fact that this era of history remains relevant in contemporary discourse. Utilizing communism as label is similarly effective, due to Serbia's history as part of the socialist state of Yugoslavia from 1945 until its dissolution in the 1990s. This is a case of using historical examples as rhetorical tools to strengthen the securitizing move of a certain threat, warning the audience to legitimize the usage of extraordinary measures so as to not repeat such a moment history. The extraordinary measures employed against student protestors and universities garnered international attention due to their frequent excessiveness, brutality, and potential infringement of human rights. Such measures are products of the securitizing discourse by government officials, portraying the academic community as a threat that must be stopped, even if that can only be done by using extreme measures.

The securitization of the academic community in Serbia during the period of the student protests also included examples of government discourse targeting individuals. The most notable target was professor Vladan Đokić, rector of the University of Belgrade, who openly supported the student protests and their demands. During the protests, professor Đokić emerged as a symbolically relevant example of support for the students by academic institutions. In turn, government officials attempted to discredit him, thus attempting to undermine the whole student movement. After a discussion in late June 2025 between the Rector and members of the government regarding university enrollment quotas, President Vučić stated that:

There is huge dissatisfaction within the largest party with the results of the talks with Đokić, who showed absolute irresponsibility, frivolity and participated in the attempt to overthrow the state. (Aleksandar Vučić, quoted in Radio Slobodna Evropa 2025a)

The president added that members of his party would not “talk with terrorists and those who were bringing down the state, and Đokić is one of them” (Aleksandar Vučić, quoted in Radio Slobodna Evropa 2025a).

Such rhetoric is in line with the discourse from other government officials, such as National Assembly President Brnabić's statement in May 2025 where, referring to Rector Đokić, she said:

And I recommend to him that he does not humiliate our country and with it our citizens any more by thinking that the law does not apply to him. That's why in the end comes the time of responsibility (Ana Brnabić, quoted in Tanjug/RTV 2025).

In line with the government securitization of the academic community and student movement as a whole, rector Đokić was particularly singled out as representatives of the academic community's criticisms of democratic backsliding and lack of rule of law. As a result, Đokić was labeled a lawbreaker, who attempted to 'overthrow the government', and even a 'terrorist', by the highest-ranking government officials of Serbia. As is the case with the student movement as a whole, this rhetoric serves to legitimize potential extraordinary measures against the alleged threat, hinted at in unspecified terms, such as 'the time of responsibility'. These processes can also be understood through the lens of the deterrence strand of securitization, as these labels and threats may play a role in disincentivizing professor Đokić in his political activity, as well as others who may fear being similarly targeted if they decided to also publicly support the students.

Taking of all the explored elements into account, we can identify all key elements of securitization of the academic community in the case of Serbia, which occurred not dissimilarly to the process analyzed in the case of the United States of America. Government officials utilized discourse that painted the students and universities as threats to Serbia and the Serbian people, attempting to justify and legitimize various emergency actions, such as arrests and beatings of students, and financial measures taken against universities and their staff. The motifs and imagery of Nazism and communism are combined with claims of foreign influence. Such claims imply the student movement as both extremely powerful, due to their alleged backing, and extremely dangerous, due to the World War II comparisons. At the same time, they are represented as undemocratic, attempting to subvert institutional pathways and take down the government in a 'color revolution', thus contrasting them with the populist leader, who claims democratic support and legitimacy. Still, even though this populist securitization of academia was present in both cases, there are clear and distinct differences in the specific way these processes occurred. In order to learn more about these differences and their significance, the following section will compare the two cases, identifying what caused the disparity, and what that disparity tells us about populist securitization in general.

6. The United States and Serbia – Different Contexts, Similar Processes

There are both notable differences between the cases' political contexts, as well as striking similarities in the securitization processes and discourse employed by the two populist leaders of the United States of America and Serbia, Donald Trump and Aleksandar Vučić. After analyzing the securitizing moves made by government officials in the U.S. and Serbia, as well as the respective backgrounds and contexts of these two countries, the following section will offer a comparison of the cases, inquiring into how the differences and similarities between them affect the processes of securitization of the academic community.

