

University of Tartu
Faculty of Social Sciences
Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies

Samuel L.P. Bussière

SECURITIZATION AS A MEANS TO LEGITIMIZE AUTOCRATIZATION: THE CASE OF
BUKELE'S EL SALVADOR

MA Thesis

Supervisor: Thomas Linsenmaier

Tartu 2025

Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of the other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

Word count of thesis: 28,831

Samuel L.P. Bussière, May 19, 2025

Non-exclusive licence to reproduce the thesis and make the thesis public

I, Samuel L.P. Bussière,

1. grant the University of Tartu a free permit (non-exclusive license) to reproduce for the purpose of preservation, including for adding to the digital archives of the University of Tartu until the expiry of the term of copyright my thesis “Public Support for Autocratization in Bukele’s El Salvador: Securitization as a Means of Obtaining Legitimacy”, supervised by Thomas Linsenmaier;
2. grant the University of Tartu a permit to make the thesis specified in point 1 available to the public via the web environment of the University of Tartu, including via the digital archives, under the Creative Commons licence CC BY NC ND 4.0, which allows, by giving appropriate credit to the author, to reproduce, distribute the work and communicate it to the public, and prohibits the creation of derivative works and any commercial use of the work until the expiry of the term of copyright;
3. am aware of the fact that the author retains the right specified in points 1 and 2;
4. confirm that granting the non-exclusive license does not infringe other persons’ intellectual property rights or rights arising from the personal data protection legislation

Samuel L.P. Bussière

19/05/2025

Abstract

It is rare, even unprecedented, that a democratically elected leader would refer to themselves as the *World's Coolest Dictator* as a selling point. It is even rarer that an electorate will wholeheartedly embrace a leader for his authoritarian appeal. Yet that is exactly what happened in El Salvador since Nayib Bukele took the presidency in 2019. The Bukele administration has simultaneously enjoyed widespread domestic support and widespread international condemnation for human rights abuses and for bringing the country down an authoritarian path. This thesis seeks to explain this paradox; more specifically, what explains the widespread support for the Bukele administration and its authoritarian measures. Using critical securitization theory, which is understood as a means of obtaining legitimacy, this thesis delves into how the government of El Salvador in the Bukele era generated public support for its measures that contributed to the autocratization of the country. Notably, it analyzes El Salvador's war on gangs and the following war against corruption, starting from its State of Exception in March 2022 to the date of submission in May 2025. As a single-case study using critical discourse analysis as its method of analysis, this thesis looks into how discourse was used to shape public opinion and generate legitimacy amongst the public. The findings provide insight into how autocratization can obtain legitimacy from the public when discursively argued as being in response to an existential security threat. In addition, this thesis's focus on digital utterances of discourse sheds a new light on how social media can be used to shape domestic opinion and perceptions.

Contents

1. Introduction.....	6
2. Theoretical Framework: Securitization and the Legitimacy of Autocratization	11
2.1 The Copenhagen School and Securitization	11
2.2 Critical Perspectives: Thierry Balzacq’s Securitization.....	15
2.3 Securitization as a Means of Obtaining Legitimacy	19
2.4 Democracy and Autocratization Theory.....	20
3. Methodology.....	23
3.1 Research Design: Single Case Study.....	23
3.2 Case Selection: El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele	26
3.3 Methods: Critical Discourse Analysis	27
3.4 Analysis.....	31
3.5 Data Availability and Sources: Official Discourse and Social Media	35
4. Analysis: The Bukele Administration from the State of Exception to Today.....	38
4.1 Stage 1: A Problem for Whom? The Referent Objects of El Salvador’s Securitization..	38
4.2 Stage 2: The Framing of an Existential Problem	41
4.3 Stage 3: Visual and Linguistic Power Relations.....	44
4.4 Stage 4: The Proximate and Distal Contexts	48
4.5 Stage 5: Extraordinary Measures, Authoritarianism and Public Legitimacy	58
5. Conclusions: Summary of Findings	68
References:.....	75

1. Introduction

During the last weekend of March 2022, 87 murders were committed in El Salvador, with over 62 having been recorded on Saturday alone (Papadovassilakis, 2022; “El Salvador: State of emergency after 62 gang killings in a day”, 2022). For a country of six million, this is nothing to scoff at. The government under President Nayib Bukele, who came to power in 2019 (Palumbo & Malkin, 2019), declared a State of Exception on the very same Sunday (Méndez Dardón, 2025). This State of Exception has persisted long past the original thirty days it was announced for, and is still in place as of the writing of this thesis, three years later (Méndez Dardón, 2025). Although it had long been believed that the Bukele administration, alongside previous administrations, had brokered behind-the-scenes truces and deals with the gangs (Sherman, 2021; “Bukele's Pact with the Gangs Lasted Three Massacres”, 2023), it is adequate to say that these all came to an end on that weekend.

Having long dominated the world’s homicide rate statistics, peaking at 106.3 homicides per 100,000 people in 2015 (*Logros y Memorias*, 2025), Salvadorans were no stranger to their government adopting radical measures to address the high levels of criminality that had persisted in the country since the end of the Salvadoran Civil War; take for example the *Mano Dura* policies from the previous government (Wolf, 2017). Yet none of these measures seemingly found as much success as the State of Exception, or more explicitly, the *war against gangs* (Colchen, 2024), which the Bukele regime started. On the first of January 2025, Bukele boasted on X (formerly known as Twitter) about how El Salvador had now become the safest country in the Western Hemisphere; and by all means, if you were to take homicide rates as the principal indicator of safety, he is right. Going from a rate of 106.3/100,000 homicides per year in 2015 to an impressively diminished rate of 1.9 in 2024 (*Logros y Memorias*, 2025; Alemán, 2025), not only does this put El Salvador as the safest country in Latin America (Cavalari & Al., 2025), but also indeed as the safest country in the Americas, with it being lower than Canada’s most recent rate of 1.94 in 2023 (*Number, rate and percentage changes in rates of homicide victims*, 2024).

However, achieving such a dramatic downturn in homicide rates in such a short time came at a cost. The Bukele administration has been accused by many of severely abusing human rights and of taking the country down an authoritarian path. Amnesty International has called on several occasions for the international community to intervene to stop the human rights and power

abuses they accuse his government of (“President Bukele engulfs the country in a human rights crisis”, 2022; “Human rights crisis could deepen during Bukele’s second term”, 2024), Human Rights Watch has accused the administration of having “systematically dismantled democratic checks and balance” in the country (*El Salvador: Events of 2023*, 2024), and the U.S.

Department of State accused El Salvador of various human rights abuses such as “unlawful or arbitrary killings, forced disappearances; torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by security forces; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention” in their 2022 *Human Rights Report* of the country. Instead of denying these accusations, President Bukele and his government have taunted and challenged their critics.

Directly addressing his detractors, he responded by saying that “if the international community is worried about their little angels” (“El Salvador grabs 1,000 gang suspects in response to weekend killings”, 2022), they should come and take care of them themselves. He even went on to rebrand himself as the “world’s coolest dictator” (Youkee, 2021) on his official social media accounts for a while.

A skeptic may put into question whether or not he is truly taking the Central American country down an authoritarian path, especially given his popularity and immense success in the most recent general elections in El Salvador. When first elected in 2019, he barely achieved a majority, although still an immense upset at the time, winning 53.10% of the vote (*Salvadoran presidency round 1*, 2019); in 2024, two years after the start of the State of Exception, he won the elections with a crushing 84.65% of the votes (*Salvadoran presidency 2024 general*, 2024). The international election observation mission did not find any indicators that the elections were rigged or that people were pressured into voting in a certain way, nor did they find anything else too abnormal for the region; however, they do note “the disappearance of the mutual checks and balances” (*Third preliminary report of the OAS Electoral Observation Mission*, 2024, p.11) that the two previous dominating parties had maintained since the end of the civil war. It is also important to note that until 2021, two years into Bukele’s term, it was illegal for a person to serve two consecutive terms; this was overruled by the Supreme Court of El Salvador in September 2021 (Renteria, 2021). All in all, it is fair to say that elections are still held in a generally free and fair manner; however, not all other indicators paint the same picture.

The Economist Intelligence Unit's 2023 *Democracy Index* (2024), Freedom House's 2024 *Freedom in the World* report (2025), and all five of V-Dem's democracy indices (2025) show that there has been a stark decline in liberal democratic standards in the country, with the decline clearly starting in 2019, notably when Nayib Bukele took power as the president of El Salvador, and getting even worse in 2022. This corresponds with the accusations of human rights abuse and authoritarianism that were quickly stated above, showcasing that the Bukele administration and the State of Exception declared by the government have indeed had an impact on the state of democracy and human rights in the country.

Yet, what remains puzzling is why President Bukele and his administration have maintained such levels of popularity despite having regressed the country in democratic terms and in terms of the protection of human rights. Not only did he win the 2024 Salvadoran elections long after the human rights abuses and his authoritarian tendencies had been observed, with over 85% of the votes, but he is also the most popular leader in Latin America. Ever since the state of emergency was declared, he has enjoyed approval ratings of over 85%, with the most recent stat being a 91% approval rate amongst Salvadorans ("Nine Out of 10 Salvadorans Support President Bukele", 2024). Furthermore, 88% of respondents to the survey also believed he was doing a good job in addressing the security concerns of the country, indicating a high level of support for the government's State of Exception despite it lasting over three years longer than it was initially supposed to. Yet at the same time, a majority of Salvadorans believe that the best political system for their country is democracy (García, 2024); these contradictions seem to indicate that they are willing to overlook the autocratization that is being carried out in their country. This raises two questions that will fundamentally guide this thesis.

First, we must ask: '*What explains the high level of public support for the Bukele administration and its State of Exception despite it having regressed the state of democracy and committed various human rights abuses?*'. Through this question, this study will address the root of the puzzle, specifically, looking into why the domestic audience reacted differently to the international community, and why they kept supporting their government, despite its allegedly authoritarian and abusive policies. This then leads us to the second part of the puzzle; for this we must ask ourselves: '*How has the Bukele administration managed to legitimize these actions, despite their undemocratic and abusive nature, to their domestic audience?*'. Using

securitization theory, this study will attempt to answer this question by looking at how securitization can be used as a means to obtain legitimacy. Answering these questions will allow us to develop a better understanding of how state actors obtain public legitimacy for actions that would not normally be tolerated, and will give us a better understanding of how a fundamentally democratic nation can support its own slide towards authoritarianism.

By answering these two questions, it is expected that we will obtain general insights that will enable us to further our comprehension of how state actors can manipulate the public into agreeing, and even supporting, measures and policies that would not normally be acceptable. In this case, we are dealing with abusive and authoritarian measures. The democratic context of this case will also give us insight into how a democratic country can openly and transparently slide into an autocracy, while the actors who are conducting this autocratization remain electorally popular despite their autocratic policies. Theoretically, it is expected that our findings will indicate that *autocratization can obtain legitimacy from the public (audience) when discursively argued as being in response to an existential security threat*. Therefore, this insinuates that securitization, through its ability to provide legitimacy, can serve as a tool of autocratization. For our case study, it is specifically expected that Bukele's administration used securitization to legitimize measures that would not be normally acceptable. As a consequence, this led the audience to support the autocratization of their country. Securitization is by no means the only way that legitimacy can be obtained, but for this thesis, this is the main theoretical approach that will be taken. Context provided in the following sections, and notably within the analysis, will make it clear why this approach was favored.

This study, as presented, will be a single case study on the Bukele era of El Salvador, but will start with his declaration of the war against gangs. This restricts the timeline of the analysis from March 2022 to the date of submission of the thesis in May 2025. Furthermore, this will be a qualitative study focused on discourse. The analysis of discourse is more often than not at the core of any study on securitization, which will be useful in our analysis of the Bukele administration's securitization, and given the fact that we will also be analyzing how people reacted to the autocratization, discourse will serve as a perfect entry point into understanding how people felt and how they justify their reactions. The method used will specifically be critical discourse analysis, which ties into the critical versions of securitization studies; these will guide

our analysis, as will become evident in the theoretical chapter. In this method, context is a key component; therefore, factual and historical elements will occasionally complement the analysis when relevant and justified by the method. Finally, the data will largely be obtained from social media, as, in this case, it provides both the physical utterances of discourses and the digital utterances. Analyzing both will further the validity of the analysis and strengthen its findings. The justifications for this choice of data over more traditional sources will be justified later.

This thesis will follow a typical structure for any thesis. After this introductory section, there will be the theoretical chapter, specifically focused on detailing securitization theory, how it can be used to obtain legitimacy, and autocratization theory. This chapter will lay out the groundwork for the rest of the study, helping us conceptualize relevant terms and ideas. This will provide important information as to why these theories are useful and will help the reader understand why they were chosen for this study in particular. Namely, how the two connect, and how one can be used to conduct the other. This will then be followed by the methodology sector, which will be divided into several sections: research design, case selection, methods, analysis, data availability and sources. This chapter will serve to lay out how the analysis will be undertaken and address all important elements and factors that will be considered throughout the study. Next, this study will turn to the analysis; in this thesis, the analysis has been divided into a 5-stage process. Each stage of analysis will build into the next, with the goal of slowly building up the results, so that every finding that comes in the next stage of analysis makes sense and can be accurately understood thanks to the context and information provided by the findings of the previous stages. Finally, this study will conclude with a recap of the whole study and its findings, while analyzing what conclusions can be made from the results of the analysis. This short chapter will give us our answers to the two guiding research questions and will close off the study. The limitations of the study will also be stated at the end of this chapter.

2. Theoretical Framework: Securitization and the Legitimacy of Autocratization

As stated previously, this thesis will rely on both the concept of securitization and autocratization. In this study, securitization is understood as a method by which an autocratization process can obtain legitimacy. The principal objective of this chapter will be to draw this theoretical link; this will be done by providing a solid theoretical background to both securitization theory and autocratization theory. A subsection on how securitization provides legitimacy will also be included to further argue and demonstrate this theoretical point. A strong demonstration of this connection is essential for this study as the goal is to understand how the Bukele government in El Salvador has managed to maintain widespread public support while engaging in autocratic activities that have largely been condemned by international human rights and democracy groups (see Human Rights Foundation, 2024; Zúniga, 2024; Amnesty International, 2023; Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2022). The first section of this chapter will start off with an overview of the beginnings of securitization theory as presented by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies and will then build into critical perspectives, largely relying on Thierry Balzacq's theory of securitization. This is followed by a short subsection that will have the goal of fully establishing how legitimacy is understood within the concept of securitization; to do so, the section will also rely on Balzacq's *'Contesting Security: Strategy and Logics'* while building off the ideas that were presented by the Copenhagen School, and finally the section on autocratization will rely on the 2019 work of Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg. The goal will be to demonstrate the theoretical connection between the two main concepts.

2.1 The Copenhagen School and Securitization

To comprehensively approach the topic at hand, it is first and foremost important to fully conceptualize and establish what securitization is, starting from its roots and building into the more critical approaches that will be used for this study. In their 1998 work *'Security: A New Framework for Analysis'*, Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde, who are the leading authors of the Copenhagen School of security studies, formulated the initial and most influential theory of securitization. Although they initially (1998, pp. VII-VIII), had only planned to update

the regional security complex, they ended up creating a new strand of study in the field of security and international relations.

When this work was published, the field of security studies was divided when it came to what could be considered a security issue. Two camps had formed (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 1-2), with one side being the traditionalists who strictly understood security issues as military issues of states, while the other camp being the ‘wideners’ who believed security issues could stretch much larger and include environmental, economic, and societal issues alongside the traditional military issues. The traditionalists’ main argument was that widening the issues that could be considered as security issues “endangered the intellectual coherence of security” as it would simply become an all-inclusive term with little to no meaning (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 3). Their counterparts argued that widening the term was necessary as new types of threats were emerging that were not simply military issues, and that scholars needed to address them instead of turning away from them. As this thesis is not directly about military affairs, many of the more classical approaches to security studies would be unfit for such a study. The Copenhagen School authors, themselves ‘wideners’, formulated securitization with this primordial debate in mind. Their theoretical approach to this debate ended up being more moderate, yet still included more into what could be understood as a security issue, or what could be *securitized*.

A question that the three academics judged important to answer when developing securitization theory is the simple but rather philosophical question of ‘*What is Security?*’. This question will remain crucial in later approaches to securitization theory. As traditionalists would answer, the authors begin by stating that “security is about survival” (Buzan & al., 1998, p. 21), meaning that a security issue is an issue that “is presented as posing an existential threat to a designated referent object” (Buzan & al., 1998, p. 21). In turn, the fact that this issue is presented as an *existential threat* then justifies the use of *extraordinary measures*; this is a process that has traditionally been conducted by the state. State actors and their militaries cannot simply take extraordinary measures on their own, as they would lack legitimacy. Therefore, there is always the need to define the security threat, explain why this threat is perceived as existential, and it is only then that the extreme measures taken will be seen as legitimate. This line of reasoning leads the authors to conclude that “security is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics” (Buzan

& al., 1998, p. 23). According to the three scholars, public issues are either non-politicized, politicized, or at their most extreme, they are *securitized* (Buzan & al., 1998, p. 23). This means that whatever issue is discursively presented as being related to security is inherently more urgent and takes precedence over all issues that are not *securitized* (Buzan & al., 1998, p. 23). This is the starting point for securitization theory.

In the original work presented by the Copenhagen School, the main idea and components of securitization theory are laid out. First of all, it is important to note that the way that securitization is conducted and can be observed is through “discourse and political constellations” (Buzan & al., 1998, p. 25). They elaborate on this point by stating that the question researchers should ask themselves is “When does an argument with this particular rhetorical and semiotic structure achieve sufficient effect to make an audience tolerate violations of rules that would otherwise have to be obeyed?” (Buzan & al., 1998, p. 25). When that line is crossed, it is only then that we can confidently say that what we have observed is securitization. However, not all attempts at securitization are successful, even if some elements of the theory are present. Securitizing actors may make discursive attempts to portray an issue as one that poses an *existential threat* and requires *extraordinary measures* to address, however, this is only the *securitizing move* (Buzan & al., 1998, p. 25). As an example, think of how world leaders argued to their population that to defeat the pandemic, we were required to follow measures that would never be tolerated or judged as acceptable under normal circumstances. For an issue to be securitized, and for there to be successful securitization, the *audience* has to approve of the securitizing move and recognize the threat as existential. In securitization theory, the audience is understood as the people to whom the discourse is directed, whom the securitizing actor is trying to convince; this will be further elaborated upon later in this section. If the audience does not accept this, then we have only witnessed a *securitizing move* and not securitization. Therefore, in the case where the securitizing move fails to convince, the issue is *not* securitized.

In the case that the securitizing move resonates with the audience and they accept it as existential, extraordinary measures taken in response will then be viewed as legitimate, even if they do ‘break the rules’. At this point, it is important to point out that the issues that are presented as *existential threats* do not actually have to be existential; they simply need to be presented as such and accepted as such. Actors, or *securitizing actors*, can present whatever they

want as an existential threat even if it is not. Think of President Trump’s recent remarks about Greenland. The following statement serves as a perfect example:

“For purposes of National Security and Freedom throughout the world, the United States of America feels that the ownership and control of Greenland is an absolute necessity.” (Dodds, 2025).

