

# Understanding variation in national climate change adaptation: Securitization in focus

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## Abstract

Climate change is recognized today not just as a pressing and prominent issue on government agendas but also one that has been increasingly ‘securitized’ in a variety of national and global settings. We know little, however, if climate change adaptation, as a subset of climate action, has followed a similarly securitized path. This article addresses that question, exploring not only if climate change adaptation has been securitized but also what type of securitization – threat-oriented or risk-oriented – has emerged. Turning our empirical focus to three national settings of Norway, Sweden, and The Netherlands, we look for signs of securitization as well as whether securitization has been facilitated, shaped, or even blocked by existing governance features in each setting. We use this study to link the securitization literature with environmental governance approaches by building a novel analytical framework. Our findings show some intriguing and unexpected patterns, including evidence of risk-oriented securitization couched nevertheless as ‘business as usual’. We contribute to the growing debate on securitization in environmental governance while also casting new light on national climate change adaptation processes.

## Keywords

Climate change, securitization, climate change adaptation, climate governance, riskification

## Introduction

Climate change is recognized today not just as a pressing and prominent issue on government agendas but also one that has been increasingly ‘securitized’ in a variety of national and global settings. Securitization, broadly put, is the process by which a public policy problem is constructed and accepted as an issue of existential significance rather than one of normal policy making (Buzan et al., 1998; Waever, 2008). Once securitized, an issue is treated in exceptional ways and by applying extreme measures. Newer theorising loosens the empirical requirements of securitization: existential threat framings need not be the only signs that securitization is taking place, nor are extreme measures required to denote securitized outcomes. More subtle speech acts, and practical action, too, may be doing the ‘securitizing work’ (Huysmans, 2011). In either variant, securitization matters since it leads to new power dynamics within government, special resources being redirected, and new decision-making processes outside of normal, accountable lines. It is no surprise, then, that climate change per se has been examined using securitization analysis.

Less scholarly attention has been paid to securitization of the specific question of climate change *adaptation*, despite the issue’s swift climb up national and international agendas (European Commission, 2021; IPCC, 2021). Adaptation refers to efforts to prepare for and adjust to both the current and predicted effects of climate change, beyond mitigation. Today, climate change adaptation is a central goal in its own right and has earned political and scholarly attention accordingly. Yet we know little about whether securitization processes present in climate change, generally, may have spilled over into efforts to *adapt* to climate change, specifically. The question is vital for understanding how this pressing policy problem is handled as well as the specific ways in which it is addressed and by whom. More broadly it reveals, to paraphrase Lasswell (1950), ‘who wins and who loses’ in modern climate governance and who has the power to enact change (Hansen, 2000).

This article asks whether climate change adaptation bears the markings of a securitized response, and if so, what type of securitization it reflects. We contribute uniquely to the small but growing body of research focused specifically on the securitization of climate change adaptation. We also theorize why the securitization of climate change adaptation may follow distinct pathways in national settings, linking the climate governance literature to the security governance literature.

After setting the scene for the analysis (section two), we then present our theoretical approach to defining and measuring securitization (section three). Following a discussion on methods (section four), we present our analysis of key securitization dynamics on climate change adaptation in three national settings – Norway (section five), Sweden (section six), and the Netherlands (section seven). We find evidence of securitization in most countries, although no dynamics or outcomes that reflect traditional securitization processes. Furthermore, we find that existing actor networks, governmental structures, and established ideas refract processes of securitization and shape outcomes. We conclude by drawing out the main findings of the studies and by affirming our contributions: not only do we demonstrate the applicability of a revised securitization approach to climate change adaptation, but we also do so with an emphasis on understanding local contexts (section eight).

## Studying the securitization of climate change adaptation

Climate change generally has led to a swift rise in attention to the question of climate change adaptation. Climate change adaptation (hereafter, ‘CCA’ or ‘adaptation’) refers to adjustments in ecological, social, or economic systems in response to actual or expected climatic effects (IPCC, 2014). It involves necessary adjustment to the realities of climate change – seen by some as an admission of failed mitigation efforts (Schipper, 2006). Today, CCA is a central goal prominent in national and international policy agendas (Biesbroek et al., 2010; Dellmuth and Gustafsson, 2021; Nalau and Cobb, 2022), shifting scholarly and practitioner attention to how, and in what forms, governance of climate change adaptation takes place. To investigate this question, various analytical frameworks can be used ranging from governance approaches generally (Peters and Pierre, 2009; Young, 1994) to security governance specifically (Bossong and Lavenex, 2016; Sperling and Webber, 2019). Much literature has investigated the connection between climate change and security in terms of a ‘nexus’ (Bremberg et al., 2022; Floyd, 2008). And of course there is an extensive literature on climate governance that helps to untangle the actors, processes and institutional fora in which governance takes place (for excellent reviews, see Dellmuth and Gustafsson, 2021; Sapiains et al., 2021; Zelli, 2011). We build on the insights of these works, but the contribution of this article lies more in the precise ways that security logics (Balzacq, 2015), both risk versions (Bigo, 2016; Van Asselt and Renn, 2011) and threat versions (McDonald, 2013), may come to shape issues not ostensibly associated with ‘security’ per se. Securitization as an analytical and methodological approach thus allows for greater insights on how such processes play out and with what effect.

Indeed, the securitization of pressing policy issues such as CCA profoundly influences how they are governed. This explains why studies of the securitization of climate change, generally, have proliferated in recent years (see inter alia Corry, 2012; Diez et al., 2016; McDonald, 2013; Oels, 2012; Rothe, 2015; Warner and Boas, 2019) within the broader literature linking climate change and security (see inter alia Barnett, 2003; Bremberg et al., 2022; Floyd, 2016). Scholars using the traditional definition of securitization – requiring an elite actor to frame an issue as existential, thereby legitimating emergency responses – reach equivocal results. Some authors argue that there has been a clear securitization of climate change (Brauch, 2009; Brzoska, 2012; Trombetta, 2011) while others have argued against a successful securitization of the issue either owing to the absence of a clear securitizing actor (Scott, 2012), the lack of audience acceptance of the move (Warner and Boas, 2019), or a dearth of emergency measures (Buzan et al., 1998).

