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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Contested Securitisation of Migration in the Post-Soviet Space: The Case of Russian Migrants in Georgia

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**ABSTRACT**

The Kremlin's war in Ukraine since February 2022 has triggered an influx of Russian migrants into Georgia, to which elite Georgian groups have responded in a contradictory manner. While the ruling party, Georgian Dream (GD), has presented the migration wave primarily as an economic opportunity, the opposition and civil society have portrayed the event as a security threat, and demanded an immediate response to stem the flow of Russian migrants. These different responses can be explained by pre-existing polarisation among elite groups over wider foreign policy issues, which leads to the construction of divergent discourses on the influx of Russian migrants. In so doing, Georgian political actors not only identify distinct sources of threats and opportunities, but also strategically deploy these divergent perspectives to further their broader foreign policy objectives. While the ruling party's desecuritising discourse emphasises economic benefits and a pragmatic engagement with Russia – thereby reinforcing its policy of normalisation – opposition groups securitise the influx to underscore existential threats to national sovereignty and align with a pro-Western agenda. An analysis of these elite (de)securitisation discourses therefore also reveals the discursive strategies of (de)legitimisation employed to support or undermine competing foreign policy stances.

**KEYWORDS**

Russian migrants; Georgia; securitisation theory

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Georgia has experienced an unprecedented influx of Russian migrants, fleeing political oppression, conscription and economic uncertainty. This surge, with an estimated 100,000-110,000 Russians relocating to a nation of only 3.7 million people in 2022 alone (Chumburidze and Gavrilova 2023), has profoundly impacted Georgia's socio-economic fabric and political landscape. This large-scale movement has been facilitated by Georgia's existing policy, adopted unilaterally in 2012, which allows Russian citizens to enter and remain in the country for up to one year without obtaining a visa (Gurgenidze 2012). While stimulating economic growth, the influx has also triggered inflation and exacerbated existing inequalities (Kucera 2022; 2024). Moreover, the concentration of migrants in major cities has led to the formation of a distinct social stratum (Darieva *et al.* 2023; Darchiashvili *et al.*

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2024), occasionally causing tensions with the local population who largely support Ukraine and perceive the widespread use of the Russian language as a reminder of past imperial dominance (ISPI 2023). Despite these far-reaching consequences, the Georgian government's response has been strikingly ambivalent, especially when contrasted with the reactions of other key actors in society. The ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party has largely downplayed the scale of the influx, framing it instead as an economic boon. In stark contrast, the political opposition and civil society have characterised it as a significant threat, demanding swift and decisive action. This article delves into these divergent responses and the contrasting mitigation strategies proposed by Georgia's elite groups in the face of this major development.

We argue that the starkly different responses to the Russian migrant influx are symptomatic of a deeper polarisation among Georgian elites regarding the country's overall foreign policy orientation, particularly its relationship with Russia and the West. These divergent perspectives are not merely academic disagreements; they are actively instrumentalised by political actors – both the government and the opposition – to enhance their legitimacy, discredit their rivals and further their respective domestic political agendas. The absence of a unified national strategy for managing the influx of Russian migrants and its consequences underscores the profound disagreements over Georgia's foreign policy trajectory, especially in the wake of the Ukraine war. We maintain that the ruling party's desecuritisation of the migration issue is consistent with its overarching foreign policy objective of avoiding confrontation with Russia while promoting economic engagement and people-to-people ties. Conversely, the opposition and civil society's securitisation of the influx, coupled with their calls for robust resilience measures, reflects their deeply ingrained belief that any form of dependence on Russia represents an existential threat to Georgian sovereignty and its Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

By analysing these competing narratives through the lens of the Copenhagen School, we engage directly with the burgeoning literature on the securitisation of migration in security studies. We contend that securitisation and desecuritisation are fundamentally discursive practices (Wæver 1995; Buzan *et al.* 1998), and that exogenous events, such as the migrant influx, are not inherently threatening; rather, they acquire the status of threats only when interpreted and framed as such by influential actors. The contrasting responses to the Russian migration in Georgia vividly illustrate how elite disagreements over foreign policy priorities can lead to discursive battles over the very meaning and significance of a new exogenous development. We argue that seemingly erratic or contradictory policy responses (or the lack thereof) are, in fact, rooted in deeply held ideological convictions and are better understood as strategic adjustments to the event, shaped by pre-existing meaning structures – in this instance, the competing foreign policy visions within Georgia.

