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Securitizing Much? A Comparative Analysis of How the EU and NATO Differ in Their Institutional Securitization of Energy Security (2022–2024)

Energy security has been a priority on the European Union's (EU) agenda for the last decade. However, the significance of this issue escalated in the early 2000s following the accession of former Eastern Bloc countries to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which coincided with increased Alliance attention to energy security as a strategic concern. The onset of the war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, marked a period of heightened energy security uncertainty in Europe, bringing the issue to the forefront of both EU and NATO institutional discourse. This study employs securitization theory to explore the research question: How do the European Union and NATO differ in their institutional securitization of energy security during the period 2022–2024? Drawing on qualitative discourse analysis, it examines official institutional documents, statements, and strategic communications issued by both organizations. The analysis shows that energy security was framed as a security concern by both organizations throughout the period under review, although it was articulated in distinct ways that reflected each organization's institutional context and mandate. By comparatively analyzing these discursive practices, the article contributes to the literature on securitization and international organizations by highlighting variations in how energy security is framed during periods of crisis.

Keywords
Energy Security, NATO, EU, Securitization, War in Ukraine

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Introduction

Energy security, or its synonym, security of supply (Kruyt et al., 2009), has been a priority on the European Union's (EU) agenda for the last decade. Fundamentally, energy stands at the core of the EU's foundational identity as an economic union rather than a military one. Over the past two decades, energy security in Europe has also gained increased prominence with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), especially after the inclusion of the term in its Strategic Concept in 2010 (Çelikpala, 2014). The geopolitical and security landscape in Europe underwent a significant shift following Russia's annexation of Crimea in early 2014, propelling energy security to the forefront of both the EU's and NATO's agendas, albeit with different responses from each organization (Gardner, 2014; Van de Graaf & Colgan, 2017). The onset of the war against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, ushered in a new era of energy (in)security, reminiscent of 2014 but with heightened tensions. This escalation was marked by the partial disruption of energy supplies from Russia to the EU, the explosions of the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines in 2022, and the damage to the underwater gas pipeline and communications cable connecting Finland to Estonia in 2023 – both incidents occurring in the Baltic Sea.

The kinetic attacks on critical energy infrastructure in the Baltic Sea, together with the broader disruption of energy flows following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, intensified the framing of energy security as a matter of urgent concern in Europe. In this context, both the European Union and NATO increasingly addressed energy security through official statements, strategic documents, and public communications. Although prior studies have explored the energy security policies and reactions of the two organizations individually (Mileski, 2012; Dubský & Tichý, 2023), there is still a scarcity of comparative research on how various international organizations discursively frame energy security during periods of severe crisis. This article addresses this gap by analyzing and contrasting the institutional securitization of energy security within the discourses of the EU and NATO from 2022 to 2024.

Consequently, this article asks the following research question: How do the European Union and NATO differ in their institutional securitization of energy security during the period 2022–2024? Instead of evaluating the effectiveness of policies or assigning material responsibility for energy security outcomes, this article centers on the

discursive construction of energy security as a security issue within the official institutional discourse of NATO and the EU.

This article takes a broad view of energy security and the security of supply, encompassing various discourses on the subject, including energy itself, critical energy infrastructure, energy insecurity, and the prioritization of energy security as a top-tier emergency risk for both organizations.

1. Theoretical framework – Securitization

The notion of securitization was first articulated in a working paper, "Security and the Speech Act: Analyzing the Politics of a Word", by Ole Wæver in 1989, which he then further developed in "Securitization and Desecuritization" (1995) and in collaboration with Barry Buzan and Jaap de Wilde in "Security: A New Framework for Analysis" (1998). In these works, the scholars of the Copenhagen School defined a security issue as a problem presented as an existential threat to a designated referent object. They subsequently widened the theory into security studies, publishing several books and articles that broadly furthered the conceptual understanding of securitization (Özcan, 2013, p. 8).

In terms of energy securitization, the most important element, according to Özcan (2013), is the increasing demand for and dependence of actors on limited energy resources. In order to analyze the process of energy securitization, it is essential to consider the energy supply chain, which is divided into three main components: production, transportation, and consumption.

Nevertheless, as Özcan argues, energy should be considered a topic linked to all other security sectors (military, environmental, societal, economic, and political) (Özcan, 2013, p. 13). Christou and Adamides (2013) respond to this idea. They state that the widened security agenda is limited to the five original sectors, while the position of energy – either as a referent object or as a potential sixth sector – remains unclear. At the same time, they argue that there is a case of an underexploration of energy securitization in the literature (Christou and Adamides, 2013, p. 509). Continuing on the theme of underexploration, Szulecki (2016) states that "using securitization for the study of energy is not as straightforward as it may seem". He notes that while the concept is not new, few studies attempt to apply

it consistently in the sector, although he contributes significantly to the topic by presenting two different models for the empirical study of energy securitization (Szulecki, 2016, p. 2). Wilson (2019) argues that energy securitization, a process where governments frame energy as an existential threat to state interests, is variable and contingent. The present work does not aim to assess audience reception or contestation and therefore treats institutional endorsement as sufficient evidence of a securitizing discourse.