6.1. Key Differences and Similarities – Securitization of the Academic Community in Different Political Contexts

The United States of America and Serbia have significant differences in their political contexts and histories, in the institutions and political systems in place, as well as the political cultures of their citizens. The United States of America has long been considered a model liberal democracy, with a stable two-party system and a strong president limited through the system of checks and balances. There were no major shifts in the political landscape since the 1960s, at the very least, with the same two parties representing moderate liberal and moderate conservative positions competing for power. Donald Trump's populist challenge to entrenched systems seems to have resonated with many Americans, however, and right-wing populism has become an important factor in the American political landscape. Serbia's case, on the other hand, is completely different. Within the last few decades, Serbia has seen and been involved in multiple wars, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the changing of at least four names and states (SFRY, FRY, Serbia and Montenegro, and finally Serbia), a massive political and economic transition, and significant swings in the level of democracy. The authoritarian regime of the 90s was overthrown by a popular revolution, leading to a brief period of liberalism and the expansion of democratic institutions, only for the process to be cut short first with the moderate democratic backsliding of President Tadić's second term, and especially with the significant backsliding under the Serbian Progressive Party and Aleksandar Vučić.

Even with all these differences, there are important similarities in the way that populism shapes these countries' current political landscapes. Going back to the minimal definition of populism as a "thin-centered ideology" (see p. 9), we can identify, in both countries, the constant and consistent attempts to portray the antagonistic divide into "the ordinary people" and the "corrupt elite", in this case embodied by the academic community in general, and

student protestors specifically, and the policies implemented by these populist leaders appeal to the alleged general will of the ordinary people, rather than the educated elites. Furthermore, both of these political leaders utilized right-wing populist rhetoric, attempted to present themselves as belonging to, as well as representing the ordinary people, by performing “ordinariness”. The performance of “ordinariness”, understood as part of the populists’ identification with “the people” represents a key element of populist securitization. Present in both cases, this element further showcases the need of the populist leaders to differentiate themselves from the elites, in a way that allows them to remain to be perceived as outsiders even after being in power, whether it be for two terms (in the U.S. case), or well over a decade (in the case of Serbia).

Another key similarity, indicative of the wider trend of securitization of academic communities by right-wing populists, is that both countries have had significant drops in measured academic freedoms. For example, the Varieties of Democracy Academic Freedom Index shows a drop in academic freedoms in Serbia from 2024 to 2025, with the index going from 0.77 to 0.6 in one year (V-Dem 2026), though, notably, this does not take account recent measures taken during 2026. A similar trend can be noticed in the United States as well, with an initial drop from 0.89 to 0.68 during President Joseph Biden’s term, and an even sharper drop to 0.4 during Donald Trump’s second term (V-Dem 2026). We can identify remarkable similarities in the rhetoric and measures employed in the United States and Serbia in the period of November 2024 – June 2026. Both countries saw the academic community opposing certain policies and undemocratic tendencies of the right-wing populist government. Student protests occurred, while professors and academic institutions often supported the students and levied further critiques of the government’s actions. In both cases, these actions led to a government crackdown and the targeting of the academic community. Student protests were dispersed, students were arrested, and academic institutions were targeted by laws and executive orders.

Both Serbian and American officials utilized similar rhetorical devices in their official discourse, often labelling members of the academic community as ‘extremists,’ ‘terrorists,’ foreign agents – in short, threats to their countries. The populist leaders in Serbia and the U.S. used similar historical comparisons as rhetorical tools to increase the likelihood of a successful securitization. By comparing the alleged threat to real historical examples, such as Nazism, Communism, or terrorism, the securitizing actors hope to facilitate the audience’s acceptance of the requested extraordinary measures, as part of the “external, contextual and social” facilitating conditions of a speech act (Austin 1975, cited in Buzan et al. 1998: 32). The implicit claim is that if such measures are not taken, history will repeat itself. While the historical threats

called upon remain dependent on both of the countries' specific historical contexts (e.g. focusing on the discourse on terrorism and communism threats in the U.S., and primarily the discourse on Nazism threat in Serbia), the comparisons serve a similar function in both securitizing attempts – it strengthens the argument of the securitizing actors by making the alleged threat seem more severe and imminent. The two countries' populist governments also converged in the allegations that members of the academic community were intolerant of others' viewpoints and beliefs, attempting to censor or undermine them. This discourse has the effect of further securitizing the academic community by making them appear as a significant threat, while also making 'the people' whose values and free speech are alleged to be under attack identify as a more homogenous group, with a shared identity in opposition to the Other represented by the elites.