More recently, theorists have developed alternative versions of securitization theory, arguing that not all the assumed preconditions of the original ‘Copenhagen School’ version are required for securitization to take place. Some authors have made only slight adjustments to the theory, mainly changing the empirical focus to study ‘collective securitization’ in supranational organizations like the United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU) (Dupont, 2018; Sperling and Webber, 2019). Other scholars retheorize the key stages of securitization and their empirical indicators, resulting in

different versions of securitization (see [Stritzel, 2007](#) for an overview). As we explain below, different versions of securitization loosen its various elements regarding: which actors can make the securitizing move, which imageries, logics and discourses denote ‘urgency’, what and why some measures should be deemed extraordinary, and what normative connotations different kinds of securitizations may carry ([Bigo et al. 2014](#)).

These different version of securitization have been applied in the field of climate change, too. While some studies find evidence of traditional forms of securitization focused on existential ‘threats’, others reveal that securitization is more likely to take the form of omnipresent ‘risks’ ([Brauch, 2009](#); [McDonald, 2013](#); [Trombetta, 2009](#)). [Corry \(2012\)](#) argues that a securitization of climate change has taken place, but using a different kind of discursive ‘grammar’: an effect he labels ‘riskification’. [Diez et al. \(2016\)](#) emphasize that securitization is taking place on climate change, but the exact form and character, some based on threat-oriented logics, others based on risk-oriented logics, differs across regions and nations. [Odeyemi \(2021\)](#) shows that climate change, especially at international levels, has been largely but not totally treated as a ‘risk’ more than a ‘threat’.

As the international policy agenda shifts towards CCA specifically, the question emerges as to whether securitization is taking place on that issue, too. Understanding how CCA governance takes place, whether it is securitized, and, if so, *what kind of securitization* is unfolding, becomes an urgent concern to build knowledge about international and national capacities to make critical climate change adjustments. There is preliminary evidence at the international level, namely in UN and EU settings, that a degree of securitization has taken place regarding CCA ([Morsut and Rhinard, 2022](#)) and that different *versions* of securitization are on display. Additional research is needed on whether and what kinds of securitization are taking place on CCA at national levels. In what follows, we focus on whether and how adaptation has been securitized at national levels – in Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands. In the next section we build a framework for analysing securitization in such settings.

## Explanatory framework

The original securitization approach is associated with the Copenhagen School of security studies, which broke new ground in arguing that ‘security’ is not an objective phenomenon but rather something we speak into reality ([Balzacq et al., 2016](#); [Buzan and Waever, 2003](#)). Securitization theory explains how issues move from the realm of ‘normal’ politics to the realm of security where the state can bypass democratic discourses and procedures. The precise mechanisms by which this happens is set out in the original approach by [Waever \(1995\)](#) and further developed with colleagues ([Buzan et al., 1998](#)). Securitization is initiated by elites as a speech act, in other words, a ‘securitizing move’, through which ‘an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat’ ([Buzan and Waever, 2003](#): 491).

The advent of securitization theory spawned decades of research on a wide variety of issues areas, not only on territorial threats. In so doing, researchers came to critique and refine several tenets underlying securitization theory. One critique took aim at assumptions of agency behind the initial securitizing move. Early work rested on the notion that heads of government initiate that move, although subsequent research showed that collective groupings, non-elected leaders, and other members of the broadly defined ‘political community’ may also lead the effort ([Balzacq, 2010](#)). Moreover, the construction of the ‘threat’ may take different forms, including not just discourses but also certain practices that assume an issue is extraordinary ([Bigo, 2006](#)). Another critique focused on the impact of the audience on securitizing move. Surely an act of securitization requires complicity of the audience, scholars argued, thus prompting research on the interplay of the

securitizing act and those who must accede to it (Côté, 2016). A third critique challenges the definition of exceptional measures that theoretically result from a securitizing move. Scholars argued that response measures do not necessarily have to be extraordinary in nature or weight – a doubling of defence budgets to combat the USSR, to cite a hypothetical example, is not required for securitization to take place. Securitization may be underway even in cases of incremental policy change, when new approaches become the norm. Or it could result in new policymaking models and paradigms related, for instance, to risk management or use of the ‘precautionary principle’ (Morsut and Engen, 2022). Finally, work on securitization theory relaxed the assumption that threats must be seen as existential. Traditional approaches focused on identifiable and discrete belligerents as ‘threats’. More recent research, however, argued that threats may take different forms and be constructed differently – but still lead to a form of securitization. The framing of problems as ‘risks’ is one such example, in that threat language and related imagery may be absent, but a type of securitizing process is nevertheless unfolding.

### *Different securitizations: Threat versus risk*

These critiques give rise to different variations of securitization theory. A clear distinction is emerging in the literature between two kinds of securitizing ‘logics’ that may drive different securitization processes (Balzacq, 2015; Stiglund, 2022; Van Munster, 2005). One is based on a threat-oriented logic, whereby a securitizing act identifies a clear, direct ‘other’ which is existential in presumed impact. The accompanying discourse and practice would assume urgency, too, in that a lack of quick action implies failure and extreme harm. Such action brings extraordinary measures outside of the normal pace and process of policy change. A threat-oriented logic of securitization has been found in relation to a number of public policy issues and is generally accompanied by discourses and practices that deviate significantly from the status quo. This includes the prioritisation of some actors in decision-making, new policy paradigms taking root in response to urgent need, and policy processes shifting from one area of government to another.

