

## BOOK REVIEW

**Elizaveta Gaufman, 2017, *Security Threats and Public Perception. Digital Russia and the Ukraine Crisis*, Palgrave Macmillan, USA, 222 pp., ISBN 978-3-319-43201-4**

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In the last decades, a vast array of academic papers has been devoted to the analysis of Russia's behaviour on the international arena and to the triggers of its perception on security. The explanatory field expanded from approaches based on the psychology of the leader to historical perspectives, media and communication studies or international relations viewpoints.

In this diverse academic landscape, *Security Threats and Public Perception*, written by Elizaveta Gaufman, delivers an interdisciplinary and audacious analysis on Moscow's perspective on security. Currently working as a lecturer for the University of Tübingen, Gaufman published her volume in 2017, as a continuation of her doctoral research. Despite its recent release, the book already received positive reviews from influential researchers of the former Soviet space, such as Andrei Tsygankov, who referred to it in commendatory terms.

*Security Threats and Public Perception* is an attempt to map the security narrative of Russia, balancing between how threats are built and magnified, how history and collective fears nourish the security narrative and what sort of conditions are required from such a narrative to be accepted by an audience. To answer to this sort of questions, Gaufman provides an analysis based on three different

(yet complementary) theoretical perspectives: the theory of securitization - as developed by the Copenhagen School -, contributions from the collective memory studies, as well as outlines from the studies on the enemy image.

The book includes nine chapters. The first three of them discuss the theoretical perspective, while the following five narrow the research, applying the theoretical framework to concrete threat constructs: the American international behaviour, fascism, threats to Russia's spiritual bonds and migration. The last chapter deals to the so-called *lesser threats* - a list of menaces that did not meet the criteria to generate successful threat narratives.

The first chapter is introductory, insisting on the structure of the book and on its scope. The innovative component of the volume - which claims to provide an improved version of the securitization theory -, as well as the main arguments for choosing three different theoretical perspectives are also briefly presented. Gaufman suggests that the securitization theory, enemy image research and collective memory studies complement each other and reciprocally fill the gaps in knowledge and conceptualization. One of her favorite examples results from the Copenhagen school theoretical standpoint, which defines a successful securitization process as one accepted by the audience. Gaufman underlines that, instead of speaking about audience, the Copenhagen school fails to provide a meaningful analysis on this topic, a deficiency that can be corrected by taking into consideration other theoretical contributions or cross-domain approaches.

The second and the third chapter - *Defining Securitization, Enemy Images, and Memory*, respectively *Identifying Threat Narratives* - present in detail the research methodology and the theoretical perspectives applied in the empirical analysis. Relying upon the concept of securitization, Gaufman suggests that a successful security narrative derives from the existence of an enemy image structure associated to the threat, an anchor to collective memory, respectively the development of a rhetoric on the governmental level which upholds the securitization discourse. At the same time, the threat construct must be largely accepted by the audience.

*The USA as a Primary Threat to Russia*, which is the fourth chapter of the book, is a brief digression on how the United States and the West are portrayed by Moscow. Gaufman states that, in this case, the threat construct is developed on

two dimensions – a geopolitical one, usually associated with the international behaviour of the United States – and a cultural dimension – mainly associated with the EU and presented as a threat for the cultural heritage and the moral traditions of Russia. The author shows that, during the Soviet era, the threat construct concerning USA was based on the critique of the American economic and social model, while, in the contemporary Russia, the focus has shifted to the idea that Washington aims to undermine Moscow's sovereignty and its political influence. Gaufman observes that, given the Cold War and the wide variety of stories, cartoons, news and materials depicting, in the past, the Western countries, this threat construct is, most probably, the most embedded in the collective memory and the richest in enemy images. It is also largely accepted by the audience, given that, according to surveys led by Levada Center, more than 80% of the Russian citizens see America as a menace for their country.

The fifth chapter, *Fascism and the Ukraine Crisis*, deals with another threat construct which is enforced by a strong enemy image and collective memories. However, unlike the American threat, the Fascist danger, is rather linked to a historical *Other* and is seeded on a moral ground. The threat construct is based on two core ideas. The first one is that Fascism worked as an existential threat to Russia, the World War II victory being not only a triumph against an alliance led by Germany, but also as a crucial moment for the survival of the Russian nation. The second refers to the fact that Fascism and its supporters are depicted as being 'on the wrong side of history', while those who fight against them are the defenders of liberty and peace. Gaufman notes that Fascism and its historical appanage are currently exploited not only to suggest the existence of a major threat to Russia, but also to indicate that Moscow's position is built on moral values and will triumph against those who defy history. Gaufman avers that a high incidence of news, stories and comments concerning Fascism was observed, on the internet, during the Ukraine crisis, USA and EU being assimilated to the supporters of this ideology and accused for hindering the peace arrangements in the region and undermining the sovereign interests of Russia. This type of discourse has been adopted by the political elite and found anchors in the collective memory not only in relation to Fascism, but also in relation to the common historical roots of Russia and Ukraine.