Although some may argue otherwise, as of February 2025 most Americans, do not believe that “*the ownership and control of Greenland is and absolute necessity*” for their national security, nor for “*freedom throughout the world*”, with only about a third of the population supporting Greenland becoming American (Montgomery, 2025). Nonetheless, Trump’s words still place this issue as one of immense importance requiring extraordinary measures (Shapiro & al., 2025) and is clearly attempting to build towards the legitimization of actions that would go outside the regular realm of politics; therefore this would be a perfect example of a securitizing move that was not, or has not yet been, accepted by the audience.

Continuing on the point that threats do not need to be *existential*, or even real, to be securitized, the authors claim that what truly sets securitization apart is the specific rhetorical structure that is used to present the threat (Buzan & al., 1998, p. 26). The Copenhagen School authors state that in order to observe this process, analysts and scholars need to seek to “understand the processes of constructing a shared understanding of what is to be considered and collectively responded to as a threat” (Buzan & al., 1998, p. 26). They use the language theory term of “*Speech Act*” (Buzan & al., 1998, p. 26) to refer to this process. A threat does not have to be existential or real; what is important is for the language used to describe, present, and argue this threat to give it this preeminent importance and urgency. These words have to be convincing to the audience and convince them that they are, in fact, facing an existential threat.

The main issue remaining to obtain an adequate understanding of the Copenhagen School’s securitization theory is addressing what they believe can be securitized, and who can ‘*do*’ and ‘*speak*’ security. This is the topic where divergence is felt the strongest in later iterations of securitization, as it is in some way the most impactful way to set parameters to the theory; in other words, we now find ourselves back to the traditionalists and wideners debate. Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde (1998, view chapters 3-8) believed that security can be spoken in five different sectors: *military, environmental, economic, societal, and political*. Their argument for

extending security past military affairs is that “*if we place the survival of collective units and principles – the politics of existential threat – as the defining core of security studies, we have the basis for applying security analysis to a variety of sectors without losing the essential quality of the concept*” (1998, p. 27). Even though they widen what can be spoken of as *security*, they maintain that the characteristics of what is deemed an ‘*existential threat*’ and what can be deemed a ‘*security issue*’ will be dependent on the sector it is related to. Meaning what is understood as an existential threat in one sector (i.e. environmental), may be seen as a positive in another sector (i.e. economic). Therefore, the very meaning of *security* is flexible and is highly dependent on context and sector.

Regarding the securitizing actor, or who can *do* and *speak* security, the Copenhagen School scholars identify “*political leaders, bureaucracies, governments, lobbyists, and pressure groups*” (Buzan & Al., 1998, p. 40) as the most common performers of *speech acts*. In this regard, they remain rather grounded and mostly aligned with the traditionalist perspective. However, the academics do believe that identifying the actor requires more analysis than identifying the referent objects of securitization. The issue is that the referent object will always be the referent object, but people who speak security (perform speech acts) are not necessarily the *actor*. An individual can be the actor, but can also speak on behalf of a *collective*, making the collective the actor. To identify who and what constitutes the *securitizing actor*, the three scholars recommend “*focusing on the organizational logic of the speech act*” (1998, p. 41). What can be perceived as an individual actor can also be embodied by a collective. Take, for example, the MAGA movement, although it embodies the ideals of one dominant individual and is often presented as such, it is the collective that speaks, even if it is quite clear they speak the words of Donald J. Trump.

2.2 Critical Perspectives: Thierry Balzacq’s Securitization

Since the initial theory was presented in the late 1990s, countless scholars have relied on the Copenhagen School’s work, and many have tried to improve and further deepen the theory. With the critical school of security studies emerging around the same time as the Copenhagen School (van Munster, 2007), critical authors have made highly impactful contributions to securitization studies. Concerning this study, two critical versions of securitization showed promise. First, there was Rita Floyd’s ‘*Just Securitization*’ (2011; 2019) as presented in her 2019 book *The Morality*

of Security: A Theory of Just Securitization, and second, there was Thierry Balzacq's revisitation of securitization theory (2005; 2014; 2016; 2019). Even though there is much to be gained from Floyd's *Just Securitization*, the normative and ethical focus of her theory would not serve much purpose in this study; therefore, it was judged best to continue the theoretical framework by relying on Thierry Balzacq's work. His understanding of securitization is as follows:

(Securitization is) "an articulated assemblage of practices whereby heuristic artefacts (metaphors, policy tools, image repertoires, analogies, stereotypes, emotions, etc.) are contextually mobilised by a securitizing actor, who works to prompt an audience to build a coherent network of implications (feelings, sensations, thoughts, and intuitions) about the critical vulnerability of a referent object, that concurs with the securitizing actor's reasons for choices and actions, by investing the referent subject with such an aura of unprecedented threatening complexion that a customised policy must be immediately undertaken to block it."
(Balzacq & Al., 2016, p. 495).

In his 2005 work '*The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context*', Balzacq starts off by directly challenging the Copenhagen School's securitization theory. The main problem he argues is that "*the assumption of a speech act approach ultimately reduces security to a conventional procedure such as marriage or betting in which the 'felicity circumstances' (conditions of success) must fully prevail for the act to go through*" (2005, p. 171). Therefore, to him, the original theory created some sort of "*code of practice*" that assumed little potential deviation from the theorized boundaries set by three authors. On the other hand, Balzacq (2005, p. 172) believes securitization to be a "*strategic (pragmatic) practice that occurs within, and as part of, a configuration of circumstances, including the context, the psycho-cultural disposition of the audience, and the power that both speaker and listener bring to the interaction*". This understanding makes securitization much less static and rather flexible depending on the precise instance.

The main point he makes is that the *strategic* and/or *pragmatic* action of discourse is not equivalent to the *speech act*, specifically because of how unbending the principles of the speech act are. As Balzacq claims (2005, p. 172), discourses of security are better seen as pragmatic/strategic; as the strategies taken to communicate the securitizing move depend on the

context, the actor, the audience, and the sector in which it takes place. To put very simply, the *strategic view* of security he adopts, in contrast to the *speech act view*, can be compared to “*pragmatics*” and “*universal pragmatics*” (Balzacq, 2005, p. 172). *Universal pragmatics* have universal rules and principles, meaning that when discourse does not follow what is set in stone, then we cannot claim security has been spoken or that securitization has happened. On the other hand, *pragmatics* focuses on the flexibility of language usage and how discursive strategies can change depending on the context, giving more space to the analyst while also ensuring that everything is covered. Therefore, instead of focusing on the speech act when analyzing discourses of security, Balzacq suggests that we understand spoken security as “*discursive techniques allowing the securitizing actor to induce or increase the public mind’s adherence to the thesis presented to its assent*” (2005, p. 172).

What is common to all of Balzacq’s works on securitization is his focus on ‘*audience*’, ‘*political agency*’ and ‘*context*’ (2005, p 173; 2016, pp. 495-498). In regard to the *context*, Balzacq (2005, p. 181) highlights that one of the flaws of the original theory is its failure to consider external context. For him, there is *internal* and *external* context, or, respectively, *institutional* or *brute* threats Balzacq, 2005, p. 181). Institutional threats are security threats that are simply spoken, meaning that all the power they have and the danger they represent are inherently created through the use of language. On the flip side, brute threats are physical threats that truly exist, without being spoken or not; these threats can cause damage even if their threat is not spoken. As Balzacq points out, “language does not construct reality; at best, it shapes our perception of it” (2005, p. 181). To paint a picture, an example of an institutional threat would be the Christian belief of the Apocalypse or Hell, to many this threat feels very real, and they adjust their lives accordingly, yet there is no direct physical threat that can be established in relation to this, only one that has been constructed through language. On the other hand, think of natural disasters as a brute threat; even if no one were to ever acknowledge them, they would still pose a physical threat to whoever experiences one. In the case of security studies, it is very rare that threats are only constructed by one or the other; therefore, when studying spoken security, it is always important for the analyst to consider both contexts.

Continuing with the *audience*, this is something that critical perspectives, such as that of Balzacq, place immense importance on. Without the audience and their approval, securitization

cannot take place, meaning that the audience is the decisive element in enabling the securitizing of issues. Given that the securitizing actor's main objective is to convince the audience and align their threat perception, the audience shapes the discursive strategies taken by the securitizing actor. As Balzacq points out, "*to persuade the audience, that is to achieve a perlocutionary effect, the speaker has to tune his/her language to the audience's experience*" (2005, p.184). Although this point probably does not have to be argued further, simply listen to the discourse of a right-wing political leader and a left-wing political leader in almost any given *Western* country. What becomes tricky is identifying what exactly the audience is and who the securitizing actor is targeting, or trying to convince. In one of his later works, the scholar (2019, p. 336) acknowledges that one cannot identify the audience before security is spoken, nor does the audience even need to be present/visible when *security is spoken*. The audience is more of an '*analytical requirement*,' whose "contours might be blurred, but its consequences are often visible" (2019, p. 336). Often, there can be many layers to the audience, and it is not always as straightforward as it may seem. Take for example a world leader (*actor*) giving a strong and passionate speech at the UN General Assembly attacking another country and its actions (*securitizing move*), perhaps even referring to the leader of that country as *the Devil*; on one side the actor could be attempting to justify his country's stance, actions, and its foreign policy in the eyes of world leaders, but at the same time the actor could be trying to convince his home audience of the threat in an attempt to justify his own domestic policies. This means that one single instance of spoken security can be multifaceted and attempt to convince various different audiences. It is important to note that "*securitizing actors develop maps of target populations based on both stereotypes [of the referent subject] they themselves hold and those they believe to prevail among that segment of the public likely to become important to them*" (Balzacq, 2005, p.184). Therefore, discursive strategies change, and successful securitizing actors know how to adapt their discourse accordingly.

Finally, on the topic of '*agency*', it is important to understand the power relations between the securitizing actor and the audience. To Balzacq, agency is understood as the '*practical force of discourse*' (2005, pp. 186-187). This implies that the actor and the audience are in some sort of symbiotic relationship where one acts in accordance with how the other reacts. Agency is thus placed at the center of any securitization study as the theory inherently implies a study on how an audience reacted to the discursive practices of the actor. Balzacq (2005, p. 187) uses the term

'discursive action' to describe the power of discourse that pushes an audience to enable and legitimize the extraordinary measures that the actor wants to that. He continues by arguing that the link between discourse and action is first that "*through mutual knowledge discourse shapes social relations and builds their form and content*" (2005, p. 187); this is what he calls the *'constitutive side'* of discursive action (Balzacq, 2005, p. 187). This implies that discourse is what permits the actor and the audience to align their threat perceptions and come to common conclusions as to what needs to be done to address the threat. The role of the securitizing move is to establish this mutual understanding. Secondly, "*as vehicle of ideas, discourse targets and creates the instantiation of a particular communicative action*" (Balzacq, 2005, p. 187), which he refers to as the *'causative side'*. This is essentially what pushes the audience to accept and give consent to a securitizing move, which in turn enables the extraordinary action. When discursive actions are taken by the securitizing actor, agency is then placed in the hands of the audience; it is they who decide how to interpret and react to the discourse.

2.3 Securitization as a Means of Obtaining Legitimacy

From the very start of securitization theory, the link between securitization and legitimacy has been evident and a key part of the theory. As is clearly stated in the founding literature on securitization theory, "*Securitization is not fulfilled only by breaking rules nor solely by existential threats but by cases of existential threats that legitimize the breaking of rules*" (Buzan & al., 1998, p. 25). To put it simply, securitization is the means by which actors and their actions obtain legitimacy, meaning the whole process of securitization, when successful, is in some way a form of legitimization. If a securitizing actor fails to convince the audience with his securitizing move, then the actor will have failed to gain legitimacy, and any actions taken, especially extraordinary measures targeting the referent object that the actor attempted to securitize, will not be seen as legitimate by the audience. Therefore, although issues can obtain legitimacy without being securitized, they cannot be securitized without first being legitimized. From this assumption, Balzacq's main arguments are that "*security practices somewhat negotiate their content and meaning with the context and other practices therein*" and that "*security practices owe their logic to processes of securitization*" (2014, p. 17).

Thierry Balzacq's 2014 book *'Contesting Security: Strategies and Logics'* places even more emphasis on the legitimacy that securitization provides and its role in the process as a whole.

With the initial objective of his book being to understand what exactly the ‘*logic of security*’ is, Balzacq’s work ties the two concepts together. In this understanding of security, he relies upon one key assumption, which is that “*security practices result from securitization*”, meaning that the ‘logic of security’ inherently means the ‘logic of securitization’. Highlighting the importance of legitimacy in securitization theory, the author states that “the logic of securitization comprises a specific grammar or rules of the political and the principle of legitimacy, that is, a necessary (not sufficient) condition by which security practices are sustained and without which they lose their moral grips on the subjects” (Balzacq, 2014, p. 18).

Furthermore, Balzacq (2014, p. 18) argues the point of that “*security practices draw their efficacy from legitimacy, as legitimacy confers them a normative status*”. Decisions will not be contested if they are viewed as legitimate; in this sense, securitization normalizes whatever action is taken against a threat understood as legitimate by the audience. This is not to say that what is legitimized will remain so indefinitely. A response to a threat that is at some point viewed as legitimate can, from one day to the other, lose its legitimacy, and therefore lose its normative status. Take for example the death penalty in the European Union; a few decades ago sentencing people to death for certain crimes was normalized and viewed as legitimate, yet people changed their mind, be it in response to a de-securitization process or simply due to the changing times, and now this practice is no longer normalized, nor would it be seen as legitimate if it were to happen today. With this in mind, it is also important to note that “*legitimacy is not the sole basis for enduring security practices*” (Balzacq, 2014, p. 18) as dictators and autocrats can simply force things through with very little regard to what any audience may think. However, this fact will not affect the present study. The main point being, that the more legitimate security practices are, the less friction there will be in their implementation. Therefore, the efficacy of security practices is largely dependent on how many people within the targeted audience view the practices as legitimate. When there is less and less legitimacy in the eyes of the audience, then the security practices lose their power. This means that “*legitimacy is an important factor for both the effectiveness and survival of sets of security practices*” (Balzacq, 2014, p. 18).

2.4 Democracy and Autocratization Theory

There are many ways of conceptualizing autocratization and many ways to refer to this process. The phenomenon that all democracy theorists try to understand is the breakdown of democratic

norms and principles, alongside why autocracies become more *authoritarian*. Academics have long debated how this can be observed, how we can understand this process, and lastly, how to measure it. In their 2019 article ‘*A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?*’, Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg provide a solid theoretical and methodological framework to understand this topic. Before delving into what exactly the concept of *autocratization* entails, it is first important to set out what is understood as democracy, as this is what the concept is based on. The two scholars rely on Robert Dahl’s conceptualization of “*electoral democracy as ‘polyarchy’, namely clean elections, freedom of association, universal suffrage, an elected executive, as well as freedom of expression and alternative sources of information*” (2019, p. 1096). With this definition being set, we get the first hints at how we can understand *autocratization*, as it is the breakdown of these principles that leads to the process of autocratization itself.

One of the main points that the authors highlight (2019, p. 1098) is that autocratization in the 21st century is no longer like the ones described by Samuel P. Huntington (1991) where autocratization was a rather rapid and evident breakdown of democracy; I.E. military coups, complete and rapid consolidations of powers by leaders who did not try to hide it. The issue with these old methods, as put by Lührmann and Lindberg, is that they “*had high legitimacy costs*”, and that “*sudden reversals to authoritarianism have grown out of fashion*” (2019, p. 1098). To put it simply, the digital age has changed how people access and process information. Think of all the ‘*Colour Revolutions*’ in *Post-Soviet States*, people will no longer sit by and watch their democracy be destroyed by some autocrat who seeks to consolidate power. Also consider the lack of coups (outside of the Sahel region of Africa); sudden grabs of power are no longer tolerable. Therefore, the main issue with these older means of autocratization is that they lack legitimacy and would not be tolerated by the audience.

This is not to say that autocratization can no longer happen. Which is why legitimacy becomes such an important factor for actors who seek to strengthen their hold on power, or autocratize their states. The breakdown of democracies and further autocratization in autocracies is still possible, but it needs to be done in a way that will be viewed as legitimate by its audience, as even dictators with a complete hold on power have lost their hold due to crises of legitimacy; think of the Arab Spring. Lührmann and Lindberg point out that the “*current autocratization*

unfolds in a more clandestine and gradual fashion than its historical precedents” (2019, p. 1098), making it less flagrant to the audience that is affected which also allow these figures to find ways to legitimize what they are doing, as it a more slow and gradual process.

According to the two scholars autocratization is “*antipode of democratization*” (2019, p. 1098) and is conceptualized “*as a matter of degree that can occur both in democracies and autocracies*” (2019, p. 1098) meaning that “democracies can lose democratic traits to a varying degree without” (2019, p. 1098) fully becoming an autocracy, while autocracies can further autocratize and also lose whatever democratic trait they had. What should be noted is that this is not a stagnant process that always has the same traits; every case is different, as all countries have their own practices and norms. For the authors, autocratization can be separated into three different categories: *democratic recession*, *democratic breakdown*, and *authoritarian consolidation* (2019, pp. 1098-1099). *Democratic recession* is the process by which a full democracy ‘*autocratizes*’ but remains democratic. *Democratic breakdown* entails the full breakdown of democracy, by which a democratic regime fully transitions into an authoritarian regime. Finally, *autocratic consolidation* takes place when a regime that is already authoritarian becomes even more autocratic. Therefore, analysts should pay attention to these differences and seek to identify what precise case we are dealing with when trying to evaluate and understand autocratization. As this study is dealing with a country that is still arguably a democracy, the main point of contention here will be determining whether or not we are dealing with a case of *democratic recession* or *democratic breakdown*.

Existing studies linking securitization to autocratization largely seem to have emerged from Türkiye (Yilmaz & Shipoli, 2021; Yilmaz, et al., 2024), and existing English language studies specifically about El Salvador either focus on autocratization (Wolf, 2024; Meléndez-Sánchez, 2021) or securitization (Van der Borgh & Savenije, 2014; van den Boogert, 2015), with none linking the two. Furthermore, all studies on securitization in El Salvador, specifically the securitization of gangs, were conducted before Nayib Bukele became president in 2019. Therefore, this case study will serve to fill select gaps in the existing academic literature.

3. Methodology

This chapter will serve as the introduction to the research methods that will be used to conduct this thesis. As the theoretical chapter, this one will also be divided into key sections. It will begin with an outline of the research design and a justification for why it was chosen. Then it will argue why the case selection, that of El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele, is a perfect fit for the study. Next, it will present the main method that will be used to perform the analysis. Then this study will go over data availability and what sources will be used; there will be a focus on how this study will balance data collection to ensure non-partisan and credible results. Finally, this chapter will conclude with an overview of the potential limitations of this study, with some comments on the ethical implications of this study.

3.1 Research Design: Single Case Study

As it was quickly presented earlier, the empirical part of this study will be a single case analysis. It will only examine securitization and autocratization in El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele, meaning one may assume the study's timeline would be restricted from the day he assumed office as president, the 1st of June 2019, to mid-May 2025, in the hopes of ensuring the relevancy and accuracy of the study. However, as will become more evident in the analysis, since the study focuses on the securitization process as an independent variable, the analysis will start with the declaration of the State of Exception after the weekend of killings. Therefore, the timeline will truly begin in March 2022, stretching to May 2025. However, appropriate context will be provided for events that affect the securitization process, even if they happened prior to this date; the methods subsection will justify this. The study will solely rely on qualitative methods, which will occasionally be complemented with the select usage of public opinion data, to reinforce any findings that demonstrate that there has indeed been some form of slide towards authoritarianism; this will serve to validate, and further demonstrate the analysis and the findings that are obtained from it. Given the thesis being that *autocratization can obtain legitimacy from the public (audience) when discursively argued as being in response to an existential security threat*, a single case study enables us to dive deeper into one single case to examine the phenomenon in a more detailed and complete manner.

