

Plagues of Egypt – the COVID-19 crisis and the role of securitization dilemmas in the authoritarian regime survival strategies in Egypt and Turkey

MICHAELA GRANČAYOVÁ

Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia

E-MAIL

michaela.grancayova@fses.uniba.sk

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0000-003-4117-7657>

ABSTRACT

The research looks into the authoritarian regime survival strategies in Egypt and Turkey during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it examines how the autocratic rulers in both countries dealt with the securitization dilemma caused by the coronavirus outbreak. It applies securitization theory and the concept of selective securitization to argue that although both Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rule were at some point expected to be shaken by the pandemic, the COVID-19 securitization dilemmas had an important role in helping to prolong the autocratic directions of their respective countries. Additionally, the article demonstrates that the securitization of the COVID-19 pandemic in Egypt and Turkey follows a certain political pattern where every crisis constitutes an opportunity for expanding the regimes' powers at the expense of citizens' rights.

KEYWORDS

authoritarianism, COVID-19, discursive hegemony, Egypt, monopolization, regime survival strategies, securitization, securitization dilemma, selective securitization, Turkey

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In this research, I look into the survival strategies of the authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Turkey during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, I examine how both the Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdoğan handled the securitization dilemma caused by the 2020 coronavirus crisis. The article interprets the securitization dilemma in the context of the vulnerability defined by the political economy of the regimes, which includes their dependence on cronies and economic structures. Additionally, it uses securitization theory and the concept of selective securitization to demonstrate how both presidents made use of the securitization dilemma to prolong their rules, which could possibly be shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic. They used two principal strategies to solve the dilemma and ensure the survival of their regimes. Firstly, they attempted to establish their discursive hegemony with respect to the COVID-19 agenda, which involved using repressive tactics against dissident voices. Secondly they monopolized the crisis management measures aimed at fighting the COVID-19 outbreak. As a consequence, the crisis management monopolization and the disciplining of the pandemic discourse allowed them to pursue a selective securitization, which in turn was crucial for further prolonging their authoritarian rule. Therefore, I argue that although both Sisi's and Erdoğan's rule were at some point expected to be possibly undermined by the pandemic (E.G. ARDOVINI 2020; SCHENKKAN 2020), the current securitization dilemma, the consequent crisis management monopolization and attempts at a discursive hegemony as well as selective securitization in fact resulted in the survival of authoritarianism in their respective countries. Additionally, the article demonstrates that the securitization of the COVID-19 pandemic in Egypt and Turkey follows a broader political pattern, whereby every crisis constitutes an opportunity for expanding the regimes' powers at the expense of citizens' rights.

In the case of Egypt, this pattern is deeply rooted in the country's political history, with Gamal Abdel Nasser (1956–1970) serving as an example of autocracy for the rest of Egypt's authoritarian presidents (for specific examples of Nasser's authoritarianism, see for instance Shehata 2018). On the other hand, Turkey started its new era of authoritarianism with Erdoğan's rise to power (2000–2014: THE PRIME MINISTER OF TURKEY IN 2003–2014, AND THE TURKISH PRESIDENT FROM 2014 UNTIL THE PRESENT). Although initially seen as a hope for the country's democratic transition, especially in the later years of his rule, Erdoğan succeeded in moving Turkey *"in a profoundly illiberal, authoritarian direction"* (KARAVELI 2016).

Existing research has not yet dealt with the impact that the COVID-19 securitization dilemma had on the regimes' dynamics in Egypt and Turkey. These two countries were selected for this study due to their leaders being among the most prominent Middle East and North Africa (MENA) autocrats, whose regimes were expected to be possibly undermined as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (ARDOVINI 2020; SCHENKKAN 2020) but who in reality translated the crisis into an opportunity that enabled their autocratic regimes to survive. Moreover, I chose them because of their similar handling of the crisis. By their comparison, the study aims to demonstrate that although both Sisi and Erdoğan faced the initial COVID-19 securitization dilemma caused by a number of factors (economic considerations, cronyism) that could possibly enfeeble their rule, thanks to the implementation of regime survival strategies, they have nevertheless managed to overcome the crisis and ensured the maintenance of autocracy in their respective countries. Additionally, they used similar methods (attempts to hegemonize the discourse as well as the monopolization of the crisis management measures and the consequent selective securitization) to achieve this. The contribution of the study lies in its demonstration of how autocrats use selective securitization as the best possible tactic to prolong their rule and authoritarian powers. Moreover, the article makes a clear connection between the implementation of selective securitization tactics and the ability of autocrats to overcome the pandemic's challenge to their status and capacities. Finally, the article offers a more nuanced understanding of authoritarian regime dynamics, which debunks the earlier arguments about Sisi's and Erdoğan's rule being possibly undermined by the pandemic (ARDOVINI 2020; SCHENKKAN 2020).

The article is structured as follows. I start the article with theoretical and methodological considerations, explaining the theories used and the process of collecting the data needed for the research. I then proceed by giving a brief account of how in the past, both Egypt's Sisi and Turkey's Erdoğan actively used the securitization of crises and how these securitizations translated into the sustenance of authoritarianism in the countries. Then, I examine the COVID-19 securitization dilemma and regime survival strategies in both Egypt and Turkey and, using specific examples and utterances, demonstrate how Sisi and Erdoğan approached these and how these were crucial for the further prolongation of authoritarianism in their countries. I conducted the research between January 2020 and June 2020.

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

In my analysis, I mainly rely on the concept of securitization, as developed by the Copenhagen School. Its members define securitization as “*a speech act that has to fulfill three rhetorical criteria. It is a discursive process by means of which an actor (1) claims that a referent object is existentially threatened, (2) demands the right to take extraordinary countermeasures to deal with the threat, and (3) convinces an audience that rule-breaking behavior to counter the threat is justified*” (BUZAN – WAEVER – DE WILDE 1998). Additionally, building upon their analysis, João Nunes further claims that “*what distinguishes a process of securitization is the defense of extraordinary measures – including the suspension of normal processes of (or exceptions to) democratic deliberation – as necessary responses to this existential threat*” (NUNES 2020). Furthermore, securitization is not only limited to speech acts, but also includes securitizing practices such as those employed by authoritarian regimes. These practices include controlling the discourse by non-discursive means (e.g. introducing punishments for those independent civil society actors which put forth rival interpretations of the pandemic) and other practices – such as, for instance, establishing government control over/regulating quarantining practices.

