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The EU’s collective securitisation of climate change

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ABSTRACT
Climate change is a firmly established and prominent issue of concern for the European Union. The EU became a collective agent of securitisation over time, increasingly engaging in speech acts defining climate change as a threat. These speech acts have driven forward agreed European policy measures and have informed EU positions in international climate negotiations. This piece examines how climate change became securitised and traces the historical development of the EU as an agent of collective securitisation in this domain. It argues that the EU has become a more unified, collective actor over time, that it has engaged in recursive interaction with multiple (internal and external) audiences to drive the securitisation of climate change, and that a new securitised status quo had been achieved by the mid-to-late 2000s. This new status quo positions climate change as central to the EU’s security agenda.

KEYWORDS Climate change; European Union; securitisation

Climate change is widely recognised as a pressing security concern. In recent years, it has attracted the attention of prime ministers and presidents in international fora, including the G8/G7 and G20, the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council (Oels 2012). The UN climate negotiations, meanwhile, have become a site of high politics (Terhalle and Depledge 2013). The 2015 Paris Agreement affirmed the commitment of the US, China, India and the EU (the world’s largest emitters of greenhouse gases) as well as over 190 other states, to limit average global temperature increases. The Trump administration in June 2017 declared that the US would withdraw from the Agreement in 2020 – but that act, by direct presidential intervention, advertised the high-level stakes involved and, indeed, the isolation of the American position (if it follows through, it would potentially be the only state in the world outside of the Agreement’s provisions). As for the EU, the European
Council, which brings together the heads of state and government of the member states, has taken on a greater role in climate policy development. It provides the political impetus for continued climate policy development, but goes far beyond its official mandate to discuss detailed policy measures.

This article analyses the collective securitisation of climate change in the EU. It focuses on the actions that followed EU securitising moves and argues that both the policy measures themselves and the way in which policies have been adopted constitute evidence of successful securitisation. As such, I follow the thinking of Diez et al. (2016), Floyd (2016) and Sperling and Webber (2018) that policy change shows evidence of securitisation.

Much literature has investigated the connection between climate change and security (Detraz and Betsill 2009; Diez et al. 2016; Floyd 2008). I build on the insights of this work, but the contribution of this article lies more in the field of collective security governance and European integration. While the EU does indeed engage in discourse about the importance of integrating climate change into its foreign, security and defence policies, these are policy fields that face challenges for unified, collective action (Niemann and Bretherton 2013). In contrast, when it comes to collective action on the environment and climate change, the value of supranational and unified action has long been recognised within the EU (Oberthür and Roche Kelly 2008). The focus of this article is, therefore, on securitisation for the advancement of EU and international climate action.

In general, the measures adopted by the EU on climate change fall within the remit of regular EU governance (i.e. the EU’s ordinary legislative procedure), but there are certain extraordinary elements in the way policy has been adopted. First, the EU has adopted climate measures by linking them to environmental and internal market competences. The success of policy is particularly noteworthy in that, by comparison, energy, which is a mixed competence, has long faced pushback from member states (for more on this point, see Sperling and Webber 2018). Second, the heightened importance of climate change has led to a special role for the European Council. Article 15 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) states that ‘the European Council shall provide the Union with the necessary impetus for its development and shall define the general political directions and priorities thereof. It shall not exercise legislative functions’. However, in climate policy, the European Council has done more than provide ‘impetus’. It has been a driver (or blocker) of internal policy developments; has agreed on policy measures, although that is the prerogative of the European Parliament (hereafter ‘the
parliament’) and the Council of the European Union (hereafter ‘the Council’); and has provided very detailed guidance/instructions on the direction of future policy. The adoption of (often ambitious) policy measures in the EU shows the success of the collective securitisation of climate change. The truly extraordinary part of EU responses to the securitisation of climate change is thus how measures have been adopted.

Research for this piece involved a content analysis of EU documents to identify securitising speech acts, and a policy-tracing exercise of the action that then followed. I focused particularly on the Conclusions of the Council and of the European Council since 1990, as well as documents of the European Commission (hereafter ‘the Commission’). First, I searched for mentions of ‘climate change’ (and ‘global warming’ in earlier decades). Next, I focused on speech acts describing climate change as a ‘threat’, ‘risk’, ‘challenge’, ‘security’ issue or source of ‘conflict’ in the 133 documents remaining in the dataset. I also identified mentions of ‘disasters’, ‘drought’, ‘famine’, ‘hurricanes’, ‘storms’, ‘floods’, ‘vulnerability’, ‘conflict’ for connections to securitisation moves on climate change. The increasing frequency of such speech acts over time was traced alongside the adoption of climate policy measures at the EU and international level.