A different securitizing process reflects a risk-oriented logic. Here, risks are contrasted with threats in that they are less immediate, less direct, and less characterized by a clear, threatening ‘other’. The discourses and practices related to a risk-oriented logic of securitization suggest a dangerous scenario located in the future, with serious effects but operating through a variety of routes in order to impact upon multiple ‘referent objects’ (Diez et al., 2016). A degree of urgency, like in threat-oriented notions of securitization, is implied here, too. Yet the urgency concerns preventing risks from materializing into real harm. The act of security includes permanent undertakings and long-term perspectives, since risks are seen as something to be managed, not permanently deterred. The purpose of policy action in this perspective, ‘is no longer to stop threats but to “filter” the really bad threats away’ (Rasmussen, 2006: 109). Empirical focus then turns to discourses, practices and policies focused on management and even societal engineering (Corry, 2012; Hardy and Maguire, 2016; Odeyemi, 2021), including the adoption of certain policy models, risk management paradigms, whole of government approaches, and the proliferation of risk logics across existing policy fields. Table 1 summarizes each logic.

Securitization has ‘performative effects’ (Balzacq, 2005) and thus concrete implications for how public policies such as CCA are pursued (Oels, 2012). Threat-oriented logics, as the original Copenhagen School pointed out, enable certain actors to move issues off normal policymaking agendas and onto extraordinary ones. Such moves may take place outside of institutionalized democratic control processes. Resources, too, are shifted away from other societal priorities towards newly identified security ones. Risk-oriented logics also come with normatively undesirable outcomes. Beck makes clear in his writings on ‘world risk society’ that our world has become ‘increasingly occupied with debating, preventing, and managing risks that it itself has produced’

**Table 1.** Indicators of threat-oriented versus risk-oriented versions of securitization (adapted From [Diez et al. 2016](#): 16, [Corry 2012](#): 249, and [Stiglund 2022](#): 53, 64).

	Threat-oriented securitization	Risk-oriented securitization
Rationale	Construction of issue as one of direct harm, an existential threat with immediate impact, necessitating extraordinary actions.	Construction of issue as one of diffuse harm, accompanied by dangerous scenarios requiring long-term management activities on multiple fronts.
Empirical indicators in text analysis and interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discourses, imagery, and references to ‘existential’ danger;</li> <li>• Clear identification of the issue;</li> <li>• Unequivocal use of ‘security’ language;</li> <li>• Sense of ‘urgency’ imagery and exhortations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discourses, imagery, and references to constitutive causes of harm, every day and omnipresent dangers.</li> <li>• Identification of the issue at hand, including multiple manifestations.</li> <li>• Unequivocal use of ‘risk’ language, mainly eschewing ‘security’ language;</li> <li>• Reference to time-tested policy models and approaches.</li> </ul>
Potential, ‘performative’ effects	Legitimation of exceptional measures, elevation of some societal actors to positions of power, concentration of authority in relatively few government authorities.	Legitimation of certain measures related to labelling, quantifying, and managing dangers; cross-government governance strategies placing responsibility on multiple authorities.

([Beck, 2006](#): 330). As De Goede points out, risk-logics of security can pervade all corners of public and private life, generative a feeling of ‘incalculable’ insecurity ([De Goede, 2008](#): 13). The study of different variants of securitization, then, allow us to see how climate change adaptation governance plays out and with what broader effects ([Aradau, 2009](#); [McDonald, 2013](#)).

### *Intervening factors*

As shown above, existing research on climate change response, generally, has revealed different security logics unfolding, depending on context. To investigate which kind of security logic (if any) accompanies CCA specifically, we take these insights above into account and search for evidence of threat-versus risk-oriented versions of securitization. The presence of either one says much about how CCA is addressed in national contexts – a worthy research goal unto itself. However, securitization research has been critiqued for assuming that securitization dynamics – new discourses and everyday practices – play out on a blank slate ([Balzacq, 2005](#): 174). To understand how pre-existing aspects of national governance may shape how securitization plays out, we highlight three overlapping features prominently portrayed in both the security governance literature and the environmental governance literature. We argue that these may serve as ‘intervening’ factors in shaping securitization outcomes.

One such factor is whether existing actor constellations – and their respective interests – take up the charge of driving securitizing discourses and practices. [Diez et al. \(2016\)](#) discuss the significance of ‘discursive entrepreneurs’, individually or collectively, in conducting securitizing moves whereby they pave way for the legitimate securitization of an issue (e.g., climate change), setting a new ‘norm’ for policy agendas. This argument is echoed in the climate governance literature, in which existing and entrepreneurial actor constellations are seen as critical for shaping cooperation outcomes. [Oberthur and Kelly \(2008\)](#), for instance, find that key ‘actor nodes’ in climate change coalitions shape governance outcomes in critical ways. [Wiering et al. \(2017\)](#) note the importance of

‘change agents’ in shifting discourses and prompting change in countries in which climate change was not high on the agenda.

A second intervening factor is the organization of government. This factor was overlooked in traditional Copenhagen School approaches, yet understanding ministerial versus agency governance, or centralized versus decentralized governance structures, matters for how securitization plays out. [Wesselink et al. \(2013\)](#), for example, outline the divergent processes of securitization of flooding since national and local governments had diverging priorities. [Elander et al. \(2021\)](#) highlight the bottom-up approach of securitizing climate change made possible by certain governance structures, while [Floyd \(2016\)](#) found that the fragmented nature of global, regional, and national governance hinders the process of a securitization of climate change, generally. The climate governance literature highlights this point, too. [Dellmuth and Gustafsson \(2021\)](#) show that the specific structure of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) shapes which actors engage, what discourses prevail, and what legitimacy claims survive. Oberthur and Gehring (2006) extensively document how the presence of well-established governance instruments shape what new instruments are chosen to combat climate change. The form of government, [Bae and Feiock \(2012\)](#) find, makes a difference when it comes to implementing climate change rules at local levels. The concentration of power and relationship between ministries also been used to explain how climate governance proceeds in some countries ([Ford et al., 2011](#)).