Specifically, this study will be an *extreme case study* (Gerring & Seawright, 2008, pp. 301-302). In their 2008 work, Jason Seawright and John Gerring elaborate on the various case study methods that can be used to conduct studies such as this one. The extreme case study “selects a case because of its extreme value on the independent or dependent variable” (Gerring & Seawright, 2008, p. 301). Put more simply, this entails the selection of a case that is unusual due to one of the variables being rather extreme. In this case, the case of El Salvador was initially selected due to the uniqueness of the case, in the sense that we have rarely seen a democratic country engage in such autocratic and abusive acts, with hardly any public pushback; instead the administration has seemingly enjoyed incredibly high levels of support for their actions. The simple fact that the people seem to have openly embraced the authoritarian policies and actions of the government to such an extent makes this case an extreme example. In consequence of the extreme nature of this case, it is expected that the connection between securitization and autocratization will become more visible and accessible for analysis. Given that the extreme case method “*is a purely exploratory method - a way of probing possible causes of Y, or possible causes of X, in an open-ended fashion*” (Gerring & Seawright, 2008, p. 302), this method allows the researcher to explore plausible causes for the extreme phenomenon, as is the goal with this thesis. In this case, the study will seek to further deepen existing knowledge and research to provide a better understanding of how the public acceptance of autocratization can be better explained as a consequence of extraordinary measures being legitimized by securitization; this is in addition to strengthening the link between security and democracy studies.

There are many advantages obtained from choosing to conduct a single case study. For this thesis, a case study is understood as “*an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units*” (Gerring, 2004, p. 342). This is exactly what this thesis will seek to do, and is what gives this design an inherent advantage over others. As stated, a single case study is by default more intensive and goes into more detail on the single case. Although comparative cases may also cover much of the same, they cannot go into as much depth as their attention will be divided between more than one instance of the studied phenomenon. If you have 25 thousand words in a case study, the entirety of those words will be dedicated to studying one single instance of the phenomenon of interest. On the other hand, in a comparative study, the depth of focus per instance will instantly be reduced by half, and so on the more cases you add. Due to this study using an extreme case, a comparative study would not

be able to adequately conduct the analysis, as we are relying on extreme cases in the sense that they are somewhat unique. Therefore, to truly understand what is happening in El Salvador, it is best to keep it to a single case study.

Furthermore, given the fact that the entirety of a case study is dedicated to understanding one specific instance, it also means that the study is much more “contextual” (Gerring, 2004, p. 351). As has been introduced earlier in the theoretical section, context is one of the most important factors to understand in securitization theory. That is also why more often than not, securitization studies end up being single case studies (Balzacq, 2010, pp. 31-53). ‘Context’ represents one of the three core components of the critical approach to securitization used in this study; therefore, when choosing what method to use, it is important to consider which one will allow the study to cover this aspect the best.

Now, regarding the disadvantages of the single case study, there are a couple that should be acknowledged and addressed. First of all, there is the issue of selection bias. The issue is particularly relevant to the cases that are chosen for analysis; as Balzacq puts researchers “generally share the conviction that we learn something about security logic only if we select cases that have a particular outcome, i.e., successful” (2010, p. 34). The main issue with choosing a case based on its outcome is that it may overplay and overestimate the connection between the two variables that were identified by the researcher, also meaning that selection bias brings about confirmation bias (Balzacq, 2010, p. 34). With this in mind, it is important to truly test the theory and not just apply it to the case that was identified as a good example. On the flip side, the fact that this study is a case study also gives more room to fully test the hypothesis, instead of simply demonstrating its validity through the application of the selected theories. This point is exemplified in this quotation:

“The very subjectivity of case study research allows for the generation of a great number of hypotheses, insights that might not be apparent to the cross-unit researcher who works with a thinner set of empirical data across a large number of units and with a more determinate (fixed) definition of cases, variables, and outcomes.” (Gerring, 2004, p. 350)

Moving forward, this thesis will need to keep in mind both the risks and advantages that come with selection bias and will have to balance the study to ensure the academic validity of the study.

Another risk that comes with case studies is the risk of overgeneralization (Balzacq, 2010, p. 34). To put it simply, given that only one case is analyzed, it is somewhat unknown how applicable the results are to other cases; it is also hard to pinpoint how far the theoretical implications go. As Gerring puts “*it is clear that an inference extends beyond the unit under study, but it is often unclear how far the inference extends*” (2004, p. 347). Meaning, although the results obtained by the study may be valid in the case of El Salvador, it is unclear whether or not the theoretical outcome will be applicable to explain other similar instances beyond El Salvador. Therefore, it is important to stay academically humble in the claims that the study will make; although this study may establish a theoretical link between securitization and autocratization, it may also prove that there is no credible link, the final overview of the results obtained from the analysis will simply provide literature that can justify other similar studies, and provide material for other scholars to further examine the theoretical link, if established.

3.2 Case Selection: El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele

Although in this case, the empirical observation was made before considering academic theory, the case nonetheless is an ideal one to conduct this study. The reason for this is its extreme nature and how visible some of the changes have been when looking at the case on a surface level. El Salvador, under the Bukele administration, has demonstrated very clear signs that an autocratization process has been taking place, with the government even taunting critics as shown before, but at the same time, this administration still remains the most popular one in the entirety of the Americas. Furthermore, the country’s leadership have openly and blatantly used securitized issues as a means of justifying their extreme measures. This justification has been continuous, which is reflected in the fact that even though the State of Exception was initially declared to be for thirty days, as seen in the intro, it has routinely been extended by another thirty days every month for the past three years (Méndez Dardón, 2025). Therefore, we can also be quite confident in the fact that the securitizing actor has continuously securitized problems that provide legitimacy to these actions. With this in mind, even before conducting the analysis, we can be quite confident in the fact that we will have sufficient material to analyze and to establish

a connection, as this securitization and autocratization process has apparently been continuous for a period of at least three years.

First, it will serve as the groundwork for further securitization studies in El Salvador, building off work that focused on previous governments. The Bukele administration has seemingly managed to securitize gangs and legitimize its government's authoritarian and abusive actions to an extent that no previous Salvadorian government has managed to do, and a large part of the analysis will seek to demonstrate this. The uniqueness and extremeness of the situation are what makes the case ideal for such a study. Additionally, the Bukele Regime's excessive use of social media as a means of conducting the securitization process also sets it apart from previous administrations in the country, making this study the first to examine the role and effectiveness of social media in securitization in El Salvador. The Bukele administration has largely used President Nayib Bukele's social media accounts as a means of communicating its vision and objectives in a way that has not been witnessed in other similar cases, such as the case of Türkiye (Yılmaz & Al., 2023), where the Erdogan administration has rather sought to censor and shut down access to social media (Buyuk, 2025). It is undeniable that social media has increasingly become a tool for leaders to promote their ideas, in this case, for a regime to securitize issues and seek to legitimize their actions; this study hopes to add to the existing literature on the use of social media to achieve such objectives. Nonetheless, this case takes things a step further, with President Bukele and his administration mainly communicating through the President's social media accounts; this has amassed the President more followers on X (formerly known as Twitter) than there are people in El Salvador. Furthermore, nearly all major speeches and government policies are showcased on the President's personal YouTube channel.

3.3 Methods: Critical Discourse Analysis

Concerning securitization, this study will largely rely on discourse analysis, as is quite standard in securitization studies. The reason behind this lies in the discursive nature of securitization studies, which sees discourse as a method a shaping social contexts, which is particularly relevant for this study. Specifically, it will rely on critical discourse analysis (CDA); the reasons for this will be further argued below. Generally, when using discourse analysis, the main goal is to “*establish the meaning of texts shaped by distinct contexts*” (Balzacq, 2010, p. 40). This aligns directly with the objective of securitization studies, which is to understand how an actor used

discourse to legitimize extraordinary actions. Context matters, as does the discourse. The distinct context in this case is El Salvador under the Bukele regime, and how it legitimized autocratization through the use of securitization. Discourse is used by securitizing actors to securitize the problem that is presented as existential; furthermore, the understanding of how and why the problem is existential is discursively shaped by the actor through this very same discourse. The audience's reaction to the securitization and the moves that contribute to the autocratization process is expressed through its own discourse. Therefore, discourse analysis gives us the tools needed to analyze and obtain findings from the securitization process and the audience's reactions to the extraordinary measures.

Discourse is also understood as a “*vehicle of meaning*” (Balzacq, 2010, p. 39) by which things that are intended may not be directly stated, and it remains up to the person conducting the analysis to figure out what is meant. This is done through the triangulation of data (Balzacq, 2010, p. 41). Depending on the context, an actor can choose to self-censor or tone down their rhetoric, and in other instances, the actor could be much more direct. Therefore, it is important to ensure that the discourse that is analyzed comes from multiple sources and, in this case, is not simply official documents or statements made by government officials and agencies, but that we find discourse that was spoken in various contexts. The idea is to find what ideas, narratives, and discourse is repeated throughout the various sources studied; this will be particularly relevant when analyzing the audience's reaction.

Critical discourse analysis takes this a step further; to ensure adequate understanding of the context and the discourse, it takes into account a “*diverse body of data*” (Balzacq, 2010, p. 41) which allows for a better analysis of how the argued threat is constructed and how it changes. It is also argued that CDA is the “analysis of the dialectical relationships between semiosis and other elements of social practice” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 123). This implies that we can understand “social life as interconnected networks of social practices” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 123) and that all these practices have a semiotic element. CDA and semiotics help us understand how someone's roles (i.e. president) may affect their social practices, how they represent and recontextualize problems, and how these actors are performative in their social practices. In our case, this will help us understand how Bukele's discourse (social practice) is shaped by his social position, and how he relies on performative discourse to securitize issues. In addition this will

provide us with a better way to understand how he managed to legitimize autocratic and abusive actions. Critical discourse analysis, not only permits this study to take into account sources such as pictures, videos, newspapers, and media in addition to the more commonly used sources, such as official statements, press releases, official policy, and public addresses, but it also permits us to delve deeper into the power relations figuring within the securitization process, and how this process is shaped by social practice. As Balzacq puts it, “critical discourse analysis is powerful in grasping both textual and non-textual activities of securitization and the power tectonics which enable or silence certain voices” (2010, p. 41). This advantage will become more obvious in the data section, which explains what detail has been selected and why.

Furthermore, after having collected and selected data, the researcher must keep two aspects of discourse in mind when conducting critical discourse analysis. First, there is intertextuality, and second, there is intratextuality. Intertextuality focuses on the links that exist between pre-existing discourse, the discourse that is being examined, and anticipated discourse (Fairclough, 1992, p. 270). It is argued that “*all utterances, both spoken and written, (...) are oriented retrospectively to the utterances of previous speakers and prospectively to the anticipated utterances of next speakers*” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 270). Therefore, when analyzing speeches and statements made by President Bukele and his administration, it will be important to consider how this discourse is connected to what was said before, and what they anticipate will be said by the next actor.

Furthermore, another factor to consider within intertextuality is how an utterance is interpreted by the audience. Some may choose to interpret the discourse as it was intended by the actor, and accept the narrative is argued; however, some may also resist the interpretation that is being discursively presented to them (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 291-292). This corresponds directly to the concept of securitization by which the securitizing move (the discourse) is an attempt to convince an audience that an issue is an existential threat and requires extraordinary measures to address. In the end, it is the audience that enables or blocks securitization, and this depends on how they interpret the actor’s discursive argument. Instances where the audience does not interpret the argument of discourse as the actor intended, or simply refuses to agree with it, are called ‘*resistant readings*’ or ‘*resistant interpretations*’ (Fairclough, 1992, p. 292). This adds another layer to the intertextuality; however, in the case that the hypothesis is at least right about the fact that there was securitization in El Salvador, this should not be a factor that must be

considered in this end. However, it could be helpful to understand how the audience has positioned itself in the face of the, hypothesized, autocratization of their country.

Another aspect of intertextuality is the existence of ‘*storylines*’ (Balzacq, 2010, p. 43). These are narratives that exist throughout multiple discourses that build upon one another and are meant to attribute meaning to an observable phenomenon. This can be directly connected to securitization theory, as the securitizing move is essentially a storyline that attempts to present a phenomenon as an existential threat. In theory, a storyline serves three purposes: it seeks to connect the phenomenon at hand with specific characteristics, it attempts to unify differing understandings as common ones, and finally, it contributes to a “*cognitive routinization*” (Balzacq, 2010, p. 43) regarding the referent object of the discourse; for this study, the object that is securitized. Therefore, analyzing the securitization process through critical discourse analysis also entails taking into account and understanding the storyline.

Intratextuality is related to the “*internal coherence of the text*” (Balzacq, 2010, p. 43) and focuses on the performative aspects of a text. Securitization, being by default a performative discursive strategy, means that there are several questions that must be thought of when analyzing the selected discourses. Specifically, the researcher must inquire about the approach that the text takes, whether it is “*assertive, commissive, expressive, directive or declarative*” (Balzacq, 2010, p. 43) and then ask themselves how the actor is trying to shape the understanding of an issue through their approach. This is important as this is how the securitizing actor, President Nayib Bukele and other regime officials, will attempt to shape their audience’s understanding of an issue and what needs to be done to address it. Put simply, the researcher needs to consider what is the picture that the actor is trying to paint about the issue they are discursively presenting (i.e. an existential issue).

In addition, one must also ask oneself what “*heuristic artifacts*” (Balzacq, 2010, p. 43) are used and to create what meaning. In this case, heuristic artifacts are understood as emotional appeals, metaphors, analogies and visual imagery as well as mental imagery (Balzacq, 2010, p.43). Building off the previous questions, the researcher must also ask themselves what interactions are created through the specific discourse; this study will examine the interactions between the actor, the audience, and the object of the securitization. Taking into account that the hypothesized referent object of securitization, in this case, is gangs and later corruption, the interactions

created by the discursive techniques of the actor between the audience and gangs, and later corrupt actors, are also important to consider.

In addition to using critical discourse analysis, this study will occasionally reference complementary data that showcases various points that are found and presented within the study; some elements of the analysis will be made stronger by its use, while others will simply need external sources for the discursive analysis to find its footing. However, the analysis of non-discursive elements will never overshadow the discursive focus of this study. As an example, when analyzing how the audience responded to the Bukele Government's securitization, a quick overview of complementary data, such as public opinion poll data from Latin America on the Bukele administration and on the State of Exception itself, will be used to strengthen the findings made through CDA. This complementary analysis becomes relevant for the same reasons when analyzing how the audience reacted to the autocratization of their country.

3.4 Analysis

The analytical section of the thesis will be divided into several stages of analysis. These were inspired by methods that have already been used in securitization studies and more generally in critical discourse analysis. Specifically, the analysis will combine the suggested methods presented in Thierry Balzacq's *'A new framework for securitization analysis'* (2010), and Norman Fairclough's *'Critical discourse analysis as a method in social scientific research'* (2001). Based on the two analytical methods presented by the two authors, this study has developed a five-stage analysis that will be used to conduct the analysis. Each stage of analysis will attempt to answer select guiding questions by analyzing discursive data and by using complementary data when relevant or necessary. This will be a step-by-step process that will build up to address the main puzzle of this study, that is, to assess whether or not securitization contributed to the legitimization of authoritarianism, which would explain why the Bukele administration remained so popular despite its authoritarian measures.

The first stage of analysis, titled *'A Problem for Whom?'*, will look at the primary elements of securitization and give us the basic information needed to continue the analysis. This stage will be the need to address three guiding questions: 'What is being securitized?', 'For who does this present a problem?', and "What needs to be done?". All these questions are important to answer

and keep in mind going forward, as they provide the basic context as to what the securitizing move of the securitizing actor is. In this case, although the identities audience and the securitizing actor are somewhat clear, it gives us further information about how they are being discursively presented by the actor. Addressing what needs to be done will not only give us insight into the extraordinary measures that will be taken, but it also shows us how far the securitizing actor believes they need to go to address this problem.

The second stage of analysis, titled '*The Framing of an Existential Problem*', focuses on the analysis of this exact problem. First of all, it seeks to answer the question of 'Why is this problem existential?'. This will be done through the analysis of the securitizing actor's discourse and will help us understand how the actor justifies the need for extraordinary measures to his audience. However, to fully understand the topic, there are specific aspects of the discourse that need to be addressed. Notably, this stage must seek to analyze 'how this problem is framed?', 'what are the storylines?', 'what are the obstacles to this issue being resolved?' and 'what makes this problem resistant to normal measures?'. This combination of elements pulled from Balzacq's (2010) and Fairclough's (2001) approach to critical discourse analysis will enable us to further understand the justifications for the extraordinary measures and will verbally visualize the image that the securitizing actor is trying to paint. In addition, understanding the framing and the storyline of the problems that require extraordinary measures will become further relevant when going through the context-based stage of analysis. This stage of analysis will be key to understanding why the actor discursively positions his actions as legitimate, and when combined with the third and fourth stages of analysis, will help us understand why the audience may view these actions as legitimate.

The third stage of analysis will attempt to analyze the power relations that are expressed in the discourse. Titled '*Visual and Linguistic Power Relations*', the purpose of this stage of analysis will be to analyze exactly that. Guided by the question of 'what power relations are visually and linguistically expressed through the discourse?', while also considering the semiotic aspects of the discourse, this stage of analysis will seek to unravel the fundamental power relations at the basis of the relationship between the securitizing actor and the audience. Doing so will provide us with a better understanding of how the actor discursively positions himself to be perceived by the audience, and will also give context to later understand why the audience reacted in a specific

way, and why the actor's actions may be seen as legitimate. The Bukele administration has made heavy use of visual imagery as a key component of the discourse; there are even instances that have visuals without any linguistic aspect that still manage to convey the discourse. Therefore, a careful analysis of these visuals, while also considering the linguistic element, will be necessary for this study.

The fourth stage of analysis will be one of the most important for the study. This stage will deal with the context that is relevant to the study as a whole. Specifically, it will analyze the proximate and distal contexts, and will be titled exactly as that. As with many of the stages of analysis, this one will pull its understanding of context in securitization and critical discourse studies from Balzacq's (2010) and Fairclough's (2001) methods of analysis. Distal context is regarded as the wider and more historical socio-cultural and economic context that shapes discourse. Proximate context is understood as the more direct context, such as the setting, the participants, and the direct social interactions that are generated as a result of the discourse. Doing the study without this stage would probably be feasible, and you can probably arrive at the same findings. However, the study would not manage to make the findings make sense, and the results would be shallow, as we would not truly understand why the audience reacted as they did. Analyzing the distal context will provide us with an understanding of how the social, economic, historical, and cultural context led the audience to react in a specific way to the discourse, it will provide us with more information on why the audience may be receptive to such discourse and extraordinary measures. It also may show us why they may have been open, and even willing, to sacrifice some of their democratic rights, in order to deal with issues that the actor has presented as more important than their rights. Distal context will also help us understand some of the references that the actor has made in his discourse, and what historical and societal facts are being used to push the audience towards a common perspective. On the other hand, the proximate context will give this study more context as to how the actor has used physical and digital settings to his advantage. As already established, this study will largely rely on data obtained from social media. The analysis of the proximate context will help us understand why the actor relied so heavily on digital platforms to communicate his discourse.