Other studies (Sperling & Webber, 2017; Vériter, 2025; Chen & Gao, 2021) have applied securitization theory to the analysis of international organizations as well. Sperling and Webber (2017) amend securitization theory to develop a framework that enables securitization by non-state actors, specifically NATO. They argue that in response to Russian actions in Ukraine in 2014, the Alliance has successfully translated a resecuritizing move evident in discourse into concrete policy measures, such as an increased NATO presence on its eastern flank and maritime patrols in the Baltic Sea. Sperling and Webber's (2017) conception of collective securitization is picked up by Vériter (2025), who examines the reasons why the EU restricted the broadcasting of the Russian outlets *Sputnik* and *Russia Today*. She argues that during the past decade, the EU has constructed "disinformation" into a security threat. According to her analysis, the ban on these media emerged through an expeditious and informal process that built on a decade of efforts to align EU member states with the positions of the Baltic states and Poland on disinformation (Vériter, 2025). Drawing as well on the approach of collective securitization, Chen and Gao (2021) examine EU foreign policy towards China since the mid-2010s. Their study finds that the EU has pursued escalating collective securitization moves across multiple policy frames – Asian regional security, economic security, political security, information, technology, and cybersecurity – portraying China as an existential threat. These efforts were driven by long-term trends combined with specific precipitating events which galvanized unified securitizing discourses and related policy initiatives. However, the authors find that divergent threat perceptions among member states have prevented a coherent audience response, ultimately impeding the effective implementation of the EU's collective policies (Chen & Gao, 2021).

While these studies demonstrate the analytical value of applying securitization theory to international organizations, they primarily examine securitization processes with single institutional contexts

or specific policy domains. Moreover, much of this literature focuses on the translation of securitizing discourse into policy outcomes or institutional practices. By contrast, this work employs a comparative approach, analyzing how the EU and NATO discursively frame energy security over a period of intense crisis. Instead of assessing the success of securitization processes or the resulting policy outcomes, the article centers on the institutional discourses themselves, thus advancing a more structured comprehension of the differences in securitizing practices among international organizations.

The operationalization of the theory to the empirical material boils down to the following: in every instance where a sense of emergency regarding energy security is considered to be emanating from a source within the EU or NATO, the framing of energy security on the part of these organizations, for the sake of this work, is treated as evidence of a securitizing move.

2. Methodology

The methodology employed in this article comes down to a qualitative case study approach, with the European Union and NATO serving as the primary cases. It utilizes qualitative discourse analysis as the primary methodological framework for examining the securitization of energy security by both organizations. Moreover, document analysis is employed as a complementary method, examining both primary and secondary sources, including official documents, statements, press releases, media publications, speeches, and academic articles.

In line with the Copenhagen School's conceptualization of securitization theory, securitization is understood as a discursive process through which an issue is framed as an existential threat requiring urgent attention and, potentially, exceptional measures (Buzan et. al., 1998). Following the authors' emphasis on the internal linguistic characteristics of securitizing speech acts (p.32), the analysis focuses on the presence of references to existential threats, urgency, vulnerability, and the necessity of extraordinary responses (Buzan et. al., 1998, pp. 21–29).

In practice, securitizing moves are detected by identifying repeated predicates, phrases, and argumentative structures in official

institutional documents that portray energy security and associated infrastructure as issues of existential survival, strategic imperative, or elevated risk. Instead of assessing the success or impact of securitization attempts, this study focuses on the discursive construction of energy security within institutional rhetoric across time. This method enables a rigorous, comparative analysis of securitizing practices between two distinct international organizations, while adhering faithfully to the core foundations of securitization theory.

This article adopts on institutional discourse as its primary unit of analysis. It therefore examines chosen texts produced by actors formally mandated to speak on behalf of the European Union and NATO. For the EU, this encompasses official communications released by key institutional entities, including the European Commission and the European Council. In the case of NATO, the corpus includes documents and public statements linked to the Alliance's leadership – such as those from the Secretary General and the Deputy Secretary General – and formally adopted strategic documents. Statements at the national level and informal commentaries are excluded, since the goal is to maintain a coherent comparison of organizational discourse.

The article primarily relies on EU official statements and documents – although not exclusively those published by the European Commission (e.g., REPowerEU, the Energy Security Strategy, the Energy Union, etc.) – as well as on speeches, press releases, and documents emanating from NATO officials and NATO-affiliated or NATO-focused policy think-tanks, such as the Atlantic Council (e.g., the NATO Strategic Concept 2022, NATO Summit declarations, etc.). Each text will be examined in chronologically. However, it must be underscored that the reliance on official documents limits direct assessment of reception beyond institutional endorsement. This constitutes a methodological limitation of the study.