Georgia's foreign policy choices have been explained by various factors in academic debates, including the interplay of systemic pressures and domestic factors (Gvalia *et al.* 2019); the role of identity, norms and ideas (Kakachia and Minesashvili 2015); democratisation and its impact on foreign policy (Lebanidze 2019); and the influence of external actors and power dynamics in the region (German *et al.* 2022). This article makes a novel and timely contribution to this rich body of literature by examining Georgia's foreign policy through the prism of securitisation theory – an approach that has, surprisingly, not yet been applied to this case. By doing so, we unpack how the

securitisation of emerging issues, such as migration, not only reshapes foreign policy but also profoundly impacts domestic politics, exacerbating existing societal divisions and widening the already significant foreign policy schism within the country. The polarisation of Georgian political elites' foreign policy visions since the GD came to power has already been established in the literature (Kakachia *et al.* 2018; Kakachia 2022; Lebanidze and Kakachia 2023; Kandelaki 2024). The novelty of this article is to demonstrate how divisions over foreign policy visions translate into contrasting securitisations of the migration influx that are used to legitimise a particular political approach and delegitimise its opponents. By unpacking the contrasting discourses on migration of the dominant actors in Georgia, we contribute to the literature by systematically mapping discursive strategies used for (de)legitimisation goals as well as their link to foreign policy visions.

Our research studies the responses and proposed mitigation strategies of Georgian elite groups towards the Russian migrant influx as expressed in two major discourses of securitisation and desecuritisation. These dominant discourses are studied by analysing publicly available data, such as statements, speeches, interviews and declarations on Russian migration between the first wave of the migration starting in February 2022 until December 2023. We show how the narratives over migration are embedded in the foreign policy visions of Georgian elites to demonstrate consistency between their visions as meaning structures and interpretations of an exogenous event. We also demonstrate how these narratives are used for political purposes, legitimising a political agenda while delegitimising its opponents.

The next section discusses the article's underlying theoretical and methodological approach; it is followed by an outline of the major foreign policy visions among Georgian elite groups. Our empirical analysis examines two major discourses on Russian migration and the accompanying practices, highlighting how they reflect the pre-existing visions of foreign policy. This is followed by a discussion of how these discourses are instrumentalised by political parties in Georgia for political aims. The concluding section provides an overview of our major findings and implications for securitisation theory.

## Securitisation responses to exogenous events

How do states respond to exogenous events? Why did Georgian elite groups exhibit contradictory responses to Russian migration? To answer those questions, we delve into the theoretical premises of securitisation theory nested in wider meaning structures. We argue that actors interpret the disturbances within pre-existing meaning structures – in this case, the wider foreign policy visions expressed in their (de)securitisation discourses – that are essentially instrumentalised for bolstering their legitimacy and for delegitimising their opponents.

Politicians' primary goal to legitimise their proposed actions or ideological stance (Reyes 2011) is also reflected in political discourses. Discourses represent not only words but also have a performative function to persuade an audience (McDonald 2013). The Securitisation framework of the Copenhagen School explains how actors perform persuasion by dramatising an issue as a threat to security and therefore justifying the extraordinary measures required (Buzan *et al.* 1998). Securitisation theory implies that security is not innate but rather constructed through inter-subjective meanings in

the process of (discursive) interaction between actors who advocate for different threat definitions (Ibid). It informs how security is constructed through language and more specifically via speech acts (Wæver 1995). Security itself is a speech act. By uttering the word 'security' an actor declares an emergency by presenting an issue as a supreme priority (Buzan *et al.* 1998, 26). It is through speech acts that actors raise a specific issue from 'normal politics' to 'panic politics' by describing it as an existential threat (Ibid). Speech acts have a performative effect (McDonald 2013, 72) and are attempts to gain salience in society and attain approval of the target audience for employing extraordinary measures (Buzan *et al.* 1998).