The article is structured as follows. I first discuss literature on the securitisation of climate change in a global context. Second, I move to the heart of the analysis: the collective securitisation of climate change in the EU over time. Third, I return to the model of collective securitisation proposed by Sperling and Webber (2018) to assess its usefulness for understanding this development. I conclude that the collective securitisation of climate change in the EU has been a success. I suggest that the role of recursive interaction with multiple audiences provides insight into this securitisation, and I point to a precipitating event that spurred the securitisation cycle. I close by posing questions about future developments, and call for further research into the conditions which unfold after a precipitating event and the (linked) role of recursive interaction in the context of multiple audiences.

**Securitisation of climate change: from science to securitised politics**

Climate change is a collective problem *par excellence*. The causes of climate change – namely the emission of greenhouse gases (GHGs) into the atmosphere – are linked to the heavy use of fossil fuels (coal, oil and natural gas) since the industrial revolution. Human interference in the climate system is ‘unequivocal’ (IPCC 2013), but the atmosphere is a global commons (Hardin 1968), where those who have not benefited
from industrialisation will suffer the effects of climate change alongside (or to a greater extent than) those who have gained from the industrial transition (IPCC 2013).

Since the 1980s, global diplomatic efforts to respond to the climate challenge have moved only slowly. In 1992, the international community adopted the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which then formed the blueprint for international cooperative action (Yamin and Depledge 2004). Alternative climate initiatives have grown in number in response to the perceived inefficiency of the UNFCCC processes (Bulkeley and Newell 2010), but none have the same global coverage. Several pivotal scientific (and political) reports have accompanied international efforts (IPCC 2013; Oberthür 1999; Stern 2007). The most important scientific body is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), established in 1988. Its periodic, and weighty, assessment reports provide a state-of-the-art review of the latest scientific evidence on the causes and effects of climate change. Since its first report in 1990, the IPCC has added further evidence to its initial conclusion that climate change is happening and is human-induced (IPCC 2013).

The international negotiating agenda has expanded, tackling issues such as development, indigenous rights, finance, technology transfer, justice and fairness, and dealing with the tricky issue of differentiated responsibilities and capabilities (Hermwille et al. 2015; Terhalle and Depledge 2013). Securitisation moves on climate change take place within this complex, global governance context.

**Global securitisation through speech acts**

According to the Copenhagen School, a securitising speech act has the effect of giving primacy and urgency to a political issue leading to audience acceptance of the need for extraordinary measures to be taken in response (Buzan et al. 1998; McDonald 2008; Waever 2011; see also Sperling and Webber 2018). Securitising speech acts contributed to the adoption of the UNFCCC and its Kyoto Protocol (in 1997) and, since then, securitising moves have increased along with a recognition that these policy initiatives were insufficient. The Kyoto Protocol was a far-reaching international agreement that included binding commitments on developed countries to reduce their GHG emissions (Oberthür 1999), but it suffered because of limited ratification and poor implementation (Keohane 2014).

Globally, heads of government have regularly described climate change as an existential threat (Oels 2012). The mid-2000s saw a proliferation of reports highlighting the security dimensions of the issue: Nicholas Stern
released an influential report highlighting the threats of climate change and the economic costs of inaction (Stern 2007), the fourth IPCC assessment report underlined similar messages (IPCC 2007), and the German Advisory Council on Global Change produced a report, *Climate Change as a Security Risk*, that outlined the likelihood of climate-related conflicts (WBGU 2007). In 2007, the UN Security Council discussed climate change for the first time and two years later the UN General Assembly debated climate change security. Additionally, former US Vice-President Al Gore and the IPCC jointly won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 for their contribution to combating climate change. Thus, a certain momentum was building globally, elevating climate change to the domain of high and securitised politics.

This momentum led to the fifteenth Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the UNFCCC in Copenhagen in 2009, where the international community was supposed to adopt an agreement to succeed the Kyoto Protocol. COP15 was a failure, however, with the parties unable to agree on more than a non-binding accord that was not unanimously welcomed (Dimitrov 2010; Falkner et al. 2010). It took a further six years for the international community to come together around the Paris Agreement (agreed in December 2015) that includes specific commitments to combat climate change (Oberthür 2016).