Notably, while both cases had very similar securitizing actors, referent objects, and even similar grammars of security within the securitizing acts, the speech act sequences and illocutionary and perlocutionary logics of the cases differed. While the United States case saw primarily the legitimating future acts strand, and the legitimating past acts strand. In Serbia, however, we can identify the primary use of the deterrence and control strands of securitization. A possible explanation of this disparity could lie in the most significant differences between the two cases — the political system, history, and level of democracy. As introduced by Vuori, the legitimating future acts and legitimating past acts strands, found in the U.S. case, both have similar *degrees of strength*, a term that denotes whether a speech act must be argued, or is compelling on its own. The two strands of the U.S. case both have to be argued, meaning that the audience plays a more significant role in the securitization process. In addition, both strands have a perlocutionary aim of legitimizing certain moves, further increasing the importance of the audience. The deterrence and control strand that we identified in the Serbian case, on the other hand, both rely on the formal authority of the securitizing actor, declaring to and compelling the audience, serving as the identified threat, as well. Importantly, their perlocutionary aim is also different from the U.S. case, with the former strand having the aim of intimidation and deterrence, and latter having the aim of obedience and discipline (Vuori 2008).

The difference found in the utilized strands of securitization aligns with the different political contexts of the two analyzed cases. The primary features of the audience in a process of securitization depend on the context, the cultures and norms within which this process occurs (Wertman and Kaunert 2022: 72). Even with the recent tendencies of democratic backsliding, the United States are still considered to be a liberal democracy. Decades, even centuries of

stable democratic institutions have resulted in, and been affected by, a political culture that values “legitimacy” as a key part of the decision-making process. Important acts, including extraordinary measures and emergency actions, must be argued and justified in the eyes of the general public, rather than being accepted purely due to the authority of actors employing them. In this aspect, Serbia’s political context is quite unlike that of America’s. With only a few years, at most, of liberal-democratic tendencies within the last century, political institutions in Serbia are fragile and unstable, the political culture is different, and democracy itself is not valued nearly as much, with only 59% of the population agreeing that democracy is “more acceptable than any other form of government” (CRTA and DAL 2026). Government efficiency is valued over democracy, and around 7 in 10 Serbian Progressive Party voters, the primary audience of the analyzed securitizing moves, believe that a popular president should be allowed to be elected more than twice, as is the current limit in the Constitution (CRTA and DAL 2026). It would then follow that, even though we can identify strong right-wing populist tendencies in both cases, as well as clear attempts to securitize the academic community, the political contexts of the United States and Serbia shape these securitizing processes, and limit the way they can occur. Furthermore, the populist leaders seem aware of these distinctions, intentionally adjusting their discourse to suit both the audience they seek to target, as well as the specific political context they operate within.

Country	Political System	Strands of Securitization	Degree of Strength	Perlocutionary Aim
United States	Liberal Democracy	Legitimizing future acts, legitimizing past acts	Has to be argued	Legitimizing measures
Serbia	Hybrid Regime	Control, deterrence	Requires formal authority	Intimidation, deterrence, obedience

Table 6. *Difference in strands of securitization in the U.S. and Serbia*

Even with the noted significant differences, there are many similarities in analyzed cases. One such important similarity can be identified in the roles of the academic communities of both the U.S. and Serbia. In both cases, it could be argued, the academic community were not mere targets marked as threats in the populist government’s securitizing moves, but rather securitizing actors in their own right. Eves (2025) contributes to Vuori’s classification of strands of security by introducing a sixth, protest strand, which proves useful in understanding the student protests in these two countries. This protest strand has an illocutionary logic of “do