A third intervening factor concerns the existing ideational framework in which a securitized issue is treated. All social environments are structured by existing norms and ideas about societal goals, many of which are built on historical experience and collective memory ([Diez et al., 2016](#); [Warner and Boas, 2019](#)). Discursive techniques are wielded within an existing ideational framework which allow the securitizing actor to ‘induce or increase the [public] mind’s adherence to the thesis presented to its assent’ ([Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969](#) in [Balzacq, 2005](#): 172). A country’s negative experience with risks and threats, a country’s belief in the power of individual action, a country’s reluctance to engage in military action, a population’s trust in government – these are just some examples of how ideational context matters (see also [Trombetta, 2011](#)). In the climate and environmental change literature, experience of an event is a strong determinant of how an issue is perceived and ultimately acted upon. The literature on floods highlights social learning, especially through collective experience, as an important mechanism for building the norms and ideas that render some actions acceptable for preparedness and response ([Barquet et al., 2016](#)).<sup>1</sup>

## Methods

We employ an in-case and cross-case comparative design ([George and Bennett, 2005](#); [Yin, 2009](#)). We examine the type and outcome of securitization process in each country, with an eye towards assessing whether any of our three intervening factors can account for the outcomes in a particular situation – e.g., the in-case comparison. We then look across countries to compare their type and outcomes, and gauge whether we see common patterns in terms of which of the three factors appears most prominently as an explanation. Our analytical framework does not aim for causal explanation. It helps to collect and sort empirical data in categories derived by existing theory, in the spirit of establishing ‘definitional parameters’ that give us a better understanding of an empirical situation as a step toward improved theorising ([Berenskoetter, 2017](#): 165-6).

Why these cases? Part of the explanation stems from practicalities. The authors are involved in a joint research project focused on these countries,<sup>2</sup> and each researcher possesses the language skills and local knowledge required to attain a deep understanding of dynamics in each country. More broadly, the countries allow for a most-similar research design, in so far as each displays a relatively similar governance system based on parliamentary democracy, ministerial government, and a strong role for implementing agencies ([Thiebault, 1993](#)). These common structural features are joined by a

common (if general) commitment to combatting climate change. And all three countries are grappling with increased intensity and frequency of extreme events, such as flooding, as a result of climate change.

The data used here derives from several related methods. The first includes text collection and analysis, from which we derive our discourse findings. We gathered key texts on climate change adaptation systematically, targeting the years 2015-2022, using a three-step process. We began with high-level, governmental strategic documents. These documents, usually issued by prime ministers' offices or a leading ministry, discuss CCA at the broadest and most collective level (typically being the result of cross-governmental consultation). We then turned our attention to various ministerial or agency policies on CCA. These documents are produced at a lower governance level (below the prime ministerial or governmental level) yet still capture how various ministers and agencies conceive of climate change adaptation. The last set of documents focus on the implementation stage. These include primarily internal documents at the agency level which reveal more practical variants of CCA framings and conceptualizations. All documents (58 in total) were stored in a central database and coded using the common framework presented above and by employing the key-words-in-context (KWIC) method of discourse analysis.<sup>3</sup>

A second method for data collection involved interviews with key respondents working with adaptation at national level in each country (26 in total). We used a snowball-method to identify respondents, first through a web-search of frequently appearing names in debates and then by asking interviewees about others central to CCA strategy, policy and implementation policies in both public and private sectors. The majority of respondents came from the public sector, and we endeavoured to find some officials with a horizontal view (e.g. in central government positions) and others with a sectoral view (e.g. within ministries and agencies). Our dual sources of data allow for a textured view, mainly of discourses used as part of the 'performative act' of that securitization represents, but also of the practical manifestations of these acts: policy choices, tools employed, and actors engaged. This empirical focus is in keeping with recent developments in securitization research, which argues that, to the securitising move, one must also add practices and policy to fully understand securitization (Floyd, 2016).

## **Norway: A risk-oriented securitization seen as 'normal'**

Our analysis of Norwegian climate change adaptation efforts reveals a degree of securitization, one very much along the lines of a risk rather than threat logic. That has not always been the case, though. One of the earliest articulations of Norway's approach to climate change adaptation took place in 2012-2013, with the formulation of a White Paper. That paper and its follow-up documents reveal both threat-oriented and risk-oriented framings of climate change, constructions that encouraged urgent action on adaptation while also seeing the issue as a clear-and-present threat (Miljøverndepartementet, 2013). At the same time, the discourses convey an image of climate change adaptation as a long-term project that must be integrated across all of society – as a risk-oriented logic of security would expect. Since then, however, a sequence of national level policies on climate change adaptation have moved firmly towards a risk-oriented process of securitization. Those documents, at high government levels, show that risks from climate change are perceived as diffuse and almost omnipresent, requiring a whole-of-government approach but mainly local action. This dominant narrative is echoed across the Norwegian government and has, of late, transformed the entire issue to one of 'climate risk'. Climate risk is thereby defined as 'risk associated with the implications of physical changes in the environment' (NOU, 2018: 17-18). The act of adapting to climate risk, perhaps not surprisingly, is treated as a task of 'climate risk management' to be undertaken by Norwegian municipalities (NEA, 2021). This view is most clearly articulated by the Norwegian Environment Agency (NEA), which requires climate risk management to be part of



spatial planning at the municipal level. When it comes to natural disaster preparedness, risk language is very prevalent in national documents, whereas when it comes to more general societal preparedness – even when the perceived dangers are the same – the risk language is much less apparent. Indeed, when climate change adaptation questions are addressed in ministerial and issue-sectoral documents (as opposed to cross-government strategies), neither risk- nor threat-oriented logics appear prominently. Generally, but with slight variation in different ministries, rather technical language is used without any projection of unique, urgent, or extreme imagery.