Moreover, almost every agenda, whether it relates to economy, values or culture, might become an object of securitization. Infectious diseases are no exception. As Stefan Elbe (2010) states: “*The ongoing securitization of the infectious disease can be traced back at least as far as 1992.*” Over the past years, diseases such as Zika, HIV/AIDS, SARS or Ebola were presented as threats and carefully securitized (DAVIES 2008; ELBE 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic was not any different. Many world leaders undertook extraordinary measures to stop the spread of the disease, limiting civic freedoms in the process. As Stephane Baele (2020) claims, “*[g]overnments and scientists (the securitizing actors) have invested the virus (the referent subject) with the ‘aura of unprecedented threatening complexion’ against a series of different referent objects – people’s lives, the Nation/State, health services, society, etc. – to justify the unprecedented measures [such as drastic confinement or the deployment of the army in the streets].*”

Additionally, the article uses the concept of the securitization dilemma to demonstrate Sisi’s and Erdoğan’s initial reluctance to acknowledge and securitize the COVID-19. Building upon Scott Watson’s analysis (2013), Van Rythoven (2019) claims that, “*a securitization dilemma occurs when*

attempts to protect one referent object endangers another.” Likewise, following Ronnie Olesker’s analysis ⁽²⁰¹⁸⁾ Lewis Eves and James Thedham ^(2020: 1–2) argue that *“securitizing an issue in one sector, negatively impacts upon another sector. This creates a dilemma for the securitizer as to whether they should securitize the issue or not.”* The present study builds upon these definitions and argues that Sisi and Erdoğan’s solutions to their respective securitization dilemmas are means to protect their countries’ economies from suffering substantial harm caused by the COVID-19 precautionary measures and ensure the prolongation of their rule. Finally, the article makes use of the concept of selective securitization, understood as prioritization of certain referent objects over other ones. Thus, in the case of Egypt and Turkey, measures contributing to the survival of authoritarianism were often undertaken at the expense of more crucial topics that could, however, undermine the regimes’ stability.

The 2020 COVID-19 crisis posed a dilemma for a number of political leaders as to what should be securitized, to what extent and, most importantly, by whom. Especially in authoritarian countries, the securitization dilemma was approached with a high degree of carefulness, as unpremeditated steps could threaten the regimes’ stability and legitimacy. As Egypt and Turkey were no exceptions to this, their leaders had to undertake such measures that would, on one hand, contribute to fighting the pandemic, but, on the other, would not threaten the stability of the regimes. The necessity of undertaking optimal (from the point of view of regime survival) measures was well accounted for by the later outbreak of protests in a number of both democratic and authoritarian countries, where people took to the streets to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with their governments’ handling of the crisis. In Lebanon, people blocked major roads and threw rocks at the central bank building to show that there was not enough done to protect the country’s economy and those who suffer from the crisis’ consequences the most ^(GELDI 2020). In Iraq, massive protests were held to oppose the government’s COVID-19 measures and the lockdown ^(SLY 2020). Similarly, Thailand witnessed the greatest anti-government protests since the 2014 *coup d’état*. These were triggered by the failed economy, which was hit hard by the pandemic and the strict measures imposed on the people ^(REGAN – OLARN 2020). Finally, in Belarus, President Lukashenka’s mismanagement of the pandemic contributed to *“the erosion of his legitimacy”* and the later outbreak of protests there ^(KAZHARSKI 2021). Given the possible scenarios, it was vital especially for the autocratic regimes to choose the

optimal strategy to prolong their rule. In the opposite case, they could end up facing similar protests that would potentially threaten to undermine the stability of their regimes. To prevent these, both Sisi and Erdoğan made use of selective securitization, which aimed at pointing to the gravity of the COVID-19 issue, but at the same time enabled them to prolong the authoritarian rule in their countries. This was done by attempting to establish a discursive hegemony with respect to the COVID-19 agenda and by monopolizing crisis management measures aimed at fighting the disease. Consequently, these allowed them to pursue selective securitization, which in turn was instrumental to the further survival of the authoritarian regimes. As mentioned previously, this authoritarian framing of the pandemic crisis stemmed from the vulnerability defined by the political economy of the regimes, including their dependence on cronies and economic structures. One has to bear in mind that Erdoğan's rule in particular was built on somewhat shaky grounds even before the outbreak of the crisis, with the levels of his popularity slowly decreasing (as demonstrated, for instance, by AKP's loss of major cities such as Istanbul or Ankara to his political opponents in the 2019 municipal election). Under these circumstances, a clumsy handling of the pandemic could prove fatal. Moreover, although there is certainly a key difference between the two regimes, as the Egyptian president Sisi enjoys greater levels of trust than his Turkish counterpart, in his case unpremeditated steps could equally cause trouble for his authoritarian rule. Taking into account that *"a renewed wave of popular uprisings in the fall of 2019 revealed that the country's deep-seated issues, such as widespread corruption, social inequalities and systemic poverty remain a key driver of popular discontent"* (ARDOVINI 2020), hypothetical protests caused by the government's mishandling of the COVID-19 crisis would in all probability mean further trouble for the regime. Consequently, selective securitization was a vital strategy for ensuring the further survival of the authoritarian regimes in both countries.

As per the methodology, the article makes use of qualitative discourse analysis and media analysis. The major bulk of the data comes from the official Facebook pages of Sisi and Erdoğan as well as from online newspapers and reports written in English and Arabic. Around 150 primary sources were analyzed. To conduct the research in as unbiased a manner as possible, I worked with both state-controlled and independent media in Egypt and Turkey. Among the selected sources were Egypt's independent online newspaper *Mada Masr*, the most widely-read Egyptian newspaper

Youm7 and the state controlled media *Ahram Online*, *Egypt Today* and *El Gumhuria*. Regarding Turkey, mainly sources written in English were used for further analysis. These were the independent media *Duvar English* and *Bianet* and the pro-government media *Hurriyet* and *Daily Sabah*. These newspapers were selected due to their high numbers of daily readers and thus their ability to considerably influence public opinion in one way or another. The analysis concentrated on their depiction of the COVID-19 pandemic in their respective countries, on their portrayals of measures undertaken by the governments as well as on both Sisi's and Erdoğan's responses to the pandemic.