**From securitisation moves to sufficient measures?**

This leads to the main puzzle in an analysis of the securitisation of climate change. As securitisation moves in the 2000s gained in momentum, the planned politics of international negotiations faltered when it came to agreement on sufficient measures, even within their own timetable. When measures were adopted, they were unambitious (such as the Copenhagen Accord) or significantly delayed (such as the Paris Agreement) (Dubash and Rajamani 2010). Thus, securitisation seems to have stalled after speech acts.

Scholars have put forward two main explanations as to why this may be the case. First, the audience rejected the securitisation moves (Oels 2012; Trombetta 2010). The audience included the entire range of parties in the negotiations – from those for whom climate change is a clear existential threat (such as small island states) to those for whom action on climate change represents a threat (such as fossil fuel-producing states). This meant that the audience did not accept a single, unified interpretation of climate change as a security threat. Second, securitisation was successful insofar as it put climate change firmly on the agenda of international politics, but extraordinary measures did not follow owing to
the financial and economic crises unfolding in the late 2000s (McDonald 2012). Climate change was one securitised issue among many, requiring comparatively less urgent action in the short term. I return to these considerations below in the discussion of collective securitisation of climate change in the EU.

**EU collective securitisation of climate change**

There are clear distinctions, yet close interconnections, between the EU’s *internal* role in combating climate change and its *external* role in international climate politics. Therefore, there are at least two ‘audiences’ to which the EU addresses its securitisation moves. For internal climate policy, EU citizens, organisations and member states constitute the primary domestic audience that needs to accept the move. For the EU’s external role, the international community (of states) is the main audience. However, the external audience’s ‘acceptance’ of the EU’s ‘actor-ness’ also depends on the EU’s ability to act internally and to set an example (Groen et al. 2012) – hence, the internal and external dimensions feed into each other, and the two audiences share a role in the recursive interaction that legitimises a securitising move.

Whether the EU can be considered a unitary and purposive entity has long been debated in European studies. Bretherton and Vogler (2006) provide a comprehensive overview of how, whether and under what conditions the EU can indeed be considered an international ‘actor’. Vogler (2017) describes four conditions: autonomy, volition, negotiating capability and the ability to deploy policy instruments. The EU possesses the capacity to act on all fronts in climate policy, but this development took time. Internal policy and institutional processes on climate change have evolved to influence the EU’s capacity to act and to lead internationally.

Externally, the EU’s ability to act autonomously is linked to its capacity to ‘speak with one voice’ (van Schaik 2010). Decades of involvement in international climate negotiations have increased this ability. Moving from rotating six-monthly negotiators under the various Presidencies of the Council to the appointment of ‘lead negotiators’ on specific topics provided consistency and coherence to the EU’s negotiating capacity (Oberthür and Roche Kelly 2008; van Schaik 2010). The Council Conclusions adopted in advance of international climate negotiations present a unified, single and increasingly securitised message on the EU’s climate policy intentions and on its role in international climate governance (Oberthür and Dupont 2011), demonstrating the EU’s volition to act and to lead. Over time, the EU’s external role in climate politics has thus led to an acceptance of the EU’s ‘agency’.
Internally, a similar path can be traced, with the EU becoming a more unified, collective actor on climate change over time. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Commission policy entrepreneurship can largely be thanked for advancement in climate policy (Skjaerseth and Wiettestad 2010). As climate change moved up the political agenda, the Commission and Council, with pressure from the Parliament, brought the EU together as a collective security agent for climate change. Collective securitisation moves led to ambitious internal policy proposals, although, since 2008/2009, climate ambition had waned somewhat (Dupont and Oberthür 2017).

The EU’s capacity to act as a climate policymaker is embedded in the Treaties. The 2009 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) lists ‘climate change’ as an area of (shared) competence (Art. 191). Previously, most EU policy on climate change was adopted under the EU’s environment or internal market competence, demonstrating Commission entrepreneurship in linking competences to the issue (Oberthür and Roche Kelly 2008; Skjaerseth and Wiettestad 2010). Policy instruments are generally adopted using the ordinary legislative procedure (known prior to the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 as the co-decision procedure). Under Article 294 TFEU the Commission proposes legislation that is then negotiated and amended by the Parliament and the Council. Since qualified majority voting rules apply, no single member state can veto the adoption of a policy measure. Policy measures adopted are then implemented by member states, with Commission scrutiny. Member state acceptance of policy measures based on securitisation moves is thus important for implementation.

**The status quo: 1980s–1990s**

In the 1980s, the EU was not a major actor on climate change. The preparations for the 1992 ‘Earth Summit’, however, prompted the EU to pay more attention to environmental issues in a global context. The EU began regularly calling on the international community to adopt strong measures to combat climate change. However, it did not adopt strong internal policies to the same effect. This period is often characterised as a time of EU ‘rhetorical’ leadership (Oberthür and Roche Kelly 2008).