3. Securitization of Energy Security in Existing Literature: Gaps and Analytical Positioning

Previous studies, such as those by Natorski and Surrallés (2008), Falkevik (2016), Ababakr (2022), and Iriani (2022), have used securitization theory as a tool for analysing energy security policies within the European Union. Natorski and Surrallés (2008) explore the debate about energy security in EU political circles between 2005 and 2007. Falkevik (2016) examines chosen documents to find out if the European Commission acted as a securitizing agent in promoting further integration, concentrating the analysis mainly on the Energy Union. Ababakr (2022), on the other hand, evaluates the significance of securitizing the energy relationship between Russia and EU member states, as well as the impact of the process on the regional security system involving the EU and Russia. Iriani (2022) examines the EU as a securitization actor of energy within the context of the transition to renewable energy.

Ercolani (2012) touches on NATO's institutional securitization of the issue, but the reach of that research covers only the period between the organization's Strategic Concepts (SCs) in 1999 and 2010. Ercolani focuses more on the meaning of the word "security" in the philosophical sense than on identifying specific responses or cases of energy securization by NATO. Mileski (2012), too, investigates the matter, but with the goal of justifying the Alliance's involvement with energy security. Bojanic (2015) briefly discusses NATO's role in energy security and its alleged securitization, but only peripherally within the context of the study. Turchyn and Ivasechko (2021), show how the work and priorities of NATO occupy an important place in protecting energy security, because the organization manages to clearly define the directions of its activities in this area. Moreover, they underscore the importance of the Alliance's cooperation with Ukraine on the issue. Çelikpala (2014), on the other hand, takes a more theoretical approach, focusing on the issue of the meaning of energy security for NATO in the light of the Alliance's strategic concepts and declarations.

Özcan (2013) and Szulecki (2020) examine the more general sphere of securitization of energy security. Özcan (2013) contributes to that broad field by using the lens of securitization to look at energy security in a very universal, theoretical sense, while Szulecki (2020) attempts to find the answer to why governmental actors try to use

securitization and strive to acquire special methods for countering purported risks in the energy sector, as well as why some of these efforts succeed while others encounter opposition (Szulecki, 2020).

Still, as Balzacq et al. (2015) observe, "there has not been any systematic analysis of energy security through the lenses of securitization theory" (Balzacq et. al., 2015, p. 511), which makes this article an attempt to contribute to that part of the academic literature. Through its approach, the article isolates and compares securitizing practices at the level of institutional discourse, rather than merging them with policy outcomes or audience responses. With this, the article contributes to the literature by offering a structured comparative analysis of how two major international organizations frame the same issue under similar crisis conditions, thus highlighting differentiation in securitizing logics across institutional contexts.

This article does not aim to justify actions of the securitizing actors and assumes that the audience accepts the securitization of energy security, which makes the "securitization successful", as envisioned by Buzan et al. (1998, p. 31). The following two sections empirically examine how energy security is discursively constructed by the European Union and NATO, respectively, so as to address the research question: "How do the European Union and NATO differ in their institutional securitization of energy security during the period 2022–2024?"

4. Securitization of Energy Security in the EU 2022–2024

The greatest geopolitical challenge the EU has faced since the end of the Cold War began in 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine and the subsequent energy crisis began to disrupt physical security, posing unprecedented risks and uncertainties. Consequently, energy security underwent a significant geopolitical intensification, as discourse increasingly framed energy resources as instruments of strategic leverage and drivers of state conflict (Andrei, 2022, p. 148). The invasion was immediately condemned by Western leaders as a "blatant violation of international law", prompting expressions of support for Ukraine (CNBC Staff, 2022). Concurrently, on March 2nd, 2022, the United Nations overwhelmingly adopted a resolution

demanding an immediate ceasefire and Russian withdrawal from Ukrainian territory, calling for a "peaceful resolution of the conflict through political dialogue, negotiations, mediation, and other peaceful means" (United Nations Press, 2022). For the European Union, the invasion sent shockwaves through the continent, sharply unveiling its dependence on the Russian geopolitical competitor.

Following the 24th of February and the subsequent adoption of four sanctions packages against Russia, the European Commission presented its first major political document on March 24th, exactly a month after the invasion: The Strategic Compass (SC). The document itself was expected earlier, but these critical events demanded a substantial revision and published after a revaluation of current events. Hailed as a "geopolitical awakening" (European External Action Service, 2022, p. 1) for Europe, the Compass aimed to guide the Union towards becoming a stronger and more capable security provider in the new geopolitical environment. It prioritizes four means of action to reach that goal: the ability to act rapidly and robustly; enhancing the ability to anticipate threats; investing in capabilities and innovative technologies, while reducing technological and industrial dependencies; and strengthening cooperation with partners to respond to common threats and challenges (European External Action Service, 2022, pp. 12–13, 15).