Finally, the last stage of analysis will close up the study by addressing the fundamental question that has guided this thesis. This stage of analysis, named "*Extraordinary Measures*,

Authoritarianism and Public Legitimacy” will deal with these key elements. The guiding questions for this stage will be ‘What are the policy results, and in what way are they abusive and autocratic?’, ‘How has the audience reacted to the securitization?’, ‘How has the audience reacted to the measures that autocratized the country?’ and ‘Were these measures seen as legitimate?’. The information obtained by these guiding questions will enable us to first detail the measures the Bukele administration took and how they are authoritarian, all whilst keeping in mind the aforementioned autocratization theory (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1100). The analysis of the measures will give the study insight into how the country autocratized. After this has been done, we will finally be able to analyze the audience’s reaction to these measures and understand why they seem to have been seen as legitimate by the people. This will have the goal of closing out the study while also addressing all the remaining elements important to answering the initial questions of ‘*What explains the high level of public support for the Bukele administration and its State of Exception despite it having regressed the state of democracy and committed various human rights abuses?*’ and ‘*How has the Bukele administration managed to legitimize these actions, despite their undemocratic and abusive nature, to their domestic audience?*’. After this stage, we will finally have the information needed to be able to address how the securitization provided legitimacy to the extraordinary and autocratic measures to the domestic audience of the Bukele administration.

Throughout the stages of analysis, to validate the work being presented, autocratic decisions, policies, and actions by the Bukele Regime, when relevant, will be presented to complement the analysis. This will be done so not only to show concrete examples of authoritarianism, but it will also serve to help build up context when appropriate, all in the hopes of better analyzing the research question. Non-discursive material will only be considered and analyzed when essential to the study of discourse; notably, the fourth stage of analysis will often rely on this type of information when analyzing the distal context. In addition, in the final stage of analysis, when assessing public support, and therefore legitimacy, for autocratic measures, the analysis will also need to quickly acknowledge non-discursive material to provide further backing to the discursive analysis. This comes from the fact that it is quite hard to narrow down what discourse is representative of the audience, therefore, we will need to back up the analysis with concrete proof that it is indeed representative.

3.5 Data Availability and Sources: Official Discourse and Social Media

Regarding data for the study, this is another aspect that distinguishes this study from others and makes it more unique. Largely, most of the data related to the securitization process comes from the social media accounts of President Bukele. These are either in the form of recordings of his meetings, public speeches, and press conferences, or are simply personal statements made by the president and his entourage. Although you can obtain videos of the securitizing actor's discourse from other sources, the versions published on the president's accounts usually feature a higher audio and visual quality than versions posted on even other government accounts, or in other traditional media outlets, which plays into the performativity of these utterances. Through the president's social media accounts, not only can you obtain most of the physical utterances of discourse that were used to conduct the securitization, but you can also obtain data that is not available in any physical manner.

Furthermore, the online reach of the president is much larger than that of official government accounts. Take, for example, Nayib Bukele's discourse to the nation for four years of government (Bukele, 2023c). This video was posted both on the president's personal YouTube channel (2023c) and was also posted on El Salvador's Press Secretariat's channel (2023a). The Press Secretariat account received around 452,000 views, 4400 likes, and 450 comments; on the other hand, President Bukele's account received 1,676,000 views, 25000 likes, and 3827 comments. Simply with these numbers, we can already tell that the amount of social interactions generated on the president's account is much larger, and that he has a much larger audience. This will be especially relevant in the two final stages of analysis. Additionally, the video itself features much higher quality visuals and audio on his personal account, and includes a five-minute section before the speech dedicated to people applauding and celebrating him that was not featured on the government's account. This makes the data available on the President's personal account more valuable to this study, as there is more to analyze, especially in terms of performativity.

President Nayib Bukele has not only made immense use of social media to communicate his ideas, his perspectives, but also to villainize and securitize referent objects that he presents as threats. He has largely argued and justified his government's policies through social media. By doing so, he has amassed a following larger than the population of El Salvador, which speaks to the size of his audience and how far his discursive reach is. In the analysis, it also becomes clear

that the views of his government are also expressed more directly and clearly on his social media accounts. Precisely, he has used most mainstream social media outlets in this regard, but for this study, the two most relevant ones will be what he has published on YouTube and X (formerly known as Twitter). On YouTube, you can obtain most of the physical utterances of the discourse that are relevant to this study, and you can also obtain highly edited videos that contain the discourse but not the president or any members of his administration. On his X account, you can obtain much of the same, but it also gives us a window into more personal statements and views. It further gives us the capacity to analyze his interactions with the audience and how the audience interacts with the discourse.

Complementary data will be used when relevant, however, the primary focus of this study remains discursive. The complementary data will rather be used to provide context, only when relevant. Some sources that may be referenced will be the three big democracy datasets, namely, some data will be quoted from V-Dem, Freedom House, and the Economist Intelligence Unit's democracy index. There will also be the use of some scholarly and journalistic reporting on key events related to the study, such as info related to the civil war and the issues that gangs represent. This will especially be relevant for the stage of analysis, giving context to the securitization and how the audience may react. Obviously, for the extraordinary measures, the study will try to quote primary sources, especially in regards to official legislation, therefore, the constitution of the country will be consulted, alongside any government amendments or measures that may affect it.

In addition, there is the rather difficult task of discursively analyzing how the audience has reacted to the securitization process and the authoritarian measures that came of it. To do this, this study will obtain relevant data from local news outlets in the form of reporting, interviews, and statements made by members of Salvadoran society that have been published digitally. This study will not use data from international NGOs to analyze the audience, as there is a worry that they will be overly biased in their representation of how Salvadorans feel; however, their reporting will be considered for analyzing the extraordinary measures and what makes these actions authoritarian. On the other hand, this study will consider data from the large influx of international media, alongside online content creators, who have been travelling to El Salvador to inquire the public about the changes that are being made by the Bukele administration. The

reasoning for this comes from the fact that we can visually analyze the interactions. The important part for this part of the analysis will be to balance the sources from which this data is being obtained while carefully considering what interest or political leaning the source may have.

For both the analysis of the securitization process and the analysis of the audience's reaction, as stated, the timeline will be restricted from early 2022, just as the war on gangs was declared, to today, as the State of Exception is still in place. Considering the restrictions of a thesis of this size, the analysis will have to be selective in what amount of data is used. Therefore, only the most important instances of discourse will be quoted. There are many occurrences in which the actor acknowledges elements relevant to the study of securitization, but does not spend much time focusing on it; these will be discarded. For an utterance to be considered for the study, the main focus of it must be related to the securitization process. Furthermore, statements on X will only be used when there is a relevant performative aspect that connects to aspects observed in physical utterances. For data relevant to the analysis of the audience's reaction to securitization and autocratization, the data will be carefully selected to ensure that we have access to a wide range of opinions from different members and sectors of society. Furthermore, the study will avoid, as much as it is possible, using the same news outlet twice to ensure that the study of the audience does not end up reflecting what a particular interest group wants its viewers to perceive.

4. Analysis: The Bukele Administration from the State of Exception to Today

4.1 Stage 1: A Problem for Whom? The Referent Objects of El Salvador's Securitization

This stage will rely solely on two utterances, the first being President Bukele's first major speech after his government put the State of Exception into place, and the second being his discourse to the nation after four years of government. They both serve as foundations for the securitization process that will be analyzed thereafter.

The starting point for both securitization theory and CDA is an object that is discursively presented as a problem. In this case, the object that is being securitized was initially theorized to solely be gangs. For most parts, this holds true, as the State of Exception declared in early 2022 is explicitly declared as a 'war against gangs' (*Guerra contra las pandillas*) (2022b). This battle is also presented as a war against terrorism; this aspect will be further explored in the next stage of the analysis. The focus on gangs has remained constant and has been discursively visible from March 2022, when the State of Exception was initially declared by President Bukele (2022b), to early 2025 with the Minister of Justice and Security of El Salvador, Gustavo Villatoro, declaring that the State of Exception is simply an *up front war against criminal organization* (Villatoro, 2025). As of the writing of this thesis, there have been no indicators that this issue will be desecuritized anytime soon. However, there is an important development that this thesis initially missed pre-analysis.

All in all, the State of Exception was clearly successful in regard to the initial objective it set out, and it could be argued that this war against gangs had already been won by mid-2023. The stated goal in April 2022, one week after the start of the State of Exception, was to "destroy this cancer called gangs" (Bukele, 2022b, 0:15). The homicide rate, largely associated with gangs by the administration, diminished by nearly 70% in 2023 when compared to 2022 (*El Salvador says murders fell by 70% in 2023*, 2024). In a speech to the nation celebrating four years of his government being in power, President Bukele began by highlighting himself how "El Salvador has done what no other country in Latin America was able to do, not even some of the continental powers" by having "wrestled control of the State away from the criminals" (Nayib Bukele, 2023c, 14:17). However, if his government were to acknowledge that the existential

threat that they had securitized was no longer a threat, as it had been dealt with, it would remove the need for the extraordinary measures that were taken and justified by this threat. As we know, the State of Exception is still in place as of the writing of this thesis.

It is precisely in this 2023 speech to the nation that President Bukele chose to declare a new war, that is, to present and securitize another problem as an existential threat. This served as a way to legitimize and continue the State of Exception that had been started a year prior, while somewhat removing the discursive focus on gangs, even though it explicitly remained the focal point of the State of Exception. Towards the end of his speech, he declared that, other than security issues caused by the gangs, El Salvador had another “fundamental problem” (Bukele, 2023c, 29:30). This was “an endemic problem, one which has always existed, and just like the gangs it also has its tentacles through all levels of the State” (Bukele, 2023c, 29:30), specifically this new war was declared to be against corruption.

“Just as we have battled the gangs head-on, with the full force of the state, with all the legal tools at our disposal, and with no hesitation, we will also launch a head-on war against corruption. Just as we deployed State Security Forces to corral the gang members and take them to prison, we will also act against white collar criminals, wherever they may be.” (Bukele, 2023c, 31:57).

Although the securitizing actor himself equates the threat that corruption poses with being as big a problem as gangs are, the analysis must take into account how both are discursively presented as existential problems and why. Importantly, it must be considered that the audience may be more supportive of extraordinary measures against one while being less supportive of the other, which may also have effects on support for the authoritarian measures that autocratized the country. This specific issue will be addressed in Stage 5 of the analysis, while the rest of the stages will also need to consider how both problems were presented and if, at some point, they differ.

The existential nature of both threats is presented as an issue not only to the people of El Salvador but also to El Salvador itself as a country. In regards to gangs, in his first major speech after the start of the State of Exception, President Bukele claims that it is either that they heal their society from the “cancer” that is gangs or that they “die of cancer” (2023c, 8:40).

Furthermore, much of the emphasis in both this utterance and his *discourse to the nation* one

year later is placed on how gangs have controlled every aspect of life of Salvadorans and that extraordinary measures were, and are, needed to ensure the people can live their lives safely and for their children to be raised in a safe environment (Bukele, 2022b, 2023c). Regarding corruption, President Bukele claims in his 2023 speech to the nation that corruption not only affects “all areas of life” (30:00) for Salvadorans, but also that “a country cannot operate if there is corruption” (30:08). Therefore, just as gangs were presented as a problem, or existential threat, to the whole of El Salvador alongside regular Salvadorans, the problem of corruption was also discursively argued as being a problem to the two.

As was argued for in a video commemorating the second anniversary of the State of Exception, the Minister of Justice and Security claims that:

“The world has to understand that we are dealing with serial killers, with criminal organizations whose members wake up each morning thinking of new ways to harm our people. (...) As a cabinet, we did everything within our power, but in the end, there was only one option left: to activate a State of Exception to rescue our Rule of Law.” (Bukele, 2024a, 0:26).

As seen in this quote, they argued that in order to take the extraordinary measures that were needed to address the existential threat that gangs posed, they had no choice but to declare a State of Exception. According to the constitution of the country (*Constitution of the Republic of El Salvador*, 2014), this enables the government to suspend Article 5 of their constitution, which is about freedom of movement, both to leave and to enter the country, parts of Article 6 that guarantee freedom of expression, freedom of thought and freedom from censorship, the part of Article 7 that guarantees the freedom of association and to meet peacefully, and finally Article 24 that prevents government agencies from interference within personal correspondence and telecommunications. Lastly, it also enables the legislative organ of the government to suspend and restrict parts of Articles 12 and 13. These guarantee the constitutional rights to be informed about the reasons for one’s detention, guarantee the detained person has access to a defence lawyer, and finally ensure that a judge is assigned to each case within the first 72 hours of being detained (*Constitution of the Republic of El Salvador*, 2014). This served as the starting point that enabled them to take extraordinary measures, but it is also in itself an extraordinary measure.

Regarding corruption, the State of Exception has never been explicitly declared as being maintained to fight it. Corruption serves more as a new battle that must be fought while also blurring the lines as to why the State of Exception is still in place three years later. If the battle against gangs is seemingly done in the eyes of the audience, then there must be something else to fight against that serves to legitimize the continued suspension of constitutional rights. This battle, which is discursively connected to the ongoing battle against gangs, strengthens the need for such measures. Nonetheless, throughout the whole period of analysis, both issues remain presented as existential issues that require extraordinary measures.

4.2 Stage 2: The Framing of an Existential Problem

This stage will now focus on analyzing how the problems are presented and framed, what makes them existential, what the storyline is, what is in the way of solving the problems, according to the securitizing actor, and finally, what the securitizing actor presents as being the structural and organizational challenges requiring extraordinary measures instead of simply being solvable by normal means. With the first stage of the analysis, it was found that there have been two separate issues that were securitized. Even though they were discursively presented as representing the same threat level by the securitizing actor, we will need to consider these questions for both the securitization of gangs and the securitization of corruption.

First of all, it is needed to address how the problems were framed by the securitizing actor and why it is claimed that the issues are existential. It is observed that both gangs and corruption are framed as issues that need to be “eradicated” (Bukele, 2023c, 37:10), as issues that must be resolved by any means necessary for the survival of El Salvador and its society. Eradication in itself presents the issues as requiring strong measures, as it implies the total elimination of the problems that are presented to the audience. Although the physical threat of corruption is not comparable to the physical threat that comes from gang violence, they are both discursively presented as posing the same level of threat to the people of El Salvador.

When it comes to gangs, there are a few common framings and storylines that are explicitly repeated. First, there is the notion that gangs are a cancer to society (Bukele, 2022b, 0:13; 2022c, 0:37), and two, that gangs are terrorist organizations (Bukele, 2022b, 0:25; 2023a, 2024b, 0:35). Especially concerning the comparison with terrorism, both the terms ‘gangs’ and ‘terrorists’ are

used interchangeably by the Bukele administration. A direct example of this is the ‘*Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo*’ (CECOT), which translates to the *Terrorism Confinement Center* that was built in El Salvador to imprison the people who are arrested under suspicion of being gang members (Bukele, 2023a). This inherently insinuates that everyone held here is a terrorist, and as the administration puts it, it is for the people at the forefront of the problems that El Salvador is facing (Bukele, 2023a, 2:40). Furthermore, associating gang members with terrorism, pushes the problem outside the realm of normality, and ties problem to worldwide issues such as the war on terror, which was itself fought with extraordinary measures.

The term cancer serves more as a characterization of what gangs are to society and the country itself. In one instance, gangs are presented as some sort of affliction that extorts, paralyzes, murders or disappears the people of El Salvador (Bukele, 2022c, 0:30). Additionally, there is also some emphasis on claiming that gang members are not little angels (Bukele, 2022d, 0:50; 2022a), and rather that they are dealing with the devil itself (Bukele, 2022d, 0:55). All these terms serve to explicitly frame gangs as an evil, and one that must be dealt with as soon as humanly possible. Furthermore, labelling them as a cancer or terrorists implies the existential nature of these threats, in the sense that if they are not dealt with, then El Salvadorian society itself will die. This also goes to dehumanize the gang members, while also desensitizing the audience to actions that may cause harm to these actors. Most people will not oppose the need to deal with cancer, nor will they oppose the need to deal with terrorists. It is directly stated that the only way for El Salvador to obtain “peace, liberty and happiness” (Bukele, 2022i, 0:25; 2024a, 1:23) is by eliminating the problem that gangs represent.

When it comes to corruption, it is presented as something that essentially handicaps the country. If there is corruption, then the state is inherently ineffective and incapable of providing for the needs of the people and fixing their problems (Bukele, 2023c, 30:00), which in turn serves as another connector to the war against gangs. This ties in closely with the idea that gangs are a cancer to El Salvadorian society, in the sense that both are signs that the country is sick and needs to be rid of these problems to be saved. To truthfully succeed in this war against gangs, it is implied that they must also be successful in their war against corruption. Corrupt actors are viewed as “traitors” (Bukele, 2023c, 36:00) who need to pay back what they have stolen, as it is argued that it is their fault that the country has been held in poverty and violence.

Furthermore, both issues are discursively argued as being necessary for the reinvention of El Salvador (Bukele, 2022c, 0:56; 2023b). For the country to get rid of the chains that have held it in poverty and for it to fully develop, it is necessary to do all they can to eliminate corruption and gangs. This ties into a common storyline that is discursively attached to both problems. In their own way, they are each presented as issues that are symbolic of a society and country that is sick and needs to be healed. From the gangs being compared to cancer to corruption being compared to something that poisons society from its roots (Bukele, 2022j)

Now, when it comes to what the Bukele administration argues as being the structural and organizational barriers that prevent these problems from being solved with normal measures and instead require extraordinary measures, there are a few key points that are recurrent in the discourse. For gangs, there is a large emphasis on the international community and opposition parties as being the reason why El Salvador has been unable to rid itself of this problem. The Bukele administration accuses the main historical opposition parties, ARENA and FMLN, alongside politicians, as a more blanket term, of never having achieved peace after the civil war and letting the gangs run loose (Bukele, 2023a, 1:55; 2023c, 26:10). They are additionally accused of wanting the society to go back to how it was under gangs (Bukele, 2022d, 2:47; 2023d, 0:43). The international community, alongside a heavy focus on international human rights NGOs, are accused of not caring about the Salvadorans (the audience) nor their human rights, and that they only care to defend the human rights of gang members or study how violent the country is, and that it is in their interest for El Salvador to stay violent so they can keep having something to research (Bukele, 2022b, 2:32; 2022d, 0:57; 2022g; 2023c, 10:00; 2023c, 26:10). Rather, it is suggested that it is solely the Bukele administration that truly cares and can act against these terrorists. Here is an utterance that demonstrates this exact point:

“And of course, their friends from ‘international community’ (...) and their friends from the so-called ‘human rights NGOs’, and I say that in quotes, too, because they don’t defend human rights, they are against human rights, they said nothing when these criminals killed tens of Salvadoran men and women. But they leaped to attention when we began to arrest them, saying that we violated their human rights. Poor criminal! But if we don’t do it now, then when?” (Bukele, 2022b, 2:32)

In turn, corruption is seen as a problem caused by internal malicious actors, who may even be a part of the Bukele administration itself, and backed by international journalists working for George Soros. Due to their position, it is discursively argued that these internal actors spend all their time thinking about how to squeeze the most out of the country and the people without getting caught, while also solely working towards this cause instead of working for the state as they are supposed to (Bukele, 2023c, 30:47; 2023e). In addition, it was argued that the state itself served as a barrier to prevent corruption from being addressed (Bukele, 2023c, 36:56; 2024d), which is why the securitizing actor claims that it is needed for them to take extraordinary measures and change the status quo. Concerning the Soros agents, within the discourse, they seem to be malicious agents wishing to spread lies about El Salvador that are acting on behalf of the American billionaire (Bukele, 2024e; 2024f).