Certain speech acts could be interpreted as early moves towards securitisation, but the status quo of climate change as an environmental issue, requiring the usual policy responses, remained throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The discourse on climate change in the EU was dominated by the Council, reflecting the central role of member states in EU decision-making. The Parliament was interested in pursuing environmental policy
issues, but had little political clout at this time, and the Commission generally profited from windows of opportunity as they arose and followed the policy nudges from the Council (Gupta and Grubb 2000).

The Council did not employ the language of securitisation with respect to climate change until the mid-1990s. At first, speech acts described climate change as a ‘risk’, which some securitisation scholars accept as a securitising move (Corry 2012; Diez et al. 2016). These speech acts emphasised the global nature of the climate problem, relieving the EU of specific responsibility for unilateral action. In 1995, the Council stated that climate change would lead to ‘significant damage and disruption’ and underlined the ‘necessity for urgent action’ (Council of the European Union 1995). In 1999, the Council reiterated that climate change was one of the ‘main global environmental challenges’ (Council of the European Union 1999). The European Council did not touch the issue until 1997, when it outlined ‘the need for a strong response to the risk of climate change’ (European Council 1997). But climate change remained firmly within the environmental politics arena, with the European Council stating in 1998 that ‘climate change is one of the most challenging environmental problems for the next decades’ (European Council 1998; emphasis added). Thus, while several statements can be considered early moves towards securitisation, the status quo was not disrupted.

Internally, EU policy programmes were ineffective, although they did prepare the path for future policies. Measures on energy efficiency (the SAVE programme) and renewable energy (the Altener programme) were substantially weakened during the policy process (Dupont 2016). Voluntary agreements with car manufacturers, adopted in 1998 and 1999, failed to deliver agreed GHG emission cuts (Hey 2010; Oberthür and Roche Kelly 2008). The Commission’s flagship proposal for a carbon dioxide/energy tax failed to gain support from the member states, meaning the proposal risked being vetoed owing to the requirement for a unanimous decision in the Council on fiscal measures. The Commission withdrew its tax proposal in 2001 (European Commission 2001), leaving the EU with little more to show after a decade of internal policy negotiations than a mechanism to monitor GHG emissions.

Externally, the EU pushed for legally binding international instruments, which successfully contributed to the agreement on the Kyoto Protocol in 1997. The Protocol provided clear commitments for parties to reduce their GHG emissions (Oberthür 1999). The EU agreed to a more stringent reduction target than any other party – that is, to reduce its emissions by 8% on average over the years 2008–2012, compared to 1990 levels. In the run-up to the negotiations in Kyoto, EU member states had outlined their willingness to reduce emissions by as much as 15%. The
adoption of the Kyoto Protocol provided the impetus for the EU to move forward on policy measures in the 2000s, and the member states (internal audience) accepted the importance of adopting EU policies to influence the international level.

**Precipitating event: 2000–2008**

In 2001, the EU faced a major international political challenge in climate governance that constituted a ‘precipitating event’. When US President George W. Bush declared that the US would not ratify the Kyoto Protocol, the EU was left with the choice of abandoning the international agreement or championing its entry into force (Dupont and Oberthür 2015). Although the EU had aimed to ‘lead’ international climate politics since the 1990s, the EU’s credibility was questioned owing to its lack of meaningful internal policy measures (Oberthür and Roche Kelly 2008). Given the growing securitisation of climate change and the EU’s leadership aims, the choice was made to push for the Kyoto Protocol’s entry into force.

This precipitating event (an exogenous political shock) was reflected in the discourse of the Council and European Council. In 2001, the European Council described climate change as ‘a global threat to future well-being and economic progress’ (European Council 2001), moving the discourse from ‘risk’ to ‘threat’. The Council labelled climate change ‘a major threat to the sustainable development of all countries’ and stated that ‘action to combat this major threat to our well-being and that of future generations’ was essential (Council of the European Union 2001). In 2002, the Council underlined how ‘vulnerable human societies are to climate change’ (Council of the European Union 2002); in 2004, it described climate change as one of ‘mankind’s greatest challenges’ (Council of the European Union 2004); in 2006, the Council underlined that ‘the effects of climate change may have major implications for national and world security’ (Council of the European Union 2006), linking specifically to debates around climate security more broadly (Diez et al. 2016; Floyd 2008); and in 2007, it described the ‘negative impacts of climate change’ that impose ‘a serious risk to ecosystems, food production, the attainment of sustainable development … as well as to human health and security’ (Council of the European Union 2007). The European Council continued with similar language, describing climate change in 2006 as representing a ‘growing threat’ and as a challenge that needs to be ‘tackled effectively and urgently’ (European Council 2006); and, in 2007, as having a ‘considerable impact on international security issues’ (European Council 2007b). Most significantly, in 2007, it was the
European Council that adopted the EU’s response – a commitment to reduce GHG emissions by 20% by 2020, compared to 1990 levels (European Council 2007a).