Additionally, I analyzed selected videos showing Erdoğan and Sisi addressing COVID-19 in their public speeches. These came mainly from their official Facebook pages and the Egyptian pro-government TV channel DMC. To find relevant materials, the Google search engine was used to look for combinations of the following keywords – Sisi, Erdoğan, COVID-19, COVID pandemic, Egypt, Turkey, authoritarianism, virus, COVID-19 denial and COVID-19 measures. For the purpose of the research, the same combination of keywords in the Arabic language was also entered into the search engine. In the analysis, I covered the period from January 2020 till June 2020.

SECURITIZATION AND REGIME BOOSTING IN EGYPT AND TURKEY

Egypt and Turkey have rather a rich history of using securitization as a tool for their leaders' political purposes (FOR SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF SECURITIZATION, SEE FOR INSTANCE GERI 2016; MCMANUS 2018). Generally speaking, in these countries, every crisis, whether it is the COVID-19 pandemic or a revolution, is presented as a threat to the survival of the nation and afterwards carefully securitized. Normally, the securitization then translates into emergency laws that grant the countries' leaders additional powers at the expense of civic rights and freedoms. Consequently, these lead to the tightening of their grip on the country and a prolongation of their authoritarianism. I interpret this process as a reoccurring political pattern that both Egypt's and Turkey's ruling elites take advantage of every time that their leaders face a challenge that is potentially threatening to their rule. This means that whenever the presidents face a possible threat to their positions, they have to come up with certain strategies that would ensure the survival of

their regimes, while further curbing civic freedoms. Additionally, it can be argued that rather than risking an enfeeblement of their position, the leaders frame the issue as a problem of national security, skilfully translating it to their advantage.

According to Furio Cerutti, authoritarianism is a form of government characterized “*by a strong central power*” and limited political freedoms (2017: 17). Furthermore, Linz (1967: 297) described an authoritarian regime as “*a political system with limited, not responsible political pluralism: without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without intensive nor extensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally small group exercises powers within formally ill-defined limits, but actually quite predictable ones.*” I build upon these definitions in explaining how the initial securitization dilemma in the name of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic influences the regimes’ dynamics and further translates into the stabilization of authoritarianism in the two countries.

Moreover, herein, it is also necessary to differentiate between the types of authoritarianism that can be found in Egypt and Turkey. While the current Egyptian regime is often described as a military electoral authoritarianism, political scientist researchers frequently label its Turkish counterpart as a competitive authoritarianism or hegemonic party regime. Following Bruce Bueno de Mesquita’s analysis (2014) Sahar F. Aziz (2016) claimed that, “*military electoral authoritarianism constitutes a type of hybrid regime where the military upholds the façade of elections but places current and former military officials at the helm of the elite selectorate.*” In contrast, a hegemonic party regime is described as “*a non-democratic regime that (1) rules with the aid of a dominant political party and (2) holds multi-party elections*” (REUTER – GANDHI 2011). The difference between the types of authoritarianism that are at work in Egypt and Turkey is rather significant, since (as will be mentioned later in the text) it results also in the leaders’ pacts with different types of elites and considerably influences the regimes’ approaches in fighting COVID-19 and ensuring the prolongation of their authoritarian rule.

In the past, both Sisi and Erdoğan effectively used domestic challenges such as the 2016 Turkish *coup d’état* attempt or the 2011–2014 popular protests in Egypt to strengthen their position in the respective country and prosecute their critics and political opponents. Similarly, they took advantage of the initial COVID-19 securitization dilemma to maintain their

powers and ensure the survival of their authoritarian regimes. This was done by their attempts to control the public discourse about the pandemic and by their monopolizing the crisis management measures, which in turn allowed them to pursue selective securitization, which was instrumental to the further prolongation of their authoritarian powers.

Historically, the Egyptian republic has experienced constant securitization waves since its establishment in 1953. Thus, for example the Free Officers Movement (*Ḥarakat aḍ-ḍubbaṭ al-aḥḥar*), a group of Egyptian nationalist officers responsible for the 1952 *coup d'état* and the overthrow of the Muhammad Ali dynasty (1805–1953), introduced a ban on multi-party politics and a crackdown on political opposition (METZ CHAPIN 1990), which they justified by a prospective risk of a counter-revolution financed by the West and a possible religious extremism. Additionally, in 1958, the country first enacted its Emergency Law No.162. This emergency law, an integral part of Egyptian securitization politics, including amid the COVID-19 crisis, was consecutively in effect since President Anwar Sadat's assassination in October 1981 (HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH 2008; REZA 2007) until the 1st of June, 2012. In April 2017, the current president, Sisi, declared the current state of emergency in the name of fighting terrorism and extremism in the country (BBC 2017). Although initially declared for three months, the law has been continuously reintroduced until today.

Based on that, I argue that the emergency law functions as a reoccurring part of Egyptian securitization politics that is effective for maintaining the president's position, including amid the COVID-19 pandemic. What is more, as the law grants him more competencies, it ensures the authoritarian regime's survival. Thus, for example it enables the president to monitor all forms of communication and correspondence. Additionally, it authorizes him to impose curfews, and censor books and press articles prior to their publication (SINGERMAN 2002; ALZUBEIDI 2018). Moreover, what I see as the most problematic part is that it also gives him the power to delegate the courts' competencies and investigations of crimes to the military. As Egypt is long perceived as a violator of human rights, this is yet another step in the decline in civic freedoms and the further prolongation of autocratic rule there.