X to repel threat Y otherwise warning Q” (Eves 2025: 84), making it distinct from Vuori’s other strands. The securitizing actors in this strand, i.e. the protestors (or other disempowered groups), attempt to raise “their security concerns with societal elites”, requesting from them to act in accordance with these concerns and “threatening further action if the group’s concerns are ignored” (Eves 2025: 85). The application of this strand to the Serbian case is fairly clear-cut – the students are claiming that the government is corrupt and dangerous (*threat Y*), requesting the fulfilment of their demands (*do X*), in order to avoid further protests, blockades, and even losing power at the next elections (*warning Q*). The case for the United States student protests is similar: the universities are alleged to be complicit in the government’s support of Israel’s actions in Gaza (*threat Y*), thus the universities and the government ought to cease these actions (*do X*), or else the students will continue their protests (*warning Q*). Viewed through this lens, the governments’ securitization of the academic community could be perceived as merely a response to the securitizing moves made by the academic communities of the U.S. and Serbia. This thesis argues, however, that such a conclusion would be preemptive, and would require analyzing the cases of securitization of the academic community in isolation. Instead, these processes of securitization are to be viewed as not only part of the populists’ opposition to expertise and its association to the ‘corrupt elite’, but notably the role that the academic community plays in democratic societies. Understanding this role is key in order to truly comprehend the processes of securitization of the academic community.

6.2. The Securitization of the Academic Community and the Defense of Democracy

An important part of why right-wing populists securitize the academic community can be found in academia’s role as a protector against democracy backsliding and autocratization. Universities are “values-based institutions”, with an undeniable role in propagating a free and open public dialogue, in which new ideas and views can be presented and argued (Gready and Jackson 2025: 57, 59, cf. Gumrukcu 2023: 528; Grigoriadis and Canpolat 2023: 435, 440–1; Ignatieff 2024: 194–195). A key element of this public debate is the freedom and ability to criticize the government, especially in cases where anti-democratic tendencies are present. Academics have the capacity and knowledge necessary to recognize such tendencies, to promote and argue for democratic values, while challenging governments in their attempts to curtail those values (Gumrukcu 2023: 534; cf. Ignatieff 2024; Grigoriadis and Canpolat 2023). This role of the academic community, while not making it directly involved in electoral politics, often serves as a useful source of argumentation for opposition actors in right-wing

populist regimes. The political opposition gains the opportunity to be armed with information about anti-democratic policies or rhetoric by the populist governments, created and disseminated by the academic community. Through academia, the opposition can, for example, attempt to securitize the government itself, attempting to convince the audience of its failures and dangers. The possibility of facilitation of threats to the right-wing populists' power developing is a key factor in why these actors target the academic community (Gumrucku 2023: 528; Gready and Jackson 2025: 61; Grigoriadis and Canpolat 2023: 448).

Additionally, the academic community is considered a threat not in isolation, but as part of other, structural problems, most significantly exemplified in the idea of the global elite and its malign influence (as seen in other cases such as Hungary; see Grigoriadis and Canpolat 2023: 445–6). The student protests and academic criticism of democratic backsliding are not presented as disagreement over the populists' policies, or even simply as a power-grabbing move by the local elites. Instead, they are claimed to be part of a global conspiracy, they are the alleged effect of foreign influences and globalist forces. It is precisely those influences that the populist ruler purports to keep at bay, thus defending 'the people' and their sovereignty, contrasting their alleged democratic legitimacy to the 'foreign backed' academic elite ostensibly trying to subvert democratic processes and affect political change. This framing is intentional, as it allows any new potential issue or challenge to the populists' power to be absorbed in this everlasting threat by 'global elites', discrediting it from the start, and simultaneously proving the need for the populist leader to have the power that they do. As Kurylo puts it, "[w]hatever the immediate security issue is, populists must frame it as symptomatic of the fundamental problem of the antagonism between the people and the elite which allegedly causes the former to exist in a permanent state of insecurity" (Kurylo 2022: 131). This insecurity is key to the populists' (re)production of their legitimacy, and to the maintaining of cohesion within their targeted audience, 'the people' who support the populist leaders in their measures taken against those alleged threats. These alleged threats can primarily be located within the societal sector and political sectors of security. The focus on 'wokeism' and 'culture wars' in the U.S. indicates an attack on American society, while the alleged possibility of Chinese influence through foreign students imply threats to the U.S. as a political entity. In the case of Serbia, the focus is primarily on the political sector of security, with foreign and domestic threats to the state being centered, though societal security can be noted in the discourse on alleged manipulation and exploitation of misguided youth. Even the pro-government slogan that can be found on billboards and graffiti all over Serbia, "Serbia is

winning” (*Srbija pobeđuje*) is meant to showcase the academic community as an entity outside of “Serbia”, as both a political entity and a society, which believably threatens Serbia.