The EU published its *European Security Strategy* in 2003 (European Union 2003) and a paper from the High Representative and the European Commission on climate change and international security in 2008 (European Commission 2008b). In the 2003 strategy, the EU recognised that climate change posed a global threat that was likely to ‘create further turbulence and migratory movements in various regions’ (European Union 2003: 3). The 2008 paper underlined, expanded upon and reiterated the security challenges posed by climate change, describing it as a ‘threat multiplier which exacerbates existing trends, tensions and instability’ (European Commission 2008b: 2). Furthermore, several member states reiterated the securitisation moves, with the UK putting climate change on the agenda of the UN Security Council in 2007, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel declaring that same year that climate stabilisation was the challenge of the century (Weidner and Mez 2008: 364).

The EU embarked on a systematic development of its internal and external climate policies, moving beyond the ‘rhetorical’ leadership of the 1990s to ‘leadership-by-example’ in the mid-2000s (Oberthür and Dupont 2011). Internally, the EU adopted policies on the promotion of renewable energies (Directive 2001/77/EC), on the energy performance of buildings (Directive 2002/91/EC), and on the creation of the EU’s Emissions Trading System (ETS) (Directive 2003/87/EC), which forms the centre-piece of EU climate policy (Oberthür and Roche Kelly 2008; Skjaerseth and Wетtestad 2010). The EU also engaged in a massive diplomatic effort so that a sufficient number of countries ratified the Kyoto Protocol, ensuring its entry into force in 2005 (Oberthür and Roche Kelly 2008). In 2007, the Commission set to work preparing policy proposals to implement the EU’s 2020 commitments. Externally, the EU’s policy developments played a role in the international acceptance of the EU as a ‘leader’ on climate policy.

Overall, this period was framed by an exogenous shock, a precipitating event leading to accelerated securitisation moves in the EU. While other precipitating events included natural disasters and rising temperatures, it was the political decision of the US combined with scientific knowledge of the seriousness of climate change that spurred decisive EU action. These securitisation moves interacted in a recursive manner with both internal and external audiences and included the adoption and implementation of policy measures. Member states became convinced of the importance of EU-level action on climate change, thus working in a unified manner, and international partners accepted the EU’s role as a driver
of ambitious action. Policy measures were adopted under the EU’s co-decision procedures involving the Commission, the Parliament and the Council. But the process leading to the agreement on the 2020 goals in 2007 (and, later, the policy proposals attached to it) was ‘extraordinary’ for the heightened role of the European Council. This new role for the European Council (being more involved in pushing policy forward and discussing details of policy measures) has only intensified since. The securitisation moves between 2000 and 2007/2008 thus laid the foundation for the new security status quo of climate change as an issue of high politics.

The new status quo post-2008

Following this evolution, we would expect greater involvement from the European Council as a matter of course. We could also expect some degree of centralisation of policy implementation in the EU, as climate became accepted as a collective security good, best solved through European and global action. From 2008, we can see evidence of both phenomena, but challenges remain. The European Council became far more engaged in policy developments, and the ETS Directive was reformed to remove member state interference (Dupont and Oberthür 2017; Wettestad et al. 2012).