On the other hand, desecuritisation is an attempt to take an issue out of security and emergency mode and reintroduce it to normal politics (Wæver 1995). It takes place when the issue either fades away (Behnke 2006) or active moves are initiated towards unmaking securitisation (de Wilde 2008). However, desecuritisation not only serves as a *post-hoc* move in relation to a securitised issue, but also as a countermove to securitisation when the latter is still developing (Bourbeau and Vuori 2015). As such, desecuritisation can also represent a strategy to keep issues away from a security focus, a so-called 'pre-emptive desecuritisation' (Hansen 2012) which is also apparent in the Georgian case.

By applying a securitisation theory framework, we demonstrate how counter-constructions of a specific event as threatening vs. non-threatening are presented via (de)securitisation discourses but also how they are nested within the pre-existing foreign policy visions that are further instrumentalised for legitimacy-boosting reasons.

We argue that how a society, group or individual reacts to an exogenous event is profoundly affected by the meaning structures in which they operate. The meaning of discourse becomes comprehensible only when situated socially and historically (Balzacq 2011) in a wider context (Buzan *et al.* 1998), although there is still a disagreement over what exactly constitutes 'context' when it comes to responses to critical moments (Bourbeau 2015). We regard context as the meaning structure, in our case wider foreign policy visions towards Russia and the West. This is particularly relevant in an unprecedented case like Georgia, where the flow of migrants takes place from the former coloniser into the former colony (Darchiashvili *et al.* 2024) and where Russia plays a major role in Georgia`s foreign policy. It must be highlighted that societies can be sites of multiple meaning structures (Sewell 2005), which helps explain why there may be different responses to such events. Therefore, we view crises or shocks as endogenous developments that acquire such a meaning when an agent's intersubjective understanding assigns such a definition to an event (Widmaier *et al.* 2007).

In the process of studying elite responses to Russian migration, we identified three specific discursive strategies employed by the ruling party to legitimise its interpretation of the event while delegitimising its opponents. First, we show how the ruling party uses the language of identity to construct a binary opposition between the 'we' and the 'Other' – with the 'Other' portrayed as a source of threat. In this framework, the perceived threats are conceptualised as endangering a referent object (such as a state, government, territory, or society), while the referent subject – that is, the entity deemed to pose the threat – is clearly identified (Buzan *et al.* 1998; Balzacq *et al.* 2016). Second, we document how the urgency of the issue is emphasised by situating it within a timeline that links the present – calling for immediate action – to past events that are seen as having enduring consequences for the future (Reyes 2011). Third, we illustrate how appeals to the feelings,

interests and needs of the audience are mobilised to justify the proposed measures (Balzacq 2011). Together, these strategies reveal how actors operationalise (de)securitisation of the issue to shape public perceptions and consolidate political legitimacy.

We study responses to the Russian migration influx by unpacking the dominant discourses on the topic in Georgia between February 2022 (the month of the escalation of the war in Ukraine and the first wave of Russian migration to Georgia) and December 2023. The dominant discourses were identified and analysed through a combination of inductive and deductive methods: deductively, we drew on established concepts from securitisation theory (such as referent object and subject, security framing, threat construction) to guide our data collection and coding; inductively, we conducted open-ended scrutiny of statements, speeches and media coverage to detect unexpected themes or rhetorical patterns. Our analysis focuses on the ruling GD party, the President of Georgia, the government and parliament, the main opposition parties, influential experts from academia and policy circles, and prominent civil society groups. Considering that many of the most prominent civil society organisations in Georgia receive grants from Western foundations (ADB 2020) and therefore tend to adopt a more pro-Western stance, our data collection methods (both inductive and deductive) may inadvertently capture more material reflecting this pro-Western perspective than a fully representative sample would. Consequently, the 'voice' of these organisations could be overrepresented in our study compared to the full range of possible viewpoints on the matter.