Energy constitutes one of the main topics in the document. In line with its more assertive geopolitical posture, the EU claims it is ready to cut its heavy reliance on Russian energy imports. Right from the beginning, energy is positioned within the scope of "threats to our strategic interests that we have been aware of but not always acted upon", with the document explicitly stating that Russia uses energy as a "political weapon". Several lines later, energy flows are framed within the context of "hybrid tactics and intermediate dynamics of competition", and compared to "planes, soldiers, and tanks" (European External Action Service, 2022, p. 5). The securitization of energy security and its associated risks around it are evident, placing energy diversification from Russian fossil fuels on the Union's core strategic threat list. Understandably, the narrative of the Russian invasion is a constant throughout the entire document, and the "economic and energy coercion, as well as the aggressive nuclear rhetoric", which the Russian Federation directed at Ukraine, is treated as a critical alert regarding the vulnerability of the security of supply (p. 17). This securitization is further reinforced by the Union's desire

to enhance its "resilience and ability to counter hybrid threats and foreign information manipulation and interference", placing energy on the same scale as the "instrumentalization of irregular migration and lawfare", which target Europe's energy (p. 34). Furthermore, risks to the security of supply will be mitigated, and investments will be directed toward the protection of "technologies that are critical to security of defense" (p. 48). The war in Ukraine catalysed a rapid securitization of energy within the EU, a shift that became apparent in less than a month. The Union's response to the conflict on its Eastern borders paralleled its reaction in 2014 during the Russian annexation of Crimea, but this time it demonstrated the political will to "learn the right lessons from the crisis" (p. 5). This is significant because it elevates energy security from a primarily economic concern to a matter of strategic and security relevance within the EU's overarching security framework. In discursive terms, the SC underscores an early and explicit instance of institutional securitization, embedding energy within the Union's broader narrative of threats, vulnerability, and resilience in response to the evolving geopolitical environment.

After the European Council's agreement to cut Europe's dependency on Russian energy imports on the March 24–25 (European Council, 2022), the Commission was tasked with developing a comprehensive REPowerEU plan to reach that goal, which it delivered less than two months later, on May 18. The REPowerEU plan aimed to fast-forward the clean energy transition and establish a more robust energy system, thereby fostering a "true Energy Union", with its main goal being the reduction of the Union's dependence on Russian fossil fuels before 2030 (European Commission, 2022a, p. 1). The main cornerstones of the strategy are saving energy, diversifying supplies, accelerating the clean energy transition to substitute fossil fuels, and reconciling investments and reforms (European Commission, 2022a, p. 1).

Although revered as ambitious and as the primary "vehicle" and "framework" (European Commission, 2022b) for investment in clean tech, scholars immediately argued that the € 210 billion plan could not fulfill to one of its short-term promises: replacing Russian gas supplies by two-thirds by the end of 2022–2023 winter. This was deemed unfeasible because it was "impossible" to secure enough additional gas, given the then industrial capacities of the main gas exporting countries, their contractual engagements, and their growth strategies (Lambert et al., 2022, pp. 1, 7–8). The implementation of the policy could also lead to paradoxical outcomes. The REPowerEU aims

to increase energy production from nuclear and fossil fuels, which prompted the reactivation of coal plants and investments in new LNG terminals and gas pipelines (Vezzoni, 2023, p. 1).

The Commission makes the sharp sense of emergency regarding its energy security exceptionally evident in the document, bringing to light its "heightened energy security concerns" (European Commission, 2022a, p. 1) caused by the high energy prices provoked by the conflict. In order to assure the security of supply to its Member States, the Commission advises that immediate measures are required, such as domestic natural gas production (p. 5) and additional storage, which is presented as "key for enhancing security of supply". This additional storage is expected to foster an "increased level of preparedness and response to risks in the security of gas supply", requiring additional investments to protect the Member States that are almost fully dependent on pipeline oil from Russia (p. 13). The tone of exigency rises even higher with the warning of potential "severe supply disruptions", highlighting the risk that "without further action in the coming months, gas storages will not be sufficiently filled for next winter", bringing the act of securitization directly into focus (p. 19). The diversification of energy supplies assumes paramount importance and is strongly securitized in the REPowerEU document since "the time to reduce Europe's energy dependence is now" (p. 20). There are two urgent reasons to reduce Europe's energy dependence on Russia: the first is the climate crisis, and the second is the fact that by buying fossil fuels from Russia, the EU feeds its "political and economic weapon". The moment of urgency and the reemergence of the terms political and economic "weapon" contribute to the further securitization of Europe's will to diversify away from Russian fossil fuels, which directly compromise not only the security of supply of the Union but the physical existence of the state of Ukraine as well (European Commission, 2022a, p. 20). This sequence of statements is of importance because it demonstrates the consolidation of a securitizing discourse over time. The repeated use of terms such as "blackmail", "threat", and "risk", together with the elevation of energy security alongside defense and food security, reflects the emergence of a consistent vocabulary in line with securitization theory. Instead of isolated rhetorical instances, these statements indicate a consistent framing of energy security as an issue of urgency and strategic importance, thereby reinforcing its position within the EU's broader security agenda.