Following the EU agreement on the 2020 climate goals, there ensued frenzied negotiations on internal policy measures. In January 2008, the Commission proposed measures to strengthen renewable energy policy and the ETS, to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from cars, to share the effort of reducing GHGs in sectors outside the ETS, and to support the development of new carbon capture and storage technology (European Commission 2008a). The European Council remained involved in the policy negotiations throughout 2008, culminating in its announcement in December 2008 that agreement had been reached – before the measures were adopted by the Parliament in plenary (Dupont and Oberthür 2015). Compounding the high politics of climate change was the European Council’s agreement, in October 2009, that the EU should reduce its GHG emissions by 80–95% by 2050 compared to 1990 (European Council 2009), and calling on the Commission to prepare roadmaps towards that goal. In October 2014, the European Council adopted particularly detailed Conclusions on the future climate and energy framework to 2030 (going considerably beyond providing ‘political direction’ by even outlining future policy instruments and funding mechanisms) (European Council 2014). The European Council thus (extraordinarily) leads internal responses to climate change.
The measures agreed in 2008, and particularly the ETS Directive, marked an EU-turn in climate policymaking and implementation. The first phase of the ETS from 2005 to 2007 proved unsuccessful owing to an over allocation of emission allowances by member states to polluting installations. Learning from this experience, the Commission, Parliament and Council agreed that the ETS should be monitored and managed at the EU level, with emission allowances allocated centrally. This ‘supranational’ turn was a remarkable break with ordinary policymaking where member states usually guard flexibility in implementation (Wettestad et al. 2012). Furthermore, climate policy provided more room for the EU to legislate on energy matters, with Directive 2009/28/EC on the promotion of renewable energy providing differentiated targets per member state, overseen by the Commission. Two factors can help account for this collective approach to tackling climate change. First, a clear consensus had been built on the need to act on climate change among member states and EU citizens (Eurobarometer 2008, 2015). The EU thus had an accepting internal audience. Second, externally, the EU’s declared leadership position placed pressure on the EU to continue ‘leading-by-example’, requiring the EU to demonstrate that (ambitious) collective policy measures were possible, effective and economical (Wettestad et al. 2012).

Much of the discourse on climate change since 2008 has served to preserve climate change as a securitised and high politics issue. The European Council has regularly reiterated the EU’s intention to ‘lead the fight against climate change’ (European Council 2017a, 2017b). The Council has also regularly confirmed the threat of climate change. It has acknowledged the interaction between climate change and other challenges, such as food security and poverty (Council of the European Union 2009); highlighted the vulnerability of developing countries to climate impacts (Council of the European Union 2010); and described climate change as a ‘threat multiplier’ (Council of the European Union 2018; European Commission 2008b).

However, climate change has not been the only pressing issue on the agenda of heads of state and government. The EU has had to deal with multiple concurrent crises since the onset of the financial and economic crises that began in 2007/2008 (Skovgaard 2014), including the migration crisis, international conflicts in Ukraine, Syria and elsewhere, Brexit, terrorism and internal EU malaise. The European Council has faced a crowded agenda for over a decade (Falkner 2016). Externally, the new status quo also received a blow following failed collective international action on climate change at the all-important COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009 (Dimitrov 2010; Groen et al. 2012).
As these multiple crises developed, the two drivers of EU action on climate change (internal consensus and external pressure) waned. First, divisions among member states became manifest. When the Commission presented its low-carbon economy roadmap to the European Council (European Commission 2011), its adoption was blocked by Poland, citing energy security concerns (Skovgaard 2014). The negotiations leading to the 2012 Energy Efficiency Directive (2012/27/EU) also hinted at challenging times to come. Even states previously enthusiastic about adopting stringent policies (such as Denmark and the UK) baulked at the potential costs of implementing strong policy measures on energy efficiency (Boasson and Dupont 2015). The EU’s new climate and energy targets to 2030 – although an advance upon those for 2020 – are largely judged to be insufficient given the challenge of moving to decarbonisation by 2050 (Dupont and Oberthür 2015). These goals included a GHG emission reduction target of at least 40% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels (European Council 2014). Considering the EU had already achieved a 23% reduction of GHG emissions by 2014 (EEA 2016), the 2030 goal can hardly be considered ambitious. This highlights challenges in the recursive interaction with the EU’s internal audience(s).

In parallel, international climate negotiations were hobbling along towards COP21 in Paris in December 2015 where a new international agreement was eventually adopted (Dröge 2016). The EU, learning from the mistakes of COP15, left the adoption of internal policies until after the negotiations. It tabled its 40% GHG reduction target at the Paris negotiations – the most ambitious target of industrialised countries and regions. The EU had engaged in considerable bilateral negotiations and climate diplomacy in the run-up to Paris to convince others to take action (Oberthür 2016). But the external context was no longer a major driver of EU internal policymaking. Efforts were concentrated on bringing other actors on board. From 2012, both the US and China became more amenable to international climate policies, and, in advance of the Paris negotiations, released a joint statement committing themselves to taking action (Landler 2014). All hopes of renewed US leadership on climate issues were dashed, however, when the Trump administration announced in June 2017 that the US intended to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. Even without the US, however, the rest of the world is slowly catching up with EU climate action. The EU has moved from a clear international climate leader to a ‘leadator’ (combining leading-by-example with a mediating role) (Bäckstrand and Elgström 2013), with the speedy ratification of the Paris Agreement providing a strong signal that the international community as a whole is now on a path towards decarbonisation.
This new international outlook highlights the changing context in the recursive interaction between the EU and its external audience.