The discourses of the selected actors were examined by analysing their publicly available statements, speeches, declarations and documents on Russian migration, as well as by searching online news media using the key phrases: 'Russian migration' and 'Russian migrants' in English and Georgian. Following Thierry Balzacq (2011), our discourse analysis paid special attention to the specific vocabulary, rhetorical framing and contextual cues – sometimes called 'situated aspects' – that (de)securitising actors employed in their articulations of Russian migration. Discursive strategies from securitisation theory, as identified above, served as our structure for empirical analysis.

## Foreign policy visions of Georgian elites

The rise to power of the GD coalition in 2012 marked a shift in Georgia's foreign policy approach and amplified the contestation over foreign policy visions among Georgian elites. This contestation is particularly evident in the contrasting approaches to relations with Russia.

The GD introduced a policy of 'normalisation' with Russia, which represented a notable departure from the previous government's strategy of balancing against Moscow by aligning with the West. The policy involved resuming humanitarian, economic and cultural ties, increasing trade and travel, and appointing special representatives to facilitate dialogue (Kakachia *et al.* 2018). Notably, this dialogue excluded security issues and the GD softened its rhetoric towards Moscow, leading to the de-stigmatisation and proliferation of pro-Russian groups within Georgia (Lebanidze and Kakachia 2023). This was accompanied by a 'strategic patience' doctrine, which entailed accommodating Russia's interests and avoiding actions that might provoke a negative response (ICG 2020), as evident in Georgia's cautious stance on the Kremlin's war in Ukraine where the GD avoided strong condemnation of Russia and emphasised the ineffectiveness of

Western sanctions (*Civil Georgia* 2022b). The GD framed its approach as 'pragmatic', arguing that Georgia, as a small state, needed to proactively manage its relationship with its unpredictable northern neighbour (Kakachia *et al.* 2018). They portrayed themselves as the party of 'peace', aiming to prevent conflict and labelled the opposition as the party of 'war' willing to risk confrontation (Lebanidze and Kakachia 2023). This framing sought to legitimise their approach by presenting it as a rational strategy for ensuring national security. The GD also emphasised the limited capacity and willingness of the West to provide security guarantees against Russia (Kakachia 2022), further justifying the need for a more conciliatory approach.

In contrast, the United National Movement (UNM) and most mainstream opposition parties strongly opposed the GD's 'Russia-accommodating' policy, viewing it as incompatible with Western integration and accusing the GD of pursuing the Kremlin interests (Kakachia and Kakabadze 2022). The UNM advocated a more confrontational approach, arguing that Moscow only understood adversarial language and called for a campaign to raise Western awareness of Russian actions in Georgia's breakaway regions (ICG 2020). The UNM framed increasing economic dependence and *rapprochement* with Russia as existential threats to Georgia's sovereignty and its pro-Western aspirations, which they linked to the desire for domestic development and democracy (Kakachia and Minesashvili 2015). The UNM's discourse emphasised the need for a bold and ambitious foreign policy, internationalising Georgia's problems and portraying any cooperation with Russia as compromising national sovereignty (Kakachia *et al.* 2018). The 2019 protests following the Gavrilov incident[1] and the pro-Ukrainian protests in 2022 exemplify the public manifestation of this discourse, with protesters framing the government's actions as insufficient and demanding stronger opposition to Russia. Like opposition parties, a large part of civil society adheres to an exclusively pro-European course (NDI 2023), as demonstrated by the widespread condemnation of the foreign agent law as a 'Russian law' designed to distance Georgia from its European future (TI 2024).

These contrasting approaches are not merely practical policy preferences but reflect deeper ideological differences and are used as strategies for political legitimisation. The GD's approach is presented as a pragmatic and responsible way to ensure Georgia's security, while the UNM's continued securitisation of Russia is portrayed as a necessary defence of Georgia's sovereignty and its Western aspirations. These narratives are used to mobilise public support, with the GD appealing to the desire for stability and the UNM to a strong pro-Western stance.