In the following months, energy security remained a central focus of European policy, and its securitization on the part of the Union became a frequent phenomenon because of the rising (geo)political tensions. On the May 24, not long after Russia cut electricity and gas supplies to Finland, and suspended natural gas exports to Bulgaria and Poland, the Commission and the United States condemned this act of the Russian Federation as "energy blackmail", and asserted their commitment to strengthening Europe's energy security (European Commission, 2022c). This condemnation occurred in the context of the joint Task Force on Energy Security, later formalized on January 11, 2023, by the President of the European Commission and the Secretary General of NATO (European Commission, 2023a). At the beginning of the next month, energy security, food security, and defense security were similarly classified together as being of "strategic importance" to the Union (European Commission, 2022d). Later, energy security was described as "threatened", and put at "clear risk" in the short term; therefore, coordination between Member States to preserve it was "more important than ever" (European Commission, 2022e). In the spirit of ending reliance on Russian energy, the US President and the Head of the Commission doubled down on highlighting "Russian energy coercion", which "threatened global energy security", while at the same time underscoring the Unites State' role in helping Europe diversify its energy imports with LNG (European Commission, 2022f). In July, once again, with regard to Russia's use of energy as a weapon and its energetic blackmail of Europe, Commission President Von der Leyen stressed that Member States have to address their energy security at the "European level", and be prepared for a potential full cut-off of Russian gas, which, according to her, was "a likely scenario" (European Commission, 2022g).

On the September 27, the international community reacted with concern to a never-before-seen act of sabotage: the explosions of the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines, connecting Russia to Germany and running under the Baltic Sea near Sweden and Denmark (Dutta & Ovaska, 2022). Commission President Von der Leyen was quick to respond to the event, calling the leaks "sabotage" and promising the "strongest possible response" against deliberate action against European energy infrastructure (Liboreiro, 2022).

The incident had an impact on both the political and energy security of the European Union. The Nord Stream natural gas pipelines, which were regarded as Europe's "main artery" of energy, were crucial

to the continent's overall energy security. Even though Nord Stream 1 barely maintained gas transmissions for more than half a year, the Russian side cut off these transmissions on the August 30 under the pretext of maintenance, which threatened the European security of supply even more, and the attacks on the pipelines demonstrated the vulnerability of the Union (Yin & Zhong, 2023, p. 5).

The sabotage of the pipelines was formally addressed during the Extraordinary Transport, Telecommunications and Energy Council on September 30 in Brussels, which had been planned a couple of weeks prior with the goal of approving measures to mitigate the soaring gas and energy prices on the continent (Lopatka & Abnett, 2022). During the meeting, it was stated that policy measures for the protection of European energy infrastructure would be implemented and that a "stress test" of its physical protection will be considered. All of these measures were put forward in the light of risks to the EU's security of supply, due to the high energy prices caused by the Ukrainian crisis (European Commission, 2022h). Building on this momentum, and continuing to highlight the intentional use of the "Russian energy weapon", Commission President Ursula von der Leyen presented a five-point plan for fostering resilient critical infrastructure. Stressing that "pipelines and underwater cables connect European citizens and companies to the world", as well as that "they are the lifelines of data and energy", the Commission President urgently highlighted the vulnerability of the Union's energy infrastructure (European Commission, 2022i). This was reiterated by the Commission soon after, stating that the sabotage of the pipelines and "other recent incidents" made it obvious that the resilience of the European critical infrastructure was "under threat" (European Commission 2022j).

During the subsequent year, energy security continued to be a principal objective for the Union, largely because Russia continued to use energy as "a political and economic weapon" (European Commission, 2023b). In January 2023, responds to an "even more complex risk landscape" – which included the Nord Stream pipeline explosions – the Critical Entities Resilience (CER) Directive, presented at the end of 2022, entered into force. Its objective was to "strengthen the resilience of critical infrastructure to a range of threats" (European Commission, 2024a), with energy designated as a core sector. The damaged gas pipeline and data cable between Finland and Estonia later that year further heightened tensions, bringing the CER back into the spotlight. Commission President Von der Leyen condemned this act of "deliberate

destruction of critical energy infrastructure" and underlined that only by "working together can we counter those seeking to undermine our security" (European Commission, 2023c). Throughout the remainder of 2023, the Commission leadership continued to frame energy security around the necessity of diversification away from Russian energy and resisting the energy "blackmail" exerted by Russian President Vladimir Putin. This discourse was explicitly situated in the context of "Russian aggression", which underlined the emergency of repeated emergency expressions around the security of supply (European Commission, 2023d).