Similarly, threats have historically played a central role in Turkish politics. Throughout most of his rule, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1923–1938),

“the father of the modern Turkey”, relied on an authoritarian one-party government with limited room for political opposition (ZÜRCHER 2017). Furthermore, the securitization of the “Kurdish issue” has been largely in effect since 1984, with a strong re-intensification in mid-2015 (Geri 2016). Nowadays, Erdoğan made securitization an effective tool for the implementation of his policies. Following the 2016 *coup d'état* attempt, he declared the state of emergency, which enabled him to suspend the civic rights and freedoms and bypass the parliament when drafting new laws (AL JAZEERA 2016). The state of emergency was lifted in 2018, but the unofficial securitization continued with Erdoğan transforming Turkey from a parliamentary system into a presidential one. As Ayan Musil (2018) sharply predicted, the constitutional referendum of 17th April 2017, which changed Turkey to a presidential republic, enabled Erdoğan as the winner of the 2019 elections “to undertake full control of the government.” Consequently, this resulted in the president’s centralization of power and a further decline in civic freedoms.

As explained in the preceding paragraphs, claims about the national security and the survival of the nation are an integral part of the securitization processes in both Egypt and Turkey. According to Walter Lippmann (1943): “[a] nation has security when it does not have to sacrifice its legitimate interests to avoid war, and is able if challenged, to maintain them by war.” Furthermore, Charles Maier (1990) claims that: “[n]ational security... is best described as a capacity to control those domestic and foreign conditions that the public opinion of a given community believes necessary to enjoy its own self-determination, or autonomy, prosperity and well-being.” Given the variety of definitions, it is relatively easy for Egypt’s and Turkey’s authoritarian leaders to translate any potentially threatening issue into a matter of national security. Additionally, given that the concept of national security itself is rather vague and ambiguous, it provides the leaders with a capacity to frame almost any securitization measure under the category of sustaining the nation’s future, while ensuring the stabilization of their rule.

Concerning their initial treatment of COVID-19 both Sisi and Erdoğan were at first reluctant to come up with the measures allegedly needed for stopping the spread of the virus. I put this on the account of the securitization dilemma caused by the threat to the prolongation of their rule. Hence, certain COVID-19 measures were seen as potentially threatening to economic performance and regime stability – the latter being heavily dependent on the former.

A SHAPE-SHIFTING NARRATIVE

Thus, although both Sisi and Erdoğan repeatedly used securitization as a power maintaining tool, their initial approach towards the COVID-19 crisis was quite different. Instead of admitting its serious nature and undertaking epidemiologic measures, they downplayed the gravity of the issue. I put this initial securitization dilemma predominantly on the account of Egypt and Turkey's fragile economies and the threat that their underperformance could possibly pose for the survival of the regimes and their stability.

In Egypt, the government confirmed the first COVID-19 case on 14th February 2020 (FRANCE24 2020). However, instead of preparing for the spread of the disease in the country, Egyptian elites were largely playing possum. Additionally, it took President Sisi more than a month to publicly address his people about the issue. When he finally did so, in one of his first speeches, he said: *"I urge state institutions to continue the construction of national projects"* and *"I do not support a total lockdown in the country. That is dangerous. Millions of working people would be harmed. The shutdown of schools, colleges and universities protects around 22 million students"* (DMC 2020; EL TAWIL 2020).

Based on similar statements, the present study interprets Sisi's initial securitization dilemma in the context of protecting the country's fragile economy. As *"Egypt's economy has had a current account deficit since it was a monarchy"* and *"the country's reform programs were used to shore up the regimes and reward their allies"* (KALDAS 2020), Sisi could not initially afford to further harm them as it could result in demonstrations against his rule. Moreover, with the revolutionary uprisings following the year 2011 and the related internal political conflicts, the Egyptian economy suffered another major blow. This was largely visible in the decline in tourists' visits and also in the increased poverty in the country (SAEID – ARIFIN – HASIM 2012). Although the country's financial stagnation came to an end between the years 2016 and 2017, this did not mean an improvement for the majority of Egyptians. As Sisi's mismanagement of the public finance caused the external debt to rise nearly fivefold and the public one almost twice, the living standard of a number of Egyptians declined (HAMED 2019). With almost all the money being used for paying off the debts and building megalomaniacal projects such as the new capital, and almost no investments being made to support the country's long-suffering health and public sectors, it is estimated that

currently sixty percent of Egypt's population lives in poverty (WORLD BANK GROUP 2019). Under these circumstances, Sisi's initial dilemma of whether to securitize COVID-19 is no wonder, as it could have led to protests that would eventually pose a threat to his one-man rule over Egypt.

Additionally, acknowledging the presence of the virus would mean harming Egypt's tourist industry. As this industry seemed to finally recover from the impacts caused by the 2011 revolution and the terrorist attacks (according to CEIC, in 2019 Egyptian tourism revenues hit a record 13 bln USD), Sisi could not initially risk securitizing the issue. Instead, he presented Egypt as a virus-free country, while in the meantime the disease freely spread on its cruise ships. According to Amna Puri-Mirza (2020), *"The travel and tourism industry in Egypt is one of the country's leading economic sectors, generating about 389 billion Egyptian pounds for the GDP in 2018. About 88 percent of the direct travel and tourism contribution to Egypt derives from leisure spending compared to 12 percent of business spending."* Additionally, the tourism industry is also a major employer in the country. Currently, around 1.25 million of Egyptians are employed in this sector (PURI-MIRZA 2020). Given that tourism revenues constitute a major part of Egypt's national income, a decline in the number of tourists would further deteriorate the country's economic situation. Consequently, as poor economic performance would in turn affect the living conditions of the majority of the people, this could threaten the regime's stability.