*Blasphemy: Threats to Russia's 'Spiritual Bonds'* turns the attention to the second category of threats identified in the research, namely the cultural ones. Gaufman starts her analysis by highlighting that Russia built its Soviet and post-Soviet identity in contrast to the Western one. Therefore, while Moscow portrayed itself as a virtuous and unperturbed nation, USA and its allies in Europe became the expression of a decadent world, mitigated by corruption and immorality. The export of the Western values to Russia becomes, from this perspective, a cultural threat, which could alter the inner essence of the nation. Unlike other threat constructs, the cultural one regroups, as securitizing actors, not only the representatives of the political elite, but also those of the Orthodox Church. Those who adhered to the Western values or who are simply libertine, who are part of a sexual minority or even those who have an uncommon look are, according to Gaufman, not only blamed for their choices, but also called traitors. The author notes, in this regard, that, in Russia, a so-called *sovereign morality* replaced the sovereign democracy. After a closer look to the online reactions to Pussy Riots, Gaufman concludes that the enemy image associated to *blasphemy* is usually a feminine one; it recalls collective memories built during the Soviet era (the superiority of Russia against the West) or in the Tsarist period (morals, family, the special relation to the church), it is backed by a consistent political discourse (for instance, even President Putin commented on the Pussy Riots and accused them of undermining the moral foundations of the country). At the same time, the narrative is supported by a large audience, even in turbulent times, when other subjects, such as the Ukraine crisis, occurred on the public agenda.

Following the fifth chapter of the book, the sixth section, *Sexuality must be defended*, deals with the situation of the sexual minorities in Russia and the homophobic discourse concerning them. Gaufman observes that, as in many other countries, the Russian public space is dominated by stories, images and news promoting a hate speech against sexual minorities. Nevertheless, the Russian discourse is not similar to the one encouraged by some conservative or far-right parties in Europe. The main difference is that threat is presented as coming from outside the country, as an import of immoral and deviant behaviours, whose source is the West. The members of the sexual minorities are,

therefore, called traitors both for not fulfilling a so-called duty for their country (in a demographic and reproductive sense, they do not contribute to the perpetuation of the nation or to its ability to carry wars) and for adhering to a lifestyle associated, in Russia, with a Western decadent mentality (a cultural and moral perspective, where certain values are not only contested, but also associated to the lifestyle of the traditional enemies of Russia). For analysing the threat construct, Gaufman recalls the historic background of Russia, where state and church were deeply interconnected and were interested in controlling sexuality (for fueling an ascending demographic trend and securing the moral values preached by the Church).

The seventh chapter of the book, *Migration*, deals with the Russian peculiar approach to migration and the idea of otherness. Gaufman observes that, given the multiethnic character of the country and the Soviet demographic policies, Russia deals with an anti-migrant discourse oriented not only against people coming from abroad, but also against its internal migrants, usually coming from the Caucasus or from the southern Muslim republics. The public space is dominated by some competing perspectives: the friendship between the peoples (grounded in the Soviet era), ethnic criminality and terrorism (usually related to the Caucasian and Chechen migrants) and cultural conflict. The author underlines that, even in the case of a discourse based on tolerance and peaceful relations between peoples, the othering process is well pronounced, building on clear cultural and ethnic differentiations. Gaufman shows that the migration theme is perennial in the public space, even if it faded since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis. Is it backed by a strong political discourse (as in the case of Manezhnaya riots), it generates public debate and enjoys an active audience. The othering process is enforced by collective memories, as those connected to the Chechen wars, and by the personification of the threat, resulting from the refinement of a *we – others* binary perspective.

The last chapter of the volume, called *Lesser Threats*, deals with a list of menaces that did not fully meet the criteria for generating a successful threat narrative: either they are not widely accepted by the audience or appear to no longer be present on the public agenda, or they fail to be targeted by the legislation and by the policies of the government. Some of the examples revealed by Gaufman are

Russia's relations to China (analysed as a threat without an enemy image attached), the situation of Jews and the amplitude of anti-Semitism in Russia (a routinized enemy image, magnified by a conspiracy theory), as well as the perception on some former Soviet countries, such as Georgia and Estonia (portrayed, in the media and across the internet, not as a threat to Russia, but as proxies for other enemies).

In addition to the previous sections in the volume, the concluding remarks provide an overview of the book, resuming the most relevant theoretical contributions and empirical findings, as well as the limitations of the research.

Even though the perspective introduced by Elizaveta Gauzman is an innovative and exciting one, her work also includes some conceptual haziness and problematic issues. The theoretical framework seems a bit eclectic, melting together sequences from the securitization theory, as well as memory and enemy image studies. Although the reasons behind this choice are clearly explained, as well as the way these theoretical contributions complement each other, their connection throughout the volume seems to fade and the theoretical perspectives are rather disarticulated instead of working together.

Secondly, the research methodology is questionable, relying on a wide array of examples on threat constructs. Although this type of approach can be useful for a better understanding of certain events or phenomena, the examples seem to be random, with no concrete methodology of selection behind. The lack of systematization and the absence of a research method risk to drive the research into an arbitrary area, marked by examples that confirm an already existing opinion of the researcher and the omission, whether voluntary or not, of other data that might challenge the desirable or expected outputs.

Thirdly, even if the volume delivers targeted contributions on the creation of the security agenda, the image of threats is rather static. The book only deals with some already existing successful threat narratives and gives no clues on how a security problem becomes important for the people, how it gets on the political agenda and what sort of processes describe its eventual fading.

In spite of these shortcomings, the work of Elizaveta Gauzman stands as an excellent resource for those who are passionate about communication, security studies or even sociology. As any other book, it does not provide an exhaustive

perspective and is limited both in scope and in methods. These realities do not invalidate, however, the value of the volume and its theoretical and empirical contributions. *Security Threats and Public Perception* remains a useful tool for understanding the internal realities in Russia and the way its discourse on security is articulated. The volume also provides valuable insights concerning the Russian culture and history and delivers a starting point for understating the link between the fears of the Russian people and Moscow's international behaviour.

A creative and audacious voice in the field of International Relations and security studies, Elizaveta Gaufman seems to be a promising author. With *Security Threats and Public Perception*, she managed to provide a new perspective on a highly popular and frequently approached subject. Easy to read and written in an accessible manner, the volume is a good lecture for a well-informed audience – researchers, students and academics – and those who are simply passionate about Russia.