The rhetoric remained consistent in 2024, with Von der Leyen emphasizing the European Union's success in countering Russia's attempts to "weaponize energy supply" while simultaneously accelerating the transition to clean energy (European Commission, 2024b). Regarding this energy transition, she highlighted how the fossil fuel crisis taught the EU to "protect its energy security", and further stressed that energy security is integral to achieving "independence" (European Commission, 2024c). It is evident that the discourse in 2024 did not shift significantly, as it continued to focus on the "Russian energy weapon", the diversification of energy supplies, and a move away from fossil fuels, all of which remained intertwined within a securitized context.

Throughout this analysis, it has been observed that the cores of the European Union's securitization of energy security resides in the context of its previous overdependence on a single supplier. This transition could prove fertile territory for more extensive research, since the process of the "derussification" (Khakova, 2022, p. 1) of European energy is still ongoing and sharp turns could yet be taken. Future research could examine whether a reduction in external dependency leads to a corresponding decline in securitizing discourse, or whether energy security remains embedded within the EU's broader security narrative. It would also be relevant to explore how shifts in supply structures reshape the framing of energy-related threats within institutional discourse over time.

5. Securitization of Energy Security in NATO 2022–2024

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization had a similar reaction to that of the EU regarding the conflict, condemning in "the strongest possible terms Russia's brutal and unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine" and emphasizing its "unprecedented levels of support, helping to uphold its fundamental right to self-defense" (NATO, 2022a). Describing Russia's invasion of Ukraine as "the gravest threat to Euro-Atlantic security in decades", repeated statements by Secretary General Stoltenberg called on Russia to put an end to the "senseless war" and to "withdraw its forces from Ukraine" (NATO, 2022b). More evidence that proves the extremely high level of urgency on the part of the Alliance stems from the fact that NATO activated its defense plans, resulting in the deployment of elements of the NATO Response Force (NATO, 2022b). Although tensions were high, NATO foreign ministers agreed to remain committed to the stability of diplomatic ties with Russia in order to avoid an unintended escalation, misunderstanding, or miscalculation. This decision was reached after the ministers concluded that Russia's relationship with NATO had fundamentally changed, establishing a "the new normal" regarding the Alliance's security framework (NATO, 2022c). NATO's stance was further reiterated at its extraordinary summit in Brussels on March 24, with the heads of state stressing that "Russia's attack on Ukraine threatens global security, and its assault on international norms makes the world less safe". It was affirmed that the Alliance would cooperate with the rest of the international community "to hold accountable those responsible for violations of humanitarian and international law, including war crimes". The conflict was depicted as representing a "challenge to the values and norms that have brought security and prosperity to all on the European continent" (NATO, 2022d). Consequently, the Ukrainian crisis was a top priority for discussion at the extraordinary meeting of NATO defense ministers as well, where they pledged increased support for the country, including "heavy weapons and long-range systems" (NATO, 2022e).

The first major and long-awaited document released by NATO after February 24, 2022 was its new Strategic Concept, approved in June at the Madrid Summit (NATO, 2022f). The SC focuses on four tasks: deterrence and defense; crisis prevention and management; and cooperative security, while at the same time placing the national and collective resilience of the Allies at the center of its core tasks (p. 1).

It, for the first time, designates the Russian Federation as "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area", while simultaneously drawing attention to The People's Republic of China's internationally exerted ambitions "and coercive policies" that challenge the Alliance's interests (pp. 4–5).

As already mentioned above, energy and energy security were integrated into NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept. It is essential to note that, similar to European rhetoric, the manipulation of energy supplies and the employment of economic coercion by "authoritarian actors" and "strategic competitors" were also highlighted by NATO in the scholarly reviewed document (NATO, 2022f, p.3). Furthermore, the Alliance affirms that it will invest "in our ability to prepare for, deter, and defend against coercive use of political, economic, energy, information, and other hybrid tactics". The securitization of energy security is intensified to such an extent that if energy infrastructure of supplied are severely threatened, it is stated that hybrid frequencies could lead to the implementation of Article 5 of the Alliance, which provides for mutual collective defense if a systemic armed attack occurs (NATO, 2019). In the context of working on identifying and mitigating "strategic vulnerabilities and dependencies", including critical infrastructure in a more challenging environment, within the new SC, NATO pledged to enhance its "energy security and invest in a stable and reliable energy supply, suppliers, and sources", which is a clean indication of the members' efforts to diversify away from Russian fossil fuel supplies (p. 7).

The Madrid summit, at which the Concept was approved, issued a Declaration coinciding with the strategic intent of the Concept. Consequently, the Declaration resecuritized energy security and energy supplies, stating that the Alliance would strengthen its energy security and "ensure reliable energy supplies to our military forces" (NATO, 2022g, paragraph 10). It should be underlined that in this Declaration, contrary to the European Union, NATO did not mention energy security in relation to the civilian population. Secretary General Stoltenberg also emphasized the "pressure on energy supplies and the soaring cost of living" in connection with the Alliance's financial and material support for Ukraine (NATO, 2022h, p. 1).