For maintaining its power, Sisi's regime mainly focuses on sustaining the support of the military and the state institutions, particularly the police and the judiciary. It was these "players" that first brought him to power in 2014 and helped him to maintain his grip over Egypt ever since. Unlike other candidates, Sisi did not need a massive campaign to persuade the masses that he was the right choice. As a military man and a former leader of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), which enjoyed an enormous popularity due to its role in overthrowing the Muslim Brotherhood-nominated president Mohamed Morsi (2012–2013), he just needed to place his cause in the hands of the country's military and state institutions and let them popularize his goal and treat him as the *de facto* president long before the elections. This mutual relationship was beneficial (and remained so until today) for all the parties concerned. Sisi was able to cement his position to a degree that no other Egyptian president ever achieved in exchange for fulfilling the financial interests of military and

state elites. Moreover, according to Gunter Meyer – an Arab politics expert, Sisi’s “*position is stronger than [that of] any other [Egyptian] leader since the 1952 revolution*” (DEUTSCHE WELLE 2019). In contrast to his predecessors, Sisi did not build his power around a dominant political party, but rather around a group of faithful loyalists coming from different political spectrum that share a background in military or state services and an unconditional allegiance to Sisi. For instance, the current Egyptian parliament consists of 75 former army officers (the highest proportion in the country’s history), which means that around 10% of the country’s current MPs are former police, military and special investigations officers (DARWISHEH 2019). Additionally, around 140 parliamentarians come from the private sector (DARWISHEH 2019) and are ready to support the president in order to get lucrative business deals as well. With a weak and fragmented opposition and the rest of the parliament willing to do as Sisi pleases, it is crucial for the president to preserve this equilibrium in order to ensure the prolongation of his authoritarian regime. Thus, it was equally necessary for him to implement such anti-COVID-19 measures that would allegedly stop the spread of the virus, but not displease the elites. In a circle where the police and the judiciary support the military in order to preserve their autonomy and interests (DARWISHEH 2019) and the military supports Sisi to maintain their standing as almost the sole economic beneficiaries of the state’s business agenda, it is crucial for the president to keep this balance and fulfil everybody’s expectations. Moreover, as nowadays, according to the Egyptian Constitution, the military’s authority is “*beyond the control of the executive branch*” (DARWISHEH 2019) and the mutual relationship and reliance between the armed forces and the current president are stronger than ever before, it is even less surprising that Sisi is not willing to risk losing their support. Moreover, “*Egypt’s military has dominated the government and economy since a coup against the pro-British King Farouk in 1952, and every ruler since has been a military general, to the exception of Morsi*” (FENTON-HARVEY 2020).

Additionally, keeping military business interests satisfied is crucial for the sustenance of the regime’s legitimacy (for specific examples of the Egyptian military’s influence on the economic sector and the political life in the country, see for instance Marshall 2015; Roll 2015). As the Egyptian military controls almost every economic sector in the country from consumption goods production and infrastructure management to the tourism industry (ABDELHADI 2012; REUTERS 2018; SAYIGH 2019), its potential economic losses caused by COVID-19 would be enormous.

In Turkey the events unfolded according to a very similar scenario. Even after confirming the country's first official COVID-19 case on 11th March 2020 (PASLEY 2020), Erdoğan remained largely in denial and unwilling to securitize almost anything. In his first speeches related to the virus, he claimed that *"no virus is stronger than Turkey"* (CUPOLO 2020) and that *"Turkey must carry on producing and 'keep wheels turning' through the coronavirus outbreak to support exports and sustain the supply of basic goods"* (REUTERS 2020). As the Turkish economy has been largely suffering due to Erdoğan's fiscal policies (FINANCIAL TIMES 2019) and the construction of giant infrastructure project (HAKURA 2018), including prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, its total shutdown would mean even greater problems for the country. Also, with the Turkish tourism industry constituting a huge portion of the national income, the country could not allow itself to experience a similar course of events as in 2016. The bomb attacks in Istanbul and Ankara and the failed *coup d'état* attempt resulted in one of the worst years for the Turkish tourism sector (VON KESSEL 2017). An unconditional securitization of COVID-19 four years later would pose further economic problems for the country and a consequent threat to the regime's survival.

The reasons for Erdoğan's initial securitization dilemma were very much similar to those in Egypt. As tourism is an integral part of Turkey's economy, it was more suitable for the government to deny the existence of the disease in the country altogether. With its 34.5 billion dollar record revenues for last year (2019), (BUYUK 2020A) it is beyond doubt that the tourism industry constitutes a major player in the country's economy. Moreover, as according to the 2020 Economic Impact Record (EIR), *"[t]ravel and Tourism supported more than 2.6 million jobs or nearly a tenth (9,4%) of the country's total workforce"* and generated around 30% of its annual income (FRAKES 2020), the country could not afford to present itself as the center of the pandemic.

Additionally, taking into account Turkey's long-term negative economic situation, the country's elites could not allow its further deterioration. Therefore, even after the confirmation of the first cases of the virus in the country, Erdoğan insisted on taking small steps, *"keeping the wheels turning."* Similarly as in Sisi's case, this approach had also to do with Erdoğan's need to prevent possible uprisings and maintain the support of his cronies. As previously mentioned, the situation is very different to that in Egypt. In terms of regime survival, the Turkish president does not depend on the military or the police, but rather on a carefully selected

class of royal-like businessmen. In order to satisfy their financial interests and maintain their support, Erdoğan typically assigns to his cronies lucrative business contracts that enable them to use the state as a cash cow. One such example is the building of the “Kanal Istanbul” (the Istanbul Channel) – a megalomaniacal project aimed at connecting Istanbul’s European part with Marmara and the Black Sea. Although it is seen as a prospective ecological disaster by a number of Turkish activists, Erdoğan began the preparations and some of the companies close to his government already started the bidding in the official tender. As Turkey’s crony capitalists rely heavily on mega projects to survive (SOYDAN 2020), it is crucial for the regime to keep their business interests satisfied and maintain their support. One such supporter is, for instance, Ferit Sahenk – the CEO of the Dogus Holding conglomerate – a company active in the automotive industry, the financial sector and the media, which, due to its functioning as a government contractor, made a fortune and significantly rose in size. Among similar examples are the Turkish businessmen Sitki Ayan, Ethem Sancak and Ahmet Calik. Such mutual relationships usually work through a scheme in which the loyal businessmen get lucrative contracts, and the Turkish treasury backs high loans from European banks in exchange for their political support of Erdoğan as well as the mainstream media outlets, which they turn into “*pro-government mouthpieces*” (BILICI 2020).

Given that Erdoğan and his loyal business class of royal-like businessmen have been economically mismanaging Turkey for some years now (SOYDAN 2020), the economic restrictions would destabilize the country even further. Thus, given the circumstances, similarly to the case of Egypt, Turkey’s poor economic performance would possibly lead to popular protests and a possible threat for the already weakened regime.