These various threats and claims of insecurity are tied to another important element of these processes, the idea of securitization as vulnerability. Securitization inherently implies a level of vulnerability of the securitizing actor (Markiewitz 2024). This vulnerability has multiple important effects. Notably, it is a form of ‘group identity’ (Abrams and Hogg 1990, as cited in Markiewitz 2024: 205), shaped by the “ongoing dialectic between the state and the audience” (Markiewitz 2024: 205). The state of vulnerability is used to justify the need for emergency measures and extraordinary actions (Markiewitz 2024: 205). This is particularly relevant to populist contexts, where this vulnerability serves as an argument for the power of the ‘elites’, even when the populists are in power. By showing that even the populist leader is seemingly powerless against the ‘globalist elites’, these regimes make their arguments for their securitizing moves stronger. For example, when the governments of the United States and Serbia securitize student protestors and label them as serious threats to these countries’ societies and political stability, they imply that the students must actually be backed by foreign governments, or be extremists of some kind. Otherwise, the governments would not need to show their vulnerability in that way.

Furthermore, each of the cases has another important similarity that affects the way populist securitization occurs. Both countries face a notable level of political polarization. In Serbia, this is seen primarily in the divide of government and opposition supporters (see Council of Europe 2026), while the divide in the U.S. is based on support for either the Democratic or Republican party (Pew Research Center 2022). While in the U.S. there is more of a clear left-right ideological divide, the differences in Serbia tend to manifest more in attitudes on democracy and the rule of law (CRTA and DAL 2026). This polarization is significant as, in both cases, it creates two *levels* of ‘the people’ – the actual amalgamation of all the citizens of the political community, which tend to disagree about many of the basic principles of the populists’ politics, and the selected subgroup identified as the true, ordinary people by the populist. This second group is the primary audience of the populists’ securitization (Kurylo 2022: 135), they are the sufficient base of support that the populist needs to convince in order to remain in power. The wider electorate, as well as the media, and civil society, serve as a secondary audience, for whom it is not necessary to actually accept the securitizing moves, but rather serve to disseminate them (Kurylo 2022: 135). This phenomenon further reinforces the idea that there are multiple possible audiences for securitization in any given community (Balzacq, Leonard and Ruzicka 2016; Salter 2008). That is why the discourse

used by government officials in these cases often seems extreme and divisive; it is not meant to be a message for all of the citizens, as not all of the citizens make up ‘the people’. Instead, it is ‘tuned’ specifically to persuade this selected audience, adjusted to their experiences as context (Balzacq 2005: 184).

In addition, in such polarized societies, it would be unlikely for the populist leader to even have meaningful success in ‘reaching across the aisle’ and garnering support from the opposition. For example, President Donald Trump could not, without meaningfully changing his policies, ideology, and rhetoric, win over a significant enough portion of the Democratic Party. Just the same, President Aleksandar Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party could not expect to gain voters from members of the student movement. In fact, attempting to do so would require such changes in these populists’ political strategies that they would risk losing their key base of support. This is precisely why the processes of populist securitization differ from traditional securitization in liberal democracies. The populist leaders, the securitizing actors in these processes, are selecting their supporters as the primary audiences. But even this primary audience is not, on its own, homogeneous. It is comprised of people belonging to various socio-economic backgrounds, with various different interests. Seeing as this heterogeneity could provide difficulties for the populists’ attempts to garner support for their policies, the securitizing moves they attempt serve a key function. The securitizing moves present this identified ordinary people that the populist represents not only as the audience, but as the referent object alleged to be threatened. Suddenly, the people gain a unifying cause, allowing for “amalgamating disparate issues under the guise of the struggle for the security of the people”, a process that gets constantly repeated by the populist leaders (Kurylo 2022: 130). Going back to our cases, the different socioeconomic status of Trump supports, for example, does not prove an issue when rich and poor Americans alike are claimed to be threatened by the ‘globalist elites’ and their ‘cultural Marxism’. The situation is similar in Serbia; disunity within the core group of supporters is undermined by constant alleged threats from foreign agents supposedly backed by Western governments, whether they are members of opposition parties, student protestors or academic workers.