Under this new security status quo, the level of ambition of internal climate policy has not necessarily matched the discourse of climate change as a securitised issue of high politics. Climate change is discussed by prime ministers and presidents, securitisation moves are reinforced, but challenges remain owing to the recursive interaction with internal and external audiences – driven by lower internal unity and lower international pressure. In response, the agreed targets, policies and measures include heightened member state flexibility and lower stepwise improvements, leading to fears of an implementation gap (Lampinen and Uusikylä 1998).

**Successful securitisation: convincing multiple audiences**

The historical narrative and content analysis of EU climate change policy demonstrates that the EU has evolved into an agent of collective securitisation. It also reveals that securitisation moves in the 2000s (spurred by the precipitating event of the US withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol) sparked the recursive interaction between the EU and its legitimising internal and external audiences. This process, in turn, produced a new securitised status quo, with climate change firmly embedded in high politics. Climate change can thus be considered a good example of collective securitisation in the EU. The adoption of measures to combat climate change included an ‘extraordinary’ role for the European Council and some far-reaching target-setting and centralising policies. Since around 2008, however, the new securitised status quo has not (yet) produced sufficiently ambitious action in the EU.

As discussed above, there are two main explanations for why efforts to securitise climate change might falter (or fail or stall). First, the audience does not accept the securitisation moves (Oels 2012). The EU engaged in recursive interaction with (at least) two audiences: an internal audience including EU citizens, institutions and member states, and an external audience in the international community. While the message has been the same to both (that climate change is an urgent threat), the intention behind the message was different. Internal audiences needed to be convinced to accept policy measures, and external audiences needed to be convinced to accept the EU as a leader.

Eurobarometer polls showed growing support for EU climate policy action over the years (Eurobarometer 2008, 2011, 2015), and so the EU has agreed on ever more stringent policy measures (Dupont and
The internal audience accepted the securitised message, and supported policies.

The external audience took longer to convince, probably because of the distribution of winners and losers on climate action globally – those states most threatened by the effects of climate action win the most, and those states most benefiting from the continued global fossil fuel economy are set to lose. The EU’s growing unity of message, its diplomatic efforts and its demonstration that strong climate action can be decoupled from economic growth meant the international audience also (eventually) accepted the securitisation move. Acceptance of the EU’s leading role contributed to the entry into force of the Kyoto Protocol and to the adoption of the Paris Agreement (Oberthür 2016; van Schaik 2010). The interaction between the EU and its audiences developed recursively over the 2000s: securitisation moves justified policy action, and as previous policies and international negotiations were found to be insufficient, securitisation language become more vocal, climate change became an urgent issue, and more stringent policies could be adopted.

The second explanation for the securitisation of climate change to falter is that the political agenda is too crowded to adopt new ‘extraordinary measures’ (McDonald 2012; Oels 2012). The EU’s agenda has certainly become over-burdened with crisis management (Dupont and Oberthür 2015). However, climate change was benefiting from a new security status quo from 2008. Policy outputs had become more stringent, and a central role was played by the European Council: this points to something ‘extraordinary’ in the EU’s collective response. Even with a crowded agenda, the EU has managed to adopt policy targets for 2030, and helped push the international community towards the adoption of the 2015 Paris Agreement (European Council 2014; Oberthür 2016). In sum, the securitisation of climate change in the EU can be regarded as successful, in line with the model suggested by Sperling and Webber (2018; see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Collective securitisation of climate change in the EU since the 1990s.
The US withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol in 2001 was a precipitating event leading to (accelerated) securitisation moves (along with natural disasters and increasing scientific knowledge). The relevant audiences accepted securitisation through a recursive process of multiple speech acts and ratcheting up of policy ambition. This type of recursive interaction deviates somewhat from that suggested in the collective securitisation model. Where Sperling and Webber (2018) suggest that policy outputs are part of the response, in this case, policy outputs were part of the recursive interaction. The EU’s ability to adopt and implement policy was an important part of ensuring (especially external) audience acceptance. This overall process led to the entrenchment of climate change as a securitised, high politics issue, and a new security status quo, where the European Council became firmly engaged in detailed policy development and international action.