The three intervening factors may help to explain Norway's distinct version of securitization. Beginning with actor constellations, a clearly discernible characteristic of Norwegian discourses is the lack of clear 'change agents' pushing particular narratives. The Norwegian political and public administration system is famously robust and well-organized, making it less permeable to outside interests shaping the debate. Some organized interests engaged in public discussions over climate change adaptation, however. The Norwegian Centre for Climate Services, an inter-organizational group based at the University of Bergen disseminated public analysis documenting the risks associated with climate change and the urgent need for adaptation. The Norwegian Research Centre on Sustainable Climate Change Adaptation (NORADAPT) included scholars engaged in Norwegian academic events – many public – that helped to publicize concern. The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) represents local governments in the central government in Oslo and distributed information to government officials on climate 'risk' (see, for example, [KS, 2019](#)). Industry – in the shape of insurance companies – have participated in public debates – via working papers and opinion-editorials in national newspapers. None of these organizations, however, served as powerful discourse entrepreneurs, however, since their reach was fairly narrow and their discourses on risk rather subtle. Their discourses and approaches confirmed a risk-oriented version of securitization, but one that did not drive a united discourse on risk in Norway.

The organisation of government in Norway may also have led to a diffuse approach to securitization of climate change adaptation. The Norwegian national government is based on cabinet governance. Ministries are aligned horizontally on a sectoral basis, and each sets general policy goals while specific ministers are charged with implementation. The central authority for climate policy, including adaptation and mitigation, is the Ministry of Climate and Environment along with its subordinate agency, the Norwegian Environment Agency (NEA). These bodies set the policy framework within which CCA is developed and implemented (Interview 5N, 2022; Interview 6N, 2022). The Ministry of Local Government and Modernization administer the Planning and Building Code, which applies to all local authorities dealing with CCA. In addition, the Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate fulfils tasks related to floods, waterway regulation, and hydrological projections, and is placed under the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy. Finally, there are climate-related issues related to preparedness, prevention overseen by the Directorate for Civil Protection and Emergency Planning (DSB), under the Ministry of Justice and Public Security. A review of public pronouncements of these agencies shows, generally, a risk-oriented approach to CCA but in different forms. Some agencies, for instance, emphasize the urgency of special adaptation measures required across all of society. Others are more measured in their 'security grammar' ([Corry, 2012](#)) and suggest only that climate change adaptation should be addressed as part of normal management. Only the DSB uses anything resembling a threat-oriented version of securitization, focusing specifically on existential threats to known 'reference objects', such as infrastructures and using 'emergency' related language ([Interviews, 2022](#)). The organization of government may shape outcomes in another way. In Norway, the national government establishes guidelines and frameworks, while agency regulations set the regulatory aim for municipalities. This two-step process facilitates a depoliticization of issues, in general, and prioritises technical and bureaucratic solutions. The quick adoption of CCA into the well-established risk management approach to public governance in Norway was the result.

To what extent may have ideational frameworks, such as existing cultural norms or historical experience, shaped Norway's securitization approach? Wrapping climate change adaptation in the language of risk is consistent with decades of traditional 'risk management' paradigms in Norwegian public administration (Karlson et al., 2023), as mentioned above. This paradigm emerged partly from historical safety practices associated with the oil industry. Such an organizational culture – which crosses the public and private governance divide in Norway – no doubt worked against any trend to employ 'threat' narratives related to CCA and instead treated the question as one to be addressed using existing, familiar policy paradigms. A related factor is the widely documented degree of public trust in the public sector in Norway, in that 'things will be fixed', even in the most extreme weather conditions, and which may thus serve to de-dramatize CCA as a public threat and instead lead to familiar treatment of the issue as one of risk (Christensen and Laegreid, 2005). Recent natural calamities, including 2014 flooding across localities in western Norway, re-occurring flash floods, and the 2018 severe summer drought, which also affected much of the world, have partly 'repoliticized' CCA and the importance of taking urgent action (Barth Eide, 2022). But this should not be overstated: Norway's deeply embedded 'risk' approach to climate change adaptation symbolizes a normalization of the problem into existing narratives and administrative procedures.

In short, Norwegian securitization of CCA has taken place in the form of discourses and practices underpinned by a risk logic rather than a threat logic. The adoption of 'climate risk' language reflects a variant of – not a major departure from – existing ways of treating societal challenges in Norway. There are few truly new and novel policy instruments created to address climate change adaptation as an 'existential problem'. This risk-oriented outcome may be partly explained by the lack of clear discourse-driving entrepreneurs focused on traditional version of securitization. Instead, a wide number of actors are involved: as evidenced by the structure of government which tends to diffuse responsibility for CCA across ministries, nationally, and across governance levels including national, regional and municipal. Existing policy frameworks are used to address this challenge through standard administrative procedures. Such frameworks reflect existing ideas and cultural features of Norwegian society, including 'risk management' approaches already prevalent in public administration and trust-in-government. These features are likely to weaken any effort to dramatically politicize CCA as a traditional threat-oriented type of securitization might demand.

## **Sweden: Climate change adaptation as technocracy**

If Norway's CCA discourses are securitized in line with a risk logic, rather than a threat logic, Sweden reflects very little of either. There are isolated examples of threat-oriented securitizing moves. The (National Security Strategy, 2017) identifies climate change as a 'threat to human survival' and urges immediate action towards CCA. In its first report launched in 2022, the National Expert Council for Climate Change Adaptation framed CCA as a 'security issue, with implications for financial systems and civil defence' (Expertrådet för klimatanpassning, 2022: 6). There is more evidence of risk-oriented securitizations of CCA, not least surrounding the dominant discussion of adaptation as demanded by growing national hazards (Elander et al., 2021). But in general the main narratives in Sweden do not reflect a threat-logic or a risk-logic of securitization; rather, the main discourses project an intent to treat adaptation as a technocratic implementation activity (see Expertrådet för klimatanpassning, 2022: 308; MSB, 2022: 13; SOU, 2007: 60).