4.3 Stage 3: Visual and Linguistic Power Relations

Firstly, to address the power relations that can be discursively observed through CDA, it must be stated that in many of the utterances, the visuals serve as much as the linguistic aspects themselves to express the power relations at hand. Furthermore, much of the performativity of the discourse comes from the visuals; there are even some important instances where there is no dialogue, in which the securitization discourse is shaped exclusively through visual imagery itself. This ties into the semiotic aspect of critical discourse analysis that seeks to understand how discourse and the securitization process itself are shaped by visuals in addition to being shaped by language.

Both visually and linguistically, it is obvious from the analyzed data that the Bukele administration attempted to demonstrate its absolute power hold on El Salvador. The goal is not simply to establish dominance and demonstrate the imbalance of power to the gangs themselves, but it also serves to reinforce relations of power and domination in regards to the audience and any potential opposition. Many of the videos were indeed about sending a message and showcasing how they will make use of their authority to fight this war as they see fit, and that people simply need to accept it. In a sense, this dominance in terms of power over civilians, gangs, and opposition politicians is what they argue gives them the right to act on behalf of El Salvadoran society as a whole and take these extraordinary measures. A prime example of this power imbalance is demonstrated in his public ridicule of all opposition parties during his four

years in government speech (Bukele, 2023c), in which much of the blame for the country's issues of poverty, gangs, and corruption is placed on them. This instance in particular finishes with him announcing that the properties of a previous president from another party were being raided.

However, at the same time, they try to portray themselves as acting on behalf of the people. Instead of taking all the credit and demonstrating a relation of dominance with the audience, they portray what they have been doing as a collective effort in which the audience themselves are very much a part of. In reference to the State of Exception and the other measures they have taken to fight gangs, President Bukele claims that:

“It is the most popular government project in the world. Because here there is self-determination for the people, there is sovereignty and independence. And thanks to you, as instruments of God to achieve this, 31 years after the false peace accords, our people are finally living in true peace” (Bukele, 2023b, 3:15).

At this, the Bukele administration is not afraid to step aside to let the people themselves speak on their behalf to create this sense that it is a common project that they are accomplishing together, hand-in-hand with the people of El Salvador. In a video showcasing the new Terrorism Confinement Center, Bukele takes a backseat and acts as a curious onlooker, while he is taken on a guided tour by various members of the prison and security sector. These actors show no restraint themselves, criticizing opposition parties and past governments, blaming them for the problems that gangs caused to regular workers and people, while also showing no restraint in the constant labelling of these people as terrorists (Bukele, 2023a). Instead of the securitizing move and extraordinary measures being presented by the actor, the video shows the audience themselves as willing participants in the process.

In the two-year anniversary video of the State of Exception, an apparently random citizen, followed by an anonymous female voice, claims that:

“There are many of us who aren't afraid of the gangs and their extortion anymore. Because now we can see that they are the ones in hiding, not us. (...) After two years of the State of Exception, all we have achieved has been thanks to the hard work of many Salvadorans” (Bukele, 2024a, 3:07).

Given that this video is an official production of the securitizing actor, it also tells us about how they want their audience to perceive the power relations and relations of domination. First of all, it tells us that the audience themselves are portrayed as being a part of the mainstream and the dominant social order. By including the audience as an equal partner to the securitizing actor, as if they are fighting the same fight against this cancer, they reduce the friction that may develop between the perspectives of the two. If the audience feels as if they are a part of the securitizing move, and as if they are direct participants in the extraordinary measures, then it positions them as if they and the securitizing actor were on the same side of the power dynamics; as if they are a part of the dominant side of the social order. Furthermore, the discourse places the people above the gangs and presents them as being more powerful than the gangs themselves. The idea that it is not they who need to fear the gangs, but that it is the gangs that need to fear them, plays into the power dynamics that the securitizing actor wants the audience to perceive.

As for the war against corruption, the power dynamics are presented somewhat differently. In this war, President Bukele and his administration position themselves as willing participants, who themselves are technically the ones that must be dealt with. This inherently shifts the dominance away from the securitizing actor toward the legal system. In this sense, the audience remains an external onlooker who must simply sit back and watch their police and courts take care of the problem. It could even be discursively observed that the Bukele regime positions itself as the weaker party within the power dynamics, and that they are positioned as powerless in the face of the law (Bukele, 2023c, 32:38; 2023e, 4:13).

Nonetheless, President Bukele somewhat excludes himself as he very clearly puts it that he does not believe himself to be corrupt, nor does he want to associate with anyone who is corrupt (Bukele, 2023e, 1:44). Therefore, even though the audience is discursively positioned as being on the strong end of the power dynamics, President Bukele also somewhat excludes himself and places himself along their side, or alongside with law enforcement. This is reflected in one of his speeches, where he announces that the properties of a former president were currently being raided and confiscated by the

Attorney General of El Salvador (Bukele, 2023c, 33:48) and that all that the former president stole will be returned to the people of El Salvador. This is a clear message to everyone in his administration, and to all other politicians, that no one will be safe from this war on corruption. At the same time, it is a performative demonstration of power by the president himself, who discursively places himself as being a guiding hand of the law, as he was the only person aware of this raid. This is also reflected in an instance where he summoned all the members of the executive branch of the Salvadoran government to a national broadcast, in which he asked the Attorney General to investigate everyone in the room for any past or future corruption (Bukele, 2023e, 1:26).

This imagery is also found in many other instances that were previously analyzed. Although there is sometimes this image that it is the people who hold power over the government, over gangs, or over corrupt actors, President Bukele himself nonetheless maintains the image of being the one in charge, with many visuals giving him an appearance that can only be compared to those of a ‘*Sith Lord*’ who commands legions of security forces (Bukele, 2024c; view Figure 1).



Figure 1 – Picture from Nayib Bukele's inauguration for his second term (Bukele, 2024c)

Visually, this is undoubtedly the most recurring imagery throughout all utterances of the securitization. Be it police forces, military forces, or other security forces, the President is constantly surrounded by high-ranking members of these forces, or is visually presented at the head of hundreds of them (Bukele, 2022b, 2022f, 2022i, 2023a, 2024a, 2024c).

This stands in stark contrast to the very human version of himself that he tries to portray in other instances (Bukele, 2023e) and to the understanding that it is the people who are on the dominant end of power relations. To put it straightforwardly, although the securitizing actor sometimes tries to portray himself as a man of the people and that his administration acts solely for the benefit of the people, he still visually sets himself apart as standing above and at the head of the battle against these problems.

4.4 Stage 4: The Proximate and Distal Contexts

This stage of analysis will now deal with the context relevant to the securitization process, which will also serve to further our understanding of the setting that may have led to a population that is receptive to extraordinary and autocratic measures. It will start with the distal context and then move into the proximate context.

Regarding the distal context, with this, we are looking more directly at the sociocultural and historical contexts that are directly or indirectly referenced in the discourse, while also considering what elements have shaped the discourse and how it is received by the audience. This also means that for distal context, there will be a heavy reliance on non-discursive secondary data, as it is inherently necessary to understand this sort of context. Proximate context will return to the typical discursive data used in this study.

The historical event that has shaped the discourse more than others is undoubtedly the Salvadoran Civil War and the political scene that emerged following the peace accords. The Salvadoran Civil War lasted 12 years, starting in 1980 and lasting until 1992 (Allison, 2012). This war that claimed tens of thousands of lives and devastated the country was mainly fought between two groups; the '*Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front*' (FMLN), a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group, and the government of El Salvador, which at times led by right-wing military dictatorships, and at others by other various right-wing groups, also supported by the

military (Allison, 2012). The government side eventually converged into the ‘Nationalist Republican Alliance’ (ARENA) (Allison, 2012).

An aspect of the discourse that must be remembered here is the idea that the peace accords that came at the end of the civil war did not end any of the violence nor address any of the problems that led to the civil war. This largely reflects reality in the sense that the accords were only a political deal that led to the end of violence between the two groups and the entrance of the left-wing guerrillas into the democratic process (Martínez, n.d.). The peace accords did not lead to any social restructuring, they did not provide the people with any assistance to deal with the physical and economic harm they suffered; there was no economic agreement nor true reconciliation (Martínez, n.d.). Rather, it led to the consolidation of power between these two groups.

Before continuing on this topic, it is important to highlight that ever since the end of the civil war, the political scene has been exclusively dominated by FMLN and ARENA, with these parties being the only parties to ever hold power in the country since then; that is until Bukele eventually won in 2019 (Montoya, 2019). As highlighted earlier in the analysis, the opposition parties are often blamed by the Bukele administration not only for the “false peace accords” (Bukele, 2023b, 3:15) but also for causing and enabling the violence and corruption that have plagued Salvadoran society for the past decades. The fact that only these two parties, which are in some way responsible for the civil war that destroyed the country, have also been the sole political groups that have administered the country, makes them an incredibly easy target to discursively attack as being the root cause of the problems that El Salvador needs, which in hand inherently presents President Bukele and his ideas as being the solution to these given their novelty. For the audience, when considering the Bukele administration’s discourse related to the subject, the answer to the question as to who could have caused the problems they are facing becomes quite clear: the political entities that ravaged the country during the civil war may well have also created the new problems that El Salvador has faced due to having grasped onto power ever since the end of the war. Therefore, this context undoubtedly reduces the possible friction that can develop between the discourse presented by President Bukele and the audience’s understanding of the situation.

Going back to the civil war, there are other elements that are important to consider in the analysis of the securitization discourse and the audience's reception of abusive and autocratic measures. As may be expected in any Central American war during the Cold War, there was direct support to both warring groups by various international actors. Namely, the right-wing government received funding from the United States, however, this support was limited to centre-right elements of the government to "isolate the far-right, and to defeat the FMLN" (Allison, 2012), while FMLN received most of its support from typical communist countries for the region such as the Soviet Union, Cuba, and Nicaragua (Allison, 2012). Even though there is no clear scholarship on the exact amount of help that each side received, and from whom, the common perception that took root in El Salvador was that external actors caused, or accentuated, the war in some way or another (Allison, 2012). This is relevant when considering the fact that the Bukele administration has placed some degree of blame on the international community, as an external actor that simply wants to see an El Salvador plagued by issues in order to study it. If the audience is already skeptical when it comes to the motivations of the international actors, then they will be more receptive to the idea that the international community does not want them to fix their problems, and that whatever they say must be ignored.

Another part of the socio-cultural context that must be considered is the role that gangs played in Salvadoran society until the war against gangs. Since the end of the civil war, it would be fair to say that gangs were pervasive in the day-to-day life of Salvadorans. More specifically, two gangs ravaged the country and did what they wanted without fear of any retribution. First, there was the '*Mara Salvatrucha*' (MS-13), a gang that was originally created in the 1980s in Los Angeles by wartime refugees who wanted to protect other Salvadoran refugees from the already established L.A. gangs (MS13, 2025). This group eventually transitioned into a more typical organized crime group. In the 1990s, the United States began deporting convicted members of the gang back to El Salvador, which directly imported this new problem into El Salvador (MS13, 2025). MS13 eventually spread its tentacles throughout nearly the whole of Central and North America, and for a country as small and vulnerable as El Salvador was at the time, it presented a problem that they did not have the capacity or resources to deal with.

The other gang that has trampled all over El Salvador is '*Barrio 18*' or the '*18th Street Gang*'. Similarly to the MS13, Barrio 18 became what it is today in the 1980s, also in Los Angeles

(*Barrio 18*, 2023). When the United States clamped down on gangs in the 90s, this group took advantage of being locked up to recruit more and more members, and unlike the MS13, they have historically been more open to members from all Latin American countries (*Barrio 18*, 2023). As happened with MS13, convicted Barrio 18 members were deported to their countries of origin, which again contributed to the stark increase in gang-related violence in El Salvador (*Barrio 18*, 2023). It must be kept in mind that the timing of the deportations of gang members back to El Salvador coincided exactly with the end of the Salvadoran Civil War, meaning that these organized crime groups were landing in a vulnerable country that was ripe for their operations.

Back in El Salvador, the 1990s were the beginning of the gang issues they have faced to this day. To try to deal with the encroachment of gangs in their country, Salvadoran authorities began mass arrests to lock up any person associated with gangs in some way or another, leading to a large increase in prison populations (*Barrio 18*, 2023). In 2003, the government at the time launched the '*Mano Dura*' policy (Wolf, 2017, p. 3), which expanded the national police's right to arrest people based on physical appearance; this policy was further expanded under '*Súper Mano Dura*' (Wolf, 2017, p. 54), which changed the country's legal and penal code in an attempt to combat gangs more efficiently. However, due to the relative frailty and poverty of the state, this just created a breeding ground for gang members from which they rapidly increased in numbers, as they did not have the means to keep their prisoners in check (*MS13*, 2023). This led to a situation, which was still the case up until the Bukele administration, where gangs controlled the prisons and did as they pleased (Papadovassilakis, 2023). This is relevant when considering the discursive focus on jailing all the bad actors, and the performative actions showcasing the Terrorism Confinement Center.

Furthermore, during these previous attempts to fight gangs, there was a direct clash between the government and the justice system. As an example, when '*Súper Mano Dura*' was enacted, the police arrested 19,275 people who were suspected of being gang members or being associated with gangs (Wolf, 2017, p. 91). In the end, over 95% of the people arrested were released, and their cases were dismissed by the courts, given the judicial system's refusal to prosecute cases against people who were arrested for reasons they judged as arbitrary (Wolf, 2017, p. 91). In

addition, even for the cases that were fully brought into court, most did not conclude with the sentencing of the accused.

“Of all homicides committed in 2005, only 3.8 percent were investigated and resulted in a conviction. Between 2011 and 2013, convictions were obtained in only 5 percent of homicides.” (Wolf, 2017, p. 42).

Put simply, this transformed the ‘*Mano Dura*’ and ‘*Súper Mano Dura*’ policy approaches to dealing with gangs into a glorified catch-and-release program. It must also be acknowledged that these policies further strained the resources of the state, its prison system, and its judicial system. El Salvador as a country was not in the position of dedicating such an amount of resources to a policy project that would result in such high costs for so little in return. Even though, at the time when the policies were put into place, these measures earned a large scale of public support from Salvadorans (Wolf, 2017, p. 3), there is no doubt that these measures soon became seen as failures, as the gang problems that El Salvador faced did not go away. Before the Bukele administration came to power, “more than 75% of citizens thought human rights favored criminals and prevented the state from dealing with them” (Wolf, 2017, p. 41). In the case of failure of previous attempts to deal with gangs, no matter who was in the right, who caused the failure of the policies, and what reasons were to blame for this outcome, there was one thing that was obvious to the citizens of El Salvador: these attempts to fight gangs had failed, and the justice system seemingly favored the well-being of criminals over that of the population. This is exactly what the Bukele administration has attempted to capitalize on in its securitization of gangs.

To the detriment of Salvadoran society, gangs had taken advantage of the fact that the country had not found a way, nor a common understanding, as to how to deal with them. MS13 and Barrio 18 had, in some sense, taken the public transport system of the country hostage (*MS13, 2025; Barrio 18, 2023*), they engaged in widespread extortion of all businesses and began laundering money on large scales. As reported by the *International Crisis Group*, as of 2018, namely one year before Nayib Bukele won the presidential elections, gangs were present in 94% of all municipalities (*Life Under Gang Rule in El Salvador, 2018, p. 3*). For people living in these areas, day-to-day life was entirely controlled by gangs.

“In neighbourhoods throughout the capital, San Salvador, residents heading to work or school pass through an informal checkpoint where a ‘bandera’ – the term the gangs use for their young lookouts and errand runners – asks everyone for a dollar. At many of the roadblocks, the bandera is barely eight years old.” (Life Under Gang Rule in El Salvador, 2018, p. 3).

Business owners, big or small, were also extorted by gangs in the form of “protection money”; refusal to do so usually entails consequences that are much worse than losing a bit of money (*Life Under Gang Rule in El Salvador*, 2018, p. 3). It must be taken into account that El Salvador is a country that is by no means wealthy; to be precise, in 2014, nearly 32% of Salvadorans lived in poverty while 7.6% lived in extreme poverty (Wolf, 2017, p. 38). Even though this extortion would not be tolerable in any country, a country with a population facing such high levels of poverty cannot afford this exploitation.

What made matters worse was that these gangs also controlled the movement of the people who lived in their territory. In addition to the checkpoints financially exploiting Salvadorans, if someone lived in territory controlled by one gang, they could not visit family members or friends in territory controlled by another gang; the only way for them to meet was in a so-called ‘neutral ground’ (*Life Under Gang Rule in El Salvador*, 2018, p. 4). All these elements created a general sense of fear in Salvadoran society, where one must always be conscious of where they go, when they go, and who sees them going somewhere. In addition, the poor were much more affected by this exploitation (Wolf, 2017, p. 40; *Life Under Gang Rule in El Salvador*, 2018, p. 7; Martínez, n.d.). Rich and gated communities had largely managed to evade gang control, while impoverished neighborhoods and municipalities were in some way abandoned to the gangs. The issue then became figuring out how social issues will be addressed for an area that is not under the control of any official authority and is simply left to be exploited by criminals. It should not be surprising that the audience of the securitization had become desperate and was ready to embrace extreme measures and an everlasting State of Exception, even if they came at the cost of some of their freedoms and rights.

Disregarding these failures, ever since the end of the civil war, the people of El Salvador have had more than enough reasons to feel resentful against the state, its justice system, and the

international community. This brings us to the social and economic aspect of the distal context, which will better help understand why corruption was chosen as an issue to securitize. From low levels of education, which disproportionately affected children from impoverished regions, to restricted access to clean water in rural regions, to a general lack of basic social services, to a lack of social mobility and economic opportunities, to high levels of economic inequality, to an abusive and weak police force, there are countless reasons as to why the audience may feel bitter against its government (Bissonnette, 2019, pp. 10-12; Wolf, 2017, pp. 12, 21, 34, 38). Although by no means an equal society before the civil war, a true economic elite formed during the reconfiguration of the state in the years following the peace accords. These elites are unsurprisingly well-connected to ARENA and FMLN, or even members of these parties, and own many of the important policy institutions and media groups in the country (Wolf, 2017, pp. 44-46).

This does not help that the only two political parties to have led the country until 2019 were the same two that fought during the war. Without even considering what took place during the Bukele term, in 2016, three former Presidents were under investigation for corruption. The gravity of the situation becomes further accentuated when considering the fact that these leaders were all from the most civil war period, meaning that of the four post-civil war presidents that served between 1994 and 2014, three of them were allegedly corrupt (Daugherty, 2016). Therefore, for the Bukele administration to suggest that the other parties have exploited the audience, that they have plundered the state in a manner that left it incapable of addressing the fundamental issues that the people faced, is not an idea that will be controversial in the eyes of the people.

Even without considering corruption, the failure of the previous governments to get every sector of the country on board with a common approach to dealing with their issues comes at a steep financial cost, which places further burden on an already weak state and an impoverished society. In the early 2000s to 2010s, the UNDP reports that the costs related to violence, such as health, justice, security, and other property and financial losses, amounted to around 11% of the total GDP of EL Salvador (Wolf, 2017, p. 40). There is no doubt that significant financial investment is needed to deal with their problems; however, as we know, the government, alongside the security forces, have been working counter-productively with the justice system, leading to huge

financial waste. Although one could place blame on various actors, one point that no one can contest is that this mismanagement and waste of funds took place during the rule of ARENA and FMLN.