Public opinion surveys indicate support for both approaches (IRI 2023), with 33 per cent of Georgians favouring a pro-Western course while also seeking to maintain relations with Russia and 43 per cent of Georgians supporting a strictly pro-Western foreign policy. This creates a complex political landscape where both narratives find resonance. However, the high level of support for EU integration (85 per cent) and only 3

[1]The 'Gavrilov Night' refers to the events of 20 June 2019, when widespread protests erupted in Tbilisi after Russian Duma member Sergei Gavrilov, a member of the Communist Party, addressed the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy from the Speaker's chair in the Georgian Parliament. Many Georgians perceived this as a symbolic affront to national sovereignty, given Russia's occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The protests, initially triggered by anti-Russian sentiment, escalated into broader demonstrations against the ruling Georgian Dream party, accusing it of political backsliding and excessive leniency toward Russia. The government's violent crackdown on protesters further fueled tensions, reinforcing public demands for a more assertive foreign policy stance against Russian influence.

per cent of Georgians supporting a purely pro-Russian course sets a limit on the extent to which an exclusive pro-Russian policy can gain traction.

## Elite discourses on Russian migration: securitisation vs. desecuritisation

The influx of Russian migrants into Georgia following the escalation of the war in Ukraine in 2022 became a focal point for the competing securitisation and desecuritisation discourses employed by Georgian elites.

### *Desecuritisation discourse*

The desecuritisation discourse, primarily advanced by the GD government, frames the Russian migration influx as a manageable and even beneficial phenomenon. This aligns with their overall strategy of normalising relations with Russia. GD officials actively downplay any security concerns, labelling the newcomers as "tourists" or "regular migrants" who contribute positively to the economy (*Civil Georgia* 2023a). For instance, the chairman of the Georgian Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, explained that the surge of Russian visitors was due to the end of the Covid-19 pandemic (*Netgazeti* 2022b), while the Georgian Interior Minister downplayed the security concerns related to the inflow. The government representatives emphasised Russian tourists entering Georgian border as nothing new (*Civil Georgia* 2022c) or dismissed the idea of "Russians overcrowding Georgia" (*Radio Liberty* 2022). This economic framing serves to move the issue out of the realm of 'panic politics' and into 'normal politics', effectively desecuritising the migration influx. The potential threat posed by Russia is downplayed or ignored and the emphasis is placed on the economic benefits.

Further reinforcing this desecuritisation narrative, the GD and its affiliates highlight the economic advantages of the new arrivals (*Civil Georgia* 2023a: *News Hub* 2023), while pro-Russian groups like Alt Info advocate for even greater people-to-people exchanges (*Radio Liberty* 2023a). Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili has emphasised the economic benefits of increased tourism revenue, citing the 10 per cent GDP growth in 2022 as evidence of the positive impact of Russian arrivals (Chichua 2022). The referent object in this discourse is the Georgian economy, which is portrayed as benefiting from the influx of Russian citizens. A threat to this object would allegedly come from compromising economic relations with Russia, such as by imposing economic sanctions (*Civil Georgia* 2023b). This strategy aligns with the GD's 'normalisation' policy by avoiding the politically sensitive issue of dealing with citizens from a state occupying parts of Georgia's territory. By focusing on the economic aspects, the GD attempts to neutralise potential criticism and maintain its stance of cautious engagement with Russia. Moreover, they employ a strategy of delegitimising the opposing narrative by labelling concerns about potential security risks as 'Russophobia' or 'chauvinism', allegedly instigated by the opposition (*IPN* 2023b). Irakli Kobakhidze, the GD party chairman, has even characterised protests against incoming Russians as expressions of xenophobia. He also threatened that in case of physical confrontation with Russians, the government would enforce the law on discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origin (*Radio Liberty* 2022). This

tactic seeks to discredit the securitising narrative by associating it with irrational prejudice.