We find evidence that the three intervening factors – actor constellations, governmental structures, and existing ideational frameworks – may help to explain outcomes in this case, too. The 2006 climate bill argued that 'measures aimed at mitigation and adaptation should be based on scientific conclusions' (Proposition, 2006: 139-140). Ever since, one reputable group of cross-sectoral experts played a strong role in shaping debates on adaptation through public inquiries and policies. Based on a formal inquiry (SOU, 2017: 42), Sweden passed its first National Strategy for Climate Change

adaptation in 2018 (Proposition, 2018). The inquiry was written by experts – effectively, technocrats – representing a variety of agencies and authorities. Those texts, and the hearings that preceded them, show only occasional reference to urgency, harm, and extraordinary measures. Even risk-related discourses, such as a focus on omnipresent and perpetual harm requiring comprehensive management, are lacking. Most interviews confirmed that technical competence and evidence-based decision-making, managed through a consensus-seeking approach, dominates the adaptation discourse and policy development (Interviews, 2022).

The organization of Swedish government, not unlike Norway's, seems to militate against a centralized, all-encompassing securitization process. An important dimension here are legal institutions. In Sweden, the legal framework for adaptation, including goals and formal allocation of responsibilities, is separate from the legal frameworks related to domestic crisis management or military affairs (see for example MSB, 2015b: 4, 5). Instead, CCA is considered mainly a question of spatial planning and the work of municipalities and expert agencies (Proposition, 2018). CCA tends to be integrated into existing plans and policies – most notably the national 'Plan and Building Act'. In such frameworks we found very little evidence of securitizing discourses, perhaps because of their distance from other domestic security and territorial military actors and institutions. CCA is seen as another factor that must be considered in everyday spatial planning (Interview 10S, 2022).

Other structural factors at play here include sectoral fragmentation of ministries and agencies, with individual ministries setting broad objectives that their respective agencies must work towards. This 'Measurement and Control' model of policy management places goal setting and control measures in the hand of national government while local authorities are responsible for implementation and reporting back (Elander et al., 2021). In the case of CCA, thirty-two agencies and all county administrative boards are obliged by law to report their progress on climate adaptation to the Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute which in turn shares results with the central government. This is a reporting requirement only: most CCA work is done rather independently, without direct control by national law, extra support of new legislation, or specially allocated CCA resources provided for the task (Proposition, 2018). Here, spatial regulation is a slight exception. The National Board of Housing, Building and Planning is responsible for coordinating efforts towards CCA of the built environment. The Planning and Building Act obliges municipalities to assess climate risks in their zoning plans. There are no specific guidelines as to, for example, which climate scenario or decision model should be used to adapt the built environment (Plan-och bygglag, 2010). This can be contrasted with Norway's well-established and cross-government 'risk management' policy. For the most part, official debates within the Swedish government are highly fragmented. Most national strategies are focused on specific infrastructures: communication infrastructure (roads, railways, shipping, etc.), technical supply systems (electricity systems, district heating, etc.), agriculture and tourism (forestry, farming, fishing, tourism, etc.), the natural environment and the environmental objectives, and human health. We found little securitization in any of these sectors, either risk or threat focused. As Andersson and Keskitalo (2018) argue in relation to one sector, at least, CCA seems a case of 'business as usual'.

Dominant norms in Swedish political life may have refracted any securitization efforts, too. While civil protection – and securing critical service provision – was a Cold War priority in Sweden, during the 1990s a substantial demilitarization of civil protection took place. Responsibility was placed firmly in the hands of civilian authorities (Ödlund, 2009) including the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) which has responsibility for supporting local authorities in regard to hazards (MSB, 2015a). Crucially, such responsibilities are limited to fast-onset hazards, such as floods or landslides (see, Förordning, 2008) but do not include slow-onset hazards, such as sea level rises, that characterize the need for CCA. Put another way, there is an organizational norm in Sweden against securitizing slow-onset hazards since neither the military nor the civilian civil protection authorities are involved. That norm set the tone for Sweden's

approach to CCA, which, our research shows, steers clear of discourses related to either threats or risks. Most action focuses on research and planning rather than solutions and implementation ([Expertrådet för klimatanpassning, 2022](#)).

In sum, Sweden's CCA approach does not fully securitize the issue in either a threat-oriented or a risk-oriented way. In fact, discourses and practices have not radically transformed normal policy discourses. The actors, institutions, and ideas involved in Swedish CCA reflect the same policy process dynamics as any other issue. Sectoral approaches are used, with little steering from national government. A minor degree of securitization is found in some sectors, especially regarding the potential impact of climate change and urgent need to adapt. But neither threat- nor risk-oriented logics of securitization can be found diffused through the system. Whereas adaptation action and assessments are carried out in a decentralized, technical, and local manner, it is interesting to note that climate policy, more generally, is highly centralized, politicized and expert based ([Elander et al., 2021](#)). It is only when adaptation is connected to fast-onset problems, and existing civil protection models, that allocated budgets are available for protection measures from natural hazards via MSB.

### **The Netherlands: Climate change adaptation as varied securitizations**

It is impossible to discuss CCA in the Netherlands without starting with water. With most of its landmass below sea-level, flooding in the Netherlands has long been considered an existential threat in discourse and practice ([Termeer and van Den Brink, 2013](#)). The 'water threat' is so prominent, in fact, that much of public management in the country is built around flood protection and its related tools and instruments. This integration into everyday policymaking has, ironically, reduced the amount of securitized language in terms of threat-oriented logics. The normalization of the issue does not mean it is without risk-oriented logics, though. Water is treated in terms of a constant, spatially diverse risk that requires all-of-government approaches. This is particularly true in terms of the tools and practices adopted: risk management models, flood detection systems, and a steady focus on 'casualty risks' and 'damage risks' ([HWBP, 2020](#)). The narratives studied here convey the belief that climate change poses many water-related risks that need to be addressed (even some tipping into the realm of 'threats' to national security), as part of everyday risk management. Risk practices are employed including risk evaluations supported by scientific knowledge and investigated using various techniques of 'futuring'.