To conclude the distal context, it must be stated that this was the state of affairs under the Presidential term that came right before Nayib Bukele. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that President Bukele's message of representing change, his blaming of previous political parties for the mess the country is one that, potentially, resonated with the audience. For now, it does not matter whether or not he ends up doing the same as the previous political actors have done, as he can simply deflect by pointing to the transgressions of these groups and the problems they caused to Salvadorans. The apparent lack of pushback against the extraordinary measures taken to address these issues could make sense considering the desperate state of affairs in the country as of Bukele's ascension to power.

As set out in the methodological section, by proximate context, we are seeking to analyze the immediate setting in which the discourse takes place. In this case study, two main levels of proximate context will be analyzed: first, we must discuss the physical setting, and second, we must discuss the online setting.

First, addressing the immediate environment of the discourse, we must observe the roles of participants in the discourse, what immediate social interactions are generated, and where the discourse takes place. As should be obvious by now, we are dealing with discourse largely coming from the president of a country, and sometimes from key members of the administration. There have been some instances where civilians (Bukele, 2023d, 2024a) or members of a specific sector of society were used to communicate the discourse (Bukele, 2023a), but these instances are relatively marginal. Most physical utterances from the Bukele administration came in the form of press conferences (Bukele, 2022d, 2022i; Villatoro, 2025), official meetings (Bukele, 2022g, 2023e), and public speeches (Bukele, 2022b, 2023c, 2023e, 2024g). In all cases, it is clear that the message comes from a figure of authority, as analyzed in the third stage of the analysis. President Bukele largely speaks as a figure of authority, and although at some times gives the floor to other members of his government (Bukele, 2024a; Villatoro, 2025), it is mostly a one-man show by the president. Furthermore, even when he is not delivering the discourse

himself, it is always published under his name, meaning that the discourse always carries a high level of authority, no matter who is conducting the utterance; this will be further discussed when analyzing the online setting.

Now, regarding the location of where the discourse takes place, it seems that for the physical setting, this is less of an impactful element. In reality, this discourse takes place a bit all over the country, but the usual locations of the utterances are in official government buildings (Bukele, 2022d, 2022g, 2023c, 2023e), at military or police compounds (Bukele, 2022b, 2022i, 2024b), and detention centers (Bukele, 2023a). Given the position of the securitization actor as the administration of the country in which they are conducting the securitization move, this is not surprising nor unexpected. Obviously, the discourse itself is given some degree of legitimacy by such locations, but at the end of the day, this plays arguably a negligible role in how the discourse will be received by the population of El Salvador. With the exception of the tour of the Terrorism Confinement Center (Bukele, 2023a), which had the goal of establishing both fear and confidence in the actions of the Bukele administration, no other physical location chosen truly had a sizable impact on the discourse and how it was received.

The last remaining element of the direct physical context in which the discourse took place is analyzing what social interactions were generated. Much like the previous aspect, it seems that the social interactions generated through the physical context are not immensely impactful in this case study. Given the relative formality of the interactions due to the position of power of the securitization actor, the immediate social interactions generated are limited. Most of the discourse happens in a one-sided discussion, where the audience, or other actors, do not truly have the chance to interact with the discourse. Again, the prison tour video serves as an exception here, since the video showcases a man-to-man discussion about the prison, the ‘terrorists’ it will hold, and the inefficiency of previous governments in fighting these issues (Bukele, 2023a). The social interaction generated demonstrates to the audience how the security sector fully trusts the Bukele administration to fight the securitized issue, and that it is only the Bukele administration that has had the guts and will to fight this issue. Another exception is two instances of discourse in which Bukele announces and argues for the war on corruption (Bukele, 2023c; 2023e). In the first instance, President Bukele announces the war against corruption and that a former leader of an opposition party is being raided and having all his properties seized

(Bukele, 2023c). During the second instance, he summons every member of his government and then asks the Attorney General to investigate them for corruption; this was also broadcast to the whole of El Salvador to see (Bukele, 2023e). The immediate social interactions generated here are confrontational and hostile, but at the same time, this shows the audience a man who is willing to stand up for them and hold his government accountable for any wrongdoings.

More importantly, the digital setting has demonstrably had a larger impact, as President Bukele has achieved an online presence and reach that far outweighs any he could have reached in a physical setting. This is what makes this particular case unique for El Salvador, for the region, and in the wider study of securitization and autocratization. Going back to the three aspects of proximate context, the role of the participants does not change much, even in a digital context, but the location of the discourse and the immediate social interactions generated are changed and have a stronger impact on the outcome of the securitization process, and the legitimacy of the extraordinary measures.

Starting with the participants and their role, it is clear that the role of President Bukele and his administration does not change, even in an online context. However, the President makes use of his large online presence to present the voices of others, be it random Salvadoran civilians (Bukele, 2024a), members of the state apparatus (Bukele, 2023a) or anonymous voices with no face (Bukele, 2022c, 2022f, 2023d, 2024b), as his own. This is a recurring aspect of the discourse that removes the face associated with it while also giving it a degree of authority, given that this discourse is always posted on President Bukele's social media accounts. It further argues to the audience that this is not a battle that is being led alone by the president and his administration, but rather that it is a battle that they are all facing together. The use of anonymous voices accompanied by well-presented visual imagery serves to paint an image of what are the problems they are facing, while also presenting a united front from all sectors of society, who are often featured in the visuals (Bukele, 2022c, 2022f, 2024a, 2024b).

The digital location of the discourse is of high importance as it greatly affects the type of interactions that can be generated, therefore, the analysis of these two can be done as a pair. First of all, the digital location of the President's social media accounts gives the discourse a much larger reach than any physical discourse can have. It is not uncommon for the president's utterances to have several hundred thousand, even millions, of views and interactions when

published digitally. This would be impossible in a physical context. The president and the administration have used this to their advantage, not only to obtain a bigger audience for instances of discourse given physically, but also to communicate their thoughts on a much more personal level. In this case, many of the utterances that are published on the president's social media accounts are simply not uttered in physical instances. The digital location gives the audience access to the securitization actor's thoughts, opinions, and statements that may not be as straightforward to convey in any physical context.

Furthermore, the online location also enables the audience and the actor to interact in ways that would not be possible in a physical context; it also enables the audience to interact with each other to discuss their thoughts on the discourse. This is especially relevant in the case of his X (formerly known as Twitter), where you do not need to scroll for even ten seconds to find him quote-tweeting or replying to his online audience. Although the authenticity and validity of these interactions can be debated, as it is very likely that many of the participants on the side of the audience are either bots or simply not Salvadoran, the interactions generated can still be seen by Salvadorans, and therefore affect how they perceive the securitization process and its outcomes. Admittedly, it is fairly difficult to measure the reach social media can have, but what we do know from companies, such as 'NapoleonCat' (2025) and 'DataReportal' (Kemp, 2025), that specialize in data statistics for advertisers, is that 60-72% of Salvadorans have used social media in the last year. As most know, people tend to repeat things they see online; therefore, it can be expected that many Salvadorans who themselves do not use social media will hear about what the president is saying, even if it is exclusively posted online. This will be addressed within the next stage of analysis, which will seek to analyze how people reacted to the securitization and the extraordinary methods that led to the autocratization of the country, even if some of these utterances were made in a purely digital context.

4.5 Stage 5: Extraordinary Measures, Authoritarianism and Public Legitimacy

In this case of securitization, the securitizing actor acted fast and did not wait for the approval of the audience. Rather, the actor has typically acted first and then asked for permission later. Many of the extraordinary moves were announced themselves during specific utterances; however, as we have seen in previous stages of the analysis, the securitization and the extraordinary moves do not come from nowhere, the distal and proximate context made these actions somewhat

logical, at least when combined with the discursive argument of the Bukele administration. In some way, this makes this section of the analysis more straightforward, as the audience is not necessarily given the time to fully react to every utterance of the discourse before the Bukele administration starts these extraordinary measures. Therefore, their reactions are inherently both to the securitizing move and the extraordinary measures, as they were mostly made simultaneously. This stage will first go over the extraordinary measures that were enacted by the Bukele administration, then it will address how they have contributed to the autocratization of the country. Once this is done, there will be an analysis of how the audience has reacted to both the discourse and the actions of their government. Doing this will also showcase whether or not the moves were seen as legitimate by the audience, therefore concluding the analytical section.

As discussed in the first stage of analysis, the main measure that accompanied the securitization of gangs was the State of Exception. As already mentioned, this measure suspended several key rights of the population of El Salvador, such as freedom of movement, thought, association, and freedom from censorship. Furthermore, as stated before, it removed many of the restrictions on arbitrary detentions, giving the government permission to arrest people as they wanted, without needing to provide a valid reason, without giving the detained individual access to a defence lawyer, and without having each case assigned to a judge (*Constitution of the Republic of El Salvador*, 2014). This enables the government to simply arrest whoever they want, whenever they want, and hold onto this person indefinitely. As of March 2025, over 85,000 people have been detained under the State of Exception, representing about 1.4% of the total population (Goebertus, 2025). Even though the removal of these rights very well affects the audience themselves, the securitizing actor made sure to communicate in his discourse that only criminals will be affected, and that normal people would have nothing to fear. This was done with the intention of gaining the support of the audience in the suspension of their own rights. In addition, this State of Exception is the starting point for all further extraordinary moves, which all tie back to the discourse on the problems that El Salvador faces.

Before moving on, the State of Exception itself has, allegedly, been used for countless abusive acts. During a statement in the court case against President Trump's recent deportations to El Salvador, the director of the Americas Division of Human Rights Watch alleged that El Salvador has knowingly contravened the "UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners"

(Goebertus, 2025) due to the overcrowding of detention facilities such as the Terrorism Confinement Center, that people who are jailed are barred access to communication with family and friends, that people are not charged with crimes but cannot leave, that over three thousand children have been arbitrarily detained with some even being subjected to torture, and in general many of the prisoners show signs of torture and general mistreatment (Goebertus, 2025).

For most of these, Human Rights Watch has concrete documentation, however, the government of El Salvador is also very open about these facts. President Bukele boasts in his discourse about how they will jam people into prisons, even if the location is at max capacity, and that these people will be completely cut off from the outside world (Bukele, 2022b, 2023a). They showcase many of the abusive aspects of their detention centers in videos, be it the general conditions, the sanitary conditions, the punishment they have for problematic prisoners, and they even taunt how they will simply starve the prisoners, if needed (Bukele, 2022b, 2023a; “4,000 criminales han sido trasladados”, 2023). Furthermore, it is also true that the Bukele administration has used the State of Exception to justify amendments to give them the right to detain children and jail them as adults. Specifically, in February 2025, the El Salvador legislative assembly passed a reform that would enable them to jail people of 18 and under in adult prisons, and that would remove the jailed youth’s access to “prison benefits, such as conditional release” (“El Salvador: Criminal law reforms exacerbate human rights violations”, 2025). Moreover, since the State of Exception, children between 12-15 can now be sentenced to ten years in prison, whilst adolescents between 16-18 can be sentenced up to 20 years (Wehr, 2022). Lastly, the Human Rights Watch court statement alleged that people are simply not able to leave the detention centers, even if they are not convicted (Goebertus, 2025); this is also true as since the State of Exception, people who are even suspected of being gang affiliated are not “entitled to be released after two years of custody, even if there is no evidence of any criminal act or they have been acquitted” (Wehr, 2022).

When talking about how the securitization was used to legitimize autocratization in the eyes of the public, it is first important to go back to the fact that during President Bukele’s first term, he abolished the traditional presidential term limit that existed in El Salvador (Renteria, 2021). This was enabled by Nayib Bukele’s political party’s control of the National Assembly. In 2021, the National Assembly dismissed many of the key judges of the Supreme Court of Justice of El Salvador, and also dismissed the Attorney General (Graute, 2023). He quickly filled their

vacancies with people loyal to him (Graute, 2023). Then, the Supreme Court of Justice ruled that the term limits in the constitution were excessive, and ruled that stopping people from voting for whom they want to “would go against the will of the people” and that presidents could now run for consecutive terms (Graute, 2023). Although this happened before the State of Exception, the elections were only due nearly two years after the start of the war on gangs, therefore, the audience was given more than enough time to decide how they felt about this breach of their constitution. Even if allowed by the Supreme Court to serve again, there were still many constitutional barriers that would prevent someone from running twice, however, as the Supreme Court was loyal to the Bukele administration, they simply did not act on it and instead gave him the right to run again when he submitted his application (Alemán, 2023).

What is also relevant to this study is the fact that Bukele announced his unconstitutional re-election bid in his Independence Day speech, again surrounded by countless soldiers and his government, he alleged that El Salvador had never known liberty, freedom, sovereignty and independence and that the country only obtained these thanks to his administration (Bukele, 2022e, 3:40). He claims about the reasons the country never truly got to celebrate their independence go back to the problems he securitized; namely, corruptions, external powers, the peace accords, gang related violence (Bukele, 2022e, 5:00, 8:30, 11:35, 13:00). Notably, from the thirteen minute mark of his speech (Bukele, 2022e), the discursive focus turns towards gangs and how they have stopped Salvadorans from being able to celebrate and enjoy independence. During this speech, there is also heavy emphasis on the fact that Salvadorans themselves (Bukele, 2022e, 5:20) will tell you this, and that you do not need to listen to him or trust any polls to acknowledge this fact. This all serves as a buildup to him stating (Bukele, 2022e, 18:25) that it was the people who gave him the super majority, and therefore let his government replace the previous Attorney General and the Supreme Court Judges, whom he accuses of being connected to ‘terrorists’ (Bukele, 2022e, 19), in other words, gang members. All this to say, that now that they are finally independent, because of his government and the audience, that the ways of his government are the only way forward (2022e, 22:30) and that he will be running, unconstitutionally, again for president. The fact that international observers, as stated before, observed general free and fair elections, does not change the fact that just his running against is a clear breach of the constitution that was only enabled by a judicial coup enacted by the Bukele administration. The way this authoritarian breach is discursively presented and justified

insinuates the consent of the people for these measures; however, what remains to be analyzed is whether or not the extraordinary and authoritarian measures were truly seen as legitimate by the audience.

Before doing so, we must go through some other extraordinary measures that contributed to the autocratization of the country. As established, the Bukele administration essentially carried out a judicial coup, which gave it full control over the country's judicial system. Therefore, the government has been enabled to pass any law it wants. One of the authoritarian measures passed by these courts came in the form of a reform that criminalized “the creation and distribution of texts, graphics, or graffiti reproducing and transmitting messages from or presumably from gangs” (Wehr, 2022; “El Salvador: Sweeping new laws endanger rights”, 2022). Offenders may face up to 15 years in prison (Wehr, 2022). Although it may not be obvious, the vagueness of this reform essentially criminalized direct reporting on gangs and stifled any form of investigative journalism that may not show what the government wants them to show. In a video justifying his use of imprisoned gang members to destroy tombstones of dead gang members, which was justified by this very same law, President Bukele (2022h, 1:20) justifies this law by comparing it to Germany prohibiting Nazi imagery. The Journalist Association of El Salvador sees this law as a direct form of censorship against independent press and media, and believes that it was put in place to stop and punish reporting on subjects the government would like to keep secret (Wehr, 2022). A member of the Bukele administration (Castro, 2022) claimed that these new laws would enable them to legally consider NGO and media groups as terrorist groups if they were to contravene these new reforms. In addition, the Salvadoran Journalist Association reports that in 2024, the rights of members of the press were violated a total of 467 times, with the government increasing its crackdown on free press and journalists (*Centro de Monitoreo: Vulneraciones a la prensa 2024*, 2025). Members of the media have continuously expressed their discontent with the measures taken by the government, claiming that every year since 2022 has slowly made it harder and harder for them to carry out their jobs (“Bukele’s media chokehold in El Salvador”, 2025). With all these facts in mind, it is clear that the securitizing actor made use of the securitization process to autocratize, through the removal or restriction of several key rights, the country; now what remains to be known is whether or not these measures were legitimate in the eyes of the audience.

This brings us to the final part of this stage of analysis: discovering whether or not the securitization and the measures that came with it truly enjoyed the consent of the people. Analyzing this will uncover whether or not the measures that autocratized the country were seen as legitimate.

Although we know that members of the press do not approve of his measures, the same cannot be said of the general population. As claimed by the President of the Journalist Association of El Salvador:

“Bukele is an expert in digital marketing. These videos that look as slick as commercials, show how calculating the president is in terms of selling his version of reality. It’s just marketing. But in terms of propaganda, they have been very effective in pushing the notion that Salvadorans will only feel safe by discarding due process. Basically, by killing democracy. But this isn’t something that would trouble the great majority of those who suffered at the hands of gangs. That’s the paradox.” (“Bukele’s media chokehold in El Salvador”, 2025, 5:57).

The information provided in the previous stages of analysis provides context for this statement. The people of El Salvador have suffered continuously and tremendously for the past decades, be it at the hands of their government, guerrilla groups, corrupt politicians, or gangs. Seemingly, no one has had their back, even if they said they would. The international community funded the warring parties of the civil war, the United States took their war refugees and sent them back as organized gang members, and the two parties that are said to have made the peace accords have accentuated their problems leading the country to being the murder capital of the world while also at the same time of being corrupt. These same political parties abandoned Salvadorans to live in poverty while they spent lavishly on ineffective measures, leaving gangs to control their everyday life, extorting them and stopping them from visiting family and friends. Therefore, it is unsurprising, to even the press members who are being suppressed, that people are willing to support these authoritarian measures. The Bukele administration has presented itself as a wing of change blowing over the country that will finally do what must be done to solve their problems. When referring to the government’s strategy, Jessica Ávalos, an investigative journalist, claimed that

“Their strategy is effective because, in addition to telling people we fixed your most pressing problem, it succeeded in selling new fears among the public. Unless Nayib Bukele gets another five years, gangs will be back out on the streets.”
(“Bukele’s media chokehold in El Salvador”, 2025, 6:32).

This brings us back to the everlasting State of Exception that has continuously been justified by the Bukele administration. This also helps us understand why President Bukele (2023c) felt the need to start a new ‘war’ in his four years of government speech, but this time against corruption. At the same time, there is never any acknowledgment that the initial objective of the State of Exception has accomplished its goals, even though they often boast of their accomplishments (Bukele, 2022f, 2022i, 2023b, 2023c, 2024a). Therefore, it makes sense for the people that this extraordinary and autocratic suspension of their constitutional rights is needed, as it is discursively argued by the actor that there are still many issues to fix. People who have suffered for so long at the hands of so many different actors will inherently be more receptive to this idea, and will also be more open to someone saying that if they trust him and enable him to do what must be done, then their problems will finally go away.

Yet, without declaring victory, the government promoted images of success and of a new life for Salvadorans in its discourse. A key leader of Bukele’s political party, ‘*Nuevas Ideas*’, which translates to ‘new ideas’, claimed that *“In just three years, we have fulfilled the country’s dream of going from being one of the most dangerous countries in the world to being one of the safest countries in the region.”* (“The Price of El Salvador’s War on Gangs”, 2024). To a large extent, that is exactly what the people want, and why they will tolerate abusive and authoritarian measures; as long as these can fix their issues, then they are legitimate and acceptable. In a report by The Economist, which was seemingly intended as a hit piece, the sole civilian who is visibly questioned about her thoughts on the measures taken answers that: *“Now one can walk with peace of mind. One’s children are less worried. So, thank God, with the regime, yes, for me, this is good.”* (“Inside El Salvador’s war on crime”, 2023).