Similarly, the demands on regulating Russian migration are portrayed as irrational (*Netgazeti* 2022c) but also as a source of destabilisation and potentially leading to war (*Civil Georgia* 2022b). The opposition and those demanding limitations on Russian immigration or economic relations with the Kremlin in general are presented as referent subjects, a source of threat to the Georgian economy but also to the stability and peace of the state. They emerge as a major Other in the discourse, characterised as xenophobic and irrational in contrast to the rational Self. So, while the ruling party desecuritises the Russian influx itself, it is simultaneously securitising the responses of its opponents to the event as threatening, to the extent of becoming threats to state security and stability. By removing anti-Russian graffiti and detaining anti-Russian demonstrators (Kucera 2022), the government further reinforces its commitment to a desecuritising approach, managing the public discourse and performatively demonstrating its control over the situation.

### *Securitisation discourse*

In contrast, the securitisation discourse is championed by the main opposition parties, including the UNM and European Georgia, along with many civil society organisations and policy experts. These actors frame Russian migration as an existential threat to Georgia's security, societal stability and Western aspirations. They portray the influx as a large-scale, poorly regulated process that poses both immediate and long-term dangers. By calling the influx "mass migration", "uncontrollable" and "unregulated" (Badridze 2022; Gvalia and Menabde 2022), these actors convey the sense of instability and therein the need for immediate and extraordinary measures.

Opposition politicians emphasise the risks of Russian migration, starting from threats to local Georgians due to allegedly hostile attitudes of Russians (European Georgia 2022) to the infiltration of individuals supportive of the Kremlin or those subject to sanctions, particularly in the context of Russia's partial mobilisation in September 2022 (Badridze 2022; Gvalia and Menabde 2022). They argue that this influx could provide a pathway for further Russian manipulation and interference in Georgia's internal affairs, thus successfully securitising the issue by portraying it as an existential threat. The referent object in this discourse is Georgia's social stability, national security and sovereignty, which are presented as being directly threatened by the influx of Russian citizens. Russia is implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, framed as the referent subject, the actor posing the threat. They are consistently alluding to the emotion of fear, where any inaction to deal with the new event could lead to existential threats to the country.

Academic and policy analysts contribute to this securitisation narrative by deeming the economic benefits of the influx, such as increasing GDP, as short-term benefits, while warning of potential demographic disruptions, rising inflation, increased real-estate prices and social inequality, and even the export of non-democratic values, including corruption (IDFI 2022; Gvalia and Menabde 2022; Kakachia and Kandelaki 2022; *Netgazeti* 2022a; ISET 2023). Several policy analysts point to a negative net migration rate due to the large number of leaving Georgians and arriving Russians (Kakachia and Kandelaki 2022; Shaoshvili and Turkia 2022). Others emphasise societal problems

created by the Russian migrants, assuming increasing tensions among locals and incoming groups and thus posing a threat to societal safety (Chanadiri 2023). Some even raise the spectre of the Kremlin using the presence of Russian speakers in Georgia as a pretext for future intervention, drawing parallels with Moscow's rhetoric in Ukraine and other post-Soviet conflicts (Kakachia and Kandelaki 2022; Shaoshvili and Turkia 2022). This framing reinforces the perception of an existential threat by linking the migration issue to historical patterns of Russian interference. By emphasising the potential for long-term negative consequences, they further justify the need for extraordinary measures.

Another concern relates to Georgia's increasing economic dependency on Russia. Several research papers from watchdogs and think tanks have highlighted how the increasing number of Russian remittances and registered Russian companies and businesses in Georgia is part of Tbilisi's growing economic dependence (TI 2023b). Economic interdependence with Russia is noted as one of the country's biggest current threats, potentially leading Georgia to become a hostage to Russian demands (*IPN* 2023a) or being exploited by Russia's tendency to use economic relations as leverage over dependent countries (TI 2023b; ISET 2023). Economic dependency during the war in Ukraine and Russia's geopolitical assertiveness in the region are also considered to make Georgia vulnerable to the diffusion of corruption practices from Russian companies and increased espionage (ISET 2023). Russia, as the major Other within this discourse, is characterised as aggressive and untrustworthy.