This statement came nine days before the sabotage of the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines, which prompted an immediate institutional revaluation by the Alliance. NATO expressed "deep concern" over the explosions and declared that, as Allies, they commit to "prepare for, deter, and defend against the coercive use of energy

and other hybrid tactics by state and non-state actors". Regarding deliberate attacks on allied critical infrastructure, the Allies pledged that such actions "would be met with a united and determined response" (NATO, 2022i). Measures for protecting critical energy infrastructure were taken immediately, with NATO deploying planes and ships to the North and Baltic seas to monitor these lifelines, reinforcing the discourse that "NATO Allies are now supporting each other to prevent anything similar from happening to any other energy infrastructure" (NATO, 2022j). The vulnerability of the Alliance's unprepared critical infrastructure was repeated more than once during the months following the explosions, prompting the Alliance to "reassess the risks" to its infrastructure system. Consequently, naval presence was doubled in the North and Baltic Seas, complemented by increased surveillance and intensified information sharing among the Allies (NATO, 2022k, 2022l, 2022m).

In 2023, energy security was immediately described as a strategic "challenge" for the Alliance by the Secretary General, positioned along cyber defense and emerging technologies (NATO, 2023b), as NATO restated its commitment to "step up to better deter and respond to threats to critical infrastructure" (NATO, 2023c). In relation to the statement that the war in Ukraine and its consequences would be "global", energy security was once again framed in emergency terms by Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană, who stressed that "the way that we respond to the aggression will be the way in which the future of the world will look like" (NATO, 2023d). Ahead of the Vilnius Summit, institutional communications highlighted that "energy security is not a stand-alone issue, but a variety of considerations that span across NATO's three core tasks" (NATO, 2023e).

The main topics discussed at the NATO Vilnius Summit, which was held on the July 11–12, 2023, were deterrence and defense, Ukraine's future membership in NATO, and deepening relations with partners in the Indo-Pacific (Gotkowska & Graca, 2023, p. 1). Scholars observed chosen structural shifts demonstrating that the Alliance is partly returning to the defense planning processes and structures that were in place during the Cold War but abandoned during the 1990s. The agreement made on the eve of the summit between Turkey, Sweden, and the NATO Secretary General, on the basis of which Turkey pledged to ratify Sweden's accession protocol as soon as possible, was significant in bolstering chosen deterrence and defense in the Baltic Sea area (Gotkowska & Graca, 2023, p. 3).

Energy security was introduced in the document, framed as

playing "an important role" in the Alliance's security framework (NATO, 2023a, paragraph 68). In addition to ensuring a "secure, resilient, and sustainable" energy inflow for NATO's military – as only stated in their Madrid Summit declaration from 2022 – the document emphasized that NATO's capacity to support national authorities in protecting critical infrastructure would be even further developed. Reflecting the essence of the need for Allies to diversify their energy supplies "in line with their needs and conditions" away from Russia, which "intentionally exacerbated the energy crisis", the Communiqué also develops this line of thought. This focus was absent from the 2022 Madrid Declaration, constituting evidence of further and more intensified securitization of the security of supply on the part of the Alliance (NATO, 2023a, paragraph 68). Continuing on that spirit, the Heads of State and government repeated their commitment to protecting critical undersea infrastructure, which is portrayed as being under a "real and developing" threat. It was affirmed, yet again, that "any deliberate attack against Allies' critical infrastructure will be met with a united and determined response", which further securitizes the issue (NATO, 2023a, paragraph 65).

In 2024, NATO's focus on energy security increasingly concentrated on the protection of critical underwater infrastructure. Stoltenberg frequently called for enhanced protection and resilience in response to emerging challenges, particularly in light of the 2023 damage to the Finland-Estonia pipeline and the earlier Nord Stream explosions (NATO, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d). Russia continued to be identified as the primary threat to NATO's critical infrastructure (NATO, 2024e). The establishment of the Critical Undersea Infrastructure Network, aimed at enhancing the security of undersea cables and pipelines, represents a significant step in NATO's securitizing practices (NATO, 2024f). The Washington Summit Declaration reinforced the need to increase resilience against all hazards, including those affecting critical energy infrastructure. Energy security was once again emphasized, particularly in the context of military needs and climate change (NATO, 2024g). The heightened focus on maritime energy infrastructure in 2024 can be directly linked to the pipeline incidents in 2022 and 2023. It could be argued, as Mileski (2012, p.35) underlines, that NATO must continue working in the area of energy security in order to survive and function in the modern "international security age".

6. Discussion of Comparative Empirical Findings and Their Significance

The empirical findings above reveal both divergences and convergences in how the EU and NATO frame energy security. Although both of institutions increasingly describe energy as a matter of strategic importance in response to the war in Ukraine, the nature, scope and purpose of their securitizing moves differ significantly.