There are differences between the level of securitization in various sectors in the Netherlands. While flood governance (and water governance overall) displays risk-oriented securitization, other climate-related adaptation needs related to heat, health, and drought are not. These CCA issues tend to be integrated with other governance matters and dealt with to a lesser extent in comparison to water-related risks. As in Norway, a 'risk management' policy model treats new risks, including those associated with CCA, as part of normal governance. National documents confirm our interview data showing a clear focus on research, planning and cooperation. Even if deadlines and time-frames are present (an indicator of risk-logics), the narratives indicate that the authorities expect to be able to safely deal with the risks related to climate change without the need for extreme changes of pace and direction in the normal governance of the country (see for instance [NAS, 2016](#)). Any sense of urgency or an existential threat, usually coupled with threat-oriented securitization, is difficult to discern empirically either through our document analysis or interviews. Some risk-oriented securitization is found in efforts to categorize, measure, and 'manage' a host of various hazards via CCA, with a strong emphasis on data collection, modelling, and careful planning. In other sectors, such as heatwave planning, until recently there has been little to no narratives associated with multiple, dangerous scenarios, as in risk-oriented securitization (see, for instance, [RIVM, 2015](#)). Thus, the discourses across Dutch government are best characterised as 'varied securitization', with variation amongst threat, risk and non-securitization across sectors.

This outcome seems influenced at least partly by the three intervening factors in our theoretical framework. Starting with actor constellations, groups linked to high water and flooding take an outsized role in ‘selling’ the importance of CCA in the Netherlands. When climate change, generally, hit the Dutch agenda in 2006, it was partly driven by scholars from Delft University, who mobilized for longer-term, more activist approaches to climate change via a ‘Delta Programme’ which led to the establishment of the second Dutch Delta Committee in 2006 (Van Buuren, Ellen and Warner, 2016: 28). The effort illustrates the willingness and motivation of scholars to securitize the issue of climate change and have in place urgent, tangible measures. Since then, CCA itself has not been addressed with the same kind of entrepreneurial activities, but some evidence can be found in the activities of specialized governance bodies such as the *Rijkswaterstaat* (the National Agency for Waterways and Public Works), Regional Water Authorities, Safety Regions, and Regional Public Health Services. In particular, *Rijkswaterstaat* and the office of the Delta Commissioner have an important role in pushing the agenda of flood related CCA. The Delta commissioner organizes the [National Delta Conference](#), an important meeting place for CCA related actors (Deltacommissaris, 2022). Drives for greater attention to non-water related adaptation activities may be growing, however. Heat adaptation has risen on the political agenda due to the efforts of the ‘National Association of Municipalities for Climate’ and the entrepreneurial roles of several key academics who are highly visible in national politics (Interview 6NL, 2022).

Securitization patterns of CCA in the Netherlands may also be shaped by the structure of government. As in Norway and Sweden, there is no central control of the issue in the Netherlands. A rather complex governance structure addresses CCA in a decentralized manner based on the collaboration of various actors at different scales of governance – and in different sectors but mainly water, health, and the built environment. This is in line with the Dutch tradition of collaborative and consensual policy making (e.g. the Dutch polder model). Government bodies from various sectors (ministries and national governance bodies) and levels (national, regional, municipal) have been involved in the development of CCA plans, including the Delta Programme and the National Adaptation Strategy (NAS), as have representatives from the business community and civil society. Considering the historical centrality of water in Dutch society, it is no surprise that responsibility for CCA policymaking and coordination falls under the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management. As in Sweden and Norway, national CCA frameworks (e.g., the Delta Programme and NAS) only steer and guide implementation of CCA at sub-national levels (provinces, regional water authorities, regional public health services, safety regions, and municipalities). The openness of the process to a multitude of actors and interests may have dampened any coordinated, centralized securitization effort.

Existing ideational frameworks in the Dutch governance system play a role here, too. The Dutch national experience with catastrophic flooding sets the tone for climate change action, evidenced by the fact that the Dutch formally recognized climate change since the 1970s and focused on protecting critical infrastructures affected by flooding. Even though the memory of historical disasters has ostensibly faded (Warner and Boas, 2019), adaptation to water related climate change effects is well-integrated in Dutch governance – with a scattering of threat-oriented securitization discourses as mentioned above. Flood risk governance is part of the DNA of the country, and it is highly institutionalized and secured in the Delta Law, the Delta Fund, and the Delta Commissioner. In applying the traditional Dutch Polder Model, adaptation is normalised, with echoes of Swedish CCA policy, as a technical, depoliticized approach. However, the narrative is more risk-oriented than in Sweden, with the notion of omnipresent dangers requiring myriad responses ‘for which every member of Dutch society is partially responsible’ (NAS, 2016: 13). Amongst interviewees, there seems to be a cultural reluctance to speak of crisis, emergency, or urgency. The focus lies in the collaboration of many actors on different governance levels in the data collection, goal setting, monitoring, and drafting of concrete plans to find solutions to emerging risks.

CCA in the Netherlands thus shows little signs of threat-oriented securitization. Instead, discourses and practices, especially in relation to water management, reveal risk-related logics of securitization: references to dangerous, future scenarios, rather than a specific threat; appeals to manage multiple manifestations of danger; and, application of risk management models of governance. Importantly, though, other kinds of adaptation activities – such as health and spatial planning – display neither threat- nor risk-oriented approaches. This might be explained by the diffused nature of CCA governance in the Netherlands, the lack of a single, driving ‘discursive entrepreneur’, and a national administrative culture that has integrated the management of climate-related water hazards into ‘everyday’ governance.

## Comparison and conclusion

Understanding whether public policy issues are securitized or not tells us much about how an issue is handled, by whom, and through what means. While climate change has been studied using securitization lenses, CCA per se has been less so—and certainly not in the context of the countries in focus here. This article sought to remedy this gap by studying the *kind* of securitization that has taken place on CCA in recent years in Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands. Recent securitization theory distinguishes threat-oriented and risk-oriented versions, and we aimed to uncover which, if any, of these versions took hold.