Furthermore, the securitising camp connects the issue of Russian migration to a broader critique of the GD's 'normalisation' policy, accusing the government of allowing Russian influence to expand across various sectors or intentionally appeasing Russia by allegedly only controlling migrants unacceptable to the Russian regime (Badridze 2022). Therefore, along with Russia, the Georgian government is also portrayed by these critics as a referent subject threatening the state – both through its inaction and by facilitating an environment that enables increased Russian influence. Securitising actors argue that the government either overlooks or willfully downplays the potential risks inherent in allowing the influx of Russian citizens without strict regulation. President Salome Zurabishvili has also voiced concerns about the security risks associated with unchecked migration, calling for tighter border controls and describing the phenomenon as part of a "hybrid war" waged by the Kremlin (*Business Media* 2024). This highlights the convergence of different actors around the securitisation narrative. Calls for stricter visa policies, mandatory background checks, enhanced data collection on arrivals, and even an "occupation tax" on entering Russians (*Civil Georgia* 2022a; ISPI 2023; Gvalia and Menabde 2022; TI 2023b: *1TV* 2023; Zourabichvili 2023; *Radio Liberty* 2023b) exemplify the securitising actors' demand for extraordinary measures to address what they perceive as an emergency situation. These proposed measures go beyond the realm of 'normal politics' and demonstrate a clear attempt to move the issue into 'panic politics', thus reinforcing the securitisation discourse.

Lastly, both experts and politicians criticised the economic benefits that Georgia saw due to increased trade and resumed flights with Russia, as well as from the inflow of Russian citizens avoiding sanctions, as damaging to Georgia's reputation in the eyes of the Western partners (*IPN* 2023a; *Tabula* 2022). As we argued elsewhere (Kakachia and Kandelaki 2022), such gains have been viewed by some as "reaping benefits from

the Russia-Ukraine war", prompting a sense of moral discomfort or shame. Moreover, forging closer ties with Russia is seen as jeopardising Georgia's prospects for EU integration (TI 2023a). That mending relations with Russia is incompatible with Georgia's Western aspirations is a key dividing line between the ruling GD elites and the political opposition/civil society in Georgia. Any compromise or form of cooperation with Russia is considered to be driving Georgia away from the West and accepting Russian citizens in the context of Ukraine war is interpreted in a similar vein. Thus another referent object is Georgia's European future, where the government features as a key referent subject, threatening Georgia's chances of Western integration.

## Instrumentalisation of competing discourses for political legitimacy

The competing securitisation and desecuritisation discourses surrounding Russian migration are not merely differing interpretations of an event, they are strategically employed by Georgian elites to legitimise their broader political agendas and delegitimise their opponents. These discourses serve as powerful tools in the ongoing struggle for political dominance and the shaping of Georgia's future.

The ruling GD party instrumentalises the desecuritisation narrative to justify its policy of 'normalisation' with Russia, which emphasises cautious engagement and the avoidance of provocation. By framing Russian migration as an economic asset and downplaying security concerns, GD officials seek to shield themselves from accusations of compromising Georgia's sovereignty or appeasing the Kremlin. This narrative allows them to maintain their carefully calibrated approach towards Russia while simultaneously presenting themselves as responsible economic managers. Furthermore, the GD uses desecuritisation discourse strategically to delegitimise the opposition, portraying them as 'xenophobic', 'warmongering', and out of touch with the economic needs of the Georgian people. This reinforces the GD's self-constructed image as the "party of peace" (Lebanidze and Kakachia 2023, 11), a label that resonates with parts of the population that are wary of renewed conflict with Russia.

Conversely, the UNM and other opposition parties, such as European Georgia and Lelo for Georgia, alongside civil society organisations and policy experts, have consistently called for stricter controls on Russian migration, including the introduction of a visa regime and increased scrutiny of Russian citizens seeking residency permits. These demands are presented as necessary measures to protect Georgia's national security and prevent the erosion of its sovereignty. By framing the Russian migration as an existential threat, the opposition seeks to delegitimise the GD's 'normalisation' policy and present themselves as the true defenders of Georgia's national interests. They accuse the government of being weak and subservient to Russia, arguing that its inaction is emboldening Moscow and putting Georgia at risk. This narrative is further reinforced by highlighting the government's reluctance to condemn Russia's aggression in Ukraine and its refusal to join Western sanctions. The securitisation discourse employed by the opposition also serves to mobilise public support for a more assertive foreign policy stance towards Russia. By appealing to Georgians' historical memory of Russian aggression and their strong pro-Western sentiments, the opposition aims to create a sense of urgency and rally the public behind their demands for stricter measures against Russian migration.