As demonstrated in the previous paragraphs, both Sisi and Erdoğan faced initial COVID-19 securitization dilemmas caused by their reluctance to threaten their respective countries’ economies. Given that especially the tourism industry constitutes a significant part of their annual revenues, a COVID-19 securitization would in both cases contribute to the economic underperformance. Moreover, as both presidents experienced popular protests driven by increasing levels of poverty and/or decreasing civic freedoms even prior to the pandemic (SAMAAN – MACKINTOSH 2019; BBC 2019) the crisis’ negative impact on the economies could threaten the regimes’ stability. Thus, considering that the two regimes faced similar securitization

dilemmas, to which they reacted in similar ways, a clear parallel can be seen between Sisi's and Erdoğan's initial treatment of the COVID-19 crisis. In what follows, I will look more closely at the regimes' resemblances in applying selective securitization and regime survival strategies, and how these influenced the dynamics in both countries.

THE SECURITIZATION DILEMMA, SELECTIVE SECURITIZATION AND THE AUTHORITARIAN REGIME SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

When facing the initial COVID-19 securitization dilemma, both Sisi and Erdoğan decided to implement similar strategies that ensured the further survival of their authoritarian regimes. Firstly, they attempted to establish a discursive hegemony with respect to the COVID-19 agenda and secondly, they monopolized the crisis management measures needed for stopping the spread of the disease. In both cases, the official regimes aimed to control what was securitized, to what extent and by whom. This was enabled by their efforts to control the national media and permitted speech acts as well as via selective economic and religious measures allegedly targeted at defeating COVID-19.

First of all, by making use of selective securitization they attempted to achieve a discursive hegemony aimed at controlling the information about the virus. The official regimes achieved this through their strict control of the media and permitted speech acts. As it was necessary to inform the public about potential risks of the new disease, but at the same time prevent prospective critics from addressing the issue as this could result in a questioning of the regimes' capabilities to fight the disease and a decrease in their support, the COVID-19 securitization constituted a significant dilemma for both leaders. Sisi and Erdoğan decided to solve this dilemma by attempting to establish a discursive hegemony with respect to the COVID-19 agenda, which consequently translated into a selective securitization. Thus, the media and individuals promoting the regimes' official COVID-19 doctrines (which were largely doubted all over the world) were left in peace, whereas those opposing the doctrines were persecuted. In relation to this, both Egypt and Turkey administered harsher punishments (including steep fines and prison terms) to anybody challenging the official COVID-19 narratives and spreading what the government classified as fake news (AHRAMONLINE 2020; MADA MAŞR 2020; AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL 2020). Additionally, they aimed to silence

the critical voices by portraying their owners as traitors to the nation or as (in Egypt) “*ahl el-sharr*” (evil people).

Thus, earlier, in April 2020, during his speech to the nation, Sisi said: *“I want to tackle the issue of doubting the state. Doubts targeted the New Suez Canal and energy projects, among others, but we accomplished them. The evil segment leading the doubting campaign aims to penetrate the state institutions. They would treat you well for around five years and then rule unilaterally”* (DMC 2020; EL TAWIL 2020). Furthermore, he addressed the issue of the government allegedly hiding the real numbers of the COVID-19 victims as well, saying: *“Why would we want to hide anything? If we do not want bad people in Egypt, we must shun the rumours these evil ones are spreading”* (DMC 2020; ABDELHALIM 2020).

Putting the president’s words into effect, in March of this year, the Egyptian government forced the British-German journalist Ruth Michaelson to leave the country after she indicated that the number of COVID-19 cases in Egypt could be higher than the officially reported figure (MADA MASR 2020). Similarly, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, the Egyptian Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR) blocked several news websites and social media accounts on the grounds of combatting fake news. On the other hand, the government did not sanction loyal media spreading conspiracy theories, such as those where the virus was said to be a new form of biological warfare or those which hosted a person dressed up as the Coronavirus who complained that he was now blamed for everything (ALHAYAH TV NETWORK 2020). This double standard approach towards national media and individuals was a vital strategy in helping to legitimize the government’s anti-COVID-19 measures, while at the same time enabling a further crackdown on opposition voices.

Turkey adopted a similar approach, in which its attempts at discursive hegemony enabled a selective securitization. At this point, it is necessary to acknowledge that despite all the legal changes and political pressures, it is far more difficult to achieve discursive hegemony in Turkey, where there is a far stronger anti-government discourse that cannot easily be monopolized, than in Egypt. Nevertheless, it is still possible for Erdoğan to pursue this strategy in a manner similar to Sisi’s. The Turkish president largely vilified the opposition, stating that *“instead of contributing to the fight against the pandemic, journalists [are] ‘throwing up’ false information and untruths and [are] thus more dangerous than the virus itself,”* accusing the

opposition media of “waging a war against their own country [and] working night and day to break the nation’s morale”, and warning them that they will “drown in their own pools of hatred and intrigues along with terrorist organizations.” On another occasion, he stated that the country has to be rescued not only from the coronavirus but from “all media and political viruses, too”

(DEUTSCHE WELLE 2020).

Erdoğan also made active use of Turkey’s judicial system and he himself filed a criminal complaint against the Fox TV station host Fatih Portakal over his ironic post on Twitter, and accused him of spreading fake news. Portakal’s tweet questioned the measures undertaken by the government to fight the COVID-19 disease (DEUTSCHE WELLE 2020). Furthermore, Turkish authorities questioned and arrested hundreds of journalists and ordinary people who challenged the official coronavirus narrative. Among the most visible victims of the fight against free speech was a medical doctor who was forced to publicly apologize to the nation for questioning the government’s official COVID-19 numbers and therefore allegedly contributing to the spread of the panic (BIANET 2020). Unsurprisingly, on the other hand the pro-government media and individuals who blamed the virus on the State of Israel or on the Gulen movement (BOZKURT 2020) were not bothered. Thus, relying on conspiracy theories, the Turkish loyalist media, similarly as those in Egypt, were able to legitimize the government’s anti-COVID-19 measures, while at the same time downplaying the seriousness of the issue. Thus, we see that although Erdoğan certainly does not enjoy a monopoly on political discourse in Turkey, he actively tried to hegemonize the pandemic debate. In his attempts, he relied on both discursive and non-discursive means, with the latter including open intimidation and repressive measures against journalists, experts, and other public figures, as well as ordinary people whose stance on COVID-19 differed from his.