Opinions expressed in Salvadoran media and social media, with the exception of *El Faro*, largely reflect this willingness to accept these authoritarian measures, as long as they

bring them a better life. In an article discussing the re-election of Bukele, *El Mundo*, a Salvadoran newspaper, claimed that Salvadorans are celebrating Bukele's measures, even at the cost of some of their freedoms. They quote a 66-year-old housewife who, after voting, said something that roughly translates to "*Security has improved; before, not everyone could be here. I hope this will continue and that the economic situation will improve*" ("*El Salvador Mide en las urnas La Abrumadora popularidad de Bukele*", 2024). Largely, non-discursive data also goes to confirm the simple fact that people do not care about their government being democratic or not; as long as they are capable of fixing their problems, then that is good enough. A study conducted by the *Latinobarómetro* in 2023 reported that about 63% of Salvadorans do not mind a non-democratic government, as long as it is capable of addressing their problems (Magaña, 2023). This explains why the Bukele administration has felt the need to continuously securitize issues, while also never ending the State of Exception. As long as the audience believes there is a problem, then most of them will view their actions, even if autocratic, as a net positive.

A prime example of this is this statement by a lady whose son has been arrested. She claims that her son had nothing to do with gangs and was arrested by mistake, yet she can help but express her admiration and support for Bukele, saying: "*He (Bukele) has done everything possible to make the country better. If some of us are suffering the consequences, well these things happen*" (Graham, 2025). Not only does this show us how much people are willing to suffer and lose to support Bukele's extraordinary measures, but it also shows us how desperate the pre-existing state of affairs was for someone who has had her son taken away, still express deep support and thankfulness for the very person who's policies caused her son to get locked up.

Before the re-election of Bukele in 2024, his running mate, Félix Ulloa, was challenged about their democratic track record. As a response, he said,

"To these people who say democracy is being dismantled, my answer is yes. We are not dismantling it, we are eliminating it, we are replacing it with something new. (...) The democratic system that existed for years in El Salvador only

benefited crooked politicians and left the country with tens of thousands murdered.” (Kitroeff, 2024).

The Salvadoran people responded to this by electing the two with over 84% of the vote (*Salvadoran presidency 2024 general*, 2024). Ulloa’s statement also very specifically insinuated that it was democracy itself that caused the two problems that they securitized, namely corruption and gangs, and it is clear that this is an idea that resonates with people. Why would they care about democracy if democracy is what led them to where they were, as the murder capital of the world? If democracy means what it had before, then it should come as no surprise that they are open to other forms of governance. As a random taxi driver in San Salvador said,

“The gangs dumped bodies here like it was nothing. Sometimes in pieces over hundreds of metres. It used to be that every time you left home, you ran the risk of being robbed or even killed. The President Changed that.” (Graham, 2025)

It should not be surprising that if this was the state of affairs, people are ready for radical change by any means. The authoritarian measures that came as a result of the securitization are discursively presented as being the solution to effectively combat these problems; at the same time, they also represent change for a people who were tired of the old.

To close out this stage of analysis, all of this stage’s findings and observations point towards the fact that these measures were viewed as legitimate by the audience, and largely as a result of the securitization process led by Nayib Bukele and his administration. To give these findings some more credibility, here are some relevant non-discursive findings that solidify the analytical outcome of this study. Nearly 70% of Salvadorans think the general situation in the country has become better over the last year, with about 92.7% of these respondents attributing this improvement, in some way, to the Bukele administration (*La población salvadoreña evalúa la situación del país*, 2025, p. 10). The same poll finds that only 14.1% of the population believes the respect of human rights has gotten worse, that only 9.4% believe that the administration of justice got worse, whilst at the same time about 90.2% of the respondents answered that they now felt safe or very safe (*La población salvadoreña evalúa la situación del país*, 2025,

p. 11, 25, 26). Other polls, conducted by *Observa El Salvador*, a collective of several polling organizations in the country, found that only 12.2% thought Bukele's second run for president was unconstitutional, while 77% supported it; it was also found that Bukele enjoys widespread support from over 81.5-84% of the population (*Estudio de Humor Social y Político*, 2024). Polls from CID Gallup show that as of November 2024, 91% of Salvadorans approve of Nayib Bukele's presidency, namely almost a year after his unconstitutional re-election and over two years since the State of Exception began (Hernández, 2024). It also shows that 82% of the audience believes that the country is going in the right direction, a stark difference from the 83% who believed the country was headed in the wrong direction in 2018, namely a year before Bukele came to power (Hernández, 2024). Furthermore, this same study shows that not only did 77% of the people agree strongly with the measures against gangs, with another 16% somewhat agreeing, but that 62% strongly believed that stronger measures should be applied against these gangs (Hernández, 2024).

With all this in mind, there should be no doubts that President Bukele's securitization of gangs and later corruption was entirely successful and that, therefore, the autocratic measures taken by his administration were seen as legitimate. Even though the findings will be more straightforwardly laid out and summarized in the conclusion, it is important to state here that the findings seem to confirm the idea that *autocratization can obtain legitimacy from the public (audience) when discursively argued as being in response to an existential security threat*. Furthermore, the findings point in the direction that the Bukele administration's use of securitization had a direct impact on public support for the regime and the measures that autocratized the country. The securitization provided legitimacy to the government and their actions, as the public was convinced by the discourse that this was indeed in their interest, and as we just analyzed, the people of El Salvador were consciously willing to sacrifice some of their liberties, and sacrifice the state of democracy in the country, as long as these sacrifices helped their government, the securitizing actor, address the existential problems presented in the securitization. The conclusion will address how the findings answered our two guiding questions and will close out the study with the implications and limitations of the results.

5. Conclusions: Summary of Findings

Rounding things up, the question that this thesis set out to answer was: *‘What explains the high level of public support for the Bukele administration and its State of Exception despite it having regressed the state of democracy and committed various human rights abuses?’*. The initial observation that inspired the study was the fact that Bukele was enjoying both international condemnation for human rights abuses and for turning the country into an autocracy, and also enjoying widespread public support, with him seemingly being, conservatively, the most popular leader in the Americas, or more realistically one of the most popular leaders in the world. What was puzzling was the fact that even though he openly autocratized his country while adopting abusive measures in his fight against gangs, even claiming to be the world’s coolest dictator, his policies were still apparently widely popular and viewed as legitimate, at least domestically. The question then became *‘How has the Bukele administration managed to legitimize these actions, despite their undemocratic and abusive nature, to their domestic audience?’*. What was theorized was that through the use of securitization, and therefore discourse, the actor managed to manufacture consent for his measures. By answering these two fundamental questions, we would obtain a better understanding of how state actors can manipulate the public into agreeing to measures and policies that would not normally be tolerable, while also giving us better insight into how a country can slide into autocracy while still remaining electorally popular.

The theoretical starting point for this study was then securitization theory, specifically the idea that an actor discursively presents an issue as being an existential problem to an audience, and then, if the audience is to resonate and agree with this discursive argument, extraordinary measures are taken. As the analysis shows, this is exactly what happened. What also made securitization theory relevant is the legitimacy that is, theoretically, provided through a successful securitization. Both the Copenhagen School’s version of securitization and Balzacq’s critical approach to securitization directly acknowledge the fact that securitized issues legitimize extraordinary actions. Therefore, if this study were able to conclude that the actor indeed managed to securitize an issue and also managed to convince the audience that specific measures were needed, then theoretically, those measures would obtain legitimacy in the eyes of the public. This would explain why the President and his administration managed to remain so popular despite their open despote for democracy, and the autocratic and abusive measures they

have taken to fight their problems. Autocratization theory was mainly relevant to understand how democracies can autocratize, even if they do not fully transition into an autocracy. Furthermore, it helped us understand what elements we should be on the lookout for when trying to assess whether or not there is a process of autocratization.

As each stage of analysis served to build up the findings into a coherent answer to the research question and inherently solve the research puzzle, it is first important to start with an overview of the findings, to summarize them and lay them out more simply. It is only after doing so that we will finally be able to answer the research question. In the first stage of analysis, '*A Problem for Whom?*', it was found that not only gangs had been securitized, but that the securitizing actor continued what was started in the securitization of gangs, with the securitization of corruption. These were both discursively presented in some sort of continuous securitization of problems that the people of El Salvador and the country itself have suffered since the end of the civil war. It was argued by the securitizing actor that without addressing these issues, the country may die of these "cancers" (2023c, 8:40). Therefore, there was the imminent need for extraordinary measures, that began with the declaration of a State of Exception that suspended several constitutional rights of the people and limitations of the government.

The second stage, '*The Framing of an Existential Problem*', found that the problems were discursively argued as needing to be eradicated by any means necessary; even if the measures taken are abusive or authoritarian, it is required as they are dealing with a life-or-death scenario for El Salvador. The two main characterizations of gangs are that they are terrorists and that they are a cancer. The idea that they are terrorists plays into the global war against terror, in which states have essentially given themselves the right to fight terrorism by any means necessary and that it is justified. Further, it pushes the problem outside the realm of normality, as they are not simply dealing with lowly gang members; they are dealing with terrorists. The idea of this problem being a cancer furthers the message of it being an existential problem that has devastating consequences on the country and its people. Corruption is presented as an issue that handicaps the country due it preventing the country from truly addressing its problems, and that therefore, for gangs to be defeated, corruption needs to be defeated. Finally, both issues are presented as preventing the country from emerging from its dark past of war and poverty, and for the country to reinvent itself, these issues must be dealt with. In addition to corrupt actors being

presented as a barrier to addressing their problems, there is also blame put on the international community, especially human rights groups, which are accused of wanting the country to have problems, and even causing or enabling their problems.

Next, the '*Visual and Linguistic Power Relations*' stage of analysis focused on the power relations that could be observed both visually and linguistically. This is relevant in any critical study, but especially this one, as it helped us develop a better understanding of why the audience may have been influenced to support abusive and authoritarian. The actor, through power relations, seems to have influenced the audience to support his measures in the name of fighting against gangs and corruption, and also saving their country. This stage of analysis found that President Bukele positioned himself, through both visuals and language, as the center figure of this fight to save the country, while also contrasting himself against the old political parties that had dominated the political landscape of the country for the past decades. Although he is sometimes humble in his discourse, he still remains the centrepiece of this fight, who visually commands armies of military personnel and police forces. The rest of his administration more or less serve as decoration, who all adhere to the vision and goals that President Bukele seeks to achieve.

The fourth stage of analysis, '*Proximate and Distal Contexts*', laid out all the important historical, economic, and societal contexts through the analysis of the distal context, whilst analyzing the more immediate digital and physical context through the proximate context. For distal context, it was found that the civil war and its legacies, the history of gangs in the country, and the legacy of corruption and failure of previous governments seem to have shaped how the securitizing actor framed his discourse, while also influencing how the audience reacted to this discourse. Due to the issues that they faced in the past, which seemingly kept worsening until Bukele took office and started his *war*, it becomes unsurprising that the population would be willing to tolerate autocratization and abuse, as long as their problems are solved. In addition, the proximate context notably examined how the strategic use of digital and physical means to communicate the discourse inherently altered the interactions between the actor and the audience. This more direct form of communication and interaction through social media also altered how the audience interacted with the discourse itself, making it much more direct, down-

to-earth and personal, which in turn seems to have made them more receptive to the ideas being presented.

Finally, the last stage of analysis, ‘Extraordinary Measures, Authoritarianism and Public Legitimacy’, took a direct look at these subjects and put them into context thanks to the information provided by the other stages of analysis. Due to the actor discursively initiating the securitization process at the same time as implementing the measures, it became apparent that the audience’s reaction to one directly became the audience's reaction to the other. This section went over the measures, describing them, making it clear that many are authoritarian and abusive, which in hand also confirms that there is indeed an autocratization process, as quickly shown in the introduction through the usage of large-scale democracy data-sets. It also served to paint a picture as to why the country was regressing democratically and slowly autocratizing. Then, all that was left was to examine how the audience reacted to the securitization, and whether or not they were supportive of the authoritarian and abusive measures, therefore, making them legitimate. It was found that the audience both resonated with and reflected many of the narratives of the discourse, as they not only saw these problems as existential, but they also saw the Bukele administration as their only hope, and President Bukele himself as the main player in this fight against gangs and corruption. It also became clear that the audience was accepting of the measures, even supportive of them, with findings showing that many wanted even stronger measures, and that they did not care even if it came at the expense of some of their rights and liberties. The findings indicate that the audience did not mind authoritarian measures as long as their problems were fixed. To put it simply, Bukele’s securitization managed to obtain public legitimacy for measures that served to autocratize the country.

To answer our two guiding research questions, the first four stages of analysis answered ‘*How have they managed to legitimize these actions, despite their undemocratic and abusive nature, to their domestic audience?*’ by building up the context needed to understand why the audience could be led to react positively to the securitization, while also providing important context to answer the initial research question of ‘*What explains the high level of public support for the Bukele administration and its State of Exception despite it having regressed the state of democracy and committed various human rights abuses?*’. The fifth stage of analysis, building off all the findings of the previous stages, finally answered this question, confirming that it was

found in this case study that *authoritarian measures, and therefore autocratization, obtained public legitimacy and support as a result of being discursively argued as a response to an existential security threat.*

Regarding the wider implications of these results, there are a few key takeaways. Notably, concerning the initial theoretical expectations, it was confirmed that in this case, autocratization can obtain widespread support and legitimacy from an electorate if it is discursively argued as being in response to an existential security threat. Although securitization is by no means the only way extraordinary policies can obtain legitimacy and public support, the findings indicate that it is indeed one of the means. This study found that this legitimacy can be used by democratically elected leaders to autocratize their countries, while also generating public support for it. Considering the context of the recent phenomenon of democratically elected autocrats such as Hungary's Orbán or Türkiye's Erdoğan, this raises the possibility of more studies, and even comparative studies between actors who remain democratically popular despite their authoritarianism. Our findings point towards discourse as being one of the keys to this success.

Furthermore, our findings indicate that the digital sphere, specifically social media, can have an extensive impact on how a discourse is transmitted and how it is received. The interactions generated by digital utterances of discourse are fundamentally different from those generated by physical instances of discourse. Even though you cannot confirm the identities of those interacting with the discourse, neither can the target audience of the discourse; therefore, an audience's perspective of discourse can be largely shaped by interactions from anonymous outsiders. It must also be acknowledged that algorithms on social media often lead to echo chambers, and with politicians, it usually turns into a hateful or supportive bubble. These echo chambers can then influence how the domestic audience of an actor perceives the actor's discourse, in either a positive or negative manner. Any look at the interactions generated by President Bukele's digital utterances of discourse will find that the interactions are overwhelmingly positive and supportive of the administration and the measures it has taken. Therefore, the domestic audience can unconsciously be influenced by digital algorithms to develop a certain opinion and perspective. This implies important changes in the way that discourse will need to be studied, while also making it much more difficult to accurately study reactions to this discourse.

With the summary of the findings, it is also a good time to address some of the limitations of this study's results. First of all, there is the issue that, in the author's opinion, you can never truly obtain entirely representative and accurate discursive data for the audience. Even though it is the case in most countries, the high levels of poverty in El Salvador exacerbate the fact that the voiceless and marginalized will mostly remain unheard. It is undeniable that we were able to obtain some peeks into their world through our analysis, but it remains hard to accurately judge, or fairly state, that this represents the entirety of the Salvadoran population. One issue with democracy is the fact that it can, at times, generate a tyranny of the majority, and the same is true regarding the discursive analysis of a general public, even if taking a critical approach. The results of the analysis will always favour the voice, or discourse, of the majority, as that is what is most representative of the studied population as a whole.

Additionally, this study also has to deal with the fact that the studied process is not yet complete. Unlike many studies, this thesis did not go in with the benefit of hindsight, nor the knowledge of what the final results of the Bukele administration's war against gangs and corruption will bring. The State of Exception is still in place, and as of writing this thesis, President Bukele will remain in power until 2029, meaning, in all likelihood, there still remains much to be seen and analyzed. This inherently means that the study is, in some way, incomplete, and that a most likely significant portion of relevant developments are yet to happen.

However, what this study does do is set the groundwork for any future studies on the Bukele era in El Salvador, especially in regards to his security policy, the balance of power between gangs and government, and his radical changing of the political landscape in a country that was dominated by the two factions that caused their civil war. Not only does this study provide insight into how discourse, through securitization, can be used to enable and provide legitimacy to an openly authoritarian government, but it also helps shine light on an often overlooked region of the world. The two terms of the Bukele administration have, thus far, brought radical changes to a country that was seemingly held back by the ghosts of its past and inefficient government. Even though it is clear that he is steering the country down an authoritarian path, it is also clear that, for now, his policies are working. The country is changing, and violence has been reduced to levels unseen in the rest of the Americas. Yet what remains to be seen is whether or not these

changes will have a long-term effect, or if the country will again be plagued by the issues that led it to become the *murder capital of the world*.