In comparative perspective, our cases reveal two sets of important findings. The first is that no country displayed a combination of discourses and practices associated with traditional securitization. There were very few references to an existential threat, a fixed referent object, and a sense of urgency that gave way to exceptional action. Instead we found more examples of riskification, in which discourses reflect the *potential* for future harm, the need to protect multiple referent objects, and the need to manage rather than suppress multiple dangers. In most of our cases, this riskification is accepted and unquestioned as ‘normal’. CCA was treated as an important challenge but one that could be managed using existing tools and approaches. In Norway, for instance, the long-standing risk management model, associated with oil industry hazards, was seen to perfectly fit the challenges of CCA. This means that CCA, in these countries at least, will not be associated with urgent ‘emergency’ mindsets leading to extraordinary action to resolve a pressing threat.

The second set of findings confirms that the pre-existing factors we identified in the theoretical discussion are likely to contribute to these outcomes. The diffuse nature in which governments manage CCA, through fragmented governance structures and little central interference, allows for decentralized discourses (traditional, threat-oriented securitization requires a relatively unified and authoritative securitizing actor). In the countries examined here, national governments set broad instructions, while the majority of the discursive treatment and practical implementation takes place amongst a bevy of different authorities and actors. The fact that CCA covers multiple sectors – water, energy, spatial planning, agriculture, etc. – means that no single group of ‘discourse entrepreneurs’ seemed capable of driving a full-fledged securitization of the threat-oriented variety. Existing management ideas and cultural norms influenced outcomes, too, mainly in two ways: well-trodden, familiar risk management models were seen as appropriate for CCA, despite the issue’s gravity; and, a general trust in existing governance structures allowed policymakers to take a ‘business as usual’ approach. These findings support studies that argue that climate change per se was subject to a risk-oriented approach and confirms that CCA followed a similar path in the countries under examination here.

Other questions are worth reflecting on, with an aim towards further research. One is empirically oriented: should the lack of a threat-oriented approach, and the prevalence of risk-oriented securitization, be seen as (normatively) positive or negative? On the one hand, the original Copenhagen School approach to securitization warned against the extreme politicization

of threats since they argued this may lead to undemocratic outcomes (Waeber, 1995). Newer research is also sceptical of threat-oriented securitization precisely because it can remove issues from normal policy agendas onto extraordinary, security agendas. This allows politicians to avoid broad, societal action on the topic. Swyngedouw (2010) argues that rendering climate change as a security issue paradoxically removes ‘the political’ from the actions actually needed to adapt. Abrahams (2019) shows that in the context of the US, the connection between climate and security is most often framed as a challenge to adaptation and resilience, or used as a political argument to pressure others to act on climate change; but in either case, rhetoric fails to materialize into actual political programs (Warner and Boas, 2019). The ‘postpolitical’ or ‘postdemocratic’ condition of climate change is seemingly aided by the framing of climate change as international and technocratic. However, as several authors have pointed out, approaching climate change as ‘risk’ may be as democratically deleterious as overtly securitizing it (see especially McDonald, 2013; Wenham, 2019). On the other hand, a handful of our interviewees argued for more centralized, urgent approaches to the issue – some interviewees even advocating for securitization – to ensure that CCA receives the political attention it deserves. Some respondents felt that decentralized ‘business as usual’ was not solving the problem. Future research could usefully explore what form of politicization is optimum to ensure adequate and effective management of one of today’s most pressing public policy problems.

Another question worth further reflection is the suitability of the ‘securitization’ approach for analysing the issue of CCA. Securitization has proved its value in non-security related policy framing analyses (Aradau and Van Munster, 2007), and as the results of our analysis attest, we believe it offers important analytical purchase on our research question. There are, nevertheless, potential limitations. One is the danger of analytical overstretch (Wenham, 2019), especially for an issue as broad as CCA, which includes a wide variety of adaptation issues that could, analytically, be studied separately (see also Von Lucke, Wellmann and Diez, 2014). Some CCA sub-issues (e.g. flood adaptation) may be more susceptible to security framings, for instance, while others less so. Such variation is an analytical question; future research, however, could parse out these variations in more detail than we have been able to do in this article. A more general proviso for future researchers studying CCA from a securitization perspective is to ensure the research question and ontological orientation of the study requires using the securitization approach—to avoid unnecessary and unfruitful ‘stretching’ of the approach beyond its analytical intentions.

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## Notes

1. The treatment of climate related policy questions as security concerns is one line of research within the field of international relations and security, but increasingly the appropriation of climate by security actors has come into focus. Oels (2012) for example has persuasively argued that the everyday practices of professionals in the transnational security field are producing climate change-induced disasters as a legitimate threat. Hulme's research on climate reductionism (2011) has shown how climate knowledge has come to authoritatively define futures, a case of 'climate reductionism' that serves to shape most other public policy constructions.
2. The authors are part of a multiyear research project titled 'Local climate change adaptation: from risk governance to securitization strategies?' (Project No. 302599) funded by the Research Council of Norway. More information can be found at <https://www.uis.no/en/research/climate-change-adaptation-strategies>.
3. In this project we gather publicly available documents and conduct in-depth interviews to uncover which security discourses, if any, are used to address CCA. Such an approach prompts the question of who drives such discourses. Policy documents and policy strategies reflect governmental policy but not solely of a technocratic nature. Those documents reflect, we argue, the current political discourses of their times, which no doubt draws on images, scripts, assumptions, and language of what might be called the political *and* administrative elites, collectively. Both classes of elites have been forced to respond to political imperatives (namely public pressure to act on climate change) and extra-parliamentary action and strikes on climate that have strongly shaped political positions and perspectives. Put another way, our empirics capture both the political and technocratic forces that combine to shape discursive approaches to a policy question—an aggregate construction captured by our additional interviews with key actors across the political-bureaucratic spectrum. This is yet another reminder of the importance of reflecting on the essential question of who has the power to speak 'security' within a securitization framework (Hansen, 2000).

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