Secondly, the selective securitization was enabled via monopolizing crisis management measures. Similarly to the previous case, by taking control over who could securitize, and where and to what extent it could be done, both presidents ensured the stability of their regimes, while at the same time giving the impression of undertaking steps necessary for defeating the virus. Thus, for example Erdoğan’s regime strictly sanctioned every unauthorized anti-COVID-19 measure. Fearing that his political opponents would use these as an opportunity to improve their own

standing, Erdoğan chose to monopolize anti-pandemic steps even at the expense of helping the population. Herein, the monopolization served as a precondition for selective securitization to be performed. By its application, the president sought to secure his position as a principal power in fighting COVID-19. Additionally, thanks to his granting the right to help solely to himself and his political allies as well as the implementation of harsh punishments against its violators (including criminal prosecution), Erdoğan succeeded in depriving his opponents of the possibility to use official channels/instruments of crisis management.

Hence, for instance, the Turkish president recently ordered the opening of a criminal case against the mayor of Istanbul Ekrem İmamoğlu (ZAMAN 2020). İmamoğlu, a member of the Republican People's Party (CHP) and a prospective candidate for the 2023 presidential elections, launched a campaign in Istanbul aimed at collecting money for those affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. Additionally, together with the opposition mayors from the Izmir and Ankara municipalities, he started an initiative to deliver free meals and bread to those in need. Erdoğan was swift to respond. He declared the opposition campaigns illegal, ordered the opening of a criminal prosecution against their actors and turned people's attention to his own "National Solidarity Campaign", a cause to which he promised to give his seven months' salary. In a similar way, he prevented the opposition from distributing the mandatory face masks, pledging that they would be distributed for free by his government (DUVAR ENGLISH 2020A).

As mentioned before, by monopolizing the crisis management measures and the following selective securitization, Erdoğan sought to undermine the opposition mayors' ability to increase their popularity and ensure the prolongation of his autocratic rule in the country. The former is especially true in İmamoğlu's case. As he is viewed as a prospective candidate for the 2023 presidential elections in Turkey (DUVAR ENGLISH 2020B) he constitutes a serious threat for the current president. The best way to diminish this threat and turn the initial securitization dilemma to the president's own advantage was to make use of the COVID crisis in a way that limited İmamoğlu's powers and presented Erdoğan as the nation's saviour.¹

Furthermore, the monopolization of the crisis management measures permitted the leaders to undertake a number of selective economic and religious steps. Resulting from another securitization dilemma, these were needed

for helping to limit social interactions and mitigate the spread of the virus, while at the same time keeping the countries' economies alive and thus ensuring the prolongation of the presidents' rules over their respective countries.

In Egypt, this was done via new amendments to the emergency law that granted Sisi additional powers in his fight against the pandemic. Thus, for example, the extended law authorized the president to ban or limit any public or private gathering and shut down schools and businesses (YOUM7 2020). Although this also meant banning Ramadan gatherings and school events, as well as shutting down restaurants and cafes, the new law did not stop public transport, or the construction of infrastructure and national projects (REUTERS 2020; SAYED 2020). On top of everything, in one of his speeches, Sisi said: *"I do not support a total lockdown of the country. That is dangerous. [...] I urge state institutions to continue the construction of national projects. We are building 100,000 new fully-furnished social housing units. Each costs around LE 200,000"* (DMC 2020; EL TAWIL 2020).

In a similar fashion, the monopolization of crisis management measures helped Erdoğan with performing selective securitization. Thus, for example, he ordered the closing of cafes, gyms and restaurants, but refused to shut down factories and big businesses. He stated that *"continuing production and exports was Turkey's top priority"* and that *"Turkey must keep its wheels turning"* (GOKAY 2020). Moreover, the president's urge to protect the country's economy at all costs also translated into his government's approach towards national curfews. These were only imposed on people older than 65 and those younger than 20. Additionally, within the latter group, they excluded those between 18 and 20 years of age who regularly went to work (GURSEL 2020). The whole-nation lockdown was only in effect during weekends and bank holidays. By performing a selective securitization aimed at supporting the economy, Erdogan also sought to stabilize his already somewhat precarious position in Turkey and prevent possible uprisings. As Turkey's poor economic performance could lead to a similar scenario as that in Egypt, where one of the reasons for ousting the former president Hosni Mubarak was the country's poor economic conditions (JERMANOVÁ 2019), a total financial shutdown would in all likelihood result in demonstrations and people's efforts to get rid of their authoritarian leader.

Considering that both Sisi and Erdoğan decided to shut down primarily small businesses such as restaurants or barber shops, but not

big companies and manufacturers with a high concentration of people (or if they did so, then only for a week or two), these measures could not be viewed as serious efforts to stop the spread of the virus. On the contrary, the monopolization of the anti-pandemic measures and the consequent selective securitization served as strategies to keep the countries' economies alive, satisfy the financial interests of the regimes and their kleptocratic allies and prevent possible mass uprisings. Furthermore, similarly as in the previous cases, the implementation of these measures contributed to the prolongation of the presidents' authoritarian rules.

Moreover, in Turkey, a similar course of action could be observed in the implementation of selective religious steps aimed at mitigating the spread of the disease. Although ordering a suspension of new registrations for Umrahs, Erdogan initially hesitated with the quarantining of pilgrims returning from Mecca even after Saudi Arabia officially confirmed its first COVID-19 cases. What is more, he only appealed to people to self-quarantine (BALTA 2020; DUVAR ENGLISH 2020C), thus delegating all responsibility to those possibly infected. Given the fact that one of Erdogan's closest allies is Ali Erbas, the head of Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs, also known as Dyianet, it is no wonder that the president was initially reluctant to quarantine the returning hajjis. As in the last years before the COVID-19 crisis, Dyianet became one of key tools for the implementation of Erdogan's foreign and domestic policies (OZTURK – SOZERI 2018; BUYUK 2020B), President's good relations with its representatives are crucial for the survival of his regime, especially when it comes to its support among more conservative parts of the society. Thus, although eventually agreeing to suspend new Umrah pilgrimages, the president was in no particular hurry to quarantine the returning hajjis.