First, the referent object of security measures varies between the two institutions. The EU primarily frames energy security in relation to economic stability, societal resilience, and security of supply for both its member states and the civilian population. By contrast, NATO's discourse is more narrowly focused on the protection of critical infrastructure and the operational readiness of military capabilities. This reflects NATO's core function as a defense alliance, where energy is positioned repeatedly in relation to military effectiveness and collective defense.

Second, the discursive intensity and vocabulary of these discourses show apparent similarities but also contextual differences. Both organizations employ terms such as "threat", "risk", "weapon", and "coercion", indicating a shared securitizing language aligned with the broader geopolitical context of the war in Ukraine. However, the EU more frequently links energy security to concepts such as "resilience", "transition", and "independence", embedding its strategic framing within a broader policy framework that includes climate objectives and market regulation. NATO, by contrast, more consistently situates energy within the realm of hybrid threats and collective defense, resorting to potential references to Article 5.

Third, the functional purpose of each institutional discourse differs. In the case of the EU, the framing serves to legitimize wide-ranging policy interventions, including market regulation, diversification strategies, and the acceleration of the energy transition. In NATO, this practice primarily justifies increased surveillance, the protection of critical infrastructure, and enhanced military coordination among Allies.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings suggest that the discursive construction of threats is not a uniform process but is concurrently shaped by institutional mandates and policy competencies. While both actors respond to the same external shock – namely, the Russian invasion of Ukraine – their respective approaches reflect their distinct roles within the Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

Dimension	European Union	NATO
Primary referent object	Economy, society, energy consumers	Military capability, critical infrastructure
Main threat identified	Dependency, supply disruption, coercion	Hybrid threats, infrastructure attacks
Key discourse	Resilience, transition, independence	Defense, deterrence, collective security
Policy function	Justifies regulation and transition policies	Justifies military preparedness and protection
Scope	Civilian-economic	Primarily military

These differences have important implications for understanding the broader governance of energy security in Europe. While the EU expands the scope of energy framing into economic and societal domains, NATO reinforces its role within the military-security reprisal. Together, these dynamics suggest a complementary but asymmetrical securitization process, where energy security is simultaneously embedded within both civilian and military frameworks.

Conclusions

This article examined how the European Union and NATO discursively framed energy security during the period 2022–2024, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and a series of disruptions to Europe's critical energy infrastructure. Drawing on securitization theory and qualitative discourse analysis, this study compared the official institutional discourse produced by both organizations during a period of profound geopolitical uncertainty.

The findings demonstrate that energy security was consistently framed as a matter of security by both the EU and NATO. Across institutional documents and statements, energy supply, critical infrastructure, and resilience against disruption were repeatedly presented as matters of urgency and strategic importance. The persistent use of terms such as "threat", "risk", "coercion", and "weapon" indicates not only the presence of securitizing moves, but also their consolidation over time into a stable discursive pattern rather than a temporary reaction to a crisis.

Simultaneously, the analysis highlights substantial differences in the discursive construction of energy security across the two organizations. Within EU institutions, energy security was typically portrayed as a broad, multidimensional issue, closely linked to

economic stability, societal resilience, and long-term strategic autonomy. In contrast, NATO's discourse primarily conceptualized energy security through the lens of resilience against hybrid threats, critical infrastructure protection, and its implications for military readiness and collective defense. This divergence is significant because it demonstrates that securitization is not a uniform process, but one that is shaped by institutional mandates, competencies, and strategic priorities.

These findings carry broader theoretical implications. They suggest that securitization at the international organizational level is differentiated and context-dependent, even when triggered by the same external shock. Rather than producing a single, coherent security narrative, the crisis in Ukraine generated parallel securitizing discourses that reflect the distinct roles of the EU and NATO within the European security architecture. In this sense, energy security emerges as a hybrid domain, situated at the intersection of economic governance and military security.

Empirically, the article also shows that securitization in this case is sustained and cumulative. Over the period 2022–2024, initial emergency framings evolved into more structured and institutionalized narratives, embedding energy security within broader policy agendas such as resilience-building, diversification, and infrastructure protection. This indicates that securitization can extend beyond immediate crisis response and become integrated into the long-term strategic thinking.

By comparatively analyzing EU and NATO institutional discourse during a period of severe energy and security crisis, this article contributes to securitization scholarship by demonstrating how different international organizations construct the same issue in distinct ways, thereby shaping the scope and direction of policy responses. It highlights that variation in securitizing practices is not merely rhetorical, but reflects more profound institutional logics that influence how security challenges are defined and addressed.

Future research could build on these findings by examining how these parallel securitizations interact in practice, particularly in areas where institutional responsibilities overlap, such as the protection of critical energy infrastructure (Atanasov, 2024). Further work could also explore the relationship between institutional discourse and member state preferences, as well as the extent to which securitizing narratives are accepted, contested, or reshaped by different audiences.

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