This discursive battle underscores the deep polarisation within Georgian politics and the extent to which foreign policy visions are intertwined with domestic power struggles. The case of Russian migration in Georgia thus provides a compelling example of how securitisation and desecuritisation discourses can be employed as legitimisation strategies in a highly contested political environment.

Public opinion in Georgia reflects a complex interplay of concerns and priorities, creating a fertile environment for these competing discourses to take root and be exploited. While a significant majority of Georgians (69 per cent) expressed concerns about the negative consequences of the Russian influx, citing cultural, social and security-related threats, and supported the introduction of a visa regime (CRRC 2022), a substantial portion of the population (55 per cent) also favours maintaining or even deepening economic ties with Russia (NDI 2023). Similarly, 26 per cent of the Georgian population mentioned that "they tolerate Russian migration because they are essential for the Georgian economy" (IRI 2023). This division in public opinion provides both the GD and the opposition with opportunities to tailor their narratives to specific segments of the population. The GD's desecuritisation narrative, with its emphasis on economic benefits, resonates with those who prioritise economic stability or fear the consequences of a more confrontational approach towards Russia. On the other hand, the opposition's securitisation narrative, with its focus on national security and Western alignment, appeals to those who are more apprehensive about Russian influence and prioritise Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

## Conclusion

This article has explored how elite discourses on a new exogenous event – here, the influx of Russian migrants into Georgia – can diverge substantially, also leading to differing mitigation strategies. By grounding our analysis in securitisation theory, we illustrated how foreign policy visions both *shape* and *are shaped* by these discursive practices. The ruling GD applied a desecuritising discourse, emphasising economic benefits and 'normal' politics to maintain its cautious engagement with Russia. Conversely, opposition parties, civil society groups and policy experts engaged in a securitising discourse, casting the influx as an existential threat to Georgia's sovereignty, societal stability and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. We showed that these seemingly contradictory narratives stem from entrenched differences in how elites view Russia and the West, and are then strategically mobilised to bolster the legitimacy of one camp while undermining the other.

Our analysis highlights that the meanings attributed to such external phenomena are not predetermined; rather, they are constructed by relevant actors within the frame of pre-existing foreign policy visions. In Georgia's case, these visions have long been polarised between strategies of 'normalisation' and the imperative to contain Russian influence. While the government downplayed potential security risks by focusing on economic gains and framing the migrants as harmless 'tourists', the opposition and civil society stressed societal threats and potential infiltration by hostile actors. Such framing allowed the government to appear pragmatic and pro-stability, whereas its critics positioned themselves as defenders of Georgia's sovereignty, leveraging the historical fear of Russian expansion to justify stricter measures and enhance their own

political credibility. By demonstrating how the same development – that is, Russian migration – was read either as a benign economic boon or an urgent security crisis, we reveal how elite discourses are instrumentalised to reinforce political agendas, whether by downplaying threats in order to preserve economic ties or amplifying them to justify bolder defensive measures.

This is particularly pertinent in states like Georgia that share complicated, confrontational histories with a powerful neighbour. The analysed case underscores how contested geopolitical environments can exacerbate political polarisation when new exogenous events arise. Future research might examine how the securitisation of migration shapes broader foreign policy decisions in contested geopolitical spaces, conducting comparative analyses beyond Georgia – such as in Moldova or the Baltic states – and investigating how (de)securitising discourses unfold in other small states facing politically charged migration. This would enrich our understanding of how historical tensions, foreign policy orientations and strategic legitimation practices converge under new external pressures. Moreover, it could explore how framing migration as threatening or non-threatening ultimately shapes policy outcomes over time, including its impact on broader foreign policy orientations and domestic political stability in these and other regions.

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