Where securitisation seems to have stalled is in maintaining high policy ambition after the emergence of the new status quo. In assessing why, we can question audience acceptance, and suggest that the multiple audiences no longer accepted the securitised move. We can certainly see a lack of unified responses on the shape of future climate policy both in the EU and between the EU and its external audience(s). The diminished unity can also be attributed to the differing priorities of parties working in a crowded securitised agenda. Thus, the conditions required to move forward in a new cycle of securitisation do not seem to be in place.

The proposed model highlights the importance of a ‘precipitating event’ to spur a cycle of securitisation. The Trump administration’s decision to withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement disrupted international cooperation on climate change. Scientific evidence now routinely highlights the causal relationship between GHG emissions and the rising number of extreme weather events and deteriorating trends in the climate system (IPCC 2013). It remains to be seen whether Trump’s political action could combine with scientific analysis to precipitate a new wave of securitisation in the EU. Early signs suggest that the retreat of American commitment has emboldened the EU and international actors. In September 2017, the EU, Canada and China co-convened the first Ministerial Meeting on Climate Action – a gathering of 34 states committed to implementing the Paris Agreement. A second meeting followed in June 2018 at which the Climate Action and Energy Commissioner, Miguel Arias Cañete (2018) pledged that the EU would ‘increase its emissions reduction target from the current 40% per cent to slightly over 45 per cent by 2030’. That same month, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, hosted an international ministerial-level conference on Climate, Peace and Security
to consider ‘the gravest security threats posed by climate change and to identify how best they can be managed’ (European Union, External Action Service 2018). ‘Sustainable peace, sustainable security’, Mogherini (2018) contended, required global action to tackle climate change, a phenomenon as dangerous to global security as weapons of mass destruction.

Conclusion

The EU has been an agent of collective securitisation on climate change, leading to a new security status quo. This process began with climate change identified as an environmental issue in the 1980s and 1990s. By the mid-1990s, a series of speech acts securitised climate change, and these were followed by policy output throughout the 2000s. Climate change – as a securitised policy domain – has been on the agenda of the European Council since the mid-2000s. Along the same timeline, climate change moved from being an issue within the environmental Directorate-General of the Commission and the Council of Environment Ministers, to one engaging the Commission, the Parliament, the Council and the European Council together – the EU acting as a collective unit.

This process of securitisation involved an increase in speech acts following the precipitative event of US withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol; recursive interaction with multiple audiences internally and externally; and the development of policy measures, in an intermingled and recursive manner. The new security status quo is remarkable for the role the European Council plays in policymaking, and for the fact that climate change remains high on an agenda crowded with other pressing issues. Where the Copenhagen School might consider the securitisation of climate change a failure owing to a lack of ‘extraordinary measures’, understood as emergency military measures (Oels 2012), this analysis of collective securitisation demonstrates the value of examining policy formulation processes in a multi-level, supranational context.

After 2008, ambition on climate action in the EU started to wane. As time passes and climate change accelerates, simply maintaining a certain level of ambition becomes insufficient. This leads to questions about how a new securitisation cycle begins again and progresses towards a new status quo. Following the cycle of collective securitisation outlined by Sperling and Webber (2018) we would expect a new precipitating event to invigorate securitisation moves towards another ‘new’ status quo. While the broader context of international engagement on climate change has changed, the US intention to withdraw from the Paris Agreement may provide some impetus towards further securitisation moves, in combination with the reality of climate impacts worldwide. Further research
could illuminate what constitutes a precipitating event, and what conditions are favourable for building on such an event to pursue collective securitisation.

The climate case also highlights how the EU managed its recursive interaction with multiple audiences. In times of fewer crises and higher internal unity, this proved a key element towards successful securitisation. More research on such interaction could prove useful to highlight conditions under which multiple audiences accept collective securitisation moves.

It is also worth investigating the EU as an agent of collective desecuritisation. Desecuritisation in the original Copenhagen School formulation was regarded as an acceptable strategy because it returned an issue to normal politics, moving it out of the realm of the exceptional or the emergency (Williams 2003: 523). However, as Floyd (2011) has argued, with certain issues securitisation is morally right if the threat it seeks to address is compelling. Climate change arguably falls into this category and it may well be the case that the EU will (indeed, ought to) mobilise on an indefinite basis arguments in favour of securitised action. In doing so, it would talk and behave in a manner quite different from another of its powerful discourses – as a security community which has desecuritised relations among its members. That dynamic of simultaneous collective securitisation and desecuritisation across issue areas is reflective of the complex discursive and governance forms embedded within the EU.

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