References:

- AFP. (2024, February 4). *El Salvador Mide en las urnas La Abrumadora popularidad de Bukele*. Diario El Mundo. <https://diario.elmundo.sv/politica/el-salvador-mide-en-las-urnas-la-abrumadora-popularidad-de-bukele>
- Al Jazeera English. (2025, February 23). *Bukele's media chokehold in El Salvador*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Wtfb7faiSg>
- Alemán, M. (2023, November 4). *Tribunal electoral avala que bukele busque la reelección presidencial en el Salvador*. AP News. <https://apnews.com/world-news/general-news-7b9a03a686ac3a5e703629e171414377>
- Alemán, M. (2025, January 2). *El Salvador closes 2024 with a record low number of homicides*. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/el-salvador-homicides-gangs-bukele-69384a8705267eadd18dcd28a53465b>
- Allison, M. (2012, March 1). *El Salvador's Brutal Civil War: What we still don't know*. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2012/3/1/el-salvadors-brutal-civil-war-what-we-still-dont-know>
- The Associated Press. (2022, March 29). *El Salvador grabs 1,000 gang suspects in response to weekend killings*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/29/1089390179/el-salvador-grabs-1-000-gang-suspects-in-response-to-weekend-killings>
- Balzacq, T. (2005). The three faces of securitization: Political agency, audience and context. *European Journal of International Relations*, 11(2), 171–201. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066105052960>
- Balzacq, T. (2014). *Contesting security: Strategies and logics* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203079850>
- Balzacq, T. (2019). Securitization theory: Past, present, and future. *Polity*, 51(2), 331–348. <https://doi.org/10.1086/701884>
- Balzacq, T., Léonard, S., & Ruzicka, J. (2016). 'Securitization' Revisited: Theory and Cases. *International Relations*, 30(4), 494–531. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117815596590>
- Barrio 18*. InSight Crime. (2023, November 14). <https://insightcrime.org/el-salvador-organized-crime-news/barrio-18-profile/>
- BBC. (2022, March 27). *El Salvador: State of emergency after 62 gang killings in a day*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-60893048>

- Bissonnette, I. (2019). El Salvador's Drivers of Poverty: Low Levels of Education, Lack of Access to Water and Sanitation, and Violence and Crime. *Global Majority E-Journal*, 10(1), 4–16.
https://doi.org/https://www.american.edu/cas/economics/ejournal/upload/bissonnette_accessible.pdf
- Bloomberg Originals. (2024, February 2). *The Price of El Salvador's War on Gangs*. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtLiQnXC7sQ>
- Bukele, N. (2022a, March 29). *Y si la "comunidad internacional" está preocupada por sus angelitos*. X (Formerly known as Twitter).
<https://x.com/nayibbukele/status/1508278475026845696>
- Bukele, N. (2022b, April 8). *NUEVOS SOLDADOS Y POLICÍAS PARA LA GUERRA CONTRA LAS PANDILLAS*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fyb4zf44TYQ>
- Bukele, N. (2022c, June 2). *Este es un momento único*. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ys26OMWZNd8>
- Bukele, N. (2022d, June 29). *Conferencia de Prensa*. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xCne3RHIsA>
- Bukele, N. (2022e, September 17). *Nayib Bukele announces reelection bid on Independence Day speech*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yd6Vr9ansIY>
- Bukele, N. (2022f, September 19). *Un 15 de septiembre diferente*. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8TERLCUsZg>
- Bukele, N. (2022g, October 17). *Los Derechos Humanos*. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v05iYwOs0iw>
- Bukele, N. (2022h, November 14). *¿Por qué destruimos las lápidas en las tumbas de los pandilleros?*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_W0JK8uzt4
- Bukele, N. (2022i, November 25). *Cómo estamos logrando la victoria*. YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8ATZWmPa_Q
- Bukele, N. (2022j, December 29). *En El Salvador, nunca se combatió la corrupción*. X (Formerly known as Twitter). <https://x.com/nayibbukele/status/1608283382798057472>
- Bukele, N. (2023a, February 2). *Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo*. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuBjhrGykM>

- Bukele, N. (2023b, March 28). *Aniversario del Régimen de Excepción*. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vZGQhuCGIk>
- Bukele, N. (2023c, June 5). *Discurso a la Nación, por 4 años de Gobierno*. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTUAWoqEdZY&>
- Bukele, N. (2023d, September 18). *¿Recuerdas esto?*. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agKZyM7-CSU>
- Bukele, N. (2023e, November 29). *El legado correcto*. YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIhmb6oS_xU
- Bukele, N. (2024a, March 28). *Dos años del Régimen de Excepción*. YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Jvm_Dq3lTw
- Bukele, N. (2024b, May 8). *Nuestra Fuerza Armada cumple 200 años y está a punto de lograr su victoria más grande*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUzo_iguIH8
- Bukele, N. (2024c, June 3). *Strong men create good times....* X (Formerly known as Twitter).
<https://x.com/nayibbukele/status/1797628037854634227>
- Bukele, N. (2024d, July 7). *Cuando iniciamos la guerra contra las pandillas, recibimos muchísimos ataques y condenas de la “comunidad internacional.”* X (Formerly known as Twitter). <https://x.com/nayibbukele/status/1810014778095792453>
- Bukele, N. (2024e, August 23). *Casi nunca comento los fake news de este panfleto de Open Society (Soros)*. X (Formerly known as Twitter).
<https://x.com/nayibbukele/status/1826753047726526618>
- Bukele, N. (2024f, October 10). *Los “periodistas” pagados por Soros recibieron la orden de atacar*. X (Formerly known as Twitter).
<https://x.com/nayibbukele/status/1844166656148267369>
- Bukele, N. (2024g, December 3). *No podemos seguir siendo el único país en el mundo que no aprovecha sus recursos naturales*. YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtA_1Ho_0hQ
- Bukele, N. (2025, January 1). *El Salvador cierra el 2024 con una tasa de 1.9 homicidios por cada 100,000 habitantes, consolidándose, indiscutiblemente, como el país más seguro del Hemisferio Occidental*. X (Formerly known as Twitter).
<https://x.com/nayibbukele/status/1874526269653520736>

- Bukele's pact with the gangs lasted three massacres.* El Faro. (2023, March 1).
<https://elfaro.net/en/202303/opinion/26745/Bukele's-Pact-with-the-Gangs-Lasted-Three-Massacres.htm>
- Buyuk, H. F. (2025, March 27). *Turkey tightens noose around media and internet after mayor's arrest.* Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/03/27/turkey-tightens-noose-around-media-and-internet-after-mayors-arrest/>
- Buzan, B., Waeber, O., & de Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis.* Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Castro, J. (2022, April 4). *Así es Señor Presidente.* X (Formerly known as Twitter).
https://x.com/JorgeCastro_SAO/status/1510777754500927498
- Cavalari, M., Manjarrés, J., & Newton, C. (2025, February 26). *InSight crime's 2024 homicide round-up.* InSight Crime. <https://insightcrime.org/news/insight-crime-2024-homicide-round-up/>
- Centro de Monitoreo: Vulneraciones a la prensa 2024.* APES. (2025). <https://apes.org.sv/>
- Colchen, G. (2024, January 22). *Bukele Saca Filo a su polémica "guerra contra Las Pandillas" en la recta final de la Campaña.* France 24.
<https://www.france24.com/es/am%C3%A9rica-latina/20240122-bukele-saca-filo-a-su-pol%C3%A9mica-guerra-contra-las-pandillas-en-la-recta-final-de-la-campa%C3%B1a>
- Constitution of the Republic of El Salvador, El Salvador.* World Intellectual Property Organization. (2014, June 28). <https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/legislation/details/3769>
- Country graph.* V-Dem. (2025). https://www.v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/
- Daugherty, A. (2016, February 12). *3 former El Salvador Presidents investigated for corruption.* InSight Crime. <https://insightcrime.org/news/brief/three-el-salvador-presidents-investigated-corruption/>
- Democracy Index 2023: Age of Conflict.* Economist Intelligence Unit. (2024, February).
<https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023/>
- Dodds, K. (2025, February 21). *President Trump, Hemispheric Security and the Greenland Connection.* Groupe d'études géopolitiques.
<https://geopolitique.eu/en/2025/02/21/president-trump-hemispheric-security-and-the-greenland-connection/>

- The Economist. (2023d, July 21). *Inside El Salvador's war on crime*. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZtuK-ALP7o>
- El Salvador says murders fell 70% in 2023 as it cracked down on Gangs*. Reuters. (2024, January 3). <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/el-salvador-says-murders-fell-70-2023-it-cracked-down-gangs-2024-01-03/>
- El Salvador: A Thousand Days into the state of emergency. "security" at the expense of human rights*. . Amnesty International. (2024a, December 20).
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/el-salvador-mil-dias-regimen-excepcion-modelo-seguridad-a-costa-derechos-humanos/>
- El Salvador: Criminal law reforms exacerbate human rights violations against children and adolescents*. Amnesty International. (2025, February 27).
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/02/el-salvador-reformas-ninez-y-adolescencia/>
- El Salvador: Events of 2023*. Human Rights Watch. (2024a). <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/el-salvador>
- El Salvador: Freedom in the World 2025 Country Report*. Freedom House. (2025).
<https://freedomhouse.org/country/el-salvador/freedom-world/2025>
- El Salvador: New Laws Threaten Free Expression, privacy*. Human Rights Watch. (2024b, December 12). <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/12/el-salvador-new-laws-threaten-free-expression-privacy>
- El Salvador: Sweeping new laws endanger rights*. Human Rights Watch. (2022a, April 8).
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/08/el-salvador-sweeping-new-laws-endanger-rights>
- El Salvador: The false tradeoffs between security and democracy*. Human Rights Foundation. (2024, September 9). <https://hrf.org/latest/el-salvador-the-false-tradeoffs-between-security-and-democracy/>
- El Salvador's human rights crisis could deepen in Bukele's second term*. Amnesty International. (2024b, February 6). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/02/el-salvador-human-rights-crisis-bukeles-second-term/>
- Elections: Salvadoran presidency 2019 round 1*. IFES Election Guide. (2019, February 12).
<https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3102/>

- Elections: Salvadoran presidency 2024 general*. IFES Election Guide | Elections: Salvadoran Presidency 2024 General. (2024, February 29).
<https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/4189/>
- Fairclough, N. (1992). Intertextuality in Critical Discourse Analysis. *Linguistics and Education*, 4(3–4), 269–293. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0898-5898\(92\)90004-g](https://doi.org/10.1016/0898-5898(92)90004-g)
- Fairclough, N. (2001). Critical Discourse Analysis as a Method in Social Scientific Research. *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, 121–138.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857028020.d8>
- Floyd, R. (2011). Can securitization theory be used in normative analysis? towards a just securitization theory. *Security Dialogue*, 42(4–5), 427–439.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010611418712>
- Floyd, R. (2019). *The Morality of Security: A Theory of Just Securitization*. Cambridge University Press.
- García, J. (2024, December 10). *Encuesta Revela Una regresión en Valores Democráticos*. Noticias de El Salvador - Noticias de El Salvador, noticias internacionales, salvadoreños por el mundo, economía, negocios, política, deportes, entretenimiento, tecnología, turismo, tendencias, fotos, videos, redes sociales.
<https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/encuestas-reeleccion-presidencia-de-la-republica-libre-expresion-asamblea-corte-suprema/1186972/2024/>
- Goebertus, J. (2025, March 20). *Human rights watch declaration on prison conditions in El Salvador for the J.G.G. v. Trump case*. Human Rights Watch.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/20/human-rights-watch-declaration-prison-conditions-el-salvador-jgg-v-trump-case>
- Government of Canada, Statistics Canada. (2024, July 25). *Number, rate and percentage changes in rates of homicide victims*. Government of Canada, Statistics Canada.
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tb11/en/tv.action?pid=3510006801>
- Graham, T. (2025, May 6). *Does Nayib Bukele's campaign against democracy give a blueprint for Trump?* The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/06/el-salvador-nayib-bukele-model-trump>

- Graute, L. (2023, November 13). *A second term for “The world’s coolest dictator”?* Verfassungsblog. <https://verfassungsblog.de/a-second-term-for-the-worlds-coolest-dictator/>
- Hernández, S. (2024, November 27). *Nueve de Cada 10 Salvadoreños Aprueban la Gestión del Presidente Nayib Bukele, según CID Gallup - Noticias de Hoy en el Salvador*. La Noticia SV - Noticias de El Salvador, última hora, en vivo hoy. <https://lanoticiasv.com/nueve-de-cada-10-salvadorenos-aprueban-la-gestion-del-presidente-nayib-bukele/>
- How Nayib Bukele is becoming “The world’s coolest dictator.”* Directorio Legislativo. (2025). <https://directoriolegislativo.org/en/how-nayib-bukele-is-becoming-the-worlds-coolest-dictator/>
- Huntington, S. P. (1991). Democracy’s Third Wave. *Journal of Democracy*, 2(2), 10–34. <https://doi.org/https://www.ned.org/docs/Samuel-P-Huntington-Democracy-Third-Wave.pdf>
- Kemp, S. (2025, March 3). *Digital 2025: El Salvador - datareportal – global digital insights*. DataReportal. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-el-salvador>
- Kitroeff, N. (2024, February 2). *He Cracked Down on Gangs and Rights. Now He’s Set to Win a Landslide*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/02/world/americas/el-salvador-bukele-election.html>
- La población salvadoreña evalúa la situación del país a finales del año 2024*. IUDOP. (2025). <https://uca.edu.sv/iudop/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Bol.-Eva-de-anio-2024.pdf>
- Life Under Gang Rule in El Salvador*. International Crisis Group. (2018, November 26). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/life-under-gang-rule.pdf>
- Logros y Memorias*. POLICIA NACIONAL CIVIL. (2025, April 7). <https://www.pnc.gob.sv/logros-y-memorias/>
- Lührmann, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2019). A third wave of autocratization is here: What is new about it? *Democratization*, 26(7), 1095–1113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029>
- Magaña, Y. (2023, July 13). *Latinobarómetro 2023: La Mitad de la Población en al es indiferente a la democracia*. El Economista. <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/politica/Latinobarometro-2023-la-mitad-de-la-poblacion-en-AL-es-indiferente-a-la-democracia-20230731-0036.html>

- Martínez, O. (n.d.). *A brief history of El Salvador, gangs, the U.S., and the difficulties of empathy*. New American Story Project.
<https://newamericanstoryproject.org/context/brief-history-of-el-salvador/>
- Meléndez-Sánchez, M. (2021). Latin America erupts: Millennial authoritarianism in El Salvador. *Journal of Democracy*, 32(3), 19–32. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0031>
- Montgomery, D. (2025, February 1). *Binational poll: Most Canadians and many Americans oppose Canada joining the U.S.* YouGov.
<https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/51505-most-canadians-many-americans-oppose-canada-joining-us>
- Montoya, A. (2019, May 13). *The election of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador shows how wartime polarities have dissolved into pragmatism - LSE Latin America and Caribbean*. LSE Latin America and Caribbean. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2019/05/13/the-election-of-nayib-bukele-in-el-salvador-shows-how-wartime-polarities-have-dissolved-into-pragmatism/>
- MS13. InSight Crime. (2025, April 3). <https://insightcrime.org/el-salvador-organized-crime-news/mara-salvatrucha-ms-13-profile/>
- Méndez Dardón, A. M. (2025, March 27). *Mass incarceration and democratic deterioration: Three years of the state of exception in El Salvador*. WOLA.
<https://www.wola.org/analysis/mass-incarceration-and-democratic-deterioration-three-years-of-the-state-of-exception-in-el-salvador/>
- Nine out of 10 Salvadorans support president Bukele's second term, CID Gallup survey reveals*. El Salvador in English. (2024, November 27).
<https://elsalvadorinenglish.com/2024/11/27/nine-out-of-10-salvadorans-support-president-bukeles-second-term-cid-gallup-survey-reveals/>
- Observa El Salvador. (2024, January 16). *VI Estudio de Humor Social y Político Perspectiva Electoral 2024*. Observa El Salvador 2024. <https://www.disruptiva.media/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/vi-estudio-de-humor-social-2.pdf>
- Palumbo, G., & Malkin, E. (2019, February 3). *Nayib Bukele, an outsider candidate, claims victory in El Salvador election*. The New York Times.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/03/world/americas/salvador-bukele-election.html>

- Papadovassilakis, A. (2022, March 28). *Gang murder rampage sends shockwaves through El Salvador government*. InSight Crime. <https://insightcrime.org/news/gang-murder-rampage-sends-shockwaves-through-el-salvador-government/>
- Papadovassilakis, A. (2023, December 6). *Keeping a lid on Prisons*. InSight Crime. <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/el-salvador-keeping-lid-on-prisons/>
- President Bukele engulfs El Salvador in a human rights crisis after three years in government*. Amnesty International. (2022, June 2). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/06/el-salvador-president-bukele-human-rights-crisis/>
- Renteria, N. (2021, September 5). *El Salvador Top Court opens door to president's re-election, U.S. protests*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/el-salvador-top-court-rules-presidents-can-serve-two-consecutive-terms-2021-09-04/>
- Repression and regression of human rights in El Salvador*. Amnesty International. (2023, December 5). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/12/el-salvador-policies-practices-legislation-violate-human-rights/>
- Seawright, J., & Gerring, J. (2008). Case selection techniques in case study research. *Political Research Quarterly*, 61(2), 294–308. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912907313077>
- Secretaría de Prensa El Salvador. (2023a, June 2). *Presidente Nayib Bukele anuncia lucha contra la corrupción*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjDzZG9Dz3c>
- Secretaría de Prensa El Salvador. (2023b, March 18). *4,000 criminales han sido trasladados al Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmqXgkOMOMU>
- Secretaría de Prensa El Salvador. (2023c, November 29). *Presidente Nayib Bukele reitera llamado a la transparencia del gabinete de Gobierno*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xCmMzAouJw>
- Shapiro, A., Summers, J., Ozug, M., Dorning, C., Arrieta, R., Brown, A., Zamora, K., & Janse, A. M. (2025, February 17). *How trump's comments about Panama and Greenland are going over in both locations*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2025/02/17/nx-s1-5272622/how-trumps-comments-about-panama-and-greenland-are-going-over-in-both-locations>

- Sherman, C. (2021, December 9). *U.S. Treasury: El Salvador Government negotiated with gangs*. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/nayib-bukele-el-salvador-gangs-c378285a36d55c18f741c3f65892f801>
- Sherman, C. (2024, February 5). “*Cooler dictator*” to “*philosopher king*,” Nayib Bukele’s path to reelection in El Salvador. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/nayib-bukele-el-salvador-president-0ab3b1d63d3633c535b2cb9b60c56879>
- Social media users in El Salvador - 2025*. NapoleonCat. (2025). https://napoleoncat.com/stats/social-media-users-in-el_salvador/2025/
- Third preliminary report of the OAS Electoral Observation Mission in El Salvador*. Organization for American States. (2024, March 5). https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=S-005/24
- U.S. Department of State. (2023). *El Salvador 2022 Human Rights Report*. U.S. Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/el-salvador/>
- van den Boogert, L. (2015, November 26). *The securitization of street gangs in El Salvador: An analysis of anti-gang policies and the Gang Truce of 2012*. Utrecht University Student Theses Repository Home. <https://studenttheses.uu.nl/handle/20.500.12932/21824>
- VAN DER BORGH, C., & SAVENIJE, W. (2014). De-securitising and re-securitising gang policies: The Funes Government and gangs in El Salvador. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 47(01), 149–176. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022216x14000741>
- van Munster, R. (2007). Review: Security on a Shoestring: A Hitchhiker’s Guide to Critical Schools of Security in Europe. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 42(2), 235–243. <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/45084456>
- Villatoro, G. (2025, January 6). *Un estudio sobre lo que había pasado en El Salvador en los últimos 40 años*. X (Formerly known as Twitter). <https://x.com/PNCSV/status/1876361816277741909>
- “*We can arrest anyone we want*”: *Widespread Human Rights Violations Under El Salvador’s “State of Emergency* . Human Rights Watch. (2022b, December 7). <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/12/07/we-can-arrest-anyone-we-want/widespread-human-rights-violations-under-el>

- Wehr, I. (2022, May 19). *State of emergency in El Salvador: Heinrich Böll Stiftung: Brussels Office - European Union*. Heinrich Böll Stiftung | Brussels office - European Union. <https://eu.boell.org/en/2022/05/19/state-emergency-el-salvador>
- Wolf, S. (2017). Mano Dura. In *Mano Dura: The Politics of Gang Control in El Salvador* (pp. 49–73). essay, University of Texas Press. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7560/311219>
- Wolf, S. (2024). El Salvador under Nayib Bukele: The turn to electoral authoritarianism. *Revista de Ciencia Política (Santiago)*, 44(2), 295–321. <https://doi.org/10.4067/s0718-090x2024005000122>
- Yilmaz, I., & Shipoli, E. (2021). Use of past collective traumas, fear and conspiracy theories for securitization of the opposition and authoritarianisation: The Turkish case. *Democratization*, 29(2), 320–336. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1953992>
- Yilmaz, I., Shipoli, E., & Demir, M. (2023). Autocratic survival and Securitization. *Securitization and Authoritarianism*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-0506-5_1
- Youkee, M. (2021, September 26). *Nayib Bukele calls himself the “world’s coolest dictator” – but is he joking?* The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/26/naybib-bukele-el-salvador-president-coolest-dictator>
- Zúniga, R. (2024, February 16). *As democracy is “dismantled” in El Salvador, US faces hard choices*. Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/democracy-dismantled-el-salvador-us-faces-hard-choices>