In conclusion, the United States and Serbia both have ongoing processes of securitization of the academic community, propagated by right-wing populist leaders in power. Although we identified meaningful differences in the two countries’ recent histories in and political contexts, which have essentially affected and shaped these processes, the key elements of securitization, such as the securitizing actors, target audiences and referent objects, as well as important aspects of the securitizing moves, showed striking parallels. The differences in

the stability of democratic institutions and political cultures limited the ways the populist leaders could argue for the legitimization of extraordinary measures. However, they proved inconsequential in stopping the actual targeting of the academic community. We have identified two key explanations for this process of securitization. The first explanation concerns the very nature of populism, and its need for constant (re)production of security threats which are utilized by populist leaders presenting themselves as protectors of the people. The second reason for this securitization is more specific, and is affected by the role academic communities in societies in general, and in periods of democratic backsliding specifically. Due to its important role in free and democratic societies, academia proves to be a vital obstacle for right-wing populist governments attempting to curtail democratic institutions and practices for their own benefit.

7. Conclusion

This thesis explored the recent trend of securitization of the academic community by right-wing populist governments, through the examination of two relevant cases – the United States of America and Serbia. The aim was to illuminate how and why these processes occurred, analyzing how the populist nature of these regimes affected the securitization of academia. The thesis concluded that the processes of securitization of the academic community in populist regimes occurred, at least in part, due to two connected factors. Firstly, inspired by recent literature on populist securitization, we conclude that populism itself requires constant securitizing moves, and constant allegations of serious threats, in order to revitalize its base of support. The second factor is tied to the specific and unique nature of academia and the academic community itself. The academic community plays a key role in healthy democratic societies, warning of potential government overreach and promoting important democratic values. While significant for society as a whole, this role presents a possible threat to populist regimes, whose rise to power is often followed by periods of democratic backsliding. The academic community is securitized by these actors not only due to its direct criticisms and warnings regarding democratic backsliding and the rule of law, but also due to the secondary effects of influencing and promoting political opposition from within. Further, the knowledge produced by the academic community regarding the state of democracy in such regimes is also often used by international organizations and other foreign actors, potentially affecting the populist leaders' position.

The thesis included a literature review (Chapter 2), covering the major contributions and debates in securitization theory, populism studies, and the political contexts in Serbia and the U.S. This section provided important insight into how studies of populism can intersect with studies of securitization, and how these two phenomena interact and influence each other. However, it also showed that this relationship, while important, has been under-researched in contemporary political science and security studies literature. Similarly, the analysis of literature on the analyzed cases showed that, while current events such as the student protests in both countries have garnered scientific interest, they yet to be thoroughly examined through the lens of securitization theory, and especially to be connected to wider trends of populist securitizations of the academic community. Chapter 3 of this thesis provided the main theoretical and methodological frameworks of this study. The key concepts used in this research regarding populist studies and securitization theory were identified and defined. The

methodological basis, inspired by Lene Hansen's post-structural discourse analysis, was adapted to this specific research. The choice of a comparative case study and the case selection were explained.

Chapters 4 and 5 focused on the specific cases themselves, i.e. the United States of America and Serbia, respectively. Both chapters began with a brief overview of the current political landscape and context in the analyzed cases, as well as including important background, when relevant. The main sections of these chapters consisted of analyzing the relevant discourse produced by government officials of the two countries, and applying securitization theory in order to understand the effects of this discourse. Within this discourse, key elements of securitization were identified and mapped. Securitizing actors, referent objects and alleged threats were labeled, and important attributes of security grammar and threat imagery were noted. The analysis showed multiple examples of government officials in both countries labeling student protestors as extremists, anti-democratic, violent, even alleging them to be terrorists. There were also labels specific to each of the countries' political contexts, with U.S. officials claiming that the student protestors were 'antisemitic', 'far-left', and in collusion with the Communist Party of China, while members of the Serbian government compared students in Serbia to Nazis, and similarly implied foreign influence, though from the West. The securitizing moves were then categorized as different strands of securitization, with legitimizing future acts and legitimizing past acts being most common in the U.S., while deterrence and control were most notable in Serbia. This difference in the form that securitization of the academic community took in the two analyzed cases was explained in the following chapter.