By undertaking a number of selective measures aimed at fighting the disease, but which in reality served as strategies for the regimes' survival, both Sisi and Erdoğan succeeded in ensuring the durability of their autocratic rules at least for the time being. Dan Slater (2010) argues that durable authoritarianism can be achieved via an effective state where the economic elites pay higher taxes to finance the ruling machine in exchange for order and security. Similarly, Brownlee (2007) and Magaloni (2006) claim that authoritarian regimes become more durable when they limit intra-elite conflicts and regulate loyalists' access to the spoils of public office. Sisi and Erdoğan's ties to their cronies and the range of the above-mentioned

authoritative regime survival strategies served as tools which succeeded in prolonging the autocratic directions of both countries, even if just for a short time. Recent popularity polls conducted in both Egypt and Turkey are a clear sign of this.

According to a nation-wide representative survey made in October 2018, President Sisi and his government enjoy a considerable amount of trust among the country's inhabitants. Around 70% of Egyptians said they had *"a great deal of trust"* or *"quite a lot of trust"* in the current leader and his cabinet. Similarly, 90% of Egypt's citizens trust the country's military and its decisions (SINGH – WILLIAMSON 2020). Moreover, *"given these high levels of trust and the controlled information environment, the public is likely to accept restrictive policies to combat COVID-19, even if they create hardships in the short term. If anything, the crisis may generate an increase in support for the authorities"* (SINGH – WILLIAMSON 2020).

The situation for the regime in Turkey looks somewhat less optimistic, but by no means tragic. Although according to recent polls, the approval rating of Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) fell to 30%, Erdoğan himself enjoys the trust of around 50% of the society (SOYLU 2020). With his recent conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque and strong anti-LGBTI statements, it is possible that in the next months, the numbers in his favour will increase, especially among his more conservative voters. Moreover, this possibility is further confirmed by the results of a recent study (conducted by Durham University's Business School) on disaster authoritarianism, which examined the impact of natural disasters such as hurricanes and tornadoes on small island nations. These suggest that in such conditions, disasters tend to lead to a rise in authoritarianism and even its support among the masses (MCKAIN 2019). Similarly, a team of researchers found a link between exposure to natural disasters (in this case, earthquakes) and an increase in support for right-wing authoritarianism among Italian adults with previously low authoritarian tendencies (RUSSO ET AL. 2020). Additionally, following Murray, Schaller and Suedfeld's work, Thomson and Ip (2013), argue that: *"There is evidence that a link exists between the prevalence of infectious diseases in the local ecology and an authoritarian system of governance."* Moreover, as they further claim, *"It may be that viral outbreaks may be an overlooked but significant factor in accentuating authoritarian tendencies in democracies and consolidating authoritarian rule in the so-called hybrid, semi-authoritarian regimes and closed autocracies"* (THOMSON – IP 2013).

On the other hand, although for now, both leaders apparently succeeded in ensuring the survival of the regimes in their respective countries, it is highly debatable whether it will last only temporarily or for a longer time period. Even nowadays, some experts suggest that given the possible serious economic impacts of COVID-19, in the future, both Sisi and Erdogan may expect more popular dissent, threatening the stability of their rules (SINGH – WILLIAMSON 2020; SCHENKKAN 2020).

CONCLUSION

The article looked into the authoritarian regime survival strategies in Egypt and Turkey during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, it examined how the authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Turkey dealt with the securitization dilemma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and how it influenced the regimes' dynamics in both countries. The study's findings suggest that although both Sisi's and Erdogan's rule were at some point expected to be threatened by the pandemic (ARDOVINI 2020, SCHENKKAN 2020), the strategies that the regimes implemented in reality contributed to the survival of authoritarianism in both countries at least for the time being. Additionally, the present study developed the concept of the securitization dilemma and interpreted it in the context of the countries' economic stagnations and related possible uprisings. According to the article's findings, the two countries' dilemmas were solved by pursuing two major strategies. Firstly, the regimes attempted to achieve a discursive hegemony regarding the pandemic by using repressive measures to control the spread of information about COVID-19. Secondly, they monopolized the anti-pandemic crisis management measures. Consequently, these attempts at discursive hegemony and crisis management monopolization allowed both Sisi and Erdogan to pursue selective securitization, which in turn was instrumental in furthering the survival of their authoritarian powers. Given that in both cases, the official regimes aspired to control what was securitized, by whom and to what extent, contrary to some expectations, the pandemic did not undermine the two authoritarian regimes, but, helped them to survive at least for the time being. This was enabled by the leaders' strict control of the media and permitted speech acts as well as via selective economic and religious measures allegedly targeted at defeating the disease. Moreover, as further demonstrated in the study, in both Egypt and Turkey, securitization follows a certain pattern that is deeply rooted in the given country's political history, where every crisis constitutes an opportunity for expanding the regime's powers at the expense of civic rights.

ENDNOTE

- 1 Herein, it is important to note that in this case, Erdoğan's tactics partially backfired. Although, he was able to prevent opposition mayors from the usage of official channels/instruments of crisis management and thus he firstly succeeded in presenting himself as the principal power in fighting COVID-19, he failed to foresee his opponents' creativity. Thus, even though banned from the implementation of the official instruments of help, "both Istanbul and Ankara's mayors have developed creative solutions[which seemed to help them increase their popularity] and asked citizens to directly pay the utility bills of struggling families or donate money to people who have lost their jobs" (Aksoy 2020).

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Michaela Grančayová is a PhD student at the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences of Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia. She earned her master’s degree in Translation and Interpreting (Arabic Language and Culture, and English Language and Culture) from the Faculty of Arts of Comenius University. In her PhD thesis, she deals with the role of Egyptian women in the democratization processes within the Arab Spring. Among the topics of her interest are the Arab Spring, Arab feminism, autocratic regimes, the Middle East, modern trends in Islam, Islamophobia, populism, radicalism, securitization theory and Muslim women in European politics.