Chapter 6 focused on the comparison of these two cases, showing clear similarities in the processes of securitization that occurred, despite major differences in political contexts and histories. The two analyzed countries had vastly different political histories and contexts, this paper identified unexpected convergences in the way these governments employed securitizing rhetoric to target the academic community. Both the United States and Serbia saw an outbreak of student protests during a similar period, and responded in ways that, while different in their specificities, largely resulted similarly – in attempts to label the academic community as being under foreign influence, thus undermining domestic political and societal stability. Both countries saw arrests of student protestors, and attempts to financially undermine universities. Further, the analysis gave insight into the role of the academic community as a defender of democratic values in an era of democratic erosion, and their role in criticizing, or even mitigating democratic backsliding. This role explains, in part, the convergence in securitization

of academia between the two analyzed cases. This process of securitization is pragmatic, discrediting and silencing criticism, which could otherwise threaten the right-wing populist regimes directly, or inform the arguments of an already existing political opposition. There is also a more general, complementary explanation for these processes – populists require allegations of threats in order to keep their status as defenders of the people and their will; populism and securitization are intertwined. Populist leaders utilize securitization as a way to remain in a constant state of crisis, allowing for usage of emergency measures, and entrenching their key bases of support from those they claim to protect, and (re)-constituting ‘the people’ as an identifiable, discrete group. This analysis contributes to our understanding of the relationship of securitization and populism, though there is still much to explore, as there is not much literature on this topic.

However, this chapter also identified key differences in certain aspects of these securitizations, regarding the strands of securitization employed. There were measures that were markedly different, with the U.S. expelling foreign students, and Serbian gendarmerie allegedly using a less-lethal ‘sound canon’ during a protest, for example. Further, as mentioned previously, there is a notable difference in the strands of securitization employed by the securitizing actors. This thesis offered an explanation of these differences, based on the historical and contextual divergence between the two cases. The thesis argued that this difference in processes of securitization, marked by their different perlocutionary aims and degrees of strength, are shaped and influenced by the political contexts and systems of the two countries. The liberal-democratic tradition of the U.S. limits the severity of the securitizing moves, and ensures that measures employed by securitizing actors, no matter how extreme, still have to be justified and legitimized in some way. Serbia has not successfully consolidated as a democracy, leading to a lack of such impediments. Securitizing actors in Serbia rely on control and deterrence, use formal authority and intimidation, when employing securitizing moves. Such conclusions could aid further research in this topic, as it could inform similar comparisons of other securitizing processes. Comparisons of similar securitizing processes are not common in securitization theory literature, although they can tell us much about how securitization occurs, and what factors it.

There is still a need to further explore the relationship between securitization and populism. This phenomenon is underexplored in the literature, with very few scholars analyzing it. While the relationship between academia and democracy has been studied, as well as, to a certain extent, the wider trend of securitization of academia and the rise of anti-expert rhetoric, there is space to connect these tendencies to the rise of right-wing populism, and

further analyze the way the mechanisms of populism interact with them. How will the securitization of the academic community impact further democratic backsliding in right-wing populist countries? How will it impact the academic community itself? Are universities and other academic institutions resilient enough to be able to withstand these assaults on their freedoms and independence? These questions are especially relevant due to the wide-spread trend of securitization of academic communities all over the world.

From a theoretical perspective, the concept of the audience in securitization theory is still widely contested and debated. Further developments to the concept, and the theory of securitization itself, are necessary in order to make the theory more usable in the analysis of empirical cases, as shown by Silva and Pareira's meta-analysis (Silva and Pareira 2024). More specifically, the audience is especially important for populist securitization, as the concept intersects significantly with the (re)construction of 'the people' in populism. What mechanisms can populist leaders employ in order to provide a constant appearance of outside threat? Given the fact that right-wing populism is on the rise all over the world, how will that affect populist leaders' ability to connect 'the corrupt elite' to foreign actors and globalists? Further, there is space to explore how political systems in general influence and shape securitization processes.

From an empirical perspective of Serbia and the United States, the literature is still limited, as the analyzed processes are ongoing. Nevertheless, there is space for further application of securitization theory to these cases and their various aspects. Other than the securitization academic community, what other similarities can we identify between these two politically disparate right-wing populist countries? This thesis' conclusions indicate that there is value in such comparative case studies. Other than these two cases, the trend of academic securitization in populist contexts can be analyzed in a variety of other cases, offering not only insights specific to those countries, but contributing to our understanding of this trend in general.

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